
THE MURDER GERM
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Another Pollard "spine chiller" – this will keep you awake
by Captain A.O. POLLARD V.C.,M.C.,D.C.M.
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by

Captain A. O. POLLARD,
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The Murder Germ

CHAPTER ONE

A CONVICT ESCAPES

DOMINANT above all other sounds, the siren blared its warning over the countryside.

As the harsh note rose crescendo through the gathering mist, men ceased their labours to listen excitedly, women called their children indoors and shot the bolts.

No one who dwelt within range of that ominous blatant alarum had any doubt as to its meaning: a convict had escaped from Broadmoor criminal lunatic asylum.

But whilst the message was plain enough to those familiar with the neighbourhood, it conveyed little or nothing to Flight Lieutenant Francis Antony Grayling. Ignorant of the fact that he was anywhere near the prison boundary, the caution left him quite unmoved.

He was far more concerned with the thickening haze, which he cursed softly under his breath. It was the very devil. Unless he could get into the air again within the next few minutes, it looked as though he would be earth-bound for the night.

Not that it would matter very much, except for the inconvenience. Now that he had passed from the Active List into the Royal Air Force Reserve, he was his own master, his movements concerned no one but himself.

All the same, it would be a fag to be held up. He would have to find a guard for the machine, and an hotel in which to sleep. Since he could no longer call on Service organization to help him, it meant making all arrangements single-handed.

It jolly well served him right for shouldering other people's troubles. When Mortimer told him his engine was not running as smoothly as it should he ought to have left it to the mechanics to put right, instead of offering impulsively to trace the mysterious loss of power.

He had thoroughly enjoyed the flip at first. It was exhilarating to fly again after having been on the deck for a whole month. Nor did the engine he was supposed to be vetting exhibit the symptoms Mortimer had outlined.

Deceived by the absence of trouble, he had gone farther than he had originally intended, and was almost as far west as Basingstoke when the air-screw suddenly began to lose revolutions.

Tony at once swung round and headed for home, but the engine refused to pick up, and he quickly realized he was faced with a forced landing. Had he been still in the Service, or a veteran of longer standing, he would have endeavoured to make Farnborough aerodrome, but with the novelty of being a civilian fresh in his mind he decided to be independent.

The country beneath offered few difficulties to a pilot of his experience. There was a considerable amount of woodland, but there were also numerous open spaces, and, selecting one at random, he glided to leeward, landed, and switched off the engine.

He had already surmised the fault, and a brief examination confirmed the correctness of his diagnosis: the rocker arm of the magneto had become stiff with the heat of the engine, and was functioning only intermittently. It merely required to be cleaned and oiled, and the engine would be as right as rain.

Although invisible from the air, the mist had begun to form before he came down. Now, as he worked, he was conscious that it was steadily intensifying. Thin whorls curled upward from the grass and floated about the fuselage like thistledown. Harmless in themselves, as they joined together they wove a mighty bandage which would presently blindfold the earth and deprive those within its belt of their vision.

Tony would have completed his repair long before the fog threatened his take-off had he not dropped a tiny screw. A vital part of the mechanism, it was barely a quarter of an inch in length, and the field grass made his search a laborious business.

He groped on hands and knees for nearly half an hour before his perseverance was rewarded. But as he straightened his stiffened back, he realized how considerably visibility had lessened during his preoccupation.

It might still be possible to get away, he determined, and hurried with the reassembly of the contact-breaker. At last it was back in position, and, closing the cowling, he prepared to restart the engine.

He was in the act of taking hold of the propeller-blade when he heard footsteps running towards him. Glancing over his shoulder he saw a big man materialize out of the mist. He was bent with the crouching gait of a fugitive. Gripped in his right hand was an automatic pistol.

At sight of Tony standing by his aircraft, he halted abruptly, and the gun came forward in a menacing challenge.

"What do you want?" demanded Tony sharply, though even as he spoke he knew the question was redundant.

The letters B.C.L.A. on the white corduroys, the siren in the distance, informed his brain in a flash of the peril in which he stood. How the devil could he have forgotten that Broadmoor was in the vicinity?

For a moment or two the convict did not answer. Breathing heavily from his exertions, he fought to recover his voice.

"God, what luck!" he panted at last. "An aeroplane ready and waiting for me!"

To Tony's surprise his voice was soft and cultured.

"I'm afraid it won't help you," said Tony deliberately. "I've forced landed here with engine trouble."

The man leered cunningly and firmly shook his head.

"It won't do, laddie," he contradicted. "You were just going to start her up." He nodded towards the air-screw. "Go on, swing her round!"

Tony hesitated whilst his brain raced. What should he do? How could he outwit the fellow? He seemed sane enough, but he must have been off his rocker at some time, or he would not have been in Broadmoor.

The convict gave him no time to think of a plan. Tony's reluctance to obey inflamed him to fierce anger. With eyes blazing, he thrust the pistol against his victim's ribs.

"Swing her, you swine," he ordered between set teeth, "or I'll blow you to hell!"

In face of that flash of madness in his gaze, Tony seized the propeller-blade with alacrity. It would be suicidal to resist. Perhaps the engine would jib, perhaps a warder would show up in pursuit, perhaps . . .

It was no good. The engine was still warm, and went off at the first tug.

Tony stepped back and forced a smile.

"There you are," he said brightly. "Shall I hold the gun whilst you climb into the cabin?"

The convict ignored the suggestion.

“Get in!” he snapped. “I know what you’re thinking, but it’s no use. I’m just as sane as you or any other man. They’ve had me shut up there quite long enough. Now my chance has come, and no one’s going to stop me. Get in!” he yelled viciously.

A loaded pistol in the hands of a madman is a powerful persuader. Convinced of the futility of resistance, Tony preceded his captor round the wing and climbed into the cabin. The convict followed and slammed the door.

“Now take off!” he ordered curtly.

“All right, but I’ll have to taxi back to the hedge. With this mist, I’m not sure what lies in front of us.”

His passenger eyed him craftily.

“Oh no, you don’t; you’re not going to fool me like that. This field is big enough and to spare. You go right ahead.”

Tony shrugged his shoulders and opened the throttle. Further argument would obviously be a waste of time, especially as there was something in what the fellow said.

The field was quite large enough for a safe take-off in normal conditions. But there were three or four trees at the far end which, whilst they could have been easily avoided in clear visibility, were a potential source of danger now they were blanketed from view.

As the monoplane gathered speed across the turf, Tony peered forward through the windscreen. Every nerve and muscle in his body was tensed for instant action. In the ordinary way he would take a risk with the next man, but he did not fancy a crack-up because of the whim of a crazy runaway.

He was annoyed with himself for being caught off his guard, humiliated that he had been forced to do the other’s will, worried as to the outcome of the affair.

Would anyone believe him when he announced that he had been overpowered, or would the police regard him as an accessary in the convict’s escape. Whatever happened meant a loss of self-esteem. Those who had never been in a similar position would condemn him for not being quick-witted enough to out-general his assailant or would laugh at his helplessness.

The bumping of the undercarriage wheels on the uneven ground ceased as the machine became air-borne, and Tony eased back his stick to make her climb. Almost at once they were clear of the mist and into the brightness of the setting sun. Dead ahead, less than a hundred feet distant, spread the branches of a mighty oak.

Instantaneously, Tony moved rudder and control column, and the

monoplane banked in a steep turn, the lower wing almost touching the grass. Had his reactions been less acute, they must have crashed. As it was, there was a harsh jar as the port wheel struck a branch. The next instant the danger was passed, and Tony came back on an even keel.

"Where am I to take you?" he asked quietly, wondering how much damage the bump had occasioned.

The convict looked down through the window at his side. The fog was not yet thick enough entirely to shut out the landscape, and the buildings of his recent prison were clearly visible.

He shook his fist in their direction and laughed insanely.

"They thought they could hold me there, but they couldn't. Do you know who I am?" he asked Tony, proudly. "You won't let it out if I tell you, will you?" he went on confidentially. "No, perhaps it isn't safe; one can't trust a living soul these days."

Too unhappy to humour him, Tony made no reply. The mist did not extend very far to the south; perhaps if he edged down towards Farnborough he could land on the aerodrome and get some help in securing this maniac.

His passenger seized his arm and shook him roughly.

"Don't you know you must reply when a senior officer addresses you?" he demanded. "I shall have you court-martialled if you're insubordinate. I'm the head of the Secret Service, I'd have you know," he declared arrogantly.

Apparently the poor brain realized it had given away its secret, for he lowered his voice.

"Take me to France," he requested. "No, Belgium, to Ypres. There are some spies in the cellars under the ramparts. I have to interrogate them."

With Farnborough in mind, Tony decided to indulge his fancy.

"Very well, sir, as you wish. The course will be due south. Round we go."

He banked and turned in the desired direction. The machine was up to one thousand feet now and he could see the old airship hangar at Farnborough station dead ahead. Somehow he must think of a plausible excuse for landing there. Hell's bells, what should he say?

"We'll have to fill up with petrol somewhere," he remarked off-handedly. "Ypres means a long flight."

As he spoke he kept his gaze on the horizon, but he was conscious that his expression was being studied suspiciously.

"That means landing, doesn't it?"

"I'm afraid it does. It's a nuisance, but it can't be helped."

“Yes, it can, yes, it can. We’ll go somewhere else—Rouen, Paris, Calais, anywhere, but we’re not going down again in England. Don’t you understand? The enemy are watching for me. They’re everywhere, with guns too. I should be shot like a dog. No, no, I’ll not go back! I’ll not, I’ll not!”

His breath came rapidly with excitement as he worked himself into a frenzy.

“But we must land sooner or later,” Tony pointed out firmly. “The bus won’t fly without fuel.”

He hoped that by speaking with decision he would coerce his passenger into agreement, but his attitude had the opposite effect.

“You’re trying to trick me,” the madman guessed uncannily. “That’s what it is; I see it now. You’re one of them—an enemy trying to destroy me.”

He raised the automatic and endeavoured in the confines of the cabin to point it at Tony’s head. Tony held off the barrel with his free hand and in a moment the incident had developed into a struggle for the possession of the gun.

“Sit still!” ordered Tony curtly as his big assailant rose to his feet. “You’ll have the machine out of control in a minute.”

The warning was ignored and in the next instant Tony was obliged to relinquish his hold on the control column to defend himself.

As the madman tried to twist the gun towards him he endeavoured to prevent him. Backwards and forwards it moved as each put forth a fresh effort, but, hampered by the confined space, neither was able to manœuvre with advantage.

Crack! A deafening explosion as the maniac pressed the trigger. The bullet struck some vital part of the engine, which ceased to function, and the struggle continued in silence.

As long as the air-screw was revolving normally the machine, being inherently stable, had continued on a fairly even keel, yawing and pitching with the vagaries of the wind. Now, without the necessary forward thrust to hold it up, the nose of the machine dropped and the monoplane dived steeply earthwards.

Indifferent to the danger of crashing out of control, and furious at being thwarted, the maniac hurled his full weight against his adversary, pinning Tony against the cabin door. It was impossible for him to aim the gun in this position, however, and, releasing his grip on the barrel, Tony administered a short-arm jab.

His opponent grunted with pain and, abandoning the gun in his turn, took

Tony by the throat with both hands. His strength was colossal, and almost at once Tony felt strangled.

There was only one thing to do before he lost his senses. Raising his knee he butted his adversary in the pit of the stomach.

The ruse had the desired effect. Releasing his grip the madman sank back into his seat. He was doubled up with pain and for the time being the fight was over.

Delighted with his victory, Tony turned his attention to regaining control of the monoplane, but a glance through the window cut his satisfaction like a knife.

They were at an altitude of less than three hundred feet almost directly over a wood. Deprived of the engine, a forced landing was inevitable, but would he be able to clear the trees and reach the clearer space beyond?

Pulling up the nose of the machine out of its dive, Tony nursed it at the flattest gliding angle he could attain. Slowly it edged forward towards safety whilst each instant the trees seemed to grow taller and more menacing.

They were almost at the fringe and Tony's hopes were rising when an unexpected down-draught caused the monoplane to drop ten or fifteen feet. Desperately Tony pulled back the control column to compensate for the loss of height.

The machine responded partially, the last tree brushed the under-side of the fuselage, and they were over.

No, by heaven! An outflung branch fouled the tail-plane unit, caught in the elevator. A moment later, equilibrium upset, the monoplane plunged headlong towards the ground.

Still Tony was not done. Kicking over the rudder he endeavoured to turn his doomed machine so that the port wing would strike first and lessen the shock of the crash.

He partly succeeded, but there was insufficient space for the manœuvre.

Zunk! The monoplane hit the earth, bounced springlessly, and flattened out like a stricken moth.

CHAPTER TWO

TONY OVERHEARS A QUARREL

THE force of the impact jerked Tony from his seat, bringing his head into sharp contact with the instrument-board. For a few moments stars danced before his eyes; then, as his mind cleared from the shock of the crash, he struggled into an upright position and looked about him.

One of the wings of the monoplane was crumpled in a shapeless tangle, the engine had been torn from its bearers, but the cabin and most of the fuselage, being steel-framed, were more or less intact.

His once-violent passenger lay like a log. There was a nasty-looking gash from his forehead to his scalp and, from the angle at which it stuck out, his right arm appeared to be broken.

Tony forced open the cabin door and dragged the unfortunate wretch into the open. He was quite unconscious and looked as though he would remain so for some time. It was quite evident that his injuries needed skilled attention. Rather than waste time fixing temporary bandages, it would be more sensible to summon a doctor right away.

Which direction would be the best to take to obtain help? wondered Tony, as he surveyed the neighbourhood. The field into which the monoplane had fallen was entirely surrounded by trees. Although there must be a house of some sort within a radius of a few hundred yards there was nothing to indicate its whereabouts.

Fixing the cardinal points by the position of the sun he endeavoured to estimate his approximate position. The machine had been flying south towards Farnborough when the struggle began. Since the wind was from the west they would probably have drifted slightly to the east of the main Southampton road. Unless he had unconsciously shifted the rudder-bar, in which case they might have headed anywhere.

Still, it was a good bet to place Aldershot to the west, and, anyway, it was not possible to go very far on any course in this neighbourhood without reaching houses and people. With this comforting thought in mind Tony collected his wits, which were still rather scattered from the knock he had received on the head, and set out towards where the sunset showed crimson through the wood.

The trees on this side of the field proved to be a belt about fifty yards in width. As he emerged from their shelter Tony found himself at the back of a small estate of some four acres in extent. The gardens and lawns showed every sign of being well tended and it was obvious that the owner was someone of substance.

Climbing a gate in the boundary hedge Tony threaded his way towards the house, which faced an unseen road on the far side of the grounds. He was lucky to find such a big place so handy. There would probably be a telephone but, even if not, there would undoubtedly be servants who could be dispatched in search of assistance.

He had nearly reached the building when a retriever dog came galloping towards him. Its tail was wagging in friendly salute and it exhibited every sign of pleasure at his arrival.

Heartened by this display of hospitality Tony approached a door at one end of the house and knocked boldly. Nothing happened. He knocked again, but still there was no answer. When a third attempt proved fruitless he tried the handle. The door was locked.

“Damn it all; isn’t anyone at home?” he asked the dog, which stood watching him interestedly.

With the hopes he had entertained rapidly dwindling he walked round the building in search of another entrance. At the front he came to a built-out porch, and with the urgency of his mission to goad him he banged heavily on the brass knocker.

Again no one came to receive him, but whilst he was debating the advisability of going in search of another house he suddenly heard voices in a room adjacent to where he was standing.

There was someone in the house, then. But why the devil didn’t they answer?

Annoyed at the inmates’ indifference Tony left the porch with the intention of tapping on the window of the room where the conversation was proceeding. But he had not taken more than a few steps when he realized he would be disturbing a first-class row.

“It’s not a bit of use your protesting,” said someone angrily. “My daughter is entirely outside our bargain. Sooner than see her married to you I would kill you with my bare hands.”

That’s a pleasant idea, thought Tony, and halted to hear the reply.

It came soft as the answer that turneth away wrath.

“You are quite mistaken, my dear Dr. Manners.” The accents were clipped

and precise. “Quite mistaken. I regard Hilary as a dear friend, yes, but marriage has never entered my mind. If she should fall in love with me, it would be a different matter——”

“She’ll never fall in love with you, Beney,” interrupted the other contemptuously. “You—a blasted Chi-chi; not if I know her. She’s only polite to you because you’re my partner.”

There was a moment of silence, fraught with tension. Although he could not see the two participants in the argument Tony could imagine that they were staring at each other hatefully. That reference to a Chi-chi would get under any Anglo-Indian’s skin.

The next words showed that he was not mistaken.

“You go too far, Manners.” The suave tones had risen to a high pitch of scarcely restrained fury. “Don’t forget that a word from me will send you to ——”

“Can I be of any assistance?”

Startled by the unexpected question Tony spun round to face the speaker. She was a girl in the early twenties, with golden hair and bright blue eyes. Hilary, thought Tony at once, and looked at her more closely. Was she the sort who would tolerate a Eurasian?

Of medium height, she carried herself with a natural grace that hinted at dancing, fencing, riding, and many other active pastimes. But in addition to a healthy figure he judged her to have an equally healthy mind. There was something in the directness of her gaze and the serene tranquillity of her expression that proclaimed the wholesomeness of her character.

Father need have no fears, reflected Tony, and was surprised at the satisfaction the deduction gave him. He had instinctively formed an antipathy towards the unseen half-caste.

Hilary flushed slightly under his prolonged scrutiny.

“Were you looking for someone?” she inquired.

A slight sharpness in her tone betrayed that she had doubts of his *bona fides*.

“Er—I beg your pardon, Miss—er——” He was on the point of saying Miss Manners, but checked himself in time. To mention her name would imply that he had been eavesdropping and, however justifiable the circumstances, it would be difficult to explain that it was accidental. It might cause her to form a bad opinion of him, and for some reason which was purely instinctive he wanted her to like him.

“There’s been a crash in the field back yonder and I’m seeking assistance.

Not being able to make myself heard at the back of the house I came round here."

Hilary's eyes travelled searchingly over his clothes. Evidently she was not quite sure whether to believe him. Signs of dishevelment patent to the feminine judgment decided her.

"I'm so sorry," she said penitently. "I thought——"

She did not disclose what she thought, but hurried to the house door with an air of decision. Opening it with a key from her bag, she disappeared inside.

She re-emerged almost immediately followed by two men.

One was tall and distinguished-looking, with white hair, whom, from his facial resemblance to Hilary, Tony had no difficulty in identifying as the Dr. Manners of the conversation he had overheard.

The other was short and sleek and fat. Except that he had black hair and brown eyes there was nothing about him to indicate his mixed origin. He might have been of any nationality, whilst a general air of benevolence which enveloped him like a cloak belied the threat which Hilary's arrival had prevented Tony from fully hearing.

To judge from their present demeanour the two men might never have had a cross word in their lives.

"My daughter tells me there's been an aeroplane accident," said Dr. Manners briskly. "Where is it? Of course we'll do everything we can."

"Is there anyone besides yourself?" inquired the Eurasian blandly.

"Yes, another man."

Tony suddenly remembered that he had not removed the gun; if the madman had recovered consciousness there might be trouble.

"Er—I think I ought to warn you that he's an escaped convict."

He went on to give a brief résumé of the incidents leading up to the crash.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Manners. "You had a lucky escape, my friend. Hilary, ring up the police-station and have them send some men up here.

"No, not yet," contradicted Beney. "Let's have a look at him first. He's not likely to give us much trouble with a broken arm."

"But we shall have to call the police sooner or later, Mr. Beney," protested Hilary.

"Quite true. Very well, then, you make the call whilst we discover the extent of his injuries."

Under Tony's direction, the three men hurried across the garden and through the belt of trees. The convict was lying exactly as Tony had left him

and was still quite insensible.

"Compound fracture of the right humerus," pronounced Dr. Manners after a brief examination. "This wound in the skull is even more serious, though; I don't like the look of it at all."

"Nor I," agreed Beney. "We must get him to the house at once."

He looked round for material from which to improvise a stretcher and caught sight of another man emerging from the trees.

"Ah, here comes Westacott. Good man, Westacott," he called. "You've shown more presence of mind than we did."

He referred to the stretcher which the newcomer carried over his shoulder.

"The credit belongs to Miss Manners," declared Westacott dryly. "She unearthed it from the old surgery, I believe. Ah, that looks like a bad depressed fracture of the skull."

He was a tall spare man with a lantern jaw, who might have been anything from forty to sixty.

Without reference to either of his associates he picked up a fragment of wreckage and bound the injured man's arm to it as a rough splint. The speed and dexterity of his work decided Tony that he was a surgeon.

"That'll save unnecessary complications from the journey," he declared. "Though from the look of his scalp I'm thinking I'm wasting my time. He's from the B.C.L.A., you say? Poor laddie, it'll be a happy release for him."

"Then you don't think he'll survive?" queried Tony.

Westacott shook his head.

"That's beyond my powers of prophecy, young man. We'll do all we can for him, of course, even though we're well aware that it'll only mean sending him back to a living death. It's the contrariness of the situation that prompted my remark."

Between them they lifted the patient on to the stretcher and bore him to the house, where they found that Hilary had prepared a bed in readiness to receive him. With at least two doctors in attendance Tony felt he was no longer required, and went downstairs to tell his story to the inspector of police and two constables who had arrived in response to Hilary's summons.

In exchange for his account of the commandeering of his monoplane the inspector told him something of the convict's escape. He was a man named Sidney le Maitre, who had been committed to be detained in Broadmoor during His Majesty's pleasure following a particularly brutal murder.

Ordinarily le Maitre was perfectly harmless and well-behaved and gave the

warders a comparatively small amount of trouble. But from time to time at varying intervals he was subject to a neurasthenic brainstorm, when he became exceedingly violent and unmanageable.

One of these attacks had come upon him whilst he was working in the fields with a gang of seven or eight other inmates. The single warder in charge who had tried to restrain him was struck down with a spade. Le Maitre then took the pistol which was in the warder's pocket and disappeared into the fog.

"Where he found me waiting for him," concluded Tony ruefully.

He was wondering what Mortimer would have to say about the wreck of his machine.

"Well, all's well that ends well, sir," remarked the inspector cheerfully. "He might easily have done you in instead of himself."

Hilary arrived with a message that the doctors would like to see him upstairs, and the inspector departed. The girl was about to follow, but Tony detained her.

"I'm terribly sorry to be the cause of such an upset in your house," he apologized.

"It's perfectly all right—really," she declared brightly. "No one could possibly mind in the circumstances. It's unfortunate that we haven't any servants here, but we shall manage."

The house, she explained, had only recently come into her father's possession. A relation who was in practice there had recently died and willed it to him, and she and her father had come down that day for the first time to view it.

"Dr. Westacott is another local practitioner, I suppose?" queried Tony diffidently.

With the conversation he had overheard between Manners and Beney fresh in his mind he was full of curiosity concerning the triumvirate.

"Oh no, he's not; he and Mr. Beney followed us to spring a surprise party. We all hail from London. Mr. Beney, who is a scientist, is associated with Father in bacteriological research, and Dr. Westacott is in private practice in Paddington."

Tony smiled.

"The surprise turned out more than they bargained for."

He was referring to his own intrusion, but she mistook his meaning. Her pretty face clouded.

"Yes, it was. Father was ridiculously annoyed about it. He's been

overworking lately and his nerves are a bit on edge. When you arrived Dr. Westacott and I had gone down to the village to get some food to relieve the situation, but I can't think why the others didn't hear you."

Tony did not enlighten her. But later, as he sat in the train which took him back to London, he could not help wondering whether the threats he had heard uttered with so much venom were really serious.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TONGUE MURDER CASE

DESPITE the severe handicap of having been christened Algernon Kitchener, Chief Inspector Dunthorne was considered one of the smartest members of the Criminal Investigation Department. In a service where promotion is by merit only his rise to his present position from the uniformed ranks was a record. Already it was whispered that if his luck held he would eventually become one of the few Deputy Commissioners to be appointed from the "inside".

In appearance he was a typical policeman, tall and broad-shouldered. His bulk and gait, which marked him for what he was, had not proved in any sense a drawback, however. On the contrary, he had found them on many occasions to be an effective disguise.

The criminal mind against which he fought, naturally warped in its outlook, looked beyond him for something more subtle. Either, it argued, he was too obvious to be a detective or, if he were one, his ponderous tread and slow, unhurried manner suggested a sluggish brain.

That was where his victims made their mistake. His intelligence and acumen were well above the average, whilst training and practice had developed powers of clear thinking which enabled him to view each case he handled in its proper perspective. His deliberate deportment was but the outward and visible sign of a methodical tidiness of mind which pigeon-holed impressions so that they were immediately available when needed.

The news of le Maitre's attempted break from Broadmoor interested him intensely, for it was his handling of the case which led to le Maitre's arrest and conviction, that gained him his step to chief inspector.

Sidney le Maitre was by no means a member of the criminal classes. The son of a parson related to a noble house, he had graduated by way of Harrow and Sandhurst to a crack infantry regiment of the line. During the war he distinguished himself on more than one occasion and had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross when a shell during the battle of Passchendaele Ridge abruptly terminated his military career.

For months he had lain between life and death in a base hospital, and when, towards the end of the campaign, he was discharged, with his body physically healed, he was only a wreck of his former self.

Prior to being wounded he had never exhibited the slightest sign of insanity, but now, little by little, he began to indulge in queer inexplicable actions which, after a few years of anxious observation, caused his wife secretly to consult a famous brain specialist.

The symptoms were harmless enough in themselves, she explained, and his childishness, as she called it, was only apparent at irregular intervals. Normally he loved her very dearly and treated her with every courtesy, but when the bad mood was on him he used to fly into an ungovernable rage for no apparent reason. On two occasions he struck her with his fist.

Afterwards he was so terribly apologetic and so abject in his remorse that she felt constrained to forgive him, whereupon their relationship became agreeably pleasant once more.

Nor was his temper directed solely against her. He used to declare that he was a member of the British Secret Service employed on counter-espionage against foreign spies in England. She was never quite able to determine whether he was officially appointed to this work or whether it existed solely in his imagination, since, whenever she referred to it, either he swore at her or pleaded secrecy.

What caused her to doubt the genuineness of his appointment was the way he went about his task. He would pick upon a perfect stranger in a restaurant, a railway train, or in the street and stalk him for hours. Sometimes—when the subject realized he was being followed—there would be an unpleasant scene, when le Maitre would blandly apologize and withdraw, only to suffer agonies of self-reproach at what he termed his failure to carry out his duties.

The specialist shrewdly inquired whether there had ever been any previous “mental” cases in the family, and on receiving a negative reply had assured Mrs. le Maitre that as long as her husband had no worse delusions she had nothing much to worry about. He had experienced thousands of neurasthenic cases brought on by the shock of war, and his belief was that time and sympathetic treatment would eventually cure a large proportion of them.

His advice was perfectly sound as far as it went, but, as he afterwards declared, it would have been very different had he been in possession of the full history of the family. Mrs. le Maitre did not tell him, because she did not know, that three generations back the titled head of the family had been a homicidal lunatic who had committed two murders before an attack of typhoid fever had sent him to an early grave.

Pride of name and the exaggerated importance of his position in the country had caused the dreadful secret to be hushed up so that no one outside his immediate relatives and the family solicitor had the slightest inkling of his

crimes. Had he lived he must have gone to trial and the scandal would have been out, but his timely decease provided an opportunity for drawing a veil over the family skeleton.

That misconceived duty of a century earlier to an aristocratic lineage was to cost Mrs. le Maitre her life. She was found one morning lying at the foot of her bed with her head terribly mutilated by a blunt instrument. The weapon, a German mace used in trench-bombing raids which le Maitre had brought home as a war souvenir, was near her on the floor. Its handle was devoid of finger-prints.

It might have been taken for an ordinary murder but for one horrible fact. What convinced Detective Inspector Dunthorne, as he was then, that the crime was the work of a lunatic was the discovery that the victim's tongue had been cut out at the roots.

At first the whole affair was a baffling mystery. Although le Maitre's idiosyncrasies, revealed by the servants and the brain specialist, focused suspicion on him, he appeared to have a perfect alibi. On the night the crime was committed he was away from home at a small hotel in Hampshire, where he was spending a fishing-holiday.

His attitude towards his wife's death was irreproachable. Though stricken with grief he gave the police every possible assistance, answering all their questions without hesitation and offering a large reward for the apprehension of the criminal.

It was the zest with which he threw himself into the hunt that eventually gave him away. He was constantly suggesting to Inspector Dunthorne that in his opinion the crime was the work of spies. The theory was so palpably ridiculous—doubly so in view of the mutilation of the victim—that at first Dunthorne dismissed it with scorn as having no bearing on his investigation; later he changed his mind.

Careful investigation of all the evidence obtainable gradually eliminated every possible suspect until Dunthorne was faced with the astounding fact that as long as le Maitre's alibi held good he had not a single clue which led to anybody. Yet try as he would to upset it, the alibi remained unshakable.

The distance from the hotel to the le Maitre residence was approximately fifty miles—an easy two hours' journey in a car. Four hours counting both ways; allowing half an hour to enter the house and perpetrate the murder and another half an hour for eventualities made a total of five hours.

Le Maitre was known to have retired to bed shortly after ten-thirty at night. There was an outhouse immediately below his window, which was at the rear of the hotel, and it was quite practicable for him to have climbed out and later

returned without being seen.

His car was kept in some stabling adjacent to the main building. As the entire premises were on the slope of a hill it would have been possible for le Maitre to have pushed it out of the garage and allowed it to coast down out of hearing before starting the engine. By returning along a route which brought him to the top of the hill above the hotel he could have replaced the car in its garage equally soundlessly.

Once he had established the feasibility of le Maitre being the criminal, Dunthorne instigated searching inquiries to find some evidence to support his theory, but he came up against a blank wall. No one could be found who had seen le Maitre outside his bedroom during the night, and although numerous people asserted that they had noticed a car of a similar make at various points along the route between the two places their testimony when examined closely was too vague and contradictory to be of value.

Six weeks passed without the inquiry making any progress—weeks in which Dunthorne explored every possible avenue, likely and unlikely, with painstaking thoroughness, only to return inevitably to the conviction that le Maitre was his man if only he could pin the crime on him.

One day le Maitre repeated his suggestion that the murder was the work of a foreign spy. In a sudden fit of pique—the Press had expressed some scathing opinions regarding police failure to track down a homicidal lunatic—Dunthorne answered him harshly:

"To the devil with your spies; you'll be mistaking me for one next!"

He noticed that le Maitre looked at him strangely and for the rest of the day followed him like a shadow.

That night after he had gone to bed Dunthorne was awakened by a telephone call. The man who spoke was one of a police picket which had been keeping le Maitre under observation ever since the detective's suspicions were first aroused.

The purport of his message was dramatic. Le Maitre had climbed out of a side window of his home, had pushed his car silently from the garage to a point about a hundred yards from the building, had then started the engine and driven off. A mobile police patrol car was following him at a discreet distance.

"Where the deuce can he be going at this time of night?" queried Dunthorne. It was past one o'clock in the morning.

He was soon to discover. Three-quarters of an hour later he was waiting in his sitting-room for further news when he heard a pane of glass break in the kitchen. Hurrying to the spot, he was in time to see le Maitre climbing in through the open window. He was carrying a heavy spanner and his eyes were

blazing with maniacal fury.

Before he could fully enter the room he was seized from behind by the mobile police; but he fought desperately until he was finally overpowered.

His venom was clearly directed against Detective Inspector Dunthorne, and he made it quite clear that he had intended to kill him.

“Blasted spy!” he kept calling out. “Let me get at him! I’ll silence him! He won’t give away any information when I’ve done with him!”

But even such strong circumstantial evidence as his attack on the detective would not have been sufficient by itself to prove that he had murdered his wife. Fortunately for their case the police found on him, when he was searched, the large jack-knife with which he had cut out his victim’s tongue. Clots of blood round the hinge were compared with the blood of the dead woman and found to be in the same type, and it was this apparently minor item that decided the jury in their verdict.

Although nearly ten years had passed since le Maitre had received his sentence, the incidents which led up to it were still quite fresh in Dunthorne’s mind. He was particularly interested in reading in the report of the escape that the madman still regarded himself as being attached to the Secret Service.

“That delusion of his was an object lesson which I’ve never forgotten,” he confided to the Deputy Commissioner when they were discussing the affair. “It taught me that every remark of a possible suspect in a case, however trivial or irrelevant, is worth weighing carefully. Had I paid more attention to le Maitre’s original suggestion that his wife was killed by spies I should have nabbed him in half the time and saved myself a deal of worry and anxiety.”

The Deputy Commissioner flicked over the pages of the report.

“I suppose we can accept the story told by this fellow Francis Antony Grayling?” he inquired “He was in the Air Force, I see.”

Dunthorne shook his head.

“If you are wondering whether the break was prearranged with an aircraft conveniently handy to whisk the prisoner out of reach of pursuit, you can set your mind at rest. I’ve checked up on every detail, and there isn’t the slightest doubt that le Maitre did a bunk on the spur of the moment.”

“Well, that’s that, then,” said the Deputy Commissioner, and tossed the file into a basket. “I suppose the Broadmoor people have arranged to take him back as soon as he can be moved?”

“He’ll never be moved. The doctor tells me that the crack he got on the head has settled his hash. It can only be a question of time.”

“Hum! Well, he’s better off dead than a prisoner for life, in my opinion.

Let me know——Yes, what is it?" he asked as a messenger entered the room.

"It's a message for Chief Inspector Dunthorne, sir."

Dunthorne glanced at the flimsy and tossed it across the desk.

Le Maitre died this afternoon, it read.

"That's the end of the tongue murder case," commented Dunthorne shortly.

But before many months had passed he was constrained to wonder whether it was only the beginning.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE UNACCOUNTABLE BEHAVIOUR OF A DOG

IT was not Tony Grayling's fault that four months elapsed after his encounter with le Maitre before he saw Hilary Manners again. Twice he called at her Kensington address, which he unearthed from the telephone directory, and he telephoned on several occasions, but each time he was politely informed by a suave-voiced butler that she was away from home.

Even the most ardent infatuation is apt to fade in such circumstances, and he had almost relegated her to a might-have-been when they met unexpectedly in Oxford Street.

She was staring at some hats in a shop window when he caught sight of her and, halting abruptly, waited for her to turn towards him. As he gazed at the nape of her neck just below where her hair curled upwards in a rippling wave he thought what a stunning creature she was. He would be an ass indeed if he did not get to know her better.

Presently she resumed her walk. Tony at once planted himself in front of her and removed his hat, but she showed not the slightest sign of recognition, and passed him by with an easy self-possessed disdain.

Discomfited by the rebuff, Tony hesitated. He had no wish to force himself on her if she did not wish to know him; and yet—hang it all, it could only be that she had forgotten him.

An inspiration flashed into his brain, and he hurried after her.

"How's Rags getting on, Miss Manners?" he inquired pleasantly.

She stopped at once and looked at him with an expression which he did not understand.

"I remember you now, of course," she admitted, though without very much enthusiasm. "You're Flight Lieutenant Grayling, aren't you—the man who crashed near our house at Rainhurst. Forgive me for not recognizing you just now, but I—well—er——"

"I quite understand," Tony relieved her embarrassment. "You thought I was being fresh."

He laughed contentedly; it was a topping bit of luck meeting her again.

She made no reply, and he racked his brains for something to say next;

somehow his usual verbosity seemed to have deserted him. He was so terribly anxious to make a good impression so that she would want to see him again that the sentences would not form properly.

"How is Rags?" he repeated at last. "I thought him such a jolly little fellow."

Surely an interest in her dog would warm her heart.

To his amazement and distress she went very pale and tears glistened in her eyes.

"Rags is dead," she revealed in a half-strangled sob.

"Oh, I say! That's too bad. I'm most dreadfully sorry. I wouldn't have asked if I had had the least idea."

He could have kicked himself for distressing her when he only wanted to please her.

His sincerity was so evident that she was touched by it.

"I'm quite sure you wouldn't," she declared. "But you couldn't possibly know about him, could you?"

Someone bumped heavily into Tony's back and reminded him that they were taking up a large portion of a crowded pavement.

"Look here," he proposed earnestly, "what about having a cup of coffee somewhere and telling me all about it? Unless, of course, you don't care to talk about it," he amended quickly.

Hilary hesitated. She really had intended to buy some things before lunch, and she would only just have time. But he seemed so interested in her dog and her loss was so very recent that she felt she must unburden herself of the whole story. Both her father and Erasmus Beney merely regarded the defunct animal as a medical specimen; it was rather nice to find someone who promised sympathy.

"Very well, but I mustn't be too long."

Tony gave her no time to change her mind. There was a tea-shop within a few yards which would do as well as any other, and he led her towards it. A corner table provided the right atmosphere for the exchange of confidences.

When the coffee had been placed on the table Hilary began her story. Rags, who was four years old, had always been of a quiet and affectionate disposition. He barked at dustmen and postmen, of course, in a perfectly normal doggy way, but he had never bitten anyone in his life up to the time of Tony's aeroplane crash; with most people he had, in fact, been rather too friendly, with the result that he was totally useless as a watch-dog.

“I never could stand animals that bark the place down as soon as anyone looks at them,” put in Tony tactfully.

He well remembered the joyous welcome Rags gave him in the garden at Rainhurst; at the time he thought what a jolly nice pal such a good-tempered creature must be.

“He remained like that until about a fortnight ago,” Hilary went on with her story. “Then he suddenly had a fit of madness.”

“Madness? Good lord!”

“You may well say ‘Good lord!’; that’s what I said. It only lasted a couple of hours, and then he was absolutely normal again. I swear he was; I knew him better than anyone in the world. I was prepared to guarantee that it would never happen again, but they wouldn’t believe me, and he—he had to be put to sleep.”

“My word, I am sorry. Poor little chap.”

“Yes, and that horrid, cruel, loathsome Erasmus Beney wanted to conduct a post mortem on him. On Rags. Can you imagine anything so utterly—beastly?”

“I certainly can’t; he must have the soul of a vandal. What did your father say?”

“Dad? Oh, he didn’t say much; he never does. He’s so completely absorbed in his search for an influenza filter—if you know what that is—that he scarcely knows what’s going on around him.”

There was a short pause whilst Tony lit a fresh cigarette.

“I know a bit about dogs,” he declared. “Tell me about this madness. What were the symptoms? Did he foam at the mouth or anything like that?”

“Oh no, it wasn’t rabies; at least, Dr. Westacott said it couldn’t have been, otherwise the postmen would have got it.”

“The postmen?”

“Yes, he bit two of them. Didn’t I tell you?”

“Well, no. You haven’t really told me very much about it at all yet. Where did all this happen?”

“At Rainhurst; we were there for the week-end. I had only just returned from Scotland, where I had been staying with an aunt. Rags was with me. The whole time we were there he never once showed the slightest sign of temper over anything.”

“When did you get back?” asked Tony, thinking of his telephone calls.

“Last Tuesday week; we flew from Perth. You’re used to the air, Flight

Lieutenant Grayling; do you think it could possibly have been flying that upset poor Rags?"

"Upset him? How do you mean? Was he air-sick?"

"No, no, I don't mean in that way. Do you think the height and the strangeness of being off the ground could have unbalanced his brain."

Tony grunted.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I've never heard of an animal being affected in that way, and thousands of them travel by air nowadays. Why, did he seem at all funny when you landed?"

"Oh no, he was absolutely O.K.—as far as I could see. It was on the Saturday—we drove down to Rainhurst on the Friday evening. I had arranged to play golf with some people I know. When I left home he was quite all right—at least, as right as he ever was when I went out without him. He used to clap his tail between his legs and creep into his basket with an expression on his face as if he had been whipped for something he hadn't done."

She smiled at the recollection; then remembered that he would never do it again and bit her lip.

"It's funny how they like to go everywhere with you, whether it's possible or not, isn't it?" said Tony.

"We're the fools not to take them," declared Hilary fiercely. "If ever I have another dog I'll never let him out of my sight for a single instant; then things won't happen like that which happened to Rags."

"Do you think the postman kicked him?"

"The man never had a chance to kick him, from what they told me. He was delivering a registered package at the door when Rags simply hurled himself out of the morning-room and buried his teeth in the man's calf. There was a second man waiting in the road with a van, and before anyone could stop him Rags dashed out and bit him too. What I don't understand is that he's never once attempted to bite anyone before."

"It certainly does seem queer if the man hadn't provoked him in any way. How do you, yourself, account for it?"

"I can't. I've thought and thought and I can only assume it was some sudden brainstorm. That's why I had to agree to have him destroyed. However much I loathed having it done, it was impossible to guarantee that the fit wouldn't recur."

"No, you can't very well shut them up in an asylum when you see it coming on like they do human beings."

"Even that doesn't always work; what about the man who attacked you that

day?"

"Le Maitre? Yes, that's true. They say he hadn't had a relapse for three or four years before he broke out that afternoon."

"You had a very lucky escape from being killed."

"I was lucky in more senses than one," countered Tony, and looked at her meaningly.

Hilary returned his gaze with complete composure. She was quite used to the admiration of the opposite sex, and she accepted his homage as a matter of course. Nevertheless, she was much too feminine to resist the impulse to lead him on a little further.

"Yes, it isn't everyone who crashes in a doctor's back garden and finds three medical men waiting to pick up the pieces. Didn't it surprise you?"

"It certainly did," agreed Tony, and suddenly remembered the conversation he had overheard.

Once again he wondered, as he had wondered several times in the last few months, what constituted the secret hold that Beney obviously possessed over Hilary's father.

"Don't forget that a word from me will send you to . . ." Beney had said in a tone that was unmistakably sincere.

What did he mean? Where could he send him? What unhappy mistake could Dr. Manners possibly have made that enabled his Chi-chi partner to blackmail him?

If only he had caught that last word before Hilary's question drowned the conversation. Was Hilary aware of her father's misdeed—whatever it was? Tony did not think so. In the short time he had known her he had formed the opinion that she would not tolerate Beney for a single instant if she guessed he was linked to her father with a threat.

"A penny for your thoughts," offered Hilary.

She was surprised and not a little piqued that he had failed to follow up his first implied compliment to her. According to the rules of the oldest game in the world he should have ignored her wilful misinterpretation of his remark and returned to the attack. Instead of which he had retired into his shell like a snail.

He must be very much more backward than she had imagined, and the impulse to enmesh him in the web of her attractiveness instinctively strengthened.

"They wouldn't be worth such a large sum of money," smiled Tony. "I was thinking of Erasmus Beney."

“What about him? He’s a very ordinary young man.”

“Extraordinary. He struck me as being quite an unusual type.”

“In what way—because he’s a Eurasian?”

“Partly that—it’s a little difficult to explain. For one thing he’s so very different from your father that I was surprised to learn they were in partnership.”

“Oh, that! Dad thinks the world of him. He’s frightfully clever and terribly useful in the hunt for the ’flu bug. They’ve been working on it together for years, ever since they met somewhere in Burma.”

So they had met in Burma. Tony made a mental note of the fact for future reference. If ever he met anyone who had been out there he might casually mention the two men’s names and see if they awakened any memories.

In the meantime he would keep his ears open for any casual remark that might give a clue to the mystery. He must think of an excuse to call at their laboratory and renew acquaintance with them.

“If you’re so interested in Mr. Beney, how would you like to meet him again?” Hilary might have read his thoughts. “He’ll be at our place for dinner tomorrow night; if you like to come along too you can talk to him to your heart’s content.”

The invitation was the outcome of Hilary’s awakening interest in her new admirer. Although he was totally unaware of the fact, his preoccupation over Beney’s threat against her father had done more to further his cause than any number of compliments.

