

THE  
GALLOWS  
*of*  
CHANCE

Two vertical decorative lines run down the left side of the cover. Each line consists of a central vertical line with a repeating hatched pattern, flanked by two solid lines. At the top and bottom of each line is a circular motif with a hatched border.

E. PHILLIPS  
PENHEIM

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# THE GALLOWS OF CHANCE

By  
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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## CHAPTER I

Even the butler's voice seemed to reflect the general regret at the departure from Keynsham Hall of a popular guest.

"Sir Humphrey's car has arrived, your lordship," he announced. "It will be round at the front in a few minutes."

A slim, clean-shaven man of early middle age, tall and with a slight stoop, still wearing the boots, gaiters and heavy tweeds of a long shooting day, rose reluctantly to his feet to take leave of his fellow guests and his host and hostess, Lord Edward Keynsham and his sister Lady Louise. That he was well liked amongst them was evident, for they all added an obviously sincere word of regret at his departure. Louise, who kept house for her brother, was perhaps more silent than the others, but in her tone was a curious little note of disturbance. This was the most favoured of her visitors and she hated losing him.

"I do think," she protested, looking into his face almost as though she hoped he might still change his mind, "that you could do everything that was necessary from here. We are so civilised really, considering that we are in the heart of the country—telephone night and day and all that sort of thing, and a racing car in the garage for you, if necessary. I would drive you up myself and guarantee you sixty."

"It is one of those matters in which we ought not to interfere, my dear," her brother intervened firmly. "Humphrey knows the ropes better than we do and I'm sure he knows how much we would like him to stay. He will give us another few days, I hope, when we shoot the woods."

"We shall miss you at the high birds," some one from the background remarked pleasantly.

"Come into the library for one moment," Louise begged, "and I will give you that book I promised."

"Don't keep him long," Lord Edward enjoined. "It is later than he planned to start already."

"Only a minute."

They crossed the hall. Sir Humphrey opened the door of the library and his companion closed it firmly behind them. She looked up into his face anxiously. They were a very good-looking couple as they stood on the hearthrug in the firelight,—Louise slim and willowy, with clear, ivory complexion only slightly flushed by the day in the open air, and deep blue eyes in which lurked a shade of trouble at that particular moment.

"Humphrey dear," she asked, "is there anything wrong I don't know

about?"

"Not a thing," he assured her. "It is only this wretched business which makes me hurry away."

"But it all seems rather queer," she went on. "Why didn't Edward send you up in one of our own cars?"

"He wants them for the shooting to-morrow, I expect. A hired one does just as well for me."

"I wish I could take you myself," she sighed.

He shook his head.

"Too rough a night, my dear," he observed. "Don't you worry about me. I have enjoyed my three days immensely and I shall come again before the season's over, if Edward asks me."

"I hope you will," she answered. "You look strong, of course, but I think—as every one else does—that you work too hard and I know you sleep badly, although you won't confess it."

"I'm a little run down," he admitted carelessly, "but even these three days have done me a lot of good. I'm always glad to come here, Louise. You know that."

Her hand rested on his for a moment.

"And I am always glad to have you," she assured him, with a slow, but very attractive smile.

The door was somewhat noisily opened. Lord Edward came in.

"If you're ready, Humphrey," he said. "Best for you not to get up to town too late."

Sir Humphrey bade his hostess good-bye once more. Keynsham walked with him out into the hall and waited whilst he was helped by one of the servants into his thick shooting cape. Both men were of striking, though different appearance. Sir Humphrey Rossiter, for twelve years a brilliant figure at the Bar and now a Cabinet Minister, conformed, upon the whole, almost too closely to type. There was a slightly ascetic cast to his otherwise well-shaped and very human features. His clear grey eyes, his firm mouth and jaw were all distinctly legal. His host, on the other hand, was often quoted as being the handsomest man in London. He was six foot three in height and powerfully built. His mouth was irresistibly humorous and his fearless blue eyes seemed to challenge the whole world to be as happy and contented as he was himself. The brown hair—innocent yet of a single fleck of grey—was brushed back from his forehead and there was just the slightest upward twist at the back of his ears. His features were absolutely of the aristocratic type, and there were no indications in his presence or expression of the commercial gifts which had enabled him to restore the fortunes of an impoverished family. He was entirely in the atmosphere as he stood upon the broad steps of his magnificent home,

speeding the parting guest.

"I expect they're putting your traps in, Humphrey," he said. "The car will be round from the back quarters directly. You will have a wild night, I'm afraid, but directly you get well away from us, the roads are wonderful. You ought to get to town in three hours."

"I shall be up in plenty of time," Sir Humphrey declared, pressing the tobacco down into the bowl of his pipe with long, nervous fingers. "All that is really necessary is for me to be at the other end of the telephone, where I can communicate with somebody very important if the unexpected should happen. It is a sort of necessity that is not a necessity, if you know what I mean. If by any thousandth chance anything should turn up and I was away at a shooting party, I should get a terrible roasting from those gentlemen in the opposition Press."

"I suppose there is no chance," Lord Edward asked hesitatingly, "of anything turning up?"

There was no mistaking the note of wistfulness, almost of eagerness, in his tone. His departing guest, who had been through a good deal of that kind of thing during the last few days, shook his head almost curtly.

"I can see no possibility of anything of the sort," he confessed.

"Sorry," Keynsham apologised. "One cannot help being interested in the poor fellow, though. The last-minute reprieve of a convicted murderer always seems to me the most dramatic incident that could possibly happen."

"I'm afraid in this particular case," his companion observed, "there is no hope of anything of the sort. You people have all been very good down here not bothering me with questions, especially since I know where your sympathies are, of course, and where mine are too, as a human being, I will admit. This is not a question, however, where sentiment can be allowed to intrude."

"Of course every one understands that," Keynsham sighed.

Sir Humphrey watched the lights of the car coming up the avenue.

"I regret it as much as any of you," he said, "but I am afraid there is not a chance for poor Brandt. Between ourselves, his case has worried me more than any since I've been in office. It wasn't only knowing the man, and his wife being a dear friend—one has to forget that sort of thing—but the whole affair seemed so unnecessary. A man lost his temper and killed another. There will have to be a new definition of manslaughter before I could send a man to the gallows cheerfully."

"He was always a man of violent temper," Lord Edward remarked sadly, "and after all, Benham was such an out-and-out bounder. Clever actor, of course, but I couldn't stand the sight of him."

"No more could I, if it comes to that," Sir Humphrey acquiesced, "but after

all, the law is omnipotent and the law says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' "

The car had drawn up below and a footman, with a rug over his arm, was holding open the door.

"The beginning of the week after next we shall shoot the home woods," Keynsham reminded his departing guest. "I'll let you know the exact date."

"You are very kind," Sir Humphrey declared, blowing out the match with which he had just lighted his pipe. "If I can work it, I shall be glad to have another couple of days some time before the season is over, at any rate. We poor devils are kept pretty close at it nowadays, though. Good-bye. Many thanks for a delightful shoot. I like your new way of driving the lower woods. Seems to me you keep the birds much better in hand. My regards to Louise and once more my regrets."

The car drove off and Lord Edward, shivering a little, hurried back to the warm and comfortable hall. The little company all looked up at his coming.

"Did you get anything out of him at all?" one of the guests asked eagerly.

Lord Edward nodded.

"Just at the last moment," he confided. "I daren't ask him anything direct, of course, but I went as far as I could. He told me straight out that poor Brandt was for it."

Louise shivered.

"I didn't like the man," she admitted, "but I can't see that killing any one in a fight is murder."

"These legal fellows have water in their veins, not blood," her brother declared irritably. "Why, Rossiter confessed out there on the doorstep that he wasn't satisfied with the present definition of manslaughter. Why the mischief can't he or some of the other big bugs change it then? You heard what the Lord Chief Justice himself said the other day? He acknowledged that there were extenuating circumstances, as he called them, in the case, but they were not such as the law could take any account of."

"We have not had a Home Secretary for years," an elderly man asserted from the background, "who would have been so insensible. We know perfectly well that there's nothing the King likes better than to sign a reprieve."

"No good now, I'm afraid," Louise sighed. "What about tubs and a rubber before dinner?"

"Dinner!" her neighbour groaned, as he rose to his feet. "I've eaten a whole plateful of buttered toast."

"My digestion is ruined," another extraordinarily healthy-looking young man remarked, also preparing to depart. "The only time I have an appetite nowadays is for these illicit meals. I never tasted muffins like those in my life."

"All the way from Norwich, my dear Charles, to satisfy your greed," his hostess confided, smiling. "Never mind, I have an idea that with the help of a



cocktail you will be able to glance at something to eat at half-past eight."

"One has one's hostess' feelings to consider," the young man observed, with an air of mock resignation. "Is it short coats to-night, Louise?"

"Short coats for every one," she announced. "You'll be without a host, as you know. Edward has to go into Norwich on political business. And don't be late, any of you," she enjoined. "I had no bridge last night, and I like to play before dinner. You can keep your white ties till to-morrow, when you'll all have to dance. Au revoir, everybody."

The pleasantly tired little crowd drifted away to their rooms. Soon the dozen bathrooms of Keynsham Hall were all in requisition, to the great content of their occupants. Every one was feeling the pleasant glow resulting from a day in the open air with healthy and ample exercise. Even the near-by tragedies of life and death do little more than scratch the surface of other people's day-by-day existence.

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Sir Humphrey Rossiter, the youngest Home Secretary who had ever filled the post, leaned back in the corner of his hired limousine with his feet upon the opposite seat, his arms folded and his pipe firmly between his teeth. Although nothing about his appearance or the quality of his shooting during the last few days would have denoted the fact, he knew very well that he was distinctly nervy. His late host's tentative, almost apologetic queries as to the *cause célèbre* which had occupied the columns of the daily papers during the last few weeks had filled his brain again with the very ideas from which he had been anxious to escape.

The whole principle was wrong, he told himself savagely. The case of this fellow Cecil Brandt, for instance. There was no doubt whatever that he had killed another man. He had been brilliantly defended, had had a perfectly fair trial, a very capable jury had found him guilty of murder, and a judge, who if he erred at all, was considered to err on the side of leniency, had sentenced him to death. Surely, as the law stood, that should be the end of it. These petitions, all this Press rhetoric, this wave of sympathy created for the condemned man came too late. There had been some slight technical quibble about the charge being reduced to one of manslaughter which, for the simple reason that the prisoner had refused to give evidence, and the prosecution had been ruthless, had borne no fruit. Cecil Brandt had been found guilty of murder. It was unfair that after the verdict, after judge and jury had done their duty according to their convictions, the eyes of the whole world should have been fixed upon him—Humphrey Rossiter. The whole business had become a torment. The newspapers had made covert appeals, he had been flooded with anonymous letters—some of them very graciously and eloquently written—and other signed communications from people high in the estimation of their fellows

concerning this unfortunate man. They had bombarded him from every quarter and in every possible manner, heedless of the fact that he had the right to interfere only if further evidence had transpired after the trial, or if considerations had arisen which had not been presented to the judge or jury. It was too late now to talk of extenuating circumstances, because no extenuating circumstances had been shown. The wheels of justice had spun, were spinning now, to their appointed end, and it was not for him to thrust a tardy interference into the spokes. He knew quite well what every one was hoping for from him, and he was passionately aware that it was entirely and utterly unreasonable. It had even been hinted that a certain private telephone wire to a very august personage was being kept open to the last minute, in case he should have any suggestion or appeal to make. The whole thing was maudlin, he told himself angrily. There were moments during the first half-hour of that drive, with the wind booming across the open heaths and the rain streaming down the closed windows, when he could honestly have confessed that he was sorry he had ever taken office. He was supposed to be a hard man. People would probably think him harder still after to-night. Yet, at the bottom of his heart, he was suffering agonies because to-morrow morning at eight o'clock Cecil Brandt, a man who had dined with him at his house, a man who had married the woman for whom he had always had a fervent admiration, was to be hanged. . . .

He refilled his pipe and tried to think of other things. He thought of those few years of perfect happiness which his invalid wife had enjoyed in the contemplation of his success. He thought of some of his successful speeches in the House. He had never fancied himself as an orator, but somehow or other the fluency of the Law Courts had begotten the eloquence which had brought him an amazing measure of parliamentary success. Pleasant thoughts, but somehow insufficient on this one particular evening. Continually he found himself back in the condemned prison cell of Wandsworth Gaol. A tribute to law and order! That was what this sentence had meant. A just and faithful tribute. None the less so because the victim belonged to a class of society seldom seen in the dock of a criminal court. In one of his speeches only a few weeks ago, the Right Honourable Sir Humphrey Rossiter had pointed out to an appreciative audience that in no country in the world were the laws administered with such unflinching determination as in England, and that in no country in the world were crimes of violence so little known and so few of them undetected. There had been a great burst of applause and every one had smiled a smile of fatuous self-satisfaction. Some sacrifice had to be made to reach this happy state. Sentiment had sometimes to be strangled, generous impulses to be checked. Sympathies could not exist in the making or dispensing of the law. It was just that Cecil Brandt should die. His death was a

tribute to the unflinching inevitability of the law.

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The not too pleasant meditations of Sir Humphrey Rossiter were brought to an abrupt and amazing end. He had been vaguely conscious, just after they had rounded a bend in the road, of a red light not more than twenty yards ahead. He felt the sudden application of the brakes, the slight rocking and skidding of the car, which was brought skilfully enough almost to a standstill. Then followed a series of unexpected and bewildering happenings. Some one had sprung up by the side of the chauffeur, had gripped him by the arm and, with extended finger, was pointing down the road. Both his own doors were flung open, admitting a scurry of rain and wind. Two men, strangely disguised in white masks, entered, one from either side. Sir Humphrey looked at them in amazement, but his demand for an explanation was never fully spoken. The last thing of which he was conscious was that he was being pinioned in his place by one man, whilst another was bending over him with a handkerchief in his hand. A sickly smell of some sort of anæsthetic brought with it a temporary wave of unconsciousness. He fancied that he felt the fierce breath of a man upon his cheek, fancied that in the distance he heard the report of a gun and a cry. He fancied many things, but it was an hour before he was sure.

## CHAPTER II

Sir Humphrey Rossiter opened his eyes and found himself in what seemed to be the unusually large cell of a prison. The floor was certainly of stone, the walls of plaster, the deal table before him uncompromising in its severity. The windows were high and barred. The furniture consisted mainly of a single bench and the only illumination was supplied by candles at the farther end of the table. Exactly opposite to him was seated a man wearing a white mask.

“Where am I?” was Sir Humphrey’s not very original but quite natural question.

“In prison,” was the brief reply. “Don’t be afraid, though; your time will soon be over. You will leave it before daylight—even before eight o’clock strikes.”

Through his tangled thoughts crept a vivid impression of something unpleasantly significant in the words. Then he remembered. It was at eight o’clock in the morning that Cecil Brandt was to die.

“Don’t be foolish,” he scoffed, suddenly realising that his hands were tied with thick cord behind his back. “I suppose there is some purpose behind this mummery. Let me know what it is at once.”

“Yes, there is a purpose,” the man at the other end of the table replied, and Sir Humphrey knew that his first idea was a correct one and that the voice, although not exactly familiar, was the voice of a well-educated person. “I can see that you are impatient. We are in the same position, therefore I will not waste words. We are here to prevent, through you, what we consider an act of injustice. If we cannot prevent it, we shall at least avenge it. The situation does not rest with us, although it might appear so. It rests with you.”

“What is this madness?” the imprisoned man demanded, tugging at the cords which bound his hands.

“It may seem like madness, but I can assure you that it is not,” the other rejoined. “This is a last and desperate effort to save the life of a man who, according to the laws of justice such as we conceive them, should not die, or if he does, to see that the person who is responsible for his death dies also.”

Sir Humphrey was recovering his self-possession. Really any one in the world ought to have known better than to have attempted such a stunt with himself as the victim.

“You have been reading too much fiction,” he said contemptuously. “How on earth do you suppose that you are going to save the life of a man condemned by the law of his country to die by this assault on me?”

“Because you are still in a position to intervene on his behalf,” was the

prompt rejoinder, "and because if you do not, you will surely lose your own life."

"I never heard such idiocy," Rossiter scoffed. "I cannot save the man's life and I do not intend to lose my own. Let us bring this thing to an issue. According to etiquette, I must be in my home to-night, in case the improbable should happen and it should become necessary for me to communicate with the Governor of Wandsworth Gaol. You will do no good by keeping me here. It is simply absurd for you to suppose that you can force a Minister of the Crown to betray his trust through fear of personal violence. I should be glad to be allowed to continue my journey."

"That," the other assured him, and there was a new and more solemn note in his voice, "it is doubtful whether you will ever be allowed to do."

Above the howling of the wind Sir Humphrey became conscious of the sound of hammering outside. Together with his companion he listened to it for a few seconds in silence.

"What is that?"

"Just the finishing touch to your scaffold. A rough affair, I'm afraid, but the best we could do."

"My scaffold?" the Home Secretary repeated.

His *vis-à-vis* nodded.

"I am anxious to impress upon you the fact," he said, "that if Cecil Brandt dies at eight o'clock to-morrow morning, you will beat him to eternity by several hours. We have our private executioner here. He was once in the business but retired with a pension. He is preparing for you at the present moment."

"I have come to the conclusion that you are mad," Sir Humphrey pronounced.

"I have come to several conclusions about you," was the calm retort. "First of all, I have decided that you have more courage than I imagined. You seem to show very few signs of alarm and yet you are extraordinarily near death. Perhaps it is because you do not realise the situation. In that case, you are not quite so quick-witted, and shall I say instinctive, as I thought. You must have failed to grasp the fact that every word I have spoken to you, and shall speak, is and shall be sober, absolute truth."

The mock drama of the thing seemed to fade away. Even the white mask no longer appeared ridiculous. Sir Humphrey stared steadily across the table.

"My God!" he muttered.

"That's better," the other approved. "The sooner you appreciate the reality of the situation, however disconcerting it may be, the better. I am not going to reopen the Brandt case. You have done your duty without a doubt and studied it at first hand. Arguments between us under the present conditions would be

ridiculous.”

“Presumptuous is the word I should select,” the Home Secretary remarked drily.

His *vis-à-vis* bowed.

“*Touché*, Mr. Home Secretary,” he acknowledged. “I shall only state three bald facts. A man of notoriously bad temper goes home unexpectedly and finds a person of whom he is jealous alone with his wife in his flat. There is a fight and the latter is killed. The law has decided that the husband should be hung for murder. I—you will pardon my becoming for a moment personal—have decided that he shall not.”

“And what have you to do with it?”

“Nothing officially. There are a few of us who think that the hanging of Cecil Brandt would be murder and that penal servitude would be a far more suitable punishment. You are the only man who could carry our opinion into effect. That is why we have decided to hang you unless you intervene.”

Sir Humphrey’s wits were by this time fully alert. He realised that the situation was far more serious than he had at first imagined. In the gloom of that terrible apartment he could make out little of his companion, save that he was a powerful man and that his voice indicated him to be a person of culture. Once or twice he had heard other voices outside. There was some one, he was sure, guarding the door. Physical resistance, especially with his hands bound, was an impossibility.

“Cecil Brandt was sentenced under a misapprehension, and I am beginning to believe that you know it,” the man at the end of the table continued. “For some reason or other, he never revealed the fact of where or how he discovered his wife and the man he killed. The jury and the general public have been led to believe that the quarrel and fight took place in a room on the ground floor, whilst Benham was waiting for Mrs. Brandt. I do not for a moment believe that that was so. I have reason to believe that the fight took place in Brandt’s own bedroom, where Benham was discovered. Under those circumstances, the fight was inevitable, and to kill a man in a fight with such provocation is not murder but manslaughter.”

“I have no doubt,” Sir Humphrey said, with a note of cynicism in his tone, “that you have studied the law and that you know what you are talking about. The fact remains that neither your opinion nor mine makes the slightest difference. It seems incredible to me, I tell you frankly, that Cecil Brandt should not have told his lawyer the truth. I honestly do not believe that there is a word of truth in what you are saying about the fight having taken place upstairs. No one who knows Katherine Brandt would credit it.”

“I believe it,” was the calm rejoinder, “and your only chance of leaving this place alive is to become converted to my point of view.”

"It seems to me that you are becoming ridiculous," Rossiter declared. "Cecil Brandt has been sentenced to death and he will be hanged at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. If you attempt any deed of violence upon me, as is apparently your intention, well—I will admit that the odds are too great for me to make any effectual resistance, but—you will, without a particle of doubt, pay for your crime upon the scaffold."

"You think we shall be traced, then?"

"I shall begin to think that you are really as mad as you appear to be," Sir Humphrey observed contemptuously. "So far, your arrangements seem to have been quite intelligent, but the undetected abduction and assassination of a Cabinet Minister, even in the middle of a thinly populated county like Norfolk, is not a possible happening."

The man at the end of the table chuckled. It was not a pleasant noise but it sounded perfectly natural.

"Like all lawyers," he pointed out, "you rely too much on things as they seem to you. I agree that most enterprises of this sort would fail because their authors would be shortsighted or foolish people. We, on the other hand, have made our plans with the utmost care. Nothing is more certain in the world than this fact. If you do not carry out our instructions, you will be a dead man and buried before daylight, and long before the alarm can be given, every trace of what has happened will have disappeared."

"If you believe that," the Home Secretary replied, "I feel that I am indeed in a serious position because I *must* have fallen into the hands of lunatics."

"Lunatics or not, those are our intentions," was the grim pronouncement. "There are five of us in this house, which is otherwise deserted. We are going to take our risks and we are going to deal with you as I have said. Our telephone is at your service—subject to supervision. Will you telephone to Scotland Yard, to Windsor or direct to Wandsworth Gaol? I think, in any case, we should like you at first to telephone to the Governor of Wandsworth Gaol to authorise him, in case of further messages being held up, to hold over the execution."

"You seem to have thought this matter out quite carefully."

"Every detail has been considered."

Rossiter looked coldly down the table.

"Very well, then," he announced, "I have no wish to delay the proceedings. You can carry out your plans or remake them as you wish. I have no intention of using the telephone. I shall not speak to Windsor. I shall not speak to Scotland Yard—unless you allow me to do so privately. I shall not speak to Wandsworth. That may clear the way for you."

"It certainly does. I was getting a trifle bored with this conversation."

The speaker leaned forward and tapped twice upon the table with his

finger. Almost immediately Sir Humphrey found his arms seized from behind and he was practically lifted to his feet. He was between two men both taller than he was.

“I regret,” his *vis-à-vis* declared, also rising, “that we are deficient in one or two small adjuncts to the ceremony we are about to perform. For instance, we have no chaplain. I shall walk in front, however, and conduct you to the place at which you will meet your death. I cannot say that I shall pray for you, because that is not in my line, but I shall at any rate lend an appearance of regularity to the affair. This way, please. First of all—Dick,” he added, turning round, “these fellows at the last moment have a habit of calling out and making unsettling appeals. Take his handkerchief out of his pocket and put it in Sir Humphrey’s mouth. Good. Now follow me.”

Rossiter, partially gagged, his hands closely bound, and with the arms of two strong men through his, passed up the side of the room. His guide threw open a thick, oaken door and they crossed a courtyard—a large, but strangely built courtyard it was, square with stables of old-fashioned design, coach houses and a large garage. At the further extremity was a perfectly new building, a shed of fresh pine board, with a flight of steps leading to a rude door. There was a smell of sawdust everywhere. The knocking inside the building continued.

“Thirty yards to the place of execution, there to hang by the neck until you are dead,” the man in front observed, turning round and raising his voice a little, that it might not be drowned by the wind. “I hope you realise now that we are in earnest.”

They crossed the yard. The man in front mounted the rudely fashioned steps and pushed open the door. Sir Humphrey’s face was splashed with the rain and the wind blew pleasantly upon his forehead. He paused for a moment but they forced him on. He too mounted the steps and then no possible effort of repression could keep the shiver from his limbs. They were in a perfectly bald apartment, smelling strongly of newly sawn wood and running across the roof of which was a stout pole. From the latter dangled a great length of rope with a formidable-looking noose. Underneath it was a trapdoor propped open. Another man, also wearing a mask, came up the rungs of a ladder from the cellar underneath and looked through the opening. He said nothing and disappeared again.

“You will have a wonderful drop,” Sir Humphrey’s guide explained. “You know the *modus operandi*, I suppose? You stand upon the trapdoor—I shall tell the man when to put you there—and you see we have made a rough lever which only needs a blow and the door gives way beneath. I should not wonder,” he added, “if your neck were not broken just as quickly as Cecil Brandt’s.”



The Home Secretary peered down into the chasm. A sensation of horror was beginning to creep icily into his veins. These men were in earnest. It could not be, he told himself. Such a thing in the middle of an English county, amongst civilised folk, was impossible. And yet—they were in earnest. Below was what seemed to be a cellar. His guide untwined the rope from the pole and dropped it down. It hung at least twenty feet from the bottom, the noose empty, its slight sway hideously suggestive. The man who seemed to be in charge of the proceedings looked appraisingly at Sir Humphrey.

“What are you?” he speculated. “Just about five foot ten and a half, I should say. You see, you will have at least twelve feet margin. You need not fear a breakage or anything amateurish of that sort. We have tested the drop with twenty stone taking the place of your body. Everything worked beautifully. . . . Dick, I see no reason for delay. The collar and tie off, if you please.”

Sir Humphrey’s *négligé* costume might have been donned for the purpose. The man called Dick, who had not yet spoken, stepped forward once more, and with lithe strong fingers, which had recently been washed with scented soap, divested their prospective victim of his flannel collar and tie. They unfastened the front of his shirt. Another man, who seemed to appear from nowhere, also dumb, also wearing a white mask, pulled down the noose with a roller and strengthened the slipknot. . . . Then fear came to Sir Humphrey Rossiter. As a pantomime, the thing seemed to fade away. It was stern reality with which he was faced and death which was hovering near. His incredulity had vanished. These men were in deadly earnest. They meant taking his life. A hideous death too—an ignominious one. The executioner, a man of coarser mould, came nearer, spanned his neck with his fingers which smelt of disagreeable things, and widened the noose a trifle.

“You’re a fool, Sir Humphrey,” his torturer-in-chief declared. “Neither you nor Cecil Brandt absolutely deserve to die, yet you are both leaving the world through the fatal quality of obstinacy. Brandt will die because, somewhere amongst his more vicious qualities, he was too great a gentleman to have the world suppose evil of his wife; and you because you are too pig-headed to perform a humane action. Have you anything to say?”

“Nothing,” Sir Humphrey replied, and was astonished at the robustness of his voice.

“This is your last chance. The noose is going over your head. If you want to say a prayer, you had better say it. If you want to live, you had better consent to be led to the telephone.”

It seemed to Sir Humphrey later on in life that the smell of that fresh hemp would linger in his nostrils till the day of his death. The man who was to play the part of executioner was standing only a foot away from him, the loop

balanced in his hand, ready to slip over his neck. He wore a workman's suit of grey tweed with marks of white paint upon it, his breath smelt like a drunkard's. He was a horrible person. The rest seemed all alike—four of them—grim, shadowy figures. At first, he had scarcely thought of them as real; they had seemed to him like the puppets in some fantastic nightmare. Now that he knew them to be men in deadly earnest, knew that they meant to keep their word, there was something bloodcurdling in the sight of their glasslike eyes, their white masks, the quietness of their movements, their absolute silence. The lust for life was in his blood, was flowing up to his brain. If only he could believe that man's story, believe that it was true that Cecil Brandt had been shielding his wife! The weak moment passed, however, for the choice was not his. The words were strangled in his throat. The rope fell over his head whilst he remained incapable of speech. . . . Then a sound from close at hand broke into the breathless drama of the intense silence. There were flying steps upon the ladder, and the man who was waiting with folded arms on the other side of the trapdoor to give the signal, suddenly leaned forward and held up his hand.

“Wait,” he ordered.

Another of these foul figures, white-masked, clad in a long overall disguising his shape and form, came, swift-footed, up the steps into the shed. He hurried to the man who seemed to be the leader, drew him on one side and talked eagerly. Presently the latter turned around. The rope was still around Rossiter's neck, the seconds seemed to be dripping blood.

“Sir Humphrey Rossiter.”

The Home Secretary's eyes flickered. Was that really his name? Was it really he who stood within a few feet of a loathesome death, surrounded by this silent, unrecognisable crowd of would-be assassins? Was it he—a Cabinet Minister serving a great Power with all Scotland Yard behind him—who was passing through this terrible ordeal with death yawning at his feet? He opened his lips, but speech was still impossible.

“Practically the only thing in life which could have saved you has happened,” his arch-tormentor continued. “Cecil Brandt's wife is now at your house in Chestow Square, waiting for you. She is prepared to tell the truth. A tardy fit of remorse, perhaps, but still there it is. Are you listening to me, Sir Humphrey?”

“Yes, I am listening,” was the half-choked response.

“If we let you go upon your journey unharmed, you will arrive at your house before eleven o'clock. Katherine Brandt is a friend of yours. You will believe what she tells you. If you discover it to be the truth—what we others have known all the time—that that fight to the death took place in Katherine Brandt's bedroom, will you see to it that Brandt is relieved?”

The numbness refused to pass. Sir Humphrey was willing enough to speak

but his tongue was incapable of performing its office. He seemed suffocated with the smell of the rope. It was all so hideously unreal. His eyes were gazing down into the chasm and he found it impossible to look away. That was where he was to drop. He fancied that he could see a body dangling there. His fancy leaped backwards and forwards. He was dead. He was alive. He was dead. No, those were real words.

“You heard what I said, Sir Humphrey? If we let you go and pack you off to London, will you see that Cecil Brandt gets his reprieve, provided that his wife is waiting for you and that she tells you the truth—truth which will afford you ample justification?”

“Of course I will,” Sir Humphrey croaked. “Take me away from this place,” he suddenly shouted. “Take me away quickly. If Katherine Brandt is in my house when I arrive in London, and tells me the story you have told me, Cecil Brandt shall not hang. I can say no more.”

They removed the rope from his neck. The man by his side closed the trapdoor and they took him down the wooden steps. They half-carried him across the courtyard and stood silently around him in the gaunt apartment from which he had been brought. He asked faltering questions but received no reply. It was quite ten minutes before he was joined by the man who had been the ringleader in his ghastly trial. The latter still wore his mask, but he used the words of a human being, and speech was something.

“The car is being brought round for you, Sir Humphrey,” he announced. “You will be accompanied for some distance by one of my friends and for a portion of the way you will be blindfolded.”

“Are you seeking any pledge from me?” Sir Humphrey asked.

“Certainly not,” was the indifferent reply. “When you return to London, you can take precisely what steps you please concerning what has happened to-night; you can send your Scotland Yard men down to discover this house, you can endeavour to trace us by every means in your power, you can set the law in action against us. I ask for no pledge save one, and to that pledge you are already committed. Provided Katherine Brandt tells you the story I have already related, her husband is not to hang to-morrow.”

“He shall not,” Sir Humphrey promised. “But, my God, if ever you come into my hands, it will be a different matter!”

“I shouldn’t threaten too much,” the other replied coolly. “You might find it difficult to get very far with any indictable offence. Besides, there is the ridicule, you know. You would almost have to resign. We are law breakers, of course, to-night—I and my friends—but chance has spared us the grim necessity of taking your life and we had already counted the cost.”

Another of those preposterous figures appeared, carrying a tray. He poured whisky plenteously into a beautifully cut old tumbler.

“Say when,” he enjoined, in the friendly conversational tones of a fellow clubman.

Sir Humphrey gripped the tumbler. His murmured “when” was long delayed. The drink was like life in his veins. His feet were on the earth again. His brain was clearing. He had been in a hell, the flames of which would scorch his sensibilities for a lifetime to come, but the physical terror of it all was passing.

“Good-night, Mr. Home Secretary,” the man at the other end of the table exclaimed, as the bandage was placed over his eyes. “A pleasant journey to you. Don’t forget that the lady is waiting.”

Sir Humphrey maintained the dignity of silence.

### CHAPTER III

"I never realised that it would have made so much difference," the woman moaned.

Humphrey Rossiter made no immediate reply. He was seated before his library desk, his chair turned slightly towards the woman who was the only other occupant of the room. Before him was a sheaf of papers marked "*REX versus BRANDT*," which he appeared to have been studying. He was still wearing the shooting clothes in which he had left Keynsham, but his appearance generally was dishevelled, and in the green, shaded lamplight his expression was almost ghastly.

"I ought to have told the truth at first," the woman went on, in a gentler and more collected tone. "Cecil, with all his roughness at times, was terribly sensitive. He loathed the idea of what he called a bedroom drama. I know I shouldn't have listened to him, but I was half crazy at the time. Does it really make things so very different?"

This time Sir Humphrey answered her. With his forefinger, he tapped the papers in front of him. He looked at her almost incuriously. He had scarcely noticed the fact that she was beautiful. He was conscious only of an immense fatigue.

"The story you have told," he explained, "would have made all the difference, if told at the time of your husband's trial. The charge would probably have been reduced to manslaughter. According to the evidence you gave in Court, your husband returned on a Sunday afternoon when you were not expecting him, found Benham there as an ordinary caller waiting to see you in his study. Your husband never minced words and he told Benham that he was not a welcome visitor at any time. The two men quarrelled and your husband killed Benham under circumstances of considerable brutality. The jury quite properly returned a verdict of murder. Now you tell me at the very last moment that Benham was in your bedroom when your husband returned, that the fight took place there, and it was only after Benham had been killed that your husband carried his body down to the study."

"You don't think—" she faltered.

"Of course, I don't," he interrupted. "I don't even ask you for any explanation. I daresay it will never be necessary to offer any—"

"But I must tell you just what did happen," she insisted eagerly. "I was compelled to see Gervase Benham that afternoon. We were to start rehearsing the next day, and there were still two places in the cast to fill. He called, and the servant opened the door to him and showed him into the study in the usual

way. Then she came up to announce him and I said ‘all right.’ I was lying down with a headache and I really believe that I dozed off for a little time. I woke up with a start, remembered that he was waiting and tapped on the floor with my foot. That is why he came up.”

“And you told the other story,” Rossiter meditated, “at your husband’s insistence, to prevent scandal. He did not wish it known that he had killed this man Benham in your bedroom.”

“That is what he said,” she assented wearily. “It did not seem to make much difference where it was done—the man was dead, and I was crazy with the horror of it all.”

“Your husband’s point of view, though of course blameworthy, does credit to his sensibility,” Sir Humphrey pronounced. “I always maintained that he was fond of you in his way, and here is the proof of it. If the Press had known that the struggle took place in your bedroom, the whole matter would have been looked at from another angle.”

“I should have risked it,” she said sadly. “I don’t believe any one in the world would have believed that there was anything between me and Gervase Benham. Did you, Humphrey?”

“Of course not,” he answered. “You will forgive me, though, Katherine, if I remind you that we must keep the personal side out of it altogether, during this short conversation. Your visit to me is entirely official. People might have strange things to say under the circumstances if ever any other idea got about.”

“I quite understand,” she murmured. “Anyhow, I have brought you the true story, whether I have to go to prison for it or not. It is not too late, is it?”

“It is not too late,” Sir Humphrey replied; “but why did you wait until now?”

His nervous fingers drummed upon the edge of the desk. He looked into what were supposed to be the most beautiful eyes in London. At that moment they were set and almost glassy. Notwithstanding the warmth of the room, she shivered.

“You must not ask me that,” she begged. “You must not indeed. It came to me suddenly—it might even have been from overhearing a chance conversation—that it might make this great difference. I thought the truth might have leaked out some other way. When the time got so short, I knew then that I had to act. You won’t ask me any more, Humphrey?”

He considered for a moment. It was such a strange position for a man with a scrupulous sense of honour.

“No,” he decided, “I do not think that I need ask you any more.”

“And it is not too late?” she repeated, with a terrible note of wistfulness in her tone.

“It is not too late,” was the firm reply. “I shall feel justified now in

arranging for the reprieve. If you had told the truth in the witness box, notwithstanding your husband's request, it would have been better. Even now it is not too late, though. You can set your mind at rest on that point."

She rose to her feet. Sir Humphrey was too weary himself to take note of ordinary things, although for a moment he thought it strange that there were no tears in her eyes. She carried her handkerchief crumpled up in her hand like a ball, but it remained dry.

"I am going to send you away now," he said, touching a button upon his desk. "It may sound very brutal, but I think you must realise that it is best for nothing but official words to pass between us to-night. I am glad that you have come. I am glad that you have given me the opportunity of sparing you the greatest shock of all."

The butler made his silent approach. Sir Humphrey touched his visitor's icy cold fingers and patted them with his other hand.

"You can show Mrs. Brandt out, Parkins," he directed, "and if she hasn't her car, send for a taxi. Believe me," he added to her, "I am grateful for your visit."

She left the room, a silent wraith of a woman, attempting no word of thanks or even of farewell.

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Sir Humphrey resumed his seat in his favourite chair before his favourite table in the room which was his greatest solace in life. The window in front of him, across which the dark red curtains were now drawn, looked out on to a pleasant square where there was very little traffic and at certain times of the year a fragrant barricade of flowering limes. But it was, after all, a winter room. There were very few law books or parliamentary records amongst the volumes with which the walls were lined. There were books of sport, of poetry, of classical fiction, or biography, historical works—the mental playground of a man with cultivated tastes. The furniture was massive but comfortable, and Parkins saw to it that there were always plenty of flowers. It was here that Humphrey Rossiter considered the problems of his own day-by-day existence. In other places, in Whitehall and Westminster, he did his life's work. As a rule to sit in that chair, to feel himself steeped in the atmosphere he loved, was sufficient to rest his overtired brain, to bring him relief from any crisis. To-night the charm failed. Continually his hand was creeping up to his neck. He fancied that the smell of hemp was always in his nostrils. He heard the hammering, felt again the horror of that gruesome pageant. Impossible though it might seem, he knew that he had been on the point of death. Not death alone, but the terrible and sordid extinction of what was really a great career. The horror of it was unrealisable. It was there now at the back of his brain. It was there in those shivering fits, which he was always trying to

control, the tired twitching of his limbs, the fluttering pain which kept on coming and going. He thought even with satisfaction of the sleeping draught recently prescribed which he would find in his bedroom. . . . Where was he? He sat up with a start. Was it sleep, or what was it which had nearly stolen his senses away? He tried to remember why he was seated there and his eyes fell upon the pile of documents. REX *versus* BRANDT. Why, of course, there was work to be done before he went to bed. He reached out for the telephone.

“Give me the night exchange of Wandsworth Prison,” he directed. “Official.”

He suddenly began to tremble. He had been holding the receiver in his hand a moment ago. Now it was lying upon the floor. Some one else had been speaking. It could not have been his voice—those strange, quavering tones, the half-finished sentence. And the room—the room was full of mist. It was spinning round. His neck! He grasped at it frantically. The rope was there again. After all, he had not escaped. They were going to hang him in that awful place. He was slipping—already slipping from his chair. Below him was that awful cellar. . . .

They found him later, lying upon the carpet.

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When he opened his eyes, a nurse flitted to the bedside. She smiled at him cheerfully and called out to an elderly man who was seated at the table, writing. He came over at once and Sir Humphrey recognised his doctor.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “Have I been ill?”

“Something like it,” the other admitted. “You are going to be all right, though. I warned you that you were run down, you know, before you went on that shooting visit. You will have to rest now.”

Sir Humphrey’s fingers were playing nervously with his forehead. They lingered around his throat. Hemp! Why was that horrible odour in his nostrils? Why was the doctor wearing something white over his face? He was standing on the edge of something. What was it? There were other people in the room, fading away and coming again—a man with a cruel voice. There was something he had to do, something on his mind. . . . Suddenly his cry rang through the room. He raised himself fiercely in bed and gripped at the arm of the doctor who was leaning over him.

“What time is it?” he demanded harshly. “How long have I been here?”

The doctor pushed him back, for with a sudden access of strength he was already halfway out of the bed.

“What time is it?” he groaned. “Tell me.”

“It is four o’clock in the afternoon,” the physician said soothingly. “It was midnight when they sent for me and we brought you up here at once. Do be a good fellow and lie down.”



“Oh, my God!” Rossiter moaned. “Brandt—that man Brandt. He was to have been hanged at eight o’clock.”

The doctor nodded gravely.

“I saw it in the early editions,” he confided. “Brandt was hung, all right, at Wandsworth Prison.”

Then once more everything faded away. They had him this time, all right. A black sea of horror seemed to close over his head. He felt himself sinking through space. Unconsciousness was a blessed relief.

