

THE STRANGE BOARDERS OF PALACE CRESCENT



**E-PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM**

THE PRINCE OF STORY-TELLERS

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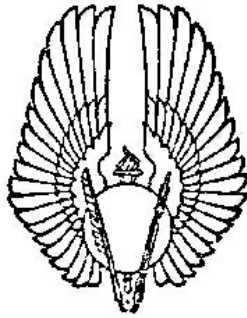
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THE STRANGE BOARDERS OF PALACE CRESCENT

By
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CHAPTER I

Neither the day upon which Roger Ferrison, a tall sturdy young man of sufficiently pleasing appearance, presented himself at Mrs. Dewar's Palace Crescent Boarding House, situated within a stone's throw of the Hammersmith Road, nor the manner of his initiation presented any unusual incident. He stepped off a bus at the corner of the shabby but pretentious looking thoroughfare and, carrying a large kit bag in his hand, walked slowly along, scrutinising the numbers until he had found the one of which he was in search. He rang the bell of Number Fourteen, was peered at from the area below and, after a not unreasonable delay, was admitted by an elderly manservant of somewhat impressive appearance. He was thin but tall, and of athletic build. His striped jacket and carefully brushed black trousers conformed to type. He threw open the door hospitably and regarded the visitor's bag with interest.

"You were wishing to see Mrs. Dewar, sir?" he enquired.

"I am the new boarder," Roger Ferrison announced. "I called to see Mrs. Dewar the other day when, I understand, you were out. I should like to have a word with her before I go to my room, if she is disengaged."

"Certainly, sir."

The man carried the bag a few yards into the somewhat sombre and barely furnished hall, deposited it against the wall and led the way past the curtained-off apartment which seemed to be a sort of lounge, past a somewhat extensive hat-and-cloak room and through a green baize door a few yards along a much narrower passage on the left. He paused at a door on whose panel was painted the single word OFFICE, knocked in punctilious fashion and simultaneously ushered in the newcomer.

"Mr. Ferrison, Madam," he announced. "Says he's a new boarder. I have left his kit bag in the hall for the moment."

The room was an epitome of uncouth untidiness and discomfort. Two hard cane chairs were set against the wall and a horsehair couch with a gaping wound in its side stood by the fireplace. Behind a cheap American roll-topped desk sat a woman who, though she lacked every form of feminine allure, seemed still in odd contrast to her unattractive surroundings. She was almost painfully thin—a defect which she accentuated by the plain black dress drawn tightly over her flat bosom. Her dark hair in which, curiously enough, there was not a streak of grey, was brushed severely back from her forehead. Her features were hard but regular, her grey eyes were

almost stony in their calm. The sole adornment of her person was a singularly ugly cameo brooch. She looked at her visitor without any gleam of welcome in her face. It seemed impossible to believe, in fact, that her lips had ever been trained to smile. Nevertheless, her voice, when she spoke, startled the young man. He had seen something of several grades of life and he recognised it as what is mysteriously known as the voice of a lady.

“You are Mr. Ferrison, are you not?” she said. “You called last week and I showed you Number Sixteen which I think you agreed to take.”

“That’s right,” he assented. “It was arranged, you remember, that I should try it for a month at thirty-five shillings a week.”

“Including breakfast and dinner,” Mrs. Dewar amplified, “without coffee or any form of drink except water, and the first month to be paid in advance.”

“Quite so,” he agreed. “Here I am and here is the money.”

He produced a somewhat shabby pocketbook, came nearer to the desk and counted out seven limp-looking pound notes. The lady at the desk gathered them in, locked them in a small black cashbox and wrote out a receipt in a firm unhesitating hand. He watched her fingers as they gripped the pen. It seemed to him that they were like the talons of some bird of prey.

“I hope you will be comfortable, Mr. Ferrison,” she said. “We dine at half-past seven. My boarders generally assemble in the lounge, on the right as you came in, for a few minutes first. *Apéritifs* are supplied there, if you need one, at a low price. Are you in the habit of dressing for dinner?”

“I am afraid not,” Ferrison replied.

“That is of no consequence,” she continued, her tone remaining singularly monotonous. “My boarders do as they please. A place shall be allotted to you in the dining room.”

“If such a thing is possible,” he suggested, “I should like a table to myself. I drink nothing and am generally too tired at the end of the day to want to talk.”

Mrs. Dewar considered the matter.

“There is a small table just inside the door you might have,” she told him. “I will speak to Joseph about it. Joseph is our only manservant. He is not a wonderful waiter, but he is willing. You will just have time to wash your hands and look at your room once more before the gong goes. If your bag is heavy, I am afraid I must ask you to carry it up yourself.”

“I sha’n’t need any service of that sort,” Roger Ferrison assured her. “I have been in the colonies and I am quite used to doing things for myself.”

He left the room with a queer feeling that some one had been dropping cold

water down his spine. Outside, Joseph was waiting. He had the air of one who has been listening.

“You will be staying here, sir?” he asked.

“I shall,” the new arrival answered. “You need not worry about my bag. I shall carry it up myself. You won’t find I shall be much trouble to you. I shave in cold water and I shall use the bathroom any time it is vacant after six o’clock.”

Joseph looked at him critically from underneath his bushy dark eyebrows—the most distinguishing feature of his face.

“Seems to me you are planning to be amongst the star boarders, sir,” he remarked.

“I don’t believe in giving trouble if I can help it,” Ferrison smiled.

“There’s one thing I’ve got to show you, sir,” the man confided, as they reached the bottom of the stairs. “It’s the only thing the old lady is really cranky about. You see this cloakroom, sir?”

He opened a door by the side of the lounge and displayed a long, narrow cupboard-like apartment. Upon one side of it was a row of hooks, a number painted above each and a slit below for a card. From most of the hooks were suspended keys.

“If you happen to have a card in your pocket, sir,” Joseph suggested, “I would be glad of it.”

“I have only a business card,” Roger Ferrison said, producing one.

“I’ll trim it up, sir, and make it fit,” the man replied. “The Missus will want to see that it’s in its place before she goes to bed to-night. The rule of the house is if you go out after dinner you take your key with you and come in silent. You come right in here and hang your key up. You are not supposed to take it up to your room or anything of that sort. Then, if Madam wants to see whether any of her boarders are out what she considers too late, she can come in here with a candle or a torch and see for herself.”

“Seems an odd idea,” the new boarder commented. “However, I won’t forget. I don’t suppose I shall use my key very often.”

“Them cinemas now,” Joseph observed, “they run away with a lot of money.”

“Quite right,” the young man agreed. “I very seldom go to them, myself. A book from the library and a quiet evening is more my form. I am on my feet most of the daytime.”

The butler glanced curiously at the kit bag.

“Any more luggage, sir?”

“I have a few odds and ends down at my office,” Roger told him. “If I decide to

stay here I may bring them up.”

“Well, you may like it and you may not, sir,” Joseph remarked cryptically. “I’ve got to go and brush up now and bring the vermouth before dinner.”

He took his leave. Roger watched him for a moment with a certain degree of interest. There was something curiously inhuman about his appearance, with his thin neck, his heavy eyebrows and exceptionally smooth face, which looked as though he were relieved even from the necessity of using a razor. Roger Ferrison, as he marched up the stairs carrying his bag, decided that the pair of them—his landlady and the butler, the only two he had met of his new associates—were both human beings of an unusual type.

CHAPTER II

At a few minutes past seven o'clock that evening Roger Ferrison, having carefully brushed his brown business suit and indulged in the luxury of a clean collar, descended to the lounge. He entered without curiosity, without even that interest which a healthily minded young man of twenty-five might naturally be expected to feel in the little company of people who were to be his occasional associates for, at any rate, the next two weeks. Life had almost a stranglehold upon him in those days and he was living chiefly upon his courage. Nevertheless, a certain kindliness of disposition and a leaven of good manners kept him more or less in touch with the acquaintances of the moment. Mrs. Dewar came forward to greet him.

"I shall not introduce you to every one," she announced. "You will soon find out who people are for yourself but you should perhaps know Mr. Luke, my oldest supporter here."

A man of youthful middle age, pale, with light-coloured eyes, greying hair, but with a certain amount of strength in his face, detached himself from a little group of men and held out his hand to Roger.

"Hope you will like it here, Mr. Ferrison," he said. "We are not a very sociable crowd, I am afraid, but that too has advantages."

Roger Ferrison shook hands and made some indeterminate speech. He was introduced to three or four others, commercial men apparently of his own standing but possibly more prosperous. Several ladies' names were mentioned but in such a manner that a bow was sufficient. Then Mrs. Dewar led him a little further into the room. A girl, who on first appearance seemed to Roger to be startlingly beautiful, was seated in an easy-chair with three or four young men gathered around her. She was very thin and very pale, but her copper-coloured hair was beautifully coiffured, parted in the middle and brushed smoothly back. She had hazel eyes and artistically treated lips. She would have been noticeable anywhere but in the crowd which was gathered in Mrs. Dewar's lounge she possessed a very rare and palpable distinction. She held out her hand with a smile to Roger.

"I hope you will like it here and stay with us a long time, Mr. Ferrison," she said. "We need a few younger people. That is where Mrs. Dewar and I sometimes do not agree. She likes all these elderly, staid, successful professional and business people. Some of us would like a little more frivolity."

"I'm afraid I sha'n't be much of a help in that direction," Roger Ferrison

acknowledged, smiling. "I have to work very hard indeed, and where I live and what I do after business hours just now seems to make no difference to me. You like to dance and that sort of thing, I expect?"

There was a queer silence around the chair. A young man kicked him lightly on the foot. Suddenly Roger became aware of two large rubber-shod ebony sticks leaning against the chair. The colour mounted almost to his forehead. The young woman hastened to relieve his embarrassment.

"Of course, I should love to, Mr. Ferrison," she said. "Just now, you see, I cannot. I have had an accident, but I like people to realise that I want to, all the same. Still, there are other things—theatres, cinemas, all manner of amusements, for which I think we young people ought to have more appetite than some of our elders."

"I'm so sorry," Roger apologised. "I had no idea."

"Of course you hadn't," she interrupted. "And believe me, I'm not at all sensitive. Some day, I am convinced, something will happen—some great doctor will lay hands upon me and I shall throw away my sticks and you shall teach me all the new dances."

"I hope you will find a better teacher," he observed. "And indeed, Miss Quayne, it is so kind of you to make light of my blunder."

She laughed happily at him.

"How on earth were you to know?" she questioned. "Come and talk to me after dinner, won't you?"

He passed on. A slim pretty girl in a simple frock, a little shy and just a little shabby, reminded him somehow of himself, as he made his way across the hall. She was evidently of no great importance, however, for he did not remember that Mrs. Dewar had mentioned her name.

Roger found that his wish had been granted. He was seated at a very small, very uncomfortable table between the service entrance and the sideboard, but he shared it with no one. There was a carafe of water on his table in place of the usual bottle or half bottle of wine or whisky with their clip labels. The linen, he noticed, although coarse in quality, was clean and the table utensils bright and well polished. From his point of vantage he took stock of the assembled company. His first impressions were drab enough. The only person who stood out at all seemed to be the lame Miss Quayne. She was also the only one who shared her table with no other guest, but unlike his own, hers was in the best position, facing the door, on the other side of the room in a pleasant corner. She sat with a book in front of her in which she was apparently absorbed. She was served different food from the others on a different

sort of china, and he admired the colour of the wine—a faint amber—which sparkled in her glass. Once she looked up and their eyes met. She smiled across the room at him, a smile that left him for a moment puzzled. She was trying to say something but his wits were not sufficiently acute to receive the message. He bit his lip in some discomfiture. He was rather a stupid person, he feared, amidst a crowd. He would have been better in a solitary room, even if he had been unable to afford regular meals. The shy little girl whom he had thought so pretty coming in seemed to him to have been watching his discomfiture. There was a touch of sympathy in her dark shaded eyes which he resented. Perhaps that was the reason why, when he entered the lounge after dinner, he ignored the fact that she was seated upon a divan by herself and joined the handful of young men who were hanging around Flora Quayne's chair.

“How nice of you to come and talk to me, Mr. Ferrison,” she said. “Bring a chair up, won't you? I am sure you are tired. You look as though you had had a long day's work. Or sit here, won't you?”

Roger, who had been on his feet since eight o'clock in the morning, glanced around but, finding no chair, accepted her gestured invitation and sat on the arm of her *fauteuil*.

“You must know these other kind friends of mine, Mr. Ferrison,” she went on. “This is Mr. Reginald Barstowe, our Beau Brummel, who is in a bank somewhere and sends me beautiful flowers. He has a great many friends and is a terrible gadabout, but I always feel we shall know all about him some day!”

Mr. Barstowe, a dark, olive-skinned young man, who was one of the few beside Mr. Luke who wore a dinner jacket, nodded to Roger and looked at the speaker speculatively.

“What do you expect to find out about me, Miss Quayne?” he enquired. “I am a very simple person and my life is an open book.”

“Oh, you are in finance and that is always mysterious,” Miss Quayne observed, “and you go rushing off to the continent and come back looking as though you had just saved the country from sudden terrible disaster. You talk gold. Mr. Bernascon too. What do we others know about gold?”

“What do I know, or Bernascon either, for that matter, about Walter Pater?” the young man demanded, turning over the book that lay in her lap. “We each have our way to travel in life. I dare say even from a very ordinary boarding house like this the roads branch out in many different ways.”

“I should like to compare notes with you all some day,” Flora Quayne remarked. “I think there is something very interesting about the day-by-day life of even the

simplest human being. Look at Mr. Luke over there, reading a detective story all by himself in that corner. Does any one know what he does in life—what he is interested in? He talks a great deal and he talks about very interesting things, and we know that he belongs to the best clubs and is a very good golfer, but I have never heard him say a single self-revealing word as to what his tastes really are.”

Bernascon, a shrewd, powerful-looking man, carelessly dressed yet with something of an air, joined in the conversation.

“You never know what an Englishman’s business is,” he said “When I was living down at Forest Hill, I travelled up to London off and on in the same carriage with a neighbour for two years before I found out that during all that time he ought to have been a customer of mine. We lose a lot by our taciturnity.”

“Kind of self-consciousness, I suppose,” a young man named Lashwood observed, whom every one knew to be a manufacturer of leather trifles in the East End. “I do my own travelling and meet so many people I know in my job that I could not keep it quiet if I wanted to. On the other hand, present company excluded, I have been here two or three years and there have been at least a score of fellow boarders I have sat down and talked to and taken a drink with, exchanged cards and all that sort of thing. I have seen them walk down the street, hop on and off busses, run against them sometimes in the City, and yet I haven’t the faintest idea what line they are in.”

“Wonderful place, the City,” Mr. Bernascon reflected. “Millions of us crawling about like flies and not one of us has the slightest conception of what the man he jostles in the crowd is thinking about, or who he is or what he is making out of life.”

Flora Quayne smiled.

“I think,” she said, “that there is a certain dignity about reticence. I like to think that all my friends, at any rate, have a secret side to their lives, one which they don’t talk about. What do you think, Mr. Ferrison?”

Ferrison, whose thoughts for a moment had flashed into a dingy, barely furnished office, half of which had been converted into a sort of carpenter’s shop, and who had spent more than an hour that day with his partner, plotting how to avert the bankruptcy which seemed to be waiting around the corner, was prompt in his acquiescence.

“Other people’s affairs do not really interest anybody,” he agreed. “We pretend to be interested sometimes but it is mostly politeness. If you’ve got hold of a good thing and are making a lot of money, they are generally jealous and hate you if you mention it; and if you are desperately hard up and are fool enough to acknowledge it they think you want to borrow, and sheer off. I am all for every man minding his own

business.”

“You look like that,” Flora Quayne declared approvingly. “I rather admire independence.”

“It is more difficult,” Mr. Bernascon meditated, “to keep quiet about your good luck than your bad. I once knew about the same time a friend who had won three thousand pounds in one of those sweeps and another who had made a bad debt in his business of about the same amount. I had always looked upon them as being men of the same temperament but you don’t suppose the fellow who had made that big loss went around talking about it. He kept his mouth closed as tight as wax. But, my God, we used to run when we saw the other chap coming!”

“Talking of good fortune,” Flora Quayne remarked, “Some kind friend has sent me a box for the Carlton Cinema to-morrow night. Every one says it is such a good film. Who would like to be my escort?”

“All of us,” they promptly declared.

“Then you will all be disappointed,” she continued, smiling. “I am going to ask our latest comer—Mr. Ferrison. Mr. Ferrison, will you be my escort, please? It doesn’t commence until half-past nine. Morning clothes will be quite all right,” she added hastily.

Ferrison shook his head.

“It is very kind of you, Miss Quayne,” he said. “I couldn’t possibly go.”

Her eyebrows slowly went up. Her fingers were twitching. The others, who knew her better, recognised the signs. Ferrison, on the other hand, never for a moment imagined that hers was a deliberate choice or that she would be disappointed in any way at his refusal.

“To tell you the truth,” he explained, “I am being a little worried just now. My work has been terribly hard. I should find no pleasure in attempting to amuse myself.”

Mr. Reginald Barstowe straightened his tie.

“I’m longing to see that film,” he said hopefully.

“I sha’n’t go myself,” Flora Quayne declared pettishly. “I shall send the tickets back. I am sorry to have put you to the discourtesy of refusing my invitation, Mr. Ferrison,” she added. “Mr. Barstowe, will you help me, please? I am going to that divan on the other side of the room. There is a draught here.”

The young man stepped eagerly forward. The girl shook out her skirts and rose. She looked very elegant and beautiful in the shaded lamplight. The light waft of perfume from the handkerchief which she had pressed to her lips reminded Roger of lilac and spring crocuses. He looked after her blankly. Mr. Luke turned towards him.

One of his imperturbable smiles flickered at the corners of his lips.

“You will get used to Miss Quayne’s moods in time, if you stay here, Mr. Ferrison,” he remarked. “We all spoil her because of her affliction. And if,” he went on, “you will pardon my saying so, it is diplomatic to keep friends with her. She is what in our world we call a star boarder. She pays Mrs. Dewar twice as much as any one else, has the best room, specially cooked food and is altogether quite a power in the place.”

“Thanks very much for your advice,” the young man said ruefully. “I never dreamed that she would care whether I went or not. I have not known her more than an hour or so. Seems to me,” he went on, “she is rather an unusual sort of young woman to meet at a cheap boarding house.”

Mr. Luke, who was standing with his hands behind his back, looked out into vacancy.

“Boarding houses,” he pronounced, “are strange places. I read a successful novel lately about an hotel. The idea was the lifting of the roofs in the various rooms, seeing something of people when they were really themselves and not as they wished other people to see them—in character, as well as behaviour. Most interesting book. I sometimes think even in a fourth-rate struggling establishment like this one might get a few shocks if anything of the same sort happened. We seem a very ordinary lot of people but I expect we too have our eccentricities. I think,” he added, as he moved away, “I shall have an hour with the *Times* before I turn in. The financial situation abroad makes one feel very nervous these days.”

Roger Ferrison had a queer fancy as he watched the unhurried departure of the slim grey man with the colourless complexion and eyes. It came and went like a flash. The crisis in his own affairs was too acute for outside fancies. Nevertheless, he went up to his room with the conviction that if he had time or inclination to be interested in them, he should find his fellow boarders in Palace Crescent a queer lot.

Some hours later he stood downstairs in the cloakroom, an electric torch in his hand, staring at the long row of pegs opposite in blank amazement. A restless night and a loose bulb had forced him downstairs into the lounge for matches. On his way back a sudden impulse came to him to glance at that row of keys. He had heard the good nights, he had heard the footsteps upon the stairs, yet from five out of sixteen of those pegs the keys were absent! Five of the boarders from Palace Crescent, at two o’clock in the morning, had either broken the rule of the establishment and taken their keys up into their rooms or were spending the early hours of the morning threading the secret byways of the sleepless City.

CHAPTER III

“There’s a note for you in the rack, Mr. Ferrison,” Joseph informed him on his arrival at Palace Crescent soon after six the following evening. “Don’t forget to hang your key up before you go upstairs.”

Roger Ferrison looked at him sharply.

“Why is it so important for me to hang my key up?” he demanded.

Joseph seemed a little taken aback.

“No offence, sir,” he apologised. “Only it is the rule of the house and the only one, it seems to me, that Madam sets much store by. The moment you come in, you hang your key up. Any one telephones or asks if Mr. Ferrison is in, just a glance at the board and we know if you are here. It is convenient in many ways.”

Ferrison drew his key from his pocket and hung it on the hook marked Number Sixteen.

“There you are then,” he pointed out. “Now, tell me—does every one obey Mrs. Dewar’s request?”

“I should say that the gentlemen are perfectly wonderful at it, sir. They have got into it now as a matter of habit. As soon as they enter the house up goes the key.”

“Really? And suppose they go out again in the evenings?”

“Simple matter to pull it down again, sir.”

“And when they come in at night—supposing they are a little tired or thinking about other things?”

“Makes no difference, sir. I must say they are most respectful in doing what they are asked. If by any chance any one is out late at a theatre, or a bit of supper afterwards, or anything of that sort, the key’s hanging up there before they go to bed.”

Roger remembered last night and felt that he was being watched. For some undefined reason he held his peace. He had been on the point of referring to those five empty hooks. Something in the man’s stealthy regard made him change his mind.

“Let’s hope I will fall into line with the rest,” he observed, “if ever I am out late. Must be a mistake about that note, Joseph. There’s not a soul knows my address except my partner and I have just left him.”

“The note is from Madam, sir.”

Roger felt a sudden sinking of the heart. If for any reason he had displeased any one? If he was to be turned out? If even a portion of the seven pounds was to be

impounded? He strode to the letter rack, took down the note and read it rapidly. After all, it seemed harmless enough.

Dear Mr. Ferrison, (he read)

Would you be so kind as to step in and see me for a moment if you are home from business before six-thirty this evening.

Faithfully yours,

Hannah Dewar

“Is Mrs. Dewar in her room?” Ferrison asked.

“She is there and she will be there for another half an hour, sir,” the man confided. “At seven o’clock punctual she goes to dress. There never was such a lady for punctuality as Mrs. Dewar.”

Roger pushed open the baize door, walked down the passage, knocked at the door of the office and was immediately bidden to enter. Mrs. Dewar, sphinxlike as ever, was seated at her desk, adding up some figures in a small ledger before her. She set down the pen at his entrance.

“Won’t you sit down for a moment, Mr. Ferrison?” she invited.

“You won’t want me for long, will you, Mrs. Dewar?” he replied, seating himself gingerly, however, on the edge of one of the cane chairs. “Hope I have not been doing anything wrong—breaking any of the rules of the house or anything of that sort?”

“Certainly not, Mr. Ferrison. I am sure your behaviour has been everything that could be expected. What I am going to ask you is more in the light of a favour.”

Mrs. Dewar had not in the least the appearance of a woman to whom the asking of favours was a usual thing. If there was any change in her at all, it was a certain hesitancy which seemed to denote a distaste for the situation.

“You made the acquaintance last night,” she began, “of a young lady—Miss Quayne.”

“Yes,” Roger admitted briefly.

“Miss Quayne,” his landlady continued, “is a very valued client of this establishment. She is very much liked and respected by all my boarders. They have, perhaps, got into the habit of spoiling her. Miss Quayne’s affliction makes her very sensitive.”

“Well?”

“She invited you, Mr. Ferrison, to accompany her to the cinema, to-night I think it was, or to-morrow. This was meant as a compliment to you because you are the

newest arrival here. You found yourself unable to accept her invitation.”

“I thought it was remarkably kind of her,” Roger acknowledged, “but I am not in a position to accept that sort of invitation at present.”

“Might one enquire why not?”

Roger’s eyebrows were slightly upraised.

“Isn’t that rather an unusual request?” he queried, “Need I do more than say that it does not suit me to accept any invitations for the present?”

The chill immoveability of the woman was disturbed. One might almost have said that there was a certain amount of pleading in her cold eyes as she turned towards him.

“Mr. Ferrison,” she explained, “the welfare of this house is largely dependent upon the caprices of Miss Quayne. I think that my other clients understand this. They do their best to humour her. She was very much upset at your refusal to go to the cinema.”

“But, my dear Mrs. Dewar,” he protested, “it is perfectly natural, surely, that I might find myself unable to go?”

“Why?”

He half rose to his feet, then he sat down again with a little laugh.

“Well, I’m not sure that it will not be better for me to answer that question,” he said, “although it seems to me rather an unusual one. Fact number one, then. I not only have not evening clothes fit to be seen in with a young lady at night, but I haven’t another suit of clothes to my name,—even my stock of linen is practically exhausted. You have seven pounds of mine, which is very nearly all I had left and, if I don’t succeed in what I am trying to do by the time my month is up, I shall be completely and utterly broke. I couldn’t pay for a programme for Miss Quayne. I couldn’t pay for a taxi. I couldn’t offer her supper afterwards, or any of the amenities which she would have a right to expect. How can I accept an invitation from a young lady under those conditions?”

“Is that all?” Mrs. Dewar asked, and he fancied that there was a note of relief in her tone.

“Of course it is all. Isn’t it enough?”

“It is a matter of pride, then,” she said. “I sympathise with you because I have been proud myself in the days when I had sufficient courage. Could I not appeal to you, Mr. Ferrison, to put your pride in your pocket for the sake of doing a good action? Miss Quayne is not quite like other young ladies.”

He deliberated for a moment, then he laughed again.

“The thing is not worth talking about,” he decided. “If, under all the

circumstances, Miss Quayne desires my escort, I will go with pleasure—this once. I don't mind what I do once but nothing would induce me to make a habit of it. Not that she is likely to ask me again, anyway."

It appeared to him that the relief in his landlady's face was immeasurable. He failed to understand it. It was another of the small mysteries which seemed to multiply in this place.

"Would you be so kind, Mr. Ferrison," she begged, "as to step down to her room and tell her that you will be pleased to go? It is the next but one to this, on the same side. She has had rather a bad day. She suffers a good deal of pain sometimes. It wouldn't take you a minute."

He rose brusquely to his feet. He was looking forward with distaste to the whole enterprise.

"Very good," he conceded. "I'll do as you ask."

He left the room, knocked at the second door on the left and was at once bidden to enter. His eyebrows were raised in surprise as he crossed the threshold. Here was an apartment utterly different to anything the mind could have conceived in connection with Palace Crescent. His feet sank into a beautiful Turkey rug of one of those faint Eastern shades something between mauve and blue. The silk curtains were of the same colour. There was Louis Quinze furniture in the room—genuine—two great bowls of flowers upon the table, a pile of books, a wood fire burning in the grate, although it was already May. Flora Quayne, who had been lying upon a couch, sat up and held out her hands.

"How sweet of you to come and see me, Mr. Ferrison!" she exclaimed. "It means you have changed your mind about the cinema, doesn't it? Or the opera—or the theatre—anything you like. I have so many kind friends—they send me boxes for everything. Do sit down there. It is a real man's chair. Unless you like to go on holding my hands—I don't mind."

He backed away a little awkwardly—all the more so because he fancied her eyes were inviting him to remain where he was. He sank into the depths of a very comfortable easy-chair.

"If it really gives you any pleasure, Miss Quayne," he said, "I would love to go to the cinema with you. Frankly, I refused because this is the only suit of clothes I possess in the world and I shall have to treat you to my last collar. I cannot send you flowers. I can do no more than pay your taxi and buy your programme. As for supper afterwards, that's out of the question. I should have accepted your invitation with pleasure if I had been able to treat you properly in these ways."

She laughed softly.

“What an idiot you are,” she crooned. “As though they mattered, anyhow! I am not poor, but it is not to my credit. The money I have has been left or given to me. Don’t think of that again, please.”

“All right,” he muttered, none too graciously. “On those conditions I shall be delighted.”

“I cannot offer to buy you a suit of clothes,” she went on, “but those you have look very nice. I shall be ready half an hour after dinner this evening and please, Mr. Ferrison, there will be no expenses at all. As I dare say you don’t know, I own a car, so no taxicab will be necessary. My maid always sees me into the theatre or wherever I go, so I never have to look about for silver. I am terribly sorry, of course,” she concluded, “to hear that you are going through a bad time, but it doesn’t make the faintest particle of difference.”

He looked at her, glanced round the room and looked back at her again. There was luxury everywhere—in the drooping roses, a great bunch of orchids in the background, the books and magazines, the little jewelled knickknacks on her table. He felt a sudden admiration for her restraint. He was perfectly certain that it was owing to her sense of the fitness of things that she came in to dinner so simply dressed and without jewellery.

“Well,” she remarked, with an amused little smile, “you seem to be rather taking stock of me.”

“Perhaps in a way I was,” he admitted. “I was sorry, by the way, to hear from Mrs. Dewar that you were not well.”

“I am never well,” she told him, “when I don’t get my own way. Look at those lines under my eyes. They are there just because I was angry. When I come into dinner, you will see nothing of them. Don’t you feel a magician?”

The words of common sense were upon his lips but he suddenly remembered her infirmity. She must be young, too, he decided.

“I am only too glad,” he said, “that Mrs. Dewar explained matters to me. If it gives you any pleasure to have me take you out to-night, I shall be delighted.”

“You would not care to come and sit at my table for dinner, I suppose?” she invited.

“Do you mind if I don’t?” he begged. “I have my own way of doing things here and I don’t want to interfere with them. In a few months’ time things may be different and then I’ll take you to the Ritz and give you the best dinner I can order and take you to any show you like afterwards.”

“I should love that,” she told him, “but I should be just as glad to be hostess. I won’t press you about dinner to-night. We will meet in the lounge afterwards.”

At nine o'clock she escaped from the little circle of men, who seemed always to surround her after dinner, and came across to him. He felt himself for the moment touched by the obvious efforts at simplicity which her toilette betrayed. She was wearing a very plain black dress of some material which looked to him like velvet, and a small hat to match. The only ornament was a diamond clasp with which it was fastened. She handed him opera glasses and her bag.

"Now for our expedition," she exclaimed gaily. "Of course, you know you have all sorts of things to do for me. I hope you won't mind. I have to be carried down these steps. That's the reason Mr. Luke will never take me out."

"If I were a young Goliath like Mr. Ferrison," Mr. Luke said, "there is nothing I should glory in so much as showing you my strength."

They made their way into the hall. The maid, who was fussing round, gave him a hint or two and he carried her like a child through the door, down the steps and into the waiting limousine. She sank into her corner with a sigh of pleasure.

"You held me as though I were a bag of feathers," she laughed.

"You can't pretend that you are much of a weight, can you?"

She pouted a little.

"I have known men quite as strong as you who have been out of breath when they set me down. Marie," she went on, speaking to her maid, "you will ride with George in front to the Carlton Picture House and show Mr. Ferrison how to help me. Then you can go and see your sister, if you like, but be back at twelve o'clock."

"Very good, Madam."

She held his hand all the way to the theatre. Her fingers felt to him hot and feverish.

"You must not think," she said, "that because I need so many attentions I am a helpless invalid. I am really nothing of the kind. My leg is not withered or anything of that sort. This lameness of mine is simply the result of an accident. Once or twice I have almost been able to walk alone. A doctor in Vienna is sending me a masseuse next month and she and my London man are hoping to make a tremendous difference."

"I am very glad," he assured her. "I wish that you could be cured altogether. I hope that you will be some day."

"I think I shall be," she confided. "I am not ambitious for great things. I just want to live my life as other women live theirs. They all say there is no reason why I shouldn't."

"I don't know much about it," he admitted, "but I can't imagine why you

shouldn't."

"If I marry the sort of man that I should like to marry," she said, "I hope that we shall live in Italy. I do need more warmth and a drier climate; then I should be quite all right."

"Would it be awfully impertinent of me if I asked you why on earth you stay at Palace Crescent?"

She was silent for a moment.

"I have known Mrs. Dewar all my life," she confided. "She has had great misfortunes. I fancy that my being there helps a little. She does a great deal for me too—it is not all one-sided—and my rooms are very nice. You must come and look at them again when you are not in such a hurry. Do you mind carrying my small bag when we get to the theatre? You will find any quantity of small silver in there which you must use as it is necessary. Tell me, Mr. Ferrison," she went on, changing the conversation suddenly, "are you engaged—perhaps even married or anything of that sort? Have you any very serious ties?"

He shook his head.

"I haven't had much time to think of that sort of thing," he said. "My family history is not worth knowing. My father was a furniture manufacturer in the Midlands, but the war and the aftermath of the war ruined his business and we all had to do what we could for ourselves. Fortunately I have no one dependent upon me. I went out to Canada. Stuck it for two years, but I couldn't make a living. Then I came back and I've settled down to see if I can do anything in London. It doesn't seem easy, though. My only brother is in the Civil Service in India and doing moderately well. My only sister married a rich man, thank heavens. I see her sometimes but she is absorbed in her home and her children. One gets like that, you know."

"So you are really quite alone?"

"Absolutely and entirely, and likely to be. Sometimes I think I'll have to chuck it all and go back to Canada. It is a man's life there, at any rate."

Her fingers gripped his tightly.

"You must not do anything of the sort," she insisted. "You must just stay here where you are. Perhaps not for long. I never make promises. I tire of people so easily. I don't think I should tire of you, though. I am like all partially disabled and weakly people. I adore strength. The way you lifted me! Well, I'd better not talk about it," she broke off, with a little laugh. "I might make you shy. You are shy, I believe, aren't you?"

"I am not used to young people or women or social stunts of any sort, if that's

what you mean,” he confessed. “You see Canada takes that out of you pretty well.”

“What made you come to Palace Crescent?” she asked abruptly.

“An advertisement in the *Weekly Despatch*,” he answered. “In a way, I would rather have had a room than a boarding house, because I am not used to people but, to be quite frank,” he admitted, a gleam of humour in his eyes, “I could not get enough to eat anywhere except at a boarding house. Food is awfully dear when you have to buy only enough for one, and a decent room takes up quite a lot of money.”

“I wonder why you chose Palace Crescent,” she meditated. “Anyhow, I’m glad you did. I’ll tell Mrs. Dewar that you are to be fed up.”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t do anything of the sort,” he begged. “Besides, for what they charge, I think it’s wonderful. I have not been so well looked after for a long time.”

“You are nice looking, you know,” she said suddenly.

“Don’t be absurd,” he protested. “My hands are hard and rough. My skin is baked dry with the sun.”

“Your hands are a man’s hands, anyhow,” she interrupted, “and I like that lean, hard face of yours. You won’t let me fall in love with you, will you, Mr. Roger Ferrison?”

“You couldn’t if you tried,” he assured her.

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “I am very susceptible. . . . Isn’t it absurd that we are there already?”

This time there was no carrying. With Roger on one side and the maid on the other, she limped gracefully across the pavement, down the corridor and into the box. With a little sigh of content she established herself in an easy-chair and made Roger draw his seat up to her side.

“There is only rubbish going on now,” she explained. “The real thing starts in ten minutes. Sit close to me and tell me some nice things. Tell me how you are going to stop my falling in love with you if I want to.”

“By not falling in love with you,” he answered.

Her silence chilled him. He suddenly felt that he was a boor. He ought to have remembered that she was ultra-sensitive. He laughed awkwardly.

“Make allowances for me, please,” he begged. “I am a rough man of the woods. I have scarcely a penny in the world and I may have to go out and earn my labourer’s wage at any moment. Being with you here in surroundings like this makes me feel—well, like a bull in a china shop. You will have to forgive me for everything I say that is wrong and remember only that I am terribly grateful to you for being so sweet to me and,” he went on, with a sudden influx of courage, “in that gown and hat

I think you look simply adorable.”

She leaned towards him and slipped her fingers in his.

“You have said exactly the right thing,” she whispered.

There was very nearly another outburst about his steady refusal to go anywhere, even to a grillroom, for supper, but on the whole the evening passed without any of the threatened storms. The chauffeur took the key and opened the door of the boarding house and Roger carried her up. He would have taken her into the lounge but she tugged at his neck.

“Don’t go there,” she insisted. “There are people sitting up. You must carry me to my room.”

He obeyed. The lights were turned on there and a wood fire had been made up. From the adjoining room, the door of which was open, there came the pleasant sound of the bath being filled and the odour of bath salts. In front of the fire, also, on a small table, was set a silver plate of sandwiches, a small bottle of champagne in a bucket, whisky and a syphon. She threw off her hat and made him draw up her couch to the table.

“You are lucky to-night,” she told him. “If it had been Marie’s night out, you would have had to help me with my frock. As it is, she will be back in a quarter of an hour or so. Do help yourself to sandwiches and—which do you prefer—wine or whisky? I thought so,” she went on, as he chose the latter without hesitation. “Please open the champagne for me then and help yourself.”

None too skilfully, he did as he was bidden. Her ease and graciousness, however, did much towards putting him at his ease. She was seated upright on the sofa at the other side of the small table and there was amusement, as well as something which seemed to be affection, in her beautiful eyes as she watched him.

“I believe,” she laughed, “that this is the first time you have ever had supper alone with a girl in her own room.”

“I am quite sure it is,” he answered emphatically. “In Canada we had a man’s mess—never saw the women except an odd waitress now and then.”

“Were they very attractive, the waitresses?” she asked.

“One never looked at them,” he replied. “The work and the outdoor life seemed to reduce one to a sort of coma. All one thought of was going to sleep at the end of the day.”

“Well, I’m glad I have no rivals across the sea, then,” she smiled. “Would you be very sweet, please, and go and turn my bath off? Marie will be here in a few minutes but that may be too late.”

He rose to his feet impetuously, nearly upsetting the small table, made his way across the room with its various treasures, into a bathroom such as he had never seen before in his life. The bath itself, which was within a few inches of running over, was sunken and fashioned of marble which matched the colour of the hangings. Indefinable and nebulous garments were laid out a short distance away. He turned off the tap and hurried back. She looked at him with an amused smile.

“Did you like my bathroom?” she asked.

“Looks like something out of a fairy tale,” he answered.

“You didn’t look about you too much, I hope?”

“I saw—a few things,” he confessed, “and I dipped my fingers in the water—the perfume was so wonderful.”

“Silly! Give me some more wine, please.”

He obeyed. She took one of his hands and stroked the long brown fingers.

“Yes, your hands are hard,” she meditated, “and your nails are shocking. Never mind. I’ll manicure them one day.”

“It wouldn’t be worth while,” he assured her. “I do several hours’ carpentering every day and I should only break my nails.”

“I like your fingers, anyway,” she went on. “They are so strong. I am like all people who have been invalids—I don’t consider myself an invalid any longer because my leg is so much better—I adore strength. I suppose we are all the same—it is something to cling to. . . . There, if you have finished your sandwiches, take a cigarette and give me one. Light it for me if you will.”

He performed his task with some trepidation. She leaned back upon the couch.

“Do you know,” she confided, “that you are the first of Mrs. Dewar’s boarders—except Mr. Luke, and he only once—who has seen my rooms? What do you think of them?”

“They seem to me just like rooms out of a palace,” he told her. “One cannot imagine finding anything of the sort in a place like this.”

“They were prepared specially for me, of course,” she told him. “Do you like Palace Crescent, Mr. Roger?”

“I don’t know yet. I haven’t been here long enough. The place seems to me more like a puzzlebox than anything. All those funny people and—then you.”

“Do you find the people funny?”

“Oh, no funnier, I dare say, than they find me. Mrs. Dewar is certainly unusual, though, isn’t she?”

The girl knocked the ash from her cigarette.

“Yes, she is unusual,” she admitted. “Will you come with me to the cinema next

time I ask you, Mr. Ferrison?"

If she expected a prompt acquiescence she was disappointed. There was a frown upon his face.

"I'm not sure," he answered. "I don't think so. What I am hoping is that very soon I may be able to ask you to come with me and to take you out wherever you like to go afterwards. If I can do that, then I will accept your next invitation afterwards."

"How stupid you are," she complained. "I am rich. These things mean nothing to me. Why am I not allowed to find pleasure by entertaining a friend—even if he happens to be a man?"

"You cannot call me a friend yet. We have known one another less than twenty-four hours."

She patted his hand.

"Don't be so crude," she scolded. "However, perhaps I like it better than if you made speeches about having known me all your life, and all through the lives before, and all that sort of thing. I am a sentimentalist, Mr. Ferrison, and you are the most matter-of-fact young man I ever knew in my life. Perhaps that's why I like you, why I think that some day I may like you very much indeed. Is that Marie moving about in the bathroom?"

He caught a glimpse of her cap.

"It is," he assented. "I must go."

"Carry me there first, please," she insisted.

He looked at her sticks.

"Aren't you rather a fraud?" he smiled. "You could get there quite well with one stick and my arm."

She made a grimace.

"Don't be boorish! I like to be carried and I am always spoilt. I have never found any one so strong as you and I love it. If you say another word, I shall make you carry me round the room half-a-dozen times."

He picked her up. She nestled closely to him, her arms wound around his neck.

"How far are you going to take me?"

"Straight to the bathroom."

"Do you really find me heavy?"

"No. Why?"

"Your arm seems to be shaking."

"That's because I'm not used to this sort of thing," he answered gruffly.

He paused on the threshold of the bathroom.

“Shall I put you down here?”

“In a moment,” she sighed. “Good night.”

She lifted her lips in the most natural way possible. He kissed her awkwardly, set her down and handed her sticks to the maid. Then he swung round. She called out to him mockingly.

“Are you running from temptation?”

He made no attempt at a reply. The atmosphere of the bathroom, he decided, must have been overheated for, as he passed along the passage, he found his forehead and his hands were wet.

CHAPTER IV

Audrey Packe's startled eyes shone as though the king himself had spoken to her. Perhaps, as a matter of fact, the simile was not so far exaggerated for, although they had not as yet exchanged a single sentence, Roger Ferrison, during the last week, had certainly been the ruler of her little region of troubled thoughts.

"I suppose we are waiting for the usual Number Thirty-three?"

She recovered herself before he had ceased to wonder at the sudden change which that illuminating smile had made in her pleasant but somehow negative appearance.

"The usual Number Thirty-three," she assented shyly. "You go by it too?"

"It depends on my morning's work," he explained, his eyes searching amongst the tangled mass of vehicles. "Sometimes, if I am going direct to the City, where my office is, I take the Underground."

There was a brief silence. She racked her brain for something to say. She was terrified lest he might pass on and forget her.

"How do you like it at Palace Crescent, Mr. Ferrison?" she enquired.

He shifted his rather large bag from one hand to the other and appeared to reflect. There were shrewd and capable lines to be traced in his face but he also possessed the stolid air of one who never replies to any question in a hurry.

"Well, I have scarcely made up my mind yet," he confided. "Don't know that I either like it or dislike it, so far. I suppose it is the same as most boarding houses. One must live somewhere if one has not a home, and it is cheaper anyway than digs."

"If one has not a home," she repeated, with an almost unnoticeable sigh.

The bus drew up at the corner. Ferrison was evidently a young man of good manners, for he stood on one side and helped her in. There happened to be plenty of room and, after he had disposed of his bag, he seated himself beside her.

"Where do you work?" he enquired.

"At Mallory's Stores."

He showed some interest.

"That's queer," he reflected. "I'm going there this morning."

"You don't work there?"

He shook his head.

"Wish I did, if the job was good enough. I want to try and see one of the buyers."

Don't suppose I shall have any luck, though. I haven't had any up till now."

He was gazing rather moodily at his carefully arranged shoelace. She immediately felt a passionate but quite illogical wish to help him. She was an observant young woman and she had noticed that although he was neatly dressed, his trousers shone in places at the seams, his shoes had been several times mended, his linen, though clean, was of cheap quality and the cuffs of his shirt were frayed. There were things, too, connected with his department at Palace Crescent which indicated poverty. The small uncomfortable table at which he sat was the worst in the room. His carafe of water was significant. He had not, up till the present, at any rate, indulged in the coffee served after meals at a small extra cost. She had noticed, too, that when he had been invited to the cinema by Flora Quayne, he had made no change in his toilet, and there had been a rumour in the lounge that he had at first refused the invitation. Somehow, Audrey had it in her mind that he must be desperately poor.

"What do you sell?" she asked.

"A new form of carpet and general cleaner," he told her. "The best in the world, if only one could get hold of the right man who would give one time to explain it. The trouble is that there are too many sweepers on the market and too many people trying to sell them. The majority of them are nearly as good as mine, but not quite."

Like most young people talking about themselves and their own affairs, he was becoming somewhat engrossed. She stole a careful glance at him. Yes, he was pleasant-looking enough—tall and strong too—but his eyes were tired and his lips had an anxious turn.

"You see," he went on, "we are manufacturing in such a small way. My friend and I own the patent for our machine. We invented it ourselves and we have sunk all our capital, buying a few oddments of machinery and manufacturing as many as we dared. It is very hard to quote a price against these fellows who are turning them out by the thousand. It is very hard too," he concluded, with a sigh, "to get any one to give our machine even a trial. I have been to your place five times already without having been able to see the buyer of the department."

"You are not the only one," she assured him. "Mr. Simpkins is a very difficult man—very busy too."

"What do you know about him?" he asked, with a questioning glance.

"I am in the household goods department," she confided. "I started in the office but my typing was not very good—I had to teach myself—and they paid me scarcely anything. I found that their saleswomen earned much more than I did, so I got them to move me as soon as there was a vacancy."

“Know anything about house-cleaning machines?”

“Just a little,” she acknowledged. “But it is not really my department. I just pass customers on to the young men who look after it. I’m sure yours is wonderful, though,” she added, after a moment’s hesitation. “Perhaps you will show it to me one day.”

“You would be the first person who has let me show it to them for nearly a week,” he declared bitterly. “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll come up and clean your room at Palace Crescent as it has never been cleaned before.”

She laughed.

“I can fancy Mrs. Dewar’s face, if you suggested such a thing!”

“I shouldn’t do it when you were there, of course. I didn’t catch your name the other evening. May I know it, please? Mine is Roger Ferrison.”

“Mine is Audrey Packe,” she told him.

He nodded without any great show of interest.

“I remember,” he said. “Mrs. Dewar was very punctilious about introductions when I first came but I’m afraid that I didn’t listen very carefully. There were so many people. I had no idea. I thought it was quite a small place. It seemed cheap and that was what attracted me.”

“I suppose that’s what attracts most of us,” she observed dolefully. “There are one or two, though, who seem to have plenty of money. Flora Quayne, the lame girl, for instance. She dresses beautifully, as I dare say you have noticed, goes to the theatre or cinema whenever she likes, and has a private car of her own. Don’t you think she is terribly attractive?”

“She is very beautiful,” he admitted. “She is so far outside any world I have known anything about,” he went on, after a moment’s hesitation, “that I find her a little difficult to understand. I wonder how her lameness came about?”

“They say that either her nurse or her mother didn’t look after her properly when she was young and she had an accident. No one knows the truth about it or the real story of why she lives at Palace Crescent, for that matter. Then, so far as regards money, there are Mr. Luke and Mr. Bernascon, and Mr. and Mrs. Padgham. I can’t think what they stay there for. There’s no allowance made for meals if you are not in and I see them going out once or twice every week.”

“Practical young person, aren’t you?” he remarked, with a smile. “Luke is that fellow who sits at Mrs. Dewar’s table, isn’t he? Kind of star boarder, I should think. What does he do, I wonder?”

She shook her head.

“Nobody knows. That’s one of the queer things about us all at Palace Crescent.

I have stayed at one or two boarding houses before and perhaps that's why I notice it. Here no one ever mentions their business, whatever it is. Freda Medlincott, the girl who is looking for a place on the stage, is the only exception. Every one else we have more or less had to guess at. Sometimes it seems to me quite mysterious."

"Could there be anything mysterious about Palace Crescent?" he asked, with a queer little smile. "We all of us, except Miss Quayne, perhaps, seem such ordinary people."

The girl by his side looked out of the bus and wondered. Mr. Luke, their fellow boarder, of whom they had been talking, brought by the exigencies of the traffic to a standstill in his high-powered car within a few feet of the omnibus, glanced carelessly through the window and recognised the young man and the girl. He smiled slightly and raised his hat. Perhaps he too wondered.

Mr. David Gedge, one of the most esteemed floor managers in the great firm of Mallory, watched with an approving smile the completion of an interesting sale in his own department by one of his favourite assistants, and stopped to address a word of congratulation to her.

"You are looking very cheerful this morning, Miss Packe," he remarked.

"We have been busy," the girl replied, "and I like work."

"I wish there were more like you," the manager grumbled.

He paused with his hands behind his back to survey the crowded room. A young man carrying a heavy bag came round the corner and, catching Audrey's eye, ventured upon a smile of recognition. She nodded to him brightly.

"Any better luck to-day, Mr. Ferrison?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Same as usual," he answered. "No openings."

