RONALD STANDISH

SAPPER

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The Dinner Club
The Man in Ratcatcher
Out of the Blue
Word of Honour
John Walters
Shorty Bill
Jim Brent

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RONALD STANDISH

By "SAPPER"

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The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,
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1

THE CREAKING DOOR

I

RONALD STANDISH lay back in his chair with a worried look on his usually cheerful face. In his hand he held a letter, which he read over for the second time before tossing it across to me.

“The devil and all, Bob,” he said, shaking his head. “From what I saw in the papers a clearer case never existed.”

I glanced at the note.

> *Dear Mr Standish* (it ran),—
>
> *I do hope you will forgive a complete stranger writing to you, but I am in desperate trouble. You will probably remember a very great friend of mine—Isabel Blount, whom you helped some months ago. Well, it was she who advised me to come to you. Would it be possible for you to see me to-morrow afternoon at three o’clock? I shall come, anyway, on the chance of finding you disengaged.*
>
> *Yours sincerely,*
>
> KATHERINE MOODY.

“Which means to-day, in a quarter of an hour,” he said, as I laid down the note. “And I fear it’s pretty hopeless.”

“You know who she is, then?” I remarked.

He nodded gravely and crossed to a corner of the room where a pile of newspapers was lying on a chair. And as I watched him I wondered, not for the first time, what had made him take up the profession he had. A born player of games, wealthy, and distinctly good-looking, he seemed the last person in the world to become a detective. And yet that was what he was when one boiled down to hard facts. True, he picked and chose his cases, and sometimes for months on end he never handled one at all. But sooner or later some crime would interest him, and then he would drop everything until he had either solved it or was beaten.

With the official police he was on excellent terms, which was not to be wondered at in view of the fact that on many occasions he had put them on the right track. At times some new man was apt to smile contemptuously at the presumption of an amateur pitting himself against the official force, but the smile generally faded before long. For there was no denying that he had a most uncanny *flair* for picking out the points that mattered from a mass of irrelevant detail.

"It's bad to prejudge a case," he remarked, coming back with two papers, "but this looks pretty damaging on the face of it."

He pointed to a paragraph, and I ran my eye down it.

"SHOCKING TRAGEDY IN LEICESTERSHIRE

BRUTAL MURDER OF YOUNG ARTIST

> "A crime of unparalleled ferocity was committed yesterday in the grounds of Mexbury Hall, the home of Mr. John Playfair, who has lived there for some years with his ward, Miss Katherine Moody, and her companion. Standing amongst the trees, some way from the Hall and out of sight of it, there is a summer-house which commands a magnificent view over the surrounding country. And it was in this summer-house that the tragedy occurred.
>
> "It appears that for some weeks past Mr. Playfair has allowed a young artist named Bernard Power to use it as a studio. Yesterday, on returning in the afternoon from a motor trip, Mr. Playfair, while taking a stroll in the grounds, happened to pass by the summer-house, where he was horrified to see a red stream dripping sluggishly down the wooden steps that led to the door. He rushed in, to find the unfortunate young man lying dead on the floor with his head literally crushed in like a broken egg-shell.
>
> "Touching nothing, he rushed back to the house, where he telephoned for the police and a doctor, who arrived post-haste.
>
> "The doctor stated, after examining the body, that Mr. Power had been dead about five hours, which placed the time of the crime at ten o'clock that morning. Then, with the help of Inspector Savage, who has charge of the case, the body was moved, and instantly the weapon with which the deed was done was discovered. A huge stone weighing over fourteen pounds was lying on the floor, and adhering to it were blood and several hairs that obviously had belonged to the dead man. Mr. Playfair explained that the stone had originally come from an old heap which had been left over when the foundations of the summer-house had been laid. This particular one, he went on to say, had been used as a weight on the floor to prevent the door from banging when the artist wanted it open: he had suggested it to him some weeks previously.
>
> "It is clear that a particularly brutal murder has been committed, as any possibility of accident or suicide can be ruled out. The

> murderer must have approached from behind while the unfortunate young man was at work on his picture, and bashed in his head with one blow.
>
> “The police are in possession of several clues, and sensational developments are expected.”

I looked at the date. It was yesterday’s paper. Then I looked at the other paragraph he was indicating.

“These are the sensational developments,” said Ronald, “which are doubtless responsible for Miss Moody’s letter.”

> “The police have lost no time in following up the clues they obtained in the shocking tragedy that occurred the day before yesterday at Mexbury Hall. It will be recalled that the body of a young artist named Bernard Power was found in the summer-house with the head battered in in a fashion which proved conclusively that a singularly brutal murder had been committed.
>
> “Yesterday Inspector Savage arrested a neighbouring landowner, Mr. Hubert Daynton, on the charge of being the murderer. It is understood that a stick belonging to the accused was found in the summer-house; and the butt end of a cigarette of a brand he habitually smokes was discovered lying on the floor.
>
> “The accused protests his complete ignorance of the affair, and further developments are awaited hourly. Needless to say, Mr. Playfair, in whose grounds the tragedy occurred, is much upset, as the dead man was a protégé of his.”

I put down the paper and glanced at my companion.

“It certainly seems pretty bad for Mr. Hubert Daynton,” I said. “He seems to have gone out of his way to leave incriminating evidence lying about.”

“Exactly,” Standish remarked. “Which may be a point in his favour. However, there goes the bell. We’ll hear what Miss Moody has to say.”

The door opened, and his man ushered in a delightfully pretty girl of about twenty-one or two, who looked from one to the other of us with a worried expression on her face.

“Sit down, Miss Moody,” said Ronald. “And let me introduce a great pal of mine, Bob Miller. You can say anything you like in front of him.”

“I suppose you know what I’ve come about, Mr. Standish,” cried the girl.

“I know what has appeared in the papers,” said Ronald, “which summarises into the fact that Hubert Daynton has been arrested for the murder of an artist called Bernard Power in the summer-house of your guardian’s place.”

“But he never did it, Mr. Standish,” she cried, clasping her hands together.

“So, I gather, he states. At the same time, the police seem to think otherwise. Now will you be good enough to fill in all the gaps, as far as you can, which have been left by the papers? And one thing I beg of you—don’t keep anything back. It is absolutely imperative that I should have all the facts, even if they appear to you to be damaging.”

“I will conceal nothing,” she said. “You know from the papers that I live at Mexbury Hall with my guardian, and Hubert Daynton has the neighbouring house, Gadsby Tower. He was often over with us, and we did the same thing at his place——”

“Was?” put in Ronald. “Do you imply anything by using the past tense?”

“During recent months matters have become a little strained,” she said, a slightly heightened colour coming into her cheeks. “To be brief, he wanted to marry me, and my guardian didn’t like the idea.”

“Why not?” said Ronald bluntly. “Was there any particular reason, or just general disapproval?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “Uncle John—he’s not really any relation, of course—is very old-fashioned in some ways, and has the most absurd ideas about what girls ought to be told. But one thing is certain: the moment Hubert made it clear that he wanted to marry me, Uncle John’s manner towards him changed completely.”

“One further point, Miss Moody,” said Ronald, with a faint smile. “What were your feelings on the subject?”

“Well,” she answered frankly, “I didn’t say I would and I didn’t say I wouldn’t. He’s rather a dear, and I like him immensely, but I can’t say I’m in love with him. In addition, I’m terribly fond of Uncle John, who has been a sort of mother and father to me, and the fact that he disapproved did influence me. There was an idea at the back of my mind, I think, that in time I might get him to change his mind about Hubert, which would have made a difference.”

“I understand perfectly,” said Ronald. “And that was the condition of affairs between you and Hubert Daynton at the time of his arrest?”

“I’m afraid it wasn’t,” she answered slowly. “Two months ago Bernard Power came to stay at the village inn. He was an artist, as you know, and in some way or other he got to know Uncle John. Now, my guardian is a photographic maniac—it is the one absorbing hobby of his life—and as Bernard went in for landscape work they seemed to find something in common. He was continually asking Bernard to dinner; and fitted him up, as you read in the papers, in the summer-house as a studio.”

She paused for a moment, and glanced from Ronald to me.

“The poor man is dead now,” she went on, “and if it wasn’t for Hubert’s sake, I’d say nothing. But there’s no getting away from the fact that Bernard

Power was a nasty bit of work. You both of you look thoroughly human, and you'll know what I mean when I say he was always pawing one, touching one's arm or something like that—a thing I loathe. But matters came to a head three days ago. I happened to be passing the summer-house when he called out to me to come and have a look at his picture.

"Without thinking, I went in. To do him justice, he was a very clever painter. And before I knew where I was, he'd seized me in his arms and was trying to kiss me. I was perfectly furious. I'd never given him the slightest encouragement. However, after I'd smacked his face as hard as I could, he let me go. And then I told him a few home truths and left."

Again she paused, and bit her lip.

"I left, Mr. Standish, and, as evil fortune would have it, I ran into Hubert paying one of his very infrequent visits. He had come over to see me about a spaniel I wanted. If only it had been an hour later it wouldn't have mattered; I should have recovered. As it was, he saw, of course, that I was angry and realising I'd come from the direction of the summer-house, he jumped at once to the correct conclusion.

" 'Has that damned painter been up to his monkey tricks again?' he cried.

"And very foolishly I told him what had happened. He was furious, and there's no denying that Hubert has a very nasty temper when roused. I regretted having said anything the moment the words were out of my mouth, but then it was too late. And it was only with the greatest difficulty that I prevented him going off then and there to put it across Bernard Power. I told him that I was quite capable of looking after myself, and that the matter was over and done with.

"In the middle of our conversation Uncle John joined us. He saw at once that something was up and asked what had happened. Hubert told him and he didn't mince his words, which got Uncle John's back up. And finally the two of them very nearly had a row.

"Uncle John's point of view was that he was the proper person for me to go to, and that it was no business of Hubert's. Hubert, on the contrary said it was any decent man's business if some swab of a painter kissed a girl against her will. And then he made the damning statement that he personally proposed to interview Mr. Bernard Power the following morning."

"Did anyone else hear that remark besides you and your guardian?" asked Ronald.

"No one," she said. "Of that I'm positive."

"Why did he specify the following morning? Why didn't he go right away?"

"He had people coming to lunch, and it was getting late."

"And the following morning was the morning of the murder," said Ronald thoughtfully. “Now let’s hear exactly what Daynton says took place.”

“He says that he started from Gadsby Tower at half-past nine and walked over to the summer-house. He found Bernard Power had not yet arrived, so he lit a cigarette and waited for him—a cigarette which he admits he threw on the floor and put out with his shoe.

“Then Bernard Power came in, and apparently Hubert went for him like a pickpocket. He called him a leprous mess, and a few more things of that sort, and they had a fearful quarrel, in the course of which Hubert put his stick up against the wall, because he was afraid he might hit the other with it, and he was a much smaller man than Hubert. Then he left, and went back to his own house, which he reached at twenty-past ten.”

Ronald Standish nodded thoughtfully.

“Forgetting all about his stick,” he remarked. “A very important point, that.”

“He was so excited, Mr. Standish,” said the girl. “I know the police think as you do, but surely it’s understandable.”

“My dear Miss Moody,” he said with a smile, “you quite mistake my meaning. Now that I’ve heard your full story I think it tells enormously in his favour. It is certain that he must have discovered he had left his stick in the summer-house on his way back to Gadsby Tower. There is nothing that a man notices quicker. If, then, he had murdered Power he would at all costs have had to go back to get it. To leave such a damning piece of evidence lying about was tantamount to putting a noose round his neck. But what was more natural than that he, rather than renew the quarrel, should decide to leave it there, and get it some other time?”

“Then you don’t think he did it?” she cried eagerly.

“What I may think,” said Ronald guardedly, “is one thing. What we’ve got to prove is another. If he didn’t do it—who did? The crime, according to the doctor’s evidence, must have been committed very shortly after Daynton left the summer-house. It is, therefore, I think, a justifiable assumption that the murderer was near by during the interview, heard the quarrel, and seized the opportunity of throwing suspicion on somebody else. So that at any rate one line of exploration must be to find out if this man Power had an enemy who was so bitter against him that he wouldn’t stick at murder. And from what you tell me of his manners with you, it would not be surprising if he has gone even further with some other girl. In which case there may be a man who was not as forbearing as Daynton.”

“Then you’ll help Hubert?” she cried.

“Certainly, Miss Moody,” he said. “Now that I’ve heard the details my opinion is quite different. Bob and I will come down with you this afternoon. But before we start there are just one or two points I’d like cleared up. First—

what were your movements on the day of the murder?”

“I stayed in the house till lunch; and in the afternoon I played tennis at a house five miles away.”

“You had no communication with Daynton of any sort—over the telephone, for instance?”

“None.”

“And Mr. Playfair—what did he do?”

“He went out on one of his photography expeditions. He started in the car about half-past eight in the morning and was not back till after lunch.”

“One last point. You have already said that no one could have overheard the conversation between the three of you on the drive. But did you by any chance mention it to anybody afterwards?”

“No,” she said. “I said nothing about it. And I’m sure Uncle John didn’t either, as he was in the whole afternoon fiddling about with his latest camera.”

“Then it must either have been an unfortunate coincidence for Bernard Power or——”

He broke off and stared out of the window thoughtfully.

“Come along,” he said, rousing himself at length. “Let’s go down and look at this summer-house. I hope your nerves are good, Miss Moody. Bob generally drives, and never at less than sixty miles an hour.”

II

The grounds of Mexbury Hall were extensive, and the summer-house was a good quarter of a mile from the Hall itself. Trees surrounded it on three sides, affording admirable cover for anyone who wished to hide. The fourth was open, and gave a magnificent view over the country to the south. It was simply built of wood, with a sunblind that could be let down over the big window.

A policeman was on guard as we approached, and he looked doubtful when Ronald explained his business.

“Inspector’s orders, sir, were that no one was to be allowed in. Still, I suppose you’re different.”

“Come in yourself, officer, and you’ll see that I’m not going to touch anything. I take it nothing has been moved except the body?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Were you here yourself when the body was found?”

“I came with the Inspector, sir.”

Ronald knelt down by the wooden steps leading to the door, and carefully examined the ominous red stain. Then, with a shake of his head, he got up.

“Too late,” he said. “Nothing to be got out of that now.”

He pushed open the door and stepped inside. Then, according to his invariable custom, he stood absolutely motionless, with only his eyes moving from side to side as he absorbed every detail. On the easel stood the half-finished picture spattered with the dead man's blood. The overturned chair still lay where it had fallen as the artist had crashed to the floor.

"Not much doubt about what happened, sir," remarked the constable. "Never seen a clearer case in all my service. Fair battered to pieces, he was, poor gentleman."

"What's the meaning of this, Roberts?" said a gruff voice from outside. "I ordered you to admit no one."

Ronald Standish swung round. A choleric-looking man in uniform was standing in the doorway.

"Inspector Savage, I take it?" Standish said genially. "I have been commissioned by Miss Moody to make a few inquiries on behalf of Mr. Daynton."

He held out his card, and the Inspector grunted.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Standish," he remarked. "And if I was you I'd wash my hands of it. You'll get no credit out of this case."

"Perhaps not," agreed Ronald. "Still, when a lady asks one to do something for her it is hard to refuse."

"Kinder in the long run," said the other. "There's no good in raising false hopes in her mind. You've seen in the newspapers what we've discovered. What you may not know is that Daynton admits to having had a furious quarrel with the murdered man at the very time the deed was done."

"It was that fact, amongst others, my dear Inspector, that caused me to take up the case. Surely no one out of a lunatic asylum would go out of his way to damn himself so completely if he had done the murder. His stick, I admit, he couldn't get over, since he was imbecile enough to leave it here; the cigarette stump is awkward. But why he should then add a quarrel which no one had heard is really more than one can swallow."

He was swinging the door backwards and forwards as he spoke, and I saw by the glint in his eye that he was hot on something.

"Very clever, Mr. Standish," laughed the Inspector, "but not quite clever enough. Both Miss Moody and Mr. Playfair knew of his intention. So how could he deny it? I say, sir, *must* you go on making that squeaking noise with the door?"

"Both ways, you notice," said Ronald. "It creaks when it opens and it creaks when it shuts. Moreover, it shuts of its own accord. Very interesting."

We stared at him in amazement, but he took no notice, and at last the Inspector turned to go, with a significant glance at me.

"By the way, Inspector," said Ronald suddenly, "had the dead man got a brush in his hand?"

"No; but one was lying on the floor beside him."

"Was there any paint on it?"

For a moment the Inspector looked nonplussed.

"I really couldn't tell you at the moment," he said, and Ronald shook his head.

"My dear fellow," he remarked, "you surprise me. Get hold of it and examine it. And if there's paint on it, sit down and think things over, bearing in mind the fact that the door creaks."

"And if there isn't paint on it?" said the other with ponderous sarcasm.

"There will be," answered Ronald quietly.

"Anything else you can suggest?"

"Yes; but I don't think you're likely to do it."

"What's that?"

"Release that unfortunate chap, Daynton."

"Release Daynton?" gasped the other.

"Why not? For I can assure you that he had no more to do with the murder of Bernard Power than you or I had."

"Then who did do it?"

"I promise you shall know at the first possible moment," said Ronald.

"Well, until I do," grinned the other, "Mr. Daynton remains under lock and key."

Ronald was silent as we strolled back to the house, and I knew him too well to interrupt his reverie.

"By the way, Bob," he said suddenly, as we neared the door, "say nothing—even to Miss Moody—about our thinking Daynton innocent. It might get round to the servants."

She met us on the drive, and with her was a man of about forty-five, who we correctly surmised was her guardian, Mr. Playfair.

"Well," she cried, after introducing us, "what luck?"

Ronald shook his head.

"Early days yet, Miss Moody," he said gravely. "I've seen the Inspector, and I'm bound to confess it doesn't look too good."

"I blame myself very much," said her guardian, "but never in my wildest imagination did I dream of such a tragedy occurring."

"In what way do you blame yourself, Mr. Playfair?" asked Ronald.

"In going out so early that morning. I ought to have waited here and been present at the interview. Hubert is such a hot-headed chap."

"But, Uncle John, he didn't do it!" cried the girl.

"My dear," said the other sadly, "I wish I could think so. And let us hope that Mr. Standish succeeds in proving it. Candidly," he went on as she left us, "I wish she hadn't been to you. You understand how I mean it. The case is so painfully clear that I fear even you can do no good. And the sooner she realises it the better.”

“Perhaps so,” agreed Ronald. “As you say, it’s a pity you went out as early as you did.”

“Well, I wanted to get to Comber Ness by noon, and it’s very nearly a four hours’ run. I don’t know whether my ward has told you,” he went on, with a faint smile, “but I’m a most enthusiastic photographer. And I have just acquired a new toy. Are you by any chance interested?”

“Very,” said Ronald. “I do a bit that way myself.”

“Then come and have a drink, and I will show it to you.”

He led the way into the house and we followed him.

“It is a stereoscopic camera,” he explained, as he took it off a table in the hall. “And doubtless you know the principle on which it works. The two lenses are the same distance apart as one’s eyes, and two negatives are taken at each exposure. Then by making positives and holding them in one of those machines that you probably remember from your early youth, the whole thing stands out as in real life.”

“And you went over to Comber Ness to get a photograph,” said Ronald.

“Exactly,” said the other, and then gave a rueful laugh. “And didn’t get it—at least, not what I wanted. I’ve only just got the machine. In fact, it was my first load of plates. Now, if you examine it, you will see a little number at one end of the plate-carrier. Every time you change a plate after taking a photo the number goes up one, so that you always know how many plates are left. The numbers range from one to twelve, and the night before Wilkinson, my butler, who is almost as keen as I am on it, happened to mention to me that number twelve was showing, which meant that there was only one more plate left. And I forgot all about it till I arrived at Comber Ness.”

“But one exposure was surely enough?” said Ronald.

“Quite—if I hadn’t wanted to take two different views. It is, as you know, one of the most celebrated beauty spots of England, and I had promised an American friend of mine two photographs taken from totally separate points. And I had only one plate. So there was nothing for it but to use the camera as an ordinary one by covering one lens with a cap and taking one view on half the plate, and then covering the other lens and taking the second view on the other half. But, of course, it spoiled things from a stereoscopic point altogether. However, I’m glad to say they both came out well. I left them to be developed that day, and they were sent up this afternoon with the other eleven.”

He was examining some of the results as he was speaking, and at that moment his ward came into the hall.

“Good Heavens! Uncle John,” she cried, “this is hardly the time for photographs.”

“Sorry, dear,” he said contritely. “The matter came up in the course of conversation with Mr. Standish. You see, this was the camera I was using that day at Comber Ness.”

She seemed sorry at having spoken so sharply, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

“It’s all right, old ’un,” she said. “So that’s the new toy, is it? Can we see the pretty pictures?”

“I’ve got to make the positives first,” he answered. “These are the negatives.”

“Well, it’s all beyond me. And I thought they were going to be much bigger. Each of them seems just the same size as that other camera takes—the little one.”

“Quite right. This camera takes two identical pictures on every plate, each of which is the same size as the little one.”

“And when were these very good views of the grounds here taken?” said Ronald.

“Let me see. I think I took those the day before I went to Comber Ness.”

“A very fine machine,” cried Ronald. “They are so clear cut. And these two separate ones of Comber Ness. Beautiful! Beautiful! I should very much like prints of those myself, if you would be good enough.”

“Certainly,” said our host. “Delighted. And now I expect you’d like to see your rooms.”

He led the way upstairs and, having told us the time of dinner, left us. And shortly after Ronald came sauntering into my room and sat on the bed.

“What do you make of it, Bob?” he said.

“Nothing at all,” I answered. “And though you may be perfectly clear in your own mind, old lad, that this man Daynton didn’t do it, I don’t see that you’ve got much forrader as to who did.”

He made no reply, and was staring out of the window as the butler knocked to find out if there was anything we wanted.

“I hear you’re very keen on photography, Wilkinson,” said Ronald pleasantly.

“In a small way I dabble in it, sir.”

“Mr. Playfair was telling me it was a great hobby of yours. What do you think of that new camera of his?”

“I’ve only seen it once, sir. He asked me to tell him the number showing at the end. Twelve it was, I remember. That was the night before the tragedy, sir. I do hope that you may be able to do something for poor Mr. Daynton. Such a nice gentleman, sir.”

“I hope so, too, Wilkinson. By the way, Mr. Playfair does most of his developing himself, doesn't he?"

"Invariably, sir," said the butler, looking faintly surprised.

"But he had this last lot developed for him?" persisted Ronald.

"Yes, sir. He apparently lunched at Barminster on the day of the murder, and left them with a chemist there."

"Thank you, Wilkinson. No—nothing to drink."

The butler left the room, and I stared at him.

"You seem very interested in our host's photography," I said.

"Bob," he remarked, "if you had just bought a new stereoscopic camera and had motored over a hundred miles for a view, would you suddenly be so overcome by a promise given to an American friend that you wouldn't use your new acquisition as such?"

"What in the name of fortune are you driving at?" I cried. "Anyway, whatever I might or might not do, we have seen what our host did. There's the proof in the negative. Why, good Lord, man, you can't suspect him."

"I didn't say I did. I merely asked a question. You see, Bob, one thing is perfectly clear. A man who was at Comber Ness in the morning and arrived at Barminster for lunch could not possibly have left here as late as ten o'clock."

"Very well, then?"

"A perfect alibi. But it would have been an equally good alibi if he had carried out the same time-table and taken a stereoscopic picture there instead of two separate views. So again I ask—why those two different views?"

"It must be the American," I cried.

"Must it? Or is it because he *couldn't* take a stereoscopic picture?"

"Then he couldn't have taken the other two?"

"Sound logic," he grinned. "Well, time to change, I suppose."

"Look here, Ronald," I almost shouted, "what *do* you mean?"

The grin departed, and he looked at me gravely.

"It means," he said, "that we are dealing with a particularly dangerous and unprincipled man, whose only slip up to date is that he did not expend a pennyworth of oil on the hinges of the summer-house door."

And with that he left the room.

All through the evening his words kept recurring to me, and the more I thought of them the more amazing did they become. It seemed to me he must be wrong, and yet Ronald Standish was not in the habit of making a definite statement without good reason. And when, next morning, he suddenly announced his intention of returning to London, I was even more dumbfounded.

The girl was terribly disappointed, and it struck me that his attempts at consolation were very half-hearted. He seemed to have lost interest in the case, though he gave her a few perfunctory words of hope.

"I'll be back this evening, Miss Moody," he said, "and perhaps by then I may have something to report."

But I heard him expressing a different opinion to our host when she was out of hearing. For some reason he did not want me to go with him, and so I spent most of the day with her trying to cheer her up. It was a little difficult, since I manifestly could not allude to the amazing hints he had dropped the preceding evening. In fact, the more I thought of them the more fantastic did they seem. If Ronald had a fault it was that he sometimes seemed to go out of his way to find a complicated solution to a thing when a simple one fitted the facts. And for the life of me I could not see wherein lay the difficulty over our host's explanation of the two different photos on the one plate.

He returned about six, looking weary and dispirited, and my heart sank.

"Waste of time, I fear," he said, as we all met him in the hall. "I'm afraid it's a case of going back to London for good."

"And throwing up the case?" cried the girl.

"I fear I was to blame, Miss Moody, in speaking too hopefully in my rooms," he said. "So if you could give orders for our things to be packed, we'll be getting along. By the way, Mr. Playfair, don't forget those two photographs you promised me."

"I did them for you to-day," said our host. "I'll see if they are dry."

He left the hall, and for a moment we were alone.

"Got him, Bob," he said, and his eyes were blazing with excitement, "by an amazing piece of luck."

But he was his apathetic self when Playfair returned with the prints.

"Astoundingly good," he remarked, as he examined them. "How did you manage to do it, Mr. Playfair?"

"Do what?" cried the other, staring at him.

"Avoid taking the steam-roller which has been standing idle in the centre of this particular view for the last ten days."

For a moment there was dead silence, and I saw that every atom of colour had left our host's face.

"I did not go to London to-day," went on Ronald. "I went to Comber Ness, where I took this photograph. Not fixed yet—but look at it."

He flung it on the table; it was the same as the other. But in the centre was a steam-roller with a tarpaulin over it.

"You devil!" screamed Playfair, and made a dash for the passage leading to the back of the house.

"Hold him, Bob!" roared Ronald, and I collared him. He struggled like a maniac, but I kept him till Ronald came running back with the plate in his hand.

"He was going to destroy that," he cried. "Well, Mr. Playfair, have you any explanation as to why that steam-roller is missing from your photo?" And then with a sudden shout—"Stop him, Bob!"

But it was too late. I felt his body relax in my arms, almost immediately after his hand came away from his mouth. Then he slithered to the floor—dead.

III

"I'm blowed if I see how you did it, Mr. Standish."

It was three hours later, and Inspector Savage was gazing at Ronald in undisguised admiration.

"By starting with a theory diametrically opposed to yours," said Ronald. "You were convinced Hubert Daynton had done it; I was convinced he hadn't. Then who had? My first idea was that the murderer was some man Power had wronged—probably over some woman. He had been hiding near by, and had taken advantage of the quarrel he heard to do the deed and throw the suspicion on someone else. Then I suddenly realised the enormous significance of the fact that the door creaked, and shut of its own accord.

"Now, Power was sitting at his easel some four yards from the door. Suppose the door was shut when the murderer entered; it would creak as he opened it. Suppose it was being kept open by the stone with which the deed was done; it would creak as it shut, after the stone was picked up. *In either event it would creak.*

"Now, what does anybody do who hears a door creak behind him—especially if there has just been a quarrel and the creak may mean that the other person has returned? He looks over his shoulder to see who it is. And if he sees some enemy of his, some man he has wronged, he does not continue his job with his back to the new-comer. But Power went on with his painting. Therefore the person he saw he did not regard as an enemy, but looked on as a friend. So much of a friend, in fact, that he did not object to this new arrival walking about behind his back—always an uncomfortable sensation unless your mind is completely at rest. And at once a very different complexion was put on the matter.

"Then came my interview with Mr. John Playfair, and the question of the two separate pictures of different views of Comber Ness on the one plate—the point that puzzled you so much, Bob. You remember that when I said it might be because he couldn't take a stereoscopic picture, you countered by saying that in that case he equally could not have taken the two separate views. Which was right, up to a point. He couldn't have *taken* either, but that doesn't prevent a negative appearing on a plate.

"The man was a skilled photographer, and he was faced with the necessity of proving to the world that he had been to Comber Ness. If he could do so he was safe. But since he had no intention of going anywhere near Comber Ness, what was he to do? He knew that if you take a negative and make a positive from it, you can produce a second negative in a dark room on exactly the same principle as you produce a print. But he had no stereoscopic picture of Comber Ness; he'd only just bought the machine. What he had got were two separate views taken with his smaller camera.

"So he makes two positives—you remember Miss Moody told us he was fiddling about in the dark room all the afternoon before the murder—and then he takes out his last stereoscopic plate. You see the importance of its being the last one; that accounted for his having to put them both on one plate. And that was why he took three unnecessary photos of his own grounds. On to that last plate he clips the two positives, side by side, exposes it in his dark room, and returns the plate to the camera. There is his alibi. He need never go near Comber Ness, and, in fact, he never did.

"He had Wilkinson's evidence that twelve was the number showing—you noticed there, Bob, the slight discrepancy between Playfair's statement and the butler's. He had the chemist's evidence that the plates were handed over to him to be developed; he had the hotel evidence that he lunched at Barminster.

"Exactly what he did we shall never know. He drove away at eight-thirty, and presumably concealed his car in some lane. Then he returned and hid near the summer-house. He was taking no risk up to date; if he was found there was no reason why he shouldn't be in his own grounds. And everything came off. He murdered Power, and drove quietly over to Barminster, where he lunched."

"But why this cold-blooded murder of a man he apparently liked?" I asked.

"The usual reason," he answered. "Once or twice after dinner last night I caught the look in his eyes as they rested on the girl. He was in love with her himself, which can account for many things. Why he took up Power at all I can't tell you—possibly at the beginning he had some idea of choking off Daynton by making him jealous. Then he may have feared that instead of doing that the artist's attentions to the girl might have the opposite result and bring Daynton and the girl closer together. Or perhaps he may have become jealous of Power himself. Anyway, he saw his opportunity of getting rid of both of them. And but for the astounding piece of luck of my finding that steam-roller where it was, he'd have gone darned near doing it. Being a clever man, he realised at once that his whole alibi had become worse than useless—it had become a rope round his neck. For what possible reason could there be, save the true one, for his saying he'd been to Comber Ness when he hadn't? That was why I was so off-hand to-day. At the first hint of suspicion he would have destroyed the plate and never given me the prints, trusting to the chemist's evidence that it had been a view of Comber Ness."

“Well, I’m sure I’m much obliged to you, Mr. Standish,” said the Inspector. “Mr. Daynton has already been released.”

“And doubtless will provide the necessary consolation for Miss Moody,” said Ronald, with a smile. “For I don’t think we need waste one second’s pity on that singularly cold-blooded murderer.”

And it wasn’t until we were driving into London that he turned to me thoughtfully.

“I think the lie was justified, Bob, don’t you?”

“What lie?” I said.

“That steam-roller only arrived at Comber Ness early this morning.”

2

THE MISSING CHAUFFEUR

I

It was on a morning in late September that, happening to drop into Ronald Standish's rooms, I found a man with him whose face seemed familiar to me. He was sprawling in one of the easy chairs, smoking a cigarette, and he glanced up as I apologised for interrupting.

"You're doing nothing of the sort, old boy," said Ronald. "In fact, you've arrived at a very propitious moment. Do you know the Duke of Dorset, known to most of the dear old schoolfellows as Catface? This"—he waved a hand at me—"is Bob Miller."

The Duke grinned cheerfully.

"I was up in Town on business," he said, "and I suddenly remembered that Ronald sometimes did the sleuth act. So I called round to see him."

"Not much sleuthing about this," laughed Ronald. "Bob—we are rising in business. We've now become a registry office for servants."

"If somebody would explain," I murmured mildly, "it might be a little easier."

"Catface has lost his chauffeur," Ronald remarked. "Hence his visit. But tell Bob the story. I'd like to hear it again."

"It sounds a bit absurd, I must admit," said the Duke, "and there is probably some quite ordinary explanation. At the same time it's no use pretending that I'm not worried. My chauffeur has suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. He's been in our service for years; he was with my father. And he's vanished into thin air."

"It's this way, Bob," said Ronald. "The man's name is Williams, and he lives with his wife in a cottage on the estate. By the way, are there any children?"

"Two," said the Duke. "A boy and a girl—about ten and eight years old."

"Well, it appears that the night before last Williams left his cottage just after seven o'clock, telling his wife that he was going down to the 'Bat and Ball' to have a pint—the 'Bat and Ball' being the chief pub in Medchester, which, as you know, is the village close to Catface's hovel. Apparently it was not an unusual thing for him to do, and Mrs. Williams thought nothing about it. But, as time went on and nine o'clock came with no sign of him, she began to get uneasy. So finally she rang up the 'Bat and Ball,' to find to her amazement that he had never been there. She still wasn't really alarmed. There was another pub to which he sometimes went. But that wasn't on the telephone, so all she could do was to wait. And wait she did until eleven o'clock, when she became genuinely frightened. So she put on a hat and went down into the village, a matter of ten minutes' walk. At that hour both the pubs were shut, but she beat up the two owners, only to find that her husband had not been to either of them that night.

"By this time, of course, she was in a thorough panic. She could only assume that her husband had been taken ill or had had a fit on the way. So she got the local constable out of bed, and armed with a lantern the two of them searched the road the whole way back to her cottage, without, however, finding any trace of him. And that is as far as we go at the moment. Her husband did not return during the night. He had not returned when Catface left for London yesterday after lunch. And such is the story of the missing chauffeur."

"Possibly he's back by now," I said.

"I told his wife to wire me at the club if he returned," said the Duke. "You see, the extraordinary thing to my mind is that Williams, of all men, should act in such a way. It's as if one's butler suddenly stood on his head in the dining-room."

"Probably suffering from loss of memory," I remarked.

"But in that case surely he'd have been found yesterday!" he cried.

"Not of necessity, by any means," said Ronald. "It doesn't follow that he's remained in the neighbourhood. He had money. What was there to stop him wandering about all night, and then taking a train for somewhere?"

"The only station within miles is Croyde Junction," said the Duke. "And he's as well known there as I am. Naturally I rang them up to ask, and no sign of him had been seen. I'm worried, old boy, not only because I'm genuinely attached to the fellow, but also because it's an infernal nuisance having to get a temporary chauffeur for the Grand Duke's visit."

He saw my look of bewilderment and explained.

"The Grand Duke Sergius is coming to stay with me next week. In the old pre-Bolshevik days he was one of the loud noises in Russia, and he was a great personal friend of my father's. And he has announced his intention of putting in two or three days with me during his stay in England."

"But do you think there is any connection between your chauffeur's disappearance and the Grand Duke's visit?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Probably I've got the wind up needlessly," he said, "but the possibility has occurred to me. He is a leader and mainspring of the Whites, and I know that his life has been threatened on several occasions."

"Still, it is difficult to see how abducting your chauffeur is going to help them to carry out their threat. They can't possibly know whom you are going to engage in his place. They can't, so to speak, force a man on you."

"I know all that," he agreed. "I've said it to myself over and over again. And still I can't get rid of the thought that there may be some connection."

"Have you taken any steps to get another man?" asked Ronald.

"I told my agent to write about it," he said. "Honestly, old boy, I wish you'd come down for a few days." He leaned forward in his chair. "It's possible—perhaps probable—that I'm talking through the back of my neck. But I *am* uneasy. If it wasn't for the Grand Duke the thing would be quite different; I shouldn't have worried you. But I'd never forgive myself if anything happened while he was staying with me. Why doesn't Miller come, too? I can give you both some shooting. And I'd feel easier if you'd cast your eye over things."

Ronald smiled.

"I've got no objection to trying to hit a few in the beak, old boy," he said. "And I don't suppose Bob has either. But I frankly think you are worrying yourself most unnecessarily about this man's disappearance. I'm convinced myself you'll find that there is some quite simple explanation."

And at that we left it, after agreeing to motor down that afternoon.

The Duke had arrived before us, and a glance at his face showed that further developments had taken place.

"I've got Mrs. Williams here, Ronald," he said. "I want you to hear what she has to say. I'm terribly afraid there has been foul play."

We followed him into a small writing-room, where a middle-aged woman, her eyes red with weeping, was waiting.

"Now, Mrs. Williams," he went on, "I want you to tell these gentlemen exactly what you've told me. They've come down from London especially to see if they can do anything to help you."

"I will, your Grace," she answered; "though I fear my poor Henry is beyond human aid. He'd never have gone away like that, without so much as a word to me, of his own free will."

"Supposing you just tell us everything, Mrs. Williams," said Ronald gently. "I have already heard from his Grace the bare facts of your husband's disappearance. Now I want to hear further details."

"Show Mr. Standish what you found to-day," said the Duke.

She fumbled in her bag, and finally produced a sheet of paper, which she handed to Ronald. On it was written the following sentence in block capitals: —

"And where did you find this?" asked Ronald, holding it up to the light.

"In my husband's livery, sir," she answered. "There was a hole in the top pocket, and as I was folding it up and putting it away this morning I felt this rustle in the lining."

"Which cross-roads does it refer to?"

"There are cross-roads half-way between the cottage and Medchester," said the Duke.

"I see," said Ronald. "So for the moment, at any rate, we'll assume that that is the spot alluded to. Now, Mrs. Williams, you say you found this in your husband's livery. Did he wear it on the day he disappeared?"

"Yes, sir. He came in about six o'clock and changed."

"Was he in his usual spirits, or did he seem at all worried?"

"Not exactly worried, sir, but rather quiet like."

"In other words, different from what he generally was?"

"Well, yes, sir—he was a little. And yet not enough to make me remark on it at the time. Though what with one thing and another and getting the children to bed, I didn't have much chance of speaking."

"And he's said nothing to you in the last few days which could throw any light on this note?"

"Nothing, sir." And then she hesitated. "Well, there was one little thing, sir."

"Out with it," said Ronald. "It's the little things we want."

"Well, sir, about four days ago, or perhaps five, he did say to me that there was a lot of wicked scoundrels in the world. And he said it as if there was something at the back of his mind."

"Did you ask him what he meant?" cried the Duke.

"I didn't, your Grace," she said. "He was just going out, and after that it slipped my memory."

"So there's really nothing more you can tell us, Mrs. Williams?" said Ronald.

"No, sir. I can't think of anything."

"And your children noticed nothing?"

"No, sir. I haven't told them yet. I've just let them think their daddy has gone away for two or three days."

She clasped her hands together.

"Oh, sir—do you think there's any hope?"

"Good Heavens! yes, Mrs. Williams," cried Ronald cheerfully. "You go back to your cottage and keep your spirits up. I shall probably be along that way shortly myself. By the way, there is one more question I want to ask you. Has your husband got any friends or acquaintances who are not English?"

"Not that I know of, sir," she answered. "If he has, he's never mentioned it to me."

"Thank you, Mrs. Williams. Now, don't forget what I said: keep cheerful."

"What do you make of it, Ronald?" said the Duke, as the door closed behind her.

"Nothing at all at the moment," Ronald answered, "except the one significant fact in that note."

He put it on the table.

"Look at that seven. Have you ever seen an Englishman make a seven with a horizontal line across it? Whereas a lot of Europeans do. I don't say it's conclusive, but it's more than likely that the writer has lived a lot abroad. Question number two. Is it a man or a woman? No answer possible from what we've got at present. From what you tell me, Williams is not the sort of man who would play the fool with a girl."

"Most emphatically not," said the Duke.

"But, on the other hand, he might be taken in by a sob-stuff story and think he could help someone. So, as I said, we do not know if it's a man or a woman. All we can say is that the loss of memory theory is out of court, and that he left the house to keep a definite assignation."

"Which looks bad to me," said the Duke. "For nothing will make me believe that he would not have communicated with me if he'd been able to."

"It has that appearance, Catface," agreed Ronald. "However, we may as well go and have a look at the place, though I don't suppose we'll find anything after such a lapse of time."

"I'll come with you," said the Duke. "There is ample time before dinner."

We strolled across the park, and after we had gone about half a mile he pointed to two cottages ahead of us.

"One of those is Williams's," he remarked; "the other belongs to the head keeper."

"I think we'll start at the cross-roads first," said Ronald. "Has anybody except the local constable been over the ground?"

"I couldn't tell you," answered the Duke. "I told my agent to do all he could, and to get in touch with the police at Dorchester. Incidentally—talk of the devil——Well, Johnson, any fresh developments?"

A middle-aged man in riding breeches was coming towards us, and his expression was grave.

"I'm sorry to say there are, your Grace," he said. "About thirty yards up the road leading to Cantrell's farm the undergrowth at one side is all beaten down. There is blood on the grass, and every appearance of a desperate struggle having taken place."

The Duke turned to Ronald.

"That settles it," he remarked. "That's the spot we're making for."

He introduced us to the agent, and we all four walked on together.

"I was just coming to report to you," continued Johnson. "He must have been set on by someone in the darkness, and in the struggle gone swaying up that side road. That's Inspector Morrison from Dorchester in front of us now. It was he who discovered it."

The Inspector saluted as we came up and led us to the spot.

"Pretty clear what happened, your Grace," he said. "Though why anyone should want to assault Mr. Williams is beyond me. Case of mistaken identity, I suppose."

"Not that, Inspector," remarked Ronald, handing him the note. "This has just been found in his coat. He was deliberately decoyed here."

As he spoke he was peering at the ground carefully.

"Is this track much used?" he asked.

"Very little," answered Johnson, "and mainly by Cantrell."

"Has Cantrell got a car?"

"Yes—but its been out of action for the last week. A big end went."

"Well, a car has been standing here comparatively recently. You can see the impression on the grass if you look closely."

He straightened up and his face was grave.

"Things look much worse than I thought, Catface," he said in a low voice. "It's hardly conceivable that the mark of that car at this particular spot should have no connection with the struggle. So it boils down to the fact that the whole affair was definitely planned. But why the deuce anybody should want to kidnap your chauffeur is a bit of a poser."

He turned to the Inspector.

"You haven't by any chance heard of any foreigners being in the neighbourhood?" he asked.

The Inspector shook his head, but Johnson swung round at once.

"Funny you should ask that, Mr. Standish. There's been a woman—quite young—staying at the 'Bat and Ball' recently. And two or three days ago she was joined by two men who arrived by car. They all left that night. By Jove! it was the very day of this affair, now that I come to think of it."

"But why do you imagine that they were foreigners?" asked Ronald.

"Cheadle—the landlord—told me they were," said Johnson. "Apparently they all spoke English perfectly, but amongst themselves they used some other language."

"Well, Inspector," said Ronald, "there's something for you to go on. That note was almost certainly written by a foreigner, and now we hear that three foreigners were staying at the ‘Bat and Ball’ on the day of Williams’s disappearance and left in a car that night. Moreover, a car stood here recently.”

“Not much proof anywhere, sir,” said the Inspector doubtfully.

“None at all,” agreed Ronald. “But if there is no connection, it is an extraordinary chain of coincidence. If I were you, I’d try to get a description of those people from Cheadle, and put some quiet inquiries on foot. It’s just within the bounds of possibility that someone might have noticed the number of their car.”

He turned to the Duke.

“And that, it seems to me, is all that we can do. Sorry not to be more helpful, old boy, but the business of tracking a car and people is beyond me. It’s a police job pure and simple.”

“Supposing you’re right, Ronald, do you think they’ve killed him?”