## CHAPTER IV

Along Piccadilly and Pall Mall, across Trafalgar Square and down the Strand a slowly driven limousine was making leisurely progress in the dusk of a February afternoon. Its occupant sat back as far as possible in the car with folded arms, his hat pulled forward over his eyes, his general air being that of one who desires to escape observation. He looked like a man who had been near the grave, as indeed he had. He had also the expression of one driving to his own funeral, as indeed was allegorically the case. The Right Honourable Sir Humphrey Rossiter was about to call upon the woman whose husband he had sent to the scaffold.

The rain pattering against the windows was rather a relief than otherwise, for it aided the seclusion which he sought. It was not until the door of the car was thrown open by the blue-coated commissioner outside the Savoy Court that he became a visible person. All London knew him from photographs, caricatures and from the days when he himself was a figure in Society and a constant diner-out. Hats were raised, polite speeches embarked upon, even during those few seconds when he stepped across the pavement and rang the bell for the lift. No one, however, directly addressed him. A well-known journalist, who had just paid a visit to an American film star, stepped forward, then thought better of it. Every one knew that Katherine Brandt lived in the Savoy Court, and a good many realised that he was on his way to visit her.

The lift man made bold to express his pleasure at seeing Sir Humphrey about again, and the latter acknowledged his kindly speech with a nod and a very faint smile. He had preserved his good looks through his illness, but he was still gaunt and pallid. His throat seemed to have fallen away—he had the air of a man who had looked at death. The lift man brought him exactly to the level of the fourth floor and, stepping across the carpeted way, rang the bell at the number for which he had asked. The door was opened almost at once by a maid in quiet, dark clothes. He had no need to ask any question. She took his coat and hat and he followed her into the sitting room. . . .

Katherine Brandt rose impulsively to her feet, from the depths of the easy-chair in which she had been seated, and held out both her hands. She had been wondering for days how she would meet him and had decided to leave it to chance. In the end they were both perfectly natural.

“Humphrey,” she said, “I have been living in the shadow of tragedy and so have you. It is time our wills came to work. I am reading light novels and translating two plays from the French. In a week or two I am going over to Cannes. As a matter of fact, I am only here now because I had made up my

mind that I would not leave London without seeing you.”

“That was very kind,” he murmured, still holding her hands.

“It was not really kindness,” she insisted, and he could not fail to notice that she was an altered woman since that night when she had sat at the other side of his writing table and told her story. “It was not really kindness,” she repeated. “It was just a passionate desire to get this thing over. There are two men dead—one very unjustly—and you and I who are living have suffered agonies as great as anything they could have suffered. I am very sorry for poor Gervase Benham and I am very sorry for Cecil, but the world belongs to the living, Humphrey. It belongs to us. We cheat ourselves and we cheat God when we wrap this cloak of misery around us because of the past,—the past which no one can alter. After all, there are many other unhappy people in the world, only our unhappiness has been frothed up with melodrama. . . . You will have tea, won’t you? I will order it and get that over.”

She touched a bell and then she saw to it that he had a comfortable chair.

“Of course you understood,” he began, “what happened? Doctor Standish came to see you?”

“I understood perfectly,” she assured him.

“I sat before the telephone, I had even called the number,” he recounted. “I had been feeling ill. The past month had been one of great anxiety and even on that very night I had had a great shock. I never dreamed, though, that any crisis in my health was so near at hand, or I would have sent for the Prime Minister, or some one who could have taken things over. I had my recommendations all ready and the telephone receiver in my hand. Suddenly I felt the room sway and I remember nothing until four o’clock the next afternoon.”

“It was a strange tragedy,” she reflected, “but perhaps I can make you feel a little better about it. I have something to tell you.”

“Yes?”

She poured out his tea. He watched her, fascinated. Life had returned to her. There was even colour in her cheeks. The beautiful dark gold of her hair had never seemed so glossy, her eyes, blue enough to appear almost violet, were soft and brilliant.

“I’ll tell you what I think would be best,” she said. “Here we are—two people who should know each other, because we have been and always will be friends. We may as well look the facts in the face. If one could mention the word humour in connection with our present plight, it would be a strange thought for the world to know that one of the only men I have ever cared for was the man who in Cecil’s last days held the power of life or death in his hands. That, I know, was what made it so terrible for you.”

She spoke no longer in a dreary monotone as she had done six weeks ago in the library. She might almost have been speaking of other people. She was

intensely vital. He felt the life creeping back into his own veins, felt that there had been something morbid about his state.

“Now I want you to listen carefully,” she went on. “That afternoon Gervase Benham absolutely had to see me about the casting of our new play. I told him to come round to the flat. I must say that I was glad Cecil was supposed to be out of town until Monday morning, because he was, as every one knew, insanely jealous about any one connected with the theatre. I had a bad headache and was lying down on the couch before the fire. The maid came and told me that Gervase had called. I nodded and said that I would be down in a few minutes. She asked me then if I wished her to remain in to make tea. Well, it was her Sunday out, I didn’t want any tea and I knew Gervase preferred whisky and soda, so I told her that she could go. Forbes, the butler, and his wife had already left directly after luncheon, and my own maid always had Sunday afternoons and evenings off. We kept up a very small establishment really, because we couldn’t make up our minds where to buy a house, and it was not at all unusual for me to be alone, if by any chance I was in town. The girl went away, and I imagine she left the flat in a few minutes. I felt simply too lazy to get up, so I knocked with my heel upon the carpet, hoping Gervase would understand that he could come up. You know, we don’t think so much of these things in my profession, and my bedroom was very large and furnished almost as a sitting room. As a matter of fact, though, Gervase had never been in it. I explained that I was very tired and commenced to discuss the matter he came to see me about, he standing upon the hearthrug—and you know what happened. Cecil, who, it seems, had been watching the house, burst in. He wouldn’t listen to a word from either of us. There are some details I have wiped out from my mind, because unless I destroyed the very germs of the memory, I should lose control of myself. He killed Gervase there and then brutally. We both knew that Gervase was dead. I had been shrieking all the time, trying to get help, but of course doing no good. After it was all over, Cecil was cooler than I have ever seen him. I have known him more agitated and upset when the soup had come in cold.

“‘I am not going to have him found in your room,’ he said to me.

“‘What are you going to do about it, then?’ I asked.

“‘I am going to take him down to my study,’ he replied, ‘and, listen to me. If ever you tell a single soul that it was in your room I killed him, I will come back from the grave and treat you the same way.’ That is the sort of man Cecil was, and that is what he said to me. He carried Gervase into the study quite easily, arranged him cunningly in a natural attitude, telephoned for the police and confessed that a man had come to see him whom he very much disliked, that they had quarrelled and that he had killed him. Don’t shiver, Humphrey. You practically knew all this. Now I am going to add something.”

“There is something else I very much want to know,” Sir Humphrey admitted.

“You are going to know it,” she promised him. “I was allowed to see him just before the end. I am going over this quickly. He had only one thing to say to me—‘If ever you tell where I killed Gervase Benham,’ he threatened, ‘you will disobey my dying wish, and if they try to keep me in foul penal servitude, I will break out, whomever I have to murder, and I will come back to you.’”

“God!” Sir Humphrey muttered. “You mean he wanted to die, then?”

“He preferred death to penal servitude. Now you know. He didn’t want his reprieve. He didn’t want to live. For some reason or other, he was afraid to live. I daresay no doctor could ever have found it out, but there are many forms of madness, and Cecil was as mad as the maddest lunatic in any asylum. I honestly believe, Humphrey,” she concluded, leaning a little towards him and taking one of his hands in hers, “that if your illness had not come upon you as it did, and you had signed that reprieve, worse tragedies might have happened.”

Sir Humphrey drew a long breath. Katherine’s words had been like an inspiration. To him also seemed to have come some return of vigour, a keener appetite for life.

“This is the end of one of the greatest tragedies through which two people could ever have passed,” she murmured. “You believe all that I have said—I mean that you follow me and understand it?”

“Absolutely,” he assured her.

“Then listen to the summing up,” she went on, with a smile. “You have a wonderful brain and a tremendous amount of will power. The whole world knows that. At the same time, you are highly sensitive, and yours is not the sensitiveness of overwrought nerves and vanity, like Cecil’s was. You know perfectly well that the sensitiveness must be lived down. You have a great career and you must go on with it, for your own sake and for mine, because it would make me miserable to know that disaster had come to you on my account.”

He made a little movement towards her and she saw the grateful light in his eyes. There was all the spirit of response in her swift smile.

“Dear Humphrey,” she said, “I know exactly what is at the back of your mind. You feel that the tragedy of Cecil’s death was your fault, and you are filled with a spirit of self-immolation. Just now we are too overwrought. We must be ourselves again before we yield to emotions like these. . . . Now I am going to ring for your favourite afternoon whisky and soda—push that tea away—and you are going to sit down and be quite natural and talk. Tell me your plans for the future and forget the past. Why not smoke? I have some wonderful cigarettes.”

He lit one.

“The first since my illness,” he confided, “and I thought myself an inveterate smoker. Katherine, for the present I shall accept your point of view. You are, as I always knew you were, one of the most wonderful women in the world. I am not going to be behind you in this time of crisis. I will push the horror away, but before we dismiss it, I must ask you one question.”

“Ask me anything you will,” she begged.

It seemed, as he sat there, as though the lines deepened in his face. Once again he was sensing those moments of terror. His voice became almost metallic.

“Have you any idea,” he asked, “what happened to me on the way up from Norfolk that night?”

“What happened to you,” she repeated fearfully. “What do you mean?”

Her magnificent fortitude had gone. She was a changed woman—the terrifying ghost of a woman who had leaned across his desk with twitching fingers and horrified eyes, telling her story to him on that awful night. She was an actress, but there had come a time when she could not act. She was frightened.

“What I am going to tell you will sound like melodrama,” he said gravely, “but it is the truth. I fell into the hands of a band of men who honestly, I believe, meant putting me out of the way in horrible fashion unless I promised to sign a reprieve for Cecil.”

“Don’t tell me any more about it,” she cried. “Hadn’t I been through it all before? I don’t want to hear. I refused at first, but I telephoned—I promised to go to you—I swore that I would get the reprieve, that you would give it to me when I told the truth.”

“Then you saved my life,” he acknowledged. “I very nearly lost my reason, but you saved my life.”

“Forget it,” she begged feverishly. “Do forget it. I broke my word to Cecil for that reason, and for that reason only. Your life was too precious a thing.”

He sat a little more upright in his chair.

“Who were those people?” he asked, and already his eyes were harder and there was a touch of the official in his tone.

The entrance of the waiter, the business of serving him with whisky and soda and pouring her own cocktail gave her a few minutes’ respite. When the waiter had finally gone, she was still a shaken woman, but she had recovered a measure of her poise.

“Humphrey,” she said, and this time she came near to him and for the moment touched his shoulder with her fingers, “you know that I have a great affection for you and always have had. Anything in the world that was possible I would do for you. Do not ask me impossibilities. I know nothing about that

business—nothing. I want to forget it. It is part of the hideous past. I will not look back.”

He reclined in his chair, drinking his whisky and soda with obvious enjoyment, thoughtful and tolerant, somehow feeling that he himself had been reprieved. He was becoming himself again. The pleasant little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes had reestablished themselves, the slight frown upon his fine forehead had nothing in it save of the intellectual. One felt that a live brain was at work upon a live problem.

“I don’t know that I can blame you, Katherine,” he conceded, “for trying to wipe out altogether the memory of everything that has happened. I am not sure, though, that it is quite possible. You must not forget that I have an official position, and it is my duty to find out who those lawbreakers were, or resign. I look to you to help me.”

“I cannot do that,” she cried passionately. “I know nothing. Leave it alone, Humphrey. No one was hurt. Forget it.”

“I am convinced,” he told her impressively, “that they meant murder and murder of a peculiarly noxious type. They gave me a shock, the memory of which I shall never forget so long as I live. It is a very grave offence indeed, Katherine, to try to tamper with the administration of the law.”

She suddenly rose once more, crossed the hearthrug, and fell on her knees by his side, took his head between her hands and kissed him on either cheek. It appeared like a spontaneous outburst of light-heartedness, but there was a note of hysteria which jangled. Her fingers burned upon his flesh.

“You old dear,” she exclaimed, “I am so glad they made you Home Secretary. You would have been an awful bore as a judge! Don’t be so terribly serious, please, and don’t bother your head any more about things that are done with. Just sit down and get well and start work again. All the papers say how you have been missed. Besides, you have my interests to look after now. You have no time for any more complications.”

He smiled.

“What a slave driver you are!” he remarked. “I was rather thinking that I ought to resign my post and come to Cannes with you!”

“You will do nothing of the sort,” she admonished him. “I have remained an honest woman through many temptations, and when I go to Cannes with you or any other man, I am going as his wife. All the same, I am in favour of a holiday for you later on. You need it, you poor man, and Cannes is always there.”

“I felt so when I got up this morning,” he confessed. “This is actually my first excursion into the outside world, and though I wanted to see you so much, I rather dreaded it. I see now that I was foolish. Although I have found you wickedly obstinate, I have also found you the most wonderful tonic in the

world. I am going to send my doctor packing and get back into harness again. When can we have dinner together?"

She considered the matter for a moment, sipping her cocktail, enjoying the warmth of the fire, light-hearted again, almost happy at the signs of the loosening up of that tension in his face. She was watching the man reborn. His self-confidence was reestablished. Already the terror was slipping away into the background of his thoughts. There it must remain until it was finally buried.

"Can it be the day after to-morrow?" she suggested. "I am always lonely on a Sunday night. Not a restaurant, of course; and you and I alone. Here or at your house?"

"At my house," he begged, "at eight o'clock—earlier, if you like. I want to make the evening as long as possible and I'm packed off to bed at eleven."

"I will be with you at eight," she promised, "and I will tell you then what they want me to do in the spring. I have a wonderful offer from America. You had better give up being a Cabinet Minister and be my agent, Humphrey!"

"I have no doubt I should be better off," he remarked. "I used to be rather good at theatrical contracts when I was a struggling man of law. . . ."

He rose presently to make his farewell and she walked with him to the door. All the time he felt that her eyes were searching his—there was something which she wanted him to say. Her happiness glowed and faded. In her last words she showed it. There was fear still in her heart.

"You won't think anything more of that nightmare, Humphrey?" she begged. "You won't open up all this miserable business again?"

He kissed her fingers which he drew gently from his arm. He disregarded, however, the burning enquiry of her eyes.

"I can't be drawn into rash promises," he said lightly. "You must give me time to get my bearings."



## CHAPTER V

The return of the Right Honourable Sir Humphrey Rossiter to public life, after an absence of nearly two months, was a gratifying tribute to his personal popularity. Newspapers commented with satisfaction upon his convalescence. He received an ovation from both sides of the House when he took his seat in Parliament. The sympathy of society had all the time been with him during the very trying position in which he had been placed, owing to his well-known friendship with the wife of the man whose death sentence he had been compelled to sign. He had comported himself, it was felt, with dignity and propriety under very trying circumstances, and had never given cause for the slightest suspicion of scandal. Katherine Brandt who, during the last few years, had made such rapid strides in her profession that she was now one of the most popular actresses upon the stage, had been at school with his wife, and before the latter's death they had been frequent companions. Her marriage had cut her off from a great many of her former friends. Her husband, Cecil Brandt, was rather a puzzle to every one. He was good-looking, evidently enormously wealthy, a good all-round athlete and an undoubted sportsman. She had met him on a voyage back from Australia, become engaged upon the boat and married immediately on her arrival in England. It had been a surprise to all her friends and a disappointment to many of her admirers. No one succeeded in really liking him. Brandt took a shoot in Hampshire and hunted in Leicestershire. He did most of the things men do exceedingly well, his manners were excellent and, although he seldom referred to the fact, it soon transpired that he had come over from Australia in one of the earlier units to serve in the war. His few connections spoke of him vaguely—Cecil had always been a rolling stone, they said. They had heard of him occasionally as engaged in various enterprises—most of them, it appeared, successful—in various quarters of the world. He was a silent man, however, who seldom spoke of his affairs, and men rather disliked him because they failed to understand him. Every one acknowledged his devotion to his wife, but that was discounted to some extent by his almost insane jealousy with regard to her. Rossiter, however, had never hesitated in his loyalty to both of them. He was an inevitable visitor at Katherine's first nights and they were his frequent guests, both at his official residence and at the house in Chestow Square, which he had chiefly inhabited since his wife's death. The position in which he was placed by Brandt's crime was viewed everywhere with sympathy. Like many men who are without intimate friends, Rossiter was perhaps all the more popular on that account amongst society in general. . . .

The first day of his reappearance was a keen pleasure to him. He spent a couple of hours at the Home Office, lunched at his club, where he was received with the utmost enthusiasm, took his seat in the House for two hours, and afterwards called at a florist's and sent a box of roses to the Savoy Court. None of these activities, however, interfered with his original purpose. At half-past six he was seated in the private apartment of General Sir Harold Moore, the Chief Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard.

"This is a great honour, Sir Humphrey," the latter observed, as he himself wheeled up an armchair for his distinguished visitor, poked the fire and pushed a box of cigarettes to the corner of his desk. "You ought to have sent for me, though. I could have come round to Whitehall at any time."

"Quite so," Sir Humphrey replied. "You are very kind, General, but I had a wish to see you here in the centre of your activities, and I think it would be just as well if you sent for Matterson. As a matter of fact, I am going to tell you a rather strange story, and I fancy that the dealing with it will come under his administration."

"Criminal work, eh?" the Chief Commissioner remarked, as he took the receiver off his telephone instrument.

"Criminal work, without a doubt," Rossiter assented.

Colonel Matterson, who occupied the position of Subcommissioner, obeyed his Chief's summons promptly. He was a tall, thin man with a worn, thoughtful face, an almost immovable monocle and a pronounced habitude of silence. He greeted the visitor with interest and sank into a chair opposite to him.

"Sir Humphrey has something to tell us," his Chief explained, "which might come under your jurisdiction. I sent for you to come up at his suggestion."

"Very glad if I can be of any use," Colonel Matterson murmured, with a curious glance across at the Home Secretary. He knew, as all the world knew, that the latter, during the last few months, had been in touch with the drama of life.

"You are used to strange stories, I expect, General," Sir Humphrey began. "Here, I think, is one of the strangest you will have ever heard, and one upon which I require immediate action. I have asked myself over and over again," he went on impressively, "whether it was possible that the whole thing might not have been one of those delusions heralding the nervous breakdown and brain fever from which I subsequently suffered. A flat and positive negation is the reply to myself and to either of you two gentlemen who might conceive the same idea. What I am going to tell you actually happened to me on the night of the nineteenth of December, on my way up from a few days' shooting with Lord Edward Keynsham at Keynsham Hall near Fakenham."

The two men composed themselves to listen, full of polite interest but without any idea of the shock in store for them. Sir Humphrey, in a still, precise tone which seemed nevertheless to convey all the time a thrill of the drama underneath, told his story. When he had finished, the Chief Commissioner had let his cigarette burn out unnoticed in the ash tray, and was staring at his visitor, his mouth a little open, in very undignified fashion. For several seconds he remained without speaking a word. Then he was very British and unofficial.

“Well, I’m damned!” he exclaimed.

“I very nearly was,” was Sir Humphrey’s ironic comment.

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The Chief Commissioner touched his bell and, in accordance with his instructions to the uniformed orderly who answered it, Chief Inspector Smithers, a tall, melancholy-looking man with a slight, black moustache, sallow complexion and deep-set eyes, made prompt appearance. He had been writing a report, his fingers were ink-smudged and his hair tousled. The Subcommissioner, in obedience to a nod from his Chief, took up the questioning.

“Smithers,” he asked, “has there been any trouble down in Norfolk lately?”

The man shook his head.

“Not that I am aware of, sir,” he replied. “They are not very fond of applying for outside help in any of those eastern counties, but I must say they don’t often have occasion. Simpson and I were down on the Cawston business a few months ago, but that’s all fixed up now. There’s been nothing stirring there that I know about since the Holmes murder in Norwich. They found the man themselves and hanged him.”

“No rumour of any band of criminals roving about the place?”

“Not that I’ve heard of, sir.”

Colonel Matterson changed his line of enquiry.

“Have you had any report or information from any district of a gang of burglars or criminals who have adopted a white mask as a means of disguise?”

The Inspector shook his head with a somewhat superior smile.

“Never heard of anything of the sort, sir. Sounds more like these gentlemen who write the detective stories about us.”

“There are one or two ugly gangs working, as you know, Smithers,” the Subcommissioner went on. “One of them has been operating up Leeds way and another in the Manchester district. Is there any possibility of one of them having been in Norwich or thereabouts on December the nineteenth?”

The Inspector scarcely paused to reflect.

“Not the slightest, sir. Norfolk would be no county for them. There are no large manufacturing towns and no concentrated money. So far as we are

concerned, Norfolk is one of our most peaceful counties.”

Matterson conferred for a minute or two with his Chief in undertones, then he turned around and once more addressed the Inspector.

“Smithers,” he instructed, “you had better return in half an hour and bring me up two men upon whom you can thoroughly rely—Simpson, I should think, for one. The choice of the other I leave to you. The three of you will have to go down to Norwich to-night upon a special mission which I will explain to you later. Make your preparations at once, if you please.”

The Inspector, who was to have been a very important fourth at a rubber of bridge that evening, and whose wife was expecting to be met at the theatre, saluted without change of countenance and withdrew. The Subcommissioner turned towards Rossiter.

“Smithers is one of the best men we have here,” he confided. “He has an unflinching memory and though he has had some tough cases to deal with, he seldom makes a mistake.”

“Seems an intelligent fellow,” Sir Humphrey commented. “Now, tell me, both of you, what do you think of my story?”

“I think it is one of the most amazing I ever heard outside the pages of fiction,” the Subcommissioner replied.

“If you had not been the narrator, Sir Humphrey,” his Chief observed, “I should have gone even further; I should have called it incredible.”

“Of course,” Colonel Matterson pointed out, “what happened, Sir Humphrey, as I daresay you have decided for yourself, is easy enough to grasp in its broad details. This fellow Brandt, although he made a very presentable appearance, was in with a queer crowd. We have had his name brought before us half a dozen times, for instance, in connection with Baccarat Club raids, and although he never absolutely found trouble, he had one or two narrow escapes. He was just the man who might have had friends and sympathisers amongst the criminal classes.”

“I do not believe,” Sir Humphrey declared, “that the men who got hold of me—the leaders, at any rate—belonged to the criminal classes at all. That is why I think you ought to be able to get hold of them without much difficulty. I know an educated voice when I hear it and I could swear that the man who appeared to be their leader was public school and Oxford. What puzzles me, when I allow myself to think of it at all, is where they got their details from. Everything was horribly accurate.”

“They must have got hold of a big house too,” the Chief Commissioner pointed out. “You don’t happen to know Norfolk well geographically, Sir Humphrey?”

“Unfortunately I don’t,” the latter regretted. “Keynsham Hall, as you will see by the map, is not far from Fakenham. When we left in the car, which was

hired by telephone—your man will find out all about that, of course—we seemed to be going in the right direction, and that’s all I can say about it.”

“Was it a clear night?” Colonel Matterson enquired.

“There was a gale of wind blowing and the rain started before we had gone a mile,” Sir Humphrey replied. “I was pleasantly tired—Keynsham never overworks his guns, but we certainly had had a long day—so I buttoned up my coat, put my feet up on the opposite seat, leaned back and dozed. I had the impression that it was a large house to which I was taken, but I was blindfolded when I arrived at it and blindfolded when I left.”

“How long do you think you had been in the car?”

“Roughly I should say about three quarters of an hour.”

“After you got away,” the Subcommissioner continued, “how did they deal with you? Did you remain blindfolded?”

“They removed my bandage,” Rossiter answered, “just after we had passed through Royston, and from Royston to Barnet—where they bundled me out into the road about a hundred yards away from a taxicab stand—I sat with a revolver jabbed into my ribs and the arm of a very strong man through mine. They chose a quiet corner for getting rid of me. The bags and gun cases were taken out first, then they hustled me on to the path, and the car was gone like a flash.”

“Proof, if any were needed,” Matterson meditated, “that the chauffeur was on the job, anyway. Did you try to see the number?”

“I did, but it was one of those temporary plates. I happened to notice that because there has been so much fuss about them lately. There was another thing that struck me too. The car to all appearance was like a sort of limousine taxicab, but it must have had a wonderful engine. It went off at something like thirty miles an hour.”

“There should be no difficulty about tracing the car,” Matterson mused. “Smithers had better start from Keynsham and work from there. There is nothing more you can tell us that is likely to be useful.”

“Not a thing,” Sir Humphrey assured them, rising to his feet. “I shall always be within touch, if there are any questions you want to ask me. I’ll be getting along now, if you don’t mind. It has been a pretty long day for me.”

“You have told us the most remarkable story I have ever listened to,” General Moore confessed, as he walked with his visitor to the door. “I don’t want to appear too sanguine, but it seems to me that it should not be at all impossible of solution. What do you think of it, Matterson?”

“There may be legal difficulties about the indictment,” the latter replied, “but I think we ought to be able to get hold of the men within a week. I agree with Sir Humphrey—I do not think that we shall find they belong to the criminal classes at all. They were people of imagination, I’m sure of that. No

one but people of our own class would have thought of attacking your nerves in that way. Of course, our difficulty may be that they may own up frankly, declare that they never meant to go to extremes, and insist upon it that it was simply a desperate effort to save a friend. In that case, I don't know what class of assault the affair would come under."

"My mind and body were both assaulted," the Home Secretary declared, with a faint grimace of unpleasant reminiscence. "I will look up my old law books and see what we can do to them. For the moment—find me the miscreants. That is all I ask."

"I shall feel that I ought to lose my stripes if I cannot do that," the Subcommissioner replied rashly.

## CHAPTER VI

Sir Humphrey and his doctor dined together that evening in Chestow Square. The latter was jubilant at his patient's triumphant recovery, but insisted on a glass of champagne to counteract the fatigues of the first day.

"By-the-by," he remarked speculatively, "you said something about a shock, but you never told me what it was that brought on the crisis that terrible night. Your physical condition was bad enough, of course, but it was scarcely sufficient to account for your complete breakdown."

Sir Humphrey fingered the stem of his wineglass. The two men were alone, for the single servant who had waited on them had departed in search of coffee.

"No, I never told you, Standish," he assented. "I do not think I ever shall. I have had to dig the matter up this afternoon for Scotland Yard, but I do not think that I shall ever tell anybody else."

The physician missed the note of seriousness in his host's voice. He leaned back in his chair and held his glass to the light.

"1884, isn't it?" he observed. "A magnificent wine. Drier than Jubilee and much better for us. . . . If you want to live for ever, Humphrey, you must get out of these habits of secrecy. A man should be prepared to tell his lawyer and his doctor everything."

Sir Humphrey smiled slightly. The look of renewed health in his face was manifest, but there was nevertheless a very serious expression in his eyes as he sipped his wine.

"I agree with you about the port, Standish. Quite my favourite year. Concerning the other matter, I am afraid that, notwithstanding your axiom, I shall never tell you of my experience."

"A little overtired with the long day's shooting, I expect," Standish suggested.

"Nothing to do with that at all," was the deliberate reply. "I will tell you as much as this—I went through a mental strain that night which might well have upset a man in more robust health than I was. As to the nature of it—well, it will be the object of my life in future to drop it into the well of forgetfulness, to speak of it or to hear it spoken of as seldom as possible. To be told the truth would not help you in your diagnosis, Standish," he concluded, "and every time I speak of it, which is only in case of sheer necessity, it awakens devastating memories."

"My dear fellow, not another word," the physician begged. "I just spoke out of the idlest curiosity. At present, I am interested in only one matter—how

the mischief did you manage to get this wine transported so that it opens up in such perfect condition?"

Sir Humphrey smiled.

"The question of transport has never arisen," he explained. "This little house—every one wonders why I am so fond of it—belonged to my father and my grandfather. The wine was laid down in these cellars."

"I always wondered why you stayed on here when you have an official residence," the doctor remarked.

"The official residence I use as little as possible. You see, I have no official hostess. My sister comes up from the country whenever I require her, but she is a busy woman and I do not worry her too often. Every one else in the Cabinet is a domestic person with wife and family, and except where it is clearly the Home Secretary's job, I let them take on the entertaining. What about a cigar to-night, doctor?"

"If you don't mind," the latter replied, "I would rather you gave smoking another month's rest. That glass of port you are drinking will do you all the good in the world, and half another one after it, if you like; but I would cut out the brandy, spoil your coffee with a little milk, and smoking I would leave entirely alone, except for an occasional cigarette. Yours is not ordinary work, you know, and you are the sort of man who feels his responsibilities deeply. Temperament counts for so much in health; much more than people realise. You would be a stronger man, you know, if you did not take your life and your duties quite so seriously."

"If there is any man in the world who could do my work without taking it seriously, I should like to meet him," the Home Secretary expostulated.

"That's all very well, but the limits must be observed. A man cannot be all the time working. If it had not been for your cricket at school and the 'varsity, you would never have been the man you are to-day. You ought to play more golf, accept a few more shooting invitations, go to the theatre oftener, and if I dared, I'd go so far as to say marry and have domestic interests."

"And all this advice free," Sir Humphrey murmured. "Nothing like having one's doctor to dinner for getting the truth out of him."

"Well, you're certainly succeeding in that," the other admitted. "Physically every organ you have is adequate, but you have a tendency to unsettle them and put them out of accord by using your brain too much. . . ."

Parkins served the coffee and made an announcement.

"There is an urgent telephone call for the doctor, Sir Humphrey," he announced. "He is asked to go to Harding House at once."

"You will excuse me, I know, Humphrey," his guest begged. "It is old Lady Harding—one of my best patients. Nothing serious, but she doesn't like it if I keep her waiting. I sha'n't bother about seeing you for a day or two. I



will ask you to report in a week. No, no coffee, thank you, Parkins. I will get along, if you'll call me a taxi."

Sir Humphrey strolled into the hall to see his guest off. As he turned away from the closed front door he noticed that there were several strange hats upon the rack.

"Whose are these choice specimens of headgear, Parkins?" he asked, a little puzzled.

"Four gentlemen are waiting to see you in the library, sir," the man confided. "Colonel Matterson is one of them, and I fancy that the other gentlemen are from Scotland Yard. They arrived at the same time as the telephone message for Doctor Standish, so I did not announce them."

"Quite right, Parkins," his master approved. "I will go in at once and see what they want."

In the library he found the Subcommissioner, Inspector Smithers and two other men awaiting him. The former was standing upon the hearthrug and advanced to greet his host.

"Sir Humphrey," he explained, "I want you to meet the three members of my staff whom I have chosen to look into this affair of yours. They will start for Norfolk to-morrow morning, but they were exceedingly anxious—Inspector Smithers particularly—to ask you a few questions first. I thought you would not mind if I brought them round. They are leaving by the newspaper train."

"Certainly not," Rossiter acquiesced, "although there is little I can say beyond what I told you this evening."

"Inspector Smithers you have already met," Colonel Matterson said, pointing to the sallow-faced man with the black moustache. "This is Inspector Simpson, who has done some excellent work for us."

Sir Humphrey shook hands with Inspector Simpson—a strongly built man, with a ruddy complexion, bright blue eyes and a somewhat ferocious expression.

"And this," the Subcommissioner concluded, "is Detective Pank. Pank, I may say, still has his spurs to earn, but he has done some useful work and he happens to be a Norfolk man."

Detective Pank, under the average height, but with a well-set-up, athletic figure, sandy-haired, with an insignificant but thoughtful face, rose to his feet and shook hands with obvious nervousness. Sir Humphrey established himself in an easy-chair. Inspector Smithers leaned respectfully forward.

"We are very sorry to trouble you, sir," he began, "but there are one or two points upon which we should like information before we leave. Colonel Matterson has been in telephonic communication with Norwich this afternoon, and, with the help of some maps we have bought, we have a fair idea of the

neighbourhood of Keynsham Hall. There seems to be only one lonely tract of country anywhere near, and that's round Thetford. To reach that part of the world from Keynsham, you would be on a straight road nearly the whole of the time. Do you remember, sir, after you left Keynsham Hall, whether you turned to the left or to the right?"

"To the left," was the prompt reply.

"Reverse number one," Inspector Smithers observed, with a little grimace. "That would be the Norwich road and probably the best road to London. Can you tell us whether you found yourself upon a twisty road or whether you just went straight ahead?"

"At first we were turning corners all the time," Sir Humphrey admitted. "I was surprised, in fact, to find the road so narrow and winding. I really cannot tell you much about it, though, because I was very tired and I was dozing nearly all the time."

"Thank you. Can you describe the room in which you found yourself when they removed the bandage from your eyes? Did it look like a room in an old house or a modern one?"

"It looked like nothing except what it was supposed to represent," Sir Humphrey declared. "It looked like a glorified prison cell."

"With reference to the courtyard," Smithers asked. "Did it possess any distinction? Did it look like the courtyard of a famous country house, for instance?"

"It might have been the back courtyard of any place," Sir Humphrey decided, "and I take it that it was a back courtyard, because there were no large entrance gates. There was nothing particularly imposing about it, except the high red brick walls, and the fact that it was of considerable extent. To tell you the truth, I did not look about much. I was absorbed by the ghastliness of the newly built shed and the rest of the environment."

"About how long do you believe that you were in the car between the time of leaving Keynsham Hall and your arrival at your destination?"

"Hard to say," Sir Humphrey replied, "but I should think it was between half and three quarters of an hour."

Smithers studied his notebook for a moment.

"I don't wish to bother you, sir, with questions about points on which we already have information, but I gather that you were not able to recognise any of your captors?"

"Certainly not."

"You have no suspicion as to the identity of any one of them?"

"Not the slightest."

"Your impressions, however, especially concerning the one who appeared to be the ringleader, were that they were men in a superior class of life?"

"That is so," Sir Humphrey agreed, "with the exception of the man who played the part of hangman. He smelt strongly of drink and was wearing a shabby grey suit with white paint marks upon it."

Inspector Smithers turned to his Chief.

"So far as I am concerned, that is all, sir," he announced. "We are not proposing to ask Sir Humphrey any of the questions which we can find out for ourselves by enquiries in the neighbourhood."

"Have you anything to ask, Simpson?" the Subcommissioner enquired.

"Nothing at all, sir."

"If I might," Detective Pank intervened a little nervously, "I should like to ask about those white masks. Did they seem like new ones made for the occasion or as though they had been worn before?"

Sir Humphrey nodded approval. The question appeared to him to have some point.

"Curiously enough," he confided, "they seemed to me as though they had been worn before. The one on the man's face, who stood on my right hand when we passed out into the yard, might almost have been described as soiled."

"Thank you, sir."

"Anything else, Pank?" the Subcommissioner asked good-naturedly.

"Nothing else, sir, thank you."

Colonel Matterson rose to his feet.

"Then I don't think we need worry you any further, Sir Humphrey," he said.

"Can I offer you gentlemen anything?" Rossiter enquired, with his hand upon the bell.

"Thank you, no," Matterson replied. "I am sure the others feel as I do. We quite understand that you have to be kept very quiet for a time, and, believe me, we won't bother you unless we are driven to it. Furthermore, the whole of our enquiries—you may be sure of that—will be kept utterly and entirely secret. I quite realise, and so do my men here, that the kidnapping of the Home Secretary is a matter which must never become public property, unless when the mystery is solved it reaches the Criminal Courts."

They all signified assent. Sir Humphrey shook hands with them and touched the bell. Matterson lingered behind.

"I am hoping," he confided, "that we shall have a report to make to you almost immediately. This seems to me like a very amateurish job and, if Brandt had only been a more popular man, I should not have hesitated to put it down as a stupid attempt at bluff on the part of some of his pals. From the enquiries I have been able to make, though, he had not enough friends who would have been willing to run the risk."

“Come in and have a whisky and soda with me before you go,” Sir Humphrey begged abruptly. “You have finished with your staff, haven’t you?”

“Absolutely. Their train travels at six o’clock to-morrow morning and they have had my last word.”

Rossiter led the way back to the dining room and helped his guest from the sideboard.

“I have only one single, small thing to confide to you,” he said.

“In that case,” Colonel Matterson observed, “I sha’n’t sit down. I know what it is to be about again after such an illness as you have had. That’s enough—only a splash. Now tell me what it is.”

“Just this. These men may have been, as you say, a gang of something little better than practical jokers. They did not give me that impression, but that’s neither here nor there. I do not even allow myself to think of that night. All that I want to do is to forget it. But I must tell you this. Katherine Brandt, whom I saw this afternoon, and who is the only person to whom I have mentioned them, seemed absolutely terrified when I told her the story. I do not wish her to be questioned; I shall never ask her any questions myself, but if it helps you in any way, you can, I am sure, take this for granted: there was something she either knows about or guesses at—possibly something in the background of Brandt’s life—which induces her to take the whole affair very seriously indeed.”

The Subcommissioner set down his empty glass.

“That sounds mysterious, but it is worth thinking about,” he commented, as he took his leave.

## CHAPTER VII

Sir Humphrey's habit of using his latchkey and going straight to his library, when he returned at the end of the day to Chestow Square, was responsible for the thrill of pleased surprise he experienced on the following evening. It was as though the sedate and dignified apartment had been transformed and beautified in exquisite fashion by unseen hands. Bowls of dark red roses adorned the chiffonier. A cunningly fashioned tray of deep purple violets stood upon his writing table. There were vases of arum lilies, late chrysanthemums with long-petalled blossoms, carnations and a pot of hyacinths in different parts of the room, and a flame of scarlet azalea was set in a distant corner. The perfume was so sweet as to be instantly arresting. He paused to look around him, and Louise came out of the shadows, wiping her fingers upon a towel and laughing softly.

"Am I going to be in terrible disgrace?" she asked. "Forgive me, please. Parkins begged us to come in and wait for you, and I brought you all that our hothouses could produce, from Norfolk. I could not bear to think of Parkins arranging them, and he said you might be another hour. That is the end of my excuses."

"As though you needed any," he protested, amazed at the thrill of pleasure which her unexpected presence had caused him. "Louise, my dear, how nice to see you."

"You are really better?" she asked, looking earnestly into his face. "You are thinner, you know. Come and sit down. May I stay for a few minutes and talk to you? Edward has gone away but he is calling back for me."

"May you? Why, of course."

He pushed an easy-chair up to the fire opposite to his own, then he wandered round the room.

"There's not a florist's shop in London could show a more beautiful collection," he declared. "I never saw such roses."

"Yes, they're beautiful," she admitted. "You are not obliged to keep them all in here, of course. I just began to arrange them and I couldn't help going on."

He bent his head over the violets and turned around to find her watching him, a smile upon her lips, a pleasant light in her eyes. She had thrown aside her furs and, in her perfectly plain, dark-coloured gown, with the border of lace around her throat, she seemed to him very attractive indeed. There was something almost shy in her expression as she met his eyes.

"What will you have—tea?" he asked.

She made a little grimace.

“My dear Humphrey,” she remonstrated, “it’s past six o’clock.”

He touched the bell, summoning Parkins, who made prompt and respectful appearance. As a rule, he would have very much resented the interference of any one decorating his apartments, but he approved most heartily of Lady Louise.

“Dry cocktails,” Sir Humphrey ordered. “Shake them in the room, Parkins.”

“Very good, sir.”

With the closing of the door, she leaned forward in her chair.

“I have been so anxious to hear from your own lips about your illness,” she confided. “Please tell me. Edward did not walk you too far that last day, did he? Lester Harwood said he felt too tired to shoot next morning.”

Sir Humphrey shook his head.

“It was not that,” he assured her. “I am afraid I was run down before I came. I had been working hard and probably your keen Norfolk air after this mollycoddling atmosphere was rather too severe a change.”

“Did you feel ill on the way up?” she asked anxiously.

“Not altogether well, once or twice,” he admitted. “However, I got here. I had rather a trying interview afterwards and perhaps that upset me. Whilst we are on the subject of my illness, thank you so much, and thank Edward, if I don’t see him this evening, for all your enquiries and the flowers.”

“We felt responsible in a way,” she confessed. “I was so miserable about it that I went off to Cannes for a fortnight, as soon as I heard that you were really out of danger. I called last week on my way through London, but you were still not seeing anybody. Then I tried to settle down in Norfolk again, but didn’t feel a bit like it, so I descended upon Edward yesterday.”

“Having stripped all your greenhouses, I’m afraid,” he remarked.

Parkins came quietly into the room, followed by a second man carrying a silver tray. He handled the shaker in vigorous fashion, poured out two foaming cocktails, which he offered to Lady Louise and Sir Humphrey, and left the shaker upon the small table.

“Anything important during the day?” the latter enquired.

“Mr. Carthew has dealt with everything, sir,” Parkins reported. “He is engaged at present finishing some letters but he would like a word with you before he leaves.”

“What a blessing a good secretary is,” Sir Humphrey remarked, as he raised his glass.