The floor manager suddenly ceased his inspection of the room and glanced at the young man, who had paused before the counter. Audrey Packe took her courage into her hands. After all, David Gedge had been one of her father's friends and it was he, in fact, who was responsible for her presence there.

"Mr. Gedge," she said timidly, "this is Mr. Ferrison, a friend of mine. He has the most wonderful house-cleaning machine in the world. He invented it himself, but he can never get to see Mr. Simpkins. It seems a pity," she added, "because we often get complaints of some of those we stock."

Mr. Gedge frowned slightly but not seriously. This sort of thing was against the rules but he was in a gracious humour. He nodded to the young man.

"I am afraid Mr. Simpkins is a very busy person," he observed.

“It seems so, sir,” was the doleful reply. “I come regularly on his days and I am generally the first arrival, but I have never been able to see him yet.”

“What is the name of your firm?”

Ferrison produced a card.

“We have not been very long established,” he admitted frankly. “Just another fellow and I and a few workmen. If you would allow me, sir, I sha’n’t be in any one’s way here.”

The young man certainly knew how to make the most of an opportunity. The avenue in front of the counter, behind which Audrey Packe was standing, happened for the moment to be almost deserted and along the middle of it, in very little more time than it took to open the bag, a curious affair which looked like a deformed steam roller, throwing out long arms in every direction, was hard at work with a musical but businesslike purr. Every moment a circular protuberance at the back of the handle, which the young man held, was increasing in size.

“God bless my soul!” Mr. Gedge exclaimed, watching with fascinated eyes.

“Your floors look clean enough, but they needed that,” the manipulator of this strange apparatus remarked.

“But where do the dust and débris go to?” Mr. Gedge enquired, adjusting his pince-nez.

“Into this contrivance at the back,” the young man pointed out. “That’s the patent—the chief part of it, anyway.”

He touched a spring and the whole affair seemed to collapse in his hand. He thrust it back into the bag. Mr. Gedge examined the floor which had been traversed and removed his glasses.

“Come with me, young man,” he invited, taking him by the arm. “I will take you round to either Mr. Simpkins or one of the managers.”

Audrey Packe watched the two disappearing figures. She was scarcely disappointed that the young man, talking so eagerly to his companion, seemed to have forgotten to throw even a glance in her direction. She was basking in one of the rare but poignant pleasures of life. She had drawn heavily upon her small stock of courage, she had said the right word at the right time, and she had helped the person who, at that particular moment, meant more to her than any one else in the world.

CHAPTER V

It was the avowed ambition of Mrs. Dewar's professional life, though secretly she took not the slightest interest in the social inclinations of her clientele, to make the dinners at the boarding house over which she presided what she called sociable affairs. For that purpose, although she sat at the head of a long table to which the ordinary newcomer was invited upon his or her arrival, she encouraged the majority of her boarders to make up parties amongst themselves and occupy small tables which were distributed around the room. Most of her visitors, after the first few days, were glad enough to do so, but amongst those who remained faithful to the company of their hostess were Mr. Luke, Miss Freda Medlincott—the fair-haired, voluble young lady who was hoping for a position upon the stage and Mr. Reginald Barstowe, the dark-haired, taciturn young man who spent a good deal of time hanging around Flora Quayne's chair and who was supposed to have something to do with banking. These, with a Colonel Dennett, a retired Indian Army man who seldom spoke a word to any one and drank a great deal of water with his meals, were, just at the moment of Roger Ferrison's arrival, the only occupants of what might have been termed the head table.

"So Mr. Ferrison has found a companion already," Freda Medlincott remarked, motioning with her head towards the small table at which the inventor of the automatic cleaner was seated amicably with Audrey Packe as his *vis-à-vis*. "I wonder when those two found time to make friends? I have never seen him speak a word to any one since he has been here, except Miss Quayne."

Mrs. Dewar glanced coldly at her neighbour.

"Mr. Ferrison has done what I wish every one who comes here to do," she confided. "He has found an agreeable companion and devoted himself to her entertainment. I am always flattered when any of you choose to remain with me, but I never wish any one to feel the slightest compunction about the matter. As regards Miss Quayne, she has always made it a condition that she have a table to herself and I don't think that she would be inclined to leave it or to share it."

"No one has ever invited me to desert," Miss Medlincott observed, with a self-pitying sigh and a glance across at her *vis-à-vis*. "I sometimes think that those tables against the wall for two look very cosy."

If it was a challenge, Mr. Luke ignored it. He had a singular habit of appearing, when he chose, absolutely detached from any conversation.

“I accept your continued presence here, my dear Miss Medlincott, as a great compliment,” Mrs. Dewar pronounced. “As to your not having been asked to desert, I am afraid that I cannot accept that. It was only the other evening I heard Mr. and Mrs. Padgham begging you to join them.”

Freda Medlincott looked across the room to where a middle-aged man—the only one in the room except Colonel Dennett, Mr. Luke and Reginald Barstowe to wear a dinner coat—was seated opposite his good-looking wife.

“Mr. Padgham always terrifies me,” she confessed. “I am perfectly certain that he has a terrible past. The person whom I would really like to see here would be an opulent and susceptible theatrical manager or writer of plays.”

“How do you know that I don’t write plays?” Mr. Luke asked from across the table.

The girl regarded him speculatively. Her dark eyes, in contrast to her golden hair, were rather effective. The longer she looked, the more bright with interest they became.

“To tell you the truth,” she observed, “it never entered my head. Flora Quayne always declares that there is an element of mystery about you. You may be a great writer. Two of the best plays in the West End lately have been written anonymously.”

He looked at her with cold grey eyes. His tone remained expressionless.

“You see what risks you have run,” he pointed out, “in taking so little notice of me.”

“If you are as clever as I believe you are,” she rejoined languishingly, “you will realise why I have refused at least half-a-dozen invitations to leave this table.”

“You get served sooner here,” Reginald Barstowe, the young man connected with money, ventured, entering into the conversation for the first time.

“That is a very unkind remark,” Freda Medlincott declared. “No one has ever suggested before that I was greedy.”

“Besides,” Mrs. Dewar put in equably, “it is not true. It is part of my system to maintain a perfect equality in such matters. Every table in the room is served first in rotation.”

“So that if I were really greedy,” the girl pointed out, “I would change my table every night. What nonsense we do talk,” she went on more seriously. “A change of place would not appeal to me in the least. The only thing that I do sometimes wish —”

“Is it anything we can alter, Miss Medlincott?” her hostess enquired.

Freda Medlincott, who had been glancing at the ceiling with a rapt expression, shook her head slowly.

“It was a stupid thing to say,” she confessed, “but then, I am an imaginative person.”

“And that wish?” Mr. Luke ventured.

“I would like to feel that Palace Crescent was a less obvious sort of place—that we were not all of us exactly what we seem to be.”

“I don’t think we are,” Colonel Dennett mumbled. “Humbugs and hypocrites, most of the world that I come across. I expect we are about the same as the others.”

“But I mean something romantic,” the girl explained. “That Mr. Luke here was perhaps, as he has suggested, a well-known author living here incognito. That Reginald Barstowe, who has just been so rude to me, was a famous criminal, perhaps even a murderer. That Colonel Dennett was in the Army Secret Service, living here in disguise. That Mr. Padgham was as wicked as he sometimes looks. That Flora Quayne, with her sensitive quivering mouth and those beautiful eyes, was a sort of Louise de la Vallière in disguise. That all of you were utterly different. That Palace Crescent was the sort of place where all sorts of tragedies were being hatched and developed.”

“Uncomfortable,” Mr. Luke criticised tonelessly.

“Might be true about some of us,” Reginald Barstowe commented. “Miss Quayne, if it were not for her strange way of looking at you sometimes and her stand-offish manners, could be quite as fascinating as the heroine of any historical romance I ever read.”

Mrs. Dewar’s eyes were fixed upon the closed curtains at the other end of the room. They were a little vaguer than usual. Otherwise her face had not in any way relaxed.

“So you think,” she observed, “that we are all commonplace people and that our lives are as humdrum as they seem.”

“How are we going to get away from it?” Freda Medlincott demanded. “We know all about the Colonel from the army books of reference. We know that Mr. Padgham, instead of being concerned in a life of crime, is a solicitor down at Finsbury, has made plenty of money and only practises occasionally. We should only have to telephone the manager of the bank where Mr. Barstowe pretends to work and there is no doubt that we should get an excellent reference about him. We know that Miss Packe is employed at Mallory’s and we know, since just before dinner was served, that Mr. Ferrison is engaged in trying to sell some sort of a machine of his own invention. We know that Mr. Ollivant, the moody-looking gentleman who sits by himself and talks out loud whenever he reads the menu, was once a great financier and lost most of his money in the war. We know that Mr. Lashwood is a

manufacturer of some sort in the far East End, and that the two Misses Clewes have come to die here, because they spent the first forty years of their lives in a country village. We do not know exactly what you do, Mr. Luke, except play golf and shoot with a syndicate. The fact is, that we know too much about one another. Books of reference, 'Who's Who' and telephone directories have all brought us too close together."

Mr. Luke sipped his wine thoughtfully.

"It seems a pity," he remarked. "By-the-by, you have not mentioned Miss Quayne."

"Poor Miss Quayne," Freda Medlincott murmured. "It's quite true that we none of us know anything definite about her, but I suppose I left her out because of her infirmity. She wouldn't have much chance of getting into mischief, would she?"

"I don't see why not," Mrs. Dewar said calmly. "I think you are very wise to leave her out of your speculations but she is surely as much a possible heroine of romance as any one you have mentioned."

"One of the greatest villains in sensational fiction," Mr. Luke reminded them, "was a man with a club foot. Nowadays, with the kingdom of science to help, crime can be spun as it were from the easy-chair. Then, so far as romance is concerned, if the historian is to be trusted, Louise de la Vallière was almost as lame as Miss Quayne when she embarked upon the greatest romance of history."

Colonel Dennett drank half a glass of water at a gulp and leaned forward.

"Let's see what sort of a physiognomist you are, young lady," he said. "Supposing you knew that one person in this room was a dangerous criminal, whom would you select as the most probable?"

Mrs. Dewar rose to her feet. She performed the action as she did most others—soundlessly—without any visible effort.

"I think," she intervened, "that the conversation has gone far enough. We had better withdraw."

On the way out of the room Freda Medlincott whispered in Colonel Dennett's ear. He seemed a little startled.

"You may be right," he acquiesced, after a moment's reflection.

On their way into the lounge they came across Roger Ferrison, whistling softly to himself as he brushed his hat by the light of a standard lamp. Mrs. Dewar paused and drew him on one side.

"I have a message for you, Mr. Ferrison," she said.

"A message?" he repeated.

“Miss Quayne was not well enough to come in to dinner to-night. She wondered whether you would stop in and have a word with her.”

Roger Ferrison left off brushing his hat. There was nothing he desired so fervently in life as to refuse this very simple invitation.

“Do you mean now?” he asked.

“It would not take you long. Miss Quayne seems to be suffering a good deal.”

Ferrison sighed and hung up his hat.

“Of course, I will. Would you mind,” he added hesitatingly, “if Miss Packe comes out before I return, telling her where I am? Say I shall only be a minute or two.”

“I will do so,” Mrs. Dewar replied. “Pardon me,” she went on, “I do not wish to seem impertinent, but do I gather that you are going out with Miss Packe?”

He looked at her in frank astonishment.

“We are going to a cheap cinema,” he confided. “We sha’n’t be late and I shall remember about the keys.”

“It’s not that,” Mrs. Dewar said. “I really ought not to say what I am going to say to you, but you see we all have the deepest sympathy for Miss Quayne. You are the one person she has singled out to spend an evening with. She enjoyed it so much and—she needs some one to be kind to her. I think she will feel hurt if you are only able to stay for a moment because you are going out with Miss Packe.”

“That sounds very queer to me,” Roger Ferrison, confessed, honestly but bluntly.

“I am afraid,” Mrs. Dewar admitted, “it may sound also rather impertinent. If so, you must forgive me. I was thinking of you as well as of my boarder. Miss Quayne has the command of a great deal of money and many advantages. She is able to offer so much to those who will spare a little time for her distraction. I was thinking only that if you knew how sensitive she was, perhaps it might make a difference.”

It was a very lame speech for the precise Mrs. Dewar. Roger Ferrison made no direct reply. He stubbed out his cigarette in a small receptacle provided for that purpose on the hall table and turned away.

“At any rate, I will go and speak to Miss Quayne,” he promised.

CHAPTER VI

Roger Ferrison knocked timidly on the second door up the passage. Almost immediately he was bidden to enter. He advanced with some hesitation towards the couch where Flora Quayne was lying. She turned her head and welcomed him with a smile. There was no doubt whatever about her fatigue being genuine. There were dark lines under her eyes. The veins in the hand which drooped over the side of the couch almost to the carpet were painfully apparent.

“So you have come,” she murmured. “I had no message. I have not heard from you all day.”

He came up to the side of the couch and stood looking down at her.

“But, my dear Miss Quayne,” he protested, “I had no idea that you were not well. I was looking forward to seeing you at dinner this evening. I was astonished when I heard that you were ill.”

She tossed out her long slim leg pettishly. It was revealed to his unwilling perceptions that she was wearing the thinnest of fur-edged negligees over her night clothes.

“You should have known,” she complained. “You should at any rate have enquired. You know that if I am not exactly delicate I am nervous.”

“I am afraid I don’t know nearly so much about you as you seem to think,” he told her good-humouredly. “I left the house at half-past eight to earn my living. I returned at seven o’clock—barely time to have a good wash, put on my last clean collar and present myself for dinner. I looked across the room at once towards your table. I was sorry to find that you were not there.”

She looked down at her leg pensively. Perhaps she was admiring, as he ought to have been, the beautiful silk-clad outline.

“Well, you’re here now,” she said, with a sigh of content. “Will you sit quite close to me, please, and hold my hands, and will you let me feel your arms wrapped around me again? I seem to need strength to-night. And will you please presently read to me? I will show you what—some quite simple poetry.”

“But to-night,” he told her clumsily, although he moved his chair slightly nearer to the couch, “I cannot do any of these things. You will laugh at me after what I said the other night, but it is a fact, all the same. I am taking a young woman to the cinema.”

She seemed for a moment to become absolutely rigid. Her lips opened and closed again. Only her eyes held this.

“It is not in the least like last time,” he continued. “We shall take a bus as far as we can for a penny, we are going in the one-and-sixpenny places at the cinema, and we shall walk home. No programmes, no luxuries of any sort. The total agreed sum of expenditure is three shillings and twopence!”

“Who is the—person?” she asked.

“Some one who did me a good turn to-day,” he explained. “I have something I am anxious to sell. She is employed at Mallory’s and she helped me to get an audience with the buyer. He gave me an order—almost the first, certainly the best I have ever had.”

Her finger nails seemed to be digging into the side of the couch.

“That is how I always suffer,” she said. “I lie here and other people steal things from me. Who is she?”

“Her name is Audrey Packe,” he continued. “And believe me, she wouldn’t steal anything. She is perfectly honest.”

“I know her,” Flora Quayne reflected. “She is what Mrs. Dewar calls third class. She has one of the smallest rooms, no extras, and has to pay her account to the day or out she must go. So you have made friends while I have been lying here!”

“A very useful friend.”

“And you are taking her to the cinema?”

“If I could afford it,” he said stoutly, “I’d take her out to dinner. She deserves it.”

She raised her head. There was a note of anger in her tone.

“Then what are you doing here?” she demanded. “You have no right to come and talk to me if you are going—to take—”

The words seemed to die away on her lips. For a moment he was afraid she was going to be ill. He rose and moved towards the bell. Her white hand called him feverishly back.

“Wait,” she faltered.

He yielded to the appeal of her imploring gesture and resumed his seat. She lay perfectly still for several moments. When she spoke again her tone sounded perfectly natural.

“I am being foolish,” she confessed. “It is one of my bad days. How much time have you?”

“Five minutes,” he declared ruthlessly.

She raised herself on the couch.

“Put your arm around my back,” she begged. “Your other hand under my knees—you know how. Now, carry me round the room. Don’t say a word. Just carry me round and bring me back again.”

He obeyed. The task was no more than carrying his empty kit bag, yet he found himself with his teeth clenched as he set her down again.

"I like that," she said simply. "You are the strongest man who has ever carried me. Pour me out some more coffee, please."

He did as she asked. He noticed that there was a second cup.

"Help yourself, if you have time," she invited. "I ordered coffee in here. I thought you might be able to stay."

"I'd like some," he told her.

"Please help yourself."

She watched him anxiously. Her hand sought his and he held it almost tenderly.

"There's something in your eyes that frightens me to-night," she said. "You are pitying me. I will not be pitied. Do you hear? I say—I will not be pitied."

"I was doing nothing of the sort," he denied halfheartedly.

"You think I am a poor, crippled, disabled creature," she said, her bosom rising and falling quickly. "I am not. Give me your hand."

He yielded it at once.

"Lean over," she insisted, guiding his hand to her arm. "You feel that—it is a woman's arm?"

"Of course it is," he assented. "I never doubted it."

She laid his hand upon her leg.

"That is, at any rate, a girl's leg," she pointed out. "There are no protruding bones—or anything of that sort. It is softer than anything you have ever touched before? Now the other one. No, I insist."

The colour mounted to his forehead. He felt his hand shaking.

"My dear—"

"Be quiet! Do as I tell you. Leave your hand in mine. You feel my knee? It is like other people's knees, isn't it? My legs. Is there any difference?"

"Of course there's not."

"Come here! My ribs. There's flesh on them, isn't there? My bosoms—they're the bosoms of a child, perhaps. That's fashionable nowadays! They're there all right, though. Then what is the matter with me?" she cried, suddenly flinging his hand away and stretching out her own arms. "What is the matter with me, Roger Ferrison? Why do you pity me? Because I limp? It was not my fault. It was the cruelty of others."

The breathing seemed to die away within her. Feelings such as he had never dreamed of had swept over him. He felt the moisture in his own eyes as he looked into hers.

"My dear," he assured her, "you are all wrong. I am a poor clumsy fellow who's

lived in the backwoods. I don't know how to express myself but I think you are beautiful. If you belonged to me—if you were my sister—”

“Or wife,” she interrupted.

“My wife—anything,” he went on, “I should be proud of you. I should not pity you at all. I cannot say more than that.”

“Then why don't you feel more for me?” she demanded.

“My God!” he cried. “I've not known you a week!”

“You have not known that little cat you are taking out to the eighteen-penny cinema for twenty-four hours!”

“You are not to be compared,” he said soothingly. “She did me a good turn. Heavens, it isn't much I am doing for her in recompense, is it?”

“But you want to take her,” she urged. “I should like you to be thinking of nothing but me—me—me—all the time. I should like you to have asked to have had your dinner outside my room and listened, in case there was anything I wanted. I should like you to have asked to sleep there on my mat! . . . Poor darling, are you so frightened of me? You need not be.”

She seemed to crumple up again—gracefully and humanly this time, so that he had no fears. He sat by her side in silence, leaving his hand in hers. Anything was better than another outburst. The minutes ticked away. There came a knock at the door. To Roger the sound was like music.

“Come in!” he invited.

It was Mrs. Dewar who entered. She closed the door immediately behind her.

“I must apologise for hurrying you, Mr. Ferrison,” she said, “but your partner wishes to speak to you on the telephone and Miss Packe is waiting for you.”

He rose to his feet, ignoring the feverish grip of those hot fingers.

“I'm sorry,” he said mendaciously. “I think that Miss Quayne has fallen asleep. I didn't like to disturb her. She seems to be very tired. Perhaps you will know what is best to be done.”

He crossed the room, tiptoeing his way clumsily across the thick carpet. There came no sound from the figure on the couch. He slipped past Mrs. Dewar and closed the door into the passage and heard the green baize door swing to behind him with a sense of immeasurable relief. In the hall Audrey Packe was waiting, after he had finished telephoning.

“Forgive me,” he cried eagerly. “No, I have my key. Let's go off at once. I very seldom wear a hat—mine isn't fit to look at, anyway.”

He strode down the hall. She looked up at him in amazement.

“You've not been committing a murder or anything, have you?” she asked.

“I have been doing and saying everything that was stupid and clumsy, I think,” he confessed, as he gulped down a long breath of the fresh air. “Anyway, we’re off now. I say, I’m awfully sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“You are fined a penny,” she told him gaily. “I don’t want to miss the start of the film and I’m not going to arrive breathless. The busses are empty this hour of the evening and we should be up there in no time.”

Roger Ferrison grinned. A sense of humour which had lain dormant in the backwoods of Canada was beginning to struggle up into the light.

“The girl I took out last week,” he complained, “stood me a good deal more than a penny bus.”

Behind them, as they scrambled laughing on to their omnibus, events in the lounge of the Palace Crescent Boarding House shaped themselves very much as usual. After a certain amount of desultory conversation, the guests who were going out made their way to their rooms and descended presently, waving casual good nights as they passed towards the front door. Before taking their departure, however, each one paid a visit to the dark alcove adjoining the cloakroom at the corner of the lounge and helped themselves to their latchkeys. First of all came Reginald Barstowe, neatly attired for the evening, as usual, and following him Maurice Bernascon, less trim but more imposing, in his heavy overcoat and slouch hat; Mr. Padgham, a dashing middle-aged man with something of the Victorian dandy in his black moustaches and sideways tilt of the hat, followed a few minutes later. After that there was a lull. Miss Susannah and Miss Amelia Clewes, with Mrs. Padgham and a fourth, settled down to bridge, and Freda Medlincott, having rung up two or three acquaintances and being offered no agreeable diversion, yawned and took her book up to bed. Mr. Luke, about ten minutes later, with the air of one who had suddenly made up his mind, rose to his feet, fetched his coat and hat from the cloakroom, secured his latchkey and left the house. An hour or so later, the bridge party having broken up and such of the other guests as had lingered in the lounge having made their way upstairs, Joseph, according to custom, made his appearance, dragged the hall table into the lounge, placed upon it a jug of water, half a dozen tumblers, two syphons of soda water and three bottles of whisky with labels attached on which were written the names of the fortunate owners. After that the lights were turned out and Palace Crescent indulged in its first spell of sleep.

CHAPTER VII

At a few minutes after midnight the deep repose brooding over the interior of Palace Crescent Boarding House was broken by the sound of the first returning latchkey, followed by footsteps in the hall. The curtains leading into the lounge were pushed back and Roger Ferrison, leaning forward, turned on one of the electric lights. By his side was Audrey Packe. Mindful of his duty, he stepped into the alcove and hung up his key. In the act of turning away, he paused and whistled softly.

“Why, I thought this was such an early place!” he exclaimed. “Past twelve o’clock and five keys still out.”

Audrey peered over his shoulder.

“That seems queer,” she remarked.

“I say,” he whispered, with the air of a happy conspirator, “let’s sit in the recess over there and talk for a few minutes. They won’t see us when they do come in. We were all squashed up in that cinema and I’ve not really had you to myself yet.”

She indulged in a reckless little laugh.

“Mrs. Dewar is a terrible stickler for the proprieties and I’m sure she wouldn’t like it, but let’s stay for a time, all the same,” she assented.

He turned out the light and they made their way to the recess which he had pointed out. Their whispered conversation, animated enough at first, soon became subject to long pauses. One of these was interrupted some time later by another latchkey turned in the lock and the swift opening and closing of the front door. Whoever this newcomer was, he had evidently made up his mind to disturb nobody, for his footsteps were almost inaudible, even to the unseen listeners in the lounge. They were conscious of the curtains being noiselessly drawn apart, but the indistinguishable figure would have nothing to do with the switch. He moved to the alcove in which the latchkeys were hung and paused there for a moment or two. Suddenly a ray of brilliant light, evidently from an electric torch, flashed down the line of hooks, as though taking note of the absent keys. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it was extinguished. They heard the faint sound of receding footsteps, after which the person who had entered the house and inspected the alcove opened and closed the door with meticulous care and took his leave. The tension in the lounge was at an end. Audrey drew a sharp little breath of relief. Her companion whistled softly.

“Now I wonder who the mischief that was,” he whispered. “Why should he

come in like a ghost, use his electric torch to see who was in and who was not, and then, instead of going to his room, leave the house again?"

"I can't imagine who it was or why he went out again," Audrey answered, "but I think, don't you, that we ought to go upstairs now?"

But the spirit of adventure was in Roger Ferrison's veins.

"Let's stop a few more minutes," he pleaded. "As a matter of fact I think we ought to. There was something distinctly queer about that visitation, whoever the person might have been."

"I'm much too contented to argue," she murmured, leaning back once more in her place.

One o'clock struck—half-past—before there was the sound of another latchkey. Seated breathlessly in their corner, neither Audrey nor her companion—although their eyes by now were accustomed to the darkness—were able to recognise the indefinable shape of the owner of the rather heavy footsteps who crossed the few yards of the lounge, disappeared for a moment into the alcove and then stepped back into the hall. They sat with bated breath until the late comer had made his way up the stairs.

"I think that was Mr. Bernascon," Audrey whispered.

"Might have been."

"I can't make out," she went on, "why neither the first man who had the electric torch nor Mr. Bernascon, if it was he, didn't turn on the light just for a moment to see their way to the alcove."

"Seems queer," Roger assented. "I hadn't an idea, either, that any one stayed out so late. They all talk as though they went to bed about half-past ten."

Audrey rose reluctantly to her feet but a firm hand kept her in her place. Again there was the sound of a latchkey, again an entrance and again the late comer ignored the electric switch. This time, however, the footsteps were unhurried and deliberate. There seemed to be no attempt at secrecy. The faint rattle of a key being returned to its hook indicated that the duty of the house had been done. Nothing else.

"I should be inclined to swear," Ferrison whispered, "that this last fellow, whoever he may have been, was wearing rubber shoes. We shall have to see this out now, Audrey."

"I don't mind," she consented softly.

Five minutes—perhaps ten. The two young people were far too engrossed to have any but a dazed idea of the passage of time. On this occasion it was obvious that the latchkey was turned with deliberate care to avoid sound so far as possible.

The door was closed in the same fashion and along the passage came the creaking sound of a man walking on tiptoe in patent shoes. Some instinct must have led Roger to draw his companion right back into the hidden portion of their recess for, this time, the returned wanderer did not follow the example of his predecessors. He paused at the open entrance to the lounge and they heard him breathing fast, as though he had been running. Then, suddenly, the lounge itself was illuminated. The newcomer stood on the threshold with his finger on the switch, listening.

“Mr. Padgham,” Audrey whispered under her breath.

Roger dared do no more than nod. There was something about Mr. Padgham’s appearance which made him think it would be just as well to remain in their place of concealment. The latter stood quite still as though with the object of recovering his breath. Then he moved towards the tray, gripped the bottle bearing his name, poured out a generous portion of its contents and, ignoring the soda water, drank it off, setting down the glass with cautious fingers. Once more he listened and this time, although he had drunk copiously and set down the nearly empty glass with a gulp of satisfaction, it was more than ever obvious that for some reason or other he was seriously disturbed. He was always of pallid complexion but now he was as pale as death. Back in their hollow depths his eyes glittered with the uneasy light of fear. He stood motionless for a few more seconds, although, to the relief of Roger and his companion, his attention seemed entirely concentrated upon the back part of the house and the stairs. Finally, with careful fingers, he too hung up his key and disappeared. They listened to the creak of his patent shoes upon the carpeted way, they heard the door of his bedroom on the first floor softly opened and closed. Mr. Padgham had come and passed on. . . .

“Roger,” Audrey whispered.

“What is it, dear?”

“I’m terrified. I have never seen or heard all these people behave like this before.”

“Perhaps you have not been up so late.”

“That’s quite true,” she admitted. “It doesn’t make it any less strange, though, to think that it may have been going on all the time. We must say good night now. If we stay much longer, I shall be afraid to go to bed.”

He rose reluctantly to his feet, then suddenly gripped her shoulder once more. For the moment she heard nothing. She looked at him enquiringly. There was no softly turning latchkey to attract their attention, no footsteps in the hall. Yet there was something—something which seemed to be coming from beyond the alcove, beyond the back of the staircase, along the tortuous passage led to the back quarters. It was

like the soft shuffle of a slippers foot, lighter than the foot of any human being. Roger was completely puzzled. It was the girl who first guessed the truth.

“Mrs. Dewar,” she whispered. “That’s just the pace she walks.”

“Where is she?” he asked, bewildered.

“Coming along the passage from her room. She sleeps just behind the bureau.”

He listened. Two o’clock!

“What on earth can she be doing down here?”

They heard the soft swinging of the green baize door. The sound of the footsteps became more apparent. They ceased. Dimly they could see the shape of some one standing in the alcove. There was the flash of a torch, which sent them swiftly back into the corner of the recess. It was never once turned their way, however. It swept the line of hooks from which the keys were hanging, slowly and deliberately. Almost at once it was extinguished.

“I cannot bear this,” the girl faltered. “I’m going to own up to Mrs. Dewar about having been here and ask what it’s all about.”

He laid his fingers softly upon her lips.

“I shouldn’t,” he begged. “If she thinks we are spying, we might get turned out. Listen. She’s going.”

They caught an impression of her dim shape moving away. The sound of her footsteps grew fainter. Once more the door swung. Then Roger, with a warning gesture to Audrey, turned on the light. They both leaned towards the alcove. There were still two keys missing from their places, still two empty hooks.

They mounted the stairs slowly, arm in arm.

“If there’s one profession,” Roger Ferrison confided in a low tone, “which appeals to me more at the present moment than the job of selling household cleaners, it is that of a detective. What on earth can it mean—all these men coming in on tiptoe at this hour of the morning—nearly all of them groping about the place as though they were afraid of turning on the light and only Mr. Padgham going near the whisky bottle?”

“And he seemed scared to death,” Audrey reflected. “I have never seen him without his swagger before.”

“Every one of them coming in separately too,” he went on. “There didn’t seem to be any connection between them and there doesn’t seem to be if you see them in the daytime. And yet these respectable stodgy boarders in a respectable stodgy boarding house are out until nearly two o’clock in the morning, each one comes in separately, and only one of them has the courage to turn on the light and gulp down a

drink. You have been here much longer than I have, Audrey. Have you ever noticed anything queer about the place before?"

"Not a thing," she assured him. "I have stayed in several other boarding houses and I thought that this was the dullest and quietest I had ever known."

They paused at her door for a last good night. When they parted, their minds had become a blank. They were caught up in the vortex of a personal passion. They were intrigued no longer by the strange borders of Palace Crescent.

CHAPTER VIII

The end of that amazing day, however, had not arrived for Roger Ferrison. In the very act of crossing the threshold of his room and before he could have closed the door, which would effectually have blocked his hearing, his footsteps were arrested by one of those ordinary but quaintly disturbing sounds, of no account whatever in the busy daytime but curiously impressive in the dead silence of the night. The telephone bell in the hall near the front door rang.

Roger Ferrison stepped back, leaned over the banisters and listened. Save for the persistent clatter of the bell from the somewhat ancient instrument below, the whole house was wrapped in darkness and silence. The summons ceased. There was still no sound, no light anywhere in the house, no open door. Roger's first impulse was to decide that this was no affair of his and to go back to his room. Then he remembered the unreturned latchkeys and remembered, too, the somewhat isolated position of the instrument. It was just possible that with every one's door closed, the summons might remain unanswered. He himself, in a state of curious exaltation that night, was disposed to help the whole world, much more to do a trifling service to his landlady. He kicked off his shoes, descended the stairs, took off the receiver and spoke.

"Hello! Who's there?"

A gruff, but in a queer sort of way, vaguely familiar, voice answered him.

"Is that West Kensington thirteen-thirteen?"

"Yes."

"The boarding house of Mrs. Dewar?"

"Yes."

"Kindly ask Mrs. Dewar to come to the telephone."

"Who is speaking?" Roger asked.

"That doesn't matter. Fetch Mrs. Dewar at once, if you please."

"Look here," Ferrison explained. "I'm just a lodger in the house, who happened to be going to bed late. I scarcely know which Mrs. Dewar's room is. Why on earth do you want to disturb her at this time of night? Is it anything serious?"

"It is very serious indeed," was the curt reply. "Kindly fetch the lady at once."

"I'm not going to disturb her unless I know who it is," Roger retorted with sudden doggedness.

"It is the sergeant of Bartels Street Police Station," the voice confided, "and if

you don't do as I ask, you will get into trouble."

"All right. Hold on," Roger acquiesced.

He turned on the light in the hall and made his way to the office on the ground floor at the back of the house, where Audrey had told him Mrs. Dewar's sleeping apartment was also situated. Arrived there, and with his hand already outstretched to venture upon a gentle summons, he suddenly stiffened. It was an old house and the fittings and woodwork alike were warped and shrunken. From underneath the door itself and through the keyhole he could distinctly see the glimmer of a light. . . . Furthermore, although he knew that Mrs. Dewar was a widow of unimpaired respectability, he was suddenly conscious of low, muffled voices inside. More than ever he disliked his self-imposed task but, having gone so far, he had no alternative but action. He knocked softly but firmly upon the door. The voices inside ceased at once. He could almost sense in the abrupt silence the shock which his summons must have been. Furthermore, in a few seconds, the light also was extinguished. There was absolute stillness in the room. The time for hesitation was past, however. He struck the panel of the door sharply once more and this time not without effect.

"Who is that?" was the swift demand from the inside.

He recognised Mrs. Dewar's voice—cold, level and curiously unmoved, even under these strange conditions.

"It is I—Roger Ferrison—your new boarder. The telephone is ringing in the hall. I heard it as I was going to bed and I thought you ought to know."

There was a fluttering murmur which might have been due to an indrawn breath but Mrs. Dewar's voice continued a few seconds later calmly enough.

"The telephone? At this hour of the night? You must be mistaken."

"I am not mistaken," Rogers insisted. "As a matter of fact, I have already answered the call."

"You answered it! Who is speaking, then?"

"The sergeant at Bartels Street Police Station. He insisted upon speaking to you at once."

In an incredibly short space of time the door was opened. Mrs. Dewar stood upon the threshold in a dingy, dark red dressing gown. She might have been undressed but she gave Ferrison the impression that she was not. She held the door only slightly open.

"This is absurd," she said calmly. "I am much obliged to you, Mr. Ferrison, all the same."

She stepped into the passage and closed the door behind her.

"I will not trouble you further," she continued. "I will speak to the sergeant

myself. I suppose some one has left a window open or has forgotten to close a door at the back. I find the police in this neighbourhood very officious.”

Her level tone had its effect upon him. The whole affair seemed suddenly to lose its sense of drama. Ferrison smiled to himself at the state of excitement into which he had been thrown. He held open the green baize door.

“I expect that’s it,” he assented. “I noticed, however—I came in late myself—that there were a couple of latchkeys short. That made me think that it might have been an accident to one of your boarders.”

“I expect some one has taken his upstairs with him and will return it in the morning,” Mrs. Dewar explained. “It is against the rules but one cannot expect everything from gentlemen who come in so late. Don’t wait up any longer, please, Mr. Ferrison. I will deal with this troublesome sergeant.”

“You would not like me to stay, in case I can be of help?” he asked, as they reached the hall.

“It really would not be worth while,” she assured him. “I am quite certain that it is only an ordinary message. With your work to see to in the morning, it is time that you were in bed.”

Mrs. Dewar showed no signs of haste about answering the telephone. As Ferrison mounted the stairs, he looked behind and found that she was watching him. She had practically reached the instrument but she was waiting until he had turned the corner before she held the receiver to her ear. He shrugged his shoulders. The atmosphere of the place was growing more and more mysterious, but he was no busybody and he had many thoughts to occupy him. He went on to the second landing. Then he paused. He had made up his mind not to look round again but an indefinable impulse, far stronger than any ordinary curiosity, glued his feet to the floor, impelled the slow turning of his head. He looked downwards into the well of shadows and with difficulty repressed an almost irresistible desire to call out. Mrs. Dewar was still standing before the telephone; her left hand was grasping the receiver, the palm of her right hand was pressed against the wall as though for support. She was standing or leaning side face to him, but no view of her features was necessary to indicate her state of suppressed but mortal terror. He almost expected at any moment to see her crumple up and collapse. Instead, she spoke a single inaudible monosyllable into the transmitter, then dropped the receiver from her fingers so that it hung downwards by its quivering cord. Roger knew that she was struggling for composure—and winning. . . She picked up the receiver again and spoke. The words were inaudible but he felt that her tone was steadier. Mrs. Dewar was becoming once more normal. She hung up the receiver and rang off. Then she

turned slowly away. In her movement towards the passage leading to her room, she paused before the switch to the light which still lit the hall. She hesitated here for a moment and then, to Roger's surprise, she passed on, leaving it burning. He heard her footsteps upon the oil-cloth, the swinging of the green baize door, her entrance into her own apartment. With a shiver of relief, he stood up and stretched himself. The little drama, whatever its meaning might have been, was played out. But was it? The light was still burning in the hall. Not only that, but Mrs. Dewar, the most parsimonious of all boarding-house keepers on the subject of lights, had purposely left it burning. . . .

Roger moved up a stair and waited. The same dogged obstinacy which had kept him showing his unwanted machine to at least a hundred unwilling buyers was with him now. He was rewarded. In a very few minutes—although it seemed longer—he heard again the swinging of the baize door and footsteps once more along the passage. Mrs. Dewar, holding in her right hand some invisible object, passed underneath and turned into the alcove. She was there no more than a few seconds but when she returned her hand was empty. This time she made leisurely progress down the hall and extinguished the light. There was an air of finality about her movements. When he heard the swing door close again, he felt sure that he had seen the last of Mrs. Dewar. He waited ten minutes, then he slipped downstairs again in his stockinged feet. He turned at once into the alcove, lit his briquet and glanced eagerly at the long line of keys. This time there was only a single one, under the printed name of Colonel Dennett, missing. The other vacant space had been filled up and the name upon the card above was the name of Mr. Luke.

CHAPTER IX

Three o'clock struck from the Hammersmith clock as Roger Ferrison, with a sigh of relief, closed his eyes. In five minutes he was asleep. At four o'clock precisely the same clock was striking the hour. He sat up in bed with a half-strangled exclamation. He had been sleeping so heavily that for the moment he scarcely remembered where he was or what had awakened him. Then he heard it again—a police whistle, shrill, piercing, ominous.

Still only half awake but thrilled by that tragic sound, he sprang out of bed and hastened to his wide-open window. The sound, he was convinced, had come from somewhere quite near. There were nowhere any signs of life and the darkness was unbroken. He seemed to be looking downwards into a vault of emptiness. Paying the minimum rate, his room was naturally at the back of the house. It was, in fact, little better than an attic. He had never even troubled to look out. He listened intently. It was the quietest hour of the night, or rather early morning. Traffic was almost suspended upon the nearby main road. It was the period between the coming home of the belated and the sallying out of the early. For a moment he was strongly tempted to get back to bed and pull down his windows. He had had enough excitement, he told himself, for one day. All the time, however, he found himself hurrying on his clothes. A police whistle was a thing which could not be disregarded. He crept down the three flights of stairs noiselessly, feeling his way. On the ground floor he ventured to kindle his briquet. A stroke of luck befell him. On the corner of the alcove was the electric torch which Mrs. Dewar had been carrying earlier in the evening. He picked it up, turned it on and, shading it with his hand, passed down the passage, taking care to push back the baize door noiselessly. He passed Flora Quayne's room, descended some more steps, passed through what was evidently the kitchen and reached the scullery. Here he came to a sudden halt. Lying in an uneasy posture close to the back door, on a rough mattress with a cushion for a pillow, was the long, spiderlike form of Joseph in his vest and trousers. He was apparently fast asleep and snoring. Roger's first idea was, naturally enough, to wake him. He stooped down with that intention. Suddenly he paused. By the side of the sleeping man's hand, almost within reach of the grip of his fingers, was an apparently new and obviously expensive revolver. Roger picked it up and examined it curiously. It was a small but a villainously effective weapon and it was fitted with a modern silencer. Whilst he was in the act of examining it, there was a sudden growl from the

floor, almost like the growl of a wild beast. Joseph was sitting up. He seized Roger's hand and wrenched away the weapon. He was no longer the well-trained servant. His white face was convulsed with fury.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, blinking viciously.

"I heard a police whistle just outside here," Roger replied, moving towards the door. "Why it didn't wake you, I can't imagine."

"Police whistle, me eye!" the man grunted. "You don't know what a police whistle is. It was one of them lads that go off on bicycles from the mews there at all hours of the night."

"I've lived in rougher countries than this," Roger told him, unlocking the door, "and I know a police whistle when I hear one. Where does this lead to?"

"No business of yours where it leads to," was the surly reply. "You get back to bed and don't meddle in things that don't concern you."

Roger turned on his torch again. In front of him was a small, sooty patch of what might once have been called a garden, with a path leading to a door in the wall. Roger strode across it, turned another key and found himself in a narrow passage leading down to some mews. Scarcely a dozen yards away a policeman was stooping down, examining some dark object upon the ground. He flashed on his lantern at the sound of footsteps.

"What's wrong?" Roger asked. "Didn't I hear your whistle?"

"You might have done," the policeman answered cautiously. "I've blown it two or three times. My mate's just been along. He's gone to fetch the sergeant."

"What's wrong?"

"Some poor chap got his, all right."

Roger came to a standstill by the man's side. He looked downwards and, strong though he was of nerve and used to some of the rougher phases of life, an exclamation of horror broke from his lips. He had seen dead men before in places where dead men were likely to be found, but there was something awful about the unexpectedness, the apparent futility of this. The man was lying almost peacefully on his back, with one leg drawn up, the fingers of his hand clenched together, his eyes still wide open. A black felt hat lay a few feet away. The overcoat which he apparently had been carrying was lying in the gutter. His spectacles, broken with the fall, were lying shattered by his side. His black bow was just as neatly arranged as it had been at dinner time. Nothing about him was in disorder except for that one terrible hole in his shirt front, exactly over the heart.

"Happen to know him, sir?" the constable asked.

"I have spoken to him once," Roger admitted. "I cannot say I know him but I

can tell you who he is. He is a retired soldier—Colonel Dennett, his name is—and he is staying at the Palace Crescent Boarding House.”

The policeman stroked his chin.

“That’s the biggish place—takes in two or three numbers—Fourteen, Sixteen and Eighteen,” he remarked. “He must have been going to try the back entrance.”

“When did you find him?” Roger asked.

The policeman shook his head.

“No good answering questions twice over,” he replied cautiously. “Here’s the sergeant. Now that you’re here, you had better stay and hear what he has to say.”

A motor car had drawn up in the mews at the bottom of the passage. The sergeant came striding up. He was a slim, alert-looking man, crisp and direct in manner and of speech.

“What’s this, Simmonds?” he asked. “Know anything about him?”

“Not much, sir, except that he’s dead. My beat takes in the mews, but I thought I saw something dark lying on the ground last time up, so I came along. I found him lying just like that and blew my whistle. Harding came up and I sent him for you.”

“See any one about?”

“Not another soul, sir, except this gentleman and he’s only just arrived.”

“Hear any shot?”

“I did not, sir. Seems rather strange, for it’s a still night and I have never been far away.”

The sergeant glanced at his watch and made a few notes.

“Know anything about this, sir?” he asked Roger.

“Nothing whatever,” was the prompt reply. “I am living in the Palace Crescent Boarding House. I keep both my windows wide open all the year round. I expect that’s why I heard the police whistle and the others didn’t. When I arrived, I found the policeman bending over the body. I can tell you who the gentleman is.”

“That’s something—identification,” the sergeant muttered. “Always saves time.”

“His name is Colonel Dennett,” Roger went on. “He is a boarder at the Palace Crescent Boarding House—been there rather a long time, I believe. I have only just come and I was introduced to him a few nights ago.”

“Well, the poor fellow got it quick, that’s one thing,” the sergeant observed. “Pockets been turned inside out and tucked in again, I see. I don’t want to touch him for the moment. Harding’s bringing the doctor. Matter of form, of course. He’s as dead as mutton. Was he a gentleman likely to be carrying much about with him in the way of valuables, do you know, sir?”

“I shouldn’t have said so,” Roger replied. “I know the impression at the

boarding house is that he was very poor. He had one of the smaller rooms. You will have to talk to Mrs. Dewar, the landlady. She can tell you.”

“I shall have to go and see her as soon as the doctor’s been,” the sergeant announced. “What might your name be, sir?”

“My name is Roger Ferrison.”

“You are living at Mrs. Dewar’s boarding house?”

“A new arrival.”

“Any business address?”

“Number Seventeen, Canonbury Street. Another fellow and I are manufacturers in a very small way of a patent cleaning machine.”

“What was your address before you came here?”

“The Canonbury Hotel. I’ve just got back from Canada.”

“You knew nothing of this poor fellow, then, until you came down this way?”

“I never saw him in my life till I met him in the lounge of the boarding house on the night of my arrival.”

There was a brief silence. The sergeant was examining the passage.

“No signs of the weapon,” he muttered to himself. “Here comes the doctor. Good.”

Another car drove up. The doctor arrived—curt, to all appearance shockingly inhuman and not in the least disposed to waste time.

“A very horrible case of murder,” he said, after a brief examination. “Shot fired at pretty close range too, from a very powerful weapon. Must have died like a blink. Clothes seem pretty ancient. You will have the body moved down to the mortuary, I suppose, sergeant?”

“To the station first, if you don’t mind, sir. We will have the finger-print man down from Scotland Yard. Remember, Harding, I want him handled very carefully. The linings of his pockets have been pulled out. They might help. Got a card, sir?” he added, turning to Roger.

Roger presented him with one.

“Perhaps you would not mind letting Mrs. Dewar know up at the boarding house that I shall be round in about half an hour,” he said. “Just as well to prepare her for what’s coming.”

Roger gave one last look at the quiet pinched face of the dead man and turned away with a shiver. He made his way back to the scullery. There was no sign there of Joseph but he met him in the passage a few yards from the entrance to the kitchen. He had thrown on a coat but he was still rather a wild-looking object.

“Where have you been to?” Roger asked.

“I had to go and tell the Missus you were poking about outside,” the man answered sulkily. “Those are her orders—always have been. She likes to know where her boarders are. That’s why she keeps them keys. When one of ’em prances out like you at four o’clock in the morning, she’s got to know about it.”

“I see,” Roger observed. “You will find out presently that I had very good reason for prancing out, as you call it. By-the-by, where is that revolver?”

“What revolver?”

“You know perfectly well,” Roger answered sharply. “It was lying by your side when I came down. I even picked it up and was looking at it when you snatched it away.”

“Well, if I have it, it’s my property and nothing to do with you,” Joseph declared. “And if you want to live here peaceably, young sir, I can give you a word of advice. Don’t you go poking your nose too much into things that don’t concern you. Them as makes a habit of doing that generally find trouble.”

The man with his long, loping walk went off towards the kitchen. Roger stood watching him. A sudden uneasy thought had come to him. When he had examined the revolver, there was one thing which had struck him as being queer. It was loaded in five chambers only. One barrel must have been discharged at some time or other. He called after the disappearing figure.

“Come here a moment, Joseph.”

The man came unwillingly back.

“I want to get another hour’s sleep,” he muttered.

“And before you get it I want to ask you a question,” Roger persisted. “You may find that the police will be asking it of you before long. When did you fire off the first barrel of that revolver?”

The man’s appearance was for the moment the appearance of a madman. He restrained himself with an effort.

“I was just forgetting that you are one of the gents I am supposed to wait on,” he said, “and I was going to ask you what the hell business that is of yours?”

“It isn’t my business, I admit,” Roger answered, “but it’s a sure thing that the police will very soon make it theirs.”

“The police! What police?”

“Look here, Joseph,” Roger said not unkindly. “I don’t think you had anything to do with it but you may as well know the truth. Colonel Dennett was shot—murdered—within a few yards of our side gate some time during the night. They have just taken him away. A revolver shot, it was—through the heart.”

The man staggered to a chair. He covered his face with his hands. He uttered no

sound, made no movement.

Mrs. Dewar's weary, precise voice was heard calling from the other side of the kitchen.

"Mr. Ferrison, will you please come this way?"

Roger promptly obeyed. Joseph remained rocking himself in his chair, apparently in a sort of stupor.

CHAPTER X

Mrs. Dewar led the way to her office. The bedroom, Roger now observed, was a small apartment little larger than a cupboard, which opened out from it.

"You seem to be a very restless young man," she said, without asking him to sit down. "I begin to think that you would be too restless for us here. We are quiet people, as a rule. We find our own business quite sufficient to look after."

"Quiet people, are you?" Roger answered, with some irritation. "Well, I shouldn't have thought it. I haven't been wandering about to amuse myself, I can assure you."

"What do you mean?"

"I happen to sleep with my windows pretty wide open," Roger explained. "I heard a police whistle and you know what any man's duty is if he hears that. I went to see what it was about."