“I can’t tell you. I don’t know. There’s a lot of blood about. The struggle was pretty desperate. All that one can do is to hope that he’s only been laid out.”

“Lord! but I wish I could get to the bottom of this,” cried the Duke in a worried voice.

We were walking back over the park towards the house.

“I’m infernally sorry for Williams—poor devil!” he went on—“but what’s the object of the thing?”

“Well,” said Ronald slowly, “it seems to me that there are two possible alternatives which suggest themselves at once. The first one is that they made some suggestion to him which he resented so much that they had this fight. The second one is rather more sinister. They decoyed him there in order to abduct him, so that someone else might be substituted in his place—someone who might prove more amenable to this suggestion.”

The Duke stopped and stared at him.

“What sort of suggestion?” he demanded.

“I did not think so at first,” said Ronald, “but with these fresh developments, old boy, I am bound to admit that I’m beginning to agree with your original suspicion that it’s got something to do with your visitor of next week. Otherwise the whole thing is absolutely incomprehensible.”

“What the devil am I to do?” cried the other. “Shall I make some excuse and put him off?”

“You can hardly do that on what we’ve got up to date. We *may* be entirely wrong. All you can do is to vet the new man when he comes very thoroughly, and——”

He broke off suddenly.

“Hallo! a new development. What does Mrs. Williams want?”

She was running across the grass towards us, waving her arms, and evidently in a state of considerable excitement.

“Your Grace,” she gasped as she came up, “this has just come.”

In her hand she held a letter which she brandished in the air.

“Steady, Mrs. Williams,” he said soothingly. “Let’s have a look at it.”

“It’s from Henry, sir.” She turned to Ronald. “But look at the writing.”

And Ronald was looking at the writing with a face grown suddenly grave. For its colour was reddish brown, and it looked as if the wrong end of a penholder had been used, so thick were the letters. The envelope was addressed to “Mrs. Williams, Lilac Cottage, Medchester,” and was stained with mud and dirt.

“Read what’s inside, sir,” she cried.

The contents consisted of a double sheet of paper on which two words were written, also in reddish brown:—

Harvey petrol.

“Harvey!” cried the Duke, who was looking over Ronald’s shoulder. “Why, that’s the local garage.”

“Is that so?” said Ronald thoughtfully. “You are sure this is your husband’s writing, Mrs. Williams?”

“Positive, sir. Besides, I know the paper. You see that little W in the corner, and Henry always carried some in his pocket-book. And envelopes. What does it mean, sir?”

“Postmark—Belton. Where’s Belton?”

“Next village to Medchester on the London road,” said the Duke.

“Then, your Grace, he must be there,” she cried. “But why has he used that funny-coloured ink? And why is the envelope so dirty?”

“I’m afraid you mustn’t build on the hope that your husband is at Belton, Mrs. Williams,” said Ronald gravely. “In fact, I’m sorry to have to tell you some bad news.”

“He’s not dead, sir?” she said piteously.

“No, no. I don’t think for a moment he’s dead. But I’m afraid he’s been badly hurt.”

“Can I go to him, sir?” she cried.

“We don’t know where he is, Mrs. Williams.”

“But, look here, Ronald,” said the Duke, who had been studying the envelope, “the date of the postmark is to-day.”

“Which shows that it was posted to-day, but not that it was written to-day. This letter was thrown out of the car in which he was travelling, and fell in the mud. Evidently to-day somebody found it and put it in the post.”

“How on earth can you tell that?” demanded the Duke incredulously.

But Ronald did not answer. Instead, he turned to the woman.

"Will you leave this with me, Mrs. Williams? I'll take great care of it. And the instant we know anything about your husband we'll let you know."

"Very good, sir. I'm sure, sir, you will."

She curtsied, and went stumbling back to her cottage.

"Now, Ronald," cried the Duke, when she was out of hearing, "how do you know this letter wasn't written to-day?"

"Because I recognised at once the ink that had been used. It's blood, Catface. And from the colour it's considerably more than one day old."

"Good God!" gasped the Duke. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Somehow or other Williams managed to write this, using his own blood as an ink. He knew that if his wife got it she would bring it to you. It must be a warning of sorts, but what it means is somewhat obscure."

"We always do get our petrol from Harvey," said the Duke. "His is the only garage within miles."

Ronald put the letter carefully in his pocket.

"It's one of the most extraordinary cases I've ever struck," he said. "And at the moment I don't see one ray of light."

That state of affairs continued for the next week. The new chauffeur, a man by the name of Groves, arrived with the most impeccable references, two of them from people known personally to all of us. Harvey, whose garage we visited casually, proved to be a typical West Countryman with a jovial face and a cheery manner: a man who, if appearances ever count for anything, was as honest and straight as could be found in Dorsetshire. Cheadle, with whom we had a pint or two, gave us as closely as he could a description of the three foreigners, but, as Ronald had anticipated, it proved quite useless. It would have fitted a hundred people equally well. And the mystery of Williams's whereabouts remained as profound as ever.

It was not until two days before the Grand Duke's arrival that any further development took place. Ronald and I were strolling through the village on our way back to lunch, when Johnson, the Duke's agent, came out of the "Bat and Ball" and hurried towards us.

"That woman is back," he said. "Returned this morning."

"Is she, by Jove?" cried Ronald. "We'll come in and have a drink. I'd like to have a look at her without her knowing it."

"Good morning, gentlemen," cried Cheadle, as we entered the bar. "That lady——"

"Three pints, Mr. Cheadle, please," interrupted Ronald quickly, at the same time giving him a warning frown. "And have something yourself."

The room was full of the usual crowd that gathers in a village inn at midday, and after a cursory glance round Ronald dismissed them. At the same time, he did not relax his caution.

“Not a word, please, Mr. Cheadle,” he said, in a low voice. “I want to see that lady without raising her suspicions. Is she having lunch here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then my friends and I will lunch here, too. Give me a table where I can get a good look at her.”

And for half an hour, in the intervals of trying to masticate the so-called cold beef, we were able to study the woman at our leisure. And it must be admitted that the insult to our digestions was not worth it. Just a distinctly pretty young foreigner having lunch by herself in an English inn—that and nothing more. And yet the clue to so much lay under that tight-fitting little hat.

“Bob, I’m flummoxed,” said Ronald, as we left the inn. “Absolutely flummoxed. Why has she come back? What is the connecting link? There *must* be one. No woman like that is going to stay at the ‘Bat and Ball’ for fun. But we’ve got no proof: nothing but two or three apparently unconnected facts. What is the link? Are we being damned stupid, or is it really something that we couldn’t know yet?”

And that night I heard him pacing up and down his room for hours, until at length I fell asleep.

II

Even now, after the lapse of years, I sometimes wake up sweating at the nearness of the thing. But for one tiny slip on their part, and Ronald’s extraordinary quickness in realising its significance, one of the most atrocious crimes of modern times would have succeeded. Many garbled accounts have appeared in the Press. Now for the first time I will set down the real truth of that amazing plot.

It occurred on the second day of the Grand Duke’s visit. A ceremonial call on a former British Ambassador who lived some fifty miles away had been arranged, and at eleven o’clock the car drew up at the door. Groves was driving, and seated beside him was the man who passed as the Grand Duke’s secretary, but who was in reality a highly-placed secret service man. Behind sat the Grand Duke and his host. The car rolled away, some of the house-party watching it depart. Nothing could have been more normal. And then two minutes after it had gone a chance remark of Johnson’s threw the spark into the powder magazine.

“Never seen the Duke so angry in my life,” he said, “as he was with that new chauffeur a few minutes ago.”

“What was the trouble?” asked someone perfunctorily.

“He’d let the car run practically dry of petrol.”

"What's that?"

Ronald's voice came like a pistol-shot, and then things moved.

"Bob—get the bus. Move, man, move!"

I raced towards the garage, and was back inside a minute with the Bentley, to find Ronald waiting. He boarded her whilst she was still moving, leaving a crowd of surprised guests staring after us. He flung himself down in the seat beside me, and with a little thrill I felt something hard in his pocket pressed against my thigh. Whilst I had got the car, he had got his revolver.

"The tank of Catface's car was full last night, Bob," he said quietly. "I had a look at it on purpose. Stamp on the gas, boy."

And three minutes later we were in the village. In front of us was the Rolls outside Harvey's garage, filling up from the petrol pump.

"Pull up just behind her," said Ronald.

His eyes were darting in every direction, but at the moment the scene looked harmless enough. The village street was almost deserted save for a powerful-looking racing car outside the "Bat and Ball," and Harvey and his assistant, who were manipulating the pump. The secret service man had descended and was standing by the window on the side of the Grand Duke. The chauffeur, having watched the filling for a few moments, had returned to the driving seat. At length the operation was over; the pipe was held up to let the last drops out; the gauze filter of the car was put back in the tank; the cap was screwed on. And a moment later they were away.

"Seems all in order, old boy," I said.

He did not answer; only stared after the back of the retreating car.

And suddenly his eyes narrowed, and without a word he raced down the street after it. Stopped, picked something up in the road, and came back towards me like a madman.

"Get her going!" he roared. "And chase the Rolls."

He fell in beside me, and I saw that he held in his hand a gauze filter. Even then I didn't get it. Evidently the assistant had forgotten to put it back in the tank, and any time would do to return it. And at that moment the roar of the racing car behind us drowned our own machine.

"They're after us," said Ronald, through set teeth. "And they've got our legs. Saw the curtains moving in the inn and I knew we were being watched. The woman and two men."

"What shall I do?" I cried. "Let her all out?"

"Yes, until I tell you otherwise."

The road was twisty for the first mile, and we swung round corners with the other car on our tail. In the glass on the screen I could see their faces at times, and suddenly I saw one of them stand up and draw a revolver from his pocket.

“Look out,” I howled. “They’re trying gun work.”

“Are they, by gosh?” said Ronald, kneeling up on the seat and facing backwards. “Two can play at that game. Swerve about a bit, Bob, till he’s fired.”

Came a crack and the pilot lamp shattered.

“Now keep her steady.”

For about a hundred yards the road was straight, and I could see them all in the mirror. And then it happened. Ronald fired, and the car behind us seemed to swerve like a mad thing across the road. I had a vision in the glass of wheels upside down; heard a frightful crash; then silence save for the roar of our own engine.

“I burst their front tyre for them,” said Ronald quietly, sitting down again. “And now then, Bob, every ounce of juice.”

His face was cold and set, but I could feel the nervous tension of him. And still half dazed I drove on—drove as I have never driven before or since—drove till we saw a minute or two later the Rolls in front of us.

“Keep your horn going,” he cried, standing up and waving his arms violently.

At last we saw Catface look round, then turn and give an order to Groves. The car slowed down and stopped.

“Pull up beside ’em, but stand by to move on,” said Ronald.

We reached them, and Ronald yelled his orders.

“Fall into this car for your lives!” he shouted. “Hurry! For God’s sake, hurry!”

They tumbled in a heap into the back of the Bentley.

“Drive on, Bob. Stamp on it again.”

And I suppose I’d gone fifty yards when it happened. There came a deafening explosion, and the Rolls seemed literally to split in two. The whole of the back part flew in pieces, and what was left became in half a second a raging inferno of flames. For a while we watched it in awe-struck silence, and then the Grand Duke lit a cigarette and turned to his host.

“Cutting it a trifle fine, I think. Do all your cars do that, my dear fellow?”

“How did you find out, Ronald?” said the other shakily.

But Ronald was staring at Groves, who had turned as white as a sheet.

“Who got at you?” he said sternly. “And how much were you paid for emptying the tank?”

“Nothing, sir,” he cried. “Before God, I swear it. It was a lady, your Grace, who had never seen his Royal Highness, and she begged me to stop the car in the village so that she could have a closer look at him. She wanted to take a photograph, and she suggested emptying the tank.”

“You damned scoundrel!” roared the Duke. “How came that infernal bomb or whatever it was into the car?”

“That he is not responsible for, old boy,” said Ronald quietly. “Harvey’s assistant is the man who did it. But whether he knew it was a bomb or not I can’t say. Turn the car round, Bob. There are one or two little things to be cleared up.”

And the first of them was soon done. The car that had pursued us had turned clean over and crashed down a steep bank, killing all three occupants.

“They started some shooting practice at us, as you can see,” said Ronald, pointing to the shattered lamp. “So I retaliated, and was lucky enough to burst one of their front tyres.”

“Assuredly, Mr. Standish,” remarked the Grand Duke, “you seem to be a man after my own heart. Though I am still not quite clear why, if you saw the bomb being put in, you did not warn us at the time.”

“Because, sir, I did not realise then that it was a bomb. I thought the assistant was putting back the gauze filter, and it was not until it fell off the back of the car as you drove off that I realised that what he had put in was something else. Sheer luck. No skill of mine. Had you gone another thirty yards before it slipped off, and rounded the corner out of sight, the death roll would have been in our camp, I fear. But—it did slip off, and I saw it. It was a certainty then as to what had happened, confirmed by their immediate pursuit of us.”

And that is the true story of one of the most sensational cases of the past few years. Harvey’s assistant proved to be almost a half-wit who had been bribed by one of the men to put the time bomb in the tank, having been told by him that it was a patent device for increasing mileage. And Williams, who had been kept a close prisoner in a house on the outskirts of London, returned to the Duke’s service. It transpired that the woman had made the same suggestion to him as she did to Groves, and on his refusing indignantly, the two men had sprung on him out of the darkness. She had previously pitched him some yarn about being persecuted, and he had met her on one or two occasions. In fact, the only remaining thing left to chronicle was the arrival, a few days later, at Ronald’s rooms of a beautiful little clock. And on the back of it was engraved: “Guaranteed not to explode. Sergius.”

3
THE HAUNTED RECTORY

I

THE fact that Ronald Standish was amply provided with this world's goods was a great advantage to him in more ways than one. In the first place, it allowed him to pick and choose his cases, since the question of a fee did not enter into matters. He worked for the sheer interest of the thing, and the utmost I have ever known him ask were his out-of-pocket expenses. Often, indeed, he dispensed with these if his client was not well off. There was one example I remember in which they were considerable, but since he was working for a woman whose husband had been killed in the War, leaving her extremely poor, he refused to accept a penny.

But he derived benefit from his pecuniary position in another and not quite such an obvious manner. Acting completely on his own as he did, taking cases only when he felt like it (I have known periods of six months when he hasn't handled one at all), he was not habitually rubbing shoulders with the criminal classes in the way his professional *confrères* had to do. And, consequently, he was not known by sight to any large number of the people he was up against. Which, in view of the fact that no one looked less like a detective than he, was on certain occasions an immense help.

At the same time, there was but little reciprocity about the matter. It was the exact opposite to the old proverb Tom Fool. There were very few of the big men that Standish did not know by sight, and his was the type of memory that never forgot a face. He made a point of attending, as a casual spectator, any trial that promised to be of the slightest interest. But unless it justified its promise, he rarely stayed longer than was necessary to memorise the features of the prisoner. And so stored away in his brain was an immense gallery of portraits that he could inspect at will—an asset of incalculable value on occasions. And one such occasion was the strange case of the Haunted Rectory, a case which also illustrated his astounding quickness at spotting little things which other people missed. I was one of the other people!

It was early in April when he and I arrived at the small Cornish town of St. Porodoc. We were on a golfing holiday, and having sampled Saunton and Westward Ho! we wandered farther west till we reached a course which, according to its own members, at any rate, was better than either of them. And assuredly it was a beautiful piece of golfing country. Moreover, not being so widely known as its more illustrious neighbours, there was no crowd. In fact, Ronald found a certain amount of difficulty in getting a level game. His handicap was scratch, whereas I regret to state that mine has never descended into the realms of single figures. And since the Easter crowd had not yet arrived the field was a little limited. However, he played the best ball of the secretary and myself on two or three occasions, and it was at the nineteenth hole after one such match that the incidents I am about to relate started.

The secretary, Maxwell—a retired Naval officer—was a man after our own hearts. And I remember that he was in the middle of a story when the door of the club-house swung open, and he stopped abruptly.

“Hallo, Vicar!” he sang out cheerily. “How’s the ghost?”

The new-comer was a charming-looking old man, with the fresh complexion that only years of living in the country can preserve. His grey hair was still plentiful; his eyes clear and bright, but at the secretary’s question his expression clouded over.

“Worse and worse,” he said ruefully. “Maguire says he’s going.”

“By Jove! That’s bad,” cried the other, with a whistle of surprise. “By the way, let me introduce our vicar—Mr. Greycourt. This is Mr. Standish and Mr. Miller.”

The clergyman bowed and sat down.

“Yes—I think I will have something,” he remarked. “I’m so worried I don’t know what to do. The whole thing seems to me so absurd.”

“It’s certainly a pity if Maguire goes,” said Maxwell. “And, by the same token, Standish, it’s unfortunate it’s Lent, otherwise you could have had a round or two with him. He’d have given you a good game.”

“What’s the trouble about Lent?” remarked Ronald.

“Maguire is my curate,” explained the vicar, “and the dear fellow won’t play golf in Lent. He says he’ll see me through Easter, Maxwell, and then he won’t stay any more.”

“Which means he won’t get a game on these links at all,” said the secretary. “Surely something can be done to make him alter his mind, Vicar?”

“Excuse my butting in,” said Ronald, with a smile, “but at the moment it’s all rather confusing.”

“And very boring, too, it must be, to a stranger,” said the vicar apologetically.

“Not at all,” cried Ronald. “Let’s hear all about it, and possibly I might be able to suggest something.”

“I’m sure I should be eternally grateful if you could,” said the other. “Well, then, Maguire came to me some weeks ago—a delightful young fellow in every way—tall, upstanding, a typical British sportsman, and exactly the sort of man that we want to-day in the Church. So much did I feel that, in fact, that after he had been with me for two or three days I had a very serious conversation with him.

" 'My boy,' I said, 'don't think for a moment that what I am going to say to you is inspired by anything but a sense of duty. The only reason that I applied for a curate is that with advancing years I find this straggling parish too much for my old legs. But I never dreamed that a man of your ability and charm of manner would arrive. You are wasted here, Maguire. You should be in some big centre, where your talent will not be hidden under a bushel.'

"He smiled and thanked me for the compliment. And then he explained his reasons for coming. It appeared that he had had a serious illness, and he thought a few months of Cornish air would pull him together.

" 'Moreover, sir,' he went on with a smile, 'I must confess to another thing. The fame of the St. Porodoc links has reached as far as London. And once Lent is over, I hope to have many a round over the course.'

"Is he a very star-turn golfer?" put in Ronald.

"Apparently he was in the running for his blue," said Maxwell, "so he must be fairly hot stuff. But he arrived after the beginning of Lent, so I've never seen him play. In fact, I've only seen him once, and then it was in the distance."

"I think he goes on the principle of keeping as far as possible from temptation," said the vicar with a smile. "I know nothing about the game myself, and so I fear I can't tell you how good he is, but he is certainly extraordinarily keen. However, that is only a side issue. To return to the main point: you must know, Mr. Standish, that I am unmarried, and the vicarage, though very comfortable, is too big for one man. And so when Maguire arrived I suggested to him that he should take up his quarters with me."

He paused to sip his drink, and it struck me that I had seldom met a more perfectly delightful old man.

"He fell in with the idea at once," the vicar continued, "and I placed at his disposal a sitting-room of his own. Our meals we take together, but I considered it essential that he should have his own den to go to when he wanted it. And for a week everything went swimmingly. Almost every evening we talked together for an hour or two before retiring, and then during the day he was out getting in touch with my parishioners.

"I think it was on the eighth day after he came that I noticed he was looking a little worried at breakfast, and asked him if anything was wrong.

" 'Nothing, sir—nothing,' he answered, but I wasn't satisfied.

" 'My dear boy,' I said, 'there's no good saying that. Something has upset you. Come now: out with it.'

"For a moment or two he hesitated; then he looked across the table at me.

" 'It seems a ridiculous thing to say, sir,' he said, 'but is this house haunted?’

“I stared at him, speechless. It was the last thing I expected him to say.

“ ‘God bless my soul!’ I cried at length, ‘not that I’ve ever heard of. Why?’

“ ‘Last night,’ he said quietly, ‘I awoke quite suddenly. The moon was shining through a chink in the curtains, and in its light, standing at the foot of the bed, I saw a man. At first I thought it was you, and I asked you what you wanted. And then, as I became more fully awake, I realised it wasn’t you, but someone I had never seen. At once the thought of burglars entered my mind, and I sprang out of bed. And as I did so, the man vanished. I lit my candle to make sure. The room was empty. Then I looked at my watch. It was just two o’clock.’

“He resumed his breakfast, and for a moment or two I felt nonplussed. That the thing was merely a dream I felt convinced, but Maguire had spoken so quietly, and with such a complete absence of any excitement, that I hesitated to say so. And then he took the words out of my mouth.

“ ‘Probably a nightmare, sir,’ he remarked; ‘and yet it was very real. Perhaps that second whack of cream with Martha’s pastie last night. I mustn’t fall again.’

“And so it passed off, and I thought no more about it until three days later, when it was my turn to be awakened—this time by footsteps outside my door. I slipped on a dressing-gown, and went into the passage. From the hall below me came the flickering light of a candle, and peering over the banisters I saw Maguire.

“ ‘What is it?’ I called out, and he looked up and saw me.

“ ‘No nightmare now, sir,’ he said a little shakily. ‘I’ve had my visitor again, and this time he didn’t vanish. He went through the door, and I followed him down here. And then he just disappeared into the wall.’

“ ‘Come, come, Maguire,’ I cried testily,’ this is absurd.’

“ ‘So would I have said a week ago,’ he answered gravely. ‘Now I know it is not. Mr. Greycourt—this house is haunted.’

“ ‘Then why have I never seen anything?’ I demanded.

“He had no answer to that. He couldn’t tell me. But I was unable to shake his conviction. I suggested he should change his bedroom, and he did so—at first with good results. For three or four nights nothing happened. Then the ghostly visitor appeared to him again. I sat up with him, but whenever I did so we saw nothing. And last night it came to him once more. I was awakened by a noise downstairs that sounded like a window shutting. Then I heard his footsteps outside my door. His face was white and his agitation was obvious.

“ ‘It’s getting on my nerves, sir!’ he cried. ‘I don’t think I can go on much longer. It vanished into the wall again.’

“ ‘I thought I heard a window bang,’ I said, but he shook his head, so it was apparently something else that woke me. And, to cut a long story short, this morning at breakfast he told me that he felt he couldn’t stay. He would remain to help me over the Easter celebrations, but after that he must go. Naturally I was greatly upset, but what can I do? The poor fellow is going to pieces. It is unfair to ask him to remain. But I shall never be able to replace him with anyone I like so well. And even if I did get a satisfactory successor, how do I know that the same thing won’t happen to him?”

Ronald had listened with the closest attention to the vicar’s story, and before making any comment he carefully filled his pipe.

“What servants have you, Mr. Greycourt?” he asked.

“Old Martha, who has been with me for years, is the cook. And I have a younger girl who does the rest of the work.”

“Have either of them ever seen this ghost?”

“No. And no mention has been made of it to them. You know what servants are, and Maguire quite agreed with me that it would be folly to alarm them. But do you really believe in such manifestations, Mr. Standish?”

“Evidently your curate does,” said Ronald dryly. “And as far as I myself am concerned I keep an open mind. Personally I have never seen one. At the same time, so many people of integrity have, at various times, vouched for their existence that it would be a bold man who denied their possibility. At the same time——”

He relapsed into thoughtful silence, and I looked at him curiously. The story was one of the last that I should have thought would have interested his practical brain.

“Then I suppose,” said the vicar, rising, “that there is nothing to be done.”

“As far as the departure of your curate is concerned, nothing that I can see,” answered Ronald. “But if it would be of any assistance to you, I should be only too delighted to come up to your house and have a look round.”

“Will you both come to lunch to-morrow and discuss it with Maguire?” he cried, and Ronald nodded.

“Thank you very much,” he answered. “We’ll be there.”

“What do you really make of it?” said Maxwell as the door closed behind the old clergyman.

“Nothing at the moment,” said Ronald. “But there is one possible point of interest. I don’t profess to be well up in ghostly lore, but from what I have read on the subject I have always believed that a ghost haunted a locality and not a person. Now in this case it is Maguire who is haunted. No one else has seen it now or ever before. It arrived, so to speak, with the curate. I wonder if it will depart with him?”

And once again he relapsed into silence, which remained unbroken till we all three rose to go and dress for dinner.

II

The vicarage, which we found next day without difficulty, was a rambling old house about half a mile from the top of the cliffs. A well-kept garden lay in front, and as we opened the gate a tall young man straightened up from a flower-bed where he was working and came towards us with a smile.

"The vicar told me you were coming," he said; "he'll be in shortly. Excuse my not shaking hands, but gardening is not conducive to cleanliness. By the way, I'm Maguire."

"So I guessed," said Ronald genially. "This is a nasty experience of yours."

The curate's face clouded over.

"Believe me, Mr. Standish," he remarked, "I wouldn't have worried that dear old man for the world. But I can't go on. I think my nerves are as strong as most people's, but this thing is wearing them to a frazzle. I daren't go to sleep now. I just lie awake wondering whether it's coming."

"Are you by any chance what the Scotch call fey?" said Ronald.

"I've never seen anything of the sort before," he cried. "But after this experience, I think I must be. You see, I'm the only person who has seen it. And the only conclusion I can come to is that I am what is technically known, I believe, as *en rapport* with this particular earthbound spirit. So that when I arrived here it was able to manifest itself for the first time."

He made a sudden dart at a large snail, and picking it up threw it over the wall.

"Doubtless they fulfil some purpose," he remarked, "but they are a pest in a garden."

"How is your nocturnal visitor dressed?" asked Ronald, as we went into the house.

"As far as I can tell you, in brown," answered the other. "But I've really only seen his outline. He always eludes me, and then he vanishes just about there."

We were standing in the hall, and he pointed to a spot on one of the walls.

"Don't let's talk about it, if you don't mind. I try to forget it during the day. Come up to my room, and we'll wash our hands."

We followed him up the stairs into a large, airy bedroom, where he left us to get some hot water from the bathroom. And somewhat curiously I glanced round. There was the bed at the foot of which the ghostly visitor appeared; there near the window the bag of temptation—his golf clubs. A cheerful, sunny room—the last one would have associated with the supernatural. Then I happened to glance at Ronald's face. And to my amazement I saw on it the look I knew only too well, which was replaced by his usual imperturbable expression as Maguire entered with the can. He had seen something, but what?

A few minutes later we descended to find the vicar waiting for us in the hall.

“Welcome!” he cried. “I hope Maguire has done the honours, and that you are ready for a real Cornish lunch?”

“I certainly am, Mr. Greycourt,” said Ronald. “The links here give one an appetite. I understand you play, Mr. Maguire?”

“I’m frightfully keen on it,” answered the curate. “But I don’t play in Lent.” He gave a deprecating smile. “However, I confess that I’m longing to loosen my arms again.”

He gave a couple of practice swings as if to illustrate his remark. Then we all went into the dining-room and sat down.

“We must try to fix a round after Easter, if I’m still here,” said Ronald, and Maguire nodded.

“By all means,” he answered. “Though I fear the same proviso applies to me.”

A slightly embarrassed silence settled on the table, which the vicar broke by inquiring how we liked the place. And thereafter throughout the meal the dangerous topic was safely avoided. No allusion was made to it, in fact, until after lunch, when Maguire had left the room to go to the telephone.

“I suppose you haven’t succeeded in making him change his mind?” said our host.

Ronald shook his head.

“No, Mr. Greycourt. And I think I can safely say that it is better that he should not. The experience is evidently very real to him, but I am hopeful that when he leaves here he will go somewhere where the manifestation will—er—cease. Somewhere, perhaps, where the food is not so rich.”

His voice was expressionless, and the vicar nodded thoughtfully.

“You think it’s digestion?” he said. “Perhaps so. In which case a change of diet may work the trick.”

“I think it will do him a lot of good,” remarked Ronald gravely. “Very plain diet: wholesome, of course, and at fixed hours. But don’t mention it to him, Mr. Greycourt; he might think we were unfeeling.”

“Of course not; of course not!” cried the worthy clergyman. “I shouldn’t dream of doing so.”

“And while I think of it, Vicar, there is one other thing I would like to suggest to you. If, during the few remaining days he is here, you should again hear him moving about at night—take no notice. Remain in your own room. It is a case, if I may say so, where the intervention of a third party does more harm than good.”

“Perhaps you’re right, Mr. Standish. I will do as you say. He must work out his own salvation. . . . Ah! my dear boy—parish matters?”

He smiled at Maguire, who had just returned.

"It's my cousin, sir. He is passing through Wadebridge again. Apparently the last consignment of cream was so much appreciated that he's going to call for some more."

"Splendid! Splendid! I hope he'll stay for tea. Are you playing golf, Mr. Standish?"

"Not this afternoon," answered Ronald. "Bob and I were thinking of having a walk along the cliffs."

"Good. You'll find them beautiful—very beautiful. And if you are near here, come in for tea also."

"What the dickens were you driving at?" I asked Ronald as we left the house. "Your remarks on Maguire's diet seemed to me to be pretty pointed."

"Getting quite bright, aren't you, Bob?" he said with a grin.

And then the grin faded, and with compressed brows he swung along over the springy turf.

"I hope that dear old chap follows my advice," he said at length.

"That was another thing I couldn't understand," I remarked.

"Unless I'm much mistaken, you will within the next few days," he answered. "The vicar has come to no harm as yet, but it's only because he's been lucky."

"You mean he's in danger?" I said.

"Very grave danger," he said quietly.

His eyes were roving round the landscape as he spoke.

"But what from?" I demanded.

"That ghost. It would have been a bad thing for the vicar if he had happened to come out one night in time to see it, or rather not to see it. Let's walk over to the edge of the cliff there."

"You are an irritating devil," I said. "Can't you be more explicit? Give me some clue to what you are driving at!"

Once again he grinned faintly.

"Do you remember the snail our friend threw over the wall? A most instructive action, old boy, when coupled with that bag of golf clubs."

We had reached the top of the cliff, and stood peering down. A clearly-marked path led to the beach, and he nodded his head as if satisfied.

"It fits together, Bob," he remarked. "An old, old game, with one or two distinctly novel features in it. And, but for the snail, I might never have spotted it."

I refrained from profanity, and inquired mildly what he proposed to do next.

"Admire the beauties of nature, old boy, until the time arrives for us to get a look at Maguire's cousin. I feel he might help."

And not another word could I get out of him on the subject during our two hours' walk, a walk which I noticed was so planned that it brought us back to the vicarage about four o'clock. A car was standing outside the gate, and as we approached two men came down the path carrying a wooden packing-case. One was Maguire; the other, presumably, the cousin. And the instant he saw them, Ronald went dead lame.

"Twisted my ankle, I don't think," he muttered, sitting down on the bank. "Go on, Bob, and see if that second man has anything wrong with his nose."

I strolled on, and got level with the car just as it was starting. Maguire was talking earnestly to his companion, who was in the driver's seat, and as I came up to them they both looked at me. And with a queer little thrill I noticed that the cousin's nose had an odd kink in it, as if it had been broken and not set straight.

Almost immediately the car drove off, and Maguire crossed the road with a smile.

"Where is Mr. Standish?" he asked.

"He gave his ankle a bit of a turn," I said, "and I was just coming to ask for a little cold water."

"Of course," he cried. "We must get him indoors. Here he comes now."

Ronald was hobbling along the road, and called out cheerily:

"Quite all right. Don't worry. Thought for a moment I'd twisted it properly, but it's nothing at all."

"Sure you won't bathe it?" asked Maguire solicitously.

"Quite, thank you. I'll get straight on. It's no distance to the hotel."

"It's a pity my cousin has just gone. He could have given you a lift."

"Better to walk," said Ronald. "So you got the cream off, did you?"

"Yes, he's taken it with him. Well, Mr. Standish, we must try to fix that game some time."

"Sure thing," cried Ronald. "If I'm still here all you've got to do is to ring up the hotel."

With a cheerful wave of his hand, he limped on and the instant we were out of earshot he turned to me eagerly.

"Well! Had he?"

"Yes," I answered. "It looked as if it had been broken."

"Good," he cried. "I thought I recognised him, even at that distance. Bob, the plot thickens, or perhaps it would be more correct to say that it clears up."

"Who was he?" I demanded.

"The last time he was given free board and lodging at His Majesty's expense it was under the name of John Simpson. His real name, I think, is Robert Stenway, and he's just about as nasty a customer as you could wish to meet."

"Then what the dickens is he doing in this galley"—I asked—"carting Cornish cream about for a curate?"

Ronald began to shake with laughter.

"Bob," he remarked, "I take off my hat to you. Maguire is no more a curate than that Cornish cream is cream. And that being the case we will send a wire to my friend Inspector McIver, which, unless I am much mistaken, will bring him down here post-haste."

III

"If 'Snarkie' Stenway is in it, it's dope for a certainty," said McIver.

We were in our sitting-room the following afternoon, and Ronald nodded.

"I thought so myself," he remarked. "But this fellow Maguire is a new one on me, Mac."

"I can't spot him either from your description. Maybe I'll know him when I get a closer look at him. Or perhaps he's a genuine beginner."

"Then he shows astounding aptitude for it. Incidentally there he is, walking towards the post office."

The Inspector sprang to the window and peered out. Then he shook his head.

"No, I don't know him. Still, perhaps this is the beginning of an acquaintance that is destined to ripen."

"And no harm will be done by visiting the post office after he's gone," said Ronald. "People have been known to send wires from post offices, the imprints of which are left on the next form."

He strolled out of the room, and the Inspector grinned at me.

"No flies on him, Mr. Miller. How did he stumble on this?"

"Ask me another," I said. "I've been with him the whole time; I've seen everything he's seen; and all I can get out of him is that it was through seeing this man Maguire throw a snail over the wall."

McIver roared with laughter, and a few minutes later Ronald returned with a telegraph form in his hand.

"Virtue rewarded," he remarked. "It's to John Cuthbertson, Charing Cross Post Office. 'Shall have more cream to-morrow.' "

He threw the form on the table.

"A bit quicker than I thought. It means he'll be getting the cream to-night. Wherefore, Bob, if you want to see the ghost, a bit of shut-eye won't do anyone any harm. It may be an all-night job."

"I'll just arrange for a couple of men from Wadebridge in case of accidents," said McIver, "and then I'm of your way of thinking."

It was a pitch-dark night when we started at ten o'clock. The two local men had already been sent on with instructions to lie up by the road a few hundred yards short of the vicarage. And there we found them half an hour later.

"No one has passed, sir," said the sergeant, "and the light downstairs has just gone out."

"Good," said McIver. "Then we'll get closer and wait."

We approached cautiously, and finally went to ground in some bushes about thirty yards from the house. Light was coming from two of the bedrooms, and once Maguire came to his window and looked out. Then the lights were extinguished and our vigil began.

The wind had dropped. The only sound was the distant beating of the surf on the shore. And after a while I began to feel drowsy. It was a weary business waiting, with no possibility of a cigarette. And then, just as my head was nodding, I felt Ronald stiffen beside me. From the direction of the cliffs had come the call of a sea-bird. It was thrice repeated, and immediately the light in Maguire's room went on.

We waited tensely, our eyes straining into the darkness. And suddenly I heard Ronald's whisper in my ear: "There he is." A figure was just discernible creeping along the side of the house. Then a light began to flicker in one of the downstair windows. A candle was being carried down the stairs. And then the set, white face of Maguire himself came towards the window.

"Now," muttered McIver, and we all rose.

The window was opened, a bulky parcel was handed through, and at that moment we were on them. The man outside was so surprised that he showed no struggle at all. Not so Maguire. He fought with a cold ferocity that was almost inhuman. And it was not until Ronald knocked him out with a beauty on the point of the jaw that McIver got the handcuffs on him.

We stood breathing a bit heavily, when a plaintive voice from the stairs reminded us of the vicar.

"What is it?" he cried, standing there in his dressing-gown. "What has happened?"

"We've laid your ghost for you, Mr. Greycourt," said Ronald reassuringly. "I'm afraid we made a bit of a noise over it."

"But I don't understand," said the other, dazedly. "Why is Maguire handcuffed?"

"Because he richly deserves to be," answered Ronald. "So you've come to, have you?"

He glanced at the prisoner, who was glaring at him with eyes full of vindictive hatred.

"Now, young man," he went on, sternly, "there's one question that you'd better answer, and answer darned quickly. Where is Maguire? For on your reply depends whether you're in the running for a six-foot drop."

“He’s not croaked; we’ve got him hidden,” snarled the other. “But”—he burst into a flood of hideous blasphemy—“I’ll be even with you over this one day, Mr. Meddlesome.”

“If you don’t stop that language I’ll gag you,” snapped McIver. “Take ’em both into that room and keep ’em there,” he ordered the sergeant.

“Now, sir,” he continued, as the vicar joined us, “somewhat naturally, you’re a bit surprised. But if you will come and have a look at the contents of this parcel you’ll understand. You see these packets? Do you know what is inside them?”

He opened one, and the old man stared at the contents uncomprehendingly.

“Snow,” went on the Inspector. “Cocaine. Your so-called curate has been using your house for smuggling dope.”

“I can’t believe it!” cried the vicar. “How did you find it out?”

“Better ask Mr. Standish,” laughed McIver. “He’s the wizard in this case. And while he’s telling you I’ll just examine the room upstairs.”

“It must have come as a shock to you, Mr. Greycourt,” said Ronald quietly. “But once you realise that this man whom you have known as Maguire is not Maguire at all, and certainly not a clergyman, it will help. You see, I’ve got rather a suspicious nature, and a severely practical nature, and though I don’t deny the possibility of ghosts, I’m sceptical about them. And I became more sceptical still when I found out that no one else had ever seen or heard of this apparition. So out of idle curiosity I asked myself what object would be served if there wasn’t a ghost at all—if, in fact, the whole story was a lie. And one answer stuck out a yard. It would enable the man who invented the yarn to move about at night without incurring your suspicion. Which was suggestive, but was only a mere surmise on my part—a bare possibility—when I came to have lunch with you. Then there occurred one of those strange little things on which the best-laid schemes go wrong. The man posing as Maguire seemed a delightful fellow: his personality seemed all that one would expect in a really sound sporting curate. And when in a moment of zeal he flung a snail over the wall, as one gardener to another I took to him more. Then we went up to his bedroom to wash. McIver,” he sang out, “bring those golf clubs down, will you?”

“Right you are,” answered the Inspector. “And I’ve got a nice pot of cream as well.”

He came down the stairs carrying the bag of clubs and a china jar.

“What do you want the clubs for?” he demanded.

“I happened to look at those clubs while he was getting some hot water,” went on Ronald.

“Try one, Bob; take that mashie.”

Completely mystified, I took the club out of the bag, and then in an instant light dawned on me.

"Good Lord," I cried, "it's a left-handed club!"

"Exactly. And he'd thrown the snail with his right hand; he poured out the water with his right hand; he swung his arms in the hall right-handed. In fact, here was a right-handed man, reputed to be a first-class golfer, with left-handed clubs. Which, as Euclid said, was absurd. So at once the case had to be examined from a fresh angle—the angle that this so-called Maguire was an impostor. And everything began to fit in. His refusal to play golf in Lent: obviously the easiest way of avoiding the exposure of his complete ignorance of the game. His decision to leave you after Easter, when Lent ends, and his excuse would no longer hold water. And then another, more ugly, thought arose—he could not have bought those clubs himself. No dealer would have sold a right-handed beginner left-handed clubs. Therefore they must belong to the real Maguire; and what had happened to him? And on that point, according to what this man says, I'm glad to hear he has not been murdered. But I didn't know that then, and so I warned you, Vicar, to let him ghost-walk by himself. Quite clearly he was a dangerous customer, a fact further proved by the way he fought to-night.

"The rest was easy. What possible purpose could bring a man of that sort down here—save smuggling? This house lends itself admirably to getting contraband from a boat lying off the coast. Moreover, you had been awakened on one occasion by a noise that you thought was like a window shutting. And when I heard that a cousin was taking Cornish cream to London from here instead of buying it for himself, the thing became obvious. When, still further, I found that this so-called cousin was a notorious dope smuggler and criminal, the case was complete, and I wired for my old friend, Inspector McIver, with the result you've seen to-night."

"Clever trick, this, Mr. Standish," said the Inspector. "Looks like a genuine pot of cream, doesn't it?"

He held out the jar: all that could be seen was a layer of the delicious stuff with its skin of faint golden yellow. And then with a spoon he scraped it away, revealing an inch underneath packet after packet of cocaine.

"In fact, a very ingenious plot, the memory of which may solace him through a few years of seclusion," he went on with a grin. "With your help, Vicar, we'll get Snarkie to-morrow, and that will conclude the entertainment."

And with the vicar's help we did. The worthy old gentleman lied as to the manner born with regard to where Maguire was when Stenway arrived, and personally helped him carry the cream we had made up to the car. And there McIver arrested him, while Ronald congratulated Mr. Greycourt on his ready tongue.

"Not at all, Mr. Standish," he answered, with a merry twinkle in his eye. "I said that Maguire was visiting one of my parishioners, whether willingly or not I saw no reason to state. And it may interest you to know that the police station is within the confines of my parish."

So ended a clever crime which, save for Ronald's quick eye, would never have been detected. Stenway got seven years: the other man, who turned out to be the son of a wealthy manufacturer in the Midlands, and who had been a wrong 'un from his birth, got five. It was the first offence that had brought him into actual contact with the police, but I shall be surprised if it is his last.

And as for the genuine Maguire, who, to do the scoundrels justice, had been quite well treated, he and I beat Ronald and Maxwell in a four-ball foursome only last week. After which we all dined with the vicar, concluding with a pot of cream. Only the cream was not limited to the top inch.

4

A MATTER OF TAR

ONE of the most useful assets in Ronald Standish's mental equipment was his extraordinary knowledge of out-of-the-way little tips that are not known to the man in the street. He seemed to have a positive storehouse of them locked away in his brain; in fact, he was a sort of living edition of one of those peculiar compendiums called "Do you know?" or some such title. An astounding memory had a great deal to do with it. Any new fact that struck him as being of interest was locked away and duly docketed in his mind ready for immediate production when required. And one of the best examples of this gift of his was shown in the case of the Fallconer diamonds. And though, as an instance of his powers of detection, it is perhaps not so illuminating as many others, it illustrates his quickness on the uptake and powers of observation to a very marked degree.

It was on an afternoon in early June that I wandered round to his rooms to find him in the middle of a telephone conversation.

"I shall expect you round at once," he said as I entered, and then he hung up the receiver.

"A lady visitor, Bob, is on her way," he remarked, "and from what I gathered over the telephone she is in a state of considerable agitation. Let us, therefore, endeavour to make the darned place a little more presentable to the feminine optic before she comes."

He threw a couple of niblicks into the corner, and removed his cricket bag from a chair where it was in the process of being packed.

"A nuisance," he said. "I was going to have played to-morrow. But when Jumbo Dean has wished her on to us, I can't let him down."

"Do you want me to stay?" I asked. "It may be private."

"Wait and see, anyway," he said. "Her name is Miss Fallconer, which conveys rather less than nothing to me."

He reached for a copy of "Who's Who" and opened it.

"Only one Fallconer mentioned," he remarked, "and he has one daughter, so it may be him. A widower living at Oxbridge Place in the county of Sussex. He's a J.P., and has written two or three books on travel, so that one is not surprised that his club is the Travellers'. Age fifty-six. After which," he continued with a grin, "we shall probably find he's not our bird at all."

I strolled over to the window. A girl was just getting out of a taxi in the street below.