Had he fussed over her and given her his undivided attention she might never have given him another thought; nearly all men behaved like that towards her. But when he persisted in talking about Erasmus Beney, whom she loathed and detested, he succeeded in annoying her.

This young man must be punished for his indifference, she decided severely. She would invite him to dinner, and when he came she would jolly well see that he got his fill of Beney. From past experience she knew that most of the conversation round the table would be medical shop; by the end of the evening he would be cured of his interest in Beney for life.

“I say, that’s most awfully decent of you. I should like to come immensely.”

There was no doubt about the enthusiasm of Tony’s acceptance.

Hilary gathered her bag and gloves with the smile of a siren.

“Very well, then, that’s settled. We shall expect you a few minutes before eight. Father will be wearing a dinner jacket, I expect.”

Tony followed her from the shop in a seventh heaven of delight. Beney and his mysterious threat no longer had any place in his mind. Hilary liked him well enough to invite him to dinner at their second meeting. Everything was going swimmingly.

He saw her into a taxi and closed the door.

"*Au revoir*, and thanks awfully," he cried exultantly.

The taxi moved off and Tony turned to stride purposefully along the pavement. Life was jolly good.

A newsboy at his elbow shook out a new placard.

"Brutal Murder in the West End", he read.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE END OF A MONEY-LENDING RACKET

LONDON'S latest murder had taken place in the neighbourhood of the tangled maze of streets that lies between Maida Vale and the Harrow Road. The victim was a Jewish money-lender named Reuben Isaacs, who carried on a profitable business in a small suite of offices over a greengrocer's shop.

The tragedy was discovered by the woman cleaner, Mrs. Hewlett, whilst she was engaged in preparing the rooms for the day's business. According to her story, she entered the suite as usual about eight o'clock in the morning, letting herself in by a key through a door at the side of the shop which led direct to a flight of stairs. When she reached the outer office she noticed that the lower window was not quite closed.

At the time she did not attach any importance to such a trivial detail, and, taking her pans and brushes from the cupboard in which they were kept, she set about her work.

Having swept and tidied the outer office she crossed to the door of Isaacs' private sanctum. But no sooner had she turned the handle than she realized something was wrong. The curtains were drawn, the electric light was burning, and there was, as she put it in relating her sensations to the policeman who took down her statement, "a queer sort of stillness that give me the creeps right down me blinkin' spine".

But despite her fears Mrs. Hewlett was not a woman to run without cause. Intuitively aware of what she was about to see she boldly entered the room and looked behind the desk.

Isaacs was lying on his side on the floor. The back of his head had been beaten to a pulp with repeated heavy blows. One stiff arm was raised as if to offer futile protection from the attack.

Mrs. Howlett was gazing at the corpse in horror-stricken fascination when something lying on the blotting-pad on the desk sent her screaming from the room. It was the victim's tongue, and it had been roughly cut out with a penknife which lay beside it.

The officer who arrived in response to her shrill cries of "Murder!" and "Police!" was a man of action. There was a telephone in the greengrocer's shop, and within a few minutes of lifting the receiver a patrol car, warned by

wireless from Scotland Yard, brought reserves to his assistance.

Shortly afterwards an inspector arrived to take charge and under his direction the hunt for clues which would lead to the arrest of the murderer began along the well-ordered lines evolved by experience. Photographers, finger-print experts, and other skilled tradesmen came and went, each attending to his duties with the meticulous care which symbolizes modern criminal investigation.

It was the divisional police surgeon who first suggested that it was a case for Detective Inspector "Kitch" Dunthorne. His examination was very brief at this stage. Isaacs had so obviously been killed by blows on the head that he contented himself with taking the temperature of the body and other customary tests in order to fix the approximate time of the crime. A detailed autopsy would be carried out later.

"This job reminds me of the le Maitre case," he observed grimly whilst waiting for his thermometer to register. "You know, the fellow who broke out of Broadmoor a month or two back. If I were you, Saunders, I should get Dunthorne to have a look at it; medically, it might have been done by the same man."

Inspector Saunders duly reported the doctor's opinion to the Yard, and later in the day Kitch Dunthorne drove round to the offices with the Deputy Commissioner's instructions to take over the case.

He found that a great deal of spade-work had been completed. A list of Isaacs' clients had been made and was being examined with a view to picking out any characters known to the police; everyone who had called at the offices during the day had been asked to account for his subsequent movements; inquiries had been made in the neighbourhood as to whether any suspicious character had been noticed loitering near the building.

"Hum!" commented Kitch when Saunders showed him such reports as had come in. "Nothing doing along these lines so far. You know the man we want is a homicidal lunatic, of course?"

"Oh yes, that seems plain enough anyhow. There isn't a thing missing, as far as I can see."

"Nothing touched?"

"No, nothing. There was over £50 in his wallet and nearly £200 in hard cash in the safe. As the key was on his chain the killer would have had no difficulty in lifting it. It's all in one-pounders too."

"That rules out robbery, then—unless he was disturbed. How did he get in?"

“Through the window in the other room. There’s a ladder in the yard which he probably used. It was quite easy to get into the yard, which backs on to the canal tow-path.”

“He took a risk, all the same, if there was anyone about; there might have been a pair or so of lovers out there.”

Saunders shook his head.

“It would be too late for lovers, I should say; the doctor gives the time as midnight or a little after.”

“You’ve missed your opportunities if you think midnight’s too late for love, Saunders,” chuckled Kitch. “However, perhaps something will turn up through one of the men making inquiries round the district. What about the weapon now?”

“They found a good set of prints on it as well as on the knife. They’ve both gone to the Yard. They don’t belong to anyone we’ve had through our hands, though.”

“I’m not surprised; this job wasn’t done by any ordinary criminal or there wouldn’t be any finger-prints. We’ll have to look for a man who had a deep grudge against Isaacs—or thought he had.”

He based his deduction on something more than the obvious evidence of brutality. Ever since he entered this death-chamber he had been reminded more and more of that earlier case the details of which le Maitre’s sensational escape had revived.

The smashing of the skull, the weapon carelessly abandoned, the ghastly mutilation of the tongue were such outstanding features in both instances. Had he not known beyond any shadow of doubt that le Maitre was dead and buried he could have sworn that the two crimes were the work of the same individual.

How did it come about that this murder was committed so closely to the pattern made notorious by le Maitre? It might be, of course, that the murderer, in perpetrating his crime, had been subconsciously influenced by the details of the le Maitre case which had been republished following his breakaway from prison.

Such an imitation was psychologically possible, and in the absence of any evidence to the contrary it provided a working hypothesis from which to deduce the motive for the murder.

According to the brain specialist who examined him, le Maitre had killed his wife because he conceived the fanciful notion that she was an enemy spy working against the country he loved. His intense uncontrolled patriotism had caused him to hate her in the same way he had come to hate Dunthorne when

the detective suggested to him ironically, “You’ll be mistaking me for one next.”

Isaacs’ murderer might not possess the same degree of patriotism or any love of country whatever, but the fundamental motive which governed his deed remained the same. He killed the money-lender because, for some as yet unknown reason, he hated him.

There would be little difficulty in finding a person who detested and loathed a professional money-lender, thought Dunthorne gloomily. The trouble was that there would be too many of them. Unless he could light on some feature in the case which reduced the circle of possibles, it looked as though the investigation would string out into a lengthy process of elimination.

Seating himself at Isaacs’ desk—the body had been removed to the mortuary before his arrival—he tried to visualize the scene as it must have been set when the murderer entered the room.

One thing was obvious from the start—Isaacs could not have been taken unawares. He had a clear view of the door, and whoever paid him such a late visit must have been well known to him, or, at least, expected by him.

A glance at the cash-book lying open on the desk revealed that the last entry was in the name of Miss Elsie Delaney, who had been loaned the sum of four pounds to be repaid, with interest, at the rate of ten shillings per week. There was no mention of security, and Dunthorne wondered.

“What about this one?” he asked, his forefinger underlining the name.

Saunders was ready with his answer.

“She’s a chorus-girl working at the Clarion Music Hall. She came here to see Isaacs at eleven-thirty last night, after the show. She says she rang him up at half past seven and he promised to be here to meet her.”

“Hum! She must have needed the money badly.”

“Blackmail,” declared Saunders tersely. “Agent’s commission. Her agent, a man named Herbert Lane, informed her, so I understand, that unless the money was paid to his office by nine o’clock this morning she would lose her job.”

“Someone must look into the rights and wrongs of that in due course. What sort of girl is she?”

Saunders shook his head.

“Apart from the fact that the probabilities are against it, she couldn’t have done this job. She’s only a fluffy little thing, and she wouldn’t have had the strength. Besides, as she came here for money, she would undoubtedly have taken his pocket-book.”

“Was she alone?”

"No, a friend waited for her in the street. She was here twenty minutes. I've questioned the friend, who saw nobody near the building except a few ordinary passers-by."

Dunthorne pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

"Well, she establishes the fact that Isaacs was alive at approximately ten minutes to twelve, and the doctor says death occurred about midnight. It must have been a close thing that she wasn't present when the murderer entered. What about Lane?"

"I haven't done anything about him yet. His name is not in any of the records here, and there's nothing to suggest that he knew of Isaac's existence."

"How did Delaney hear about it? Is she an old client?"

"No, this was her first visit. I understand she asked the theatre door-keeper if he could put her on to a good money-lender, and Isaacs was his recommendation."

"Well, I suppose I had better interview the two of them, although it looks as if we've got all we are likely to get from that quarter. You might like to come along with me, Saunders."

Taking Dunthorne's car, the two policemen drove to the address off the Edgware Road where Elsie Delaney shared a bed-sitting-room with her girl friend.

She received them in an elaborately trimmed dressing-gown, and it was plain that the description of a "fluffy little thing" given by the detective who interviewed her earlier in the day was decidedly apt. But it did not apply to her mentality.

"I don't know why you've come round to see me again," she greeted her visitors suspiciously. "But you're unlucky. I'm not saying another word about anything, except in the presence of my solicitor."

It was evident that she had been discussing her position with someone who knew the ropes. Dunthorne smiled disarmingly.

"In that case, Miss Delaney, there's no more to be said. I'm sorry you feel unable to help us, and I promise to see that your name is kept out of the papers."

He nudged Saunders surreptitiously and turned to leave the room.

"Here, not quite so fast."

Miss Delaney had no wish to be left out of the news, whatever the outcome of the affair. There was a nice comforting feeling about having one's name in the paper, and if a photograph went with it, so much the better.

Dunthorne waited politely, with his hand on the door-knob.

"Yes, miss?"

"Well, you may as well tell me what you've come about, as you are here. Then I can talk to my solicitor about it and have my reply ready for later on."

Dunthorne shook his head and turned the handle.

"I'm afraid we haven't time for such an elaborate procedure. If we find we want you, we'll send for you to come to the Yard."

The door was open now.

"No, no, you've misunderstood. I want to help—really I do. It's only that I thought——"

"That we suspected you of complicity? Not yet, my dear young lady." He closed the door again. "As a matter of fact, this case may do you more good than you realize. This agent of yours, Herbert Lane, he's blackmailing you, isn't he?"

Her eyes flashed with sudden anger.

"I'll say he is, the dirty rat! I've paid him his commission once already, only I haven't got a receipt to show. Now he's made me pay again, or I should have been out of the show on my ear."

Dunthorne nodded understandingly.

"Just as I thought. Well, now, I'll see that Mr. Lane gets his desserts without you being brought into it. In exchange, I want you to answer just one question. Who was it gave you Mr. Isaacs' name?"

"Alfred Paget, the door-keeper at the theatre. I told your—the gentleman who called earlier. But I've learnt something about that since. It's a ramp, that's what it is. Lane put him up to it."

The full story came out in a spate of words from which the experienced Dunthorne picked out the facts.

Lane and the dead Isaacs had a working agreement which was highly profitable to both of them. In his capacity as a theatrical agent, Lane put the screws on the girls who passed through his hands. Faced with the alternative of paying up or being thrown out of employment, they had to find the money he demanded from somewhere.

That was where the stage door-keeper came in. In return for a monetary consideration from Lane, he gained the girls' confidence and recommended Reuben Isaacs as an easily touched money-lender.

No wonder Isaacs did not have to bother about security, thought Dunthorne grimly. He got his money back twice over, and, in case of default, his dupes

were deprived of their earning power.

“I think we’ll go along and have a word with Lane right away,” he declared when he and Saunders had pumped Elsie Delaney dry. “I should very much like to know where he was round about twelve o’clock last night.”

Lane was not in his office in Shaftesbury Avenue, and they hurried to his private address at Brixton. His wife opened the door and stood back without a word, in mute invitation for them to enter. White-lipped, she pointed to a room at the back of the house.

Minus coat, collar, and tie, Herbert Lane was slumped before an untasted breakfast. As the detectives entered the room, he sprang to his feet. His expression was pitiably cowed.

“I knew you’d come!” he cried hoarsely. “Yes, I did it, I did it! Something came over me like madness, and I thought he’d given us away; I felt I had to stop him. I went round there——”

“Just a minute,” interrupted Dunthorne sternly.

“Before you say any more, I must caution you that anything you tell us will be taken down and may be used in evidence at your trial. I formally arrest you for the wilful murder of Reuben Isaacs. Now come along with us.”

As Lane struggled miserably into his coat, Dunthorne noticed a small inflamed rash on his prisoner’s forearm. But at the time it did not occur to him that it had any bearing on the case.

CHAPTER SIX

HILARY FINDS A CORPSE

TONY GRAYLING paid off his taxi outside the Manners' house with a pleasurable sense of anticipation. Convinced that Hilary's invitation indicated that she reciprocated his own feelings, he regarded the evening as a definite step forward in their relationship. Once he was established on visiting terms, they would be able to see each other as frequently as they wished.

Although purely a secondary consideration, he was also anxious to see how Dr. Manners and Erasmus Beney behaved towards each other. Were they outwardly the best of friends, or was a veiled hostility apparent between them? It was no business of his, of course, but he was infernally curious concerning the bond that linked them together.

His ring at the bell was answered by the suave-voiced butler who had been so frequently obliged to inform him that Hilary was away from home. The man recognized him at once, and smiled rather condescendingly, to Tony's way of thinking.

"Well, Roberts, I'm here again, you see."

Even the frigidity of a butler's reception was powerless to chill Tony's high spirits.

"Yes, sir, very pleased to see you, sir. This way, sir, if you please."

Soft carpets, warmth, solidity; Tony's impressions as he followed his dignified guide were definitely favourable. The atmosphere of the house conveyed the impression of a united family in comfortable circumstances.

Roberts threw open the drawing-room door.

"Flight Lieutenant Grayling," he announced dispassionately.

Tony braced himself for his entry, walked slowly forward, and became aware that the room had only a single occupant.

She was a woman of from thirty-five to forty, he judged. She might have been pretty once, but discontent and thwarted hopes had set their seal on her features so that she appeared hard and unattractive to Tony's young eyes.

Quite unaware that she made no appeal to him, she smiled engagingly.

"Hilary will be so annoyed that she was not here to greet you," she declared archly. "She was obliged to rush to the kitchen about something.

She's so terribly capable in domestic matters, don't you think? Oh, I forgot, this is your first visit, isn't it? Hilary was telling me about it."

Tony cleared his throat whilst struggling to think of something to say. But before he could speak she went on again.

"Of course, you don't know who I am, do you? I quite forgot. I'm Edith Westacott. You've met my husband, I know—over that terrible business of that man le Maitre. Wasn't it awful? It must have been a real nightmare for you; I'm sure it was."

"Oh, I don't know," growled Tony. "It didn't seem much at the time."

To his intense relief, Dr. Manners entered the room.

"Ah, Grayling, how are you? Forgive me for not being here when you arrived. You've introduced yourselves, I suppose. Have some sherry or a cocktail? Edith, what's yours?"

Hilary appeared whilst the drinks were being dispensed, followed shortly afterwards by Dr. Westacott and Beney. As he sipped his sherry and joined in the small-talk around him, Tony wondered whether there were to be any more guests. Apparently there was no Mrs. Manners, as he did not hear her mentioned.

His query was answered when they adjourned to the dining-room. The table was set for six, and he found himself on Hilary's right hand with Dr. Westacott beside him. Mrs. Westacott sat on the right of her host with Beney between her and Hilary.

Conversation was general during the early part of the meal, although it was carried on mostly by Mrs. Westacott and Beney. Dr. Manners interjected a remark or two at intervals, whilst Westacott spoke only when he was directly addressed.

Hilary made a charming hostess, tactfully explaining to Tony any allusions to people or events to which he had not the key. It was part of her plan to be extra nice to him before she engineered that he was monopolized by Beney.

Quietly studying the personalities around him, Tony formed the opinion that Beney was the centre of another drama, besides the secret of his relationship with his partner. Although Edith Westacott was talking generalities, the majority of her remarks were aimed in Beney's direction, and there was a subtle something in the way she looked at him that revealed a hidden tenderness.

Beney seemed utterly indifferent to her overtures, and although he was perfectly polite, deliberately avoided her efforts to engross his attention.

By the time the fish had given way to the entrée, the clash of interests had

segregated the party into groups.

Manners was talking to Westacott about the progress he had made in his researches. His conversation was highly technical and quite unintelligible to the lay mind. The enthusiasm with which he was speaking formed a strong contrast to his earlier manner, and gave Tony the impression that his mind was absorbed with his work to the total exclusion of social interests.

At the other end of the table Hilary had been drawn into the duel between Edith Westacott and Beney. Turning his shoulder to block the unwelcome advances on his left, Beney plunged into a discussion of a play which he and Hilary had both seen. Since they alone could appreciate the finer points, it had the effect of temporarily diverting Mrs. Westacott's attention to Tony.

"Did you read about that murder that was committed yesterday, Flight Lieutenant Grayling?" she asked brightly. "Wasn't it too awful? Cutting the man's tongue out, I mean."

"It was, indeed," agreed Tony gravely. "He must certainly have been mad at the time to do a thing like that."

"But he wasn't mad—at least, James said he wasn't. Didn't you, James?"

"I didn't express an opinion one way or the other," denied Westacott deliberately. "You really shouldn't make these statements, Edith."

He turned away to renew his conversation with Manners; but his wife was not to be silenced so easily.

"Well, if you didn't say he wasn't mad, what did you say? Whether you expressed an opinion or not, you must have one. The man was in your surgery a few hours before it happened."

Her revelation had an electric effect on the whole room. Beney ceased speaking in the middle of a sentence and swung round towards her. Hilary gave a gasp of surprise. Manners looked annoyed at the interruption to his talk.

Even Roberts was shaken out of his habitual calm. He was in the act of replenishing Westacott's glass when she spoke, and, in some unaccountable fashion, spilled some wine on the doctor's hand.

The trivial incident seemed to annoy the doctor intensely.

"Damn you, Roberts!" he cried angrily. "Do be more careful, man!"

He recovered himself immediately, and turned to Hilary with a smile of apology for his outburst.

"I'm afraid my nerves are at sixes and sevens," he confided. "I've been absolutely run off my legs with this diphtheria epidemic. As a matter of fact, I must ask you to excuse me as soon as dinner is finished. I've a number of calls that must be made tonight."

“Of course, Doctor,” said Hilary at once. “We expect that here,” she told Tony. “We’re usually lucky if our guests survive the meal.”

“Is this true what Edith tells us?” asked Beney interestedly. “Was Lane really through your hands on the night of the murder?”

Westacott frowned at his wife with unconcealed annoyance, whilst everyone present waited for his answer.

“He was,” he admitted at last. “Though I must say I prefer not to discuss my professional engagements.”

To Tony’s surprise, Hilary’s father showed marked curiosity in the affair.

“You know perfectly well you can speak quite freely here, Westacott,” he said with some asperity.

Westacott laughed shortly.

“Well, since you all seem so very interested. But I warn you you’ll be disappointed.”

“I shan’t,” interposed Hilary definitely. “Any detail connected with a murder thrills me to the core.”

“All right, then; he came to have an anti-toxin injection.”

Beney chuckled heartily.

“What a come-down! I expected a psychosis at the very least.”

Westacott shrugged his shoulders.

“I warned you,” he reminded them.

“Is that all we’re to hear?” demanded Hilary. “I want to know what he looked like. Was he quite normal?”

“Absolutely. A little funky of the needle perhaps, but he was a poor specimen, anyhow.”

Manners leaned forward earnestly.

“I think we’re entitled to a little more as we’ve got so far,” he supported his daughter. “Was he one of your regular patients?”

“No, I never saw the fellow before. He telephoned during the morning in a great state of excitement, I understand. I was out at the time, and Nurse took the message. It appears that a girl employed in his office didn’t turn up to her job, and when he made inquiries he learned she was down with diphtheria. It frightened him silly, and he at once telephoned me—someone he knew gave him my name—to know what I was prepared to do about it.

“Nurse told him to wait until he got home to see his regular man, but he explained that he had an engagement which would keep him up West until the last train. In the end, to pacify him, she booked him to come to me between six

and seven. He duly arrived, I plunged the syringe into his arm, and that's the end of the matter as far as I'm concerned."

"Have you told the police all this?" asked Beney.

"I have—pretty much as I've told it to you Apparently he has a slight nettle-rash on his arm for which the police surgeon wanted to account."

"Why couldn't you tell me all this when I asked you this evening?" demanded his wife irritably. "Since there's so little in it, it wouldn't have done any harm. All you would tell me was that the man was no more insane than I am."

Tony with difficulty repressed a grin. The lady evidently did not appreciate the maliciousness of her husband's remark.

"My dear Edith, you know quite well that I never discuss my cases with you, so why should I make an exception of this one? I don't profess to be a psychologist, and I'm not in the least qualified to pass an opinion concerning the state of this man's mind, which is what you wanted to know."

From the tone in which he spoke and the facial expression with which Edith Westacott listened, it seemed more than likely that a quarrel was about to break out between husband and wife.

Hilary stepped skilfully into the breach.

"Good heavens, it's nearly half past nine!" she exclaimed, as though the time was of the smallest consequence. "Come on, Edith, let's leave them to their port."

She rose to her feet, and the tension was broken. Tony opened the door and waited whilst the two ladies retired. When he returned to the table Westacott was taking leave of his host.

"I'll come back if I can, but I won't promise. You know how it is at these times. So long, Beney."

He nodded to Tony and hurried from the table. His hand was on the handle when the door opened to admit Roberts. There was a moment's confusion as the two almost collided, then the butler politely made way.

"Good God, man!" cried Westacott furiously. "You're as clumsy as an elephant."

The next moment he was gone.

"Westacott seems extra jumpy tonight," remarked Beney casually.

Manners filled his glass and passed the decanter to Tony.

"He's desperately overworked, I gather. These epidemics are the very devil."

Beney smiled.

"We oughtn't to grumble, as we supply the anti-toxin."

"I know; but I would rather spend my time otherwise. Did you get a positive today?"

"No; we shall have to try another medium, I think. Cuthbert's a wash-out." He offered Tony his cigarette-case. "Cuthbert's our tame guinea-pig," he explained. "We're trying to give him influenza, and he won't respond."

"I don't blame him," said Tony dryly.

"I shall try him tomorrow with the stuff from that other test-tube," declared Manners, with decision. "As you will reach the lab first you might tell Nurse to get everything ready."

Beney was not sure whether he agreed to the test, and in a moment the two scientists were engaged in a heated argument concerning the proposed experiment.

Watching them without in the least comprehending what they were talking about, Tony could not help thinking of that other argument he had overheard between them. Then he had imagined them the bitterest of enemies, now they appeared to be the closest of friends. Could he have been mistaken in assuming there was a mystery surrounding their partnership?

Nearly half an hour passed, and he was beginning to be bored with his role of spectator when Roberts arrived with a message that coffee was waiting in the drawing-room.

"I was instructed to say," he added, "that Flight Lieutenant Grayling is to go in at once without waiting for you and Mr. Beney, sir."

"Very well, Roberts; he'll come now. You show him the way. I hope you'll excuse us for a few minutes, Grayling; this is really very important. You're quite wrong about the temperature, Beney." He returned forthwith to his discussion. "In my opinion——"

Tony did not wait to hear what the opinion was. Here was his opportunity to escape, and he took it whilst the going was good. Now for a long-awaited talk with Hilary.

But he found with dismay that he had only escaped the Scylla of a medical argument to be wrecked on the Charybdis of Edith Westacott's curiosity.

Hilary looked up from the piano as he entered the room.

"Mrs. Westacott's simply dying to hear all about your adventure with le Maitre," she announced sweetly. "I've promised you'll tell her all about it."

With Edith Westacott looking expectantly towards him he had no

alternative but to comply, and for the next three-quarters of an hour he was involved in question and answer until he wished heartily that he had never set eyes on any member of the Manners family.

At last, in sheer desperation, he rose to his feet.

"I'm afraid I shall have to be going now, Miss Manners. Er—thank you so very much for a most delightful evening."

Hilary slid off the piano-stool and moved towards him. She could afford to be more lenient now that his punishment was complete. He would be pretty fed up at the moment, of course, but if he really liked her he would certainly try to see her again.

"Must you really?" she asked innocently. "Won't you wait for Father? It's too bad of him not to have come in sooner."

Tony fixed her with his eye.

"I really must," he said with determination.

In no circumstances would he stay in the house another five minutes if he could help it.

"If you really must, then. But you will have a whisky-and-soda before you go." She rang the bell. "Roberts ought to have brought it in before this."

But Roberts made no response to her summons. She rang again; still no response.

"He's probably gone to sleep; I'll go and roust him out. I won't be a minute."

She tripped lightly from the room, the essence of care-free maidenhood.

Suddenly there was a piercing, fear-haunted scream, paralysing in its intensity.

Before it died away Tony was through the door. He could see Hilary at the end of the passage clinging to the wall for support.

"What is it?" he cried as he raced towards her.

She pointed silently into the butler's pantry.

Roberts was lying in a huddled heap on the floor. The back of his head had been bashed in with a claw-hammer which lay beside him. Reposing in an empty tumbler was his tongue, cut from his mouth by some sharp instrument.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TONY ATTEMPTS TO MAKE DEDUCTIONS

THERE came the sound of an opening door, the rush of hurrying feet.

"What is it, Hilary?" asked Dr. Manners sharply. "What's the matter?"

Conscious that Mrs. Westacott was close behind him, Tony instinctively closed the pantry door. He felt that he was trembling violently, but his brain seemed to be working with the precision of a machine.

"She's had a bad shock," he answered the doctor's question. "Roberts is dead. Take her to her room, Mrs. Westacott, and see what you can do for her."

"Dead?" queried Beney, crowding forward. "Roberts?"

"He's been murdered," revealed Tony in a low voice. "There's nothing you can do for him; Miss Manners is the first consideration at the moment."

Beney took the hint and, throwing his arm round Hilary, helped the stricken girl towards the staircase.

Edith Westacott stood staring at the pantry door. Under her make-up her face was chalk-white and she repeatedly moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

Tony shook her roughly by the arm.

"Pull yourself together and go with them," he ordered sharply. "Get her some brandy or something. And don't ask her any damn' silly questions," he added brusquely.

"Did you say he had been murdered?" asked Manners when they were alone. "Are you sure it isn't just a fit?"

His voice was shocked, but Tony was glad to see he was quite self-possessed.

"You had better have a look," declared Tony, and threw open the door.

Manners viewed the gruesome sight with professional calm. Bending down, he closely examined the battered skull.

"I should say that death was instantaneous," he pronounced. "Poor Roberts. I wonder who could have done it." His gaze centred on the tumbler with its grisly contents. "If that thing could only speak!"

An electric bell purred softly on the wall; the indicator designated the front

door.

"I'll go; you stay here. If any of the other servants show up, head them off."

"Shall I ring up the police?"

Tony indicated a telephone on the table.

"Yes, please do; but not from here. You had better use the instrument in the dining-room."

The front door bell rang again and he hurried to answer it. Tony returned to the dining-room and called Scotland Yard.

As he gave his message he could hear voices talking in the hall. Surely that was Westacott? He had managed to return, then.

Westacott and Manners came into the room as he was replacing the receiver and crossed to the sideboard. Manners took a decanter of whisky from a cupboard.

"Here you are, help yourself. You look all in, man."

Tony noticed that Westacott's hand was shaking like a leaf. His nerves must be in the hell of a state.

Westacott poured out a generous measure of spirit and drank it at a gulp.

"I needed that," he declared fervently. "I'm tired, I suppose, and your news fairly bowled me over. Did I understand you to say the tongue has been cut out, Manners? Like the Herbert Lane case?"

"It's exactly the same, as far as I can see. Extraordinary, isn't it?"

"It is, indeed; if murder were a disease, I would say there was an epidemic of it."

"Both these murders are modelled on the le Maitre case," pointed out Tony. "He bashed his victim on the head and cut out her tongue."

Westacott poured himself another whisky.

"It must be due to a mania, don't you agree, Manners? I swear that no normal person could bring himself to do such a thing."

"Unless it's some sort of a blind to put the police off the scent. Hallo, here they are," he cried as a car drew up at the house. "That's quick and no mistake."

"They receive their orders by wireless fitted in the cars," explained Tony, following the others into the hall.

The two men who had arrived so promptly were members of the mobile police patrol, and their orders were to see that nothing was disturbed pending the arrival of the Yard murder experts.

One of them was a singularly intelligent fellow, and the moment he heard about the tongue-cutting episode he rang through to headquarters.

As a result of his report Kitch Dunthorne was fetched from his home. He reached the Manners residence within an hour of the discovery of the crime and at once took charge of the proceedings.

There was every indication that the murder was perpetrated by an intruder to the house. A window had been found open leading from the garden, and traces of earth-stained footmarks were found both outside and inside the butler's pantry.

With the aid of a powerful torch a search was made of the garden, but the footpaths were concreted. And beyond establishing that it was possible to effect an entry by climbing the end boundary wall from a passage at the back, nothing was discovered.

Whilst photographers and finger-print experts carried on with their duties, Kitch conducted an inquiry amongst those present in the house during the evening.

The servants were speedily eliminated. The cook and the two maids were in bed and asleep when Hilary made her tragic discovery, and were not aroused until after Dunthorne had arrived at the house.

Hilary, Edith Westacott, and Tony were dealt with equally quickly. All three were able to corroborate one another's statements that they were in the drawing-room together from the time when Roberts conducted Tony from the dining-room to the moment when Hilary, receiving no response when she pressed the bell, went to find out why the butler had not answered.

"Very well, then, you ladies may retire," conceded Kitch when he had heard all they had to say. "I'll let you know if I want you again."

Except for confirmation of details he was not particularly interested in the movements of the women-folk. In his opinion, mad or sane, no woman, with the possible exception of a few who earned their living as manual workers, could have inflicted the head injuries which caused the butler's death.

The sheer brutality with which the blows must have been delivered, the mutilation of the tongue, and the abandonment of the bloody claw-hammer made it clear to his experienced mind that the killing was the work of a homicidal lunatic.

Fully conscious though he was that the outstanding features of the case were almost identical with those which attended the death of Isaacs, and, several years earlier, of Mrs. le Maitre, he paid scant attention to such a singular coincidence at this stage. He was a practical individual, trained to

consider facts and to disregard supposition. And since Sidney le Maitre was dead and Herbert Lane locked up, it was quite out of the question that the three crimes could have any material connection.

The uniformity of detail which linked the three cases together was capable of explanation as conscious or subconscious imitation. Copying the example set by other people is a primitive instinct of the human mind, and in the case of brains warped by madness, the trait is frequently highly developed. In the specific instance he was investigating it was quite probable that the murderer, having read the Press report of Isaacs' end in the morning papers, had been influenced to copy the lurid particulars in his own crime.

Dunthorne did not for one moment imagine that the killer would be found amongst the members of the Manners household or guests. But with the thoroughness of police routine, which gains results more by a process of patient elimination than by spectacular deduction, he meant to leave no avenue unexplored, however improbable.

"Now, sir"—he turned to Dr. Manners when the door had closed behind Hilary and Mrs. Westacott—"from what we have been told I understand that you and Mr. Beney remained in the dining-room. Were you both still there when Miss Manners screamed?"

"No, we had parted company for some time."

"Where were you?"

"I was in my study."

"And you, Mr. Beney?"

"I was still in the dining-room."

Tony listened to their replies with considerable interest. From the way they were talking when he left them he had concluded that their discussion had lasted the whole time he was in the drawing-room. What, he wondered, had terminated it so quickly?

Once again the remembrance of that quarrel at Rainhurst entered his mind. Had it broken out once more when they were alone, causing Dr. Manners to leave his guest to his own devices? If they had parted on a friendly basis it was rather extraordinary that one, if not both of them, had not joined the party in the drawing-room.

"And you, neither of you heard anything—unusual, shall we say?"

Dr. Manners shook his head.

"Absolutely nothing. I admit that my study is at the back of the house, but the curtains were drawn; and in any case I had something else to occupy my mind. I suppose I may as well tell you that Mr. Beney and I had been engaged

in an argument concerning a particular form of mosquito which is found in the swamps of Burma. I will spare you the details, unless you think they are essential. But as we were getting nowhere I went in search of a book on insect life and habits that would support my case. I sat down to look up the physical formation of the particular insect we were discussing, and I suppose I became engrossed in my subject. If you require any confirmation of what I've just told you, you'll find the book lying open on my desk."

Beney smiled broadly.

"I confess I wondered why you didn't return," he remarked dryly in his clipped Anglo-Indian speech. "But I too was well occupied in your absence. If you examine the table-cloth in the dining-room, Inspector, you will discover the pencilled workings of a mathematical formula with which I was amusing myself to relieve the tedium of waiting."

Tony felt a bit of a fool. He had been jumping to conclusions about the two partners' absence from the drawing-room, when it was capable of a simple and straightforward explanation. Now he came to think of it, Beney might have been tempted to keep away from the drawing-room as long as Edith Westacott was there; he had shown plainly at dinner that he did not like her.

"Have you any more questions?" asked Dr. Manners.

Dunthorne shook his head.

"No, sir, thank you. What you have told me is quite sufficient, I think. This is purely a matter of routine, you understand." He smiled faintly. "You gentlemen are not suspected of being accomplices in any way, but we frequently get a tip from a chance remark that is of inestimable value in our investigations." He turned to Dr. Westacott. "Now you, sir. I understand you left the house immediately after dinner and returned a few minutes after the crime was discovered. I should like to know why you came back."

"I came back to fetch my wife."

The answer was a perfectly natural one. But somehow, to Tony, it did not ring quite true. There was no doubt in his mind that Dr. and Mrs. Westacott barely tolerated each other; their attitude at the dinner-table had made that plain enough. Why then did the doctor now assume the role of a devoted spouse?

An ugly thought entered his mind. Westacott had twice shown animosity in the dining-room towards the dead butler. Could it be possible . . .?

Tony suppressed the thought instantly. There was a vast deal of difference between the doctor's slight testiness, attributed to nervous strain, and the hate to incite such a brutal murder. The doctor's reply was a perfectly normal one. Why should he reveal his marital differences to a police officer?

“I am jolly glad I’m not a detective,” decided Tony grimly. “I should be reading motives and criminal intentions into the most innocent actions and remarks.”

Dunthorne appeared to have accepted the reply at its face value.

“Purely as a matter of form, sir, may I have a list of the calls you made whilst you were away? Just the names and addresses of your patients and the approximate duration of each visit will do.”

Westacott felt in his pocket and produced a small note-book.

“Certainly, Inspector. There are about half a dozen of them. Here is my case-book, if you care to look at it.”

Tony was puzzled. Hang it, this second reply of the doctor’s did not seem genuine either. He was altogether too ready to comply with the detective’s requests. And his manner was altogether too blatantly unconcerned.

Why, after seeming so nervous and upset when he first heard the news, was he so calm and self-assured now? What had brought about the change of front? The whisky perhaps?

Yes, it must have been the whisky. He had taken a couple of stiff ones straight away, one after the other, and they had given him Dutch courage.

“I see this last one is an address in Paddington. What time did you leave there?”

Tony leaned tensely forward as Westacott hesitated. Was he about to clear himself or increase the doubt that had crept back into Tony’s mind. Even at this time of night he could not drive from Paddington in under ten minutes.

“About ten forty-five,” stated the doctor slowly, and Tony relaxed.

It was within two or three minutes of ten forty-five that Hilary had gone in search of Roberts. Since Westacott had an alibi for that time—and no doubt his statement would bear a close investigation—it rubbed him out of the picture.

“What’s the matter with your wrist, Doctor?” asked Dunthorne sharply. “Have you strained it or something?”

Westacott looked startled.

“Strained it? Oh no.” He held out his hand and wriggled his fingers. “No, I haven’t strained it. As a matter of fact, being in the middle of a diphtheria epidemic, I gave myself a dose of anti-toxin this afternoon as a precautionary measure, and it has brought on a slight nettle-rash.”

He pulled up his sleeve to disclose his forearm. Discolouring the white skin was an angry scarlet patch.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MRS. WINTERBOTTOM'S STORY

"CAN I give you a lift?" Dr. Westacott asked Tony.

The police inquiry was completed for the time being as far as the guests at the dinner-party were concerned, and they were free to go home. Beney had his own car and Edith Westacott had arranged to stay in the house as company for Hilary in her distress.

Tony accepted the offer with alacrity. It is not every day that a fellow finds himself on the spot when a murder is committed, and he wanted badly to discuss it. Perhaps, with luck, he would hit upon a solution of the crime which would forestall the police.

He realized, however, that he was greatly handicapped by knowing nothing whatever of Roberts' life and habits. In the circumstances he could not very well cross-question Manners, and he did not think that Beney would be likely to satisfy his curiosity. But a few well-chosen questions to Dr. Westacott might have the desired effect.

He was quite convinced now that Westacott could not have been the murderer. No man, he felt, could have so steadfastly faced an examination by Chief Inspector Dunthorne with the secret knowledge that he had savagely destroyed a fellow creature only an hour or so earlier. Westacott's obvious nervousness when he arrived must definitely be due to some other cause.

The doctor's first remark after they left the house tended to confirm his conclusion.

"I'm mighty glad that's over," he declared with a short laugh. "At one time I was inclined to think that that eagle-eyed copper suspected me of being his man."

Tony ventured a pointed observation.

"Perhaps it's as well that no one recalled how angry you were when Roberts spilled that wine on your hand."

The doctor glanced at him whimsically.

"If a spot of temper constituted a motive for murder there wouldn't be enough rope to go round. Poor Roberts; he's dead now and I ought not to say it, I suppose, but he always did have an irritating effect on me. He was always so smug and goody-goody."

The conversation was going just right for Tony's purpose, and he hastened to take advantage of his opportunity.

"What do you mean exactly? It was my first visit to the Manners and I know nothing about him."

"Well, he was one of those fellows who never seem to put a foot wrong. No vices, no women, no anything as far as I'm aware. He had been with the Manners for years, ever since Manners came home from the East, I believe, but I've never heard of him getting honestly drunk or even pinching his master's cigars.

"I suppose, as a doctor, one develops a certain sympathy with the common weaknesses of human nature, and, to my way of thinking, a man without any failings is nothing more nor less than a freak."

Tony remembered the dead butler's apparent condescension towards him when he arrived at the house. He certainly had the earmarks of a being superior to his fellows.

"I think I know what you mean. 'God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are'," he quoted. "All the same, Doctor, like many another hypocrite he must have led a double life; otherwise, how do you account for tonight's tragedy?"

"I simply can't," declared Westacott bluntly. "Quite frankly, when Manners opened the door and told me about it, I was completely flabbergasted. If it had been Beney now I might have understood it."

From his tone Tony gathered that he did not care much for Beney. He was tempted to ask why, but refrained; in view of Edith Westacott's attitude towards the Eurasian it might be a delicate subject.

"I noticed you were a trifle upset," he remarked dryly instead.

"You're pretty observant, aren't you?" commented Westacott rather sharply.

Apparently he considered that his condition required more explanation, and he proceeded to give it.

"I had come straight from a rather trying case," he revealed. "A kid, aged five. She was black in the face when I reached the house and the parents were running round in circles. I was obliged to perform a tracheotomy with no one to help me. In case you don't know what that is, it means jabbing a knife into the patient's windpipe, and you have to hit the exact spot—or else . . . Fortunately, this one turned out O.K. and the kid is now in hospital being well cared for.

"By the way, I told them to ring up and leave a message at my house as to

how she was going on; if you aren't in a great hurry would you mind if I pop in to get it?"

"Why, of course not, Doctor; in any case I didn't mean you to go out of your way. I thought——"

"That's all right; it was only a question of ten minutes."

He slowed the car and turned to the left. They had emerged from the Park at Lancaster Gate and were running along the Bayswater Road. Now they entered Albion Street and, crossing a few streets which intervened, drew up at the doctor's surgery in Devon Square.

Westacott switched off the engine.

"Now you're here you may as well come in for a drink. Hallo, I wonder why the light is on in the dining-room."

Followed by Tony, he mounted the steps to the front door, which he unfastened with a latch-key. The dining-room was to the left of the hall. Westacott opened the door and looked inside.

"Why, Mrs. Winterbottom," Tony heard him exclaim, "whatever brings you here at this time of night?"

There was the sound of muffled sobbing.

"Something terrible's happened, Doctor." The woman's voice was agonized with grief. "He's gone—my Ernie's gone!"

"Dear, dear! Whenever did this happen? He was going on quite all right when I left."

"He wasn't, he wasn't; he couldn't have been. Else he wouldn't have dressed and gone out."

"Dressed and gone out? Why on earth didn't you stop him?"

"I didn't know until he was gone; he was so quiet like. Oh, whatever shall I do, whatever's to become of me and the children?"

The sobbing broke out afresh. From where he waited in the hall, uncertain what to do, Tony pictured her as a thin, faded little creature utterly helpless and despondent. His heart contracted in sympathy with the awful abandon of her despair. Whoever would be a doctor from choice? he wondered grimly.

From inside the room came the chink of glass on glass, the trickle of a liquid.

"Here, drink this," ordered Westacott with kindly brusqueness. "Yes, all of it. Now try and tell me exactly what occurred."

"Thank you, sir; I'm sorry to be so stupid, but it's been such a shock. He was such a kind, patient man, and for him to go like this has fair broke me up."

“Of course it has, Mrs. Winterbottom; I can understand that. But I’m still in the dark, remember. He dressed and went out, you say?”

“Yes, sir. It must have been about a half to three-quarters of an hour after your visit. I had left him lying in the hopes that he would get a bit of sleep. That needle of yours turned him up a bit, I reckon. Well, it was a quarter after ten; I know the time, because I had just switched off the wireless.

“ ‘Time for that medicine the doctor left,’ I says to myself, and, taking the bottle and a spoon, I kinder crept upstairs. ‘Are you awake, Ernie?’ I calls quietly; but he didn’t answer, so I pushed open the bedroom door.

“Well, you could ’ave knocked me down with a feather, straight you could. He wasn’t there. The bedclothes were all tumbled, but of Ernie there wasn’t a sign. I calls and calls and rushed all over the house; but he weren’t nowhere.

“ ‘This is a fine kettle of fish,’ I says to myself, and I was just thinking of running out to fetch a policeman when I heard the click of the back door and there’s my Ernie back again, all dressed up in his outdoor clothes.

“ ‘Wherever do you think you’ve been?’ I asks him angrily. I was all put out by the shock and worry of it, as you can understand. But he didn’t answer me direct, and when I goes towards him I see what a state he was in.

“You never see anything like it, Doctor; I never did. His clothes were splashed with blood and his face was as white as a sheet and he was shivering and shaking so I thought any minute he would fall down.