“I think I should like to be your secretary,” Lady Louise confided. “I’m tired of doing nothing.”

He smiled.

"I've read the newspapers oftener than usual, up to the last few days," he said. "'Doing nothing' rather amuses me! Pictures of Lady Louise Keynsham at the hunt, in the Holcombe shooting party, at the gala performance of the Opera, flying from Le Bourget en route to Cannes, playing golf at Mandelieu —"

"A rubbishy sort of life," she interrupted. "Edward is the person I envy. He never seems to have a moment to spare; and look what a success he makes of his career."

"I take off my hat to him," Sir Humphrey agreed. "Other men have made great fortunes, of course, but it is not often you find any one brought up like Edward who can go straight into what they tell me was almost a declining business, and make such a huge success of it. Did you say he was calling for you this evening?"

She nodded.

"We arrived here together about an hour ago," she explained. "When he found you would not be back until six o'clock, he took the car and went off to pay some visits. He may be back at any moment now to call for me. Do you mind if I smoke? Don't get up. I like my own, please, and I have a briquet."

Sir Humphrey took a cigarette himself from a box on the table by his side.

"I shall be glad to see Edward," he acknowledged. "Something I want to ask him."

"He felt your illness terribly," Louise assured him, looking thoughtfully across at her host. "I don't know why, but he seemed to think it was partly his fault—as though, if he had urged you more strongly, you might have stayed at Keynsham instead of taking that night ride."

Sir Humphrey shook his head.

"Nothing would have induced me to stay," he declared. "I did what I knew to be my duty in getting off to London that night, although it was a pretty ineffective proceeding."

She was quick to detect the note of bitterness in his tone and she changed the conversation.

"Every one missed you the last two shoots, and at dinner time we always drank to your recovery," she confided. "We got a thousand pheasants from the two home beats the last day, leaving off shooting hens altogether an hour before lunch. Edward was awfully bucked. . . . I hope you are going to take care of yourself now, Humphrey. You look tired, you know. You're not going out this evening, I hope?"

"Parkins and Carthew see to that," he answered, smiling. "A cutlet, a glass of claret, one of those wonderful peaches I see on the chiffonier, and bed at half-past nine for me. No chance of your staying and looking after me, I suppose?"

She shook her head regretfully.

“It’s the Wardley House dinner and ball to-night,” she reminded him. “I’m booked to dance with Royalty, and when that thrill is over, I see a very dull evening before me. Don’t talk if it makes you tired. This is such a delightfully restful atmosphere I believe I could go to sleep.”

He looked lazily across at her, full of content and appreciation of the perfect picture she made, with her slender body almost voluptuously relaxed, her fearlessly displayed legs delicately clad in the newest shade of grey silk and the patent shoes well cut to display her arched instep.

“You are terribly good-looking, Louise,” he said. “No wonder you are so much the vogue. I look down the second column of the *Times* every day, expecting to see that ‘a marriage has been arranged’, et cetera.”

“Do you want me to get married?” she asked.

“I should have a perfectly unreasonable and dog-in-the-mangerish hatred of your fiancé,” he confessed, with a sudden disturbing reflection that the speech which he had started lightly enough was the sober truth.

She smiled as though gratified. Her lips, as they parted, became fuller and more vivid curves of scarlet. Her smile seemed to be coming also from her deeply shaded eyes.

“You lovable person,” she murmured.

She caught sight of his disappointed frown and glanced over her shoulder. Parkins had entered the room.

“Lord Edward Keynsham,” he announced.

Keynsham crossed the floor with extended hands, the vigorous and boyish personification of splendid manhood. He had been paying formal calls, and his town clothes showed off to the fullest advantage his fine muscular figure. He came up to Sir Humphrey with outstretched hands and a delightful smile upon his face.

“Humphrey, old man, this is wonderful,” he exclaimed. “Don’t move. I forbid it! I will bring this chair up. What’s that I see—a cocktail shaker? Parkins,” he added, looking around, “you’re going to bring me a glass, aren’t you? We must drink to your master’s recovery.”

“If your lordship will allow me, I will replenish the shaker,” Parkins said respectfully. “This has been here some few minutes.”

It was an easy and pleasant little trio, composed of people who evidently liked one another. Keynsham seemed almost as delighted as his sister to welcome Rossiter back. He gossiped and told news of their mutual friends until the replenished cocktail shaker arrived, then he drank to his host’s renewed health with his hand upon his shoulder, a thrill of earnestness in his tone.

“I cannot tell you, Humphrey,” he said, “how we all felt about your being



taken ill like that directly you had left us. Do set my mind at rest—I didn't give you too much to do that last day, did I? You *would* walk that outside drive, you know. I told you the Lindsay boy would do it."

"I was only pleasantly tired," was the emphatic reply. "It was not that—as I was telling Louise. I was pretty well run down before I came. I ought really to have lain on my back for two or three days. And then—"

"Yes?" Keynsham asked.

Sir Humphrey did not finish his sentence.

"By-the-by," he enquired, "I was going to ask you something. Just a question about that car your people hired for me. Do you know where they got it from?"

Keynsham puckered his brows for a moment in thought.

"Well, I can't say exactly," he admitted. "Grover generally rings up his friend at Fakenham, and then if they haven't anything, they send to Norwich. There wasn't anything wrong with it, was there? You didn't have a breakdown or anything of that sort?"

"No, there was no breakdown. We got to London all right. Still, I should like to know where the car came from. Perhaps later on we may talk about it."

"You're making me curious," Lord Edward confessed.

"Well, there was a little incident," Rossiter confided. "It is nothing I'm going to talk about at the moment, but you may hear of it again."

"I will find out for you," Louise promised. "I'm going down to Norfolk tomorrow for a few days, and I will ask Grover."

"Good girl," her brother said, lighting a cigarette from the box which his host had pushed towards him. "I have no memory for that sort of thing. I shall always think it was the greatest pity in the world, Humphrey, that you hurried away. No miracle happened, you see, after all. That poor fellow Brandt was for it."

Sir Humphrey drained the contents of his glass.

"Yes," he agreed, "Brandt was hung."

"I wonder, have you seen Katherine since?" Keynsham enquired. "I hope it's not an impertinent question. One simply does not know what to do about it."

"Yes, I have seen her," Sir Humphrey admitted. "Of course, it has been a terrible blow, but she's facing the situation."

Louise blew out a little cloud of smoke.

"Why do you talk about that terrible subject?" she protested. "Edward, do try and get Humphrey to promise to come and spend Easter with us. I know it's dreary enough at this time of the year, but spring in some of the sheltered parts of Keynsham is wonderful, Humphrey. You shall pick the first violets from our hedges on the south side of the park and you will never want to look

at these conservatory grown ones I brought you to-day.”

“I’ll come—if I can get away,” Sir Humphrey promised.

Louise glanced at the clock and reluctantly rose to her feet.

“I will even promise you,” Keynsham said, as he followed his sister’s example and shook his host warmly by the hand, “that if you don’t bring a car down, I will send you up in my own special Hispano-Suiza.”

“You shall have a choice of that,” Louise intervened, “or my Bentley.”

“I have a great weakness,” Sir Humphrey confessed, as he thrilled with the caress of Louise’s fingers, “for riding in a Bentley.”

## CHAPTER VIII

At five minutes to eight precisely on the following Sunday evening, the Right Honourable Sir Humphrey Rossiter descended the elegant curving stairway of his house in Chestow Square and entered the dining room. He glanced with satisfaction at the small round table with its chaste appointments and tasteful arrangement of flowers. He looked through the menu, then put it down with an almost self-conscious smile as he realised how many of her favourite dishes he had remembered. He poked the fire, which was very little in need of such attention, and made his way into the library adjoining. As he passed across the hall, eight o'clock struck. He consulted his watch. Exactly right. At any moment now, he would hear the car stop outside. Katherine had always been noted for her punctuality. He took up a Sunday paper and threw it down again. Scarcely worth while reading. He heard the hoot of a taxi outside and listened expectantly, but the taxi passed on. He pulled out his cigarette case and toyed with it for a moment, then he remembered the doctor's orders, and with a wry face replaced it.

Five minutes past eight. She would be here directly now. She would be wearing black, of course. He liked her best in black. Nothing showed off so beautifully her deep golden hair. Poor woman, what a tragedy her marriage had been, how heart-rending the whole affair. There had been a time, he reminded himself, standing on the hearthrug and looking up at the Adams ceiling, when he had wondered whether it would have been possible for him, without sacrificing his career, to help her to forget? This caring for women was a strange thing. There had been so many—attractive, well-born, wealthy—who, especially since his first few years of office, had almost gone so far as to hint their preference for him. No good. Only two women in the world had ever stirred his pulses. He had admired Katherine when his wife had been alive, realised the hopelessness of it all from the first, and looked steadily away. But now, after his seven years of loneliness, with this terrible happening and his own freedom, it might be possible. The only disturbing thought was—did he still wish it? Another taxi hooted and passed. He glanced at the clock. It was twelve minutes past eight. This was not like Katherine. Parkins entered with the cocktails.

"I wonder whether you would care for your cocktail, sir," the latter suggested. "The lady seems to be a few minutes late."

"Give me one and leave the shaker on the table," Sir Humphrey enjoined.

Parkins, a very discreet man, clean-shaven, grey-haired, fully alive to the responsibility of being the butler of a Cabinet Minister, served his master with

precision and, as instructed, left the tray upon the table. As he was nearing the door, Sir Humphrey glanced at the clock. The quarter past the hour had struck. The square outside was inhospitably silent.

“Parkins,” he said, “you might ring up the Savoy Court. Number 29 is Mrs. Brandt’s suite. Ask if she has started, will you?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Sir Humphrey sipped his cocktail. A Martini or a Bronx was it, he wondered. Curious how his palate had failed him. It was the remains of his nervous breakdown, he told himself, this queer feeling of uneasiness that came over him as he glanced once more at the clock. If she had changed her mind and decided not to come, of course she would have let him know. A few minutes late in the traffic jam of London! It was not worth thinking about. All the same, he was glad he had telephoned. He turned almost eagerly to the door as Parkins made discreet reëntrance some five minutes later.

“Mrs. Brandt left the Savoy Court at a quarter to eight in a taxicab, sir,” he announced. “She gave this address.”

Sir Humphrey felt a great relief.

“Caught in a block, I suppose,” he observed. “Very good, Parkins. Bring her in as soon as she arrives.”

He took another sip of his cocktail. He walked the length of the room and, drawing on one side the heavy curtains, looked out on to the square. The night was misty but not particularly dark. The twin lights of a car had just rounded the corner. This must be she. He remained where he was, looking out. The car passed on.

He dropped the curtains and stepped back into the room, took up his glass and drained its contents. It might seem a little unsociable but he was not quite himself yet. He would have another one when she came and drink a little less wine for dinner. He picked up the *Sunday Times*. There was E. V. Lucas’ article to be read—something about a jaunt around the old bookshops. That was to have been one of his own first holiday treats. Bookshops had always been amongst his favourite hobbies. Quite half the volumes that lined his walls had been bought by himself. He tried to remember a visit of his to Bath. What a haul he had made there. . . . He refused to look at the clock. He wanted to remember the titles of some of his purchases. No good. He rang the bell, he scarcely knew why, but it was absolutely necessary for him to do something.

“Parkins,” he said, “you see the time? Mrs. Brandt has not arrived. At the most, it could not have taken her more than a quarter of an hour to get here. That means that she should have been here at five minutes past eight, and it is now half-past.”

The man cudgelled his brains for an explanation.

“You don’t think, sir,” he suggested, “that Mrs. Brandt has gone to a

restaurant by mistake?”

“A plausible idea, Parkins,” his master approved, “but it doesn’t apply in this instance. Mrs. Brandt, owing to her recent loss, could not be seen dining in a restaurant for some time. No other place was mentioned. Dinner was to have been here at eight o’clock punctually. You remember that the commissionaire at the Savoy Court heard her give this address.”

“I’m afraid cook is getting a little uneasy, sir,” Parkins ventured.

“I am more than a little uneasy myself,” Sir Humphrey snapped. “I think, Parkins, that you had better ring up the Savoy Court again. Explain that Mrs. Brandt has not arrived here and find out if she has returned for any reason.”

“Very good, sir.”

Parkins this time was absent for more than five minutes. When he returned, he was looking more perplexed than ever.

“I spoke to the hall porter myself, sir,” he declared. “Mrs. Brandt left in dinner attire at a quarter to eight and they have not heard of her since. The man asked me, sir, whether I knew that Madam was leaving for the Continent tomorrow morning.”

“Leaving for where?”

“Leaving for the Continent, sir. Her things are packed and her reservations made for the Blue Train.”

“That seems most extraordinary,” Sir Humphrey meditated. “I expect she changed her plans and was going to tell me about it this evening. In any case, it doesn’t alter the rather alarming fact that she left the Savoy Court for this address more than three quarters of an hour ago and has not arrived.”

“Quite so, sir.”

“Ring through on the private line to the Accident Department at Scotland Yard. I will speak to the Superintendent-in-charge myself.”

“Very good, sir.”

The minutes ticked on. Very few of them passed, however, before the telephone bell at Sir Humphrey’s side tinkled. He raised the receiver.

“Superintendent Horton speaking.”

“Sir Humphrey Rossiter, Home Secretary, at this end. Have you any accident reports within the last half hour?”

“None at all, sir.”

“A lady—Mrs. Brandt—left the Savoy Court at a quarter to eight in evening clothes by taxicab. She gave the man the address of my house, Number 16, Chestow Square. It is now over three quarters of an hour ago and she has not arrived. Call up all the police stations and send out a motor-cycle squad. Have enquiries made at every possible place en route and report any accident or misadventure to this address.”

“It shall be done immediately, sir,” was the prompt reply.

Sir Humphrey hung up the receiver. He found Parkins hovering discreetly in the background.

“Cook wondered whether you would not have dinner served, sir,” he suggested. “She could keep something back in case the lady arrived later.”

Sir Humphrey felt a distinct shock. Had it really come to that? Was there really fear that she might not arrive at all?

“I shall wait for another quarter of an hour,” he decided. “You will have to make a fresh cocktail when Mrs. Brandt arrives. I will drink hers now.”

“There’s many of those old taxicabs breaking down nowadays, sir,” the butler remarked, as he wielded the shaker vigorously. “And being Sunday night, the lady might have some trouble in getting another. Might have happened in the park, and there’s few taxis passes along there any time.”

“Quite so, Parkins,” his master agreed. “I feel sure that something like that has occurred.”

Sir Humphrey swallowed half of his second cocktail at a draught, then he put down the glass and began to walk restlessly up and down the room. He was a man to whom untoward or unexpected events had seldom happened. The daily incidents of most of his life had followed one another with precision and according to plan. This second inexplicable occurrence, coming so soon after his own melodramatic abduction, stupefied him. He was unable to think clearly. He could form no conjectures as to what might have taken place, for he had no experience to go by. A woman had left an hotel *de luxe* to take a quarter of an hour’s drive through the heart of a civilised city and dine with him. More than an hour had passed. Where was she spending the time? In a hospital or—? There his brain failed him. There was no rhyme or reason about the thing. Katherine was not a Cabinet Minister with powers of life or death. He could not imagine any one to whom her disappearance would be of the slightest interest. He could not imagine any catastrophe which could have happened to her. All that he knew was that the thing in itself was damnable, and that fear was creeping into his heart. It was fear of the unknown. It was the very fact that he could not focus his apprehensions which made them all the more tormenting.

The tinkle of the telephone again—the firm, almost strident voice of Superintendent Horton.

“Enquiries have been made at every police station within a reasonable radius of the Savoy and Chestow Square, Sir Humphrey,” he announced. “No accident of any sort is reported. No charges have been brought in, nor anything which could possibly be connected with the lady’s disappearance. There have been two minor casualties taken in at the hospitals, but in one case it was a man and the other a child.”

Sir Humphrey was relieved without being relieved. At the back of his mind

always lurked that fear of which he refused to take cognizance.

"In what direction, Sir Humphrey, do you wish me to proceed further?" the Superintendent enquired.

"For the moment, I can suggest nothing," the former confessed. "There is obviously something wrong, but I don't quite see of what service you can be. Where is the Subcommissioner this evening?"

"I can tell his movements by the sheet, sir, if you will hold on for two minutes," the Superintendent replied.

Sir Humphrey acquiesced. There was very little fear of the line being disturbed while he was at the other end of it. In less than the stipulated time the Superintendent had returned.

"Colonel Matterson was playing golf at Sunningdale to-day, sir," he announced. "He was dining at eight o'clock at the Sheridan Club and expected to return home about, midnight. He would be at the Sheridan Club now. Do you wish me to call him?"

"You had better do so," Sir Humphrey decided. "Ask him to speak to me here."

"It shall be done, sir," the Superintendent promised. "By-the-by, I have sent off two men on motor cycles—smart fellows both of them—one to start at Chestow Square and work backwards, and one from the Savoy Court. They will notify every constable and sergeant en route and enquire whether anything unusual has been noticed in connection with the progress of any taxicab."

"Very intelligent, Superintendent," the Home Secretary approved. "I am much obliged to you."

He rang off. Once more he summoned Parkins.

"Parkins," he ordered, "ring up the Sheridan Club. See that it is made an urgent call. Tell them to ask Colonel Matterson to step to the telephone at once to speak to Sir Humphrey Rossiter."

"Very good, sir."

Another of those horrible periods of waiting which seemed so long and were after all so brief. Then the tinkle of the telephone bell. Sir Humphrey took up the receiver.

"Matterson speaking. Is that you, Sir Humphrey?"

"Yes. Sorry to trouble you, Matterson, but a very disturbing thing has happened. Mrs. Brandt—you know whom I mean—Katherine Brandt—left the Savoy Court over an hour and a half ago to dine with me. She has not arrived nor is there any news of her."

"Have you rung up the Yard?" Colonel Matterson asked quickly.

"Some time ago. I rang up the Accident Department first. The hospitals have no fresh cases. There is no report of any accident. Superintendent Horton took the matter in hand in a very intelligent fashion."

“Where are you? At home?”

“Yes. Number 16, Chestow Square.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can get a taxi,” the Subcommissioner promised.

Sir Humphrey laid down the receiver and, suddenly realising that he felt very weak and faint, made his way into the dining room. He rang the bell.

“Parkins,” he ordered, “you can serve dinner.”



## CHAPTER IX

The Subcommissioner was shown into the dining room when he arrived, a little flurried, at Chestow Square. He found Sir Humphrey still trifling with the fish.

“You can take the things away, Parkins,” his master enjoined. “I want to talk to Colonel Matterson.”

The man hesitated.

“You will excuse me, sir,” he ventured, “but the doctor was very particular about meals. If I might suggest a small piece of the pheasant.”

“Bring it in by all means,” Colonel Matterson intervened. “Sir Humphrey, I insist. I’ll sit in your easy-chair and we can talk just the same. Sorry I cannot join you. I had just finished dinner when your message came.”

Sir Humphrey yielded and Parkins hastened from the room.

“This is a queer business,” the Subcommissioner went on. “I was so close to the Savoy Court at the Sheridan that I went in for a moment to make enquiries. You know, I suppose, that the lady is all packed up for the Continent?”

“I didn’t know it until to-night,” Sir Humphrey confessed. “I saw her the day before yesterday. She spoke of going to Cannes then, but she hadn’t fixed a date. She seems to have made all these preparations without consulting me. We agreed to dine here to-night and I was to hear all her plans. The Cannes business is all right, but it is quite out of the question that she should have broken her engagement voluntarily without letting me know.”

“Most extraordinary,” Matterson murmured.

“Katherine Brandt,” Sir Humphrey continued impressively, “is one of the most considerate women I have ever met. She was always punctual for an appointment and nothing would have induced her to do a thing like this except —”

“Except?”

“Except under compulsion.”

“You are thinking that she too has been kidnapped?”

“It is a horrible thought,” Sir Humphrey declared, with a shiver, “but what else can I think?”

There was a brief silence. The pheasant appeared and was carved at the sideboard. Sir Humphrey did his best to eat, exchanging meanwhile only monosyllabic remarks with his guest. Presently he pushed away his plate.

“Parkins,” he directed, “pour me out some wine. Colonel, what are you going to take?”

“A glass of that port I see on the sideboard,” was the prompt reply.

“Very good. Serve us, Parkins, then leave everything just as it is for half an hour. Switch the main telephone into this room, keep the servants out of the way and keep away yourself. I want to talk to Colonel Matterson.”

“Very good, sir.”

The two men sat opposite to each other. The Subcommissioner toyed with his wineglass.

“Any theory?” he asked, looking keenly across at his host.

“Not the ghost of a one,” was the dejected reply. “I was never more absolutely at sea.”

“I am in the same box at present,” the other admitted. “I can’t see how this affair connects with yours in any way. Your abduction must have been carried out by men who wanted Brandt’s life saved, therefore they must have been more or less his friends. If they were his friends, what do they want to interfere with his wife for? I cannot see any motive—or any beginning or end to the affair. We shall have to theorise, I suppose, and I hate theorising. Katherine Brandt we all know about, of course. The life of an actress of her distinction is pretty well an open book—a very creditable book hers, too. What about Brandt? He was always rather a mystery, wasn’t he?”

“It seems strange to me,” Sir Humphrey admitted, “how little any of us really knew of the fellow. Katherine met him in Australia when she was touring there, they travelled home on the same steamer, and were married directly they arrived in London. As it happens, it was a few months before my wife died. Brandt was always supposed to be, and so far as I know he certainly was, an enormously rich man. He backed his wife’s shows to any amount, although I should think he rather made money by that. He owned race horses, kept a dozen hunters down at Melton Mowbray, and leased the best shooting he could get. We won’t speak of his establishment in Dean Street, but that must have cost him a small fortune.”

“He had plenty of friends, I suppose?”

“Any quantity, of all sorts, but I never heard any one speak as though they really liked him.”

“Was he always on good terms with his wife?”

“So far as I know. He seems to have treated her well enough, except for his insane jealousy. He offered to settle half a million pounds on her if she would give up the stage and promise never to act again.”

“The more one knows from the inside, the better,” Colonel Matterson reflected. “What about this fellow Gervase Benham?”

“He played lead once or twice in Katherine’s companies. He was a visitor at the house occasionally. I have met him there myself once or twice. Lately, however, I think that Brandt was so infernally rude to him that he refused to go

there. I suppose that was the reason why the poor fellow, who had to consult sometimes with his principal lady, chose that unfortunate afternoon for his visit when he thought that Brandt would be out of the way.”

The Subcommissioner sipped his port meditatively.

“It won’t do, Sir Humphrey,” he said at last. “This evening’s affair stands by itself. There’s nothing to be made out of these outside people. The men who made that desperate effort to save Brandt’s life could have no sane reason for wanting to abduct his widow. There’s no sense in it. The thing doesn’t fit together. I am afraid we shall have to look to more ordinary causes for Mrs. Brandt’s disappearance. I should suggest that she had probably been worried to death by callers and reporters, and that she decided to slip away from London without letting a soul know. You will get a telegram presently, I should think, and her maid will have instructions to follow her.”

“She started out in a taxicab at a quarter to eight this evening to dine with me,” Sir Humphrey said in a dull, even tone. “She gave the address of this house to the taxicab man. She was in evening clothes without even a hat.”

“On the other hand,” Colonel Matterson pointed out, “you must remember that that’s probably just the way in which she would frame her disappearance, if it really is a voluntary disappearance. You know what newspaper men are today. They are very hard to evade, and she could never have left the Savoy Court to-morrow morning, however unostentatiously, without her destination being known, and being besieged by journalists. She may have gone to a friend’s house, changed her clothes and be on her way to Paris by now.”

“Without a line to me?” Sir Humphrey queried.

“Without a line to you,” Matterson repeated. “You will get it in time, of course. I expect you will be getting a belated letter or telegram or even a telephone call at any moment. It’s treating you very inconsiderately, of course, and not what one would have expected of her, but as a theory, it all fits in with the circumstances.”

Sir Humphrey shook his head.

“You may be right, Matterson,” he acknowledged, “and your theory is reasonable enough, so far as it goes, but I don’t believe in it.”

“Remember I have a certain amount of experience behind me,” the other argued. “I should think that out of a dozen cases of disappearance which are brought to us, eleven of them, when they are sifted down, turn out to have been voluntary. When you have a situation like this, you must deal with the facts as they are. I cannot bring myself to believe that during the short distance from the Savoy Court here, on a Sunday night too, she can have met with any mishaps.”

“If that is your personal conviction,” Sir Humphrey said, a little stiffly, “I hope you will not allow it to influence the energies of your staff. If we receive

no news of Mrs. Brandt within the next hour, and she is still missing from the hotel, I shall expect you to set about the task of finding her under the assumption that she has met with some such misadventure as happened to me.”

“Don’t you worry about that, sir,” Colonel Matterson begged. “If Mrs. Brandt’s disappearance continues without any definite explanation, I can assure you that the best brains in Scotland Yard will be engaged on the task of finding her within an hour or so. Not only that, but we shall find her. My own opinion, as I have told you, is—before midnight we shall have a message giving a reasonable explanation of her absence. If we do not—well, you know that we have a Big Four, as we call them, for criminal work. We also have a Secret Three for disappearances. They are all standing by at the present moment, and they will be at work, as I told you, the moment after midnight.”

Sir Humphrey touched the bell.

“Has Mr. Carthew arrived?” he enquired of Parkins.

“He is waiting in the study, sir.”

“Send him in,” Sir Humphrey directed. “Carthew, as I think you know,” he went on, turning to Matterson, “is my private secretary. I told Parkins to send round for him some time ago. I thought we might find him useful.”

A young man, wearing an overcoat over his evening clothes, was presently ushered into the room. He was short, thick-set and of amiable appearance. Sir Humphrey nodded to him in friendly fashion.

“Carthew,” he said, “sorry to break up your evening, but I need your help for a short time. Mrs. Brandt, who was to have dined here at eight o’clock, has not arrived, and as you see it is now half-past ten. She left the Savoy Court in evening dress at a quarter to eight. We have made all the usual enquiries without result. I wish you to ring up Lady Middleton Hall, Mrs. Osbourne Smythe and Mr. Guy Philpott, the manager of the theatre. Ask in my name whether any one of the three has received any communication from Mrs. Brandt during the day or if they have any idea where she is. You understand?”

“Perfectly, sir,” the young man replied. “I can get Guy at once. He was in my party for dinner and they are still there. The two ladies I will ring up directly afterwards, or—they’re very near—I might take a taxi.”

“I leave it to you, Carthew,” his Chief acquiesced.

“It’s rotten luck that this should have happened,” Matterson sighed, as soon as the two men were alone again. “You have got over your illness so well and we need you badly at Whitehall just now. There are at least a score of things down at the Yard the Chief and I want to talk over with you. I was hoping you would be able to spare us an hour to-morrow.”

“Nothing will prevent my being able to resume such work as is necessary,” Sir Humphrey declared. “The search for Mrs. Brandt will be quite outside my activities. I must be in the House to-morrow evening and I shall have to attend

a reception at night, but I can give you two hours in the morning, say from ten till twelve.”

“That would do for us wonderfully,” Matterson assented. “Shall we come to Whitehall or will you come to the Yard?”

“I shall come to you. I find it almost impossible to avoid interruptions at Whitehall—however important the conference is. Meanwhile, don’t let me keep you, if you would like to be getting back.”

“My dear Sir Humphrey,” the Subcommissioner expostulated, “I shouldn’t think of leaving you. I want to hear the result of your enquiries, and besides, we may get definite news at any moment.”

“Just as you please, of course.”

“I should like,” Colonel Matterson went on, “to stay here until midnight, and if nothing has happened then, I shall go back to the Yard and start things going. Perhaps I could use your other wire to the Yard now? I can make sure then of having the man I want there.”

“You know the ropes,” Sir Humphrey replied. “There is a general telephone here, but my private wire is in the library across the way. I won’t offer to come with you, if you don’t mind. I might be rung up here.”

“Of course not,” Matterson agreed. “I sha’n’t be a minute.”

He hurried off. Sir Humphrey rang the bell and instructed Parkins to clear away the remains of his scanty dinner. The cloth was removed and the decanter of wine placed upon the shining mahogany table. Sir Humphrey noticed nothing. He was seated stiffly in his easy-chair, his eyes fixed upon the silent telephone.

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In a matter of five or ten minutes the Subcommissioner of Police, having executed his commission on the telephone, returned to the dining room.

“All fixed up—” he began.

Then he broke off in his speech. The heavy curtains of the room were being blown inwards by a cold current of air. A little wisp of mist had drifted through the open window. The wine was upon the table, there were no signs of any disturbance, everything else was in its place, but the Home Secretary was missing!

## CHAPTER X

General Sr Harold Moore, the Chief Commissioner of Police, was a fine upstanding figure of a man, powerfully built to withstand shocks of every description. Nevertheless the flesh under his eyes was a little baggy and he had lost some of his healthy colour as he opened the newspapers the following morning in his private room. Seated a few yards away was Colonel Matterson, and in the background Detective Inspector Cowling, one of the famous Three at the Yard, who specially concerned themselves with mysterious disappearances.

“I’ll talk to you both,” the Chief Commissioner muttered, “as soon as I see whether those paragraphs are in the *Times*. I hope they are. Must stop the evening papers gassing.”

The news items of which he was in search were easily discovered. The first was in the Court and Society News and was brief enough:

Mrs. Brandt has left the Savoy Court for the continent. No letters will be forwarded.

The second was in the general news with an important headline:

We regret to state that the Right Honourable Sir Humphrey Rossiter, Secretary of State for Home Affairs, has suffered a slight relapse after his recent illness and has been moved to a Nursing Home. No communications of any sort will be dealt with or letters forwarded.

“That’s all right,” the General exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. “Gives us a day or two, at any rate.”

“Precisely, sir,” Inspector Cowling commented. “The one thing we want to avoid in cases like these is a lot of talk and gossip. I’m hoping we’ll clear this whole business up before any one guesses at the truth.”

“I hope to goodness you may,” was the General’s fervent response. “Did you learn anything from the condition of Sir Humphrey’s dining room?”

“Not very much,” was the cautious reply. “Of course, it is one of these old-fashioned houses, the lower windows of which are practically on the ground and only protected by shutters. When these are pushed back, it’s as easy for any one to pass in and out by the window as by the door.”

“What is the drop?” Matterson asked.

“Barely a couple of feet and on to a cement pavement. The catch of the window does not appear to have been tampered with, and the butler admits that it was very likely left unfastened until the shutters would be pulled to at night. One puzzling thing, however, is that although it must have been perfectly easy for any one to enter the room, it is a very large apartment, and one cannot imagine Sir Humphrey seeing any one approach without calling out or ringing the bell.”

“Just so,” Matterson agreed. “He knew perfectly well that I was in the next room all the time.”

“And in any case,” the Inspector went on, “why should he have allowed himself to be taken away by this visitor? He had plenty of time to see him coming, he had plenty of time to shout out. One has to consider the theory, gentlemen, that Sir Humphrey’s departure was voluntary and that it isn’t a case of disappearance at all.”

“What in God’s name you’re going to make of that, I don’t know,” the General mumbled.

“Neither do I, at present,” the Inspector admitted coolly, “until we come across some shadow of a motive. We know that a large motor car did draw up outside the house at a quarter to eleven, which was just about the right time, and the constable who saw it noticed the extreme quietness with which it approached and was brought to a standstill, no hooting or grinding of brakes or anything of that sort. Unfortunately, his attention was distracted just then by a motor cyclist without a rear light, and he had to cross the road to take some particulars. When he came back again, the car had gone. He seems to be the only person who saw it and he is not able even to give us any idea as to its make.”

“A car stopping outside the house just at that particular time must have had some significance,” Colonel Matterson remarked.

“I have two men,” the Inspector confided, “who are at work upon nothing else but the tracing of that car.”

“No news from Norfolk yet, I suppose?” the Chief Commissioner enquired, after a moment’s pause.

“Not yet, sir,” Matterson replied. “I shall let Smithers have a brief report of what has happened here, but I shall make no comment upon it. Let them come to their own conclusions, and we may correct them afterwards, if necessary.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s sound,” the General meditated. “Your idea is, then, to treat these two disappearances separately and work at them from an entirely different angle?”

“Exactly,” Matterson agreed. “The one thing that I should like to understand, though, is what the precise connection was between our Chief at Whitehall, Brandt and Brandt’s wife.”

"I don't think there is anything to be discovered there," was the General's confident pronouncement. "Sir Humphrey is no philanderer and never has been."

"Sir Charles Dilke was no philanderer," Matterson reminded him.

"He was a man of entirely different temperament to our friend. If you're going into psychology, I don't think you will find much to help you in that triangle. I know something of what I'm talking about, because I have met the three of them socially several times, and naturally I hear all the gossip there is going around at the clubs. I have never heard a word about our friends. Go ahead your own way, though. I don't pretend to be a detective. Anything else I can do for you, Cowling?"

The Inspector consulted his notebook.

"I should like a list of the guests at the shooting party at Keynsham Hall," he begged.

The General raised his eyebrows.

"So, after all we've said, you're determined to connect the two affairs in your investigations," he remarked.

"Only in one single instance," the detective assured him, "and that's a matter of detail. I am more anxious than I can tell you to keep the two apart. Suggestions from the one would keep on interfering with one's outlook upon the other. No, I'm going to keep them apart, all right."

"You will find the list of guests and every other particular we got together for Smithers and Simpson in the Records Department," the General told him. "I may say I don't think that it will help you."

The Inspector rose to his feet.

"I shall start at the Savoy Court, of course, sir," he confided. "It's an old-fashioned lay-out, a *cherchez la femme* stunt, but after all it was Mrs. Brandt who started the mystery of the evening by not turning up for her dinner with Sir Humphrey. I shall be very surprised to find out," he went on, smoothing his hat quietly, "that the same cause which prevented Madam from keeping her appointment did not bring Sir Humphrey to his dining-room window."

"I never like to hurry a man at his work," Colonel Matterson remarked, "but don't forget this—those two notices in the papers this morning may keep things quiet for a time, but it's terribly hard to fool the Press."

"I have four of my best men at work on details now," the Inspector announced. "I won't waste a minute, sir."

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As soon as the two men were alone, General Moore motioned to his satellite to draw his chair a little closer.

"What do you really think of it all, Matterson?" he asked.

"I wish I knew what to think," the latter replied. "Of course, from a purely



technical point of view, in making his enquiries I daresay Cowling is right in separating the two affairs, but there is no doubt whatever in my mind but that they will join up when the mystery is solved. That is to say, I am convinced that the same people or the same interests, are concerned in Mrs. Brandt's disappearance as in these two abductions of our Chief."

"It's common sense, sheer common sense," the General assented; "yet how are we to connect them?"

"Quite so," Matterson agreed. "Our troubles seem to me to be twofold. First it is almost impossible to find one central motive for the three incidents, and secondly I have been through our lists again and we have no organised band of criminals capable of work like this. Half a dozen of our leading lights in the criminal world have already received a domiciliary visit and they all have perfect alibis. If this is an amateur stunt, all I can say is—God help us in the future! You are looking as though you had an idea, General."

The Chief Commissioner shook his head.

"Nothing that could be called an idea, I'm afraid," he denied. "As I told you just now, I don't pretend to be a detective. The thing that has been in my mind all the time, though, is just this—that the only person who might have tapped at that dining-room window and brought Sir Humphrey out without a second's hesitation would have been Katherine Brandt."

"But if so, what then?" Matterson demanded. "Does it get us any nearer? Why the devil could she not come to dinner in the ordinary way, if she wanted anything from Sir Humphrey?"

"If we knew that, the whole mystery would be solved," was the dry rejoinder. . . . "I shall have to go around to the Foreign Office now, Matterson, about this Russian business. You will know where to get me if anything turns up. If you have any further discussion with Cowling during the day, my idea—for what it is worth—is that he should concentrate upon the easiest task."

"And what do you consider the easiest task?" Matterson asked a trifle grimly.

The General became impressive.

"It ought not to be impossible to trace Katherine Brandt, wherever she has gone to or whoever has got hold of her," he pronounced. "If Scotland Yard cannot do that—a woman who leaves one of the best-known hotels in London on a Sunday night, when traffic is far lighter than on any other evening—all I can say is that we shall have to revise the department. No reprimand, mind, but put it up to Cowling that I shall expect to hear something about Mrs. Brandt during the day."

Colonel Matterson nodded.

"I'm quite of your opinion, Chief," he said.

Which was tactful of the Subcommissioner and happened to be the truth.

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The management of the Savoy Hotel and Court were naturally only too anxious to be of any assistance to Scotland Yard. One of the under managers escorted Inspector Cowling to the apartment which Katherine Brandt had occupied and invited him to make such investigations as he desired. The Inspector neglected nothing. The waste-paper basket had unfortunately been emptied, but there was a drawerful of letters, mostly of sympathy, kind offers of various sorts, and invitations, not one of which was of any practical service. The Inspector even looked through the books and magazines lying about and took notice of the newspapers which had been supplied. Finally he asked for Katherine Brandt's maid, who had been warned to be in attendance. She was a quiet, neatly dressed young woman, English and a little nervous. Inspector Cowling adopted his most pleasant manner and begged her to take a chair.

"I see your trunks seem to be all packed," he remarked.

"Everything is prepared for going abroad," the maid told him. "Madam said we should be leaving to-day or to-morrow."

"For the Continent?"

"For Cannes, sir. I believe the concierge knows all about that."

"Mrs. Brandt had seats in the Blue Train to-morrow," the under manager confided. "We have telephoned to the Carlton Hotel for a small suite."

"Then you heard nothing from her to indicate that she had changed her mind?"

"Nothing whatever."

The Inspector turned towards the maid.

"Your mistress said nothing in your hearing which would have led you to believe she was not leaving for the south of France as arranged?"

"Not a word. In fact," the girl went on, gaining confidence, "I'm still packing my own things ready to leave to-morrow. Mrs. Brandt has only been away for one night, after all. I don't know what has happened to her, but I shouldn't be surprised to see her back at any moment and ready for the train to-morrow morning."

The Inspector smiled tolerantly.

"You think that we are making too much fuss about one night's disappearance?"

"Seems to me that you are," the maid assented. "Mrs. Brandt always knew just what she wanted to do, and as a rule, when the time came, she did it."

"Well, you may be right," the Inspector conceded. "By-the-by, did you dress your mistress last night?"

"Certainly I did, sir."

"Did she tell you where she was going?"

"She nearly always did, in case of telephone calls. She told me that she was

dining with an old friend, Sir Humphrey Rossiter, and she was very particular about wearing a certain black gown which was in the style he liked.”

“And so far as you are concerned—? By-the-by, may I know your name?”

“Rosa Brown my name is.”

“Thank you. So far as you are concerned, then, Miss Brown, you believed, when your mistress left, that she was going to keep her engagement and dine with Sir Humphrey?”

“Of course I did,” the young woman acquiesced. “And another thing, I am quite sure Madam believed it too. She was not one to chop and change around. I never knew a lady so sought after who was so particular in keeping her engagements.”

“Very nice of her, I’m sure,” the Inspector approved. “By-the-by, Miss Brown, I was interested in what you said just now that you thought she would be back in time to catch the train to-morrow. You have no real reason for saying that, I suppose—just your own idea, eh?”

“Just my own idea, sir, that’s all,” she agreed. “Madam is rather like that. She’s very fond of turning up at the last moment. As a matter of fact, her last words to me were to be sure that I left some milk for her and the heating kettle.”

“You were not supposed to sit up until she got back, then?”

“Madam was always very considerate,” the girl confided. “If she wasn’t home by half-past ten, I was free to go to bed.”

“Had she many visitors?”

The maid frowned and glanced towards the under manager as though for support.

“I have never been one,” she said, “to talk about my mistress’ affairs.”

“In this instance,” the hotel official pointed out, “things are entirely different. Inspector Cowling here represents the law. We have to tell him everything.”

“I’m not sure that there is anything particular to tell,” she meditated. “People were telephoning Madam all the time and asking if they might come and see her, but she made the same reply to every one—that they must give her a little more time. There were one or two exceptions, of course.”

“Who might they be?” the detective asked insinuatingly.

“Well, there was Mr. Guy Philpott. He came several times. He was always trying to persuade Madam to sign a contract. And there was Mrs. Philpott, his wife. Then there was Lady Middleton Hall and her cousin Lady Hynes, and Sir Humphrey Rossiter. He only came once—on Friday. I can’t think of any one else.”

Inspector Cowling made a note of the names in his book.

“Thank you,” he said. “Now, tell me, what do you propose to do, Miss

Brown?"

"I shall stay here and wait for my mistress' return."

"For the present, I think you are very wise," the Inspector agreed. . . . "I think I noticed the trunks when I came in. Yes, here they are," he added, leading the way into the hall. "So that is Mrs. Brandt's luggage for Cannes, eh?"