“Here she is,” I said, “and there’s a man with her. Both of ’em young.”

A few moments later she came in, followed by her companion. They were a striking-looking couple, and I instinctively glanced at her left hand to see if they were engaged. They were not; there was no ring on her finger.

“How d’you do, Miss Fallconer?” said Ronald, going forward with hand outstretched. “May I introduce my friend, Bob Miller?”

She gave me a little nod, and then turned back to Ronald.

“Good Heavens! Mr. Standish,” she cried, “you’re not a bit like what I imagined.”

“Sorry about my face,” laughed Ronald. “ ’Tis a poor thing, but mine own.”

“I don’t mean that at all,” she answered, laughing also, “but it’s all this.”

She waved a hand round the room generally.

“Did you expect to find me immersed in a test tube?” said Ronald cheerfully. “Or peering at you out of the cupboard with a false nose on?”

He looked inquiringly at the man, who so far had not spoken.

“This is my cousin, Mr. Sanderson,” she said, and Ronald pulled forward two chairs.

“Let’s get down to it,” he remarked. “You’re evidently very worried, so there’s no good wasting time.”

She took a seat facing the window, and I studied her covertly. She was an extremely pretty girl, but, as Ronald had said, she looked anxious and troubled. One foot was tapping nervously on the floor, and once or twice as she talked she bit her lip as if to control her voice.

“It was Major Dean who advised me to come to you,” she said. “You know him, don’t you?”

“I know Jumbo very well,” Ronald assured her. “And anything I can do for a pal of his will be a pleasure.”

“Mr. Standish, Jack couldn’t have done it—I know,” she cried.

“I don’t want to interrupt you, Miss Fallconer,” said Ronald quietly, “but you must remember that I know absolutely nothing of the matter on which you have come to consult me. So may I ask you to begin at the beginning, and taking your own time, tell us everything that has happened? *Everything*, please, omitting nothing, however trivial it may seem to you.”

He handed her his cigarette-case, but she shook her head.

“My father,” she began, “is Mr. John Fallconer, and we live at Oxbridge Place.”

Ronald glanced at me.

“It is the one in ‘Who’s Who’ then. Go on.”

“My mother died a few years after I was born, and since then, except for the time when I was at school, and one or two other gaps when he has been abroad, he and I have lived there by ourselves. He was a very wealthy man. Even to-day, though, of course, he's been hit like everybody else, father is still pretty well off."

"Is the place entailed?" put in Ronald. "I mean, on his death does the property go to you, or to the male next of kin?"

"To me," she said slowly, "unless he chose to make a will leaving it to someone else, which I don't think is likely."

"All right. That's quite clear," said Ronald. "Now we can get down to the real business."

"I say, Beryl, my dear," put in her cousin, "hadn't you better tell Mr. Standish something about old Jack before we come to last night? He must get it clear, you know, about everybody concerned."

"I suppose I had," she said. "Half a mile from us, Mr. Standish, there is a small chicken farm which is being run by a man called Jack Dalton. And"—she hesitated for a moment—"well—he's been the cause of the only quarrels father and I have ever had."

"Leave this bit to me, old thing," said Sanderson quietly. "Jack Dalton is a topper, Mr. Standish, but honesty compels me to admit that he's a damned bad chicken farmer. At least, the bally birds don't seem to pay, and as he's got practically no money at all of his own he's pretty impecunious. That, however, has not prevented what you have probably guessed already: the two of 'em are in love. But her respected male parent has old-fashioned ideas on the subject, and fails to see why his daughter should ante up the boodle for Jack's eggs. That's about it, isn't it, Beryl?"

She nodded.

"Yes, but there's another point," she said. "Jack feels just the same himself. He says he won't marry me unless he can make his farm pay."

"I see," said Ronald. "We have now got that relationship taped. Let's get on with it."

"The night before last—that is to say, Tuesday," she continued—"we had a small dinner-party. Harold was there and Jack——"

"So Jack is invited to the house, is he?" put in Ronald.

"Oh! yes," she cried. "Father likes him very much. He often shoots with us. It's only when I come in that the trouble arises. Where was I? Harold and Jack were there; the Vicar and his wife, and Sir John and Lady Grantfield who brought Harold in their car."

Ronald looked inquiringly at Sanderson.

"I live about seven miles away, Mr. Standish," he explained. "And my car being temporarily out of action Sir John, very kindly, gave me a lift."

"Carry on, Miss Fallconer," said Ronald.

“After dinner,” went on the girl, “father sprang a surprise on us. We were all sitting in the room that used to be the billiard-room, but which we have now converted into a sort of general living-room, when he suddenly produced from his pocket a large case. And inside it was the so-called Fallconer tiara. It used to belong to my mother, and it’s always been a bit of a joke in the family. It’s of great value, but perfectly hideous. The diamonds are magnificent stones, but the setting has to be seen to be believed. And it appeared that he had removed it from the local bank that very afternoon with the idea of bringing it up to London to-day to get it altered for my twenty-first birthday. I, of course, had seen it before, but the others hadn’t, and it was passed round for everyone to have a look at. And then he proceeded to lock it up in a drawer in his big writing-desk, which stands in one corner of the room.

“ ‘But surely, Fallconer,’ said Sir John, ‘you’re not going to leave it there. Why, a child could open that drawer with a hairpin.’

“Father laughed.

“ ‘Possibly,’ he agreed, ‘if there was any reason for him to try. But since we eight and the bank manager are the only people who know it’s there, I’m not worrying.’

“And then we started to play bridge.”

“No servant came in while it was being handed round?” asked Ronald.

“No; of that I’m certain,” she said.

“Is this room on the ground floor?”

“Yes, but all the curtains were drawn.”

“I see,” said Ronald. “So it comes to this—that on Tuesday night your father put away this tiara in a locked drawer in his desk, and so far as either of you know no one but the eight people you have mentioned knew of its presence there.”

“Precisely,” said Sanderson.

“Now we come to yesterday,” continued the girl. “Father and I were alone after dinner, and we both went to bed before eleven. He had intended to catch the early train to London this morning, and I’d been playing tennis and was tired. In addition to that—we’d—we’d had a row.”

“What about?” asked Ronald.

For a moment or two she hesitated and glanced at her cousin.

“Cough it up, old thing,” he said. “There’s no good hiding anything.”

“It was about Jack again,” she said. “And it was rather a bad one. Apparently he’d asked father to lend him some money in the afternoon. I know that he wanted more capital to extend his farm with, and I suppose he caught father at the wrong moment.”

“I can’t imagine why the silly ass didn’t come to me,” put in Sanderson.

“Well, Miss Fallconer,” said Ronald, “let’s hear what happened after you and your father went to bed.”

“Just as I was falling asleep,” she answered, “I heard what sounded like a heavy bump. I listened again, but it was not repeated. And then as I lay in bed something unusual struck me. For a while I couldn’t make out what it was, and then at last I got it. A light was shining on the tree opposite my window, which had not been there before. So I got up and looked out. And to my amazement I found that the light came from the billiard-room.

“I looked at my clock. It was just after midnight. I wondered who on earth could be in there at such a time. And then I suddenly thought of the diamonds. So I put on a dressing-gown and went down.”

“Good for you,” cried Ronald approvingly.

“I opened the door,” she continued, “and for a few seconds I thought the room was empty. And then happening to look towards the fire-place I saw father lying on the floor. I rushed over to him, fearing for one ghastly moment that he was dead. But I soon saw he wasn’t, but was merely unconscious.

“I was too worried about him to think about the diamonds, as I thought he’d had some sort of a fit. So I roused the house, and we telephoned for the doctor, who came within twenty minutes. He made an examination, and then he gave me the biggest shock of all.

“ ‘This is no fit,’ he said. ‘Your father has been knocked out with a weapon of some sort.’

“I stared at him stupidly. ‘Knocked out!’ I cried. ‘Who by?’

“ ‘That I can’t tell you,’ he answered. ‘But he is in no danger, though he will probably be unconscious for several hours. The only thing to do is to get him to bed and make him as comfortable as possible.’

“And it was then that the diamonds came back to my mind. I rushed over to the desk, and found the drawer had been forced and it was empty. Evidently father had caught the burglar in the act of stealing the tiara, when the man had stunned him and escaped. A window was open. The whole thing seemed clear. So we got him upstairs and rang up the police station. There was no good in the doctor remaining, as there was nothing to be done till father came round. And so, finding myself alone except for the servants, I got on the telephone to Jack, to ask him if he’d come round and help me with the police.”

Once again she hesitated, and glanced at her cousin. But he was apparently engrossed in the toe of his shoe.

“He was out,” she went on after a while; “at least, I could get no answer. So I thought of Harold, forgetting his car was out of action. But he managed to raise one in the village and arrived just about the same time as the police.”

“Which was at what hour?” asked Ronald.

“Ten minutes past one,” said Sanderson, and Ronald made a note.

“And at what time did Miss Fallconer telephone to you?” he asked.

“As near as makes no odds, twelve-thirty,” answered Sanderson. “But it took me some little time to get dressed and rouse the owner of the village car.”

“Quite,” said Ronald. “What then, Miss Fallconer?”

“The police asked all sorts of questions, and, of course, I could tell them nothing,” said the girl. “They rushed round the garden looking for footmarks; they examined the window-sill for fingerprints. And then at four o’clock father recovered consciousness.”

Ronald leaned forward, his eyes fixed on the girl’s face.

“Oh! I know he didn’t do it,” she cried passionately. “It’s all some ghastly mistake.”

“Steady, Miss Fallconer,” said Ronald quietly. “Let’s hear all about it.”

“Father accused Jack of having done it,” she answered, controlling herself with an effort.

“His exact words, please.”

“He said—‘That damned young swine Dalton did it. He was masked, but I recognised his coat.’ Then he became all muzzy again.”

“Recognised his coat,” repeated Ronald thoughtfully. “Is there any particular significance in that remark?”

The girl had risen and gone to the window, and her cousin answered.

“Unfortunately there is, Mr. Standish,” he said gravely. “When my uncle became coherent again he gave us fuller details. Apparently he had heard a noise in the billiard-room and had gone down to find out what it was. And there he saw a man bending over the desk in an overcoat which was unmistakable. We’ve all of us pulled Jack’s leg about that garment of his, but he said it was an old friend. It had a sort of purplish tint about it which was like nothing else I’ve ever seen. In addition to that it was filthy dirty.”

“In fact,” said Ronald, “as you have just said, an unmistakable garment.”

“Quite,” said Sanderson.

“How very peculiar!” remarked Ronald dryly. “I somehow think that if I was going to break into a house I should not choose something to wear which would inevitably give me away if I was discovered.”

“Just what I say,” cried the girl eagerly.

“What is Dalton’s explanation of the matter?”

“He says that the coat must have been stolen from his house by whoever did it.”

“He absolutely denies that it was him?”

“Absolutely.”

“Where was he when you rang him up, Miss Fallconer?”

“He says that he couldn’t sleep and went out for a walk.”

For a while Ronald was silent as he filled his pipe, and suddenly the girl went to him appealingly.

“Mr. Standish,” she cried. “I *know* he didn’t do it. Jack would never have hit father.”

“My dear Miss Fallconer,” he answered gravely, “whoever it was who stole the diamonds never had any intention of hitting your father when he started out. That was an entirely secondary thing done on the spur of the moment when Mr. Fallconer discovered him. Have they arrested Dalton?”

“Not when we left,” she said. “But father has told the police everything. And I know they think he did it.”

“Well, what do you want me to do, Miss Fallconer?” he asked.

“Come down with us, Mr. Standish, and see if you can’t find out something to help him. Major Dean, who is staying near us, told me this morning that if anyone in England could save him you could.”

“Jumbo exaggerates,” said Ronald with a faint smile. “But I’ll come and see what I can do.”

“Thank you a thousand times,” she cried. “Will you come in my car or go in your own?”

“In my own, thank you, Miss Fallconer. I’ll be at Oxbridge Place as soon as possible.”

“I’ve got to get that stuff from the chemist for father, Harold,” she said at the door. “Will you be in St. James’s Square in ten minutes?”

“All right, my dear,” answered her cousin, picking up his hat as she went out. And then he paused, listening to make sure she had gone.

“Mr. Standish,” he said gravely, “I fear you’re going on a fruitless errand. I hadn’t the heart to try and dissuade her from coming to you, and perhaps—who knows?—you may spot something which we’ve missed. But since you are, so to speak, acting for Jack, it’s only fair that I should tell you what I have not mentioned to anybody. I’d been over in the bus yesterday, and dropped in on Jack just after his interview with my uncle. And he was in a furious rage. As a matter of fact, he’s got the devil of a temper at times. And he announced not once, but two or three times, his intention of making the darned old swab, as he put it, sit up.”

“Threats of that sort may mean a lot or nothing at all,” remarked Ronald.

“I agree. But I fear you’ve hit the nail on the head. I don’t think for one second he meant to strike my uncle, but I do think he intended to steal the diamonds. You see, the devil of it is that there are only four men except Mr. Fallconer himself who knew where the tiara was. And of those four the Vicar and Sir John are obviously out of court, while I was in my house seven miles away. It’s a hopeless case, I’m afraid. However, let’s trust you won’t think so.”

With a nod he went out, and Ronald turned to me.

“What do you make of it, Bob?”

“Frankly, old boy, very much what Sanderson does. Pretty black.”

“It was very hot last night,” he said enigmatically.

“What the dickens——” I began, but he was already in his bedroom throwing things into a bag.

“Pack a bag, Bob,” he said. “I’ll come and pick you up.”

The whole way down he hardly spoke, and I wondered at his preoccupation. To my mind the thing was obvious. Had someone been lurking outside the window on the night of the dinner-party and seen the tiara being handed round, surely he would have broken in on the Tuesday, and not waited till Wednesday—I said as much to Ronald.

“Some such idea had occurred to me,” he said, with a faint smile. “Which, coupled with the fact that the night was hot, raises an interesting point.”

“What point?” I demanded.

The smile grew more pronounced.

“Think it out,” he said. “And surely there is Sanderson standing by the road?”

We pulled up as he waved to us.

“I got off at my house and waited for you,” he said. “Will you come in and have a drink before you go?”

“I’ve heard worse ideas,” remarked Ronald.

“And perhaps you’d give me a lift afterwards,” continued Sanderson as he led the way. “My bus is still out of commission. Confound it,” he said, peering into the sideboard. “There isn’t a siphon. Mrs. Burton,” he shouted, going to the door, “siphon, please. A dear old woman,” he continued as he came back, “but as deaf as a post.”

A moment later she entered beaming, and carrying in her hand a small bottle done up in white paper.

“Here it is, sir,” she said.

“What on earth is that?” he asked.

“The oil of eucalyptus you wanted this morning. The chemist did say that you’d bought some yourself, but I thought I’d get a bottle and make sure.”

“Very kind of you, Mrs. Burton,” said Sanderson, “but in the meantime what I want is a siphon.”

She bustled away, and he turned to us apologetically.

“Sorry,” he remarked. “She seems to get deafer every day. Perhaps you’d like a whisky and eucalyptus. As a matter of fact I thought I had a bit of a cold coming on this morning, and there’s nothing like it, in my opinion.”

The housekeeper returned with a siphon, and Sanderson poured out the drinks.

“Here’s fortune,” he cried. “And may you be able to help poor old Jack. We go past his cottage on the way to my uncle’s house.”

We finished our glasses and re-entered the car, with Sanderson sitting behind.

"You'll have to go slow over one bit," he said. "They're just tarring, and they're doing it damned badly, I think, with a particularly vicious sort of yellow grit on top of it."

We came to the place quite shortly, and though Ronald almost crawled the rattle of the tiny fragments on the back of the car was very audible.

"You're right," he said. "Damned badly. I'll have to—go even slower."

I glanced at him quickly. The pause in his last sentence had been very perceptible. And it was obvious to me that that was not what he had intended to say. But his expression was inscrutable and his next question quite casual.

"How long have they been at it?" he asked.

"They only started yesterday morning," answered Sanderson. "Now in about a mile we come to Jack's place. Are you going to stop there?"

"We might look in and see what he has to say," said Ronald, "though I fear it's not much use. I've been thinking the thing over on the way down, and it looks pretty hopeless to me."

And once again I glanced at him in surprise, though I said nothing.

"There's the cottage," said Sanderson. "And, by Jove! There's a constable there. I know him, too; he's a local fast bowler. Good evening, Paxton," he called out as we walked up the path to the house. "Any further developments?"

"Afraid there are, sir," answered the policeman. "They've arrested Mr. Dalton."

"The dickens they have!" said Sanderson, with a significant look at Ronald. "When did they do it?"

"Half an hour ago, sir. You see, we found the coat what the squire was talking about—that there overcoat of Mr. Dalton's. And in the pocket was the case what the diamonds had been in."

"And the diamonds?"

"Ain't found them, sir. Not a trace."

"Where was the coat found, officer?" asked Ronald.

" 'Idden away, sir, be'ind one of the 'en 'ouses," answered the man. And then he hesitated. "I suppose as 'ow I didn't really ought to, but would you gentlemen like to have a look at it? It's in the 'all."

"I certainly would," said Ronald. "After all I've heard about this garment I'm most curious to see it. Great Scott!" he cried as he saw it, "no wonder you used to pull his leg over it."

He had taken it down, and was examining it carefully, and suddenly I saw that unmistakable gleam in his eyes which I knew only too well. He was hot on something, but no one except me would have noticed it.

"Interesting," he remarked. "Indeed, a coat of many colours. However, it opens up a field for research."

“What?” cried Sanderson incredulously. “That coat does? How?”

“It has recently been worn by a discharged soldier who has a pronounced limp and fair hair,” said Ronald quietly. “I am beginning to see daylight. Bob,” he continued, turning to me, “will you and Sanderson go on to Mr. Fallconer’s house and wait for me? There are one or two inquiries I’ve got to make, but I hope to get there myself in time for dinner.”

He got into the car and drove off, leaving us staring after him.

“Is he pulling our legs?” demanded Sanderson. “What’s all that bilge about a discharged soldier? He couldn’t possibly deduce that by looking at an old overcoat.”

“It’s astounding what he can get at,” I answered, though I was wondering a bit myself. It seemed wellnigh impossible to have made such a deduction, and yet his voice had been perfectly serious. “Let’s do what he says, anyway,” I continued, “and wait for him at your uncle’s house.”

He took me by a short cut over the fields, and all the way he did nothing but hark back to Ronald’s remark.

“What on earth are we to tell Beryl?” he said just before we reached our destination. “If his remark means anything at all it means that this discharged soldier is the criminal. But it would be a shame to raise her hopes and then find he was fooling.”

“Let’s just say that he’s making a few inquiries and hopes to join up for dinner,” I said.

We found Beryl with her father, and she introduced me to him.

“Delighted if you’ll both stop and dine,” he said when I told him about Ronald, “but I’m afraid he’s wasting his time. The thing is as clear as a pikestaff, though I’d never have believed it of young Dalton. No, no, my dear,” he continued as his daughter began to protest, “we don’t want to go over it all again. If he had given me back the tiara, and promised to leave the district and never see you again, I might have been lenient. But now justice must take its course.”

“The police have searched for the diamonds?” I asked.

“Of course,” he answered testily. “But what’s the good? He wasn’t going to leave ’em in the middle of the dining-room table. He had the whole night in which to hide the tiara. It may be buried anywhere in the country-side, near some landmark that he can recognise later.”

And so it went on for an extremely uncomfortable hour. Mr. Fallconer, whose head was obviously still hurting him, grew more and more irritable, whilst his daughter, with a sort of pathetic faith in Ronald, continually stared out of the window down the drive. And at last came the welcome sight of the car. Not, frankly, that I hoped for anything, but the situation would now be settled one way or the other at any rate.

We all met him in the hall.

“Found the discharged soldier?” said Sanderson, with mild sarcasm.

“No,” answered Ronald genially. “That, I fear, was a little flight of fancy indulged in on the spur of the moment. But what I have found is far more important.”

And from his pocket he produced the tiara.

“The diamonds!” shouted Mr. Fallconer. “Where were they?”

But Ronald did not answer. His eyes, stern and relentless, were fixed on Sanderson, who, with an ashen face, plucked ceaselessly at his collar. And soon we were all looking at him.

“Need you ask?” said Ronald gravely. “I found them in your nephew’s desk.”

“It’s a lie!” muttered Sanderson thickly. “It’s a plot.”

“The plot was yours, Sanderson,” said Ronald, and his voice cut like a knife. “And a pretty rotten one, too. Why, you poor fool, it was next door to obvious from the word go.”

But the other waited to hear no more and, like a whipped cur, bolted from the house.

“Stop him!” roared his uncle. “Stop the damned young blackguard!”

“Steady, Mr. Fallconer,” said Ronald quietly. “You can always get him if you want to. But I would suggest your thinking things over calmly first. After all, he is your nephew, and the scandal will be considerable. But one thing, of course, should be done at once. You must ring up the police and tell ’em to let Jack Dalton go immediately. Explain things as you like, but he is as innocent as I am.”

“I knew it!” cried the girl. “Though how you found out beats me.”

“A very simple case, Miss Fallconer,” he said, “and yet a case which showed an extraordinary mixture of skill and stupidity on the part of your cousin. The first point of interest was the fact that last night was very hot—the sort of night on which no one would dream of wearing an overcoat for warmth. I add those last words advisedly—for warmth.

“We now come to that blessed old coat—a most conspicuous garment; a garment about which Dalton was used to being chaffed; a garment which would be instantly recognised by your father or by you. Well, now, it is conceivable that if he wanted the coat for warmth he might have chanced wearing it; but he didn’t. Therefore what possible purpose could there be in his putting it on? If he proposed to steal your diamonds, it is the very last thing he would have worn. And so the obvious alternative solution was that it wasn’t Dalton who was wearing the coat at all, but someone who wanted to impersonate him. So much was clear before we left London.

“Came the next question—who could this be? First, it was some man who knew the tiara was in your desk. That boiled us down to the four who dined with you, or someone looking through the curtains on the night of the party. Second, it was some man who knew Dalton intimately—so intimately that he knew all this jest about the coat. And that was one of the reasons which made it improbable that it was a casual burglar who had seen from outside. The other reason, as you pointed out, Bob, was that a casual man would have gone for it on the night of the party and not waited. So I considered your four guests; in fact, Mr. Sanderson considered them for me. And somewhat naturally I dismissed the Vicar and Sir John Grantfield.

"Now we came to the first difficulty, for by this time I was frankly wondering about your nephew. On the face of it he had a perfect alibi. Mr. Fallconer had been attacked just after midnight. Miss Fallconer rang him up at twelve-thirty. His car was out of commission. He couldn't have walked seven miles in less than half an hour. He couldn't even have bicycled it unless he was a racing champion. He wouldn't have dared to ask for a stray lift, or even hire another car. And so if his car was *really* out of commission he was exonerated.

"Well, we called in on him on our way down. And then we went to Dalton's cottage, where we saw the coat. And on that celebrated garment there were some interesting marks. Behind the right shoulder were three or four splashes of new tar, and adhering to the tar were tiny fragments of yellow grit. Now, between Dalton's place and Sanderson's there is a stretch of new tar covered with yellow grit which they only commenced work on yesterday. So it appeared possible that the driver of an open car might have worn that coat when going over that stretch; the marks were just where one would expect to find them. And the significance of the oil of eucalyptus struck me at once—a bottle of which Mrs. Burton had given him while we were there.

"Back I went and examined his car. True, it was out of commission, but a glance at the trouble showed that half an hour's work was all that was necessary to put it right. Then I looked at the back: no trace of tar. Then I searched in the rubbish heap and found this."

He took a blackened old rag out of his pocket and the reek of eucalyptus filled the room.

"The proof I wanted," he continued, and we stared at him in amazement. "The whole thing was clear. Your nephew had taken Dalton's coat, probably when he saw him yesterday afternoon. He repaired his car and drove to somewhere near here, going over the newly-laid tar and getting some on the coat. Then, having knocked you out and got the diamonds, he left the coat in Dalton's farm and drove back. Mrs. Burton, being deaf, never heard the car at all. Came a stroke of luck for him when you rang up, Miss Fallconer. To his mind it established his innocence. He then came over here in a hired car; went back this morning and again took his engine partially down. But a further point had to be dealt with: the back of his car was covered with tar splashes—noticeable splashes because of the yellow grit. He realised that if they were seen he was for it, since the work only started yesterday. And here he was clever. He happened to know a small fact which very few people do know. Unfortunately for him, I knew it too, and very nearly gave it away in the car, Bob. There is nothing so good for removing tar from paint-work as plain oil of eucalyptus. Moreover, no suspicion would be aroused by his asking for some, whereas if he bought one of the patent mixtures sold for the purpose—even if he could have got it in the village—questions might have been asked. And so when I found this rag in the rubbish beside the garage the whole chain of events was complete, and I decided to commit a small burglary myself, which very fortunately was successful. I had noticed a big desk in the room he had taken us to, and I decided to chance it. Picking locks is a little hobby of mine, and that one presented no difficulties.”

“I think it’s simply amazing, Mr. Standish,” said the girl.

“Honestly—no, Miss Fallconer. Sheer luck was far too big a factor for me to take much credit. For there is no getting away from the fact that it was the fresh tar on the road and the eucalyptus being brought in by Mrs. Burton that solved the matter.”

“Well, we’re extremely grateful to you,” said Mr. Fallconer. “Young Jack will be here at any moment now and will be anxious to thank you himself. But there is one point that occurs to me. What would have happened if I hadn’t interrupted him? He’s a man with a lot of money; he didn’t want the diamonds for the cash they’d bring.”

Ronald smiled faintly.

“Solving things that have happened is hard enough without trying one’s hand at things that haven’t. But I think I can hazard a guess. The tiara was destined for Dalton’s house: taking the first opportunity, Sanderson would have planted it there, as the phrase goes.”

“But in Heaven’s name—why?” cried Mr. Fallconer. “What motive had he?”

Ronald’s smile grew more pronounced, and he stared at the girl.

“A singularly charming one, if I may say so,” he answered.

5

THE HOUSE WITH THE KENNELS

"A YOUNG lady to see you, sir. Here is her card."

With a frown of annoyance Ronald Standish put down the golf bag he had just picked up and took the bit of pasteboard from his man.

"That's a nuisance, Bob," he said to me, and then he raised his eyebrows. "Miss Nancy Millington. I wonder if she is any relation of Tom Millington whom I've played cricket with. Show her in, Sayers."

The butler left the room and a moment later he ushered in a pretty girl of about twenty-five, who looked from one to the other of us in doubt.

"I wonder no longer," said Ronald, with a laugh. "And what can I do for Tom Millington's sister?"

"How did you know?" she cried, surprised.

"My dear Miss Millington—you're as alike as two peas. How is the old lad?"

"He's very well, Mr. Standish, and it was he who told me to come to you. He thinks I'm a half-wit for bothering you at all, and I'm not at all sure I don't think the same myself now that I'm here."

"Take a pew, bless you," said Ronald, "and let's hear all about it. Incidentally, this is Bob Miller."

"It all seems so trivial and stupid," she began, "when one starts to put it into words, that probably you'll laugh at me the same as Tom did. But I can't help it. I feel I've got to get it off my chest. He and I, as perhaps you know, Mr. Standish, live together. We've got a house down at West Bilsington, which is a little village not far from Pulborough, in Sussex. Tom does a bit of farming in the intervals of playing cricket, and we've been there about four years.

"Most of the houses round us are small cottages belonging to labourers; in fact, the only big one in the neighbourhood is the rectory, which is a great barn of a place. And it is about the rectory that I've come to see you. A year ago the old vicar died. He was a man with considerable private means, and an awfully good sort. He and his wife used to do a lot of entertaining in a mild way—tennis and that sort of thing; and so, when he pegged out, we were all of us very concerned as to who was going to take his place.

"Well, I don't know how these things are arranged, but the next incumbent, or whatever they call it, hadn't got a bean to bless himself with. He's an extraordinarily nice man, and his wife is charming, but they found they couldn't possibly afford to live in the rectory. You want at least four servants, and they simply couldn't run to it. So they put it in the house-agent's hands, with no result until two months ago, when a Mrs. Hamilton took it, and the vicar and his wife moved into a cottage.

"Somewhat naturally, as you can guess, we were all very anxious to see the lady. The tennis court is the only decent one for miles, and we hoped the old regime would start again. Which is where we were disappointed. A week after Mrs. Hamilton arrived we discovered she was mad on dogs, and proposed to start kennels. She hung up notices all over the place to say that dogs would be taken in and boarded, and proceeded to cover the lawn with wired-in runs for them. And in addition to that, she actually brought half a dozen dogs of all varieties of breeds with her. I'm afraid all this is very boring," she added apologetically, "but I must begin at the beginning."

"Tell it your own way, Miss Millington," said Ronald.

"As you can imagine," she continued, "in a small village like ours everybody knows pretty well everything about everybody else. The butcher or someone passes things on to the cook and she does the rest. And it soon became known that Mrs. Hamilton's *ménage* was rather a funny one. For one thing, she had nothing but men servants; for another, two of them, at least, were foreigners. Of course, there was nothing in that——"

"Just one moment, Miss Millington," interrupted Ronald. "What aged woman is this Mrs. Hamilton?"

"Forty—forty-five," said the girl.

"And is she English?"

"I wouldn't swear to it," she answered. "She speaks English perfectly, but once or twice it has seemed to me that she's got the trace of an accent."

"Is there a Mr. Hamilton?"

"If there is, he hasn't been down there, to my knowledge."

"I see," said Ronald. "Please go on."

"Another thing that soon became obvious was that she was a very unsociable sort of woman. I gave her a fortnight to settle in and then I went to call. She was quite polite and returned it a week later, but one could tell at once that it was only because she had to, and that she didn't intend to let it go any further. Not that I wanted it to, but she is our next-door neighbour, and in a little place like that one naturally wants to be friendly. She is always quite pleasant if she is on the lawn and I happen to be passing, but she definitely gives you the impression that it's a case of bare politeness, and that she wishes to goodness you'd go away. The trouble is that I'm absolutely devoted to dogs, and I never can resist having a look at them when I go past the gate. Which is what caused the first thing that has brought me here to-day.

"Three weeks ago I was going into the village, and looking on to the lawn I saw her with a new arrival—a perfectly topping Irish terrier.

" 'What a beauty!' I cried. 'What's his name?'

" 'Cheaper,' she said. 'Because I got him cheaper than I expected.'

"The jest, I admit, was feeble, but it was such an extraordinary thing for her to make a joke at all that I went in and joined her.

" 'He is a good dog,' she went on. 'Quite the best Airedale I've seen for a long while.'

"I stared at her in amazement.

" 'But, Mrs. Hamilton,' I cried, 'he's not an Airedale; he's an Irish terrier.' "

The girl paused for a moment, as if searching for the right words.

"I don't want to exaggerate, Mr. Standish," she went on, after a while, "but the effect was literally amazing. Admittedly, it was an incredible error for a dog-lover to make, but one would have expected her to laugh it off, or to pretend that she'd been fooling. After all, there is a certain similarity between the two breeds. It's not like mistaking a pug for a mastiff.

"She turned white with fury, and for a moment I actually thought she was going to hit me. A look came into her eyes that was positively venomous, and I stepped back a pace. And then she recovered herself.

" 'Of course,' she said, with a forced laugh. 'How stupid of me!'

"I stayed on a few more minutes; then I left. And the more I thought over it the more I wondered. How could anyone who is keen on dogs make such a mistake? And why the fury when it was pointed out? Because I hadn't imagined it, Mr. Standish: I can assure you of that.

"I talked it over with Tom, and he pooh-poohed the whole thing. He seemed to think that the lady had a bad temper naturally and was furious with herself at being caught out. Which was all right as far as it went, but it didn't answer my difficulty. How could a *genuine* dog-lover be caught out over such a thing?"

Ronald nodded, and I could see he was interested.

"And having got as far as that," continued the girl, "I went a bit farther. Was she a genuine dog-lover, and if she wasn't, what on earth was the object of all this elaborate pretence of kennels? Again Tom laughed at me. His contention, and I admit it is difficult to answer, was that no one but a congenital idiot would rent the rectory at a place like West Bilsington and install dogs all over the lawn unless they were fond of animals. If she wanted to bury herself there, why couldn't she do it without the dogs?"

"I can think of two very good reasons," said Ronald quietly, "but it's early days yet. This happened, you say, three weeks ago. I take it something further has occurred since?"

“Yesterday,” she answered promptly. “And it was that that decided me to come and see you. It may be all rot. Tom shrieked with laughter when I told him, and probably you will too. I was passing the gate of the rectory about eleven o’clock in the morning, and I stopped as I nearly always do to have a look at the dogs. Suddenly, I don’t know why, I happened to glance up at the house. And there, pressed against one of the top windows, was a face. The sun was shining on the room, and so I could see the features clearly and the expression of fear and terror on them. Then in a flash the face had gone, almost as if it had been dragged away by someone behind.”

“Man or woman?” asked Ronald.

“An elderly man,” she said. “I stayed there as long as I could, wondering if he would reappear, but he didn’t.”

Ronald lit a cigarette thoughtfully.

“Let’s get this straight, Miss Millington,” he said. “The lawn is between the road and the house, so the house must be a considerable distance from where you were standing. Now, can you really be sure that the expression on this man’s face was one of fear and terror?”

“Just what Tom said,” she answered. “In my own mind, Mr. Standish, I am perfectly sure. As I told you, the sun was shining on him, and in that momentary glimpse he stood out as clear as a photograph. Tom says that it is one of the servants who is sick, and, of course, he may be right. But if ever a man was appealing for help, that man was; I’m sure of it. So much so, in fact, that I very nearly told our local policeman when I got into the village. And then I thought I’d better ask Tom’s advice first.”

“I don’t think the policeman would have been much use,” agreed Ronald. “Your evidence is a little too thin, isn’t it, for official action?”

“But you do believe me, don’t you, Mr. Standish?”

“I certainly believe all you’ve told me,” answered Ronald. “But what interpretation to put on it is a different matter. Terror and great pain might look much the same at a distance, and Tom’s theory about the sick servant is quite possibly correct. Again, Mrs. Hamilton’s anger over her mistake about the Airedale is also capable of an innocent solution.”

“Which means you think there’s nothing in it!” she cried, with keen disappointment in her voice.

“Not at all,” Ronald assured her. “I am merely trying to show you that we mustn’t be too hasty in jumping to conclusions; which is just what you, bless your heart, have done. You are convinced that Mrs. Hamilton is a fraud, to put it mildly, and that she and her gang of servants are holding some man prisoner, and probably torturing him.”

He laughed, and after a moment she laughed too.

“Put like that, it does seem a bit absurd,” she confessed. “And, as Tom says, it would be ridiculous if she is a fraud to bother about the dogs.”

“Now that,” said Ronald, “is where I entirely disagree with Tom, for two reasons, as I said before. Either the whole thing is completely innocent and you’ve made a crashing bloomer, or something very like my melodramatic picture is the truth. As you rightly remarked, in a tiny place like that everybody is intensely curious, and if this Mrs. Hamilton is playing some deep game, it is essential for her to have an occupation which will account for her being there.”

“But why dogs, if she knows nothing about ’em?” I put in.

“Reason number two,” he answered. “If there are dirty doings going on in the house, what better guardians could she possibly find than a bunch of dogs that bark the place down if a stranger approaches the door? Especially at night.”

“You’re quite right. Mr. Standish,” said the girl. “They make the most awful row. So you do think there’s something in it?” she added.

“ ’Pon my Sam, Miss Millington, I don’t know. I should say it’s about a fifty-fifty chance. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do, if you like. Can you put Bob and me up for two or three nights?”

“Of course,” she cried. “Only too delighted.”

“Good! Then he and I will arrive with golf clubs complete, ostensibly to play round those very excellent links near Pulborough. And in the intervals of so doing we will cast a discerning eye on the denizens of the rectory.”

“How splendid!” she said. “I’m so glad, Mr. Standish! Because I’m certain there is something wrong.”

“Do you really think there is anything in it?” I asked when she had gone.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“On the one hand we have woman’s intuition, which is never a thing to be sneezed at; on the other, some first-class golf. So, old lad, we score either way.”

There would have been no mistaking the rectory even without the dogs on the lawn. The only large house in the village, it stood some forty yards back from the road and about the same distance from the church, from which it was separated by an old wall with a wicket gate in it. Trees ran along the rectory side of the wall; on the other lay part of the churchyard. So much was obvious as we drove slowly past, and then, just as we got to the gate, Ronald somewhat unexpectedly stopped the car.

“No time like the present, Bob,” he said. “We’ll do a bit of acting.”

There was no one in the garden, but he pointed to the notice board for the benefit of anybody who might be watching from the house and led the way up to the front door. Immediately all the dogs started barking furiously, and I saw a curtain shake in one of the end rooms. We were being inspected.

“I see from the notice on the road,” he said to the man who opened the door, “that you are prepared to receive dogs and board them. Can I see the owner of the place?”

“I will find out if she is in,” answered the man, speaking with a pronounced foreign accent. He was a saturnine-looking fellow, dark-skinned and swarthy, and I put him down as an Italian.

He was away some time before he returned to say that Mrs. Hamilton would receive us, and to my surprise he seemed considerably agitated. However, we followed him through the hall to a room at the back of the house where we found the lady sitting at a desk, writing. She rose as we entered.

“I was just motoring past, madam,” said Ronald with a bow, “and I happened to catch sight of your notice. I have a terrier in London, for whom I want to find a happy home for the next six months while I am abroad. Would you be prepared to take him?”

“Certainly,” she answered. “My terms are half a guinea a week.”

They continued talking details for a time whilst I glanced round the room. It was just what one would have expected to find in such a house—sunny and comfortable, and the conviction began to grow on me that Miss Millington had made a mistake. Outside was another stretch of lawn with more dogs on it, and beyond that lay the kitchen garden.

“Then that is settled,” I heard Ronald say. “I’ll send the little chap down in a week or ten days.”

She pressed the bell, which was answered by the same man who had let us in, and whom we again followed through the hall. We had penetrated the fortress, but it did not seem to me that we had gained much by it.

“Didn’t it strike you,” I said, as we got into the car, “that that blighter who let us in had been ticked off when he went to find out if she was at home?”

“Well done, Bob,” said Ronald with a laugh. “You’re getting on fine. But did it strike you as to why he’d been ticked off?”

“How on earth can I be expected to know that?” I cried.

“Didn’t you notice any difference in his appearance when he returned to say that Mrs. Hamilton would see me?”

“I can’t say that I did.”

“Not so good, old boy. When he opened the door to us he was not wearing gloves. When he came back he was.”

“One of her rules, I suppose, and he’d forgotten.”

“Did you see his nails?”

“No, I didn’t. What was the matter with them?”

He did not answer for a time, and when he did it was about something completely different.

“Is it possible,” he said, “that anybody could seriously think that a terrier eats a pound of dog biscuits twice a day? For that is what I told the lady my mythical hound consumed, and she swallowed it hook, bait, and sinker. I must say she was at pains to inform me that all practical details were left to the kennelman, but even so, Bob—a terrier, and two pounds of biscuits a day is a bit hot.”

“Then you do think the show is crooked?”

“I said fifty-fifty to Miss Millington. Now . . .”

He fell into a brown study, which continued till we reached the Millingtons’ house.

“The devil of it,” he said as he stopped the engine, “is that we’ve got no excuse for going back there again, and it will be the deuce of a job to reconnoitre that house with dogs fore and aft, so to speak. I’d no idea she had more at the back.”

Tom Millington came out to greet us grinning all over his face, and Ronald introduced me to him.

“Delighted to see you,” he cried, “but I never thought Nancy would catch an old bird like you, Ronald, with her mare’s nest.”

Ronald smiled but said nothing, and we followed Millington into the house, where we were joined by his sister.

“Here are your wretched dupes, Nancy,” he said. “The least you can do for them is to produce some whisky and soda.”

“What time does the post go out?” asked Ronald.

“Six o’clock,” said Millington. “You’ve plenty of time to catch it.”

“Good. Well, Miss Millington, I’ve interviewed your girl friend.”

“You’ve seen Mrs. Hamilton!” she cried. “How did you manage that?”

“I am sending her a non-existent terrier in a few days which eats two pounds of biscuits a day. At least I told her so and she didn’t dispute the fact.”

For a moment she looked bewildered. Then she turned triumphantly on her brother.

“There you are, Tom. I knew she was a fraud.”

“Just because she knows nothing about dogs doesn’t prove she’s a wrong ’un,” he said obstinately.

“It doesn’t prove it,” agreed Ronald. “But from one or two little things I saw, I think the betting on it is quite sufficient for me to write to Scotland Yard and make a few inquiries on the matter. Only I must beg of you to say nothing about it to anyone. If we’re wrong it’s the most libellous thing to do. If we’re right we don’t want the smallest chance of giving the alarm. Which is why I do not propose to post the letter in the village box. The local postman would probably die of heart failure.”

“Let’s go and have a round,” said Millington, now definitely impressed, “and you can post it on the way there. But what on earth can they be up to in a place like this?”

“That remains to be seen, old boy,” answered Ronald. “Mrs. Hamilton and the man who opened the door are both new ones on me, so I’ve got no ideas as to their line of country. But if one of my surmises is correct, I think I could hazard a pretty shrewd guess.”

And more than that he refused to say, though we were all itching with curiosity. We played golf that evening, and two rounds the next day, and never once did he allude to the matter. And then on the following morning came the reply from the Yard.

“Blank,” said Ronald after he had read it. “Nothing is known about them. And I’m afraid I rather expected it. However, the point that now arises is what we’re going to do about it—if anything.”

“We must do something,” cried the girl. “If they are criminals we can’t let them stay on at the rectory.”

“If you can tell me of any method by which we can turn ’em out,” laughed Ronald, “we’ll get down to it. We haven’t got a vestige of proof, and if we managed to get into the house in search of it, it’s we who become the criminals. No, Miss Millington, I fear it’s no go at present. So I think I will go back to London and make a few further inquiries, leaving Bob, if you can bear him, to hold the fort at this end.”

“We’d love Mr. Miller to stay on,” she said, but I could tell she was disappointed.

“Keep your eyes skinned, Bob,” said Ronald. “See without being seen, and don’t let ’em suspect you.”

Which was all very fine and large, as I said to the girl after he had gone. How on earth was I to see without being seen? I could not stand at the front gate, nor could I walk backwards and forwards past it for hours on end. A hiding-place in the grounds was out of the question because of the dogs, so that altogether it seemed a somewhat tall order. And then at lunch she had a brainwave.

“Do you, by any chance, sketch, Mr. Miller?”

“Not so that you’d notice it,” I said. “Why?”

“Because if you could, sufficiently well not to make it ridiculous, I thought you might sit in the churchyard and draw the church. Then you’d have at any rate two sides of the house under observation.”

Now, as a matter of fact, as a schoolboy I had done a certain amount of sketching in a mild way, and the advantages of her suggestion were obvious. The trouble was that it had been very mild, and my fear was that my effort would be so crude that anyone seeing it would know I was an impostor. Still, it seemed the only possibility, and after lunch we drove into Horsham for the necessary paraphernalia. Then, having obtained permission from the vicar, I proceeded to the churchyard.

One difficulty immediately presented itself. To even the most inexperienced eye there was only one feasible spot in which to set up my easel, from the point of view of drawing the church, and that spot was utterly unsuitable from the point of view of watching the rectory. However, undeterred by trifles of that sort, I selected a place which gave me the best observation post for the house and commenced work under the rheumy gaze of an incredibly old man who was pottering round tending the graves.