"A police whistle? Where?"

"In the mews at the back. I'm sorry, Mrs. Dewar," Roger went on, forgetting his momentary annoyance. "I have some rather bad news for you."

"Bad news," she repeated bitterly. "Well, what is it?"

"Colonel Dennett has met with an accident near here. It looks as though he had been intending to enter the house by the back door. At any rate, he was found in the path leading from the mews."

"Found?" Mrs. Dewar repeated, and a still horror seemed to have crept into her deep-set eyes.

"I am terribly sorry to have to tell you, Mrs. Dewar, but it is best to hear the worst and get it over," Roger said. "Here, sit down, do."

He pushed a chair towards her. She took no notice of it.

"What has happened to Colonel Dennett?" she demanded.

"He has been murdered," Roger told her. "Shot through the heart most brutally."

The woman's lips moved but no sound came. Roger watched her carefully. He was ready to spring to her assistance if necessary. He had an idea that she might at any moment collapse. Afterwards it seemed to him strange that she asked none of the usual questions. She didn't ask him why. She didn't ask him by whom. She didn't ask him if the murderer was already in custody. Just accepted what she was told. Incurious. Of what she might have been feeling inside, of what thoughts were teeming at the back of her brain, he could form no idea. She gave him simply the

impression of suspended sensation.

“I would like to fetch you some brandy or something, if I knew where to find it,” he suggested.

She seemed not to hear him. Her eyes were travelling through the room now. She was seeing something of which he had no knowledge.

“What time was this?” she asked.

“They cannot tell yet. The policeman found him about half an hour ago. That’s about the time I heard the whistle and went down. No one, however, seems to have heard any report, so unless they get some further evidence, it will be difficult to say exactly when it took place. The doctor will probably be able to say how long he has been dead.”

“You heard nothing except the police whistle?”

“Nothing. It woke me up. I went down, of course. I am not a busybody, I can assure you, Mrs. Dewar, but it is a man’s duty, wherever he may be, to answer a summons like that.”

“You came downstairs from your room, you found your way outside through the scullery door?” she said, speaking very slowly, almost as though she were visualising his progress. “Did you meet any one on the way?”

“I saw no one,” he told her, “except your man Joseph, who appeared to be asleep in the back kitchen. He had not heard the whistle, so naturally he was not very pleased at being waked up.”

“He came to tell me that you had left the house,” she confided. “Of course, he didn’t know then how serious this all was.”

“I am afraid, Mrs. Dewar,” Roger went on, “that the police will be wanting to interview you very soon. If I can be of any help, please send for me. I shall go upstairs and see if I can get an hour’s sleep now.”

“Yes, do,” she replied. “I will try to see that they don’t disturb you.”

She moved back towards her room, the landlady who had just been told of the murder of one of her boarders, an amazing type of self-control—or inhumanity. Once more Roger mounted his three flights of stairs, took off his things and lay down on the bed. Sleep, he told himself, would be an utter impossibility. He had seen men who had been killed in a fight, he had been in some rough places at one time, but he had never felt anything like the horror that the sight of that frail dead body had caused him. Violent deeds did not seem to march with civilisation and Dennett was, after all, a simple type of man—what could he have done to deserve such brutality? Sleep! How could one sleep after such an experience? . . . The next thing he remembered was the sun flooding into the room.

Death, the greatest tragedy the world knows, does very little, or nothing, towards arresting or slackening the turning wheel of life. At eleven o'clock that morning, according to appointment, Roger and Jimmie Sark, his partner, were seated in the private office of Mr. Simpkins, buyer of household goods for the firm of Mallory.

They received a cordial enough welcome but no indication was given at first as to the turn affairs were likely to take.

"In the first place," Mr. Simpkins began, "we received your delivery of thirty-two Safresson cleaners yesterday. The cashier has sent up a cheque for them, less the usual discount, which I presume is in order."

"Quite in order," Roger Ferrison declared, producing a fountain pen and signing the receipt. "We are rather hoping," he added, summoning up his courage, "that you will be able to give us a larger order."

"H'm," Mr. Simpkins ejaculated, with the air of one considering the idea. "What sized order could you deal with?"

The two partners exchanged glances.

"Mr. Sark," Roger explained, "is the head of the factory department."

Mr. Simpkins smiled. He had sent a messenger down to investigate the factory.

"I should think we might manage a hundred a month," Mr. Sark ventured hesitatingly.

Mr. Simpkins sat back in his chair and pressed together his finger tips.

"I can see that we shall have to talk about this business in a different fashion, my young friends," he said. "You are not aware, perhaps—didn't I understand, Mr. Ferrison, that you have just arrived from Canada?—that the firm of Mallory is one of the largest distributing firms for household equipment in the world. We have factories in most of the colonies and branches in most large cities. A hundred of those little machines of yours with our selling weight behind should go every morning."

Roger tried to speak but found his throat ridiculously dry.

"We had better," Mr. Simpkins continued, "talk business on an entirely different basis. I have examined your patent and found, although the idea seems so simple, that it is sound. Are you disposed to sell it?"

The two young men exchanged glances.

"No," was their simultaneous answer.

"I don't blame you," Mr. Simpkins proceeded. "I should probably offer you what would seem a fantastic price for it, but you would live to regret the day. Besides, it would leave you without any employment or an interest in life. That's not the way we like to do business. What I should propose—what our lawyer to whom

I have put the situation proposes—is, roughly speaking, this. We form a small company with a capital, say, of fifty thousand pounds—an offshoot of Mallory's. Twenty-five thousand pounds' worth of the shares you two will divide. Twenty-five thousand pounds' worth we shall hold. Mr. Ferrison could be chairman and we should wish to appoint a vice-chairman from our own staff. With the capital provided, we should equip a factory with modern machinery, we should buy for cash the various materials necessary for manufacturing the article. We reckon that this would reduce the cost some thirty-five per cent., and, going into the figures as closely as I can, I have come to the conclusion that upon a capital of fifty thousand, thirty-five per cent. would be about the profit we should make. We should be willing for you two to draw a salary of a thousand pounds a year each to commence with. The financial side of matters, such as the declaration of dividends, bonuses, et cetera, would be in the hands of our accountant but you would, of course, have a lawyer who would superintend the drawing up of the charter. I do not think, Mr. Ferrison or Mr. Sark, you would have any reason to find fault with the proposition."

"If I understood it properly, I think it is an amazing one," Ferrison declared.

"We accept it, of course," the other young man faltered.

"We do not want to waste any time," Mr. Simpkins went on. "The one part of our household equipment with which we have been dissatisfied has been our cleaners. Here we have found what we want and we are anxious to put them on the market at once here and abroad. Bring your lawyer to us this evening. We have already several factories on our list which might be suitable. I should like to get one equipped and at work within a month. There would be no difficulty," he went on, with a glance at the seams of Roger's suit, "about a capital advance. You two, of course, would have plenty to do looking after the machinery our expert proposes and other matters, so your salaries would commence from to-morrow. Communicate with your lawyer, Mr. Ferrison, and bring him here at four o'clock. You will find our own man fully instructed but, in case you are ever in doubt as to the broad proposals of our deal, it is this: The profits made by Mafresson Limited (as we shall call the company) will be divided exactly between us who find the capital and place the article and you who lease the patent to the company. The agreement and charter will be upon those lines. Is it satisfactory?"

"It sounds perfectly overwhelming," Ferrison confessed.

"If you only knew what Roger and I have been through," the other young man said, with a little choke in his voice, "you would understand what this means to us. It is just what we prayed for—that we should get one of the big firms in the world to take us up. We couldn't do any good in a small way—people would not listen to us.

My father was a Primitive Methodist parson,” Sark continued, “and I am not ashamed to say that this sounds like an answer to prayer.”

“Well, run away out and have a drink on it,” Mr. Simpkins suggested, with a smile. “Not that I approve of drinking in business hours,” he added, as he opened the door, “but there are occasions—there must always be occasions.”

The two young men felt entirely dazed as they reached the street. It is certain that they would at once have taken Mr. Simpkins’ advice, but in the heart of Knightsbridge they had no idea how to set about it. Roger touched his face and found it wet with perspiration.

“Let’s go into the park and sit down for a moment,” he proposed.

His companion agreed eagerly. They selected an empty bench and silently shook hands. Sark, who was the more matter of fact of the two, seemed nevertheless the more affected.

“Sounds too good to be true,” he kept on muttering.

“Good God!” Roger exclaimed suddenly.

“What is it?” his friend demanded. “Don’t startle me like that, Roger. What’s wrong?”

Roger smiled reassurance.

“It’s nothing really wrong. I quite forgot—we owe all this to a little girl behind one of the counters there. She got a friend of hers to take me up to Mr. Simpkins, and there we just marched out of that place with our heads in the air and never even thanked her.”

“Gee, how you startled me!” the other young man said, with a sigh of relief. “I thought you had gone and sold half the profits or something to pay for the patent.”

“Did you have any breakfast, by the way?” Roger asked curiously.

“As a matter of fact, I didn’t,” Sark admitted. “It took exactly all there was in the safe, all there was in the petty cash and the odd change I had in my pocket to pay the drayman to deliver those cleaners.”

Roger Ferrison smiled.

“Come on, old chap,” he invited, rising to his feet. “I have an amazing, a wonderful, a perfectly good pound note in the inner pocket of my waistcoat. I can feel it now. It is practically all I had left, after I had paid my landlady. We’ll take a tuppenny bus down into the City and we’ll go to the Canonbury Hotel. We’ll get something to eat and look at the directory. Perhaps we need not even do that. There’s a man at the boarding house I’m at—Padgham his name is—who’s either a lawyer or in a lawyer’s office. We’ll go to him.”

They walked briskly down towards the main road and boarded a bus.

“What came over you a few moments ago, when you mentioned your boarding house?” Roger’s partner enquired curiously.

Roger pointed down to the placards hung on the railings at the entrance to Hyde Park.

“It went out of my head with all this excitement,” he said. “But look at that.” They read the placard.

TRAGIC DEATH OF A RETIRED COLONEL

“Colonel Dennett, his name is. He was murdered this morning close to our boarding house. I saw the body. He was one of our boarders. Queer thing,” Roger went on, as they rolled away Citywards. “A few hours ago, I thought I should never forget seeing him lying there and the horror of it all. Now it doesn’t seem anything. Selfish brutes, aren’t we?”

“As nature made us,” Sark assented drily. “Who cares about a dead Colonel anyway, when there’s a live fortune to be made?”

The horrors of the night had passed. There was a certain callousness in his friend’s speech which grated, but subconsciously Roger Ferrison knew that he was in entire agreement. By the time they reached the City, excitement had banished appetite. They drank a tankard of beer each, instead, and for all they knew, it might have been water. Then they studied a directory.

“What did you say your pal’s name was?” Sark enquired.

“He’s not a pal,” Roger explained. “He’s just a fellow boarder at Palace Crescent. I was told that he was a lawyer. If he can’t take the job on himself, he’ll tell us where to go.”

“Here he is,” Sark pointed out. “Padgham, Number Seven, Angel Court, Finsbury.”

“Not ten minutes away. Let’s hurry up, in case he goes out to lunch early.”

Angel Court was found with some difficulty. It was not an attractive locality. They passed through the open door of a shabby but still severe-looking, grey-stone building and glanced up at the board of names. Half of them seemed to have been crossed out but there in letters that were once white, but were now very nearly obscure, was the name of which they were in search.

T. PADGHAM. 2ND FLOOR

Roger looked about him. There was no porter. A glance at the lift inspired one with a sense of insecurity. The place seemed deserted, except for a messenger boy who was descending the steps as they entered and who went off swinging his bag.

"I don't like the appearance of this place," Roger admitted frankly. "I think we should do better to go and ask the landlord of the Canonbury Hotel to tell us the name of a lawyer."

"Well, we're here," Sark pointed out reasonably enough. "No harm in going upstairs and asking a civil question."

"All right," Roger assented. "Come on."

"Our lives now," his partner observed, "may be of some value. I am for walking gently up the stairs and leaving the lift alone."

They mounted to the second floor almost in silence, passing only one man upon the stairs. The atmosphere of the place was still depressing. Arrived at their destination, however, they discovered a door on the second floor, on which was plainly inscribed the name T. PADGHAM.

"Oughtn't it to have 'solicitor' or something after it?" Roger asked doubtfully.

"Well, if he's not a solicitor, that's the end of it," his friend declared. "Now we're here, we're going to ask."

It was he who knocked at the door and opened it in response to a somewhat hesitating invitation. The interior was not attractive but it seemed to bring the room within the bounds of possibility. There was an empty desk close by and another larger one in the middle of the room at which Mr. Padgham was seated. There were tin boxes against the wall but they seemed purposely stacked so that the name of the occupier's clients remained unseen. There were two or three bookshelves half full of decrepit-looking volumes, a couple of easy-chairs and a strong smell of cigar smoke. Mr. Padgham held a pen in his hand but there was no evidence that he had been writing. He looked at the newcomers in frank amazement.

"What do you want?" he asked, and there was something in his voice which puzzled the two young men.

"Sorry if we have intruded, sir," Roger said. "I ought not to have come, perhaps."

He hesitated. It was obvious that Mr. Padgham's hand was shaking. Roger remembered that he had not seen him at breakfast time and, looking at him as he sat there, his hair unkempt, his linen no longer even passable, a strained look about his face and eyes, Mr. Padgham might have been the perfect presentment of a City man who had spent the night out and was rather sorry about it.

"You are the new boarder at Palace Crescent, aren't you?" Mr. Padgham interrupted. "What on earth do you want here? What do you want with me?"

For some reason or other, Mr. Padgham seemed afraid. Roger smiled cheerily.

"I'm terribly sorry we have intruded, sir," he apologised. "The fact of it is, my

partner here and I urgently need the services of a lawyer. We don't know a soul in London and I suddenly remembered when I was introduced to a few of you the night of my arrival that some one said they thought you were a solicitor. I looked your name up in the directory and here we are. If we have made a mistake, I'm sorry."

Mr. Padgham laid down the pen. He gripped the fingers which had been holding it with his other hand, as though he found them numb. His half-ironical, half-Victorian flamboyant geniality seemed to have fled away. His moustache had no life in it. He was either a sick man or he was very much afraid.

"Seems an odd story, that," he mumbled doubtfully. "A very odd story. Sit down, Mr. Ferrison. What is it you want? Are you in trouble?"

Roger laughed cheerily.

"Not likely," he answered. "We have just had a stroke of real good fortune, my friend and I. We've got a wonderful offer from Mallory's, the great wholesale firm, to take up a machine of ours. They want us to bring along a lawyer and meet them at four o'clock."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Mr. Padgham demanded hoarsely, his bloodshot eyes turning from one to the other. "Mallory's at four o'clock? A machine?"

"Well, I'll explain it more fully, if you like," Roger said. "You see, it's like this—"

"Do you mean to say," Mr. Padgham interrupted, "that you have not come here about this affair at Palace Crescent—about what happened last night—I mean, early this morning?"

"Good Lord, no," Roger declared. "For the moment I had forgotten all about it."

"But you are the young man who heard the police whistle—who went out and saw the body—aren't you?" Mr. Padgham persisted.

"That's quite true," Roger agreed. "It knocked me over completely at the time, but my friend and I were just saying how selfish we are in life. This stroke of good fortune seems to have driven it all out of my head. In any case, I should not have come here to see you about that!"

Mr. Padgham swallowed hard. He had the air of a man who was trying to pull himself together but who was in too grievous a state. Suspicion still lurked in his eyes.

"Sorry, I'm not at all myself," he confessed. "Poor old Dennett—we were not exactly friends, but I saw a lot of him. Such a horrible death! They told me quite suddenly too. I've not been myself since."

"When did you see him last?" Roger asked, in perfect innocence.

Such spirit as there was left in the man blazed up.

“What the hell do you mean by asking me questions?” he demanded, his hands trembling. “I have lost an old acquaintance—murdered—murdered within a few yards of the house where we were living. What do you mean by coming here and asking me when I saw him last? Are you a policeman in disguise?”

Roger rose to his feet.

“I think we had better leave you, Mr. Padgham,” he said. “I can see you are too much upset to talk business to-day. As to being a policeman—that’s all rubbish. I have no interest in the poor man’s murder, except that murder is always a horrible thing. I’d scarcely ever spoken to Dennett and the only time he might have said a civil word to me he didn’t. Not that I minded, but there’s not a person in the world in whom I had less interest.”

Mr. Padgham seemed soothed but still in an extraordinary state of nervous suspicion. He sat looking at the wall opposite to him and muttering to himself. Roger turned to his friend.

“We won’t bother Mr. Padgham any more, Jimmie,” he said. “I had no idea I was going to let you in for this. We have struck an unfortunate morning.”

Mr. Padgham turned his head.

“Come back, you two,” he called out. “What is it you wanted—a solicitor? Well, I don’t practise nowadays. I’m tired of it. I have other affairs to see to. Company law—you want somebody who knows something about company law, I suppose. First class. Here you are.”

He drew a piece of paper towards him and scribbled down the name of a firm in Lincoln’s Inn.

“You needn’t say I sent you,” he went on. “They might not think it much of a recommendation. They are a first-class firm, all right.”

Roger took the paper and thrust it into his waistcoat pocket.

“I’m very much obliged, Mr. Padgham,” he said. “This will help us immensely. I’ll say a friend recommended me. I hope you will be feeling better when we meet again.”

The man at the desk waved them away.

“The kindest thing you can do,” he concluded, “is to forget this visit. I’ve sent my clerk out. I couldn’t bear any one in the room with me. I keep on seeing poor old Dennett. Damn him!”

Roger and his friend took their leave. On the way down the stairs, Sark shivered.

“I should never call myself a detective, old chap,” he remarked, “but if I were,

and if I wanted to find out who had had a hand in the killing of your Colonel Dennett, I think I should want to know where that poor devil we have just left spent the early hours of the morning.”

CHAPTER XI

Roger Ferrison returned home to Palace Crescent that evening, wearing new shoes and with a brown paper parcel under his arm. It was an hour before the usual dinner time. Joseph and a maid were engaged in laying the dining tables and a faint smell of cooking pervaded the premises. There was nothing to indicate the recent tragedy and Roger, having deposited his key upon its hook, was turning to mount the stairs when the green baize door was softly opened and a face, which in that dim light seemed to him almost the face of a Madonna, looked out upon him. Then the human smile parted her lips and the door was pushed farther open. Flora Quayne, using one stick only and supporting herself against the wall with the other hand, appeared.

“Mr. Ferrison,” she called out softly, “do put your parcels down and come to my room for a moment. I want to speak to you.”

Roger, who was far too happy to have refused anybody anything, promptly obeyed. He brought his parcels with him, however, and laid them down in a corner just inside her sitting room. She looked at them with a whimsical smile.

“Why do you carry those things yourself?” she asked. “I thought men hated parcels. And what is in them? I’m curious.”

“Perhaps,” he promised, “you’ll see before long.”

“I shall see what? Please explain.”

“You and every one else here,” he assured her. “In one parcel there are two new suits, bought from the shelf, ready-made. It seems that I am a large man’s stock size. In the other there are shirts, ties and underclothes. As you may notice, I have on a new pair of shoes.”

She laughed quietly.

“You strange man!” she exclaimed. “Is that how you do your shopping?”

“This time yesterday,” he told her, “I had not the faintest idea when I should ever be able to do any shopping again. My partner and I have had some wonderful luck. We have each received a sum of money down on account of a sale and we have each been spending it.”

“Were you really so poor?” she asked gently. “You were so proud last night; and I wanted to ask you if I could lend you some money. Money is of so little use to me unless there is some one to share it with.”

“That’s very nice and human of you, anyhow,” he said.

Her beautiful long arm reached up to his neck and rested on his shoulder. It was not exactly a caress but it was a very sweet little gesture of intimacy.

“Ring that handbell,” she begged.

He obeyed. A small bronze affair it was, curiously shaped. From the inner room, a moment later, came Marie the maid. She carried a tray on which was a silver shaker.

“You don’t hate *apéritifs*, I hope?” Flora enquired. “I had just made these cocktails before I came out to look for you. They are not shaken yet.”

“Hate them!” he repeated. “Try me! I don’t know much about them, though.”

“You will like this one,” she assured him, as the maid, after handling the shaker vigorously, poured its contents into the two glasses, “for I made it myself and I thought of you whilst I was making it. I hoped I should have the good fortune to find you in the lounge or I should have sent Marie up to your room. I want to ask you a favour, dear friend, but first I will drink your health.”

They pledged each other solemnly, Roger thought that he had never tasted anything so delicious in his life. She laughed with all the gaiety of a child when she saw his appreciation.

“I can mix you a dozen different sorts,” she confided, with a charming air of conceit. “A different one for every day of the week.”

“I can’t believe that you could improve on this.”

She pushed the cigarettes over to him and led him gently towards the easy-chair. She sat on the arm by his side.

“I have a favour to ask,” she repeated.

“Couldn’t say no after this, could I?” he replied. “Especially,” he went on, with sudden realisation of the shadow hanging over the house, “as this has been a lucky day for me, notwithstanding its bad start.”

“Do you mind trying to forget that bad start?” she pleaded. “That’s what I wanted to beg of you. Mrs. Dewar is too proud to ask favours of her boarders. I am asking one for her. Don’t leave because of this dreadful affair and don’t talk about it more than you can help—especially to-night at dinner time.”

“I’ll promise not to talk about it, willingly,” he assented, “and I’ve no idea of leaving for the present. If things turn out as seems possible, I might ask Mrs. Dewar for a better room, but I certainly would not think of leaving. I rather thought she was going to give me notice this morning. She seemed to think that I had no business to leave the house to answer that police whistle.”

“She was not herself,” Flora Quayne explained earnestly. “That’s why I made up my mind to speak to you. She was afraid you were annoyed. If you went, that horrid

girl who sits watching you with those googly eyes would probably go too, and when one begins, there is no telling where it would end. Besides, I don't wish you to go."

"If you spoil me like this," he laughed, "I will stay on forever. There's something about the atmosphere of your room, Miss Quayne, that excites me. I don't know what it is," he went on meditatively. "Directly I cross the threshold, it seems to me that I'm in a changed world. You are rather a romantic person, aren't you, with your beautiful dresses and those sweet, fragrant perfumes. I always hated scent before. Your room, too, with its beautiful furniture. Such a nest of luxury in such a—well, very commonplace environment, isn't it?"

The joy of her face was almost childish in its ingenuousness.

"Tell me just how you feel when you come in here," she begged. "Happy? Excited? Glad to be with me?"

"Why, of course," he assured her. "Haven't I told you so?"

"Do you think," she persisted, "that Miss Packe would seem at home in a room like this and wearing my sort of clothes and saying the wicked things I say to you?"

He shook his head.

"Miss Packe is one of the best in the world," he declared. "I admire her terribly and I like her more than I can tell you. She went out of her way, too, to do me a good turn. All the same, I couldn't fancy her in your environment."

"Her legs are quite straight, I suppose?" the girl sighed.

"I don't think," he said bluntly, "that there's very much the matter with yours."

The light of joyous gratitude shone in her eyes.

"That's sweet of you," she murmured, her arm stealing around his neck. "You know more about them than any one else in the world, except Marie, and I always imagine that people think they must be much worse. Every one pities me so and I hate it! I thought I saw the same look in your face. That's what rather sent me crazy the other night—why I determined that one man, at any rate, should know I am not horribly deformed. You know it, don't you, Roger? You are the man I want to know it."

He suddenly felt a breath of danger. It was very faint and it seemed to bring with it a sense of vague excitement. Some feeling he failed to analyse stirred him for a moment. He only knew that it was like yielding to some new and unexplored pleasure.

"Roger," she whispered, "can I ask you another favour?"

"Yes."

"To-night is going to be rather awful. Every one will be gloomy and yet they will try not to be. I want to go in for Mrs. Dewar's sake. Will you come and sit at my

table?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't."

"Why not?"

He set his teeth. He was a fool, perhaps, to have taken that second cocktail. The warmth of the room, the perfume from a bowl of roses close at hand, the faint exotic effect of her near presence, disturbed his senses. It was so hard to say the commonplace things and the things which he had to say.

"Because," he told her, "I have asked Miss Packe to share my table. I told you about this stroke of good fortune which came to me to-day. It was through her. I should be very ungrateful if I left her alone on this particular evening."

"But Miss Packe is not going to be here! Haven't you had your note?"

"I've had nothing. She doesn't arrive from work generally until later than this."

"She sent word in to Mrs. Dewar to say that she would not be dining to-night, as she had to go to her aunt's in Putney. I know that she sent a note for you at the same time."

"I didn't look in the rack," he admitted.

Flora leaned backwards.

"Marie!" she called out. "Marie! Go and look in the rack and if there is a note or letter for Mr. Ferrison, bring it here."

"Certainly, Madam."

"You see, I happen to know," the girl went on, "because I have been in to see Mrs. Dewar several times to-day. It was whilst she was hoping that every one would dine downstairs that Miss Packe's note came. Of course, she could not complain about that, but she is terribly sensitive about people staying away because of what has happened."

Marie returned, bearing a note upon a salver. Roger tore open the envelope and read.

Dear Mr. Ferrison,

My aunt, with whom I generally spend my holidays, is not well and she has asked me to go straight from work to see her down at Putney. She adds that she wants to arrange the date for my going to Cornwall. I feel that I must go. Do you mind very much?

Sincerely yours,

A. P.

P.S. Of course if you really felt angelic you would telephone me at eight o'clock at 18—12 Putney and let me know about the interview. Mr.

Gedge told me that he was quite sure it was all right but I want to hear from you. And if you feel more angelic still, later in the evening, why don't you come down and fetch me at ten o'clock? The address is Seventeen Ranelagh Terrace, and it's just about halfway up the hill on the left.

Roger thrust the note into his pocket.

"Quite as you say," he remarked. "Miss Packe has to go to see her aunt. I am to fetch her later on."

"You will dine with me?" Flora asked eagerly.

"If I may, I would love to," he promised. "But if we drink wine, you drink it with me. Prospectively," he went on, stretching himself out in the chair, "I am a wealthy man. I feel it coming on. One of the first things I shall do is to buy one of those shaker things, the necessary bottles, and get you to tell me how to mix something like this."

She laughed happily.

"We will have rival cocktail parties," she exclaimed. "I don't go up the stairs easily, so you shall give yours in a corner of the lounge and I shall give mine here. You will be able to ask Miss Packe and I shall ask whom I please. It will be amusing. Shall you wear your new suit to-night, Roger?"

"Well, I thought I'd better have my dinner clothes made to measure," he explained, "so I sha'n't get them for a week. I have a very nice dark blue suit, the seams of which don't shine at all. Shall I wear that?"

"I love blue serge," she told him. "As for me, I am all distraught. Marie and I will spend the next half hour going through my frocks. I have never dined with you alone, you see."

"You've only known me a week," Roger reminded her, with a sudden return of his practical self.

"Oh, don't be foolish," she remonstrated. "As though that mattered! We shall sit opposite each other. I must remember that. And oh," she groaned, "I quite forgot. After all, my choice is limited. This is a night of sorrow. It must be grey or black—or smoke colour, perhaps."

He finished his cocktail, rose to his feet and picked up his parcels. Leaning against the wall in a remote corner of the room was a brand-new golf bag filled with a formidable looking array of clubs. He pointed it out to her.

"When may I give you a lesson?" he asked, smiling.

"Some day," she promised him cheerfully. "I warn you I have made up my mind to get completely well and play all manner of games. That bag, though, was my

birthday present to Mr. Luke. Not the clubs, of course, just the bag. He brought it in this afternoon because he wants a slight alteration made.”

“Has he been playing to-day?” Roger asked.

She nodded.

“He was afraid people might think it rather callous of him,” she said, “but he was playing with the captain of Sunningdale, a very old engagement. I think he really left his clubs here because he didn’t want to be seen carrying them upstairs.”

Roger turned towards the door. With the intriguing idea before her of choosing her gown for the evening, she allowed him to take his leave almost without protest.

“We will meet in the lounge,” she proposed. “I will conduct you myself to the table, and don’t dare to drink one of those horrid *apéritifs* after my Side Car! They are made of nothing but vermouth and water, and I believe Joseph sees to it that they are half water.”

“How is Joseph, by the way?” he asked. “Still very upset?”

“Every one is upset,” she replied. “Be down quite early, please. I shall want to go in at the first stroke of the gong, and remember—although I know you must go some time—I shan’t expect you to hurry away to fetch my rival. How I hate her!”

“I’ll take a taxi,” he promised, “so as to spend every possible moment with you.”

The door to Mrs. Dewar’s room was open as he passed and she called him in.

“One moment, Mr. Ferrison,” she begged. “Please close the door.”

He obeyed and stood just inside the room, patiently holding his parcels.

“Do you know that you are summoned as a witness at the inquest on Colonel Dennett?”

“I thought I should be,” he answered.

“It is to be held to-morrow,” she confided, “at three o’clock.”

“I’m so sorry for the shock this must have been to you,” he said. “Is there any further news about the affair?”

“News? No. I have not heard of any. I am more worried about poor Joseph just now than any one. He is a very nervous man and he is terribly upset. For months he has been saving up all the tips he gets and he had just bought himself a revolver. The police found it in his cupboard to-day. Did you see it last night? I do hope that you didn’t.”

“Mrs. Dewar,” Roger told her gravely, “if I go to the inquest, as it appears that I must, I shall be sworn and I shall have to tell the truth.”

“But perhaps you didn’t see it?”

“I did. It was lying by his side, only an inch or two from his fingers. He appeared to be asleep, but a portion of the rug which covered him had been dragged over as

though to conceal it.”

Her hand clasped her forehead for a moment. Even the gesture was a surprise to Roger. It was as though a new spring of movement had been found in a perfect automaton.

“Did you notice anything particular about it?”

“Of course I did,” he admitted. “The first barrel had been fired.”

“Lately?”

“I couldn’t tell.”

“Was there any smell of gunpowder in the room?”

“I noticed none.”

“Then Joseph’s story might be true,” she went on, her eyes searching his face anxiously. “He says that he fired off the first barrel at the high wall to test the throw and forgot to reload it.”

“So far as I am concerned, that might be the truth,” Roger admitted.

She opened the door for him and stood at one side. “Thank you, Mr. Ferrison,” she said. “We shall see you at dinner, I hope?”

“Why, certainly I shall be there,” he promised.

CHAPTER XII

The sole occupant of the lounge when Roger descended a short while before the dinner hour was Mr. Padgham, who was standing on the hearthrug reading an evening paper. He threw it to one side at the young man's entrance.

"I was hoping I might see you, Mr. Ferrison," he said. "I am afraid you and your friend must have thought I was in a pretty poor way this morning."

"Well, I'm glad to see you looking yourself again, anyhow," Roger replied.

Mr. Padgham had certainly made a swift recovery. The colour had come back to his cheeks, he had evidently paid a visit to the barber's, and his long moustache, with its curiously assertive droop, was back in form again. He remained standing with his hands clasped behind him.

"The thing was a shock," he went on. "A murder like that on the premises, as you might say. A man you had been in the habit of meeting every day for a year or so, too. It takes the wind out of your sails, what? Not that he and I had ever had much to say to each other. These ex-army officers are always a trifle difficult."

"I had scarcely seen anything of him," Roger remarked.

"A secretive sort of chap," the other observed. "Perhaps something may come out at the inquest which will throw a light upon the affair. Might have been suicide, you know."

"The doctor didn't seem to think that was possible, and then, no weapon was found on the spot," Roger pointed out. "By-the-by, we went to see the firm of lawyers you were kind enough to recommend and they have our affairs in hand."

"Capital," Mr. Padgham declared cheerfully. "Good firm—first-class people. Don't think, Mr. Ferrison, that I don't appreciate your offer of business, but to tell you the truth I practise very little nowadays. I have two permanent appointments and I don't look about for outside business. Very kind of you to think of me, all the same. What about a glass of sherry?"

"I should like it very much," Roger assented.

They rang the bell for Joseph, who came in promptly and filled the order without delay. He, too, seemed to have recovered from his early morning breakdown. His manner was subdued but composed. There was still a scared look in his eyes, however, as though the memory of the shock lingered.

"Every one dining as usual, Joseph?" Mr. Padgham asked.

"I think so, sir," the man replied. "No one has warned off that I knows of,

except Miss Packe. They'll talk me into the grave just because they know I was somewhere near the spot where that poor old gentleman was done in," Joseph went on bitterly. "They've been at it in the kitchen all day. Why they can't leave it alone, I don't know. Talk about cheerful things, I say."

"You're quite right, Joseph," Mr. Padgham said, as he lifted his glass to his lips and exchanged nods with Roger. "All the brooding in the world won't bring the poor fellow back again."

"All the same, a mystery like that does appeal to people nowadays," Roger remarked. "Look at all the murder and mystery stories that are written."

"I don't see that it's much of a mystery," Mr. Padgham objected. "Whoever did it was a fool. Fancy doing away with a poor old man like that for the sake of what he might have had on him! His pockets were rifled—turned inside out, they say. I suppose any old gentleman going home between three and four o'clock in the morning—in dinner clothes too—runs a bit of a risk," Padgham reflected. "Still, it's a wicked job. I don't suppose Dennett ever had more than a five-pound note on him any night of his life."

Roger remembered the promise he had made to Flora and changed the subject.

"Well, here they all come," he announced, glancing towards the open curtains. "Here's Barstowe and Bernascon, and those two dear old ladies, the Misses Clewes, and Mr. Luke too."

"Luke's a good fellow," Mr. Padgham observed. "If ever the house needs a bit of support, he's always on hand."

Mr. Luke's demeanour seemed to be perfectly well chosen for the occasion. He was somewhat graver than usual; a trifle more colourless, he might have seemed, but he showed no signs of undue depression. He entered carrying an evening paper in his hand, turned down at the money market.

"Sorry to see the Stock Exchange has had rather a bad day," he remarked to Padgham and the others.

"What about Home Rails?" Mr. Bernascon enquired.

"Down," was Mr. Luke's succinct reply.

"Argentines?" Mr. Barstowe ventured.

"Flopped," was the disconsolate report. "Nothing seems to have held up except a few home industrials."

Roger, not being interested, hung about on the outskirts of the group. Suddenly he felt a touch on the arm. He looked around. The younger of the Misses Clewes, the septuagenarian spinsters, was looking up at him with a bright light in her eager eyes.

“Mr. Ferrison,” she asked, in a tone which was little more than a whisper. “What do you think of this shocking affair?”

“I am trying not to think about it,” Roger answered.

The little old lady scarcely seemed to have heard him. She was carrying her knitting in her hand and all the time she talked the long steel needles were busy.

“My sister and I,” she went on, “are greatly disturbed. We have had many friends in the service. In fact, we may be said to be a soldier family. Our uncle, Colonel Clewes, commanded the Royal Surreys.”

Roger made no reply but he inclined his head sympathetically.

“We are greatly disturbed, my sister and I,” Miss Susannah repeated. “Do you think, Mr. Ferrison, it was any one in the house who committed the crime?”

“Heavens! I shouldn’t think so.” Roger answered emphatically. “The poor old man could not have had any real enemies. It was just some desperate fellow who thought he looked worth robbing, I should think.”

Miss Susannah Clewes gripped Roger by the arm and led him a little further away from the group of men. Her long, clawlike fingers, he noticed, were covered with rings set in an old-fashioned style. She sank into a chair.

“My sister and I do not think so,” she confided. “To tell you the truth, Mr. Ferrison, we do not trust the people in this boarding house.”

“But, why not?”

“We have reasons,” Miss Susannah went on mysteriously. “Very grave reasons. We came to the conclusion some time ago that we ought to leave. My sister, though, is more adventurous than I am. She wants to stay. She said to me only a few weeks ago—‘Some time, Susannah, something will happen in this place. We must stay and watch.’ And something has happened!”

Roger looked down at his strange companion with very mingled feelings. Against his will, her words had stirred up a sort of disquietude in him. They, too, had sensed the atmosphere! There was something in those hard keen eyes, half-frightened, half-jubilant, utterly mysterious, which puzzled him.

“My sister and I know very few people here,” she continued. “Perhaps we might have spoken to some one else if we did. My sister thinks you look honest, though, Mr. Ferrison.”

“I hope I am.”

“We are very worried indeed. To tell you the truth, Mr. Ferrison, my sister and I know something, or rather I do and I have told Amelia. We cannot make up our minds whether we ought not to attend the inquest. What does one do, Mr. Ferrison, when one knows something and the police have asked one no questions?”

“Well, I don’t know much about it,” Roger replied, “but I should have thought that you could attend the inquest and then get up and ask to be allowed to give evidence. The coroner would certainly hear what you had to say.”

“But it would be in the public court?” Miss Clewes asked anxiously.

“Of course,” Roger assented.

“My sister would not like that,” Miss Clewes declared. “I do not see that that would matter, though. It is I who know something—not my sister. You see, what we know casts a ghastly reflection upon some one. It would scarcely be possible for us to stay here afterwards. We should like to convey our information secretly.”

“There is no secrecy in such matters,” Roger told her.

“Would what we say appear in print?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Would our names be published?”

“Certainly.”

The old lady shook her head. She wore very long earrings which jingled with the gesture.

“We should not like the notoriety,” Miss Susannah said firmly. “Perhaps I had better try and forget what I know.”

The gong sounded. The elder Miss Clewes, who was seated on a divan close at hand, called to her sister.

“We must go in, Susannah,” she insisted in a queer, birdlike little treble. “Come and assist me to rise. Last night the soup was cold. To-night we said we would be amongst the first.”

Roger hastened to assist Miss Amelia to her feet. Susannah rolled up her knitting reluctantly.

“Do not mention what I have told you to any one, Mr. Ferrison,” she whispered. “We should not wish it known that we were thinking of giving evidence.”

“I won’t tell a soul, Miss Clewes,” he promised. “I think you can put it out of your heads, too, that any one inside the boarding house was concerned in the affair.”

The little old lady shook her head at him.

“But, Mr. Ferrison,” she reminded him, “you don’t know what we know.”

Flora Quayne’s entry into the lounge provoked a murmur of mingled comment—admiration from the men, something very different from the few women. She was wearing the black velvet dress which Roger had admired but, even to his inexpert eyes, it was obvious that she was wearing very little else. Her face was as pale as a famous powder much affected by Spanish ladies could make it. Her eyes seemed

deeper set than usual, her lips more restless. Roger hastened to meet her. She handed him one of her sticks and took his arm.

"I feel wicked," she whispered. "I know I ought to be wearing that expression of gloom like all the others, but I can't. I am happy because I am dining with you. Colonel Dennett was a stupid old man. I have only spoken to him a few times in my life. Why should I pretend to be miserable because he is dead?"

Roger looked at her curiously.

"You sound very heartless," he said.

"I have too much heart," she rejoined, "for my own happiness, and too little hypocrisy. Mrs. Dewar sent a message praying me to come in to dinner to-night. I do not think that I should have come if I had not been dining with you."

"Considering that you must be her best boarder," he remarked, "I scarcely ever see you go out of your way to speak to Mrs. Dewar."

"I avoid her as much as possible," Flora agreed. "To me, she seems a very miserable person. I don't like miserable people. I like people who are gay and who help me to forget my own sorrows. Look around at all this crowd now. Do you believe that there is one of them who really cares because Colonel Dennett has been killed? They are all pretending to be shocked, but they talk eagerly about the affair, they are all the time interested, they are really half enjoying the excitement of it."

The gong rang. It was certainly true that every one hurried briskly to their places and displayed the usual interest in the menu. There were a good many curious glances directed towards Flora Quayne's table when they saw Roger take his place opposite to her. There was whispering also about the bottle of wine which stood in an ice pail between them. Flora herself looked at it enquiringly.

"I want, if I may, to do something to return your hospitality," Roger explained awkwardly.

She looked at him with a frown.

"But I thought you were so poor just now?"

He shook his head.

"To-day has changed everything."

She raised her eyebrows listlessly. He had an idea that his good fortune was, for some reason, distasteful to her.

"I like better to be the one that gives," she admitted. "Still, I shall drink to your better fortune, of course. Meanwhile, look around. Do you see one single person here whom you could honestly say had the appearance of being genuinely distressed?"

"Mrs. Dewar looks grave," he remarked, "but then, she always looks as though

she were living in a world of ghosts. I think Mr. Padgham appears as though he had had some sort of a nervous shock. Joseph goes loping along, looking more like a melancholy kangaroo than ever, and the two old ladies, the Misses Clewes, for the first time seem to have forgotten their knitting. Otherwise, I'm afraid you are right."

"Mr. Padgham drinks too much," she said. "I don't like him near me. People who drink too much are generally sloppy. That's what, I expect, is the matter with him. But the Clewes women—I don't see why they should look so upset. You were talking to one of them when I came in, Mr. Ferrison."

He nodded.

"To tell you the truth," he confided, "Miss Susannah, the one nearest to us, gave me rather a shock. She told me that she knew something about last night's affair and asked my advice about going to the inquest."

"What on earth could she know?" Flora Quayne asked incredulously. "She had a dream, perhaps, or saw a face in a looking glass!"

"She told me nothing definite," Roger acknowledged. "She only assured me in a very mysterious manner that she knew something about the murder. I don't suppose it's anything of any consequence, really, but it sounded rather intriguing."

"Will she go to the court, do you think?"

"I shouldn't think so," Roger replied. "She emphasised the fact that she and her sister are very anxious to avoid what she called notoriety."

Flora was looking thoughtfully across the room. For some reason or other, she seemed to have developed a new interest in the Misses Clewes.

"What could she know?" she repeated. "They certainly were not friendly with Colonel Dennett. I heard him speak of them once in a very uncomplimentary way. They're rather a trouble to Mrs. Dewar, I should think. I wonder she keeps them."

"I suppose it pays her," Roger suggested. "I don't think she would keep them if it didn't. She doesn't look like a woman with very much heart, does she?"

"A London boarding-house keeper could scarcely afford such a luxury," Flora replied.

"It must be a cruel way of earning a living," Roger reflected. "I don't notice people much as a rule, but Mrs. Dewar, in a way, fascinates me. She looks like the spectre of a woman, like the wraith of some one who was once alive."

"What a horrible idea," she observed, with a shiver.

"It's badly expressed, I know, but I have never heard her say a natural word, I have never seen her look as though she meant a thing she said, I have never seen her give way to any feeling whatever for more than a few seconds. She is like a human automaton. I should think some time or other she has had a great trouble in her life."

“Dear me,” Flora Quayne sighed, “here comes Joseph with the sweets. Dinner has slipped and slipped away, and I have not said one of the things I wanted to. What time did you say you had to fetch my detested rival?”

“Ten o’clock. Somewhere up in Putney. Twenty-five minutes from here, at least.”

“I have ordered coffee in my room,” she told him. “I insist upon that. You are really a most privileged young man, although you will not acknowledge it. Fancy if I asked Mr. Barstowe or Mr. Bernascon to come and have coffee with me! Couldn’t you see Mr. Padgham curling his moustache? I believe it is the puzzle of his life why I don’t yield to his fascinations. Why do I like you so much, I wonder?”

“Are you sure that you do?” he smiled. “You see, there are only one or two of us here of anything like your age, anyway.”

“It is not a matter of age, and besides, you don’t know how old I am. I think you exercise a sort of unholy fascination over me because I adore strength. Weaklings are generally like that. Will you carry me round my room before you go off to Putney, Mr. Ferrison?”

“Certainly not,” he answered. “You can walk around your room perfectly well yourself. In fact,” he went on, “I think you are rather a fraud with those sticks!”

“That’s the worst of having been confidential about my person,” she said, smiling into his eyes. “If you have quite finished, do you mind if we go?”

He helped her to rise. She gave him one of her sticks and leaned heavily upon his arm.

“This is so much more picturesque,” she whispered. “How beautifully unself-conscious you are! You don’t seem to realise that there is not one of these twenty or thirty people who is not making some remark about us at the present moment.”

“Who cares?” he answered lightly.

“I do. I am always morbidly anxious to know what people are saying about me. I think the general impression here is that I am a very wicked person. That is because I have a car of my own and smoke cigarettes when I go out on the street and carry a Peke and wear clothes that they consider improper. I do so wonder what they are all saying! I think I know, though. The women are all telling the men that I have not a scrap of underclothes on, and the men are agreeing that it is disgraceful!”

Roger held his peace.

Mrs. Padgham, with a frown upon her handsome face, turned towards her husband.

“Tom,” she complained, “you have scarcely taken your eyes off that girl all through dinner time. When you have not been staring at her, you look like a man who has had the fright of his life. Are you losing your nerve? If so, the sooner we get back to New York, the better.”

“Let me alone,” he muttered savagely. “It’s bad enough to have to sit here and never be sure.”

“You might as well take to drink as give way to your nerves like this,” she warned him. “You’ll hear the news as soon as there is any.”

Miss Susannah Clewes leaned towards her sister.

“Flora Quayne is a brazen young woman,” she whispered. “I do not believe that she is lame at all. She uses those sticks to excite sympathy. And she has no clothes on. A forward person, Amelia. Hussy!”

Her sister answered in a quavery voice.

“Who is the young man? I don’t remember him.”

“You don’t remember anything,” Susannah declared “He has been here for several days. That girl from Mallory’s Stores had her eye on him but she will have no chance against Flora Quayne.”

“What were you saying to the young man before dinner?”

“I told him that I thought I should go to the inquest.”

Miss Amelia nearly choked. When she spoke, it was with only the thread of a voice.

“You didn’t tell him what you saw?”

Miss Susannah shook her head. A smile that was almost cunning parted her thin lips.

“Not yet. I have ordered a taxicab, Amelia. We shall go to the inquest. If I deem it advisable, we will take a lawyer with us. He will tell us what to do.”

Mr. Luke glanced across the table to be sure that Freda Medlincott was not listening.

“Has the inspector been here again to-day?” he asked.

“He was here for over an hour,” Mrs. Dewar replied, without looking up from her plate. “He was up in Colonel Dennett’s room. He sent for Joseph too.”

“Nothing of interest transpired?”

“Nothing.”

“I trust,” Mr. Luke continued, “that my absence at Sunningdale all day was not unduly commented upon?”

“I do not think that any one knew you were there,” Mrs. Dewar replied. “The inspector did not ask for you. He seemed to understand at once when I told him that all my male boarders were away during the daytime.”

Mr. Luke nodded.

“It may have seemed a little callous,” he remarked, “but I felt I had to go.”

His eyes, void of all expression, were following Flora and Roger as they left the room.

“It seems rather a pity,” he remarked, “that that very pleasant-mannered, somewhat stupid young man could not have slept more soundly last night.”

Mrs. Dewar helped herself to some water from a carafe in front of her. She drank it very slowly.

“He has made a fortunate business deal, I understand,” she said. “It may be difficult to keep him here.”

Mr. Luke watched Roger’s broad shoulders disappearing. He poured himself out a glass of his special port and raised it to his lips. He caught the upward flash of Flora’s eyes as the young people passed through into the lounge and his lips parted very slightly. He seemed about to make a remark but changed his mind. He sipped his port instead.

CHAPTER XIII

As a young man, Roger Ferrison conformed to type. Throughout that very pleasant dinner hour he had suffered occasionally from qualms of conscience, as he had realised the charm of his companion's soft voice, her unusual personality, the flame which shone sometimes in her eyes. He had felt a sense almost of guilt as she had led him gently across the lounge, down the passage to her room. Guilt, perhaps because of the curious sense of excitement, the unusual stirring of the blood in his veins. Then, when they had arrived at her apartments and she had settled herself with a slightly weary air upon the sofa, and had merely pointed to his easy-chair, calling to Marie to bring the coffee, he was aware, not of a sense of relief, which should have been the natural corollary to his qualms of conscience, but a sense of faint but definite disappointment. Flora seemed suddenly tired. Her eyes were half closed, her arms hung listlessly over the sides of the couch.

"Serve Monsieur with his coffee, Marie," she directed in French. "Give him some of the old Armagnac. I will take some myself. I'm tired."

Roger accepted both coffee and brandy. It was a very different matter, however, to be served by Flora's maid, trim and capable though she was, to having Flora herself sit on the arm of his chair and wait upon him. Even when Marie retreated into the bedroom and bathroom beyond, her mistress apparently forgot her usual injunction to close the door.

"You are tired," he remarked, with utterly illogical irritation. "I'll drink my coffee and go quickly. I shall have to leave at half-past nine, anyhow."

"It is because you have to leave at half-past nine that I am tired," she sighed.

"You knew beforehand, didn't you?" he reminded her.

"Quite well," she assented. "I'm used to more impulsive people, you see. I am used to people who change their minds—not rocks of virtue like you."