“I naturally thinks he’d been struck by a motor-car or something; you never know these days, do you?

“ ‘Whatever’s the matter?’ I asks him again; and he stares at me something awful.

“ ‘I’ve done it, Liz,’ he says. ‘He’ll tell no more lies and make no more trouble. I’ve settled his hash this time and no error.’

“Well, then I thinks he’d been fighting. He was always a rare ’un with his fists, was my Ernie when he was roused.

“ ‘Just you come on back to bed,’ I says. ‘You’ve no call to be out scrapping at this time of night.’

“But when I went to touch him he pushes me off fierce like.

“ ‘You keep your hands to yourself,’ he says, ‘else I’ll serve you same as I served ’im.’

“I wasn’t standing none of that nonsense, though, and he was as weak as a rat anyway. Somehow I got him upstairs and back to bed again. But I could see he was in a bit of a fever by that time. He kept calling out and shouting delirious like. Then all of a sudden he flopped back on the pillow, his face

went sort of funny, and I knew he'd gone."

"So you came round here to me?"

"Yes, sir, once I was sure. I didn't know what to do, you see, and I thought you oughter know. Your servant she give me a cup of tea and tells me I could wait here until you came, and so I did."

There was a long silence whilst Dr. Westacott considered her extraordinary story. Tony could hear him pacing up and down the room. His own heart was beating strongly with emotion. Could the terrible conclusion which had thrust itself into his mind be possible?

Westacott's footsteps ceased.

"Come along, Mrs. Winterbottom; I must go back with you and see him."

As he emerged into the hall he halted abruptly. He had evidently forgotten all about Tony.

"You heard, of course," he said quietly. "I must go back to the house with her. Will you wait here for me? I should like to talk it over with you."

Tony agreed without demur. He was anxious to know whether the doctor would confirm or deny his suspicions.

For the next half-hour he waited impatiently for the doctor to return. His thoughts were in a turmoil. The whole thing was so utterly fantastic. But for the indisputable fact that both men were dead it would be unbelievable.

At last he heard the car draw up to the kerb. Westacott's footsteps were slow and lifeless as he mounted the steps. His key grated in the lock.

Tony was on his feet when the doctor entered the room. Westacott went straight to the sideboard and poured himself a stiff drink which he swallowed at a draught.

"I think it's true," he declared, the empty glass poised in his hand. "As far as anyone will ever be able to tell, that is."

"But why? Did he know him? What was his motive?"

The questions which had been accumulating in Tony's mind poured out in a rush.

Westacott slumped into a chair and passed his hand across his forehead.

"I can't tell you," he declared wearily. "To the best of my knowledge and belief he never even knew Roberts existed until I called there tonight."

Tony was flabbergasted.

"But people don't murder complete strangers," he protested violently.

"I've never heard of such a case before," admitted Westacott. "Only mental derangement could account for it."

“How did he hear about Roberts, anyway?”

“Through me, I’m afraid. I shall never forgive myself, though, of course, I can’t be blamed really.

“It happened like this: Winterbottom came to my surgery for the first time yesterday evening. He had a slightly relaxed throat and was running a bit of a temperature. Nothing much, you understand, but with this diphtheria epidemic about I took a swab and advised him to go home and get to bed.

“This morning, when I called, he seemed about the same, but this evening, just before I set out for Manners’ dinner-party, the swab came through positive. I at once rang up the hospital for an ambulance; but they are terribly overworked at present, and the best they could promise was that they would pick him up some time tomorrow morning.

“Directly I left Manners’ house this evening I went round there, taking with me an anti-toxin injection which I administered as a precautionary measure. Winterbottom was certainly running a much higher temperature than when I saw him in the morning, and his condition made him rather fretful when I produced my hypodermic.

“Whilst I was making my preparations he noticed a spot of wine which Roberts had spilt on my cuff. He thought it was blood, so I explained exactly what had happened, mentioning that I had been dining with Dr. Manners, from whose laboratory his anti-toxin emanated. Quite likely I referred to the butler as a blundering fool who had annoyed me intensely with his clumsiness.

“There was nothing more than that in it, I swear, and I can only think that the thought of Roberts as some sort of sinister blackguard persisted in his mind after I had gone. The fever may have turned to semi-delirium, bringing about a state in which he acted under the influence of his subconscious mind. The brain sometimes works in a peculiar way, and he may have conceived a personal grudge against Roberts from what I told him in all innocence. What actually transpired in his tortured mind we shall never know.

“What we do know is that he got up and went out, and from the blood on his clothes and a blood-stained knife which I found in one of his pockets we can deduce the rest. The exertion, coupled with the fever and his general condition, proved too much for him, and his heart must have given out shortly after he returned home. I can only regard it as a merciful release.”

“Have you got in touch with the police?” asked Tony dully. He felt oppressed by the infinite tragedy to which he had been listening.

Westacott did not appear to hear the question, but got up and mixed himself another drink.

“You’ve notified the police, I suppose?” Tony said more loudly. “They’ll have to be told, of course.”

“No, not yet; there’s time enough, and I want to be absolutely sure before I move. It’s still possible that we may be mistaken and there’s some other explanation.”

His face was averted as he spoke, and though Tony thought nothing of it at the time he was to recall the circumstance later.

“That’s what I wanted to speak to you about,” went on Westacott hesitatingly. “I want you to promise to keep your mouth shut about this for the time being and leave the handling of it to me. I—er—I should like to make a post mortem before I say anything. If I tell them first they may take matters out of my hands.” He cleared his throat.

“You’ll promise to leave it to me, won’t you?” he asked insistently. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Very well, Doctor,” agreed Tony somewhat reluctantly.

It seemed a strange enough request for a doctor to make, he thought, but after all it was really none of his business.

CHAPTER NINE

A LOVERS' QUARREL

THE laboratory in which Dr. Manners and Erasmus Beney carried out their investigations was situated in the neighbourhood of Tottenham Court Road. Here it was sufficiently central to be available to the coterie of specialists who inhabit Harley Street and Wimpole Street, as well as being adjacent to the School of Tropical Medicine.

It was a modest suite of offices consisting of one large room for practical work and two small studies where the principals kept their books and papers.

The main apartment was furnished with benches, sinks, ovens, and the usual equipment associated with scientific research; the walls were covered with shelves of bottles of various sizes; there were innumerable test-tubes, microscopes, and other medical apparatus.

When Erasmus Beney arrived on the morning following the murder of the Manners' butler he found the door locked and the place deserted. The explanation was contained in a letter which was awaiting him inside. The nurse who was employed as an assistant had developed a sore throat and a slight temperature and was confined to her bed.

"I hope she hasn't caught diphtheria," thought Beney peevishly, throwing the letter on to a table.

Her duties consisted mainly of tidying up, replacing bottles on shelves, labelling specimens, and answering correspondence and the telephone. They were none of them occupations requiring any degree of skill or training, and her position could no doubt be filled temporarily, but she was accustomed to their ways and he disliked the prospect of superintending a newcomer.

There was always the danger that a person of inexperience might make a mistake in handling the different batches of cultures, with disastrous results.

With a sense of irritation that Fate should have presumed to cause him such inconvenience Beney went into his room and put on his overall. With the diphtheria epidemic that was ravaging London there was a big demand for anti-toxin and a great deal of work lay in front of him.

As he set about his tasks he wondered whether he should ring up Manners and ask him to come along to lend a hand. It was the partners' habit to take turns at attending the laboratory—an arrangement which gave each of them a

great deal of time for private research, but in the circumstances he felt he would be quite justified in his request.

He was restrained, however, by the fact that he and Manners were no longer working together in unison. Their relations had been badly strained ever since Dr. Manners first suspected that Beney was making advances to Hilary. The open quarrel at Rainhurst had brought matters to a head. Since then the hostility between them had been veiled only before strangers.

Beney smiled sardonically as he recalled the statement Manners had made to Chief Inspector Dunthorne. The fool had thought it necessary to invent an argument about a mosquito to account for their having parted company after Tony Grayling left the dining-room.

Actually they had separated by mutual consent after another heated outburst from the older man. No doubt he was afraid that if the police learned they had been quarrelling it might get into the papers to the detriment of their professional standing.

It had suited Beney to back up his partner at the time for several reasons. One of them was that he did not want Edith Westacott to know that Hilary attracted him.

Edith Westacott was not the type of woman to allow herself to be superseded without a struggle. She had been his secret lover for a long time, and he was well aware that she would fight tooth and nail before she let him go to another woman. Already he had made several attempts to free himself, but she refused to recognize that his passion for her had cooled.

Busy with his work, he did not hear the outer door of the laboratory open, and it was with a start of surprise that he looked up to find Edith standing in front of him.

“Good lord, Edith, how you startled me!”

Unsmiling, she nodded with satisfaction.

“Startled you, did I? I’ll more than startle you before I’ve finished with you.”

Recognizing the danger-signals, he decided on diplomacy.

“I’m terribly glad you’ve called. I was going to ring you up in a few minutes to tell you how sorry I was not to get a word with you alone last night.”

She glanced searchingly over her shoulder.

“Where’s Nurse Cunningham?”

“Sick, I’m afraid. It’s a damned nuisance just at this time; I don’t know what we shall do without her.”

“Don’t try to change the subject. You deliberately avoided me and you know it.”

His look of surprise was well simulated.

“How can you say such things, Edie? It isn’t fair. I had it all planned for us to slip away together, only that frightful business of Roberts spoiled it. I was going to suggest that as Jim was detained could I offer you a lift home?”

She looked as though she would like to believe him and did not.

“Why do you tell me such lies? You hardly spoke a word to me at dinner. You were so cold I nearly cried.” Her voice broke suddenly. “I don’t believe you love me any more,” she sobbed. “Oh, Rajah, I’m the most miserable woman in the world, and you said you’d make me the happiest.”

Beney cursed her under his breath. Why was she always so damnably melodramatic?

With difficulty he forced a smile.

“I do love you, Edie. Haven’t I told you so a thousand times? But I couldn’t very well show it in Manners’ dining-room, could I? You know what a stickler he is. If he thought there was the least possibility of a scandal he would make things jolly unpleasant for me. I might even lose my job.”

“Lose your job!” cried Edith sarcastically. Her mood had changed from a weak woman suffering unjustly to a raging termagant. “That’s funny, that is. Why, everyone knows that you have old Manners in your pocket.”

“Who says that?” demanded Beney sharply.

“James for one and I for another. It’s perfectly obvious. The poor old fool can hardly call his soul his own.”

Beney thought of the one subject on which his partner found strength to resist him, and his face darkened.

“It would be better if you and James minded your own business instead of discussing mine,” he snapped.

Edith flushed with anger.

“You were pleased enough for me to take an interest in your affairs once,” she reminded him bitterly. “It’s as I thought—you want to break with me. There’s someone else, I suppose.”

Beney thought he saw his opportunity.

“What if there is?” he demanded truculently.

She looked at him wide-eyed whilst the colour slowly receded from her cheeks.

“Then there is someone else!” she accused hoarsely.

Though she had suspected it she had not been quite sure until now.

Seizing him by the arm she shook him violently.

"Tell me who she is!" she cried. "Tell me who she is! If it's Hilary I'll ____"

"You'll what?"

Her mouth set in a thin line.

"I'll go straight to James and ask him to divorce me, naming you as co-respondent. He'll do it fast enough, don't make any mistake. He's told me a thousand times he would get rid of me if he could do it decently. Hilary won't have anything to do with you when you've been through the Divorce Court with the tale I'll pin on to you. I know her, the little pig. She's the unstained-honour type."

Beney was dismayed. He had always known she would be awkward, but he had never realized how completely he was at her mercy. She was perfectly correct, he knew, in her estimate of Hilary's character. If she carried out her threat he would lose Hilary for good.

He would probably be cold-shouldered in his profession also. However broad-minded the medical and scientific professions may be, mud which degrades is just as damaging as in any other walk of life.

There was only one thing for him to do. He had stirred up a hornets' nest, and unless he wished to be badly stung he must act quickly. Some form of powerful soporific was clearly indicated.

He showed his teeth in an ingratiating smile.

"You've given me an idea," he declared heartily. "It mightn't be such a bad plan if you really think he would do it."

"Do what?"

"Why, if James would divorce you. You know I've suggested it often enough; up till now you've always said you didn't want it that way."

"That was because I knew it would ruin you. But I'll smash you with pleasure before I let you go to another woman."

"Edie, Edie, Edie, you don't really think there's anyone else, do you?" His voice was soft and silky. "I was only teasing you; surely you knew that."

She searched his face suspiciously. Was he fooling her or had she been too hasty in her conclusions?

She knew only too well how slender was her hold on him. He was definitely polygamous by nature and she did not attempt to blind herself to the fact that he would always hanker after other women whatever she did to try to

stop him.

That did not matter as long as she remained first in his affections, but she had no intention of being thrown overboard. Her resentment was aroused when she thought his mind was set on Hilary because it indicated that he was done with her.

Hilary was in a different category from the rest. He would have to mean marriage before he could hope to secure her affections, and any hint of a clandestine affair proceeding at the same time would ruin his chances with her.

Now the first flush of her fear had passed Edith decided that Hilary could not possibly be a serious rival to her. Knowing his needs and her own physical attractions she could not believe that he would consider Hilary worth the self-denial that winning her would entail. She was altogether too fastidious for him.

Conceit in her own undoubted charms prevented her from realizing that the difficulty he would have in making Hilary care for him provided a spur to his predatory instincts.

"Well, if you didn't mean it, why did you say it?" she demanded tearfully. "It's cruel of you to upset me so."

He took her in his arms and held her so that she could not see his face.

"I wanted to see what you would say. I do love you, Edie; there isn't another woman like you in the whole world. Let's do it," he pretended fiercely. "Let's get James to divorce you; then I can marry you and we'll be together for always. It'll be heavenly."

She nestled to him closely for a moment before pushing him away.

"It would be heavenly," she agreed, "but I'm not going to do it."

"Oh, Edie, why ever not?"

"For the same reason as before. What would become of your work!"

"Oh, that! Damn the work."

He paced agitatedly up and down the room; it was he who was being melodramatic now.

"What does my work, what does anything matter beside our love?"

"It matters a lot to me. We're going on very well as we are, and we shall just have to meet quietly whenever we can until something happens."

"Nothing ever will happen unless we make it," he cried dismally.

Inwardly he was rejoicing at his victory. He had successfully diverted her from realizing he was in love with Hilary and he would just have to humour her until he could devise some plan for breaking with her.

A moment later he discovered that his satisfaction was premature.

“Rajah, darling!” cried Edith excitedly. “You’ve given me an idea now. As Nurse Cunningham is away ill, I’ll come here and take her place.”

The suggestion was perfectly feasible. Before her marriage to Dr. Westacott she had been employed as a trained nurse at one of the big London hospitals. The duties in the laboratory were well within her capabilities.

Beney swore under his breath. Having her about him all day long was the last thing he desired, but if she set her mind on it, how the deuce was he to prevent her from doing what she wanted?

Until he could think of some convincing reason why he could not agree—and it would have to be convincing, he decided sourly—he must simulate enthusiasm for her proposal.

“I think it’s a splendid idea,” he declared warmly, “and if it rested with me I should engage you right away—but I’m afraid it’s up to Manners. He’s the senior partner, you know.”

“But he always does what you say; I know he does.”

Beney occupied himself testing the temperature of one of the ovens so that she could not study his expression.

“In some things perhaps, but not in everything. He doesn’t like you, you know, Edith.”

“Huh! The feeling’s mutual. The way he looks at me anyone would think I was the dirt beneath his feet. I expect he regards me as an abandoned woman. I hate him.”

“If you feel like that about him why do you go to his house?”

“I went last night because you were going to be there. I might have stayed at home for all the good it did me; it was the most miserable evening I have ever spent in my life. Oh, Rajah, why were you so cruel to me?”

Fearful lest she should break out again, Beney hastily changed the subject.

“Good lord, look at the time; you’ll have to go, sweetheart; he’ll be here in a few minutes. It wouldn’t do for him to find you alone with me if we’re to persuade him to give you that job.”

“Then you will speak to him about it?”

“Yes, yes.” He ushered her towards the door. “I’ll mention it directly he arrives. Good-bye. Well, *au revoir*, then. Really, you must go now; I’ll ring you later.”

He sighed with relief as the door closed behind her. How the devil did he ever find her appealing? he wondered.

All the same, it might be a good thing to let her act for Nurse Cunningham

whilst she was away. She would serve to infuriate Manners at any rate. By playing off one against the other he might, if he were clever enough, cause each to cancel the harm that the other might do him.

The thought had no sooner formed in his mind than Nurse Cunningham entered the laboratory. Her naturally sallow complexion looked peaky and drawn, and her eyes, behind the thick lenses of her glasses, were dull and watery.

"Hallo, Nurse," exclaimed Beney in surprise. "I thought you were ill."

She gave him a watery smile.

"So I am, in a way, Mr. Beney. Last night when I wrote I felt terrible, but the doctor said it wasn't diphtheria, and I felt so much better when I woke up that, as you're so busy here, I thought I would make an effort."

"Good for you!" cried Beney, and reached thankfully for the telephone.

Thank goodness, it would not be necessary to put up with Edith after all.

CHAPTER TEN

MANNERS MAKES A CONFESSION

ROBERTS' terrible death had thrown the usually orderly Manners household into a state of gloom. The maids went about their duties with fear-haunted faces illogically apprehensive lest they should suffer a similar fate. Cook handed in her notice first thing in the morning, declaring that she could not remain another night in a place where such a thing had happened.

Hilary sympathized with their agitation whilst she did her best to allay it. But whilst she forced herself to live her daily life as if nothing had happened, the memory of that ghastly mutilated figure haunted her every action.

The morning was a nightmare which tested her courage to the uttermost. The police were still in the house, coming and going, taking measurements, asking questions. The telephone rang incessantly. Reporters besieged the front door and a small crowd of gaping sightseers clustered stolidly on the pavement outside.

It seemed it was not enough that she had had the horror of finding the dead body. With no one to help her the whole burden of the aftermath was on her shoulders.

Her father had retired to his study immediately after breakfast and had issued orders that he was not to be disturbed. Hilary did not blame him; she knew it was not selfishness that prompted him to desert her in her hour of need. He considered his work to be of such paramount importance that no event, even murder, fire, or earthquake, could be allowed to interfere with it.

Whenever he was working at home it was customary for him to be taken some tea round about eleven o'clock, and in the midst of all her worries she did not forget it. Although he frequently left it untasted she had noticed that he had always remarked on the omission on the few occasions it had been overlooked, and with characteristic thoughtfulness she did not want to give him even so slight a cause for additional annoyance.

Cautiously opening his study door so as not to disturb his train of thought, she quietly entered the room. At once she halted abruptly and her heart began to thump against her ribs. Not another one? she thought wildly. It can't be——

"Dad!"

The cry was involuntary, forced from her lips by the wild emotion that

threatened to overwhelm her.

Manners was seated at his desk with the upper part of his body sprawled across the books and papers with which it was littered. His face was hidden by his arms, and at first sight it looked exactly as though he were lifeless.

At the sound of his daughter's anguished cry he raised his head, and Hilary saw that his expression was tortured with some deep mental strain.

"Good lord, Hilary, how you startled me!" he cried irritably. "What on earth possessed you to come creeping in here like a—like that?" he amended.

He had been about to say "like a criminal", but had checked himself in time. It was hardly fitting to use such a simile in the circumstances.

Hilary closed the door and advanced swiftly towards him.

"Oh, Daddy dear, what is the matter? Why were you lying like that? You frightened me so. When I first saw you I thought—I thought——"

"Well, you shouldn't think. You've no one but yourself to blame for coming in like some damned cat. I—I was deep in thought; now you've broken the train of it."

Feminine intuition told her he was prevaricating. He was deep in thought, yes, but his thoughts had nothing to do with his researches; nor were they the sort that any interruption, however drastic, would be likely to drive out of his mind.

The signs were plainly obvious. His attitude of hopelessness, the look she had surprised, his efforts to regain his normal poise, made it patently evident that he had been wrestling with some deep-rooted worry.

Hilary set down the tea-tray with an air of determination.

"Now, look here, Daddy, you can't fool me," she said firmly. "Something's troubling you, and whatever it is, I mean to share it."

"Troubling me? I don't know what you mean. I was thinking of an experiment."

"Experiment my foot! What experiment? You can't tell me, can you?—I can see it in your face. No, don't bother to invent one; I'm not interested. What I am interested in and what I mean to hear is the cause of your worry."

He glanced at her swiftly and looked away. How like her mother she was in this attitude! Except that her mother always got what she set out to get and he had no intention of confiding his secret to Hilary. Why, only the other day she was playing with her dolls. How the devil could he discuss the fear that haunted him with a girl who was barely grown up?

"I was thinking of poor Roberts," he declared in a tone which he hoped

would carry conviction. “I can’t get him out of my mind. I suppose the police haven’t discovered anything further?”

“Nothing that they’ve told me about. The last thing they wanted to know was whether we’ve had to discharge any maids because he had got them into trouble. I told them no, of course, but how it would have helped if I had had to say yes is beyond me altogether.”

“I expect they were following up a theory that he was killed out of revenge for something,” suggested Manners.

“Yes, of course it would be that, I suppose. But I can’t quite see Roberts as a ladies’ man, I must say. If it had been Beney now——”

She shrugged expressively.

“Beney?” echoed Manners sharply. “What about Beney?”

“So it was something to do with Beney you were thinking of just now,” accused Hilary, and, realizing she had skilfully led him into a trap, Manners flushed.

“What if it was?” he demanded truculently. “Look here, Hilary, I won’t be cross-questioned like this by my own daughter. You——”

She smiled like an indulgent mother listening to a petulant child.

“You will and you’ll come clean, my great important scientist. How many dozens and dozens of times have you told me that I’m your greatest pal? Well, pals exist to help in times of trouble, so unburden yourself and then we’ll put our heads together and see what can be done about it.”

He sighed regretfully.

“There’s nothing we can do about it, I’m afraid. Even if I told you—and I’m not going to tell you—neither you nor anyone else can alter established facts.” He patted her hand. “It belongs to a chapter in the past, and now there’s nothing for it but to sit tight and reap the consequences.

> “The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
> Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it,”

he quoted Omar.

“You’ll know fast enough, my dear, and from an outside source, I expect, and when you do, you won’t think very much of your Daddy any more. So, you see, I want to hang on to your love and respect just as long as I can.”

Hilary swallowed a lump which had risen in her throat.

“How blind and stupid men can be!” she asserted. “You don’t understand us women, do you? Do you know, Daddy, there’s nothing you can have done

in the past or in the present or in the future that can make one pin-point's difference to my feelings for you. You're my darling Daddy, and I should love you just the same and stand by you as I know you'd stand by me, even if I knew now, this very minute, that you were the one who did that awful thing to Roberts last night."

Her simple assertion of faith in him, made with such transparent sincerity, broke down his barriers more thoroughly than all the arguments she might have brought forward to undermine them. For a few moments he looked at her without speaking, his heart too full for words.

"If you feel that way about things, you've certainly got a right to know the worst," he told her hoarsely. "But I warn you it's not a very pretty story and I'm not going to try to whitewash myself to let you down lightly."

"I want it plain and unvarnished," she assured him. "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"So help me God," he finished and gulped a mouthful of tea to offset his emotion. "Sit down, child; it's a long story."

"Not in a chair," she protested. "Look, I'll manage very well here."

"It took place about eighteen years ago," he began when she had settled herself on the edge of the table. "I was in Assam at the time, resident medical officer on a big tea plantation. Your mother had been out there with me, but you were only four, and because the climate was too unhealthy for you she had brought you home to England.

I won't confuse you with a lot of names of places which you couldn't follow without the aid of a map. Sufficient to say that our plantation was in Cachar, not more than a hundred miles from the River Barak. It covered an area of several hundred square miles, and for medical purposes I had a central hospital which I controlled personally, and ten outlying medical stations in charge of native doctors. I used to make a complete circuit about once every six weeks which entailed some long and strenuous car journeys through the jungle.

"Most of the work consisted of ordinary attention to minor ailments and first-aid for the workers engaged in tending and gathering the tea crops.

"Every now and again, however, an epidemic of some virulent disease would break out, and then I was almost worked to a standstill, organizing isolation camps for those afflicted, segregating the fit from suspected contacts, and generally tackling a dozen men's work with one pair of hands.

"By far my most important concern was the tracking down of the source of the disease so as to prevent it breaking out again once we had it in hand. This work entailed the examination of drinking-water, pools, and wells, the testing

of milk supplies, and a hundred and one other things requiring a knowledge of bacteriology far in excess of anything attained by the normal G.P. in England.

"It was this branch of my job which eventually induced me to specialize in the science of tropical diseases with particular reference to typhoid fever, which was our greatest enemy. As you know, typhoid is frequently contracted from flies and mosquitoes, and much of my research has been directed towards deciding on the particular types of insect that carry the bacilli and suitable methods for their extinction.

"We are now sufficiently advanced to be able to say with a fair degree of certainty that mosquitoes are also responsible for many other forms of diseases as well—we have known for many years that they cause malaria, for instance—and it is this work which is engaging my attention at present.

"That is by the way, however, although it is necessary for you to understand something of my problems to appreciate what I'm now about to tell you.

"I was in the middle of a bad outbreak of typhoid which had occurred in the neighbourhood of our most northerly medical post when I suddenly received word to return to headquarters. The wife of our principal overseer, who was expecting a baby, had developed complications a month before her time and it was essential that I should see her as soon as possible.

"Ill though I could be spared, of course I went at once. I did not expect to be away for more than a few days, and, leaving full instructions with the native doctors who would be in charge in my absence, I drove like fury over the terrible track which was the main road through the plantation.

"Here I must mention a point which has an important bearing on what is to follow. Just before I received the message which called me back, I was about to test some milk which I believed to be infected with the typhoid bacillus. The apparatus at my disposal was terribly crude and primitive compared with the instruments we employ today, and as there was no time to prepare the culture before I left I took the specimen with me to examine when the opportunity occurred.

"You can guess now what is coming perhaps. When I reached my patient's bedside I found her much worse than I had expected. There was nothing for it but to operate, and her baby was stillborn. That was bad enough, but there was worse to follow. A fortnight later she developed an attack of typhoid more violent in character than any case we had at the camp.

"There were no other cases at headquarters, and there was only one conclusion I could draw as to its origin. Somehow through utter criminal carelessness I had mixed up the milk of my specimen with some of her food."

“What happened?” asked Hilary softly. “Did she die?”

“Yes, she died. In her weak state she had no resistance to offer against such a dose of infection as she had swallowed.”

“How perfectly terrible for you, Daddy! Whatever did you do?”

“I went straight to her husband and placed myself at his mercy. But he hadn’t any to give me. Unnerved by his wife’s death, the climate, and the responsibility of his position, he swore he would never forgive me. He called me everything that’s bad under the sun, including murderer. He also said he would have me hounded out of my job and my profession, and before I had left him he had sat down to write a full report of my crime, as he called it, to the owners of the plantation in England.”

“How unfair! Did they uphold him?”

“They never received it,” disclosed Manners dryly. “I have reason to believe it was written, although I’ve never seen it. The overseer—I don’t want to give you his name—died suddenly the same day from a snake-bite in the leg.”

“What a ghastly tragedy! But if he wrote the report, what happened to it?”

“It disappeared. Someone took it from the overseer’s desk and used it for his own purposes. I might never have heard any more about it if Erasmus Beney had qualified as a doctor. But he failed his exams., and because he was ambitious and cunning he brought into play the weapon he had hoarded against just such an eventuality.”

Hilary uttered an exclamation of amazement.

“Do you mean Beney blackmailed you into making him your partner?”

“He did, and he’s been doing so ever since. He had a clear-cut case, you see. According to the story he had carefully concocted, I murdered—er—the overseer to suppress the report. I am supposed to have poisoned him and called it snake-bite to cover up my crime.

“I can’t refute it, you see, because I was the only white doctor on the station and it was impossible to exhume the dead man to prove the story a lie.”

“You ought to have gone straight to the police,” declared Hilary severely. “If you had done so at once they would have had to believe you.”

Manners passed a hand across his face.

“I know what I ought to have done, but I didn’t do it. Now it’s too late. They’ll never believe me after all these years—my silence implies guilt.”

“But surely the delay weakens Beney’s case too?”

“No, it strengthens it. He’ll say he’s only just unearthed the report amongst

my papers. I'm completely and utterly in his hands."

There was silence for a few moments whilst Hilary turned over in her mind what she had heard.

"Why are you so particularly worried about this beastly business today? If he's kept silent so long is it likely——"

"Unfortunately it is. We quarrelled bitterly last night because I've refused to give way over something he wants badly. If he chooses to tell his story to the police and they fail to find Roberts' murderer you can guess the conclusion they are likely to draw."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

INSPECTOR DUNTHORNE HAS A HUNCH

IN ignorance of Mrs. Winterbottom's late night visit to Dr. Westacott's surgery, the police were baffled. More than twelve hours had elapsed since Alfred Roberts was brutally struck down, yet they had not succeeded in discovering a single clue which would lead them to his murderer.

Seated in his office at Scotland Yard, Chief Inspector Dunthorne meticulously examined the sheaf of reports which bore on the case. Not one of them suggested a fruitful line of inquiry.

Roberts, who was a bachelor, emanated from South Wales. He was the only son in a respectable working-class family, and neither his parents nor his two sisters could recollect that he had a single enemy. His letters home were always cheerful; there was no hint of trouble nor mention of a love-affair.

He had been employed with the Manners family for nearly six years. They had found him honest and capable in his work and quite steady in his leisure. He seemed to have few friends, and although he was well known in several of the local public-houses he never stayed longer than half an hour in any of them.

As far as could be seen there was absolutely no motive for the crime. Nothing appeared to have been stolen from the house or the pockets of the corpse, and no one could be found to breathe a word of a quarrel, serious or otherwise.

A search for clues in the Manners' house and garden had produced an equally negative result. Beyond establishing that the murderer entered from the outside, the police experts had made no progress whatever. The earth found in the passage corresponded with the soil of a bed at the far end of the garden, but the ground was hard and undug and did not show a footprint that would enable the size of the intruder's feet to be estimated. All that could be deduced was that his shoes had a plain sole.

Dunthorne finished reading the dossier and reached for his pipe.

Inspector Saunders, who had been patiently awaiting his chief's instructions, looked at him inquiringly.

"Spot anything?" he inquired laconically.

Kitch Dunthorne shook a mournful head.

"Absolutely nothing. The man who did this was either superlatively clever or abnormally lucky."

"Lucky, I should say. The clever ones usually leave their visiting-card."

"Yes, and so did this man, if we can only read it."

He blew mechanically through his empty pipe and proceeded to fill it.

"You know, Saunders, I hate to say it, because I haven't got a shred of evidence to back me up, but I've a feeling that there's some connection somewhere between this murder and these other two."

He spoke with some diffidence, as though he half expected his subordinate to laugh at him. The idea of Kitch Dunthorne, who always preached of the vital necessity for fact as the basis of evidence, allowing himself to theorize was both fantastic and absurd.

But Saunders was far too surprised to consider the anomaly.

"How the devil can there be? The others are accounted for."

As far as he was concerned, since the respective murderers had been arrested, there was an end of the matter.

"Yes, I appreciate that."

Kitch hesitated. It was damned difficult explaining to someone else what was little more than an imaginative notion in his own mind.

"Let's take the Isaacs case, since it's fresh in our minds," he suggested presently. "Supposing for some reason that Lane hadn't made a confession. Where should we have been?"

"We should have got him all right; we had his finger-prints."

"Well, imagine we hadn't got them, what then?"

Saunders shrugged his shoulders. He could not for the life of him see what his chief was driving at.

"If he hadn't confessed and we hadn't got his finger-prints we should have been up a gum tree. Is that what you want me to say."

Kitch ignored the hint of sarcasm and lit his pipe.

"We should have been up a gum tree," he puffed. "And when this fresh case turned up two days later with exactly the same earmarks, what would have been our conclusion?"

"Why, that the same man did both jobs, I suppose."

Kitch banged his fist on the desk.

"Exactly so, and we should have been quite justified in assuming it. In each case the murderer entered from outside by a window, evidently aroused no

suspicion in his victim's mind since there was no sign of a struggle, waited until he turned away, and then bashed him on the head with a heavy instrument; cut out his tongue as soon as he was dead and walked out again, leaving the weapon with which he did the deed behind him."

"There were no finger-prints in the Roberts case," pointed out Saunders. "And the murderer took his knife away."

"Mere details which don't detract from the remarkable similarity of the two murders."

"Quite true; but you can't get away from the fact that Lane did not kill Roberts, because he was safely locked up in a cell."

"You leave Lane out of it for a moment and concentrate on what I'm telling you. Now let's take a look at the le Maitre case; you don't remember that, do you?"

"Only by name. I was a young detective-constable at the time."

"Well, listen whilst I give you the high-spots." Kitch ticked them off on his fingers. "Le Maitre entered the house by the dining-room window—he was staying away from home on a fishing-trip at the time. The defence made a point of the window entry, since any ordinary man would enter his own home through the front door with a key. But the medical evidence of insanity squashed that.

"Mrs. le Maitre did not scream or cry out because she must have recognized her husband. If she had, poor woman, she might have been alive now, as her brother and his wife were asleep in an adjoining room.

"He beat her on the head with a German mace, cut out her tongue, and cleared out the way he had come in, leaving the mace behind him. No finger-prints were found in his case because he wore gloves; we discovered them in his car stained with blood after we nabbed him. Together with the jack-knife which he also took away, they supplied the evidence which brought about his conviction."

Kitch leaned over the desk and wagged his pipe at Saunders.

"So you see we have three cases that are almost identical in detail," he observed solemnly.

Saunders remained unimpressed. There was a marked similarity, certainly, especially with regard to the tongue-cutting, but in view of the fact that the first two murderers were known to have no connection with each other he could not see how the third could be linked to either of them.

"What are you trying to prove?" he asked caustically. "Supernatural control?"

“I’m not trying to prove anything yet; I’m merely examining the facts as they stand. But supposing you wait till I’ve done with you before you heave buckets of cold water. There are several other points I haven’t touched on so far.”

Saunders grinned cheerfully.

“Go on, I’m listening. As I’ve heard you say a thousand times—when a man starts speculating instead of sticking to facts, there’s no knowing where he’ll stop.”

“But these are facts,” declared Kitch somewhat testily. No one likes to be informed that he is going against his own gospel. “If only you had a particle of imagination, Saunders, you would be waiting open-mouthed for what I have to say next.”

Saunders immediately opened his mouth and adopted a goofy expression.

“How’s that?”

“How’s what? You look about normal to me.” Kitch chuckled as the thrust went home. “Seriously, though, Jack, I firmly believe there’s something in all this or I wouldn’t be wasting my time. When I’ve got it all off my chest I think you’ll agree.”

He relit his pipe, which had gone out.

“Now for some more strange coincidences. Roughly four months ago le Maitre broke out of the B.C.L.A. He met this young Air Force officer, Grayling, and they took off in an aeroplane.

“There was a crash, and who do we find attended to them?—Manners, Beney, and Westacott. And whilst we are about it we may as well include Manners’ daughter.

“Doesn’t it strike you as dashed peculiar, to say the least of it, that these five people were present the night before last when Roberts met his death?”

“Yes, I suppose it does. But they weren’t there when Isaacs was killed.”

“No, though even in Isaacs’ case we have a link with them. Don’t forget that Lane visited Westacott’s surgery on the very evening he knocked out his money-lending friend.”

“By Jove, yes! There was a mark on his wrist from a hypodermic syringe.”

Saunders was becoming interested at last.

“There was also a mark on Dr. Westacott’s wrist last night.”

“So there was. But I don’t see what you can make out of that.”

“Nor do I. I only mention it because we’re dealing in similarities.”

“Then you’re not suggesting that Dr. Westacott might be our man?”

Dunthorne puffed away silently for some moments before he replied.

"No—and yes," he said at last. "No, because it's impossible to see either how or why he should have done it. Yes, on account of my—call it a hunch, if you like—that all these jobs have some connection. I've checked up on Westacott's movements from the time he left the house to the time he returned as closely as possible, but they are not by any means cut and dried. According to his case-book, he paid six visits in the period; I've had a man on making discreet inquiries about them. Here is his report."

He picked up a paper and passed it to his subordinate.

"At the first one, name of Winterbottom, he stayed about half an hour. The patient must have been pretty bad because I understand he died later in the evening. The next four he just sort of popped in and out again. And the last one occupied approximately thirty to thirty-five minutes. No one seems to be able to give an exact time of arrival or departure. If you work it out as I've done, you'll see he hardly had time to slip back between two of his calls, commit the murder, and continue his round to establish his alibi."

"Anyway, nobody seems to have noticed him," commented Saunders.

"Quite apart from that we have other evidence which helps to rule him out. On the last of his visits he performed an important operation on a child of five. There's no doubt about it; the parents are full of it, and Andrews checked up at the hospital to which the kiddie was taken.

"Now, I put it to you, Saunders, that no man, however tough, would have the nerve to stick a knife in a child's throat without making a hash of it who had committed a murder of the character of this one we're investigating within the previous hour."

Saunders scratched his head. He was not quite so quick-brained as his superior officer, and some of the reasoning seemed hopelessly contradictory.

"But you said just now you did suspect him." He objected.

"So I do—but not of this particular job. What I suspect is that he may in some way be responsible for these murders taking place. Don't you see the difference?"

"I'm afraid I don't," declared Saunders helplessly. "A man's either committed a murder or he hasn't. If he hasn't what the hell's the point of suspecting him? We know who did the others. It don't make sense."

Dunthorne smiled contemptuously.

"On the contrary, it's elementary, my dear Watson, as Sherlock Holmes would have said.

"Try and get this into your thick skull, there's a good fellow. I'm not

suggesting that Westacott killed Roberts. And even if we had second sight and knew for certain that he had, we haven't got one particle of evidence to offer the dumbest jury that was ever called. I said just now I had a hunch that these three crimes were connected in some way. I suppose, as a policeman, I've no right to have hunches. We're supposed to stick to facts and nothing but facts. That's all right as far as it goes, but this is a case where we need a bit extra than facts, I fancy.

"In my opinion the extraordinary resemblance between these murders fully justifies us in investigating the lives of all these people concerned, and in that sense I suspect the lot of them—Westacott, Beney, Manners, and Grayling.

"There may be nothing in my idea and we may be wasting our time, but until something breaks which definitely excludes them, or any one of them, from the list, I mean to carry on unearthing their histories right back to the day they were born."

He rose to his feet and buttoned his coat. There was a purposeful look about him which Saunders had seen on more than one occasion. Kitch Dunthorne had lost the scent. But like the thoroughbred he was, he would never give up searching until he found it again and followed it to its quarry.

Saunders reached for his hat.

"Where are we going, Kitch?"

"To Dr. Manners' laboratory to start with."

CHAPTER TWELVE

WESTACOTT TAKES AN AFTERNOON OFF

EDITH WESTACOTT reached home after leaving Beney at the laboratory, to find that her husband had had an early lunch and was preparing to go out.

"There's a telephone message for you," he announced as they met in the hall. "It's from your friend Beney. He says Nurse Cunningham is back at work and so they won't be needing you. I don't know what he means, but no doubt you do."

Edith thought she knew well enough. Beney had not the pluck to tell her to her face that she was not wanted, and had chosen this method of informing her.

She restrained her fury with difficulty. Although she and Jim Westacott had only been man and wife in name for several years, she knew he would never tolerate her friendship with the Eurasian if he had any inkling of the true state of their relationship.

"It's nothing very much," she said with forced lightness. "Nurse Cunningham has been away ill, and as they are very busy at present I promised Dr. Manners last night that I would lend them a hand for a few days."

"It's the first I've heard of it," grunted Westacott, but he was not particularly interested in the way his wife spent her time and he did not pursue the subject.

"Where are you going?" she asked curiously as he picked up his hat. "This isn't your day for the hospital."

"I'm taking the afternoon off," he declared, and smiled at her look of astonishment. "If anyone wants me I shan't be available before my evening surgery."

His hand was on the door-latch when she called him back.

"I was going to ask you to give me an injection. Dr. Manners said last night that in view of this epidemic everyone ought to be done as a precaution."

Westacott shook his head.

"See me about it tonight, though I hardly think it's necessary in your case."

"You don't seem to care so much about my safety as you do your own," she snapped; but he was gone.

Fuming with anger, Edith went up to her room. But even before she had

reached the first landing James Westacott had passed out of her mind. Their affection for each other had been dead too long for his apparent lack of interest in her well-being to hurt her very deeply. She knew quite well that her real resentment was directed against Beney, and more particularly Nurse Cunningham, for spoiling her plans.

James Westacott had forgotten his wife just as quickly. His mind was fully occupied with the autopsy he had conducted during the morning on Ernest Winterbottom. Should he issue a death-certificate or request the coroner to conduct an investigation?

The answer to that question depended to some extent on this afternoon's expedition. He felt like an explorer who, groping forward in a fog in unknown territory, has arrived at the edge of a down slope. Would he be able to find a way to a safer level, or was he about to plunge over a hidden precipice?

Reaching the Bayswater Road he turned west; but he had proceeded only as far as the Park entrance when he was held up in the traffic. His attention on the traffic constable's white sleeve, he did not notice Tony on the sidewalk.

Tony stepped into the road and thrust his head through the near-side window. He had made three attempts to speak to the doctor on the telephone during the morning and had received evasive replies. Was Westacott really so unattainable as his staff suggested, or was he attempting to avoid further discussion?

"Hallo, Doctor; you're the very man I wanted to see."

He had had time carefully to think over the promise he had made the previous night and had decided he could not keep it. In his opinion the police ought to be advised immediately of Winterbottom's nocturnal adventure. He had quite made up his mind that if Westacott made a further excuse about telling Scotland Yard he would go there himself.

"I heard you'd been on the 'phone; I'm sorry I wasn't available."

As he made the conventional apology Westacott cursed the chance which had brought about this meeting. Not that he had anything against Tony. He regarded him as a pleasant enough youngster, but he had no intention of taking him into his confidence.

"I was sorry too," disclosed Tony dryly. "It may be rather awkward explaining the delay to the police."

"The police? Good God, man, you haven't been to them."

"No, but I'm going."

Tony was more determined than ever now; Westacott's tone suggested he was deliberately withholding vital information. It seemed decidedly fishy.

Westacott wondered desperately what he had better do. The traffic constable was on the point of waving him on. If he left Tony to carry out his threat it might——

"Here, jump in, there's a good fellow. I want to talk to you."

Tony hesitated. He was on his way to the Manners' house to offer his condolences to Hilary. He was walking because it was a fine day and he had plenty of time. It was the latter factor that decided him.

"Very well, I'll come as far as Holland Park."

He could stroll through Holland Walk and arrive at his destination at about the same time.

He scrambled in, the policeman dropped his arm, and Westacott let in his clutch. There was silence whilst the doctor changed to top gear. Tony was telling himself that he would not be diverted from his purpose. Westacott was carefully choosing his words.

"If I were to assure you that I have every intention of going to the police myself, what would you say to that?" he asked at length.

"I should say you're steering a bit off your course. This isn't the way to Scotland Yard."

"It is—indirectly. I'm hoping to secure a piece of evidence this afternoon which is of vital importance."

Tony was interested but sceptical.

"Oh? And where is it to be found?"

"At Rainhurst," revealed the doctor, and noted the look of amazement on his passenger's face.

"At Rainhurst?" echoed Tony. "Do you mean . . .? But surely——"

"I know what you're thinking, and I suppose I shall have to satisfy your curiosity. It's hardly likely you'll trust me blindly, is it?"