"All but the hats and the boots, which aren't packed yet."

"I see," the detective murmured.

He stared meditatively at the trunks as though in some vague way they interested him. He stooped down and examined the locks and then stood up again.

"I suppose these were all packed by yourself, Miss Brown?" he asked.

"Of course they were," the girl replied. "Madam only keeps one maid."

"They are all locked, naturally?"

"I shouldn't leave them out here, if they weren't."

"I wonder whether it would trouble you very much," the Inspector asked apologetically, "if I were to beg you to open one for a minute? I should like to have a glance at really high-class packing."

The girl appealed once more to the under manager.

"I don't see the sense of it," she objected. "I packed them all myself and locked them up Saturday afternoon."

"If the Inspector wishes it," the under manager said suavely, "there can be no harm in it, Miss."

The maid opened the small bag which she had been carrying and produced a bunch of keys.

"Which one?" she enquired.

The Inspector indicated the nearest, a leather steamer trunk. The maid unlocked it and, between them, the Inspector and the under manager unfastened the straps. The maid touched a spring and the lid flew open. She gave a little scream. Instead of the neatly packed contents they had expected to see, there was an untidy medley of rolled up gowns, bundles of crêpe de chine, scarves and gloves, all in wild confusion.

## CHAPTER XI

The maid, as soon as she had recovered from the shock, would have thrown herself upon a shamefully maltreated robe of white satin, but her arms were suddenly imprisoned by the Inspector.

“Forgive me,” he begged. “There may be work for our fingerprint expert here. I imagine it is waste of breath, Miss Brown, to ask you if that was the condition in which you left this trunk.”

“Condition in which I left it indeed!” the girl exclaimed indignantly. “The mistress has often told me I’m one of the neatest packers she ever saw. Some one has upset every mortal thing in the trunk.”

“Where do you keep the keys?” the Inspector asked.

“In my bag. They have never been out of my possession. We can’t possibly leave the things like that, Mr. Inspector. They’ll all be ruined. If the mistress sees them, she’ll have a fit. All those three gowns from Worth too! What they didn’t cost!”

“They must be left as they are for the present,” the Inspector decreed. “Open the other trunks, if you please. We must know if they are all in the same condition.”

The girl obeyed with trembling fingers. There were tears in her eyes and she was obviously distressed. The contents of both the other trunks had been treated in the same ruthless fashion.

“There are things there which will be spoilt,” the girl declared. “Heaps of them. I should like to know who’s been messing about here.”

“So should we,” Cowling said calmly. “It’s no good worrying, Miss Brown. The thing has happened and we must make the best of it. Lock up those trunks again, if you please, without touching the straps. You must leave the contents as they are.”

The girl was crying in earnest as she went on her knees to obey.

“When will I be able to take these things out?” she begged.

“As soon as possible,” the Inspector assured her soothingly. “Soon after midday to-morrow, I should think. All locked up now, eh? That’s right. I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to let me have the keys.”

She obeyed without a murmur and he slipped them into his pocket.

“You say that these were never away from you after you had finished packing?” he asked.

“They have been in this bag all the time,” the girl replied, “and I never lose sight of it. I took it out with me last night to the cinema and I slept with it by the side of my bed.”

“You couldn’t have done more,” the Inspector consoled her. “I shall ask you a few questions later on, perhaps.”

He opened the door and Miss Rosa Brown, taking the hint, departed in a dazed and tearful condition. Then he came back into the sitting room. The under manager was looking very concerned indeed.

“Don’t you think you ought to have asked her whom she went to the cinema with and if she locked her door at night?” he enquired.

“That will do later,” the Inspector replied. “As a matter of fact, we have some very clever people to deal with in this affair, and there’s no lock there they couldn’t have opened in a minute, with or without the keys. I should like to have your concierge up now, if I may. I can scarcely ask him questions at his counter.”

The concierge was summoned and appeared almost at once, a civil, pleasant-faced man dressed in the livery of the hotel.

“Goodchild,” the under manager said, “this is Inspector Cowling from Scotland Yard. You will answer any questions he puts to you and give him any information you can.”

“Do my best, sir, with pleasure,” was the prompt reply.

“I sha’n’t keep you longer than I can help,” the Inspector promised. “Did you happen to be around when Mrs. Brandt came down in the lift and left the hotel, at about a quarter to eight last night?”

“I was downstairs behind my counter, sir. At eight o’clock I should have been relieved. I was there when Mrs. Brandt stepped out of the lift and asked for a taxi. I called out to James who whistled it up for her.”

“Did she seem in any way disturbed?”

“Not in the least,” was the emphatic reply. “I hadn’t seen her smile in quite the same way since—since she arrived. Wonderful handsome she looked too, sir, if I may say so. She was all in black with a black silk coat and ermine collar.”

“Nothing about her appearance to make you think that she was contemplating flight anywhere?”

“Not a suggestion of anything of the sort, sir.”

“Did you hear the address she gave to the taxi man?”

“I did, sir. We were not very busy at the time, and when that is the case and a client like Mrs. Brandt passes out, I often lift the flap of my counter and step on to the pavement to see that she is being looked after. I did so in this instance. She stepped into the taxi as light as a bird.”

The Inspector scratched his chin.

“That taxicab is rather a puzzle, Goodchild,” he remarked. “We’ve had men on, trying to track it down since midnight. The driver wasn’t one of your regular hands, was he?”

“He was not,” the concierge admitted. “I’ll tell you where the trouble was, sir,” he went on. “You see, it was Sunday night, and a great many of the men who have done pretty well during the week, they knock off on Sunday night—knowing it’s likely to be a slack time—have supper with the Missus or something of that sort. I expect that’s the reason why we didn’t take much notice of there being a stranger on the rank. James declares that he had never seen the man before, but he didn’t think of looking for his number. Why should he?”

“Exactly,” the Inspector agreed. “Why should he? It was just unfortunate that it was Sunday night. . . . Now, Goodchild, you must have received a lot of telephone calls for Mrs. Brandt.”

“I certainly did, sir,” the man assented. “Many more than I could remember. There were very few callers, though, that she would see.”

“So her maid told me. Do you happen to remember who had permission to go up?”

“Well,” the man reflected, “there was Mr. Guy Philpott and his wife—they came several times—together and separately. There was Lady Middleton Hall, and Lady Hynes, a Mrs. Osbourne Smythe, who was a stranger to me, a lawyer gentleman and sometimes his clerk from Lincoln’s Inn, and on Friday we had the honour of having Sir Humphrey Rossiter here—just got over his illness. Very sorry we all were to see from the papers this morning that he is not quite so well.”

“That’s about all the people whom Mrs. Brandt saw, then, Goodchild?”

“So far as I know, sir. I’m not on duty all the time, of course.”

“Where is your relief man?” the Inspector asked.

“He’s downstairs now, sir. He didn’t go home, in case you might be wanting to ask him any questions.”

“Very considerate,” the Inspector commented. “Well, I don’t think I need trouble you any further, Goodchild. I’m much obliged for what you have told me. Our idea is, of course, that Mrs. Brandt will be turning up again directly. I think you have already had instructions that we do not wish this affair spoken of in any way, especially to the newspaper men.”

“Every servant and porter in this part of the hotel,” Goodchild announced, “has been told that he’s off without a week’s notice if he mentions the word disappearance in connection with Mrs. Brandt. That’s the order from the office.”

“Capital!” the Inspector murmured. “That gives us a chance for a day or two. Now I think, Goodchild, I should like to have a word or two with your relief. It can’t do any harm.”

“I’ll send him up at once, sir,” the latter promised, as he took his departure. . . .

The night porter, a younger and sleepier-looking replica of his confrère, duly appeared. The Inspector greeted him pleasantly.

"I know Goodchild very well," he remarked. "What is your name?"

"Harris, sir. Philip Harris."

"Well, Harris, I haven't much to ask you. You were not on duty when Mrs. Brandt left the hotel on Sunday night?"

"No, sir. I came up by the Hammersmith bus and arrived here at five minutes past eight."

"Well, it seems to me there's only one question for you. Goodchild has told me about all the people who had the entrée to Mrs. Brandt's rooms in the daytime—was there any one not on that list who went up while you were on duty?"

"Only one gentleman, sir. He had sent her flowers several times; bought them at the shop opposite and brought them over himself, but he had never suggested a call. On Thursday evening, I think it was, about nine o'clock, he made enquiries as usual, and he was just stepping off when he came back and said to me—I was standing behind the counter—'I wonder whether Mrs. Brandt would care to see me for a moment?' So I said—'Let me ask her.'"

"You haven't said who the gentleman was," the Inspector interrupted.

"Sorry. I forgot that, sir," the man apologized. "A gentleman very well known to all of us here, and one of our best customers—Lord Edward Keynsham."

The Inspector nodded respectfully.

"A very popular gentleman everywhere," he observed. "Did Mrs. Brandt receive him?"

"She sent word down that she would be glad to see his lordship for a few minutes."

"I see," Inspector Cowling reflected. "Well, Mrs. Brandt had a very pleasant list of friends. No chance of any of them playing any tricks. I don't think I have anything else to ask you, Harris."

The man picked up his cap.

"Anything I could tell you, sir," he said, "that would help, I would be delighted to. A very charming lady, Mrs. Brandt. But there it is. Of course, it was unfortunate about the taxicab—"

"We don't need to bother about the taxicab," the Inspector interrupted. "Another department is looking after that."

The man saluted and turned towards the door. The Inspector seemed to be studying one of the oil paintings which hung upon the wall. Suddenly he swung around.

"Oh, by-the-by," he asked, "how long did his lordship stay?"

Harris paused on the threshold.



“So far as I can remember, about a quarter of an hour, sir,” he confided. “Certainly not longer. I remember his coming down because he bought an *Evening Standard* from me and gave me a small tip. Very generous and thoughtful, his lordship, always. Never uses the lift even, without a trifle for the boy.”

“Well, we have not all got his lordship’s money,” the Inspector remarked, smiling.

“It isn’t every millionaire, though, sir, who knows how to give tips like a gentleman.”

The man saluted and took his leave. The under manager and Inspector Cowling descended together in the lift. At the former’s urgent invitation, the Inspector accompanied him to the bar and accepted a whisky and soda. The hotel official was naturally worried.

“I had hoped,” he said gloomily, “and the manager had hoped too, that we should have been able to keep this matter absolutely quiet. I suppose, however, you will have to do something else about the ransacking of Mrs. Brandt’s trunks.”

“I am considering that matter,” the Inspector observed. “What’s your opinion of the maid?”

“Honest, but rather stupid, I should say,” the other replied. “I certainly should not myself connect her with the affair. She was with Mrs. Brandt when she and her husband came to stay here a year ago, whilst their house was being painted.”

The Inspector nodded.

“She seems to me honest enough,” he agreed. “I tell you what it is,” he went on, after a brief deliberation, “I won’t interfere any further for the moment. I must just send our fingerprint man down, but after that we’ll all keep away. You hold a little court of enquiry yourself with your housekeeper and the manager—you know the run of the place and the possibilities of it. Let me have the result as soon as possible. Of course, if I don’t find it satisfactory, I shall have to come back myself and see if there is anything further to be done. Any one could have opened those trunks, of course, if they could once get into the rooms and be sure of being undisturbed. Go through your list of new arrivals and see if there was any one who particularly asked to be on that floor.”

“I’ll make every possible enquiry,” the young man promised. “You shall have the result in an hour or two.”

“And remember—no interviews,” the Inspector insisted. “Keep this right out of the Press.”

“We shall do everything, Inspector,” the other reiterated fervently, “that is humanly possible, for our own sakes as well as yours.”

The Inspector took his leave, gave an address to the chauffeur, climbed into his car and settled down to consider the only problem presented by his hour-and-a-half's work: Who was the mysterious visitor who had found his way unseen into Mrs. Brandt's rooms and ransacked her trunks?

## CHAPTER XII

Very greatly to the relief of the established authorities, a sensational murder, committed during the next few days, was followed by the brilliant detection and arrest of the criminal in the act of boarding the steamer on which he was attempting to leave the country, and within a few hours two long-sought-for criminals were also brought to justice. Scotland Yard basked in a glow of almost lyrical praise from the experts and from the Press. Half a dozen undetected murders of the usual type in Chicago also stirred people's imagination. "England's police service the finest in the world" was the headline displayed by a leading newspaper. In the midst of it all, however, the Prime Minister sent for General Sir Harold Moore, who found his way to Downing Street in some trepidation.

"I have sent for you, General," the Prime Minister said, congratulations having been first offered and accepted, "to ask you to tell me exactly what has become of my Home Secretary, Rossiter?"

"I wish to God I knew, sir," was the rueful reply.

"I fail to understand the situation," the Prime Minister continued. "I have addressed several personal letters to Chestow Square marked 'To be forwarded,' and I have written myself to Miss Rossiter, who is the only relative of Rossiter's I have ever known. The letters have been returned to me with the remark that Sir Humphrey is not at Chestow Square, and Miss Rossiter has written me that she has no knowledge whatever of her brother's whereabouts, and adds that she understands Scotland Yard are interesting themselves in the matter. The young man, Hugh Carthew, Rossiter's private secretary, is either lying or he knows even less."

The Chief Commissioner took his courage into his hands and recounted the full story of Sir Humphrey's two disappearances. The Prime Minister's surprise when he had finished was obvious.

"Do you seriously mean to tell me, General," he asked, "that you have had three of your best men in Norfolk for all this time, and that they have been absolutely unable to trace where Sir Humphrey was taken to from a well-known country house in a sparsely populated county?"

"I regret to say that they seem to have failed completely," the Chief Commissioner acknowledged. "They are coming back this afternoon and I will let you have a copy of their full report."

The Prime Minister indulged in an impatient gesture. He was used to parliamentary commissions and reports without results failed to interest him.

"And furthermore," he continued, "do you mean to tell me that Sir

Humphrey stepped out of his own window in Chestow Square, whilst you were in the next room, and disappeared on a Sunday night so completely that no trace of him has been found in London ever since?"

"I am afraid that it is quite true, sir."

"And what is this about the lady—Mrs. Brandt—who never turned up for dinner? Katherine Brandt, the actress, I understand."

"She too disappeared the same night," the Chief Commissioner confessed. "We have had good men on the case without result. We have no idea whatever what has become of Mrs. Brandt."

"Amazing!" the Prime Minister exclaimed.

"I know that it must seem amazing to any one," his visitor acknowledged. "I hope you will not forget, sir, that Scotland Yard has come through a great many ordeals with flying colours, and I think our work this week is noteworthy. Here, as I admit, we have for the moment completely failed, but the truth will come out. We shall succeed sooner or later—"

"But in the meantime I want my Home Secretary," was the impatient interruption. "I have kept on putting off matters, but everything in his department is getting into a horrible mess. I suppose you don't seriously doubt but that he has gone off somewhere with the lady?"

"I don't believe it for a moment."

The Prime Minister leaned back in his chair and thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets.

"Why don't you believe it?"

"Why should he have gone off with her?" the Chief Commissioner demanded. "They were both free and without entanglements. He had been waiting three hours for her to come to dinner, and for the last two of them he had been ringing up Scotland Yard, sending round to her friends and acting like a completely distracted man. As you have heard, she left the Savoy Court at the proper hour, giving the address of his house. She never arrived. The dinner was there. The house was there. There was no one who had any claim upon either of them. There was not the slightest object in their going away secretly together."

"The woman must be working some stage stunt," the Prime Minister, who was a woman hater, growled. "Rossiter is simply playing up to her."

"Rossiter would never lend himself to anything of the sort," the General declared almost vehemently. "I happen to have known him pretty well in my younger days, and he was almost an ascetic in his attitude towards women. His wife, Lady Rossiter, who no doubt you know was an invalid for the last six or seven years of her life, was very fond of Katherine Brandt and so, I daresay, they met often enough, but there has never been a word of scandal with regard to them. Humphrey Rossiter devoted himself to his wife while she was alive,

and he has seen a great deal less of Katherine Brandt since he was a widower than before.”

“What sort of a fellow was this Brandt?”

“A colonial, I believe. Very wealthy and, in a way, good-looking. He had good English connections, but he had spent most of his life abroad. He was just settling down to English ways over here when the tragedy happened.”

“Was there any justification for that?” the Prime Minister asked. “You know I never read the papers.”

“Not the slightest,” was the emphatic reply. “I am convinced of that. I do think sometimes that Katherine Brandt regretted her marriage, but I do not believe for a single moment that there was anything between her and that actor fellow. No more does any one else, as a matter of fact.”

“Well, it’s all damned annoying,” the Premier summed up, after a brief pause. “I want my Home Secretary. I don’t care a fig what has become of the woman, but I want Rossiter. It seems such an unholy sort of mix-up. Haven’t you any theory about it at all, General?”

“I have not been able,” the Chief Commissioner confessed, “to set up a single theory which my common sense has not promptly demolished. I have been like a man in a crazy skittle alley trying to set up pins which fall down all the time. If you hear of another mysterious disappearance in a day or two’s time, I’m afraid it will be mine. I am sure that I am qualifying for a Nursing Home!”

“Go and change places with Rossiter, then,” the Prime Minister proposed, a little brutally. “I could spare you better than him. Forgive me if I seem irritable, Moore, but the whole country is embarrassed by a situation like this. If Rossiter had died, well, it would have been a great blow, but we have one or two men who could fill the gap. But hang it all—he’s dead enough, so far as his utility to us is concerned, and yet we cannot appoint any one else. Every one of his departments is complicated, and, like a great many other staff men, he carried far too much in his head. Call a meeting of your heads of departments when you get back, General. Explain to them the fix we are in.”

“We have a conference arranged for this evening,” the General confided.

“Let me know the result to-morrow morning and what news you have from the men who have been down in Norfolk. Breakfast with me, if you can, at half-past eight. We can have a few minutes together then before I get into harness.”

“With great pleasure,” the Chief Commissioner, who hated alike early rising and breakfast, lied. “I hope I shall have some news for you.”

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Norfolk had apparently not agreed with either Chief Inspector Smithers or Inspector Simpson. They both had the depressed and irritated air of men who

had to report a failure. Pank, on the other hand, whose appearance was too insignificant for more than passing notice, seemed exactly as usual.

“Well, gentlemen,” the Chief Commissioner greeted them, waving them to chairs, “your reports have not disclosed very much. I am hoping you have been keeping something back.”

Both Smithers and Simpson shook their heads.

“It has been the most disappointing week I ever spent,” the former recounted. “We started, as you know, at Keynsham Hall. Every one there was most anxious to help. We had the free use of motor cars, men who knew every by-road placed at our disposal, and Lady Louise herself accompanied us on more than one occasion and introduced us to people who were likely to be difficult. In fact, every scrap of information was ready for us almost before we could ask for it. We worked out the times and we visited practically every country house in Norfolk within a possible radius. There was nowhere any place which corresponded in the least with Sir Humphrey Rossiter’s description.”

“Failure number one,” the Chief Commissioner remarked.

“What about the hired car?” Colonel Matterson, who had just come in, enquired.

“The hired car was telephoned for by a garage in Fakenham,” Smithers confided. “Keynsham Hall rang them up but they hadn’t anything good enough, so Lord Edward, who seems to have spoken himself, told them to send to Preston & Sons in Norwich. The car was a Daimler, and the chauffeur a man who had an excellent character, but who had only been with the firm three weeks. He was hired specially for night work.”

“And where are they now—the man and the car?” Matterson asked.

“The car was back in its place at three o’clock next morning, just about the time it was expected,” Smithers recounted. “The man went back to his lodgings to wash and dress; after a night job, they are always allowed to take six or eight hours off. Late in the afternoon he turned up, took the car out, just leaving word with the porter that he had a job, and he has not been seen or heard of since.”

“You enquired at his lodgings, of course?”

“I did that on the same day,” Inspector Simpson replied. “The man came back, paid his bill, packed his bag, left his room exactly as it had been when he had taken possession. Not a scrap of writing or an article of clothing, not a tie, not a button. He said that he was going to London. Whether he went or not, no one knows. We have got his description, of course, although it doesn’t altogether agree with Sir Humphrey’s. We thought that with your permission we would get out placards and offer a reward. Frame a case against him for faulty lights or something of that sort. It seems to be the only chance of finding

him quickly.”

“So that you have come back with practically nothing to report?” the Chief Commissioner remarked slowly.

“Not a thing, sir,” Smithers acknowledged. “I never was on a worse job in my life. Every one willing to help us. Lady Louise taking us out herself to the most likely spots and introducing us and doing everything she could think of. No one showed the least hesitation in throwing the whole of their places open to us. There were some big farmhouses, some just about the right distance too, that seemed likely, but there was not one of them answered to the description when we came to examine it. There’s no use beating about the bush, sir, we have been on a fool’s errand, and we are no nearer a clue to this night ride of Sir Humphrey’s than before we undertook it.”

“What about you, Pank?” Colonel Matterson asked. “You don’t seem to have much to say for yourself.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Pank confessed, with a nervous little cough. “I ought perhaps to have reported sick and come back. I caught a very bad feverish cold and I couldn’t do much good. I was able to make out the list of places for the others, to give them the mileage, and I happened to know the people where the chauffeur lodged and got his description; otherwise I’m afraid that I was a washout.” There was a moment’s silence. Then the Chief Commissioner asked an abrupt question.

“You have heard what has happened up here?”

“We certainly have,” Smithers admitted. “It makes the thing still more diabolically difficult. I suppose it must be the same gang who have got hold of Sir Humphrey again—but what for? The obvious idea is, of course, vengeance, because Brandt was not reprieved, but they know so much that they must know it was not Sir Humphrey’s fault.”

“We were wondering, coming up, sir, if there was anything in Mrs. Brandt’s disappearance which would help us.”

“You had better go and see Cowling and join up with him,” Colonel Matterson suggested. “You may be able to help one another. If you stumble across any fresh idea, come up to me at once, and if I have gone, come after me to my house in Hyde Park Terrace. I have to breakfast with the Prime Minister to-morrow morning and to take him your news, and he won’t like it.”

“I’m very sorry, sir,” Inspector Smithers sighed, as he rose to his feet.

“We shall pull it off yet, sir,” Simpson declared, but his tone lacked hopefulness.

Pank said nothing. . . .

“Well, what do you think of that, Matterson?” his Chief asked, after the door had been closed.

“I think that it’s very disappointing,” was the frank reply. “I know very

little about Pank. He went along with them chiefly because he knows the country so well, but he has brought off one or two very simple affairs quite creditably. Smithers and Simpson, though, I cannot understand. They had the look of village policemen on their faces whilst they were talking about the affair. I admit it is difficult, but they never had a flash of what you might call inspiration between them. They have had plenty of time to use their brains as well as their eyes and tongues. Not a theory from either of them! Not a suggestion."

"Damnable!" the Chief Commissioner muttered. "I don't mind telling you that Downing Street is fuming. They don't take any notice of the luck we have had this week with Copley and those other two fellows. They've simply got it in the neck for us about Rossiter. They want him like hell, and of course, from their point of view, it does look like bad business."

Matterson leaned back in his chair dejectedly.

"We have combed every garage in London, Newmarket, Thetford, Norwich, Royston and Barnet," he announced. "We have very discreetly offered a reward of two hundred and fifty pounds for information regarding the car. We have visited every Nursing Home, private or public, and every hospital. We have had over two hundred men—our own and locals—watching at the various ports. We have under observation every one of the crooks in London who would be likely to be concerned in an affair like this. We have a splendid fingerprint impression on the sash of the window in Chestow Square, but we have nothing corresponding to it in our archives, and for all we know, it may be the thumb and finger of Sir Humphrey himself. We have got to have a bit of luck about this, or I'm afraid we shall be in the cart."

"You don't think," the Chief Commissioner suggested, "that Rossiter went off with Katherine Brandt?"

"Why the devil should he?" Matterson asked petulantly. "There is nothing whatever to prevent their being married at St. George's, Hanover Square, any moment they like. What inducement could there have been for him to have stepped out of his window in his dinner clothes, leaving me in the next room, and bolting from his own house? The thing is ridiculous. Besides, that would not cast the least light upon his first abduction, which, after all, is the keynote to the whole thing."

"Every idea concerning the entire business is ridiculous when it's put into words," General Moore declared savagely. "I don't mind a complicated case, but this one is a sheer absurdity. Nothing could have happened that did. There is no possible reason for anything that has happened. . . . Who the hell is this? Come in!"

Entirely contrary to etiquette the door was opened, and Detective Pank made timid entrance.



## CHAPTER XIII

Detective Pank came very nervously forward. The Chief Commissioner in a temper was enough to frighten any one, and his appearance at that moment seemed to indicate that he was in a very bad temper indeed.

“Well, what do you want, Pank?” he asked gruffly. “This is entirely against rules, you know, for you to come in like this.”

“I know it, sir,” was the hesitating reply. “I’m sorry. I wished to have a word with either you or Colonel Matterson if you will favour me, whilst the others were engaged.”

“What is it that you want?” the General demanded. “Got something up your sleeve, eh? Out with it, if you have, and I will forgive you for anything.”

“It’s not exactly that, sir,” Pank confessed. “I have come to ask you if you will be good enough to dismiss me from the force.”

“Dismiss you!” the General repeated in surprise.

Colonel Matterson looked up from the letter he had begun to write. He knew more about Detective Pank than his Chief.

“What’s the trouble, Pank?” he enquired.

“Leave off twiddling with your hat, man, and sit down and get your breath. We are not going to eat you,” the General said, looking very much as though he were. “If you have any ideas about this case, we are only too anxious to hear what you have to say, although I don’t see why you didn’t speak up whilst the others were here.”

Detective Pank placed his hat upon the carpet and sat down in the nearest chair. The Subcommissioner had rightly diagnosed his fit of nervousness. He recovered his self-possession immediately he began to talk.

“It’s like this, sir,” he commenced, addressing the Chief Commissioner, “I’d like to be dismissed from the force temporarily, so as to be free to tackle this job from outside.”

“Explain yourself to Colonel Matterson,” the General enjoined. “I don’t interfere personally in these matters. Address yourself to him and I feel sure you will find him reasonable.”

“Well, sir, it’s like this,” Pank explained, turning towards the Subcommissioner. “Whenever there’s a delicate investigation to be made rather out of the ordinary run, I have always found that it handicaps us when people know that we are from the Yard. Superintendent Smithers and Inspector Simpson are first-class men, without a doubt, but they were both in Norwich not long ago on another case and nearly every one knows them by sight. Apart from that, they went everywhere as Scotland Yard men, and wherever they

went, people knew that Scotland Yard men were coming, and sometimes I'm not sure that that is an advantage."

"I see your point," Colonel Matterson agreed.

"I know every inch of Norwich city," Pank went on, "and I know the country all around Keynsham Hall. There is not a country house or a large farmhouse within a possible radius, taking Sir Humphrey's time as being correct, where there could have been a room such as he described, opening out on to a courtyard large enough to have contained an execution shed."

"Why didn't you tell the others so then?"

"I did tell them before we started out. Of course, they were my superior officers and they took very little notice of what I said. I went with them on the first of their rounds and then I developed a feverish cold and went to bed until yesterday."

"Did you have a cold?" the Subcommissioner asked, his eyes very set and intent under his beetling eyebrows.

"No, sir. I wanted to keep out of the way and to make a few investigations on my own account."

"Was that quite in accordance with etiquette and your position?" was the somewhat stiff enquiry. "You were there to help the other two to the best of your ability."

"Quite true, sir," Pank assented eagerly, "and I have worried very much about the whole business. The only thing was that I said to myself—the case is the thing. Nothing counts except solving this mystery, and it doesn't matter how we do it or who does it."

"The fellow's right there," General Moore grunted from his seat.

"I said to myself," Pank went on, with increased confidence, "Smithers and Simpson are known to every one in this hotel—we were staying at the Royal, sir—to every one at the hotel and to most of the people who go into the bar, as Scotland Yard detectives. Wherever they went, they were marked men. Norwich is a good-sized city, sir, but in a way, it is just an overgrown country town. It's the greatest place for gossip I ever knew. I knew quite well from one or two things that had occurred to me—they may be perfectly ridiculous and I sha'n't, unless you insist upon it, tell you now what they are—but I knew that I could do no good if I went about with two well-known Scotland Yard detectives, or if I was seen with them in the city or thereabouts. That is the reason, sir, I went to bed with a feverish cold and I came away alone on the train before theirs."

"I always said," Matterson remarked, turning towards his Chief, "that there was just a little too much of the Bucket type about Simpson."

The Chief Commissioner nodded.

"Get on with it, Pank," he invited.

“Now, as things are,” the latter went on, “there’s scarcely a soul in the city who saw me with Smithers and Simpson, and as for the country people, I’m not minding so much about them just now. There are many of my friends down there, of course, who knew that I came up to London to be a policeman, but they none of them knew that I was going into the detective service. What I would like to do, sir, if you would be so good as to kick me out of the force, is to go back to Norwich as a commercial traveller, or anyhow, with a civilian job. I would like to go back this evening, and I don’t mind telling you that I should try to get a room where that chauffeur was. I should carry out my investigations a little differently and I should work upon an idea of my own. If it doesn’t turn out all right—well, you are rid of a poor detective, and if you don’t want to take me on again, I will find another job. If it turns out as I hope—that I am able to help—then perhaps you will reinstate me as soon as the matter is cleared up.”

“Reinstate you,” Colonel Matterson repeated, with a queer little smile. “If you have the luck to solve this affair for us and tell us where Sir Humphrey Rossiter was taken to that night and by whom, it won’t be a question of reinstatement; we will promote you! That’s right, isn’t it, Chief?”

“I should say so,” the latter agreed heartily.

“Now can you give me some of your ideas,” Colonel Matterson asked. “I may tell you, Pank, what I think is not any secret to any one here—we are being hard pushed about this business. Sir Humphrey is badly needed at the Home Office and the Government are taking it out of us. If we could solve the mystery of his first disappearance, it would be something, especially as I feel sure that if we did that it would lead on to the elucidation of this second affair.”

“As to that I cannot say, sir,” was the deferential reply. “Of course, my ideas may be all wrong, anyway.”

“Now, come on,” the Subcommissioner begged him. “Let’s see what you are driving at.”

“I am hoping, sir,” Pank said wistfully, “that you will allow me to keep a great deal of what is in my mind just where it is. It won’t do any good to give false hopes. If I am wrong, I am wrong, and that’s the end of it, but it is a sensitive matter, and a mere whisper might upset everything. I will tell you this much, if you will allow me, sir. I have worked it out, time, roads and everything—it all fits in—and I believe that Sir Humphrey Rossiter was brought to Norwich.”

“To Norwich?” the Chief Commissioner repeated incredulously.

“Why to Norwich?” Matterson asked curiously.

“Because of a word I heard let fall at a small pub in a back street, sir,” Pank confided. “You wouldn’t know Norwich as I know it, sir. I was brought

up as a lad there. Pubs in Norwich are not like what they are anywhere else. You go out at night and you walk along one of those crooked, hilly streets and you come to a curtained window and a wire blind, and a door like an ordinary street door, except that there's a name over it. You open the door, and they're pretty well all the same, a kind of taproom, then a counter, and behind it a parlour—sort of private bar. There's hundreds of these little public houses about the place. Scarcely any rent to speak of, and the landlord and his wife live on the premises. I was in one the first night, when I'm afraid I let the others think I was nursing my cold, and a chap came in—he had forgotten me, but I knew him very well by sight—and began talking. Well, he just said one thing—that's all—and it put an idea into my head. I couldn't sleep for thinking of it. Next morning, after the others had gone out, I got a push bike and I prowled round the place up to the Hellesdon Golf Links and round by the aviation works, and had a look at all the new ground they have got planned out for building. Yes, I had a good morning's investigation, and when I came back—well, that idea of mine was still there."

"Why on earth didn't you talk to Smithers and Simpson about it?" Matterson asked.

"For this reason, sir," Pank explained. "It is not, as it might seem, because I wanted to make a scoop of my own—I promise you that. I have asked you to give me the sack and I shall never ask you to take me back again if I'm wrong. I am backing my chance, as it were, so it's a fair deal. But this much I do know—if I was seen in the streets with Smithers and Simpson, or if I started making enquiries with them in the direction I am thinking of, that would be the end. We should get to know nothing and there would not be any way of getting to know anything."

"Sounds very mysterious, you must admit," the Subcommissioner pointed out.

"I admit it, sir," Pank agreed. "There's another thing. The man who keeps the house where that chauffeur lodged is my uncle. Relationships count for something in Norwich. It is about one of the most sociable places in the world, when you are known, and the most stand-off place in the world when you are a stranger. If I go and take a room with my uncle, he will be telling me without hesitation anything he knows about that chauffeur, whereas, knowing him as well as I do, I would swear that he would keep his mouth closer shut than an oyster to any one of the police, even if it were myself, asking him questions about an ex-lodger."

"Common sense," Matterson agreed.

"You must acknowledge, Pank," the Chief Commissioner pointed out, "that yours is a very unusual request. Smithers and Simpson are your superior officers. You went down with them to deal with the case. I don't know

whether we should feel justified in letting you take it on alone.”

“I’m not asking you to do so, sir,” Pank pointed out. “Smithers and Simpson have spent their time there and made their report. All right. I want you to kick me out and leave me to work on my own, as though I were one of the private detectives of fiction. If I find I’m right, what do you suppose I am going to do about it? I shall be back here or on the line to you like a shot. I will expect to be reinstated later on, but the others can follow up anything I have discovered, if you wish. My point is simply that I must make the preliminary investigations alone and not as a member of the police force, or I shouldn’t have a chance. It is worth while letting me try, sir.”

Matterson rose from his chair and whispered in his Chief’s ear. Then he rang a bell.

“Bring me Pank’s dossier,” he directed the man who answered the summons.

The detective sighed.

“Not a very brilliant one, I’m afraid, sir,” he remarked. “This is my first real opportunity.”

There were a few moments of nervous silence. The orderly returned with a doubled up sheet of paper. The Subcommissioner and his Chief studied it together and exchanged a few words. Then the former returned to his place.

“Very well, Pank,” he decided. “You are sacked. You shammed a cold and did nothing to help your superior officers in this investigation. Quite sufficient reason for getting rid of you. Go to the Cashier’s Department, draw what is due to you and sign off.”

No man ever accepted dismissal so cheerfully. Pank’s eyes were bright as he rose to his feet.

“To whom shall I make my reports, sir?” he enquired.

Colonel Matterson handed him half a dozen envelopes addressed and franked.

“To me,” he instructed. “The envelopes I am giving you are marked so that they are only opened by myself, and all I can say is—I hope you send us good news.”

Detective Pank smiled hopefully.

“I think I can promise you one thing, sir,” he said, “and that is that I shall be able, before long, to send you a piece of information that no one in the world would ever have found out, if I had not happened to step into that little pub and stand an apparent stranger a couple of pints of beer. I shall be back there to-morrow night and I hope to goodness he is.”

“What about money?” the Subcommissioner enquired. “Unofficially, of course, we will supply you with all you want.”

“I have plenty, thank you, sir,” Pank replied. “I am a saving man and I

have no family. I am going to buy a second-hand sample case somewhere before the shops close to-night, and I am going down by the newspaper train to-morrow morning with a new job—peddling leather heels.”

“I hope,” the Chief Commissioner said—for him graciously—“that your new occupation will bring you back to us.”

“I hope so indeed, sir,” was the fervent reply, “and good-night, gentlemen.”

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“Well, what do you think of that?” the Subcommissioner asked his Chief.

“What do you?” was the guarded reply.

“I am inclined to believe in the little man. I’ll tell you why. I think he is right in his main argument. Now, take the ordinary criminal case. There is no harm in Smithers and Simpson showing themselves in the foreground. They know the criminal and the criminal knows them. It is a matter of wits. What they need is the proof. That is what they want to wriggle out of his friends, or find out in any possible manner. Identity is not of so much concern, because the criminal knows the detective and the detective knows the criminal. On the other hand, you take a country district or a small town where the criminal may have no end of pals and is not known personally to the detectives. He has an advantage over them from the start. We are a law-abiding county, but there is always a feeling of sympathy with the underdog. You watch a hare being chased and you hope it will get away. Therefore our men, who are known to be our men, might very easily find themselves up against a very difficult proposition in a county like Norfolk. People would not need to know who the criminal or criminals were—they were probably Norfolk men—and that would be enough. They would prefer helping them to helping strangers, even though the strangers had the law behind them.”

“That’s sound,” the Chief Commissioner agreed. “There is, at any rate, a good deal to be said for the point of view.”

“I think a fellow like Pank, with his wits about him, in a place where he has a good many friends, is more likely to bring this thing off than the smartest men in the force,” Colonel Matterson pronounced. “I sympathise personally with every word he said. If he had been seen about with Smithers and Simpson, his old pals would never have talked freely to him. That man at the pub, for instance, whoever he might have been and whatever he had to say, would have kept his mouth shut all right, if he had had the least idea that he was talking to a ’tec. I’m with Pank, Chief. I should not be at all surprised if he brought this thing off.”

“If he does—” the Chief Commissioner began fervently.

“I like his idea of peddling heels,” Colonel Matterson remarked, thoughtfully tapping his pencil against his teeth.

## CHAPTER XIV

At about half-past eight on the following morning Ernest Pank, looking smaller than ever in a long and somewhat shabby mackintosh, trudged up the hill from Norwich station, side-by-side with a truck containing a sample case and his own portmanteau. It was raining, with a flurry of cold wind every now and then, and he thought more than once, with a sigh of regret, of the comfortable coffeeroom at the Royal or the Maid's Head. Instead of patronising either hostelry, however, he tramped on for about three quarters of a mile and arrived before a neat little house in a long row of precisely similar residences. He knocked at the door. After a moment or two it was opened by a man in shirt and trousers, whose face was half lathered and who still held a razor in his hand.

"What might you be wanting, young man?" he demanded.

Ernest Pank grinned.

"That's a nice way to treat your own nephew, Uncle," he observed.

The man beckoned with his razor to a woman in the background.

"Clara," he exclaimed, "look what the wet weather's brought in! Step in, young man, if you've a fancy to. What have you got in your barrow?"

"Tell you presently," Pank replied, taking off his mackintosh and hanging it on the diminutive rack. "Well, Aunt," he went on, greeting a stout but pleasant-looking woman who had just made her appearance, "what were you thinking of having for breakfast this morning?"

"If it isn't Ernest Pank!" she exclaimed. "Why, lad, I thought you were a policeman in London! What are you doing in these parts?"

She threw open the door of the kitchen, which was also the living room, beckoning to her nephew to follow her in. There was a pleasant smell of bacon frying. His uncle padded into the back kitchen, took his shaving brush out of the jug and went on lathering himself and listening.

"I tried that police job," his nephew confided. "I didn't do so badly at it, but it was a poor show. I had a pint or two in me one night," he went on, feeling it very easy to slip into the old Norfolk intonation, the raised voice at the end of the sentence and the cut words, "and I ran into the Inspector. We had words and I took my leave—or rather, they gave it to me. I'm a commercial traveller now. Step up the scale, what, Auntie Clara?"

"Commercial travellers are dangerous gentlemen," the lady remarked, turning to her frying pan. "That's what I tell your cousin Amy. There's no telling who you pick up with on Rampant Horse Street or London Street at night nowadays. They're most of them commercials, and after no good.

What's brought you here at this hour of the morning?"

"I'll tell you what it is," he explained. "I have no particular fancy for wasting my money in hotels, and as the only cheap ones are the temperance places," he added, with a crafty glance towards his uncle, who had paused to listen, "I wondered, as you have only Amy left at home, whether you have an odd room, and if you could put me up for two or three nights."

His uncle went on shaving. His aunt considered the matter.

"Well, I don't know," she meditated.

"I'm a payer, mind," her nephew pointed out. "I've saved money for the last two years and had a bit of luck too. I have a good job with these heels and I could afford an hotel, all right, but I am on my own expenses and what I say is—why chuck away the money?"

"Well, there's sense in that," his aunt admitted. "You are talking like old James Pank used to, and he died a warm man. You'll have to get your dinner out. The old man don't come home now, but if two meals—breakfast and supper—and your room for six bob a day—"

"They're mine," her nephew interrupted brusquely. "Show me the room and I'll wash my hands and be down after that bacon."

"I can't stop to show you anything," his aunt declared. "If I leave the bacon, it will stop sizzling. You march up the stairs and the first door on your left—that's yours."

Ernest Pank did as directed. The little room was almost bare of furniture except for the bed, but spotlessly neat and clean. He looked around it with keen eyes, then descended to the street, picked out his personal bag from the truck and handed half a crown to the barrow man.

"Go and get your breakfast," he told the latter. "You can come back here in an hour."