It was a beautifully warm afternoon and I soon began to feel infernally sleepy. What little cunning my hand had ever possessed seemed to have completely gone, and my preliminary effort looked like a cross between a Martello tower and a drunken lighthouse. The old man was immensely edified.

“Have ’e done much in that line, sir?” he mumbled, after he had inspected it long and carefully.

“Not for some time,” I answered, with what dignity I could, hoping fervently that my audience would not increase.

He cupped his hand round his ear.

“What do ’e say?” he remarked. “I be terrible ’ard of ’earing.”

“I said not for some time,” I told him in a loud voice, and even as I spoke I realised that a man was watching me intently from one of the top windows of the rectory. He was not the one who had let Ronald and me in when we had called on Mrs. Hamilton, but he also looked like a foreigner. For an appreciable time he stood there staring at me. Then as suddenly as he had appeared he vanished, and a few moments later I saw him come out of the front door and walk towards the wicket gate. Evidently he was going to speak to me, which was the last thing I wanted. One glance at the effusion I had produced would give the whole show away. There was only one thing to be done, and I did it. I tore off the sheet, crumpled it into a ball and threw it away.

“A fine day for sketching,” he remarked, as he came up. “And an excellent subject.”

“Which, I fear, I did but scant justice to with my first attempt,” I answered, lighting a cigarette. “In fact, I have thrown it away.”

“What a pity!” he said. “I would have liked to have seen it.”

He was looking round, and my heart sank. What on earth was I going to do if he picked it up and opened it? And suddenly, to my amazement, I realised it was no longer there. It had fallen between two graves, and now there was no sign of it. And then it dawned on me what had happened: the ancient had picked it up.

“Yonder octogenarian has removed the outrage,” I said lightly.

“I really must see it,” he remarked with a smile. “I assure you I am no mean critic. Hi—you!”

The old man took not the slightest notice, but continued pottering about with his hoe.

“He’s as deaf as a post,” I said. “But I am not at all anxious for it to be seen; it is altogether too bad.”

“Artistic modesty,” he cried, and to my alarm and annoyance he went up to the old chap. Which was devilish awkward. We could not have a bellowing match in the churchyard.

“Have you got the sketch the gentleman threw away?” he shouted.

“Aye, sir, it’s a beautiful day,” wheezed the other. “Just what we want at cherry-picking time.”

“The sketch that you picked up, you old ass.”

“The grass, sir. Maybe that could do with a drop of rain. Which reminds me,” he chuckled, “that I could do with a drop of summat myself. ’Tis powerful thirsty weather.”

He hobbled away down the path, and I burst out laughing at the other’s discomfiture. He looked completely nonplussed. And then the more sinister aspect struck me. Why was he so keen to inspect this sketch of mine that he had even displayed considerable bad taste over the matter? If ever a man had been told plainly that I did not want it looked at, he had. And yet he had persisted. If he was so anxious to find out whether I was a genuine artist, it followed that he had reasons for fearing I might not be. Which was yet another proof that things were going on in the house which he wished to conceal. But he had quite recovered himself when he rejoined me.

“He certainly is a little hard of hearing,” he remarked genially.

“Are you also interested in dogs?” I inquired.

“I fear not,” he answered. “It is my aunt’s hobby. Aren’t you going to sketch any more?”

I had risen and started to pack up.

“Not to-day,” I said. “I’m just beginning to think that our elderly friend’s idea of a drop of summat has much to commend it.”

I did not tell him that as nothing would induce me to draw a line under his eye there did not seem much object in prolonging the interview. Mrs. Hamilton was walking about amongst the dogs; it seemed unlikely that I should find out anything more. And so I left him standing there and started home. Did he suspect me? That was the point. Most certainly I suspected him, but was the converse true? His attempt to test me had been foiled by the old man’s deafness. What was the final result in his mind?

“Aunt!” scoffed Nancy Millington, when I told them about it. “I don’t believe it.”

“I admit I’ve seldom seen two people who are less alike,” I agreed. “Still, I don’t see that that has much bearing on it either way!”

“It’s another proof that they’re crooked,” she cried. “Why should he pretend to be her nephew when he isn't?"

"Hold hard, old soul," said her brother with a grin. "It is just possible, you know, that she *is* his aunt."

"Any message from Ronald?" I asked.

"Not a word," said the girl, and shortly after we all went to dress for dinner, a meal at which we endeavoured without conspicuous success to keep the conversation off the rectory.

It was the sudden furious barking of all the dogs at about eleven o'clock that gave Tom Millington the idea.

"What about doing a little observation by night from the churchyard, Miller? There's no moon, and it's nice and warm. We might find out something."

"I'm quite on," I said. "Let's go and change into some other clothes. And we'd better wear rubber shoes."

His sister wanted to come too, but with brotherly frankness he informed her that she would merely be a damned nuisance. And so half an hour later we two men found ourselves crouching amongst the graves as near to the wicket gate as we could get. The top rooms of the rectory on the side facing us were in darkness, though light was streaming out from two windows in front.

Not a breath of wind stirred; the night was absolutely still. The village, a few hundred yards down the road, was long since asleep. And I was just beginning to feel a strong craving for a cigarette, when with disconcerting suddenness a light went on in one of the downstair rooms in front of us. A man, clearly visible through some thin curtains, had just come in, and I edged nearer Millington.

"That's my bird of this afternoon," I whispered.

He crossed to the french windows and flung them open, whilst we shrank back, though it was out of the question for him to see us as we were well in the shadow. For some time he stood there silhouetted against the light, and the smell of his cigar came to us distinctly.

"Nothing much the matter with that weed," breathed Millington in my ear. "Why can't the bally man go and smoke it somewhere else? It's making me envious."

Suddenly he swung round. Another man—the servant who had admitted Ronald and me—had entered the room carrying something in his hand. It looked like a piece of white paper, and he put it on the table. Then both men pored over it in silence for some minutes. At length my acquaintance of the afternoon produced a magnifying glass from his pocket, and continued his examination through that. And he was just straightening up when there came a startling interruption. A man's scream, instantly suppressed, rang through the night. And it came from the house.

With a snarl of rage my acquaintance dropped the magnifying glass and sprang to the door, followed by his companion. And in a flash Tom Millington was on his feet.

“Come on, Miller,” he muttered. “I’m not standing for this. That scream was one of mortal terror.”

We rushed through the wicket gate, and into the room. The door was open, and heedless of what noise we made we raced up the stairs. The passage was lit, and as we passed one of the rooms a pitiful moaning sound came from it. And Tom Millington without hesitation walked straight in.

For a moment there was dead silence, and we took in the whole scene. Lying in bed was a dazed-looking man. Standing over him were Mrs. Hamilton and the two who had been in the room downstairs. And in the woman’s hand was a hypodermic syringe. For just a second the sick man’s eyes sought ours in an agony of supplication. Then they closed wearily and he sank back on the pillows.

“What is the meaning of this monstrous intrusion?”

Mrs. Hamilton had at length found her voice.

“What is the meaning of that poor devil?” I cried sternly, pointing at the bed.

“By Gosh! it’s the —— artist,” said her so-called nephew softly, getting between us and the door and ringing the bell.

“How dare you break into my house?” cried the woman, white with anger.

“Cut it out,” said Millington curtly. “When one hears some poor wretch screaming in terror one doesn’t stop to ring the front door bell. Well—what explanation have you?”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw that two more men had entered the room, and an ugly-looking couple of customers they were. Then I turned back to the woman, and just caught a meaning glance that passed between her and her nephew.

“You are evidently under some delusion, Mr. Millington,” she remarked in a very different voice from her former one. “I still consider it an outrageous thing for you and your friend to come into my house unannounced at this time of night. But hearing what you did it is perhaps understandable. This poor man is suffering from an agonising and practically incurable complaint, and the only thing we can do to help him is to give him continual injections of morphia.”

“What doctor is attending him?” said Millington stubbornly.

“Really, Mr. Millington! I confess I’m amazed at your question. What possible business can it be of yours? But if you wish to know, it is a specialist from Brighton. And now I must really request you to go. Otherwise I shall have to ask my nephew to ring for the police.”

“Nephew!” came a genial voice from the door, and we all swung round. To my astonishment Ronald was standing there with three other men, one of whom—the speaker—I recognised as Inspector McIver of Scotland Yard.

“Well, well,” he continued, “one lives and learns. I didn’t know you went in for aunts. So you’re up to your old games again, are you, Joe?”

“I don’t know what the devil you’re talking about, McIver,” answered the other sullenly. “You fellows will never give a man any credit for trying to run straight. I’m helping my aunt with her dogs.”

“Are you, now? And do you feed ’em on these?”

From his pocket McIver produced a piece of paper, which I recognised as being similar to the one the two men had been examining downstairs.

“I’ve struck some damn fool things in my life, Joe,” he continued, “but actually to leave one lying about in a sitting-room with the window open wins in a canter.”

I looked at the paper more closely. It was a five-pound note. And the next moment we were all of us mixed up in it. With a howl of fury the man called Joe had hurled himself on the footman.

“You thrice damned fool!” he screamed. “You’ve wrecked everything.”

“Not quite,” said McIver, when they were finally separated. “But each of you thinking the other had it saved me a lot of bother. Put the bracelets on all of ’em.”

A sergeant entered the room.

“I’ve found the outfit, sir,” he announced, but McIver took no notice. He had gone to the bed, and was staring at the unconscious man. And suddenly he gave a long whistle.

“Blest if it isn’t Mr. Symington, the millionaire! He’s supposed to have left for Paris three or four days ago. My sainted aunt, Joe, you’ll be for it this time good and hearty. Forging bank-notes and abduction with violence should keep you occupied at the taxpayers’ expense till it’s time to redeem the three and a half per cent. War Loan.”

And at that instant the sick man opened his eyes.

“Save me,” he muttered. “Forging my signature. Stop the cheques.”

“All right, sir,” said McIver soothingly. “Don’t you worry your head about that. We’ve caught the whole bunch.”

“Came down about my dog,” whispered the other. “They must have sent faked letters to hotel.”

His eyes shut, he seemed to sleep.

“What have you done to him?” said McIver sternly.

The woman shrugged her shoulders, she knew the game was up.

“Nothing serious,” she said. “He’s only bung full of morphia. I was speaking the truth when I told those guys that.”

And then she stared at Ronald.

“What put you wise?” she asked.

“Apart from the small matter of Irish terriers and Airedales,” he said, “the fox terrier has yet to be born that eats two pounds of biscuits a day.”

“But you were wise to that before you left London,” I remarked. “What made you wiser?”

It was an hour later, and we were having a final nightcap. Mr. Symington had been removed to a nursing home, the prisoners to a less comfortable destination.

“When I saw Joe Darlington,” he answered. “At least, that was the name under which he last enjoyed His Majesty’s hospitality. What his real name is I doubt if even he himself knows. He has several aliases, speaks four or five languages fluently, and is a natural criminal. And to think that he would sit in the country on a dog farm was to think the unthinkable. So I *knew* the show was crooked, a thing I had only guessed before.

“You remember I asked you if you’d noticed that other man’s nails when he opened the door. Well, I had, and I’d seen they were stained and discoloured with acid. Such stains may come quite innocently; they may also come very much otherwise. They are almost invariably to be found on a forger’s hands, and when I saw them I told you that if anything shady was going on I could give a pretty shrewd guess as to what it was. Seeing Darlington this afternoon made it to my mind a certainty. I don’t think he has ever been actually in that line himself, but he would be an invaluable help in getting the notes distributed, which is more than half the battle. So I got on the ’phone to McIver, who arrived about two hours ago with his merry men. And the rest you know. It was luck, of course, each of ’em thinking the other had the dud fiver, but we had them in any case.”

“But what I still don’t understand,” I said, “is about this man Joe Darlington. You hadn’t seen him before you went to London, so how could you ’phone McIver?”

Ronald grinned gently.

“My dear old boy,” he said, “I never went to London. I had the very greatest faith in your ability to bolt any badger there might be. I was tolerably certain you had only to be in the vicinity of the house for half an hour for the suspicions of every inmate to be aroused. And I banked on it.”

His voice changed suddenly.

“Oi be terrible ’ard of ’earing,” he wheezed, producing my crumpled-up sketch from his pocket. “My sainted aunt, Bob, it might be anything from a joint of beef to a ship in distress at sea!”

6

THE THIRD MESSAGE

I

“SUSSEX at the Oval; Oxford at Lord’s. Which shall it be, Bob?”

Ronald Standish pushed back his chair from the breakfast table and started to fill his pipe.

“Neither—unless I’m much mistaken, old boy,” I said from the window. “A warrior showing traces of excitement has just crossed the street and is making for the door. It looks like a job of work!”

The bell rang furiously, and a moment or two later Ronald’s butler ushered in a visitor. He was a man of about thirty-five, dark and clean-shaven, and he was in a state of considerable agitation.

“Mr. Standish?” he inquired, looking from one to the other of us.

“That’s me,” said Ronald. “What can I do for you?”

“I must first of all apologise for coming at such an unearthly hour,” he remarked, “but a very shocking tragedy has taken place. And remembering that a friend of mine, Major Brewster——”

“Jim Brewster in the 10th Lancers?” put in Ronald.

“That’s the man.”

“I know him well. Please go on.”

“Remembering, then, that he once told me that you were prepared sometimes to take on detective cases, I ventured to come straight away to you. Stavert is my name—Herbert Stavert.”

“Take a chair, Mr. Stavert; and take your time,” said Ronald. “But before you begin, I’ll just have the debris cleared away.”

He rang the bell, and while Sayers—his man—was removing the breakfast things, no more was said.

“Now,” said Ronald, as the door closed, “let’s hear all about it.”

“To make things clear, Mr. Standish,” began the other, “I must go back five months. Does the name Sir James Brackenbury convey anything to you?”

Ronald knit his brows.

“Brackenbury! Vaguely—yes. I know I’ve heard the name, but at the moment I can’t connect it with anything. Wait—didn’t he fall over a cliff and break his neck?”

“So I thought until last night,” said the other, grimly. “Now I don’t think that ‘fall’ is the right word. However, you shall hear the whole story and judge for yourself. Sir James Brackenbury was my uncle; he was also, in a sense, my employer. I used to live with him at Stalbridge Hall, doing for him what little secretarial work he required. But it was really only a nominal job; I was more a companion than a secretary. To be quite frank, he never got on with either of his sons, and when his wife died, about two years ago, he suggested that I should make the place my home.

"I deliberated for some time as to whether I should accept his offer. Again, to be quite frank, my uncle was a somewhat queer-tempered individual, and I was doubtful as to how we should get on. But jobs are hard to come by these days, and, to cut it short, I went—an action which was not approved of by either of my cousins. They made the most offensive insinuations, the more offensive because they were so obviously groundless. The property was entailed; the title must pass automatically, so what I was expected to get out of it I don't know. But I want to make it clear that the family atmosphere was not good.

"Well, for about fifteen months the arrangement continued. I ran the business of the estate; opened my uncle's correspondence, arranged his shooting parties, and so on. And, somewhat naturally, my uncle got into the habit of expressing himself pretty freely in front of me. Which brings me to the next family difference. It has, so far as I can see, no bearing on the matter, but I think it better to tell you everything. You must know, then, that the principal cause of my uncle's anger with his elder son Harry was that he refused to get married. The old man was frightened lest the title should ultimately come to Dick, the younger boy, whom he disliked far more than he did Harry."

"It certainly sounds a very happy family," commented Ronald dryly. "Did the two brothers dislike one another also?"

"They got on fairly well together so far as I know. Harry was in the Guards; Dick was in some motor business down in Brighton. And it was the old man's custom always to allude to him as that damned chauffeur. Harry came twice while I was there for the shooting. Dick never entered the house. And that was the state of affairs at the beginning of last March, when, on opening my uncle's letters one morning, I found an extraordinary communication. It was typewritten, evidently on a cheap machine, by someone who was not an expert. The spacing was uneven, and some of the letters were irregular.

" 'Place the papers on the seat by the summer-house.'

"That was the message. Just that and nothing more. I looked at the envelope; the postmark was a London one."

"One moment," interrupted Ronald. "Have you got that paper on you?"

"I have not," said Stavert. "You will understand why shortly. After breakfast I showed it to my uncle, commenting on its strangeness. And, to my amazement, the old man turned as white as a sheet.

" 'Good Lord! Uncle James!' I cried. 'What's the matter?'

"He slowly recovered his colour, though I could see he was terribly shaken.

" 'The devils,' he muttered at length, 'the foul devils! I'll be damned if I do. Let them do their worst.'

" 'But who are you talking about?' I cried, bewildered.

" 'Never you mind,' he said, and with that he tore the note into tiny pieces and flung them in the paper basket.

" 'But are there any special papers?' I persisted, for I certainly had never heard of them.

" 'You mind your own business,' he answered, and stumped out of the room.

"The next few days my uncle was unusually silent. Two or three times I tried to get him back on to the subject, but on each occasion he shut up like an oyster. And after a while the thing began to fade from my mind, when suddenly the tragedy occurred. About two miles from the house is an old disused quarry. My uncle was found at the bottom of it with his neck broken. It was easy to see what had happened. For some reason or other, he had been standing too near the edge; the ground had given way, and he had fallen. Death was instantaneous. The thing had happened at dusk, the body being found by a passing labourer about eight o'clock at night.

"Harry, of course, at once motored down, but Dick was out of England on business. And I immediately told Harry the whole story of the letter. For the decision we had to make was whether or not I should allude to it at the inquest. And, rightly or wrongly, we decided not to. I felt that it was principally for my cousin to say, and he was very averse to mentioning anything.

" 'It can't bring the poor old chap back to life,' was the line he took, 'and we'll have these confounded newspaper men round us like a swarm of bees. It is impossible to say that there is any connection between the two things. There are no marks indicating violence on the body. It's far better to have a verdict of accidental death returned.' And in due course it was, with the obvious rider about the danger of the quarry and the need for a more adequate fence."

"One moment, Mr. Stavert," said Ronald. "Was your uncle in the habit of taking long walks, and that one in particular?"

"Yes; it was a favourite direction of his."

"A fact which would be known or could be easily found out by the writer of that message?"

"Presumably so."

"Another point. Is the spot from which he fell visible for a long distance around?"

"No, it is not. There is a little dip there, and the usual path runs round the top of the dip. But it can, of course, be seen from below."

"I understand perfectly. It comes to this—that a man could hide in that dip and not be seen by anyone walking along the top of the quarry until he was close to him."

"That is so, Mr. Standish. From your questions I gather you think the verdict may have been wrong."

"I don't say that. But I most certainly think that you and your cousin acted wrongly in suppressing a very material piece of evidence."

"So do I—now," cried the other bitterly. "And this time it certainly won't be suppressed."

"This time?" said Ronald, staring at him. "You've received another of these messages, have you?"

"That's why I'm here, Mr. Standish. However, to go back. After the funeral, Harry and I went through everything in an endeavour to find anything which might possibly account for the letter. We found nothing—absolutely nothing. I, of course, knew where most of his papers were, but even in a drawer he kept permanently locked there were only a few faded letters and the draft of his will."

"What sort of letters?" demanded Ronald.

"Love letters—old ones—from a lady who did not become his wife," said Stavert. "I think you can dismiss the idea at once of their being the object of the communication, for the lady involved has been dead some years. And so we were forced to the conclusion that he had either destroyed these papers, whatever they were, or else that there was some secret hiding-place which we had not discovered."

"Again I must interrupt," said Ronald. "In Sir James's past life had there been any periods when he might have got mixed up with such a thing as a secret society, let us say, or with any organisation of a political or criminal character?"

"I'm glad you asked that question, because it was one of the first things we discussed. And beyond our knowledge that he had been pretty wild as a young man, and had been a lot in America, we could come to no conclusion. I think the correct way of putting it would be that, though we had no proof that he had become involved in anything of the sort, neither of us would have been surprised to hear that he had."

"I get you," remarked Ronald. "Please continue."

"Well, his death, of course, terminated my job and my life at Stalbridge Hall. Harry made a half-hearted suggestion that I should continue there, but it was clear that he didn't really mean it. And so I returned to London, where I have been since then until a week ago, when I got a letter from him asking me to go down and see him at once. He met me at the station with a peculiar look on his face, and the instant we got into the car he pulled this out of his pocket."

As he spoke Stavert handed an open envelope to Ronald, who took out the contents.

" 'Place the papers on the seat by the summer-house.'

"A facsimile, Mr. Standish, of the message his father had received, even to the extent, I should think, of being written on the same machine."

Ronald held it up to the light; then he examined it carefully through a magnifying glass. After which he laid it on the table.

"Well—what happened then?"

"We discussed what was the best thing to do. Clearly we could not comply with the request, since there were no papers as far as we knew. Equally clearly we could not go to the police, since on the face of it the message did not seem one to cause alarm. It was only the fact that it was the second one that gave it its significance, and to admit that it was the second one was to admit that we had suppressed the first. So we finally decided that we would lie up in wait by the summer-house and see what happened. Whoever it was who had written the note would have to come and see if the papers were there, and we then proposed to nab him."

Ronald leaned forward expectantly: clearly he was interested.

"For six nights we waited. Nothing happened; no one came near us. Once I thought I heard a movement in the undergrowth a little way off, but it may have been a fox. At any rate, our vigil was useless. And then came last night."

He paused and lit a cigarette, and I noticed that his hand was trembling a little.

"It was raining pretty hard after dinner, and Harry said that he'd be damned if he was going to get wet to the skin lying about in a damp wood. And so for the first time for a week we both went to bed. This morning, at seven o'clock, I was awakened by the footman, who was white and shaking.

" 'For God's sake come at once, sir,' he said. 'Sir Harry is dead!'

"I sprang out of bed and dashed along to his room. He was sprawling on the floor, and there was a hole in the back of his head I could have put my fist in. When we turned him over it was obvious what had happened. The poor devil had been shot through the eye. So I immediately telephoned for the police and a doctor, and then, getting into a car, I came straight up to you."

Ronald raised his eyebrows.

"I suppose you waited to see the police, didn't you?"

"No. I left a message as to where I was going, and told the butler to say I'd be back by noon. I felt there was nothing I could do at the moment, and I desperately wanted your advice. Would it be possible for you to come back with me now in the car?"

“I will certainly do so,” said Ronald. “But I think you must be prepared for a bit of a tail-twisting from the police for bolting off like that. To put it mildly, it was a most irregular thing to do.”

“I can’t help that, Mr. Standish,” said the other. “If I’d waited there, there would have been interminable delays and red tape. You know what the local police are, and I want the best opinion on the spot at once before half the clues are obliterated.”

“What clues are there up to date?”

“I don’t know. But there must be some. I refuse to believe that a man can be murdered without any traces being left. And I want you to find those traces.”

Ronald rose.

“All right, we’ll come with you. By the way—did no one hear the shot?”

“I heard nothing, and none of the servants mentioned it. So, presumably, no one did.”

“Strange,” said Ronald thoughtfully.

“It’s a big rambling house, and the servants’ quarters are right at the other end.”

“Still, it takes a good deal of nerve to discharge a gun in the middle of the night when a house is quiet. However—we’ll see.”

II

We reached Stalbridge Hall about midday, to find, as Ronald had anticipated, a very ruffled Inspector. And his temper was not improved when he learned the reason of Stavert’s absence. But after a while, having delivered himself of a suitable reprimand, he recovered sufficiently to tell us what he had found out.

“The murderer,” he remarked, “entered the house by way of the library window. If you care to verify the fact, Mr. Standish, by means of some subtle deduction, we can go there and see.”

“Thank you, Inspector,” said Ronald cheerily, with a wink at me. “I feel it will be a waste of time after what you’ve found out yourself, but still it can do no harm.”

The officer led the way to a big room in one wing of the house.

“If you look through the window,” he continued, “you will see the marks of his footprints in the flower-bed outside. The ground is still damp and they are clearly visible. He then stood on the sill, and with a stout knife forced the hasp of the window: the damage to the woodwork is plain. In fact, he made no endeavour to conceal his mode of entry. There are traces of mud on the carpet, those nearest the window being particularly clear.”

He had opened the window as he spoke, and Ronald began to examine everything in his usual methodical way while the Inspector, with a barely concealed smile, watched him. And I must say that even I was a little surprised at the amount of time he took: the thing did indeed look obvious. The footprints outside, the mud on the window-sill and carpet, the splintered woodwork, all told their own tale.

“Have you deduced anything fresh?” demanded the Inspector a little sarcastically, as Ronald closed the window again.

“My dear Inspector, I’m sure you’ve seen everything there is to be seen,” answered Ronald mildly. “As you say, he certainly seemed determined that we should know how he got in. By the way, was this window shut or open this morning?”

“Shut, but not bolted,” said the other.

“I see,” said Ronald. “Well—what then?”

“He proceeded to poison the dog——” continued the officer.

“What’s that?” cried Stavert. “Rollo poisoned?”

“It was found lying dead in the hall just behind the banisters, and the doctor had no hesitation in saying it had been poisoned. You can see the body now.”

We followed him into the hall, and there, lying half concealed behind the staircase, was a big Airedale. And a glance at the stiff, rigid legs was sufficient to confirm the doctor’s diagnosis.

“Was he a good watch-dog?” asked Ronald.

“Excellent,” said Stavert.

“If he hadn’t been, there would have been no necessity to poison him,” remarked the Inspector, with a pitying glance at Ronald.

“Quite so, Inspector,” he answered humbly. “Very stupid of me not to have thought of that.”

The officer gave him a suspicious look, but Ronald’s face was expressionless. And after a moment he led the way upstairs.

“We are now going to the room where the late baronet was murdered,” he continued. “Once again the murderer has left traces of mud, which are plainly visible on the light carpet.”

He flung open the door, and we walked in. The body, covered by a sheet, was lying on the bed, and Ronald lifted a corner and looked at the head. It was a ghastly wound, the only merciful thing being that death must have been absolutely instantaneous.

“I see that there’s no trace of scorching on the face,” he remarked. “Have you found the bullet?”

“Yes,” said the Inspector. “It was embedded in the wall behind the bed. And here, I must confess, I am a little nonplussed, for to the best of my belief I have never seen such a bullet before.”

He held it out to Ronald, whose face lit up the instant he saw it.

“I don’t wonder, Inspector,” he cried. “And this accounts for what was puzzling me. This bullet was fired from a weapon which is far more common in America than it is here—a compressed-air rifle. At close range it is as deadly as an ordinary gun, and, bar a hiss when fired, it makes no noise. That’s why you heard nothing, Mr. Stavert, and also why there is no sign of scorching.”

The Inspector nodded portentously.

“I suspected something of the sort,” he remarked.

“But have you any clue as to the murderer?” cried Stavert.

“At the moment—no,” answered the Inspector. “And that is where you may be of help, and is the reason why your absence this morning was very unfortunate. Time has been lost, and in a case like this every moment is of value. Now, Mr. Stavert, what we want to find in a case of this sort is the motive. It is clear that your cousin was murdered by someone who possessed a good working knowledge of the house. Do you know of anyone who had a grudge against him?”

“I knew very little of my cousin’s life,” said Stavert, “and still less of his friends and acquaintances. I know that he was very popular in his regiment.”

“Mr. Stavert,” interrupted Ronald, “I think you should tell the Inspector at once what you told me. And while you do so I will have a further look round. Come along, Bob. Now,” he continued as we went down the stairs, “let’s go back to the library. I want to have a final look at it unhampered by that mutton-headed policeman.”

Once again he studied the window-sill with the utmost care. Then he stood on it and examined the marks on the woodwork with his magnifying-glass. Then he looked at the flower-bed outside as if measuring its width in his mind’s eye.

“Just shut the window, Bob,” he said, and I did so, leaving him balanced precariously on the sill outside. He paused for a moment; then he jumped, landing a good yard short of the grass on the other side of the bed.

“What’s the great idea?” I demanded, opening the window once more.

“Get up yourself and jump,” he said. “Jump as far as you can. Leave the window open.”

I did so, and found that I could clear the flower-bed with ease, owing to being able to crouch on the sill, while Ronald had had to stand upright.

“And now,” he continued, “we will remove my footmarks, lest the worthy Inspector should have a rush of blood to the head.”

He smoothed them over with his stick, and was lighting a cigarette as the officer, followed by Stavert, appeared at the window.

“This is a most important development, Mr. Standish,” he remarked.

“I thought you’d find it so,” said Ronald.

“It presents us, of course, at once with the motive: revenge because the papers were not forthcoming.”

“Exactly,” cried Ronald. “But revenge on whose part?”

“The man who typed the message. Who else?”

“So that all you have to do is to lay your hands on him. It seems to me that you may find it a little difficult, in view of the fact that nobody knows what these papers consisted of.”

“Nevertheless, it gives us one very important point to go on. This vendetta was not so much a personal one against the dead man, but it was more in the nature of a family feud. It is on Sir James’s life, therefore, that we must concentrate rather than on his son’s.”

“Very true,” murmured Ronald. “It is a pleasure and a privilege to work with you, Inspector. By the way, Mr. Stavert, was your uncle ever in Australia?”

“Yes, for a considerable time when he was a young man,” answered Stavert in some surprise. “Why do you ask?”

“Well—it’s a long shot. But I think you’ll find that your cousin’s murderer was a left-handed Australian, at least six feet tall——”

“With red hair and a slight stammer,” snorted the Inspector. “Really, Mr. Standish, this is hardly the moment for far-fetched jokes.”

“I don’t think Mr. Standish is joking, Inspector,” said Stavert quietly, turning to Ronald. “What makes you think so?”

But Ronald was looking thoroughly annoyed.

“I am not in the habit of making far-fetched jokes on occasions such as this,” he remarked shortly. “As I say—that is my opinion; you can take it or leave it.”

He turned on his heel, giving me an imperceptible signal to follow him.

“That will give ’em something to think about,” he chuckled. “Hallo! Who is this, I wonder?”

A youngish man was coming rapidly along the path towards us, carrying a small suit-case in his hand.

“Is this true about poor old Harry?” he called out as soon as he saw us.

“Are you his brother?” asked Ronald, and he nodded.

“Yes. I got a wire this morning to say he was dead.”

“He was murdered last night,” said Ronald gravely.

“But in Heaven’s name who wanted to murder the old chap?” cried the new baronet.

“That’s what we want to find out,” answered Ronald.

He glanced round. We were out of sight of the house.

"I would like a few words with you before you go on," he continued. "I am going to make a somewhat peculiar request to you, and before I do so it is necessary for me to tell you who I am and why I'm here."

Briefly he explained the situation, and as soon as he mentioned his name the other nodded.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Standish. No need of any further introduction."

"Good. Well, now you know that when your father died he had just received a letter telling him to put certain papers on the seat by the summer-house."

"Yes. I was told so afterwards."

"Your brother received a similar notification a week ago."

The other whistled.

"The devil he did! So there's a connecting link between the two cases. One, too, that makes it look as if my old governor was murdered."

He was staring at Ronald thoughtfully.

"Just so. And now it's going to be your turn."

He put down his suit-case and lit a cigarette.

"Look here, Mr. Standish, this seems to me to be getting beyond a joke. What are these papers, anyway? Hasn't anybody got an idea?"

"No one," said Ronald gravely. "But I think if you will do exactly what I say we shall be able to solve part of the mystery, at any rate. Are you by chance going to be married?"

We both stared at him in blank amazement. The question was so completely unexpected.

"I am not," the young man answered. "But what the deuce has that got to do with it?"

"I told you, didn't I, that I was going to make a peculiar request?" continued Ronald. "And I'm coming to it now. I must beg of you to trust me, and to believe that, strange though it may seem to you, it gives the surest and safest way of solving this murder. You are in grave danger, Sir Richard. Not, of course, at this moment; but it is there, hanging over you. And I want to remove it as soon as possible. Will you, therefore, remember that you are going to be married in a fortnight? That, owing to your brother's death, the ceremony will be a quiet one, but that you don't propose to postpone it? And that after it is over you will be leaving for a lengthy honeymoon on the Continent? Further, and this is the most vital thing of all, you are not to tell a single soul that your story is not the truth."

The young baronet's eyes had been growing rounder and rounder as Ronald proceeded.

"Well, I'm damned!" he muttered at length. "Do you really mean it?"

"Never more serious in my life," said Ronald quietly.

"But who am I supposed to be marrying?"

"There must surely be some girl, unknown to your cousin or the members of the household, who would fill the bill. Someone you've met at Brighton."

"All right," said the young man. "I suppose I can invent somebody, if you think it is absolutely essential."

"Absolutely," answered Ronald. "And it's still more essential that no one should have the faintest suspicion that it is an invention. You are going to be married in a fortnight. So get that idea into your head. And there is one thing further. Should you receive a similar communication about the papers, let me know immediately in London. *But do not tell anyone else that you have let me know.* On that, Sir Richard, your life may depend. The line you must take up is that you think the whole thing is rot, and if the writer of the message plays any tricks with you, you are quite capable of dealing with him. Do you get me?"

The other nodded.

"Perfectly; I'll do it."

"Good," said Ronald. "And not a word to a soul. Ah! here comes the Inspector with your cousin. We'll stroll on."

"For the love of Pete, Ronald," I said, when we were out of earshot, "what is the great idea?"

"All holders of an old title should be married," he answered, with a grin. "Perhaps it will inspire him to do so in reality."

Then he grew serious again.

"But there are certainly points about this case, Bob, which render it almost unique in my experience. And it's very lucky that we met that youngster when we did. Let's pray that he can play his part."

III

During the next few days I found myself growing more and more bewildered over the whole thing. Try as I would, I could think of no explanation for this supposed marriage, and Ronald was not communicative. But as time went on, and more than a week elapsed since the murder, I noticed that he became a little uneasy. He would never go far from the telephone, and whenever a post arrived he went eagerly through his letters.

The verdict at the inquest had been the only one possible in the circumstances—"Murder by some person or persons unknown." The Inspector had been congratulated on his reconstruction of the crime, especially his discovery of the type of weapon that had been used, and was now, according to the papers, hot on a clue.

It was on the tenth day that the telephone rang while we were at breakfast, and Ronald went to it. And I saw at once from his face that it was the message he had been waiting for.

"It's come, has it?" he said. "Excellent. Now listen to me, Sir Richard, and obey my instructions literally. You will be quite safe till to-night. I want you to be thoroughly bombastic about it the whole of to-day, and refuse point-blank to tell the police. Is your cousin with you? Coming back this afternoon. Tell him, of course, that you've received it, but do not let him keep watch with you to-night. Tell him that at dinner. You propose to be alone in your bedroom. No—don't—tell anyone that you've rung me up. Now, there's a big set-in cupboard in your room; you've got to smuggle us into that somehow without anybody knowing. You can do that, can you, if we get down about nine. All right—the side door by the shrubbery. I remember it. And don't forget that it's vitally important that you should announce at dinner in front of the servants your determination to sleep alone.

"So it's worked, Bob," said Ronald, as he hung up the receiver. "The third message has been sent, though I was getting a bit worried. That supposed marriage was drawing rather too close."

"But what would that have had to do with it?" I demanded, scenting a chance of finding some ray of light in my mental fog.

"Well, it would have upset things rather if he'd had to admit he wasn't even engaged," said Ronald, with a grin. "Seems such a funny thing to lie about, doesn't it? Almost qualifies him for a mental home."

"Confound you, you know I don't mean that!" I cried.

But he only grinned the more.

"Think it over, Bob. Use the old grey matter."

And I was still pondering at ten o'clock that night as I stood beside Ronald in the cupboard of Sir Richard's bedroom. He had got us in safely unseen by anyone, and there was nothing for it now but to wait. A footman came in to turn the bed down for the night, and at eleven o'clock the baronet came upstairs.

He stopped for a moment or two talking to his cousin outside, and we heard the latter begging him to be allowed to share the vigil. But Sir Richard was adamant, and after saying good night cheerfully, he came in and shut the door. And a few seconds later Stavert's door closed also.

"All right?" asked the youngster, coming over to the cupboard.

"Quite," said Ronald, in a low voice. "Get undressed, and go to bed. I want you to turn about in it so as to give it the normal appearance of having been slept in."

Ronald crossed the room, and noiselessly locked the door. Then, opening a bag he had brought down with him, he took out a life-size wax head and shoulders. He looked critically at the colour of the hair; then at the baronet's.

"Not too bad from memory," he muttered. "Now we'll set the scene."

We watched him as he carefully arranged a bolster and a pair of hunting boots under the bedclothes, moving them this way and that till the result was exactly like a body. Then he put the head sideways on the pillow and pulled up the sheet around it till only the hair and a bit of the forehead were visible. And finally he unlocked the door again and turned out the light.

"It might be better," he said, "but it will serve. Into the cupboard with you, Sir Richard: all we can do now is to wait."

The house grew silent, though every crack of the boards sounded like a pistol-shot in the stillness. But it was not until the clock in the hall had just chimed two that I felt Ronald's hand tighten on my arm. A door had opened somewhere. I listened intently, though I could scarcely hear anything save the pounding of my own heart. And then quite distinctly came the sound of footsteps along the passage. They paused outside the room, and I heard Sir Richard draw in his breath sharply.

There came a low knock; then the door handle was tried. Someone was coming in: and tense with excitement I peered over Ronald's shoulder through the chink we had left open. I could hear nothing now: the footsteps made no sound on the carpet. And for what seemed an eternity we waited.

Suddenly a beam of light shone on the bed; and then everything happened quickly. There came a sharp whistling hiss, and the splintering noise of the wax mould breaking. And then the room was flooded with light. Ronald was standing by the switch with a revolver in his hand. Herbert Stavert, his teeth snarling like a trapped animal's, leant against the bed.

"I don't think we need trouble you any further," said Ronald calmly. "Ah! would you?"

A shot rang out, and Stavert, with an oath, dropped the gun he had raised and clutched his shattered wrist.

"So it was you, you swine," shouted Sir Richard. "By God! I wonder if they'll let me be present at the gallows?"

"There's no crime in shooting a dummy," muttered Stavert at length.

"From the word go, Stavert, I realised you were a fool," said Ronald deliberately. "But I should think that even you can't be such a complete imbecile as not to realise how utterly you've damned yourself by this performance. One question, and one question only, I would like to ask you from a point of academic interest. Did you murder your uncle? You refuse to answer? Perhaps you're right. You can only hang once; and your unfortunate cousin supplies the necessary evidence for that. Ring, Sir Richard, will you? We must get the police."

IV

“I don’t think,” said Ronald, an hour later, when Stavert had been taken away, “that I have ever struck a crime which was in some respects so carefully thought out, and in others so incredibly bungled. The conception was brilliant; the execution simply puerile. He left so many clues lying about that one simply fell over them.

“Let us take the conception first, as he intended to do it. And for that we must go back to your father’s death. You heard the question I asked him, but we may never know the answer. Was the whole thing an invention on Stavert’s part, or did your father really receive that message? Stavert says he tore it up. Is that the truth?

“My own impression is that it is. There would not seem to have been much object in his murdering his uncle, and thereby depriving himself of an easy job and a pleasant home. And so I think the balance of probability is that his story with regard to your father is correct. He did receive a message, and if he was murdered it was not by Stavert.

“Now come on to your brother. Stavert, finding that life in London was a very different proposition from his life here, began to think things over. He was hard up, and your brother was wealthy. And gradually the scheme must have taken shape in his brain. If he could avert all suspicion from himself by supplying a very plausible motive for some unknown person to have committed the crime, he was one step nearer the title. And one cannot deny that in outline his scheme was good. These mysterious papers, which were inherently quite probable, and the clear trail of a forced entry to the house—what more was necessary? And when in addition you realise the invaluable point, as far as he was concerned, that it did not throw suspicion on anybody in particular who would be able to prove his innocence, but merely on someone who could never be found, it must have looked a certainty to him. Then, of course, after a suitable lapse of time you would have been the next victim, and he steps into the whole shooting-box. Finally, he would send himself a similar message, and then by some strange piece of luck discover the papers. Faked, naturally, but good enough to end for ever the family tragedy.

“So sure was he, in fact, after having killed your brother, that he was safe, that he took the extra bold step of coming up to me. And he certainly told his story so convincingly that when I motored down with him I had not the slightest suspicion of the truth. But when I arrived on the scene and looked round, a very different aspect of affairs came to light.

“The first glaring error was the earth-mark on the window-sill. There was only one. Ostensibly the man had stood there some time while he worked at the catch. Why on earth should he stand on one leg? Then came the question of the dog: what was he doing all this while? He was found in the hall: why hadn’t he barked? He must already have been dead. Who had killed him?

Obviously someone in the house. And at once a different complexion came over the matter. Was it a servant, or who? I couldn't say at that time. But it was clear that there was a confederate, who had opened the window, after having first monkeyed with the catch as a blind, allowing the murderer to walk straight in, putting one foot on the sill. Further, he had then closed the window after the crime was committed, a point which I proved by the simple experiment of trying to jump the flower-bed. With the window shut no one could clear it; with it open it was easy. And there were no out-going footsteps in the earth.

"So far so good. But now a very pertinent point arose. Why this elaborate and obvious trail? Why didn't the confederate inside merely open the front door? There could be no reason for it save one—it was a false trail. The error lay in the fact that it was far too obviously false. It was condemned as soon as you looked into it. And it knocked out the possibility of two people being involved.

"We were getting warm then. The murderer couldn't get into the house without a confederate. If there had been a confederate he would have opened the front door. Therefore there was no confederate. So the murderer must have been inside the house. How did that fit in? And I soon saw that it fitted perfectly.

"The murderer stood on the inside of the sill before his shoes were muddy, and cut the woodwork round the catch. Then he opened the window, cleared the flower-bed, came back and shut the window. Then, realising he was supposed to be a stranger, he poisoned the dog. Previous to that, in all probability, he had murdered your brother, who might otherwise have been aroused by the noise. Who was it?

"Who was most likely to have been able to go into your brother's room in the middle of the night without arousing his suspicions? Who was most likely to have in his possession an expensive and very rare gun? It was beginning to look obvious. So I made a ridiculous statement about a left-handed Australian to throw him off the scent; and then luckily met you, when I surprised you by my matrimonial suggestion. I saw at once that by that method we could bring things to a head. If my suspicions were right, he would have to strike, and strike quickly. Which he did, with the result we know."

"Hold hard a minute, Standish," cried Sir Richard. "Why should my supposed marriage make him strike quickly?"

Ronald grinned gently.

"My dear fellow," he said, "messages ordering papers to be placed in the summer-house can be delivered to grown men. But they lose much of their efficacy if delivered to the twins in a bassinet."

7

MYSTERY OF THE SLIP-COACH

“WELL, I’ll be danged. She’s signalled through, and yet she’s stopping, though she’s late already. Be there summat up?”

The stationmaster of Marley Junction scratched his head, and stared at the oncoming express which was now slowing down rapidly.

“Isn’t she supposed to stop?” Ronald Standish asked.

“No, sir; she ain’t. There be a slip coach for here, but main part goes through.”

Rows of heads were already protruding from carriage windows as the train came to a standstill, and the guard got out.

“What’s the matter, Joe?” demanded the stationmaster.

“Murder’s the matter,” was the unexpected answer; and with a lift of his eyebrows Ronald turned to the other member of our little party.

“You seem to be having a busy time of it, Inspector,” he said, and with an expression of relief the two railway officials turned round.

“Are you the police, sir?” cried the guard.

“I’m Inspector Grantham of Scotland Yard,” answered the other. “What’s that you say? Murder!”

“Yes, sir. And I’ll be pleased if you can come this way, for we’re a lot behind time. He’s in the slip coach.”

We followed him to the rear of the train, paying no attention to the excited comments of the passengers, several of whom had got out on the platform. And as we got to the back carriage an irascible-looking, elderly man, who might have been a retired colonel, an old clergyman and his wife, and a young man of perhaps thirty, with a worried expression on his face, descended.