His intonation implied a question, and Tony shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he declared seriously. "I'm sorry, Doctor, but I'm remembering this is a murder case."

Westacott laughed mirthfully.

"Great Scott, man, you sound as though you suspected me of complicity!"

Tony felt a bit of a fool. Without analysing his thoughts too closely, that was precisely what he had suspected. But he had only vague doubts and not a single shred of evidence to support his supposition.

"I don't go so far as to suspect you," he denied. "But your hesitation in informing the police of what you know strikes me as definitely—peculiar,

shall we say?”

Westacott reached the decision that had been forming in his mind. Since Grayling knew so much it might be as well to tell him everything after all. It might be all to the good to have an independent witness to support him.

“Look here, Grayling,” he said in a much more serious tone of voice than he had hitherto employed, “up till a short time ago you and I were strangers to each other, and you can hardly blame me for hesitating to make you my confidant. But circumstances have thrown us together, and I’m going to tell you everything I know and ask you to help me.

“To say ‘everything I know’ gives rather the wrong impression,” he corrected himself. “ ‘Everything I fear’ would be nearer the mark perhaps. A lot of it is only guesswork so far, but I mean to get to the bottom of this ghastly business whatever comes of it.”

Tony was distinctly impressed by Westacott’s obvious sincerity. He was also intrigued by the suggestion of mystery. What was he about to hear?

Whilst the doctor was occupied in negotiating the bottle-neck at Notting Hill Gate, Tony readjusted his opinion of the man beside him. The promise of silence that the doctor had extracted from him was evidently the outcome of some other emotion than a guilty conscience. How easy it was to misjudge a fellow on a half-truth!

Clear of the traffic once more the doctor turned to Tony with a smile.

“You’ll be getting out in a moment or two; all I ask at present is that you trust me until this evening.”

Tony shook his head.

“I couldn’t possibly wait that long,” he grinned. “I’ll come with you if you’ll have me, and we’ll dig up this bit of evidence together.”

“ ‘Dig up’ is nearer the truth than you know, my friend. We’re going to Rainhurst to exhume the body of a dog.”

Tony felt a thrill of excitement run through him like fire.

“You mean Rags—the dog that bit the postmen?

“So you know about Rags?”

“Yes—Hilary—Miss Manners told me. I don t quite see the connection, though.”

“There may not be one—that’s what we’re going to find out.”

Tony frowned in perplexity.

“I suppose I’m dense, but——”

“Let’s consider events in their proper order, broke in Westacott. “I’m in

rather a fog myself, and it may help me clarify my thoughts if I relate them to you.

"We'll kick off with the day you first dropped out of the skies into my life. I make that my starting-point, because nothing of this sort ever happened to me before. I was merely a hard-working G.P. and my patients either died on my hands from natural causes or reacted to my treatment according to the text-books.

"Then you came along with a homicidal lunatic escaped from prison and somehow my little world's gone topsy-turvy.

"No, don't interrupt," he said as Tony was about to speak. "I had better make it quite clear at the outset, I suppose, that I'm not attaching the slightest blame to you in any shape or form. I regard you as much the victim of circumstances as I am myself."

He braked for another set of lights. Red and amber changed to green and he went on.

"These are the facts: Le Maitre, whom I assisted in tying up after your crash, committed a particularly brutal murder in a particular way. The feature of his crime which gave it the title 'The Tongue Murder' was that he cut out his victim's tongue after killing her.

"Medically, I gather, he was regarded as a comparatively harmless neurasthenic before the crime, and I understand that he's been fairly quiet since he's been in Broadmoor.

"Very well. Now consider what has happened in my little world since he appeared on the scene. I'm not going to attempt to explain these things at present, I might mention, because I haven't as yet a logical explanation to offer. That's why I haven't gone straight to the police; I want to have some facts at my finger-tips and not merely a cock-and-bull story of vague suspicions which prove to have no foundation."

"I'm damned glad you're telling me all this, Doctor," declared Tony gravely.

Westacott's reasons for asking him to keep his mouth shut were bona fide, after all. His distrust of the doctor's motives was apparently unwarranted. But since Westacott shared his apprehension that something was wrong somewhere, he was evidently justified in his assumption that Roberts' death was not an ordinary murder.

"I'm glad too," said Westacott shortly. "Now I've begun to talk I'm realizing more and more that this is too big a thing for one man to keep bottled up to himself. It's hell to have the thoughts I had last night. I'm not going to tell you what they were yet until I have some proof one way or the other.

“But to get on with the story. The first thing that happened that was a bit queer was that Rags had a fit of madness and bit the postman. I put that in here, talking to you, to keep things in their proper chronological order, though it may have nothing to do with the case at all. That is what we are going to find out.

“Nobody thought anything of it at the time, of course. Dogs seem born to bite postmen and dustmen and such-like. But Rags had always been a singularly good-tempered dog and had never shown any viciousness with anybody. I didn’t see him whilst the fit was on him so I’m only speaking from hearsay, but apparently he reverted to normal again afterwards.”

“It’s a great pity they had to do away with him,” said Tony, thinking of Hilary’s grief.

“Yes, but it was the only thing to do. Manners felt he couldn’t risk another attack which might result in something more serious.”

“And you think that whatever caused Rags to bite the postman affected Winterbottom when he left his house last night?”

“You’re going a bit too fast; I don’t think anything, I tell you. I’m merely trying to put two and two together.

“This I do know: Herbert Lane and Ernest Winterbottom both seemed perfectly ordinary human beings when they came to my surgery the night before last.

“Lane went away and committed a murder the same evening and Winterbottom committed one the following day. Both were crimes which showed decided symptoms of mania, and both were almost identical in detail with the murder committed by le Maitre. What do you make of that?”

Westacott turned excitedly towards Tony as he spoke and narrowly escaped collision with a car that was overtaking them. They were on the Great West Road now, where a driver needs a maximum of concentration on his job.

“I think it’s decidedly queer,” agreed Tony. “But the point is, what do you make of it? As a medical man, I mean?”

“Ah, there you’ve got me. If I believed there was such a thing as a murder bug I would say without hesitation that it had infected them—and the dog too. As it is, I don’t know—yet.”

“What does ‘yet’ mean?”

“Simply this: I conducted an autopsy on Winterbottom this morning and extracted certain organs for examination. Incidentally, there was no doubt about the cause of death. His heart was in a frightful state, and with the fever on him and the excitement which he was probably experiencing, I’m not

surprised that it collapsed.

"When we get to Rainhurst I'm going to dig up that dog and take out the liver, kidneys, and other portions of his interior. When the two sets of parts are analysed by an expert we may get somewhere."

"You don't suspect foul play?" queried Tony. "I mean——"

"Good heavens, no! What gives you that idea? Foul play on whose part? What possible motive could there be? How could you account for the choice of victims? I disliked Roberts, it's true, but I cannot imagine he ever gave anyone reason to want to murder him."

The doctor's logic was unanswerable, and Tony felt abashed. Once again he decided regretfully that he would make a very poor sort of detective. He was far too prone to jump wildly to conclusions.

They continued discussing the curious circumstances which brought them together until they at length reached the house at Rainhurst behind which Tony had crashed with le Maitre. It was now unoccupied. But Westacott had brought a spade, and, taking it from the back seat, he guided his companion to a small, freshly heaped mound at the far end of the garden.

Refusing Tony's offer of assistance, the doctor took off his coat and set to work. He had made a hole only a few inches deep, however, when one of the upper windows of the house was thrown open to reveal Erasmus Beney smiling down at them.

"You're wasting your time, Westacott," he called pleasantly. "The animal was buried in quicklime."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BENEY PROPOUNDS A THEORY

"WHAT the hell are you doing here?" demanded Westacott angrily.

Beney's smile became more pronounced.

"That is a question I was about to ask you."

"We're minding our own business. Suppose you do the same?"

"It happens to be my business—very much so. Surely when one finds people digging up one's property without leave one is entitled to some sort of explanation."

Westacott looked blank.

"Is this your property?"

"It is. Manners didn't happen to want it, so he sold it to me."

Westacott shouldered his spade.

"In that case I suppose we had better apologize and clear out."

He signed to Tony and started towards the house.

"There's no hurry," declared Beney with unruffled good humour. "Wait at least until I come down; I should like to speak to you."

Taking their acquiescence for granted he disappeared from the window.

"What shall we do?" growled Westacott. "Wait for the blighter or clear off?"

"Oh, I think we might as well wait," suggested Tony tactfully. "After all, we're in the wrong and he's being quite decent about it."

Although he did not like the Eurasian himself, common courtesy required that they should fall in with his wishes. But quite apart from any such consideration, Tony was glad of the opportunity of a talk with Beney for another reason.

His discussion with Westacott on the way down had set him thinking very deeply. It certainly was an extraordinary coincidence, to say the least of it, that two murders had been committed almost identical in detail with le Maitre's earlier crime. He did not know enough about medical science to suggest a reason for the imitations, and he was eager to hear as many expert opinions on the subject as possible.

As an ordinary general practitioner Westacott had gone as far as he could in extracting the vital organs of the dead Winterbottom, who they felt certain was the perpetrator of a most mysterious killing. Since Beney was a trained pathologist, surely he would be able to take them a step further if only Westacott could be persuaded to confide in him.

There was, of course, the quite understandable enmity between the two men over Edith Westacott, but in a case of this sort, involving questions of life and death, it was their duty to sink their personal differences in an effort to solve the problem which confronted them.

Whether Westacott liked it or not, Tony meant, if he could, to lead the coming conversation on to the subject of Roberts' murder and by a few judicious remarks force the doctor to seek the bacteriologist's advice.

As it happened Beney saved him the trouble.

"As I rather fancy we're all here this afternoon on the same errand, suppose you come in and swap information?" he suggested when he appeared at the front door.

Westacott opened his mouth to decline the invitation, but Tony forestalled him.

"Good idea!" he cried heartily. "We can do with some fresh light on our difficulties, can't we, Doctor?"

Westacott frowned angrily and wished he had not brought Tony after all.

"I don't think Beney will be able to tell us much," he demurred. "In any case I must be getting back to town; I've been away too long as it is."

Beney characteristically exposed his even teeth.

"You can spare as long as it would have taken you to dig up that dog," he declared.

Tony saw a chance to start a profitable discussion.

"How did you know Rags was buried in quicklime?" he asked.

"Because I conducted the funeral."

Westacott could not resist the impulse to put a question that had been worrying him.

"Why the quicklime?"

It seemed an unnecessary provision for the burial of a dog that had not been suffering from disease.

"Manners insisted on it," disclosed Beney. "Why, I cannot say."

"So it was Manners' idea, was it. Hum!"

"It does seem rather peculiar in view of after events, doesn't it?"

The Eurasian spoke softly, with an unmistakable significance.

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Westacott.

"I mean the same thought that was in your mind when you drove all this way to exhume a dead animal."

Westacott and Tony exchanged glances. Beney evidently knew something.

"If you're referring to Roberts' murder——" began Westacott, and stopped.

How could he go on with what he was about to say without telling Beney about Winterbottom?

Tony came to the rescue.

"The doctor and I thought it rather peculiar that the man who killed Roberts practically duplicated the mad actions of that man le Maitre."

"And since Rags also exhibited symptoms of mania when he bit the postman, you wanted to see if you could trace a connection," Beney finished for him. "It never occurred to me that the dog might have something to do with it."

"Then why did you come here today?" questioned Westacott. "You said just now you were here on the same errand as us."

"So I am. You don't suppose you're the only ones who have noticed the similarity in these murders, do you?"

"Well, what's your explanation?" asked Tony eagerly.

Beney smiled and held open the door.

"Come inside and I'll tell you," he promised. "It's hardly the theme for a doorstep."

Tony at once stepped across the threshold to give a lead to his companion. But Westacott had no intention of refusing the invitation again. His curiosity had temporarily overcome his dislike of Beney and he was as anxious as Tony to hear what he had to say.

Beney led his guests into the room adjoining the porch through the window of which Tony had heard him quarrelling with Manners on the occasion of his first visit. As he took a seat and accepted the cigarette his host offered him, Tony could not help recalling the incident, and a strange thought occurred to him.

Could it be possible that these extraordinary crimes were in any way connected with that quarrel? Manners had undoubtedly threatened to kill his partner if he persisted in making advances to Hilary, and in his reply Beney had hinted at some hold over the older man.

Was one of these scientists employing his specialized knowledge to try to destroy the other without incurring suspicion?

It was a fantastic idea and he dismissed it at once as impossible. How could such a theory be tenable for a single instant when the money-lender Isaacs was one of the victims? Roberts, who was attached to the Manners household, might possibly have been killed by mistake, but, as far as he was aware, Isaacs had no connection whatever either with Manners or Beney.

"I must apologize for the general disorder of the place," remarked Beney smoothly. "The house has not been occupied since I took it over from Manners, and I have not yet engaged any servants."

Westacott perched himself on the edge of the table.

"Never mind the formalities, Beney; let's hear what you have to say."

Beney shrugged his shoulders in dumb protest at the doctor's brusqueness.

"I don't know that I really have very much to say yet; that is, nothing definite. The whole thing seems so incredible that I should probably have dismissed it as impossible were it not that, as a scientist, I know that the seemingly impossible frequently happens."

He turned to Tony.

"I'm afraid many of my remarks will be somewhat over your head, Flight Lieutenant Grayling, but you must forgive me if I do not spend time attempting to put them in simple language as our friend Dr. Westacott is in a hurry."

Westacott uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"If I am it's because I want to get to the bottom of this matter."

"I can understand your impatience," said Beney with more seriousness than he had yet exhibited. "It must be unnerving to know that the infection may have occurred in your surgery."

"Infection? What do you mean?"

"Simply this: I believe that the man who killed Roberts as well as the man who killed Isaacs in some way contracted a bacteria infection from the man whose injuries we attended in this house."

"Good God, you can't mean it! What you're suggesting amounts to a murder bug!"

"Well, and why not? We know that bacteria convey anthrax, typhoid, erysipelas, leprosy, consumption, and other diseases too numerous to mention, so why not a disease of the brain that causes a man to determine to take a fellow human's life?"

The suggestion was stupefying in the magnitude of the possibilities it opened up, and his audience was overwhelmed by it.

Westacott stared at him in open-mouthed amazement whilst he reviewed the medical aspect of its implications.

Tony was equally astounded, although his thoughts were directed to a more personal consideration of the matter. If Beney's theory was correct, life would become a horrible nerve-racking business; just as one could never anticipate a cold in the head, so one would never be absolutely sure that one was not on the point of committing a murder.

Without waiting for them to recover Beney went on with his exposition.

"As you are well aware, Westacott, murder and other criminal tendencies are attributed medically to malformation of the brain or to some external injury causing certain cerebral cells to become congested, and a school of research is engaged in investigating this important branch of preventative therapeutics.

"But leave all that class of what we might call predestined murderers on one side. How often we hear of cases of murders committed on the spur of the moment—men destroyed in the heat of a quarrel, women strangled in a moment of passion! Questioned afterwards, the killer cannot explain the impulse that prompted him. 'Everything went blank,' he says, or, 'Something came over me.'

"Isn't it feasible to suggest that these people, who have lived normal lives up to the day of their crime, are not necessarily responsible for their hideous actions? Isn't it reasonable to suppose that their brains may have been poisoned by some form of bacterial organism?"

"It's a novel point of view," agreed Westacott hesitatingly, "but——"

"But no one has ever propounded it before. Is that it? That's no argument against it, though. No one thought seriously of bacteriology at all until Pasteur came on the scene."

Tony, who knew nothing whatever of the technical side of the argument, ventured a question:

"If you're right, and no one has troubled to evolve an antidote, how is it that murder isn't on the increase?"

Beney spread out his hands.

"That is a question I cannot answer adequately without further investigation. It may be that by summarily disposing of the victims, civilization has kept the scourge in check. It may be that the 'bug' only attacks people in a low state of health.

"Take the particular case we are considering as an example. We know

nothing about Roberts' murderer yet as the police have not tracked him down, but in the Isaacs case, the murderer Lane visited Westacott in fear of contracting diphtheria and insisted on a precautionary anti-toxin injection. Had Westacott examined him thoroughly I have no doubt that he would have found him generally below par."

Westacott and Tony exchanged glances. The secret they shared concerning Winterbottom tended to confirm Beney's suggestion.

"You don't think the anti-toxin injection had anything to do with it?" asked Westacott uneasily. "I mean, you suggested just now that the infection may have been contracted in my surgery; do you think it possible that I unwittingly passed the bug into these poor fellows' systems?"

Beney lit a cigarette whilst he considered the point.

"I'm very much afraid I do," he said at length, "though I hardly think it likely that the anti-toxin had anything to do with it. I'm not saying that just because you got it from us," he smiled, "but because I consider my deduction quite logical. After all, you told us that you had injected yourself with anti-toxin, yet you haven't committed a murder."

"That's true enough, and it couldn't be the needle, because I used the same one."

"It might be the cotton-wool with which you wiped the puncture. It might be anything. It might not even be through your surgery at all."

"But you think it is—why?"

Beney shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think anything really; I'm only surmising. Until we know something more about the bug—if it is a bug—we can't do much else. The reason I mentioned you and your surgery is because you are the only link between le Maitre and Lane. None of the rest of us has ever seen Lane or been anywhere near him."

Westacott made a wry grimace; it is not a pleasant thought to wonder if you are a "carrier" for murder.

"Having this idea in your mind, how is it you've come down here instead of coming to me and insisting on examining my surgery and instruments?"

"That's an easy one—I don't know yet what to look for. It might be a coccus or a bacillus; it might be motile or non-motile. I came here first to try and trace the thing at its source. Unfortunately we can't get a drop of blood from le Maitre because he's underground, but there's just a chance that I might get a culture from the room where you tied him up."

Westacott sprang to his feet.

“In the meantime my surgery—in fact, my whole house—may be reeking of infection. I think at the very least you might have warned me, Beney.”

“I intended to the moment I had anything definite to say. After all, Westacott, put yourself in my place; there may be nothing whatever in anything I’ve said. Time alone will tell.”

“Nevertheless, I’m going straight back to town to put the whole of my house in a state of isolation.”

“Just as you wish, but don’t blame me if the precaution is redundant.”

“I shall blame you if it’s a question of shutting the stable door after the horse has departed,” cried Westacott angrily, and made for the door.

Accompanied by Tony—Beney elected to stay to carry on with his self-imposed task—Westacott returned to London as fast as his car would take him.

They were at Shepherd’s Bush when Tony first spotted the news placard, and his heart went into his mouth.

“Another Tongue Murder”, read the ominous notice in thick black type.

Westacott slammed on the brakes and Tony hopped out and bought a copy of the paper. It was only a short paragraph, but he cried out sharply when he saw it.

“It’s a woman this time,” he disclosed hoarsely, “and—good God, Westacott—it happened in Manners’ laboratory!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE CASE OF NURSE CUNNINGHAM

WESTACOTT snatched the paper from him. The paragraph to which Tony had referred was in the stop-press column:

> Another murder in which the body was mutilated by having the tongue cut out was discovered late this afternoon [he read]. The victim was Miss Gladys Cunningham, a nurse employed at the laboratory belonging to Dr. Roland Manners and Mr. Erasmus Beney, the well-known bacteriologists.
>
> Only yesterday evening Dr. Manners' butler, Alfred Roberts, was found murdered in similar circumstances, and we understand that the police place great significance on the resemblance between the two crimes.

Westacott crushed the paper in his hand and stared grimly at his companion.

"Well, what do we do now?" he asked doubtfully.

"We go straight to the police and tell them all we know. It's what we ought to have done last night."

Tony had no intention of delaying action any longer. It was all very well for Westacott and Beney to want to find a medical explanation before they spoke; it was understandable that they should want to be in a position to supply a logical reason for the curious impulse to kill which seemed to be spreading like a disease.

As far as he was concerned there was no such consideration. The police were the proper people to deal with criminal matters, and the sooner they were in possession of all the facts the better for all concerned.

Westacott shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose you're right," he agreed. "Though I don't imagine they will be very pleased that we withheld information about Winterbottom. And what are we to say about Beney's theory of a germ?"

"Just repeat it and leave it to the police to follow it up or discard it as they think fit," said Tony as the doctor restarted the car.

He had been thinking a lot about Beney's assumptions during the drive, and he was inclined to regard them as so much moonshine. Whilst there was no denying that the similarity between all these murders was a remarkable series of coincidences, the suggestion that murder could be contracted was

rather too fantastic for him to accept without more definite proof than was so far forthcoming.

He rather expected that the police would look at the matter in the same light, and he was extremely surprised when Chief Inspector Dunthorne showed marked interest in everything Dr. Westacott had to tell him.

"It's not for me to comment on your reasons for withholding such vital information in a case of this sort, Doctor," declared Kitch when Westacott had come to the end of his story. "I shall make my report and leave it to higher authority to decide what action, if any, they will take about it. But I must admit that this idea of murder being catching strikes me as being worthy of serious investigation. For the moment, as you see, I have my hands full, but I have your address, and at the first convenient opportunity I will get in touch with you, to discuss it further."

The conversation took place in Dr. Manners' room at the laboratory, where Dunthorne was in charge of the inquiry into Nurse Cunningham's death. Busy though he was, he had received them the moment they sent in their names, although neither of them dreamed how keen he was to know exactly how they had occupied themselves during the afternoon.

Kitch remained deep in thought for a long time after his visitors had departed. Despite what he had told Westacott, he was far too practical-minded seriously to believe that the similarity between these tongue murders was due to a germ. It was a theory entirely outside the experience of Scotland Yard, and, like Tony, he would need some more convincing evidence than mere supposition before he entertained it.

His interest in the doctor's statement had a very different origin. As he had told Inspector Saunders when they were discussing the case at Scotland Yard that morning, the murders of Mrs. le Maitre, Isaacs, and Roberts were so alike in detail that it was impossible to ignore the conclusion that the two latter, at any rate, were the responsibility of the same mind, although actually executed by different individuals.

He was still in the dark as to how the actual murderers came to be induced to commit their particular crimes and the motive for them; those were details he had yet to unearth. Some form of hypnotism might be a feasible explanation, or a powerful drug which paralysed the higher cerebral centres of the brain and rendered the subject responsive to the suggestions of the person who had administered it.

Both possibilities pointed to someone with a considerable knowledge of medicine, and the fact that he had two doctors and a scientist connected in some way with one or more of the cases under review suggested to Kitch that

he was thinking along the right lines.

At present Westacott was his most likely suspect. Westacott had been present at le Maitre's death; he had seen Lane in his surgery shortly before Lane killed Isaacs, and now he had revealed that he had visited Winterbottom at his home immediately before Winterbottom left his sick-bed to murder Roberts.

That was a curious yarn and no mistake; what would Saunders make out of it? wondered Kitch sardonically. A man suffering from diphtheria and with a high temperature, getting out of bed, dressing himself and walking a mile or more before climbing into a house he had never visited before to murder a man he had never heard of except in casual conversation.

Why, the thing was so utterly incredible that not one person in ten thousand would believe it. Yet according to Westacott it had happened.

Not only according to Westacott either. That young Air Force officer was prepared to corroborate the story, and the wife also. Grayling might possibly be an accessary, but it was not very likely that Mrs. Winterbottom could be persuaded to tell lies about her dead husband. Anyway, he would be able better to decide on that point when he had interviewed her.

Before he got round to that, however, he must complete the investigation of this latest case. Now that he knew about Winterbottom's nocturnal excursion, the original idea that it might be the work of the same person who had killed Roberts must be abandoned. How else did the information he had received from Westacott affect the facts?

Nurse Cunningham was alive half an hour after noon, because he and Inspector Saunders saw her when they visited the laboratory in the hope of interviewing Dr. Manners.

She was afterwards seen at a neighbouring restaurant where she had her lunch, returning to the laboratory shortly after two o'clock. According to the porter of the block of buildings in which the laboratory was situated there was nothing in her manner to indicate that she was either worried or apprehensive.

On the contrary he declared that she was particularly bright and cheerful.

"She was feeling much better," she had said when he asked after her health as she passed his office; "she thought that returning to work had done her more good than any amount of physic."

Some time about three o'clock to three-fifteen Miss Hilary Manners entered the building and went up in the passenger-operated lift. He did not speak to her then, but when she came down again about ten minutes later he passed the time of day with her.

She answered him naturally, and he was quite convinced that she was neither flustered nor upset such as a young girl might be expected to be who had seen her second corpse within twenty-four hours. Apparently she was the last person except the murderer to see Nurse Cunningham alive, for the porter was quite positive that no stranger had entered the front door from the time she left to the moment the murder was discovered.

Questioned closely, however, he admitted that he was away from his desk once or twice but never for more than five minutes at a stretch.

The tragedy was discovered by the afternoon postman. He reached the laboratory on his ordinary round a few minutes before four o'clock and, having a package to deliver too big to go through the letter-box, he opened the outer door of the suite and entered, just as he had done on numerous other occasions.

This time his cry of "Post!" was strangled in his throat, for almost at his feet, as though she had been running for the exit when she was struck down, lay the huddled figure of a girl in a bloody coat which had once been white.

The man did not wait to make any sort of an examination, but dropping his bag of mail he raced down the stairs to tell the porter of his gruesome find. The porter at once rang Tottenham Court Road police-station and within five minutes the police were on the spot.

Since he was aware that Scotland Yard had been notified of the crime the inspector in charge did no more than bend over the girl to make quite certain that life was extinct. At once he made the startling discovery that, as in the cases of Isaacs and Roberts, her tongue had been cut out. He found it lying on the floor beside her.

Here was clearly a job for Kitch Dunthorne, and when the Inspector's telephoned report was received at the Yard a few minutes later Dunthorne and Saunders were dispatched to solve what the Press described as "Another Tongue Murder Mystery".

Kitch had not been on the spot many minutes before he realized that although this new killing was remarkably similar to the others in essentials, it differed considerably in details.

The fact that the body was lying near the outer door of the suite was not the only evidence that the nurse had been aware of her killer's intentions. In the laboratory proper there were signs of a furious struggle: a table was overturned, dozens of bottles and test-tubes were smashed to atoms, and the entire floor was strewn with broken glass, drugs, and the gelatine composition in which cultures of various highly contagious and infectious diseases were preserved for examination.

Because of the very real danger of contagion the police experts were

obliged to proceed with the utmost caution. Students from the adjacent School of Tropical Diseases in rubber gloves, masks, and protective clothing were brought in to handle the débris whilst Inspector Saunders hovered near by in an attempt to prevent them innocently destroying any clues which would lead to the perpetrator of the crime.

Before anything was allowed to be touched Dunthorne had succeeded in building up a rough reconstruction of what must have occurred. Everything pointed to the killer, on this occasion, being a woman.

Two still lukewarm and scarcely tasted cups of tea on one of the side-benches suggested that the dead nurse knew her murderess and had received her in a spirit of friendliness.

On the floor near by lay the shattered remains of the tea-pot, and tea-stains on the mob-cap which was still on the head of the body indicated that when the nurse had turned away for some reason her assailant took the opportunity to strike her on the back of the head with the nearest missile to hand.

The blow had not been sufficiently forcible to stun her, and she had turned to defend herself. Her broken spectacles intimated that the next attack had been aimed at her forehead. Afterwards, confused by the unexpectedness of the assault, and at a marked disadvantage from the loss of her glasses—one of the lenses which was still intact revealed that she was very short-sighted—the unfortunate girl had fought desperately for her life.

In the end, realizing the struggle was going against her, she had made a last despairing bid to escape from her relentless opponent. Within a few feet of the door and safety she had been overtaken and struck down, and the battered condition of her skull when her mob-cap was removed testified to the maniacal fury of her murderess, who must have continued hammering on her victim long after life was extinct. Followed the ghastly, senseless mutilation; the blood-stained scalpel which had been used was found lying by the corpse.

No finger-prints were discovered on the handle of the knife or the handle of the broken tea-pot, which indicated that the woman—if it was a woman—had worn gloves. The point was startlingly determined a few minutes after Kitch left Dr. Manners' room to inquire into the latest developments.

Saunders, who was missing, suddenly burst in through the outer door, followed by two detective constables. His expression of triumph made it clear that he had found something of importance.

"We've been inspecting the outside of the building," he cried enthusiastically, "and we've found these."

He held up a pair of woman's grey gloves rolled into a ball. They were stained and saturated with blood.

Dunthorne took them from him and examined them closely. Cut to a medium size, they were of an expensive quality, and the manufacturer's name indicated that they were imported from the Continent.

"Put two men on at once to trace where these were bought," ordered Kitch. "If they don't lead us to the actual person we want, at least they'll give us a line on her. When you've done that, come back and show me exactly where you picked them up."

The spot was at the bottom of an enclosed area at the back of the building. The gloves were lying immediately beneath the iron staircase provided as an emergency escape in case of fire as laid down by the Metropolitan Building Act.

Access to the fire-escape was gained on each floor through folding doors at the end of a corridor. They were provided with a quick-release bolt which came unfastened at the push of a short iron bar.

Kitch realized at once that he was faced with two alternatives. From the position in which the gloves were found they might have been flung haphazard through a window in the corridor or they might have been dropped by someone who used the fire-escape as a mean of egress from the building without the necessity of passing the porter's lodge.

The building was in the form of a square, and once in the area it would be possible to cross to one of the other blocks and, after entering through an emergency door, reach a different street from that in which the usual entrance to Manners' laboratory was situated.

Such a route would presuppose that the person using it had entered the building the same way, as it would be essential that the emergency doors be left unbolted against the return.

Altogether it would be a risky proceeding. In addition to the contingency of the doors, being fastened in the interim, there was a strong possibility of anyone attempting such a feat being seen from one of the many windows which overlooked the area.

Whilst he did not lose sight of the fact that in each of the tongue murders, as well as the original le Maitre case on which they appeared to be based, the killer had entered through a window, Kitch did not see how, this time, the feat could have been successfully accomplished.

His mind reverted to Hilary Manners, a female, and the last known person to see Nurse Cunningham alive. The police had been trying to trace her without avail ever since the porter had mentioned her visit to the laboratory; her evidence might be important. She had not returned to her home and no one there was able to account for her absence. It seemed that she had completely

vanished.

“Send a good man round to make discreet inquiries as to her size in gloves,” he gave instructions. “If he can get hold of an odd one, or at least find out the maker’s name, so much the better.”

The report came over the telephone half an hour later. Hilary’s size corresponded with the gloves found in the area, and she had at least two pairs of a similar make in her wardrobe.

Kitch dry-washed his hands in rising excitement.

“Get on to the B.B.C. and arrange for an S O S to be broadcast. You know what I want. Anyone who can give any information regarding the present whereabouts of Miss Hilary Manners, etc., etc., please communicate with Scotland Yard. But don’t give any indication as to why we want her.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HILARY HAS AN INJECTION

"THIS is the Regional Programme from London. Before I read the Second News there is one police message.

"We are asked by the Commissioner of Police to broadcast the following:

"Will Miss Hilary Manners, or any person who may be able to throw any light on her present whereabouts, please communicate with New Scotland Yard? Telephone number, Whitehall 1212."

Twenty million people heard the announcement delivered in calm, dispassionate tones which gave no inkling of the reason for it, yet not one single individual was in a position to comply with its request.

The surname, already notorious from its connection with the two murders which had followed each other with such startling rapidity, naturally gave rise to a considerable amount of rumour and conjecture.

Many, who had no conception whatever of the wanted girl's personality, expressed the opinion that she must at least be an accessary to the crimes. She was classified in various circles as the actual murderess, the mistress of the murderer, and a heartless siren who had caused them to be committed.

Some, with a more vivid imagination than their fellows, prophesied that she was yet another victim of the homicidal lunatic who had perpetrated the other two killings.

"When they do find her she'll have her head bashed in; you mark my words," they declared darkly.

On the other hand, those who were of Hilary's acquaintance were frankly worried. Not yet because she seemed to have disappeared—she had not been absent long enough to arouse anxiety in this respect—but because the police had considered it necessary to issue a broadcast appeal.

Why the urgency? How did she come to be mixed up in the affair? What possible evidence could she give that was vital to the investigation?

In the Manners kitchen the maids listened to the announcement of their mistress's name with a feeling of intense satisfaction. As Emily, the housemaid, put it: "It wasn't half exciting to be sort of mixed up in a real live murder, even if it do give you a creepy feeling down the spine when you pass the door of Roberts' pantry."

Now it seemed that they also had a connection with the death of Nurse Cunningham. There would be more reporters, more envious glances from other maids in the district, more interesting conversations with the tradesmen at the door, and more questions from handsome, well-set-up detectives.

"Do you think we ought to tell the doctor?" queried Betty doubtfully. "He's sure not to have been listening, and he's ever so worried about her."

"Yes, let's," agreed Emily, and smoothed down her apron. "I'd better go and then I can tell him about the gloves at the same time."

Manners received the information with a non-committal nod. He had been called to the laboratory directly the tragedy was discovered and was already aware that the police desired to interrogate his daughter regarding her visit during the afternoon. He had been assured that it was purely a question of routine.

But when the maid had departed he began to consider the matter from a fresh angle. This incident of the glove inquiry for instance; why should the police want to know Hilary's size and make of gloves if all they wanted from her was a confirmation that the nurse was alive and well when she left the laboratory? Surely the fools did not imagine she could have anything to do with the case?

He must look into this at once and find out what it was all about. He was not going to stand for Hilary being made the target of a police inquiry because the idiots were too inefficient to get on the track of the real criminal. No, by heaven; he would go round to Scotland Yard at once and tell them what he thought about their methods! The very idea!

He hurried from the study in search of his hat. The sight of the telephone in the hall gave him an idea and he dialled Dr. Westacott's surgery. A feminine voice answered his call.

"Hullo, Edith; is that you? This is Manners speaking. I suppose you haven't by any chance seen Hilary?"

"I'm afraid not, Doctor. Is anything wrong? I heard the police broadcast message just now and I wondered."

Manners snorted with barely suppressed indignation.

"There's nothing wrong," he declared feelingly. "Nothing whatever. It's only these meddlesome fools exceeding their duty. You've heard about our trouble at the lab, of course? Apparently Hilary popped in there during the afternoon. She must have left her gloves behind, or something, and these—these crass idiots are trying to make a mountain out of it. They actually had the impudence to send one of their plain-clothes men sneaking round to the house

to ask the maids what size she takes. I'm going down to Scotland Yard to tell them what I think about it."

"Her gloves?" echoed Edith sharply. "What can her gloves have to do with it? I don't understand."

"Neither do I, but I mean to find out. I just rang up to say that if Hilary should look in at your place send her straight home. She's not to go near Scotland Yard until I've seen her."

He rang off, leaving Edith Westacott in a state of excited confusion. Although she had not revealed the fact to Dr. Manners, she herself took exactly the same size in gloves as Hilary, and frequently bought them at the same shop. Could it be possible that it was she and not Hilary who had left a pair behind?

Heavens, she hoped not! If they traced the gloves to her she would have to admit that she had called to see Beney earlier in the day. It would mean lies and complications which she wished to avoid. She must go upstairs at once and see if her gloves were in her bag where she thought she had placed them.

As she left the room on her errand a maid passed on her way to answer the front door, and before Edith arrived at the first landing she heard Hilary's voice inquiring for her.

"Hilary!" she cried, and ran swiftly down the stairs again. "My dear, where have you been?"

"Where have I been? I've been to the pictures. Why, whatever's the excitement?"

"Then you don't know? You haven't heard?"

It seemed almost incredible. With the entire Metropolitan Police Force and the whole of Great Britain on the look-out for her, she had spent the last three hours or so at the cinema, blissfully ignorant that she was wanted.

"Heard what?" Hilary's eyes contracted with fear and she clutched at Edith's arm. "There's nothing wrong with Father, is there?"

She suddenly pictured him as she had seen him that morning lying across his desk with his head buried in his arms.

"No, Doctor Manners is perfectly all right. I was speaking to him on the telephone not five minutes ago."

"Then what is it? Why do you look so funny?"

Edith laughed hollowly.

"If I look funny, there's every reason for it. Come into the drawing-room and I'll tell you all about it. There's been another murder."

“Another one? Who is it this time? Nobody——”

“Nurse Cunningham.”

“Good lord! Why, I saw her this afternoon; she was perfectly all right then. When did it happen?”

Edith closed the door and turned to face her visitor, but she did not immediately answer the question.

Instead: “Where are your gloves?” she demanded.

Hilary frowned in perplexity.

“My gloves? What on earth have my gloves to do with it?”

“Everything. The police found your gloves in the laboratory and they want to ask you about them.”

Hilary looked both startled and astonished.

“There must be some mistake,” she cried incredulously. “It sounds too absurd to be true. In any case, I didn’t leave my gloves there now I come to think about it; I had them with me when I reached the Regina. I distinctly remember taking them off.”

“Are you sure?”

Edith felt a spasm of uneasiness. When first she had noticed that Hilary was gloveless she had persuaded herself that her own gloves must be upstairs; now there was a fresh doubt about it. Unless Hilary reassured her in a moment or two she would invent an excuse and slip up to make certain.

“Yes—at least, almost sure. You know how I am with gloves, Edith. I’m so often in the country that when I’m in town I’m always leaving them about somewhere.”

“I know, and this time you’ve been foolish enough to leave them on the scene of a murder.”

“But I didn’t, I tell you.” Why was Edith so idiotic as to persist? “I know I had them with me at the cinema.”

“Well, we can soon find out. Ring up and ask if they’ve been found.”

“All right, I will in a minute or two. First of all I want to hear about poor Gladys Cunningham. I can’t bring myself to believe that she’s been killed.”

“She’s dead right enough, I’m afraid. It must have happened almost immediately after you left her. Didn’t you see the placard? The papers say it’s another tongue murder.”

“Oh no!” Hilary cried out in shuddering horror.

She had only to close her eyes and a vision of Roberts as she had found him the previous night rose up to torture her.

“I’m afraid it’s true. Terrible, isn’t it? I wonder——”

She broke off and stared at Hilary with an expression of abject terror. Thoroughly frightened by it, Hilary cried out in alarm:

“Edith, whatever is the matter? Are you ill?”

Edith shook her head and sank into a chair.

“Those gloves—supposing they’ve found them and there’s blood on them. They’ll think . . . They’ll know——”

“Edith! Whatever are you talking about? You’re surely not afraid they’ll suspect me just because I left my gloves there—if I did leave them there? Why, they might not even be my gloves; I’m not the only person who wears ffolliott’s.”

“No, you’re not the only person who wears ffolliott’s.”

She was about to add: “I do myself”, but suddenly changed her mind. Of course! She had nothing to fear. They could never find out that she had been there. They might suspect it, but they could not prove it.

Even if it were she and not Hilary who had left her gloves behind, it did not really matter. She need not even bother to go upstairs to look. The point was no longer of any significance.

The unanticipated relief from worry made her laugh, an unmirthful ripple that bordered on hysteria.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she said thankfully. “Just for the moment I was afraid they might involve you. It gave me quite a turn. It was stupid of me, I suppose, but you’ve had enough trouble to face, with Roberts last night.”

Hilary was touched by her apparent solicitude.

“It was most awfully sweet of you, Edith dear, but really I’ve nothing whatever to be afraid of. If Scotland Yard want to interview me, I suppose I’ll have to go round to see them, though I confess I shan’t enjoy it. They ask such terribly frank questions. ‘Had Roberts ever got any of the maids into trouble?’ was one of them this morning, and there were others even worse.”

Edith smiled at the younger girl’s unsophisticated outlook. She had completely recovered her composure.

“Well, you won’t have to go—at present at any rate. Dr. Manners said over the telephone that you’re not to go near Scotland Yard until you’ve seen him. I was to send you straight home.”

“Oh, in that case I had better be getting along. I really called here to see Dr. Westacott. He isn’t in, I suppose?”

“No, he took the afternoon off, and he’s a lot of calls to make in

consequence."

Hilary moved towards the door.

"It doesn't matter; tomorrow will do just as well."

"What was it you wanted; is it anything I can do?"

"I don't think so, thanks. Daddy said at lunch something about getting Dr. Westacott to give me a precautionary injection of anti-toxin. You remember, he was talking about it at dinner last night."

"Yes, I remember; as a matter of fact, I've already taken his advice." A sudden thought struck her. "Would you like me to do it for you? I'm quite qualified, you know."

Hilary seized on the idea with avidity.

"Would you? I would much rather. I really want to be done in the leg so as not to show a mark, but I don't know whether I could bring myself to suggest it to the doctor."

Edith laughed.

"I understand, you modest little violet. There certainly is a bit of a mark."

She pulled up her left sleeve to reveal an angry mottled rash above the elbow.

"I did it myself, so I can't complain, but if I had thought about it I should have adopted your suggestion. Come into the surgery; it won't take more than a minute or two."

In the surgery, whilst Hilary prepared herself, Edith got ready the hypodermic syringe and charged it from a tiny rubber-capped phial.

"You're in luck," she commented. "This is the very last dose until James gets some more in. Ready?"

A touch with a pad of cotton-wool soaked with iodine, a sharp prick, and the inoculation was completed.

"Feel all right? Good! You may have a slight nettle-rash tomorrow, but don't worry; it will soon go away. If you find a detective on the doorstep when you get home you can tell him about this as an excuse to leave you alone."

"I'll remember," promised Hilary; but the smile with which she said it did not stay with her very long after she was in the taxi which she hired to take her home.

What could be the meaning of these terrible murders which had been committed without apparent rhyme or reason? What malignant Fate had ordained that they should be so closely connected with her life? It was monstrous that her darling father who had already suffered so much at the

hands of his unscrupulous partner should be the victim of such hideous circumstances.

The story he had told her of his early misfortune in Assam had been running through her brain all the afternoon, and it was really in order to think it over quietly that she had gone into the isolation of the Regina Cinema.

If only she could think of some way of getting even with Erasmus Beney! She would not rest until she found a means of ridding her father from his clutches. Perhaps if she were clever enough she could get him to show her the dead overseer's report. If it were destroyed . . .

The cab drew into the kerb and she realized her journey was over. Someone opened the door, and she got out, to find herself face to face with the man who had been occupying her thoughts.

"Hilary, where have you been?" asked Beney anxiously.

She ignored him entirely and paid off her driver. As she attempted to enter her gate Beney placed himself in front of her.

"What have you been doing?" he persisted.

She told him the first thing that entered her head.

"I've been inoculated."

He looked at her aghast.

"Inoculated?" he cried roughly. "By whom?"

"If you must know," she replied icily, "by Mrs. Westacott. Now will you kindly let me pass?"

He ignored her request. His face was working wildly and she could see that he was deeply agitated.

"No, Hilary, I won't. I dare not. My dear, you are in the most deadly danger!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TONY LASHES OUT

IT was quite by chance that Tony Grayling heard the police broadcast inquiring for news of Hilary. He was in his club at the time, scanning the evening papers and meditating on the amazing theory put forward by Beney, and its effect on civilization if it could be proved to be true.

If murder were actually a disease, as he had suggested, and modern medical science could isolate the virus, as it had succeeded in doing in so many malignant complaints, why, it might herald the dawn of a new era. Supposing, for instance——

"We are asked by the Commissioner of Police to broadcast the following:

"Will Miss Hilary Manners, or any person who may be able to throw any light on her present whereabouts . . ."

The name cut through his train of thought like the knife of a guillotine. The police wanted Hilary? What the devil for? Good God! Surely it was not she who found the corpse at the laboratory.

Hell's bells! If it were! Poor little kid! Coming so soon after the shock of discovering Roberts' dead body it would be enough to cause a nervous collapse.