"I have never before," he reflected, "been called a rock of virtue."

"Give me a cigarette, please," she begged. "I am afraid to move about much—I might get one of my bad headaches. To-night I feel lonely. I want to be soothed and petted until I am put to bed and there is no one."

He lit her cigarette and she accepted it languidly. Acting upon a sudden impulse, he sat down on the edge of the couch.

"What about me?" he asked. "I am here for a solid hour, if you like. I know very little about soothing and nothing at all about petting, but I could be taught."

She opened her eyes. Her tone was subtly softer.

“Would you be a willing pupil, I wonder?”

“Of yours, yes,” he answered, feeling that he was slipping from grace.

“But if you had an alarm watch,” she said, “you would push the hand round to half-past nine first, in case you became engrossed.”

“Well, I don’t happen to possess one,” he assured her, “and I’ll take my risk.”

“If I were well, it would give me pleasure to try and make you forget.”

“Perhaps the effort might make you well.”

“But if I made the effort and failed,” she meditated, “I should certainly collapse. To-night I could not bear disappointment. Put that mighty arm of yours round my neck just for a moment, Roger.”

He obeyed—awkwardly enough. Her head, with its wealth of disarranged and beautiful hair, reposed there securely. Scarcely noting what he did, he smoothed her hair back into its place. Even he realised its soft silkiness.

“You will be able to be my champion now,” she murmured, “when these old cats whisper about dyed hair. Look at the roots of mine. Feel it.”

“No one but an old cat could hint at such a stupid thing. It is the most beautiful hair in the world.”

“While your fingers are there,” she confided, “it feels alive. I think I must be full of electricity. If you go on doing that, perhaps I shall awake, after all. A few minutes ago I felt that the evening was over for me. I had no courage. I felt that I must let you go—to your common little shopgirl.”

He withdrew his fingers at once. He would have withdrawn his arm but she held it tightly. There had been something very sad as well as bitter in her tone.

“A wrong note,” she sighed. “I ought to have been genteel like a well-brought-up young woman and lied about my thoughts of her, I suppose. I cannot help it. To me she is a common little shopgirl and I am afraid you are interested in her. What I think I never fear to say. Bad taste, I suppose. That also I cannot help. These things do not matter. You may see her one way and I another, and yet on all the great things in life we might agree. If you want to kiss me, you must call out to Marie to close the door. If you want to go on kissing me, you must promise to stay just as long as I keep you—just as late as I wish. You will obey me in everything.”

He rose to his feet. The room for a moment seemed to be going round. The rising and falling of her delicately out-lined bosoms seemed somehow associated with that waft of perfume, the perfume of spring flowers, which he found so intoxicating. When he called to Marie, he scarcely knew his own voice.

“Marie,” he directed, “your mistress wishes the door closed.”

The maid appeared almost immediately upon the threshold. She stood there, mute and disapproving. She had a *peignoir* upon her arm.

“I was bringing Madame her dressing gown,” she announced, turning appealingly to Flora. “Madame remembers that she nearly fainted when I dressed her. She is not well enough to sit up to-night.”

Flora raised herself upon her couch. Her face was pale, her eyes curiously brilliant. Roger, in those few seconds, forgot many things. He remembered only her frailty, that she clung to him as to a stronger being. He stopped the angry words upon her lips by bending over her and closing them with his own. Suddenly the full consciousness of what he was doing hit him. He drew away.

“Flora, I think that your maid is right,” he said. “I’m going to carry you to your room.”

“You will come back when I send for you?” she begged.

“Of course I will,” he promised.

Her arms went round his neck. She clung to him as he lifted her into his embrace.

“Walk slowly,” she whispered.

Now again there was a change. There was the ghost of a mischievous smile at the corners of her lips.

“Walk very slowly—slower still. Perhaps then I shall forgive you. I’m tired to-day,” she went on. “It is this horrible thing which has happened, and I feel that if one opened one’s eyes, one would see other horrible things. Don’t let anything hurt me, Roger.”

He carried her through the bathroom into her bedroom, another tiny palace of luxury. The maid pulled aside the silk coverlet and he laid her on the cool sheets. She settled down with a sigh of content, her arms still around him.

“You must stay,” she pleaded.

The maid touched him on the shoulder.

“When Madame is like this,” she interposed, “she must be left. She exhausts herself too much with conversation. Monsieur will understand.”

So Roger Ferrison, not quite himself, took his leave and boarded a bus for Putney.

Everything was nearly, if not quite, all right with the rest of the evening. Roger found Mrs. Packe, Audrey’s aunt, a very pleasant old lady—rather garrulous and arch—of a type which a few weeks ago he would have passed as being quite reasonable. She made sly jokes about hanging on to her cottage in Cornwall until she

could lend it to her niece for her honeymoon, and she indulged in a metaphorical wink when she left the two alone whilst she answered the telephone.

“It was all right, then?” Audrey asked eagerly.

“Absolutely,” he assured her. “I shall never feel grateful enough to you for that word of yours to Mr. Gedge. Everything has turned out quite wonderfully. Mallory’s are satisfied with the patent. They would buy it if we’d sell. Instead of that, they are starting a company to make the cleaners. They insisted on our bringing our own lawyer. We found a first-class one whom Mr. Padgham recommended. Jimmie Sark and I get a royalty on every machine made and a good salary for supervising the factory.”

“It sounds like a serial,” Audrey Packe exclaimed, laughing nervously. “‘From Pauperdom to Park Lane’ or something of that sort.”

“It’s not running to Park Lane just yet,” he replied, “but it will certainly run to anything reasonable, as soon as we have things fixed up. How long are you going to stay, dear? I have your key as well as mine and I don’t think any one who is out late to-night will be popular.”

“I am as tired as I can be,” she confessed. “Directly Aunt comes in, we’ll go. Do light a cigarette, Roger. Aunt loves the smell of smoke.”

Roger obeyed eagerly. Audrey had come straight from work without changing her clothes and was looking tired—perhaps a little nervous. They seemed so near a crisis, and yet she had an idea—she told herself that it was ridiculous—that for some reason or other there was a change in Roger. His new clothes seemed to have carried him away from her. She found herself suddenly longing for those shiny seams and a cuff edge which she could clip with scissors.

“Like winning an Irish Sweepstake or something, isn’t it?” she remarked. “Tell me, Roger, are you going to stay on at Palace Crescent? Of course you won’t.”

There were several ways he could have answered that question. The one he chose depressed her.

“For the present, I have decided to stay on,” he said. “Mrs. Dewar is afraid that this terrible business may result in her losing some of her boarders but some of the older ones have been talking to me, and I think every one has agreed to stay. I shall probably ask for a better room. Suits me as well as anywhere and, of course,” he added, after a momentary hesitation, “you’re there, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am there,” she assented listlessly. “I suppose I shall hang on.”

He had his opening but for some reason he shirked it. It was through no definite feeling of infidelity but rather a conviction that any fresh demands upon his seldom released emotions would be in the nature of an anticlimax. Audrey Packe was

peaceful, without a doubt. Already his nerves felt soothed. Mrs. Packe came bustling in and appeared disappointed.

“Well,” she announced, “that’s that. I have told Tom he cannot have the cottage until late in the autumn. Now, if you take my advice, young man, you will bustle Audrey off home. Long hours they keep them in these big establishments, and she’s been too jumpy all the time since she arrived here to have a rest. Scarcely a mouthful of supper, either.”

“Never mind, Aunt,” Audrey said with a smile. “My fortnight at the cottage will soon put me right. One does get tired of London in the spring, if you have to work all the time.”

“You will find a bus at the corner in ten minutes,” her aunt told them.

“I’m going to take Audrey home in a taxi,” Roger volunteered. “I’m feeling extravagant to-night, Mrs. Packe.”

She beamed amiably upon him.

“Well, you don’t look like a spendthrift to me,” she said. “Once in a while there’s no harm in being a bit extravagant. Come up again, Mr. Ferrison. Any friend of Audrey’s is always welcome. Come and have a bit of supper any night next week.”

“I’ll fix it up with Audrey if I may,” he promised.

“Come, and welcome, whenever you like.”

They found a taxi almost at the door. Audrey sank back amongst the not too luxurious cushions with a sigh of relief.

“What a lot poor people miss in the world,” she exclaimed. “I should never have dreamed of a taxi home and yet it does seem such a luxury. I suppose very soon, Roger, taxis will be an everyday thing in your life—or perhaps you’ll have a car.”

“I hope I shall,” he agreed. “And please don’t forget, Audrey,” he went on, taking her willingly yielded hand, “that I shall always remember how much of this I owe to you. I know it cost you something to make up your mind to speak to Mr. Gedge.”

She laughed more happily.

“I ought not to have minded,” she said. “He was an old friend of my father’s and I did so want to be useful to you.”

They sped through the still crowded streets. Roger felt curiously tongue-tied. He knew quite well what was in his mind to say to Audrey, what he had made up his mind to say when his partner and he had sunk on to that bench in the park, after their interview with Mr. Simpkins. Now he was dumb. It was there all right, he was sure, the same identical feeling, but he just felt that to-morrow or the next day would do. When the taxi stopped at Palace Crescent, only a few drowsy words had been

spoken. Roger, as he hung up his key, pointed to the long, shining row.

“Not yet eleven o’clock and every one at home.”

“Good night, Roger. Thanks for fetching me.”

Even then he knew that he wanted to walk up the stairs with her, but he didn’t. He lingered, instead, listening to shuffling footsteps coming from the back of the house.

“Some one coming,” he remarked. “Perhaps I had better just wait and see who it is before I turn out the light. I’ll follow you in a moment.”

Audrey slowly mounted the stairs. Roger waited with his fingers upon the switch. The green baize door was pushed slowly open. A white face stared out into the semi-obscurity. Roger called to him quietly.

“Is that you, Joseph? What do you want?”

Joseph pushed his way through the door. Roger, no close observer of his fellows, realised then that the man must have made a tremendous effort during the service of dinner. He was no longer suave, eager and full of energy. His lean cheeks seemed to have fallen farther in. His eyes were listless. His lips were drawn over his teeth. His linen was no longer spotless. He wore a shabby poplin coat in place of his tails. His hair was unbrushed. He came drearily forward.

“Mr. Ferrison,” he said, “will you talk with me for five minutes secretly and in private?”

CHAPTER XIV

Roger led the man into a remote corner of the lounge and forced him into a chair.

"You seem upset, Joseph," he remarked. "Anything fresh happened?"

"Something fresh is happening all the time, sir," the man faltered. "Something fresh will happen all the time, as long as one stays here. Please pardon the liberty I am taking, sir. I had to speak to some one or get drunk, or go crazy. I dared not get drunk. There's that inquest to-morrow."

"I know," Roger muttered. "I'm summoned myself."

"It means nothing to you, though, sir. You only arrived on the scene after the whistle had been blown, after the policeman had found the body. They can do nothing to you. They cannot lie and perjure and worry you on to the scaffold. They might do that to me."

"Don't talk nonsense, Joseph," Roger enjoined. "You didn't kill Colonel Dennett, did you?"

"Not I, sir," the man declared fervently. "But there you are—I was the nearest person they know of who might have got at him, and I had never replaced the cartridge I fired off for a test. They've tumbled to that, all right. Me with a revolver close at hand with one barrel discharged! I can't think of anything else. I've had my clothes off once. I couldn't go to sleep."

"But, after all, it was a perfectly reasonable thing for you to test a new weapon," Roger remarked. "Perhaps, if you went to the place where you fired off the cartridge, you might find the bullet."

"They'll think I planted it there now. They're so damn cunning, these police. They won't lock me up. They won't lock anybody up. They'll wait like a lot of hawks till the inquest's over. Then down they'll come on you like a ton of bricks! You know what will happen to-morrow, sir?" Joseph went on, his face working fiercely. "I'll tell you. The police will ask for an adjournment of the inquest. They will only take formal evidence. The coroner will grant it. He will give the police their week or fortnight, and they will fix it on some one during that time."

"But, Joseph, how can I help you?" Roger asked impatiently.

"We're all in the mess, sir. Every one of the boarders here," the man pointed out piteously. "A quiet-living old gentleman like the Colonel—he had had no past. He'd got no enemies. They'll fix it on one of us, sure. Then there's that blasted old doll—Miss Susannah Clewes."

“What about her?” Roger asked. “She was trying to talk to me before dinner.”

“She saw something, or thinks she did, sir, and there’s no one can get a word out of her. All I know is that she’s ordered a carriage to go to the inquest. She says that you are the only person she could trust but that you were not sympathetic. She declares every one of the boarders is in a conspiracy. She’s dangerous, sir. That’s what she is. She’s as old as the hills and she’s got a quiet ladylike manner about her. She’d go and talk a man’s neck away and come back believing she’d done the right thing.”

“I’ll see if I can get her to talk to me in the morning,” Roger promised.

Joseph mopped his forehead with a handkerchief which strongly resembled a dishcloth.

“As quiet and nice a home this was until a few months ago, sir,” he moaned. “What’s come over everybody is more than I can say, but I don’t mind telling you the one person I’m afraid of is Miss Susannah Clewes. She has visions, that woman has, sir.”

Roger yawned. He was very tired indeed, after his long and exciting day.

“Well, look here, Joseph,” he said. “I can’t see that we are doing any good talking like this. Some one has murdered Colonel Dennett. It wasn’t you and it wasn’t I. Whatever other people may say or do or whatever evidence may be given, it’s not likely to do either of us any harm. If it was some one in the house, it’s a very terrible thing, but we cannot come any nearer the truth by talking about it. Every one is in, I see. I’m going to bed.”

“Very good, Mr. Ferrison,” Joseph replied dejectedly. “I’m sorry if I am all fussed up, sir, but there’s a queer atmosphere about the place. The cook, she’s been sitting rolling her eyes at me all the time in the kitchen, and the maid, she’s reading a murder story in one of those serials. And the gentlemen, when they rang for soda water, they had been talking about me when I came in. I could tell by the way they stopped suddenly. Am I the first butler in the world, I wonder, who had a fancy to own a revolver when he was left to guard the house?”

“Of course you’re not,” Roger soothed him. “Come along, I’ll leave you to see to the lights. Don’t turn this one out until I get on the first landing. I’ve forgotten my matches.”

“Very good, sir.”

On his way up, Roger paused on the second landing outside Audrey’s door. He listened for a moment. The light was out. There was no sound of any one moving. He climbed the last flight of stairs and entered his own room. With a sigh of relief, he closed the door and sank into his solitary chair. Twelve o’clock struck. The noise of

the traffic in the Hammersmith Road came to him as a subdued roar, punctuated by the honk of the taxicabs and the more sirenlike horns of the better-class cars. It seemed to him that these precious moments, as he slowly undressed, were the first that he had had during the whole day in which to breathe freely and to realise his great good fortune. This labyrinth of drama into which he had stepped did not, after all, concern him. He determined to put it out of his mind. The days of his bitter struggles were over. He was absolutely assured of a dignified and successful future. Work? Of course he would work, but outside that lay a whole world of pleasure at which he had as yet scarcely glanced. He slipped off his underclothes and tried on his new suit of pyjamas. The shopman had been right. They were an excellent fit. He stretched himself out in bed—the luxury of sleepiness already upon him. He could relax now. No fears about his ghastly bills. No fear of getting into debt. Life was going to be smoother in every way. He wished Audrey had sat up long enough for just one tender word of good night. He had been rather a dumb person in the taxi. That other strange spell was still upon him. It was Audrey, of course, whom he must take from her sordid life behind the counter and make happy. That room down the passage—that didn't belong to real life. It was one of those enchanted chambers that grow out of fancies and disappear. She was wonderful, Flora, in her way, with her sweet clinging arms, the melting of her tremulous lips, her pleading—yes, it was almost pleading—for something in life she feared to miss. He was getting sleepier and sleepier. He wondered how her accident happened. He was figuring her now being dropped from a mountain top and he was there at the bottom to catch her. There was one thing, if he had to say good-bye to her, he must find out the secret of that perfume. It took him back to the country, to the sweet scented gardens, to the thrill of spring. Yes, Flora . . .

Back from a world of sweet odours, of a thrilling caressing voice, of an unimaginable invitation, through a fog of dazed apprehensions to a bitter ugly present. Some one was trying the handle of his door! The echoes of a woman's scream, low but horrible, seemed to be ringing in his ears. He sat upright, gripping the bed on either side, listening for a moment to be sure that he was in his senses. Then he sprang to the door, turned the key and threw it open. He was just in time to catch in his arms and save from falling the scantily attired, apparently unconscious figure of Annabel Padgham.

CHAPTER XV

“For the love of heaven!” Roger exclaimed. “Mrs. Padgham!”

She gripped him by the shoulders—not, as he realised, in any sort of embrace, but from sheer terror—and in those few seconds of almost suspended animation, his senses were sufficiently alert to realise an abrupt cessation of footsteps at the bottom of the last flight of stairs.

“Who’s that?” he called out, leaning forward.

There was no answer. Roger, scarcely knowing what he was doing, shook the half-fainting figure of the woman.

“What do you want up here?” he demanded. “Who is it following you?”

“Tom,” she gasped. “I was terrified. I ran away.”

“But what do you want with me?” he asked bluntly.

“I don’t want you,” she faltered. “I wanted any one. I was frightened. I was looking for Miss Clewes.”

“Hers is the next room,” Roger pointed out. “But what on earth do you want with poor old Miss Clewes at this hour of the night? Is every one mad? What’s the matter with your husband?”

“I shall faint,” she murmured, “if I don’t sit down.”

He fetched a chair from his room and set it out on the landing, leaving his own door open so that she might get the air from the window. Then he poured out a glass of water and brought it to her.

“All I have,” he said laconically.

He leaned over the banisters. The sound of footsteps had ceased but down below he heard a door being opened and closed very softly. Through his open window floated the chimes of Hammersmith Church Clock—three o’clock.

“I wish—” he broke off in his somewhat angry speech.

Annabel Padgham was obviously fighting hard for consciousness. Every vestige of colour had left her cheeks. Her eyes, deep blue eyes they were, were filled with something which he could only sense as fear. He took her hands and chafed them.

“There’s no one likely to hurt you up here,” he assured her. “Besides, I think I could take care of you. But you might tell me what has happened. This place seems to be getting like a madhouse.”

“I wish we had never seen it,” she moaned. “I wish we had stayed down in Finsbury. It was all Tom’s rich friends. He would come up West and now God

knows what sort of a net we're in!"

"You're feeling better?" he asked.

"A little."

"Well enough to go back to your room, if you lean on me?"

She shook her head.

"Not just now. Presently—yes. Tom is mad. When I go, you must take me down. Give me a few minutes longer."

"Very well then," he agreed. "But on one condition. Tell me what brought you flying up the stairs to my room, with your husband following you?"

"Fear."

"What of?"

"Tom—Tom chiefly. I was afraid he was going to have D.T. He's been talking and shouting to himself until I couldn't bear it any longer. Then I'm frightened of the house. Some one in it murdered Colonel Dennett. I'm sure of that. There seem to be ears listening everywhere. If anybody heard that, I expect I should be murdered!"

"Well, no one could hear it."

She drew a little sigh.

"I suppose not."

"Now, tell me why you were looking for Miss Clewes."

"It was not Miss Clewes in particular I wanted," she replied. "It was any woman—and Mrs. Dewar is too far away. It has been a hideous evening since you went off with the witch."

"With whom? The witch? Who's that?" he asked.

"I forgot you didn't know. We all call Flora Quayne the witch. It's those strange eyes of hers and her lovely hair and her voice."

"Well, never mind about Flora Quayne. What do you mean by a strange evening?" he demanded.

"Every one except Mr. Luke was nervous," she went on. "Mr. Luke sat in an easy-chair reading the *Nineteenth Century* and he never spoke to any one. Tom had four drinks after dinner—a thing I have never known him do before. Mr. Barstowe went out, and most of the others followed him, one by one. They didn't seem to want to go. They seemed to go because they couldn't stand it any longer. Miss Amelia Clewes sat knitting very fast and never spoke to any one. Susannah kept on walking about restlessly and asking where you were. I went to bed early. My nerves were getting worse and worse. I put on a dressing gown and sat reading. Then Tom began calling out from the bed. I thought I was going mad and I was terrified!"

She raised the tumbler, still half full of water, which she had been holding tightly, and drank its contents. Then she gave him back the glass.

“I was forgetting,” she said, in an entirely changed tone; “I cannot tell you any more. There is something wrong in the house, something I don’t understand. If Tom won’t leave, I shall run away to-morrow. Don’t you stay, Mr. Ferrison,” she advised, looking up at him earnestly. “Take that nice girl, Miss Packe, and go off somewhere else. These people seem all right, but they’re not. They’ve got Tom. I swear they’ve got Tom. They won’t get me. I’m going.”

She leaned forward to the turn of the banisters, steadied herself and rose to her feet.

“I can’t ask for your confidence, of course,” Roger said awkwardly, “especially if you don’t want to give it to me, but I do think, after waking me at this hour of the night, you ought to tell me what it’s all about.”

“I wish I could,” she groaned. “You have been very nice, Mr. Ferrison. Just as I should have expected. I cannot tell you what’s happening or what I am afraid of, because it is all so vague—and there’s Tom, you see. Take my advice—leave this house after the inquest to-morrow.”

“I’ll take you to your room now, anyway,” he insisted. “Here—lean on me. Put your arm on my shoulder like that and your other hand on the banisters. Fine. Now, come along.”

They descended the stairs, one at a time. She made her way to the end room on the first floor.

“If you’re frightened,” he said, “don’t mind waking me up again, or shall I come in and speak to your husband?”

The closed door in front of them was thrown suddenly open. Padgham stood there. He showed no surprise. He scarcely even glanced at his wife. His bloodshot eyes were fixed upon Roger. All his bounce and assumed gentility seemed to have departed.

“Your wife has had a fright,” the latter explained. “She ran upstairs to find Miss Clewes and knocked at my door by mistake. She very nearly fainted. I’ve brought her back.”

“Never mind about my wife,” Mr. Padgham interrupted. “I have been wanting to speak to you ever since dinner time, Ferrison. I have a straight question to ask you. Will you give me a straight answer?”

“If I answer your question at all,” Roger replied, “you may rely upon it that I shall tell you the truth.”

“What brought you down to my office in Finsbury yesterday?”

“Well, I told you in the lounge before dinner, but I’ll repeat it if you like. My partner and I are practically strangers in London. We needed a lawyer. Mrs. Dewar said that you were one. I looked you up in the telephone directory and came down to find you.”

“Yes, I know that’s what you told me, but is it the truth?” Padgham persisted.

“It is the truth,” Roger replied, “and if you want to confirm it, ask the solicitors whose name you wrote out for me. We went to see them. They have taken on my business and are working for me.”

Some sense of strain passed from the man’s face. His fingers even played nervously with his neglected moustache.

“I have done you an injustice, young man,” he confessed. “I thought you were prying into my affairs. I have some business on just now—private business. I want to keep it to myself. If strangers come around, I get suspicious.”

“Well, you need not be suspicious about me,” Roger assured him. “My own business takes up all my time. I’ll say good night to you both now.”

“Tom, don’t you think—” his wife began.

He turned fiercely upon her.

“Shut up!” he ordered. “Good night, Ferrison.”

He closed the door. Roger marched up the stairs. He was determined to keep both his ears and his eyes closed. He would not answer any calls of distress, succour any more fainting ladies or be diverted for one instant from his firm intention of reaching his bed and lying down once more behind a locked door. There were unfortunately difficulties in his way. When he reached the last flight of stairs, upon the topmost one, with an old mackintosh wrapped around her shoulders, looking very cold and miserable, but knitting with amazing rapidity, sat Miss Amelia Clewes! Roger was past being surprised at anything and he was, as a matter of fact, feeling rather angry.

“What in God’s name are you sitting out there for, Miss Clewes?” he demanded. “Do you know that it is past three o’clock in the morning?”

Miss Amelia’s fingers ceased their restless task. She wound up the wool and rose to her feet.

“I have lost my sister, Mr. Ferrison,” she confided.

“But you don’t expect to find her by sitting here on the top of the stairs knitting, do you?” he retorted. “Lost her? What do you mean?”

“We occupy the same room,” Miss Amelia continued with dignity. “It is adjacent to your own. She has been very disturbed all the evening. For some reason or other, she was very anxious to see you. We came to bed at ten o’clock and I slept rather

more heavily than usual. I woke up some short time ago and found her bed unoccupied.”

“Well, what do you suppose has happened to her?” Roger asked. “Why come to me? I don’t even know her habits.”

“She wanted to see you so much,” Miss Amelia explained, “that I thought perhaps she might have sought you out. I ventured to look into your room—I found it empty at three o’clock in the morning.”

“My God!” Roger exclaimed in exasperation. “That’s only because I have had to take another lunatic downstairs. I have not seen your sister all the evening. She began to talk to me in the lounge. She said she had something important to say. She spoke about the inquest. Then Miss Flora Quayne, with whom I was dining, came along, so I had to go. Since then I have not seen your sister, and if you will forgive me saying so, Miss Clewes, I don’t want to see her. All that I want to do is to get back to my bed and go to sleep.”

Miss Clewes drew her mackintosh around her with some dignity.

“Don’t let me keep you, Mr. Ferrison,” she begged. “I am sorry. I had an idea from what my sister said that you were a young man of kindlier disposition.”

Roger swallowed hard. Life was not treating him well!

“If I could do anything to help you find your sister,” he told her, “I should be delighted. Now, will you have another look in my room and assure yourself that she is not there?”

“That is very good of you, Mr. Ferrison.”

She followed Roger through the doorway which he flung open. He turned on the light. He opened the one wardrobe. The whole room was disclosed in its somewhat pitiful bareness.

“Now you are satisfied,” he concluded, “that your sister is not here, suppose you have one more look in your own apartment.”

She acquiesced at once. Roger remained politely outside her door. She came back again almost immediately.

“My sister is not here, Mr. Ferrison,” she announced. “It is as I told you—she has disappeared. I am very much concerned and anxious.”

“Very well,” Roger said, “is there any other place where one might look for her?”

Miss Amelia considered.

“I should like to consult with Joseph,” she acknowledged wistfully. “Joseph is a very civil person and he would at least be able to tell me if my sister has left the house.”

“Is your sister in the habit of leaving the house at three o’clock in the morning?”
Roger groaned.

“I have never seen my sister before in such a condition,” was the quiet reply.
They descended the three flights of stairs in silence.

“I don’t know,” Roger confided, as they reached the hall, “where to find a bell to summon Joseph, but I can show you where he sleeps.”

“If you will be so kind.”

They passed through the green baize door, through the kitchen into the scullery. Joseph was lying in the same place but this time there was no revolver by his side. Roger turned on the light and the man sat up with a start.

“Don’t be scared, Joseph,” Roger said. “We only want to ask you a question.”

Joseph’s hands went instinctively to his hair. He smoothed that, buttoned the top button of his vest and rose in ungainly fashion to his feet.

“Our trouble is,” Roger explained, “that Miss Clewes’ sister has disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” Joseph repeated vaguely.

“She went up to her room at the usual time with Miss Amelia here,” Roger continued. “Miss Amelia has just waked up and her sister is not in her room.”

“What can I do in the matter, Mr. Ferrison?”

“We can’t ask you to search every room in the house,” Roger said. “That would be ridiculous. I will ask you to have a look in the dining room as we pass and to knock at Mrs. Dewar’s door and ask whether she has seen anything of Miss Clewes. After that, so far as I am concerned, I can suggest nothing more, and I think we had better go to bed and wait till morning.”

They carried out the programme. Joseph found his way into Mrs. Dewar’s room and, returning after a very brief delay, explained that his mistress had neither seen nor heard anything of Miss Susannah since she and her sister had retired to their room. The dining room was, as they had expected, empty. At the bottom of the stairs Roger addressed his companion firmly.

“Now, Miss Amelia,” he said, “I am very sorry for your natural anxiety, but I really do not think that you need worry. Your sister’s key was hanging up, so she has probably not left the house. In fact, it seems impossible that she should have done so without dressing.”

“My sister would not dream of venturing into the streets without being properly attired,” Miss Amelia declared.

“Well, that’s that, you see. It ends the matter, so far as I can see. You must wait till the morning. She might be with Miss Packe, or with Miss Medlincott, or any one. We cannot go knocking up every one to enquire.”

“If I hear anything, Miss,” Joseph said respectfully, “I will at once let you know.” He bade them good night. Roger and Miss Amelia mounted the stairs together.

“There’s nothing more I can do for you, Miss Clewes?” Roger asked, as they reached the top landing.

“Nothing,” that lady acknowledged. “You are a very kind and courteous young gentleman, Mr. Ferrison. I am much obliged for what you have done already. I shall go back to my room and knit.”

“You should go to bed,” he advised.

“I cannot go to bed,” was the placid reply. “Something has happened to my sister. I must wait and know what it is. I rest my mind more knitting. Good night, Mr. Ferrison.”

Roger once more sought repose. This time it was the sun that woke him.

CHAPTER XVI

“There is no doubt about it,” Mr. Luke remarked the next morning at breakfast time, “that we boarders at Palace Crescent are a quaint lot of people.”

Reginald Barstowe, who had just skilfully dissected and disposed of a kippered herring, pushed his plate away, helped himself to marmalade and moved his chair a little farther up the table. It was very seldom that Mr. Luke offered general remarks.

“In what respect, sir?” he asked eagerly.

“I was referring at the moment,” the other expounded, “to the disappearance of Miss Susannah Clewes. Last night, I understand, half the house was disturbed by Miss Amelia, who volunteered the extraordinary statement that her sister had—er—vanished into thin air. Searches were made in all manner of places without result. I believe I am right, Mrs. Dewar, in saying that Miss Susannah’s disappearance is as yet unexplained?”

“Quite right,” Mrs. Dewar admitted. “The whole thing is most mysterious.”

“Miss Clewes was seen last night before dinner,” Mr. Luke went on, “when her deportment and behaviour were exactly as usual. She announced her intention of attending the inquest to-day to offer evidence concerning this terrible tragedy which is depressing us all so much. What evidence she may have had to offer no one knows. She believed she had information of importance, but that is neither here nor there. What is so amazing is that notwithstanding the closest of searches and many enquiries, Miss Clewes has definitely disappeared from these premises.”

“Surely her sister knows where she is?” Reginald Barstowe exclaimed.

“On the contrary,” Mr. Luke proceeded, “Miss Amelia declares herself absolutely ignorant of her sister’s whereabouts. Notwithstanding which fact, mark you, she seems to have enjoyed her usual breakfast, to which she sat down the moment the gong went, and is now pursuing her habitual avocation—knitting—at the table.”

Reginald Barstowe toyed with his closely clipped moustache. He glanced over his shoulder at the table where Miss Amelia was engaged in her favourite pursuit, directing her attention every now and then towards the newspaper which was propped up in front of her.

“She seems to be taking it very calmly,” he observed. “I always thought that she and her sister were devoted to each other.”

“Except for Mr. Luke here,” Mrs. Dewar confided, “they are my oldest patrons.”

They have lived here for ten years and I have scarcely ever seen them apart.”

“Forty years in the same house in the country before that, I understand,” Mr. Luke proceeded. “Their lives have been, as it were, unrolled before us day by day. They always do the same things. There is no variation in their manner of living. They never miss a meal, they rise at the same time, they go to bed at the same time. Suddenly, one of them discovers that she can give valuable information concerning this ghastly crime, which has upset us all so, and during that same evening she disappears from the face of the earth! This morning her sister is down to breakfast at the stroke of the gong, has eaten her usual boiled egg, has drunk her cup of coffee, and has now commenced to knit. I take off my hat to people like that,” Mr. Luke concluded, “but I don’t understand them.”

Mrs. Dewar shook her head.

“Who could?”

“I shall address Miss Clewes upon the subject,” Mr. Luke declared.

He rose from his place, strolled down the room and paused before Miss Amelia’s table. She welcomed him with old-fashioned courtesy.

“Any news of your sister, Miss Amelia?” he enquired.

“No news at present,” was the quiet reply. “Mr. Ferrison thinks that I should communicate with the police. May I ask, Mr. Luke, whether that would also be your advice?”

“I should not hesitate for a single moment in doing so,” he declared. “Of course, Miss Amelia, your sister may have wandered out of the house during a temporary lapse of memory, or this statement of hers about having evidence to offer in the case of Colonel Dennett’s murder may have been the beginning of some weakening of the brain. In either case, though, official enquiry should be made at once.”

Miss Amelia sighed.

“It would be very distasteful to both my sister and myself if our names should appear in the newspapers,” she said.

“It would be still more distasteful to you, I imagine,” Mr. Luke rejoined, “if you find that your sister has wandered into the river.”

Miss Amelia continued to knit.

“I do not believe that such a thing is likely to happen to Susannah,” she said. “I think she has conceived the idea that she is in some sort of danger from unprincipled people who might be connected with Colonel Dennett’s death. She is probably hiding somewhere.”

Mr. Luke tried to conceal his look of incredulity.

“Might one ask you, Miss Amelia, whether your sister confided to you the nature

of the information she proposed to offer to the authorities?"

"I cannot answer that question. If she did, I would conceive it my duty to remain silent. It is my sister's affair."

"But do you know?" her questioner asked, with a sudden thrust.

Miss Amelia knitted in silence.

"You will excuse my answering that, Mr. Luke," she said.

Mr. Luke with a slight, a very slight, bow turned and resumed his place.

"That old lady is a marvel," he announced. "Instead of being upset by her sister's disappearance, she seems to be rather enjoying the excitement of it. Never let me flatter myself that I know anything about human nature again."

"What could the old lady who has disappeared know, anyway?" Reginald Barstowe demanded. "The murder took place in a narrow passage with high walls on either side."

Miss Medlincott, who had only just come in, also moved her place farther up the table.

"Those two are just a couple of fussy old maids," she declared. "Probably when Miss Susannah turns up, her wonderful information will be that she thought she saw the shadow of a man against the wall or heard footsteps running up the path!"

Joseph deposited a rack of hot toast in front of Miss Medlincott, who was one of his favourites. She looked up at him with a smile.

"Are you one of the victims of the inquisition this afternoon, Joseph?" she enquired.

"I have received a subpœna to attend the inquest, Miss," he replied.

"What do you suppose has become of Miss Clewes?" she asked, dropping her voice.

He shook his head ponderously and glanced over to where Miss Amelia was seated.

"Lost her memory, I should think, Miss," he suggested, as he moved away.

Mr. and Mrs. Padgham entered together—Mrs. Padgham with the morning paper under her arm and an air of great affability—Padgham with his hands in his pockets, his hair and long moustache carefully tended, his bearing almost jaunty.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dewar," he greeted her, pausing for a moment at the long table. "Good morning, Luke. Any of you going to the inquest this afternoon?"

"I am naturally subpœnaed," Mrs. Dewar confided.

"I don't think I can get off," Barstowe regretted.

"I shall most certainly be there," Mr. Luke declared.

"No one to take me," Miss Medlincott sighed. "I couldn't push my way into a

coroner's court alone."

"An inquest such as this," Mr. Luke said gravely, "is scarcely the place for a young lady, or I would offer my escort. I shall simply be there in a way to watch over the interests of Palace Crescent."

"I don't think I am popular here," Miss Medlincott complained. "There's our latest young man, Mr. Ferrison; he dines with Miss Packe one night and Flora Quayne the next, and scarcely even says good morning to me!"

"Your turn to-morrow night, perhaps," Mr. Luke told her. "Where is Ferrison, by the way?"

"Mr. Ferrison," Mrs. Dewar explained, "had his breakfast and left the house before eight. Naturally he has to attend the inquest, and he told me he has a very busy day before him. Good morning, Mr. Ollivant."

Mr. Ollivant had come bustling in with the *Financial Times* in his hand. He looked at Roger's empty table with an air of disappointment.

"Don't tell me that Mr. Ferrison's gone already?" he exclaimed.

"He was out of the house by eight o'clock," Mrs. Dewar told him.

Mr. Ollivant frowned.

"Very annoying. Very annoying. I understand that he is connected with a small company that is being formed. That is entirely my line of business, you know. I should think I have floated as many companies as any man in the City. Does any one know Ferrison's telephone number?"

They all looked blank. Joseph was able to impart the information that it was not in the telephone book. Mr. Ollivant sat down to his breakfast in a very bad temper.

"They are buying tin again," he remarked abruptly to his neighbour, Mr. Lashwood, looking up from his paper.

"Who cares?" Lashwood retorted. "All I wish is that they would buy shoes. Ladies' shoes I'm interested in, and the stock market can take care of itself, so far as I am concerned."

"Metals are always interesting," Mr. Ollivant persisted. "You should have a go at Nickels some day. A man I know made a fortune in Nickels last week."

"Probably lose it next week," Mr. Lashwood observed. "One business is enough for any man, I say."

"Any shrewd man," Mr. Ollivant pronounced impressively, "with the command of a very small capital, should be able to double his income by taking an intelligent interest in finance."

"Rather have a go at the gees myself," was the depressing reply. "Joseph, hot tea and my *Daily Mail*."

Mr. Ollivant sighed and subsided into his paper. Suddenly he looked up.

“What was all that moving about the house last night?” he enquired. “Doors opening and shutting, people going up and downstairs.”

“Never heard a sound,” Mr. Lashwood grunted.

No one else took any notice. Mr. Ollivant turned round in his chair.

“Didn’t you hear anything, Mrs. Dewar?”

“Nothing at all.”

Mr. Ollivant grunted.

“Where’s your sister this morning, Miss Clewes?” he asked the latter, leaning forward.

“She is not here for the moment,” Miss Amelia replied.

“Not what you would call a sociable lot, we Palace Crescents,” the financier grumbled, as he turned over the page of his newspaper.

Mr. Luke rose finally from his place, drew his serviette through its ring and strolled down the room to the table where Mr. and Mrs. Padgham were seated. He bowed his salutations to the lady and laid his hand on Padgham’s shoulder.

“Playing golf to-day, Padgham?”

“Not to-day. I have some trustee business to see to.”

“Glad to hear you do a stroke of work now and then,” Mr. Luke observed.

He looked around the room. As it happened, no one was seated in their vicinity. He leaned over towards Padgham.

“Thinking of getting out of London this cold spell?”

“Hadn’t any idea of it.”

Mr. Luke stroked his upper lip for a moment.

“Thought you might have an idea of taking Mrs. Padgham to find a little sunshine,” he observed. “Spain or the South of France, you know. Easy to get at, those places, nowadays.”

Mr. Padgham frowned.

“What are you driving at?” he demanded. “You know perfectly well that I’m not going away.”

“Saw you come out of one of those shipping offices in Pall Mall yesterday,” Mr. Luke observed quietly. “Just entered into my head, that’s all, that you might be thinking of a trip. I wouldn’t go just now. Put it off for a bit, Padgham. The weather isn’t settled enough. Are you looking in at the inquest this afternoon?”

“No.”

“Quite right. I hate those sort of places myself. If anything interesting should crop

up,” Mr. Luke enjoined, “well—you’ll be in your office about four. Wait there until I come.”

“Wait there until you come,” Mr. Padgham repeated in parrotlike fashion.

Mr. Luke strolled benignly away. Mrs. Padgham held one hand up to her head whilst she poured out some coffee. Her husband once again had the look of a man from whom the stiffening had gone.

“Blast that fellow!” he muttered under his breath.

Mr. Luke appeared to be in a sociable frame of mind. He caught sight of Bernascon on his way to the door and approached him.

“Good morning,” he said. “I didn’t know you were down yet.”

“I’m late,” Bernascon admitted. “Only just arrived. Bacon and eggs and fresh tea, Joseph. What’s the news this morning?”

“The outside world or the news of our own making?” Mr. Luke asked with a faint but cryptic smile.

Bernascon looked down at his plate and polished his glasses carefully.

“Our own news isn’t quite so good,” he observed. “Any board meetings going?”

“Padgham has one,” Mr. Luke replied carelessly. “Four o’clock this afternoon at Finsbury—if it is necessary.”

“I shall be rather glad when that confounded inquest is over,” Bernascon said, helping himself to a piece of toast and buttering it slowly.

“You are probably thinking of our lady friend,” Mr. Luke remarked. “I don’t think you need worry. Mrs. Dewar and I had a look at the room as soon as Miss Amelia had descended. Whatever sort of a vision she thought she saw, there’s nothing to be seen from there.”

“I suppose those two are just what they seem to be?” Bernascon ventured.

“I’d stake my word upon it.”

“And the other people about the place,” Bernascon went on thoughtfully. “Somehow or other. I seem to have noticed a different atmosphere here the last few days.”

“Fancy.”

“I’m restless, anyway,” Bernascon continued, “especially with this other affair so imminent. I think I shall look in at the court this afternoon.”

“Lunch with me at the Savoy Grill,” Mr. Luke invited. “We’ll go together.”

“I’ll be there,” Bernascon promised, pulling himself together. “One o’clock, I suppose. Wish I’d known before. I shouldn’t have ordered bacon and eggs. Heavy dish for the morning—bacon and eggs—but I felt I needed sustenance. The

prospect of a lunch at the Savoy Grill would have done just as well.”

“You fellows always overeat at this hour of the day,” Mr. Luke said, as he nodded and prepared to stroll away. “The continental breakfast for me and a little orange juice to wind up with.”

“You can’t live as you like in a boarding house,” Bernascon complained.

Luke smiled.

“You can if you want to—in this one,” he observed.

CHAPTER XVII

A coroner's inquest, in nineteen cases out of twenty, may be a dull enough affair but a coroner's inquest in which the subject was obviously the victim of a cold-blooded murder, and in connection with which no arrest has yet been made, may contain every element of drama and the excitement that waits upon it. That, at any rate, seemed to have been the opinion of the crowd who had streamed into the small room attached to the hall in which the function was being held. They came from Fleet Street, from the Law Courts, from the solicitors' offices, and every square inch of room there was to spare had been taken possession of by the sensation-loving public. Practically every one of the boarders at Palace Crescent was present—Roger, Joseph and Mrs. Dewar in the small space reserved for witnesses. Mr. Luke and Bernascon had found two chairs in a retired corner. Mr. Lashwood was squeezed in amongst the standing crowd. Reginald Barstowe, with Freda Medlincott and Ollivant, had found places on one of the hard benches against the walls.

It seemed at first, however, as though the sensation mongers were doomed to disappointment. After the formal part of the proceedings had been got rid of, the policeman and inspector had testified that no weapon had been found near the body, the doctor had gone into the box and testified that the wound could not possibly have been self-inflicted, Inspector Rudlett rose in his place and addressed the coroner.

"On behalf of the police, sir," he announced, "I have to beg for an adjournment of the case."

"You have no further witnesses you wish to call?" the coroner asked.

"Not at this stage of the proceedings, sir," the Inspector replied. "The matter has been carefully gone into at headquarters and I am instructed to make the application for an adjournment."

The coroner stroked his chin.

"At the moment," he confessed, "I scarcely see the reason for not dealing with the case as it stands. The obvious verdict which the jury will probably return could not in any way interfere with the course of justice."

"I shall only repeat, sir," the Inspector continued, "that the head of the Criminal Department would much prefer an adjournment. The Solicitor for the Crown is in court, if you care to call upon him, sir."

"I will hear what Mr. Huskins has to say," the coroner decided, leaning forward.

The Solicitor for the Crown rose to his feet.

“Mr. Coroner,” he explained, “I find myself in a somewhat difficult position for, on the face of it, I am inclined to sympathise with your own desire to ask the jury who are already empanelled to deliver a verdict on the basis of the evidence given. They would be able to do so, without a doubt, and any further proceedings would then take place in another court. For reasons, however, which I cannot go into in public, the authorities would prefer the inquest adjourned, even if it is only for a week. I think I may offer a promise, sir, that if you accede to this course, no further adjournment will be asked for.”

“The application is perhaps slightly unusual under the circumstances, the evidence as to the nature of death being so clear,” the coroner pronounced. “Nevertheless, I shall grant your request, Mr. Huskins. I am quite sure the authorities must have sound reasons for their action and I can even conceive certain circumstances under which their further investigations might be aided by the fact that no definite verdict had been returned by this court.”

After all, however, neither this heterogeneous collection of sensation seekers, nor the assembled boarders of Palace Crescent, were to be altogether disappointed. From some hidden place in the well of the court an elderly lady had risen deliberately to her feet, with the obvious intention of addressing the coroner. She was slight, plainly dressed, with white hair and steely blue eyes. There was a spot of colour in her blanched cheeks, otherwise she seemed perfectly composed. In her left hand she held a small knitting bag. The fingers of her right hand rested upon the back of the seat in front of her. To the bulk of the spectators the incident was unusual and provocative of a mild interest. To the boarders of Palace Crescent it was a very different affair. The sound of that high-pitched, somewhat quavery, but very distinct, voice carried with it a grim portent of approaching tragedy.

“Mr. Coroner,” the woman said, “I wish, if you please, to make a statement. My name is Susannah Clewes. I am a boarder at Palace Crescent, the house in which Colonel Dennett lived and the nearest house to the place where he was murdered.”

The coroner frowned severely.

“Madam,” he said, “you are entirely out of order in addressing the court. You can only do so from the witness box and under oath, and I am on the point of acceding to the request of the police to adjourn this enquiry.”

“But I have information to give,” Susannah Clewes continued, “which is of the utmost importance.”

“The police,” the coroner assured her, “will be very glad to hear privately anything you have to say. Inspector Rudlett here has charge of the case. He will

interview you in the anteroom as soon as these proceedings have closed.”

“But I wish to give my information before these proceedings have closed,” Miss Clewes persisted. “You don’t understand, sir, the importance of what I have to disclose. I saw the murder committed, Mr. Coroner, by a person who is at this moment in the court.”

If Miss Clewes had been aiming at a great effect, she had certainly succeeded. There was a long and breathless silence unbroken by the faintest of whispers. Then there was a low murmur, something that was almost like a smothered sob. The coroner leaned towards the Crown solicitor.

“Mr. Huskins,” he said, “you have heard what this lady has said. Do you wish to put her in the box or do you still persist in your request for an adjournment?”

The solicitor turned to Inspector Rudlett, who was seated only a few places away. The latter rose to his feet and whispered for a moment in his questioner’s ear. Mr. Huskins nodded.

“Mr. Coroner,” he announced, “the authorities would prefer to question the lady before they put her into the witness box. The lady, I might add, was reported missing late last night from her home, the Palace Crescent Boarding House, where she lives with her sister. Up till midday to-day nothing had been heard from her.”

“I was keeping out of the way,” Miss Clewes explained, “because I was afraid that something might happen to me. I was hiding. I hid until half an hour ago, when I came here. I should like to give my testimony. I shall not feel safe if the arrest of the guilty person is not made before I leave this court.”

The coroner, who had come to the same conclusion as a great many other people, namely, that this strange old lady was mad, smiled at her benevolently.

“Madam,” he said, “I am adjourning this inquest for a week and you will then have an opportunity of giving your evidence. In the meantime, I beg of you to say no more, as your position is entirely irregular. Inspector Rudlett will escort you to the anteroom and if, as you say, you are in any fear of intimidation or violence, you will be taken under police protection. On the application of the police,” he went on, in a louder voice and addressing the jury, “I declare the inquest adjourned for seven days.” There was a certain amount of hubbub. People seemed unwilling to leave their places. They were all leaning forward to look at Miss Clewes. Inspector Rudlett had taken a place by her side.

“If agreeable to you, Madam,” he suggested, “we will wait for a few minutes until the people have cleared off. I shall be glad to hear what you have to say then.”

“I am not acquainted with the procedure at inquests or in courts of justice,” Miss Clewes confided, “but I think it is a very foolish thing that when I am in a position to

point out the guilty person to you you should open the doors of this court and let them go free.”

“Madam,” the Inspector assured her with a smile, “it is very difficult indeed for any guilty person to escape the clutches of the law. I think you need have no fear. More harm is done in the way of letting criminals escape by too hasty an arrest than in any other way. Besides, the coroner was quite right. You must not get up and make speeches without going into the witness box.”

“So many strange rules,” Miss Clewes sighed, opening her bag. “They even stopped my knitting after I came into the court.”

The Inspector smiled again.

“Now that the proceedings are over and the coroner has left his seat, I don’t suppose they will mind what you do. In a minute or two the place will be cleared and then I shall be glad to hear what you have to say.”

“And the murderer,” Miss Clewes said calmly, “will all the time be racing away to safety.”

The Inspector shook his head tolerantly.

“There’s no safety from the law, Madam,” he told her.

Mr. Luke glanced round the dining room at Palace Crescent that night in his usual expressionless fashion and chuckled faintly.

“Well,” he remarked, “our dear friend Miss Susannah Clewes does not seem to have scared any one away, anyhow. No one absent without leave, that I can see. What did you think of her performance this afternoon, Mrs. Dewar?”