The Inspector paused for a moment.

“This coach is separate from the rest of the train, I take it?” he said. “There’s no connecting corridor?”

“That’s so, sir,” said the guard, “as you can see. No one can pass farther than my van, which is just in front of it.”

“Then get the coach uncoupled. And all passengers, please, who were in this coach must wait.”

He entered, and we followed him along the corridor of the carriage. The stationmaster had gone off to give the necessary orders; the guard accompanied us.

“Everything is as it was found, sir,” he said. “After the train was stopped I travelled in this coach myself.”

“Why did the train stop? I thought this was fast to Downwater?”

“Communication cord was pulled, sir, by the reverend gentleman.”

The Inspector nodded.

“We’ll go into that later,” he said. “Where’s the body?”

For answer, the guard opened the door of the centre compartment. On the seat by the opposite window was sprawling the body of a man. One hand hung limply downwards, and on the cushion and the carpet lay an ominous red pool. A glance was sufficient to show that he was dead, and that the cause of death was a wound in the head. The window was shut; his suit-case littered up the rack; and in the opposite corner to the body a pair of wash-leather gloves was lying on the seat.

Suddenly Ronald gave a whistle.

“Good Lord!” he cried, “it’s old Samuel Goldberg, the bookmaker.”

“You know him?” said the Inspector.

“I’ve betted with him from time to time,” Ronald answered. “But all in due course, for you’ll have to do something about this train, Grantham. Why not let it go on with a relief guard and run this coach into a siding.”

The Inspector nodded, and a few moments later the express was speeding on her way, whilst the slip coach, with us still on board, was shunted off the main line.

“Yes—I knew him, Grantham,” said Ronald. “He was a bookmaker, and quite a decent fellow. Great Scott! What’s that mess?”

He was studying the woodwork of the door with a puzzled expression.

“Why—it’s the remains of a raw egg! Here are bits of the shell on the carpet. And there’s the place it hit the door. What an extraordinary thing to find in a railway carriage. Did you notice it, guard, when you came in?”

“Can’t say as ’ow I did, sir. I was so worried and bemused that I didn’t think of little things like that. When I sees there was nothing to be done for the poor gentleman I just shut the door again and started the train off after telling the driver to stop her here.”

“And you shut the window, too?”

“No, sir. The window was shut already. Both the window and the door was shut when I got here.”

“I think we’d better start our investigation, Mr. Standish,” said the Inspector. “We can come back again later to the body. Pull down the blinds”—he turned to the stationmaster—“and lock the carriage up. No one is to enter it.”

We found the other occupants of the coach pacing about the platform. The young man had joined up with the clergyman and his wife; the irascible military man was fuming visibly.

“I hope you’ll hurry this business as much as possible,” he cried irritably. “I’m judging hounds this afternoon, and I shall be late. I may say that I knew nothing about it till the train was stopped.”

“Quite, sir, quite,” said the Inspector soothingly. “But in view of the fact that a man has been found dead in circumstances which preclude natural causes, you will appreciate that I must make inquiries. Now, sir,” he turned to the clergyman, “I understand that it was you who pulled the communication cord and stopped the train. Presumably, therefore, it was you who first discovered the body. Will you tell me all you know? First—your name, please.”

“I am the Reverend John Stocker,” said the old man, “of the parish of Meston, not far from here. And really I fear I can tell you but little of this terrible affair. I was reading in my carriage——”

“Which compartment did you occupy, Mr. Stocker?”

“Let me see—which was it, my love?” he asked his wife.

“The third-class one—two away,” she answered promptly.

“Please proceed,” said the Inspector, making a note.

“It so chanced,” continued the clergyman, “that I happened to glance out of the window at a passing train. It was travelling in the same direction as ourselves, at about the same speed, on the next line. I watched it idly, as we very slowly overtook it, when suddenly, to my amazement, I saw some people in the train beckoning to me. They were shouting and pointing, and though, of course, I could not hear what they said, it seemed to me by their agitation that something must be wrong, and that, whatever that something was, it was in our train. So I got up and walked along the corridor to find, to my horror, the body of that unfortunate man.”

“What did you do then?” said the Inspector.

“I pulled the communication cord.”

“Did you go into the carriage?”

“No, I did not. The door was shut, and the sight had unnerved me.”

“And what happened then?”

“This gentleman”—he indicated the hound judge—“came out from his compartment at the other end of the carriage, and I called to him. He came at once, and I showed him what had happened. By that time, of course, the train was slowing up.”

“Quite correct,” barked the other. “I went——”

“One moment, sir, if you please,” said the Inspector. “Your name?”

“Blackton—Major Blackton. Late of the Gunners.”

“Now, sir. When you saw the dead man what did you do?”

“Opened the door, and went in to make certain, though, when you’ve seen as many men shot through the head as I have, it was obvious to me at first sight that he was beyond aid.”

“Did you shut the window?”

“No, sir, I did not. The window was already shut. I noticed it particularly, because I remember thinking to myself what an extraordinary thing it was that a man should be travelling with both door and window shut on a hot day like this.”

The Inspector nodded thoughtfully.

“Any more you’d like to say, sir?”

“Naturally, my first thought,” continued Major Blackton, “was that it was a case of suicide.”

“Why naturally?”

“Damme, man. I hadn’t shot the feller, and it wasn’t likely the padre had, and at that time I thought we were the only people in the coach. However, when I found no sign of any weapon on the floor or the seat I realised it couldn’t be suicide. That wound caused instantaneous death, or I’m no judge of such matters, so that by no human possibility could he have got rid of the gun.”

Once again the Inspector nodded.

“You said, sir,” he remarked after a pause, “that at that time you thought you were the only people on the coach. When did you find you weren’t?”

“Just before the train stopped, when that young man joined us in the corridor. And it seems to me that he might be able to tell you something, because he’d been talking to the dead man.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because he said so. ‘Good God!’ he said, ‘what’s happened? I was only talking to him ten minutes ago.’ Then he had another look and said: ‘What on earth has he done that for?’ And by that time the train had stopped and the guard took charge.”

He glanced at his watch.

“That’s positively all I can tell you, Inspector, so with your permission I’ll get away.”

“Sorry, sir,” said the Inspector quietly, “but at the present juncture that is quite impossible. You don’t seem to realise,” he continued a little sternly, “that a man has, so far as we know, just been murdered under conditions that render it imperative that the other occupants of the coach should place themselves unreservedly at the disposal of the police. Other points may arise over which I shall want to see you later. And now, before I interrogate the other gentleman, there is one further question. Did either of you two gentlemen hear the sound of a shot?”

“I certainly didn’t,” said Major Blackton, “but then I was at the far end of the coach.”

“I didn’t, either.” The clergyman glanced at his wife. “Did you, my love?”

She shook her head decidedly.

“I heard nothing,” she said. “Nothing at all.”

“Thank you, madam.” He beckoned to the young man. “Now, sir, will you tell me what you know of this affair? First—your name.”

“Carter—Harry Carter.”

“Did you know the dead man?”

“I did,” said Carter quietly.

“What was his name?”

“Samuel Goldberg.”

“Had you spoken to him since leaving London?”

“I had a long talk with him. That’s what made it so amazing, because he seemed his usual self when I left his compartment.”

The Inspector consulted his notebook.

“You said to Major Blackton: ‘What on earth has he done that for?’ or words to that effect. What did you mean by that remark?”

Carter stared at him.

“Just what I said. I couldn’t make out why he should commit suicide.”

“Why should you assume it was suicide?”

Carter stared at him even harder.

“What else could it have been? Unless it was an accident.”

“It was neither suicide nor an accident, Mr. Carter. Goldberg was murdered.”

“Murdered? But who by?”

“That is what we are endeavouring to find out. Now, Mr. Carter, am I to understand that you didn’t hear Major Blackton and the guard talking in the corridor after the train started again and saying it was murder?”

“I did not, and for a very good reason. I returned almost at once to my own compartment to try and think out how this very unexpected development was going to affect me.”

The Inspector stopped writing and glanced at Standish. Then he looked steadily at Carter.

“Mr. Carter,” he said gravely, “it is my duty to say one thing to you. We are investigating a case of murder, and everything points to the fact that the murderer was one of the people who travelled from London in that slip coach. You need not tell me anything that might, in certain eventualities, incriminate you.”

Carter stared at him in amazement.

“Good God!” he burst out at length, “you aren’t suggesting that I had anything to do with it?”

“I am suggesting nothing,” answered the Inspector shortly. “I am merely pointing out your possible future position. And having done so I will now ask you in what way Goldberg’s death could affect you? You need not answer if you don’t wish to.”

“But, of course, I wish to. I’ve got nothing to hide. I owed him money, and I was wondering whether his suicide—as I then thought it was—would wipe out this debt.”

“Had your discussion with him previously concerned this debt?”

“It had,” said Carter.

“Was it an acrimonious interview?” asked the Inspector mildly.

“Well, when you ask your bookie not to press for payment and he cuts up rough, it’s not very pleasant.”

“And it terminated some ten minutes before you found that Goldberg had, as you thought, committed suicide?”

“That’s right.”

“May I ask how much was the sum involved?”

“A thousand pounds.”

Inspector Grantham tapped his teeth with his pencil.

“One final question, Mr. Carter. Did you know that Goldberg was going to travel by this train?”

“I hadn’t an idea of it until I found him in the same coach.”

The inspector rose and closed his notebook with a snap.

“That is all for the present,” he said, and then, for the first time, Ronald spoke.

“I should like to ask you two or three other questions, Mr. Carter. When you had your interview with Goldberg, did you sit by the door?”

“I did—in the opposite corner to him. By Jove! now I come to think of it, I’ve left my gloves there?”

“Was the window open?”

Carter thought for a moment.

“It was: wide.”

“And the door?”

“Shut.”

“Now, Mr. Carter, I want you to think carefully. Did he throw a raw egg at you?”

Carter stared at Ronald with a look of utter amazement, which changed to an angry flush.

“Are you trying to be funny? Because, if so, it seems to me neither the time nor the place. A raw egg? Why the devil should he throw one at me?”

“Exactly,” said Ronald. “Why the devil should he? Well, Grantham, what do you propose to do now?”

The Inspector, who had frowned slightly at Ronald's last question, again took charge.

"I'm afraid I must request you three gentlemen, and you, too, madam, to remain here for a little while yet. I know, sir, I know about your hound show, but this is even more important. Guard—come with me. And you too, Mr. Standish—if you care to."

We returned to the slip coach and the guard unlocked the door. Then, leaving him on the platform, we entered the carriage.

"What do you make of it, Mr. Standish?" said the Inspector.

"At the moment, Grantham, remarkably little," said Ronald. "There are one or two very strange features about the case. Have you come to any conclusion yourself?"

"Only to the obvious one that Goldberg was murdered by someone who was in this coach. Further than that I would not care to go, though it would be idle to deny that of the four occupants the most likely is Carter. Of course, it is possible that there was someone else in the carriage who escaped when the train stopped, but there are two grave difficulties to put up against that theory. First, it was the clergyman who pulled the communication cord. Surely, the murderer would have done it himself. And even if he didn't, but had seized on this unlooked-for chance of escaping, he would have been bound to be seen by people in the train. I mean, one knows that when a train stops unexpectedly everyone's head goes out of the window."

"And what about the egg?" remarked Ronald thoughtfully.

"Confound the egg!" cried Grantham irritably. "You've got it on the brain."

"I have," agreed Ronald, unperturbed. "But before we go any farther, let us examine the compartment thoroughly again."

I watched them from the corridor for ten minutes, and at the end of that time the Inspector came out and joined me.

"Nothing of value; no trace of any weapon."

"And no trace of any more eggs," said Ronald. "Now, don't get angry, Inspector. I'm not fooling. But when an extremely bizarre fact intrudes itself on one it is advisable not to overlook it. Now, have you ever heard of a man carrying one raw egg about with him? Frequently have I known people to take half a dozen or even three in a paper bag, but not one. There isn't even a paper bag. Was he, then, carrying this solitary egg in his hand or in his pocket? However, let us go on a little further. Assuming for the moment that he had got this one egg, why did he throw it at the door? It seems a strange pastime."

"Your second point is easier to answer than your first," said the Inspector. "Goldberg was unarmed, and when he looked up and saw the murderer standing in the carriage he threw the first thing at him that came to hand."

“This solitary egg.” Ronald stared at him thoughtfully. “Was he holding it, studying its beauty? Or was it on the seat beside him? However, perhaps I am over-stressing the point. Where are you off to now?”

“To get on with the case, Mr. Standish,” answered the Inspector tersely. “I don’t know how or why that egg got there, but I do know that that man was murdered. Almost certainly the murderer flung the weapon out of the window, but it is just possible he did not. So my first move will be to search the baggage of the four people I have detained.”

“Splendid,” said Ronald quietly. “Have I your permission to wait here a little longer? There are one or two more points I would like to look into, and I will, of course, pass on anything I find to you.”

With a faint smile the Inspector departed and Ronald turned to me.

“There’s something very rum, Bob—very rum indeed about this affair. Apart from the egg, who shut the window? Did Goldberg, after Carter had left him? Did the murderer, either before or after he’d done it? Or is Carter lying? I don’t think he is.”

Ronald was talking half to himself.

“To place too much reliance on faces is dangerous, but I don’t think he is. His evidence has the ring of truth. And I ask you—would he have left his gloves here if he’d done it?”

He went back into the compartment and stood staring round.

“The clergyman—what about him? And our military friend? As things are, the clergyman is the more likely, as the other had to pass the door to get to this compartment. Moreover, we only have the clergyman’s word that he saw people beckoning to him from the other train. It’s unlikely, of course, but it’s conceivable that he, too, was in debt to Goldberg, and has staged a pretty piece of acting the innocent after killing him. Means his wife is in collusion with him, but stranger things have happened. But it’s that damned egg that beats me.”

“Well, old boy,” I said, “I admit it’s very peculiar, as you say, but it seems to me we’ve got to accept it as a fact that Goldberg was in possession of one raw egg. I mean, it isn’t likely the murderer came with an egg in one hand and a gun in the other.”

Ronald spun round and stared at me.

“Great Scott! Bob,” he cried, “I believe——”

He broke off abruptly, and dashed into the next compartment, where he opened and shut the window several times, while I looked on in blank amazement. What on earth there was in my semi-jocular remark that had caused this activity was beyond me, but I knew better than to ask. And then he returned to the scene of the murder, and kneeling down on the floor by the door he examined the sticky mess of shell and yolk on the carpet.

“Hopeless,” he muttered, “hopeless; but—ah!”

He was carefully picking out a piece of shell, which he placed on the seat. The search continued: two other pieces were selected, which, after a further scrutiny, he roughly joined together.

“Do you see, Bob?” he cried.

I did and I didn’t. Stamped in violet ink on the fragments were some letters. On one piece was written “atch”; on the other, “ways.” Presumably part of the name of the firm where the egg had been bought, and I said so. But what further light that fact threw on the matter was beyond me, and I said that, too.

He put the bits of shell into an empty match-box, as there came the sound of people getting into the carriage.

“Perhaps you’re right, Bob; we’ll see,” he said, slipping the box into his pocket.

Inspector Grantham was coming along the corridor, and with him was a man carrying a small black bag. A doctor obviously, but the thing that struck me at once was the expression of subdued triumph on the Inspector’s face.

“Here you are, doctor,” he said “And as soon as you’ve made your preliminary examination I’ll have the body moved to a waiting-room.”

Then, as the doctor entered the compartment, he joined us in the corridor.

“I’ve found the revolver, Mr. Standish,” he remarked complacently.

“You have, have you?” said Ronald. “Where?”

“In one of Carter’s suit-cases.”

“Was it loaded?”

“No, but there was a half-open packet of ammunition. And that’s better than your raw egg, I’m thinking.”

“How does he account for its being there?” demanded Ronald, ignoring the gibe.

“He doesn’t. He simply says he was taking it down to the country with him.”

“Which,” said Ronald, “is probably the truth.”

“Of course it is,” agreed the Inspector. “I don’t suppose for a moment that he brought it on the train to shoot Goldberg, but finding Goldberg in the same carriage with him he yielded to the temptation. Come, come, Mr. Standish,” he went on good-humouredly, “you’re very smart and all that, but really there is no good trying to pretend that there is any mystery here. Goldberg was shot by someone in this carriage. Carter admits having had a bad quarrel with him; Carter is in possession of a revolver and ammunition. Moreover, no sign of arms can be found on the other three people concerned. The thing is as plain as a pikestaff.”

And I saw that Ronald looked worried.

“Too plain, Grantham,” he said. “Altogether too plain. But if you’re right there's only one place Carter ought to be sent to, and that's a lunatic asylum. The man must be crazy. Why on earth didn't he throw the gun out of the window?"

The Inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"Like your raw egg, Mr. Standish, I can't tell you," he remarked. "Well, doctor?"

"Killed instantaneously, of course," said the other, joining us. "If you will have the body moved, Inspector, I will carry on at once."

The Inspector bustled off, followed by the doctor, and Ronald turned to me.

"Bad, Bob; damned bad," he said, and I have seldom seen him look so grave.

"You think Carter did it?" I asked.

"I am as certain as I can be of anything that he didn't," he answered quietly. "But on the face of it, Carter's position is about as serious as it could well be."

And so Carter evidently realised. We found him in the custody of a policeman, and the instant he saw us he sprang to his feet.

"Look here, sir," he cried to Ronald, "I don't know who you gentlemen are, but I assume you're something to do with the police. Well, all I can tell you is that I swear before Heaven I had no more to do with the death of Samuel Goldberg than you had. I often take a revolver with me when I go down to stay with my uncle. I'm a very keen shot, and potting at rabbits is marvellous practice."

"I believe you, Carter," said Ronald, holding out his hand. "But there's no good blinding yourself to the fact that a combination of circumstances has put you in a very awkward corner."

Carter's expression, which had cleared at Ronald's first words, clouded again.

"It's hideous," he cried passionately. "It's like a nightmare. I'm not a fool, and I see the gravity of the situation. Someone in the carriage must have shot him and I'm found with a gun. But if I'd done it should I have kept the revolver?"

"Exactly what I said to the Inspector," said Ronald, with a grave smile. "But you may depend on one thing——"

He broke off.

"Hallo! Grantham doesn't look too happy."

The Inspector was coming along the platform with a puzzled frown.

"Well, Mr. Carter," he said, "I must apologise."

"What do you mean?" Carter almost shouted.

"The bullet doesn't fit your revolver."

For a moment or two there was dead silence. Then Ronald stepped up to Carter and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Congratulations,” he said. “Well out of a nasty position.”

“Thanks,” said Carter quietly. “I don’t want to go through another half-hour like that again. I don’t blame you in the slightest degree, Inspector; it must have looked a cert to you. But you can imagine my feelings, knowing I hadn’t done it.”

“I apologise again,” said the Inspector. “But, damn it,” he burst out, “who did? Well, it will be a question of searching the line till we find the revolver that that bullet does fit.”

“You never will,” remarked Ronald, lighting a cigarette.

“Why not?” demanded Grantham.

“Because it isn’t there.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me next that Goldberg wasn’t shot at all,” said the Inspector sarcastically.

“No, not that. But once again I am going to suggest to you that you consider in all its aspects the extraordinary phenomenon of the raw egg.”

“Any other points?” asked the Inspector, impressed in spite of himself.

“Two,” said Ronald. “First—the strange fact that the window was open when Carter’s interview with Goldberg finished, and was shut when the body was found. Second—that Carter is certainly not the only person in the world who owes Goldberg money.”

“Damn it!” exploded Grantham, “I believe you know who did it.”

“No, I don’t,” said Ronald emphatically. “Moreover, it is quite possible I never shall. But we’ll see. Once again congratulations, Carter, on a lucky escape. If that bullet had fitted your gun you would have been in the soup. Come on, Bob; here’s our train coming. I’ve just got time to ask the guard of the express one question.”

And the only remark he made to me the whole way up to London added considerably to my mental confusion.

“Well done, Bob,” he said. “You solved that in masterly fashion.”

“I solved it!” I spluttered.

“Of course you did, old boy. When you said the murderer had an egg in one hand and a revolver in the other.”

For the next few days I did not see him at all. The newspapers, naturally, were full of the case, and interviews were published with all four of the other occupants of the carriage. In fact, “The Mystery of the Slip-Coach” appealed immensely to the man in the street, owing to the strange circumstances of the crime.

And it certainly was a baffling affair. As far as the public was concerned, it was obvious that one of the four people in the coach was guilty, and in most clubs betting on the final result was frequent. And it was inevitable that Carter should prove the favourite in spite of the fact that the shot did not fit his revolver. The Vicar and his wife were a delightful old pair who had lived a blameless life for years at Meston; Major Blackton turned out to be an extremely wealthy man who had just returned to England after a prolonged absence abroad, and who had never heard of Goldberg in his life.

“You mark my words,” said a man one day to me, “young Carter did it, and he’s a mighty deep ’un. Shall I tell you how? He had a second revolver. D’you get me? The gun he shot Goldberg with he bunged out of the window, leaving the other one to be found.”

The trouble was that in spite of an army of searchers no trace of another gun could be found. A large reward was offered by the police, without producing any result, and another theory was started. Carter must have had a confederate who picked up the revolver when it was thrown from the train. And that held the field for quite a time, till it was conclusively proved that Goldberg had only decided to go by that train on the very morning in question, and that it was, therefore, utterly impossible for Carter to have known about it in time to make any such arrangements.

Another source of information from which the police had hoped to derive some help proved of no assistance. The people in the other train, who had first seen the body, could say nothing which threw any more light on matters. They were two young men, one of whom was standing up at the window watching the express as it gradually overtook them. He had seen the body sprawling on the seat and realising that something was amiss, he had, with his companion, attracted the Vicar’s attention. But of one thing they were positive: the window of Goldberg’s carriage was shut. And as time went on it began to look as if the mystery would prove insoluble, which would have been unpleasant for Carter. For there was no doubt that a large percentage of the public believed that in some way or other he had done it. And even though that belief was only due to the fact that it was most unlikely that any of the other three was guilty—that it was arrived at by a process of elimination, and was not the result of any positive evidence—it made things no better for him.

And then one morning I got a ’phone message from Ronald, asking me to go round to his rooms. He was not in when I got there, but, somewhat to my surprise, I found Inspector Grantham.

“Morning, Mr. Miller,” he said gloomily. “I hope Mr. Standish has found out something, for this case isn’t doing me any good.”

“I know he doesn’t think it was Carter,” I said.

“Then who could it have been?” he cried. “But I can’t arrest him. We haven’t a shred of evidence. If only we could find the gun it was done with.”

The door opened and Ronald entered.

“Come in, Mr. Meredith,” he said, nodding to us. “Here are the other two gentlemen who I know will be interested in our little venture.”

A morose-looking individual entered as he was speaking, who contemplated us suspiciously.

“You remember, Bob,” Ronald went on, “our ideas about a chicken farm. Well—I’ve found the very spot, and Mr. Meredith is quite willing to sell.”

“Give me my figure, and you can have it tomorrow,” said the new-comer. “Not that it isn’t a good proposition: it is. But I haven’t the money to run it. I’ll have a drop of Scotch, thank you.”

I glanced at the Inspector as Ronald filled a glass, but his face was impassive. Only the faintest of winks showed that he realised something was up, but I knew he was as much in the dark as I was.

“Here’s how,” said Meredith, and drained his drink. “Well, gentlemen, do we talk business?”

“No time like the present,” said Ronald cheerfully, ringing the bell. “Take away that empty glass, will you, Sayers,” he told his man, “and bring in some more clean ones. Now, Mr. Meredith, I understand Hatchaways is for sale, and that the price you are asking is fifteen hundred pounds?”

“That is correct,” agreed the other, his eyes sparkling greedily.

“And it is not mortgaged nor encumbered in any way?”

“No; the property is quite clear.”

The door opened, and Sayers came in carrying some more glasses. And as he put them down I saw him nod to Ronald.

“Have you had to borrow any money on the place, Mr. Meredith?” continued Ronald.

“You’ll pardon me, Mr. Standish, but I don’t see that that has anything to do with you,” said Meredith truculently.

“You didn’t borrow, for instance, from Samuel Goldberg, who has recently been murdered?”

Meredith gave one uncontrollable start. Then he pulled himself together.

“Never heard of the man till I saw his death in the paper.”

“Strange,” said Ronald quietly. “He was a complete stranger to you, maybe?”

“Absolute.”

“Then why, Meredith, did you throw that egg through his open window in the Downwater express as his carriage came level with yours?”

Meredith lurched to his feet and tried to bluster. But there was sick fear in his face and Grantham moved towards the door.

“It’s a cursed lie,” he said thickly.

"Oh, no, it isn't," answered Ronald sternly. "On the shell of the egg you threw are fingerprints: on the glass you've just drunk from are fingerprints. And those fingerprints are identical. There's your man, Grantham. He murdered Samuel Goldberg by shooting him through the head from the other train."

For a moment there was silence, and then with a roar of rage Meredith whipped a revolver out of his pocket. But he was too late. Grantham was on him like a flash.

"And that is the gun, Inspector," continued Ronald, calmly, "that I told you you would not find on the permanent way."

* * *

"I wish to Heaven you'd elucidate, old boy," I said a few minutes later, "for it's the smartest thing I've ever known."

Ronald filled his pipe thoughtfully.

"You may remember, Bob," he said, "that after your illuminating remark I went into the next compartment and started monkeying about with the window. Now, there are two main types of fitting in trains. The more common has a long strap, and with that sort, when the strap has been pulled to the full extent, an outward push on the bottom of the window is necessary to keep it shut. The other type has no strap, but a slot in the top sash which, when pulled up to the full extent, automatically remains there. And that was the type used in the slip coach.

"You may also remember how I harped on the raw egg. I could not place it, Bob; every instinct in me rebelled against the thought that Goldberg carried one raw egg with him. Then you made the remark about the murderer carrying it. Once again it was incredible if the murderer was in the carriage. He wouldn't come in, plaster an egg on the door, and then shoot Goldberg. But, supposing the murderer hadn't been in the carriage—what then? For a considerable time another train had been running parallel with the express, and at about the same speed. Supposing a man in that other train had seen Goldberg sitting in his compartment, and to attract his attention had thrown an egg through the open window, what would be Goldberg's reaction? He would get up to shut the window, to prevent more eggs following. Supposing that then the egg-thrower shot him through the brain. Now you and I have seen men killed instantaneously in France, and if you cast your mind back you will remember that quite a number threw up their arms and fell backwards. What would have happened if Goldberg's fingers had been in the notch of the window? Just what did happen in this case: he shut the window with his last convulsive jerk, thereby making it appear impossible for him to have been shot from anywhere except inside the carriage, which was, of course, an incredible piece of luck for the murderer.

“So on that hypothesis I started. You heard me say to Grantham that I might never find the man who did it, and but for luck which now turned against him I never should have. My starting point, naturally, was the other train and its occupants. Now the last station at which it had stopped, before the murder had been committed, was Pedlington, and so there I repaired. I made inquiries with the utmost caution, because it was essential that nothing should get into the papers if we weren’t going to alarm our bird, whoever he was. And after talking to the stationmaster and getting in touch with the guard of the train, facts began to accumulate, though it was a slow business.

“The first thing I found out was that the train was comparatively empty—so empty that the guard was able to remember more or less accurately how the passengers were seated. And the important thing was to ascertain how many compartments had only one occupant. There were only three to his certain knowledge: one with a woman, two each with a man. More than that he could not say, except that the woman was very old.

“Now came the wearisome search. I eliminated the woman, and concentrated on the men. I went to every station after Pedlington at which the train stopped, and got in touch with the ticket collector. It was still an absolute toss-up if I could spot my man. If it was someone carrying a few eggs in a paper bag it was hopeless. And then came an astounding stroke of luck. The collector at Marlingham—four stations beyond Pedlington—remembered a man who got out there with a basket of eggs and who asked the way to some farm.

“Bob, I was getting warm. Off to the farm I went, and found that a man called Meredith, who owned a chicken farm called Hatchaways, not far from Pedlington itself, had been there. And now I knew I’d got him. You remember the letters on the broken shell—‘atch’ and ‘ways.’ He was my bird, but he was still a long way from the net.

“So back to Pedlington, where I posed as a man with a certain amount of money who was interested in chicken farming. And I soon met Master Meredith, who thought he had found a sucker. Further inquiries revealed the fact that he was in bad financial straits, and was only too ready to sell. Further inquiries also revealed the very significant and unusual fact that he always carried a Colt revolver in his pocket wherever he went—a habit, he said, he got into while out West. So I staged the little performance this morning. Marshall, from the Yard, the fingerprint expert, was outside, and when Sayers nodded to me I knew that there was no mistake.

“Just one of those strange crimes that nearly came off. It wasn’t premeditated, of course. By a mere freak of fate the two trains ran side by side for some time, and Meredith saw the chance of getting rid of the man to whom he owed money in such a way that no suspicion could fall on him. And when Goldberg shut the window as he died, Meredith must have thought himself absolutely safe. Which,” he concluded, “he would have been if he’d thrown a banana and not an egg.”

8

THE SECOND DOG

“ONE of the most dangerous mistakes you can make in any investigation is to start with a preconceived idea.”

Thus one of Ronald Standish’s favourite maxims, and seldom has its truth been better demonstrated than in the case of the murder of Daniel Benton, when, but for the lucky chance of Ronald’s presence at Croxton Hall for the annual cricket match, an innocent man might well have gone to the gallows.

The thing happened on the night of our arrival. The house-party was a big one, comprising as it did most of our eleven, and several of the Free Foresters whom we were playing next day. Bill Maybury, our host, was in his usual good form, and we were just going in to dinner when the butler, looking very perturbed, came in and whispered something in his ear.

“Daniel Benton murdered!” cried Maybury. “Good God! Who did it?”

The butler hesitated for a moment.

“There’s a rumour, sir,” he said, “that Sergeant Johnston is arresting young Joe Drury.”

Bill Maybury looked very grave.

“Young Drury,” he repeated. “When did it happen, Parker?”

“I’ve just heard the news, sir. The postman brought it.”

“The devil!” said Maybury. “Ronald, this looks like something in your line. I don’t know any details, but from what Parker says our fast bowler to-morrow is on the verge of being arrested for murder. I don’t believe he did it for a moment,” he went on. “He’s a hot-tempered boy, and there’s no love between him and that blackguard Benton.” He pulled himself up. “Still, if the man’s dead, I suppose one oughtn’t to call him a blackguard.”

A silence had fallen on the room at the mention of the word “murder,” and Ronald broke it.

“Let’s hear a bit more, Bill. Who was the dead man, and who is this young Drury?”

“Daniel Benton,” said Maybury, “came to these parts about three years ago, and took a small house about a mile from here. And though the poor devil seems to be dead there is no use in pretending that he will be the slightest loss. In fact, not to mince words, I have seldom in my life met a bigger swine. In his early days he was a seafaring man, and what induced him to settle in the depths of the country I don’t know. However, he took the house for five years. He seemed to have a certain amount of money, and his principal method of spending it was down his throat. And when he had drink on board that man was a devil incarnate. He was immensely powerful, with a great ragged black beard, and about twice a week he used to go round to the 'Greyhound' and have a bout. The other men loathed him, but they were all afraid of him. He'd sit in the corner of the bar speaking to no one till he got well sprung: then the trouble would begin. He delighted in picking a quarrel. He was a foul-mouthed brute, and the fellows here, though no more squeamish than most, were utterly disgusted by him. He couldn't get out a sentence without an oath in it, and his stories were invariably connected with his own unsavoury past.

"But even that," he continued, "wouldn't have mattered so much if he could have kept his hands to himself. Twice he's been before the bench for inflicting grievous bodily harm on two of the lads. The first time we fined him; the second we gave him three months. But each time it was the same thing: he started sneering at someone until the victim lost his temper and struck him. Then Benton would wade into him and half kill him."

"What a delightful member of the community," said Ronald.

"You're right, old boy," said Maybury, "and if young Drury has killed him it's no more than he deserves. At the same time, that's not going to help the boy much."

"Was there any special animosity between the two?"

"That's the devil of it," answered our host. "There was. Drury was one of the two he laid out. The boy was walking out with little Nellie Seymour, and one day they met Benton. And that night Benton came into the bar, and started making foul innuendoes about them. Drury, of course, flared up and went for him, but it was simply pitiful, I believe. He's quite a well-built, strong lad, but he was like a child in that brute's hands.

("That was the case we gave him three months for because of the provocation.)

"Benton half murdered him, which was damned galling to his pride. And that, coupled with what had previously been said about Nellie and him, drove him wild. And he started uttering foolish threats—'he'd do the swine in,' and that sort of thing. It came to my ears, and when I met him one day I told him to quit it and not be an ass. To keep out of Benton's way as much as possible; to avoid the fellow. But, from what I understand, it has been proving very difficult. Benton, somewhat naturally, regarded Drury as the cause of his imprisonment, and has been seizing every opportunity of sneering at him and making his life a hell."

"When did Benton come out of prison?" asked Ronald.

"Two months ago," said Maybury. "And there's no doubt about it, it's made him worse."

“I wonder how he was killed,” remarked Ronald.

“I’ll ring for Parker and see if he knows. Parker,” he said as the butler entered, “what was Benton killed with? Was he shot?”

“I don’t know, sir,” answered the man. “All the postman said was that the room was like a shambles. But I’ve just heard, sir,” he went on, “that young Drury turned up at the ‘Greyhound’ in a terrible condition about an hour ago. Bleeding he was, and all muzzy like, but he wouldn’t say anything. He just had a couple and then stumbled off home.”

“By Gad! that looks bad,” said Maybury gravely. And then he looked tentatively at Ronald. “I suppose, old man, you wouldn’t like to . . .”

“Of course, I will,” said Ronald. “Let’s go and see if there’s anything to be found out.”

“Thanks, Ronald,” said Maybury gratefully. “Sergeant Johnston is an excellent man, but I’d like that boy to have the very best possible chance. You fellows go and have dinner; we’ll have something when we get back.”

“Coming, Bob?” said Ronald.

“You bet,” I cried, and a few minutes later we started off with Maybury in his car.

It was a beautiful starlight night. The air was cool after a heavy shower that had fallen about six o’clock, and it seemed hard to realise in the peaceful country-side that we were on our way to a scene of murder. But as we drove along the main road we overtook people in twos and threes hurrying along and evidently bound for the same destination as ourselves.

“There’s Benton’s house,” said Maybury, suddenly pointing ahead; and in the glare of the headlights we could see a crowd already gathered in the road. They parted as we drew up by the gate, and a stolid policeman on duty saluted as he recognised Maybury.

“Bad business, sir,” he said. “The sergeant’s hinside now with the hinspector. Stand back there,” he cried, as two or three of the more daring spirits tried to follow us in.

“Good evening, Sergeant Johnston,” said Maybury, addressing a stout, florid-faced man who was standing in the hall. “This is a bad show.”

“Very bad indeed, sir,” answered the sergeant, touching his hat. “Inspector Merrifield is here, but it’s just one of those obvious cases.”

A tall, thin man in plain clothes came out of one of the rooms and looked at us keenly.

“This is Mr. Maybury, sir,” said the sergeant. “One of our bench of magistrates.”

“A terrible affair, Inspector,” said Maybury. “And I’ve taken the liberty of bringing Mr. Standish, who is staying with me. He’s very well known at Scotland Yard: and since I hear there is some talk of young Drury being implicated in this business, I hope you'll let him have a look round."

"I've heard of you, Mr. Standish," said the Inspector none too graciously. "And if you think you're going to get anything out of this business you're sadly mistaken! The whole thing is obvious."

"For all that, I'd like just to have a look, Inspector," said Ronald genially. "Though I'm sure you've spotted everything there is to see."

The Inspector flung open the door of the room behind him, and we all went in.

"Everything is as it was," remarked the Inspector, "except that I've drawn the curtains because of the crowd outside."

Ronald nodded shortly, and we all stood silently looking round. Lying on the floor against the wall opposite to us was a huge, black-bearded man. His open eyes seemed to glare at us horribly: his mouth had set itself into a snarl. One great hairy hand lay outstretched on the carpet: the other was clenched round the metal shaft of a spear, which stuck out from his chest. Just above him a similar weapon had been half wrenched from the wall and now dangled precariously from one support. The blood, which had ceased to flow, had collected in a pool by his side, and the whole effect was incredibly gruesome.

"The spear was driven clean through him," said the Inspector. "The point is sticking out of his back."

"You presumably know what sort of a spear that is," remarked Ronald.

The other raised his eyebrows.

"Whatever sort it is," he answered, "it was sufficient to kill him, and that's all that matters to me."

"Perhaps you're right," said Ronald quietly. "Still, it is instructive. I think you said, Bill, that the dead man had been a sailor, so that accounts for him having harpoons about the room."

"That's what they get whales with, isn't it?" cried the Inspector.

"It is," said Ronald. "And I see that the one with which he was killed was hanging by the side of its companion, which is still on the wall."

"Excellent," remarked the Inspector with a faint smile. "The companion which Benton was trying to get down when he was murdered."

"Ever tried to throw a harpoon, Inspector?" asked Ronald mildly.

"I can't say I have. Why?"

"I only wondered," said Ronald still more mildly. "You have a shot at it one day and you'll be surprised at the result. However, what's all this about young Drury?"

"Have you seen all you want to see in here?" said the Inspector with a touch of sarcasm.

"For the moment, yes," answered Ronald.

"Then we might go to another room, and I'll tell you what happened."

He led the way across the hall, and we followed.

“See that no one goes into that room,” he ordered the constable at the door, and the man saluted.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said, “it’s one of those cases which solves itself automatically. I’m sorry for young Drury, who, Sergeant Johnston tells me, is a good lad, and who seems to have had the utmost provocation. However, the law is the law, and justice must take its course. It seems, then, that Drury has a dog to which he is very attached. It’s a mongrel of sorts——”

“I know the animal,” cried Maybury. “It’s an intelligent little beast.”

“This afternoon,” continued the Inspector, “the dog appears to have been out on its own. (I may say, gentlemen, that what I am about to tell you is at present only hearsay from the constable, but I shall, of course, have it all substantiated.) While the dog was out it met Benton, and whether it barked at him or whether he was in a rage and recognised it as belonging to Drury, I don’t know. What is clear, however, is that he picked up a big stone, threw it at the dog and broke one of its legs.”

“The damned swine!” said Maybury.

“Not content with that,” went on the Inspector, “he caught the dog, and wrote a note, which he fastened to its collar—a note which Drury showed to several men in the ‘Greyhound.’

“ ‘Next time I’ll break its —— head.’

“That was about six o’clock, for Drury had been away for the afternoon and only found out what had happened when he returned. He was in a white rage.”

“Somewhat naturally,” cried Maybury.

“And,” continued the other, without heeding the interruption, “spent half an hour uttering wild threats against Benton. Also, though usually, I understand, an abstemious lad, he drank several whiskies, which still further inflamed him. Then he left the ‘Greyhound’ with the avowed intention of coming here and having it out. He did come here, arriving at about seven o’clock.”

“You know that for certain?” said Ronald.

The Inspector nodded.

“This man Benton has an old woman called Betsy who cooks for him and does the work of the house. We’ll send for her in a moment, if you like, and she will tell you herself. At any rate, she let him in, and he joined Benton in the room opposite, from which shortly after she heard the sound of furious quarrelling, followed by blows. She hung about in the hall, too frightened to go in, and after a while the noise ceased. So she returned to the kitchen to get supper ready.

“She was there for about a quarter of an hour, and then started to carry the meal into the dining-room. And as she was crossing the hall she heard a loud voice, which she swears was not Benton's. And the words that she heard are, I fear, about as damning to Drury as they could well be.

" 'Three bells in the second dog, you swine.'

"Of course, she may not have got the sentence absolutely right. It might have been three bricks, or something of that sort, but on one point she remains absolutely unshaken: the phrase, 'the second dog,' was used.

"She waited—listening—and a moment or two later heard a sound as if something had been thrown against the wall. Then all was silent, and she continued with the supper, which was ready at a quarter to eight, when she went in to tell Benton, and found what you have seen. She rushed out screaming, and fortunately ran straight into Sergeant Johnston, who communicated at once with me. And that, gentlemen, is the whole damning story in a nutshell. Young Drury arrived just before eight at the 'Greyhound' in a state of terrible agitation, and very badly knocked about."

"By Gad! it looks bad," cried Maybury. "What do you think, Ronald?"

"That I'd like to speak to Betsy," he said.

"She can't tell you any more than I've already done," snapped the Inspector.

"Perhaps not," remarked Ronald quietly. "But I'd still like to see her."

The Inspector made a sign to the sergeant, who left the room.

"So your theory, I take it, Inspector," said Ronald, "is somewhat as follows. Young Drury came here at seven o'clock, and proceeded to have a furious row with the dead man. Moreover, they came to blows, when presumably Drury was knocked about. Then—well, what happened then?"

"Drury left in a flaming rage," said the Inspector, "a rage which grew more intense with every step he took until it mastered him, and he determined to kill Benton. He returned, and managed—how I can't say—to get one of the harpoons down from the wall. Benton, realising his intention, tried to get the other, but was struck down before he could succeed."

"And then young Drury helped himself to rum," murmured Ronald.

"So you saw that glass, did you?" grunted the other.

"Well, Inspector," cried Ronald with a smile, "I am not completely blind. And since it is improbable they were drinking together, the rum must have been consumed after Benton was killed, as a nerve bracer."

"What on earth does that signify?" said the other. "It doesn't alter facts."

"It depends on what are facts," said Ronald. "Ah! Betsy," he swung round as the door opened and an old woman came in, followed by the sergeant, "there are one or two questions I want to ask you: How long have you been in this house?"

"Three years, sir," she mumbled. "Ever since he came." She jerked a thumb at the room opposite.

“And during those three years did he ever have anyone to stay?”

“No, sir; no one.”

“Many visitors by day?”

“No, sir: he didn’t like strangers. He had special bolts fitted to all the windows just after he came here,” said the old crone. “He used to lock up most particular each night: always did it himself.”

“Thank you, Betsy. Oh! one more question. This voice that you heard shouting about the second dog—could you recognise whose it was?”

“No, sir; I couldn’t. But it must have been young Joe Drury.”

“Which shows how singularly dangerous a witness of that sort can be,” said Ronald as she left the room. “It must have been young Joe Drury. Why?”

We all stared at him, the Inspector with a barely concealed sneer.

“Are you suggesting that it wasn’t young Drury?” he demanded.

“Certainly,” said Ronald calmly. “You may take it from me that Drury had no more to do with Benton’s death than I had.”

“But, damn it!” exploded the other, “that remark Betsy overheard practically proves it was him.”

“On the contrary,” said Ronald, “it practically proves it wasn’t.”

“Then who the devil was it?”

“That is more than I can tell you at this stage of the proceedings,” answered Ronald cheerfully. “But I don’t think there will be much trouble about laying our hands on him when we want him. And I very much doubt, Inspector, if you will find that it turns out to be a hanging matter. Now, if you don’t mind, I would like one more look at the room where he was killed.”

We followed him across the passage, the Inspector looking at the sergeant and winking significantly. But Ronald, even if he noticed, paid not the smallest attention. Quietly and systematically he was examining the wall near the door, and at last the Inspector could stand it no longer.

“Looking for fingerprints?” he inquired.

“Something of the sort,” said Ronald. “Ah! here it is, as I thought.”

We crowded round him to look. The paper had been torn away at the spot where he was pointing, and the plaster behind was showing. The hole was about an inch deep, and looked as if it had been made by the sharp corner of a cupboard or desk.