His heart contracted with agony as, in the absence of any knowledge of the reason for the police broadcast, he visualized her entering the laboratory door and seeing the dead nurse huddled lifeless on the floor.

Suddenly another thought entered his tortured brain, paralysing in its frightfulness. If Beney were right and the impulse to murder was the result of a germ, could it be possible that Hilary had contracted it?

"No, no!" he said to himself as the bitterness of the idea scarred his mind like some powerful acid. "Not that, oh, God, not that!"

It was impossible to believe that Hilary, the personification of sweet innocence, could suffer such an awful soul-shattering calamity. She could not be the culprit; it was unthinkable, absurd, bizarre.

Yet, according to Beney, it was highly probable that the others, Lane and Winterbottom, had been infected with a murder germ carried unknowingly by Westacott. And if the others, why not Hilary—or anyone else for that matter? Perhaps he himself—especially as he had been so much in the doctor's

company.

Far rather that than Hilary. Far better that he should be the one to commit the awful crime of murder than the girl whom he now realized he had come to regard as the most desirable creature in the world.

The truth entered his mind in a vivid flash of inspiration. He loved her, had loved her ever since first they met. Up till now he had not realized it. He had regarded the attraction he felt towards her as no more serious than the emotion he had experienced a hundred times before.

It had needed this terrible nerve-shattering emergency, to bring the reality home to him. He loved her, and wherever she was, whatever she had done, nothing, neither doubt, suspicion, nor the accusation of proved facts, would ever be able to shake his trust in her.

If she had done this ghastly deed—and his innermost ego refused still to believe that she had—he would stand by her to the bitter end. Should the chance offer he would take her place and, if necessary, gladly give his life for her. She should not suffer so much as a single moment of unhappiness if any effort on his part could spare her.

Then why are you still sitting here, you ten thousand times a fool? Get going, and put your fine thoughts into words! Even if you are allowing your imagination to run away with you, and she is no more responsible for this unfortunate nurse's death than you are yourself, the fact that the police want to interview her means that she is in some sort of predicament where she needs a friend to stand by her. Find her and see her through.

Eager for action he sprang to his feet. His brain was working at top speed. What should he do? No use to try her home; the police would have done that already. Damn it! If only he knew more about her friends and acquaintances!

He knew the Westacotts though; perhaps the doctor or his wife would help. At least they might offer a suggestion as to the most likely places to search.

He went into a telephone box and dialled the doctor's surgery. The high-pitched "burr!" told him the number was engaged. Curse the delay! Replacing the receiver he took a turn or two up and down the corridor; then tried the number again. Still engaged. Hell and damnation!

Should he wait any longer? No, it was wasting valuable time. Why not go round there; the surgery was no more than ten minutes in a taxi?

Better still, he would fetch his own car from the garage where it was kept. Then if the Westacotts gave him a clue or two he would be in a position to follow them up.

Had he carried out his first idea and taken a taxi he would have reached the

Westacotts' house before Hilary left. As it was, Fate ordained that when he arrived at the garage he found his car blocked by another which had its back wheels jacked up for a mechanic to change a tyre.

Ordinarily the process of bolting on the spare wheel would not have taken more than a few minutes, but on this occasion, owing to the fact that the spare had not been in use for many thousands of miles, the mechanic met with considerable difficulty in freeing a patent locking-device which retained it in position.

The minutes passed with maddening frequency whilst Tony fretted and fumed. To his repeated requests to hurry up the man replied: "I shan't be more than a jiffy, sir." Since he had already removed the punctured wheel he was loth to replace it and lower the car from the jack.

The operation was completed at last, the obstructing car was removed, and Tony was free to drive out into the street. He turned westwards and, driving as fast as the exigencies of London traffic would allow, reached Devon Square a few minutes after Hilary's taxi had departed.

Whilst he was sorry to have missed her, he was vastly relieved to learn that she was safe and well, and, thanking the maid who informed him that she had gone home—in the circumstances he had not bothered to interview Mrs. Westacott—he re-entered his car and headed for the Manners' residence.

His heart was light, with the thought that he would soon be with her, as he passed through the gate and rang the house bell. Perhaps it was not quite the right time to tell her that he loved her, but he would offer to serve her in any way he could, and surely she would be able to read between the lines.

The door was opened by Emily, who looked at him expectantly.

"May I see Miss Manners?" he asked brightly.

"Miss Hilary isn't at home, sir. She's not been home since after lunch."

"Not at home?" Of course, Hilary had instructed the maid to say that so as not to be disturbed.

He smiled knowingly.

"I quite understand," he said, "but this is different. Ask her if she will see me—Flight Lieutenant Grayling is the name."

Emily shook her head.

"But I've just said she isn't at home, sir. They've been looking for her all over the place, and the doctor is most worried."

Tony decided it was time to be firm.

"I happen to know for a fact that she is at home," he declared

authoritatively. “I’ve just come from Dr. Westacott’s, and she left there a few minutes before me in a taxi.”

Emily was interested but sceptical.

“Miss Hilary did, sir? Are you sure? Why, the doctor rang up Mrs. Westacott just before he went out and they said they had not seen anything of her.”

“She must have reached there shortly afterwards. Anyway, she had been there, and they told me quite distinctly that she left to come here.”

Emily looked blank. The situation was getting beyond her comprehension.

“Well, she hasn’t arrived yet, sir. Lawks a’mercy, I wonder what could have happened to her now!”

Tony wondered also, but he would obviously make no progress by continuing to bandy words with the maid. With a word of excuse he retired to his car.

What should he do now. It was maddening to think that he had so nearly caught up with her only to lose her again. Where could she have gone—Scotland Yard? That must be it. He had better go there and find out; it was no damned use remaining here.

He was on the point of restarting his engine when a hand tapped sharply on the near-side window. Tony lowered it and looked out to find himself faced by a uniformed constable.

“How long are you proposing to stay here, sir?”

“Not any time; I’m just going.”

“That’s all right, sir; I thought at first you were the same gentleman who was stopped down the road for the past hour, but I see now it isn’t the same car, though it’s like it.”

Tony pricked up his ears.

“What was he like? Did you see his face? Was he short and fat and—and oily-looking?”

The constable chuckled.

“I suppose that would about describe him. Is he a friend of yours?”

“Anything but!” snapped back Tony, and pressed the self-starter.

For some unaccountable reason Tony was afraid. Beney—he was certain in his mind that it was Beney—had not waited for an hour in a car without a very definite purpose. If his business in the road had been legitimate he could have spent the time in the Manners’ house.

The fact that the termination of his vigil coincided with Hilary’s arrival

pointed to a sinister conclusion. Somehow—by guile or force—he had got the girl into his car and had driven off with her.

As he let in his clutch and moved off down the road, Tony tried hard to deduce the Eurasian's motive. It might be, of course, that since he also was in love with her—Tony could never forget that conversation between Beney and Manners he had overheard at Rainhurst—his intentions were perfectly innocent.

Perhaps he had merely forestalled Tony in an act of chivalry. He might only be escorting her in the ordeal of visiting Scotland Yard, or he might, in defiance of the law, have taken her out of London so that the searching detectives would be unable to find her.

Whilst these were undoubtedly possibilities, Tony could not bring himself to believe that they were probabilities. Either jealousy or instinct insisted that, whatever prompted Beney's action, it was something in his own interest.

He ground his teeth with rage at the thought of Hilary in the Eurasian's power. He pictured her, terrified and panic-stricken, trying to escape, whilst the dark-skinned Beney, cool and triumphant, gloated over her helplessness. He imagined all the ghastly things that might be happening to her.

Somehow he would, he must, find her and assure himself that she was all right. He believed that if she had stood in need of a true friend before, her extremity was now a thousand times more urgent. In his distress he pictured Beney as a loathsome satyr.

The devil of it was, where was he to look? If he went to Scotland Yard first and they had gone out of town, he would have wasted an hour. But he would waste two or three if he raced down to Rainhurst and they were still in London.

Nevertheless, he must take some risk if he was to attain his objective, and, banking on the secretiveness with which Beney had waylaid Hilary, he headed his car towards the Great West Road.

Fear urged him on whilst the traffic held him back, and by the time he reached the limit of the thirty-mile-an-hour area he had worked himself into a ferment. Supposing Beney was a potential murderer who had lured Hilary away from home before he killed her. Supposing he was some sort of maniac who had engineered these other crimes in order to divert suspicion from the act he was contemplating.

Tony was too upset to appreciate that his thoughts were entirely illogical. He only knew they existed, chasing one another like hideous phantoms through his tortured brain. They galled him like spurs, and under their influence he drove as he had never driven before.

Towns, villages, road-signs flashed past. With accelerator hard down the

car ate up the miles. Fast as it went Tony endeavoured with every trick he knew to make it go yet faster.

He reached the turning from the main road at last and, travelling more cautiously now because of the winding way, he presently drew up before the house at Rainhurst that he had left only a few hours earlier.

There was a car already in the drive, and with a thrill of satisfaction he recognized it as the one in which Beney had arrived during the afternoon.

They were here, then. His guess was right. For some reason of his own Beney had driven Hilary to a place where he thought they would be uninterrupted.

Keyed up with purpose, Tony switched off his engine and sprang to the ground. There was a light in the dining-room and he made towards it.

The sight which met his eyes as he peered through a chink between the curtains made his blood run cold. Hilary was propped up in a chair. Her wrists and ankles were securely lashed with cord and her mouth was swathed in a bandage which acted as a gag.

Beney was standing by the table, on which some bottles of drugs, cotton-wool, and other medical paraphernalia were arranged. In his hand was a hypodermic syringe which he was in the act of charging.

As Tony watched he laid it down and, crossing to Hilary, drew back her sleeve and dabbed a pad of cotton-wool on her forearm.

Tony waited no longer. With a bellow of animal rage he hurled himself bodily against the window. His shoulder sent the wood and glass flying in fragments, and the impetus of his rush carried him over the sill and into the room.

As he scrambled to his feet he was conscious that Beney had the hypodermic in his hand. The knowledge sent him berserk, and he advanced ruthlessly on his enemy.

“Don’t be a fool, man!” shouted Beney; but he got no further.

Tony’s fist took him on the point of the jaw, and Beney collapsed in an unconscious heap.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HILARY ESCAPES FROM RESTRAINT

NOW that his anger was temporarily satisfied Tony turned his attention to Hilary. He had not yet done with Beney by any means, but the Eurasian would be *hors de combat* for some minutes, and there would be little satisfaction in thrashing him until he had recovered from the initial onslaught.

As he wrestled with the knot which secured the bandage round her mouth Tony could not help noticing the strange look in Hilary's eyes. The pupils were dilated, making her expression appear hideously repellent.

Had she been a stranger the look would have caused him to form an adverse opinion of her nature, but with love blinding his judgment, he dismissed it as the outward and visible sign of the terrifying ordeal with which she had been confronted.

"You poor darling," he murmured encouragingly as he unwound the gag which prevented her from speaking. "What you must have suffered! Thank God I found you in time!"

"Thanks awfully," she croaked as soon as she was free and worked her jaws to loosen them. "Get me out of these ropes as quickly as you can; I've work to do."

The tone in which she spoke was so unlike that of the girl he thought he knew that he paused in his task and stared at her in astonishment.

"Work?" he echoed. "What work? If you mean going to Scotland Yard, I don't think there's any hurry about that."

The expression in her eyes became a look of cunning.

"I didn't say Scotland Yard, did I? They don't know everything by any means. What are you waiting for? Hurry, man, hurry!"

Tony recommenced his wrestle with the cords with a heavy heart. If she could speak to him like that when he had strained every nerve to come to her rescue, she could not possess any of the feelings for him that he had for her. She obviously regarded him as no more than a convenience.

"Why did he bring you down here?" he asked as he succeeded in releasing her hands. "How was it he got you into his car?"

Hilary laughed harshly.

“He brought me here because he’s afraid of what I know. I thought he was going to take me to——Never mind.”

She stood up as Tony cast loose her feet and, crossing to where it lay on the floor, picked up the hypodermic syringe. Bending over the still unconscious man, she pushed back the sleeve of his right arm.

Tony seized her by the wrist.

“Whatever are you going to do?” he cried.

She shook herself free.

“Do? Why, serve him as he was going to serve me. That’s the only way to treat a spy.”

“A spy?”

What could she mean? Tony was aghast and desperately worried. She seemed to be acting as though her brain were affected.

“Yes, he’s a spy all right—an enemy spy.”

She leaned towards Beney again, but Tony restrained her. Somehow he must get her out of the room before she could do any damage. Heaven alone knew what that syringe might contain.

“I’m sure you’re quite right about him,” he said to humour her. “But don’t you think this is a case for the police? He can’t get away whilst I’m here. Supposing you ring up the local station and tell them to send a couple of constables?”

She shook her head.

“We can’t do that; the ’phone’s been disconnected since Father gave up the place.”

Tony bit his lips; he must do something.

“Well, my car is outside. You could run down and fetch them; it isn’t very far.”

To his relief she agreed instantly.

“I had forgotten the car. Of course!”

Throwing the syringe on the table she walked swiftly towards the door.

Tony followed, his mind a riot of indecision. He was glad she had acceded to his suggestion, but at the same time he was apprehensive about allowing her to go alone. Was it safe for her to drive in her present condition? Ought not he to accompany her?

She paused on the threshold and turned towards him.

“You’re not coming too,” she declared fiercely. “You must stay here and

keep watch."

Tony forced a reassuring smile.

"Oh, I think he'll be all right. That crack I gave him will keep him quiet for some time yet."

She bit her lip; then quite unexpectedly her manner changed. The strangeness seemed to leave her and she became almost her normal self.

"You're a good sport, Tony, to have done all this for me," she told him warmly. "I know just what you're thinking, but you're quite wrong. I bumped my head struggling with him on the way down, and it made me a bit dizzy, I suppose. But I'm all right now, really I am."

Tony breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm darned glad to hear it," he declared fervently. "I was beginning to think you were ill."

She smiled an impish smile which did not extend to her eyes. Fixed and haunted, they suggested to Tony a soul in torment.

"I'm no more ill than you are, my dear man." She held out her hand. "See? My nerves are as steady as a rock."

"All the same, I think I will come with you," insisted Tony dryly. "If Beney does get away the police will soon catch him again."

He was determined not to leave her alone whilst that look remained in her eyes.

She shrugged her shoulders resignedly.

"Have it your own way, but at least have the sense to tie his hands and feet before we start. Then you can come with a clear conscience."

It was a practical suggestion, and Tony decided to adopt it. It was something that she had raised no further objection to him accompanying her.

As he picked up the cord to tie Beney's hands she strolled slowly through the doorway.

"Where are you going?" he asked sharply.

"Merely to get some fresh air. How suspicious you are!"

Tony grunted and went on with his work. His ears were tuned for the first sound of the self-starter. If he heard it he meant to drop everything and run.

Beney was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness. His eyelids twitched, and when Tony lifted his arm he pulled it away.

Tony finished tying his prisoner's hands and was about to start on the feet. His actions were mechanical, his mind was centred on Hilary.

What was she doing out there? He wished she would come back. What the deuce could have caused that icily detached, far-away manner of hers? As soon as they had informed the police about Beney he would jolly well take her home. She ought to be in bed, under the care of a qualified psychologist.

Brrrrrrrr. . . . The self-starter whirred and Tony sprang to his feet. It sounded like his machine, but it seemed to come from a considerable distance. What the devil . . .?

He raced through the door into the drive. His car was no longer where he had left it. Hilary had released the brake and pushed it silently as far as the road.

Tony broke into a sprint, but it was no use. She had tricked him neatly with her common sense suggestion that he should secure Beney. Long before he could get anywhere near her she had let in the clutch and driven out of his reach.

Wasting no time or regrets for his foolishness in trusting her, Tony ran back to the house. Beney's car was still available. He would take it and go in pursuit. Despite the advantage of her flying start, there was just a chance that he might catch up with her.

Tearing open the door he leapt into the driving-seat and pressed the self-starter. The engine awoke with a roar. Jamming the gear-lever into reverse he let in the clutch.

At the first revolution of the wheels he knew he was out-generalled. One of the back tyres was flat, either from a puncture or because Hilary had let out the air. Cunning little devil!

He switched off the engine and stepped back into the drive. What should he do now? He had lost Hilary, but he still had Beney.

As he re-entered the house he heard a noise in the dining-room. Beney had come to and was sitting up, struggling with his bonds. His face was ashen from some powerful emotion.

"Where is she?" he demanded fiercely. "What have you done with her? You meddlesome fool!"

"Don't you talk to me like that!" cried Tony angrily.

The edge of his temper was ragged with his defeat.

Beney was too upset to be intimidated. Raising his bound hands he shook them furiously.

"Do you know what you've done?" he asked, and there was something in his tone that commanded his hearer's attention. "You've released a potential murderess!"

A murderess? Hilary? The thing was impossible, ridiculous. And yet—that look in her eyes, the strangeness of her manner; could that be the explanation of them?

"Good God, man, what are you saying? How do you know? How could she be?"

"She's been infected with the murder germ—the thing I was telling you about this afternoon."

"How do you know?"

"Don't waste time asking a lot of damned silly questions. I do know; I'll explain how as we go along. We must get after her at once and try to stop her—if we can."

"All right, come on. Hell, isn't there a knife anywhere?"

Utterly flabbergasted though he was by the terrible revelation, Tony was convinced that Beney was speaking the truth. He was intensely curious to hear the full story; but he realized that every second was vital. For the time being he must subordinate himself to Beney's leadership.

Then, as he looked anxiously around for something with which to sever Beney's bonds, his eye fell on the hypodermic syringe, and he paused. Was Beney trying to bluff him for some reason just as Hilary had bluffed him a few minutes earlier?

"What about this?" he asked suspiciously. "What were you going to do to her when I arrived?"

Beney uttered an exclamation of exasperation.

"It's a strong dose of morphia I intended to inject to keep her quiet. If you hadn't butted in——"

"All right, all right; I thought I was acting in her interests just the same as you did. I would give my right hand to undo my mistake."

It was sheer unadulterated hell to know that it was his fault that Hilary was free. Once again his fatal tendency for impulsively jumping to conclusions had been his undoing. If he had waited to question Beney instead of judging him blindly to be a villain, this dreadful situation would not have arisen.

In Beney's care she could have been restrained until the effect of the germ, which had temporarily obtained control of her brain, had worn off or been counteracted. Now, through his crass idiocy she had given them the slip and was on her way to perpetrate some ghastly murder.

He winced with inexpressible agony as, in his mind, he saw her creeping up behind her unsuspecting victim. It was the limit of horror to visualize her little hand dealing a succession of brutal blows. And afterwards, when the

lifeless corpse lay at her feet, she would force open the stiffening jaws and ruthlessly hack at the thing that had been a tongue.

Frightful though the contemplation of such a scene was, it was a mere travesty beside the anguish of soul that Hilary would experience later. When the effect of the germ had dissipated, and she realized what she had done, her youthful innocence would be consumed in the fires of hell. How could she endure the ordeal of a trial and the inevitable wait in prison until death released her from her misery? Perhaps even the solace of death would be denied her.

No girl of her disposition, brought up as she had been brought up, could undergo such mental suffering without her brain being affected. She would lose her reason, and the authorities, with mistaken mercy, would spare her life only to incarcerate her in some criminal asylum where she would grow old behind bars, to Tony's mind a punishment worse than death.

It should not be. Although she had got away she would not yet have had time to carry out the crime the devil that possessed her contemplated. Somehow she must be frustrated.

Afterwards Tony could never quite determine how long it took before they started in pursuit. From the moment when he released Beney's wrists to the moment when, the dud wheel changed for the spare, he drove out on to the road was a jumbled nightmare. In the gathering dusk he worked as he had never worked before, his actions mechanical whilst his brain seethed with hideous thoughts.

"Where do you think she's gone?" he asked grimly, as the car leapt forward under full throttle.

Beney considered carefully. The question had been in his mind ever since he knew that Hilary had got away.

"London, I think. I can't imagine where else she would make for."

Tony seized on the note of hesitation.

"Can't you be sure, man?" he asked irritably. "Everything depends on us not making a mistake."

"It's impossible to be sure," retorted Beney. "The most we can do is to guess."

"In that case we had better stop at the first telephone we come to and warn Scotland Yard to have every policeman in England on the look-out for her."

"I think you're right," agreed Beney decisively. "I brought her down here to shield her from publicity, but it's too late for that now. There's a 'phone-box just after you reach the main road."

Tony drew up outside it with a screech of brakes. He gave the Whitehall

number and in a few seconds was talking to Chief Inspector Dunthorne.

When he rejoined his companion he was smiling hopefully.

“I’ve given them a full description of the car and they’ll concentrate on intercepting it,” he explained. “Thank God for the wireless; they’ll have notified the whole Metropolitan area by now.”

“I suppose they asked a lot of questions?”

“He would have done if I had let him. But I told him every second was of importance and he agreed to wait for the story until later. Incidentally, I’ve still to hear it myself. Just exactly how do you know Hilary has contracted a murder germ?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WESTACOTT IS FOUND DEAD

BENEY answered Tony's question as they drove swiftly towards London through the night.

"You remember when you left me this afternoon," he began, "I told you and Westacott that I had run down to Rainhurst to look for a culture to substantiate the theory I put forward to you? Well, that was only partly true; I already had what I wanted."

Tony glanced incredulously towards him, but the Eurasian's face was invisible in the darkness of the car.

"Do you mean you had established that a murder germ actually existed?"

If that were true, why had the fool kept it to himself? To Tony's frank mind such an important discovery ought to have been communicated to the responsible authorities immediately.

"The answer is both yes and no. Yes in that I had isolated a foreign organism for which I was unable to account in any other way. No because I needed further proof before I could be absolutely certain of its effect. These things take time, you know. I don't suppose you have much knowledge of bacteria. They are organisms of such infinitesimal size that they can only be seen at all through a powerful microscope.

"After I had prepared a specimen in pure culture I had to wait whilst the organisms within it developed. I watched it daily for several weeks before I was able to say with any degree of certainty that it was a new classification of germ."

"Several weeks? But the first murder only took place yesterday."

"I know it did, and it gave me the first real clue to the problem which confronted me. But if you will only keep your questions until afterwards instead of interrupting, I shall be able to explain much better."

"Sorry," muttered Tony, and concentrated his attention on the road.

"My interest in the matter began with the death of Hilary's dog," went on Beney. "It behaved so strangely during its attack of madness that I thought it would be interesting to conduct an autopsy on it to try to discover what had affected it.

“Hilary objected of course—women are always ridiculously sentimental about these things—so I was obliged to resort to a harmless subterfuge. What we actually buried in the garden was a box of old books I picked out of an attic, as you would have discovered if Westacott had persisted in his exhumation operations.”

“Then there wasn’t any quicklime?”

Tony could not resist putting the question.

“No, there was no quicklime; nor did I want Westacott to find out the real state of affairs for a reason which I will tell you in due course.

“I found, on examination, that the animal’s brain was perfectly normal and, intrigued by the apparent absence of any symptoms to account for its remarkable change of character, I proceeded to apply a number of other tests.

“There’s no point in going into exhaustive details which you would probably not understand, but a microscopic examination of a drop of blood revealed the presence of certain streptococci which, to put it simply, should not have been present.

“I realized at once that I was on the track of something definitely unusual which led me to make a thorough inspection of the whole body. To my surprise I found out that the animal had received a recent hypodermic injection. There was a small puncture behind the right fore-quarter, which was, of course, quite hidden by the hair but which was unmistakable to anyone with medical knowledge because of the characteristic congestion of the neighbouring veins.

“Now you can see where we’re getting to. The dog’s fit of savageness was brought about deliberately and not by natural causes.”

“Good God, man, do you mean to say——”

“I do, but have patience until I’ve told you everything.

“As you can readily understand, it never occurred to me at first just why anyone should take the trouble to carry out such a peculiar experiment on a domestic pet. Nor with the information at my disposal could I form an exact opinion as to the nature of the germ with which it had been infected; its form and habits were quite outside my experience. I was handicapped for lack of data.

“The need was supplied when these mysterious murders began to take place. I admit that I was not particularly stirred by the first one. Except that I was mildly interested in the similarity of detail with the crime committed by le Maitre, the death of a money-lender awakened little surprise; a man of his calling makes enemies easily.

“The murder of Roberts was a different matter. The same ghastly details were present yet there was an entire absence of motive. As Manners’ partner, I knew Roberts well, and he never seemed to me to be the sort of man who would give anyone cause to destroy him so brutally.

“I spent most of that night turning the case over in my mind. There must be some logical reason to account for these murders so closely following the particulars of le Maitre’s crime, I told myself repeatedly. Subconscious imitation was one theory, of course, but it seemed to me to be a little too coincidental to expect two separate individuals to execute such exact patterns of the original without some more definite incitement than the facts gleaned from a newspaper report.

“There would be plainly noticeable differences in each case, I argued. The murderers might have read accounts in different newspapers. Dissimilarity in their personalities would cause them to vary their mode of attack. It was abnormal that the two murders should have such similar features.

“At precisely what point in my thoughts I remembered the dog, I cannot say. The connection came to me suddenly and brought with it a curious conviction that I was on the right track. I seemed to know, without any feeling of doubt, that there was a link between these murders and Rags’ madness, if I could only find it.

“From what I told you this afternoon you will have a pretty general idea of my line of approach. I took for my hypothesis that the streptococci I had cultivated were germs which induced an impulse to murder, and set out to see how far it fitted with the facts.

“And all the time at the back of my mind was the remembrance that the dog had had an injection.”

Beney paused, either for a rest from talking or to let the point sink in. Tony, who had followed the story with the closest attention, ventured a comment:

“So had both the others.”

“Both the others?” Beney took him up in a flash.

Tony remembered that Beney knew nothing about Winterbottom, and felt a bit of a fool. Still, since Beney had obviously put in so much work in connection with the case surely he was entitled to the fullest information?

“Yes, you haven’t heard about the man who killed Roberts, have you?”

He went on to give a brief account of Mrs. Winterbottom’s night visit to Dr. Westacott’s surgery, and the curious behaviour of her dead husband.

“I’m glad you’ve told me about this,” declared Beney when Tony had

finished—“very glad. It clears up a point that’s been puzzling me quite a lot.”

“Why, what was that?”

“The hypodermic puncture-mark on Westacott’s wrist,” said Beney surprisingly. “I thought—never mind now what I thought; obviously it wouldn’t be logical.”

“I can’t say I follow that last remark.”

Beney laughed harshly.

“I don’t suppose you do, but you may in a few minutes. We’ll jump now to what I found at Rainhurst this afternoon. When you left, you believed I was going to look for a specimen, didn’t you? Well, so I was in a way.

“But it’s rather a tall order to expect any germs, however tenacious of life, to exist away from their natural environment for a period of four months—especially in a doctor’s house, where everything is automatically sterilized after use.

“I had a good look round, certainly, but I didn’t really expect to find anything, so I was not disappointed.

“The real reason I went to the house was to attempt a reconstruction of everything that happened when we carried le Maitre in there after your aeroplane crash.

“It was Westacott who tied him up, you remember, and it was Westacott who attended to him afterwards. Manners helped him, and so did I, but it was Westacott who would be considered to be in charge. He was with him when he died too. There was an inquest, of course; there always is in such cases, but in face of the evidence given by Westacott and Manners, a post mortem was not considered necessary.

“This is the significant fact: no one besides Westacott took the bandages off le Maitre’s head and saw the wound, with the possible exception of Manners, from the time he entered the house to the time he was buried.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” asked Tony gravely.

He liked Westacott and he did not at all care for this constant repetition of his name. Did Beney think he was in any way responsible for these horrible crimes?

“I’m suggesting—and all the facts to date bear me out—that one of these two, Westacott or Manners, extracted some serum from le Maitre’s brain as he lay helpless and prepared from it a toxin which has caused three murders to date and may yet cause several more.”

He spoke with such conviction that the doubts which surged into Tony’s mind were temporarily checked.

“How perfectly ghastly!”

“All murder is ghastly, my friend; these are more so than usual because the instigator of them is a fiend in human form who does not mind how many innocent people he sacrifices to attain his end.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, I think it’s obvious. This—this monster—I won’t pronounce a name yet as I’m not absolutely sure—sets out to kill someone against whom, for some unknown reason, he has a grudge. He does not wish to commit the actual deed himself because of the consequences if he is found out, so he adopts this second-hand method of attacking his enemy.

“He prepares the toxin containing the murder germ, and arranges for a third party to be injected in the hope that the third party will kill his victim for him. Ingenious, isn’t it?”

“It would be if it were true, but it can’t be. You must be mistaken, Beney. I don’t believe that the similarity in these murders can be any more than coincidence, or if there is a murder germ, as you declare, the murderers caught it by accident.”

“Aren’t you forgetting the dog? There is no doubt whatever that he was injected with a hypodermic syringe. And, as you pointed out just now, so were the others.”

“We don’t know that it was the same germ though.”

“You’re avoiding the issue. If we can get hold of another specimen germ the point can easily be settled.”

Tony frowned unhappily; he felt like a lone swimmer out of sight of land. If he only knew which direction to take he would regain his confidence.

“But who injected Hilary . . . and why?”

“She told me it was Mrs. Westacott, although I do not for a moment think she had any idea of the harm she was doing. It was apparently a terrible mischance. The point is that in each case we know of—Lane, Winterbottom, and now Hilary—the material injected came from Westacott’s medicine-chest and purported to be anti-toxin against diphtheria.”

“Wasn’t it supplied by your laboratory?” queried Tony shrewdly.

“The diphtheria serum was, but if you’re thinking of Manners there is one important reason why I do not think he could be responsible.”

“What’s that?”

“Why, the fact that Westacott, who admitted to having given himself an injection, was not affected like the others. Was that coincidence or design?

Before you told me about Winterbottom I thought that possibly he—don't you see, I thought he was the one who killed Roberts?"

"Good God!"

Tony remembered his own suspicions of the doctor with dismay. He wanted desperately to be fair to him, and yet Beney was piling up the evidence with ruthless logic that could not be denied.

"But if he had killed Roberts, what could have been his motive? What can he have had against a mere butler?"

"I did not think it was the butler he was after. If you notice, in all these crimes the killer has had a grudge against his victim which is quite consistent with the le Maitre case.

"Le Maitre thought his wife was a spy. Lane believed the money-lender, Isaacs, had double-crossed him. Winterbottom, in a highly feverish state which the germ accentuated, felt that the doctor who was treating him must be avenged from a fancied insult.

"If you remember, Roberts had the misfortune to spill some wine on Westacott's hand. Westacott was quite unreasonably put out about it, and it occurred to me the incident might have diverted him from his real purpose."

"Which was . . .? I'm afraid I must seem awfully dense, but this case has got me in a flat spin."

"I can well understand that; it's enough to unnerve anyone." The even tones of the Eurasian's voice suddenly changed.

"It's awful, terrible, hideous!" he cried brokenly. "All these deaths for nothing. I shall never forget how Roberts looked as long as I live. And now Hilary——"

There was a sudden movement in the car and Tony realized with amazement that his companion was weeping violently.

His collapse was so sudden and unexpected that Tony was at a loss to account for it. He had been talking so rationally, building up his story with such apparent calmness, that his breakdown was an anti-climax.

With a sympathy engendered by his own feelings, Tony attributed it to anxiety concerning Hilary. He must love her very much, he thought. Poor devil! It was hell not to know the fearful lengths to which the fateful germ might have driven her.

His anger welled up against the devil who was responsible for her plight. In his heart he swore a mighty oath. He would not rest from now on until such a fiend incarnate was exposed and brought to trial for his callous deeds.

"This is no time for that sort of thing," he said harshly. "I know how you

feel, but if we're to save her we must keep our wits about us. You said just now that in all these crimes the murderer has had a grudge against his victim. If that's true, surely it gives us some slight clue as to where she may have gone."

Beney made an effort to regain his self-control.

"You're right, of course, but I've thought and thought, and there isn't anyone she hates that I know of. She was always such a friendly girl."

Tony grunted with disappointment. He had hoped earnestly that something would emerge from Beney's amazing disclosure which would help him to get on Hilary's track, but it seemed that he was no further forward than when they left Rainhurst. Everything depended on whether the police had succeeded in intercepting the car.

They were nearing their destination now and he was obliged to give more attention to his driving in the increasing traffic. Although he had kept a sharp look-out he was not conscious of passing a single mobile police patrol. Was that a good sign or a bad one? Had they managed to catch her before she committed any harm or had she slipped through their cordon?

The question was answered when they drew up before the Manners' house. Chief Inspector Dunthorne was waiting for them with a distinctly worried expression on his face.

"I'm sorry to say we've no news," he revealed regretfully.

Almost as he spoke the telephone-bell rang and he moved to answer it. At the first sentence he uttered an exclamation of dismay. Lowering the instrument he turned to his impatient audience:

"Dr. Westacott's been found dead in Hyde Park," he disclosed solemnly.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TONY ARRIVES IN TIME

THE inspector's announcement affected his hearers differently.

Beney groaned, collapsed in a chair, and buried his face in his hands.

"We're too late!" he cried in agonized tones. "She's done it, and I tried so hard to stop her. Whatever will become of her? Whatever will become of her?"

"For God's sake shut up!" snapped Tony tersely.

Though his heart was ice and he was experiencing a curious sinking sensation in the pit of the tummy, common sense told him that Hilary could have had nothing to do with this fresh development.

Allowing between fifteen and twenty minutes from the time she gave him the slip to the moment when he and Beney started in pursuit, and another five for his telephone-call to Scotland Yard, she would hardly have had time to find Westacott, let alone to murder him.

She could not possibly have foreseen that he would be away from home, and even if she had gained on her pursuers in the drive from Rainhurst, which Tony did not think likely, it would have taken her considerably more than half an hour to visit the doctor's surgery, ascertain his list of proposed calls, and track him down.

Nor, if Beney's theories could be accepted as a hypothesis, was Westacott likely to be the objective of her murder impulse. From the way she had spoken of the doctor in Tony's hearing, she had quite a warm regard for him; it was highly improbable that her outward esteem masked a secret grudge of such intensity as to influence her whilst her mind was subordinated to the germ.

If it had been Edith Westacott instead, or Beney, it would have been more readily understandable. Tony sensed rather than knew for certain that Hilary did not like Edith, and she had told him in so many words that she loathed her father's partner.

Tony recalled her attempt to attack the Eurasian with the syringe when he was lying unconscious at Rainhurst. He had headed her off then and she had not returned for a later assault, but it was possible that, with the cunning of the maniac who temporarily possessed her, she was merely awaiting her opportunity.

Without disclosing the trend of his thoughts Tony resolved to arrange that

Beney remained with the police for the time being; he would be safe enough in their company. That settled, he would dash round to the Westacotts' house to satisfy himself concerning Edith Westacott.

Meanwhile Kitch Dunthorne had been obtaining further details from his informant.

"It may be murder," he declared, when he had replaced the receiver. "They're not sure yet. But, at any rate, it isn't another tongue murder, thank goodness. There are apparently no marks of violence either on the skull or elsewhere.

"His car was drawn up to the kerb in the Serpentine Road and he was sitting bolt upright at the wheel. One of our men who had had the car under observation for some time went to speak to the occupant and discovered that he was lifeless."

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. If the car had been under observation for some time, Hilary was ruled out without question.

"It must be suicide," asserted Beney definitely. He appeared miraculously to have recovered from his depression. "He probably realized he was about to be exposed and decided that this was the only way out."

"What are you talking about?" asked Kitch sharply. "Exposed for what?"

"Mr. Beney thinks that Dr. Westacott was responsible for these horrible tongue murders," explained Tony. "He has a theory that the germ Westacott told you about earlier this evening was deliberately injected in his victims to cause them to kill people on his behalf."

Kitch frowned in perplexity.

"But if that's the case why did he tell me about it?" he inquired astutely.

Tony shrugged his shoulders.

"Search me! But I think you ought to hear what Beney has to say; if it can be proved, Westacott is the most ingenious criminal in centuries."

"I didn't say that Westacott was responsible," denied Beney cautiously.

His shocked expression suggested that he would be the last person to speak ill of a dead man.

"No, but you jolly well inferred it. From what he told me, Inspector, it could have been only Westacott or Dr. Manners."

Kitch swung round a chair and straddled it with his arms along the back.

"Let me hear this theory of yours, Mr. Beney," he begged earnestly. "I'm rather interested."

Beney seemed reluctant to repeat it.

"It's a long story; don't you want to go along and investigate this new crime?"

"Plenty of time for that. My assistant, Inspector Saunders, is on the spot, so fire away."

"One moment, Inspector," interposed Tony. "You won't be wanting me for a bit, will you? I'm rather keen to continue searching for Miss Manners."

"Run along, then, and don't forget to let me know if you find her. If you 'phone the Yard they will always be in touch with me."

Ignoring Beney's glance of irritation, Tony hurried from the room. Beney was safe for a good half-hour at any rate; in the meantime he would trace Hilary or bust.

As he drove through the Park on his way to Devon Square, Tony could not help thinking about Westacott, and the insinuations that Beney had alleged concerning him.

From his personal knowledge of the man, slight though it actually was, he could not bring himself to believe that the lean, hard-working doctor, who had shown such kindly practical sympathy with Mrs. Winterbottom in her distress, could have engineered such a series of appalling crimes as had been executed within the last few days.

Perhaps he was biased by his regard for Hilary, reflected Tony, but it was even more difficult to consider Roland Manners as the arch-criminal. Yet, according to Beney, these two provided the only alternatives, if one assumed the Eurasian's reconstruction of what took place in le Maitre's death-chamber to be correct.

There was a third possibility, of course, if one included Beney as well. He was on the spot and presumably he had as many opportunities as either of the others to extract the necessary components from the patient's injured brain from which the Eurasian declared the death germ was concocted.

Still, if he were the culprit, it was decidedly difficult to see what object he would have in explaining the whole of his vile plan in detail. One would be inclined to think that, on the contrary, he would be only too anxious to keep the whole dreadful business as secret as possible. Surely it would be tantamount to suicide to reveal details which might invite the suspicion of the authorities to fall on him.

Apart from this incongruity he was as likely a suspect as either of the others, and Tony determined to regard him as such until circumstances should produce convincing proof to the contrary.

He turned the corner into Devon Square as this resolution formed in his

mind, and all considerations of fixing the responsibility faded as he concentrated on his search for Hilary.

On the far side of the square he could see a car drawn up outside the Westacotts' house with a uniformed police chauffeur at the wheel. No doubt the police were breaking the news to Edith Westacott of her husband's untimely death.

She would be in no danger as long as they were in the house, thought Tony, even if she were the objective of Hilary's hate, and, resolving not to approach until they had departed, he applied his brakes and switched off his engine.

For perhaps five minutes he remained seated where he was. Then growing restless from inaction he opened the door and stepped out on to the pavement.

Walking up and down relieved his feelings for a time, but presently, his impatience increasing, he strolled slowly round the square so as to be ready to enter the house the moment the police car moved off.

He had reached the last corner and was about to turn down the side in which the Westacotts' house was situated, when, chancing to glance down a narrow alley which led to a mews running parallel with the street, he noticed a car jutting out into the fairway at the far end. Only the back of the vehicle was visible, but in such a narrow entrance, designed in the days of carriage traffic, it formed a sufficient obstruction to prevent another car passing.

"That's a damnably careless trick on somebody's part," thought Tony, with fleeting interest, and continued on his way.

He had taken only two or three steps, however, when some prompting from his subconscious mind made him pause. Little though he had seen of the car at the end of the alley, it had struck a chord of memory. His immediate thought was, "Surely it couldn't be", followed an instant later by, "Supposing it was?"

His pulse raced with excitement as he turned back and hurried into the mews. Even before he reached the corner he knew for certain. It was his own car, by Jove!

He had run Hilary to earth, then! His guess had been correct, and it was Edith Westacott whom she had selected for her quarry. A moment later satisfaction that he was so close on her trail changed to dreadful anxiety. Supposing he was too late? Those police officers had been in the house a long time. Supposing they were not engaged in interviewing Edith Westacott, as he had assumed, but were examining her dead body?

As in his imagination he visualized the girl he loved, brutalized by the poison in her brain, kneeling beside her victim, knife in hand, whilst she endeavoured to force open the stiffening jaws, his brain reeled. For a moment

or two, paralysed with horror, he was unable either to move or think. All initiative appeared to have deserted him.

The next instant character and training triumphed. He realized he was face to face with an appalling emergency and he must act—and act at once. This was no time to think of what might have happened; even the few seconds he had waited whilst his blue funk was on him might be the measure of time between successfully preventing Hilary from accomplishing her awful deed and arriving after its execution.

His brain was operating at full pressure now. There were two alternatives open to him. Either he could run round to the front of the house and enlist the services of the police in searching the house or he could endeavour to follow Hilary's trail by himself.

He chose the latter. Without bothering fully to formulate his reasons he felt instinctively that if he could come up with her before she encountered her victim he might be able to get her away without anyone being aware of her proximity.

Although he well knew she could not logically be blamed for the intentions which incited her, other people, less well informed, might conceivably denounce her. If he could prevent her action and keep the whole horrid business quiet she would be less affected by her terrible experience when her reason was restored once more to normal.

If he was to trace her whereabouts with the minimum loss of time it was essential that he deduced accurately her plan of campaign. This, he fully realized, was not in the least a question of thinking in terms of Hilary, the girl, but of remembering the exact details of le Maitre's movements when he set out to murder his wife all those many years earlier. Since her mind was controlled by the influence of the germ her actions would closely imitate those of the prototype.

Tony recalled, as he looked about him, that she had already exhibited this extraordinary tendency to copy. In order to evade him when she left Rainhurst, she had silently pushed the car down the drive before starting the engine, exactly as le Maitre had done when he left his Hampshire hotel on his fateful drive.

When he reached the house containing his victim, le Maitre had effected an entrance by climbing through a window. So had Lane when he entered Isaacs' office, so had Winterbottom when he broke into the Manners'. Tony had no information concerning Nurse Cunningham's murderer, but he felt he had sufficient data to bank on Hilary using a window instead of a door to gain admittance to the building he was scanning so carefully.

From where he stood he could see at least four windows partially open, but the lower part of the house was concealed by the coach-houses of the mews, and there might be others. Using the car as a step up he swarmed on top of the low roof of the nearest building to get a better view.

It was the easiest to climb in the row, and he realized, as he made the effort, that Hilary must have preceded him by this same route. It explained why the car was in just that position instead of being farther down the mews.

To a man of his agility there was little difficulty in making his way along the roofs of the coach-houses to the Westacott building, and in a few minutes he was able to drop down into the narrow yard which separated him from the house.

Right in front of him yawned a wide-open window on the ground floor, and with the keenness of a hound on a breast-high scent he crossed the yard and straddled the sill.

The room in which he found himself was in utter darkness and, anxious not to stumble over some obstruction and make a noise, Tony struck a match. From the bottle-filled shelves on the wall he gathered that the apartment was the dispensary, but he was only concerned with the position of the door at the far side, and did not bother to make a close examination.

Tip-toeing across the floor he cautiously opened the door and peeped through the crack. The passage was lighted, and, glancing along it, he reconnoitred the general lay-out of the building.

Almost directly opposite where he was standing was the servants' staircase. Its proximity at once suggested that Hilary had ascended it; knowing the house intimately she had selected the entrance which offered the least risk of exposure.

Tony immediately guessed the room for which she would have made—Edith Westacott's bedroom. She would be hidden there in the darkness, weapon in hand, awaiting the coming of her victim.