The man touched his hat and bundled off. Ernest Pank ascended once more to his temporary apartment, opened his bag, washed his face and hands and listened. A sleepy-looking girl with big dark eyes and a pleasantly provocative mouth looked in at the door.

"Hello!" she exclaimed. "Are you a new lodger?"

"You may call me that, if you want to," was the prompt reply. "I'm your cousin Ernest and I'm going to kiss you."

"What put that into your head?" the girl laughed, submitting willingly enough to the embrace. "Quite the gentleman, aren't you? I thought you were a policeman up in London."

"I was," he assented, "but since I won the Calcutta Sweep, I've gone into the heel business. I have come down this way to sell a few, and I'm going to board here instead of in an hotel."

"That's all right," she said. "Glad to have you, Cousin Ernest. Come along



down to breakfast. I've got twenty minutes exactly."

"Still in the millinery?"

She made a little grimace.

"The same old shop. I'd better have gone into a shoe factory. It's better money if it's not quite so ladylike."

"Longer hours," her cousin reminded her.

"That's true," she admitted. "I don't mind the night—it's about the same thing—but I hate getting up in the morning."

The four sat around the table and exchanged a little family news before the exodus began. First of all the girl, with a yawn, pushed her chair back, got up and straightened her hat before the mirror. From the door she looked back.

"What time do you finish work, Ernest?" she enquired.

"Same time as you," he answered gallantly. "I'll fetch you from the side door."

"Six-thirty then. If there's any one else there waiting—a chap named Alf—he's no good, and you can give him a push. So long, Mummie and Dad."

"Full of life, ain't she?" Mrs. Pank asked proudly, as the front door slammed.

"And as good-looking as her mother," the young man agreed. "You still at the same shop too, Uncle?"

The latter nodded.

"Foreman now," he confided. "Get my dinner at the mess. Saves me something, that does. It's a long way off down here, even when the buses ain't full. See you to-night, Ern."

"Rather," Pank replied. "We'll go round to some of the old places."

Ernest was left alone with his aunt. She refused to allow him to help with the dishes and pointed to the easy-chair. He sat there, smoking a cigarette.

"What do you do with that nice room when I'm not here?" he asked.

"Let it when we can."

"Who was your last tenant?"

"Inquisitive, ain't you? Never you mind. No one who would ever do you any harm."

"Kept it pretty neat for you, anyway."

"He hadn't much to do with that," Mrs. Pank declared. "Any room in my house has got to be kept clean, whoever goes on her knees to do it."

"Was he a commercial, same as me?"

"No, he was not, if you want to know. He was a chauffeur."

"How did you happen to lose him?"

"He was only on a temporary job," Mrs. Pank explained. "And if you take my advice. Ernie, you won't go questioning your uncle about him. I'm not quite sure why or wherefore myself, but the old man is a bit touchy on the

subject. Nice young chap he was too and paid good money.”

“I ain’t curious about him,” Ernest Pank observed. “I am only too glad he cleared out before I came along. I’ll go and get my stock book and start out to see a few customers. What time’s supper?”

“Eight o’clock, and it will be cold to-night,” his aunt announced. “Bit of ham and some boiled eggs. Cup of tea, if you want it. The old man doesn’t.”

Ernest Pank grinned.

“Still likes his pint, eh?”

“He likes it and he’ll have it, and it don’t seem to do him any harm,” his better half confided.

“I’ll stay with him,” the visitor decided. “You don’t need to bother about any tea for me.”

He ascended the stairs, rather pleased to find that they squeaked noticeably, left his door an inch or two ajar, moved his bag on to the bed and commenced a remorseless search of the apartment. After twenty minutes he acknowledged failure. There was not a sign or a relic of any sort of a previous tenant. Reluctantly he put the room out of his mind. Between the chauffeur’s neatness and his aunt’s cleanly habits, there was not even a scrap of paper left behind. He went downstairs, donned his mackintosh, bade farewell to his aunt and called his man.

“George,” he said, “this is not the sort of weather I fancy for tramping about the streets.”

“There’s no one but a fool would do it unless he had to,” was the gloomy reply.

“Well, I don’t have to. I have had two good weeks. You follow me up to the Flying Fox.”

The man touched his hat. He had not been impressed by his client’s choice of a lodging, but the half-crown had been good enough. He wheeled his trunk into the yard of the Flying Fox and waited. Presently Ernest Pank appeared, followed by the boots, with whom he had been doing a little business.

“Get the cases under shelter,” the former directed. “Now, don’t open your mouth too wide. How much for the day, whether we go out or not?”

“Eight shillings, including the barrow,” was the prompt reply.

“Here’s half a sovereign, and you can go home and keep warm,” his temporary employer enjoined. “I can do all the business I want without carting any stuff around.”

The man grinned.

“You’re the sort I likes to work for. What time to-morrow morning?”

“Here at nine-thirty. . . .”

Soon after opening hours Ernest Pank made his way to the Cat and Chickens, the small public house where he had heard that one suggestive

sentence from the one person who gave point to it. He took an easy-chair by the fire in the parlour, stood a drink to his host, sent the young woman out for the morning papers and made himself comfortable. Not a customer came in, however. At one o'clock he reluctantly made his way to a small restaurant, and the afternoon he spent asleep on his bed, rather to his aunt's disapproval. A treasury note, however, retrieved the situation.

"No need to brag about it, Aunt," he observed, as he accepted a cup of tea a little later on, "but I have not been doing so badly. Got a good bonus when they turned me out of the force. They couldn't stop that, because it was coming to me, and I am on a soft thing with these heels."

"I always said that you were a smart lad, Ernest," his aunt commented.

Ernest Pank smiled.

"Well," he said, "when it comes to selling things, there's not many can put it across me. But that police business was never much in my line. I was an inch under size too, and they didn't half let me know it."

"What's an inch under size?" his aunt scoffed. "Why our Amy, and she's particular enough about the boys, she only keeps company with the little ones. She won't go with a tall chap. Clumsy she calls them. She's right too. She's generally right, that girl is."

"I'm going to fetch her at half-past six," her cousin confided. "I expect I'll take her for a little walk. We'll be in to supper at eight, though."

"That's good," Mrs. Pank declared, with a broad smile. "I'm telling you the truth, Ernest, when I say that I'm glad to see you again. What I say is, relatives are relatives, and if cousins don't count for anything much, still it's nice to see that you don't forget."

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At half-past six promptly Amy appeared in the back street behind the important millinery shop where she spent her days. The rain had ceased and Ernest, in his well-brushed blue serge suit and well-assorted linen, was a very much smarter person than the young man who had descended from the clouds in a mackintosh. She took his arm proudly.

"Let's go for a little walk," he suggested.

"I'd love to," she assented.

"Shall we have a look at the cathedral?"

"It's always nice down that way," she agreed.

He bought her some chocolates and watched with amazement the speed with which she devoured them.

"Don't they make you thirsty?" he asked.

"Terribly."

"What about a glass of wine?"

"I don't often go into those places," she hesitated. "But with you," she

tugged at his arm, "with you it would be all right."

They made their way to the Cat and Chickens. More disappointment. The man who had been the central figure in all Pank's thoughts lately again failed to make his appearance. Pank, however, who was now welcomed as an old customer, ordered a glass of port for his companion, sherry for himself, whisky for his host, and made himself comfortable in the large easy-chair. Amy sat on the arm and took his hand.

"You may kiss me if you like, Ernest," she invited, as soon as the landlord had disappeared.

"Of course I like," he answered, accepting the invitation. "Aren't I glad I came and looked Uncle and Aunt up this morning? Jolly nice room I've got too."

"Hope you'll stay a long time," she said, cuddling up a little closer.

"If I don't, I shall come again," he assured her. "How long did the last lodger stay?"

"Him—oh, only a fortnight."

"Chauffeur, wasn't he?"

The girl nodded.

"Queer chap," she went on. "I didn't like him. He seemed so nervous all the time; afraid to open his mouth for fear something would drop out. First of all, he spoke as though he was some one's chauffeur in the neighbourhood, and then we found out that he had got a job at Preston & Sons, the big garage. He went away all in a hurry. I always thought there was something rather queer about it. Not that he didn't pay—he paid all right."

"What was his name?" her cousin enquired artlessly.

"Bowhill. Tom Bowhill. Oh!" she exclaimed suddenly, sitting up with a start.

"What's the matter?"

"Mummie and Dad both made me swear I'd never tell any one who asked what his name was," she confided. "They said that he was on a special job, that there might be enquiries about him and that no one was to ever answer them. He paid them, I believe, a lot of money for their promise. Now I've done it! But it doesn't matter telling you, does it, Ernest?"

"Of course it doesn't," he scoffed. "What do I care about the young man? Besides, aren't we cousins? You can tell me anything. Tell me the name of your steady, if you like."

"I haven't got one," she assured him confidentially. "There's lots of chaps always around, but there's no one I fancy. The millinery is very genteel, you know, Ernest, and I can't stand these rough fellows after it. I always say if I can't get some one who can act and look like a gentleman, I'd sooner stay as I am. Don't you think I'm right?"

“I do, dear.”

“Then kiss me again.”

He obeyed with enthusiasm. She rested her head upon his shoulder.

“Talking about that lodger—I’ve forgotten already what you said his name was—” Pank remarked—“where did he come from, or rather where did he go to when he left?”

She looked up at him, not exactly with suspicion but with a mild wonder in her eyes.

“Why are you so curious about him?”

“I’m not really,” he answered, “but, if you want to know, the only chap I have met from Norwich for a long time said something about your walking out with a lodger.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” the girl exclaimed indignantly. “I take a walk sometimes with one or two young gentlemen friends, but I never went out with him—not a yard.”

“And I hear,” Ernest Pank persisted, “that he left Norwich to go up to London to arrange to get married.”

“He didn’t go to London at all, not to stay, at any rate,” Amy contradicted hotly. “He went back to his own home and job somewhere Fakenham way.”

“Well, I beg pardon, I’m sure,” Pank said earnestly. “I don’t care a fig what his name was or where he went to. I was just a bit jealous. Don’t let’s mention his name again.”

“Don’t let’s,” the girl acquiesced. “I have broken my sworn word—two or three times over, if it comes to that,” she added, with a little laugh. “But I know it doesn’t matter with you, does it? You’re in the family, aren’t you, Ern?”

“Am I, dear?”

She sighed.

“I’m afraid you’re too used to talking to young ladies. You have a kind of glib way.”

“No one else ever told me so,” he assured her.

Just then a bulky-looking man, in a grey suit with a patch of white paint near the waistline, opened the door and lounged into the room.

## CHAPTER XV

The ex-detective welcomed the newcomer with a smile and a cordial good evening. The latter seemed somewhat surprised, but returned the civility.

“Shall we make room for you by the fire?” Pank suggested. “The young lady and I will move up a little.”

“Very kind of you,” the other replied, with a deprecatory wave of the hand. “I have a weakness for bars myself. Later on, if I may, I’ll bring a chair up. Come on, Harry,” he added, making his way to the small opening. “A pint of stout—and look sharp about it.”

For some reason or other the owner of the little haven seemed depressed.

“A pint of stout,” he repeated thoughtfully.

“What’s the matter?” his prospective customer demanded. “It’s a good enough drink, isn’t it?”

“When you drink my stout or when you drink my beer,” the publican replied, “either of them are good drinks, but there’s one sad point about ’em —”

“And what’s that?”

The landlord leaned across the extemporised counter which divided the two rooms and was the only thing which suggested a public house.

“They want paying for,” he whispered hoarsely. “Look here, Mr. Humble —”

He unhooked a slate which hung in a recess and tapped with a pencil a certain name with a long list of entries underneath. The name was Humble and the list of drinks consumed was formidable. The owner of the name scowled at the slate.

“All that,” he remarked.

“Not to speak of the free drinks you’ve had,” the landlord reminded him. “Now, if you’ve got the price of a pint of stout in your pocket, I won’t take it off your account as many would, but I’ll give you the stout. Could any one say fairer than that?”

The landlord looked around the room as though to challenge comment. Ernest Pank met his eye and plunged into the discussion.

“What’s all this trouble about a pint of stout?” he asked. “My friend, Mr. Humble, will have it on me.”

The latter turned his head. There was something furtive about his expression, as though the sound of his own name had filled him with suspicions.

“How did you know my name?” he enquired.

Ernest Pank smiled. The fact that he had just heard the landlord mention it seemed to have escaped his notice.

“I like that,” he exclaimed. “I’m a Norwich man, aren’t I? I was down where you used to work, not many days ago. Draw a stout, landlord, and give us another drink each. How’s business, Mr. Humble? This is my cousin, Miss Pank.”

“And what may your name be?” Mr. Humble asked, not over graciously.

“Curiously enough,” the ex-detective confided, “my name is Pank too, same as my cousin’s. Plenty of us about the city and all of us more or less related.”

“When were you down at the place where I used to work?” Mr. Humble asked, still suspicious.

“Let me see. It must have been six weeks ago. You were just closing down, I believe.”

This was a desperate venture, but just then Ernest Pank felt like taking chances.

“Whether we were or whether we were not just closing down,” Mr. Humble said with emphasis, “is no business of any stranger’s.”

“Don’t call me a stranger,” Ernest Pank begged good-naturedly. “Why, I’ve known you by sight as a Norwich man for years.”

The drinks made their appearance. Mr. Humble looked with approval at his foaming tankard.

“Well, then, I won’t,” he consented graciously. “Here’s your very good health, Mr. Ernest Pank, and I’m willing enough to be friendly with you and all the world. I’m one of those that’s always more inclined to like people than dislike them—provided they treat me right. But what I don’t hold with is people as tries to interfere in other people’s business. My work may be this or it may be that. That’s nobody’s concern but my own.”

“You are right,” his young acquaintance declared with enthusiasm. “Full of common sense, isn’t he, Amy?” he added, turning to his cousin.

Amy, however, was not sympathetic. She had viewed the entry of Mr. Humble with disappointment and disapproval, and, as an addition to their company, she regarded him as a nuisance. She tossed her head.

“I daresay he is. I don’t know and I don’t care very much. Ern, I think it’s almost time we started, unless you want to be late for supper.”

“Late for supper is what I never am,” Ernest Pank asserted, “but we don’t have supper till eight and it’s only half-past seven. I like this little room,” he went on expansively. “I like the fire. I like our friend, Mr. Humble. Think of the cold outside—the driving rain—”

“It weren’t raining when I came in,” Mr. Humble interrupted.

“Well, it might have been,” the young man corrected himself. “It’s been

raining all day, anyway, and the air's damp. Perhaps you'll say it's not comfortable in here?"

"I'll not go so far as that," Mr. Humble acknowledged. "The place itself is well enough. I might say that I wish our host had a little more confidence in his fellow creatures, and realised that when an artist is temporarily deprived of his occupation, he needs sympathy and leniency from any one who wants to call himself a pal."

"You got my sympathy, all right, Mr. Humble," the landlord declared, leaning amiably across the counter. "You've always had that, but you've had twenty-six pints of stout and about the same quantity of beer as well, and some day or other a reckoning would not be so bad."

"Harry!" Ernest Pank expostulated, addressing the landlord. "Harry Chittock, I don't think you quite realise who our friend is. You don't realise his importance."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I don't know much about his job," the landlord agreed. "Not since he came back to these parts, at any rate. He's what I call darned secretive about himself. What I says is, I don't care what a man does so long as he behaves and I see the colour of his money."

"To show you what I think of Mr. Humble," Ernest Pank continued, thrusting his hands into his pockets, "I'll tell you this, Chittock. If Mr. Humble were to come to me and say 'I have unfortunately become indebted to this house for a trifle like two or three pounds for necessary refreshment,' I would say—'Mr. Humble, as a Norwich man and an old acquaintance, do me the favour of accepting that sum as a loan.'"

The landlord rubbed his hands. This sort of talk might lead to something. Mr. Humble was too much astonished to indulge in the simplest of gestures. His small, crafty eyes seemed to have disappeared in folds of flesh. His shaggy hair seemed more unkempt than ever.

"Well," the former remarked. "There is some in this world fortunately has money to throw away on their friends, and there is some as is born so generous they don't know what to do with it."

Amy clasped her cousin's hand. Wealth like this must not be allowed out of the family.

"Ernest," she insisted, "that clock is slow, and I don't wish to stay here any longer. Please come."

Ernest Pank rose at once to his feet. The man in the grey suit scowled.

"Going off, are you?" he scoffed bitterly. "After all that fine talk!"

"Only to supper," his new friend confided. "This is a hungry city, you know, Mr. Humble. One must eat here as well as drink. This way, my dear."

He opened the door and Amy passed unsuspectingly into the passage. Her cousin touched Mr. Humble on the shoulder.



“What about a glass at ten o’clock this evening?” he whispered. “We could have a little chat then. . . .”

The walk home was pleasant enough. Amy was inclined to be petulant at first, but at the touch of her cousin’s arm around her waist she was a different person. They passed underneath an avenue of trees leading to the close, and under every third one they paused for an embrace.

“You are a one for kissing,” Amy rallied him, as they emerged into the civilised spaces.

“When I find something worth kissing,” was the gallant reply.

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Supper was a thoroughly enjoyable meal. Ernest did his best to make himself agreeable, and a reawakened Amy was, to her mother’s mind, the personification of charm and light-hearted wit. The young man, who was in no need of further information, was most careful to avoid all reference to the departed lodger, and any faint suspicions which his relatives might have possessed were soon dispelled. He told them, instead, of his commercial triumphs and hinted at a prospective order so large that he might have to leave the city for a couple of days to make sure of its prompt execution. At the conclusion of the repast, he gallantly invited Amy to share with him the large easy-chair, where they sat hand in hand, to his aunt’s delighted approval. Mr. Pank thrust his feet upon the fender and became absorbed in the morning paper. Presently his better half glanced at the clock.

“Half-past nine,” said she. “What about it, Amy?”

Amy rose with a sigh.

“I wish it was Saturday,” she muttered. “I hate going to bed early and I hate getting up early.”

“Some day perhaps,” her cousin commented, as he kissed her, “you won’t have to. Marry the man with the dibs, my dear. That’s all you have to do.”

She very nearly blushed, and Mrs. Pank’s expansiveness warned her nephew that he had better be careful. He looked across at his uncle.

“Do you ever turn out these nights?” he asked.

“I don’t often,” Mr. Pank observed thoughtfully, as though the idea were a new one to him. “There’s the Blue Dragon almost opposite.”

“Come on,” his nephew invited. “We’ll have just one. You don’t mind, do you, Aunt?”

Mrs. Pank was not in the humour to object to anything. Hats and coats were produced, and uncle and nephew crossed the broad street to where the bright lights of a large public house invited their visit. Mr. Pank seated himself heavily upon the leather-covered divan.

“Kind of running away with us, ain’t you, young man?” he remarked shrewdly, as his nephew ordered him a double whisky.

“Oh, I don’t know,” was the friendly reply. “We relatives don’t see enough of one another.”

“I’m a man of few words,” Mr. Pank said, as he watched the arrival of his whisky, a small jug of hot water and a piece of lemon as per command, “a man of few words I am, but you be careful about Amy, young fellow. She’s a good girl and I don’t want her head turned. If you’ve done a bit better in the world than we have and you’re thinking of amusing yourself—”

The young man patted him on the shoulder.

“Don’t be silly, Uncle,” he enjoined lightly. “Young people understand one another nowadays. They have a bit of fun and there you are.”

“Whisky and soda, eh?” his uncle commented, watching his nephew’s drink being served. “So you really make money out of those heels, eh, Ernest? There must be a powerful lot of them used in the city.”

“About four times as much as I did being policeman,” was the enthusiastic reply. “If the offer I have got to-day is accepted, I shan’t want to do any more business here this visit.”

“Ever think of marrying and settling down, eh?”

“That might be.”

A friend and fellow bowler came in and was greeted by Mr. Pank with open arms. Their conversation became intimate and technical. Ernest Pank paid for the drinks and rose stealthily to his feet.

“I won’t be long, Uncle,” he said. “I’ve got an appointment with a customer at ten o’clock. Leave the door open if you get home before me.”

“We shall be home,” Mr. Pank Senior told him with emphasis, “at the same time. You’ll leave where you are at closing time. I shall do the same thing. We shall probably meet upon the doorstep. It will be as well.”

Mr. Humble was waiting a little dejectedly in the still deserted sitting room. He greeted his generous young friend with acclamation.

“So you’re here again,” he remarked.

“Looks like it,” the newcomer assented. “Draw your chair up to the fire. Landlord, take the orders and don’t forget yourself. Give it a name, Mr. Humble.”

Mr. Humble elected to follow his host’s example.

“You’re a very free young fellow,” he observed. “What’s your business, if one might make so bold as to ask?”

The ex-detective drew a leather heel from his pocket.

“That’s my business,” he explained, handing it out. “Sold enough of ’em to-day to fill this room and more.”

Mr. Humble turned it over carefully between his yellow-stained and not too clean fingers.

“A heel,” he remarked, with the air of one who has made a great discovery.

“A heel for a woman’s shoe,” the landlord added, not to be outdone.

“You are both of you right,” Ernest Pank assented.

“Made of leather,” Mr. Humble put in triumphantly.

“And goodish leather too,” the landlord agreed, raising it to his nose and smelling it.

“Two clever chaps, aren’t you?” their companion observed approvingly. “Well, my business is selling those heels, and as there’s no one else present in the same line of business, I don’t mind telling you that I do pretty well with them. Now, what might be your job nowadays, Mr. Humble?”

The latter moved uneasily in his chair. He watched his questioner suspiciously.

“I’m not in business at all for the present,” he confided. “I’m thinking of branching out in a new line.”

“An artist, perhaps, when you’re at it,” Pank suggested.

“I might be called that,” the latter acknowledged. “Landlord, don’t slop my drink over.”

The conversation passed from heels to canaries. It appeared that the landlord was in possession of the champion bird of the city, and in the discussion which followed, the ex-detective seemed to lose all his curiosity as to Mr. Humble’s profession.

“Closing time in ten minutes, gentlemen,” the landlord announced.

“That being so,” Ernest Pank said, with a grandiloquent gesture, “and I having had one of the best days of my life, we’ll say the same again, Harry.”

The latter chuckled as he rose.

“You may make the money, all right, young man,” he commented, “but I will say this, you do know how to spend it!”

“I spend it on good stuff,” was the smiling reply. “Mind you that, landlord. I spend it on good stuff. That’s why I come along here, instead of to one of those big, glaring palaces. A comfortable place like this and a pal. . . . Here, steady on.”

Mr. Humble had slipped down in his chair, but was promptly assisted back again.

“By-the-by,” he said, not quite steadily and blinking out of his close-set eyes, “that little loan we were speaking of?”

“Quite so,” his young friend murmured, searching for his pocket-book. “A pleasure, Mr. Humble, I can assure you. When you are working again, I’m sure you will be glad to repay me, but don’t hurry. Three pounds, eh?”

“I’ll take it,” the landlord suggested.

“No, you don’t,” Mr. Humble declared, suddenly very much soberer. “You may have two off the account and I’ll take one. I have matters of my own to look after. My young friend, I am obliged to you—I am greatly obliged to you.

But let me ask you one question: what do you mean about my working again? I work when I choose, when the fancy takes me, when a job which is absolutely in my line is offered. That's when I work."

"Sounds like the way these artists talk," Pank observed.

Mr. Humble looked at him suspiciously and there was something in those shifty little eyes that the ex-detective scarcely liked.

"I wish to hell I knew what your job really was," he muttered. "Selling heels, eh? I wonder."

Fortunately that was the end of Mr. Humble's brief relapse into sobriety. Once more he collapsed in his chair and went to sleep, breathing stertorously. The landlord would have awakened him but Pank intervened, holding up his glass.

"I hate a man who can't hold his liquor," he declared. "Here's the best until to-morrow, Harry."

"And the best to you, sir," was the hearty response.

The ex-detective glanced over his shoulder. Mr. Humble was still emitting unpleasant sounds. His eyes were still closed.

"Of course, I know about his old job," Pank said softly, "but what's he been doing lately?"

The landlord leaned across and whispered in his young patron's ear. Ernest Pank shook him by the hand, put on his hat and coat and went out into the night, smiling.

## CHAPTER XVI

Ex-detective Pank's enthusiasm for his new avocation seemed, during the next few days, to suffer a temporary decline. He left Norwich early on the following morning for the market town of Fakenham, and he forgot even to take with him a sample of his wonderful heels. He took a commercial traveller's room at the pleasant old-fashioned hotel, hired a shabby old Ford car from the garage, and spent the whole of that day and the next driving around the vicinity. He found his way to Keynsham Hall and spent at least half an hour gazing with much admiration at this lordly pile from different points of view. He spoke to no one and asked no questions. His chief concern seemed to be to accomplish a curious effort at timing. He drove slowly round the outskirts of the place until he reached the back gates of the Hall. Arrived there, he glanced at his watch and held it to his ear, as though to be sure that it was going. He was just about to settle down in his seat and start off, when he was aware of the approach of a very charming and attractive young woman who was walking with a gun under her arm and a keeper a few yards behind in respectful attendance. To Pank's surprise she stopped by the side of the car.

"Have you lost your way?" she asked pleasantly.

"Thank you, no, Madam," he replied, raising his hat. "My old car needs a rest every now and then. I was just starting off."

She nodded and looked at him with frank curiosity.

"Have you been up to the house?" she enquired. "Did you want anything?"

"I would like to be allowed to go over it some time, Madam," he admitted, "but I have not been up. I wasn't sure whether it was shown to visitors. I am having a few days' holiday in these parts, and I borrowed this old car from the mechanic to drive around."

"Bad weather for a holiday," she remarked. "If you want to see the house some time, you may. Say that I gave you permission—Lady Louise."

She nodded and walked on. Pank looked after her for a moment thoughtfully, then he examined his watch again and started up. He drove steadily and at a fair pace along the byways until he came into the main road for Norwich. Here he continued on his way till he reached the outskirts of the place and pulled up near the lane which led to the golf links. He noted the time and smiled, took out his notebook and made an entry. It had taken him exactly three quarters of an hour to drive from the lodge gates of Keynsham Hall to that little corner in the suburbs of Norwich in which he was interested.

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That afternoon ex-detective Pank seemed to develop an unusual vein of

laziness. He sat about in the bar parlour of his hotel for several hours, talking amiably to the few visitors and cementing his acquaintance with the young lady behind the bar. A portion of the evening passed in the same fashion and he retired early. The next morning he drove out to the small golf links, made friends with every one connected with the place, borrowed an old-fashioned set of clubs, and greatly disturbed the local professional by very nearly beating him in a round. After lunch he took up his now familiar place in the bar parlour and talked of his exploits to any one who would listen to him. He had several acquaintances now amongst the tradespeople, whose conversation seemed always to interest him. The following morning he spent in more profitable fashion. From ten o'clock until nearly midday he studied the older architecture of Keynsham Hall and devoted himself afterwards to the pictures. The butler, who took him around, a grave and silent man, handed him a manuscript catalogue and left him for the most part to his own devices. Pank's artfully concealed, but almost desperate attempts to break through his taciturnity were never once rewarded.

"I've read about the shooting parties you have here, in the papers; seen pictures of the guests too," he remarked, as they reached the last gallery.

"Very likely, sir," the man replied. "As to pictures, though, I can't remember that I have ever seen one in the illustrated papers. His lordship doesn't care for that sort of thing."

"I thought I saw one," Pank reflected. "*Daily Sketch*, I think it was. The time the Home Secretary was shooting here."

The butler strolled away to examine the frame of one of the pictures on which he fancied that he had discovered a fleck of dust. When he returned it was with the polite but obvious desire to show his visitor out. He accepted a ten-shilling note with some apparent reluctance.

"Worth more than that," Pank said. "But things are not what they were. I daresay you hear that from a good many others besides me—dining-room talk and that sort of thing?"

"I never listen to the conversation which goes on when I am serving," the man replied. "I have enough to do as a rule to perform my duties."

"You entertain a good deal here, I suppose?"

"When his lordship is in residence we do. There's nothing else you would care to see, sir?"

"Nothing, thank you."

The butler escorted him along the wide corridor which led to the back stairs.

"By-the-by," the departing visitor confided, "I am no stranger here, you know. I was born in Norwich."

"Indeed, sir."

“Did you ever have a chauffeur here—a distant relative of mine—name of Bowhill?”

“There was a young man of that name attached to the garage, I believe.”

“Still here?” Pank enquired indifferently.

The butler shook his head.

“He left for Canada some weeks ago. A foolish proceeding, we all thought. Any one in service with his lordship doesn’t often need to change.”

“For Canada,” Park murmured under his breath. “Hard work out there, I should think. Money in it perhaps sometimes, but a hard life.”

“I agree with you, sir. Things here may be difficult, but in England, if you’re in good service, there is always some one to fall back upon.”

The butler resumed his habit of silence. He escorted his charge to the courtyard and pointed to a Gothic door let into the wall.

“Her ladyship said if you cared to look at the gardens—there’s not much there at this time of the year, of course—you could wander about by yourself.”

“Much obliged to her ladyship,” Pank replied. “I’ll just look around for a few moments.”

He took leave of his guide and made his way out into the far-famed gardens. There were a good many men at work but little to be seen except the glass houses. He lit a cigarette and walked slowly about, deep in thought. He was a sensitive little man, sensitive in his nerves and apprehensions, a gift which had helped him towards the few successes he had attained. He was beginning to rely somewhat upon that part of his nature. With the exception of one piece of information, drawn with the utmost difficulty from his guide of the morning, he had learned nothing during two days of adroit questioning. It began to dawn upon him that this taciturnity was scarcely all accidental. He felt, in the butler’s silence, in the unfriendliness of one or two other men whom he had accosted, in the lack of communicativeness on the part of every one he had come across, even so far afield as Fakenham, there was something to be explained. There was, without doubt, a sense of mystery about Keynsham Hall and the doings of its noble occupants. . . .

He turned back to the house. As he reached the last bend in the path, he came face to face with Lady Louise, surrounded by a small army of dogs. She greeted him with a friendly nod.

“You found the pictures interesting, I hope?” she enquired.

“Very interesting indeed,” he replied. “The Sir Peter Lelys are wonderful, and the two Turners I had never seen.”

She raised her eyebrows slightly.

“Colour appeals to you?”

“Always,” he admitted.

“I wonder that you care to walk about the gardens of a Norfolk country

house in February, then,” she observed.

His eyes followed hers. In a sense there was a deserted air about the broad, flowing lawns and neat but empty flower beds, the rather sad green meadows below, unstarred with any form of flower or weed. On the other hand from the freshly turned brown earth came a pleasant aromatic smell. The swiftly opened and closed door of one of the long glass houses let out an odour of exotic plants, mingled with the more pungent perfume of hyacinths. From underneath the shrubs came furtive glimpses of little beds of snowdrops, and the white mist curling around the ditches below had here and there a dim suggestion of faint blue.

“It’s not the same thing, of course,” Pank said respectfully, “but I can’t help thinking, your ladyship, that there is colour even here, if one looks for it.”

“You know who I am?” she questioned.

“You mentioned your name the other afternoon. I have seen your pictures in the papers too,” he told her. “Besides, I’m Norfolk born, although I’m not here often.”

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Pank,” he told her. “Ernest Pank.”

She called back two of the more adventurous of the dogs, but showed no signs of moving herself for the moment.

“We are rather discourteous, I’m afraid, just now to our visitors. An unfortunate incident took place here a few weeks ago and we have had detectives around, making enquiries. My brother has been forced to give orders to all the local people to abstain from answering questions from strangers.”

“Indeed, your ladyship,” Pank exclaimed curiously. “I don’t seem to have noticed anything about it in the papers.”

She watched a flight of pigeons for a minute, high over the wood.

“It was nothing of any real importance,” she confided. “Just one of our guests was held up on his way back to London. A great many people seem to have developed a ridiculous curiosity as to what really happened to him.”

“I’m not an inquisitive person,” Pank assured her.

She laughed and dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

“I think you are quite harmless,” she agreed. “Only we are all a little on edge in these parts. If you take my advice, you won’t ask questions whilst you are in the neighbourhood.”

She passed on with a nod of farewell. The ex-detective stepped into his Ford car and made a noisy departure.

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Notwithstanding Lady Louise’s injunctions, Pank made one more effort in questioning. He had a glass of beer at the Keynsham Arms and induced the landlord to join him.



“Been looking at the pictures,” he confided. “Lady Louise showed me the gardens too. Lovely place.”

“The finest place in Norfolk, to my mind, sir,” the publican agreed.

“I was born in Norwich,” Pank went on. “I had a sort of cousin living out here—Bowhill his name was. Used to be in the garage.”

The publican glanced doubtfully for a moment at his customer. The mention of Lady Louise’s name had, however, already half dispelled his suspicions. Besides, there was nothing impressive or mysterious about Pank.

“That’s right,” the landlord agreed. “Nice chap but a little glum, Tom. He was the first servant I ever knew who left his lordship of his own free will. He went to a garage in Norwich to see if he could better himself, and his lordship let him have one of the old cars for a song. He couldn’t make it do, however, so he went off to Canada. Always in here in the afternoons for his glass, Tom was.”

“And no fool, either,” Pank said, as he set down his tankard empty. “If I hadn’t got to drive my old tin kettle to Fakenham, I should have another. It’s good beer.”

“It’s the best I can get,” the publican declared, with a smile, as he accompanied his guest to the entrance. “When I took this place, it was tied with a Norwich house whose name I won’t mention. Bad stuff. His lordship got me out of that. His lordship seems to get any one out of any scrape they get into. There’s not a soul in these parts,” the man concluded, as Pank climbed into the driving seat, “who isn’t thankful for the day he made his fortune and was able to buy back Keynsham.”

Pank drove back to Fakenham, but he had very few more questions to ask in the bar parlour that evening. He did, however, venture upon one.

“Ever have any gentlemen staying here for the shooting?” he asked of the florid young woman with the waved hair who was presiding over the counter.

“Not enough,” she replied, with the air of one having a grievance. “There was three gentlemen about two months ago wrote for rooms, just about the time one of the big shoots at Keynsham. Then they changed their minds and went to Norwich.”

“I wonder if one of them was a friend of mine?” Pank ruminated.

“Can’t say, I’m sure,” the young lady replied. “Master was so cross when they decided not to come that he tore up their letter. I’ll tell you where it was written from, if that helps you—the Savoy Hotel in London.”

“It gives one an idea,” Pank confessed.

## CHAPTER XVII

There was something characteristic in the knock upon the door of Number 17 Chapel Fields Terrace, in the southern outskirts of Norwich. It was firm but not assertive. A sensitive ear might almost have found in it a note of courteous friendliness. Mr. Elijah Pank lowered his *Norwich Evening News*, his wife paused in the act of folding up the tablecloth. Amy, who was standing before the mirror, regarding the angle of her hat and rearranging an insubordinate tress of hair, indulged in a distinct start.

“Now who might that be?” Mrs. Pank asked, making no movement towards gratifying her curiosity. “I can’t think of a soul likely to come here at this hour of the evening. Expecting any one, Elijah?”

“No, I ain’t,” her husband replied. “You go and see who it is, Mother, instead of wasting your breath wondering. Or there’s Amy—her legs are younger. Let her go and see.”

Amy was willing enough, but her mother was before her. She threw open the door and Mr. Ernest Pank, very neatly dressed and with a smile upon his face, stepped into the passage.

“Hello,” he exclaimed, “how’s everybody? Good-evening, Aunt,” he went on, embracing her chastely. “How are you, Uncle? Amy, my dear, you look quite pretty enough without any more fussing around with your hair. Are you ready?”

They all stared at him. There was a certain amount of doubt in Elijah Pank’s severe regard, there was sheer bewilderment in his wife’s rather saucerlike eyes, and there was mingled excitement and pique in Amy’s expression.

“Ready for what?” she demanded.

“Isn’t this Wednesday?” the visitor queried. “Didn’t you promise to have dinner with me at one of the big hotels on Wednesday night?”

“Can’t remember a word about it,” she faltered, the pink colour stealing into her cheeks and the light of pleasurable anticipation in her eyes.

“Going off without a word,” Mrs. Pank exclaimed with severity, as she recovered her composure. “Leaving your luggage behind and never a good-bye even. That’s the way you treat your relatives, is it?”

“What sort of manners do you call that, young man?” Elijah Pank chimed in. “Why, you might have been a deserter!”

“What are you all talking about?” Ernest Pank asked cheerfully, as he laid his hat upon the dresser table and looked around him in friendly fashion. “I told you I had taken too big an order and had to go up to London to see

whether we could fill it. I left all my things down here to show that I was coming back. I'm here now to finish the job. You didn't expect me to waste my money on telegrams, did you? Can I take Cousin Amy over to the Royal Hotel for dinner?"

"No, you cannot," her mother objected vigorously. "I'm not going to have the girl's head filled with stuff like that. Take her to dinner indeed—at eight o'clock in the evening! She had her dinner at one o'clock, as folks like us do, and she's just had her bite of supper—though scarcely a mouthful, I will admit. What are you talking about?"

"I sha'n't be five minutes," Amy promised, squeezing her cousin's arm. "I was only going out with Harry to-night, so I was wearing my old hat. Five minutes. You wait where you are and don't go playing any more tricks till I come down."

She ran upstairs with flying footsteps. Her mother looked after her helplessly.

"That's young people nowadays," she said, shaking her head.

"Got a will of her own, anyway," her father grunted, opening out his newspaper.

"Why shouldn't she have?" Ernest Pank demanded, passing a cigar to his uncle and lighting a cigarette for himself. "I say—you've been having something good! Makes me hungry to smell it."

"It's boiled beef, young man," his aunt confided. "I can dish you up a little if you like."

He shook his head.

"Not to-night, thanks. I promised Amy when I got back again we would go into the Royal or the Maid's Head, sit down and have our dinner with the rest of them there. And why not? I'm making plenty of money, Amy looks nice enough to go anywhere and the treasury notes count. The only thing I'm afraid of is that perhaps she's not hungry, if she has had supper."

"Don't you worry," her mother replied impressively. "The girl's scarcely eaten anything since you went away. To-night she had an idea that she couldn't eat beef, and she's done nothing but fumble with some bread and butter and some apples Mabel Wilkins sent in. I'll put the warming pan across your bed, Ernest. You'll be staying the night?"

"I can't this time," he regretted. "Sorry, Aunt, but my Chief is coming along by the night train. I've had to take a room at the Royal."

"Business must be easy with you that you can go and stay in a place like that," Elijah Pank remarked.

"It's not for pleasure," his nephew declared earnestly. "Next time I come these are my quarters, if you can take me in. I'm not one for hotels myself, but when the governor is along, he likes to have me on hand."

Downstairs came Amy, wearing a hat of the béret type with little flaps at the sides over her ears, a confection which the millinery establishment in which she worked had pronounced the latest decree of Bond Street. Her clothes were neat, her figure trim, her gloves and shoes a little better than passable. She was filled with the unshakable confidence of the real provincial. She took her cousin's arm and led him away.

"If Ernest's a little extravagant," she said, looking back, "what does it matter? He works hard and so do I. We must spend sometimes."

"These young people," Mrs. Bank murmured happily, as she closed the door behind them. . . .

They walked pleasantly up to the Post Office Square. There was only one convenient spot on the way, but they did not fail to exchange the least cousinly of kisses.

"I'm not pretending that I'm used to these sort of places, you know," Amy explained, as they mounted the steps of the hotel.

"Don't you worry," her protector reassured her. "They won't bite us."

On the contrary, the two young people were received as though they had been expected and as though their coming was the most usual thing in the world. They were ushered into the coffeeroom by an effusive head waiter and given a comfortable table. Ernest Pank glanced at the menu, approved of it and ordered a bottle of wine. To Amy it was a glimpse of the world her dreams had conceived and the films had confirmed. . . .

"I sha'n't be able to let you go again, Ernest, you know," she said, when dinner came to an end.

He sighed and returned the squeeze of her fingers under the tablecloth.

"I would like to settle down," he confided. "Unfortunately my business takes me all over the country."

"What—selling those stupid heels?"

"They're not stupid," he contradicted her. "They're the best-made heels in the world. They are paying for this dinner. They paid for my new suit of clothes and they paid for something else I've got in my pocket. They will even run to coffee in the lounge," he invited, rising to his feet. "What about a cigarette?"

"I should love one," she assented. "That's the only decent thing about my shop—they let us smoke now and then without kicking up a fuss about it."

They took possession of two easy-chairs in the open hall and ordered sweet liqueurs with their coffee. When they had been in evidence some twenty minutes or so and Ernest Pank felt that his position as a local young man was established, he rose to his feet, with a word of excuse to Amy, and, crossing to the office, put his head through the open window.

"Would you be so kind, Miss," he asked politely, "as to let me have a look

at the visitors' book?"

"That's no trouble at all," was the bland reply.