“I commend that hole to you, Inspector,” he remarked. “Also the fact that some of the plaster has trickled out on to the floor, a state of affairs which I am sure Betsy would have rectified had she noticed it. Now, surely with that to go on, and the rum, and the fact that Benton was killed round about half-past seven, you ought to be able to lay your hands on your man. It’s a pity that you’ve allowed the villagers to obliterate every footprint for miles around, otherwise we might have got some more evidence, but you've got enough to go on. And while I think of it—be careful with the gentleman when you get him—because I think you will find that he is quite as powerful as the man he killed."

The Inspector, who had flushed angrily at Ronald's remarks, controlled himself with an effort.

"What a lovely story it would make, wouldn't it?" he remarked. "Has he brown or blue eyes?"

Ronald smiled cheerfully.

"That I'm afraid I can't tell you. But he's tanned and weather-beaten, about the same height as myself, walks with a slight roll, and possibly has a beard."

But the Inspector had had enough, and with an angry snort he left the room.

"If you've got the time to play round with this fooling, Mr. Standish, I haven't. I wish you good night."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ronald.

"Interview young Drury," snapped the other. "And I wish you luck of your bearded, weather-beaten roller."

"A pig-headed individual," said Ronald as he departed. "A little lesson will do him no harm."

"But are you honestly serious, old boy?" cried Maybury as we walked to the car.

"My dear Bill," answered Ronald quietly, "I can assure you of one thing. However big a swine a man was I wouldn't jest in the room where he lay dead."

"Then how the devil you've done it beats me," said our host. "I saw all you saw."

Ronald smiled.

"Mustn't ask me to explain the doings just yet, Bill," he said. "Besides, we haven't caught our bird. Do you mind if we drive to the 'Greyhound'? We may as well begin our inquiries there."

"Can you get it, Bob?" said Maybury as we started.

"Haven't an earthly," I confessed. "But then I never have."

The car pulled up at the "Greyhound" and Ronald got out.

"I shan't be long," he said and disappeared inside. A minute later he was out again with a pleased look on his face.

"Luck right in," he remarked. "Drive slowly towards Tetterbury," he told the chauffeur, "and stop the moment I tell you to."

"We've landed him quicker than I expected," he said, getting in with us at the back. "And if you don't mind we'll take him up to your place and hear his story. But don't alarm him till we get him there."

The car, headlights blazing, drove slowly on. And I suppose we'd gone about a mile when suddenly I felt my pulses quicken. In front of us, in the middle of the road was a thick-set man walking with a pronounced roll.

"Our bird," said Ronald quietly. "Stop when you come abreast of him."

He had a bundle slung over his shoulder, and as the car approached he swung round. And I heard Maybury whistle under his breath; the man had a beard.

"Want a lift, mate?" sang out Ronald. "Hop in beside the driver."

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said. "I'm bound for Tetterbury."

"We'll send you on there later," said Ronald. "I expect you could do with a bit of grub first. To the Hall," he told the chauffeur.

"Well, it's never been Tom Dixon's way to refuse a good offer. Thank you, gents, I don't mind if I do."

"I told the landlord at the 'Greyhound' to tell that ass Merrifield to come up there too," said Ronald in a low voice. "Hope you don't mind, Bill."

"My dear man," answered Maybury, "I'm too puzzled to mind anything. The whole thing has me beat."

Which applied equally to me.

The house-party was assembled in the hall when we arrived, and Ronald jumped out quickly to warn them to say nothing. And so it was a silent group which stared curiously at the man who stood blinking a little in the light. He was clearly puzzled, and when Ronald shut the front door behind him he made a quick movement as if he expected a trap.

"Sit down, Dixon," said Ronald quietly. "What you did this evening has got to be explained, you know."

"What are you getting at, mister?" he growled. "I've done nothing this evening."

And at that moment Inspector Merrifield, looking completely mystified, came into the hall.

"What's this the landlord tells me?" he began, and then he saw Dixon standing sullenly in the centre of the group.

"Good Lord!" he muttered, staring at him foolishly. "Who's that?"

"The man I was telling you about, Inspector," said Ronald, with a faint twinkle in his eyes. "And he is just going to tell us why he killed Benton."

With an oath the man lurched forward.

"It's a . . . lie," he shouted. "I don't know who you mean."

"Don't be a fool, Dixon," said Ronald sternly. "Your only chance is to make a clean breast of it. And to show you how useless it is to lie I'll tell you exactly what took place. This evening you arrived at Benton's house. Through the open window you saw him sitting in his room drinking. Then you either climbed in through the window or, opening the front door, you walked through the hall to his room, where you confronted him with the remark, ‘Three bells in the second dog, you swine!’

“He recognised you at once, and in some way managed to get at one of the harpoons on the wall behind him, which he flung at you. It missed and, hitting the wall, fell at your feet. You picked it up, and as he tried to get the second you hurled it. And, Dixon, you did not miss. Then you took a glass, poured yourself out some rum, drank it, and left the house.”

The man who had been listening with ever increasing amazement and fear collapsed limply in a chair.

“Strike me pink, mister!” he muttered, “were you watching from the road? You’re plumb right, but it was him or me.”

“I know that,” said Ronald quietly, “and that’s why we want to hear what led up to this affair.”

The Inspector stepped forward.

“I must caution you,” he said, “that anything you say will be used in evidence against you.”

Dixon looked at him contemptuously.

“Copper, are you? That’s all right, mister. If there’s any justice in this country they’ll do nothing to me for killing a black-hearted devil who should have been dead this last thirty years. From what I’ve heard down in the pub yonder he made himself pretty well hated round these parts, but you can take it from me, gentlemen, that he was a Sunday school marm compared to what he was like in the old days.

“Bully Benton he was known as, and well did he deserve the nickname. Even when he was sober he had the temper of a fiend, but when he was drunk the man was uncontrollable. He was as strong as two ordinary men, and the life he lived kept him fit in spite of his drinking bouts. He owned a whaler, and that’s not work for the weakling.

“I first met Bully Benton in ’97 in a low-down joint in Sydney. He’d just come back from a cruise and he had money to burn. And from the very first we hated one another. I reckon I’m no plaster saint myself, but there are limits, gentlemen. And he was over it. Some of the stories I could tell you about him you wouldn’t believe. Once when he was drunk he soaked a cat in oil and set light to it, and there are a score of other things he did which made one wonder if the man was sane.

“We steered clear of one another as much as we could. Though I says it myself, I was one of the few men that Bully had a wholesome respect for. We never actually came to a scrap, but I was no chicken in those days and the result might have surprised him. He knew it, too, and that was enough for him, though it made him hate me all the more. I suppose, mister, there’s not such a thing as a wet about? I reckon I’m not much of a hand at talking.”

Bill Maybury pressed the bell, and while we waited for the drink to come the strange contrast of it all struck me. The ring of men in evening clothes, each of them absolutely fit according to our standards, and yet what chance would any of us have had against Bully Benton? But there, quietly lowering his pint of beer, was the man who, when it came to stark reality, had beaten him in the final test—a man who, but for Ronald, would now be sitting in a third-class carriage to all outward appearances a common sailor.

"I shan't be much longer now, gentlemen," he continued, putting down his tankard, "and then you must do with me as you sees fit. You belong to one class, I belong to another, but there's one thing where all of us meet on the same level—when we come to love an honest girl. Perhaps you won't believe it, that there was a time when Tom Dixon was a bit of a favourite with the women, but from the moment I first set eyes on little Alice Preston there was never room for another girl in my life. And now I knows it was the same with her, though for a time I didn't. God! I thank you for that!"

His great fists were clenched: the sweat glistened on his forehead: for the moment we were non-existent.

"No," he repeated, "for a time I didn't. We were pledged, Alice and me, though her parents were not too pleased about it. They wanted something better for their sweet girl than a rough sailorman. I didn't blame them: she was worthy of the highest in the land. But she was true to me, and we were going to be wedded when I got back from my next cruise."

And once again did he forget we were there.

"I got back to Sydney," he went on after a while, "and went round to her house at once. And there her father met me.

" 'Tom, lad,' he said, 'I've got some terrible bad news for you.'

"My heart almost stopped beating.

" 'Not Alice!' I cried. 'Don't say anything's happened to her?'

" 'She's run away,' he said in a rasping voice. 'Run away with Bully Benton.'

"Gentlemen, I reckons I went crazy. I shook him like a dog shakes a rat; told him he was a liar and it was a trick to fool me. But at last I understood that it was the truth: my Alice had run away to sea with Bully Benton. We didn't even know if they was married, but what did that matter? I'd lost her: Bully Benton had got her. She'd gone down to his boat happy and care-free—we found that out from one of the watchmen: gone willingly.

"It broke me up, mister; broke me up utterly. And I went to the devil in my own way. I'm not excusing myself; I was young and headstrong. But the finish of it was that I got three years. I didn't care; I came out more black-hearted than I went in. And the first thing I did was to look round for Bully, only to find that he'd quit the game and left Australia.

“ ‘And the girl,’ I said to the man I was talking to. ‘Has she gone with him?’

“ ‘Alice Preston?’ he cried, looking at me strangely. ‘Of course, you wouldn’t have heard, Tom. The poor child fell overboard and was drowned.’

“So she was dead, and serve her right, was my thoughts. She deserved it for playing me false, and I felt no pity for her. Until one day a week later when I happened to meet the cook who had been with Bully that trip. I was drinking hard, and feeling that I cared neither for God nor man, when he altered my life for me.

“ ‘If only you’d been here, Tom,’ he said, ‘it would never have happened.’

“ ‘What d’you mean?’ I cried. ‘I couldn’t have stopped her going: wouldn’t have if she’d wanted to.’

“ ‘Wanted to, you damned fool!’ he shouted. ‘Wanted to! You must be mad to think such a thing.’

“And then, gentlemen, I heard the truth. Heard how Bully had lured her on board his boat with a cock-and-bull story about me having put back because I was ill, and that he would take her to me. How or why she believed it, God Almighty only knows. Maybe it was that, with her mind, she was incapable of suspecting the devilry of that foul blackguard. Just a few hours’ sail, he told her; she’d be back before nightfall. So she went with him—all blind trust and confidence.”

He was speaking slowly now, was Tom Dixon, and you could have heard a pin drop in that crowded hall. For every one of us there realised that he was hearing the simply told story of one of life’s stark dramas.

“Can you realise her feelings, gentlemen, when it first dawned on her that she’d been deceived? Can you realise her feelings when she went on her knees to that man and he just laughed in her face? Can you realise her feelings when he first flung his foul arms round her and soiled her with his lecherous kisses? One friend she had—the cook—and Bully split his head open with a belaying-pin; he showed me the scar.

“ ‘So it was better that she fell overboard,’ I said when he’d finished.

“And then, gentlemen, he looked at me queerly.

“ ‘She didn’t fall, Tom,’ he said. ‘She jumped.’ ”

For a while Tom Dixon was silent, staring in front of him, and seeing the ghosts of that tragedy of long ago. Then with a little shake he pulled himself together.

“I guess that’s about all, gentlemen. There and then I vowed that some day, at the same hour that my girl went to her death, Bully Benton and I would settle accounts. For years I have been seeking him, and quite by chance a fortnight ago in Marseilles I picked up an English newspaper of several months ago. And in it I saw a little paragraph saying that a Daniel Benton had been given three months for assault. I had found him at last: there could not be two of them.

"The rest this gentleman knows, though how he found it out I can't understand, seeing that he wasn't there. I don't know how I stand with the law of England; I don't know what they can do to me: I don't care. I killed Bully Benton and I guess if they want to hang me for it they can."

"You take it from me, Dixon," said Ronald quietly, "that the law won't hang you for it. You'll have to go with the Inspector and stand your trial, of course, but in view of the fact that you went to him unarmed and he flung the harpoon at you first, it will only be a formality. And may I say one thing more? I don't think there is a single man here who would not be proud to have acted as you did."

"It makes one feel a bit small, doesn't it?" he said ten minutes later.

Dixon had gone with the Inspector; Bill Maybury, Ronald and I were sitting down to a belated dinner.

"Little games of cricket and golf; nice food on nice plates; all the even tenor of our lives—and what we've just listened to."

"Agreed," grunted Maybury. "But we're still infernally curious, Ronald."

"Little fiddling clues," Ronald laughed shortly. "It was easy, Bill. From the word 'go' I was certain it wasn't young Drury. To throw a harpoon requires not only enormous strength, but very great skill—skill it was wellnigh impossible that a country lad could possess. Only a man trained to the sea could have done it.

"Then the rum: essentially a sailor's drink, and already I was fairly certain in my mind that a seafaring man was at the bottom of it, a conviction which was strengthened by what Betsy told us with regard to Benton's fear of strangers. Surely that must date back to his old life. But when we came to the remark she overheard I had proof positive.

" 'Three bells in the second dog, you swine!'

"And there you see the danger of a preconceived idea. The Inspector, his mind full of the story of young Dairy's dog, seized on the word dog—in a way, a very natural mistake. I, on the other hand, had already arrived in a nautical atmosphere and to me the remark had a totally different significance. The dog watch on board ship is from four to eight in the evening; the first dog from four to six; the second dog from six to eight. And three bells in the second dog is seven-thirty—the time when Dixon entered the room; the time we now know when Alice Preston jumped to her death.

"By now I knew that the man who had killed Benton was a sailor: no landsman would have used such a phrase. Moreover, he'd killed him with one of Benton’s own weapons. How had he got it down from the wall with its owner sitting in the way? Obviously he couldn’t have, so it must have been flung at him first. The rest was easy. I found the mark on the wall, and realising that Benton would have aimed at his chest deduced that he was about the same height as myself. Incidentally, the fact that plaster was still on the floor was strong evidence that the mark had been made recently. And finally, deep-sea sailors are invariably weather-beaten, walk with a slight roll, and frequently have beards. And when the landlord at the ‘Greyhound’ told me that just such a man had left a few minutes earlier walking to Tetterbury I knew we had him.”

He lit a cigarette thoughtfully.

“But this night a man has talked with us.”

9

THE MAN IN YELLOW

I HAD known little Marjorie Beaumont since she was a child of six, but of late years since both her parents had died in one of the influenza epidemics I had rather lost sight of her. She was living, I knew, somewhere down in Kent with an elderly uncle. Where, exactly, I was not sure till I received the letter I now held in my hand.

> *Groomley Park,*
> *Nr. Ashford.*
>
> *Dear Bob* (it ran),
>
> *Come and feed with me at the Six Hundred to-morrow (that's to-day when you get this) and meet Bungo. Also there is something I want to ask you about. Expect you one o'clock.*
>
> *Yours,*
> *Marjorie.*
>
> *P.S.—You have got a pal who does things, haven't you? You know, arrests people, and all that.*

I smiled slightly. As a description of Ronald Standish, the postscript was not without humour. But what on earth could she be wanting to see him about? And who was Bungo? Points which doubtless would be settled at the Six Hundred, where I duly arrived at a little after one.

I saw her at once in a far corner sitting with a good-looking youngster. They were deep in conversation—so deep, in fact, that I had reached the table before she saw me.

"Bob, you old dear," she cried, jumping up, "it's great of you to come. This is Bungo."

I shook hands.

"His real name," she continued, "is Jack Ayrton, but it's used so little that he's almost forgotten it himself. And he and I are engaged."

"Splendid," I said. "All the usual and that sort of rot. But where," I remarked, glancing at her left hand, "is the outward and visible sign of this happy state of affairs?"

"That," remarked Bungo gloomily, "is where you butt your head into the snag. We *are* engaged, but Uncle Henry thinks otherwise."

"I don't think you know him, Bob," put in the girl. "But I've lived with him at Groomley Park ever since the poor old parents died. He's been my guardian now for ten years."

"And he doesn't approve of the nuptials?" I said. "Why not?"

"The Lord knows," answered Bungo. "I know Marjorie has a spot of cash belonging to her, but so have I."

"Ayrton's Fabrics for All," explained the girl. "That's his father."

"I see where the cash comes," I remarked. "Thanks: I can do another of those. Does Uncle Henry give no reason?"

"Uncle Henry says I'm too young," said the girl, lighting a cigarette. "Of course, I know that it will be lonely for the poor old fish when I join up with Bungo, and I don't want to hurt his feelings, Bob. He's been awfully good to me all these years. At the same time, he's got to get used to the idea; and he now understands that when I come of age next November, Bungo and I are going to pull it off. But until then I've promised him I won't."

"But what has this got to do with my pal who arrests people, and all that?"

The girl laughed and then grew serious again.

"Seems a bit obscure, I must admit," she answered. "What we've been telling you up to date has nothing to do with him, but Uncle has—over something completely different. Shall I tell him, Bungo, or will you?"

"You're in the chair, old soul," he remarked. "Cough it up."

"It started about three weeks ago," she began. "We were having breakfast, just he and I, when the post arrived. Bungo wasn't down, and so he didn't see the beginning of it. But I suddenly heard a noise like a pig grunting, and there was Uncle Henry, half out of his chair, staring at one of his letters as if it was a bomb. He was plucking at his collar with one hand, and clawing at the air with the other."

"That's when I came tottering in," said Bungo, "and I thought the old chap was having a fit. At any rate, Marjorie and I clustered round, and when the commotion had died down a bit we asked him what had stung him.

" 'They've found me,' he muttered. 'After all these years they've found me.'

"Which didn't convey much to us." The girl took up the story again. "So we laid him out to cool, and after a while tried to find out what the trouble was. But he wouldn't say anything more, and a few minutes later he left the room and went to his study, where he locked himself in, a thing I've never known him do before."

"Did you see the letter that had caused the trouble?" I asked.

"We got the envelope," said Bungo. "Here it is. But we didn't see the contents until much later."

I glanced at the envelope, but it did not seem to point to much. It was addressed to Mr. Henry Beaumont, Groomley Park, Nr. Ashford, in what was a childish rather than an illiterate hand. The postmark was Folkestone.

“Not much there,” I said, handing it back. “What happened next?”

“Nothing till dinner that night,” answered the girl. “He remained in his study all day, and had his lunch there.”

“Which must have been considerably more liquid than solid,” put in Bungo. “When Uncle arrived for dinner he was quite-nicely-thank-you.”

“So would you have been, my lad,” she cried, “under similar circumstances. Anyway, Bob, we tackled him about it again, and this is what we gathered. All his early life was spent in the East; and it seems that when he was a youngster he was pretty hot stuff. At any rate, one night in the dim, dark ages—Swettypore in ninety-four sort of business—he and some pals were making whoopee.”

“And they got gloriously sprung,” said Bungo.

“And having got gloriously sprung,” continued Marjorie, “they proceeded to raise Cain round some especially sacred Buddhist temple. In fact, according to him, they laid out some priests, and concluded the entertainment by dancing the Lancers with some of the girls attached to the place.”

“Who were a particularly sacred brand of virgin,” explained Bungo.

“What a dam’ fool thing to do,” I remarked.

“So they all realised the next morning,” he said. “And so Uncle Henry admitted when he told us. The fact remained, however, that it had been done, and there was no undoing it. But they were only passing through the place on their way home on leave, so at crack of dawn next morning they beat it while the going was good. But not before one thing had happened. Pinned to the table in the rest house they found a note: ‘Vengeance will overtake you sooner or later.’ ”

“It seems to have been some time on the road,” I murmured.

“Just what I said to Uncle,” cried Marjorie. “But he didn’t agree. He said that Time was a totally different thing in the East from what we Westerners understood, especially where the religious orders were concerned. Thirty or forty years mean nothing to them with their conception of life after death.”

“And this was three weeks ago,” I said. “Has anything happened since?”

“For ten days nothing happened at all,” she answered. “Bungo had to leave, so that Uncle and I were alone except for the servants, who are all women. He locked up with the utmost care every night, and always slept with a loaded revolver under his pillow, but when I suggested going to the police about it he refused point-blank. He seemed to be afraid that if he did he would have to tell them about this episode of the temple, which is not a thing he wants made public.

“Ten days ago, Bob, a second letter arrived, this time from Ashford. It came at breakfast, like the first, and again Uncle Henry shut himself up in his study the whole day. I begged him to show me the two notes, but he wouldn’t.

He seemed apathetic, almost resigned, and grew quite irritable when I once more suggested the police.

" 'What good would the police be in a case like this?' he snorted. 'What use would they be when pitted against the mysteries of the East? If these men mean to get me they will get me even if the whole of Scotland Yard is round the house.'

"So I had to let the matter drop. Uncle is as obstinate as a mule when he wants to be; and to make matters worse a few days later he got a bad attack of gout which, by the way, he is still suffering from. And then the day before yesterday occurred an incident which threw him into a veritable panic.

"I had been sitting with him for about ten minutes in his room before dinner, when my maid came in to ask me some question. And when she saw me she looked very surprised.

" 'I thought you'd already changed, miss,' she said. 'I saw you in your yellow dress half an hour ago, and going into the master's bedroom.'

"The effect on my uncle was electric.

" 'Yellow dress!' he shouted. 'My God! Search the house, Marjorie! Search the house! Take my revolver with you.'

"He tried to get up, but his gout was very bad that night. And so, amazed beyond measure at this extraordinary outburst, Janet—that's my maid—and I went into his room. It was empty. There wasn't a sign of anyone, or of anything having been moved. And then I sent for the chauffeur, who lives in a cottage close by, and with him we went over the house. We looked into cupboards; we looked under beds—not a sign of a soul. And having told Uncle Henry I asked him what on earth it was all about, and why such a harmless remark as Janet's should have caused such a commotion.

" 'Naturally you wouldn't understand, Marjorie,' he answered heavily. 'You've never been out East. But that yellow dress of yours is exactly the same colour as the robe which the Buddhist priests all wear.'

"I stared at him incredulously.

" 'You don't mean to say,' I cried, 'that you think that Janet saw a Buddhist priest going into your bedroom?'

" 'Then what did she see?' he said. 'It wasn't you. It couldn't have been one of the servants.'

" 'But there's no one there,' I assured him.

"He smiled pityingly.

" 'And you can't expect me to believe,' I cried, 'that they can vanish into thin air.'

" 'I don't expect you to believe anything,' he answered quietly. 'Let us assume that Janet made a mistake.'

"But I could see that he did not think so, and that night after dinner I stuck in my toes. I took up the line that it wasn’t fair to me, and that if he wouldn’t tell the police the least he could do was to allow me to ask someone else for help. And at last he consented, though he obviously considered it useless.

“ ‘Open the top drawer of my desk,’ he said, ‘and you’ll find there the two notes that came by post.’

“I did so, and here they are, Bob.”

She passed them over the table to me, and I examined them curiously. The writing was the same as that on the envelope, but the paper was different. It was a sort of parchment, about the size of a small luggage label, and it looked as if some sort of scratchy pencil had been used by the writer.

Do you remember Ranapore

So ran the first one, which had been posted in Folkestone.

The punishment will fit the crime

That was the second, which had come from Ashford. I handed them back to Marjorie, and shrugged my shoulders.

“It’s beyond me, old thing,” I said. “They look as if a child had written them when under the influence of drink. Did your uncle explain anything?”

“Only that that was the paper always used by the Buddhist priests, and that it was the leaf of some palm tree.

“ ‘They’re genuine, Marjorie, my dear,’ he said. ‘Only too well do I know it. No one but a priest would possess that paper; no one but a priest would understand how to do that writing, which is a special art. Go if you like and get anyone you wish to help, but it is useless. They’ve found me, and there’s no more to be said.’

“And so, Bob, I thought of you and that friend of yours.”

“Whom I will get on the ’phone,” I said. “And if he isn’t playing golf or cricket we’ll go along and see him at once.”

Ronald was in, and ten minutes later we were all sitting in his room. He was dealing with a rusty niblick when we arrived, but as Marjorie Beaumont retold her story he ceased operations on the club and listened intently.

“What’s the verdict, Mr. Standish?” said Bungo, when she had finished.

Ronald was studying the two messages through a magnifying glass.

“These are undoubtedly genuine,” he remarked. “By that I mean that your uncle is perfectly right when he says that they were written by someone who has learned an art which is generally regarded as the exclusive property of the Buddhist priests. They scratch the words with a very fine pointed stylo, and then shake a dark powder over the leaf, which fills up the grooves of the letters. Then they wipe the rest of it off, leaving the writing showing up clearly.”

“But do you really think the old dear is in any danger?” asked Marjorie anxiously.

“Frankly, Miss Beaumont, I am inclined to take the whole thing very seriously,” he answered, “especially now that I have examined these messages. If it was just some silly joke they would have been written on paper. You see, except in a museum this palm leaf is unprocurable in England; also the implement with which the writing was done.”

“What ought we to do about it?” she cried.

“Well, if you like, and you don’t think your uncle would object, I’ll come down and look into things on the spot,” he said.

“Mind! I should think he’d kiss you on both cheeks,” said Bungo. “When can you go?”

“This afternoon,” answered Ronald. “There are one or two things I must do first, and then I’ll motor down with Bob.”

“It’s awfully good of you, Mr. Standish,” said the girl. “And I know my uncle will think so too. Especially as even Bungo won’t be there.”

“Less of your ‘even,’ ” said Bungo, with a grin.

“I’ll keep the two messages for the time, if I may,” said Ronald. “There are a few points I would like to verify. And we’ll be with you in time for dinner.”

Marjorie smiled at him gratefully and departed with Bungo.

“Nice children,” remarked Ronald, watching them from the window. “What do you make of it. Bob?”

“There’s only one thing that has struck me,” I said. “If the writing was done by a genuine Buddhist priest there oughtn’t to be much difficulty in putting one’s hand on him.”

“A very sapient remark, old boy,” he agreed. “The only snag being that though the secret of this writing originated with them there are other people who know it.”

“You mean it may not be a priest at all, but someone else who knows of this episode in the old man’s past.”

“Exactly,” he said.

“But, then, how do you account for what the maid Janet saw?”

“I don’t,” he answered quietly. “For that, my dear Bob, is the most curious feature of a very curious case. A very curious case,” he repeated, and seemed on the point of saying something more. Then he altered his mind and, crossing to a cupboard in the corner, he took out a small bottle of dusting powder. He shook some carefully on to the second of the two messages, and again examined it through his magnifying glass.

I stared over his shoulder, and even with the naked eye I could see a confused medley of fingerprints, which was just what one would have expected. Several people, including myself, had handled it, and I failed to see what he hoped to discover from such a blurred trail. But after a while a rather surprising thing occurred. Out of the jumble of marks, two prints began to stand out more clearly than the rest; one came directly under the centre of the word "punishment," the other midway between the two words "fit the."

"We progress," he said tersely, "though I hardly hoped to have such a clear result. Do you see those two prints, Bob? What do you make of them?"

"That two people have held the leaf more firmly than the others," I answered promptly.

"Very nearly right," he remarked. "But it's one person, not two. Those fingerprints are identical. Let's try the other message."

Again, only less clearly, two stood out from the others—one under "you," the other under the last syllable of "remember."

"Once more the same gentleman," he said. "And so, old lad, we have in our possession four perfectly good fingerprints of the left thumb of the writer of these messages."

"How on earth do you know that?" I cried.

"I know it because I've seen this writing being done," he said. "The trouble is that I'm afraid it isn't going to help us much. It is most improbable that the writer is an old criminal, so we can't trace him at Scotland Yard. And, since we can't trot round the population of Folkestone and Ashford asking 'em for prints of their left thumbs, we're not much forrader."

"But if we can find a Buddhist priest," I cried, "that print gives us the proof."

"If," he answered cryptically. "At any rate, let's go and look for him. You get the bus, Bob, while I go round to the Yard to make absolutely certain he's not an old lag."

I picked him up an hour later at the club, and as soon as he saw me he shook his head.

"As I thought," he said. "They can't help us. So we'll have to see what we can do on our own."

We arrived at Groomley Park at half-past six, and it was evident at once that there had been further developments. Marjorie was standing on the doorstep with News written large on her face.

"Uncle Henry has found out where they are," she cried.

"You mean the message writer?" said Ronald, staring at her.

"Yes," she answered. "But come on up and see him and he'll tell you himself."

We followed her up the stairs, and I could see that Ronald was surprised, though he said no more.

“This is Mr. Standish, Uncle Henry,” she said, opening the door into a room that was obviously his study. “And Bob Miller, whom you’ve heard me talk about.”

I studied Mr. Beaumont covertly. He was sitting in an easy chair with one foot well wrapped up, stretched out in front of him.

“Sit down, gentlemen,” he said. “Sorry—but my damned foot prevents me getting up to greet you. Well—I gather Marjorie has told you the story.”

“That is so, Mr. Beaumont,” said Ronald. “But I now hear that you’ve solved the mystery.”

“Solved it,” he cried. “Of course I have. And if the police weren’t such infernal fools, and this wasn’t such a regulation-infested country, I’d have the whole lot arrested to-night. Snake-charmers—pah! they’re no more snake-charmers than I am.”

“At the moment,” said Ronald mildly, “it seems a little hard to follow.”

“The circus, sir,” barked the old man. “One of those cursed things with brass bands and merry-go-rounds and things. My fool of a parlourmaid told me about it after lunch, and happened to mention there were Indian jugglers there. So I sent her out to make inquiries—they’ve pitched their show in the village a mile away—and what do you think I’ve discovered? The circus was in Folkestone when the first note was sent, and in Ashford at the time of the second. Isn’t that proof, sir?”

He thumped the table at his side and glared at Ronald.

“A good piece of presumptive evidence, Mr. Beaumont,” he said quietly, “but, I fear, hardly proof.”

“Bosh!” snorted the other. “Do you know anything about Buddhist writing?”

“A little,” said Ronald mildly.

“Well—you’ve seen those two messages, haven’t you, so what more do you want?”

“Quite so,” answered Ronald soothingly. “They were most certainly written by someone who is conversant with the art and has used the proper implements. But that is not to say that one of this snake-charming troupe is of necessity the culprit. It is certainly a coincidence, and one that is well worth following up, but that is as far as we can go at present.”

The old gentleman snorted again. Then he turned to his niece.

“Go down and see about some drinks, my dear,” he cried. “I would like a word with Mr. Standish alone.”

“You see,” he went on as the girl left the room, “it’s that second message that worries me, about the punishment fitting the crime. Marjorie has already told you what we young fools did, and I am so desperately afraid that these devils may try and do something to her by way of revenge. For myself, I'm an old man and it doesn't matter, but if they hurt a hair of her head I'd never forgive myself."

"Naturally, Mr. Beaumont," said Ronald gravely. "Some such idea had also occurred to me."

"She's a high-spirited child, and until she comes of age I feel she is my charge. Then, of course, she will have her own money and, I gather, proposes to desert me for young Ayrton. But until then I feel myself entirely responsible. And, if you will forgive my saying so, what I fear is that you are up against something you don't understand. Janet is an unimaginative girl. What was it, then, that she saw? They have powers of which we Europeans have no conception. And against those powers ordinary methods are of no avail."

"Then we must try extraordinary methods," said Ronald. "By the way, Mr. Beaumont, does that door lead to your bedroom?"

"It does," said the old man in some surprise. "Why?"

"That, then, is the room into which Janet saw or thought she saw the individual in the yellow dress disappearing."

"Yes. There is another door to it leading into the passage, and it was through that one the man vanished."

"You were in here at the time?"

"I was."

"And you heard nothing?"

"Not a sound. One doesn't hear these people when they walk, my young friend."

Ronald rose.

"Perhaps not, sir. Well, I think I'll just have a look round, and later on, Bob, you and I might go to the circus and have a shot at the coco-nuts. We'll report in due course, Mr. Beaumont."

We left the old gentleman muttering sarcastically to himself, and going along the passage encountered a quiet-looking woman of about forty dressed in black. Ronald stopped.

"Are you Janet—Miss Beaumont's maid?" he asked.

"I am, sir," she said.

"Would you please tell me exactly what happened that evening when you saw someone in yellow going into Mr. Beaumont's bedroom."

"There's nothing much to tell, sir," she said. "I was coming up the stairs, and I saw someone wearing a yellow dress standing just outside the bedroom door. It was exactly the colour of one of Miss Marjorie's evening frocks, and when whoever it was opened the door and went in I assumed it was her."

"Naturally," said Ronald. "And what did you do then?"

“I did some sewing for half an hour, and then as I was returning to Miss Marjorie’s room I heard her voice in Mr. Beaumont’s study. So I went in to find out if there was anything she wanted, and found that she hadn’t dressed for dinner, so that it couldn’t have been her I saw.”

“So during that half-hour the passage, so far as you know, was empty.”

“So far as I know, sir, it was.”

“Thank you, Janet,” he said. “That’s all at the moment.”

“A puzzling point, Bob,” he continued as we went downstairs. “She doesn’t strike me as the sort of woman who would imagine things. And if someone in a yellow robe was really there, why did nothing happen? What was the object in getting thus far and then going no further?”

We found Marjorie in the hall, and she waved her hand at the drink tray.

“Help yourselves,” she said. “Well, Mr. Standish, what do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think, Miss Beaumont,” he answered frankly. “In fact, I’m completely nonplussed. I shall go to the circus and see these Indian jugglers, and perhaps we may find out something. In any event I would not, if I were you, go far from the house alone, at any rate while they are in the neighbourhood.”

He reverted again to Janet’s story on the way there.

“It baffles me,” he said. “It seems so absolutely pointless. Clearly there was no difficulty over the fellow getting away, but what earthly use was there in going there and then doing nothing? If he’d introduced a snake into the bedroom, or something of that sort, we should have had a motive. But as it is I’m defeated.”

The circus turned out to be a small one, and we had no difficulty in finding the jugglers. There were four of them, and when we had paid our shillings and entered their booth we found ourselves in a group of staring yokels watching a cobra swaying slowly to and fro to the sound of a pipe whilst the player squatted on the ground in front of it.

“They’re Tamils,” whispered Ronald to me. “Fortunately I can talk a bit of their lingo. But we’ll have to wait till their show is over. And then by means of a little ruse we may get some information. You didn’t know I was something of a conjurer, did you, Bob?”

We watched the mango tree grow, and all the other tricks familiar to those who go East, until at last the show ended and the audience departed. Whereupon Ronald stepped forward and said something in a dialect which brought the four natives excitedly to their feet with broad grins on their faces. Next he produced from his pocket a pack of cards and I wondered what on earth was coming. Evidently he was going to show them some trick, but what good he hoped to obtain by that was obscure. And then suddenly the man’s amazing ingenuity dawned on me, though I could not understand a word he was saying. For each of the natives had grasped one of the four corners of the pack with their left forefinger and thumb, so that four thumb-prints would be obtained on the top card.

I forgot even to look at the trick, so lost was I in admiration of his cleverness. And when a quarter of an hour later we were sitting in the neighbouring pub with the vital card in front of us he admitted that the trick had been a complete frost.

“However,” he remarked as he sprinkled the dusting powder on the card’s surface, “I dare say my reputation for sleight of hand will survive the failure.”

The four thumb-prints came out perfectly, and from his pocket-book he produced the second message. And a few moments’ comparison established the complete innocence of the jugglers. None of the four thumb-prints on the card bore the smallest resemblance to those on the palm leaf.

“Which settles that once and for all,” he said, draining his tankard of beer. “So we’ve got to start all over again, Bob.”

“I feel I’m being a fool,” he said at length. “I feel I ought to be able to get something out of Janet’s evidence. And I can’t. Why should this man, having got into Beaumont’s bedroom, having done all the difficult part safely, leave without profiting by it? Making all allowances for times not being accurate, the old man was alone after our unknown entered the bedroom. Why, Bob, why? Did he hear or see something that scared him? Or did he do something in that room which hasn’t acted yet, and which sometime will function and kill Beaumont? Or . . .”

He fell into a deep reverie which lasted for ten minutes; then he beckoned to the landlord.

“How much longer is that circus remaining here?” he asked.

“It be going to-morrow morning, sir. Up to Tenterden.”

“Thank you. Come on, Bob. Let’s be getting back. And since I have a feeling that the very walls have ears, say nothing of our little effort in conjuring to-night.”

A warning which proved unnecessary, for we found the whole house in a turmoil on our return. Another message had arrived. It seemed that Mr. Beaumont’s gout being a little better, he had gone down to dinner. And on his return to his study he had found it lying on the table.

“There it is, sir,” he roared, holding it out to Ronald. “The damned swine! Put there while I was downstairs. Take it, man, take it,” he went on testily, “I can’t hold my arm out the whole night.”

I glanced at Ronald in some surprise, for he was staring at the little leaf of paper like a man bereft of his senses. Then in an instant his face was as expressionless as usual, and taking the note he read out the contents:—

Be at Handel Corner at one to-night

“Where is Handel Corner?” he asked.

“About three miles from here,” said Marjorie.

“And what do you propose to do about it?” asked Ronald.

“Do!” shouted the old man. “What the hell can I do with a foot like this? But you and your friend can do something. Go to Handel Corner and catch this devil. Find out who it is, and bring him here for the police to deal with.”

“A very good idea, Mr. Beaumont,” said Ronald thoughtfully. “That should settle things once and for all.”

“Take one of my revolvers and shoot the dog on sight.” The old gentleman’s wrath was rising.

“You had the house searched after you found this, I suppose?”

“Of course! Of course!” said Mr. Beaumont testily. “No trace of anyone. He vanished the same as he did last time. Don’t take your car right up to the corner, Standish. Leave it some way off and walk. Then you’ll trap the blackguard. Damn it!” he exploded, “what are you hesitating about? Surely two young men like you aren’t frightened, are you?”

But Ronald did not even smile; I have never seen him look graver.

“No, Mr. Beaumont,” he said at length, “not frightened, I assure you. Come along, Bob,” he turned to me abruptly. “We shall have to be leaving shortly.”

“And bring him back dead or alive,” grunted the old man as we left the room.

“You’re darned pensive, Ronald,” I said as we went downstairs. “What’s the great idea?”

“Only that I’ve just solved the mystery of what Janet saw,” he answered. “Where is Miss Beaumont?”

“Here she is,” said Marjorie, appearing from the drawing-room. “Do you want to speak to me?”

“Yes, Miss Beaumont, I do,” he said. “I want you please to obey my instructions implicitly, and I think we shall catch the gentleman who has been causing the trouble. Now, I have the best reasons for believing that the note your uncle received to-night is a trap with the sole purpose of getting us out of this house. I didn’t tell Mr. Beaumont so, as his condition at the moment, owing to his gout, is so excitable that it could do no good. It is far better that he should believe that Bob and I have gone to Handel Corner or he might spoil the whole thing. Now I come to what I want you to do, and I don’t want you even to tell Janet. Go upstairs in a few minutes and undress in your own room, as usual. When you've dismissed your maid, turn out your light and then, without making a sound, go to some other room and stay there. Turn out the light there, too, and lock the door. Have you got me?"

"Perfectly," she said quietly. "I will do just what you say. But what are you and Bob going to do?"

"Just for the moment we'll leave that," he said gravely. "How long will it take you before you're ready?"

"Twenty minutes," she answered, and he glanced at the clock.

"That will do nicely," he said, and we watched her going up the stairs.

"The most damnable quandary I've ever been in, Bob," he remarked as she disappeared. "However, it's got to be gone through. Let's get to it."

First he walked into the billiard-room, where he opened a window noiselessly; then he rejoined me in the hall.

"Time we started," he said. "Let's get the car."

"But," I began, "I thought you said——"

"You drive," he went on, opening the front door, "and I'll take the map."

Completely bewildered, I followed him to the garage, and we started off down the drive. But hardly had we turned into the main road, when he told me to stop.

"Now back to the house on foot," he said, "and keep on the grass."

Skirting the drive, we reached the open window in the billiard-room, and he put his lips to my ear.

"Take off your shoes," he whispered, "and don't make a sound."

On tiptoe I followed him up the stairs, where the passage was in darkness, and he led the way to Marjorie's room. No light was shining through the keyhole, and very cautiously he opened the door. The room was empty. She had carried out her instructions.

"And now," he breathed, "we wait."

Screening his torch he flashed it round until he found a switch by the dressing-table.

"Sit by that, Bob," he whispered, "and for God's sake turn it on when I tell you."

Then he took off his coat and waistcoat, lay down on the bed and put out his torch.

Half-past twelve chimed faintly from the clock below in the hall. The house, save for the occasional crack of a floor board, was silent. A quarter to one; one, and I could hear the beating of my own heart. What were we waiting for? What was going to happen? And then quite suddenly came a much louder crack from just outside the door.

I heard Ronald move slightly on the bed, and with my pulses hammering and one hand on the switch I waited. Whatever it was, it was coming now. Old

Beaumont had been right. It was Marjorie who was in danger.

The door was opening slowly, and I could see the faint outline of a cloaked figure standing there. Then, in a flash, it had disappeared and the springs of the bed shook. Came a sudden grunt and a snarl; then Ronald's quiet voice —"Light, Bob."

I switched on, and stared in amazement at the scene. Standing by the bed was a man in a yellow robe. He was struggling furiously in Ronald's iron grasp, but after a time he grew quiet. His features were squat and almost Mongolian, but as I got up and went nearer there seemed to be something very odd about his face. Until Ronald put up a hand and pulled off—a mask.

"Well, Mr. Beaumont," said Ronald in a terrible voice, "have you anything to say to excuse yourself for attempting such an inconceivable crime as the murder of your niece?"

I stood rooted to the ground. Beaumont—her uncle. He stood there mouthing, helplessly. Then with a sort of strangled cry he bolted from the room. I turned to follow him, but Ronald stopped me.

"There is only one expiation," he said gravely "Pray Heaven he takes it!"

He did a moment or two later, and the sound of the shot brought Marjorie rushing out of her room.

"What is it?" she cried wildly.

"I will explain things shortly. Miss Beaumont," said Ronald, laying his hand on her arm. "Please go downstairs now. Come with me, Bob."

We went to the study. There was nothing to be done. But Ronald bent down and picked up a small bottle that was lying on the floor. And having pulled out the cork he sniffed it.

"The vile old devil," he said softly, slipping it into his pocket. "Prussic acid."

And so we went downstairs to the weeping girl through a crowd of frightened servants.

"Get the police and a doctor," said Ronald to the parlourmaid. "And no one is to go into the study till they come."

"It's very bad news I'm afraid, Miss Beaumont."

He drew her into the drawing-room.

"There is no doubt at all that this business has so preyed on your uncle's mind," he went on gravely, "that it sent him off his head. And to-night it came to a climax and he shot himself."

Which was the verdict ultimately returned at the coroner's inquest.

"Far better so, Bob," said Ronald to me after it was all over. "To tell the truth would only damage the girl and not hurt him."

"What made you get it first?" I asked.

"When he gave me that third note," he answered.

"I saw you staring at it," I said. "But you couldn't have spotted the thumbprint."

"No; but I spotted the thumb. In doing that writing the leaf is held firmly between the thumb and the first finger, and in the thumb-nail a nick is cut. Into that nick is put the implement the writer scratches with to keep it steady. And when I saw that he had just such a nick in his thumb I was completely dumbfounded. Up to that moment the truth had not even remotely dawned on me. And then I saw that it all fitted together, and that, at last, what Janet had seen became comprehensible. Naturally, nothing had been done by the man in yellow if he was Beaumont himself."

"But what was his idea in being seen?"

"To establish an atmosphere," he said promptly, "the atmosphere of the mysterious East. He started it with the notes and the story of his youth, and added to it as he went along. The circus was a golden opportunity to throw suspicion on the wrong person, but he overlooked the little matter of fingerprints. And since the circus was moving early the next day it was clear he would have to act that night. His gout, of course, was a fiction, though a very plausible one. In fact, Henry Beaumont was as pretty a damned villain as I've ever come across."

"But the main question is still unanswered," I reminded him. "*Why* did he want to murder Marjorie?"