He was about to emerge from the dispensary when he heard footsteps approaching and he drew back and closed the door. From the sound of the voices through the panel they were two maids and they were discussing the calamity that had overtaken their master. The few phrases he overheard convinced him that no harm had as yet befallen their mistress, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

As soon as they had passed he ran lightly up the stairs. The room he sought would undoubtedly be on the first floor, and as he reached the landing he looked eagerly about him. There were seven doors from which to choose and, throwing caution to the winds, he began methodically to open each in turn.

The first three proved fruitless; the fourth revealed a woman's dressing-room. Concluding the next would end his search he switched off the light preparatory to leaving, when he thought he heard the sound of a sob.

It came from the direction of the window, which was screened from sight by long curtains extending to the floor. Tony reached them in three strides and tore them apart.

Hilary was crouched against the wall, weeping as if her heart would break. Beside her, on a narrow ledge, reposed a heavy pestle.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A RUBBER-CAPPED SERUM PHIAL

SURPRISED and perplexed though he was by Hilary's totally unexpected attitude, Tony's main feeling was intense relief. Instead of the hard, callous virago who had outwitted him at Rainhurst, he had to deal with a weak, dismayed girl who was obviously on the verge of a collapse.

As she turned swiftly towards him, alarmed by his sudden arrival, he noticed that the terrible look of mad frenzy had gone from her eyes. Beneath the lids, reddened with weeping, they shone soft and appealing, and, touched by the infinite pathos of her situation, his heart went out to her in a wave of tender sympathy.

"Hilary!" he cried softly. "My darling! Thank God I've found you in time!"

He held out his arms; and, instinctively longing for the protection of his masculine strength, she fell into his embrace and buried her face against his shoulder.

For a few moments he held her tight whilst the emotion which convulsed her expended itself in paroxysms of violent shuddering. Urgently as he desired to get her out of the house before her presence was discovered, he knew it would be useless to propose any course of action until she was calmer.

He believed he could understand the reason for her change of front. The effect of the injection, administered more than three hours earlier, had worn off; the impulse to kill had left her and, with probably only the vaguest recollections of the murderous intentions with which she had climbed through the dispensary window, she had come to her senses in Edith Westacott's dressing-room with no means of accounting for the dreadful thoughts which had passed so recently through her mind.

It must be rather like awakening from a nightmare, thought Tony, when the impressions caused by a series of horrible dreams are so vivid that one cannot at first be absolutely certain that they are fictions of a disordered brain and not real experiences.

Presently the trembling of her limbs became less ungovernable and she released herself gently from his clasp.

"Am I mad?" she asked piteously. "Oh, Tony, have I gone off my rocker?"

Tony shook his head in absolute negation.

"Of course not," he declared, smiling deliberately. "What an idea! You're no more mad than I am, you darling."

His brain fought for some reason to give her which would satisfactorily account for her unusual behaviour. It must be plausible and sufficiently convincing to prevent her worrying about her sanity.

"There's been an accident," he improvised. "You were concussed, and before they could stop you you disappeared in the crowd. We've all been looking for you for hours." He watched her anxiously to see if she would swallow his invention.

"An accident?" she repeated. "To my taxi? I—I don't remember it."

"Of course you don't; it happened too quickly. You must have been thrown against the side and banged your head."

She frowned in perplexity and gingerly felt her forehead.

"It seems all right; I don't seem to have a headache or anything. Was anyone hurt besides me?"

"Luckily no—taxi-drivers are pretty tough, you know."

She glanced round the room.

"This is Edith's boudoir. What made me come here?"

She shuddered violently.

"I've had such a horrible dream; I dreamt I was going to——"

Tony put his hand over her mouth.

"You mustn't dwell on it—whatever it was. Now I've found you I want to get you home to bed. Do you feel all right to come along with me?"

"Yes; but, Tony, how did I get in here? And where is Edith?"

Tony decided to be firm.

"You really mustn't ask a lot of questions at present," he said severely. "I promise faithfully you shall hear everything that happened in due course. In the meantime I want you to do just as I tell you without wanting to know why."

He was afraid that she would think it decidedly strange when he smuggled her out of the back of the house instead of walking boldly through the front door. But whilst he felt certain there was no need for anxiety lest the fit of madness should return to her if they encountered Edith Westacott, he was determined, if he could, to keep her escapade as secret as possible.

Since no actual harm had been done, he hoped with all his heart that it might be possible to prevent her learning the truth. With the co-operation of

the others, surely the fiction of the taxicab accident could be maintained, at least until some reliable brain specialist pronounced her safe from any ill-effects.

Crossing to the door, he opened it a few inches and peeped out. The landing was still deserted, but he could hear voices at the foot of the main staircase. Probably the police were on the point of departure.

Turning to Hilary, Tony placed his finger on his lips.

"Are you game to slip out the back way?" he whispered. "Mrs. Westacott doesn't know you're here, and I see no reason why we should tell her."

She nodded her agreement.

"O.K. But wouldn't it be simpler to go through the surgery? There's never anyone there at this time of night."

It was a suggestion that appealed to Tony very strongly. Leaving by a different route from the one by which she had entered would obviate the possibility of Hilary's memory being awakened.

"Can we get to it by the back stairs?" he asked.

"Yes; turn to the left when you reach the passage, and it's the second door on the right."

"Good! Are you ready? Come on, then."

Hand in hand, they crept silently down the stairs. There was no one about —the maids were in the kitchen engaged in excited conversation—and they reached the surgery without incident.

Tony switched on the light and looked about him with interest. According to Beney it was in this room that the murder germ had been injected into the murderers of Isaacs and Roberts. Was there anything to show whether Westacott had used the death lymph knowingly or in utter ignorance that it was other than the diphtheria anti-toxin he believed he was administering?

His eyes fell on a tiny cap of red rubber lying on a bench. The phial to which it belonged was reposing in a waste receptacle among some discarded bandages and cotton-wool. Thinking it might prove to be an important clue, he picked it up and slipped it in his pocket.

"Why do you want that?" asked Hilary.

"Oh, I don't know," said Tony evasively. "Collecting things is a weakness of mine. I expect I'll find a use for it."

Hilary smiled tolerantly.

"How funny you are—wanting a thing like that! I can get you dozens of perfectly clean ones from Father's laboratory. That one contained the injection

that Edith gave me this evening; I saw her throw it there."

"Indeed."

Tony's tone was indifferent, but the importance of the tiny glass tube magnified a thousandfold in his mind. If the matter it had contained could be analysed by a qualified chemist, his report placed side by side with Hilary's symptoms and reactions would give an almost complete history of this amazing virus.

Whatever the experts might say about it, Tony no longer believed that a germ producing an impulse to kill could be contracted by chance. Quite apart from Beney's discovery that the dog, Rags, bore the mark of a hypodermic syringe, he felt certain that the whole series of astounding crimes was part of some diabolical plot conceived in the brain of a madman.

What the motive of the plot might be, or indeed whether there was any motive at all, was a problem he meant to solve. It would be difficult, he well knew, but he felt that it was his duty, and the duty of every right-minded citizen as well, to do everything in his power to lay by the heels a maniac who had established so drastically that he had no regard for human life.

He said as much and a great deal more during a lengthy discussion with Dr. Manners after delivering Hilary at her home. Even before he listened to the story of her terrible experience, Manners ordered her to bed and gave her a strong sleeping-draught.

"I don't know how to express my thanks adequately," he declared to Tony when he had heard everything. "She's all I have in the world; even my work could never compensate me if I lost her."

His voice trembled with the emotion of a father whose only child has been miraculously saved from the brink of the grave. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, and the hand with which he lit a cigarette was trembling violently.

"I'm very glad to have been of service," Tony assured him awkwardly.

He wanted to say a lot more, to tell the doctor that he loved Hilary with all his heart and that he would gladly sacrifice his life rather than that she should suffer a moment's wretchedness through her ghastly experience. But somehow the sentiments refused to form themselves into words.

"Of course she must never know what really happened," he declared instead.

"No, she must never know," agreed Manners emphatically. "If she ever learns the truth of this unhappy business she will worry herself into a lunatic asylum."

There was a short silence whilst each man was occupied with his own thoughts.

Tony was trying to decide whether to acquaint Manners with everything that Beney had told him on the drive from Rainhurst. Since the doctor was in such close attendance on le Maitre before he died he might be able to throw some light on who, if anybody, had tampered with the patient's brain.

It was a delicate subject to introduce. If Westacott was eliminated it left only Manners and Beney, and the doctor might conceivably take umbrage at the implied suggestion that he was implicated.

For his part, Manners was considering whether he should ask Tony's advice about informing the police that Beney had been blackmailing him. He realized full well that if the police made the discovery for themselves they might be inclined to think that he knew more than he had disclosed of the mysterious tongue murders.

Although Tony was a comparative stranger, his bearing during the last few days had proved him to be both intelligent and reliable, and the doctor felt that any opinion he might give would be well worth listening to. He was also influenced in his choice of confidant by the very obvious interest Tony had shown in his daughter.

"I'm glad it was you and not Beney who found Hilary," he said at length.

Tony looked at him in surprise. Not knowing the doctor's train of thought, the remark appeared to be irrelevant.

"It's kind of you to say so, sir; but, in fairness to Beney, he did his level best."

Manners grunted expressively.

"There's a very good reason why: he wants to marry her."

Tony smiled.

"You don't sound very keen on the idea."

"I'm not, Grayling. Sooner than that I'd——"

He stopped abruptly, and Tony could not help wondering whether he was about to use the same sinister phrase he had employed during his quarrel with the Eurasian at Rainhurst.

"Sooner than see her married to you I would kill you with my bare hands," he had declared on that occasion.

"I think perhaps I had better tell you exactly why I don't favour him as a prospective son-in-law," he went on after a brief pause. "It doesn't place me in a very good light, I'm afraid, but circumstances being what they are, I feel that

some responsible person ought to know the full story behind our partnership."

Without waiting for the younger man to reply he plunged forthwith into the narrative he had related to Hilary only that morning.

"So you see, if I were ever tempted to kill him, the police wouldn't have to look very far for the motive," he concluded.

It was a curious thing to say, and Tony could not help wondering how often the thought of murdering his blackguardly partner had entered the doctor's mind.

Once again he found himself speculating as to whether these extraordinary crimes could possibly have resulted from the enmity between the two scientists.

The idea, which had seemed utterly bizarre and fantastic when it first occurred to him, did not appear nearly so impossible in the light of recent developments. Both had the knowledge and the opportunity to prepare the death germ; both had a perfectly sound reason for wanting the other out of the way.

This story of the past contained elements which pointed equally to either man as the guilty party. If Beney were so heartless and unscrupulous as to have built his future and prosperity on an incriminating stolen document, it might be presumed that he would not shrink from causing the death of half a dozen people in an endeavour to gain his end.

Manners, on the other hand, brooding for so many years over the injustice of Fate which had turned an unhappy accident into a scourge to dominate his life, might have had his reason affected by the smouldering hate he bore his blackmailer.

It was ironical indeed that Hilary, who was the unconscious cause of the enmity between the partners reaching a climax, should have been infected, but it did not necessarily rule either of them out as suspects. The injection given her by Edith Westacott could not have been foreseen by either of them.

Feeling the little glass phial reposing in his pocket, Tony reflected grimly that the mistake which had involved Hilary might well prove to be the instrument which unravelled the tangle and brought the author of these hideous killings to account.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Tony did not at first hear the remark which Manners addressed to him.

"Would you advise me to tell Dunthorne, or continue to keep silent?" the doctor repeated.

Tony heard him that time, and at the same instant an idea materialized in

his mind.

There was a way by which it would be possible to determine definitely whether either of these two, Manners or Beney, was the originator of the death germ. Though it would involve a ghastly risk, surely any peril was worth the hazarding to expose a multi-murderer. But if he could persuade the police to give their co-operation, the chances of success should at least be even.

“Neither,” said Tony curtly. “I’m going straight along to Scotland Yard to tell him myself.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MYSTERY OF A HOODED COBRA

By the time Chief Inspector Dunthorne reached the spot in Hyde Park where Dr. Westacott's body was found, Inspector Saunders had succeeded in tabulating all the information that was available.

As Kitch had related to Tony and Beney, the tragedy was discovered by a constable on duty in the Park. According to his story, he had first noticed the car when he passed along Serpentine Road about half an hour after sunset. Unlike most of the other vehicles in the vicinity, which were lined up to face the water, it was on the other side of the road, parallel with the railings, its near-side wheels resting on the sandy horse ride.

He did not pay much attention to it at the time, thinking that the owner had probably stopped to exercise a dog on the grass, but when he passed again within a few minutes of lighting-up time he glanced across the road with the thought in his mind that the driver was running it a bit fine.

Despite the deepening gloom, he could see quite distinctly that a man was seated behind the steering-wheel, and, concluding that the lighting regulations would be remembered when he started his engine to drive off, the constable continued on his way.

Twenty minutes later he noticed that the car was still in darkness, and with the intention of issuing an unofficial warning, he strolled towards it and tapped on the side window to attract the driver's attention.

His summons went unheeded, whereupon the constable turned the handle and shone his lamp into the interior of the vehicle. It contained only the person whom he had seen on his earlier scrutiny: a man, well dressed, sitting bolt upright at the wheel with his right hand resting on it. His head was leaning to one side in an unnatural attitude and his eyes were staring.

The constable realized at once that he was dead, and gently closing the door, he blew his whistle for assistance. He was quickly reinforced, and a cursory examination of the corpse was carried out by an inspector.

He found no superficial indication that the dead man had met with a violent death and, assuming that it was a case of heart failure, the inspector ordered the body to be removed to an ambulance which had been summoned and the car to be taken to the police-station.

It was Scotland Yard which connected the identity of the deceased with the cases being handled by Kitch Dunthorne, and in the Chief Inspector's absence at the Manners' house, Inspector Saunders was despatched to take over control of the investigation.

By the time Saunders arrived on the scene the divisional police surgeon had completed a preliminary examination of the body. He found no trace whatever of external violence, such as might have been occasioned by a weapon, but on the muscle of the left upper arm, in close proximity to the main brachial artery, were four tiny punctures which suggested the bite of a small animal, or possibly a snake.

The area surrounding the wound was discoloured and inflamed, and the few spots of blood which had escaped from the teeth-marks were clotted. The general appearance of the injury indicated some form of poisoning, and the impression was confirmed by the characteristic contraction of the pupils of the eyes.

"It's too early yet to give a definite decision," the surgeon told Saunders in reply to his inquiry, "but unless I'm very much mistaken it has all the earmarks of snake-bite."

"A snake—in Hyde Park?" queried Saunders. "What sort of a snake do you suppose?"

"There you've got me. I'm not an authority on reptiles; I'm afraid you'll have to call in a toxicologist. But I don't think it can possibly be a British snake. I know there is a slightly poisonous adder found in Devon, the Isle of Wight, and other parts of the country, but even if its sting were fatal to human beings, which I doubt, I should want some convincing that it could find its way into a doctor's car in the heart of London."

Saunders wrote rapidly in his note-book.

"Can you give us any idea what time death occurred?" he asked.

"I should say the heart stopped beating approximately at sundown. Don't misunderstand that reply. Without knowing the type of reptile and the nature of the particular poison injected there is no means of ascertaining when the wound was inflicted. It may have been an hour before death occurred, or even longer.

"What usually happens in cases of snake-bite is that the person affected becomes drowsy and gradually sinks into a stupor, which persists until the action of the heart is overcome."

Saunders nodded knowingly.

"So that in this particular case the snake may have bitten him before he

entered the Park at all. Feeling sleepy, he may have pulled up his car where it was found with the idea of taking a short rest."

"What you suggest is quite possible," the doctor assured him, and Saunders smiled with satisfaction at his own astuteness.

Now that he had learned all that the doctor could tell him prior to a post mortem examination of the corpse, he repaired to the police yard where Westacott's car was standing. Although he did not much fancy the task, it was his duty thoroughly to inspect the vehicle in a search for possible clues.

Mindful that a dangerous reptile might be lurking in some corner of the upholstery, he set about the job with considerable circumspection. He might, of course, have detailed subordinates to run the risk of a speedy and horrible death in his stead, and it was greatly to his credit that he undertook the work himself.

Half an hour of probing with a carving-knife convinced him that no living thing was concealed in any part of the vehicle, and with a greatly relieved mind he turned his attention to a more orthodox examination.

He was still engaged in this occupation when Kitch Dunthorne arrived, accompanied by Erasmus Beney. They had driven direct to the police-station from Manners' house after Beney had told the detective the same story he had related to Tony on their journey from Rainhurst.

Kitch had listened throughout with the greatest interest, and although he had made no notes, every material fact was carefully recorded in his mind. The moment he reached his office at the Yard he meant to set machinery in motion to check up on every possible item that could be confirmed.

He would start with le Maitre himself. His body would have to be exhumed and the wound on his head examined by the leading pathologists in England. It would mean a Home Office order, of course, but no doubt the Commissioner would arrange the official details once he was convinced of the necessity.

Then there was the dog Rags. The police would issue a formal demand to Beney and would take charge of the microscope slides and cultures he had prepared from the animal's blood. They were undoubtedly of the very highest importance if the arch-criminal they were seeking was to be brought to book.

Whilst he mentally drew up his plan of campaign, Kitch recalled with a pardonable feeling of complacency the hunch which he had outlined to Saunders earlier in the day. He had given as his opinion then that the crimes they were handling were connected in some way with le Maitre, and now he had received unexpected confirmation that his theory was correct.

At the same time he also said that until something turned up which definitely excluded one of them from the list he meant to investigate fully the

lives of Westacott, Beney, Manners, and Grayling.

The first batch of inquiries had already been sent out. A note to the publishers of the Medical Register asking for details of the careers of Manners and Westacott; a cable to Calcutta begging for Beney's antecedents; a request to the Air Ministry for Tony's service history sheet.

Now, before all the replies had been received, one of the suspects was dead. And, if Beney's extraordinary story were accepted at its face value, the deceased was the mainspring of the whole terrible business.

Was it suicide, an accident, or murder? Any one of the three was possible, though not all were probable. Suicide, for instance, was extremely unlikely to be the end of a scoundrel so utterly ruthless as to engage in wholesale murder.

Accidental death would be more credible. It would be the poetic justice of Fate if such a monster as the Eurasian had outlined should be wiped out by some simple mishap, though, as a custodian of law and order, Kitch would much prefer to see him sentenced in the dock.

Murder suggested that someone was aware of his culpability and had anticipated the verdict that would be meted out to him if he should be found guilty when brought to trial.

There was an alternative possibility, also, which Dunthorne did not overlook. If Westacott were found to have been murdered, his death prompted the thought that he was an innocent man who had stumbled on the truth by accident and who had been destroyed before he could expose the real culprit.

If that were the case the riddle was within measurable distance of solution. Whatever Westacott had unearthed, the police could ferret out also. With one suspect removed from the list more attention must be given to the other three until, by a process of elimination, the right man could be arrested without shadow of doubt.

Whilst all these thoughts were marshalled in his brain, he listened with a perfectly open mind to Inspector Saunders' account of his investigations. Beney, whom he had asked to accompany him in case he needed further amplification on some detail of his death germ theory, was not present at the discussion.

"So the doctor thinks it was a snake-bite," remarked Kitch when Saunders had concluded his report. "That's very interesting. Show me on my own arm as near as you can where he was bitten."

Saunders obligingly pinched his triceps between finger and thumb. Dunthorne frowned thoughtfully.

"That looks very much like murder," he declared at once, and smiled at the

expression of astonishment on his subordinate's face.

"How the devil do you make that out? And for God's sake don't tell me it's elementary."

"But it is. In the first place killer snakes are so uncommon in England outside Zoos as to suggest that one was employed deliberately, and, in the second, the wound is hardly in the place where one would expect a man to be bitten accidentally; the leg, the buttock, or the neck would be more likely. Anyway, it definitely wasn't suicide."

Saunders, somewhat nettled that his superior should have reached a conclusion in five minutes which had not occurred to him in an hour, presumed to sneer.

"Oh, you're quite sure about that?"

"Yes, quite." Kitch stretched across his body with his right hand and felt the spot on his left upper arm which Saunders had indicated. "Try it yourself. If you wanted to make a snake bite you it would be on the front of the arm and not at the back. When will the doctor conduct the autopsy?"

"First thing tomorrow morning."

"Good. See his report is telephoned to me at once. I shall want to know the exact nature of the poison and the species of reptile that caused it. You'll find that its native home is Burma," he prophesied.

"Why Burma?"

"Because Messrs. Manners and Beney were both in Burma for years."

"Whew! So you think——"

"Never mind what I think; we want facts. Ask Mr. Beney to come in here."

Dunthorne drummed nervously with his fingers whilst the Eurasian was being fetched. He believed that this latest development narrowed down his investigation to the two scientists, though he knew very well an arrest was out of the question until he had some more definite evidence. In the meantime he must proceed with the utmost caution.

He had not disclosed all his deductions to Saunders by any means, preferring to keep his real opinions to himself until incontrovertible proof was forthcoming to support them.

The more he thought about it the more convinced he became that Westacott was not killed by a live snake. Despite the medical evidence and the tooth-marks in the arm, such a method of committing a murder seemed altogether too crude for the man who had conceived the death germ.

The whole blessed business was fishy—deuced fishy. Anyone with normal

common sense would know that the ownership of an uncommon reptile could be traced in no time. The Curator at the Zoological Gardens probably knew the home of every snake in Europe; one had only to work through the list to find out which creature could not be accounted for satisfactorily on the evening in question, and the thing was done.

Kitch thoughtfully scratched his chin. The killing had been made to look like snake-bite for a particular reason. Of course. The murderer intended the snake to be traced. He had probably disposed of Westacott because he knew too much, and had carefully arranged a false scent to throw suspicion on a third party.

By Gad, the fellow behind this affair was a slippery customer and no mistake! If only——

His train of thought was interrupted by Beney's entrance, and he nodded towards a chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Beney. We are rather at a dead end with this Westacott business, and I was wondering if you could help us."

"Why, certainly, Inspector. I'll willingly do what I can."

Dunthorne nodded his thanks.

"I'm going to ask you a rather peculiar question," he announced impressively. "Apropos of the theory you've formed, do you happen to know if Dr. Manners has in his possession such a thing as a stuffed snake; one that he brought home from Burma as a curio, I mean?"

Beney looked startled.

"A stuffed snake!" he queried. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Whatever has——"

"Never mind that at present; I'll explain later. For the moment kindly answer the question if you can."

Beney's face was a study in crafty wariness.

"No, Manners hasn't such a thing to my knowledge, but—but I have. There's a specimen of a hooded cobra hanging on the wall of my sitting-room. What the hell has it got to do with this business?"

Dunthorne, with difficulty, repressed his eagerness. It was not exactly the answer he had expected, but it was highly satisfactory.

"I wonder if you would mind ringing up your housekeeper to ask if it's still there," he begged diffidently, and pushed the telephone instrument across the desk.

Beney lifted the receiver and dialled the number of his apartment.

Followed a short conversation and a pause whilst the person to whom he spoke went to look.

"What!" cried Beney suddenly into the mouthpiece. "It isn't there? Are you sure?" He turned to Dunthorne with an expression of blank incredulity. "It's disappeared!" he disclosed, and his voice sounded utterly nonplussed.

He was about to hang up, but Dunthorne stopped him.

"One more question. Ask if Dr. Manners has visited your apartment today."

The answer was in the affirmative, and Kitch smiled grimly. He thought he knew for certain now who was the murderer of Dr. Westacott and the unscrupulous blackguard who had engineered all the other crimes—but bringing his guilt home to him was altogether another matter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EDITH WESTACOTT RELATES A NIGHTMARE

BENEY did not return at once to his rooms when he left Chief Inspector Dunthorne. Late though the hour was, he hailed a taxi at the nearest exit from the Park and drove to the Westacotts' house in Devon Square.

No lights were showing on the ground floor, but he did not hesitate to ring the bell. After a delay of some minutes the door was opened by a sleepy-eyed maid in a dressing-gown.

"Mrs. Westacott's gone to her room, sir," she informed him in reply to his request.

"I dare say she has; all the same, tell her I must see her."

He pushed unceremoniously past the maid and entered the dining-room.

"I'll wait in here," he announced masterfully.

His manner impressed the girl with the importance of his visit and she hurried upstairs to inform her mistress of his arrival. Edith, who was lying on her bed fully dressed, rose at once. Pausing long enough to repair her complexion and tidy her hair, she went eagerly down to the man who had once been her lover.

In her feminine judgment there could be only one reason why he had called on her at that time of night. The news had reached him that her husband was dead and he had come at once ostensibly to commiserate with her on her loss, but in reality because the way was now clear for them to marry.

She must have misjudged him this afternoon when she thought he no longer wanted her. He had really meant it when he told her he loved her. Her fears of Hilary as a rival in his affections could have had no foundation after all.

"This is good of you, Rajah," she cried happily as she swept into the room where he was waiting. "You've heard, then? It's awful, of course, but I can't really pretend to be sorry. Although perhaps not quite so drastically, it's what we've wanted, isn't it?"

Beney, who was standing by the sideboard, swung round at her entry. But the look she was hoping to see did not materialize on his face. Instead he scowled angrily.

“Why the devil isn’t there any whisky here?” he asked peevishly. “I’m simply dying for a drink, and all I can find is soda-water.”

The mundane complaint, his first words to her, coming instead of the sentimental outpouring she had fooled herself to expect, struck the welcoming smile from Edith’s lips. She halted abruptly in her advance and stared at him unbelievingly. She wanted his love, and all he needed was a drink.

“Is that all you have to say to me?” she asked reproachfully.

He made a gesture of nervous irritation.

“By no means, my dear Edith, but it’s the most important item at the moment.”

The most important item at the moment. He was thirsty with an animal thirst whilst she suffered from a craving of the spirit. It was no use blinding herself any longer. The passion he had had for her was dead; nothing he might say when his desire for a drink was satisfied could ever make her believe otherwise now.

She sighed resignedly, and moved slowly forward to his side. He should have his drink. Oh yes, a dozen drinks if he wanted them. But as soon as the phrases would form in her mind she meant to tell him just exactly what she thought of him.

“There ought to be some whisky here,” she declared, lifting the empty decanter. “It was half full when I had dinner. I swear it was.”

Her forehead puckered in a frown; could one of the maids have had it?

“I hope you haven’t taken to drink, Edith,” said Beney facetiously.

She rounded on him angrily.

“You know very well I never touch it. Nobody does here except James, and he hasn’t been in since half past six.” Mention of her husband reminded her that he would never drink whisky again, and she swallowed some hidden emotion. “You’ve heard about him, of course?” she asked again.

“Yes. As a matter of fact I was with that police-inspector fellow when the news came through. They think he was murdered.”

The colour left her cheeks and her eyes widened with horror.

“Murdered? Are you sure? They didn’t tell me that—only that he had been found dead.”

“Well, you can take it from me he was murdered.”

Beney spoke callously, making no attempt to spare her feelings.

“Do they know—have they any idea who—who did it?”

“They think they have. They believe it was old Manners. At least, all the

evidence they've got so far seems to point to him."

"Dr. Manners?" Her voice was incredulous. "It doesn't seem possible. Why should he want to—to kill James?"

Beney shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask me another—unless it was because James had discovered something he didn't want known. But, look here, Edith, before we start a lengthy discussion of the subject, what about that drink?"

She knelt down and procured a fresh bottle from a cupboard. Her movements were mechanical, her mind wholly occupied with the news Beney had announced so casually.

"There's a corkscrew in the centre drawer. Does Hilary know about this?"

"Not yet. Nobody does except the police, me, and now you."

"Is that why you came here tonight—to tell me?"

"No, I could have done that on the telephone. I want to see if there's any evidence here that might incriminate him. Do you mind if I look round the surgery?"

Smarting from his indifference, she answered him sourly:

"You're very polite all of a sudden. If that's all you wanted you could have let yourself in through the surgery entrance and left me in peace. You used to know the way well enough."

She was referring to the fact that in the heyday of their affair she had provided him with a key to the surgery, the door of which opened into an alley, so that he could enter the house unobtrusively when her husband was out on his visits.

Beney poured himself some whisky and added the soda.

"I should have done so, but unfortunately I lost the key some time ago."

He finished his drink at a draught and moved towards the door.

"You may as well come too," he threw over his shoulder. "I don't want the police to think I'm meddling. If they should ask what I've been doing here you had better say I'm acting at your request."

He expects me to do his bidding though I know perfectly well he's only trying to help Manners because he's Hilary's father, thought Edith bitterly. Nevertheless she followed him into the surgery and, perching herself on the examination-couch, watched him silently.

Beney seated himself at the doctor's table and began methodically to inspect his books. His fingers deftly flicked over the pages and traced the entries down each column. Presently he stopped and a puzzled frown appeared

on his face.

“Do you happen to know where James kept his phials of anti-toxin?” he asked. “Of course you do; you used one for Hilary, didn’t you?”

“Yes; but it was the last.”

“The last?” cried Beney sharply. “Yes, I suppose it would be,” he went on in a matter-of-fact tone. “That is, if there were two in the medicine-case he had with him.”

"Why do you want to know all this? Why can’t you tell me what it’s all about? What have they got to do with——”

“Everything,” he answered curtly. “They weren’t anti-toxin at all; at least, not only that. Each of them contained a deadly serum which had the effect of causing the person injected to commit a murder.”

He went on to give a brief explanation of the death germ and the way it had affected Herbert Lane and Ernest Winterbottom. But Edith was not listening. At the first mention of murder the colour had drained from her cheeks, and her eyes took on a desperate haunted look like the expression of a soul in purgatory.

Her lips silently formed the word “murder”, and she swayed on her seat. Suddenly she fell sideways like a log, crumpled and collapsed in a heap on the floor in a dead faint.

When she presently recovered, Beney was kneeling beside her holding a bottle of smelling-salts. His face was hard and inflexible, and there was neither mercy nor compassion in his expression.

“So it was you,” he accused harshly. “I’ve been wondering who killed Nurse Cunningham. I was looking for the entry in his day-book, but it wasn’t there. Did James inject you, or did you do it yourself?”

She shivered violently and closed her eyes.

“What is to become of me?” she moaned piteously. “I didn’t know I had done it; I thought it was a bad dream. Only I couldn’t find my gloves.”

Beney seized her shoulder and shook her violently.

“What are you talking about? What gloves? You had better pull yourself together and tell me all about it if you want me to help you.”

At that she looked at him searchingly.

“Oh, Rajah, will you help me? I thought you didn’t care any more. I thought you didn’t care.”

She was blubbering now, great tears that welled from her eyes and rolled ridiculously down her cheeks. Her mouth was puckered with emotion and to

Beney's eyes she looked utterly silly.

"For heaven's sake pull yourself together!" he cried irritably. He went into the dining-room and returned with a generous portion of neat whisky. "Here, drink this; it'll put some stuffing into you."

He held the glass to her lips and tipped it with such lack of feeling that the liquid slopped over her chin. But the raw, unaccustomed spirit did its work and in a few moments she sat up and dabbed at her eyes.

Beney gave her little time to compose herself.

"Tell me exactly what happened," he ordered. "When did you give the injection and how long after was it you——"

"Rajah, don't talk like that, please! It sounds so—so horribly matter-of-fact—as if I were some sort of specimen."

"Pshaw!"

He was about to curse her, but changed his mind; he knew of old that if he wanted to get any sense out of her she would have to be humoured.

"I can quite understand you're upset, Edie," he said soothingly, using the old nickname. "I'm only trying to help you. Don't you understand? Unless you tell me everything that took place I can do nothing."

She looked at him with fear-haunted eyes.

"Do you think they will—hang me?" she asked hoarsely.

"Of course not! They don't even know yet it was you, and they need never know if you use your head. When did you have this injection?"

"After lunch. I asked James to give it to me, but he was so off-hand about it that I decided to see to it myself."

Little by little, with many questions and much prompting from Beney, the story came out.

Edith had succeeded in injecting herself in the fleshy part of the upper arm, but the shock of the syringe needle made her feel rather faint, and as soon as the operation was completed she went up to her room to lie down.

She must have fallen asleep, she thought, and the first thing she knew in her normal state of consciousness was that she was seated on a chair in front of her dressing-table.

"I thought at the time it was a funny thing to have done," she explained. "I had had a perfectly ghastly nightmare and I concluded that it had caused me to get off the bed in my sleep. At the time I put it down to the effect of the anti-toxin, and I was going to speak to James about it. But now I suppose all the terrible things I dreamed really happened."

“Tell me what you thought you dreamed,” prompted Beney.

He was intensely interested in her story. As a scientist he was eager to know exactly how the death germ worked.

“The whole thing is a bit hazy, like dreams usually are,” she went on. “One thing I was quite certain of: I hated Gladys Cunningham more than I had ever hated anyone before in my life. I remember now I thought of her as an enemy spy plotting against the country, and I had been detailed to make sure she didn’t get away with any information. I suppose I was thinking of her because I had your telephone message just before telling me I couldn’t work in the laboratory because she had come back.”

She was unable to recall every incident that happened, but she remembered walking through the streets with the fixed determination in her mind that Nurse Cunningham must die. She was also well aware that she must evade observation, and when she reached the building in which the laboratory was situated she stood for some time on the opposite side of the road until she saw the hall-porter come down the steps and walk towards a tobacconist’s shop.

She at once slipped across the road and took the lift to the second floor. She went into the laboratory quite openly, prepared, if her victim was not alone, to make an excuse to return later. But her victim was alone, and over a cup of tea Edith was suddenly seized with an impulse to bang her on the head with the tea-pot.

“Anything that happened afterwards is hopelessly confused,” she declared tearfully. “That was why I was sure it was a dream. She fought like a mad thing, and it was only my strong sense of duty that gave me the courage to fight back. Somehow I knew that it was essential that she must not escape me. How I eventually killed her or how I got out of the building and back here without being seen, I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“And you didn’t know until just now that it was you who murdered her?” asked Beney curiously.

“No. I thought I spent the afternoon asleep, you see. When I read in the papers that she was dead I believed that my dream was an amazing example of telepathy. It was only the incident about the gloves that made me doubt.”

“The gloves? You mentioned them before. What about them?”

“Why, just after the police broadcast for Hilary, Dr. Manners telephoned to say a detective had been making inquiries about what size gloves she took. I remembered that in my dream I was worried because my gloves were covered in blood and I didn’t know what to do with them.”

“Well?”

“Then Hilary came here and said that thousands of people wore ffolliotts and our size is only average, and I didn’t think any more about it.”

“But didn’t you look to see if your gloves were missing?”

“Yes, and they are; but then the police came round shortly afterwards to say that James was dead, and it put everything else out of my head. Do you think it’ll help them to find me?” she asked tremulously.

She had been led by his obvious interest to believe that he meant to go out of his way to help her, but now she was to suffer a rude shock.

“I don’t know and I don’t care!” he cried roughly. “That’s for you to worry about.”

He had the information he wanted, and her fate was a matter of very little consequence. He left her shortly afterwards to her conscience and her fears.

To his analytical mind one fact stood out before all others. Her story proved his theory that the action of the death germ was definitely to induce a desire to kill the person the subject hated most at the moment of injection.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A CONFERENCE AT SCOTLAND YARD

COULD any fellow be placed in a more damnable situation? thought Tony savagely, as he drove slowly along the Knightsbridge Road. He had entered the Manners' house satisfied that Hilary's father was innocent of all connection with the tongue murders; he had left it with his mind seething with gnawing doubts.

Manners' confidence regarding the incident in Assam should have satisfied him, he supposed; instead, he read into it the most appalling possibilities. As Manners had told the story he appeared to be a man paying an enormous price for a genuine mistake. Even if he had accidentally infected his patient with typhoid fever, nothing could condone Beney's action in using the overseer's report to blackmail him into arranging a partnership.

That was the weak point in Manners' conduct without a doubt. Surely an innocent man, however irresolute in character, would not have succumbed to the importunity of a blackguardly blackmailer without a struggle. To Tony's youthful intolerant outlook it was unthinkable.

Yet, if he was to be believed, that was precisely what he had done. His excuse that he was afraid of being accused of the overseer's murder was plausible enough, perhaps, but if only he could have foreseen the trouble he was laying up for himself by refusing to face the charge, it would have been well worth his while to suffer the ordeal of suspicion. His common sense ought to have told him that he could not be convicted for a crime he had not committed.

His foolishness, or weakness, suggested guilt, however reluctant one was to condemn him. And Tony was very reluctant. It went against the grain to suspect the man he hoped would be his future father-in-law of anything; when it was a question of homicidal lunacy it was appalling.

For his own peace of mind he must find out for certain one way or the other as quickly as possible. The embryo of a plan by which he might satisfy himself had formed in his mind before he left the house. He now proceeded to make arrangements to put it into execution.

In the first place it was necessary to dispatch a couple of letters. His club was a convenient place in which to write them, and, parking his car near by, he

went into the smoking-room and set to work.

The basic idea of his scheme was inspired by a firm conviction that Westacott had been killed because he knew too much. Although he had no logical grounds for his assumption, he could not bring himself to believe that the doctor, who had been in excellent health when they drove to Rainhurst during the afternoon, had succumbed to natural causes. Suicide he ruled out without a second thought, and the police would have been in no doubt had Westacott met with an accident.

Tony's deduction was murder right from the start, and he said so emphatically to Dunthorne and Saunders in the former's office at Scotland Yard. He went there directly his correspondence was safely in the post and arrived shortly before the detectives returned to headquarters after their investigation into Westacott's death.

At first Dunthorne neither confirmed nor denied his declaration.

"That's very interesting, Mr. Grayling," was his non-committal comment. "I'm always pleased to hear the opinions of anyone so closely connected with a case as you have been. Supposing you tell us just why you think Dr. Westacott was murdered."

Unknown to his visitor, he pressed a bell concealed in the side of his desk and a stenographer in the next room picked up a pencil and adjusted the earphones which connected him to a microphone situated above Tony's head.

Tony cleared his throat.

"I think he was murdered because he was attending le Maitre when he died," he asserted deliberately.

Dunthorne nodded understandingly.

"You base that on Beney's theory, of course. But what I want to know is why do you differ from Beney's conclusions? We may as well speak straight to each other. Beney thinks it was Westacott who originated the death germ. From what you've just said you disagree?"

"Yes, definitely. I spent the afternoon with Westacott and I was with him last night when Mrs. Winterbottom told us about her husband. I know you people want facts and not impressions, but I'm quite sure that Westacott knew no more of this business than I do."

"We shall certainly want a little more evidence than that," put in Saunders, with a touch of sarcasm.

"I'm about to give it to you," retorted Tony swiftly, and went on to relate Manners' account of his unhappy experience in Assam.

When he mentioned that the overseer on the plantation had died

unexpectedly from snake-bite he noticed his audience exchange glances, but, not having the key to their thoughts, he did not appreciate the significance of the coincidence.

"So, you see," he marshalled his conclusions, "leaving Westacott out of it for the moment, at le Maitre's death-bed, with equal chances of extracting the necessary serum whilst their victim lay helpless, we have a Chi-chi who has blackmailed his partner over a considerable period of years and a doctor who admits to a serious mistake through which his patient lost her life, and who was only saved from a nasty scandal in consequence because the husband who was about to accuse him of carelessness conveniently died.

"Now, gentlemen," Tony went on forcibly, "I've no wish to say anything to Dr. Manners' detriment—far from it; in fact I have a particular reason for wishing to clear him of suspicion. But it seems to me that his story may very well supply the clue to the mystery we are trying to solve.

"I appreciate, of course, that Dr. Manners gave me the information voluntarily, which undoubtedly counts in his favour, but if he's off his blinking rocker, as the man who thought of this devilish death germ must certainly be, he may not have realized the construction that can be put upon it."

Thoroughly wound-up now, Tony ticked his points off on his fingers.

"In the first place, supposing, instead of it being an accident that he mixed up the milk of his specimen with the food which was given to the overseer's wife, he did it deliberately. I know I'm making a pretty ghastly suggestion, but I feel I'm fully justified in the circumstances. Unless this death germ business is put a stop to pretty quickly half London may be infected with an impulse to murder."

"Never mind the apologies," interposed Kitch brusquely, "They aren't necessary where a homicidal lunatic is concerned."

"Right ho! Well, to continue: supposing, as I say, he did it purposely—after all, the possibility is no more outlandish than the case with which we are dealing. As far as we know at present the death germ has no more purpose than the childish experiment of a disordered mind.

"He may even have had a definite object in view. Perhaps, for all we know, he gave her an overdose of typhoid with the idea that if he could succeed in bringing about a cure he would add materially to medical knowledge of typhoid treatment.

"But, whatever the reason, he failed and she died. Supposing then, overcome with remorse at what he had done, he made an impulsive confession to the husband. He probably knew him pretty well—people become mighty close friends when they are tucked away together in the wilds of the earth.

Instead of treating the matter with a ‘jolly hard cheese, old fellow—better luck next time’ attitude, however, the overseer considered the loss of his wife in such circumstances as sheer unadulterated murder.

“From what Manners told me, I gathered he was as mad as a hatter. Anyway, he sat down straight away to write a detailed report which would have finished Manners for life.”

Tony instinctively paused for a moment to create a dramatic effect.

“Doesn’t it strike you as mighty curious, to say the least of it, that he should have met his death from snake-bite before that report could be dispatched?”

“By God, yes!” cried Saunders excitedly. “It looks to me as though——”

“Wait a minute! Wait a minute! How many times have I told you, Jack, not to jump to conclusions? When a man starts speculating instead of sticking to facts, there’s no knowing where he’ll stop. No offence meant to you, Mr. Grayling, but if you had been in this game as long as I have you would have learned that there are two sides to every question. Yes, and sometimes three.”

“I was coming to Beney in a moment or two,” Tony assured him earnestly.

“I dare say you were. How did he come into possession of the overseer’s report which gave him his hold over Manners, etcetera, etcetera. But let us deal with one thing at a time.

“You’ve put forward a very shrewd argument, Mr. Grayling, and I admire the way you’ve thought it all out. But you haven’t produced one item of fact that would convince a jury. You cannot tell me the name of a single person who was present in the overseer’s bungalow on the night the snake bit him; you do not know whether he was in bed and asleep, or walking about; you have no idea whether the—er—accident occurred in the daytime or at night. In fact, you know practically nothing at all beyond the one item that he died. Why, even the cause of death being snake-bite is not admissible without the confirmation of a post mortem.”

Saunders nodded his agreement.

“That’s quite right, Kitch; but you won’t be able to rake up much proof after all these years.”

“Perhaps not; but we can try. Already I have some information that confirms one part of the doctor’s story.”

He searched amongst the papers on his table for a cablegram which had arrived during the evening from the Chief of Police in Calcutta.

“Here we are. Erasmus Beney—in attendance at Royal Hospital for three years as medical student; failed to pass intermediate qualifying examination.”

He flung the flimsy on the desk.

"It's not very much, but it is something. Now we've learned what Mr. Grayling has had to tell us we'll go ahead more energetically. I'll send a wire to them out there asking for every detail they can supply about this overseer's death. When we have something more definite we shall be better able to decide our proper course of action."

Tony felt exasperated. Whilst his reason told him the inspector was right thoroughly to test each step as he advanced, his impulse was to rush forward and achieve something spectacular.

"And in the meantime I suppose it doesn't matter how many more people are brutally murdered?"

Kitch Dunthorne shook his head reprovingly.

"We don't deserve that, Mr. Grayling, and you know it. In our job, whatever our inclinations, we are obliged to make haste slowly. Do you realize that if we made an arrest on circumstantial evidence and our case was not sufficiently strong to ensure a conviction, our prisoner would be discharged? In this country a man is considered innocent until he has been proved guilty, and the judge in his direction to the jury invariably warns them that unless they are convinced beyond any reasonable doubt they must return an acquittal.