"I want to see if my cousin was staying here some time in December," Pank explained, as he turned the pages backwards. "Ah, here we are. Somewhere about here." December the nineteenth—no entries which seemed of interest. Eighteenth. Seventeenth. On the seventeenth there were three entries in the same handwriting:

John W. Spence of London,  
Robert T. Mason of London,  
Thomas G. Payne of London.

"Found what you want?" the girl enquired.

He nodded and turned the book towards her.

"You don't happen, I suppose," he asked insinuatingly, "to remember these three gentlemen?"

She looked at the names doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, I remember them all right," she admitted. "They didn't show themselves in the hotel much. One of them had a private sitting room and they were up there most of the time. I can tell you one thing, if it interests you."

"What's that?" he enquired.

"They got through two bottles of whisky a day and a good many other drinks besides. Our Norwich boys are pretty useful but these three took the cake."

"Londoners, I suppose?"

She reflected for a moment.

"They all had London after their names," she told him, "but sometimes their talk seemed queer. They had plenty of money, though. The champagne they drank for dinner! You can ask the waiter. Sometimes he couldn't believe it when they sent for another bottle. The hotel could do with some more customers like that, though. They didn't give any trouble and they paid their bill all right."

"Were they business men?"

"Can't say, I'm sure," the girl, who was getting bored with the subject and would have preferred something more personal, replied. "They were about the hotel a good bit of the time. Once I remember they were all out—the last night—and didn't get back till two or three in the morning. Had to knock up the night porter."

"You didn't happen to hear them say where they had been to, I suppose?" he ventured.

"I didn't happen to be about at the time," she replied, a little sarcastically. "Aren't you by way of being inquisitive, Mr.—Mr.—what did you say your

name was?"

"Pank," he confided. "It's a good Norwich name and I'm a Norwich man."

"Norwich men are as good as the rest, I daresay."

"And as for the girls," he added, leaning farther forward, "they can't be touched anywhere."

"I'm from Brighton myself," the young lady remarked affably.

"You surprise me," Pank confessed. "Then I shall have to give Norwich second to Brighton, after all."

She made a grimace at him.

"And you with a girl of your own in the chair there!"

"My cousin," Pank explained. "A nice little thing, but cousins are cousins, you know," he went on, with an expressive gesture. "I like to give her a treat now and then when I'm down here, otherwise there's nothing doing at all. I wonder, Violet—"

"Here, who said my name was Violet?" the girl interrupted.

"I thought it must be," he hazarded. "It seems to suit you."

"My name is Miss Brown, I would have you know," she told him severely. "Madge, when I'm at home with the family."

"Well, there's no telling how soon I shall be one of them," was the bold response. "Madge, could I cut out this page of names? Listen, I'm on the square. I will give you six pairs of gloves and a box of chocolates that would make you ill if you ate it in less than a fortnight."

She hesitated with her hand upon the book. What her reply might have been it is hard to tell. At that moment she met the challenging gaze of Amy Pank. There was nothing of first-cousinly regard in those eyes!

"Don't be silly," Miss Brown replied. "Of course, you can't do anything of the sort."

"I want that page so badly," he begged.

"But what on earth for?"

"Six pairs of gloves, a four-pound box of chocolates and some silk stockings thrown in!"

"And I would get the sack. Certainly not."

"Could I have a word with the manager, then?"

"The manager is away for three days. He's gone on his ketch shooting snipe and wild duck on the Broads. Such impudence—wanting to cut a page out of our register!"

"Will you bet me I don't before I leave?" he challenged.

"I'll see that you don't," she replied, drawing the register away and placing it out of reach. "Now don't you try to jolly me any more," she advised. "With your first cousin getting angrier and angrier every minute. You go back to her and hold her hand. You can talk to me when you haven't got any lady relatives

playing around. . . .”

Ernest Pank, temporarily discomfited, retired to the lounge and begged for some more coffee. Amy was inclined to be distant.

“You seemed to have a lot to say to that young woman there,” she remarked.

“Whatever I said to her didn’t do much good,” he answered.

“Not my idea of a sociable evening at all,” she complained. “We’d do better taking a walk than hanging about here.”

“What about the cinema?”

“Too late,” she snapped. “We’d better go for a walk and if you want a drink—you most always do—you can have it at that funny little place. If your stupid friend is not there, we may get it to ourselves. Don’t you want to be alone with me, Ernest?”

He squeezed her hand.

“Of course I do, dear,” he assured her, “but I’ve got to get even with that young woman first. Wait for a moment whilst I telephone.”

“Telephone! At this time of night! To whom?”

“You’re a nice girl, Amy,” her cousin said. “A sensible girl too. I can talk to you as I can’t quite talk to Uncle and Aunt—”

“Stop kidding,” she insisted. “What is it you want? If you’re trying to get round me, well, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

He rose to his feet.

“Well, I’ll show you if I’m kidding,” he threatened. “Wait there one moment.”

He crossed the lounge to the telephone box. He was away altogether barely three minutes. When he returned, he found her drawing on her gloves.

“This is where we don’t go, please, for ten minutes,” he begged her. “I’m going to take it out of that young woman at the window. You’ll see how furious she will be. First of all, we’re going to have another liqueur each.”

“Mr. Masterful, aren’t you?” she observed. “I don’t know that I want any liqueur.”

“Well, you will to-morrow, when I’m not here, so you may as well have it now.”

“Why won’t you be here to-morrow?” she demanded.

“I shall have sold all my heels,” he told her.

“You and your heels,” she repeated. “There are times, Ernest, when, if I didn’t remember you and know that you were my cousin, I’d think that you were bluffing all of us.”

“Perhaps you would say so still more,” he meditated, “if I were to give you the present I bought for you this afternoon.”

She sprang up as though an electric shock had passed through her body.

The eternal light of feminine desire was in her eyes.

“A present!” she gasped. “Let me look at it. Please let me see.”

He drew something from his pocket. It looked exactly as a present should look. It was a square jeweller’s box, sealed and fastened with meticulous care. He handed it over to her.

“Is it really for me?” she demanded breathlessly.

“Of course it is.”

She withdrew her gloves again and dug her finger nails into the paper. Out came a wooden box, most attractive—just the sort of wooden box that might hold anything. She forced it open. Cotton wool, of course, and below it a morocco case. She drew a long breath.

“Ernest,” she cried. “What is it?”

She flicked the catch open. It was really a very handsome pendant—platinum and some small, but obviously veritable, diamonds clustered thickly together. Her eyes grew wider and wider.

“Not for me?” she faltered.

“For you, dear,” he assured her. “Of course, it’s for you. That’s so that you will forgive me for going away without saying good-bye, and not take too much notice if I seem to do foolish things.”

She hung over it. Words at first were difficult. As a matter of fact she had never handled anything quite like it before in her life. Her left hand played with it lovingly, and her right sought his.

“But Ernie,” she whispered in almost awed fashion, “it’s real.”

“Of course it is,” he answered. “I never pleaded poverty, did I? I told you I was doing pretty well. Look at it, my dear, and then put it on. Here’s some one to speak to me.”

She had scarcely any eyes even for the very imposing Inspector of Police who had entered the lobby. She sat there toying with the soft slipperiness of the platinum, turning it about so that the diamonds might catch the reflection of the electric light. It didn’t seem possible! What would the girls say? She knew very well what they would say, and she only smiled with happiness. . . .

The Inspector saluted.

“Glad to do what I can for you, Mr. Pank,” he said. “We heard about your coming from Headquarters. I am alone to-night. Captain Phillips—that’s the Chief Constable—he would have liked to see you if he had been here, but he’s away for a few days.”

The young lady inside the office was watching the two with fascinated eyes.

“I want you to persuade that young lady,” Pank explained, “to let me have a page out of her hotel register. She knows which one it is. I want to cut it out and take it up to London. She won’t give it to me, naturally, and I don’t want



to make too much fuss about it. A copy would do for her all right.”

The Inspector rapped with his knuckles upon the counter and the young lady advanced. He whispered in her ear for a moment. She looked at Ernest Pank with a new interest.

“Fancy your being a detective all the time,” she exclaimed.

“Don’t you give it away,” he replied severely. “Now that you know it’s all right, just cut that page out carefully. You can copy it first, if you want to.”

She accepted a knife from the Inspector and together they made a pretty good job of it. Pank wrapped the page up in an evening paper.

“Tell me,” she begged in an awed tone. “Had they done anything wrong? Were they criminals? We didn’t miss anything that I know of from the hotel and nothing happened in the city that I can remember.”

“I’m afraid they were not very reputable characters,” Pank admitted, “but I don’t think you will see any more of them. If you could find out what they were doing, where they went to, for instance, that time they were out till two or three o’clock in the morning, it would mean a bracelet for you.”

“I would tell you in a moment if I knew, bracelet or no bracelet,” she replied. “I didn’t even hear that they were out late till afterwards, and they were off directly.”

“Did you see much of them?” Pank asked.

“Quite as much as I wanted,” the young lady confided, with a little toss of the head. “There was one very good-looking one—quite the gentleman too. He wanted me to go up and have dinner with them in their sitting room. As though I’d be likely to, and all three of them strangers!”

“You must have had plenty of experience,” Pank said ingratiatingly. “Tell me, did you think they talked like gentlemen?”

“They talked funny sometimes,” she replied. “I thought at first that they were foreigners who had learned to speak English. One of them told me he was born in Yarmouth. Wanted to persuade me, he did,” she went on indignantly, “that because he was born there, we could get married in twelve hours if I would go over there with him. They don’t catch a Brighton girl that way!”

She pushed a recalcitrant curl back from her forehead. Ernest Pank risked his cousin’s attention being still absorbed by her pendant, and patted her hand.

“I wonder now,” he asked, “was there any one in the hotel who saw more of them than you did, who might be able to give me a word of description or a hint of some sort?”

“George, the smoke-room waiter,” she answered promptly. “There he is. You ask him. They never left him alone. It was drinks all day long and then drinks up in the bedrooms after closing hours. They were as thick as thieves with George.”

Pank crossed the hall swiftly and was just in time to stop the waiter. In a

few seconds they were upon most amicable terms.

“Remember them three, sir!” George exclaimed. “I’ll remember them to my dying day. Rough sort of gentlemen they were, in a way, but gentlemen all the same,—and as for the stuff! They didn’t seem to know what to do with it, sir. It came streaming out of their pockets.”

Pank drew the man a little farther on one side and a treasury note made its appearance, followed by a whisper. The waiter laughed.

“I’m much obliged to you for the note, sir,” he said, “but I’ve got to tell you this about those gentlemen—they treated me fair and square, and whoever wants to find out anything about ’em can get it from where they choose, but they don’t get it from me. They never did any harm that I could see. They hung about the place most of the day and played cards most of the night. They were out that once late that you speak of, but where they were I don’t know, and if I knew, it would take a rare handful of treasury notes to make me tell. I only hope I meet ’em again some day.”

Ex-detective Pank having learned a little more than he was supposed to learn, returned once more to the counter. He wished the Inspector good-night and made enquiries about the early trains to London. When he returned to his seat, he found a somewhat difficult problem awaiting him.

“Take me somewhere where I can thank you for this,” Amy begged, as she fondled the pendant.

## Chapter XVIII

The back parlour of the Cat and Chickens was empty and to Amy it was like a chamber in a palace. There was a bright fire burning and the two horsehair easy-chairs, worn at the edges and dicky as to springs, were drawn up invitingly towards it. As soon as the door was closed, she threw her arms around her cousin's neck—her little stream of words was incoherent but there was no doubt about her gratitude. The pendant indeed was more beautiful than anything she had ever dreamed of possessing.

“Ernest, you darling,” she exclaimed, as she drew away breathless. “Come and sit down, and pull your chair close to mine. What can I say? What can I do for you?”

Ernest Pank, who was a little embarrassed, knocked at the wooden trapdoor with the end of his stick, and the landlord's smiling face presently appeared. He greeted his client with a beam of welcome.

“Whisky and soda, and a glass of port for the young lady,” was the order he received.

“I'll bring them in directly, sir.”

The trapdoor was softly closed and Pank drew the two chairs a trifle nearer the fire. Amy still hung around him and before they seated themselves she bestowed upon him one more long fervent kiss.

“Ernie,” she murmured.

He held her in his arms but whispered caution.

“He'll be bringing in the drinks directly. Better sit down while we talk.”

She unwound her arms reluctantly.

“How long are you going to stop this time?” she demanded. “And are you going to take me up to London when you go? I'm so tired of Norwich.”

“Don't be silly, dear,” he said firmly. “I couldn't take you up to London and you know it. What would your father and mother say? Besides, I'm a hard-working man. I wouldn't have time to look after you.”

The door was noisily opened. A familiar figure half lounged, half staggered in. His appearance was less attractive than ever. His flannel collar was crumpled and stained and his necktie was a disgrace. His clothes looked as though he had slept in them and the laces of one of his boots were undone. He was pale and unwholesomely moist. His hair, a rusty brown sprinkled with grey, looked as though it had remained untouched by comb or brush for days. He recognised Pank with a wave of the hand.

“Look who's here,” he exclaimed, leaning against the table. “Came back to the little city all right, eh? No place like it. I've been paid for my last job—paid

by a gentleman as knows good work when he gets it. What's it going to be?"

If looks could have killed, the newcomer would have been dead, for Amy had formed plans of her own with regard to this opulent, nicely spoken cousin of hers, and she believed in impetuous methods. Pank, however, although no sign of it appeared in his face, was full of secret satisfaction.

"Sit down with us, Mr. Humble," he invited. "You're too late this time, as we've already ordered. Another whisky and soda," he called through the trapdoor which the landlord had just opened.

"Under those circumstances, I'll join you with pleasure," Mr. Humble conceded graciously. "I am for the moment in an affluent position, and in confidence I don't mind telling you that in another fortnight's time I expect to be a rich man."

"Fine," Pank murmured. "Wonderful."

Mr. Humble waved his hand.

"Money," he declared, "will never make me proud. I'll drink with you, my young friend, with pleasure. Afterwards, we'll see. You and I, the young lady and Harry will each give a name to it. We'll drink to my boss. A wonderful world it would be if there were more like him."

Pank almost shivered with anticipation.

"What's his name?" he asked, with as much carelessness in his tone as he could command.

"Never you mind that, young fellow," Mr. Humble enjoined, patting him on the back. "I'm glad to see you again. I know a gentleman when I see one. I recognised what you were, directly I came in here for the first time. You're a gentleman. My boss is a gentleman. I'm a gentleman. But you and I," he sighed—"no good talking—we ain't like him. We're all right, but we ain't the same. You're a lucky young woman," he added, turning to Amy. "Take care of him."

She tossed her head.

"I don't get much of a chance," she replied. "We were just having a sort of intimate talk when you came in."

"That's fine," Mr. Humble declared, pulling up the couch and spreading himself out in the corner. "Don't you mind me. Anything you've got to say goes in at one ear and out at the other, so far as Humble is concerned."

"Did you propose to your wife with a third person in the room?" Amy enquired.

Mr. Humble chuckled. The hint, if it was a hint, was wasted.

"Never had a wife," he declared proudly. "Never wanted a wife. Been without a wife all my life. I shouldn't have had any money to spend upon myself if I had had a wife. Married life," he went on, sitting up a little and wagging his forefinger towards Pank, "is all very well for them it suits. It don't

suit me. That's all. I like to have a bob in my pocket for a glass of beer or a drop of spirits when I'm feeling low."

"I should think you generally feel that way, don't you?" Amy asked bitterly.

He leaned forward in his place and faced her.

"Young lady," he demanded, "are you the fiancée of my friend, Mr. Pank?"

"Never mind what I am," was the sharp reply. "I was having a kind of private talk with him, anyway, when you butted in."

"If you're the fiancée of my young friend," Mr. Humble continued, "there's nothing more to be said. I may regret the fact but I shall keep my feelings to myself. In any case let me tell you this,—Mr. Pank and I have tastes in common. We seldom meet; when we do it's a mutual pleasure. A mutual pleasure, I think, Mr. Pank?"

Her cousin's reply was bitterly disappointing to Amy.

"Mr. Humble," he said earnestly, "there's no man I like to have a chat with more than you. Here are our drinks. Now, Amy, sit up and join us. Looks like good port."

"The port's all right," Amy declared shortly.

"How's business, Mr. Humble?" Pank enquired.

"I'm doing nothing at the moment," the former confided in a little outburst of frankness. "My last piece of work was a very ticklish and important commission. I have received the first instalment of my payment for it and I am now resting. I'm waiting for what may come along. With regard to funds," he went on, "if that trifling amount—"

"That's all right," Pank interrupted graciously. "I'm not dunning you, if that's what you are thinking about."

"Never gave it a thought," Mr. Humble declared, with a magnificent gesture. "Between gentlemen those matters are not discussed. They just right themselves when the—er—time comes. How is the heel business?"

"Excellent," Pank admitted. "Talking about business," he added, "I showed you my sample heel the other day, so you know what my job is. What might yours be?"

Mr. Humble drained the contents of his tumbler and watched Pank signal to the barman with apparent unconsciousness.

"In one sense of the word, I am an artist," he confided.

"I guessed it was something like that," his young friend remarked respectfully. "A sculptor perhaps or something of that sort."

"Why sculptor?" the other demanded, toying with the idea and apparently disliking it.

"Because of your hands. There's a look of the artist about you and yet

seemingly you work with your hands.”

“Quite the Sherlock Holmes, aren’t you?” Mr. Humble observed, accepting his refilled tumbler with mild surprise. “Here’s the best. My turn next, remember. Well, as it happens, you are absolutely right about that. A sculptor I am not—never tried my hand at it. Painting I have done on a large scale and a small. Designing and fitting—all that comes into my work. Have another guess, my boy.”

“You’ve got me floored,” Pank confessed. “Put us out of our misery.”

“I’ll do so,” Mr. Humble conceded graciously. “I see no harm in telling you that I am a well-known builder of scenery in cinema studios.”

Ex-detective Pank suffered the intelligence to sink into his sufficiently alert mind. There was perhaps a single spark of fire in his eyes—a single throb under his neat waistcoat. It was only one thread of the skein but it was wound tightly around his fingers.

“I felt certain that you were something of the sort,” he declared. “What do you think of that, Amy?”

Amy had relapsed into gloom and was only faintly interested.

“I have made some queer sets in my time too,” Mr. Humble went on reflectively. “Some that I ain’t going to talk about, even to you. There are times when it pays us to boost our work and others when we get well paid for saying nothing about it. My last job—well, never mind about that. It’s the one I don’t talk about.”

Pank moved his chair a little closer to the fire. He drew a gasper from his pocket and lit it with difficulty. One of his hands was tightly imprisoned in Amy’s. He leaned back with an air of satisfaction.

“I wonder whether you ever worked at that studio that they have pulled down now, out Hellesdon way?” he speculated.

“I may have done,” was the cautious reply. “What do you know about the place?”

“Nothing. Only I was staying at the Royal about the middle of December, and there were some men there—three of them—who, I believe, were in the film business. I heard them say something about the studio one night, and I rather thought they were going to buy it. I passed there the other day, though, and it was all pulled down.”

“Closing time in ten minutes, gentlemen,” the landlord called out, opening the trapdoor.

Mr. Humble had apparently gone off into a brown study. His eyes were fixed upon the ceiling and his thoughts seemed to be far away.

“Same again, Harry,” Pank ordered briskly. “No, I know what you’re going to say, Mr. Humble. Can’t be done. You can stand what you like outside this place, but here I’m at home.”

Mr. Humble conceded the point and accepted a cigarette.

“Three of them there were,” his young friend continued reflectively. “Seemed to have plenty of money. Champagne all the time in the coffeeroom.”

Humble nodded darkly. He had assumed an air of mystery.

“Payne, one of them called himself.”

“Little sandy chap?”

“Come to think of it, he was,” Pank agreed. “Did they do business up at your show?”

Mr. Humble sampled the contents of his last tumbler. His speech was somewhat less precise and he had difficulty with his cigarette.

“A fortnight ago, Ernest Pank,” he said, “I should not have answered you that question. I shouldn’t have answered even you, one of my old pals. To-day it don’t matter. The business is wound up. Yes, they did come there, and a rummy go it was.”

Ernest Pank yawned as he glanced at his watch. He rose to his feet and Amy followed suit with alacrity. Mr. Humble, however, had not finished.

“In my career, if you can call it a career,” he went on reminiscently, “I have come across things which the ordinary person might call mysterious, things the ordinary person would not be able to understand at all. I don’t know, though, that anything could cap this business up at the studio. The set I made up there to order was one of the finest that has ever been seen. Money poured out, all the timber I wanted, all the help, all the tools. Finest scene I’ve ever made. Couldn’t have been beaten in the States—couldn’t have been beaten anywhere. They all came up to look at it. They all said the same thing. There was a bit of a rehearsal one night. The company was to start turning the next day, and when the next day came—you won’t believe me, Ernest my lad, but it’s true—every one got their notice and within twenty-four hours the place was a pack of ruins.”

“You’re joking!” Pank exclaimed.

“A pack of ruins, that’s what it was,” Mr. Humble continued doggedly. “That marvellous set of mine, a wonderful work of art, was broken up and half the stuff was burnt. Pretty well brought the tears into my eyes. If I could have taken it just as it was to Sam Goldwyn, or any one of those big Americans, he would have given me a contract on the spot.”

“Seems a queer business,” Ernest Pank remarked. “I don’t see what there was for those men to buy, if they broke it all up afterwards.”

“A mystery,” Mr. Humble pronounced, holding his glass unsteadily in his hand and surveying its diminished contents. “That’s the word I used. That’s what it was. They were up there that one night, the studio all aflame and the set working. The next day they were gone, and in the morning you couldn’t tell where the studio had been. Where’s the sense of it? Now, you are a young man

I have a high opinion of, Mr. Ernest Pank, I ask you—where's the sense of it?"

"A fool's business, it seems to me," his friend pronounced.

"You're right," Mr. Humble agreed. "That's what it was. A fool's business. That scene of mine might have made me a fortune, with me to run it, if Sam Goldwyn—"

"What was the scene?"

Mr. Humble drained the remaining contents of his tumbler, then he rose to his feet.

"Paid double to keep my mouth shut," he said sorrowfully. "Not that it matters here in present company, but a man should keep his word. Better take your young cousin home, Miss," he added to Amy. "I like him. He's a dear young friend of mine, but somehow when we're together, talk I must."

"To take him home is just what I'm waiting to do," Amy agreed tartly. "Come along, Ernest."

Mr. Humble's leave-taking was almost precipitate.

"Good-night all," was his final salutation.

They heard him stumbling down the passage, heard the front door slam behind him. Ernest Pank seemed to have relapsed into a fit of abstraction. His good-night was a purely mechanical movement of the lips. His eyes were fixed upon the door through which Mr. Humble had disappeared. Ideas were forming in his brain. . . . Amy tugged at his sleeve.

"Don't you think that you might kiss me good-night," she suggested tearfully, "now that that horrid man is gone?"

The detective vanished, the man survived. He folded her in his arms.

"Dear Cousin Amy," he whispered.

"Not so much 'cousin,' " she sighed.



## CHAPTER XIX

Colonel Matterson, seated alone in his private room, stared for a moment without comprehension at the name scribbled on the usual form for visitors brought him by his orderly.

“Pank,” he exclaimed. “Why, the little man whom we dismissed a few days ago.”

“The same, sir. I was surprised to see him but I thought I’d better bring in his name.”

“Show him up at once,” Matterson enjoined.

A moment or two later Ernest Pank was ushered into the Subcommissioner’s room. There was still some slight nervousness in his manner, but he seemed to have gained in dignity and confidence during his brief absence. He was no longer afraid to take the chair to which the Colonel pointed.

“Back again already, Pank,” the latter exclaimed. “Good! Have you brought us any news?”

“News of a sort, sir,” Pank admitted. “I believe I’m on the right track. At any rate, I can tell you at once the name and whereabouts of the chauffeur who drove Sir Humphrey in the hired car, and I can tell you the name of his employer. With regard to the other matter, as to where Sir Humphrey was taken and who was at the bottom of that affair, I think I can solve that within an hour, if we can find our man.”

Colonel Matterson’s somewhat querulous expression changed as though by magic.

“You will come back here, Pank, a full-blown inspector, if that’s true,” he promised him.

“You are very kind, sir,” was the grateful reply. “I must admit there is a great deal about the whole affair I cannot understand yet, but I honestly believe that before midday I can solve the mystery of Sir Humphrey’s first disappearance. I believe that ought to lead to the clearing up of the present situation. I have a kind of theory about that in my mind, but there is a great gap to be filled up yet.”

“If you do as much as you promise, Pank, you will have set the ball rolling, all right,” the Subcommissioner said cheerily.

“It’s the second phase that is going to set us thinking. However, we shall have to leave that alone for the moment. What I want from you now, sir, is the full weight of Scotland Yard behind me. I should like Chief Inspector Smithers or Simpson and a couple of plain-clothes policemen. I want to visit a man in

Shaftesbury Avenue and ask him, with your permission, a few straight questions, with the law behind me to frighten him into telling the truth.”

“That’s easy enough,” Matterson assented. “Smithers is in this morning, I happen to know. I will give orders and have a car ready. I must just see if the Chief Commissioner is free.”

The Chief Commissioner was free and very glad to welcome the visitor whom Matterson presently took up to his room. He nodded to Pank in friendly fashion.

“Well, are you going to tell me the whole story?” he asked eagerly. “I hear that you have made some progress.”

“May I ask you a great favour, sir?” Pank begged earnestly. “I could tell you the name straight off of the man who was the employer of the chauffeur, but you might not believe me, and it would spoil your interest in the rest of the proceedings. By midday you shall know all that I know, if we find our man at home.”

The Chief Commissioner was disappointed but tolerant.

“Have it your own way, Pank,” he agreed. “I hear you are taking Smithers and two plain-clothes men with you. The Subcommissioner thought he would like to go along too. Any chance of a rough house?”

“Not the slightest, sir, I should say,” was the confident reply.

“You would not care to give me a hint?” the General asked, a little wistfully. “I have to telephone Downing Street this morning. I suppose you know that there is no news of Sir Humphrey.”

“So I understand, sir. You can go so far as this with Downing Street, at any rate, sir. You can tell them that you will be able to clear up the matter of Sir Humphrey’s first disappearance before midday, and if that does not give us a clue as to the second—well, I shall be very disappointed.”

“Are you sure that you will be able to find your man?” Matterson asked anxiously. “Why didn’t you wire us for help?”

“Because I didn’t want to scare him away. Even plain-clothes men are easily recognisable nowadays. I was walking the streets myself at eight o’clock this morning until I saw our man go where I believe he now is. I left a couple of friends of mine—nothing to do with the police—watching. If he goes out, one of them will follow him. The other will stay there to tell us.”

“Got your head on you still, I see, Pank,” the General remarked, smiling. “Well, be off then. Your escort will be ready for you by this time.”

The Subcommissioner fetched his hat and overcoat and descended with his companion to the courtyard, where they found two cars waiting. Pank gave the address to the chauffeurs and took his place in the car containing Colonel Matterson and Smithers. The latter was a little chilly.

“Think you’ve stumbled across something, eh, Pank?” he asked.

"I think so," was the modest reply. "I could not have done it if I had not had relatives in Norwich, or if I had not been able to persuade people that I was a commercial traveller selling leather heels. Norfolk people are a bit queer about well-known detectives," he added.

The car turned into Shaftesbury Avenue. A short distance along, on the left-hand side, they drew up before a block of offices. Pank looked eagerly up and down the pavement and smiled with relief.

"Our man's still here, sir," he announced. "Will you let me lead the way?"

Every one looked around curiously. It was an old-fashioned block of offices and flats, with a huge board of names stuck up inside the dingy hall. Pank studied it for a moment and turned to the others.

"Third floor," he announced.

They followed him in single file. They met no one on the stairs, which seemed to indicate that business was not brisk in the neighbourhood. On the third floor Pank knocked at a door with a clouded glass top, on which was painted in black letters

## NORWICH LIMITED

and underneath in smaller ones

CLARENCE H. EDWARDS

"Come in," a masculine voice growled.

Pank obeyed the summons. He was followed by Colonel Matterson and Inspector Smithers, who was in uniform. The two plain-clothes men remained upon the landing. The occupant of the office, who was seated at a shabby roll-top desk, smoking a pipe and banging at a typewriter, gazed at his visitors in blank amazement. He was not a bad-looking person in his way and better dressed than his surroundings seemed to warrant. Of his surprise, however, there was no manner of doubt. He removed his pipe from between his teeth and waited for them to announce themselves.

"Mr. Edwards?" Pank enquired.

"That is my name," the man assented. "Who on earth are you all, and what do you want?"

"This gentleman," Pank indicated, "is Colonel Matterson, Subcommissioner of Scotland Yard. The other is Chief Inspector Smithers, also of Scotland Yard. I myself am simply Detective Pank, but I am acting in this matter instead of my superior officers because I happen to have had the case in hand."

Mr. Edwards had still the appearance of a dazed man, but with his stupefaction there seemed to have become blended a measure of apprehension.

"What on earth," he demanded, "do you want with me?"

“Nothing very complicated,” Pank assured him. “I want you to explain to the Subcommissioner who gave you the commission to build up that gallows scene in your cinema studio near Hellesdon, what was the object of it and who was your principal?”

The man Edwards began to tremble. He leaned back in his place. He was never a healthy-looking individual, but with every vestige of colour drained from his cheeks, his appearance was almost ghastly.

“The thing was a confidential commission,” he muttered.

“There is no such thing as a confidential commission where the law is concerned,” Colonel Matterson intervened sternly. “We will have that story if you please, Mr. Edwards.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” the man faltered, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a very much overperfumed handkerchief. “I don’t know, I’m sure. I must think.”

“Perhaps you would think better,” the Subcommissioner suggested, “in a police cell. You can have your choice.”

The man expelled a long breath. Pank leaned over the desk towards him.

“Look here, Edwards,” he said. “Make the best of a bad job. You knew it was a risky commission when you took it on. You have been found out. You’re up against the law. The only way to avoid serious trouble now is to tell the truth.”

“I’ll tell the truth,” Edwards decided. “Give me just a minute. Let me get my breath again. I didn’t expect anything of this sort.”

“Criminals seldom do expect to be found out,” the Subcommissioner remarked.

The man battered the desk with his fist till the keys of his typewriter shook.

“I’m not a criminal,” he declared. “There was nothing wrong in what I did. I had sunk all my capital in building that studio and buying a lot of properties. We made our first film and everything went wrong. Our star was taken ill. The story was rotten. Anyway, when it was finished, our money was gone and the film was a flop. I didn’t know what to do with the place. It was like a white elephant upon my hands, for I hadn’t enough left even to think about making another film. I can tell you I came pretty near shooting myself. Then one day a gentleman drove up in a motor car. He asked to look around the place. He asked me whether I had a good head carpenter—whether I could build up scenes. Of course I had. Of course I could. He asked me to name a price for the place as it stood. Well, I did. ‘You can have the cash to-morrow morning,’ he promised, ‘if you will carry out a commission for me.’ Think of that, gentlemen, I ask you. What an escape! A new chance in life! I didn’t want to go bankrupt. Nothing of the sort had ever happened to me before. What do you suppose I did? Why, I sold out and we worked like slaves for his commission,

and we worked with a seal upon our mouths.”

“And who was this benefactor?” Colonel Matterson asked.

The man Edwards took no notice. He continued to address himself to Pank.

“There were only six of us from the first. One—my brother—his son, the head carpenter named Humble, who had every reason to do as he was told, for no one liked his antecedents, and two apprentices. I called them together and I told them what had happened. I promised them all the money that was owing and a thundering good sum as well, and they swore before their God that they would never breathe a word to a soul of the work they were doing. You know what the commission was I accepted? We built up an imitation prison cell; then we had a paved courtyard outside, with rigged-up imitation redbrick walls and an iron gate, and finally—we built an execution shed.”

There was a brief, throbbing silence. Some part of the man’s emotion seemed to have its effect even upon his two questioners. He himself was in a bad way. He mopped his forehead and gasped for breath. Pank mercifully left him alone for a moment. As soon as he showed some signs of recovery, however, he continued.

“You built the real thing?” he demanded.

“We built the real thing,” Edwards admitted.

“And you were able to get the details right,” Pank continued, “because your head carpenter had served his apprenticeship to Prince, the hangman. The only reason he was not taken on when Prince died was because he couldn’t keep sober.”

Edwards shivered in his chair.

“I don’t know how you knew that,” he muttered. “I should have thought for his own sake Humble would have kept his mouth closed. He made it at first without the drop. My client came and he was not satisfied. He wanted the rope slung in the orthodox way and he wanted the drop. Well, Humble soon arranged that. It was all perfect one night about the middle of December—I’ve got the date in my book; he came over and took possession. He was satisfied and he paid down the money. Why, he paid marvellous. When it was all over, he gave fifty pounds each to every one who had worked, to swear once more that they would never tell a soul what they had been doing. They were an honest lot of chaps. With all their money back and a good bit over, what do you think they did? I should have sworn that there was not one of them would have breathed a word, and how you got to know about it I can’t imagine. We handed over the place and left. A few hours later, by arrangement, we were back again, and we burned and destroyed every one of the properties; we pulled the place to pieces so that there was not a yard of the stuff left. I have never seen the gentleman since, and what happened the night we all saw the place lit up, or who visited it, I don’t know. I banked my money, came up here,

took this office, and I'm preparing to start business."

"You are trying to make us believe then, I suppose," Colonel Matterson said sternly, "that you never knew about the man who was very nearly hung in your infernal place?"

"Before God, I never knew it, sir," Edwards declared. "Humble was the only one of us allowed there. We had no idea what took place. I never knew it, sir, and what's more, I don't believe there was anything wrong."

"Tell me, then," Pank asked, "why do you suppose your benefactor—we are going to talk about him directly—why do you suppose he insisted upon your making the drop the full twenty-five feet, with the trapdoor and the lever? If it was only to amuse himself, or for a practical joke, do you think he would have been so particular about the vital details?"

"I don't know anything about that," Edwards muttered hoarsely. "He was a gentleman. I am sure he didn't do anything wrong."

"You seem very confident about some things," Colonel Matterson observed. "What did you think he wanted the place for?"

"To play a joke on some one, of course," Edwards replied. "Or it might have been to get the idea for some sort of private theatricals."

"You hadn't even the curiosity to ask him?" the Subcommissioner demanded incredulously.

"The first condition of the bargain," Edwards cried, striking the desk once more with his fist, "was that no questions were to be asked, and the second was—silence afterwards. We kept the first; now, my God, I've broken the second. I have broken my word and I have told everything, because you made me. I never reckoned about having the police in the matter at all."

"But you have not told us everything yet," Colonel Matterson reminded him ominously. "You have not told us what we must know—the name of your generous friend for whom you built this cinema scene."

"And by God, I never will," Edwards shouted. "I knew you would come to that. I've told you everything else. I am not going to give him away. If there is anything wrong with the business, he never meant it. He acted like a gentleman to me and I'm keeping my word."

He sat upright in his chair again. There was a gleam of dogged obstinacy in his eyes. No one spoke. Edwards himself reached for his pipe, pressed down the tobacco with fumbling fingers, struck a match and relit it. He refused to be impressed by the silence of the three men who waited.

"You hear?" he went on. "A Norfolk man doesn't often go back on his word and I am not going back on mine. How you found out about this job, I'm damned if I know. There's not a yard of boarding remaining in the whole place, not a foot of the shed; even the rope's burned. However, what you know you know, and much good may it do you. As for the name of the man—find it

out if you can. You won't know it from me."

Colonel Matterson shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, Edwards," he said, "we shall certainly not try to persuade you. You had better get on your coat. Smithers, call in your men. They can take Edwards to the Vine Street cells. He can be moved afterwards. I will go around and make the charge."

There was a wild light in the man's eyes as he stared at what was going on. Smithers opened the door. The two plain-clothes men entered. The Subcommissioner pointed to the occupant of the chair.

"Take this man to Vine Street Police Station," he directed. "I will be along in a few minutes, I don't think you need handcuff him."

"Do you mean that you are sending me to prison?" Edwards called out, shrinking back in his chair.

"No alternative, my man," was the Subcommissioner's reply. "We have to know the name of your principal. It is possible—I won't say certain—that we might have taken a lenient view of your situation if you had made a clean breast of it. You can't defy the law, though. There are at least five different charges under which you can be dealt with—unless you change your mind."

The plain-clothes men were standing on either side of him. There was authority in their poise and manner.

"Listen, Edwards," Pank intervened. "I'll tell you something. I'll tell you something that the others don't know yet. I could answer their question. I know to whom you sold your studio. I know for whom you built that horrible place. You are doing no good by keeping the name back. You are simply making a foolish effort to pit yourself against the law, and it can't be done."

"You don't know his name," Edwards cried stubbornly. "Not a soul knows it."

"Indeed I do," Pank assured him. "I know the chauffeur who drove the hired car in which his victim was brought there. I know who employed that chauffeur and even where he is at the present moment. It was the same man who found you that money and bought your studio."

"You're a liar," Edwards declared.

"I'm nothing of the sort," was the firm retort. "It was Lord Edward Keynsham and you don't do him one ounce of good by denying it."

The man in the chair collapsed, but the most astonished person in the room was Colonel Matterson. He was on the point of speech but a warning look from Pank stopped him. The little man was indeed in charge of the situation.

"God, how did you know?" Edwards muttered.

"Tell the Subcommissioner that I am speaking the truth," Pank persisted. "He may be lenient with you."

"It's no good my holding out, if you know," Edwards faltered, all the

strength gone from his voice and manner. “Yes, you are right. It was Lord Edward Keynsham of Keynsham Hall.”



## CHAPTER XX

At four o'clock on the following afternoon an important and carefully planned conference was held in the Subcommissioner's room at Scotland Yard. Colonel Matterson himself was seated in his accustomed place at his desk. Inspector Pank, bearing his new dignity with great modesty but much pleasure, and Chief Inspector Smithers were also in evidence. There was a shorthand writer in the background.

An orderly brought in the usual slip of paper and immediately afterwards Mr. Edwards was ushered in. He advanced a little dubiously into the room, but Colonel Matterson nodded in friendly fashion and pointed to a chair. The others wished him good afternoon. He was received as a visitor.

"I hoped you might come, Mr. Edwards," the Subcommissioner remarked.

"I was in two minds about it," the other admitted. "You gave me such a scare yesterday that I didn't know whether I was on my head or my heels. I even sent out this morning to see whether there was a boat leaving for the States."

"Yes, we heard of that," Matterson observed. "Your messenger fell down and was nearly run over going back to your office, and after all, you found that you would have had to leave at eleven o'clock to catch the *America* at Southampton. It would not have been worth while, Mr. Edwards. We would have fetched you back if we had wanted you."

"I've been watched, then, have I?"

"Certainly you have. You are being watched, not as a criminal, but as a person who may be of use to us. We have still to find out one or two more things about Lord Edward Keynsham."

"You'll find out nothing against him," Mr. Edwards declared obstinately. "He is one of the most popular men in Norfolk. I can tell you that. He's one of that sort that couldn't do a mean action if he tried. If you brought me here to find out anything against his lordship, you're barking up the wrong tree, sir. That's the truth."

The Subcommissioner toyed with his monocle for a moment. He was looking at some notes on the table before him.

"Yesterday, Mr. Edwards," he said, looking up, "we took you by surprise. A few slight inaccuracies in your statements were excusable. To-day you are being formally interrogated. You understand that?"

Edwards glanced at the shorthand writer in the corner. "Yes, I understand," he admitted.

"I shall repeat a question I asked you yesterday, your answer to which was

not convincing. Did Lord Edward confide to you in any way why he wanted this particular set made in your studio? He must have given you some reason.”

“Well, of course he did. He told me that he wanted to frighten a nervous old gentleman into doing an act of justice.”

“An act of justice, eh? So that’s all you knew about it?”

“Every scrap.”

“You didn’t know who the nervous old gentleman was?”

“No idea.”

“Have you ever thought about the affair since?”

“Could I help thinking about it?” Edwards demanded. “Here was I, practically a bankrupt, suddenly put on my legs with a thousand pounds in my pocket, and all my staff treated in the same fashion. Wasn’t it likely I should think about it? There never was a queerer way of earning money in this world. I thought about it day and night.”

“In the course of your reflections,” Colonel Matterson continued, leaning back in his chair and balancing his finger tips together, “did you happen to remember that a man was hanged on the day after that little show in your studio?”

Edwards sat dumbfounded in his chair. It was perfectly obvious that he had never connected the two happenings.

“My God, sir,” he exclaimed, “you’re right! It was a man named Brandt, who had murdered an actor. Found him with his wife and killed him. He was hanged at Wandsworth the next morning.”