"We shall have that proved for certain shortly," he said. "But in the meantime I'll hazard a guess. In a few months Beaumont would have been called on to give an account of his stewardship of his niece's money. The ultimatum had gone forth; she was going to marry Bungo. Doubtless she still will. But I'm open to a bet with you, Bob, that a hundred per cent. of their combined income will come from Ayrton's Fabrics for All."

"You mean he embezzled Marjorie's money?"

"Exactly," he remarked.

And once again he proved to be right: every penny had gone.

10

THE MAN WITH SAMPLES

"Can you spare a few minutes, Bob? Two heads are better than one, and, maybe, you'll be able to see a way out."

I had not seen Ronald Standish for some weeks, and as I put down the morning paper I saw he was looking worried.

"As many as you like," I said. "But if you can't solve the problem I'm not likely to be much good."

"It's nothing to do with solving a problem this time, old boy," he answered. "At least, not in the way you mean. By Jove!" he burst out savagely, "there ought to be a law passed allowing one to shoot a blackmailer on sight."

"So that's it, is it?" I cried. "Nobody getting at you, is there?"

"Not guilty, Bob," he said with a grin.

He grew serious again.

"Do you know Archie Maitland?"

"Sir Archibald Maitland, Bart? Yes, I know him slightly. Just got engaged to one of the Sussex girls."

"That's the bird," said Ronald. "And have you ever heard me speak of a man who calls himself Richard Mordon?"

"Can't say I have. Who is he?"

"Richard Mordon, amongst other things, is one of those kind-hearted philanthropists who will lend you any sum from five pounds to ten thousand on note of hand alone. He trades under the name of John Grant & Co. His real name I have forgotten, but his parents were foreigners who settled in England, where their precious offspring was born. He, therefore, speaks the language like a native. He has an office in the City, and lives in a house not far from Sevenoaks. I'll tell you more about that house later.

"To return to Mordon. I said, if you remember, 'amongst other things.' The gentleman, besides being the most rapacious bloodsucker in London so far as his rates of interest are concerned, has a very paying side-line. It is one that he handles with great discretion, since a mistake would involve his being kept at His Majesty's expense for several years. He conducts it entirely from his private house, keeping the moneylending business quite separate. And the side-line is this. He is prepared to buy any incriminating document which he considers worth his while.

"Setting to work with, I am bound to say, considerable skill, he let it be known amongst valets and ladies' maids that any compromising letters they chose to bring to him would be well paid for. And not being a damned fool he *does* pay well; he gets it back a hundred times over. And the result is that many a damning letter has found its way into Mordon's safe.

"Then comes the next step—blackmailing the writers. And here Mordon again shows his devilish cunning. He seems to possess an almost uncanny *flair* for squeezing the maximum out of his victims, without overstepping the mark and asking the impossible. Knowing human nature, he realises that by so doing he is far more likely to get the money. Of course, there have been cases when Mordon has suggested the advantages of borrowing money from John Grant & Co., and has thereby got it both ways, but as a general rule he touches them for just what they can pay and no more."

"You seem to know a good deal about the swine," I said.

"I do," answered Ronald. "Four or five times he and I have crossed swords, and I regret to state he has won on every occasion. You see, the devil of it is, Bob, that with a blackmailer one is helpless. The police are helpless. Unless the victim will move, nothing can be done. And that's where this blackguard is so astute. He never touches a case which concerns one individual only; there is always someone else implicated. Since ninety per cent. of his cases concern love affairs the man has to think of the woman's reputation. What he specialises in is the case where a real scandal would ensue if the facts came out. And that is the state of Denmark so far as Archie Maitland is concerned. My hat! Bob," he added despairingly, "why are people such drivelling half-wits as to write compromising letters, and then to qualify still further for a lunatic asylum by leaving them lying about? However—to continue.

"Two years ago, Archie had a love affair with a girl who must be nameless, even to you. He was quite frank about it, and while it lasted it was evidently pretty hectic. Then, as has been known to happen before, the thing fizzled out, and a year ago the girl got married to a man some fifteen years older than herself. They are ideally happy, and a child is expected shortly.

"Now we come to the point. A week ago Mordon rang up Archie as he was dressing for dinner. Archie, of course, didn't know from Adam who he was, and when Mordon suggested that he should come down and visit him at Sevenoaks Archie told him to go to the devil. Then Mordon mentioned the girl's name, which gave Archie such a jolt that he could only stutter foolishly. He'd almost forgotten the affair himself, so how on earth could this complete stranger know anything about it? However, he evidently did, and so Archie made an appointment to go down and see him the following evening.

"He found Mordon in the room in which he always transacts his business, and at first he thought he'd come to a madhouse. Immediately on his entering, a large man of the professional pug type ran his hands over his pockets. But it wasn’t that which surprised him; in fact, he hardly noticed it in his amazement at the rest of the preparations. Seated against the farther wall was the man he had come to see. In front of him was a desk, and let into the wall itself was a big safe, the door of which stood open. But the astounding thing was that a high openwork grille fenced him in completely, on the same principle that one sometimes sees in banks.

“ ‘Pardon these small precautions, Sir Archibald,’ said the blackguard affably, ‘but I have a rooted objection to revolver bullets, or physical force in any form. So I prefer to conduct negotiations from this side of the grille. Our business will not take long. Do you recognise this letter?’

“He held up a sheet of paper and Archie stared at it stupefied. It was in the girl’s handwriting, and he could see that the address was that of her parents’ house.

“ ‘How the devil did you get hold of that?’ he shouted.

“Mordon held up his hand.

“ ‘I must really beg of you to moderate your voice, Sir Archibald,’ he said. ‘Such lack of control is shockingly bad for the digestion.’

“The genuine Mordon touch, Bob: the swine always talks like that.

“ ‘I see that you do remember,’ he continued. ‘I don’t wonder either; it is not the sort of letter a man would forget. A little indiscreet, perhaps—but very affectionate. Have you had another week-end in Paris with the lady?’

“I gather that at that point Archie went mad. He cursed and swore at the sneering moneylender behind his desk; he seized the steel bars of the grille and shook them, and as he said to me, if he had had a gun he’d have shot Mordon dead on the spot. It was perfectly true that he and the girl had spent a week-end in Paris, but it had been quite innocent. It had been on the occasion of the Davis Cup, and they had decided to go over and see it. She had made a fictitious date with a girl friend for the benefit of her parents, and had then gone over by the midday boat. He had flown. And they had stayed at the same hotel, though on different floors. Which was where the devil of it all came in. Whatever it was in reality, it looked, on the face of it, just about as certain a cinch as could well be thought of.

“Archie pulled himself together, and explained the facts to Mordon, who began to laugh.

“ ‘Really, Sir Archibald, you pain me,’ he said. ‘Perhaps I had better refresh your memory as to some of the choicer phrases in the letter. Passing lightly over the opening gambit of “My own darling boy,” we arrive in a slowly increasing crescendo to the illuminating statement that “the memory of those two nights will be with me for the rest of my life.” ’

“Mordon put down the letter.

“ ‘Now, Sir Archibald, as a man of the world, what would you understand by that sentence? I, of course, am only too relieved to hear that my unworthy suspicions are unfounded, but it is just possible that there are other people—to wit, the charming lady's husband—who will not be so trusting.'

"I gather Archie then went mad again, but Mordon must be used to scenes like that.

" 'You can't, man,' Archie yelled, 'you can't! Don't you know she's going to have a baby very soon?' "

" 'Yes, I was aware of that fact,' said Mordon placidly. 'And it was in anticipation of such an occurrence taking place that I have held up this letter until now. It has, I think you will admit, a somewhat higher market value at the present time than it would have had a few months ago. Any severe shock might be very prejudicial to her health. And,' continued this super-swine, 'there is one other little point that I would like you to bear in mind, Sir Archibald. I realise that matters being as they are at the moment it is more than likely that her husband would keep things to himself—at any rate, until it is all over. So that in the regrettable necessity of my having to send this letter to him, a copy will go by the same post to the lady with a covering note informing her who has the original.'

"To cut a long story short," went on Ronald, "Archie had by this time realised what he was up against and demanded Mordon's price. It was forty thousand pounds."

"Great Scott!" I cried. "Forty thousand. It's iniquitous."

"Mordon is iniquitous."

"Can Maitland pay it?"

"He can and will, unless we can think of a way out. It's a big sum even for him, but he's a wealthy man, and sooner than run the slightest risk of upsetting the woman in any way he is going to ante up. He regards the whole thing as being his fault for not tearing up the letter."

"How did this man Mordon get hold of it?"

"On that point Archie is not sure, though he thinks it must have been through a valet that he sacked on the spot about a year ago. Anyway, Bob, how he got it doesn't really matter: he *has* got it. And for the life of me I can't think of any way out."

"When has the money to be paid by?"

"This day week," said Ronald savagely. "God! Bob, I'd give five thousand pounds to outwit that devil."

"Is there any use in going to the police?"

"Not an earthly. What can they do? In a blackmail case the only way of employing the police is for the victim to inveigle by some means the blackmailer into a room where the police are hidden. Archie has no chance of inveigling Mordon anywhere: all that side of his business is done in his own house. There’s another thing that makes it impossible, too. Even supposing we could get the police to take action, we should be precipitating the very catastrophe which Archie wants at all costs to avoid. It might be kept as Mr. X. and Mr. Y. in the papers, but the husband is bound to find out.”

“Well, my definite advice, old boy, is that Maitland should go at once to the husband and make a clean breast of it. You say he’s a decent fellow.”

Ronald nodded.

“Quite. Though I don’t know how he’d take it. He has—how shall I put it?—distinctly old-fashioned ideas. Anyway, there’s no good thinking about it, Bob. Archie has absolutely made up his mind on the subject and nothing will move him. Sooner than do that he will stump up the forty thousand.”

Ronald began pacing up and down the room.

“I’d do anything,” he said, “anything criminal, even, to beat that devil. But he’s so cursedly clever. I swear that it is easier to get into Buckingham Palace than into his house. Every downstair window is covered with steel bars, and at the slightest suspicious sound they let loose a mastiff that is the size of a donkey.”

“You have been down there, then?”

“For the last three nights, trying to see if there’s a possible chance of breaking in. Though what good one would do if one did I don’t know. Even if I got into the holy of holies, what then?” said Ronald. “There’s this grille to get through before you even begin to come to the safe.”

“Pretty risky, old boy. It would be pure and simple burglary.”

He looked me quietly in the face.

“I’d risk it, Bob: risk it every time, if I thought it had the smallest chance of being successful. I’d stick at nothing to do him down.

“If only there was some way of getting into the house, legitimately, so to speak. Through the front door, I mean. Then perhaps one might do something. But it’s like entering a Masonic Lodge. I was hiding close by last night when a visitor arrived—evidently a manservant with something to sell. He rang the bell, and after a time the door, still on the chain, was cautiously opened a few inches, and the visitor was inspected. I heard him say: ‘I’ve got some samples I want to show your master,’ and after another prolonged inspection the man was admitted. That is clearly the Open Sesame, but it doesn’t seem to help much unless you *have* got some samples. This fellow evidently had. I saw him counting notes under the lamp-post by the gate after he’d come out ten minutes later.”

“Just an idea, Ronald,” I said. “Probably perfectly useless. Would it be impossible to get a search warrant?”

He shook his head.

“Quite,” he answered. “No magistrate would sign one. And even if the police did manage to get one, what chance would they have of finding anything? Letters are very easily hidden, and they are his stock-in-trade. During the delay that would inevitably occur before they reached his room anything incriminating would have completely disappeared. No, bluff is the only thing. But how can we bluff?”

“Couldn’t run him for being in possession of stolen property? After all, that letter was stolen from Maitland.”

Ronald stood still and stared at me.

“It’s an amazing thing, Bob,” he said at length, “but do you know that that aspect of the case had not occurred to me? You’re perfectly right. That letter is just as much stolen property as diamonds received by a fence. But—does it help us? Even to search a well-known fence’s house the stolen goods have got to be traced to him. And it would be impossible in the case of that letter. Quite impossible. But—but——”

He paused, and suddenly the most extraordinary change came over his face.

“Bob,” he yelled, “you blinking genius! And to think that all these long years I have misjudged you!”

He snatched up his hat, and dashed out, hurling a Parthian shaft from the door.

“Make no engagements. Stand by till I ring you up.”

Mr. Richard Mordon was feeling at peace with the world. A sense of well-being pervaded his entire system. With one hand he was warming a glass of old brandy, in the other he held a Corona. He had dined to his complete satisfaction. In honour of the occasion he had allowed himself a pint of Perrier Jouet. The shaded lights gleamed on the polished table; the flames from a log fire—it was distinctly chilly for so early in September—flickered in the grate.

Trade that day had been good: John Grant & Co., the old-established Scotch house, had excelled itself. A well-known sporting peer; two ladies of title with wealthy but mean husbands; and the heir to a big margarine business formed the main catch.

Not a bad bag, taking it all the way round, especially the margarine entrant. It would be many years before that young man got off the hook. But if these young idiots would go getting heavily into debt over some wretched chorus girl, then they deserved to be taught the error of their ways. In fact, as Mr. Mordon sipped his brandy a glow of self-righteousness spread over him. He was a public benefactor in teaching this youth and his like a well-deserved moral lesson. Only by sound business methods could the welfare and prosperity of the Old Country be built up.

The door opened softly, and Mr. Mordon glanced up. A pimply youth was standing in the entrance with an ingratiating smirk on his face.

"Well?" said Mr. Mordon.

"Following up your instructions, sir," began the youth.

"Shut the door," said Mr. Mordon curtly, "and come in. And be brief."

The youth obeyed.

"I again took the housemaid out to tea," he continued. "The nurse has already arrived, and the doctor is visiting her ladyship twice a day."

"You reported that before," said Mr. Mordon irritably. "Anything fresh?"

"Yes, sir." The youth took a few steps forward and became confidential. "Complications, sir: they're afraid of complications. His lordship is terribly worried."

"You're sure of that?"

"It's the talk of the servants' hall."

"When is it expected?"

"In a week or ten days, sir, but now they don't seem so sure. May be earlier."

Mr. Mordon examined the ash on his cigar.

"All right. That will do. Tell Mr. Benjamin to give you five pounds."

He waved the youth out of the room, and once again contemplated his cigar. Complications! excellent. That made his position even stronger, in case Sir Archibald attempted to haggle.

He glanced at his watch: nine o'clock. In another hour his man would be arriving. And then forty thousand pounds to cap the labours of the day.

He refilled his glass with brandy. Assuredly life was good. Mr. Mordon knew it was good. He felt it in every fibre of his being. And why was it good? Simply because he possessed the gift of making it so. Other people who specialised in his—er—line were stupid. They spoiled the ship for a ha'porth of tar. They didn't pay their informants well. At least, informants was the wrong word: those people who had useful information to sell in the interest of public morality—that was a better way of putting it. That man, for instance—Sir Archibald's valet—what was his name? The man who had brought him the letter. James Fulton: that was it. Fifty pounds had been the price he had paid the fellow. A big sum. Some men he knew would have tried to foist him off with a fiver. Richard Mordon did not do business on those lines. Hence the goods—the real goods. And it paid—paid every time. None of your messy little suburban scandals for him, but the big stuff.

Again the door opened: this time it was Mr. Benjamin.

"It's O.K. about that fiver, Benjamin," said Mr. Mordon.

But Mr. Benjamin closed the door and advanced into the room.

"A man with samples, sir," he said quietly. "He asked me to give you this envelope as a proof of his *bona fides*. He said also that he heard about you from Fulton—Sir Archibald Maitland's late valet."

Mr. Mordon took the envelope and glanced at it. It had been opened and was empty.

"The Earl of Bletcheley, Upper Bruton Street, W.," he read out thoughtfully. "And a coronet on the back. Where are the contents?"

"Those, sir, are the samples. Belman—that is the name of the earl's valet—thinks they may interest you. They are in his pocket at present."

The eyes of the two men met, and Mr. Benjamin nodded slightly.

"Very good, Benjamin. I will see this man. I will ring when I am ready, as usual, and should, by any chance, Sir Archibald Maitland arrive before I have finished, ask him to be good enough to wait a few moments."

Mr. Mordon made his way in leisurely fashion up the stairs to his office, feeling a glow of pleasurable anticipation. He did not know the writing on the envelope, but it was clearly feminine. Moreover, since it was in an educated hand, the writer, in view of the coronet, presumably belonged to the peerage. It was not a question of a servant borrowing notepaper. Which was all very, very good. The day was closing in a positive blaze of glory.

He took his keys from his pocket and opened the door of the grille surrounding his desk. Then picking up a copy of Debrett he sat down.

"Bletcheley, Earl of. Arthur George, 10th Earl. b. April 4th, 1900."

His eye skimmed down the page.

"m. 1931 Lady Jane Mayhew, dau. of 5th Duke of Wessex."

So he was thirty-three years old and recently married.

"Seat Grantchester Towers, Yorkshire. Clubs Marlborough, Turf."

Mr. Mordon closed the book. All very satisfactory so far, but there was one vital thing to find out—a thing not mentioned in that august tome. How stood Lord Bletcheley's finances?

From a drawer in his desk he extracted a small black book, which he opened at a section marked B. Methodical in all his ways, Mr. Mordon always made a note of the real financial condition of any celebrity or well-known man, if such information should happen to come his way. (Bitter experience had taught him that the real condition was frequently very different from the apparent.) But in this case all was well. He could not remember when he had entered it up, but there it was—"Bletcheley: quite sound." He replaced the little book, and picking up the speaking tube told Benjamin to bring the man up.

A few minutes later there entered a man who, to the expert eye of Mr. Mordon, was a typical gentleman's gentleman. The new-comer paused at seeing the somewhat alarming-looking grille, but Benjamin having closed the door pushed him gently forward into a chair.

“Now, Belman,” said Mr. Mordon, in his most affable voice. “That is the name, isn’t it?”

“That’s right, sir,” said the man.

“Well, Belman, I gather that you think that the contents of this envelope addressed to Lord Bletcheley may interest me.”

“You can bet your sweet life they will,” answered Belman, with a coarse laugh.

“You are Lord Bletcheley’s valet?”

“Was. Got the sack without notice this morning. Me, that’s been with him five years. For doing a thing, too, that half the valets in London do.”

“What was that?”

Mr. Mordon always believed in adding to his store of knowledge.

“Wearing his evening clothes to go to a dance. Thought he was stayed put for the night, and walked straight into him as I came in.”

“And he gave you the sack?”

“Without notice, and with a character that would keep me out of a Salvation Army band. But he didn’t know what I’d found in the dress clothes.”

He gave a cunning leer, and pointed at the envelope.

“Was it in the pocket?”

“No, sir. It was not. It was an old suit of his—one he hadn’t worn for some time; and it had a hole in the inside breast pocket. I found that out as soon as I put my cigarette-case in, because it fell straight through into the bottom of the coat. And when I started to push it up again I realised that something else had fallen through before. So I got that out too. It was that letter.”

“I see,” said Mr. Mordon. “May I look at it?”

But now Belman began to get a little restive.

“Look here, sir,” he said. “Fair’s fair. You’re sitting behind a great iron fence. How do I know if I pass this letter through to you that you won’t keep it and tell me to go to blazes?”

“Because, my man, I don’t do business that way. I gather it was from Sir Archibald Maitland’s valet that you heard about me?”

“That’s right.”

“And didn’t he tell you I treated him fairly?”

“Yes,” said Belman reluctantly. “He did.”

“Then why should I do otherwise with you? This grille is merely a measure of precaution for such occasions when I have other types of client to interview. However, if you prefer it, I will come to you.”

He rose and came through into the room.

“That’s all right, sir,” said Belman sheepishly. “No offence meant. Here’s the letter.”

14, Delchester Square,
W.1.

Tuesday.

Bimbo, my pet,—John has got to go to Berlin for three nights. From what Jane told me, she's going to stop with the male parent. What about it? The Five Feathers again. Not a chance of meeting anyone there.—TALIE.

Mr. Mordon studied it in silence for a while; then he glanced at Belman.

"Bimbo, I presume, refers to the Earl of Bletcheley?"

"That's right, sir. That's his nickname amongst all his friends. Jane is, of course, her ladyship—his wife."

"And who is the writer of this? Who lives at 14, Delchester Square?"

The faintly contemptuous expression which gentlemen's gentlemen assume when dealing with lesser breeds without the law showed for a moment on Belman's face. What social ignorance!

"14, Delchester Square," he said, "is the London residence of his Grace the Duke of Chiltington. He is the John referred to."

"And who is Talie?"

Belman permitted himself a smile of triumph.

"The Duchess. Her real name is Natalie, but her friends call her Talie."

"Then this letter"—Mr. Mordon's voice was shaking with excitement—"this letter is a suggestion for a clandestine love affair?"

Belman stared at him.

"What else could it be? An invitation to go bird's-nesting?"

But Mr. Mordon ignored the impertinence. The stupendous nature of his haul had almost stunned him. A Duchess and an Earl! It was incredible. Sir Archibald's mere Baronet seemed very small beer. A Duchess and an Earl! What a day! What an amazing day!

"Where is the 'Five Feathers'?" he asked.

Belman took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one.

"Somewhere in the Malvern district," he answered. "Look here, Mr. Mordon, it's like this. I can put two and two together as well as anybody. If you look at the envelope you'll see that half the stamp and the postmark are missing. But it doesn't require that to date the letter. I know when her ladyship went to stop with her father, and the Duke went to Berlin. It was the middle of July last. And it was then that the Earl went away for two nights without me. Now I'd had my suspicions for some time—you see that word 'again' in the letter . . ."

"What had caused your suspicions?" asked Mr. Mordon.

Belman smiled—a faintly contemptuous smile.

“You may take it from me, Mr. Mordon, that there’s precious little goes on amongst that lot that we don’t know. And though I had no proof like that letter, I’d been wondering for quite a while. So when we were staying down in Sussex for Goodwood I put a few questions to the Duchess’s maid, and found that her Grace had been away at the same time, by herself. She’d been staying with a friend near Malvern.”

“How did the maid know that?”

“The Duchess told her so. And there was a Malvern label on her trunk.”

Mr. Mordon rubbed his hands together. Better and better. This man Belman was one after his own heart.

“So there won’t be much difficulty in locating the inn,” continued Belman. “And then you’ve got your case complete. Now then, sir, how much?”

Mr. Mordon hesitated.

Even with this crowning gem added to his collection he ran true to type.

“How much do you want?”

“A hundred pounds,” said Belman promptly. “Not a penny less. And it’s worth ten times that to you.”

Which was certainly true, though it was five minutes before Mr. Mordon finally agreed to the figure.

“You needn’t bother to count them,” he said, handing over a wad of notes. “They’re new, as you can see. All that you’ve got to do is to look at the first and last numbers.”

But Belman was leaving nothing to chance. Slowly and laboriously he turned them over while Mr. Mordon watched him with growing irritation. He was in a fever of impatience to gloat in secret over his latest purchase.

At last Belman was satisfied, and pocketing the notes he rose to go.

“Good evening, Mr. Mordon,” he said. “And I don’t know which of us is the bigger scoundrel.”

The door closed behind him, leaving the owner of the house frowning at such a piece of monstrous insolence. But the frown soon disappeared as he once again read the letter in his hand. A Duchess and an Earl! It staggered him. Properly handled, this ought to be worth eighty thousand at least—perhaps more. And he was just passing through the door of the grille to go to his safe when the sounds of a commotion below made him pause in surprise and annoyance. A man of orderly habits, he disliked anything in the nature of a scene. Was it Belman making trouble? He thought he recognised his voice. He hastily unlocked the safe and deposited the letter inside.

The noise grew louder. He could hear footsteps on the stairs. And the next moment, to his intense indignation, the door was flung open and a positive army of people poured into the room. There were a police-sergeant and three constables, two of whom were holding Belman by the arms. There was a good-looking young man in plain clothes whose face seemed vaguely familiar to him, whilst in the rear of the cavalcade Benjamin hopped about like an agitated hen.

“What on earth is the meaning of this?” spluttered Mr. Mordon.

“Caught him on your very doorstep, sir,” said the sergeant cheerfully.

“Caught who?” said Mr. Mordon.

“Belman. His lordship’s valet.”

He nodded towards the young man in plain clothes, and a peculiar empty feeling began to assail Mr. Mordon in the pit of his stomach. It was one thing to deal with Duchesses and Earls on paper: it was somewhat different to have the actual Earl in question in the room with a posse of police.

“What has he done?” He forced himself to speak casually.

“Stolen a lot of things from his lordship’s house,” cried the sergeant. “And quite by chance he was seen by his lordship getting into the train at Charing Cross. What’s the matter, Smith?”

“Just found these in his pocket, Sergeant,” said one of the constables, coming forward with the bundle of notes.

“You precious scoundrel,” cried the sergeant. “Something more of yours, my lord.”

The young man shook his head.

“Give the devil his due,” he said, “for he’s not guilty on that score. I don’t know where he got ’em from, but they’re not mine.”

“How did you get these notes, Belman?” asked the sergeant sternly. “Come on, my lad. It will be better for you in the long run to make a clean breast of it.”

And now Mr. Mordon’s stomach was positively heaving.

“If you want to know, Sergeant,” he said in a shaking voice, “I gave them to him. I wanted the poor fellow to have a fresh start in life.”

He threw an agonised look at Belman. Surely the fool would take his cue. But Belman was staring at his late master, and suddenly, to Mr. Mordon’s speechless horror, he took a step forward.

“Fresh start be blowed,” he said. “I’m sorry, my lord, more sorry than I can say that I’ve done what I have. But I was fed up with being sacked. I got this hundred pounds for one of your lordship’s letters that I’ve just sold him.”

“You fool,” screamed Mr. Mordon. “You blasted fool!”

But no one paid any attention to him.

“One of my letters?” said the Earl in a bewildered voice. “What the deuce are you talking about?”

“A letter from the Duchess of Chiltington to you, my lord,” said Belman in a low voice. “I found it in the lining of your coat.”

And at last the Earl seemed to understand.

“You damned swine!” he roared. “You infernal blackguard! By God! I’ll murder you for that.”

“Hold hard, my lord,” said the sergeant quietly. “This wants looking into.” He turned to Mr. Mordon. “Has this man sold you a letter of his lordship’s?”

Mr. Mordon moistened his dry lips, but seemed unable to speak.

“Come, sir, come,” went on the sergeant sternly. “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” muttered the other at length.

“And you bought it, knowing it to be stolen property?” He motioned to two of the constables. “You’ll come along to the station, if you please, and explain to the inspector. I shall want you as well as Belman.”

“But, Sergeant,” stammered Mr. Mordon, “I assure you I can make the matter clear.”

“Then you can do it to the inspector,” said the sergeant curtly.

“But I have an important engagement to-night.”

“It must wait. Take him away; I’ll be along shortly with Belman. One minute, though. He might destroy the letter on the way. Give it to me. I’ll take charge of it.”

“It’s in my safe, Sergeant.”

“Then open your safe. Come, sir, or do you wish me to take your keys from you by force?”

Stumbling like an old man, Mr. Mordon went to the safe and opened it. His mind was seething chaos. Stolen property! Police stations! And what was the sergeant saying now? Leave it open Preposterous! Impossible!

“I will be responsible for all the contents.”

The man’s odious voice seemed to come from a great distance. Was it all some hideous nightmare? He, Richard Mordon, taken to the police station. And, most dreadful thought of all—he *could not explain*. There was no explanation; it was stolen property.

The sergeant watched him as he left the room pinioned between the two constables. Then he turned to Benjamin.

“Clear out,” he snapped. “If I want you, I’ll send for you.”

The door closed. Mr. Benjamin’s footsteps died away. And as silence fell on the house a strange scene was enacted in Mr. Mordon’s private study—a performance which would have caused that gentleman, had he seen it, such a rush of blood to the head that death would have been instantaneous. For a well-known member of the peerage, a sergeant, a constable, and a recently-sacked valet were sobbing gently with laughter in one another’s arms.

“Bob,” said the Duke of Chiltington, removing his constable’s helmet, “you were magnificent.”

“Nothing,” I remarked, with pride, “to what I was during the private interview.”

“Well, chaps, we must get on with it,” said Ronald, unbuttoning his sergeant’s tunic, and removing a false moustache.

“What is the first of the doings?” asked the Earl of Bletcheley.

“Find Archie’s letter. And then burn every other damned blackmailing document in that safe.”

“Give me Talie’s letter to Bimbo,” said the Duke with a grin. “I want to have it framed.”

And for those who require the epilogue, I cannot do better than to quote verbatim a paragraph from the *Daily Observer*.

OUTRAGE ON CITY MAN

WELL-KNOWN FINANCIER TARRED AND FEATHERED

> *A dastardly outrage was perpetrated the night before last on Mr. Richard Mordon, the well-known financier. Mr. Mordon, who is a much-respected citizen of Sevenoaks, was discovered early yesterday morning wandering through some hop fields not far from Tonbridge completely covered from head to foot with tar and feathers. He is still somewhat dazed and incoherent, and from inquiries made at his house it was found that he was far too indisposed to see anyone. It is understood that the difficulty of finding out what happened has been greatly increased by the fact that the miscreants removed his false teeth.*

11

THE EMPTY HOUSE

Ronald Standish glanced at the card he held in his hand, and then at our visitor.

"Sit down, Mr. Sinclair," he said, "and let's hear the trouble. But first let me introduce my friend, Mr. Miller."

I looked at the old gentleman with some curiosity as he carefully deposited one of those antiquated hard felt hats, so beloved of our forefathers, on a chair. Pink-faced, with a small white beard, he was almost bald. He wore an old-fashioned frockcoat, and pepper-and-salt trousers. A massive chain adorned his waistcoat, whilst the large gold watch attached to it, which he consulted as he sat down, showed that he was certainly no pauper, whatever his clothes might be. He looked a typical example of a well-to-do retired tradesman who had high tea instead of dinner, called his wife "Mother," and handed round the plate in church on Sunday. In short, one of the last persons I should have expected to see in the room, and the faintest perceptible rise of his eyebrows showed that Ronald was thinking the same.

"I have been told about you, Mr. Standish," Mr. Sinclair began in a precise, rather mincing voice, "by a gentleman for whom you acted with some success a few months ago—Mr. Harper. And though I do not approve of private detectives—I consider the police, for whose upkeep I pay, should be perfectly adequate to protect me—I have decided on this occasion to consult you. To start with, what is your fee?"

It was not an auspicious beginning, and I stole a look at Ronald, whose face, however, was expressionless.

"I think that before we trouble you to continue, Mr. Sinclair," he said, "we had better understand one another. In the first place, I am not a private detective in the accepted sense of the word. If a case amuses me I may look into it; if it doesn't, I don't. In the second place, I have no fee. If I decide to take up your case, I may, if they are heavy, charge you out-of-pocket expenses. But you must get quite clearly into your mind that, as you do not contribute towards my upkeep in the same way that you do for the police, it is I who am conferring the favour on you, should I act for you, and not you on me."

I suppressed a smile. Rarely have I seen such a rapid change in anyone's demeanour as took place in our visitor's. All the pomposity vanished as if by magic, and what was left was a little old man, rather pathetically frightened.

"I'm sure, Mr. Standish," he stammered, "I didn't mean to offend you. I had no idea . . . I . . . I . . ."

Standish smiled genially.

"That's all right, Mr. Sinclair," he said. "Don't think about it any more. Now let's hear what has sent you to me."

"I do hope you will be able to assist me, Mr. Standish," he said earnestly. "I have been to the police and they don't seem to take it seriously."

Ronald pushed a box of cigarettes towards him.

"Thank you, no. I don't smoke. I suppose I'd better tell you all the facts that led up to the present situation."

"If you please," said Ronald briefly.

"I am a retired provision merchant, Mr. Standish," he began. "Many years ago I started in a small way, and by hard work I succeeded in building up what I may fairly claim to be one of the best-known chain of stores in the Midlands. I have a branch in almost every decent-sized town within a radius of thirty miles from Leamington, and up to a few weeks ago I retained full control in my own hands. But we none of us get younger, Mr. Standish, and some time ago my doctor warned me that I must take things easier. And so, to cut a long story short, I decided to give up active participation in the business, and enjoy a little well-earned leisure in the time that is left to me."

His self-assurance was returning to him, and I wondered what on earth this distinctly boring preamble could be leading up to.

"Now, while I was still in harness," he went on, "I had continued to live in the same house where I had first started. I had added a bit to it here and there, but I had never bothered to move, though my sister, with whom I live, had often suggested the advisability of doing so. It had become, I admitted, hardly suitable in size or position, but you know what it is, Mr. Standish, to undertake all the discomfort and upheaval of a move. At any rate, I'd kept on putting her off on the plea that it was very convenient for my work, and that I hadn't got the time to bother with moving.

"Well, of course, when I finally retired that excuse no longer held water, and one day about two months ago she came to me with the announcement that she'd found the very thing for us—a big semi-detached house about two miles out of Leamington. The other half was let to an old lady called Miss Burton—who was almost an invalid.

"So I went and had a look at it, and I must say I quite endorsed my sister's opinion. The rooms were large and comfortable, and the house stood well back from the main road so that passing traffic would not disturb us. At the same time buses passed frequently, which is a very important matter where servants are concerned in the country."

I glanced at Ronald, but his face only expressed polite attention, and I remembered his invariable rule of letting people tell their story in their own way, however verbose.

“And so, Mr. Standish, I decided to take it. A lot of work was necessary as the house had been empty for some time. It had to be completely repapered, and I wanted another bathroom put in. However, I went into the whole question with a good architect and plans were prepared.

“Now, my first intention had been to rent it, and the house agents with whom I was doing the business—Messrs. Manfield and Pretty—were quite agreeable. Miss Burton, I understood, rented her half, and I proposed to do the same. And so we agreed provisionally at the figure of two hundred and fifty a year. Mark you, Mr. Standish, nothing was signed yet, and not deeming it necessary I hadn’t even taken the trouble to get the first refusal. Judge of my surprise then when one morning Manfield rang me up to say that someone else was after the house and would I go round and see him at once.

“I did.

“ ‘A very strange thing, Mr. Sinclair,’ he said as I entered his office. ‘There has been no one after that house for years, and now it has suddenly become popular. And the trouble is that, as far as you are concerned, it is more popular with my other client than with you.’

“ ‘You mean he’s prepared to pay a higher rent?’ I cried.

“ ‘Exactly, Mr. Sinclair.’

“ ‘What have you done about it?’ I asked him.

“ ‘I haven’t closed with him, of course. That wouldn’t have been fair without first letting you know. But business is business, isn’t it?’

“ ‘Who is this new-comer?’ I demanded.

“Naturally he refused to tell me, but I gathered it was no one I knew. And though I was annoyed, I saw that Manfield was perfectly right. He was acting on behalf of his own client, the landlord, and it was up to him to get the best terms he could. And then I suddenly had an idea. What about buying outright? It was almost certain that the owner would prefer it, and it was more than likely it would put my rival out of the running. And so I suggested it to Manfield, who jumped at the notion.

“ ‘I must, of course, inform the other gentleman who is after it,’ he said, ‘and I will let you know the result.’

“The price I had offered was four thousand five hundred pounds, and two days later Manfield rang me up to say that it was mine at that sum. The other man wouldn’t contemplate buying at all. And so work started right away.

“All this,” proceeded our visitor, “must seem very irrelevant, I fear, but I thought it best to tell you everything that could have any possible bearing on the extraordinary events of the last few weeks. All my life I have endeavoured to do my duty as a law-abiding citizen. So far as I know, I have not an enemy in the world. And now, just as I am preparing to settle down and enjoy a few years of peace, I am subjected to what I can only describe as a series of dastardly attacks.”

Ronald leaned forward attentively.

“Do you mean physical attacks, Mr. Sinclair?”

“I do, sir,” said the other indignantly, “though really those were the least annoying. But when it came to my poor sister being subjected to insult and rudeness then I decided it was time to consult you, since the police seem unable to do anything. This persecution—for I can call it nothing else, Mr. Standish—started before the workmen even commenced the alterations.”

He produced a bulky pocket-book and extracted a slip of paper.

“This,” he remarked, handing it to Ronald, “arrived by the first post one morning.”

I got up and looked over Ronald’s shoulder. On the paper, which looked as if it was a leaf torn out of a cheap notebook, were scrawled the words:

As you value your life do not go to Holmlea.

The writing was illiterate, there was no signature, and for a few moments Ronald studied it carefully through a magnifying glass. Then he put it on the desk in front of him.

“Holmlea,” he said, “is presumably the name of your new house?”

“It is, Mr. Standish. I thought I’d mentioned that.”

“And what did you do on receipt of this?” asked Ronald.

“Well, Mr. Standish, to be perfectly frank, I did nothing. I didn’t wish to alarm my sister unnecessarily, and at first I thought it was some stupid hoax, or that someone was trying to get his own back on me. I said a little while ago that I had, so far as I know, no enemies, but I ought perhaps to qualify that statement a little. You see, I am a magistrate, and in the ordinary course of events it may be that I have incurred the enmity of someone who has come before the Bench.”

“Quite, Mr. Sinclair,” said Ronald. “One more question before you proceed. Did you notice what the postmark was on the envelope?”

“I did. It was Warwick, which, as you know, is close to Leamington.”

Ronald nodded and made a note.

“Go on, Mr. Sinclair.”

“As I say, I took no notice. I very nearly tore it up, but I finally decided to keep it, though I mentioned it to no one. The workmen started next day, and the matter had almost slipped from my mind when, happening to go to Holmlea to see how they were progressing, I saw an envelope addressed to me on the drawing-room mantelpiece. And the writing was the same as before.

There was no stamp. It had evidently been left by hand. I opened it and found this.”

Once again he extracted a piece of paper from his pocket-book and passed it across to us. It was the same sort of paper as before, and this time the following words were written:—

> *You will have one more warning. If you don’t take that, God help you.*

“I called the foreman,” proceeded Mr. Sinclair, “and asked him if he knew anything about the note. He was an honest, conscientious man who had done work for me in the past, and I am convinced he would have told me if he had known anything. But he was just as much in the dark as I was. He said that he had seen the note on the mantelpiece when he started work that morning, and as it was addressed to me he had thought no more about it. And he was positive it had not been there overnight. At my request he got all his men together and asked them if they could throw any light on the matter, but they one and all professed complete ignorance of it.”

“This grows interesting, Mr. Sinclair,” said Ronald thoughtfully. “I suppose you didn’t think of asking the foreman if he was certain that the front and back doors were locked and all the windows bolted when he left the night before?”

“But I did, Mr. Standish,” cried the old gentleman triumphantly. “You don’t want to be a celebrated detective to see the importance of that.”

“True,” murmured Ronald gravely. “And what did he say?”

“Unfortunately, nothing helpful. He could swear to both doors being locked, but he was not prepared to swear to all the windows being bolted.”

“Did you show him the contents of the letter?”

“No. I thought it better not to. But this time I took it, with the first one, and showed them both to the police. I went to Inspector Crawley, whom I knew personally from my position on the Bench, and asked him what he thought. And he was quite positive that the whole thing was a stupid hoax perpetrated by someone who had a grudge against me.

“ ‘What possible reason can anyone have, Mr. Sinclair,’ he said, ‘for trying to keep you out of the house? It’s absurd on the face of it. Depend upon it, it’s some man of low mentality who has hit on this way of trying to frighten you. It’s like the old stories one used to hear of threatening letters sent to people, signed with a skull and cross-bones.’

“So at that I left it, until a week later the third thing happened. And this time it was not confined to a letter. I was reading my paper after breakfast, when the architect was shown in, and I saw at once that something had happened.

" 'Will you come at once with me to Holmlea?' he said. 'I've got my car outside. I should like you to see the state of affairs for yourself.'

"He said no more during the drive there, but when we arrived it was obvious that things were not going well. The men were all standing about doing no work, whilst the foreman, looking very worried, was at the gate.

" 'I've left everything, sir,' he said to my companion, 'for Mr. Sinclair to see—same as you told me.'

"Well, Mr. Standish," continued the old gentleman, "to say that I was dumbfounded is no more than the literal truth. The place was like a bear garden. Pails of distemper had been thrown down the stairs; the new papers that they had put up in one or two rooms had been pulled off and hung in festoons; rubbish that had been collected into neat little heaps now littered the entire house. It looked as if a party of children had been let loose indoors with orders to do the maximum amount of wilful damage they could.

" 'It's incredible, Mr. Sinclair,' said the architect. 'In the whole course of my career I have never seen anything like it before.'

" 'Nor me,' said the foreman. 'And while I think of it, sir,' he continued, 'there's another letter for you on the drawing-room mantelpiece.' "

He passed the third over to us, and this time it was more brief.

The third warning and the last.

"Once again it had been left by hand," continued Mr. Sinclair, "and once again no one could throw any light on how it had got there."

"Excellent," cried Ronald. "This is really one of the most intriguing stories I have heard for a long while. What did you do?"

"I asked the architect to send his car back to Leamington and get hold of Inspector Crawley. This had gone beyond a question of a stupid hoax, and something drastic would have to be done about it. He came at once and looked at the damage, and though he didn't admit it I could see he was completely nonplussed.

" 'I'll have a man on duty here every night,' he said, 'and then we'll see if these goings-on continue. And, seeing that it's come to this, sir,' he continued, 'it's just on the cards that I've solved it. This house has been empty for years, and it may be that tramps have been in the habit of dossing down in it at night. And now they're angry at losing their shelter.'

"So at that it was left. The damage was repaired and work started once more. But though I had said nothing to the Inspector, an idea had struck me and I went off to see Manfield. Was it possible that my unsuccessful rival was adopting this childish method of getting his own back? But Manfield would have none of it.

“ ‘Out of the question, Mr. Sinclair,’ he said emphatically. ‘Almost as much out of the question as a bishop robbing the poor-box in church. He was a perfectly respectable individual who saw Holmlea and happened to like it. But beyond a little natural disappointment when I told him you’d bought it he showed no feeling on the matter. I mean there was no sign of any resentment.’

“I hope I am making everything clear, Mr. Standish?”

“I wish everyone who sat in that chair was equally lucid,” said Ronald.

“From that day a policeman was on duty every night,” continued Mr. Sinclair, “and nothing happened. The work proceeded apace, and I began to think that the Inspector’s theory was right. And then one morning about three weeks later came the next thing. The new bathroom had been finished except that some of the plumbing had still to be done, and unfortunately connecting up the waste pipe was one of the uncompleted jobs. Well, Mr. Standish, I don’t know if you have any idea as to the damage that can be done in a night when a tap is left running full on after the bath has overflowed? I certainly hadn’t until I saw Holmlea. The hall was inches deep in water; the plaster had come off the ceilings of most of the rooms, and several of the new wallpapers had peeled off.

“Now, of course, this may have been a genuine accident. The constable on duty heard nothing and saw nothing the whole night. And yet I can hardly believe that even the most careless plumber would be such a fool as to leave the water running into a bath when he finished work. The man naturally swore that he hadn’t, but I quite realise he would have sworn that in any event. And so it is possible that it was an accident.”

“If so, it was a very instructive accident,” said Ronald quietly.

“It was a very costly one,” said the old gentleman ruefully. “It threw back the work at least a fortnight. And what was worse, Mr. Standish, the workmen began to get jumpy. Thought there was something queer about the house, and really, I didn’t blame them. In fact, had it not been that I had already paid the money I think I should have backed out of it myself.