"That sort of thing has happened before, and a murderer has escaped the penalty of his crime because insufficient evidence was forthcoming to bring his guilt home to him. And remember this: once a man has been acquitted of a charge in England he cannot by law be tried again for the same offence.

"Thank God I've never had that happen to me yet, and I don't intend to start with this case."

Tony felt abashed; it was caddish on his part to have insinuated that the police were not doing their best.

"I'm sorry, Inspector; I ought not to have said that," he apologized. "I suppose I'm over-eager to see the blackguard responsible for these murders put behind bars."

"We're just as keen as you are, Mr. Grayling," Kitch assured him dourly, and Saunders nodded agreement. "As a matter of fact it may interest you to know that I'm having both your suspects watched from now on. We may not be in a position to arrest them, but at least we'll prevent them from doing any more harm."

He did not think it necessary to add that he was also proposing to detail men to keep an eye on Tony.

"For heaven's sake don't do that!" cried Tony in alarm. "You'd spoil

everything."

Dunthorne's mouth closed like a trap.

"What on earth do you mean?" he demanded.

Tony looked from one policeman to the other with an expression rather like that of a naughty boy caught in the act of some forbidden villainy. How would they take his proposed plan? he wondered.

"Well, I—I've thought out a scheme which I think—I feel sure," he corrected himself, "will cause the man behind these crimes to give himself away. I was going to tell you about it, of course; in fact the real reason I came here tonight was to seek your co-operation."

Dunthorne smiled indulgently. How like these amateurs to think they could do better than the regular police force.

"My dear fellow, we thoroughly appreciate your enthusiasm and all that sort of thing, but I may as well save your breath for you. We——"

Tony held up his hand.

"One moment, Inspector; before you turn me down flat, answer me just one question. If you received information that a murder was about to be committed, what would your duty be?"

"To try to prevent it, of course."

"Exactly so. Very well, then, I want to give you some information about a murder that will probably be committed tomorrow."

Saunders snorted disgustedly.

"I don't think I should joke about things like that if I were you, Mr. Grayling."

"This isn't a joke, it's deadly serious."

Kitch grinned sceptically.

"Who's the likely victim?" he asked.

"I am."

"What?"

"Don't be a fool, man!"

"I'm not a fool, I'm not joking, and I'm perfectly sane," asserted Tony deliberately. "To put it briefly, what I've done is to set a trap. And since traps don't usually function without bait, I've provided myself in that capacity. It didn't seem fair to risk anyone else's life in the circumstances," he added whimsically.

"Of all the damned silly ideas!" exclaimed Saunders, but Kitch silenced

him with a gesture.

He was thinking that he had under-estimated this youthful ex-Air Force officer. He was an exceptionally keen judge of character and beneath the inconsequential flippancy of Tony's manner he sensed an inflexible purpose.

"You must be a very brave man, Mr. Grayling," he said simply. "Tell me exactly to what you have committed yourself."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A FORCED LANDING

TONY gave the appropriate signal and the expectant mechanics pulled the chocks away from the wheels of his aircraft. He taxied slowly out on to the aerodrome, faced into wind, glanced carefully about him to make sure the flying-ground was free from obstruction. Then, thrusting forward the control column, he opened the throttle to its fullest extent.

The little low-wing cabin monoplane he had hired for the occasion began to run forward across the grass. Rapidly its speed accelerated under the pull of the air-screw. For a hundred and fifty yards it skimmed the surface of the turf before lifting gracefully into the element for which it was designed.

Directly the slight jolting of the undercarriage gave way to the smoothness of flight, Tony eased back his throttle to cruising-speed. The monoplane was climbing like a lift.

Although he had not flown this type of machine before, he knew already that she "handled" perfectly. The controls were feather-light to his experienced touch and the smoothness of her "take-off" revealed a comfortable margin of engine power.

It was good to be in the air again—damned good! The exhilaration of swift movement through space was a wonderful tonic after the strain and anxiety of the previous day. The weather was perfect too—scarcely a cloud in the sky and bright sunshine that made one revel in the joy of being alive. He was going to enjoy this flip in spite of the grim purpose for which it was being undertaken.

As the countryside unfolded beneath him like some gigantic map his mind reviewed the arrangements of which his flight constituted such an important item.

The plan, which he had discussed thoroughly with Chief Inspector Dunthorne and Inspector Saunders into the small hours of the morning, was both simple and comprehensive. It consisted of writing to Beney and Manners that he had come into possession of information that would undoubtedly expose the man responsible for the tongue murders and that he was going to Rainhurst in search of a conclusive piece of evidence before telling his story to the police.

From the way he had worded each letter he anticipated that whilst the

innocent party would certainly be interested, the guilty one would attempt to destroy him before he could carry out his intention.

When first he told them about it the two detectives tried hard to persuade him to abandon such a risky project, but when he pointed out that the letters were already in the post, they agreed to support him.

As Kitch Dunthorne put it rather grimly:

"Since there's nothing more certain than that you'll never see tomorrow's sunset if we don't keep guard over you, you leave us no alternative."

It was the method by which the police could co-operate successfully that had caused most of the argument. Saunders wanted Tony to travel to Rainhurst by road with a police car following in close attendance. Dunthorne's idea was to have a concealed cordon posted round the grounds.

Tony, assuming the leadership by virtue of his role of principal actor, refused to concur with either scheme. They were up against an exceptionally clever man, he insisted, and the slightest sign of police activity in the neighbourhood of Rainhurst would ruin everything.

In the end they accepted the plan he had already worked out. He would fly down to Rainhurst in a machine fitted with two-way radio telephony and land in the field where he had crashed with le Maitre. Whilst he was in the air the police broadcasting-station would keep in touch with him and pass on reports received from specially posted police observers as to whether either of the two suspects left London as anticipated.

Subsequent proceedings would depend largely on circumstances. Even though either Manners or Beney did travel to Rainhurst in response to his note, the mere fact of their doing so did not constitute proof of their guilt. It was possible that the innocent one might follow an impulse to join Tony in his search whilst the guilty one might lay an ambush to intercept his victim on his return.

If the trap Tony had prepared was to be effective he must actually lay himself open to an attack from the unknown murderer or obtain from him a voluntary confession of his crimes.

Whilst he recognized the necessity, it was this part of the project which caused Kitch most misgiving. Tony was quite confident that he was well able to defend himself. He was a boxer of merit, strong, physically fit, and on his guard; he did not believe any human being, however cunning or determined, could overcome him.

Kitch thoroughly appreciated his youthful self-reliance and intrepidity, but it would be his responsibility if anything were to go wrong. He could well imagine the outcry there would be from the Press if the police lent themselves

to what would be described as an unjustifiable stunt, if it resulted in the death of a private individual. Questions would certainly be asked in the House of Commons and the Commissioner of Police would be obliged to dismiss him summarily as a scapegoat.

To give him his due, it was not the prospect of his own disgrace but Tony's safety that caused the Chief Inspector to set his face inflexibly against Tony's bearing the brunt of the adventure alone. The whole thing was off, he declared, unless Tony would agree to having two picked men secreted in the house ready to come to his assistance at a moment's notice if required.

Tony argued and pleaded, but in vain. Dunthorne was adamant. Either Tony could have full police co-operation on those terms or the whole scheme must be abandoned.

There was nothing for it but to yield to the compromise, which Tony did as gracefully as possible. The last details were discussed and arranged and he returned to his flat to snatch a few hours' rest before putting his plan into operation.

It occurred to him now that he might as well get in touch with "Copper-blue", the code word of the police broadcasting-station, and find out whether everything was in order. Switching on the generator of his sending-apparatus, he adjusted the dials to the correct wavelength and lifted the mouthpiece which hung round his neck.

"CLG 7659 calling Copper-blue," he said, slowly and distinctly. "CLG 7659 calling Copper-blue. Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Over."

He turned the switch from "Send" to "Receive" and listened. Except for a noise like heavy waves breaking on a rocky shore he could hear nothing. Evidently they had not got on to him yet.

Switching back to "Send", he repeated his call a dozen times or more.

"CLG 7659 calling Copper-blue. CLG 7659 calling Copper-blue. CLG 7659 calling Copper-blue. . . ."

This time when he turned to "Receive" he had an immediate answer.

"Copper-blue answering CLG 7659. Copper-blue answering CLG 7659. We can hear you. We can hear you. Stand by for a message. Stand by for a message. Over."

"CLG 7659 to Copper-blue. Pass your message. Pass your message. Over."

"Copper-blue to CLG 7659. Number 1 left home by car half an hour ago. Reported by observer at Staines Bridge to be travelling west. I will repeat that. . . ."

Tony did not listen to the repetition. His mind was a mixture of emotions.

Tense excitement warred with bitter disappointment, for No. 1 was the agreed code designation for Dr. Manners.

It was true, then—the horrible thing that he had feared. Hilary's father was a madman and a murderer. Poor little kid; she adored him. How would she take it when she learned the bitter truth?

All the time he had been making out the possible case against Manners to the two detectives he had been inwardly assuring himself that he was exaggerating a series of unfortunate incidents. The very elaboration of his argument was the outcome of a subconscious wish that his audience might prove him to be wrong.

He had welcomed thankfully Dunthorne's reproof that there were two sides to every question and had listened eagerly for some definite proof that his reasoning was at fault. When none was forthcoming he still hoped that the police telegrams to India would bear fruit.

Now, if Manners was on his way to Rainhurst, and in the circumstances there could be little doubt that that was his destination, his belief that Hilary's father would be proved innocent was hopelessly shattered.

As he gazed down at the cars on the Great West Road, looking like ants crawling along a crack in the ground, Tony wondered miserably what he should say to Hilary when next they met. She would know the part he had played in her father's exposure and arrest—the papers would see to that. Would she turn from him in detestation or would she be big-minded enough to realize he had done no more than his duty to society?

It didn't really matter what she thought about him, he tried to tell himself unselfishly. The only question of real importance was what would it do to her?

Coming so soon after her harrowing experience of the germ the previous evening it might well affect her reason permanently to know that her own father was responsible for it. She would have to be told now, of course. It would be infinitely worse if she found out by chance.

So great was his revulsion of feeling that Tony was half minded to call off his wonderful plan and leave the police to handle things as they thought best. After all, surely he had done all that was necessary in enticing the doctor to give himself away?

He was still toying with the idea when a voice sounded suddenly in his earphones.

"Copper-blue calling CLG 7659. Copper-blue calling CLG 7659. Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Over."

Tony acknowledged and switched eagerly back to receive. Perhaps the

previous message was a mistake. Perhaps . . .

"Copper-blue calling CLG 7659. Observer reports No. 2 left home twenty minutes ago. Car proceeding west. We will repeat——"

"CLG 7659 to Copper-blue," cried Tony excitedly. "Yes, I got that O.K. Let me know further developments instantly. Over."

"Message received," was the laconic reply, and Tony settled back in his seat with what patience he could muster.

What could it mean? They had apparently both fallen for his lure like tons of bricks. Surely they couldn't both be guilty—or could they?

Frowning in concentration he tried once again to work out the points for and against each of the two suspects.

To start with, he must leave all question of that Assam business out of it and try to consider the latest series of happenings with an open mind. No doubt the deaths of the overseer and his wife had some bearing on the matter, but, as Dunthorne had said, nothing definite could be deduced from those earlier tragedies without more data.

The whole beastly business began with le Maitre's escape from Broadmoor. That must definitely be the beginning, because each of the subsequent murders was based on le Maitre's crime.

Shortly after the crash he had heard Manners and Beney quarrelling. There were no half larks about it; they were going for each other hammer and tongs. That didn't look like the formation of a murder partnership, by Jove—anything but!

Was it likely that within a few hours—it had to be within a few hours because le Maitre died during the same night—they would agree to carve out part of his brain for a joint experiment in long-distance killing? Absolutely, inevitably, and indubitably—no!

Very well, then; since it was impossible to believe that they could be working together, what motives could each have for wanting to murder the other—or anybody at all for that matter?

Manners had an excellent motive for murdering Beney; there could be no doubt about that. Not only had he been blackmailed over a long period of years—the length of time might possibly have mellowed his resentment about that, of course—but he was afraid that his Chi-chi partner was making love to his daughter, the one thing he cherished in life more than his work.

On the other hand, Beney had an equally good reason for murdering Manners. He had had his own way with the older man for years, and it must have been a very bitter blow to find him so adamant about accepting a half-

caste as his son-in-law.

Once Manners was out of the way he would be free to lay siege to the daughter's heart. Though, of course, it must have been obvious to him that if Hilary had so much as a whiff of a suspicion that he was either blackmailer or murderer his cause was lost from the start.

If Beney were responsible, that would explain the roundabout attempts. The use of the death germ was an ingenious idea to find a proxy, although surely it was a very hit-and-miss method for a clever man to adopt.

It couldn't be Beney, reflected Tony, in perplexity. If it were, what reason could he possibly have for revealing his methods gratuitously? Surely he would have kept quiet until he could have another shot with possibly greater success?

Dash it all, practically the same thing applied to Manners. Why, if he were guilty, should he have told Tony all about that Assam business? He must know that it would bring him into the limelight of suspicion; he had actually admitted it in so many words. It didn't make sense. None of it made sense. Every line of thought one started seemed to lead round a vicious circle back to the beginning.

Unless—by jumping Jehosophat!—unless the guilty one was trying to throw suspicion on his partner. That would be the act of a clever man, and the man behind the tongue murders had the abnormal genius and cunning that goes so frequently with a deranged mind.

Tony thought for a moment that he had found something, the next he was not so sure. Once again the possibility applied equally to both suspects. Having failed in his object to murder his man by infecting a third party to do the killing, whoever it was might be trying to twist the evidence to get his victim hanged. It would suit him equally well in the ultimate.

"Copper-blue calling CLG 7659. Copper-blue calling CLG 7659. Can you hear me? Can you hear me? Over."

Tony acknowledged and sent the customary "Pass your message."

But he never had a chance to hear what the message was. Before he could turn the switch to "Receive", the windows of the cabin were suddenly sprayed with oil.

Occupied with his thoughts and perplexities, he had failed to keep proper watch on his instrument-board. The oil pressure, which had been functioning correctly when he first took off, had been falling rapidly during the last few minutes.

The main oil-pipe had broken, and a pool which had collected under the

cowling had overflowed. The moment it poured out into the slip-stream of the air-screw it was thrown back like black rain.

Tony acted automatically. His left hand switched off the engine, his right depressed the nose of the monoplane into a glide. He must forced land. Had he attempted to keep on, his engine would have seized.

He was only eight hundred feet up and there was not much time to pick out a suitable field. He selected one at random and edged to leeward in a series of spirals.

At two hundred feet he turned into wind. He had judged the distance nicely and the monoplane grounded on wheels and tail skid in the centre of the meadow. It ran forward across the grass under its own momentum.

Tony was congratulating himself on his arrival when the unexpected happened. One wheel sank into an unseen hollow, and wedged. The monoplane swung round, lurched, reared dizzily, and turned right over.

Tony saw the dashboard rushing towards him, felt a blow like the swing of a sledge-hammer, and remembered no more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AN IMPULSE TO MURDER

"WELL, is he coming back or isn't he?"

"Don't ask me; danged if I know."

"Surely he wouldn't just drive away without so much as lifting a finger. It isn't natural."

"Natural or not, that's what he has done."

"Then 'tain't no manner o' use awaiting here along o' his return. Us best make shift with a hurdle."

Tony heard the conversation without comprehending what it was all about. Where was he? Who were these men standing round him talking in riddles?

Instinct impelled him to open his eyes to find out. He saw a forest of legs, some gaitered, some in gumboots, some in corduroys hitched up with a strap at the knees.

Heavens, he was lying on the ground! How did he come to be here? Who the devil were these people? What did it all mean?

He raised his head to increase his horizon, and at once became aware that he had an outsize headache. It felt just as though someone had hit him on the head with a sledge-hammer.

Of course, now he knew. It all came back to him in a rush. He had been flying from London to Rainhurst, an oil-pipe had burst, he was obliged to forced land.

There was a gully or something in the field. The wheel of his undercarriage dropped into it and turned him over. He must have bumped his skull.

Automatically he put up his hand to feel the extent of the damage. The movement might have been a signal, for ten pairs of eyes focused on him immediately.

"He's opened his eyes."

"Ay, he has that."

"Feeling better, sir?"

"What happened; did you lose control?"

"You had a lucky escape, sir, and no error."

Tony smiled in appreciation of their interest, sat up, and held out his hands.

"Help me up, some of you, will you?"

The simple request seemed to stagger them completely, and no one attempted to comply with it.

"Best to lie still for a while, sir," advised one.

"We be a-going to take you to farmhouse, we be," said another.

"Ay, come with me and we'll get the hurdle, Tom."

"Reason we ain't done nothing yet," explained a tall, broad-shouldered carter, "is on account of Amos seeing a motor-car drive away just as he come up. Naturally we thought the driver had gone for help."

"That's so," agreed Amos. "He went off down the lane as I came round the end of the spinney."

One or two of the others volunteered remarks and explanations and presently Tony had a fairly clear impression of what must have taken place.

The field he had picked out for his forced landing was alongside a narrow lane about a mile distant from the main London road. Although quite a number of people saw his machine go down it so happened that no one was working very close to where it came to rest.

Amos was the nearest, but he had to cross ploughland, and it was quite five minutes before he caught sight of the wrecked machine from the edge of a spinney about two to three hundred yards distant.

According to his story there was a car drawn up in the lane near where the aircraft was lying. He was quite sure it was stationary when first he saw it, but as he approached it moved on up the lane in the opposite direction to the London road.

There could be no mistake about the fact of a car being in the lane because it was seen by three other men also, although too far away for any one of them to be able to give an accurate description of it. The only doubt was whether Amos was correct about it being motionless; it seemed such an extraordinary thing for the driver of a motor-car to stop, presumably look at an aeroplane crash, and then drive away without making any attempt to see if the pilot needed help.

With the assistance of some of his would-be rescuers, Tony had risen to his feet whilst the strange behaviour of the missing motorist was being related. Except for a throbbing pain in his head he felt fairly normal. A bit stiff here and there, perhaps—particularly in the right thigh—but no more than one would expect in the circumstances.

This account of a motorist who would not wait to be seen interested him

enormously. Could it be either Manners or Beney? he speculated. He must have been slightly ahead of them when the break in the oil-pipe occurred, and it was perfectly feasible that one or both of them might have seen that his machine was in difficulties.

They both knew he was going to Rainhurst by air; he had mentioned the fact in his letters, partly to create an impression of urgency and partly lest the guilty one of the two might hope to intercept him on the road.

Perhaps, whichever was the criminal, guessing that it was he who was forced landing, had left the main road hoping to surprise him. But for the timely appearance of Amos, reflected Tony, which had evidently caused the fellow to take fright, he might have been found murdered in his monoplane just as Westacott had been found dead in his car the previous evening. Good old Amos!

Damn this stiffness in his right thigh. It was not so much that it hurt him as that it itched most abominably. He could scarcely resist an impulse to scratch it.

A shout from the two who had gone in search of a hurdle caused everyone to look down the lane. A motor-car was approaching from the main road.

"He's coming back after all!" cried someone excitedly.

"No, no!" came a chorus of denials. "It's from t'other direction."

"Can't be the same car, can it, Amos?"

Thus appealed to, old Amos considered the point carefully.

"No, I reckon it can't." He thoughtfully gave his decision. "The car I see drove on up towards the village."

" 'Tisn't the same car, that's certain," declared another of the men who had seen it.

The car drew up at a gate in the hedge and the driver got out and walked briskly towards the expectant group. Tony recognized the short tubby figure of Erasmus Beney.

"Is anyone hurt?" asked Beney authoritatively, as he came within speaking-distance. "Why, hallo, Grayling—it's you, is it? What's happened?"

"I've had a bit of a crack-up," said Tony dully.

He felt terribly queer all of a sudden. It was not that the pain in his head had increased, but it seemed as though the blood in it was going round in circles.

There was something about Beney he did not like very much, he thought, as the little man approached nearer. What the devil was it? Of course, he was a

spy working secretly for a foreign power against England.

Or was it Manners who was the spy? One of them was, he knew. He wished to heaven he could remember which. If only the blood in his head would keep still for a moment or two to give him a chance to think.

And that cursed itchy feeling in his thigh. He was scratching it openly now. What did it matter? What did anything matter? There was something he had to do. His nerves were keyed up like violin strings in preparation for some ordeal. He would remember what it was in a moment or two; he knew he would.

Beney was standing just in front of him now, eying him anxiously.

"Are you sure you feel all right?" he inquired solicitously. "You look all in, man."

Tony looked at him suspiciously; what was he getting at?

"I'm perfectly all right," he declared nonchalantly. "Just a bit shaken—it's natural in the circumstances, I suppose."

Some instinct was telling him that he must be on his guard. He must not let anyone know—particularly Beney—the thoughts that were passing through his mind. They were something to do with Beney; he felt almost sure of it.

He knit his brows in an effort of memory. If only the blood would stop circling; it was swirling faster than ever.

"It's been a lucky escape," declared Beney heartily. "Doubly so, if only you knew it."

He took Tony's arm and led him away from the others.

"I got your letter," he disclosed, in a low, confidential voice. "I was hurrying down to Rainhurst to warn you. I realize now that if this hadn't happened I should have been too late."

"What do you mean?" asked Tony testily.

This blasted Chi-chi was trying to interfere in his business. But he shouldn't. Sooner than tolerate any meddling he would . . .

"I mean that Manners is the man you're after," asserted Beney deliberately. "You don't have to go to Rainhurst for the conclusive evidence you need; I can give it you. It's as well you didn't get to Rainhurst, as it happens. Manners is already there and he's waiting to kill you as he killed Westacott and all these other people."

Tony closed his eyes in an ecstasy of happiness. He knew now. The blood had miraculously stopped swirling and he knew.

He didn't like Beney, but it wasn't Beney who was his enemy. It was Manners. Manners was the arch-spy who was working underground to drag

Great Britain into another war.

He had to be stopped, and there was only one way to do it. As an important member of the British Secret Service, he had been entrusted with the job and given a free hand. His only instructions were to make sure.

On no account must he disclose his intentions to Beney, though, nor to anyone else. People didn't understand the purpose of his work. They laughed at him for playing a game when all the time he was in deadly earnest. They would try to stop him if they knew the truth.

Somehow he must get away from them and go in search of Manners. What he had to do couldn't wait. Even now Manners might be perfecting his plans. He must be stopped, stopped, stopped!

Inwardly seething with excitement, outwardly calm and self-possessed, Tony looked round for a way of escape. To his disordered brain every one of the simple countrymen gathered about him was an enemy. He had bluffed them so far, but once give them cause to suspect him and his work would be ruined.

Beney's car was the answer to his problem. If only he could get into the driving-seat he would show them all a clean pair of heels. He must go warily, though. One false move might ruin his chances.

"I'm feeling a bit giddy," he said cunningly. "It's this knock on the head, I suppose. Do you mind if I go across and sit in your car, Beney?"

"Not at all, old chap; in fact, I'll come with you. There's no point in staying here any longer, is there?"

"No, I suppose not."

With Beney holding his arm and the yokels following in close attendance, Tony walked slowly towards the gate beyond which the car was standing. The procession was within a few yards of it when he halted abruptly.

"The petrol!" he cried. "I've forgotten to turn it off. It's dangerous to leave it on; would you mind seeing to it, Beney?"

"Not at all; where shall I find the tap."

"On the dashboard—but you may not be able to get at it very easily. You'll have to have help in raising the broken wing, I expect."

As he had craftily anticipated, the mere hint that something had to be done was sufficient.

"We'll go, sir," cried one man heartily.

" 'Course we will!"

"Come on, Jim—show us how strong thee be, lad."

Laughing and joking, the party trooped back to the wreck; but Tony did not wait to see them. He walked swiftly through the gate and, climbing into the car, released the brake.

The vehicle was standing on a slight forward slope, and he let it run down to the bottom under its own momentum before he pressed the self-starter. The warm engine fired at once; he slipped into gear and accelerated, heedless of the cries from the bewildered men he had so neatly tricked.

By taking the first turning to the right and then to the right again, he soon reached the main London road. Rainhurst was but a few miles distant. His quarry was waiting for him. It would not be very long before his task was accomplished.

Strangely enough, he seemed to know exactly what to do when he reached his destination without the necessity for planning a course of action. Stopping the car a few hundred yards short of the house, he slipped into the grounds and made his way under cover of the hedge which screened the kitchen garden to the back of the building. In his hand he carried a heavy wrench which he had found in the tool-box.

A short keen search discovered a window insecurely latched. Taking the utmost precaution against making any noise, he prized it open with a rusty piece of metal he picked up from the path. His entry assured, he cocked his leg over the sill and climbed indoors.

He found himself in a scullery, and tip-toeing across the floor he passed into the kitchen beyond. Here some instinct reminded him that he would need a sharp knife, and he rummaged amongst various drawers until he found just the thing he wanted.

All was now in readiness for the deed he knew he was about to commit. His weapons were at hand, his victim was awaiting him.

In a few minutes' time Manners would be dead; the arch-spy who had done so much to ruin the country he loved would have met the fate he deserved. Tony intended to bash in the back of his head with the wrench; when the corpse lay at his feet he would cut out its tongue as a sign to all the world not to speak evil against England.

As he moved slowly forward from the kitchen in search of his prey, Tony felt neither fear nor pity nor compunction. His nerves were tense for swift, relentless action. His only emotion was a soul-consuming hatred of his enemy.

Noiselessly crossing the hall, he reached the door of the dining-room. He was not sure that Manners would be there, but if not, wherever he was, he meant to seek him out.

Inch by inch he turned the handle. The door swung slowly inwards.

Peering through the crack he saw the doctor comfortably reclining in an easy chair. He was engrossed in a medical journal and was quite oblivious of the terrible threat that menaced him.

Tony's teeth set in grim determination. His grip on his bludgeon tightened. He raised his arm, took one step forward—two, three . . . he was within striking-distance.

Another instant and he would have committed murder. But in that instant a bulky form crashed into him. His wrist was seized in an iron grip. His legs were scientifically tripped from under him.

"Don't let go, Bill—this bloke's a killer," yelled a voice.

Smothered under two hefty bodies, Tony fought savagely to free himself. Despite his frenzy he was very near to tears. They must not spoil his work. They didn't understand. He was only doing his duty.

"Blasted spy!" he shouted. "Let me get at him! I'll silence him! He won't give away any information when I've done with him!"

Suddenly Inspector Saunders' fist took him neatly on the point of the jaw, and for the second time that morning Tony relapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HILARY GOES TO RAINHURST

UNACCUSTOMED to the effect of a sleeping-draught, Hilary slept late that morning. Dr. Manners had given strict instructions to the maids that she was not to be disturbed. When she eventually awoke it was long past her usual breakfast-time.

Had such a thing occurred in the ordinary way she would have leapt from her bed in vexation, but the sedative had sapped her energy and she was content to lie on in drowsy repose.

But whilst her body was slow to recover its initiative, her brain was fully active. There were a number of questions prepared by her subconscious mind during sleep for which it strove to find the answers.

What really had happened the previous evening between the time she left the Westacotts after her injection to the moment when Tony found her crouching in Edith's dressing-room? Tony had told her that she had been in a cab accident and had explained that awful dream as the result of concussion.

At the time she had accepted his explanation thankfully. It took an enormous load off her mind to believe that those terrible thoughts and unaccountable actions were only phantoms of her imagination. Tired and unnerved, she had been satisfied by his assurances without probing into the improbabilities of his story.

Now she was rested it was different. She wanted to know all the details. Where and how did the accident occur? Why was it she had not the faintest recollection of it? How was it that her head was quite unmarked.

Tony had said: "You were concussed, and before they could stop you, you disappeared in the crowd." That was absolutely nonsense, of course; she wasn't a doctor's daughter for nothing. If she were really concussed, how could she suddenly disappear? She would probably have been unconscious.

You slipped up badly there, Tony my friend, she reflected, and concentrated on calling to mind exactly what had taken place.

Everything was perfectly clear up to the time Edith gave her the injection. She remembered saying good-bye and driving off in a cab. Yes, and she remembered the cab drawing up outside her home.

That definitely disposed of the accident twaddle, but it did not throw any

light on Tony's reasons for attempting to deceive her.

Of course, Beney was waiting on the pavement. He tried to stop her entering the house. He did stop her. He told her she was in the most deadly danger.

She knit her brows in an effort to recall his exact words.

"There's been some kind of a mix-up at the laboratory. The anti-toxin supplied to Dr. Westacott was really a culture serum. You must let me take you to the laboratory immediately so that we can give you an antidote."

The seriousness of his manner had frightened her and she had agreed to his proposal without demur. She remembered entering his car and being driven through street after street. She also recollected that a funny feeling crept over her. Her head seemed to be swimming in circles so that she could not think properly. There was something she had to do if only she could remember what it was.

What happened after that was only a confused jumble of impressions. Interminable drives in cars, sometimes with Beney, sometimes alone. Tony came into the picture somewhere. He was pleading with her, trying to get her to do something.

She would not listen to him. She had a duty to perform and nothing must stand in her way. It was connected with Edith Westacott. She thought she was an enemy spy and wanted to kill her.

As she reached that point in her recollections Hilary sat up abruptly. For a moment she was seized with a deadly fear. Had she killed Edith? Was that how she came to be in Edith's dressing-room?

She sank back again on the pillows with a sigh. Whatever it was she had done that Tony wanted to cover up, it certainly could not have been that. She would have been arrested and in prison by now. Even if the police had been unable to get on her trail immediately, Tony would not have been so unmistakably glad to catch up with her.

"Thank God I've found you in time!" he had said, now she came to think about it.

Evidently Beney had been telling the truth about the anti-toxin. Edith had accidentally injected her with the wrong stuff. Instead of being a simple antidote to diphtheria it had the effect of sending people temporarily out of their senses.

She shuddered in horror as she recalled all the terrible thoughts and impulses which were still so fresh in her mind. If it made one feel like that it ought to be kept locked up out of harm's way. It was terribly careless on

someone's part if it had been sent out from the laboratory as an anti-toxin.

Hilary slipped out of bed and began her toilet. She must find out from her father exactly what had taken place and who was to blame for the mistake. If it were Nurse Cunningham . . .

She froze into immobility as she recalled what Edith had told her. Gladys Cunningham was dead—murdered! Her own experience had made her forget; now it all came back to her.

According to Edith's story, Gladys Cunningham had been murdered in the laboratory by a woman who had left her blood-stained gloves behind. And, because she had been there during the afternoon and wore the same make and size of gloves, Scotland Yard wanted to interview her.

The look on Edith's face when she asked about the gloves rose up before her. It was an expression of abject terror—and Edith had inoculated herself against diphtheria that very afternoon.

To a girl of Hilary's intelligence the deduction was too horribly simple. Edith had undergone a similar experience to herself with a less fortunate ending. Whilst under the influence of that deadly drug, or whatever it was, she had gone round to the laboratory and murdered the nurse.

Poor unhappy Edith! Hilary's heart went out to the hapless woman in a boundless wave of sympathy. She had never liked her, had always regarded her, in fact, as a most objectionable type of creature. But this was different. She had committed a crime for which no one could possibly hold her responsible.

What had happened about it? Had she been arrested or had the police not yet discovered that she was the culprit?

Hilary hurried forward with her dressing. She must go down at once and see the papers. But at the same time she must not appear too eager for news. No one must know she had guessed the truth. It would be too ghastly if Edith were arrested through any action on her part. Why, but for the grace of God, she herself might have been in a similar horrible predicament.

The breakfast-room was deserted when she entered, but the newspapers were set out as usual on a side table. She seized the first and opened it at the main news page.

"Sudden death of West End doctor in Hyde Park," read the principal headline. "Suicide or murder?—Police suspect foul play."

With a terrible fear in her heart, Hilary read on. Was this her work or Edith's? The words danced before her eyes; only the essential facts penetrated her consciousness.

It was Jim Westacott, and he had been found dead seated in his car. There was a lot about the actions and suspicions of the constable who discovered the tragedy; then a sentence which relieved a large part of her apprehension.

"As far as can be ascertained prior to a post mortem, death was caused by the bite of a snake in the left arm."

The paragraph went on to theorize about how a poisonous snake could have got into a doctor's car in the heart of London, but Hilary did not read it. If death was caused by a snake-bite, then neither she nor Edith could have been responsible for it. She was spared that additional horror, at any rate.

The account of Nurse Cunningham's murder was lower down the page. It contained no fresh information, and there was nothing to indicate that the police suspected any particular person.

There was a reference to the broadcast issued about herself.

Miss Hilary Manners, the daughter of the well-known bacteriologist, for information concerning whose whereabouts an appeal was issued by the B.B.C., returned to her home during the evening. Whilst the entire police force of London was on the look-out for her she was seated in the Regina Cinema quietly enjoying the programme. The reason the police wished to interview her was that she was the last known person to see the unfortunate victim alive.

Hilary sighed with relief. Appalling though the whole business was, it was comforting to know that she was not one of the principal figures in it.

It was terrible for poor Edith, though. Technically a murderess and now a widow as well. What would become of her? If only it were possible to help her in some way!

The whole paper seemed to consist of nothing but the tongue murders. The few facts issued grudgingly by the police were reinforced by articles which claimed to explain the amazing similarity between the various crimes. There was even a leader on the subject expressing the editor's opinion that the Government should initiate a scientific commission immediately to investigate the whole matter.

Hilary did not need a scientific commission to tell her what had happened. Her feminine sixth sense took her right to the heart of the matter. Somehow, by accident or design, the germs which were the cause of all these terrible crimes had been issued from her father's laboratory.

Not for one single instant did she imagine that her darling daddy was responsible. The fault lay either with Nurse Cunningham or, more probably, that horrible Beney. But, whoever was to blame, the effect would be the same. Her father would be irretrievably ruined. After this no one would have the slightest confidence in anything he said or did. His work, which was the

mainspring of his life, would be finished.

With her heart torn with pain and sympathy, she went to his study and tapped on the door. She must tell him how sorry she was and assure him, although he already knew it, that she still believed in him. There was no answer and she opened the door to find the room deserted.

Her first thought was that he must be in another part of the house—he never went out without bidding her good-bye—but when she inquired of a maid and learned that he had left home quite early in the car, driving himself, she became alarmed.

It was so unlike him to do a thing like that. Of course, he might have wished not to disturb her; but where had he gone? Perhaps he had left a note for her.

He had given neither verbal nor written message to the servants, nor was there an envelope in the hall. A search of the breakfast-room also proved abortive.

In desperation she tried his study table. She could not find anything addressed in her name, but there was a letter that had arrived in the morning post. Hoping that it would provide a clue to his whereabouts she tore it from its envelope.

Dear Dr. Manners [she read],

Shortly after I left you tonight I stumbled across a piece of evidence that has put me on the track of the fiend responsible for the death germ. I think Westacott must have made the same discovery earlier and paid for his knowledge with his life. Anyway, I shall know for certain tomorrow. I am flying down to Rainhurst first thing in the morning, where I know I shall lay my hands on the final link in the chain. As soon as I have it in my possession I am going direct to Scotland Yard.

Knowing your interest in the case, I thought you would like to hear my plans.

Yours sincerely,
F. A. Grayling.

Hilary read it through twice whilst fearful thoughts crowded her mind. The dissemination of the death germ was not an accident but a deliberate attempt on somebody's part to commit wholesale murder, an attempt that had succeeded only too frequently.

But it was not the consideration of the present victims' fate that caused Hilary's cheeks to blench and her hands to tremble. It was the knowledge that

Tony knew who the monster was, and was trying to expose him.

One sentence stood out from the rest and burned its message into her brain:

"Westacott must have made the same discovery earlier and paid for his knowledge with his life."

Tony was in deadly danger. If the man he was tracking had the slightest inkling of what he was doing he would kill him without compunction.

Hilary closed her eyes and offered up a silent prayer for his safety. It had come to her in a vivid flash of realization that Tony meant everything in the world to her. She loved him—loved him for his chivalry, for his forthright frankness, for his ingenuous impulsiveness. He was the man of her choice, and if anything happened to him her happiness would be destroyed for ever.

One moment she stood whilst the world seemed to rock about her; the next she was flying for her hat and coat.

She must go down there at once to see what was happening. It was inconceivable that she could wait quietly at home. It did not occur to her that she could do nothing to help and would probably be a hindrance, that her father had already preceded her, that in any case she was hours too late. She only knew she must go.

Five minutes later she drove her car out of the garage and headed west. Once clear of the traffic she went like the wind. There was very little traffic and she made excellent time. The clock on the dashboard showed five minutes to midday as she left the road and entered the drive at Rainhurst.

The appearance of the house acted on her strung-up nerves like a douche of cold water. It looked silent and deserted. No car stood in the drive. For the first time she began to wonder whether she had been over-impulsive in her dash from London.

Nevertheless she switched off her engine and walked to the front door. If Tony had flown down he would have been obliged to leave his machine elsewhere. He might be inside.

No one answered her knock. For a few moments she waited irresolutely before deciding it was fruitless to stay longer. She had turned away to return to her car, when the door suddenly opened behind her.

"Hilary, this is an unexpected pleasure!" cried Erasmus Beney.

His voice was high-pitched and excited, and as she swung round towards him she noticed that his eyes were bright and staring.

"Oh—er—hallo, Mr. Beney. I—I thought Father was here."

He laughed at that in a way she did not like.

“Not yet, my dear, I only wish he were. Perhaps, now you’re here, we’ll be able to persuade him to come.”

Frightened by his manner and expression she backed away.

“I’m afraid I can’t wait,” she muttered tremulously.

“Oh yes, you can,” he contradicted her. “I need you.”

He made a sudden rush and seized her round the waist. She fought wildly, but he was unexpectedly strong and she could not break his grip.

“Let me go!” she screamed. “How dare you! Let me go!”

“When your father comes—perhaps.”

“What do you want of him?” she asked.

“I’m going to kill him,” announced Beney calmly.

He picked her up like a child and carried her screaming into the house. The front door banged behind them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MEDICAL EVIDENCE

THE telephone-bell buzzed sharply at his side. With a gesture of apology to the man seated opposite him, Kitch Dunthorne lifted the receiver.

"Hallo? Yes, put him through. Hallo, Jack—well, what's happened."

"We've made an arrest," disclosed Inspector Saunders excitedly. "We caught him in the very act as he was about to bash Dr. Manners."

"Who was it—Beney?"

"No, Grayling. All that hokum talk of his last night was just a trick to put us off the scent. He's the killer all right—mad as a hatter too. He fought like a tiger till we got the better of him."

Kitch laughed mirthlessly.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Jack; he's not the man we're after. His 'plane crashed near Bagshot, and he went on by car. I can't say yet exactly what happened, as the man I sent to investigate hasn't reported, but he must have been got at on the ground. Did he say anything?"

"Only a lot of nonsense about Manners being a spy. I had to knock him out, and he hasn't come round yet."

"That settles it; he's acting under the influence of the germ. Put him in a strait-jacket so he can't move and bring him up here. And bring Manners with you too."

"Shall I take him into custody?"

"Good lord, no!—but I think you had better collar Beney if you see him."

"Beney? Then you've got the evidence you wanted?"

"I think so," revealed Kitch non-committally, "though I'll know better by the time you arrive."

He replaced the receiver and sat for a few moments staring thoughtfully into space. His was a heavy responsibility. He dare not make a formal arrest until he had sufficient evidence, yet if the criminal he was hunting remained at large more murders might be added to the already lengthy list.

This news that Grayling had been infected showed how dangerous the madman was. Grayling was young, strong, and on his guard against just such an eventuality. Yet in some way still to be explained he had been overcome

and turned into a tool to carry out the killer's wishes.

Kitch pressed a bell which brought his secretary into the room.

"Issue a general call to all mobile police, county police, and stations in the Metropolitan area," he ordered. "Scotland Yard desires to interview Erasmus Beney, last seen in car number so-and-so proceeding west along the Great West Road. You have his age and description and all details, haven't you? Emphasize that he's not to be arrested—yet—but every possible means of peaceful persuasion must be employed to bring him here for questioning. That's all for the moment."

He passed his hand wearily across his face as the secretary completed his notes. He had been up all night mostly seated in the same chair, and whilst his mind was still functioning with its usual efficiency, his body was desperately tired.

"Now, Sir Charles," he requested, as the door clicked into place. "You were about to give me your report."

Sir Charles Weatherby, famous Home Office pathologist, picked up a sheaf of papers in front of him. He too had not been near his bed, but in contrast to Kitch's rumpled collar and dishevelled appearance he was immaculate.

"Which will you have first; the Westacott case?"

"Whichever you like—the order doesn't matter."

"Very well, then. You understand, of course, that I haven't had time to make as thorough an examination as I could wish. You wanted me to do such a great deal in a few hours that anything I tell you must be considered as subject to revision. On the whole, however, I think I can give you everything you need."

Kitch nodded. He was prepared for the medical evidence to be cautious and reserved, but he would be quite satisfied at this stage if it confirmed the impressions he had already formed.

"I'll express myself in non-technical language," went on Sir Charles. "The more formal statement can be reserved for the benefit of the jury.

"There is no doubt whatever that Westacott died from the effects of poison from the fangs of a hooded cobra," he announced deliberately, and Kitch sat up with a start.

It looked as though his theory was negated right away.

"If that is so, how do you account——"

Sir Charles held up his hand.

"Just a moment, Inspector, please let me finish. I've submitted certain

organs to a colleague who is also a toxicologist and he confirms my finding. In our considered opinion the poison was not administered by an ordinary bite, but by some instrument designed to leave impressions of a reptile's teeth.

"Let me explain how we reached this conclusion." He thrust forward his left upper arm. "You notice that there is a certain thickness in my coat sleeve. In the event of a reptile snapping at me in the place where Westacott was bitten, I submit that the mouthful of coat would cause the creature either to miss my flesh altogether or at the most only to make a slight nip. In short, the teeth-marks would be relatively close together.

"Now, in the case we have under review they are extremely wide apart. In fact, according to comparative measurements with a full-grown species of this particular snake, the creature's mouth must have been fully extended to make such a mark. You see what I'm driving at?"

"Quite easily. You're telling me that someone gave the dead man an artificial bite with teeth charged with snake poison. That's all right and it confirms what I already know; the job was done with the head of a stuffed snake which has since disappeared, probably destroyed by the murderer.

"What I can't quite follow is how he got his victim to sit still whilst he did it. He must have felt the pinch, surely."

"That is very easily explained. An hour or so before he died, Westacott partook of a whisky-and-soda which contained a powerful narcotic. When the poison was administered he was already in a state of coma."

"That's just what I wanted to know. The doctor drank his dope, felt sleepy, pulled up his car in Hyde Park, where the murderer found him and did the rest. Very ingenious, and since there are people coming and going all the time in Serpentine Road, he was not likely to be particularly noticed. I've already instituted inquiries, but I haven't yet discovered anyone who saw his car even."

"You'll have established how the murderer knew he would be at that particular spot?"

"It rather suggests a rendezvous to me. However, we'll go into that later. What's your next item of information?"

"Le Maitre. They weren't ready for me when I got down there and I had to wait nearly an hour. It's too bad, you know, Dunthorne; my time is too valuable to waste in that way."

"I'm extremely sorry, Sir Charles," said Kitch, with proper compunction. "I'll ask the Commissioner to send a note about it."

He was not unused to eminent technical consultants complaining about the

shortcomings of minor officials. In this particular instance there had been very little time to make all the necessary arrangements. After he had persuaded the Commissioner of Police that an exhumation was essential to his case, the Home Secretary had to be roused from his bed to sign the order. Kitch was not at all surprised that the prison staff were not ready when Sir Charles arrived; the wonder was that he was not kept waiting longer.