“I think, as I have always thought,” was the composed reply, “that both Miss Susannah and Miss Amelia Clewes are slightly deranged.”

“They seem sane enough to talk to,” Mr. Luke mused.

“That’s what makes them the more dangerous,” Mrs. Dewar declared. “People who are mad all the time are no danger to any one. People who have sudden flashes of insanity are a great menace. I am afraid I shall have to tell the two ladies that their room is required.”

“Rather hard luck on them,” Reginald Barstowe reflected. “The little lady so thoroughly enjoyed her position. For once in her life, she was going to make a sensation, and then the coroner wouldn’t let her!”

“What I should like to know is—where she hid,” Freda Medlincott remarked. “Did she leave the house or didn’t she; and if she did, where did she spend the night?”

“She must have worked a clever stunt somehow,” Maurice Bernascon pointed

out. "If she stayed in the house she must have found a unique hiding place, and if not, how did she find any one to take her in without any luggage?"

"Then again," Reginald Barstowe queried, "how did she get into the court and find a place there, so that not one of us saw her? I don't believe in that sort of insanity."

"Neither do I," Mr. Luke agreed. "By-the-by, has the Inspector been round again, Mrs. Dewar?"

"He spent the morning here," was the coldly portentous reply. "He asked scarcely any questions and he gave those of us who were here to understand very clearly that he preferred to continue his investigations alone. He was at the top of the house most of the time and he had a policeman posted on the landing to see that no one went up.

"Could Miss Clewes have seen anything from the windows of her room?" Mr. Luke enquired.

"Very doubtful, I should think," Freda Medlincott asserted. "Have you ever been in it?"

"Never," Mr. Luke confessed. "Neither of the ladies has honoured me with an invitation."

"I have been in myself within the last few hours," Mrs. Dewar said. "I pointed out to the Inspector that from neither of the windows is it possible to see the spot where Colonel Dennett was shot. He quite agreed with me."

"That rather takes the powder out of Miss Susannah's bombshell, doesn't it?" Bernascon observed.

"I have no idea what information she gave to the Inspector," Mrs. Dewar said. "I am as anxious, perhaps more anxious than any one, to have this terrible business cleared up, but from the first I had no confidence in her information. No jury, I am convinced, would accept a statement from her without corroboration. She has very poor long sight, which is natural for a woman of her age, the moonlight, I understand, was only fitful, and the scene of the murder itself is not visible from her window."

"Come to think of it," Reginald Barstowe pointed out, "if she had succeeded in convincing the Inspector, there would have been an arrest before now."

"Quite so," Mr. Luke agreed.

Roger filled his glass with what was left of the half bottle of claret they had shared for dinner. He leaned a little forward in his chair. He had just finished giving Audrey Packe a full account of the afternoon's proceedings.

"Of course," he wound up, "we had our sensation when Miss Clewes stood up

calmly and offered to point out the murderer!"

"I can't think why the coroner wouldn't let her," Audrey observed.

"Neither can I, but then I don't understand law," Roger agreed. "I suppose the idea was that the police wanted to collect corroborative evidence of anything Miss Clewes might have to tell them before they made an arrest. It's a much easier thing to adjourn an inquest than to keep remanding a man on trial for his life. What are you doing this evening, Audrey?"

"Nothing."

"We might take a taxi and drive somewhere later on," he suggested, after a moment's hesitation.

"I should love it," the girl assented eagerly. "Somehow or other, one doesn't want to be mean to Mrs. Dewar, but the atmosphere of this place seems to get one by the throat. Poor old Colonel Dennett! I can't bear to look at his empty place. And those two Misses Clewes—still knitting—sitting there like sinister ghosts! I'm even afraid of Mr. Padgham. None of the people seem real or human, somehow. Why is it, Roger?"

"I expect the fault is with us," he reflected. "They are all ordinary people enough, really."

"What did you mean by saying just now that we would take a taxi later on?" she asked.

He hesitated.

"I had a note from Miss Quayne," he confided. "She wants me to go round and see her for a minute after dinner."

Audrey looked at him curiously.

"Miss Quayne seems to have become very devoted to you all of a sudden, Roger," she remarked.

He flushed slightly. The hardest thing in life was to keep natural and honest when he spoke or thought about Flora Quayne.

"I wish she would go away," he declared. "This isn't any place for a nervous person—especially just now. I shall tell her so this evening."

Audrey was twisting and untwisting her fingers. That glimmer of anxiety, which had shone sometimes in her eyes during the last few days, had come back again.

"I suppose it sounds unkind, especially considering how much she has to suffer," she confessed quietly, "but I certainly wish she would go."

Mr. Ollivant, who had once narrowly escaped a term of imprisonment for a minor offence against company law, was inclined to be bitter about the police. He

was sharing a small table with Mr. Lashwood, who would rather have talked about boots and shoes, but his companion had had his way and they had talked the whole subject of the murder threadbare.

“Seems to me that Inspector’s handling the whole affair wrong,” he declared. “He never leaves these premises, they say. What he wants is to search around for a motive—dig into his past and that sort of thing.”

“Poor old Dennett was robbed,” Mr. Lashwood pointed out. “Robbery is motive enough, isn’t it?”

“Robbed? What of?” Mr. Ollivant demanded. “Did you ever know him with a bob in his pocket? Lived on his pension and I should think he was the meanest man under this roof. His watch was an Ingersoll and he didn’t even own a cigarette case!”

“Well, I don’t suppose the man who robbed him knew what a poor haul he was going to get,” Lashwood remarked.

“Look here,” Ollivant argued. “Is it likely that his murderer, whoever he was, just met him by accident with a loaded revolver in his pocket, shot him in a lonely place and then searched him for what he might have had about him? Rubbish! I tell you whoever shot that old man had a motive, and that’s what the police want to go for. They will never discover anything kicking up the ground around the back of these premises.”

Lashwood smiled.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he chuckled. “They found a wash-leather bag in a clump of nettles this morning, only a yard or two away. A small chamois leather bag large enough for a pair of spectacles,—and of course it was empty.”

“Who told you that?” Ollivant enquired.

“Joseph. He was hanging round watching them.”

“What’s an empty wash-leather bag?” Mr. Ollivant scoffed. “Might have belonged to any one. What the police want is a motive.”

The conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Padgham was scrappy. Such as it was, it was carried on more for the sake of their fellow guests than for any pleasure they themselves derived from it.

“I can’t think what’s got you, Tom,” his wife observed. “Drink, I suppose. You’re losing your nerve, you know.”

“What do you mean?” her husband asked, a note of subdued anger in his tone. “I’m all right.”

“Well, you don’t look it,” the lady remarked coolly. “You look as though you had just got up after a three-days’ hangover! There’s a spot of blood on your collar: cut

yourself shaving again, I suppose. And you'd better have your hair and moustache trimmed and cut, if you can't keep them in better order."

He looked at her maliciously.

"Well, I don't see that you do any good by overdressing just to make a bluff. Low necks ain't fashionable now—no more is wearing jewellery as you're wearing it. Sham jewellery, especially."

In the depths of Mrs. Padgham's really fine eyes there was a sparkle of resentment which, had her husband seen it, might have brought on another nervous attack.

"They aren't all sham," she said, "and if some of them are, that's your fault. You're too mean to invest your money where it might do you a bit of good. You would sooner plant it round in foreign banks, and then you'll be the only one to get hold of it, if things go wrong. If I were you, I'd chuck it. You're not fit for a man's job any longer. Tom, tell me—did you go to Finsbury this afternoon?"

Mr. Padgham shook his head.

"Called off," he confided succinctly.

"I should think so," Mrs. Padgham observed. "Of course, no one would listen to me."

"And what would your advice be?" Mr. Padgham asked with turgid sarcasm.

"Lie low or clear out," the lady replied.

On the other side of the room, Flora Quayne was seated at her table alone, an exquisitely bound volume of Omar Khayyam propped up before her. She was eating hothouse grapes which had nothing whatever to do with the menu submitted to the boarders and sipping a glass of Château Yquem. Her eyes had been wandering restlessly round the assembled company all through the service of the meal. She had appreciated the atmosphere of trouble or fear which seemed to be hanging over the Padghams' table, the stony silence which reigned between the two Misses Clewes, who had eaten their dinner without exchanging a single remark. The somewhat staccato nature of the conversation at Mrs. Dewar's table had not been lost upon her. The death of this stupid old man, Flora supposed, was a tragedy in its way. A greater tragedy to her was the sight of Roger entertaining his little girl from behind the counter, so fresh and young and healthy, notwithstanding her slight air of fatigue. She caught sight of one of his protective glances when he leaned forward and the room for a moment seemed misty. She moistened her dry lips with wine. If only she dared drink enough of it so that she could find forgetfulness! She fancied herself in a Persian garden with her favourite author, a flask of wine by her side, pouring out and

drinking with thirsty lips and soul. She could imagine the sweet confusion of her brain—the head thrown back, the west winds, the songs of birds, the touch she craved for. And then it all faded away. This was the forgetfulness of love. It was the forgetfulness of hate which she sought.

CHAPTER XVIII

Flora Quayne was already established upon her couch when Roger paid his evening visit. Her coffee remained untasted by her side, a cigarette had burnt itself out in the ash tray. Her head was thrown so far back that she seemed to be gazing at the ceiling. Her arms drooped listlessly, one on each side of the couch, towards the floor.

“Close the door, please,” she begged. “Come and bring your chair close to me. There’s coffee there if you want it.”

“I had my coffee in the lounge,” he told her. “I’ll smoke a cigarette, if I may. I’m afraid I can’t stay long. I have some figures to look into and I’ve promised Miss Packe that we will take a drive for an hour somewhere.”

“A drive?” she repeated. “Why?”

“Because it’s a horribly close evening.”

“I’ll tell you why,” she contradicted. “Because in a taxicab you can sit with your arm around that silly little girl’s waist. You can kiss her if you want to. Isn’t that it?”

He would have been angry but for the spasm of pain in her face, the fingers gripping at the coverlet of the couch. He came and stood over her.

“Flora,” he begged. “I wish you’d leave off saying things like that about Miss Packe.”

“Why should I?” she demanded eagerly. “What is she to you? Are you—tell me if it is true—are you engaged to her?”

He hesitated for a moment.

“Perhaps I’m not exactly engaged,” he confessed. “All the same, I mean to marry her.”

“You can come here and tell me that,” she faltered, with her hand pressed to her side and her eyes calling out to his. “You can’t mean it, Roger. I could forgive you for flirting with her—a man must have that sort of amusement, I suppose. A man never realises how sacred a thing affection of any sort should be. But marriage! You can’t mean that.”

“I certainly do,” he assured her. “Of course, I know that Audrey isn’t a wonderful person like you are, for instance. She’s not clever and she’s had to earn her own living since she was a child. That doesn’t matter. I’m fond of her and I could easily be fonder. She pleases me in many ways, and it’s through her that I’ve had this great success.”

The fit of passion which he had feared showed no signs of coming. Perhaps he would have welcomed it rather than the hurt, frightened look in her eyes.

“My dear,” she said quietly, “when I think of you married, it seems like death.”

“Well, we’re not thinking of getting married just for the moment,” he assured her. “Don’t let’s talk about it, Flora. I came in because I promised to, but I think that both you and I are tired to-night. Let’s talk about ordinary things. Tell me about the book you’ve been reading. You seemed so engrossed at dinner time.”

She appeared scarcely to have heard him.

“Roger,” she went on, “if you want money to help you in your business, I can give it to you.”

He shook his head.

“I don’t need any. It’s sweet of you, all the same. All the money has been found by Mallory’s. They’re forming a company to manufacture my machines, of which I’m to be president. All my difficulties seem to have been smoothed away.”

“You don’t look very happy,” she observed wistfully.

“Just at this moment, perhaps not,” he acknowledged. “I can’t bear to see you look as though you were suffering.”

“You do care for me a little, then?”

“Of course I do. You are much too wonderful a person for me, though. After all, you know you live in a world of which I know nothing. Omar Khayyam,” he added, looking at the book which she had been reading. “You know, I never heard of him! I never heard even of the names of the authors of all these books you have about. I’m a most uneducated person—what you call a Philistine. You would be tired of me in a week.”

She smiled.

“I should be tired of you, Roger,” she said, “only when, like Delilah, I cut off your locks and your strength went, and even then, perhaps, I should not be tired of you. I don’t want you to marry that girl, Roger. You are the first man I have ever said it to, but I want you to marry me.”

He threw the end of his cigarette into the fire.

“You would hate me in no time,” he assured her. “Tell me what you think about all this confusion in the place. Are you going to stay on here?”

“I should be very sorry to leave,” she admitted.

“It may be quite uncomfortable,” he warned her. “The police have the idea that we are harbouring a criminal. That must be the idea of Miss Susannah Clewes too. Of course, no one would dream of suspecting Mrs. Dewar of being concerned in it in any way, but I’m afraid it’s going to be rather unpleasant here for a time.”

"I shall not run away," Flora Quayne declared. "Neither must you. As to poor Colonel Dennett, who in this place would ever have thought of hurting him? What would they gain by it? He was almost penniless. Every one knew that."

"I have given up puzzling about it," Roger acknowledged. "I haven't much of a brain, anyway, and what I have is addled."

"Sit on the edge of the couch, please, Roger," she begged.

She made room for him and he obeyed. Her arms stole round his neck. He made a movement to draw away but the sight of her misty eyes restrained him.

"Flora, my dear Flora," he began. "If only—"

"Pick me up," she ordered.

He obeyed. He carried her round the room and she was like a child again.

"Four times round, please," she implored. "Go away, Marie," she added to her maid, "and close the door. I'll call when I want you. . . . This is not tiring you?"

"Not in the least," he assured her. "But—"

"Never mind if it is not tiring you," she interrupted. "It may seem stupid to you but I like it. If I had all the money in the world, Roger, and a beautiful island and ships and pictures and all sorts of marvellous things, I would give them all to you to be carried about—to have you come when I called, and love me when I felt lonely as I do to-night. Fate has not been so kind to me," she went on, with her cheek against his. "Why cannot she give me just this thing? You're not really very different from other men, you know, Roger. I believe if I had seen you before you saw that little shopgirl, you would have felt everything I want you to feel—for me. But you do feel something sometimes, don't you?" she continued, with sudden fire in her tone. "I felt you quiver, Roger. You kissed me once as if you liked it. Kiss me now."

He bent over her lips. The kiss which he commenced, however, in such brotherly fashion suddenly became a thing of passion. He felt her mouth fighting for his, her arms seemed gifted with a furious strength. He was absolutely helpless. He could only tear himself away by hurting her. She turned out one of the lights as they passed the switch and her eyes shone like fire. She laughed at his discomfiture.

"There's plenty of light," she told him, "from the lamp by the side of the sofa. Like this, I feel more. Roger, can't you take me away from this place? The little girl will soon find some one else. She's just like one of the millions who pass through the streets day by day. She will find some one else soon, and if you go, Roger, I shall never find any one in the world, and I need you so much more than she does. She must see heaps of men day by day in that great place where she works, Roger. Any one of them would do for her. No one else would do for me. And I am so helpless."

She seemed to have spent herself for the moment, with her pleading and her

passion. Her arms slackened their grip. Breathless, he laid her down upon the couch and stood away. She covered her face with her hands.

“Oh, you are hard!” she cried. “Why do you fight against me so, Roger? Why do you make me ashamed? Why don’t you love me a little as I love you?”

She heard his stumbling footsteps. She moved her hands away from her eyes. The door had been opened and closed. She was alone.

CHAPTER XIX

Mrs. Dewar was seated at her hard wooden desk, carefully copying the disbursements of the day into an ink-stained and shabby ledger. She wore no glasses—she needed none. The back of her chair was as though it didn't exist. She sat absolutely upright and she wrote quickly and unfalteringly. Suddenly, however, she paused. She held her head in an attitude of rigid attention. There was a familiar sound in the passage outside. She felt a little shiver of fear, the fear which came to her only from one thing in life. She knew very well who this coming visitor was. She listened to the soft thud of the stick. She laid down her pen as the door opened and Flora Quayne entered. Then she rose slowly to her feet.

"Something is the matter?" she asked.

Flora Quayne listened for a moment, then she locked the door and threw herself on to the hard horsehair couch. She seemed to pass without a second's warning into hysterics. She turned from side to side, covered her face with her hands; her whole slight frame seemed torn and rent with sobs. Mrs. Dewar came slowly across the room and knelt by her side. She laid her hands upon the girl's forehead, yet even then her voice seemed empty of all feeling. They were the husks of words she spoke.

"My child," she begged, "don't! Please don't. Some one might come. There is something you wish for? Tell me."

The girl pushed her passionately away. Mrs. Dewar rose to her feet and stood looking down at the dishevelled figure. Flora waved her away.

"Get back to your chair," she cried, "I can't bear you near me."

Mrs. Dewar obeyed. She sat before her desk and waited. There was a great emptiness in her eyes, a wilder longing in her tired heart than the girl on the couch was feeling, but she showed no sign. Flora sat up—a strange, witchlike figure, her beautiful hair dishevelled, her face white and drawn.

"Listen—you," she commanded.

"I am listening," Mrs. Dewar said.

"It is because of you," Flora went on, and her voice was hard as steel, "that I am like this! Roger only half wants me. I can make him feel a moment's passion but no love. You got drunk—you let me fall down the stairs. It is true, isn't it?"

For one moment Mrs. Dewar's eyes were closed, then she opened them again.

"It is the truth," she confessed. "I have suffered for it—I have done what I

could.”

“You were drunk,” Flora persisted. “You were supposed to be looking after me.”

“It is true,” Mrs. Dewar confessed once again. “That was twenty years ago. Since then I have never tasted wine or any alcohol—and I have suffered! What I have done to make atonement I have done. You have luxury. This house is what it is so that you may be what you are. I live in fear and I have done evil things. You remind me of my sin and I must remind you of my sufferings.”

“I have never forgiven you,” Flora told her breathlessly.

“My God! Do I not know it?” the woman at the desk moaned, and all the sorrow of the world seemed for an instant to be reflected in her voice. “You have never forgiven me. You are my daughter and you have never forgiven.”

“Listen,” Flora said. “I might forgive.”

Mrs. Dewar sat quite still. She attempted no words.

“I might forgive,” Flora repeated. “I am torn and tortured to death. The thing has come to me which I never dreamed would come as it has. I want Roger Ferrison. Get him for me and I will forgive.”

“Roger Ferrison!”

“Get him for me,” Flora went on, moving farther forward on the couch, “and I will do what I have not done for all those twenty years, though you have prayed and prayed. I will kiss you. I will put my arms round you. I will call you ‘mother.’ I will tell you that you are forgiven.”

“If I had power to work miracles,” the woman faltered with half-closed eyes. “Let me think.”

“He is half mine,” Flora continued. “You have only half your task to do. He is obstinate. He has conscience. He thinks of that other girl. That girl must go. Do you hear? It is the girl—Audrey Packe—who is in the way.”

“What can I do?” Mrs. Dewar asked, and she had almost the look of a devotee in a cathedral.

“You know what has happened to others through those who are in this house,” the girl persisted. “Your friends are not squeamish people. You know very well, and I know, that before a week is past, that fool of an old woman, Susannah Clewes, will probably be dead. Very well. What is going to happen to one must happen to another. You must get rid of her.”

“I must get rid of her,” Mrs. Dewar repeated. “You mean you are sure that if she were out of the way Roger Ferrison would be your lover?”

“I am sure,” was the feverish reply. “What you do, how you do it, is nothing to

me. Buy her, if you like. She's only a miserable little shopgirl. Offer her money. If she won't take that, then she must be got rid of the other way."

There was a long silence. Flora, who had raised herself to a crouching posture, her face supported between her hands, gazed across at the woman in the chair. Those soft brilliant eyes were empty now of their tender lights. They seemed like the windows of a house of hate.

"Well, what are you going to do?" she demanded, and though her voice was so low that it scarcely carried across the room, there was a pent-up passion of anger trembling there.

"What can I do?" the woman at the desk asked hopelessly.

"Get me what I want," was the fierce retort. "You owe it to me. I want Roger Ferrison."

"What has come to you, Flora?" Mrs. Dewar marvelled, and so far as the advent of any emotion into her still voice was possible, it was manifest then. "You are always surrounded by such young men as may come here—most of them would be easy and willing victims. You will have nothing to say to them. Suddenly you are on fire!"

The girl clasped her hands to her bosom.

"Don't I know it?" she moaned. "I'm going mad! As for those others—don't dare to speak to me of them. I want Roger Ferrison. He would be mine easily enough but for that girl. Am I to kill her with my own hands?"

"The young man is so impossible," Mrs. Dewar lamented. "He is one of the impossible type. He has a conscience which is sufficient to make a mule of any man. Do you mean that if the other girl were out of the way—I imagine that even then it would not make any difference. He would have suspicions. The girl is a common little chit but he has chosen her. I don't think even if he were free that he would accept anything you have to offer him."

The girl was portentously calm. She picked up her stick and the thin blue veins at the backs of her delicate hands seemed like strips of whipcord.

"So you taunt me—you!" she cried. "You—who have made me what I am! Other girls have decent mothers. I have you."

Mrs. Dewar's lips moved, and moved again, and went on moving without sound. She had suddenly become like one of those dolls in a Russian Ballet, mechanical puppets in whose soundbox some string has broken. The girl, clutching the edge of the sofa with her free hand, half staggered to her feet. She swung her stick and flung it across the room, so that the woman seated there collapsed for the moment, moaning over her desk. The girl chuckled horribly. She sidled from the

couch with the palms of her hands upon the floor. She was like some wild and beautiful animal crawling through the jungle.

“So that hurt—yes? Some of the pain I bear day by day. My heritage from you! If you won’t give me what I want, you shall suffer as I have suffered. Don’t move! I may be slow but I am coming. Sit there. Wait for me.”

Mrs. Dewar pulled herself upright in her chair and rose to her feet. She crossed the room with the stick in her hand, leaned down, lifted the girl in her arms and laid her once more upon the couch—a fluttering medley of silk-clad legs and billowy lingerie.

“You shall have your way,” she yielded. “You shall triumph as you always do.”

The girl immediately ceased her struggles. She pulled down her skirt, smoothing it lovingly as though its delicate texture pleased her. The softness returned miraculously to her face. Her lips were moist and tremulous, already framing a smile. Her eyes were becoming like pools of sweet contentment. She held the hand of the woman who was leaning over her. The slight peevishness of her tone was almost attractive.

“Why do you excite me so much?” she complained. “You know that you must do as I wish. I wish that girl to be removed. Promise me before I go that it shall be done and I shall spend the night happily. . . . But it must be soon! I cannot bear to wait for Roger. I am dying of something that is worse than thirst.”

“It shall be soon,” Mrs. Dewar promised.

The girl patted the back of her mother’s hand. The latter endured the caress so long as it lasted, then she made her way to the door, opened it softly and listened.

“You had better go to bed,” she advised, looking round. “There is no one about to-night.”

There was a hungry look in the girl’s eyes.

“Roger—” she began.

“The lounge is empty and the lights are out.”

Flora Quayne took up her stick and with her strange yet not wholly ungraceful gait made her way out to the passage. She looked back for a moment.

“Good night, Mrs. Dewar,” she said, with an irony which was only half playful.

“Good night, Miss Quayne,” was the quiet reply.

CHAPTER XX

Roger returned in due course from his somewhat prolonged taxicab expedition, turned on the light in the alcove, glanced at the long line of metal pegs and whistled to himself.

"I say, Audrey," he called out softly. "Come and have a look at this."

She joined him, carrying her hat in her hand.

"Every one out to-night," Roger pointed out. "Look—Mr. Luke is out, Mr. Bernascon is out, Mr. Barstowe is out, Mr. Padgham is out, Mr. Ollivant is out!"

Audrey glanced at the clock.

"One o'clock!" she exclaimed. "Roger, how much did you have to pay that taxi-man?"

"Not half what the drive was worth," he answered cheerily. "But how the time has slipped away. And where, Audrey—where, I ask, are our mysterious fellow boarders? Mr. Luke, for instance, after dinner apologising for yawning and going to bed. And Barstowe refusing Miss Medlincott's complimentary tickets for the theatre, because he had had, as he called it, his night out last night and wanted sleep."

Audrey shook her head gravely.

"I don't understand it," she admitted. "And remember, they are not the only mysterious people connected with the place. There's Miss Clewes. Of course, she may be out of her mind, but she doesn't seem like it to me. There's that wild strange girl who won't let you alone. She isn't exactly normal, is she, Roger? . . . I have quite made up my mind I would like to leave here if I can find a place at about the same price. Would you mind very much, Roger?"

"We'll talk about it," he answered. "First of all, I'm thirsty after that wonderful drive. Let's see if Joseph has obeyed orders. I told him a bottle of whisky and a bottle of port. I tell you, Audrey," he went on, after a brief examination of the bottles, "there's the perfect boarding-house butler for you. Both there—both corks drawn—both in decanters—both with neat little cards hung around the neck! We're going to have a drink before we go to bed. Let's go in our old corner."

She laughed.

"Why, Roger," she exclaimed, "you must be tired of—holding my hand."

"Come and try," he invited. "Wait till I've made myself a whisky and soda and poured out your port."

They made their way to the recess and established themselves upon the lounge.

Roger took a long drink of his whisky and soda.

“Good,” he exclaimed. “Drink your port, Audrey. You must want something too.”

She came closer to him.

“You are not going to sit up till all those people come in, are you, dear?” she asked drowsily.

“Not if you don’t want to,” he replied. “I’m quite willing to leave this place,” he went on. “We promised to stay for a short time, you know, for Mrs. Dewar’s sake, but after the inquest next week, I think we might get away without doing any one any harm. I wish I dare smoke.”

“Can’t you?”

He shook his head.

“If there’s any mystery about these fellows,” he said, “and their queer nocturnal habits, it’s jolly certain that when they came in they would know it if some one had been smoking during the last few minutes. I remember the last time some one—I couldn’t see who it was at first but we found out afterwards that it was Padgham—turned on the light and looked round as though he were frightened to death of being seen. We were nearly discovered that time. Audrey, you’re not listening!”

No reply. Audrey was fast asleep. Roger, whose curiosity was greater than he himself realised, drew her farther back amongst the cushions, found a safe place for his whisky and soda and composed himself to wait.

Huddled up on the couch at the back of the recess, Audrey opened her eyes with a half-stifled croon of pleasure. She swayed gently away from Roger’s embrace.

“I believe,” she murmured, “I believe I must have been almost asleep.”

Roger laughed derisively.

“My dear,” he told her, “you have been asleep for an hour and a half. We have been here altogether for an hour and three-quarters. It’s a quarter to three.”

“Has anybody come in?”

“Not a soul. All the same, something queer has been going on.”

“Something queer? Tell me about it.”

He shook his head.

“It all seems so impossible,” he observed. “First of all, I am quite sure I heard the green baize door swing but I could not hear a footstep or a voice and there’s not the slightest draught from the passage. Then, I thought I heard sounds right out at the back, but they died away too. Finally I had a real shock,” he went on. “I heard

footsteps on the stairs and behold, Mrs. Padgham in a wonderful silk dressing gown and boudoir cap to match—don't forget that, Audrey, when you buy your trousseau—came down the stairs, timidly for her, carrying a torch! She turned up the light and looked at the keys. She stayed there a few seconds and then away she went upstairs again.”

“Getting anxious about her husband, I suppose,” Audrey remarked.

“Well, if you don't mind, dear, I suggest we leave them to go their own evil way. I'm stiff and I can scarcely keep my eyes open.”

“You poor dear,” she cried, rising swiftly to her feet. “It was selfish of me to have gone off to sleep like that. We will go at once. Hush!”

She caught him by the wrist. They leaned back into the black obscurity of their retreat. There had been no sound of a latchkey in the door but the light of an electric torch suddenly flashed down the row of keys. There was a slight clatter.

“The first home,” Roger whispered. “I wonder who it is.”

They had little chance, however, of finding out. What followed was a miracle of swiftness. A dark figure, absolutely undistinguishable, fled up the stairs, a phantom of a human being. Again there was a clatter—one, two, three keys were replaced. The torch was extinguished. There was a muffled sound of flying footsteps upon the stairs and then silence.

“Well, I'm damned,” Roger muttered under his breath.

“I'm frightened,” she confessed. “No one would come in like that and fly upstairs unless he was in danger or terrified. Listen! Roger, what on earth is that?”

“A most unholy motor accident, I should say,” he replied.

They stood hand in hand listening to the crashing of metal and woodwork and a single long-drawn-out shriek of agony. The windows rattled in their sashes. There was the sound of a loud explosion, the hiss of escaping steam. Then came shouts and yells.

“Roger, how ghastly!” Audrey cried. “I wish I had not sat up.”

He pushed her towards the staircase.

“I think I'd better go out, Audrey dear, if you don't mind. I don't like horrors myself, but they may need help.”

Her arms were wound tightly around him. Without an effort of absolute brutality, it was impossible for him to move.

“You sha'n't go,” she declared. “I tell you, I will not be left here. There is something fearful going on. That crash may have something to do with it. Don't move, Roger. Don't breathe.”

He closed his lips with an effort. Again there was the rattle of a key in the front

door. A vague shape leaped through the darkness of the alcove—silent-footed in a whirlwind of haste. One more key clanked in its place and the last of the returned revellers flashed by, a single creaking stair bearing slight evidence to his flying progress. Then there was silence, except that near by outside there was a smothered hubbub of voices. Roger's hand clasped his companion's wrist.

"Audrey," he insisted, "we are going to get out of this. Upstairs to your room at once. Let's see if we can go as fast as they did."

Hand in hand, they dashed up the first flight and reached the security of the darkness above.

The front doorbell of the house of mysteries in Palace Crescent was ringing at intervals whilst a heavy hand pounded upon the knocker. Joseph was full of sleepy but dignified indignation, as he threw open the door and gazed breathlessly into the night.

"What on earth are you making such a hell of a noise for at this hour of the night?" he demanded.

There was no verbal answer, but Joseph was gently but firmly pushed on one side. An inspector of police, followed by three constables, trooped into the hall. Joseph stared at them open-mouthed.

"What—again!" he exclaimed. "My God! There's more of you, too, at the back door. I can hear the noise they're making from here."

"Go and open it," the Inspector ordered brusquely. "Look here, I'll come with you. Guard the stairs and the door here, you others. Quick, Joseph, show me the way."

"Along this passage," Joseph directed.

"Turn on the lights."

"I can't," was the helpless reply. "Something's fused somewhere. Try it yourself, if you don't believe me."

"Do you mean to say there are no lights anywhere in the house?" the Inspector asked.

"Not one—for the moment."

The Inspector's torch hashed out. Joseph led the way down the passage to the green baize door and out into the scullery. Just as they entered, the window was smashed in and a constable crawled through.

"Door locked, sir," he reported.

The Inspector turned the key and Joseph drew back the bolt. Two more constables entered. The Inspector flashed his torch round, left one man at the

outside gate, one in the scullery and one in the passage. He then turned to Joseph.

“Waken your mistress at once, if she is in bed,” he ordered. “Which is her room?”

“This way, sir.”

This time there was no delay. Joseph had barely knocked at the door of Mrs. Dewar’s bureau when it was opened. She stood on the threshold, holding a candle in her hand, a dressing gown wrapped around her thin body.

“Is it about the lights?” she asked. “Inspector Rudlett, I see,” she went on, leaning forward. “What’s the trouble now, Inspector?”

“I’m going to search your house, Madam,” he announced. “You can come with me if you wish; if not, your servant here must take me to the various rooms.”

“Do you mean to say,” Mrs. Dewar expostulated, “that you propose to disturb my boarders at this hour of the night?”

“All that I require from you, Madam, in the way of conversation, is the names of the tenants of your rooms,” was the brusque reply. “Follow me, please.”

The Inspector led the way to the alcove and flashed his torch down the long row of keys. He glanced at the names with a somewhat unpleasant smile.

“No one out to-night, I see,” he remarked sarcastically. “All your boarders safe in bed, Mrs. Dewar!”

“My boarders are not in the habit of walking about the streets in the early morning,” she answered. “So far as I know, every one was in their room before midnight. However, the house is at your disposal.”

“How long have you had this trouble with the lights?” he asked, as they mounted the stairs.

“Several times during the last few months.”

“Have you made complaints in the proper quarters?”

Mrs. Dewar shrugged her shoulders.

“It seems quite useless,” she said. “The lights go on after a time. Building operations is generally the excuse.”

“I will have enquiries made into the matter,” he promised grimly.

“You might also have enquiries made into the reason for this ridiculous visit at three o’clock in the morning,” Mrs. Dewar suggested wearily. “Do you imagine that I am keeping an improper house or a gaming place or sheltering criminals?”

She had paused upon the stairs. The Inspector gently urged her forward.

“At present, Madam,” he told her, “you give me the impression of one who is trying to gain time.”

“I will take you to the door of each room,” she said, “and tell you the names of

the occupants. You can enter and explain your business yourself. I should never be able to face my boarders again if I intruded at this hour of the morning without the shadow of an explanation. The door exactly opposite is the door of the room occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Padgham. As I believe it is their custom to share a double bed, I trust you will use all discretion in your entrance.”

“The law is not concerned in conventionalities, Mrs. Dewar,” the Inspector answered, as he knocked at the door.

Detective Inspector Rudlett was more puzzled than he would have cared to admit as he stood in the lounge, about an hour later, waiting for Mrs. Dewar. He had made several notes in his pocketbook but he was bound to admit that they were not of vast importance. Every room which he had visited contained inmates who were, or who appeared to have been, sleeping. Their discarded evening clothes were more or less neatly disposed of, there was no sign of hurried entrance into any one of the rooms. Roger Ferrison and Audrey Packe, it was true, were still fully clothed, but they were not under suspicion and Roger’s explanation seemed quite satisfactory. The report from the sergeant, who had made an exhaustive search of the rear part of the premises, was utterly negative. Already Rudlett was figuring to himself an unpleasant half-hour in the office of the Sub-Commissioner. A raid like this upon a boarding house against which nothing definite was known, except that a murder had been committed in its vicinity a few nights before, whilst the real criminals of whom he had been in search had got away, was scarcely likely to lead him any nearer towards promotion. Nevertheless, he had not yet lost all hope. There was one more chance.

In due course, Mrs. Dewar appeared. Her weary expression was in no way changed. She showed no signs of triumph. She displayed none of the usual feminine “I told you so” attitude. She listened icily to the Inspector’s suave speech.

“Mrs. Dewar,” he said, “I have seen all your lodgers and questioned them as to their doings this evening. If I am able to verify their statements, you will hear no more of this disagreeable affair.”

“I am very glad to hear it,” she assured him. “Since you appear to have come to the conclusion that you have made a mistake, Inspector, may I ask in what terrible criminal conspiracy you imagined us to be concerned? A few nights ago it was a murder. What is it this time?”

“You will read more about it in the papers later on, Madam,” the Inspector confided. “There was a very serious jewel robbery in Burlington Gardens an hour or so ago. A watchman was killed and a policeman, I fear, mortally wounded. The

criminals got away in a car which was chased by a police automobile to the corner of this street.”

“It is quite a long street,” Mrs. Dewar remarked drily.

“That may be so,” the Inspector admitted. “The presumptive evidence is very strong, however, that the thieves found shelter either here or in one of the adjoining houses. Our suspicions appear to have been directed to the wrong one.”

“You have my sympathy,” Mrs. Dewar assured him. “These continued blunderings must, I fear, shake the faith of your superiors.”

The Inspector smiled as he turned away. He left Mrs. Dewar’s sarcastic comment unanswered.

CHAPTER XXI

Luncheon was never served at Palace Crescent except under special conditions, the understanding being that the great majority of Mrs. Dewar's boarders would be engaged in their City labours during that portion of the day. As the dinner hour approached, however, on the day of the police raid, the lounge was crowded at least a quarter of an hour before the usual time for assembling. There was scarcely a single absentee and Joseph did a brisk trade in *apéritifs* of every description.

"It is the first time in my life," the elder Miss Clewes remarked with dignity, "that I have been awakened to find a man in my sleeping apartment. I can assure you that I shall find great difficulty in getting over the shock."

"Poor old dear," Mr. Padgham chuckled sotto voce. "The first time in her life and then to find it was only a policeman!"

"Naturally," Miss Susannah Clewes continued, "when I opened my eyes and saw the Inspector standing by my bed, I thought that he had come to collect more evidence from me concerning the events of the other night. I should have been quite willing to have told him the whole story but he behaved, I must say, in a most perfunctory manner. He assured me that next week would be plenty of time for further discussion as to the murder of Colonel Dennett, and he persisted in cross-questioning me about events which had nothing whatever to do with the case."

"He even opened our wardrobe," Miss Amelia complained, in a shocked tone.

"I woke up," Reginald Barstowe announced, "to find the Inspector shaking my dinner clothes and holding them up to the light. He asked me twice whether the shirt was the one I had worn all the evening. He even felt the soles of my shoes and asked me how far I had walked!"

"The row outside woke me up and I was reading when he came in to me," Mr. Bernascon recounted. "He examined my clothes just the same and even felt the stub of a cigarette in the ash tray to see if it was cold."

"I can understand the police coming a bad cropper now and then," Mr. Luke remarked judiciously, "but what I cannot understand is that having searched the house last night and discovered every one peaceably in bed, they should have appeared again this morning, pretty well as soon as we had all left after breakfast, with a search warrant signed by a well-known magistrate which permitted them to ransack every room and, in short, the whole of the premises. What suspicious circumstances can they expect to find in a well-kept boarding house such as this?"

“And I’ll tell you another thing,” Mr. Ollivant chimed in, elbowing his way forward. “When the police left, they didn’t all go. They stationed a man on the other side of the road, another one at the corner and one inside the house—as Mrs. Dewar will tell you. When I left, I thought out of curiosity that I would just have a look at the back and there, if you please, was another of them at the old tradesmen’s entrance which is not used now, close to where poor old Dennett was shot.”

“You all seem inclined to treat the whole matter as a joke,” Mr. Padgham observed, “but the more I think about it, the more I ask myself what these fellows were after? Do they think we’re a company of gangsters or foreign crooks or Russians or what?”

“I can tell you what they were after,” Roger Ferrison interposed. “I was lurching in the City to-day and heard all about it. It’s the Burlington Gardens jewel raiders they wanted. You all read about that, of course?”

“Of course we read about it,” Mr. Luke agreed. “But what makes you think that they came here after those fellows? The newspapers declared that the Burlington Gardens thieves were a well-known gang whose headquarters are in a provincial town.”

“Some of them, perhaps,” Roger remarked, “but the *Evening Standard*, for instance, declares that the raiders tried to escape by the Hammersmith Road, and we know quite well that it was in the Hammersmith Road they deserted their car and left it without lights, for the police automobile which was following them to run into. That was the collision we heard from the house here. Cost three men their lives!”

“I think Ferrison is right,” Barstowe agreed. “I think the Burlington Gardens raiders tried to escape this way and every one seems agreed that it was their car which was smashed up near the corner of the road. I think we can take it for granted that was the crowd Inspector Rudlett and his men were after, but why on earth they came here to look for the fellows is more than I can imagine. We have never had a boarder of even doubtful character since I have been here.”

“I can understand the police making an initial mistake,” Mr. Luke reflected, “especially as this neighbourhood must be in bad odour for the moment, owing to poor old Dennett’s murder, but what seems to me absolutely inexplicable is why, after having had time to make the requisite enquiries, having searched this whole place and found not a single suspicious circumstance, they should have come back again this morning and have had another go.”

Flora Quayne looked up from the easy-chair which Roger had drawn up from her usual corner, so that she might join the group.

“Perhaps it was I who excited suspicion,” she suggested, in her low sweet tone.

“I was still in *déshabillé* when they arrived and they found a pistol by my bedside. I keep it there always, but it seemed to make them very angry.”

“But why do you keep it there?” Audrey asked. “Who would be likely to do you any harm?”

Flora Quayne looked across at her with wide-open eyes.

“Well, for one thing,” she explained gently, “I believe that I have very much more jewellery than any one else here, except perhaps Mrs. Padgham. I have some pearls which are worth a great deal of money and you must remember that I could not defend myself if I were attacked. My voice even does not carry far enough to shout—especially if I have a fit of nerves. That’s why I keep a pistol by my side—for protection.”

“And a jolly good reason too,” Bernascon declared with emphasis.

Then Mrs. Dewar came quietly in—also a few minutes before her usual time. She was, without a doubt, a most extraordinary woman, for without seeming to raise her voice in the least, without the appearance of addressing any one in particular, she greeted them with a few significant words which every one heard and understood.

“I feel that I have to offer you all,” she said, glancing first at Mr. Luke and then at the others, “my sincere apologies. To have had my house raided as it was last night and all you people disturbed and annoyed is most humiliating. I do not know what compensation, if any, the police are likely to offer me, but I do beg for your consideration.”

“My dear Mrs. Dewar,” Mr. Luke replied, “I can assure you I speak on behalf of every one when I express to you our deepest sympathy. There is some slight excuse for the police, perhaps, for the simple reason that this is the nearest house to the place where the raiders left their car. I feel sure, however, that in due course you will receive a full apology from the authorities.”

“I think what Mrs. Dewar is afraid of,” Flora Quayne ventured, “is that some of you may think of leaving because of this mysterious visitation coming so soon after the tragedy of Colonel Dennett’s death. It is unfortunate, of course, but Mrs. Dewar is not to be blamed. I do hope that none of you will think of leaving. I myself shall, of course, stay on.”

“And I,” echoed Mr. Luke.

“And I,” from Mr. Bernascon.

“And my wife and myself,” Mr. Padgham declared.

“I have no thought of leaving,” Mr. Ollivant assured everybody.

“Nor I,” Mr. Lashwood echoed.

“So far as my sister and I are concerned,” Miss Clewes said, “we hope to

remain, if we are allowed to do so, until after the adjourned inquest next Thursday. As for a longer period, that will depend upon events.”

Roger and Audrey exchanged a quick glance.

“May I speak for Miss Packe as well as myself, Mrs. Dewar?” he asked. “We have special reasons, not in any way connected with these unfortunate incidents, for taking our leave. The fact is, we are engaged to be married, and Miss Packe is going to stay with her aunt who lives in London and who will help her with the necessary preparations.”

There was a murmur of congratulations. Joseph, with a courteous but ungraceful bending of his long neck, came round with a silver salver on which were the requisite number of glasses of sherry ordered by Mr. Luke. Every one drank the health of the young people.

“I thank you all so much,” Mrs. Dewar said. “You are very kind indeed. With regard to Mr. Ferrison and Miss Packe,” she added, “I join in the congratulations which you are all offering. It would, of course, be unreasonable to expect them under the circumstances to stay on here. What I should like to ask though, as this is the first occasion for some time when an engagement has been announced on the premises, is that they will permit me to offer them a small celebration one night next week, at about this hour, something which I understand in more fashionable circles is called a cocktail party.”

For a single moment Audrey Packe had one of those queer impulses of distrust in Palace Crescent and every one connected with it, and she felt an almost passionate desire to refuse Mrs. Dewar’s invitation. Then she realised the hopelessness of such an effort. There was no possible excuse for refusing without ungraciousness. Roger’s face too was beaming.

“I am perfectly certain, Mrs. Dewar,” he assured her, “that Miss Packe will be as delighted as I shall be to accept your invitation. Isn’t that so, Audrey?”

“Why, of course,” was her cheerful acquiescence.

Joseph, looking taller and lankier than ever in the empty background, made his accustomed lopping bow.

“Dinner is served, Madam,” he announced.

CHAPTER XXII

Freda Medlincott abandoned a somewhat profitless interview with her agent and, in the worst of spirits, descended the narrow stairs leading from his office and looked out upon Shaftesbury Avenue. It is at no time a picturesque prospect but it was less so than ever on this particular morning for, during the last few minutes, the rain which had been threatening all the forenoon had begun to fall. She contemplated the immediate present with dismay. A taxicab would be an unheard-of extravagance, especially as she had no particular destination, and the sight of the over-filled omnibusses was depressing in the extreme. More distressing still, however, was the reflection that she had on a new hat and no umbrella.

“I beg your pardon.”

She started at the sound of a pleasant voice in her ears. What she saw was even more pleasant—a good-looking young man with humorous eyes and a faintly reminiscent smile, carrying a large umbrella. The most encouraging part of the whole thing was that his face was familiar and she really felt that he was an acquaintance.

“I am afraid you have forgotten me,” he said.

“I am sure I remember talking to you quite lately,” she admitted.

“We sat side by side in that terribly stuffy little coroner’s court the other day,” he reminded her. “Don’t you remember that dramatic moment when the old lady got up and offered to point out the murderer of Colonel Dennett?”

“Why, of course, I remember you,” she assented eagerly. “You were so kind and polite.”

“Let me persevere then,” he begged, “and offer you a share of my umbrella. Or shall I call you a taxicab? Where do you want to go?”

She smiled at him. He was the sort of young man a young woman like Freda Medlincott could smile at easily.

“Anywhere,” she told him. “I have been to see my agent about a job and I can’t have it. If I could get to any sheltered place without spoiling my new hat, I think I’d sit down and drink some poison.”

“An excellent idea,” he decided. “I know where there’s some wonderful poison over at a place they call Ronnie’s Bar. Quite respectable. In fact, it’s a sort of club. If you will cling closely to me until we get there, we will say good-bye to the streaming world together.”

She drew a sigh of content. Why couldn’t some of those stupid men at Palace

Crescent talk like this? She held up her skirts partly to avoid a puddle that stretched in front of her and partly to display her really very trim ankles. They walked off together.

“Quite a stroke of luck, this, for me,” he declared. “I was just trying to think of an excuse for an early cocktail. I don’t as a rule indulge until about five minutes before luncheon.”

“I have been very badly brought up as regards cocktails,” Miss Medlincott confided. “I take them whenever they are offered to me.”

“You say you were looking for a job,” he remarked. “What do you do, then? I thought you were on one of the papers.”

She shook her head.

“I do musical-comedy stunts of a sort,” she said. “I have been in one or two decent shows. Just now, there seems to be nothing doing. It’s all films and if there’s one thing I hate, it’s films. I expect I shall have to trudge out to Elstree one day, though.”

“I shouldn’t,” he advised her. “Films are an awful tossup. I wonder if you know a pal of mine—Sam Blundell?”

“I know him by name, of course,” she acknowledged. “I don’t get much chance, though, of meeting the men who might be of any use to me. I live in a boarding house and the people there are not in the least professional.”

He stopped outside a small, very pleasant café bar of the modern order and ushered her in. They took two easy-chairs and he ordered Martinis. A tiny blue cloth was laid upon the table and biscuits and sandwiches also made their appearance.

“What a delightful place!” Freda exclaimed, looking round. “Are you really a member?”

“Of course I am, or I shouldn’t be here,” he answered, smiling. “It is only just opened as a club, though. Much nicer. Keeps the casual wanderer out.”

“Like me,” she laughed.

“You don’t come under the heading,” he observed. “You were saying that you live at a boarding house. Didn’t you tell me that that little old lady lived there too?”

“She does. I see her every day.”

“Really! I wonder whether the old lady was serious. Fancy having seen a murder committed and going about with it all before you.”

“She lives with her sister,” Freda confided. “Two old maids. I should think both of them are over seventy. They spend the whole of their time knitting.”

“I should love to see her again. She would just fit into a story I’m writing.”

“So you write stories, do you?” Freda Medlincott remarked enviously.

"I try to," he admitted. "I am not frightfully successful but I get one or two published sometimes. Fortunately I don't altogether depend upon them for a living."

"My name is Freda Medlincott," she said. "You were going to tell me yours, if you remember, at that inquest, but it was such a crush getting out we were separated, and Mr. Luke—he is one of our boarders—took me away in his car."

"My name is Lengton," he told her. "Major Lengton, if you like. I started life in the army. Retired two years ago. How is the cocktail, Miss Medlincott?"

"Excellent."

"You are not drinking it," he complained.

"I am making it last out."

"They would shake us another, if we pressed the matter," he assured her.

She laughed.

"How do I know that you can afford to buy a strange young woman two cocktails?" she asked.

"Better than that, I can afford to ask her to lunch."

"I can't believe it," she exclaimed. "It sounds too good to be true."

"We will go to a grill somewhere," he suggested. "I hate a restaurant in the daytime. We will find a corner and you shall tell me all about your old maid."

"And you must tell me about your story."

"You might not like it," he reflected. "You see, I write to make money and it is about a lot of crooks."

"I sometimes think if I didn't know them so well, and if they were not really so harmless, that one might make a story up about our Palace Crescent boarders. We were raided the other night."