“You never connected the building of a gallows scene in your studio, I suppose, with what Lord Edward told you and the fact that the same thing was happening in real life within a few hours?”

“As God is above, I never did,” Edwards affirmed vehemently.

“Very well,” the Subcommissioner said, after a brief pause. “We’ll leave it at that. Did you know Lord Edward before he came to see you?”

“I did indeed, sir. I used to be a photographer and I’d been over to Keynsham once or twice when his lordship was giving fetes. Treated like gentlemen we always were. He ordered a cinema film from me once. I met him in Norwich several months ago and he stopped me in the street. Remembered me quite well. I told him about my studio and he promised to come and see it some time.”

“That’s all you know about him?”

“Everything except what the whole city and the whole world knows—that he had scarcely enough to live on when he came back from the war, and that he went into business in the City, made a huge fortune, bought back Keynsham Hall, which has been one of the family seats for hundreds of years, and became the most popular gentleman in the county. Lord Lieutenant he was last year,

and he could be just what he liked, so far as Norfolk people are concerned.”

“This is all hearsay,” Matterson remarked. “You know nothing personal?”

“Personal? How should I be likely to? I’ve bettered myself a little, but I’ve been next door to being a working man all my life. I did a bit of drawing and got a feeling for cheap art when I was young. That made me go into the photography business. Then, being in cinemas so much turned my head and I worked in a show at Elstree for some time. When I had saved enough money, I built that place at Norwich, and there we are.”

“Do you happen to know where Lord Edward is now?”

“Of course I don’t. Why should I?”

The Subcommissioner reflected for a moment.

“Mr. Edwards,” he said, “I don’t think that you can be of very much further use to us. I’m going to tell you that on the whole we consider what you did was a fairly reasonable action for a man in your position, and, although very grave things have happened since then, the law cannot hold you responsible for them. So you see you have nothing to fear from us, but I do wish to ask you one question, and I want you to give it your careful attention. Did his lordship, when he insisted, for instance, on that twenty-five foot drop,—did he give you any idea at all how far he meant to go in the frightening of this nervous old gentleman?”

“He did not, sir,” was the firm and definite reply.

Colonel Matterson looked through his notes and turned towards Chief Inspector Smithers.

“Is there anything you would like to ask Mr. Edwards before we say good afternoon to him?” he enquired.

“I don’t think so, sir.”

“What about you, Pank?”

“Just two trifling things, sir. When did you and your men, Mr. Edwards, hand over the studio with everything in it prepared to Lord Edward Keynsham?”

“At about five o’clock on Friday, December the nineteenth.”

“Did his lordship come over alone?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“You saw nothing of the companions, then, whom he must have had with him later to stage this affair?”

“Nothing whatever.”

“Have you no idea who they were?”

“Not the slightest.”

“The Subcommissioner,” Pank continued, “told you that he is now asking you questions in a different fashion. Yesterday’s interrogation was informal. This is a formal one, which means that if you tell us anything but the truth, you

will be in trouble. You understand that?”

“Yes, I understand it,” Edwards admitted. “I have not told you a word that was not the truth.”

“Very well, then,” Pank went on. “Did you leave any one of your men to assist Lord Edward with his practical joke?”

Edwards’ hesitation lasted no longer than the flicker of an eyelid. Nevertheless, it was a hesitation.

“No one at all,” he said stoutly.

Pank looked at him for a moment gravely, then he glanced across at the shorthand writer. Edwards had lost a trifle of his composure.

“About those masks,” Pank asked. “Had you, amongst your properties, a number of rather soiled white masks?”

“That’s so,” Edwards agreed. “We used them for a band of gangsters in the film that was such a flop.”

“And what was the name of the man whom you left with Lord Edward to play the hangman?” Pank demanded in a voice that for him was almost stern. “Don’t tell a lie this time.”

Edwards was for a moment nonplussed. He mopped his forehead.

“Humble,” he said. “Sam Humble.”

“Had some experience of that sort of thing, hadn’t he?”

“You know a damn’ sight too much,” was the vicious reply.

Pank turned away with a smile.

“That’s all I wanted to ask, sir,” he told the Subcommissioner.

The latter nodded.

“Well, Mr. Edwards,” he said, “we all thank you for your information, although I’m afraid some of it was given rather unwillingly. Supposing we should want to see you again—are you thinking of leaving the country?”

“Not now, sir,” the man replied. “I’ve done no wrong that I can think of, and I shall stay and work at the little business I have started. I’m going to buy and sell films and I have a side line dealing with requisites. You’ll find me at the same address at any time.”

“Then we’ll say good afternoon. Pank, perhaps you will see Mr. Edwards to the door and tell the orderly that we will interview our other visitor now.”

Pank obeyed orders and returned.

“No real progress with Mr. Edwards, I’m afraid,” Colonel Matterson observed. “I fancy that he has now told us all he knows. As soon as we’ve finished with Bowhill, the Chief is coming down for a short conference.”

“You will pardon my saying so, sir,” Chief Inspector Smithers ventured, “but it seems to me that the first abduction of Sir Humphrey Rossiter is pretty well cleared up by now, except for details. How are we going to link it up with Sir Humphrey’s present disappearance? Seems to me that’s what we have got

to get to work at.”

“You’re quite right, Smithers,” the Subcommissioner agreed, “but don’t you realise that the same central figure is concerned in both affairs? That’s why we want to investigate this matter with such meticulous care. It’s only a question of an hour or two. At any moment we may find the clue we want. At present, if you stop to think of the affair, it is simply ridiculous. The only value in what we are doing is that it may help us to build the bridge over to the second episode.”

“Quite so, sir,” the Inspector murmured, trying to look more satisfied than he felt. “We shall not waste any more time about it than we can help, I can assure you.”

The orderly reappeared, ushering in a smooth-faced young man in chauffeur’s undress livery. He came towards the table with belligerent carriage. The Subcommissioner did not invite him to take a seat.

“Your name is Thomas Bowhill?” he asked, beckoning him to come a little nearer to the table.

“That’s so, sir. And I should like to know what I’ve done to have the police interfering with my business and fetching me here.”

“You were fetched by plain-clothes policemen,” Colonel Matterson said coldly, “and your presence here is necessary in the interests of the law. Be so good as to answer my questions. You have been for some years in the employment of Lord Edward Keynsham?”

“That’s right.”

“About the beginning of December, you received some rather strange orders from his lordship. You were transferred to a large garage in Norwich, where you were told to get a situation as temporary chauffeur. You asked permission to garage a Daimler car of your own there, which car, by-the-by, belonged to his lordship, and you were to take on odd jobs, only accepting such as you approved of.”

“That’s right.”

“You were rung up from Fakenham on the morning of the nineteenth of December and told to be at Keynsham Hall at five o’clock to drive a gentleman to London?”

“That’s right.”

“You went to Keynsham Hall—this appears to have been one of the jobs of which you approved; what happened there?”

“I saw his lordship for a few moments in the gun room and he gave me certain orders. The gentleman came out with his shooting things and bags and I drove him by rather a roundabout way to the studio at Hellesdon.”

“You know that he was in a measure abducted?”

“I don’t know anything,” the man replied. “I was obeying orders.”

“I see,” the Subcommissioner murmured. “You would have obeyed if your master had told you to take your passenger out of the car and throw him into the ditch?”

“His lordship would never have given me any such instructions. His lordship is a straightforward, honourable gentleman for whom it is a pleasure to work.”

“No one is saying a word against Lord Edward, but don’t you think that his behaviour that night seemed a little strange?”

“I didn’t think about it. I did as I was told. I waited for my passenger whilst he was in the studio. When he came out, I drove him to where I was told to drive him—it was somewhere Barnet way. I left him with his bags where he could find a taxicab.”

“You changed the plates of your car afterwards?”

“That’s right.”

“You practically went into hiding?”

“I suppose so.”

“Why?”

“His lordship’s orders.”

“You seem to be a very obedient servant,” the Subcommissioner remarked.

“I have served in the army, sir,” was the brusque reply.

“Have you any idea why you went through all that pantomime? Why too you were turned out of your cottage and made to live in lodgings in Norwich, and become practically a taxicab driver, simply with a view to carrying out this one job?”

“I have no idea whatever, sir.”

“Yet you did it.”

“I did it, sir. I obeyed orders. Any one would, who served Lord Edward.”

“I suppose you know,” Colonel Matterson observed, “that you’ve been concerned in a criminal exploit?”

“I do not, and it would take more than the whole of the police force to make me believe it, sir. A person in Lord Edward’s position wouldn’t run any such risk.”

Matterson smiled.

“Any questions, Pank?”

The newly appointed inspector turned towards the chauffeur and there was enmity in the latter’s face.

“How is it that you’re not in Canada?” Pank enquired.

For the first time the young man hesitated.

“Who said I was in Canada?” he demanded.

“The butler at Keynsham Hall.”

“I’m under orders to go. I have not started yet. And what I should like to

know is, what the hell you've been doing, messing about at Keynsham?"

Colonel Matterson glanced up.

"Bowhill," he warned him, "another speech of that sort and I send you to the cells."

The man folded his arms and remained silent.

"I have nothing more to ask, sir," Pank announced.

The Subcommissioner touched the bell and Bowhill was dismissed.

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The Subcommissioner leaned back in his chair and glanced through his notes.

"One thing," he remarked, "becomes clearer at every moment. Lord Edward Keynsham is the man with whom we need to have a little conversation."

"Have you any idea where he might be, sir?" Pank required. "He is not in Norfolk."

"We ought to know in a very few minutes," Colonel Matterson, replied glancing at his watch. "In the meantime there's a young lady who demands our attention."

He touched a bell and gave the necessary order. A very respectable, nicely dressed young woman of secretarial appearance was promptly shown in. Inspector Smithers offered her a chair and Colonel Matterson referred to his notes.

"Your name," he asked, "is, I believe, Julia Somerby?"

"That is so," she admitted.

"You are what might be called social secretary to Lord Edward and Lady Louise Keynsham?"

"That is my position, sir."

"I'm going to ask you very few questions," Matterson assured her. "The most important is this one—was Lord Edward, to your knowledge, on terms of intimacy with the man Brandt, who was hanged at Wandsworth last month?"

The girl shook her head.

"The name of Brandt does not even appear in the social register which I keep, sir," she replied. "That means that neither Mr. or Mrs. Brandt have ever exchanged formal visits with his lordship or her ladyship."

"In other words, it would mean that they were strangers?"

"Precisely."

"One more question. The late Mr. Brandt was a member of the Shannon Yacht Club, the Doldrums Club and the Royal Automobile. Is Lord Edward a member of any of these?"

The young lady was very decisive upon the point.

"Lord Edward," she confided, "belongs only to the Marlborough, the

Carlton and the Guards.”

The Subcommissioner reflected for a moment.

“Summing up your information, then, Miss Somerby,” he said, “I may conclude that you have never seen the late Mr. Brandt in his lordship’s house or in his lordship’s company, and the same applies to his wife?”

“That is so, sir.”

“We are very much obliged to you,” Colonel Matterson acknowledged, ringing the bell for the orderly and rising as she left the room. . . .

“You didn’t ask, sir,” Smithers remarked, “any questions as to the present whereabouts of Lord Edward.”

The Subcommissioner smiled.

“I am afraid that you don’t read the fashionable news, Inspector,” he observed. “From the Riviera column of the *Times* of this morning one gathers that his lordship was entertaining a very distinguished party, including the Prince and Princess of Monaco, on his yacht in Monaco harbour on the day before yesterday. I learn from a member of his firm, however, that owing to pressure of business, he is expected back within the course of the next few days. His presence would naturally simplify matters. In his absence, however, and as we have only one more caller to receive, who is not due yet, we may as well take stock of the information which we have received and estimate its precise value to us.”

The two men, in obedience to a gesture from their Chief, drew their chairs a little closer to the table. The Subcommissioner commenced his summary.

“This is how we stand,” he pointed out. “We have discovered the name of the man who planned the Home Secretary’s first abduction and put him through what I must say was a most inhuman ordeal.

“We have discovered that that same person called upon the missing Mrs. Brandt the day before her disappearance, a fact which, unless they were better acquainted than our information would seem to indicate, must possess a certain amount of significance. That man’s dossier is upon the table. You can all read it at your leisure. I will give you the salient points in a few words.

“The present Edward Keynsham is the third son of the Duke of Durham. The family is an impoverished one, but naturally Keynsham went to Eton and Sandhurst. He served with the utmost distinction in the war, receiving French and Italian decorations besides almost everything he could get from us, and but for the death of his senior officer, he would have been recommended for the V.C. He appears to have been a young man of the utmost spirit, for immediately on the completion of the war, finding that there was not a penny in the family, and that every one of his brothers was struggling for a living, he went into business in the City.”

“What kind of business?” Inspector Smithers asked.



“He joined an old-established firm of produce importers and exporters,” Colonel Matterson announced. “They dealt in currants and spices, ginger, tea and coffee, and they imported wines from every wine-growing country in the world. It was a fairly prosperous firm but perhaps a little behind the times. Anyhow, from the moment Lord Edward joined them, they seem to have gone ahead in a most amazing fashion. This report is a very exhaustive one and I shall not trouble you with all its details, but we have here their rating at the end of the war by the Bankers’ Society and their rating now, and it is a fact that, whilst they were in the third rank financially in 1919, they are to-day marked with a triple star, which means that they must be the wealthiest firm in the trade. It means keeping a balance of approximately six figures and being not considered, but pronounced, absolutely good for any possible engagement. Proof of this you have seen, of course, in Lord Edward’s manner of living. He bought back one of the family estates in Norfolk which bears his name, and he indulges in every form of sport. Nevertheless, he still finds time to travel all over the Continent and to keep in touch with the wine growers of every country. In short, we come to this. According to his dossier and every scrap of information we have been able to gather about him, he seems to be a great gentleman, practically a millionaire, a fine sportsman, and—to judge from his munificent gifts to charity—something of a philanthropist. Furthermore, he and Lady Louise are known to have been on intimate terms of friendship with Sir Humphrey. Notwithstanding these proven facts, he is the only man upon whom a shadow of suspicion rests, for the happenings we have met to consider and the mystery we have still to solve. What do you think of that, gentlemen?”

Inspector Smithers considered it a poser. Inspector Pank said nothing.

“It’s that young woman, the secretary, who knocks the bottom out of what might have been our first theory,” the former remarked. “Lord Edward’s very character, as we’re beginning to understand it, might point to his taking desperate risks to save a friend’s life, but when you come to face the fact that no sort of social intercourse existed between him and the Brandts, then, where are we?”

There was a brief silence. Pank cleared his throat nervously.

“If I might make a suggestion,” he ventured.

“No one has a better right,” was his Chief’s gracious response.

“As Inspector Smithers has pointed out, sir, one could imagine a man of Lord Edward’s bravery and determination making a big effort to save a friend’s life. One could also look at the matter from a different point of view. One could understand him making a similar effort in the reverse direction.”

The Subcommissioner was puzzled.

“I don’t quite get you, Pank,” he admitted.

“Before I explain, sir,” the latter begged, “might I trouble you to read

Brandt's dossier? You have it there on the desk."

"I ought to have done so before," Matterson acknowledged. "It is very short, however, and very unilluminative."

He picked up a sheet of paper and read:

"Cecil Brandt, born at Windermere forty-three years ago. Father the vicar there, and several of the family landowners in the neighbourhood. Went only to local school and emigrated to Australia at the age of nineteen. From Australia he appears to have travelled a great deal in various countries and was reported to have made a large fortune on Wall Street and later with some jute factories in Calcutta. Information, however, as to his doings abroad very imperfect. Married Katherine Milsom, the well-known actress, in London six years ago. Financial reports all indicate great wealth. Bought the Imperial Theatre for two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and presented it to his wife on her first birthday after their marriage. Owns a racing stable, hunters in Leicestershire, has a long lease of the Powerscourt shooting, and has several enquiries at the present moment with house agents for a country estate, price not to exceed a hundred thousand pounds. Belongs to few clubs, and appears to have a limited circle of acquaintances, but attends most performances given by his wife at the theatre. Nothing whatever known against him, except that his name has been taken on several occasions as having been present on premises raided by the police on suspicion of baccarat having been played."

"Tells us nothing at all," the Subcommissioner summed up, as he laid it down.

"Very little that is of any use," Pank admitted. "I should like, if I may, sir, at this juncture to mention one fact. As you have been good enough to give me a free hand, I took the liberty of going down to Wandsworth Prison this morning and interviewing the governor. I asked him if he would tell me the names of the people who had applied for permission to see the condemned man during his last few days."

"Nothing in that, I'm afraid, Pank," Matterson regretted. "I asked the same question and was told that he had seen only his lawyers."

"If you will excuse me, sir," Pank pointed out, "you asked your question a little differently, and you got the correct reply. I asked if any one else had *applied* for leave to see him, and I was told that not only had his wife applied and been refused, but that Lord Edward Keynsham had asked for an interview on urgent personal business, and that the condemned man had refused to see

him.”

“That’s a point,” the Subcommissioner reflected. “You’re quite right, Pank. I only asked what interviews had taken place.”

“You will find out that it’s true, sir, if you care to confirm my information,” Pank went on. “Thinking it all over since, it has occurred to me that if Lord Edward was so anxious to see this man Brandt before he was hung, and Brandt had refused to see him, he might have run the risk of trying to stop the execution, not to save Brandt’s life, but to make a further effort to get the interview he desired.”

No one said a word. They seemed to be looking at a blank wall. Colonel Matterson held his head with his hands.

“We don’t progress, do we?” he remarked gloomily. “A quarter of an hour ago we had what seemed to be the most conclusive evidence that the two men were strangers. Now, according to you, Pank, it would appear that there was some very vital matter between the two. A man doesn’t try to see a stranger a few days before he’s hanged, for nothing.”

“The person whom I should like to see in this room,” Inspector Smithers observed, “is Lord Edward Keynsham.”

“I hope that time may come before long,” the Subcommissioner said fervently. “Meanwhile,” he went on, “I do not wish to increase the difficulties of the situation, but I ask you to reconsider these two dossiers—the very imperfect one of this man Brandt and the fine record of Lord Edward Keynsham. Can you conceive of any single bond which there might have been between the two, which could only have arisen or been recognised a few days before Brandt’s death?”

“For the moment, sir, I must admit that I, for one, cannot,” Inspector Smithers confessed. “Lord Edward is not the sort of man who would be blackmailed. Besides, there is evidence that Brandt never even went to his house.”

“Blackmail was the first thing which occurred to me,” the Subcommissioner observed, “but this fellow Brandt seems, after all, to have been fairly well liked, to have been a decent fellow and enormously wealthy. What should turn him into a blackmailer all of a sudden? The thing doesn’t hold water. What do you think about it, Pank?”

Inspector Pank was nervously pulling out his underlip and gazing hard into vacancy.

“Just at that moment, sir,” he confided, “I was wondering whether we had not better try to collect some further evidence as to the identity of the men who helped Lord Edward in that assault upon Sir Humphrey Rossiter.”

Colonel Matterson was unimpressed.

“Seems to me a little off the line,” he declared.

“I’m not so sure,” was the apologetic reply. “The identity of any one of them might bridge over that gulf which exists at the moment between Keynsham and Brandt. If you can’t see clues sometimes, you have to stumble for them. It seems to me to be like that in this case. I have their three names here,” he went on, drawing a piece of paper from his pocket, “all obviously assumed, and they all gave their address as the Savoy Hotel. This is the sheet cut out of the Royal Hotel visitors’ book at Norwich.”

He passed the page across to Colonel Matterson, who scrutinised it through his eyeglass.

“I wonder whether anything occurs to you with regard to those names, sir,” Pank ventured.

“One of them,” the Subcommissioner observed, “evidently signed for the three. They are all in the same handwriting. There’s another thing—they all sign in the American fashion, with a Christian name first, then an initial and then the surname.”

Pank smiled.

“That was what I meant, sir,” he confided. “They also gave their address as the Savoy Hotel where a good many Americans are supposed to stay.”

“You’ve made enquiries, I conclude?” Matterson asked.

Pank assented.

“I took the sheet to a friend of mine in the reception bureau of the Savoy the moment I returned from Norwich. He knew nothing about any one of them.”

Colonel Matterson frowned.

“It seems to me,” he said, “that we shall have to put Lord Edward through a pretty severe cross-examination.”

“And that,” Pank said dolefully, “may not be quite so soon as we think. I ought perhaps to have told you before. Lord Edward is not at Monte Carlo and hasn’t been there. The invitations for the luncheon party were cancelled at the last moment.”

## Chapter XXI

The conference seemed doomed to an indefinite prolongation. Even as Pank was speaking, there was a knock at the door and the orderly presented himself.

“Sir Henry Topps to see you, sir,” he announced.

“Show him in,” Matterson enjoined. “Now we shall see, Pank, whether there is any truth in that amazing statement of yours.”

“Who is Sir Henry Topps?” Inspector Smithers asked.

“Senior partner in Lord Edward’s firm,” was the brief reply.

Sir Henry Topps was duly ushered in. He was a very personable, rather elderly gentleman of military appearance, wearing an eyeglass, a fob and a four-in-hand tie with the distinction of one to whom such things are part of their everyday life. He was warmly welcomed by Colonel Matterson, with whom he had some slight acquaintance, introduced to Smithers and Pank, whose presence he seemed to realise with mild surprise, and invited to seat himself in the easy-chair reserved for visitors of distinction.

“May I?” he enquired, drawing a thin platinum and gold cigarette case from his pocket. “I see that you gentlemen have been indulging.”

“Certainly,” Matterson acquiesced courteously. “I would offer you my box, but I am quite sure that yours are better.”

Sir Henry waived the point, and presently the perfume of fine Turkish tobacco was mingled with the odour of very ordinary gaspers.

“Delighted to pay a visit to Scotland Yard,” Sir Henry observed, looking around him with interest. “First time I’ve ever had the pleasure, although General Moore has invited me more than once. What can I do for you, Colonel? A summons to Police Headquarters is somewhat a shock in my quiet life. Is it a poison case? Not an arrest for selling bad stuff or anything of that sort?”

“No, nor ever likely to be, so far as my experience goes,” was the smiling reply. “Such small things don’t come under your notice, I suppose, but you stocked my poor cellar, such as it is, and I never want better stuff. . . . It isn’t a serious matter at all, naturally, Sir Henry, but a slight complication has cropped up, and we would be awfully obliged if you would put us in touch with Lord Edward. We made enquiries but we can’t seem to learn anything definite about his whereabouts.”

“Well, that’s quaint,” Sir Henry declared. “That’s very quaint indeed. I can tell you one thing right away,” he went on, after a moment’s pause—“he’s not exactly where he’s supposed to be.”

There was a little murmur of interest. Sir Henry looked at his cigarette for a moment or two and appeared to develop a new surprise.

“The queerest thing of all,” he observed, “is why you should want to know. There are at least a hundred people in the City of London who, I am quite sure, would give a great deal for the information you are asking for, but where the mischief do the police come in? These two gentlemen too,” he added, indicating Smithers and Pank. “What have they got to do with it?”

“It isn’t exactly easy to explain, for the moment,” Colonel Matterson acknowledged. “If you can let us know where to get hold of Lord Edward, the whole thing will fall into shape at once.”

Sir Henry nodded.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t think Scotland Yard is going into the wine trade just yet, and in any case, we have always to make a clean sweep of it to the police. Lord Edward left with some friends in his yacht for Monaco, but we sent him a wireless which he probably got somewhere near Gibraltar, and he slipped off at Marseilles. The yacht went on to Monaco without him, and I am afraid he had to cancel that luncheon party you may have read about in the *Times*.”

“At Marseilles,” the Subcommissioner repeated thoughtfully. “Would it be trespassing too much on your good nature, Sir Henry, if I asked you the reason for Lord Edward’s change of plans?”

“Not a bit, my dear fellow,” Sir Henry assured him. “We received a long despatch from our agent in Bordeaux, only a day or two after Keysham had started off for his holiday. Here I can’t mention any names, but it would not interest you, anyhow. Seven of the biggest growers of wine in the Bordeaux district are badly in need of cash. They have enormous stocks, owing to the wonderful vintages of the last few years, and naturally they don’t want to throw them upon the market. We—I think I may say it without boasting—are probably the richest firm of wine merchants in the world. That sounds a little egotistical, but you only have to go to Stubbs and I think they will confirm what I tell you. To support the market, for our own sake as well as theirs, this syndicate want us to do an enormous deal in clarets and brandies, and they begged for a member of the firm to see them at once. Well, there’s the story. Keynsham left his yacht, like the good fellow he is, at Marseilles, and he has gone to Bordeaux to see them.”

Colonel Matterson leaned back in his chair.

“Sounds quite like a romance,” he remarked pleasantly. “It means, I suppose, that we shall have some cheap wine soon.”

“Not necessarily,” Sir Henry assured him. “That’s how we have made our money—having the capital to put down and hold on. We are going to keep that wine, if we buy it, just as long as we would if it were an ordinary purchase,

and we are going to sell it at just the same price as we should if we had bought it in the ordinary way. . . . A case or two to a friend, perhaps, Colonel,” he added, with a smile, “but in return you must keep what I have told you secret. If the deal comes off, we want to make our profit.”

“Well, that’s all very interesting,” the Subcommissioner acknowledged. “So Lord Edward is at Bordeaux at the present moment? Would you know where to communicate with him?”

“Certainly,” Sir Henry replied. “Care of our agents there. He may not be actually in the town. He may be at the château of any one of the Syndicate, or they may even have moved up to Paris to complete the deal after the wines have been tasted. Any letters would be forwarded, of course, but the point is this. We want it thought that Keynsham is on the Riviera holiday-making, so naturally there is not much doing in the way of correspondence.”

Rather to Sir Henry’s surprise, the smaller and more insignificant looking of the two men, whose presence in the room had been puzzling him all the time, rose respectfully in his place.

“Might I ask, Sir Henry,” he enquired, “whether you have had any communication from Lord Edward Keynsham during the last few days?”

“Not a line,” was the emphatic reply; “neither do we wish for it. His is a secret mission.”

“You are sure that Lord Edward really undertook it?” the Subcommissioner asked.

“As sure as any one can be humanly sure of anything,” was the somewhat surprised answer.

“But you have heard nothing whatever from him?” Pank repeated.

Sir Henry crossed his legs, tapped another cigarette on the arm of the chair and looked at the questioner through his eyeglass.

“I did not say that,” he objected. “No, we had a reply to our wireless. It was in code and contained one single word, a word which, decoded, meant—‘Will attend to the business mentioned.’ That was despatched from—well, my geography is not very good—but it was within fifty miles of Gibraltar.”

Pank, full of apologies, rose once more to his feet.

“Sir Henry,” he begged, “it might help towards the solution of a little trouble we are in, if you could tell us the names of the guests accompanying Lord Edward.”

“I am beginning to wonder,” Sir Henry said, with a dignified chill in his tone, “whether I have found my way by mistake into the bureau of a society newspaper. However, your question is quickly answered, sir—I have not the slightest idea.”

Pank resumed his seat and the Subcommissioner leaned forward with a deprecatory gesture.

"It was very good of you to come up, Sir Henry," he acknowledged. "I thought perhaps you might have sent a clerk or your secretary, but to come yourself is a compliment we all appreciate very much."

"You won't mind," Sir Henry observed, as he rose to his feet, "if I confess to some slight curiosity. What is this all about? What has poor Edward done?"

"Nothing whatever, I'm sure," the Subcommissioner declared hastily. "The only thing was that we thought he might have been able to help us with information concerning a little matter—can't talk about it just yet—*sub judice* you see—but if he's so difficult to get hold of, we must let it be for a time."

"And meanwhile I must bottle up my curiosity, I suppose," Sir Henry remarked, with a little grimace. "Good thing I'm not a woman. All I can say is, Colonel, I shall be delighted to give you any further information I can, but come and see me next time. Come and have lunch with us in the cellars. You shall have your information, and if you get home with it a sober man, you'll be lucky. . . . If I'm writing Edward, shall I let him know the police are after him?"

"I don't think that would disturb him very much," Matterson said, smiling, as he walked to the door with his guest.

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The Subcommissioner, after exchanging final amenities with his departing visitor, closed the door and returned to his place.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "there doesn't seem to be any mystery about Keynsham's disappearance, at any rate. Sir Henry Topps, who has just gone out, is a sheriff of the City of London, the one ambition of whose life it is to become Lord Mayor. He is a family man with a mansion at Esher, and he grows orchids. I feel sure he will do his best to get into touch with Keynsham. In the meantime—what?"

"Is there any news from Chestow Square, sir?" Smithers enquired.

"None whatever. Sir Humphrey's secretary is in residence there. He reports an increasing pile of letters every morning, but no word whatever from Sir Humphrey."

"And what about the Savoy, sir?"

"I had a report from them this morning. They have locked up Mrs. Brandt's rooms, and everything remains exactly as it was. The maid has been through all the trunks carefully and reports that nothing is missing. She has repacked and the door is sealed up."

"I think," Pank decided, picking up his hat and smoothing it absently, "that I shall make another attempt to discover something more about Lord Edward's companions on that night. The connection between him personally and Brandt seems absolutely nonexistent. They are men of an utterly different outlook and they never appear to have come into contact. If we knew more about those



companions of Lord Edward's who were with him that night, it might be helpful. I think that I must pay another visit to Norwich."

"The matter is in your own hands, Pank," the Subcommissioner reminded him gloomily. "The only thing I should like to impress upon you both is that none of this is helping directly towards getting Sir Humphrey back."

"Direct means don't seem to lead us anywhere," Pank remarked.

"I think," Colonel Matterson went on, "that the terror of the Chief's life at the present moment is that some morning one of the sensational papers will discover the truth."

"Might come at any moment," Inspector Smithers commented.

"There's another danger too," the Subcommissioner confided. "Sir Humphrey has a sister who is a great believer in the Press and apparently thinks very little of us. She has promised to keep quiet for one more week and no longer. Supposing nothing happens and she goes, for instance, to the *Daily Thunderer*—can't you imagine the headlines in the paper the next morning?"

#### WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO SCOTLAND YARD? THE NATION DEMANDS A CLEAN SWEEP!

That's the sort of thing we shall have to put up with."

"I believe," Pank pronounced confidently, "that the solution of Sir Humphrey's disappearance would come in five minutes, if we could have Lord Edward Keynsham in this room."

"Why?" Colonel Matterson asked.

"Because, sir," Pank pointed out, "in spite of appearances, there must have been something between him, Brandt and Sir Humphrey, which we haven't got hold of yet. Why did Lord Edward Keynsham want Brandt reprieved? Why did Brandt, during his last few hours, when a doomed man as a rule jumps at any chance, refuse to see Lord Edward? Why did Lord Edward call upon Mrs. Brandt? And why, the next day, did she leave the Savoy Court to dine with Sir Humphrey and disappear from the face of the earth?"

"More important still," Colonel Matterson put in, "why, after waiting for her for nearly two hours, did Sir Humphrey, left alone in the room for ten minutes, apparently walk out of the window and disappear?"

"All these things are connected, sir," Pank insisted. "It is no good thinking of them in the concrete. There is a single motive underneath the whole business."

"You are right, Pank," the Subcommissioner declared, striking the table with the flat of his hand, "and, bear this in mind—it is a motive big enough to make one of the most popular young peers in the country, who is also a millionaire, risk his reputation, to lock the lips of a famous woman like Katherine Brandt, and to involve in its meshes a Cabinet Minister whose life

has been one of entire discretion.”

“And I expect, when the truth comes out,” Inspector Smithers said bitterly, “it will all seem so easy. The amateurs in their easy-chairs will shake with laughter, and it won’t even make a plot for a writer of detective stories.”

Pank glanced at his watch and rose to his feet.

“If you will excuse me, sir,” he begged, “I think I will run down to Norwich again for a few hours. I’ll be back to-morrow. If not, I will telephone.”

The Subcommissioner nodded. There were lines underneath his eyes and he was really looking very worried indeed.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I pursue my usual custom. Go about your business your own way. But remember this. The honour of the department, perhaps its very existence in its present form, is in your hands. Sir Humphrey Rossiter must be back in Whitehall a week from to-day.”

## Chapter XXII

“If ever,” Mr. Humble declared, with slow and earnest emphasis, “that miserable little bounder should dare to swagger in here and address his conversation to me again, I shall give him such a thrashing, Harry, as he will remember to the day of his death. I don’t care whether he has that saucy little chit of a girl with him or not. She must stand by and see him get what he deserves—him and his bloody heels.”

Mr. Humble was leaning in an attitude of graceful ease against the counter of the bar in the sanctum of the Cat and Chickens. Distinctly he was not looking his best. He had a black eye and a gash over his cheekbone, his arm was in a sling, and one foot was encased in a slipper. Furthermore, vacant spaces in his mouth clearly denoted the advisability of a visit to his dentist. His clothes were more disreputable than ever; it is true that he wore a worn and crumpled soft collar, but he was without a cravat, and the general appearance of his clothing suggested that he had been taking a roll in the mud.

“Why, this does surprise me surely, Mr. Humble,” the landlord remarked. “A nice-spoken young man, I thought him, and seemed to have taken quite a fancy to you. Free-handed he was too. Why, the drinks he stood in this parlour I couldn’t no wise keep count of.”

“You kept count all right till they were paid for,” Mr. Humble chuckled. “You’re a good ’un for seeing to that, Harry.”

The landlord rubbed the counter vigorously with the cloth which he was carrying.

“It ain’t so easy to make a living nowadays that you can afford to forget what’s owing to you,” he remarked, with a covert glance at the slate which hung upon the wall.

“Never you mind about that,” Mr. Humble enjoined emphatically. “You’ll get your money in time. What that young man’s going to get he’ll find out, if ever I catch sight of his blasted phiz again.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Mr. Harry Chittock asked, with some show of curiosity. “What did he do to you?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong with him,” was the portentous reply. “He’s a bloody liar, that’s one thing. Selling those heels wasn’t his job down in Norwich. Do you know what he was? Of course you don’t. I’ll tell you. He was a sneaking little ‘tec.’ That’s what he was.”

Mr. Chittock paused in his renewed attempts to bring back the polish to the counter.

“You don’t tell!” he exclaimed.

“Took advantage of me, he did,” Mr. Humble continued. “Me being naturally unsuspecting and ready to confide in any one, he got me talking and I let drop a word or two here and there. That was all that he wanted. You see the state I’m in, Harry? This is what I got for my good nature.”

“Some one do seem to have knocked you about, right and proper,” the landlord admitted, half-sympathetically, half with professional interest, for he was himself something of a boxer.

“It’s nothing to what I’ll do to him,” Mr. Humble declared savagely, “if ever he shows his little rat’s face in here again. His saucy little chit of a girl won’t know him by the time I’ve finished. If only”—he clenched his fist and looked at it.

There was a quick footstep in the passage. The door opened. Mr. Pank, with good fellowship in his face and a dripping umbrella in his hand, beamed upon them.

“Good evening, Mr. Humble,” he exclaimed. “How are you, Harry? I’m like the bad penny, you see. Most comfortable spot I’ve seen for several hours.”

Mr. Humble swallowed hard. He began to wonder whether he had said a little too much. There was something very opulent and genial about the newcomer. Something very benevolent about his expression. Something which suggested a continual stream of warm and comforting drinks and no cold-blooded allusions to the slate. Nevertheless—he felt a sudden pain in his eye. The landlord too was watching him with interest.

“What about a hot whisky just to keep the cold out?” Pank suggested cheerfully. “Hot water and a slice of lemon, eh?”

Mr. Humble knew what was due to him as a man and he tried to forget what hot whisky would taste like.

“You dirty little tike,” he said bitterly.

Pank paused in the act of removing his overcoat.

“Mr. Humble,” he remonstrated, “what’s wrong with you?”

“You and your heels!” was the caustic reply. “I know all about you, Pank. You’re a sneak cop, that’s what you are.”

“Steady, my friend, steady,” Pank begged, as, divested finally of his overcoat, he wheeled one of the easy-chairs up to the fire. “You mustn’t talk like that, Mr. Humble. It isn’t gentlemanly. Besides, it might lead to trouble.”

“I’ve been in that, thanks to you,” Mr. Humble growled.

Pank looked him over quickly.

“Now, who’s been making a mess of you like that?” he asked. “Letting your tongue run away with you, I expect, eh? Well, don’t take any more risks. I’m quick-tempered myself sometimes. Harry, get the hot water and lemon. Humble, my friend, draw your chair up.”

“I don’t know as I want to drink with a sneak cop,” Mr. Humble muttered sullenly, moving a step or two, however, towards the fire.

“Don’t be an ass,” Pank laughed. “We all have to follow our professions. You might have been hangman to-day if you could have kept from the drink. Nasty job! I should think keeping you from it was the best thing drink ever did for you. I’m a sneak cop as you say—Detective Inspector Pank of Scotland Yard, if you please. You mayn’t like my profession. I should have hated yours. Come and sit down and tell me who’s been knocking you about.”

Mr. Humble walked to the chair as though mesmerised. He sat down, gazing stealthily all the time at his companion.

“Don’t get opening your mouth too wide,” he growled. “I was just a carpenter down at Wandsworth. I couldn’t have taken that other job on.”

“Well, you didn’t, anyway, which is a good thing for you,” Pank replied. “Now tell me who’s been knocking you about?”

“A fellow I’ve never seen before in my life,” Mr. Humble complained, eloquent once more at the thought of his grievances. “Came up to me in Swan’s Alley, he did, and tapped me on the shoulder. ‘Your name Humble?’ he asked. ‘Well, mine’s Bowhill,’ he said. ‘I’m a chauffeur and I’m going to sock you one in the jaw.’ ‘What for?’ I asked. ‘You open your mouth too wide in Harry Chittock’s parlour,’ he said. ‘You’re such a fool—you don’t know a sneak cop when you see one.’ And with that he gave me this black eye.”

The landlord presented himself, carrying a tray upon which was a bottle of whisky, a jug of hot water and a lemon cut in slices. Mr. Humble looked at these preparations and sniffed. He was a lost man.

“You’re a young fellow,” he went on, as he watched the whisky poured into the glass, “that I took a fancy to the moment I saw you, Ernest Pank, but it wasn’t scarcely playing the game. I ask you now, we sits here friendly like, you ask me questions and, looking upon you as a pal, I answer unsuspecting like. I’m not complaining. I’m not threatening or anything of that sort. But I simply ask—was it quite playing the game?”

“It was not,” Pank admitted. “A little more whisky into Mr. Humble’s glass, Harry. Half and half, I said, you know. That’s what keeps the cold out. It was not playing the game, Mr. Humble, but I ask you, as a man of the world, to remember this—I was doing my duty. I am an officer of the Crown and I was doing my duty.”

“There’s something in that,” the other acknowledged, holding his tumbler tightly in both hands and praying for the moment when it would be cool enough for him to sip.

“Considering that you were a pal,” Pank went on, “I ought perhaps to have told you the truth at once. Well, anyhow, there you are. You know’ it now. I’m a Scotland Yard detective and there’s one thing always worth remembering

about us—if I ask for information and I get it, I’m willing to pay for it. Could anything be fairer than that, I ask you?”

“I don’t know as it could,” Mr. Humble confessed, warmed all through his body by that long delicious sip. “You know I like you, Ernest, my lad. If there’s anything I can tell you that it’s worth your while to hear—”

“And er—to pay for,” Pank murmured softly.

“Well, it’s yours,” Mr. Humble decided generously. “Ask me anything you choose, Ernest, and I’ll tell you the truth.”

“Now this is what I call getting comfortably together,” Pank declared, sipping from his own tumbler and lighting a gasper. “I’m interested, Mr. Humble, in those—er—four—or was it five men who were in that stunt with Lord Edward Keynsham.”

“Three,” his companion corrected him. “There was only three—I was the fourth. Queer blokes they was too.”

“Had you ever seen any of them before?”

“Never before and never wanted to since,” was the prompt reply. “Two or three odd little jobs I did for them besides finding them masks, and not so much as ten bob amongst the lot of them. And they say Americans are so generous.”

“They were Americans, then?” Pank asked swiftly.

“All three of ’em. One—the youngest—a fine, good-looking young fellow he was, reminded me in a way of Lord Edward, though he hadn’t got what you might call his polish. The other two were just ordinary-looking gents, well-dressed and all that sort of thing, but they wouldn’t have deceived *me*. They weren’t in the same class as his lordship.”

“You don’t know where they are now, I suppose?”

“Ernest, my lad,” Mr. Humble declared, small drops of perspiration standing out on his forehead from the heat of the liquor. “I do not. I ain’t seen them from that day to this. If I knew where they were, I’d tell you willing. If I knew any more about them, I’d tell you willing—but I don’t. They didn’t seem to me of much account.”