"Did you manage to find anything?" he asked meekly.

Sir Charles leaned impressively across the desk.

"I should think I did. The whole of the cerebral hemispheres had been removed, the operation being performed before life was extinct. In fact, in my opinion, it was the direct cause of death."

"Good lord! Could that have been done by one man?"

"Yes, but it would have taken him some time."

"How long?"

"A couple of hours or so."

"I see."

Kitch recalled Beney's account of le Maitre's death: "No one besides Westacott took the bandages off le Maitre's head and saw the wound, with the possible exception of Manners, from the time he entered the house to the time he was buried."

"Was the head bandaged when you saw it?" he asked.

"Yes, it was only four months ago and decomposition had not advanced very far."

"I was wondering how it came about that the two doctors who certified death did not notice that the brain was missing."

"I think that's quite pardonable in the circumstances." Sir Charles defended his profession. "Recovery was doubtful from the start with a depressed fracture such as is described in the medical report. I can quite understand that they did not look further when they found the patient dead."

Kitch accepted the explanation with a nod.

"I'll get you to have a talk with Dr. Manners later, if you will, Sir Charles. If possible I should like you to establish that Beney had the opportunity to perform this lengthy operation without arousing the suspicions of two medical men in the same house."

He made a note on his pad. The point was important if he were to build up a successful case. If it could be proved that Beney had deliberately hastened le Maitre's death, he had the basis of another murder charge.

"Now for the serum itself. What about that?"

Sir Charles shook his head.

"There hasn't been time," he protested. "You sent me an empty phial in the middle of the night with a note asking what it contained when full, and you expect a reply first thing in the morning. You can't do these things, Inspector; you ought to know that. Besides, I had my hands full with these other matters."

The phial was the one which Tony had picked up in Westacott's surgery. He had given it to Dunthorne during their discussion.

"Then you can tell me nothing?"

Kitch's intonation was a question.

"Very little and mostly negative. We had it under a microscope and saw some streptococci, but their classification will require a prolonged inspection. One thing I can tell you, if it's any use to you: there was no trace of diphtheria anti-toxin."

The detective rose to his feet to indicate that the interview was ended.

"Thank you very much, Sir Charles; that seems to be as far as we can go this morning. I'm sorry to have rushed you like this, but you appreciate the urgency?"

"Quite, I'm sorry I can't help you more. As soon as I have anything further to report I'll let you know at once."

He shook hands warmly and took his departure, leaving Kitch alone to chew the cud of his disappointment. The interview had added considerably to the stock of his information, of course, but it had not provided him with the definite lead he was seeking.

How the devil could he arrest Beney on the evidence at his disposal? He was as certain that the Eurasian was the guilty man as it was possible to be, yet he had not one single item of fact by which he could hold him. If only he could find some proof that was not purely circumstantial!

Once again he read through the details that had been established beyond question. He had tabulated them on a sheet of paper for ready reference.

The first item was a brief account of the murder of Mrs. le Maitre for comparison with the later crimes. It consisted of the salient features of the case which he had extracted from the filed police report.

Next came a résumé of le Maitre's break from Broadmoor. The aeroplane crashed, he was injured in the head, carried to the house at Rainhurst, where he was tended by Manners, Beney, and Westacott.

Hilary's and Tony's names were added for the sake of accuracy, although

Kitch was satisfied that neither of them had any bearing on the matter.

Kitch now put his pencil through Westacott. From Sir Charles' report it was clear that he had been murdered. He added a note to that effect with a large query mark behind the word "Motive".

The story of Rags followed with a minute to ask Beney to supply the cultures of the animal's blood. There were two query marks after this.

The detective read on—Isaacs, Roberts, Nurse Cunningham. All with the same characteristics, the bashing of the skull and the horrible mutilation of the tongue.

There was nothing in any of the cases which gave any clue to the man behind it all. A day-book found in Manners' laboratory had disclosed that six phials alleged to be anti-toxin had been delivered to the order of Dr. Westacott. Lane, Winterbottom, and the untraced murderer or murderess of Nurse Cunningham accounted for three of them; the fourth was used on Hilary; the fifth had apparently been injected into Tony Grayling. Where was the sixth?

Kitch lifted the receiver of his house telephone.

"Any news of Mrs. Westacott?" he demanded.

According to the servants at her house she had left home before any of them were astir. Kitch was anxious to ask her a number of questions concerning her husband. What time he left his surgery. Whether he partook of a drink. Had she any knowledge of the whereabouts of his surgical case and could she give any sort of inventory of its contents?

The case was not in the doctor's car when Saunders searched it; nor was it in the surgery. That fact had been established by a couple of detectives who had received permission from Westacott's nurse-secretary to go through his effects.

"No, sir, nothing yet."

Kitch replaced the receiver with a frown. Where could the woman have gone? Why had she gone at a time like this?

It looked very much as though a fresh complication was creeping into a case already overburdened with them. Kitch knew of her earlier intimate friendship with Beney; such a juicy piece of gossip was bound to come out in the course of a police investigation. Could it be that she was her former lover's accessary?

He scribbled a fresh note under the last item on his list.

"Suspicious disappearance of Edith Westacott."

A thought recurred that had been in his mind earlier. If Westacott was killed because of something he had found out, what could that something be?

His finger ran down the page to pick out every item with which Westacott was connected.

He attended le Maitre on the ground where he lay injured, he bandaged him in the house, he signed his death certificate. Apparently he was nowhere near when Rags had his fit of madness, but he actually injected Drew and Winterbottom and conducted a post mortem on the latter.

What could be deduced from those few facts that provided a motive for murder? On the face of it, absolutely nothing. Yet there must be a clue somewhere, if only he could spot it.

The party arrived from Rainhurst before he had found an answer to his riddle.

"What have you done with Grayling?" demanded Kitch, as Inspector Saunders entered the room.

"Put him in a cell. He's a bit quieter now, but from the look in his eyes I wouldn't trust him a yard."

"He'll be all right when the fit wears off him. Where's Manners?"

"In the waiting-room. You're sure he's O.K., then?"

"As sure as I am of anything in this damned case. Bring him in, Jack, will you? I want to ask him a question or two before I hear your report."

Saunders grunted and withdrew to return in a few minutes with the doctor.

"Now, Doctor," began Kitch, when Manners was settled in a chair, "I want you to cast your mind back to the day of le Maitre's death. Tell me, why was it that Westacott did all the bandaging and so forth when it was your house and you were the senior practitioner?"

"That's an easy one," smiled Manners. "I happened to have a septic wound on my hand caused by a rusty nail, and I was taking an elementary precaution against infection."

Kitch struck the table a heavy blow with his fist.

"I see it now!" he cried. "Beney remembered that after he had hinted to Westacott about the death germ. He realized that when Westacott thought things over he would know that Beney must be the one responsible, so he killed him to keep his mouth shut!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A WOMAN SCORNED

WHEN Beney callously deserted Edith Westacott in the hour of her need she felt she had nothing left worth living for. She had loved him with all the violent intensity of an unsatisfied passionate nature, and would have gone on loving and serving him as long as he threw her the merest crumb of affection in return. His brutal declaration that he was utterly indifferent to what became of her brought her face to face with reality.

He did not love her and never could have loved her, she told herself piteously as the front door closed behind him. He had merely been using her for his own ends, and now that she no longer appealed to him he had discarded her with no more thought than he would have given a finished cigarette-end.

He must be utterly unscrupulous and self-centred. No man with a spark of kindliness could have abandoned her in the circumstances without so much as an expression of sympathy. He was a heartless monster to whom feelings of common humanity were unknown.

Bewildered and inexpressibly miserable, she sank into a chair and contemplated the shattered fragments of her life. She had lost her husband and her lover, and there was not a soul in the world to whom she could turn in her distress. But even these calamities paled into insignificance beside the fact that she was a murderess.

The knowledge froze her blood so that she shivered with dreadful apprehension. It was no use pretending that because the awful deed was committed in a trance she would escape the punishment due to her. Who would believe her story and excuse the ruthless ferocity of the crime.

No one! declared an inner voice, and in the silence of the room the finality of the words seemed to sound a death-knell. The air seemed to become heavy and suffocating so that she panted for breath. Her head was swimming and the walls appeared to be closing in to crush her.

With nerves stretched almost to breaking-point she staggered to her feet. She could not bear it, the weeks of waiting in a cell, the hard, merciless faces of the public gloating over her travail. She could not face the judge when he placed the black cap on his head and pronounced her doom. The thought of the drop behind the door of the death-chamber was terror unspeakable.

There was a way out, and she must take it. Her husband's poison-cupboard. Just a quick drink from a glass, and a few moments of agony, and she would be free from the misery that haunted her.

Her mind made up, she walked with faltering steps into the surgery. She knew just what she would use and where to find it.

She had unlocked the cupboard door and the means of escape was in her hand when she paused. Why should she go like this, shamefully disgraced, while Beney went scot free?

Surely he was as much to blame as she was. He had led her on, played with her affections, encouraged her to deceive her husband. It was because of him that she had hated Nurse Cunningham, who had innocently prevented her from being near him.

Edith set the bottle on the doctor's desk and her thoughts took a fresh turn. Why had he come here tonight like that?

It was not for love of her, as she had first imagined, but there must be some reason. Erasmus Beney never did anything without a purpose. Perhaps if she could find out what that purpose was she would discover a way to avenge herself for his indifference to her fate.

Revenge! The idea gave her a new object in life, provided a powerful argument why she should evade the penalty for her crime and keep on living. It would be worth while to die in the end, if only she knew he had tasted some of the bitterness he had caused her.

Although the bottle of poison remained where she had put it, she no longer had any intention of drinking it. Her mind was concentrated on a fresh aim. Beney must be made to suffer.

She seated herself where he had sat and recalled exactly what he had done. He had been searching her husband's day-book to see who had been injected with anti-toxin. But it wasn't really anti-toxin at all, he had said. It was a deadly serum which had the effect of causing the person injected to commit a murder.

As she read down the columns of entries in front of her, she was able to reconstruct some part of what had taken place. Six phials of the murder germ were received by her husband from the laboratory. Lane, Winterbottom, Hilary, and she herself accounted for four of them; the other two were missing.

Beney had wanted to know about those other two for some reason. She remembered his surprise when she mentioned that the one she used on Hilary was the last. He had concealed his interest by remarking that of course the others would be in the doctor's medicine-case.

Intuition told her that he knew that was not true. He must have seen the medicine-case and examined it. There was only one phial in it, and he had knocked her up at that late hour for the sole purpose of securing the sixth and last.

Why was the possession of it so important to him? The answer came in a sudden flash of inspiration. Because he was responsible for the deadly nature of its contents.

The conviction strengthened rapidly as she reviewed the circumstantial evidence. Since the lymph had come from the laboratory it must have been manufactured either by him or by Dr. Manners. Even if Manners had prepared it, which, from her knowledge of him, she did not think probable, Beney certainly knew about it.

But it was Manners who had suggested that she and Hilary ought to be inoculated in view of the diphtheria epidemic. He had expressed his opinion quite openly in front of all of them at the dinner-table. He would never have done that if there was risk for Hilary; she was his only child and he worshipped her.

Beney was the guilty one all right. It was strange that he had not taken steps to prevent Hilary being infected, but, of course, he might not have attached much importance to a casual dinner-table remark. He would not mind about the danger to me, reflected Edith bitterly.

Beney was more to blame for her present plight than she had at first thought. Her anger against him increased as she realized it. He had dared to tell her he didn't care what became of her when all the time he knew it was all his fault. The—the odious creature!

She would get even with him somehow. If only she could find the sixth phial and send it anonymously to the police. . . . That ought to settle him.

With her eagerness to do him an injury acting as a spur she began a thorough search of the surgery. Every shelf and cupboard, the drawers in the desk, every nook and cranny was subjected to a minute scrutiny. But it was all in vain. There was no trace of the little glass tube she sought.

In the end she found it quite by chance. As a last resort she had gone into the hall in the vague hope that it might be in a small case of drugs Westacott sometimes carried in his topcoat. The hope was fruitless, and she was turning away in despair when she spied a small packet resting on the hall table.

It was addressed to Sir Charles Weatherby and had been left for one of the servants to deliver by hand during the evening. In the excitement and upset following the news of the doctor's death it had been forgotten.

Edith seized it and tore it open. The phial for which she was looking was

inside, accompanied by a letter, asking that the contents be analysed and a full report furnished as speedily as possible.

Now that she had it she thought of a better plan. Sending it to the police would be too tame. There would be inevitable delays, and if by some misfortune Gladys Cunningham's murder was traced to her and she was arrested, she would not be able to see her victim squirm.

Far better to carry out her revenge in person. She would charge a syringe with the serum and plunge it into Beney's body. Let him taste the agony of mind that she had undergone. He would commit a murder in the same way that he had forced his dupes to commit them. It was a pleasant thought that when he recovered from the effects of the germ he would have to face the consequences.

A sudden fear seized her lest something should intervene to thwart her intentions. Such a calamity must be prevented at all costs. She would leave the house tonight just as soon as she could get ready. She would hide somewhere, where no one could find her. In the morning she would lure Beney to his doom.

Dawn was on the point of breaking when she let herself out through a side entrance. She was dressed inconspicuously and a pair of spectacles and a different arrangement of her hair had completely altered her appearance.

A stray taxi took her to King's Cross, where she secured a room in a small hotel, explaining the hour of her arrival by mentioning that she had come down from Scotland by a night express. In the morning she telephoned to Beney's rooms.

He had gone out, she was told, and had left no message as to his destination. It was a set-back, but not a serious one. As long as she remained under cover, there was plenty of time.

Half an hour later she tried again with the same result. At the third attempt, the caretaker to whom she spoke suggested he might have gone to Rainhurst.

She seized on the suggestion with avidity. It sounded probable, and even if it was incorrect the journey there need not be wasted. If she could persuade him to meet her in the country her task might be easier.

There was a convenient train from Waterloo to Farnborough. Leaving the station on foot, she set out to walk the few miles to the house; it would be better if her movements were difficult to trace.

It was just five minutes to twelve as she rounded the last bend and saw the house in front of her. A car was in the act of turning into the drive. Hastening her pace, she was in time to see Beney lift Hilary like a child and carry her screaming through the doorway.

The sight filled Edith with a cold relentless fury. If she had had any qualms before concerning what she was about to do, she was merciless now. He was here with the girl who had supplanted her in his affections; it made no difference that Hilary had tried to escape him. They should both suffer for the insult to her esteem.

Perhaps, when the fit was on him, Hilary would be his victim. It would be a sweet revenge indeed if he came round to the knowledge that he had brutally destroyed his sweetheart.

Cunningly keeping out of sight, Edith made her way to the back of the house. The window was still open by which Tony had effected an entry earlier in the day. She climbed through and crept silently along the passage.

She could hear voices talking in the dining-room; the one exultant, the other indignant. Pausing long enough to take the deadly syringe from her bag she cautiously opened the door.

Hilary was seated in a chair with Beney standing over her. His back was to the door. Edith had but to take a couple of steps and her fearsome deed would be accomplished.

She braced herself to make a rush, and in that instant Beney turned. His face went grey as he saw what was in her hand, but he did not lack courage. Without a moment's hesitation he hurled himself upon her.

Surprised by the unexpected turn events had taken, Edith lunged viciously with the point of the syringe. Had it found its mark, her deadly purpose would have been accomplished. But by a quick twist Beney managed to evade it. An instant later he had her by the wrist.

Backwards and forwards they swayed in a desperate struggle for mastery. Beney's masculine strength was offset by the fury of the maddened woman, and for a few moments the fight was equal. Kicking and scratching with her free hand, Edith prevented him from overpowering her.

Terrified out of her wits, Hilary at first remained rooted to her chair. Her limbs were trembling so that she had no strength in them. Never in her life before had she seen anything like the silent ferocity of the fight she was witnessing.

Beney swung the woman round. Had it not been for the table she would have fallen. She recovered her balance and clawed at his eyes with her nails. Still grasping her wrist to prevent her using the syringe, he gave before her.

The combatants shuffled in Hilary's direction. Fearful that they would stumble over her, she rose shakily and cowered against the wall. The movement restored her initiative. Now was the chance to escape.

Foot by foot she edged towards the doorway, reached it, and darted through. She must get out into the open and away. Her fingers fumbled with the latch of the front door. It yielded and she ran into the drive.

A car was turning in from the road. There were two men in it. With a revulsion of thankfulness she recognized the flat blue caps of the mobile police.

She waved her arms and screamed.

“Help, help! They’re killing each other.”

“Who are, miss?”

“Where?”

“In there, Beney and Edith Westacott. They’re fighting like demons.”

The driver braked hard and with one accord the two men swarmed out of the car. Hilary stared after them, wringing her hands.

She heard a shout, a bang. A moment’s silence, then a man came running round the outside of the house. It was Beney, bareheaded, his face white and set with determination.

He leapt into the police car. Came the whirr of the self-starter, the roar of the engine. He reversed swiftly down the drive.

The leading constable came into view, saw what was happening, shouted, and swore.

Beney reached the road. His car leapt forward under full throttle.

The two policemen were already in Hilary’s car. It followed in swift pursuit. The noise of the chase receded in the distance.

Hilary did not wait to see what became of Edith Westacott. With the memory of what she had seen to give her strength, she ran from the house as fast as her legs would carry her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BECAUSE OF A POWDER-PUFF

TONY rattled angrily against the bars of his cell.

"Hey, somebody! Let me out of here! What's the meaning of this nonsense?"

He had awakened from what he took to be a restless, dream-burdened sleep to find himself in totally unaccustomed surroundings. He was lying on a wooden bed in the tiniest of rooms totally devoid of furniture.

With his mind still fuddled from the after-effects of the germ, it took him some time to guess where he was. Directly he tumbled to the fact that he was in a police cell he sprang to his feet and tried the iron door.

It was locked, and although he shouted and raved no one took any notice of his demands to be released.

Puzzled and discomfited he sat down on his bed and tried to think out what had happened.

The last thing he could remember clearly was making a forced landing near Bagshot. He had got down all right, then one of the bally wheels stuck in a rut and the aircraft went up on her nose.

No, there was something later than that. He was lying on the ground surrounded by a group of yokels They were arguing about a car. Then Beney turned up——

After that everything was decidedly vague. He had driven somewhere in a car—or had he only dreamed it? Manners was there, and for some reason he wanted to clout him on the head. He had been prevented from that at the last moment by two enormous figures which sprang on him.

Good God, it couldn't be . . . ? A thought entered his mind, paralysing in its implication. Had he with all his clever cocksureness, his "I'm-a-match-for-any-of-them" self-assurance, his youthful disdain of assistance, fallen a victim to the death germ?

There could be only one answer to that question, he decided, after a few minutes' reflection. He had. Someone must have injected him without his knowledge when he was lying unconscious after bumping his head in the crash.

A second question succeeded the first; a gruesome question, this, that made his mouth feel dry and his pulse accelerate. Whilst the fit was on him, had he murdered anyone? That dream about Manners—was it not a dream after all, but dreadful reality? Had he killed the father of the girl he loved? Was he a murderer? Was that the reason why he was locked up here in a police cell?

His body became tense and rigid as this explanation for his imprisonment occurred to him. But it was not fear of the consequences to himself that brought a cold sweat to his forehead. The deed was not premeditated, and surely he could not be held responsible for an action impelled by an outside agency. In any case there would be plenty of time to think of his defence later.

The thought that filled him with horror unspeakable was his future relationship with Hilary. However extenuating the circumstances, whatever arguments he might bring forward to clear himself from blame, even though she generously forgave him, it was against all reason to expect that she would ever marry him.

The memory of her dead father would be always between them, a barrier which neither passion nor magnanimity could destroy. It would act like a canker in their lives, expanding the little differences of personal habits and temperament until she turned from him in loathing and horror.

Once more he seized on his prison bars and shook them with the frenzy of despair. He must know the worst. They must answer his questions. It was the torture of hell to keep him in suspense like this.

"Hi! Somebody, anybody! Answer me, damn you!"

There was a faint sound in the distance and he held his breath and listened. Footsteps, voices. Someone was coming at last!

Peering along the corridor he made out a small procession of four men: a uniformed constable, Chief Inspector Dunthorne, Inspector Saunders, and—merciful heaven—Dr. Manners!

Tony experienced a revulsion of joy that was like a flame of fire. Manners was alive! His dream was true, then. He had been frustrated from committing the awful deed his deranged mind had contemplated. God had indeed been good to him.

The party halted in the corridor outside and four pairs of eyes regarded him keenly. Tony moistened his dry lips.

"Feel better?" asked Kitch laconically.

"Yes—I—I'm all right now."

The detective glanced at the doctor and received a slight nod of confirmation.

"All right, Davidson, let him out."

The door was unlocked in silence, and Tony walked through the grid to freedom.

Dr. Manners held out his hand and Tony grasped it fervently.

"I'm most terribly sorry——" he began, but the doctor cut him short.

"There's no need to apologize, my boy; you were a victim of circumstances." He smiled faintly. "Just as I was when you suspected me of being the originator of the death germ."

Tony flushed repentantly.

"I seem to have made a muck of things all round," he declared dejectedly.

"Not at all," contradicted Kitch heartily. "Your assistance has been most valuable to us. We should have had our man for certain if you hadn't been obliged to forced land."

"Then you haven't got him yet?"

"No, but come up to my office and I'll tell you all about it."

The story differed considerably in essential details from what Tony expected to hear. Although Kitch admitted to having at first suspected Dr. Manners, just as he had suspected Tony and Westacott, he knew for certain before Tony had propounded his scheme for enticing the arch-murderer into a trap that Manners could not possibly be the man he was after—as far as Westacott's death was concerned at any rate.

Routine police inquiries had established the whereabouts of everyone under suspicion from the time Westacott was last seen alive to the moment his dead body was discovered. Every moment of Manners' time during this vital period was accounted for satisfactorily. There was ample confirmation that he had remained at home until the maids drew his attention to the police broadcast for Hilary, when he went direct to Scotland Yard.

Beney's movements, on the other hand, could not be checked from the hour when Tony and Westacott took leave of him at Rainhurst to the moment when he opened the door of Hilary's taxi outside her house. The constable who had informed Tony that Beney's car had been waiting in the street for the previous hour had seen the Eurasian arrive, but was unable to say that he remained with his vehicle.

"From the medical evidence," explained Kitch, "Westacott's death took place between seven-fifteen and seven-forty-five, so his car must have been stationary in the Park for a considerable time before it was first noticed. Apparently it is impossible to say exactly how long the poison would take to do its work; it varies according to the physical resistance of the person bitten, I

understand. But from our time-table, whether it was five minutes or half an hour, it is feasible that Benny administered it.

"He took a long chance to throw suspicion on Dr. Manners when he used the stuffed snake from his rooms, presuming that was the instrument he employed, knowing that Manners had visited his apartment during the day. It failed only because Dr. Manners had a cast-iron alibi, though I should imagine he had intended to manufacture other circumstantial evidence if his plans had not been upset by Miss Hilary Manners, telling him she had been infected with the death germ."

"Where is Miss Manners now?" Tony went off at a tangent.

All this explanation was very interesting, but he would far rather postpone the hearing of it until after he had seen Hilary. He would have no peace of mind until he heard from her own lips that she had forgiven him for his doubts of her father.

"She's perfectly all right," Dr. Manners assured him. "I left her this morning peacefully sleeping. We will go home together presently and surprise her."

"And Beney, where is he?"

"That's what we would like to know," said Saunders gloomily.

"I've issued a general call that he's to be roped in for questioning," disclosed Kitch. "It won't be very long before we hear news of him."

His prophecy was startlingly fulfilled a few moments later. The telephone-bell rang, and when he lifted the receiver the police-station at Farnborough gave him a brief account of Hilary's encounter with Beney at Rainhurst.

Kitch turned a grave face to his expectant audience.

"I've got a bit of a shock for you, Doctor," he said, and told them what he had just heard. "After the cars drove off she ran over a mile before a passing motorist took her to the station," he concluded. "They're going to keep her there until somebody goes for her."

"I'll go," volunteered Tony at once. "Can I borrow a car from someone?"

He was already on his feet.

"Take mine," said Kitch. "I shall have to stay here for news. See to it, Jack, will you?"

But before Saunders and Tony could leave the room, the 'phone bell rang again.

This time it was one of the mobile police officers who had chased Beney from the house. After being hopelessly outpaced in Hilary's low-powered

runabout they had come across the police car abandoned on the outskirts of Southampton.

"Now he knows the game's up he'll try for the Continent," cried Saunders.

Kitch snatched up his house telephone and issued instructions for outgoing vessels to be watched, and a search made amongst those already on board. Similar instructions were to be wirelessed to all air ports. Every policeman, foot, horse, car, and plain-clothes, was to be given a description of the wanted man.

"He can't escape us," he declared grimly. "We'll issue a broadcast tonight asking anyone who has caught a glimpse of him to report to the nearest police-station. He's far too conspicuous to be overlooked."

All was bustle and orderly confusion now that there were firm grounds for ordering the Eurasian's arrest. On Hilary's evidence he could be charged immediately with assault. Then, when he was brought before the Magistrate's bench, the police would ask for a remand for inquiries.

"And if we can't pin a murder charge on to him, given a few days to turn round, we deserve to lose our coats," summed up Kitch when he had outlined his course of action.

Tony did not wait to hear any more. Now the hunt was up, he realized that both inspectors would be too fully occupied for a while to attend to him. All he knew was that he wanted to go to Hilary.

He slipped quietly out of the building, hailed a taxi, and drove to the garage where his own car was stabled. There were no obstructions in front of it this time, and it was not very long before he was clear of London.

When he reached Farnborough he found Hilary waiting in the superintendent's room at the police-station. The look of gladness on her face when he appeared in the doorway told him what he wanted to know, and an instant later she was in his arms.

"There's something I must say to you, sweetheart," he declared firmly when the first rapture of their reunion was past. "I'm afraid you may hate me when you hear it, but I've got to tell you all the same. We must never have any secrets from each other, must we?"

She nestled more closely against him.

"There's nothing you can tell me that I shall mind hearing," she assured him with the rashness of a lover. "After my experience of last evening, I shall never judge anyone's motives again."

He gently disengaged himself and took a turn across the room.

"You had better hear first what I have to confess," he said roughly, and

went on to relate his suspicions of her father.

With the frankness of youth he did not spare himself, offering no excuses and making his story a bald account of his doubts, fears, and deductions. She shivered when he revealed that, like herself, he had been injected with the death germ, and when he told her how nearly the doctor had fallen a victim to the madness that possessed him, she cried out in agony.

"So, you see, I'm hardly a fit person to ask you to marry me," he wound up bitterly.

She rose gracefully and stood in front of him with her soul shining in her eyes.

"I'm the best judge of that," she declared soberly. "If you won't marry me I shall never marry anyone."

"Hilary, my darling angel, you mean that in spite of what I've told you?"

She nodded.

"Yes, in spite of it or because of it. You might so easily have kept it to yourself or tried to pretend that your suspicions of Daddy were only a blind. The fact that you've told me everything without reserve shows me—how fit you are to be the father of my children," she finished in a whisper.

Overwhelmed by her magnanimity, Tony could only hold her tightly to him, and it was some time before he could trust himself to speak. With his heart brimming with emotion he swore a mighty oath: in all things he would try his utmost to be worthy of her.

"I—I must take you to your father," he said humbly, when at last he found his voice. "He'll be waiting anxiously to see you."

The thought was prompted by a desire to match her generosity of spirit, and she gave him a smile of appreciation.

"I'm quite ready, but I feel an awful sight. I wish I had my powder-puff; it's in my bag at Rainhurst, I suppose. I left it when I ran."

"We can pick it up," said Tony promptly. "It's on our way."

She hesitated doubtfully.

"I'm not very keen on going back to that place."

"It'll be all right; he's hardly likely to return there from Southampton."

"No, I suppose not—O.K., then; it won't take a minute, will it?"

But when they reached the place the house looked so sinister and deserted that she changed her mind.

"I don't think I'll bother, Tony dear, if you don't think me too much of a coward."

Tony smiled complacently.

“Of course not, darling, I quite understand.”

He pushed out his clutch, but before he could engage the first gear, Beney sprang suddenly from the hedge and leapt on the running-board. He carried a pistol in his hand which he pressed threateningly against Hilary’s head.

“Drive up to the house,” he ordered sharply. “If you attempt to resist, I’ll blow out her brains!”

CHAPTER THIRTY

A GRUESOME CONFESSION

IN face of such an alternative Tony obeyed without question. Under Beney's direction he turned into the drive and drew up before the house.

Still keeping his hostage covered the Eurasian ordered his prisoners to alight. Throwing Tony the key, he bade him unlock the front door. Then, with Tony in front so that he was powerless to spring a surprise, he ushered them into the room from which Hilary had escaped an hour or so earlier.

The cords with which Hilary had been bound when under the influence of the drug the previous evening were lying on the floor and he forced her to pick them up and lash Tony's hands behind his back. Once Tony was secure he laid down his gun and fastened Hilary in the same way, completing the operation by binding their ankles.

"It was most kind of you both to come here like this," he chuckled as he stepped back to survey his handiwork. "I was wondering how I was going to finish my job now that the police are looking for me."

"You won't have very long," declared Tony resolutely. "They'll be here any minute."

He hoped to upset Beney's equanimity, but he was disappointed. The Eurasian slowly shook his head.

"You're bluffing, and you know it, my dear Grayling. This is the last place in England they will dream of searching; that's why I chose to double back here."

Tony knew he was right, and his heart sank. No one would be likely to suspect that Beney would be so bold as to return to Rainhurst with the countryside swarming with police armed with his description. The only chance that anyone might visit the house would be if Dunthorne sent a party to look for evidence, though he was hardly likely to do that until his man was in custody.

"What do you want with us?" asked Hilary fearfully. "We haven't done you any harm."

"Perhaps not, my charming Hilary, though you soon would if you had the chance." He laughed. "It's an empty compliment now, I suppose, but as recently as yesterday evening I cherished a hope that you might one day

become my wife. It's funny how circumstances alter plans, isn't it?"

"Listen to me, you damned swine!" cried Tony hotly. "I don't know what horrible ideas you've got in that cunning brain of yours, but if only you'll let Hilary go I swear I'll do what I can to help you. I'll even fly you out of the country if I can get hold of a machine."

"Nobly put, my friend, and if I really needed help I might consider it. As it is——"

"But you do need help—and pretty badly too. They're after you for murder."

Again Beney shook his head.

"Oh no, they're not—or if they are, they've got no evidence against me. The only possible charge they could bring that might hold water would be detaining Hilary here against her will."

"You told me you were going to kill Daddy," Hilary recalled.

"That's only your word against mine. But thanks for reminding me; I've a lot of work to do."

He went to a cupboard and returned with a brown glass bottle which he placed on the table in front of them.

"Vitriol!" he announced pleasantly. "I have to go upstairs for a few minutes to fetch some apparatus and other things. If either of you yells for help whilst I'm gone, or attempts to escape, you can guess what I shall do on my return."

He nodded meaningly towards the bottle and left the room. Tony waited whilst they heard him mount the stairs before he turned to Hilary with an agonized face.

"Hilary darling, what are we going to do? He's raving mad. It's all my fault that we came here; what a fool I am!"

"Sssh! You're not to blame. It was just Fate, that's all."

Tony wrestled furiously with his bonds.

"If only I could get my hands free. Pistol or no pistol, I would have a go at him."

Hilary thought of the contents of the brown bottle and implored him to keep quiet.

"If he intended to kill us he wouldn't have bothered to tie us up," she declared. "Perhaps if we don't annoy him nothing much will happen."

It was a wish rather than a conviction, and when Beney presently returned he speedily disillusioned her.

He carried a collection of test-tubes, bottles, retorts, and other apparatus on a tray, which he set down carefully on the table.

"You're going to be privileged to witness the manufacture of the death germ," he told his horrified prisoners, and Tony cried out in sudden alarm.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"You'll see, all in good time; I don't want to spoil your interest in the experiment. Do you realize this is the greatest scientific discovery of the age?"

He spoke proudly, evidently hoping to impress them with his ability.

"You arch-fiend!" yelled Tony frantically. "Aren't four murders enough for you without making more of your devil's brew!"

Beney looked at him in astonishment.

"My dear fellow, you're talking nonsense. I haven't committed four murders. One, perhaps, but that was forced on me by necessity." His teeth bared and a look of satanic fury came into his eyes. "What maddens me is that the one man I should like to kill is still alive. But that's a fault we are going to remedy," he muttered half to himself.

He became busy with his apparatus, lighting a Bunsen burner and setting it beneath a retort which he adjusted on a clamp. The retort was half full of a dark-coloured liquid, and he tapped on the glass to draw their attention to it.

"That's a serum extracted from le Maitre's brain cells," he informed them. "You did me a very great service, Grayling, when you brought such an interesting specimen as le Maitre to my doorstep. I had been wondering for some time how I could get hold of a real live murderer without arousing suspicion. Your aeroplane crash was an act of Providence."

"You talk of Providence in connection with a thing like this! It's a wonder the blasphemy doesn't choke you."

Tony was beside himself with rage and fear. The thought of what this madman might be proposing to do was a horror too awful to contemplate.

He glanced at the girl by his side. Her eyes were closed and her lips were moving in silent prayer. Pray God her petition was answered! Yet whilst he had never been so terrified in his life as he was at this moment, some ego outside his consciousness told him that he would undergo a thousandfold worse torture if only she might be spared.

Beney took the temperature of his concoction and straddled himself across a chair.

"It'll be some time yet, I'm afraid. I dare not heat it too quickly in case I destroy its efficacy."

“Listen, Beney,” said Tony earnestly. “If you have any mercy or compassion, let Hilary go. I don’t care what you do to me afterwards, but she’s a young and innocent girl. You practically admitted you loved her yourself ——”

“So I did, but if I let her go now, as you suggest, I should only be sealing my own fate. Don’t be alarmed, my dear fellow, I’m not going to kill her, if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

Tony experienced a slight feeling of relief, but it was only temporary.

“Then what are you going to do with her?”

“You’ll see presently; in the meantime, make your mind easy. Shall I tell you the inside story of this amazing discovery?”

Tony did not answer. What could he say that would have any effect on a maniac’s intentions? He concentrated the whole strength of his mind on trying to think of an effective line of argument.

Indifferent to the silence of his audience, Beney began his story. From the tone of his voice it was evident that he was extremely vainglorious of his achievements.

“I’ve always been intensely interested in bacteriology,” he told them. “When I was still a boy, long before I became your father’s partner, Hilary, I read every book I could find on the subject. It fascinated me to know that our bodies are made up of millions of tiny organisms which are propagating and dying with every breath we take so that our flesh is in a constant state of change.

“Later I felt an urge to ring the changes myself. I well remember my first experiment, which ended rather disastrously. I suppose there’s no harm in telling you, in the circumstances,” he chuckled, “though I’m giving myself away.

“It concerns your father, Hilary. I don’t know whether he has ever told you of something that happened to him on a tea plantation in Assam when you were a baby, but this is the truth of it.

“I was a house boy in the overseer’s house at the time. His wife was going to have a baby, and, though I didn’t know much about what was happening then, something went wrong. Manners, who was up-country, was fetched back in a hurry. He brought with him a specimen of typhoid-infected milk which he intended to analyse.

“Well, I won’t bore you with all the details, but I gave it to the woman to see if anything happened. As I was on the spot I had an excellent opportunity of studying the development of the disease, as I thought. Unfortunately it was

too much for her in her weak state and she died.

"No one would have known anything about it if Manners had done the sensible thing, but he went to the overseer—I forget his name—and told him he had made a stupid mistake. He always was ridiculously squeamish about such things.

"Of course the overseer was mad about it and threatened to report Manners to the G.M.C. and generally ruin him. I couldn't allow that—I was rather fond of your dad in those days—so I put a hooded cobra in the overseer's bed and effectively scotched his quite unjust vengeance."

Beney chortled softly to himself at the remembrance.

"It's funny how things turn out," he went on. "Luck was with me then as it has nearly always been since. Witness your turning up today just when I was wondering what I should do. That little incident stood me in good stead when I failed my medical exams, in Calcutta a few years later. I put a holy fear into old Manners that I had the report and would expose him if he didn't take me into partnership. The bluff worked and I've been in clover ever since.

"I've made a good many similar little experiments of one sort and another; some successful, some failures. But the really great experiment of my life has been the cultivation of a death germ."

He broke off to take the temperature of his brew.

"Not quite ready yet, but it won't be long now. What was I saying? Oh yes, about the death germ. Just how long ago it is since I thought of making a serum from the brain of a murderer I can't say, but it's been a good many years.

"Le Maitre was my first real opportunity, and I took it with both hands. If you remember, Westacott and Manners played chess that night whilst you went to bed, Hilary. Knowing that once they really got going they would keep on for hours I volunteered to sit with the patient.

"That was when I did it. I suppose it was a clumsy sort of job from a surgeon's point of view, but I got out the entire brain whilst it was still virtually alive. Then I cleaned up and put back the bandage so that everything was quite normal before I called the others to tell them the poor fellow had passed on.

"Making the first lot of lymph was a tricky business, and I had several failures before I got what I wanted. I tried it out on Rags, and when he went mad and bit the postmen I knew everything was O.K.

"I didn't quite know what to do with the rest of it. You may not believe me, but at that time I hadn't any definite idea of killing anyone with it.

England isn't Assam, and I didn't think I could get away with things quite so easily.

"Nurse Cunningham solved the problem for me. I had taken the stuff to the laboratory whilst I decided how I would use it; I wasn't really looking much further than some experiments with animals. Anyway, with the rush of this diphtheria epidemic Nurse Cunningham made a stupid mistake and sent the whole lot to Westacott done up in six phials as anti-toxin.

"When I discovered what had happened it was too late to do anything about it. Westacott had injected Lane, and he went straight away and killed that horrible money-lender person.

"Well, after that I didn't want to stop it; the whole affair was far too interesting. It was absolutely astounding that the murderer so closely reproduced the crime of his prototype.

"Roberts' murder convinced me that it wasn't just a fluke, but it also showed me that I should have to do something about fixing the blame on somebody. That Police Inspector Dunthorne was altogether too sharp and alert for my liking.

"My first idea was to involve Westacott and leave him holding the baby. It was prompted by the fact that I quite thought that Westacott had killed Roberts. When you and he came down here to dig up the dog, I realized I had made a mistake and decided to switch over to Manners.

"If I had had more time I'm quite sure I could have arranged matters satisfactorily, but the moment you had gone it occurred to me that Westacott might prove a serious obstacle to success. By hinting at the existence of a murder germ, which I did deliberately so that he would talk about it and thus help to convict himself when evidence was discovered which pointed to him being its instigator, I had set a trap which might ensnare me instead of him.

"Westacott would have to be got rid of—and his death would have to appear to be the work of Manners. I thought it all out as I drove up to London. 'Phoning his house in a disguised voice, I discovered that he was not at home. Then I entered through his surgery—I've had a key for a long time—and doped his whisky with some veronal; he's been a heavy drinker for years and I knew he would have at least one tot before setting out on his evening visits.

"I was watching from the other side of the square when he returned from the laboratory where you had been interviewing Dunthorne. I gave him long enough for his drink, then I telephoned him and told him that I had discovered that Manners was really responsible for the crime and could he run over to your house at once.

"He swallowed the bait, as I knew he would. I had gone on ahead of him

and, intercepting him in the Park, I got him to draw up in Serpentine Road so I could give him my information confidentially. I kept on talking rubbish until the drug began to take effect, then I pinched his arm with a snake's mouth charged with poison and left him to die. Pretty clever that, wasn't it?"

Tony, who had been following his extraordinary confession with ever-growing wonder at the half-caste's apparent relish in his devil's work, could not help making a gibe to upset his complacency.

"It was so clever that you completely gave yourself away. You overlooked the simple fact that Dr. Manners had a cast-iron alibi for the whole of that period."

Beney flushed angrily; like most self-centred people he did not like to be told of his failings.

"No alibi will help him when you next see him," he declared viciously.

"When I next see him? Do you mean . . . ?"

"I mean you're going to kill him for me."

"You'll never make me do that."

Tony spoke through clenched teeth. He had scarcely dared to speculate on Beney's object in preparing more of the germ. Now he knew the reason, his heart turned to ice. Might he be struck dead before he was given another injection that would give him the mind of a murderer.

"Oh yes, I will!" Beney busied himself with his mixture. "Ah, it's ready now, so I may as well tell you the part you're going to play.

"I've made it stronger this time, nearly ten times as potent as before. I don't want you to come round too quickly, you see; in fact I doubt if you'll recover at all. But that's of no consequence.

"Manners escaped last time, so this time I want to make sure. Don't have any doubts about it; you'll attack him all right. The moment the germ gets into your system your one aim in life will be to finish the task in which you were frustrated."

"Then you don't really need Hilary," Tony cried hoarsely. "If what you say is true I shall be sufficient."

"For Manners, yes; but I have a grudge against Edith Westacott too. She attacked me this morning, and she must be punished. Last night I was sorry Hilary was injected, but now I'm glad. My luck again, you see; Hilary will act against Edith whilst you do your part with Manners."

All the time he was talking he was charging a syringe from the retort. It would only be a question of seconds.

Tony glanced at Hilary to see how she was facing the horror in front of her. Her eyes were wide open, but she was not looking at Beney.

Her gaze was on the door, which Tony now realized was slowly but surely opening. He could scarcely repress a cry as he grasped what that sinister movement must mean. Someone was coming to their assistance.

Holding the syringe in front of him Beney took a step towards his victims. At that instant the door was flung wide open. Beney spun round like a top to find himself face to face with Edith Westacott.

“I must be punished, must I? You cur!”

She raised her right hand in which was an ugly-looking automatic. Taking deliberate aim she fired three times in quick succession. Beney gave a queer choking cry and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Without even a glance towards the two she had rescued so dramatically, Edith turned the gun against herself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CONCLUSION

"WHAT I don't understand," said Kitch Dunthorne, "is how you came to allow yourself to be blackmailed by him."

Manners' expression became grave, and for a moment the detective had the impression that he resented the question; then he smiled rather wanly.

"I suppose it does seem rather incredible to anyone not in possession of the full circumstances," he replied slowly. "I had intended it to remain a secret for ever, but perhaps it's only fair that you should be told the truth. Erasmus Beney was my son."

"Your son? Good lord!"

"You may well exclaim. Imagine what my feelings have been through all this terrible business, knowing my own flesh and blood to be a multi-murderer. It happened when I first went out to the East. I was young, foolish, and lonely; she was an attractive creature who went to my head like wine. Two years later I met Hilary's mother and married her, not realizing the price I should be called upon to pay for my earlier folly. Thank God she died without discovering the truth!"

He raised his glass and drained it to hide his emotion.

Kitch glanced across the room at the radiant creature who was the centre of everyone's interest. It was Hilary's wedding-day, and from the way she looked at the man by her side it was evident that she was supremely happy.

"She must never know about this," he said fervently. "It would cast a shadow which nothing could ever dispel."

"What can't you spell?" asked Inspector Saunders.

He had approached unexpectedly from behind them and had mis-heard the last phrase of his superior officer's remark. His face was flushed and it was obvious that he was enjoying himself immensely.

"British Constitution," replied Kitch meaningly.

Saunders looked puzzled.

"Why should anyone have to spell that?"

Kitch laughed.

"It's elementary, my dear fellow."

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 *The Murder Germ* by Captain A. O. (Alfred Oliver) Pollard]