"Tell me about it," he begged, making mysterious signs to the barman.

"A perfectly awful time we had. It was the early morning of that bad robbery in Burlington Gardens. You must have read all about it. The thieves left their car across the road quite near us and turned the lights off and the police ran into it; then they all seemed to get away somewhere—at least I haven't heard of any arrests—and as ours was the nearest house, the police came and searched us. I had a man in my bedroom—he was very polite, but he looked in all the cupboards and examined my clothes to see whether I had just come in or not. Every one in the house was treated the same way."

"Did they find out anything?"

"There was nothing to find out. The boarders at Palace Crescent haven't spirit enough amongst the lot of them to carry out a raid like that. There's one decent young man just come," she reflected. "Of course, he got engaged in less than a week

to the only other girl there.”

“I say, that’s rather interesting about having the police search the whole house,” he remarked. “I didn’t think they were allowed to do that sort of thing.”

“They did more,” she told him. “They came the next morning and searched the house again from top to bottom!”

“And they still found nothing?”

“If so, they kept it to themselves,” she said. “They didn’t seem to find anything wrong with the place. Our landlady was terribly upset, though. Which way do you live?”

“I have rooms in Adam Street,” he confided. “I used to be in the Temple but it’s too far out. Adam Street is awfully old-fashioned but it has a pleasant lookout and I have a decent room if I feel in the humour for writing. You must come and have tea with me some day.”

“I should love to.”

“In the meantime,” he suggested, summoning a waiter and paying him, “suppose we march out and get that spot of lunch.”

“You really mean it? I feel I’m rather inflicting myself on you.”

He laughed.

“You needn’t feel anything of the sort. I love a little adventure like this.”

“Not so much as I do,” she assured him. “I am glad I went to that inquest.”

Major Lengton seemed to be quite a well-known person. At *Ciro’s Grill* he was offered and accepted the compliment of a corner table and the luncheon he ordered met with his companion’s complete approval.

“Do you often come here?” she asked.

“Not very,” he replied. “I generally go to my own club—man’s club, you know. That’s not far from here. I always think this is a cosy little place, though, if you have some one to talk to. Who is the man over there staring at you so? Do you know him?”

She looked in the direction he indicated.

“Not that I know of,” she answered doubtfully. “His face seems familiar, though.”

“One of those rude fellows who will stare at a pretty girl, I suppose.”

She flipped the back of his hand.

“Don’t pay me compliments,” she insisted. “You’ll turn my head.”

“I should like to. What will you have to drink? I didn’t offer you another cocktail. I thought that perhaps would enable you to drink a glass of light white wine.”

“How cleverly you think things out,” she said. “I should like to lunch with you every day.”

“I am engaged Saturdays,” he meditated, “otherwise, I think it’s a fine idea.”

“Saturdays, I suppose, you spend with your fiancée or your wife?”

“Saturday I play golf all day—morning and afternoon. And if I am not out of town for the week-end, I generally dine at the club in the evening. Fiancée or wife have I none. I sometimes think it’s time I settled down.”

“I expect you are probably right,” she agreed. “Perhaps you find adventures of this sort quite as interesting?”

“More so,” he confided, “but they don’t happen every day, nor does it rain every day, nor do I often carry my umbrella, nor, I suppose, do you come to see your agent every day!”

“There are pleasanter places than Shaftesbury Avenue.”

“If I knew of them I should be there. . . . What rubbish we talk!”

She laughed.

“What would you like to talk about?” she asked. “Books? Plays?”

“I would rather talk about your boarding house—what was it you called it?”

“The Palace Crescent Boarding House. Mrs. Dewar is the name of the lady who keeps it. There are, just at present, twenty boarders, the food is good and the place is very cheap.”

“The Palace Crescent,” he repeated. “It sounds most intriguing. If I had the courage, I would live for a time in a boarding house. I always feel that I should like to study all sorts and conditions of people lumped together, and when the time comes I haven’t the courage.”

“I should think you’d have the courage for anything you really wanted to do,” she remarked.

“Not at all. What I should really like to do would be to drink a jug of that beer, and I daren’t. I know it would give me a liver.”

“Even at your tender age,” she laughed.

“My dear, I am thirty-nine,” he told her. “A liver is one of those things you get in decades. Probably by the time I am fifty, I sha’n’t have one at all. For the present, this white wine suits me much better.”

“And me,” she confessed. “I like the look of beer, but I’m not very fond of the taste and it makes you fat. I am supposed to dance when I do get a part, so I have to try and keep my figure.”

“It’s a jolly nice one,” he said, with the proper note of admiration in his tone.

“You know nothing about it,” she told him. “Not knowing that I was going to

meet with the adventure of my life, I have an old-fashioned gown designed to conceal any perfections I may have. If it had been a principal I was going to see, I should have been very differently dressed. I thought anything would do for my old agent. He knows what I am really like and what I can do.”

“How about the new hat?” he asked.

“I forgot the hat,” she admitted. “My old one is too disgusting, though.”

They talked along casually and pleasantly through luncheon. Suddenly she gripped him by the wrist.

“Heavens!” she exclaimed. “I have just remembered who that man is.”

“Tell me at once,” he begged.

“He is Inspector Rudlett, the man who came and examined us after Colonel Dennett’s murder—I was not in that, though—and the man who was in charge of the police the other night. If he was not actually in my bedroom, he was just outside.”

“What’s he doing in civilian clothes?” Major Lengton asked.

“How do you know what the police do and what they don’t do?” she answered. “I suppose he’s off duty.”

“I remember him now, of course,” Lengton meditated. “He was the man who got up and asked the coroner for an adjournment. What on earth did he want an adjournment for, I wonder. The jury had their verdict off pat—wilful murder against some person or persons unknown.”

“Perhaps he hopes at the end of the adjournment,” she suggested, “to do away with the person or persons unknown.”

“Who was Colonel Dennett, anyway—one of your boarders, wasn’t he?”

She nodded.

“Yes, but he very seldom spoke to any of us. Spent most of the daytime at a stuffy little club somewhere and always dined there one night a week. He was a soldier, you know, too.”

“Indian Army, retired,” Lengton said. “I remember now hearing something about him once. It wasn’t anything very pleasant.”

“Tell me about it,” she begged.

He shook his head.

“Very likely it was not true. *De mortuis*,’ you know. We’ll leave the old gentleman alone.”

Freda Medlincott sighed.

“It would have been so wonderful to have gone back to Palace Crescent having met some one who knew something about Colonel Dennett’s past. Perhaps it will come out at the inquest,” she said hopefully.

"It may," he admitted.

"Tell me about the story you are writing," she invited.

"Well, the most important thing about it is that I'm stuck," he confided. "I have unfortunately got my heroine into a boarding house and I don't know how to extricate her. I don't know how she lives or what she does or anything. Or rather, I do know some of these things," he went on, "but I have no atmosphere. It's atmosphere I lack."

"Come and study it at Palace Crescent," she suggested.

"It's an idea," he agreed. "I should like to see inside a real boarding house."

Freda had a sudden inspiration.

"Come and dine with me there to-night," she proposed.

"Shouldn't I love to," he replied. "But I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"If it were possible for you to dine with me," he pointed out, "it would be a different thing. I simply cannot dump myself down on your hospitality, especially in such a barefaced way."

"Can't you take me out to dinner some night afterwards, if you insist upon being so particular? I shall still owe you a luncheon, even then. And so that you need have no misgivings," she went on, "let me tell you that Mrs. Dewar only charges half a crown for a guest at dinner and the food is quite eatable. And I can get a whole bottle of red or white wine, which the men all say is very good, for very little. Cocktails," she concluded, "are so bad that every one has given them up, but I can give you a glass of sherry or an *apéritif* or a mixed vermouth."

"You are really in earnest?" he asked. "Because I should love to come."

"You are booked," she declared. "Dinner at a quarter to eight. You had better be there five or ten minutes before, to study the wild animals before they go in to feed—say, half-past seven. I'll be in the lounge, waiting for you. Palace Crescent Boarding House, Number Fourteen Partington Street, off the Hammersmith Road."

"I shall be there," he promised. "Half-past seven. Shall I see the little old lady who got up in the court?"

"I should think so," Freda assured him. "They have been there for years and I think they have only dined out four times. It would be bad luck if you were to miss her. I'll tell you at once, though, that our most interesting woman boarder is a girl of about twenty or twenty-two, very rich but lame. She wears beautiful dresses, has a table to herself; she has a suite of rooms unlike anything else in the place and in a queer sort of way she is terribly attractive. Miss Flora Quayne, her name is, and I sha'n't introduce you to her if I can help it. Only that she's lame I often wonder

some man doesn't fall desperately in love with her."

"I can't do it twice on the same day," he regretted.

"That's comforting."

"Coffee?"

"May I, if you please? That's another good thing at Palace Crescent. Their coffee is quite drinkable. You must bring your own cigarettes or cigars, though."

"I sha'n't be likely to forget my cigarettes," he promised her. "Try one of mine. If you like them, I'll bring you some. And I'll tell you what I'll do if you like—I'll ask Blundell to come along when we have that lunch or dinner together. He might know of something for you."

"You are a dear," she declared. "I have had some quite decent parts and I could have gone to America last year, but the old aunt I was living with—she's died since—didn't want me to go. As I knew she was going to leave me enough to keep out of the workhouse, I thought I had better hang around."

"Very wise of you," he approved.

"As I really am going to see you again to-night," she said presently, "if you don't mind, I'll run along now. There's just one man I want to see at the Imperial Theatre. He's sending out a suburban company in a show I used to be in. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," he answered. "You will let me see you upstairs?"

"Of course I sha'n't! Don't be late to-night. Half-past seven."

She nodded her farewell and hurried off. She glanced casually across the room at Inspector Rudlett as she neared the doors. He was engaged in earnest conversation with a friend, however, and didn't look up.

CHAPTER XXIII

Every one was suitably impressed by Freda Medlincott's guest that evening and she enjoyed her little triumph to the utmost. He seemed even better looking in his well-cut dinner clothes than in his tweeds, and most of the boarders who could catch Freda's eye came up to be introduced. He was agreeable to everybody but to the Misses Clewes he was charming. He knew the name so well. His father had had a friend in the Royal Surreys. Their uncle! Most interesting. He remained chatting with them until Freda fetched him away. She presented him to Mrs. Dewar, who looked at him with her solemn dark eyes unlit by curiosity or any other form of interest. She said the few correct words that were necessary, however, then left him to his hostess.

"Rather a spectral-looking lady," he whispered in her ear. "Does she ever smile?"

"No one has ever caught her at it," Freda replied. "She works terribly hard, I think. They say she has a husband to support somewhere but no one ever sees him. Come along—you must be introduced to the star boarder, only don't dare to fall in love with her!"

Flora gave him her fingers with a very sweet, although languid smile.

"How pleasant to see a visitor," she said. "I hope they will give us a good dinner to-night for your sake, Major Lengton, and then perhaps you will come and see us again. We are rather quaint people, don't you think?"

"I think some of you look very nice," he said.

"Some of us are," she assured him. "Or perhaps we think we are, by contrast. But, as you see, we are nearly all men. Everybody loves Mr. Luke and we all wonder why he stays here. He belongs to one of the best clubs, he has plenty of money, he is supposed to be quite a *bon vivant* and yet, every night at dinner time, he strolls into this room at five and twenty to eight to the minute and he drinks his glass of sherry. Look—twenty to eight!"

"I should think that is one of the strong points of a boarding house," Major Lengton remarked. "It must make you awfully punctual."

"If you are not, you run a serious risk of losing a course," Flora told him. "Everything starts at a different table every evening, but when it has once started, no power in this world can call it back or divert it!"

"They don't take weekly guests, I suppose?" he enquired. "I'm beginning to feel

that this one brief evening will be too short for me to find out all I want to about this place.”

“But you must not class us,” Mr. Luke, who had just strolled up, observed, “with ordinary boarding houses. We are very famous just now, or rather infamous. We have had a murder committed, if not on the premises, within a few yards of them, and the victim was one of us—and we have also been raided by the police!”

“With no disastrous results, I trust?” Lengton hoped, smiling.

“No arrests have been made up to the present,” Mr. Luke continued cheerfully. “Terrible business, that burglary in Burlington Gardens. You read about it, I dare say?”

“Of course I did,” Lengton admitted. “Very clever affair,” he went on. “English raiders don’t seem quite so brutal as the Americans, but they are just as clever in their methods. Leaving their car without lights for the police car to run into—it was a stroke of genius.”

“It happened not a hundred yards away,” Mr. Luke reminded him. “Just round the corner from here. We are only slowly recovering from the shock.”

The gong sounded from outside.

“This,” Mr. Luke observed, “is where we run.”

Joseph, with the gong still in his hand, announced the service of dinner. They crossed the hall in irregular fashion and Freda conducted her guest to the small table for two in the window which had been arranged for her use. Lengton looked about him with frank interest.

“I think your guests—or boarders, do you call them?—seem extraordinarily nice people,” he said. “I’m getting quite new ideas about this sort of place. Tell me, who are the man and woman at the next table but one?”

“A Mr. and Mrs. Padgham,” she told him. “He is a solicitor but he has retired from active practice. He has some appointments, I think. He goes to the office but he doesn’t do much. His wife is half-American, I believe. She was quite a beauty once.”

“She’s quite handsome now,” he remarked. “And the neat-looking man in an old-fashioned frock coat? I rather like that touch. Almost Dickensy. He looks a shrewd fellow.”

“He is, I believe,” Freda agreed drily. “He’s a company promoter or something. Mr. Ollivant, his name is. Just now he’s suffering from a terrible disappointment. One of our young men has invented a machine and Mallory’s are forming a company to work it. Mr. Ollivant thinks that if he had known half an hour earlier, Mr. Ferrison would have let him form the company!”

“And would he?”

She smiled.

“It is odd how people can close their eyes to facts,” she observed. “Poor Mr. Ollivant! I think every one is a little sorry for him, but no one here would trust him with a sixpence. The moment Mr. Luke saw Mr. Ollivant talking to him—But this is not interesting. What did you think about our enchantress, Flora Quayne?”

“She’s attractive,” he admitted. “How did she become a cripple like that?”

“An accident when she was quite young.”

“I can’t help feeling that I have met her before,” Lengton said. “I saw her looking at me as though she half recognised me.”

“I believe she knows some very nice people. She has a car of her own and a French maid and all sorts of luxuries.”

“Who is the stalwart young colonial with the pretty little girl?” he asked.

Freda pouted.

“Do you really call her pretty? I hate her. That young man was marked down for me but she got in first! His name is Ferrison. He is not really a colonial, only he spent some years out in Canada. He has invented a machine which cleans a house in five minutes, and he’s going to make a fortune and Mallory’s have taken an interest in the patent. That’s the company Mr. Ollivant was disappointed about.”

“Well, they seem quite happy together. I mean Mr. Ferrison and the young lady.”

“Oh, I suppose so,” Freda assented. “They neither of them have been here very long and they don’t seem to have mixed with the others. I always have the feeling, somehow, that they are strangers. They’re going, anyway, I think, in a day or two.”

“And these others are City men, I suppose?”

“They all disappear in the mornings, anyhow, and come back hungry about seven o’clock. We haven’t any romantic young novelists or artists who sit in their rooms all day here.”

“Not much of a place for riotous conversation, I should think,” he remarked presently.

She looked around.

“It’s worse than usual to-night,” she observed. “I don’t know what’s the matter with them all. What they have to say they are mostly saying in whispers. If you have finished, let’s go out in the lounge and get a place near the fire for coffee.”

Lengton was obviously a young man of *savoir faire* but even he was slightly embarrassed by the intense, though somewhat furtive, interest which his passing down the room seemed to occasion. Freda was too wrapped up in her social triumph to notice anything unusual in the attention which her guest inspired. She drew

a small couch into a favourable position and left the room for a moment to expedite the service of coffee. When she returned, Lengton was talking earnestly to Miss Susannah Clewes. He finished whatever he was saying a little abruptly and resumed his seat on the couch.

“You seem to have taken a great fancy to Miss Susannah,” she remarked curiously.

He helped himself to the coffee which Joseph had just brought.

“To tell you the truth, she rather fascinates me,” he confessed. “She is sitting there with a seal upon her lips. The police have told her, it seems, that she is to say nothing until the inquest. She believes that she saw a murder. She is quite convinced that she recognised poor Colonel Dennett, who was the victim, and the person who killed him. She sits there knitting calmly with this drama in her head until the time comes for her to lift up the curtain. . . . I am quite certain that I shall make use of Miss Clewes in my story. I hope she has not copyrighted herself!”

“It’s a shivery sort of thing to think of,” Freda observed, after a moment’s meditation. “Of course, they all say here that she’s out of her mind. She does talk strangely sometimes.”

“I should think,” he reflected, “that the police would want some corroboration of her story before they acted upon it. Perhaps that’s why they got the inquest adjourned and have made her promise not to talk. I wonder whether she will keep her word.”

“From what I know of those two old ladies,” Freda declared, “no one could make them do anything they didn’t want to. They are as obstinate as possible.”

One by one the diners streamed back into the room. Some of the others seemed a little shy, but Mr. Luke came over directly to the couch where Freda and her guest were seated. The two men drifted at once into the casual conversation of Londoners who have similar interests. They were both golfers, it seemed, and played occasionally on the same courses. They even agreed to play a match at Sunningdale upon an early date.

“You were at the inquest, I hear, the other day,” Mr. Luke observed, after a slight pause. “You recognised our spinster lady over there who suddenly made drama of a very dull show.”

“I recognised her directly I came in,” Lengton acquiesced. “Slightly touched in the head, I should think,” he added, dropping his voice.

“That appears to be the general opinion,” Mr. Luke agreed. “She always seemed to me shrewd enough. I play cribbage sometimes with her sister and it is all I can do to hold my own. I fancy the police are disappointed, though.”

“In what way?”

“Well, they took her seriously at first. We had an inspector round here the next morning, but he discovered at once that from Miss Clewes’ window the spot where Dennett was shot is completely obscured by the wall. There is later information come to hand that may be useful, but I am afraid Miss Clewes’ marvellous disclosure will fall a little flat. Quite a notorious corner ours,” Mr. Luke went on. “You know, I suppose, of the scare we all had the other night?”

“Miss Medlincott has been telling me about it. She says the police actually searched her room at three o’clock in the morning.”

“I was so thankful I had folded my undies nicely,” Freda said coyly. “They took up everything I had been wearing. I think the police are very funny people, don’t you, Major Lengton?”

“I suppose they know their job,” he remarked. “I had something to do with the military police during the war. I was not very highly impressed. They were chosen more for their bruising qualities than their brains.”

“A very famous writer of detective stories,” Mr. Luke observed, “once told me that there was no one in the world who was so easy to fool as a detective. They are always looking round the corner instead of straight ahead. They will neglect the obvious for the abstruse. I am quoting my friend now, of course, but I should not be surprised if there were something in his point of view.”

Mr. Luke passed on and took a chair next to Mrs. Padgham. Freda and her guest were left alone. They chattered light-heartedly enough for nearly half an hour. Then Freda, glancing round, noticed a thing which somehow surprised her and a little damped her feelings of triumph. She had produced as a guest one of the most attractive men who had ever appeared at Palace Crescent and yet, for some reason or other, every one seemed to be keeping as far away as possible. Conversation was being carried on almost in an undertone. Perhaps Lengton noticed something of the sort, too, for he rose to his feet.

“I thoroughly enjoyed my dinner, Miss Medlincott,” he said. “You won’t mind if I run away now. We lunch the day after to-morrow at the Berkeley. I think I am almost sure to be able to get Blundell. If the day doesn’t suit, I will make another date with him, but we will meet, anyway.”

“That’s very nice of you,” she acknowledged, walking down the room by his side. “I’ll see you off, if you must go. I am afraid,” she added, “you must think that our guests are not very sociable.”

“I didn’t notice it,” he replied. “Your friend Luke seems to be a very decent sort of fellow. I am going to take him on at golf one day. He tells me he’s a member at

Sunningdale. Don't forget Thursday."

He held her hand in his for quite an appreciable space of time and Freda was convinced that but for the shadow of Joseph lurking in the distance, he would have kissed her. She returned to the lounge somehow disappointed. On the way to her place she stopped and spoke to Mr. Padgham.

"I don't think any of you were very sociable to-night," she complained. "Didn't you like Major Lengton? You seemed to be all whispering together in corners."

"Not quite as bad as that, I'm sure," Mr. Padgham protested. "I'll tell you what it is, though, Miss Medlincott. We are all just a bit shy of strangers just now. First this Dennett affair and then the raid the other night. Makes one feel sort of self-conscious."

Mrs. Dewar, who had paused on her way out of the room, inclined her head gently.

"There is a sort of prejudice here just now about strangers, I am afraid," she joined in. "Major Lengton is a very charming person but I gathered from something you said, Miss Medlincott, that he is a writer. One feels that we might be almost—well, exploited just now, by any one in search of copy."

"You mean that he might write an article in the *Evening Standard*, 'The Raided Boarders' or something of that sort," Reggie Barstowe observed.

"I think you are all very foolish," Freda declared. "Major Lengton is far too much of a gentleman to dream of making use of us. I am lunching with him at the Berkeley on Thursday and I have promised to dine with him next week. I won't bring him here, though, I promise you, except to call for me."

"You must not take what I said too seriously," Mrs. Dewar begged. "Major Lengton is evidently all that you say and on any ordinary occasion he will be a welcome guest."

"A welcome guest," Freda repeated, as Mrs. Dewar left the room. "I should think so, indeed!"

Mr. Luke coughed apologetically. He laid a hand in friendly fashion upon Miss Medlincott's arm.

"My dear Miss Freda," he said, "there is just one thing which has probably been in the minds of one or two of us here. You probably have read for yourself that Scotland Yard, who seem to have embarked recently upon a long career of failures, have been reorganising every department, especially the Criminal Investigation Department."

"What has Scotland Yard got to do with it?" she demanded.

"Wait," Mr. Luke said. "One of their new experiments is to put in a different

class of man amongst the detectives. I happen to know that half a dozen ex-army men have joined the force within the last few weeks. It is just possible, Miss Medlincott—I am only mentioning it as a bare possibility—that Major Lengton—who admitted that he was retired—has accepted some such post as this.”

At that moment Freda Medlincott was half angry, half surprised.

“Well, what if he has? What difference does it make to us here? He’s still an officer and a gentleman, isn’t he?”

There was a curious silence which seemed to grow in intensity. Freda looked from one face to the other. It seemed to her there was the same expression everywhere. A new and dazzling light streamed in upon her. She suddenly saw all these companions of the years with different eyes. She fancied them in strange costumes of disguise, racing through the night, dealing out death from hideous weapons with humanity gone from their expressions, the criminal lust for blood flaming in their eyes.

“My God!” she shrieked.

For a moment everything around her seemed blurred. She swayed upon her feet. Mr. Luke patted her arm gently. She felt the reassurance of his clipped, cultured voice. She opened her eyes. She looked round the room in amazement. There was Mr. Barstowe handing her a chair, a look of deep concern upon his sharply cut but pleasant features. Bernascon bewildered. Miss Clewes, her knitting fallen into her lap, her forehead one large interrogation. Mr. Padgham bringing her a glass of brandy. Her old friends! What a glimpse of hell she had had! She sank into a chair.

“Do forgive me, all of you,” she begged. “I had a sudden moment of madness. I imagined—oh, do forgive me.”

Mr. Luke patted her once more on the arm.

“My dear,” he said, “these have been days of strain for every one. I don’t wonder at your imagination running away with you for a moment. Forget it. Here we all are and here we shall remain. Just as we are at this moment—just as we always have been.”

Freda held his hand tightly.

“It was only for a second,” she pleaded. “One hideous hysterical second.”

CHAPTER XXIV

The last shadow of that wild moment of apprehension on Freda Medlincott's part disappeared when she found Major Lengton waiting for her on the Thursday morning in the Berkeley at the appointed hour, and with him a young man whom she easily recognised as the much-sought-after Sam Blundell. Afterwards, she almost purred to herself when she thought of her success that morning. She talked in her most engaging manner to each man in turn. Her face was radiant with smiles. She felt herself full of confidence. Her moment of supreme triumph came, however, when Sam Blundell, after looking at her hard for a moment, suddenly threw up his hands.

"Why," he said, "you are the girl who did that clever little shadow dance in the street with Bill Ayres, in Barlot's Revue. Freda Low, I thought her name was."

"If you had looked at my card," Freda told him demurely, "you would have seen that that is my stage name. Of course I am. We got encores for that until the last night."

"And to think that you have been off the stage for nearly a year!" Mr. Blundell exclaimed.

"Not my fault," she assured him.

"It won't be mine if you are ever out of a job again," he declared pleasantly. "We will finish with the business end at once. I want you round at my office at five o'clock this afternoon. You know—Number Eleven, Henrietta Street. You need not bring any songs. Don't change a thing you have on. I've got a part waiting for you to step into. Now you can flirt with Lengton if you like."

"Oh, dear," she sighed, "I want to flirt with both of you! They were getting so sympathetic with me at the boarding house—they really are a nice, kind-hearted lot of people—but I think they were almost tired of seeing me looking disappointed, when I had been to see my agent."

"How are your fellow boarders?" Major Lengton enquired.

"All in excellent health, thank you," Freda replied. "All on tiptoe of excitement, too, about the inquest to-morrow."

"I suppose so," he reflected. "I could not make up my mind, you know, Miss Medlincott, whether I was a success with your friends or not."

"On the whole, I am quite sure you were a success," she assured him. "You rather stupefied them, I think. You see, they are thoroughly commercial and they are not used to your type."

“And the lady who won my heart—Miss Clewes? The lady who is going to have the day of her life to-morrow?”

“She’s perfectly well,” Freda replied, a little deprecatingly, “but every one seems to think that she’s crazy. She’s been off in a taxicab to see the lawyers three days running. At least, she says so. We think she’s just been driving round the park.”

“And the beautiful lame girl?”

“I’ve not seen much of her,” Freda admitted. “I think she must have been in love with Roger Ferrison, the young man who is leaving. He’s going to marry the pretty little girl he was sitting with the other night.”

“Love affairs, too, at Palace Crescent,” Major Lengton said, smiling. “You certainly have chosen an interesting place for your temporary abode, Miss Medlincott.”

“Miss Medlincott will be having a flat of her own at the Savoy Court and all the luxury of life before very long,” Sam Blundell prophesied. “By-the-by, you’ve kept your singing up, I hope?”

“I have not missed a day’s practice in a year,” the girl assured him. “I don’t believe in getting slack. I always felt that something like this would happen to me, but I didn’t take anything for granted. I have had an orange-juice fast once a week and I’m not even on bowing terms with a potato. When I was weighed down at the health culture place the other day, I was the correct weight for my height to an ounce!”

They talked their way lightly through luncheon. Just as they were finishing, Mr. Luke, with a very smart-looking, middle-aged lady, passed their table. There was a universal exchange of greetings.

“Why, you know our star boarder too, Mr. Blundell!” Freda observed, when they had passed on.

“Know old Luke!” Blundell replied. “Of course I do. I have played golf with him often down at Sunningdale. That’s Lady Mallison with him. They spend a lot of time together. Every one wonders they don’t get married.”

“Our Mr. Luke get married!” Freda exclaimed. “Why, I think that Palace Crescent would close its doors.”

“I have heard him say he lived in a queer place down Hammersmith way,” Blundell reflected. “Full of character, he called it.”

Freda inclined her head towards Lengton.

“Major Lengton was dining with me there the other night,” she confided. “He said very nearly the same thing.”

“They say old Luke’s a very wealthy man,” Sam Blundell remarked. “No one

knows where his money came from. I remember he put up ten thousand pounds, I think it was, for a show at the Gaiety once. Must have hit him pretty hard. But he's done well in some other revues."

"Well, you live and learn things about your friends," Freda Medlincott gasped. "He seemed to know a good deal about theatrical shows but I never dreamed that he put money into them. He has a beautiful car, of course, but somehow or other one never gets in the way of thinking that any one who stays at Palace Crescent is well off. Most of us are rubbing our last sixpences together."

"Shall I see you to-morrow?" Major Lengton asked, as the time came for farewells.

"I'm going to be at the court at half-past nine with a campstool," she told him; "but heaven knows whether I shall get in."

"I would offer to take you but I have no particular influence and I don't suppose I shall get a place myself," Lengton observed. "However, if you are passing Ronnie's at six o'clock in the evening, put your head in and have a cocktail and we'll talk it over."

"Love to," Freda accepted. "And I see you at five o'clock this evening, Mr. Blundell."

"Don't you dare to forget it," he enjoined.

A wonderful luncheon! It was not until she reached home that Freda Medlincott remembered that she had failed to ask Lengton a single question which might have set at rest the disturbed susceptibilities of her fellow boarders.

That evening Roger Ferrison had the surprise of his life. He was standing at the edge of a byway cut through a great tract of country which was to be devoted to the building of factories, when a limousine car drove slowly up and Flora Quayne, looking very beautiful behind the short veil which drooped from her fashionable hat, leaned out of the window.

"Come along, Roger," she invited. "You have kept me waiting quite a long time." He gasped with astonishment.

"Whatever are you doing out in the country here?" he asked, taking the place by her side.

She waved the chauffeur on and they glided towards London.

"Waiting for you," she answered simply. "You have not been kind to me for two days, Roger, but you see I forgive."

"But how on earth could you know that I should be down here?"

"I heard you tell Mr. Luke that Mallory's were building a factory for you on this

byway," she explained. "I heard you say, too, that you came down every day to mark progress and arrange about the flooring or something, whilst your partner was doing his best to turn out a few of the machines at your factory in London. I was driving this afternoon and I thought I would try and find you. After all, it is not a miracle. There is a great hoarding there which says 'Factory being built for Mallory Limited for the manufacture of Mafresson Machines.' I waited by the hoarding, read my book and you came. I wish you would always come when I want you, Roger!"

"Well, this is luxury," he declared gratefully. "I'm tired too. I like doing things but I don't like standing around. I should hate to be an architect."

"Now I am here, be kind to me," she begged. "You may hold my hand."

She drew off her glove and laid her beautifully shaped fingers in his huge palm. He stroked them with a tenderness which was so near to affection that she drew a sigh of content.

"You are very happy these days?" she asked.

"Of course I am," he answered. "I am very fond of Audrey. We are going to be married in a few weeks. Mallory's have booked most enormous orders for our machines, I have a bank balance already such as I never dreamed of and, after thinking I was going to struggle home on a bus, I find myself in this beautiful car with you. Of course, I'm happy."

"How do you think I'm looking?"

"As beautiful as ever," he told her, "but quieter somehow. You look rested—just as though something had happened."

"I am waiting for something to happen. You see, I have a will—I have curbed my passion. Sometimes for odd moments the blood in me runs as fiercely as ever and I could shriek with the pain and glory of it, and then I remember and I am like this—quite quiet. Light me a cigarette, Roger."

She passed him her case and he obeyed. She settled farther down in her corner and drew him a little nearer.

"Flora," he remonstrated, "I don't want to seem stupid, because you understand how things are with me, but I must stop this sort of thing."

"You don't like to have me almost in your arms?"

"If I do, I ought not to," he answered, "and when I do, I don't understand myself in the least. It is Audrey I love and Audrey I am going to marry, and though I know this is only a sort of hysteria, and although I am sure I am not a bit of a prig, it doesn't seem to go with honest living. It is hard to make you understand, I suppose," he went on, "because I am naturally stupid and I suppose I have a narrow way of looking at things. When I have kissed you, for instance, I have always felt that I

ought to tell Audrey—if she would not mind. Then I remember that it is not fair to kiss and to be kissed, and go and tell some one else about it. I feel as though I consent to a secret when I shouldn't."

"To think," she murmured, half to herself, "that I could be so madly in love with any one like you!"

"Well, I can't alter myself," he said doggedly. "I don't act up to my principles so that I don't know that it matters—not nearly as much as it ought to. I feel a hypocrite generally when I'm with you and I am not a bit better than other men in having scruples, because I don't act up to them, and even though it isn't right, I love taking you into my arms—so."

"That's the sweetest thing you have ever said," she declared, leaning her head against his shoulder. "Roger, it will help me to get through these days of waiting."

"Waiting—what for?"

She made no immediate answer. The palm of one of her hands was pressed against his cheek.

"Waiting for the world to come my way," she went on. "Waiting for the sun to shine into my heart. Some one wrote that once, Roger, or something like it, who was very miserable. Miserable people must have something. Let them have hope. . . . Tell me—I am curious to know—you are really going to stay on at Palace Crescent?"

"Only a few more days. It is very difficult," he continued. "I think Mrs. Dewar is a wonderful woman and every one has been very kind to us, but I know, I feel sure, that there is something strange about the place. I made up my mind the last time I was thinking about it to try and persuade you to go away."

"Roger!" she scolded him gently. "Why do you want to turn me out into the world? They spoil me so at the Palace Crescent. If I left, it would make such a difference to them. Why are you so mysterious?"

"I suppose you remember sometimes," he pointed out, "that we have had a murder committed a few score of yards from the back door, a murder of one of our own boarders? And that the other night our house was raided, every bedroom was visited by the police? They didn't do that without some very strong suspicions."

"Well, they didn't find anything wrong," she reminded him.

"Perhaps not," he admitted, "but they were there again the next morning. Not only that, but it is not the first time. There was a police inspector in the house one other night—almost the first night I came."

She raised her head to look at him for a moment and then laid it back again on his shoulder.

"What do you suggest is wrong about the place?" she asked. "What are the

police looking for? Do they think it is a bad house? I am sure the other night they found it most respectable. Mr. and Mrs. Padgham, perhaps, were in bed together, but I suppose they could have produced their marriage certificate at a pinch. The two Misses Clewes were alone, I'm sure. I was alone—every one was alone. Or is it gambling they suspect? There are only three or four shabby packs of bridge cards in the whole house."

"What they suspected the other night is clear enough," Roger pointed out. "They were after the men who had committed the robbery in Burlington Gardens."

"But where could they have hidden in the house? There were policemen everywhere like black beetles!"

"I'll tell you something, Flora," he went on, after a moment or two. "Something I have told to nobody. Something that makes me very uneasy about staying on, only I want to do the reasonable thing for Mrs. Dewar's sake. There were men who entered the house only a few minutes before the police—only a few minutes after that crash in the Hammersmith Road. They came in like professional criminals. They were wearing rubber shoes and black clothes. The lights in the house had been cut off. Some must have come from the back and some from the front. I heard them and saw them tearing up the stairs."

He felt the girl shivering in his arms. This time she didn't raise her head.

"You're frightening me, Roger," she moaned.

"My dear, that's just what I don't want to do," he declared, "yet I don't want you to think me unreasonable. I was up late that night—sitting in the lounge, if you want to know, invisible. I didn't see a single face, I couldn't identify any one. I don't know where the people came from or where they went to, so you see my story is too unconvincing to make a fuss about. I know that, honestly speaking, I ought to go to the police. Well, I have not been. What I feel is that I would like to take Audrey away and leave the thing to work itself out—and I would like you to leave too."

"I couldn't leave," she whispered. "I hate strange places. I think you must have been dreaming."

"I would like to think so," he assured her. "Audrey was with me too. She's almost as matter-of-fact as I am. We neither of us fancy things."

"You have not said a word to the police?" she asked.

"No."

"You didn't tell them anything that night?"

"No."

She looked up at him.

"Then you can't possibly say anything about it now. They will think you were

one of the thieves. They would say at once—why did you not speak up at the time?”

“Clever girl,” he acknowledged, smiling. “So they would. I missed my opportunity. Anyway, I think that before long there will be a big flare-up at Palace Crescent. I’m going to see that Audrey and I are out of it and I should like you to be out of it too. Money doesn’t seem to be any particular object to you, so why not go to one of those small private hotels?”

“You are very kind, Mr. Ferrison,” she said, with a curious new stiffness in her tone, “but I shall not leave Mrs. Dewar. If she’s going to get into trouble, I’m sorry. I shall be there too. I don’t want you to think,” she went on, drawing closer to him and linking her fingers around his neck, “that I doubt a word you say, Roger; but can you imagine Mr. Luke, or Mr. Bernascon, or Mr. Padgham as cat burglars or gangsters or anything of the sort? Can you imagine them even providing a hiding place for these mysterious visitors? Sometimes,” she continued dreamily, “one sits up late and one’s brain works strangely. I have sat up in bed—not many nights ago, Roger—started and sat up, and there in the room you were. You sat on the edge of the bed. I called to you and you let me put my arms around your neck just like this. I could feel your cheek—and your lips. They were warm, as they are now. But you never spoke and time went on. I was happy. I closed my eyes and when I opened them everything had faded away. Yet it was you I saw, Roger. I could describe everything you wore.”

“You are a fanciful child,” he said indulgently; “but then you see I am not fanciful. I could not sit up in bed and make myself happy or miserable by believing that some one else was there. I should know they were not.”

“I am not sure,” she sighed. “I must lend you some of the books I read sometimes—‘The Rosicrucians’ and some old volumes dealing with magic. There are strange things on the borderland of the two worlds.”

He felt the pulsating force of her body against his. Very gently he lifted her away.

“Those things don’t do us any good to think about,” he declared. “We have to live life as we know it. I am a materialist and I am going to stay one. When I see and hear what I saw and heard that night, I know perfectly well that there was some absolute explanation and I know, too, if it comes to that, that I ought to have told the police about it at once. It is too late now. We none of us do altogether what we should or I should not be here with you now!”

“Poor man,” she whispered. “You had no choice. I abducted you. I wish I could abduct you altogether, Roger. It might save a great deal of trouble.”

He looked at her keenly.

“In what way?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I believe in strange things, you see, that you don’t believe in. I believe somehow or other that I should be able to force my way into your thoughts when you didn’t want me. I should succeed in making you feel a little unfaithful to Audrey, when you didn’t want to be. Why don’t you give in, Roger? It might save a lot of pain. Just let me love you until you have found out for yourself that there is nothing more wonderful in the world than to be loved by a woman who sees and feels as I do. You are trifling with the most wonderful gift of life, Roger, when you push me away.”

He let down the window suddenly and a rush of cold air swept in. She faced it without flinching.

“I don’t understand a word of what you are saying,” he declared. “Let’s talk about facts as we know them. To-morrow, by this time, the adjourned inquest will be over, for instance, and you may know much more about Palace Crescent than you know now.”

She passed him her cigarette case. He opened it, lit one for her and one for himself.

“Good,” he said. “Let this be the smoke of peace. What did you think of Miss Freda Medlincott’s guest?”

“He was quite attractive of his type,” she admitted. “I know the type so well. Whenever I go out from Palace Crescent, I seem to meet so many of them. I like the less polished article, Roger. You may be surprised to hear it, but I like you. Just in the same way you ought to like the exotic and the unusual article, and then you would like me. But you don’t. The failure between us lies with you.”

“You know where we are, I suppose?” he asked.

“Yes, we are at Palace Crescent,” she said despondently. “We are home, if you like to call it that. Take me down the passage, please. If you think I deserve any reward for coming all that way to fetch you, let me make you a cocktail.”

“It’s a nice way of putting it,” he laughed, as he helped her out and gave her his arm.

“Carry me, please,” she begged. “I’m tired. I can unlock the door. You see, I have my key ready.”

He humoured her. It was hard to do otherwise. They passed through into the dimly lit hall and he closed the door with his heel. She hung up their keys and he carried her down the passage to her room. She gave a sigh of content when she saw the softly burning wood fire and smelt the perfume of the flowers in the room.

“The chair, please—not the couch. Then you can bring me the things and I will mix the cocktails. Or, there is Marie. Marie,” she called out, as the maid came

swiftly forward, “take off my coat and my hat, please. Bring me a black *négligée*—Mr. Ferrison can look the other way for a moment—and bring me the Cointreau, the juice of two lemons and the brandy, the shaker and the ice. Be quick, Marie. We want our cocktails.”

“I will carry you into the bathroom, if you like, whilst you change your gown,” he suggested.

She laughed at him.

“Shy boy,” she mocked. “But then you need not look, you know. In fact, I forbid you to. Take that illustrated paper and glue your eyes upon it from the moment Marie appears.”

When he was told to look round, she seemed to be draped from head to foot in black velvet. She was bending over the table, pouring the contents of the bottle into the shaker.

“You shall shake,” she proposed. “With your muscle, we ought to be able to get them all filmy. I like them like that. There you are. Shake and then pour out.”

“What beautiful glasses,” he observed, looking at them.

“I ought to be able to tell you that I bought them in Venice or some strange place, but I didn’t,” she confided. “They came from South Molton Street. They are beautiful but I never feel that they hold enough. Now—pour out, please.”

He obeyed. She raised her glass and leaned towards him.

“I shall drink to the day which brings you understanding,” she said.

CHAPTER XXV

Once more the small room attached to the local hall was crammed. Again amongst the scattered places allotted to the general public were to be seen practically the whole company of the boarders from Palace Crescent. Freda Medlincott considered herself the most lucky person in the court. She made for the same bench she had occupied on the first occasion and almost ran into the arms of Major Lengton.

“I have been doing my best to make myself twice the size,” he whispered, “so as to make room for you.”

“Nice man,” she whispered back. “Any excitements? It took me such a time to push my way in.”

“Nothing as yet. The jury have been empanelled—there they are—twelve exceedingly plain men, I should say, but no doubt intelligent. The coroner is very official. There has been a lot of whispering going on between him and Inspector Rudlett, who is still representing the police, and this time one understands there are witnesses to be called. We are due to have the first one at any moment. The coroner’s preliminary address has already been given. The doctor who was here last time has been excused attendance and his affidavit that from the direction of the bullet suicide is an impossibility has been read out. There we are, up to date.”

The usher leaned over the coroner. Mysterious words passed between them. The former then moved to the passage near the witness box.

“Mr. Sidney Parsons,” he called out.

Mr. Sidney Parsons, a stranger to every one, entered the box. He was a quietly dressed, pleasant-looking man of prim appearance, wearing old-fashioned, steel-rimmed spectacles. He took the oath with the air of a novice and leaned over the rail.

“Your name is Sidney Parsons, I believe?” the coroner began.

“That is so, sir.”

“You are secretary of the Junior Oriental Club in Wimpole Street?”

“Yes.”

“The deceased—Colonel Dennett—was a member of that club?”

“Yes.”

“How long had he been a member?”

“Seven years last March, sir.”

“He was at the club on the night of the seventeenth of April last?”

“He was, sir.”

“What time did he leave?”

“Not until after two. That’s very late for us and I was obliged to remind him that it was closing time.”

“Did he make any request to you that night?”

“He asked for a bedroom.”

“And you were unable, I believe, to give him one.”

“That is so, sir. He seemed very much upset but it was quite impossible. He said that he had particular reasons for wishing to sleep at the club and go home in daylight. I gathered that he was in possession of some valuables.”

“When he found that it was impossible for him to have a room, what did he do?”

“He asked me for a packet which he had deposited with me earlier in the evening and put it in his pocket. He left the club, still grumbling, at the hour I have stated.”

“And that was the last time you saw him alive?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you are probably aware that when his body was found, there was no packet on him whatever, that his pockets were indeed empty?”

“So I understand, sir.”

“I conclude, Mr. Parsons,” the coroner went on, “by asking you a somewhat delicate question but one which is necessary in the cause of justice. Was there any hesitation about the election of Colonel Dennett to the club?”

“There was, sir.”

“And what was it?”

“The committee discovered that he had been asked to leave another club of perhaps greater distinction than ours.”

“So that he left that club under, it may be said, compulsion and put up for yours?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did any explanation ever come to you of the reason why he was asked to leave the other club whose name we will not mention?”

“Only vaguely, sir. We were told that a grave accusation had been made against Colonel Dennett on account of a certain action of his when serving as tutor to a young Indian prince, after he had left the Indian Army, in one of the northern States.”

“I see,” the coroner said. “And Colonel Dennett, not being able to satisfy the committee of the other club as to his innocence of the accusation, was asked to

resign?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he did resign?"

"Yes, sir."

"And put up for your club?"

"Yes, sir. He was strongly proposed and well seconded."

"And you elected him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did it at some time or other transpire that the accusation against Colonel Dennett was with reference to very valuable jewellery which he was reported to have accepted from this young prince and secreted, the young prince not being of an age when he should have disposed of such jewellery?"

"That was what we understood, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Parsons, that will be all," the coroner concluded.

There was a disturbed whisper through the court.

"Ever know anything about that before, Miss Medlincott?" Major Lengton asked her.

"Never heard a word of the sort breathed," she assured him. "As to jewellery, we thought Colonel Dennett was living on a very small pension, as it was. He always behaved like a very poor man."

The usher once more approached the coroner. There was more whispering. The former, in his familiar attitude with one hand resting upon the witness box, called out a name.

"Mr. Kaw Dim."

A young gentleman, correctly dressed in European style, but of dusky complexion, came blithely forward. He entered the witness box and smiled at every one. It was unfortunate that his first bow was directed towards the usher.

"Your name is Kaw Dim?" the coroner asked.

"Kaw Dim is my name, sir."

"You are secretary to an Indian nobleman, whose name it has been agreed shall not be mentioned at these proceedings?"

"That is so, sir."

"You came to England on a mission from him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you tell the court, please, what that mission was?"

"To discover Colonel Dennett and to repurchase from him the jewels of which he was in possession, which had been given to him by the son of my master."

“Did you succeed?”

“Up to a point, sir. The jewels, I discovered, were lodged in a bank and Colonel Dennett had arranged for an overdraft upon them which was payable quarterly.”

“That is to say,” the coroner reflected, “that the bank held the jewels and advanced Colonel Dennett a certain sum quarterly against them.”

“That is so, sir.”

“Not a bad arrangement, when the sale of them might have been attended with difficulties,” the coroner remarked. “Did Colonel Dennett agree to sell you the jewels?”

“He did, sir. The transaction was practically completed. He agreed to sell them for a certain sum in addition to the amounts he had received from the bank. I gave the bank an undertaking, on behalf of my master, to repay all sums that had been advanced to Colonel Dennett and they handed him the jewels.”

“They did so, I understand, on the Thursday afternoon of his death?”

“That is so, sir.”

“And what happened then?”

“I was to have received the jewels from Colonel Dennett that night at his club, have paid him the balance of the sum owing and sailed for India with them this week.”

“What happened to prevent you?”

“I received a telephone message at the Savoy Hotel, where I was staying, purporting to come from Colonel Dennett, saying that he was ill and asking me to meet him at the club on Friday instead of Thursday.”

“To which you agreed?”

“Yes, sir. Colonel Dennett had seemed to me very unwell indeed the last time I had seen him.”

“And you went out of town, I understand, to spend that night with some friends in the country, leaving no address?”

“That is quite true, sir. My friends were at Brighton—college friends. I can give you their names, if desired.”

“It is not necessary at this stage of the proceedings,” the coroner said. “What happened, I gather, was that Colonel Dennett was expecting you at the club, that you did not come, that he telephoned to the Savoy and learnt that you had gone out of town, and when he found they could not give him a room at the club, he decided to take the jewels home with him.”

“That is apparently what happened, sir.”

“Then, at the present moment, you have paid off the bank’s claim, but you still

have the money you were going to pay the Colonel, and you are without the jewels?"

"That is so, sir. Directly these proceedings are over, I propose to advertise, offering a considerable reward for their return."

"You must do that carefully," the coroner remarked, "or you may find yourself compounding a felony. That is all, then, Mr. Kaw Dim. Thank you very much."

Mr. Kaw Dim smiled again at everybody and left his post. The coroner turned to the jury. Immediately Miss Clewes rose from almost identically the same place she had occupied a week before and leaned towards him.

"Mr. Coroner," she announced, "I have an important statement to make."

"Are you Miss Clewes, the lady who addressed me last time?" the coroner asked.

"That is so, sir," Miss Susannah replied. "You refused to listen to me then. This time I hope you will hear the true story of how Colonel Dennett was murdered. I can tell it you."

"Madam," the coroner continued, "no one may speak in this court except from the witness box. For certain reasons, I cannot listen to you. I ask you to sit down."

Miss Susannah was evidently perturbed.

"But Mr. Coroner," she persisted, "you want to know the truth, do you not? I can tell you the truth. I can tell you who murdered Colonel Dennett. Surely that is what you wish to find out?"

"Madam," was the coroner's stern reply, "I don't wish to seem uncivil, but instead of helping justice, you are likely to seriously retard it, if you persist in these statements. Unless you sit down and remain silent, I must have you removed from the court."

Miss Susannah reluctantly sat down.

"And you call this a Court of Justice, sir!" she mumbled angrily.

"Madam," the coroner concluded, "I have called it nothing of the sort. This is a court of investigation. The information you have will be asked for, no doubt, in a Court of Justice."