“And now we come to a week ago. This time it was nothing to do with the house, and perhaps it had nothing to do with the affair at all. We have at one cross-roads an automatic traffic control of the usual red and green light variety, and I pass the spot every evening going to the club. Last Tuesday I got there as usual, and seeing the green light showing I proceeded to cross the road. I was half-way across when a small van drove straight at me, though the red light was showing as far as he was concerned. I give you my word, Mr. Standish, he missed me by inches as I jumped for my life. Then, absolutely disregarding the traffic signal which still showed STOP, he shot over the cross-roads and disappeared, narrowly escaping a collision with another car. Unfortunately there was no policeman there—he has been dispensed with since the automatic device was installed—so there was nothing to be done. And I was so upset I could not even get the number of the van. But I am convinced, sir, in my own mind," he went on emphatically, "that it was a deliberate attempt to murder me."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if you are right," said Standish gravely. "Your story grows increasingly interesting, Mr. Sinclair."

"I reported the matter to the Inspector, but he was powerless. Moreover, he ridiculed the idea that it was anything more than an ordinary case of dangerous driving. And so I had to leave it, since there was no chance of catching the blackguard. Might I have a drink of water, Mr. Standish? All this talking makes my throat dry."

I got him a glass from the sideboard, and he took a sip.

"Thank you," he said. "Because now we are coming to the incident which decided me to come and see you. It occurred yesterday morning. I had been for a stroll in town, and when I returned for lunch I found my sister in a state of terrible agitation—in fact, she was almost in hysterics, so much so that for some time she was unable to tell me what had happened. But at last I got it out of her. It appeared that she, too, had been for a walk, and had come back by a road which is very little used. Half-way along it she became aware that two rough-looking men were following her. Considerably alarmed, she quickened her steps, but it was useless. They overtook her—one on each side, and one of them seized her arm.

" 'Listen here, old woman,' he said to her, 'you tell that brother of yours to quit the idea of going to Holmlea, or it will be the worse for both of you.'

"Then they disappeared, leaving her half fainting with fright. And nothing that I could say pacified her. It had, of course, been impossible to prevent her knowing about the damage that had been done to the house, though I had told her nothing about the three notes. But when this happened to her she at once put two and two together, and refused to accept any more my explanation that it had been the work of some irresponsible tramp. In short, Mr. Standish, she is thoroughly alarmed and flatly refuses to go to Holmlea at all, which means that I lose my money, and, what annoys me more even, these scoundrels, whoever they are, will have succeeded in doing what they set out to do."

The little man's jaw stuck out, and for a moment one could see the underlying character that had built up that chain of stores.

"Can you help me, Mr. Standish?"

"I will most certainly try to," said Ronald warmly. "But there are one or two questions I would like to ask you. Is that policeman still on duty at night?"

"So far as I know—yes."

"Are you a person of fairly fixed habits? For instance, do you usually go to the club at the same time every day?"

He nodded.

"Generally about half-past four. You mean, that the driver of that van might have known that fact?"

"Not might—but did know that fact," said Ronald dryly. "Now, Mr. Sinclair, I want you to obey my instructions implicitly. Tell your architect to stop work; say that you've changed your mind about going to live at Holmlea; have a FOR SALE board put up in the garden; and, lastly—and this is important—tell the Inspector you no longer want a policeman there at night."

The old gentleman looked at him with growing indignation.

"But that will be giving in all along the line," he cried. "I do intend to live in Holmlea."

"Possibly," said Ronald. "But unless you do what I tell you the betting is all against your ever doing so. The next time that van won't miss you."

"Oh! I see, just pretence."

"Yes," answered Ronald curtly; "but it's got to be pretence that will carry conviction that those are your genuine intentions."

"But what do you make of it, Mr. Standish?" he asked pathetically. "Why on earth should I of all people be signalled out for this persecution? Who are the scoundrels?"

"Well, you may take one thing from me, my dear sir," said Ronald gravely, "they are not tramps. You have been moving in deep waters, Mr. Sinclair; how deep, at the moment, I am not prepared to say. Do not tell anyone that you've come to me. Do just what I've said, and we'll see if we can solve your little problem. And one other word—should we by chance meet in Leamington, you don't know me. Good day to you."

The door closed behind him, and Ronald rubbed his hands together.

"We're going to have some fun, Bob," he said. "Put some rubber shoes in your bag and a gun. We'll motor down to Leamington this afternoon for a preliminary survey of the land."

"Got any ideas?" I asked.

"Only one," he answered. "And that is that the episode of the bath water is singularly instructive."

And not another word could I get out of him.

Holmlea proved to be much as I had pictured it, as we drove past that afternoon. It stood some forty yards back from the road, and a hedge separated its garden from that of Burnlea, which was the other half of the house. As yet Mr. Sinclair had not had time to carry out all his instructions, and work was still proceeding. But a board had been erected facing the road announcing that it was to be Let or Sold, and Ronald returned to Leamington in high spirits.

"I'll just ring up the old boy," he said, "and find out about the policeman."

He returned in a few moments even more pleased than before.

“Excellent,” he cried. “The men are going to be discharged this evening, and the policeman removed. So it’s just possible, Bob, that our vigil to-night may produce some result. If it doesn’t, we shall have to try again.”

“In Holmlea, presumably,” I remarked.

He nodded, and summoning a waiter ordered two pints.

“Just so,” he said. “And so I fear you will have to entertain yourself until it’s dark enough to go there.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“For a stroll,” he answered. “There are one or two little things I want to clear up, and you can’t help me.”

He finished his beer, and left the hotel whilst I sat on, puzzling over the problem. The whole thing seemed so strange and pointless. What could there be about Holmlea, which, so far as I had been able to see, was like scores of other houses, that so interested these mysterious individuals? Could it be that there was booty hidden somewhere in the house; the proceeds perhaps of some old burglary? That the burglars had just completed their sentence, and now wanted leisure to recover their loot? Or was the Inspector’s theory of tramps correct in spite of Ronald’s statement to the contrary?

Time dragged by slowly, and at last I went in to dinner. I knew there was no use waiting for Ronald: past experience had taught me what “one or two little things to clear up” meant in his case. And, sure enough, it was not until nearly ten that he appeared again, but a glance at his face showed that the clearing up had been successful. He was in a state of barely-suppressed excitement, and that for him was pretty remarkable. He was not a man who often allowed his feelings to show.

“A most interesting evening, Bob,” he remarked. “And I trust there will be no falling off during the rest of the night. Has my good friend McIver arrived?”

“The Scotland Yard fellow?” I cried. “I haven’t seen him. So you’ve found out something?”

“Even more than I anticipated, old boy,” he grinned. “Assuredly it was lucky in more senses than one that our worthy Mr. Sinclair came to us this morning. Hallo! here is McIver at last.”

“Evening, Mr. Standish,” said a burly-looking man who had come up to the table. “I came as soon as I could. Are you sure you’re right?”

“Absolutely certain, Mac. I went and called this evening, and there was no mistaking that deformed hand.”

“Well, it’s going to be a damned good night’s work if we catch ’em,” said McIver. “What about the local police?”

“I’ve seen Inspector Crawley myself,” said Ronald, “and I told him we don’t want an army of men. The small fry don’t count when all is said and done, and if we have posses of policemen marching up the road we’ll be stung. So he’s sending half a dozen of his best men by a roundabout route and he’s coming with us himself. In fact—here he is.”

The two inspectors shook hands, and then Ronald glanced at his watch.

“Time we went,” he said. “Put on your rubbers, Bob, and bring your gun, in case it’s wanted.”

I rejoined them a few minutes later, and we all got into a waiting taxi.

“Stop half a mile short of Holmlea,” Ronald told the driver as we started off.

And now I was beginning to feel excited. That something big was afoot was obvious, though what it was I had no idea. But a man in McIver’s position would not have come post-haste from London for some trifling larceny.

“ ’Ere you are, gents,” said the driver, pulling up. “ ’Olmlea’s just round the bend there in front of you.”

We paid him off, and then Ronald took charge.

“Got to do a bit of trespassing,” he said, “for we can’t possibly go along the road. Follow me. I explored the route this evening.”

He turned into some undergrowth, and silently led the way. A slight wind was stirring the branches of the trees, and twice during our walk a motor-bus rumbled past on the road a few yards away. The night was dark, and there was no moon, which made the going difficult, but at length he stopped and we closed up on him.

“There’s the house,” he whispered, “just in front of us. I’ve got the key of the front door, but the difficulty is going to be in getting over this bit of open. They may have scouts round the place.”

“You get the door open, Mr. Standish,” muttered McIver; “then we’ll dodge across singly.”

Like a shadow Ronald vanished, and a minute later a faint click told us he had been successful. Then one by one we flitted across the lawn and joined him in the hall.

The house was deathly silent. Not even the ticking of a clock could be heard.

“Be careful how you walk,” whispered Ronald. “There may still be buckets and things about.”

On tiptoe we followed him, until we found ourselves in a small vestibule leading off the hall. In front of us were steps going down to the kitchen premises, which we could dimly see by the light of a street lamp outside.

And then commenced an eerie vigil. No one spoke. No one even whispered. We merely stood and waited—I, at any rate, with no idea what for. And it was just as very faintly in the distance we heard a church clock chime midnight that a sudden sharp click came from below. I felt Ronald stiffen. The moment had come.

Scarcely breathing, we stood there. Stealthy footsteps were coming up the stairs. They passed our door, and continued up the next flight. And it was then that I became aware for the first time of a peculiar rhythmical noise that seemed to shake the whole house. Thump: thump: thump—it went on without cessation, just as if some big engine was working.

But another sound distracted my attention. The bath tap had been turned on above. The splash of water was clearly audible, though it did not prevent us hearing a creak on the stairs as the mysterious visitor descended again.

“Catch him as he passes us,” breathed Ronald. “Silently, if possible.”

But that was not to be. In the dim light we impeded one another, and the man as we sprang on him let out one wild shout before a heavy blow on the back of his head stunned him.

“Move!” shouted Ronald. “Before they get the opening closed.”

We fell down the kitchen stairs, and into the scullery. Through a hole in one wall light was streaming, and we dashed through to find ourselves in a long passage. And the thumping noise had ceased.

We raced along and burst open a door at the end. And then things happened. I had a fleeting vision of a hall with an oil lamp swinging from the ceiling, of two furious-looking men and a wizened-up old woman standing underneath it Then something red-hot seared through my chest, and I felt myself falling into blackness, punctuated by the crack of revolver shots.

“My dear old Bob—thank God he didn’t kill you. The bullet missed everything vital.”

Ronald was leaning over the foot of the bed, in a strange room when I opened my eyes, and a hospital nurse was hovering around. I was bandaged up tightly, but otherwise I felt all right.

“Do you mind explaining what happened?” I said.

“You got plugged through the chest by one of the most notorious criminals in Europe, who is now safely under lock and key with several of his associates.”

“But how did you spot it in the first place? I demanded.

“You are not to tire yourself,” said the nurse, coming forward.

“I promise I won’t,” I cried. “But I shall start biting the bedclothes unless this old scoundrel satisfies my curiosity.”

Ronald grinned.

“Don’t worry, nurse. I can do it very quickly. Well, Bob, from the word ‘go’ I dismissed the idea of tramps being at the bottom of it. One thing alone ruled them out absolutely: tramps are not in the financial position to hire motor-vans to kill people with. And so we were confronted with the plain, bald fact that some person or persons were prepared to go to almost any lengths to prevent Holmlea being occupied. Obviously it had nothing to do with old Sinclair himself. He only came into the matter because he was the prospective householder.

“Now, why do you want to keep a house unoccupied? For one of two reasons: either that you wish to use it yourself surreptitiously, or because you’re afraid the occupier will inconvenience you in some way. And of the two the second is the more likely.

“To carry on again, who were the people most likely to be inconvenienced by the tenant of Holmlea? Quite obviously the tenants of Burnlea, and at an early stage in the proceedings I determined to have a close look at the invalid lady, Miss Burton. Because it seemed wellnigh impossible that a genuine old lady, however passionately she desired privacy, would hire a gang of hooligans to wreck someone else’s property.

“Then came the episode of the bath, which, as I said, was very instructive, because it clinched almost for certain that in Burnlea lay the seat of the trouble, and that there was some communication between the two houses. While there was no constable on watch it didn’t matter what damage they did, since it could be attributed to a man entering the house from outside. But once the policeman was there that was impossible. He would *know* that no one had got in from outside. And so the only damage they could do was what would appear accidental. They couldn’t again upset the whitewash, for then it would be known that someone had been in the house, and if he hadn’t come from outside he must have come from inside—that is, from Burnlea. But with the bath no one need have been in the house at all. It could be attributed to a workman’s carelessness.

“Well—that’s about all. When I left you that evening at Leamington I made a few changes in my personal appearance, and called at Burnlea. I did not see Miss Burton, but I did see the butler, and one glance was enough. He had a curiously distorted right hand, the result of a knife brawl some years ago, and I recognised him at once. It was a gentleman called Galliday whose speciality was coining, and the whole thing became clear. Coining is by no manner of means a silent job, as you heard yourself last night.”

“You mean that thumping noise,” I cried.

“Exactly. And they couldn’t see old Sinclair and his sister standing for that either by day or night. So I got on to McIver, and the rest you know. The old invalid lady was one of the most dangerous anarchists alive—a Frenchman called Pierre Martin. In fact, the whole gang was just about as pestilential a sore as you’d find anywhere. That they would again try the bath trick never occurred to me; I wanted to hear that engine going so as to be absolutely certain.”

He paused suddenly. A horrified expression on his face.

“What is it, old boy?” I cried.

“My dear Bob,” he said, “something has just dawned on me. In the excitement of the moment nobody has turned the bath water off!”

12

THE TIDAL RIVER

"The very person I've been wanting to see. I rang up your rooms, and your man told me you'd probably be dining in your club."

I glanced up from my coffee. A man by the name of Mervyn Davidson was standing by our chairs. I only knew him slightly, but Ronald Standish had shot with him once or twice.

"Could you possibly come down to my place to-morrow," continued Davidson, "or are you too busy?"

"Do you mean professionally?" asked Ronald.

"Yes," said the other, pulling up a chair. "Do you mind, at any rate, if I tell you the story?"

"Fire right ahead," said Ronald, lighting a cigar.

"The thing happened yesterday," began Davidson, "and at first everybody thought it was an accident. However, as you don't know any of the people concerned I'd better start by putting you wise to them and to the locality. You've been down my way, I think?"

"Only once," said Ronald. "So take it that I'm quite ignorant."

"I will," said Davidson. "My house is just five miles from the sea, and as you may perhaps remember, the River Ling forms one boundary to the property."

Ronald nodded.

"Yes, I recollect that. Tidal, isn't it, as far as you?"

"For three or four miles farther up-stream. A muddy bit of water, but unfortunately it plays a big part in the tragedy which concerns my next-door neighbour, a retired business man named Yarrow. Do you want my estimate of the gentleman, or would you prefer to keep an open mind?"

"I want everything that bears on the case," said Ronald.

"His character certainly does that," said Davidson, "but I didn't want to bias you in any way. In short, then, he was a most unpleasant individual."

"Was?" Ronald raised his eyebrows.

The other nodded.

"I'm coming to that. Yes, he was a most unpleasant man, and one of the incomprehensible things of life is how his perfectly charming wife came to marry him. She is years younger than him, and an extremely pretty woman. He must have been well over fifty, whereas she is on the right side of thirty.

Exactly what his business was I can't tell you: he was one of the most morose and uncommunicative men I've ever met. But it must have been lucrative, as there was no shortage of money about the *ménage*. I've dined with them off and on, and I know the style they lived in.

"It was not, however, an entertainment I indulged in more than I could help, because the atmosphere of the household was so damnable. He was frequently rude to her in front of the servants, and even if he wasn't that he had that cold, sarcastic manner that made one long to hit him.

"He had one hobby, and one hobby only, so far as I know—fishing in the Ling. Everyone to his own taste, and if it appeals to a man to sit on the bank of a muddy river fishing for uneatable fish with a worm and a float, by all manner of means let him do so. He certainly did, for hours on end. The river flowed past his place, but between it and his boundary was a right of way. And it was at one particular spot on this path that he always took up his position.

"Now, though the path is a right of way, it is very little used. Probably not more than two people go along it a day, though sometimes on Sundays the customary loving couples walk there. But on weekdays it is practically deserted. Well, it so happened that the day before yesterday I was down near the river giving instructions to my gardener about one or two things, when I saw a man called Stapleton coming along the path. His trousers were dripping with water, and the instant he saw me he gave a shout.

" 'For God's sake come, Davidson. Yarrow has been drowned.'

"The gardener and I went at once, and sure enough it was so. Wedged against a sunken tree by the pressure of the water was his body, and a glance was sufficient to show that it was too late to do anything. His hat was on the bank, and a campstool and creel.

" 'I tried to get him out,' said Stapleton, 'but he was too heavy for me.'

" 'When did you find him?' I asked.

" 'Five minutes ago,' he said. 'I was walking from Briggs's farm and as I passed I saw that hat, which I recognised as his. So I looked over the edge and there he was.'

"Between us we hoisted the body out and laid it on the bank. I sent my gardener back for a hurdle, and while he was away we made an attempt at doing some artificial respiration. But it was utterly hopeless, and we both knew it.

" 'How on earth did it happen, I wonder?' I said after we had desisted.

" 'The only thing I can think of,' said Stapleton, 'is that he fainted, or had a fit, and fell in. The water is comparatively shallow; if he'd been conscious he'd have had no difficulty in getting out.'

"Which was perfectly true, as the bank though steep was not high. No one would have had the smallest trouble in scrambling out, and it seemed to me that his solution must be the correct one.

"At last the hurdle arrived, and we put him on it. And then it struck me that somebody had better go on in advance to prepare Mrs. Yarrow for the news. Stapleton evidently did not want to, so I said I would. I didn't relish the job: with a woman, one never knows. He had treated her like a dog during his life, but for all that you can't tell how they'll take things. To my intense relief she kept perfectly calm. She turned white and swayed a bit; then she asked me quite quietly what to do.

" 'I think the best thing would be to put the body in the billiard-room,' I said. 'You realise, Mrs. Yarrow, that he'll have to be seen by a doctor, and possibly the police may come into it. But, of course, it will be entirely a formality. It's obvious what happened.'

"I repeated Stapleton's theory, and she listened in silence. And then, in view of subsequent developments, she made a rather strange remark:

" 'My husband has never fainted in his life.'

"At the time I thought nothing of it; they were just carrying in the body, and I went to see if I could be of any assistance. We laid it on the floor, and Stapleton put the hat and the creel on the table. And then we waited a bit awkwardly, nobody quite knowing what to do next. I dismissed the gardener and the man who had helped him, and Stapleton and I talked in the hushed tones one uses in the presence of death. Little pools of water were forming on the floor under him, but it seemed indecent to move him again.

" 'I liked him, you know,' said Stapleton, 'though I know he was not popular. But it's a pretty mouldy end! And to think that I took a photograph of him on my way out to Briggs this morning. I never thought that the next time I saw the poor devil he'd be like this.'

"Half an hour later Dr. Granger arrived, and Stapleton and I left him to do what was necessary. Mrs. Yarrow had gone to her room, and I gave a message for her to the butler, to say that if there was anything I could do to help she must have no hesitation in ringing me up. Then, since there was nothing more to be done, I suggested to Stapleton that he should come over to my house and have a drink. I felt I badly needed one.

"An hour passed when suddenly the telephone rang. I went to it, and heard the voice of Sergeant Grayson at the other end. Being on the Bench, I knew him very well; a good man, distinctly above the average local policeman in intelligence. Would I go up to the Yarrows' house, and take Stapleton with me: some startling developments had taken place.

"We went immediately, wondering what on earth they could be, and the butler showed us into the billiard-room. The doctor was still there, with the sergeant and a constable, and all their faces were very grave.

" 'Sorry to trouble you, sir,' said Grayson to me, 'but it was unavoidable.

May I ask both you gentlemen to tell me all you know.’

“We did so, and when we’d finished he looked significantly at the doctor, who nodded.

“ ‘The fact is, Davidson,’ said Granger, ‘that this is not a simple case of drowning. Yarrow was drowned all right, but it was the result of foul play. He didn’t faint or have a fit, which was what I, too, first thought: he was stunned by being hit a heavy blow with some weapon on the base of his skull. He then pitched forward into the water, and probably was drowned almost instantaneously.’

“ ‘Good God!’ I cried, aghast. ‘Are you sure, doctor?’

“ ‘Quite sure, I’m sorry to say. The bruise is there plain for all to see, and by the feel of it I think something is chipped or broken inside. So you can guess how fierce the blow was.’

“ ‘But who did it?’ I said, staring at him.

“ ‘That, sir,’ said the sergeant, ‘is what we’ve got to try and find out. And we have one very valuable piece of evidence. Mr. Yarrow’s watch stopped at half-past two. Which proves conclusively that the poor gentleman met his end before that hour. Now, sir’—he turned to Stapleton—‘as you seem to have been one of the last people to see him alive, can you add anything to what you have already told us?’

“ ‘I can’t, Sergeant,’ answered Stapleton. ‘I passed Mr. Yarrow just as he was packing up for lunch. It must have been about one o’clock, as I reached Briggs’s house at ten minutes past. I had one film left in my camera, and as I wanted to get the roll finished I asked him to pose in the most characteristic attitude I could think of—sitting on his campstool fishing. I then had lunch, and the rest you know. I left Briggs’s farm between five-and-twenty and twenty to three, and found the body in the river. I went in and tried to get him out, but I couldn’t. And then Mr. Davidson came on the scene.’

“ ‘Don’t you think, Sergeant,’ I put in, ‘that it would be a good thing to get hold of the butler and find out about times from him?’

“So the butler was sent for, and it’s his evidence that has brought me to you, Standish. I can’t believe the boy did it, but I’m bound to say things look just about as black as they can be. Sorry: I’m jumping ahead too fast.

“It appears that Yarrow came in to lunch shortly after one to find a youngster called Christopher Stern having a cocktail with Mrs. Yarrow. And now comes the part that has got to be told, though naturally the butler said nothing about it. He knew, of course—we all did: you can’t keep things like that dark in the country. Young Stern is in love with Mrs. Yarrow and has been for years, though what her feelings are on the matter I don’t know.

“At any rate, it was quite clear from what the butler implied that his master was not at all pleased to find Stern there, and when he discovered that his wife had asked the boy to lunch he was even less pleased. Looking back now I remember having heard from other sources that Yarrow was very jealous of his wife, and it was obvious from what the butler said that the lunch was not a great success. We pressed him to be more explicit, but he is a good servant. And the most we could get out of him was that Yarrow was in a bad temper.

"Now comes the damning part. At a quarter past two Yarrow gathered his fishing tackle together, and the butler saw him standing in the hall talking to Stern. He was speaking angrily, though the butler did not hear what he said. But it ended in the two men leaving the house together and taking the direction of the river."

Davidson paused, and beckoning a waiter, ordered drinks.

"More than that," he continued, "the butler could not say, but it was enough to make things begin to look ugly for Stern. And the boy's own statement of what happened didn't help much. We telephoned for him and he came round at once. And I think we all watched him as he came into the room. He saw the body, turned as white as a sheet and clutched the table as if he was about to fall.

" 'What's happened?' he muttered.

" 'I want you to tell me, sir,' said the sergeant, 'exactly what took place this afternoon after you left this house with Mr. Yarrow.'

" 'But I don't understand,' stammered the youngster. 'I know nothing about it.'

"After a while he pulled himself together and his story tallied exactly with the butler's. Yarrow and he had had words after lunch—he refused to say what about, but we all of us knew—and it had finished up with Yarrow forbidding him the house. They had gone out together and he had walked with Yarrow as far as the river. And there he had left him to his fishing.

" 'Where did you go?' asked the sergeant.

" 'Along a path somewhere: I really forget,' said Stern.

" 'And what time did you leave Mr. Yarrow?'

"This again Stern couldn't remember: he supposed he'd stayed two or three minutes.

" 'So, Mr. Stern,' said Grayson gravely, 'you know nothing about Mr. Yarrow's death?'

" 'Absolutely nothing.'

" 'You didn't have a struggle with him or strike him with anything?'

" 'Good God! no. Why do you ask?'

" 'Was anyone else there while you were with him?'

" 'I saw no one.'

" 'And you didn't pass anybody as you went along the path?'

"Again he shook his head.

“ ‘Not that I’m aware of,’ he said. And then, after a moment, he added: ‘But I was all worked up and I might not have noticed. Anyway,’ he cried wildly, ‘what is it all about? Why are you asking me all these questions?’

“ ‘I am asking you these questions, Mr. Stern,’ said Grayson, ‘because so far as we know at present you are the last person who saw Mr. Yarrow alive. And Mr. Yarrow was murdered.’

“ ‘Murdered!’

“The word was just breathed—barely audible, and once again Stern clutched the table.

“ ‘Who by? But—but, it looks as if he’d been drowned.’ And then, wildly: ‘Great Heavens! you don’t suspect *me*?’

“Grayson stared at him.

“ ‘I didn’t say I did, Mr. Stern. But you left the house at a quarter past two with Mr. Yarrow; you must, therefore, have arrived at the river at about twenty past. You tell me you remained talking for two or three minutes.’ He paused impressively. ‘And Mr. Yarrow was murdered before half-past.’

“ ‘You keep on saying he was murdered,’ said Stern. ‘How do you know that?’

“ ‘He was hit on the back of the head and stunned,’ answered Grayson. ‘Then he fell into the water and was drowned.’

“And at that it was left for the time. Whether or not they have actually arrested young Stern yet, I don’t know, but it’s only a question of hours before they do so. And I wondered, Standish, if you would come down and run your eye over the country, so to speak. I’d like to do everything I can for Stern—he’s an extraordinarily nice boy. But I must confess it looks pretty hopeless to me.”

“You think, then, that he did it?” said Ronald.

“What else can one think? We know that he was with Yarrow just before it happened; we know that they were having a quarrel over Mrs. Yarrow. We know also that the place where they were is usually entirely deserted, so that the chances of someone else being there are remote.”

Davidson shrugged his shoulders.

“I am quite prepared to believe,” he continued, “that Stern didn’t even know he’d killed him. That in a moment of ungovernable rage he hit Yarrow and knocked him out, and that then, after he had gone, Yarrow rolled over and fell in the water and was drowned. In which case it might be possible to make it a case of manslaughter only.”

“What does Mrs. Yarrow say?” asked Ronald.

“Nothing at all, so far as I know. I gather that she has admitted that her husband did not like Stern, but we knew that already. In fact, with regard to yesterday, the butler knows far more than she does.”

“Well, there are certainly one or two very significant points,” said Ronald, lighting a cigarette. “So, if you like, Davidson, Bob and I will come down to-morrow. I suppose there’s a pub somewhere handy.”

“My dear fellow, I wouldn’t dream of letting you do that. I can put both of you up with the greatest of pleasure in the world. But I’m afraid it’s pretty hopeless for young Stern. There’s a good train from Liverpool Street at ten. I’ll meet you at the other end.”

“What do you make of it, Bob?” said Ronald, as Davidson went off to write a letter.

“Told as he’s told it, I must say I agree with him. It looks black for Stern. Motive, opportunity, time—everything seems to fit.”

“Almost too well,” said Ronald. “However, we’ll see.”

True to his promise, Davidson met us at the station.

“They’ve arrested him,” were his first words. “I’m afraid it’s a waste of time for you, Standish.”

“When did they do it?” asked Ronald.

“Immediately after the inquest this morning. Hallo! there’s Stapleton—the man who found Yarrow’s body.”

He waved his hand, and a good-looking, slightly-built man of about forty, who had just come out of a photographer’s shop, came over to the car.

“Bad affair this,” he said, “about young Stern. Still, I suppose it was only to be expected.”

Davidson introduced us, and Stapleton looked at Ronald with interest.

“I’ve heard of you. Mr. Standish,” he said. “Tom Ponsonby, who is a distant cousin of mine, is never tired of singing your praises.”

“That’s very nice of him,” said Ronald.

“Have you come down here over this business, or merely to stay with Davidson?”

“A little of both,” said Ronald, with a smile. “I hear they’ve arrested Stern.”

The other nodded.

“I don’t see how they could avoid it,” he replied. “If ever there was an obvious case this is it.”

He fumbled in his pocket.

“By the way, Davidson, I’ve just had that roll of films developed. Here is the last photograph of the poor chap taken an hour and a half before his death. Good, isn’t it?”

“Very,” said Davidson, passing it to us.

It showed Yarrow seated on his campstool watching his float. His face was in profile; his hat and creel were on the bank beside him.

“I’m glad I got it,” said Stapleton simply. “It’s just the pose I’d like to remember him by.”

“I wonder if you would allow me to keep this,” said Ronald. “Or perhaps you would let me have another print made. My reason is that it helps one to visualise the scene in a way that mere imagination can’t do.”

“By all manner of means keep it,” cried Stapleton. “I can easily have another done.”

“I suppose, Mr. Stapleton, that you saw no sign of any weapon on the bank when you found the body?”

“It never dawned on me to look for one. I assumed it was a common or garden case of drowning. The possibility of foul play never entered my head.”

“Naturally not,” said Ronald. “It wouldn’t.”

We stayed there talking for a few moments; then Stapleton got into his car and went off.

“Have you formed any plan of campaign, Standish?” asked Davidson. “Or do you think the thing is too hopeless to worry about?”

“Far from it,” said Ronald.

Davidson glanced at him in surprise.

“You mean that you think young Stern has a chance?”

“I most certainly do,” answered Ronald. “But until I’ve seen one thing I can’t say more than that.”

“And what is this thing you want to see?” asked Davidson curiously.

“The dead man’s watch,” said Ronald. “I take it you can manage that for me.”

“I suppose Grayson has it,” said Davidson. “It’s a vital piece of evidence for the prosecution.”

“Or for the defence,” remarked Ronald with a faint smile. “However, we’d better wait and see.”

“For the defence!” spluttered Davidson. “What on earth are you driving at, my dear man?”

But Ronald refused to elucidate further, or even to discuss the matter while we had lunch. But after the meal was over he suggested an immediate move.

“Let’s go first to the place where it happened,” he said. “And then if you’d ring through to him, Davidson, we’ll go along and interview Sergeant Grayson.”

“Certainly,” answered our host. “I’ll take you there at once. And I’ll have the car waiting in the drive so that we’ll waste no time.”

He left us to go and telephone, and I tackled Ronald about the watch. But he was in one of his uncommunicative moods, and I could get nothing more out of him than the illuminating statement that it was damned rum. Then

Davidson returned and we started for the river.

“That is where I was when I first saw Stapleton,” said out host, pointing to a clump of trees in his park. “We’ve got about another quarter of a mile to go.”

We turned into the path that ran along the bank. On our right through the bushes which fringed the river we could see the muddy waters of the Ling; on our left ran more bushes and a fence.

“Yarrow’s property,” remarked Davidson. “You’ll be able to see the house soon through the trees.”

At length he paused. We had come to a small clearing.

“Here’s the spot,” he said. “You can actually see the marks of the legs of his campstool in the ground.”

Ronald nodded, and stood motionless studying the surroundings. The gap in the bushes on the bank measured about ten yards, and the river was some thirty yards wide. Behind us the undergrowth was dense. Up- and down-stream the path twisted, so that the place was completely secluded. On the right-hand side of the clearing a tree, half waterlogged, stuck out into the water, and Davidson pointed to it.

“It was against that the body had drifted,” he said. “The tide was ebbing at the time and carried it there.”

Ronald nodded again.

“I see it’s just high tide now,” he remarked. “Let’s get the depth of the water.”

He picked up a long stick and took some soundings.

“Three or four feet close inshore and a muddy bottom.”

He straightened up and then for nearly half an hour he crept round on his hands and knees examining the ground at the bottom of the bushes. He went each way along the path, exploring it minutely, while Davidson watched him with curiosity tinged with slight impatience. At length he gave it up and rejoined us.

“I can find nothing,” he said. “But, of course, the ground is hard.”

“What did you expect to find?” asked Davidson.

“ ‘Expect’ is too strong a word,” answered Ronald. “All that can be said is that I thought it possible I might.”

He lit a cigarette, and we waited.

“Let us try and size up the situation,” he said. “To start with an obvious platitude, either young Stern did it or someone else did. If it was young Stern we are wasting our time, because frankly, Davidson, your suggestion of manslaughter won’t wash. A man who is stunned by a dunt on the head sufficient to break a bone lies where he falls. He doesn’t wriggle about afterwards. Therefore, whoever hit Yarrow saw him fall into the river.

“So we’ll consider the other alternative—that it was someone else who murdered him. Now, from what you have told us Yarrow was an unpopular man, so he probably had plenty of enemies. You further stated that fishing from this spot was his invariable hobby, a fact which other people must have been quite as well aware of as you were. Suppose, then, that this hypothetical someone else, desirous of seeing Yarrow, came here knowing that he'd find him. Suddenly he hears Yarrow approaching and quarrelling with Stern. He hides in the bushes, waits till Stern goes; then seizing his opportunity bashes Yarrow on the head and watches him drown."

I glanced at Davidson. His face expressed polite interest. And I must confess that I was a bit disappointed myself. Perhaps I had expected too much after such a prolonged examination, but the bald fact remained that an intelligent child of ten could have reached the same conclusion.

"And since," continued Ronald imperturbably, "the betting is four to one that that or something like it is what did take place, I thought I might find traces of his footprints."

And now we stared at him: this was a more positive assertion.

"How on earth can you have arrived at that?" demanded Davidson.

Ronald smiled.

"Let's go and see Sergeant Grayson," he said. "And there is only one thing more I've got to say at the moment. If my theory is correct we are dealing with a very clever man, but one who is not quite clever enough."

"You'll be telling us you know who it is next," said Davidson, with mild sarcasm.

"I haven't a notion," said Ronald frankly. "Not the ghost of an idea. But it will be something if we can prove it *wasn't* young Stern."

Sergeant Grayson was expecting us, and with a genial and tolerant smile he produced the watch.

"I hear you want to see it, sir," he said. "Though what you think you'll get from it bar the obvious fact that it stopped at half-past two is beyond me."

"We'll see, Sergeant," said Ronald cheerfully, as he examined it. "By the way, it was in his waistcoat pocket, I suppose?"

"That's right, sir: attached to a button-hole by this leather guard."

The watch was a thin gold one, and the back fitted so tightly that it was only with the help of a penknife that Ronald prised it open. And when he had done so he sat staring at the works with a puzzled frown.

"Have you had this open, Sergeant Grayson?" he said at length.

"Can't say I have, sir. Why?"

"What do you think made the watch stop?"

"Water getting in, sir, of course."

"Then why is the whole inside bone dry?"

The sergeant scratched his head.

“It’s two days ago, sir, you know.”

“Rot, man,” cried Ronald. “If enough water had got into that watch to stop it it would still be there after two weeks. It couldn’t evaporate.”

He was idly turning the swivel as he spoke, and suddenly a look of keen concentration came on his face.

“Great Scott!” he almost shouted, “the main spring is broken.”

“Must have happened as Mr. Yarrow fell in,” said the sergeant. “So that fixes the time exactly.”

“My dear sergeant,” remarked Ronald quietly, “I will, if you like, have a small bet with you. I will obtain for you a hundred different watches. You will go to the bank of the river or any similar spot and fall in a hundred times, with a different watch in your waistcoat pocket on each occasion. And if one mainspring breaks, I will present you with a bag of nuts.”

“Well, it did this time,” said the sergeant stubbornly.

“Look here, Grayson,” said Ronald, “what makes a mainspring snap? Over-winding—ninety-nine times out of a hundred. Are you going to tell me that Mr. Yarrow during a heated interview with young Stern pulled out his watch and started to wind it up? It’s ridiculous.”

“Not more ridiculous than that someone else did,” remarked Davidson.

“That’s just where you’re wrong,” cried Ronald. “Last night I carried out a small experiment. I got into a warm bath wearing a waistcoat—and deuced absurd I looked, too,” he added, with a grin. “In my waistcoat pocket was a watch. I stopped in the water for twenty minutes, and the watch was still going when I got out. It’s the point that struck me the instant I heard your story, Davidson. *This watch stopped too soon.* If young Stern had done it, a watch that fits as tight as this one would have been still going at three.”

No one said a word: we were all too keenly interested.

“When I opened the back,” he continued, “I expected to find it full of water. I was then going to suggest that we should have it thoroughly dried and carry out my experiment of last night with it. The murderer, however, was evidently unable to open it—you saw the difficulty I had—and he was in a hurry. So instead of filling it with water, he deliberately overwound it, thereby breaking the mainspring, and hoped it would not be noticed. Then he set the hands at half-past two, and replaced it in Yarrow’s pocket.”

“But why should he put them at that hour?” said Grayson.

“Expressly to incriminate Stern,” cried Ronald a little irritably. “That surely is obvious.”

But the sergeant had become mulish.

“Theory—all theory,” he snorted. “You go your way, Mr. Standish, and I’ll go mine. And when you lay your hands on the man who, having just committed a cold-blooded murder, had the nerve to do what you have suggested, Mr. Stern will be free within five minutes."

"It's your funeral, Sergeant," said Ronald quietly. "But I tell you in all seriousness that you are barking up the wrong tree. The bit of evidence that you think most damning is, in reality, what completely exonerates young Stern. Who did it, I don't know; but it wasn't him."

The trouble of it was that it remained at that. Exhaustive inquiries in the neighbourhood failed to reveal the presence of any stranger, and so far as the local residents were concerned, it was impossible to single out anyone in particular. Moreover, since public opinion was unanimous that Stern was the murderer, interest in the case had flagged with his arrest.

Ronald grew more and more irritable. He spent hours on the river bank searching for possible clues without the smallest result. And, at length, even he began to give up hope.

"There's absolutely nothing to give one a pointer, Bob," he cried to me in despair before lunch one day. "I am as convinced as ever that Stern didn't do it, but who the devil did? I feel it's leaving the youngster in the lurch, but there doesn't seem much use in our stopping on here. We're doing no good."

And Davidson agreed. Though he pressed us to stay as long as we liked, I think, at the bottom of his mind, he had come round to Grayson's opinion, that it was just theory. And so we took our departure, though it was like getting a dog away from a bone, so far as Ronald was concerned. He had told Stern's solicitor to subpœna him as an expert witness, but I knew he felt uneasy about the result.

"Even if he gets off, and I don't think they'll hang him, it's going to be a damnable thing for the youngster. If the trial was in Scotland, the utmost I should expect would be a verdict of Non Proven. They can't bring that in here, but it's what it will practically amount to. Not one person in a hundred will believe he is innocent, and he'll be under the stigma for the rest of his life."

It was the evening before the trial, and I was round with him in his rooms. Never have I known him so depressed, and it was not difficult to understand. He felt he had failed, and though it was through no fault of his, the result was the same. And then, quite suddenly, the most amazing change came over his expression.

"My sainted aunt!" he shouted. "Let me think a moment."

I glanced over his shoulder: he was studying the snapshot of Yarrow taken by Stapleton.

"What time was it when you and I and Davidson reached the river that first day we were down there?"

"We left the house at a quarter past three," I said. "So it must have been half-past, as near as makes no odds.”

“Get Vickers on the ’phone,” he cried. “Proof, Bob—proof under my nose all these weeks and I never saw it!”

Vickers was the K.C. defending Stern, and I got through at once.

“Tell him I’m coming round to see him immediately,” said Ronald, and before I had time to speak he had dashed out, and I heard him shouting for a taxi. And that night it was touch and go that I did not find myself arrested on a similar charge to young Stern. For the irritating devil would say nothing. He kept grinning all over his face and rubbing his hands together.

“Wait till to-morrow, Bob,” was all I could get out of him. “And then I can promise you the kick of your young life.”

The court was crowded, but through Ronald’s influence I got a good seat. And a glance at young Stern’s face showed that the news, whatever it was, had been passed on to him. The atmosphere was tense, as it always is during a murder trial, but the prisoner seemed the least concerned person in the place. I saw Davidson and Stapleton not far away in the body of the court, but Ronald had been given a seat just behind Vickers. And then the trial began. Counsel for the Crown outlined the case for the prosecution, and though he spoke with studied moderation it was a pretty damning indictment. He admitted freely that the case rested on circumstantial evidence, but pointed out that ninety per cent. of murder cases did. Then he called his first witness—John Stapleton—who went into the box and took the oath.

He looked, I thought, strained and pale, but that was not to be wondered at. Yarrow had been a friend of his, but apart from that, to be one of the principal witnesses when a man’s life is at stake is a nerve-racking ordeal. However, he gave his evidence in a calm and steady voice, and when Vickers rose to cross-examine him, Stapleton gave him a courteous bow.

“Now, Mr. Stapleton, we have heard that you lunched with Mr. Briggs on the day of the murder. What time did you arrive at the house?”

“Between ten and a quarter past one.”

“And it is about ten minutes’ walk, is it not, from where Mr. Yarrow was fishing?”

“That is so.”

“You therefore left Mr. Yarrow at about one o’clock?”

“Yes.”

“Before leaving him, did you take a photograph of him fishing?”

Stapleton looked surprised, as did everyone else, including the judge; so far the fact had not been mentioned.

“Now you speak of it, I did,” said Stapleton. “I’d really forgotten about it.”

“But you remember now?”

“Perfectly. I had one exposure to complete the roll and I took one of him fishing.”

“At about one o’clock?”

“Yes. It was just before I left him to go to lunch.”

“Is this the photograph you took?”

Vickers held up the snapshot and Stapleton studied it.

“Yes. That is it.”

“And is that tree that one sees half submerged in the water the one against which you found the body?”

“Yes. It is.”

Vickers passed the photograph up to the judge.

“I would ask you to examine it carefully, m’lud. Now, Mr. Stapleton, is that tree down-stream or up-stream from the place where Mr. Yarrow was fishing?”

“Down-stream.”

Vickers produced a book and opened it. And suddenly I glanced at Stapleton. Ceaselessly he was wetting his lips with his tongue.

“I have here,” continued counsel quietly, “a book which gives the times of high and low water for every day of the year in every part of the country. Would it surprise you to know, Mr. Stapleton, that on the day Mr. Yarrow was murdered, high tide in the River Ling was at one-fifty p.m.?”

“I will take your word for it,” said Stapleton in a low voice.

“Therefore, when you took this photograph at one o’clock it was not yet high water; the tide was still coming in?”

“If high water was at one-fifty it must have been.”

“Then why, John Stapleton,” cried Vickers in a terrible voice, “is it going out in that photograph? You can see the swirl of the water against the tree.”

For what seemed an eternity did the man in the box stand there mouthing, and one could have heard a pin drop in the court. Then came a sudden shout of “Stop him,” but it was too late. Stapleton had cheated the hangman. And maybe as a point in his favour he confessed before he died.

“The motive—who can tell?” said Ronald, as we waited for lunch at Davidson’s house. “But it was a devilish clever crime, though not quite clever enough. Somehow or other Stapleton must have known that Stern and Yarrow had had a row. Somehow or other he must have known that Stern left Yarrow a little before half-past two. The photograph which sealed his fate was probably taken to foster the idea that he and Yarrow were friends. And he forgot about high tide. If you remember, Davidson, it was just on the turn two days later at three-thirty. Now it gets about fifty minutes later every day, so that on the day of the murder high tide was an hour and forty minutes earlier—at one-fifty.

His one slip. But as to motive . . .”

He shrugged his shoulders, and at that moment the butler announced Mr. Briggs.

“Won’t keep you a moment, gentlemen,” he said, “but there’s just one point you might like to know. I thought no more about it till the trial to-day. At twenty-past two on the day Mr. Yarrow was murdered, someone rang Stapleton up at my house.”

“Who?” said Ronald.

“Mrs. Yarrow.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Ronald Standish* by H. C. (Sapper) McNeile]