"If this is not a Court of Justice," Miss Susannah said, in a lower tone, "I shall go on with my knitting."

The coroner turned to the jury.

"Gentlemen of the Jury," he explained, "for reasons of their own, which I have no doubt are excellent ones, the only verdict required to-day by the police is the one I suggest you give, namely, murder by some person or persons unknown. You, of course, as men of common sense, will appreciate the fact that an accusation such as

this lady was proposing to make would have retarded rather than advanced the course of justice, as the police would probably not be in a position to make an immediate arrest, and the person concerned might therefore have been able to elude justice. Her evidence will naturally be asked for in the proceedings which will follow upon these. Such information as she has will be carefully considered by the police and they will act upon it. It may be necessary for them to procure corroborative evidence before they can bring the prisoner into court with a reasonable certainty of conviction. Therefore, I ask you, gentlemen, to return a verdict in this case of murder against some person or persons unknown.”

The foreman turned and whispered to his fellow members of the jury, one by one. There was in all cases an immediate response. He rose to his feet.

“Mr. Coroner, sir,” he said, “the unanimous verdict of this jury is that Colonel Dennett met with his death by the action of some person or persons unknown.”

The coroner wrote down the verdict.

“That,” he announced, “closes the proceedings.”

CHAPTER XXVI

Major Lengton elbowed his way through the emerging crowd, handed Freda Medlincott into a taxicab and gave the man an address.

“This,” he declared with a grin, as they started off, “is most interesting. The question now is—are my boarding-house pets concerned in this? In my story, I will tell you frankly that they would be. Alas, I am afraid there is no inspiration to be got out of your people.”

“You don’t think they look like criminals,” Freda remarked.

“I certainly do not,” Major Lengton agreed regretfully. “One can never tell, of course.”

“There was a single moment, not more than a moment,” Freda confided, looking out of the window at the swaying crowds, “when I could have believed anything about them. Just one moment when they were talking, and then they all seemed to think the same thought, to be stricken with the same fear, and I had a horrible start; and then it passed and I saw them just as they are in everyday life—a really very ordinary, pleasant lot of people, with nothing sinister or mysterious about them in any way. It was just as though I had been blinded for an instant and then recovered my sight.”

“This is most interesting,” the Major observed, producing his cigarette case. “Have one, won’t you?”

She leaned over and accepted a light. Just at that moment, the memory of the expression on Miss Susannah’s face was worrying her.

“You look pretty serious,” he remarked. “Tell me what you are thinking about. It might help me.”

“I was wondering whether it might not be possible,” she said, “that I have been living in a sort of Fool’s Paradise for years. That those fellow boarders of mine *have* led secret lives, that that raid by the police *was* justified and that Colonel Dennett *was* murdered by one of them. Miss Susannah is very obstinate, isn’t she, and you would think if she really knew who it was, it would be some one from the house.”

He smoked in silence for a moment or two.

“Look at it this way, Miss Medlincott,” he begged. “You are, I consider, a very intelligent young woman. I cannot believe it possible that you could live in that house—for how long did you say?—four years, off and on, with the same people, and have been deceived in them all that time.”

"I certainly am not a crook," Freda declared. "Neither, I am sure, is Mr. Luke, nor the Misses Clewes, nor Roger Ferrison nor Miss Packe, nor Miss Flora Quayne. In fact, I cannot think of any one who might be one. Then, there's another thing. If ever there was a severe lady in this world, it is Mrs. Dewar. How could a small company of people make her boarding house their headquarters and deceive her all the time as to their activities?"

"I am beginning to admire your intelligence more than ever, Miss Medlincott," he confessed. "I'm afraid that if we go any further in our surmises, we must decide that, probable or improbable though it may be, Mrs. Dewar and that long, quaint-looking manservant must be in the know. By-the-by, what's that imposing row of keys in the cloakroom?"

"There are very few servants kept at Palace Crescent," Miss Medlincott explained, "and every one is forced to use a latchkey. To show you how particular Mrs. Dewar is, she insists upon each latchkey being hung in its place immediately the owner returns, especially after dinner."

"Ingenious," Lengton murmured.

"What do you mean by ingenious?" Freda retorted. "You're beginning to get sarcastic, I believe."

"Not I," he assured her. "What I meant was that the presence of the latchkey in its proper place might, if any trouble arose at any time, be a very excellent alibi."

"Sarcastic and suspicious," Freda persisted.

"Thank heavens we're there," Lengton laughed, as the taxi drew up. "We will drown the memory of our first dispute in the quickest Martini that was ever shaken."

They made their way into the lounge of the club and Lengton gave an order to the waiter.

"When do you start rehearsing?" he asked his companion.

"Monday," she announced. "You can't imagine how I am looking forward to it. It will take my mind off this Palace Crescent business and give me an opportunity of leaving without hurting Mrs. Dewar's feelings. I can tell her I must be nearer the theatre."

"I shall never be able to finish my story," he sighed.

"Try the boarding house on your own account," she suggested. "I have no doubt Mrs. Dewar would love to have you. You could flirt with the fascinating Flora Quayne, you could try and dispossess Mr. Ferrison, you could cultivate Miss Clewes, or, if you wish to embark upon a dangerous affair, I think Mrs. Padgham would give her eyes—beautiful eyes they are too—for an affair of any sort."

"That is the first ill-natured thing I have heard you say about your fellow

boarders,” he remarked, smiling.

“I don’t think it is even ill-natured,” Freda remonstrated. “All girls and women have a right to flirt if they get the chance.”

“I can see that my heroine is going to stay in the boarding house for the rest of her life,” he observed. “Tell me, Miss Medlincott—it was you who introduced me to Palace Crescent, drew me into the charmed circle of intrigue, so to speak—have you any views yourself about the murder of poor old Dennett? Have you any idea, for instance, what Miss Clewes’ suppressed story really is?”

“I not only have no idea,” she replied, “but no one else has. Miss Clewes may be, as they are suggesting, out of her mind, but she has a marvellous will for a frail-looking old lady. I think every one in the boarding house, at different times, has tried to make her talk but not one has succeeded. What she saw or thinks she saw that night has never passed her lips. I suppose by this time Inspector Rudlett, or whatever his name is, has wormed it out of her.”

“You have not answered my question as to whether you have any ideas of your own,” he reminded her.

“If I had, they have been upset by what we heard at the inquest,” she told him. “Those Indians follow their jewels all over the world. They would even climb down into hell after them. I should think, in all probability, one of them had been tracking Colonel Dennett, shot him and got away with the jewels. Probably that smiling gentleman, Mr. Kim Daw, knows something about it.”

The curtains of the lounge, which was an annex to the bar proper, were pulled on one side. Two men entered. Freda turned her head carelessly at first, then she gave a slight start. Mr. Luke, suave and detached as usual, had drawn out an easy-chair for his companion and was sinking into another one himself. The companion was Inspector Rudlett.

“Your friend, Mr. Luke,” Lengton murmured. “And is not that the man you pointed out to me in *Ciro’s Grill*?”

“It is,” she assented. “With Mr. Luke too. What on earth are those two doing together?”

“They were both at the inquest,” Lengton observed carelessly. “Not together, though. Mr. Luke was with another of your friends from Palace Crescent.”

Mr. Luke, glancing across the room, recognised them and, with a word of excuse to his companion, crossed the room.

“A quaint but happy meeting,” he observed, with a bow to Freda. “I might have known that a man-about-town like our friend, Major Lengton, would have found this place out. The best cocktails in London.”

“One needs something after the atmosphere of that stuffy court,” Lengton said.

“A very well-conducted inquest, I thought,” Mr. Luke commented. “In my younger days, I was called to the bar and but for a stroke of financial good fortune, I might have been practising now. I might even have been a coroner. I thought, and the Inspector here agrees with me, that it was an admirably conducted enquiry.”

“I think it’s too bad,” Freda said, “that they wouldn’t let Miss Clewes say her little piece.”

Mr. Luke smiled.

“She will have to keep that until the Inspector is ready,” he remarked. “Did you recognise the man I am with, Miss Medlincott?”

“I was not sure,” she replied. “Is it Inspector Rudlett?”

“I found him waiting for me when I came out,” Mr. Luke confided. “Poor man, he’s rather in distress and I don’t blame him. Miss Clewes is very angry because she was not permitted to go into the witness box. She refuses to talk to any one now; she has gone home to Palace Crescent and locked herself in her room! I don’t remember enough of the law to know whether she can be committed for contempt of court, but in any case, it’s an awkward situation for the poor fellow. She absolutely refuses to open her mouth or to confirm or put in writing what she told him last week! He wants me to use my influence and I am trying to convince him that I haven’t any.”

“I don’t think there is any one in Palace Crescent, Mr. Luke, who wouldn’t do as you told them,” Freda said.

He smiled gently but appreciatively.

“Well, I suppose I shall have to see what I can do with her this evening. In the meantime I must go back to the Inspector. Au revoir.”

Mr. Luke crossed the room and resumed his seat. Lengton had become thoughtful.

“So that is the Scotland Yard man who was responsible for the raid on Palace Crescent the other night.”

“He is also the man,” Freda reminded her companion, “who is handling the murder case. I wonder what he thinks about the whole business.”

“He must have some ideas about your friends, Miss Medlincott, at the back of his mind, or he would not have insisted upon that second search.”

“I’m getting perfectly muddled about it all,” Freda confessed.

“Another cocktail might clear your brain,” Lengton suggested. “I don’t know about these being the best cocktails in London, but they are certainly the mildest.”

He gave the order, disregarding Freda’s faint protest. On the other side of the

room the Inspector and Mr. Luke had just been served with whiskies and sodas. They raised their glasses in salutation.

“You gave us all a surprise to-day, Inspector,” Mr. Luke remarked. “The case certainly looks more hopeful now, although, of course, it could not be carried very far this afternoon.”

“It was the secretary of the Junior Oriental who put us on the track,” the Inspector confessed. “When I first talked to him, I thought there was something he was half inclined to say, so I had another turn at him. Then I found that young Indian’s card at the club, left for Dennett, and the thing began to work out all right.”

“Up to a point,” Mr. Luke remarked.

“Up to a point,” the Inspector agreed. “Still, it’s a great thing to have discovered a motive. Without a motive, I always think there is something blank and confusing about any case. Motive enough now and no mistake,” he went on. “I believe that those rubies the boy is supposed to have given Dennett are worth at least two hundred and fifty thousand pounds on the market.”

“Where are they now, I wonder?” Mr. Luke asked.

The Inspector stroked his chin.

“I wonder,” he said. “The murderer, whoever he was, seems to have got away with them.”

“*Pro tem.*”

“For a simple case, it is puzzling,” the Inspector went on. “Of course, we have drawn a ring round the jewels. They would be ruined if they were cut. The only person to whom they are really worth the money is the person to whom they belong. The worst of that is, though, that their possession, even by the owner, would be—well, incriminating.”

“I suppose,” Mr. Luke reflected, “you have made enquiries into the antecedents of this young Indian?”

Inspector Rudlett took a sip of his whisky and soda.

“I hope you won’t think me ungracious, sir,” he said, “after your kindness but I cannot say very much about a case, can I, when it is at this stage. You have been connected slightly with the law, so you would know that. Still, I can go so far as to say that this particular young gentleman was at Harrow and Oxford and that he is highly thought of in the Indian State where he lives. During such times as he has been in London, too, he seems to have lived a very quiet and sedate life, mixing with some very good people. It is hard to imagine him, however much he may have his employer’s interests at heart, killing a man in cold blood. It is a great risk you know,

sir, to kill a man, rob him and expect to get away with it. It comes off now and then but not very often. The young gentleman has shown no signs of wishing to leave the country in a hurry, at any rate.”

“It would not be indiscreet, I suppose, to suggest that you have had a talk with him,” Mr. Luke ventured.

“I have had several talks with him,” the Inspector acquiesced. “He adopts a very frank attitude. He is going to spend the next six months searching for the jewels and he told me if he could come across them or learn in whose hands they were, he was prepared to pay pretty well the full value of them and ask no questions. I warned him that he must not tell me that, and that he would be compounding a felony if he made any deal with any person involving the return of those jewels. He only smiled. He was an Indian, he said, and the servant of his master.”

“I see his point of view,” Mr. Luke reflected. “A very interesting situation.”

There was a silence between the two men. Mr. Luke’s pale eyes seemed to be watching the gently swaying boughs of an elm tree in the small garden outside the club. The Inspector, with the air of a man who has suddenly remembered that he had a drink, was calmly enjoying his whisky and soda. Freda who, despite herself, had been watching them from the other side of the room turned to Lengton.

“Those two rather fascinate me,” she confessed. “They can’t have been talking about Miss Clewes all this time. I should think the Inspector would be an interesting man for you to know.”

“I should love to meet him,” Major Lengton assented. “Of course, I have seen his name in the papers. They had his picture in some of them on that Oxford murder case last year but I should never have recognised him.”

“I’ll introduce you, if you like, when we go,” Freda suggested.

“Sweet girl,” he murmured.

It was Mr. Luke and his companion, however, who rose to leave first. Freda caught the former’s eye as they passed.

“Mr. Luke,” she apologised, “my friend here, Major Lengton, would so much like to meet the Inspector.”

“Why, certainly,” Mr. Luke acquiesced. “Inspector, let me introduce you to a mutual friend of Miss Medlincott’s and mine. Major Lengton—Inspector Rudlett.”

The two men shook hands.

“Very interested to meet you, Inspector,” Lengton assured him. “I read every word of that Oxford murder case last year.”

The Inspector was a very quiet man and he studied his new acquaintance before he replied.

“You interested in that sort of thing, sir?” he enquired.

“Not professionally,” Lengton admitted, “I write a few stories sometimes.”

The Inspector turned hastily away. His smile was disarming.

“You will excuse me, sir,” he said. “I’m terrified of you literary gentlemen.”

He saluted Miss Medlincott and went off with Mr. Luke.

“I love your friend,” Lengton said. “He has a sense of humour. The one quality, as a rule, policemen lack.”

“I’m getting so curious,” Freda Medlincott declared, as she finished her cocktail and they prepared to depart. “I feel just now that I would give anything in the world to know exactly what Mr. Luke and the Inspector were talking about all this time.”

CHAPTER XXVII

Miss Susannah Clewes did not hesitate to accept Mr. Luke's courteously worded invitation to visit him for a few minutes in his sitting room before dinner that evening, but she was in a very obstinate frame of mind. She sat in Mr. Luke's easy-chair, she produced her knitting and she listened to what he had to say with a faint but inexpressive smile upon her lips.

"That's all very well, Mr. Luke," she said, when he had finished, "but if it's justice that they want, why did they not let me tell the truth either time in that crowded court? Why did that usher come and stand over me so that I knew quite well I should have his horrible hand on my mouth if I tried to disobey the coroner? That's not the way to treat a gentlewoman who has an important statement to make. I am not sure that I am any longer interested in the course of justice."

"But Miss Clewes," Mr. Luke argued, "aren't you making rather a personal matter of this? It is the law of the country, you know, that you must disclose what you know about any crime or misdemeanour that has been committed—otherwise you render yourself an accessory. Now, you don't want to be an accessory to a murder, do you?"

Miss Clewes' smile was no longer inexpressive. She stopped knitting for a moment and gave Mr. Luke the benefit of it.

"Should I be hanged?" she asked.

"Of course not," he answered. "But you would be put in a very awkward position. You certainly would render yourself liable to a term of imprisonment. I am afraid if you persist in refusing to tell the Inspector anything, he may apply for an order against you."

"How silly that would be," she said, resuming her knitting. "I could get out of it so easily. I could make a false statement. I could tell him some wild thing which I had never seen."

So this was the woman, Mr. Luke mused, whom they were trying to say was out of her mind! He altered his ground.

"Why not confide in me then, Miss Clewes?" he suggested. "I was once a barrister, you know, before I was fortunate enough to come into a little money."

"Why should I confide in you?" she demanded. "I am not particularly anxious to bring the criminal to justice."

"Then why did you try to tell the truth in court and now refuse to tell anybody

anything?" he asked in some exasperation.

Miss Susannah Clewes for a moment stopped her knitting. She looked across at her questioner.

"Mr. Luke," she explained, "my sister and I have been brought up quietly and our lives have been absolutely uneventful. There were times in that sleepy country village when I think we both—I know that I did, anyhow—ached for something to happen, even if it were trouble. We wanted to do something, to be a little different, to be pointed out as heroines even of a scandal. I had that feeling when I went to the Coroner's Court, wedged in amongst all those people. It would have given me a wicked, perhaps a malicious pleasure, to have stood up, to have had every one listening eagerly to what I had to say, to have told them something that would have startled them. The Inspector robbed me of that possible minute of happiness. He would like me to tell him when we are alone, with no one else to hear, and then everything would go on quietly until he had his triumph, and at his behest I was to be put, a poor little dummy, into the witness box, to have my story drawn out of me for his glorification. You may think me a very wicked and stupid and stubborn old lady, Mr. Luke, but you have asked for the truth and you have it. The Inspector would not let me tell it my way, therefore I shall not tell it any way."

"Supposing," Mr. Luke queried, "an innocent person is accused?"

"Then I should, without a doubt, change my mind," she admitted, "but it would not be the Inspector I should tell. I should go myself to Scotland Yard and tell some one of importance."

Mr. Luke once more changed his ground.

"I dare say you have heard what the Inspector says?" he asked.

"I have heard," Miss Susannah Clewes said calmly, "that he does not attach a great deal of importance to what I may have to tell."

Mr. Luke nodded.

"You know the reason, of course. He has been in your room and he has decided that it was absolutely impossible, owing to the position of the wall, for you to have seen the murder committed."

The knitting continued faster than ever. It was the only indication Miss Clewes ever gave that she was angry.

"If it makes the Inspector any more comfortable to believe that," she said, "let him believe it."

"But I too," Mr. Luke persisted gently, "have been in your room and I have looked out of the window. I do not understand how it was possible for you to have witnessed the murder."

“Does this matter to me at all?” Miss Susannah asked. “I am not asking any one to believe what I saw. I am keeping it to myself.”

Mr. Luke tried other tactics.

“You must remember,” he said, “that the recovery of the jewels would probably follow the discovery of the murderer. There is a reward offered for them of ten thousand pounds. They are not only immensely valuable but their rightful owner is very anxious to have them back again in his country. If the murderer was arrested because of your evidence, you would probably be able to claim a portion of that sum.”

“Thank you very much for your information, Mr. Luke,” Miss Susannah replied, “but my sister and I have three hundred and ninety-five pounds a year each, derived from very sound investments. It is sufficient for our needs. A larger sum of money would upset our regular method of life and be of no advantage to us.”

Mr. Luke gave up the unequal contest at the sounding of the first gong. She accepted his invitation and allowed him to escort her to the lounge. The buzz of conversation ceased at their entrance. All eyes were turned in their direction. Mr. Luke, with a shrug of the shoulders, acknowledged his defeat to Mr. Padgham, who was the first to buttonhole him.

“Miss Clewes,” he confided, “is exceedingly obstinate. It is, I should think, a trait developed by the narrowness of the life she has led until it has become an obsession.”

“Surely she must know,” Mr. Padgham argued irritably, “that it is very wrong of her to conceal anything that she saw that night.”

“Miss Clewes,” Mr. Luke explained tritely, “is not interested in the ethical side of the question. She twice wished to tell her story in the Coroner’s Court, she was not allowed to, and therefore she will not tell it at all. You others can have a try with her, if you like. I have done my best and failed.”

“What I am afraid Miss Clewes doesn’t realise,” Mr. Bernascon pointed out to an increasing circle of listeners, “is that the clearing up of this murder mystery would relieve a certain ugly suspicion under which we are all living just now. First of all, there was this murder itself, and then the fact that the Burlington Gardens raiders ended their flight in this vicinity and are known to have taken shelter somewhere near. The clearing up of the murder mystery would probably relieve the situation entirely. As it is, I feel when I leave the house in the morning and when I come back at night that I am always being watched. People have become curious about us. However absurd it may seem, it is certainly a fact.”

“Some one was taking a photograph of the house yesterday,” Freda Medlincott

confided. "We shall all be in the Sunday papers before long."

"I can almost see it," Reggie Barstowe observed, with a grin. "It will be something like this, I suppose:

Miss Freda Medlincott, the celebrated actress, leaving Palace Crescent Boarding House for rehearsal at the Cambridge Theatre! Palace Crescent Boarding House is the *venu* of the unsolved Dennett Murder Case and is in the vicinity of the spot where the Burlington Gardens raiders made their escape.

"Very amusing, no doubt, Mr. Barstowe," Mrs. Dewar said coldly. "But I think you might consider my feelings a little."

"Only a joke, Mrs. Dewar, I can assure you," Barstowe declared. "The whole thing will certainly be cleared up before very long and I should think it would be rather good for the house. No end of people will want to come and stay here to prove their courage."

"Our notoriety is bringing us distinguished visitors, at any rate," Mr. Luke remarked. "Major Lengton, your friend and guest the other evening, Miss Medlincott, is an example. One felt, although his manners were quite perfect, that all the time he was searching for a notorious murderer and a few nimble jewel raiders when he looked round the room."

"I am sure Major Lengton had nothing of the sort in his mind," Freda Medlincott protested. "He came simply because he was anxious to see how a boarding house was conducted. He's writing a story and his heroine is living in one."

"Ever published anything?" Mr. Luke asked.

"I have not asked him," Freda replied. "That's just the one question about which I always find budding authors are a trifle sensitive."

"Mr. Grindley was once an inmate of this house," Mrs. Dewar announced. "He wrote for the Sunday papers every week and had a serial occasionally in one of the magazines. I often see his name in the paper now."

Flora Quayne summoned Roger to her side. He was wearing his new dinner coat and had treated himself to a glass of sherry.

"You didn't come to my room before dinner," she reminded him reproachfully.

"I can't come every evening, can I?" he remonstrated.

"It would give me pleasure if you did," she replied. "My cocktails are much better for you than that sherry you are drinking. Turn round, please. I want to admire your new clothes."

He laughed a little self-consciously.

“To tell you the truth,” he said, “my partner and I are invited to dine with one of the directors of Mallory’s to-morrow night and as I have never worn a dinner coat before, I thought I had better try this on.”

“It’s very nice—very well cut. But if you come to my room to-morrow evening, I will tie your tie for you.”

“I am not an expert, I’m afraid,” he admitted. “Thank you.”

“And Miss Packe?”

“She is still with her aunt,” he replied. “She was coming round to dinner to-night but she telephoned that she was worn out shopping.”

“So you are going round there afterwards?” Flora Quayne asked jealously.

“Quite right,” he assented. “I am going round directly after dinner.”

“When is the party to be?”

“Friday, Mrs. Dewar has announced. Cocktails here at seven o’clock in the lounge—real cocktails, mind you.”

“Yes, I know,” she murmured. “Mr. Luke has engaged a man from one of his clubs to come up and fix a small bar.”

“Jolly nice of him, I call it,” Roger declared. “Well, we’re all to be here promptly at seven, I am told, and then, of course, we stay on to dinner.”

“There would have been dancing afterwards,” Flora Quayne said sadly, “but Mrs. Dewar thought that I might feel left out. It was very kind of her, but I hate to think that I am spoiling any one’s pleasure.”

“No one wants to dance,” Roger assured her. “I would much rather talk to you and look at you than dance.”

She glanced up at him and then away with a quick drop of the eyes. A faint flush in her cheeks, which came and went quickly, was in itself an exquisite thing.

“That is one of the nicest speeches you have ever made to me,” she told him. “You must not begin paying me compliments like that just as you are going away.”

“Some of us,” Maurice Bernascon declared severely, “are beginning to be very glad that he is going away. Do you ever realise, Miss Quayne, how selfishly and brutally that young man, who is on the eve of matrimony, monopolises you all the time?”

“I didn’t notice it,” she smiled.

“Well, it’s true,” he insisted. “Reggie and I were talking about it the other day.”

“I must make amends,” she promised, holding out her hand. “There is the dinner gong—you and Mr. Barstowe shall take me in. Don’t think that I forget,” she went on, as she handed one of her sticks to Barstowe and leaned on his arm, “how nicely

you two used to look after me.”

“Until that fellow Ferrison came,” Bernascon exclaimed, with a fine show of jealousy.

She sighed.

“Mr. Ferrison is so strong,” she said. “He carries me as though I were a feather. Don’t go rushing off, Roger, without saying good night to me,” she added, looking over her shoulder. “You can come and fetch me after dinner to make up for this desertion.”

“It’s a promise,” he consented cheerfully.

CHAPTER XXVIII

“For a company of suspected jewel raiders with an odd murderer or two amongst us,” Mr. Luke remarked, “your guests, Mrs. Dewar, are blessed with fairly good appetites.”

Mrs. Dewar withdrew her eyes from that ceaseless watch which she seemed to keep upon the various tables.

“Yes,” she admitted, “their appetites appear healthy enough. They eat and they talk, and yet—listen! To me there seems something different in the atmosphere. I suppose it is due to all these excitements, but I am sure that every one eats faster and talks in a more disjointed fashion. Have you noticed, too, the way every one keeps looking towards the door?”

Freda Medlincott sighed.

“How I wish that Major Lengton were here! That’s just the sort of speech to have given him an idea.”

Mrs. Dewar’s bony fingers adjusted her brooch.

“Well, perhaps it is as well that he is not here,” she said. “We certainly don’t wish to give people any more ideas about us than they have.”

“The only person,” Mr. Luke observed, “who completely maintains his somewhat eccentric attitude towards life is Joseph. When you retire, Mrs. Dewar, I shall try and get him offered a place at the Sheridan. He gets over the ground with those long, lean legs of his faster than any waiter I have ever seen, and he never makes a mistake.”

“The only night I have ever seen him disturbed,” Roger Ferrison, who had moved his place for the evening to Mrs. Dewar’s table, remarked, “was the night of the murder. I admit he gave me rather a shock then. How long has he been with you, Mrs. Dewar?”

“Since the place opened,” that lady replied, “I pay him good wages but I often wonder why he stays.”

“I don’t think you need,” Maurice Bernascon interposed. “He’s one of those stickers—fairly grown into the life here. I think he will be with you until you close down the place, if ever you do.”

Mr. Luke leaned a little forward.

“Owing to the fact,” he remarked, “that the police have refused to allow any evidence to speak of at the inquest, there are many things in connection with that

unfortunate night, to which you have just alluded, Mr. Ferrison, which we have scarcely spoken of, even amongst ourselves. I remember now that you heard the police whistle and went downstairs. Was poor old Joseph in a terrible state?"

"I should say he was," Roger admitted. "I shall never forget him when I picked up his gun and examined it."

"Do you mean to say," Freda exclaimed, "that he had a gun by the side of his bed?"

"He certainly had," Roger told her. "Not only that, but one barrel had been discharged."

There was a moment's rather curious silence. Mr. Luke held up his glass of wine to the light. He seemed to be wondering whether it was quite as clear as it should be.

"I don't remember hearing about Joseph having a gun," he observed. "Did you mention it to the Inspector, Ferrison?"

"Of course I did," Roger replied. "I told him everything I could think of that night. By-the-by, though, I didn't mention the telephone call from the sergeant of the Bartels Street Police Station."

"That was of no importance whatever," Mrs. Dewar pronounced. "It had to do simply with the fact that Joseph had foolishly left a window open somewhere in the back premises. What one is naturally curious about is whether the Inspector made any remark about Joseph's possession of the revolver?"

"He did not seem to think it in any way unusual," Roger answered. "By-the-by, he did ask me to keep what I saw in the back kitchen on my way through and afterwards, I suppose, to myself. That didn't apply, of course, to you people. I have not opened my mouth about it to any one else."

"Very discreet," Mr. Luke approved.

"I should say that Joseph was very well advised to be armed," Mrs. Dewar remarked. "He has the whole of the back premises to guard, which are really quite unprotected, and if any one ever did attempt a burglary, it would certainly be from there."

"But why should any one choose Palace Crescent for a burglary?" Freda Medlincott asked.

Mr. Luke, apparently satisfied about his wine, finished the contents of his glass deliberately and refilled it.

"Well," he reflected, "boarding-house guests, as a rule, are not wealthy people, but I don't know whether it has occurred to any of you," he went on, lowering his voice. "Our dear little lady, Miss Quayne, sometimes wears very valuable jewellery. That sort of thing gets about. Even you, my dear Miss Medlincott, when you have all

London at your feet—as you probably will in a month or two—would scarcely look askance at those pearls she is wearing to-night, for instance.”

“I think her jewellery is lovely,” Freda declared heartily.

“And of course,” Roger put in, “she is on the ground floor.”

“I think,” Mrs. Dewar meditated, “I must give her a word of warning some day.”

“It would be as well,” Mr. Luke agreed. “I have been interested in Miss Quayne’s attitude towards her jewels. We all know, of course, that she is more or less an artist. She has artistic ideas which she expresses artistically and her taste in literature is of the best. She loves her jewellery because it is beautiful. It gives her the same pleasure to feel and pore over as a beautiful binding or a rare picture. It would be a cruel thing, with her limitations as regards pleasure, if she were deprived of a single gem that she values.”

Reginald Barstowe was suddenly thoughtful.

“I wonder if she would care about some insurance,” he reflected. “My people are rather good at that sort of thing.”

Mr. Luke looked down at the young man with disapproval in his face.

“I don’t think,” he said, “that insurance would in any way compensate Miss Quayne for the loss of her jewellery. It is not their monetary value which appeals to her. A woman with her outlook becomes attached to the beautiful things by which she is surrounded in a different way.”

“Nevertheless,” Reggie Barstowe remarked, in a somewhat minor key, “if she did lose her jewels, I expect a cheque for a few thousand pounds would come in handy. Insurance is pretty cheap just now.”

“Even in a very conservative old boarding house like this, Tom,” his wife remarked to him, as they paused during the courses to glance round the room, “it’s odd what changes there are. A few nights ago Mr. Ferrison, for instance, had Miss Packe always with him. They sat in that corner, gazing into each other’s eyes as though no one else in the world even existed. Then Miss Medlincott has left off dining first with Mr. Bernascon and then with any one else who would ask her. Since that young soldier gentleman came to dinner with her, she seems a different person.”

“She’s got a thundering good job,” Mr. Padgham confided. “Forty pounds a week—and more if the show’s a success.”

“Forty pounds a week is not much for a leading lady,” Mrs. Padgham, who had been understudy to one herself, remarked.

“It’s pretty good these times,” her husband grunted. “I sometimes wonder, Annabel,” he went on, leaning across the table until their faces nearly touched,

“whether it would not, after all, be a wise move to make a get-away if we can. I’m worried about old Luke. Seems to me he’s getting a bit queer in the head.”

“So you have the wind up, have you?” his spouse remarked, her beautiful eyes studying him keenly.

“Look here, my girl,” Mr. Padgham continued, a touch of hoarseness in his throat. “You and I aren’t in this together as much as we ought to be. You touch your share of what’s going, all right, and you keep the stocking, but I am the one who would have to take the knocks. I don’t like the way the police refused to call any evidence at the inquest on old Dennett, and I don’t like the way the Inspector is always drifting in and out. I don’t know whether you’ve noticed it, but all mention of the Burlington Gardens case seems to have faded out of the paper. It’s the police who have done that, I’ll bet. They’re waiting for something.”

“If you ask me what I think of Inspector Rudlett,” Mrs. Padgham said contemptuously, “I think he’s a chump. I don’t think he’s on the line at all. Scotland Yard has struck a bad streak. People seem to be helping themselves to what they want nowadays.”

Mr. Padgham apparently did not share his wife’s confident attitude.

“You may be right, Annabel,” he assented, “but to me that fellow always seems as though he had something up his sleeve. Always, on some excuse or other, this house is being watched. It’s just as though he knew he had got us when he chose to make his grab, but all the time he was waiting for the last little shred of evidence so as to make his case complete.”

“Perhaps we’d better take a holiday, if you feel like that,” she agreed. “I’m sick of this place, anyhow. There are always your friends in Russia.”

“I wish we were on our way there to-night!” Mr. Padgham said fervently. “We have done well here. The Palace Crescent Boarding House has been a gold mine, in its way. All the same, I’m getting uneasy.”

“Have you anything in your mind you’ve not spoken of, Tom?” she asked, with a shrewd glance at him.

Mr. Padgham looked a little shamefaced.

“You’ll perhaps think I’m dotty, Annabel,” he said, “but I didn’t half like that chap Freda Medlincott brought along.”

“What? Major Lengton?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean you didn’t like him?”

“Well, it seemed to me he was too interested in us all,” Mr. Padgham explained.

His wife looked at him pityingly.

“Well, you *have* got the wind up,” she scoffed. “Major Lengton was all right. I have known that type, my dear Tom, ever since I set foot on the stage. Nice, clean, gentlemanly fellows with just about the price of a supper on them and a very limited credit at their jewellers. Some of them—Major Lengton may be one—quite good at their job, but perfectly and marvellously harmless. I’ll tell you, if you want to know, that a gentleman like Major Lengton would never be the faintest use as a detective. They lack one quality—suspicion. They take for granted everything they’re told.”

“Kind of story writer, Miss Medlincott says he is.”

“An amateur, I’ll bet,” his wife declared. “Don’t I know the type! Tom,” she went on earnestly, “I don’t want you to get into trouble any more than I do myself. We have done very well the last eight years together and I don’t want to leave you, but if you lose your nerve I’m off. Nerves are the one thing in this world I have no use for. I have been in these sort of affairs too many times and whenever we have come near grief, it’s been through a nervous man. You may say what you like but Luke’s my idea of a leader. Follow him and you’ll be all right. He’ll give us the word when we have to quit.”

“That may be so,” Padgham grunted. “He will be all right—I’m not so sure about us. . . . What are these, Joseph?”

“Cutlets, Mr. Padgham,” the butler replied. “I watched them cut myself at the butcher’s this morning. I should recommend the one nearest to you, sir. Perhaps you would like a little Worcester Sauce? There are some well-browned potatoes and beans to come.”

“Joseph remains always our one bright star,” Mr. Padgham remarked, helping himself.

“Your attitude towards this place, my dear Susannah, appears to me to have changed during the last few weeks,” her elder sister observed, as they watched the arrival of Joseph with the second dish of cutlets. “Is it my fancy, or do I not notice a certain reticence—especially when you are brought in contact with Mrs. Dewar?”

“We change every day that we grow older,” Miss Susannah declared, with some acerbity. “You, yourself, my dear Amelia, narrowly escaped dropping a stitch just now.”

Miss Amelia bit her lip. The serious charge was well founded.

“Perhaps we have both been here without a change long enough,” she suggested. “Would a fortnight in Mrs. Moore’s rooms at Hastings be agreeable to you, Susannah?”

Susannah, whose turn it was to help herself to cutlets, laid down her knitting.

“Not just at present, Amelia,” she begged.

“You are going to see Miss Packe this evening?” Mrs. Dewar asked Roger.

“Directly after dinner, Mrs. Dewar. At least, after I have had a word or two with Miss Quayne.”

“She is still up at Putney?”

“She is still there with her aunt,” Roger replied. “They spend most of the time shopping.”

“You must remember me kindly to her,” Mrs. Dewar said. “Also say that we are looking forward very much to Friday.”

“So we both are,” Roger lied a little grimly.

Mrs. Dewar lit the one cigarette she permitted herself during the day. She smoked it with obvious lack of enjoyment and purely as an indication to her boarders that they were at liberty to leave whenever they chose. Flora Quayne waved her hand and Roger moved across to her. He carried one of her sticks and gave her the support of his arm upon the left-hand side. She passed out of the room, clinging to him. Outside she paused and her hand stole up to his neck.

“To-night please carry me,” she begged. “We shall get to my room quicker and I am tired.”

He would very much have preferred their present form of progress but he picked her up without demur. She clung to him with her usual little croon of content.

“Into the lounge?” he asked.

“Of course not,” she answered. “How can we talk there? The coffee is waiting in my room and my car is at the door. I am going to a reception at ten o’clock. I ordered the car at nine so that it could take you to Putney first.”

“That’s awfully good of you,” he acknowledged, “but it isn’t necessary.”

“It pleases me,” she said. “You are doing what I ask: I give you back the time, you see.”

He carried her down the passage and into her apartment. Roger, who had seen a good deal of furnishing lately—artistic and inartistic—was beginning to appreciate the soft colourings and charm of the room. The lounge was drawn up to the fire and coffee stood on the small table, between it and the easy-chair. There were also cigarettes and a carafe of brandy.

“Marie has forgotten nothing to-night,” Flora sighed, “except that she has put your chair much too far away from me. In some things I remain a baby. I like to hold the hand of any one with whom it gives me pleasure to talk.”

He paused for a moment, then wheeled his chair nearer.

“Tell me why you hesitated,” she asked, as she accepted her coffee and the cigarette which, according to custom, he had lit for her.

“If I told you, I should feel like a fool,” he answered.

“Then feel like one and tell me,” she insisted.

“It ought to mean nothing at all to me that you hold my hand,” he confided, “because I am engaged to be married and in love with my fiancée. I am quite certain that I could hold the hand of any one in the world and it would not make the least difference, and yet somehow it gives me an uncomfortable feeling—in this room—close to you. There is something in your eyes which I never quite understand. Something about myself which I understand even less. Now you know why I hesitated.”

It was always a pleasure to Roger to see her smile. For the second time in his life he saw and heard her laugh. She laughed musically and very softly, with her eyes half closed and the fingers of her right hand beating her knee.

“Roger,” she said, “let me tell you something. Not in your most eloquent moments have you ever said a thing I liked to hear so much.”

“Well, I don’t know why,” he protested. “I did not say it with any idea of giving you pleasure.”

She gave his hand a convulsive clutch, wiped her eyes with a ridiculously diminutive confection of cambric and leaned nearer to him.

“It was because you said it without meaning to give me pleasure that I loved it,” she confessed. “It will make me happier when you leave me. Now listen. I want to ask you a question. Why did Miss Packe desert us here? Why has she gone to stay with her aunt?”

Roger looked, as he felt, taken aback.

“Why, I thought every one understood that. We are going to get married next month, you know. There was no necessity at all for Audrey to go on working and she had to get her clothes.”

“We have all heard that, Roger,” she agreed, “but I wanted to know the truth. I think that there was another reason.”

“What reason could there be?”

“I am not flattering myself,” she went on, “that she could possibly be jealous of me. I know she doesn’t look upon me as a live human being. Perhaps it is as well that she doesn’t. She can never guess that I can, and do, feel a hundred times more than she ever will. No, I know it was not that, but there was some other reason, Roger.”

He looked into the fire and reflected.

“In confidence?” he asked.

“Yes, in confidence,” she promised.

“Audrey is not exactly an imaginative person,” he went on, after another brief pause, “but she has strong intuition sometimes. She came to me in positive distress one morning. She has a small room, as you know, on the second floor. Many of the doors are fitted with bolts but this one has only a lock, the key to which, the maid told her, had been lost. She is not at all a nervous person, and all this time she has been accustomed to sleep without having the door locked because there was no key, but she declares that she woke up in the night last week and found some one in the room.”

“Some one in the room?” Flora repeated. “Do you mean some one who had come in without waking her?”

“I suppose so. She has no switch by the bed and she had no way of getting a light. She lay still and trembled. She did what a great many highly nervous people do at such a time—she closed her eyes. When she opened them, the figure had disappeared. She got up then and lit a match. There was no one in the room and there was no possible hiding place.”

“Fancy, of course,” Flora murmured.

“Just what I said,” Roger observed, with a reminiscent smile, “and for the first time in my life I saw Audrey in a temper. She asked for her key the next morning and they promised she should have it. She asked again the third day and Mrs. Dewar said it was being made. On the third night she woke up just the same way and without seeing any one definitely, she is prepared to swear that some one was in her room. The window, which she had left open, was closed and she declared that there was a horrible smell of some chemical like gas, only stronger, and a kind of hissing noise. She got up and shrieked and she heard the door close. Again she could not see the figure which went out, but she was sure that who ever it was was carrying something that looked like a glass retort.”

“This is getting quite like a novelette,” Flora observed. “And what happened then?”

“Well, rather a stupid thing happened, but I dare say heaps of us would have done it under the circumstances. She opened the window. She stood there for a few minutes, breathing, and all the bad air went out. She has no bell in the room. She knows, of course, that she was paying the minimum price, so she couldn’t very well make a fuss about it. The bad odour had all gone and there was no sign that any one had been there. From then on, I think she was wise. She packed her bag and left.”

“But why on earth didn’t she complain to Mrs. Dewar?” Flora asked.

“Because she hadn’t a single shred of evidence,” Roger explained.

“But what about the bad odour?”

“They were laying down gas in the next street. A whiff or two might easily have escaped.”

“Well, the opened window then?”

“Who remembers positively whether they open their window or not at night? I believe in Audrey’s memory, of course, but no one else would.”

“Had Miss Packe any jewellery or valuables?”

“Not a single thing.”

“What about her engagement ring?”

“Even that was away being altered.”

“But I never heard of a girl who had no jewellery at all,” Flora protested.

“Well, she declares she hasn’t and I believe her. I should say,” Roger concluded, “that there was not a soul in the Palace Crescent Boarding House whom it would have been less profitable to rob.”

“It all sounds very stupid,” Flora reflected.

“I’m afraid it does,” Roger agreed. “Still, I believe that those two unpleasant incidents really happened. They’ve got on her nerves and we thought it best that she should leave quietly.”

“What did she think about it all?” Flora persisted.

“She didn’t know what to think,” Roger replied. “No more do I. No more do you or any one else. She has not an enemy in the world that she knows of, she hasn’t a possession that’s worth a sovereign—why should any one want to kill her? It doesn’t make sense. That’s why she went away. Things that you can’t understand are worse than things that frighten you. Why any one should want to hurt a sweet harmless girl like Audrey Packe, I cannot imagine. Now you know why I made her leave.”

Her fingers tightened upon his hand.

“From your point of view, Roger,” she said, “I think you were right. You must forgive me, though, if I say that I am convinced it was all fancy. Every one here is kindly. No one would have dreamed of hurting her. It won’t prevent her coming to the party, will it?”

“No, she’ll come to the party, all right,” Roger answered, “because I shall be there to take care of her. All the same, I would rather there was not going to be a party.”

“Roger!”

He turned uneasily in his chair.

“I don’t want to talk about this place, Flora,” he said. “I know more than you know. I don’t want to alarm you in any way, either, but if I had as many beautiful things as you have, I should follow Audrey’s example and clear out.”

“Where should I go?” she asked pitifully. “No one looks after me but Mrs. Dewar. She has known me all my life.”

“You could get a companion,” he suggested.

“All right,” she agreed. “I choose you.”

He laughed. For several minutes he had been exceedingly uncomfortable. He welcomed the return of her more frivolous mood.

“Well,” he declared, “I can assure you I should be very happy and I should try to give every satisfaction. Now I must hurry off. Even in your wonderful car, I shall be late.”

“Come and see me when you get back,” she begged.

“Not likely,” he replied. “It might be after midnight for one thing.”

“I sha’n’t be back from the reception I am going to until midnight.”

He kissed the fingers she pressed against his lips.

“Don’t forget your latchkey,” he reminded her.

She struggled from the couch.

“One moment,” she insisted. “Your arm, please. No, it will be quicker if you carry me. I will just show you something, then you can go. Carry me through the bathroom into my bedroom.”

“Flora!”

She turned her head away. There was a queer little sob in her tone.

“You need not be afraid,” she assured him. “Do as I tell you. You will not have many more opportunities. Marie—I have sent her on a message. Believe me, you need not remain one minute. There is something I wish to show you there.”

He told himself that the old passionate Flora lay dead in his arms. He could do as she begged him without risk or fear. He carried her through the bathroom, with its haunting perfumes, into the bedroom with its dim atmosphere of luxury. She pointed to the far wall, a portion of which was hung with a Byzantine curtain.

“Over there,” she directed.

They arrived in front of the curtain. She drew it on one side. There was a small Gothic-looking door there, with heavy bars.

“Put me on the bed, please,” she begged.

He obeyed. She threw herself down with a weary gesture and drew the pillow towards her.

“Draw those bolts,” she told him.

Once more he obeyed. She felt in her pocket and drew out a little gilded key ring with two keys attached.

“Open the door,” she directed.

There was no latch, only a spring lock.

“Which key?” he asked.

“Either of them.”

He selected one and the door swung noiselessly open. A breath of cold wind came in.

“Now close it.”

He did as he was told.

“Draw the bolts back, please,” she begged. “I just wanted to show you that I am not so helpless here as I seem. I had that door made years ago, so that in case there was a fire or trouble of any sort, I could escape easily. You see, it is only two yards from the side of my bed. I don’t have to bother about Mrs. Dewar’s latchkeys.”

“You are a most astonishing person,” he confessed. “You are always springing surprises upon one. Where does this lead to?”

“Just a narrow path. It skirts the area and you go out of the front gate, or it goes backwards into what we call the wilderness, and you can leave by the back gate. Now please pick me up, Roger. Some day I will show you my jewel safe. You would never find it unless I did.”

“I don’t want to know where it is,” he declared bluntly. “To tell you the truth, Flora,” he added, “notwithstanding all this, I have a bit of a scare on about this place. As soon as we are married, Audrey and I, I should like to find you comfortable rooms somewhere else and have Audrey find you a companion.”

For a single moment her eyes blazed at him. She mastered herself with an effort.

“Carry me back,” she ordered. “Marie needs to come in here to prepare my dress for the evening.”

She stretched out her arms to wish him good night. In one hand she held the keys.

“You would like one of them, Roger?” she asked softly. “You can have it.”

He tossed the keys back into her lap.

“No,” he exclaimed, with an undertone of savagery in his tone.

She sighed.

“You have been so kind to me,” she said. “Yet, sometimes you are so bitterly cruel. You make me feel like some of those French ladies of the seventeenth century. It was their idea of humour to offer a wedding present like that. Did you ever read a story called ‘The Clown of Armenonville’? No, I don’t suppose you would have.

Poor little keys," she added, caressing them lightly.

The chauffeur sprang from his seat and opened the door as Roger appeared. He turned away.

"Tell your mistress," he enjoined, "that I fear I should keep the car too long. I shall take a taxicab at the corner."

CHAPTER XXIX

Inspector Rudlett, installed in his small private office at Scotland Yard, pushed aside the papers which he had been studying with a gesture of weariness and glanced at the card which had just been brought him. A light broke across his usually inexpressive face. The name became suddenly familiar. He spoke urgently on the telephone. Three minutes later Roger was shown in.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Ferrison,” the Inspector said. “To tell you the truth, I had forgotten your name for the moment. Sit down.”

Roger Ferrison accepted the chair to which the Inspector had pointed. He laid his hat and umbrella upon the carpet by his side.

“Inspector,” he announced, “I have come to ask you a favour.”

“I will grant it, if I can,” the other promised. “I have always had the idea, Mr. Ferrison, that some day or other you were going to be very useful to me.”

“Well, it’s just this,” Roger explained. “Mrs. Dewar, our hostess, or landlady, or whatever she calls herself, at Palace Crescent, is giving a cocktail party to Miss Packe this afternoon. The idea is that it is a sort of celebration of our engagement.”

“I see,” the Inspector said. “Go on.”

Roger fidgeted a little nervously.

“Of course, I expect you will think I am crazy, but I am going to tell you why Miss Packe left the Palace Crescent and I stayed on.”

“Anything about that place interests me,” the Inspector confessed.

“Miss Packe is in the position I was in a few months ago,” Roger went on. “She has nothing in the world except her small wage, she does not possess a single article of jewellery, and she has always occupied one of the cheapest rooms in the boarding house.”

The Inspector smiled slightly.

“I know all about the young lady,” he said.

“Well, Miss Packe has confided to me,” Roger continued, “that she woke up one night quite lately and found that some one was in her room. I may say that it was a room without a bolt and the key is apparently lost. She has asked for it several times without result. She has no electric light and her fingers shook so that she was a long time striking a match. When she did so, the room was empty, nothing disturbed, but she had heard the door softly closed. She tried to think lightly of the incident but a few nights later she woke to find a horrible smell in the room and she herself

struggling for breath. This time, too, she is perfectly convinced, although she was unable to procure any light, that some one left the room in a hurry, and Audrey—Miss Packe—was just able to get to the window and throw it open. The fumes, whatever they were, were dispelled by the fresh air but Miss Packe was faint and ill for some time.”

“Sounds queer,” the Inspector remarked. “Has she any enemies in the place?”

“Not one that she knows of.”

“Of course she complained in the morning?”

“She mentioned the matter to Mrs. Dewar, who was apparently unsympathetic. There is some work going on in the street with the gas mains and Mrs. Dewar insisted that this accounted for the odour.”

“What about the window?”

“I was coming to that. Miss Packe always sleeps with it open and distinctly remembers opening it that night. When she staggered to it, half choking, it was closed! The next morning Miss Packe and I talked things over and we decided that she had better accept her aunt’s invitation to go and stay with her whilst she was getting her trousseau ready. She left that afternoon.”

“And you stayed on?”

“I stayed on,” Roger admitted. “There seemed to be nothing definite to go on. Mrs. Dewar has been terribly worried about Colonel Dennett’s murder and the suspicions that seem to have been aroused about the place and I had promised that I would stay until our wedding.”

“Pretty thin story about Miss Packe, you know,” the Inspector remarked. “Robbery seems out of the question and you know of no enemies. She doesn’t possess any information, I suppose, about the place?”

“She knows nothing more than I do,” Roger said, “and everything that I have known and suspected I have already told you of.”

“Now that we have wandered away from the immediate subject for a moment, I will take you into my confidence with regard to another branch of it,” the Inspector said, tapping the papers on the table. “I have here a complete dossier of every one of Mrs. Dewar’s boarders. They are, without exception, occupying reputable positions in life. The younger men are at work in a respectable way. Mr. Luke lives the ordinary life of a man of pleasure. Mr. Padgham is a qualified solicitor who holds two minor offices and practises to a limited extent. Mr. Ollivant has been connected with some financial transactions which were certainly on the shady side but there is nothing criminal against him. Taken as a whole, there is not a suspicious incident connected with one of them.”

"I'm not surprised," Roger confessed. "A more ordinary, harmless, unadventurous lot of people I have never known."

"Well, to return to the first object of your visit," the Inspector said. "What do you want me to do about Miss Packe?"

"I know I am foolish about it," Roger admitted, "but I am uneasy about the party this afternoon. Couldn't you send some one to keep an eye on what goes on?"

"I don't see what could happen to the young lady," the Inspector reflected.

"Neither do I," Roger acknowledged. "But I do feel uneasy. I wondered whether it would not be possible to have some one there who could claim to be a friend of mine or Miss Packe's."

"What time is this function?" the Inspector asked.

"From seven o'clock until dinner time, which is at eight o'clock," Roger replied. "Afterwards, Miss Packe and I are supposed to be staying on to dine with Mr. Luke."

"You can keep a still tongue in your head, Mr. Ferrison, if I arrange something in this matter?"

"You try me!"

"I can send some one whose presence will not raise too much comment, I hope. You might be the only one who would guess. Keep your mouth shut."

"It's a promise," Roger declared. "I gather from what you say," he went on, after a moment's pause, "that there's no fresh light upon the Dennett murder?"

"None at all," the Inspector confided. "Of course, we may be all wrong," he continued, "in connecting it in any way with the residents of the Palace Crescent Boarding House. That path is not exactly a right of way but it is frequently used by other people. If any one from outside knew that Colonel Dennett was likely to return by the back door, they could have waited for him there, or they might have followed him from the club."

"The whole affair seems to be almost forgotten already," Roger said. "I haven't read a word about it in the papers now for a long time."

The Inspector smiled.

"That's all in our favour," he pointed out. "We like an unsolved case to drop out of the public interest. It helps the criminals to think that the search for them is at an end and hastens the time when they may think that it is safe to try and dispose of the booty. The search for a murderer is never at an end here, Mr. Ferrison, and with these jewels still to be brought upon the market, we never despair. Come and see me again, if you ever happen to stumble across any fresh information."

"Not likely to be anything fresh, I'm afraid," Roger meditated. "There was just

one small thing about that first night I have never mentioned, though. It probably is not of the slightest importance.”

“Go ahead,” the Inspector invited.

“The telephone rang in the hall, just as I was going upstairs to bed, and I answered it,” Roger recounted. “Some one wished to speak to Mrs. Dewar. I asked his name and he refused to give it. The man who was speaking—there is no doubt that it was a man’s voice—practically ordered me to fetch Mrs. Dewar at once or I should get into trouble. When he found that I was inclined to be obstinate—I didn’t even know where the woman slept—he told me that it was the sergeant of Bartels Street Police Station speaking.”

“The sergeant of where?”

“Bartels Street Police Station,” Roger repeated.

The Inspector stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“And then?” he asked.

“I went and found Mrs. Dewar, of course. She went to the telephone and whatever the message was, it seemed to upset her. That was the end of the affair, however, except that in a few minutes she herself came and hung Mr. Luke’s key up on that board.”

The Inspector indulged in another brief period of reflection.

“There was nothing, I suppose,” he enquired at last, “familiar about the voice?”

“The voice of the sergeant?”

“Yes.”

Roger hesitated.

“It’s queer that you should ask that,” he said. “For a single moment some intonation or word he used made me think of some one. Afterwards the voice seemed quite different.”

“Of whom did it make you think, Mr. Ferrison?”

Roger shook his head.

“I could not, in common fairness, answer you that question, Inspector, because it was entirely a momentary idea which passed away almost at once. I came to the conclusion before the conversation was finished that I had been mistaken.”

“Do you happen to know Bartels Street, Mr. Ferrison?”

“I think I have seen the name up somewhere,” was the dubious reply. “I don’t even remember where it is.”

“I’ll tell you something about it then. It contains three or four shops, and I think a couple of public houses. The one thing that it does not possess and never has is a police station.”

“Do you mean to say—”

“It has no police station,” the Inspector interrupted, “and therefore there is no such person as the sergeant of Bartels Street Police Station. That was a bluff to ensure your fetching Mrs. Dewar and possibly a code so that she should know who was telephoning. Now, perhaps you would not mind passing on your idea as to that voice to me. You will never be asked to substantiate it in any way. I shall accept it as you offer it—merely as an idea.”

“For a few seconds,” Roger confided, “I thought that it was the voice of Mr. Luke.”

“Whose key,” the Inspector reminded his visitor drily, “Mrs. Dewar hung on the row, at the conclusion of the conversation. One of his keys, perhaps, I ought to say. I expect he had several. Thank you, Mr. Ferrison. I must not keep you any longer,” he added, rising to his feet. “Have no fear about to-night. We shall have a very capable man amongst the guests.”

Roger took his leave. The Inspector spoke on the telephone to another department. The department rang up the Cambridge Theatre and found Miss Medlincott. It was all very pleasantly arranged.

One detected the experienced hand of a man about town such as Mr. Luke in the arrangements made for Mrs. Dewar’s cocktail party. At half-past six, the lounge was a bower of plants and flowers. At the farther end a certain space in which was a door leading into the service quarters had been curtained off. Behind this it was understood that the cocktail bar was situated and there were rumours that in connection with it some pleasant surprise might be expected. By seven o’clock nearly every one had returned from the City. There were one or two visitors—Miss Packe’s aunt, Jimmie Sark, Roger’s partner, and Major Lengton, who had brought Miss Medlincott up from the Cambridge Theatre. Flora Quayne looked as lovely as usual in a gown of white velvet, and the roses which she presented to Audrey were the most beautiful floral offerings ever seen in the establishment. Joseph, with a new white waistcoat and his scrubby grey hair carefully brushed in honour of the occasion, appeared to be the perfect type of the capable major-domo. The Misses Clewes, according to their habitude, remained somewhat apart from the others. Their knitting lay idle upon their laps. They were watching and listening with absorbed interest. Major Lengton temporarily attached himself to Miss Susannah.

“Quite a show for a boarding house, isn’t it?” was one of his first remarks.

“This is not an ordinary boarding house,” Miss Susannah replied.

“I should have thought it was a typical one,” he ventured. “Mrs. Dewar appears

to me the absolute personification of a lady of decayed circumstances who is receiving paying guests, and taken as a whole, with the exception of Mr. Luke, perhaps, the others are very much like the ordinary men and women one passes in the thoroughfares.”

“You are not much of a student of human nature, I should imagine, Major Lengton,” Miss Susannah remarked, knitting furiously.

“Well, I don’t know,” he replied, faintly amused. “I have met a good many different sorts of people in my life. Miss Flora Quayne is out of the way, of course, and perhaps Mr. Luke. The rest of them seem fairly typical.”

“Joseph, the butler? Mr. Bernascon? Mr. Barstowe?”

“Joseph is perhaps a little quaint in appearance,” he admitted, “but with those long legs of his, he gets about the room quicker than any waiter I ever saw. Just the sort of butler, I should have thought, for a boarding house where the standard appearance doesn’t matter.”

“And the others?”

“Types—quite reasonable types.”

“I should give up writing if I were you, Major Lengton,” Miss Susannah advised. “You have not what Jane Austen used to call the primary gift. You have no insight.”

“*Touché*,” he admitted. “Go on, though, Miss Susannah. You can’t imagine how you are interesting me! Didn’t I hear once that you declared the murderer of Colonel Dennett to be an inmate of this house?”

“And the only result,” she rejoined bitterly, “was that I very nearly got transferred to a lunatic asylum! I hold my tongue now—but I know.”

“Tell me some things,” he begged.

“Well, I’ll tell you this,” she confided. “If I had been Miss Packe, I would not have come to this party. If people only knew what fools they made of themselves to intelligent lookers-on!”

Lengton was genuinely startled.

“You’re saying a great deal, you know, Miss Clewes.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she answered. “No one listens to me.”

“I’m listening to you and I am impressed,” Lengton assured her. “What has Miss Packe to fear in coming to this party?”

“Murder,” Miss Clewes answered promptly. “She either knows something about this place that they are afraid she will divulge, or there is some one here who hates her. She was a fool to come. I tried to tell that nice fiancé of hers but he would not listen to me.”

Freda Medlincott, making a hurried entrance, charged down upon Lengton and

whispered in his ear. He rose to his feet and the two left the room together. Mr. Luke looked after them with a puzzled frown.

“Seems to me there is something mysterious going on,” he observed to Padgham, who was standing near.

“Some little surprise, I am told, which Miss Medlincott and her friend, Major Lengton, have arranged for the party,” the latter confided. “Very interesting, I’m sure, but I think it’s about time they opened the bar. What’s that man of yours doing, Luke?”

“I’ll go round and see,” was the uneasy rejoinder. “I told him to begin serving at seven o’clock.”

Mr. Luke turned towards the door. Suddenly, however, there was a rattle of hooks as the curtains were drawn apart. There was a murmur of staccato voices and exclamations throughout the room. A complete bar was revealed—adequately and very beautifully arranged. There were bottles of every description upon the improvised shelves. There were three cocktail shakers in a row and a huge silver bowl full of ice. Behind the counter stood Major Lengton in a bartender’s white coat with Freda Medlincott by his side. Lengton leaned a little forward, a smile parting his lips, half quizzical, half apologetic.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “I feel that Miss Medlincott and I must make a brief explanation before we get to business. We were exceedingly anxious to make some offering to our young friends, Miss Packe and Mr. Ferrison, and a little affair which has occurred within the last few hours has helped us to make our selection. You will have many healths to drink to-night, my friends—if I may call you so, after so brief an acquaintance—for I have Miss Medlincott’s permission to tell you that a few hours ago we followed the very good example of our two young friends. In other words, Miss Medlincott did me the honour to promise to become my wife.”

There was an increasing murmur of applause. Mrs. Dewar, who was standing in the background looking more like a waxen figure than ever, stretched out her hand for the support of a chair. Mr. Luke was benign but puzzled.

“Our little offering then,” Major Lengton continued, “almost came into life of its own accord. Miss Medlincott and I beg to be allowed to offer to our young friends who are in a similar position, and to all of you others, the hospitality of this roughly improvised, but we venture to hope, adequately endowed bar. I do not wish to brag but, both in India and at home, I have a reputation as a fabricator of cunning drinks, and in Miss Medlincott I know that I shall have a willing helper. We now propose to mix cocktails as fast as you can drink them. My own servant, whom I took the liberty of bringing with me, will hand round the champagne.”

The applause this time was more vociferous, but Mr. Luke's benign expression had passed.

"This is very charming of you, Major Lengton," he conceded, "but I have already engaged a bartender and told him to bring the things down. I understood that he had arrived an hour ago."

"I can explain that," Lengton said, pausing in his vigorous wielding of the gigantic cocktail shaker. "I intercepted him at the door, told him that the arrangements had been changed, and gave him what I think he considered a sufficient recompense. You see, Miss Medlincott had interviewed Mrs. Dewar earlier in the afternoon and had obtained her permission for us to stage this small surprise."

Mrs. Dewar's still voice, which seemed scarcely more than a whisper and yet was heard in every corner of the room, cut through the temporary silence.

"I had no idea," she confided, "that the surprise was to be of this description. I thought that Miss Medlincott and Major Lengton were proposing to give us some slight entertainment."

"If we blundered in at all," Lengton said cheerfully, "we offer to every one our most profound apologies. I promise you, however, that ours are going to be the best cocktails in London. What about that Martini, Mr. Padgham? What about it, Mr. Ollivant?"

"Best I ever tasted in my life," came almost in unison from the two men.

"Champagne all right, Mrs. Padgham?"

"Delicious," was the enthusiastic reply. "I sha'n't drink too much of it, though, Major Lengton, for I am determined to have one of those wonderful cocktails before I go in to dinner."

Lengton certainly did his best to atone for any inconvenience which the joint intervention of Miss Medlincott and himself might have occasioned. From his place behind the bar, with the assistance of his companion, he served cocktails of enormous potency with the skill of one who had made it his life's work, proposed the health of the young people in a witty and pleasant speech and apologised with all humility to Mr. Luke for the disturbance of his arrangements. The latter, in a momentary silence, which was with difficulty obtained, proposed the health of Miss Medlincott—one of their most charming and popular boarders—and Major Lengton whom, during the brief period of their acquaintance, every one had learnt to like and respect. There was more applause, there were many more cocktails. By the time dinner was announced, every one was happy, not to say uproarious. Lengton and his helper lingered behind to close the bar. The thin stream of departing guests were well out of hearing.

“Do you think it was a mare’s nest, after all?” Freda asked. “Neither Mrs. Dewar nor Mr. Luke seemed very much upset.”

He shook his head gravely. He had made a final cocktail for themselves which they were slowly sipping.

“I’m afraid it was no mare’s nest,” he said seriously. “The man who had been engaged to serve the drinks was a Malayan of the worst type. He may have been clever enough at his job, but I only had to say half-a-dozen words to him and he was off. I knew him out in Singapore.”

Freda set down her empty glass, gripped her companion’s arm and led him towards the dining room.

“I wish I understood what it was all about,” she complained.

“You probably will before long,” he told her ominously.

CHAPTER XXX

It was a very cheerful and memorable feast to which the boarders of Palace Crescent sat down that night. Major Lengton and Freda sat side by side at Mrs. Dewar's table and neither Mrs. Dewar nor Mr. Luke appeared to bear the former any ill will for his interference in the evening's arrangements. Lengton, indeed, even fancied that he sensed something almost like gratitude in Mrs. Dewar's attitude towards him on those rare occasions when she either spoke or glanced in his direction.

"I don't think that my little man could have mixed a better Martini than you gave us to-night, Major," Mr. Luke said across the table.

"I have never tasted a better Side Car than yours," Freda confided.

"Very good of you both," Lengton acknowledged. "I can assure you that I have many other accomplishments besides the mixing of cocktails," he went on, smiling at his companion. "My sister always says that I am an exceedingly useful person in the house. . . . By the way, how pretty Miss Packe is looking to-night," he added, lowering his voice and glancing down the table.

"I never saw her looking so well," Freda declared. "Happiness makes a lot of difference, of course. She was just getting that tired, worn-out expression that young girls who are working purposelessly seem to develop. Almost a pity that she has to sit opposite Flora Quayne."

"Miss Quayne has peculiarities," he remarked. "To-night she looks like a white flame."

"The latest gossip is," Freda confided, "that she is hopelessly in love with Roger Ferrison. I cannot think why. She is so accomplished and he seems to me to be rather a stupid young man."

"He may be short of the social graces but I don't think he's stupid," Lengton said. "By-the-by, have you given in your notice yet?"

"Not yet. I was waiting until after the first night. I think we're sure to have a run, though. Even Ross, and he is the most critical producer I ever worked with, seems more or less satisfied."

"Still like your part?"

"I love it. I should like one more song, perhaps. Still, they've done me pretty well. What are you doing after this?"

"Anything you like. I hear they are not likely to dance here because of Miss

Quayne, but we might look in at the Embassy for half an hour. It's rather too wonderful an evening to cut short, you know," he added, in a lower tone.

She touched his hand fondly.

"You're sure you won't go away and think about it and repent?"

He glanced around the room.

"What a pity," he regretted, "that there is no immediate chance of answering such a question in the manner it deserves!"

"Liking the party, dear?" Roger Ferrison whispered to his neighbour.

"Adoring it," she answered. "Isn't it amusing, too, about Miss Medlincott and Major Lengton?"

He nodded.

"Nothing like following a good example. By-the-by," he added, "I'm not quite sure that Mr. Luke cared about having his cocktail arrangements interfered with."

"I had the same idea," Audrey assented. "He took it very well, though. Fancy a double engagement like this, Roger! I don't suppose such a thing has ever happened before at Palace Crescent."

Flora Quayne leaned across the table.

"Did you find the cocktails as good as mine, Mr. Ferrison?" she asked.

"I thought they were a little drier," answered that literal young man.

"I'm getting to quite like that fellow Lengton, after all," Tom Padgham confided, serving himself and his wife to champagne out of the bottle which Joseph had just brought.

"I have always liked him," Mrs. Padgham sighed. "I wish he had taken a little more notice of me."

"Can't think why he came here, all the same," her husband continued. "Seemed a bit off his beat. I suppose it was the Medlincott girl all the time."

"Looks like it," his wife agreed. "I never dreamt that he was in earnest about her."

"Put it across us to-night, didn't he?" her husband reflected.

He drank his champagne slowly.

"Annabel," he remarked, "you're pretty quick at noticing things. I was speaking to Luke just now. Do you see any change in him?"

"Sometimes I fancy that he's getting to look anxious," she admitted.

"I never saw him look like this before," Padgham continued. "I think that's the reason why we have always been so confident. We have run big risks, Annabel, but

we have always come out on top. Somehow, I've got an idea that he's brooding over something—either the Burlington Gardens show or Dennett. As you know, we never see much of one another, any of us, outside here. It was Luke's idea that we keep apart, but Maurice Bernascon came in to see me, when I was doing my stunt at the office this morning, and he can't get it out of his head that he's being shadowed. He's not a nervous fellow, Maurice, you know."

"If you have any suspicion of that sort, Tom," his wife begged earnestly, "why not call a meeting and wind up? Even without the Dennett stuff, you worked it out that there was nearly a hundred thousand apiece."

"Take a bit of collecting," he mused. "It's all over the world."

"I'm tired of this," Mrs. Padgham went on. "Of course, I know we're only marking time here, but we've done enough of it. This country is too small, Tom. However stupid the police are, we can't keep them guessing all the time."

"I'll give Luke a hint," he promised.

Ollivant finished the third whisky and soda which he had ordered during the course of dinner.

"Lashwood," he confided, "I'm getting fed up."

"Don't see why you should," was the somewhat dubious reply. "The old man's let you in on the Burlington Gardens show. I'm the one who's got something to grumble at."

"You've not done any work," Ollivant reminded him. "I did get the plan of the premises, by keeping on going in about that company business. Funny part of it is," he went on reflectively, "I really got them going on that. We had even discussed the amount of the capital and how the shares should be issued. I would have made more on that than my share of the swag without the risk!"

"You would have faked it somehow so that it was a swindle," Lashwood observed. "Might have got you five years, all right."

"The old man's a cool hand," Ollivant said admiringly. "If he got the touch on the shoulder, it would be a lifer for him—perhaps worse, yet there he goes on day after day, with his golf and his flying and his contract bridge at the club and his racing. He can't have a nerve in his body."

Lashwood, who was drinking a thin claret, made a wry face as he set his glass down empty.

"Good thing for us he hasn't! Still, what can a man have more? Every day he does the thing he likes best in life, he eats and drinks of the best, smokes the finest cigars, amuses himself just how he pleases. Of course he hasn't any nerves."

“He’s getting older,” Ollivant meditated. “His face seems to me to have fallen in under the cheek bones lately.”

“Maybe,” Lashwood assented. “It’s not through worrying, anyway.”

At the long table every one remained gay enough except the spectral figure who presided. Mr. Luke had provided champagne and the champagne of Mr. Luke’s choosing was always the best.

“I don’t know why,” he said, “we seem to be treating this as a joyous celebration. Personally, I dislike exceedingly departures from the Palace Crescent. I am not a sentimentalist but I hate empty places.”

“Others will soon fill them,” Audrey reminded him.

“I’m not sure,” he rejoined, with a little bow, “whether that will not be worse.”

“A boarding house is such a restless sort of place,” Flora Quayne observed. “No one settles down. Every one is always hoping for a change. I’m the only one who stays on and on and on. I suppose that’s because life is very much the same for me, anyway.”

“I wonder you don’t travel more,” Audrey suggested.

“Travelling is very inconvenient for a lame person,” the other sighed. “Then I’m so terrified that when I am away in Florence or some place like that, I might get a return of my pains. No one but the London doctors can do me any good. I nearly died in agony in Monte Carlo a few years ago. Here I am generally just as well as you others. The only thing is that I am lonely.”

“Ever try the cure at Beuillat?” Reginald Barstowe enquired.

“I never heard of the place.”

“A chap I know went there in a pretty hopeless state,” the young man went on. “He came back without his crutches. Used to have to lie in mud half the time. It cured him, anyway.”

“I could be happy enough here, without lying in mud, if Fate was kinder to me in other ways,” she murmured.

The Misses Clewes had been offered and declined a small bottle of champagne. Instead they finished up a bottle of claret which had been opened for three days.

“You are not well, Susannah,” her sister observed. “You passed the whole of the last course, although you know that the rissoles here are always good. You passed them by and you didn’t knit. That is unusual.”

“There are unusual thoughts in my mind to-night, Amelia,” was the portentous reply. “I am trying to come to a decision. There is a man here whom I trust. It is a

good deal to say of this place. He is one of ourselves.”

“Do you mean Major Lengton?”

“I mean Major Lengton,” Susannah agreed. “I wish I had met a man like that forty years ago. All these dreary days and years through which we have plodded might have seemed different.”

“Repining is useless,” Amelia declared. “There’s no human being who would not have preferred to live in the sunshine. Fate for us decreed the shadows.”

“I have an idea about Major Lengton,” Susannah went on, looking across the room. “I think that he is interested in the life here. I don’t know why or how, but I believe that he is interested, that it is not only for Freda Medlincott’s sake he comes. I have refused the others because they didn’t believe in me. I think that to-night, if he approaches me again, I shall speak.”

“Will it be safe, Susannah?”

“Our lives would not be safe five minutes,” Susannah declared, “if they knew what I saw—but they don’t. They think that I am an old woman who sees visions. That may be true sometimes but I also saw Colonel Dennett die.”

Amelia, who had finished her rissole, took up her knitting.

“It will be some time before we are served with the blancmange,” she said. “We were nearly first with the rissoles, so we shall be last with the blancmange. Make up your mind, Susannah.”

“It is made up. If they had let me speak in the Coroner’s Court before all those lawyers and gentlemen, it would have been better. They refused to hear me, though. Now I shall not go to the law. I shall tell Major Lengton.”

“When?” Amelia asked.

“I shall tell him to-night.”

CHAPTER XXXI

Mr. Luke, who at odd times was an inspired raconteur, was the centre of an animated group in the lounge after dinner listening with rapt interest to some of the stories of his early days in the Dutch East Indies and even further east. Joseph, relieving him of his empty coffee cup, had an announcement to make.

“Mrs. Dewar would be very much obliged, sir, if you could spare her a minute in her room.”

“Tell Mrs. Dewar I will be there immediately,” was her star boarder’s prompt acquiescence.

“You won’t desert us altogether, will you?” Maurice Bernascon begged.

“I will be back directly,” Luke assured him. “You should get Major Lengton to tell you a few stories. I should like to hear something of his Indian experiences myself, when I return.”

“Tell us about the big-game shooting, sir,” Bernascon suggested. “I see that your name appears once or twice in Colonel Francis’ book.”

“I will try and think up a few stories for you,” Lengton promised good-naturedly. “Just a moment, though, I believe Miss Clewes wants to speak to me.”

The Misses Clewes were seated in their usual retired corner. Amelia was knitting busily. Susannah had paused for a moment to send her little signal across to Lengton. She moved into a corner of the lounge as he approached. . . .

“Major Lengton,” she invited, “would you kindly sit between my sister and myself. I have something to say to you. Your hearing is good, I hope?”

“Excellent, I believe,” Lengton replied, seating himself.

“I ask the question,” Miss Susannah explained, “because, although the room is crowded and conversation is noisy, I should not wish a syllable of what I have to say to be overheard. I shall therefore not raise my voice as I attempted to in the Coroner’s Court.”

“I am a great admirer of a low voice,” Lengton assured her. “I shall hear every word you say, Miss Susannah.”

“I wish to preface my disclosure, Major Lengton,” she began, “with one word of personal explanation. Every one has made a great mystery of my disappearance for eighteen hours before the inquest. I disappeared because I wished for no interference from any of the guilty members of this establishment. It was quite simple. I emptied my pockets and small reticule of every scrap of paper which might lead to

identification. I put into my pocket plenty of money, I walked downstairs and out of the front door and round the corner to the hospital.”

She paused for a moment in her narration. She kept her eyes fixed upon her knitting but Lengton had the idea that there was a faint smile at the corners of her lips. She seemed to be enjoying this explanation of her brief adventure.

“I asked to see the matron,” she went on. “I explained that I felt faint and that I had lost my memory. I could not remember where I lived. I asked for a room for the night and a medical attendant to visit me. They were most courteous and did as I asked. In the morning I dressed and sat in my room, took my breakfast as usual and asked for a telephone directory. I explained to the nurse in attendance that I thought perhaps I might catch sight of a name or an address which would enable me to remember my identity. At an hour before the time fixed for the coroner’s inquest, I remembered that I was Miss Susannah Clewes and that I had an important engagement! I paid my bill, I shook hands with the matron, I gave a guinea to the medical attendant and I thanked them all for their kindly care. I then ordered a taxicab and was driven to the court. There was nothing, you see, Major Lengton, very mysterious about my disappearance.”

“It was a jolly well-thought-out scheme,” Lengton declared.

Miss Susannah bowed slightly, as though accepting a compliment.

“I have a fancy now, Major Lengton,” she confided, “to tell you what the coroner refused to let me disclose at the inquest on poor Colonel Dennett.”

Despite his excellent self control and perfect nerves, Lengton was conscious of a certain acceleration of his pulses. From the first he and the Inspector had differed about Miss Clewes.

“I announced then,” Miss Susannah continued, taking up her knitting and commencing to work, “that I was able to throw a certain light upon the murder. The Inspector visited me the next morning to take what he called a statement. I was prepared to give it and commenced my story. In the middle of it, he interrupted me very rudely and insisted upon examining my room. Having done so, he came to the quite obvious conclusion that from no part of it could I see the spot in the byway where Colonel Dennett’s body was found. He was quite correct. He decided, therefore, that my evidence was valueless. He thought that I was simply a weak-headed, imaginative old spinster because I was unable to tell him what he wanted to know in his own way. He was so right in all his—shall I call them geographical?—conclusions but was so wrong in his premises.”

There was a moment’s silence. Both women were now knitting busily. There was nothing whatever in Miss Susannah’s expression to denote anything except the most

ordinary conversation.

“The Inspector, however, has never seen far enough,” she went on. “The truth is that the murder was not committed in the place where Colonel Dennett’s body was found. The murder was committed just outside the back door, the scullery door perhaps, I should say, which opens on to the strip of garden.”

Lengton smothered the exclamation which rose to his lips.

“Don’t make this longer than you can help,” he begged. “We might be interrupted. Mr. Padgham keeps looking towards us.”

“I shall finish what I have to say,” she asserted equably. “Nothing will stop me, not even the presence of the others. I was looking out of my window before retiring for the night—it was about a quarter past two and very dark. My sister and I are accustomed from our country lives to sleep with the windows wide open and from where I was standing I could hear the key turned in the door which leads from the by-lane into what was once the garden. The door was unlocked and locked. I heard a footstep, I could see nothing until Colonel Dennett—for it was he who had entered—emerged into a broad ray of light thrown from the small electric standard at the corner. You can test the accuracy of what I say any evening.”

“Don’t forget to make two stitches, Susannah,” her sister said, leaning over. “You are nearing the end of the row.”

“The matter is in my mind,” Susannah assured her. “Colonel Dennett then emerged, as I was explaining, into the light and knocked softly at the scullery door. There was some delay before it was answered. He knocked again—three times, I believe, altogether. Then the door was opened and what followed happened very quickly. I saw a hand and wrist extended, clasp a revolver. There was a spit of fire and a smothered report. Colonel Dennett crumpled up. I heard no cry of any sort. It seemed as though he were killed dead.”

“And then?” Lengton muttered under his breath.

“I am a person with considerable self-control,” Susannah continued, “but I was trembling so much that it was impossible for me to call out. There was a very brief delay, then Joseph, in his shirt and trousers appeared. He leaned over Colonel Dennett, emptied his pockets, and whatever he found he took into the back kitchen. Then he came out. He lifted Colonel Dennett up as though he had been a child, carried him down to the door, which he unlocked with the key the Colonel had been carrying, laid him down, I suppose, in the place where the body was found, came back, locked the door and returned into the scullery.”

“Then it was Joseph who shot Colonel Dennett?” Lengton exclaimed.

Susannah shook her head.

“Oh, no,” she said, “it was not Joseph’s hand that held the revolver and fired the shot—not Joseph’s at all. The fingers were long and skinny.”

“Whose were they?” Lengton asked.

“They were the fingers of Mrs. Dewar,” Susannah declared firmly. “You see, Amelia,” she went on, leaning forward, “I have not forgotten. I have made three—I think it needed three.”

Mr. Luke was a grimmer-looking man when he entered Mrs. Dewar’s sitting room. Mrs. Dewar was there seated at her desk. Flora Quayne was lounging in the armchair. The latter welcomed him with a marvellous smile.

“I thought I had better send for you,” Mrs. Dewar said calmly. “Flora is disgusted with us all. She is disgusted with me, who pour out my life, whose heart and soul are dead with profitless labour, who have made myself one of hell’s own children to atone for a minute’s madness. Nothing that I have done counts with Flora. Neither does the fact that she too may suffer. It is her intention, she says, to disclose to the Inspector who still haunts this house the whole truth concerning the murder of Dennett and concerning those other things of which we have never spoken.”

Luke looked behind at the door to be sure that it was firmly closed. He felt for the key but the key was not there.

“How have we offended Miss Flora?” he asked quietly.

“I demanded one thing,” Flora replied. “My mother there promised it. With that one thing granted, I should have been your slave. The promise has been broken. I shall do what I have threatened.”

“No, I do not think you will do that,” Luke said. “Words are easy enough, but even those fairy lips of yours, dear Flora, would soon be closed forever if you attempted it. This is a house of recklessness, perhaps, but I have never believed in unnecessary violence or unnecessary caution. Let’s all keep friends and abandon threats. What is this thing your mother has failed to do?”

“I want Roger Ferrison,” Flora explained, with the strange flame of passion once more burning in her eyes. “That is why I required the death of Audrey Packe.”

“He is a stupid young man, with what his stupid class call principles,” Mr. Luke regretted. “Otherwise the matter would have been very easy. You must be reasonable, though, young lady. Your mother has made two attempts to help you. She borrowed that wonderful machine of mine with its cells of compressed and poisonous gas, and given another few minutes, she would have kept her promise. Unfortunately the young woman woke up, got a whiff or two of the gas, became

scared and left. We still persevered. I sought out my old friend Sandah Poor—the most expert poisoner who ever came from Asia. This time the thing was a certainty and no chemist in this world would ever have been able to declare that the young woman's death was due to anything but heart failure. You know what happened. That clumsy fellow Lengton butted in and upset everything.”

“Was he a clumsy fellow?” Mrs. Dewar interrupted. A strange look flashed in Luke's eyes. For a single second his whole expression was changed. His head was like the head of a ferocious animal.

“I wish to God I knew,” he muttered.

“Let us finish with this matter once and for all,” Mrs. Dewar intervened, and the words which fell from her lips were like drops of ice. “I will confess my sins of omission. I promised my daughter that I would kill the girl who she said stood in the way of her happiness.”

“Yes, you promised,” Flora gibed. “You have failed.”

“I borrowed that wonderful machine of Mr. Luke's which, somehow or other, he has neglected to patent, and I made my way into the girl's room. There was murder in my heart. I meant to keep my promise. Then I stood over the bedside for a moment. She is just your age, Flora. She is not beautiful like you but she is about your age. I thought of you and I faltered. There, you see, you have my confession. Twice I entered the room with the will to keep my promise and twice I failed. I make no excuses. Her life was at my mercy. I could not take it.”

“You broke your word,” Flora pronounced.

“I broke my word,” Mrs. Dewar assented. “Then, when I sat brooding over the coming of this horrible bartender, with his phial of death, Major Lengton came to me. I knew that if I accepted his suggestion, the girl's life was spared. I accepted it. Now you know the truth, Flora.”

The girl was on the point of speech but Mr. Luke broke in. His voice was under perfect control. He spoke in an even lower key than usual, but there was a light in his eyes like the gleam of polished steel.

“Listen, Flora Quayne,” he said, “you have lived for twelve years in all the luxury money could buy. Your mother has been your abject slave. Your father has been her helper. They may be said to have given their lives for you.”

Flora yawned slightly.

“No heroics, Mr. Luke, please,” she begged. “That sort of thing does not come well from you. My mother has told me of her failure. If she had spoken to me of successes, you would have been safe forever.”

“Listen, young woman,” was Mr. Luke's stern rejoinder. “We have no time now

to deal with this girl. Every energy we possess must be devoted to one thing and one thing only—completing the plans for our departure. I can feel danger in the air. I have felt it for some time. Remember that you must go down with the rest of us, if anything happens. It is in your bedroom that the private door was built. Underneath your bed is the secret hiding place where a few little articles we have had to use at times are to be found. You are one of the gang, in plain words, and you take your place with the rest of us. You are beautiful enough to turn any man's head, even the head of a dolt like Ferrison. Get him the usual way."

"Haven't I tried!" she moaned.

"Then you will never get him at all," Luke declared bluntly. "We have finished operations. The book is closed. Do you hear? In a few days' time, the Palace Crescent will be empty. Your mother is making plans for you, I don't know what they are, but you are to be the injured heroine, I know. And all her share of what's coming to her is in banks under your name. You have come through life on the soft side, for all that little accident, and you will be a rich woman until you die. There are men enough in the world. Help yourself to them. But, if you open those pretty lips of yours to say a word that hinders our departure, yours will be the first funeral."

There was a smothered moan from Mrs. Dewar.

"Flora," she implored, "listen to him. He means it. I could not save you. Everything he has said he will do in life he has done. He always will. He succeeds whilst others fail."

Flora snapped open her vanity case, looked at herself, touched up her lips for a moment and lit a cigarette.

"If you have to lose him for a time, you will get him in the end," Mr. Luke observed. "His sort of fidelity is only another sort of stupidity. It passes."

Flora held out her hand—a very familiar gesture. Mr. Luke, as he had done so many times in the past, assisted her to rise. She made her way to the door.

"You are very stupid people, all of you, not to give me what I want," she said. "However—at what hotel did you say in Monte Carlo my rooms were taken?"

"The Hôtel de Paris," Mrs. Dewar replied, and for once there was expression in her tone, an undertone of joy. "It is the only hotel. Your places are booked on the Blue Train to-morrow—yours and Marie's. You have your cheque books and I will send you a list of your balances. You have plenty of money. And, listen to this last word. If trouble should come to us, you need have no fear. The secret hiding place behind your bed—I have seen to that. The clothes our men wore at night, the weapons, all the kit which came to us from New York have gone. They are where no one will ever find them. As for your door, it was built when you were unable to

climb the stairs. Whatever happens, Flora, you are safe.”

Mrs. Dewar half rose to her feet. Her hands, gripping the top of the desk, seemed strangely unnatural. They were trembling. It was her eyes, however, that showed the greatest change. They called. Flora looked back at her and laughed mockingly.

“You broke your promise!” were her farewell words.

CHAPTER XXXII

“To-morrow I go away for a change,” Flora Quayne announced, enthroned upon her couch, a glass of champagne in one hand, a *pâté de foie gras* sandwich in the other. “That is why I begged all of you nice people to come in and say good night before you went upstairs. So many of you have been kind to me and when one is afflicted as I am one needs kindness.”

“You make a great deal too much of your affliction, Miss Quayne,” Mrs. Padgham declared.

“A great deal too much,” Miss Susannah Clewes insisted. “Many people in history, and even amongst us moderns, would give their souls as well as their bodies for a face as beautiful as yours.”

There was a short startled silence. No one expected such a speech from Miss Susannah. Flora snapped open her vanity case and looked at herself. Even she seemed momentarily unnerved.

“If I am so beautiful,” she murmured, “I don’t know why it is I fail to obtain what I want in life. Can you tell me why it is, my dear Mr. Ferrison?”

Roger, who at her earnest request had carried her in from the lounge and was seated close to the couch, shook his head.

“It seems to me you have everything in life one needs,” he answered. “There are a great many people who love you. You have the money to surround yourself with beautiful things. Every one admires you. You are off to-morrow, I hear, to the gayest little corner of Europe. What more could you want?”

“I go alone,” she said. “I take with me a maid who will be making eyes at the first good-looking stranger she sees, to whom I am nothing but a doll who provides her with the clothes she wears and the food she eats. John,” she added, calling to the extra waiter whom Mr. Luke had imported for the evening, “open some more champagne. Bring in some more sandwiches. Knock at the door of Mrs. Dewar’s sitting room and beg her to come and bring Mr. Luke. This is my good-bye party, remember, all of you. Soon, if you like, I will play to you and you shall dance. Don’t look so disapproving, Major Lengton. Perhaps I shall have a very joyful surprise for you before you go.”

“I was only thinking,” Lengton reminded her gravely, “that if you really propose to go away by the Blue Train to-morrow morning, you ought to get rid of us all and go to bed.”

“Bed,” she repeated scornfully. “When I go to bed, I never sleep. Why should I go to bed? Ah, here comes Mr. Luke and—my mother.”

Mrs. Dewar stopped suddenly like a figure turned to stone. There was an exclamation, a staccato-like gasp of surprise and incredulity. Flora looked round as though enjoying it all. She glanced once more into her mirror and handled her lipstick.

“I forgot I had not told you all yet,” she continued. “You are going to be so surprised to-night—some of you. Mrs. Dewar is indeed my mother. We agreed to keep it secret a long time ago. You see, she used to drink, and the reason I am a cripple like this is because she let me fall downstairs when I was quite young. She was very careless—or I suppose it was nothing to do with her being careless—she was drunk.”

No one seemed to find breath or to possess in those few moments the capacity for speech. Flora shut her case with a snap and went on.

“Since that day she has played the penitent. She has never touched wine or spirits. She has spent all the savings of this boarding house upon surrounding me with luxury. Not much good. I have not really enjoyed it and as for the boarding house, most of you here know what it is. It is a den of thieves.”

Mr. Luke leaned over and helped himself to a glass of champagne. The astonished manservant had remained rooted to the spot with the tray still in his hand.

“I suppose I need not tell you all,” Mr. Luke apologised, “what has happened. The tragedy with which Miss Quayne has been threatened all her life has occurred. She has lost her reason.”

Flora’s lips curled for a moment. She raised her glass and laughed across the room.

“Wonderful, Mr. Luke!”

He smiled.

“Arch villain of the piece! Star boarder of Palace Crescent! What a brain! What a pity the Inspector is not here. He was such a stupid man or I should have asked him to join us. I like people with brains. You, dear Roger,” she went on, leaning on one side and stroking his hand, “are the only stupid man I ever loved and, my God, how I have loved you! It is only now when, thanks to Mr. Luke’s friend, Sandah Poor, life is ebbing away, that I realise how empty a thing love is. For weeks I have been torn with passion. Even now—well, that doesn’t matter. I suppose you good people know—you, Mr. Luke, the arch criminal, you, my very wicked mother, you, Mr. Padgham, Mr. Barstowe, Mr. Bernascon and you minor puppets—Mr. Ollivant and Mr. Lashwood—I suppose you realise that the end has come. Perhaps not yet,

you think? Perhaps a little bluster may carry things off. Major Lengton, you are a golfer, I believe?"

Mr. Luke whispered in the ear of the waiter.

"Doctor Knowles," he said, in his usual precise tone. "Number Seven, I think it is—lower down the street. Ask him to come at once."

The man hurried out. Flora only smiled.

"The doctor," she murmured. "What a brilliant idea! What a wonderful idea a madhouse would be for me, wouldn't it? Too late in the day, though. Most of the things we desire in life come too late. Didn't you hear my question, Major Lengton?"

"It seemed to me—irrelevant," Lengton remarked.

"Not at all," she replied. "Lift up that rug over the easy-chair. No, don't look at me as though I were a lunatic. Do as I say. It will be worth while."

Lengton obeyed. Underneath was a set of beautifully polished golf clubs. Painted upon the bag were the initials "P. J. L." Most of the people in the room by this time were quite sure that Flora was out of her senses. Only, for the first time, Mr. Luke lost his sympathetic poise. He looked at the bag of golf clubs and then he looked at Flora. His hand stole into his pocket. Flora mocked him.

"Too late," she murmured. "This afternoon I sent my chauffeur down to Sunningdale with a note signed by you. Your golf clubs were to be brought back at once. You were going to Le Touquet for the week-end! You played the other day with Major Lengton, didn't you? Poor man, he little knew how happy he could have made his friend the Inspector if he could have told him all the contents of that bag! You see, about an inch from the bottom there is stitched a new leather band. The clubs do not reach to the bottom of that band. In the cavity you will find the jewels for which a great Indian potentate has agreed to pay Mr. Luke three hundred thousand pounds. I believe they are worth that."

Miss Susannah Clewes looked up from her knitting.

"All the same," she said impressively, "although Mr. Luke may have the jewels, it was not he who shot Colonel Dennett."

Mr. Luke made his effort but he made it a few seconds too late. He slipped out of the room whilst every one was crowding round the slit in the false bottom of the golf bag through which Lengton was drawing the rubies. He escaped, however, only to find himself face to face with Inspector Rudlett, who had received his summons by telephone an hour before. The passage was very narrow and there were two tall policemen behind. The Inspector produced a warrant. Mr. Luke shrugged his shoulders.

“There is just one question I should like to ask, Inspector,” he said, as he held out his hands. “That fellow Lengton I played golf with at Sunningdale the other day—he’s in the room there now—is he one of your crowd?”

“One of the new toffs, sir,” the Inspector replied, as he briskly completed his task with the handcuffs and withdrew a small revolver from his prisoner’s pocket. “Working quite well, some of them.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

Her bathing dress and a certain joyous grace of carriage, which only happiness can develop, had revealed to Roger Ferrison and to such of the world who dwelt in the old-fashioned village of Porletto a charm in his young wife which would certainly never have blossomed out behind the counter of Mallory's or under the roof of Palace Crescent. The tan upon his own cheeks, too, his broadened shoulders, an increased air of confidence which marches with prosperity, had made him a fitting mate even for an unexpectedly discovered beauty. They were both exceedingly pleased with each other. They were both very much in love.

"If I have an ungratified wish in the world," Audrey murmured, listening more to the roll of the sea in the bay below them than to her own words, "it is to know the end of all that trouble at Palace Crescent. Do you ever think of the place, Roger?"

"Every time I smell mutton curry down in our little shack," he answered.

She rolled over nearer to him on the glistening sands.

"Don't be silly, Roger," she begged. "I mean seriously."

He stretched out his hand towards a bundle of newspapers.

"Well," he said, "the month of silence we agreed upon, respecting the affairs of the Palace Crescent Boarding House, is up to-day. The trial finished on Wednesday. I can tell you everything you want to know."

"Tell me about Mrs. Dewar."

"In a moment," he promised. "First of all, I should like to tell you about that telephone call on the night of the murder."

"You mean the one from the Bartels Street Police Station?" she asked.

"I mean the call from some one who announced himself as the sergeant of Bartels Street Police Station," Roger replied. "I didn't mean to keep that to myself, but for some reason or other I never mentioned it to the Inspector until just before the final *débâcle*."

"Was it of any importance?"

"Judge for yourself," Roger answered. "There is no police station in Bartels Street. The man who spoke was no police sergeant but Mr. Luke, and putting together some bits of the evidence, I am perfectly certain of one thing—Luke was to have managed the killing of Dennett himself, if Dennett came round to the front door, but in case he chose to enter by the back, then Joseph was to have tackled it. Joseph had been given a revolver a few days before and had been told what would

be expected of him, but Mrs. Dewar evidently knew there was a weak streak in the man, so she came down to the scullery herself. I can figure them both there with the back door open when Dennett came up that cinder path. Joseph funk'd it—crumpled up, I should think. Mrs. Dewar took the revolver from him and committed the murder.”

“Mrs. Dewar!” Audrey gasped. “Then what about Miss Clewes’ evidence?”

“Miss Clewes’ evidence was perfectly all right,” Roger pointed out, “but you can’t hang a woman, it seems, when you only see her hand. Mrs. Dewar was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment in the second division. In another part of the paper it says that she will spend most of them in hospital.”

“And Mr. Luke?”

“They seemed to have had the devil’s own job in getting at him,” Roger replied. “However, he was for it all right in the end. Penal servitude for twenty years.”

“And all the rest of them?”

“Well, Padgham got five years, Bernascon three and Reggie Barstowe three. Joseph, who by-the-by was Mrs. Dewar’s husband, very nearly got off altogether, but they roped him in as an accessory and he got two years. Even the judge admitted that the evidence in some cases was most unconvincing. Very little stolen property, except the Rajah’s rubies, was discovered. Lengton got a pat on the back. Wonderful work he put in, according to the judge. He is supposed to have completely justified this new experiment of drafting men of a different social order into the police. Seems to me that he was infernally lucky, though.”

“None of the others were charged, then?”

“Not one,” Roger agreed. “There was really nothing against Ollivant or Lashwood. They were only hangers-on, after all. The more I think of it,” he went on, “the cleverer Luke’s scheme really seems to me. A boarding house like Palace Crescent is about the last place in the world where one would have thought of looking for a dangerous band of criminals. Every one of them had his regular job and stuck at it. Their night lives were cut off as clean as possible from their day-by-day jobs. I have read the whole case,” Roger continued, “and I can quite see where the police found it so difficult. They have never even now discovered a trace of the clothes these men wore when they went out at night—rubber shoes and so on. They were all destroyed or made away with, somehow or other. Yet the Inspector, when he gave his evidence, admitted under cross-examination that there had been nine robberies with violence within the last three years where the criminals had not been caught or the booty found. He was asked for an estimate of the value of the missing property and he thought it must be over five hundred thousand pounds. Obviously he

believed it was the Palace Crescent lot who were responsible but they had not left a loose thread anywhere.”

“Mr. Luke was terribly clever,” Audrey reflected.

Roger stretched out his hand for the newspaper.

“Here’s what the Counsel for the Prosecution said:—

The world of to-day is face to face with a serious crisis in its social life. Crime has become more inspired. The criminal is an utterly different type of man, moving unsuspected in our midst, often with a legitimate occupation of his own, bearing neither in his face, his characteristics or in his daily life any trace whatever of his secret preoccupation. The science of detection, on the other hand, has reached almost its limits. In any case the police themselves, in their methods, opportunities and insight, have made not the slightest progress in comparison with their natural enemies.

“The fact is,” Roger concluded, folding up the paper, “any man of to-day may be a criminal. The modern type is not in the least like Bill Sykes or Charles Peace. He looks like a hard-worked lawyer or—Mr. Luke. I expect that’s what has really brought the type of man like Lengton into the game.”

“Did Flora Quayne die?” Audrey asked.

Roger picked up an illustrated paper and turned to the fashionable news.

“Not she,” he answered. “That was just a bluff of hers about having taken Sandah Poor’s poison. She was much too worldly a little lady. Listen.

Amongst those who were entertaining at the Gala Dinner at the Hôtel de Paris last Sunday was Miss Flora Quayne and a small party of friends. Le Mercier, the great French artist, has persuaded Miss Quayne to let him paint her portrait and every one who has seen the work agrees that when exhibited it will be one of the striking features of the salon.

“That settles one thing, at any rate,” Audrey declared, stretching out her hand to his. “Wherever we finish our honeymoon, it won’t be on the Riviera!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Strange Borders of Palace Crescent* by E. Phillips (Edward Phillips) Oppenheim]