“It was Lord Edward Keynsham who sat at the other end of the table and talked to their prisoner?” Pank asked. “It was he who was running the whole affair, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was he,” Mr. Humble acknowledged. “The others had nothing to say to it. It was he who gave all the orders, although if I hadn’t seen him with my own eyes, I should never have believed it. He changed his voice and manner altogether like, directly he put on his mask.”

“You overheard no conversation between them?”

Mr. Humble scratched his head and, to assist his memory, his host refilled his glass.

“The young one that I was telling you about,” he reflected, “he seemed uncommon worried. He and Lord Edward talked for some time while they were waiting for the car. It was about that chap at Wandsworth who was condemned to be hanged. I couldn’t catch anything much of what they said, but the young one, he said to Lord Edward at the end—‘If they hang Brandt,’ he said, ‘the beast will do us dead as he’s done us alive.’ That’s every word that I can remember.”

“It’s something, Mr. Humble,” Pank assured him. “It’s a trifle, but it’s quite interesting. Now let me ask you this. In a way, it’s almost as important. What were Lord Edward’s orders to you about how far you were to go with the old gentleman? Were you really going to pop him off?”

Mr. Humble smiled a cunning smile.

“Ernest, my lad,” he remonstrated, “now think. You know me. I’m not a fool. If I’d popped him off at Lord Edward’s orders or any one else’s, where should I have been, if the truth had come out? None of that, thanks, for yours truly. I’ve seen the rope on a man, I’ve seen the job done. I’d rather die in my bed, thanking you all the same. His lordship’s orders were—‘Draw the lever, but put it out of touch. Bolt the trapdoor and see that nothing happens to the man, but let it go right up to the last moment.’ Well, the last moment had pretty near come when that telephone rings. After that, there was a rare scurry. In half an hour’s time, I should think it was, we were hard at work breaking the place up. That was as near to hanging any one as ever I’ve been.”

“Queer business altogether,” Ernest Pank said, as he absent-mindedly produced his pocketbook and pulled out two notes.

“A queer business it was,” the other admitted.

“Stick these in your pocket,” Pank invited, passing the notes across.

“It’s a welcome sight,” Mr. Humble confessed, transferring them eagerly to a place of security. “A queer business you’ve just called that, Ernest. You’re right—it was, and a hard business for me. I was the artist there, in control of the whole situation. Who else could have built that shed or that scaffold? Not a soul. Yet, would you believe me, when the time came for payment, every one there got a real handsome sum, but when my turn came, that skunk Edwards deducted about three months’ pay which he said I’d overdrawn. His lordship meant me to be dealt with generous, I know that, and I got about as much as the errand boy.”

Pank rose with a sigh, donned his overcoat and picked up his hat and umbrella.

“A dirty trick,” he said sympathetically. “See you later, Mr. Humble. Good-night, Harry . . .”

The landlord looked through the trapdoor with a grin a moment or two later.

“Help yourself, Mr. Humble,” he invited. “The bottle of whisky’s paid for. I’m glad you didn’t knock him about too much!”

Mr. Humble coughed as he helped himself with none too steady fingers.

“Too small,” he hiccupped. “I never could bring myself to hit a man that size.”



## Chapter XXIII

In his own two-seater Fiat, which was a very different affair from the crazy Ford in which he had last traversed these regions, with his own set of golf clubs behind and a properly packed suit case, Ernest Pank drove up, just before midday, to the Crown Hotel at Fakenham, garaged his car and entered the smoke-room bar. The same young lady was there and the same little collection of tradespeople.

“Good morning, everybody,” Pank greeted them cheerfully. “Good morning, Miss. Can I have a glass of sherry, please, and have you a room for the night?”

Almost as the words left his lips, he was conscious of the chill which had settled upon the room. His greeting was curtly received by the little sprinkling of customers. Mr. Formby, the butcher, noticeably refrained from making any response and coldly turned his back upon the newcomer. Jenkins, the saddler, looked dourly across at him. The others expressed their disapproval in characteristic fashions. The young lady tossed her head, served the glass of sherry from a bottle which contained little except dregs, and reported that the house was full.

“Dear me,” Pank said, unmoved, looking at the wineglass which was three parts full of cloudy liquid, with some specks of cork floating about. “I’m not in luck to-day, it seems.”

“Not here, at any rate,” the young lady replied.

He held the glass up to the light, set it down again with a sigh and ordered a glass of beer. He was served in silence. Afterwards he subsided into an easy-chair and lit a gasper.

“No rooms, I understand from the young lady,” he remarked to Sam Gleadow, the landlord.

“There’s a many coming and going,” was the vague reply. “We never know for sure.”

“Couldn’t you squeeze me in somewhere?” Pank asked amiably. “It’s only for one night.”

“I’m pretty sure we could not. I’m pretty sure o’ that. I’m not saying there ain’t rooms, because there are, but there ain’t any to let.”

Pank sipped out of his tankard thoughtfully.

“Would this rush of business prevent my having lunch here?” he asked.

“We can’t refuse food and drink to any as chooses to pay for it,” was the sullen reply. “That’s the law and we must abide by it.”

Pank finished his beer, raised his hat politely and left the place, crossing

the cobbled way and entering the coffeeroom. The waiter presiding there came unwillingly forward, allotted him a table—the most undesirable in the room—and left him to himself. Pank waited for a time, then he crossed to the sideboard, helped himself to cold beef and ham and returned to his place. The waiter reappeared with a scowl, in answer to his continual ringing of the bell.

“Bring me some bread, some butter and a tankard of beer,” his customer ordered. “And come here—a little closer to the table.”

The man obeyed reluctantly.

“I don’t want to get you into trouble,” Pank said, “but I shall do it, if I have any more of these bad manners from you. Understand that?”

The man was impressed and, against his own inclinations, he obeyed orders. Pank finished his lunch, lit a pipe and fetched his car out from the shed. He made no attempt to reestablish his popularity but drove out of the place and turned towards Keynsham. At the main gates he paused. The lodge keeper, who had opened them for him on the last occasion, came out into the road and looked at him doubtfully.

“What might you be wanting, sir?” he asked.

“I want to go up to the Hall,” Pank replied. “Can’t you open the gates?”

The man shook his head.

“Against orders, sir. His lordship’s away and the house is shut up. There’s no one there, so it’s no use, anyway.”

“Her ladyship told me I could come back any time and see the pictures,” Pank explained. “I have special permission from her. I have also a message to give her.”

“Well, her ladyship ain’t here,” the man confided. “So that’s that. Sorry, but orders is orders. The gates ain’t to be unlocked until we receive word.”

The man retreated into his cottage and closed the door. Pank reversed, drove for half a mile by the side of the tall grey stone wall, and reached a side entrance. The blowing of his horn produced the same result. This time an old woman, deaf as a post, came out and kept on repeating that the gates were closed by his lordship’s orders, and no one could pass. Pank climbed once more into his car and drove to the village. From here there was a rude entrance to the courtyard and back premises, through which on his last visit timber was being carted, and which was evidently used by the tradesmen. He turned in here but was immediately stopped.

“No road this way anywhere,” a man told him. “What do you want?”

“I want to visit the Hall,” Pank replied. “Her ladyship gave me permission to come and see some pictures and I have business with the gardener.”

“You had better write her ladyship, then. No one ain’t allowed up at the house for a time.”

“What’s wrong?” Pank enquired.

“Not your business, that I knows of,” was the surly response. “Don’t mind telling you, though, that some of these tourists have been found damaging the statuary. They’re a regular nuisance here, trapesing in at all hours of the day His lordship is the best-natured man in the world, but he has put his foot down. ‘While I am abroad,’ he says, ‘not a soul is to visit the Hall. Not a stranger to be allowed to pass.’ ”

“So his lordship is abroad, is he?”

“‘You want to keep a special look-out, Symons,’ he said to me—my name’s Symons—‘for folks that come here asking questions that ain’t any concern of theirs. Deal with ’em short, Symons,’ his lordship said. ‘I’ll see you through it.’ You understand me, sir?”

Mr. Symons was a red-faced, burly man with huge shoulders, and muscles which seemed to be straining against the sleeves of his velveteen coat. His fingers were locked around an ugly-looking ash stick.

“Yes, I understand you, Mr. Symons, I think you said your name was,” Pank meditated; “but I am not sure whether it is not my duty to go on up to the Hall, all the same.”

The man set his foot upon the step of the car and there was a very unpleasant expression on his face.

“Up to the house you doesn’t go and that’s all there is about it,” he pronounced. “You’re trespassing, as it is. Outside the gates! Right away.”

“Where’s the police station?” Pank asked.

“Bang opposite. And there’s a nice little cell there where you would sit comfortable for the rest of the day—and the night too.”

Pank slipped into reverse so quickly and noiselessly that his aggressor nearly lost his balance and fell backwards. He drove slowly down to the public house and entered. The landlord came out into the bar, wiping his hands.

“The bar is closed, sir,” he announced.

Pank pointed to the notice.

“I want a cup of tea,” he said. “You remember me, don’t you?”

The man admitted the fact.

“You was round here asking questions, a week or so back,” he reflected. “Wanted to know about Tom Bowhill, him as has gone to Canada.”

“That’s right,” Pank agreed. “I went up to the house that time and saw her ladyship. She told me I could finish looking at the pictures any time I liked. Now I’ve been there and the place is all locked up.”

“His lordship is away,” the landlord said curtly.

“His lordship was away last time I was there,” Pank commented, “but they didn’t behave as though they were frightened to let any one go up to the house.”

“Frightened! What are you talking about?” the man scoffed. “What’s

happened is that they've bloody well had enough of those tourists scratching their initials everywhere, damaging the pictures and pinching anything they could lay their hands on. I would close it for good, if I were his lordship, only he's too kind-hearted. If you want tea, sir, it will be three quarters of an hour. It's barely half-past two, and the missus hasn't got the kettle on. She's only just gone up to clean herself."

"Perhaps under those circumstances," Pank conceded, "I'd better not wait for tea. Would I be making myself still more unpopular if I asked whether his lordship was in London?"

"You can ask till your lips crack," was the discourteous rejoinder. "You'll get no answer from me."

Pank left the place and drove to the police station. He found Police Constable Choppin seated by the kitchen fire in his shirtsleeves. Something about the appearance of his visitor induced him to rise hastily to his feet. Pank handed him a paper and undid his coat. The man saluted clumsily.

"I'm off duty for an hour, sir," he confided. "I go on at half-past three, as far as Corston village, and I am on night duty this week from twelve. There were some poachers reported—"

"Quite so, Choppin," Pank interrupted pleasantly. "Every man has a right to his hour's rest. I've been trying to get up to the Hall. What's the matter that they won't let any one in?"

"Had too many tourists there lately. That's what Mr. Aldiss, the steward, said," the man replied. "They're fair fed up with them."

"You have looked through my papers?"

"Certainly, Inspector."

"Very well, then. Don't be like the rest of these yokels and refuse to tell the truth when you are asked a question. What's wrong up at the Hall?"

"I hadn't heard, sir. I didn't know as there were anything wrong," the man declared with obvious sincerity.

"Front and back gates both locked," Pank went on. "No one allowed up, even to see the garden. What's the meaning of that?"

"Can't say, I'm sure, sir," the man asserted. "I did hear that his lordship said the next time he was away from home he'd have the place locked up, he was so tired of the damage them tourists did. They always came when he was away from home."

"There are not many tourists about at this time of the year, Choppin."

"It's the truth, sir, there ain't," the man admitted. "It did seem queer to I, but there it is."

"Is any one staying at the Hall?"

"Not as I knows on. Not any one who has been out in the grounds or round the village. I ain't heard any guns, either, except Foley, the keeper. He was

after some rabbits yesterday. No, I shouldn't say there was any one staying there, sir. There was a car one night about a week ago. It come through at a great pace and turned in at the lodge gates. They were expecting it too, for everything was all open, but it might have been her ladyship, for all I know. She do rush backwards and forwards from London, when the fancy takes her. Them young women nowadays," Constable Choppin concluded, "they do act anyhow."

"You haven't come across any one in the village who saw the car?" Pank asked.

"I can't rightly say us I have, sir. Tom Foals—I suspect he was sneaking along with a snare in his pocket—he did say he'd been to see a sick brother and was nearly knocked down. It come from the London road."

"One last question, Choppin. I won't remind you again that you are talking to a superior officer. I am just asking you a plain question. Have you any reason to believe that there has been anything going on up at the Hall to account for these locked gates? Any visitors who have been kept quiet?"

The man looked dazed.

"There ain't been no word or sign of anything of the sort, sir," he declared. "Why, his lordship he be away, and her ladyship, for all her pranks, is a decent enough young body."

Pank nodded and drew on his gloves.

"I'm not altogether satisfied, Choppin," he concluded. "There are two well-known persons missing, and there are certain indications that they may have been brought here. I must let it go at that, but I may be back in a day or so with a search warrant."

"What, to go over the 'all, sir?"

"Yes."

Police Constable Choppin grinned.

"Why, that be queer talk, Inspector," he commented. "There ain't a gentleman in Norfolk so high respected or who lives such a fine life as Lord Edward Keynsham. I'd as soon suspect him of doing anything wrong as God Almighty!"

Pank nodded as he stepped into his car.

"That's the sort, Choppin," he confided, "who always get away with it."

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Police Constable Choppin felt that his hour's rest was wasted. He was mystified and upset. His nature abhorred surprise or unsettlement. His favourite report to his visiting superior was—"Things do be as usual, Inspector"—and that was how he liked things to be. This was foolish talk about anything wrong at the Hall, he decided, peering through the gloom over the wall to where the great pile of buildings blotted out the sky.

“Them Londoners can be so darn foolish,” was his complacent soliloquy, as he went upstairs to wash and prepare for his afternoon’s round.

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It had been a moist afternoon, with a strong inland wind which had brought up masses of black clouds, and then, suddenly abating, had left them brooding in the sky, overwhelming the earth with premature darkness. Police Constable Choppin tightened his belt, felt to see that his lantern, his truncheon and his matches were all in place, and opened the door of his cottage to step out on to the cobbled way. He found himself confronted by a familiar figure—the much worshipped figure of the great lady of the neighbourhood. She stood with her arm through the bridle of the horse from which she had just dismounted.

“Good evening, Choppin,” she greeted him.

“Good evening, your ladyship.”

“I hear there has been a stranger around, trying to get into the Hall,” she continued. “The same little man who was here a week or so ago.”

“I have seen him, your ladyship,” Police Constable Choppin replied, with some embarrassment. “In fact, he’s been here.”

“What did he want?”

The constable coughed.

“He didn’t rightly say, not so as to make it clear,” was the dubious answer. “He just come in to enquire if I knew any reason why the house should be all shut up.”

“What other questions did he ask you?”

“Well, your ladyship,” Police Constable Choppin reflected, “they were not what you might call exactly definite questions. He wanted to know if there was any visitors staying up along.”

“He did, did he? What did you tell him?”

“I told him not as I know’d on.”

“Did you tell him anything else, Choppin?”

The man was a little uncomfortable.

“I did tell he of the motor car late one night about a week ago.”

“Ah!” she murmured.

It seemed to Choppin that his visitor’s face was very white in the shadowy darkness which had crept down upon them. A spot of rain fell.

“Your ladyship had better be hurrying,” he said. “That cloud ain’t there for nothing.”

“Did he say anything else?” Lady Louise persisted.

Choppin felt that this might probably be the crisis of his life. He saw himself at one moment a sergeant with a larger garden and even an allotment. He saw himself almost simultaneously degraded to civilian’s clothes and turned out of the force. He was called upon to take a decision. He took it

without undue hesitation, for her ladyship's eyes shining out of that pale face were curiously compelling.

"He did say something about going away and perhaps coming back with what us calls a search warrant, your ladyship," he confided. "I made bold to laugh at he, I did. A search warrant for Keynsham Hall! No one ever heard of such a thing."

Louise turned away. She sprang lightly on to her horse's back before Choppin could offer his clumsy assistance.

"The same funny little man, I expect," she remarked lightly. "I'm sure you were very discreet, Choppin. You know how his lordship hates too many strangers around the place. Good-night."

"Good-night, your ladyship."

She cantered away into the darkness. Police Constable Choppin tightened his belt. On the whole, he was well pleased with himself. He felt somehow or other that he had progressed a step nearer that coveted stripe.

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A matter of twenty miles away Amy was standing on the stone step at the back of her millinery establishment and looking dejectedly out into the dripping streets. The rain was falling in a steady downpour. There were pools of water everywhere and a perfect torrent racing down by the side of the curb. She had no mackintosh. She had stayed late to finish some work and there was a dearth of escorts. Suddenly she found herself sheltered by a large and fat umbrella and an arm was drawn through hers.

"Kept me waiting near half an hour," a familiar voice grumbled. "Come along, child. I've a cab at the corner."

"Ernest!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

He stooped and kissed her rain-glistening cheeks.

"Come along," he invited, leading her along. "We'll drive home and I'll wait while you change your things. Afterwards, I'll take you out to dinner."

"Wait till we get to the cab," she sighed happily.

## Chapter XXIV

Seated at a corner table in the comfortable coffeeroom of the Maid's Head, with dinner, consisting of a sole, cutlets and sweet omelette ordered, and a bottle of Burgundy in its cradle already in evidence, Pank asked his cousin the question which had been puzzling him for some little time.

"Why did you make me stop at the corner of the street to-night, Amy? What was the matter with my going in to see Uncle and Aunt?"

She twisted and untwisted her slim fingers restlessly. She was looking rather fragile but remarkably pretty, her cousin thought, in her dark red costume and black hat.

"Dad and Mummie have got some silly idea into their heads, Ern," she confided. "I'm not going to have any secrets from you. You remember the chauffeur, Bowhill, who lodged with us before you, and that you were so curious about?"

"Yes, I remember him," Pank acquiesced.

"Well, he's been around asking questions about you. I think he's a horrid man. Keep out of his way, Ernest, if you see him, there's a dear."

"Why should I?"

She moved uneasily in her chair. A waiter presented two cocktails upon a salver.

"What on earth do I do with this?" she asked, as she accepted the glass.

"Drink it, with your love to me," he enjoined, "as I do with my love to you! You'll feel strong enough then to tell me this terrible news, and I shall feel brave enough to hear without trembling what your friend Bowhill is going to do to me."

"He's not my friend," Amy declared vigorously. "Oh, Ernest, what a lovely drink!"

"Don't leave a drop," he advised. "That's right. Now let's hear all about it."

"Well, you know Mother and Dad rather liked him," she went on. "He's been in to see them several times. He was in yesterday and he wasn't very nice about you, Ernest."

"That's too bad."

"He says you're one of the biggest liars in the city," the girl confided. "He says that you don't sell heels at all, but that you're a detective and that you've come down here, fooling every one and worrying around to find out things about his master."

"And what do Uncle and Aunt say to that?"



"They don't like it," she admitted. "Dad says it's all very well to be a detective—it's a respectable profession enough—but you've no call to be deceiving your own relatives."

"Well, there's one of them here I won't deceive any longer," Pank declared cheerfully. "Help yourself to the rolls and butter, Amy, and summon up your courage. He's telling the truth. I know no more about heels than the man in the moon. I am a detective—a Scotland Yard detective too—and I've just been made an inspector. I had your Dad's friend Bowhill up in London for examination a few days ago, and he's not far off being in trouble, I can tell you that."

"Ernest dear, it sounds wonderful. An inspector too! But why didn't you tell Dad all about it?"

"Don't be silly, dear," he begged. "It was my business to find out about that man Bowhill, and I did. I shouldn't have found out anything if I'd gone telling anybody, even my own people, that I was a detective. It's a very serious matter I've been engaged upon. I have been lucky, and the Chief has used me before half a dozen men who were my superior officers. If I bring it off as I hope—"

"Well?"

"Here comes the fish," he pointed out. . . .

"You're a very aggravating person," she complained.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I never know whether you are really fond of me, or whether you are making use of me to make people believe that you are a commercial traveller and just my cousin."

"That's clever of you," he approved. "Have some sauce with your fish."

"I'll give you some you won't like in a minute, if you make fun of me," she retorted.

Ernest Pank smiled quietly to himself. He was, in the ordinary affairs of life, a simple-minded person, and he was very fond of Amy. He had almost made up his mind to tell her so, when he was conscious of a sudden thrill of alien interest. A girl had entered the room, wrapped in beautiful motoring furs and a black béret, from the front of which flashed a diamond ornament. She was followed by a maid carrying a dressing case. The head waiter and the manager of the hotel both hurried forward and escorted her to a table. She sat down a little wearily, sent away the maid, ordered some dinner, and talked to the manager for a few moments. Presently the latter left her and she leaned back in her chair. Amy caught at her companion's arm.

"Do you know who that is?" she asked, in an excited whisper.

He fenced with the question, but she was too interested herself to notice the fact.

"It's Lady Louise Keynsham," she confided. "The sister of Lord Edward. They live at Keynsham Hall."

"She's a very attractive-looking young woman," he remarked.

He watched her tear the menu in half, scribble something on the back, summon a waiter and give him whispered directions. The man brought the message to Pank. He glanced it through, hesitated for a moment and rose to his feet.

"Do you mind being left alone for a minute or two, Amy?" he asked. "Lady Louise wants to speak to me."

She looked at him in astonishment.

"But you don't know her, do you, Ernest?" she demanded.

"She appears to know me," he replied evasively.

"Of course, I don't mind," Amy assented. "Hurry, dear, I'm dying to know what she wants."

Pank crossed the room and stood before Louise's table. She welcomed him with a pleasant but somewhat enigmatic smile.

"Still on vacation, Inspector?" she enquired.

"Not this time," he replied. "I'm engaged, as a matter of fact, on very serious business."

"Still trying to discover," she continued, "what happened to Sir Humphrey Rossiter on his night drive to London last month?"

Pank shook his head gently.

"I know all about that," he confided.

"Then what are you still doing down here?" she asked.

His eyes twinkled for a moment. Lady Louise looked very charming, but he took eager note of the anxiety lurking in the depths of her eyes.

"There is a kind of etiquette in our profession," he told her, "stupid, of course, but there it is—that one's first reports must be made to one's superior officer. Therefore I cannot explain exactly what I am doing down here, Lady Louise."

"Have you discovered Sir Humphrey's hiding place?"

"You know that he is missing again, then?" he countered quickly. "How do you know? There hasn't been a word of it in the papers."

"Yes, I knew that he had disappeared," she acknowledged.

He became suddenly very much in earnest.

"Lady Louise," he said, "it doesn't do for honest people to work against the police. It never pays in the long run. I wish I could make you believe this. I wish you could make your brother believe it."

"What are you talking about?" she exclaimed. "My brother is abroad."

"He may be," was the quiet reply. "That does not affect the matter."

"Do you seriously believe," she persisted, "that either of us—my brother or

I—know anything about Sir Humphrey’s disappearance?”

“You knew that he had disappeared, which was more than any one outside Scotland Yard and the servants at Chestow Square knew,” he reminded her.

“You are too clever for an ingenuous person like myself,” she remarked a little scornfully.

“On the contrary,” he replied, “it seems to me that you or your entourage have up till now proved yourselves much cleverer than the whole of Scotland Yard. We do not know where Sir Humphrey is. You and your friends do. We learn a little every day. All the time we draw nearer to the truth. I don’t imagine it is news to you to hear that I spent the earlier part of the day around Fakenham and Keynsham.”

“I don’t see what good that did you,” she observed, watching him carefully all the time.

“I certainly found a strong disinclination towards conversation on the part of every one I spoke to,” he admitted. “At the same time, there are the police, you know.”

“You wouldn’t get much out of Choppin,” she reflected, with a little smile.

“I’m not so sure,” he answered. “What a man refuses to say is sometimes as important as what he says. Choppin is very much between two stools.”

“So I gather! Didn’t I hear something about a return visit of yours with a search warrant?”

“Is that why you are on your way to London?” he asked swiftly.

“Really,” she murmured, taking a cigarette from her case and tapping it upon the table. “You detectives get into the habit of asking such a multitude of questions that you put every one on the rack. I cannot even talk to you for a moment civilly but you try to drive me into a corner. How do you know that I am on my way to London?”

“Part of that marvellous insight with which we are gifted,” he confided. “You certainly appear to be equipped for a motor journey—maid, jewel case and all. Of course, you may be going to some other place, but I don’t fancy you are. The only thing I should like to know is—are you alone?”

“Well, that is one question I can answer,” she told him. “I am alone. If you like to step out into the courtyard, you will see my Bentley coupé and you can question my chauffeur, who is sitting in the room just across the way, having his supper. We are en route for London and we are alone.”

He reflected for a moment.

“You would be! Perhaps, after all, my visit this afternoon may have produced results.”

“What a conceited person you are!” she remarked.

He shook his head.

“Believe me, I am not that, Lady Louise,” he assured her. “I cannot even

convince you of the most obvious thing in the world.”

“Which is?”

“That whether it is at your brother’s instigation or not, it is the most foolish thing in the world to enter into any enterprise of any sort which is in direct opposition to the law.”

“Thank you for coming over,” she said, with a gesture of dismissal. “You must not leave the young lady alone any longer. I’m glad to gather from what you say that you have not yet blundered across the truth.”

“I hope, for your sake, that we may not, before you have made up your mind to tell us, Lady Louise,” Pank replied.

He took his leave with a stiff little bow and crossed the room to where Amy was eagerly awaiting him.

“Well,” she enquired curiously, “whatever did she want?”

“Just to ask me a few questions.”

“Why, you looked as though you were both quarrelling all the time.”

“Well, we weren’t,” he assured her, settling himself down once more in his place. “We were like two fencers in the dark, making passes at each other. We both touched once. But let’s forget about her ladyship now and talk about ourselves. This sole is fine.”

“Delicious,” she agreed.

“And I like having meals with you alone,” he told her.

“So do I, better than anything in the world,” she confessed.

“Let’s have ’em together all the time, shall we?” he suggested, a speech which, although it may have seemed to lack romance, was exactly the speech for which Amy had been longing.

It was perfectly clear, from the moment they crossed the threshold of the little house in Chapel Fields Terrace, that Inspector Ernest Pank was faced with a hostile reception. His uncle, with spectacles pushed well back on his forehead and newspaper lowered, frowned at him coldly, without indulging in any form of salute. His aunt heaved a deep sigh and wagged her head sorrowfully.

“So you’ve been out with this cousin of yours, have you?” Mr. Pank remarked to his daughter. “Is that why you went off this morning without saying a word?”

“It was not,” Amy declared. “I didn’t know Ernest was in the city. He came to meet me after business.”

“Then he’d better not come again,” Elijah Pank pronounced, with portentous emphasis. “Do you hear that, young man?”

“I hear, but I hope you don’t mean it,” was the good-natured reply.

“When I say a thing I always mean it.”

“What’s wrong with me?”

“Your sneaking ways,” Elijah Pank confided. “I was never over-fond of the police, though I’m a right-living man myself, and for you to come down here and deceive your own folks with a tale of your being a respectable commercial traveller doing big business, and all the time ferreting and worming about, ain’t my idea of straightforward behaviour. That’s how we feel about it, young man—me and your aunt—so you’d better pick up your hat and go where you’re more welcome.”

“He’s welcome here,” Amy asserted passionately.

“Well, he ain’t. Not with me, at any rate,” her father rejoined, rustling his newspaper fiercely.

“Look here, Uncle,” his nephew begged earnestly. “I’m not going to quarrel with you, but you’ve got to look at this differently. Amy says you’ve got a weakness for the young man that was your lodger here and maybe he’s prejudiced you against me. We’ve had to have him up at Scotland Yard, but we’ve let him go. He broke the law, in a sense, but he did it at his master’s orders. All the same, we had to find out about it. If I’d come down here as Detective Pank, I shouldn’t have discovered what I wanted to know, either here or at another place in the city.”

“Yes,” Elijah Pank grunted. “Up at the Cat and Chickens. What sort of a job do you think that is—to sit up there at night and make a loose-mouthed man drunk, and worm out of him what he’d been paid good money not to tell?”

“That man, too, had broken the law,” Ernest Pank pointed out. “The police have to use their own methods to get at the truth. When there’s been a crime committed, people don’t come and give them information just for the fun of it. Your friend Tom Bowhill was serving his master. I’m serving mine. You may know who his is. Mine is the King.”

“Fine words,” his uncle muttered.

“There’s common sense behind them,” Ernest Pank insisted. “I’d rather be a soldier than a detective, if I were built for it, but we’re both serving the Crown. If we have to use subtleties sometimes, instead of our fists, we don’t do it to bring innocent people into trouble.”

“And making believe to be fond of Amy,” Mrs. Pank complained, mopping at her eyes. “That poor girl hasn’t been the same since you took to coming along. Fretting! It’s my belief that’s what she’s been doing all the time. It’s all very well to call yourself a servant of the King, Ernest, but that spying work means deceitfulness, and you can’t get away from it.”

“Well, there’s no deceitfulness about Amy and me,” Ernest Pank assured them. “We decided to get married about an hour ago and we came straight down here to tell you.”

The paper fluttered out of Elijah Pank’s fingers.

“Did you ever hear the like?” he exclaimed.

“Did you ever hear the like?” Mrs. Pank echoed. “Amy, my child, come to your mother.”

“Not unless it’s all right about Ernest,” Amy stipulated, with a defiant sob in her throat.

Elijah Pank rose and held out his hand.

“I take back what I said, Ernest,” he declared. “You’ve spoken up like a man and maybe I was hasty.”

“Ernest always was the one of the family I had a fancy for,” his aunt declared, offering her capacious person for an embrace.

“If you’d been ten minutes earlier,” his completely mollified uncle said, with a regretful glance at the clock—

Ernest slipped out of the room and came back again with a brown-paper parcel which he had left in the hall.

“Fetch out the glasses, Aunt,” he enjoined cheerfully.

“Well, I never,” the latter exclaimed, as she opened the cupboard. “Champagne wine, indeed!”

Amy threw her arms around her cousin’s neck and drew his lips to hers.

“Thinks of everything, doesn’t he?” she murmured happily.

## Chapter XXV

At about the hour when Detective Inspector Pank, on the following day, stepped out of the afternoon express from Norwich at Liverpool Street Station, Parkins, Sir Humphrey Rossiter's impeccable butler, purely in order to pass the time, was polishing a set of silver salvers in the pantry of the house in Chestow Square. Directly in front of him was a row of electric bells and indicators. He was just adding the finishing touches to a very artistic piece of work when one of the former rang. He glanced up carelessly enough. It was a question of front door or side door, for the house itself was empty of occupants. Number six would have been the front door, number eight the side entrance. The indicator was down at number three. Parkins stared at it in blank and speechless amazement.

"What's wrong with you?" Mrs. Bowman, the cook, asked, looking in at the door from her comfortable kitchen.

Parkins was temporarily bereft of words. He pointed to the indicator.

"Number three," Mrs. Bowman exclaimed. "Why—why, isn't that—"

Parkins finished the sentence for her. He laid down with great deliberation the salver which he had been cleaning.

"It is Sir Humphrey's own room," he announced. "One of those wenches you keep in order so well, Mrs. Bowman, has gone off the deep end again. If this is a practical joke, she will hear of it from me."

Nevertheless, in accordance with his usual custom, Parkins wiped his hands upon the chamois leather, untied his baize apron and donned his coat before he mounted the stairs. Halfway up the bell rang again. He indulged in a little shiver. He was not a superstitious man, but the sound of a bell ringing from his master's room, which had naturally been kept fast closed, was in itself disconcerting. The habits of the perfect servant persisted, however, and, arrived on the front staircase, he paused outside the door of the room and knocked respectfully. Then he gave a little gasp. A familiar voice replied in a tone somewhat sharper than ordinary.

"Come in!"

Parkins pushed open the door with trembling fingers. Sir Humphrey himself was standing before an open cupboard, apparently inspecting his wardrobe. He had a towel in his hands as though he had just come in from the bathroom.

"That you, Parkins?" he asked, without turning round. "I rang twice."

Parkins sought in vain for words of apology, but it was useless. For those first few moments he was speechless.

“Telephone at once to Whitehall,” Sir Humphrey directed, seemingly not noticing the man’s confusion. “Ask Mr. Carthew to come around at once and bring any important papers needing immediate attention. Afterwards bring me a whisky and soda into the library and put out my dinner clothes.”

“Very good, sir. We are—I’m sure every one will be—we are very glad to see you back again, Sir Humphrey.”

The latter nodded in not unkindly fashion.

“Thank you, Parkins,” he said. “The Nursing Home was severe and in many respects inconvenient. I was glad to get away. Home, after all, is the best place when one is not feeling quite up to the mark.”

“And Mrs. Brandt, sir?” the man ventured.

His master raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, you are thinking of the Sunday night when she didn’t arrive for dinner. She apparently wrote a note which I never received. Mrs. Brandt is quite well, I believe. Go and ring up Carthew at once.”

“You will pardon me, sir,” Parkins said, looking back from the door at his master’s apparel, “but your second-best dinner clothes will have to do. You were wearing your best ones last time we saw you.”

Sir Humphrey nodded.

“So I was,” he remarked indifferently. “The second-best ones will do quite nicely. I am not leaving the house.”

Sir Humphrey, who was dressed in a very well-cut blue serge suit, descended by the front stairs and made his way to the library, where fortunately a fire had been lit each day. Parkins found him there, when he entered a few minutes later, leaning back in an easy-chair and reading the morning paper with interest.

“Parkins,” his master said, as he accepted the tumbler of whisky and soda, “you will remember when you entered my service I told you that there were two qualities I appreciated in a servant?”

“I remember something of the sort, sir.”

“One was never to show curiosity and the other was silence. Remember that, please. I have been away and I have returned. If you read the morning papers, you will see that I have been in a Nursing Home. You can accept that item of news as the true and only explanation of my absence. You can leave the whisky on the sideboard and put my clothes out. Light a fire in my bedroom. As soon as Mr. Carthew comes, he can be shown in here.”

“Very good, sir,” the man murmured. “Certainly I will remember what you say, sir.”

“The unusual circumstances of my departure,” Sir Humphrey continued, “the fact that I left by the window and in dinner clothes, you can forget. What really happened was simple. I worked myself into a nervous state of anxiety



over the nonarrival of my expected guest. I felt unwell and went out to see my doctor. He sent me to a Nursing Home for a few days.”

“I quite understand, sir.”

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“Sir Humphrey, thank God you are back!” Carthew exclaimed, as he came breathlessly into the room a quarter of an hour later. “This is a wonderful surprise.”

It was obvious that the young man had struck the wrong note. Sir Humphrey frowned irritably.

“Thank God for what?” he demanded.

“Why, for finding you back again, sir, safe and well. I could scarcely believe my ears when Parkins told me over the telephone.”

“My dear lad, don’t be absurd,” his employer enjoined. “I left a trifle hurriedly, perhaps, but that was no one’s business except my own. I’m glad to see you had the good sense to keep everything out of the papers.”

“Scotland Yard saw to that, sir. The stipulated time would have been up tomorrow, though. We couldn’t have kept your absence a secret any longer.”

“That may be why I’ve come back,” was the dry retort. “I hope you have brought the Russian papers with you.”

“Certainly, sir. I brought them and all the other letters which you ought to see.”

“I’m ready to start at once,” Sir Humphrey announced. “Draw that little table to the fire. I don’t think the *chauffage* has been working.”

“Certainly, sir,” the young man assented, doing as he was bid. “First of all, though, hadn’t I better be doing some telephoning? We ought to let people know you are back. Scotland Yard, for instance.”

“Scotland Yard? Good Heavens, no!” Sir Humphrey scoffed. “I hope they haven’t been making a fuss just because I chose to go away quietly for a few days. That’s the worst of Matterson. He scents mystery and crime everywhere. . . . No, I don’t want to ring any one up, Carthew. Get out the papers while I light my pipe. We’ll do an hour or so’s work before dinner.”

“What about the P.M. sir?” the secretary queried.

His Chief indulged in a little grimace.

“Well, I suppose you had better just report to him,” he consented ungraciously. “Don’t make any fuss about it. Say that I found the Nursing Home uncomfortable, that I’m much better, and that I decided to return here this afternoon.”

Carthew, who was still feeling rather like a man in a dream, did as he was bidden. Presently he looked across the room, the receiver in his hand.

“The Prime Minister insists on having a word with you personally, sir,” he announced.

"He would," the Home Secretary muttered, rising to his feet. "All right. Give me the extension."

He drew the instrument towards him.

"Hello, sir," he began. "This is Rossiter speaking."

"My dear fellow, how wonderful!" was the prompt and enthusiastic reply. "How amazing! Whenever did you turn up and where on earth have you been?"

"Every one seems very upset at my return," Sir Humphrey observed gruffly. "I only went down to a Nursing Home for a few days. I wasn't feeling quite the thing, but I'm all right now. Carthew is with me and we're going into that Russian business. I shall be here until I go to bed, if you want me. Tomorrow I shall be at Whitehall, and in the House in the afternoon."

"But tell me—"

"Rotten connection, isn't it?" Rossiter interrupted. "I can't hear a word. See you to-morrow."

He rang off and put the receiver on the hook with a grin which was reminiscent of his old self.

"That will hold old Tresham for a bit," he remarked. . . .

For two hours Sir Humphrey went through an accumulation of papers and Ronald Carthew confided afterwards to several of his associates that he had never known his Chief so brilliant or so lucid. His decisions, always correct, were almost instantaneous. He seemed to have recovered all his old energy.

"Well, that's everything, sir," the young man said at last, packing up his despatch case. "A wonderful afternoon's work, Sir Humphrey, if you'll allow me to say so. I thought it would have taken at least two days to clear up all these things. Shall I come here in the morning, sir, or be at Whitehall?"

The Home Secretary considered the matter.

"You had better stay here in the house," he decided. "Your room will be ready for you, I'm sure. You can send for your typist, if you like, or you can write the necessary letters yourself and be at hand, in case I want you again. Besides, there's that infernal telephone. I expect that will be going half the evening."

"I'll be on hand, anyway, sir," Carthew promised, as he took his leave.

Sir Humphrey arranged his reading lamp and helped himself from a pile of newspapers. His reading, however, was somewhat perfunctory. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed upon a blank space upon the opposite wall. Here, with only the muffled and familiar sound of traffic in his ears, he was conscious of a genuine sense of isolation. His brain had never been keener than now, when he tried to face this new and grizzly problem that had come into his life. Memory, imagination, logic—they were all there, responsive, vitalized, slaves of his will. Nothing made any difference. His mind could do little

except move in cycles. Always it came back to that eternal cul-de-sac, that torturing monosyllable—why?

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Carthew made abrupt and apologetic entrance, and Rossiter, by no means unwilling, dropped down to earth again.

“I couldn’t stop them, sir,” he announced. “I did all I could, but Colonel Matterson is on his way. They’d heard from Downing Street, I suppose. He’ll be here directly, I should think.”

Sir Humphrey shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose I shall have to see him some time or other. Better get it over.”

“You know what your predecessor said, sir,” Carthew reminded him, with a smile. “A Cabinet Minister can never indulge in the unusual.”

“All because I left the house by the window.”

The Home Secretary sighed with a somewhat weary gleam of humour in his eyes. From outside came the sound of a rapidly driven car brought suddenly to a standstill. The front doorbell rang. There were voices. Colonel Matterson was duly announced. He came forward with outstretched hand.

“My dear Sir Humphrey,” he exclaimed, “this is wonderful. What a relief! You will excuse me, but what a relief!”

“Sit down, my dear fellow,” Sir Humphrey begged. “Aren’t you rather overdoing these expressions of relief? I suppose I was bound to come back some day.”

Colonel Matterson regarded him curiously.

“Well,” he said, “a man who walks out of his front window in his dinner clothes, without leaving word or message behind him, and reappears ten days later, without having communicated with any of his friends in the meantime, certainly presents something of a problem. You have had one ugly adventure lately; why shouldn’t we all imagine that something further had happened along the same lines?”

“Will you take anything?” Sir Humphrey asked.

Matterson shook his head.

“Not just now, thanks. I’m too interested to hear your story.”

Sir Humphrey selected a cigarette from an open box and lit it.

“I have no story,” he confided.

The Subcommissioner gasped.

“What do you mean—you have no story?” he demanded.

“Oh, there’s this much of a one, if you like,” Sir Humphrey conceded. “I left this room at about eight o’clock last Sunday week by the window.”

“Why did you leave by the window, to start with?” Colonel Matterson enquired. “I was only a few yards away.”

"I left by the window because I found it more convenient," Rossiter explained. "I came back this evening in a taxicab. The newspapers will tell you the rest. I've been in a Nursing Home."

The Subcommissioner very nearly lost his temper.

"But, damn it all," he exclaimed, "it was we who put the notices in the paper. We knew very well there was no question of a Nursing Home. We put it in to save your face and ours and stop gossip."

"One of the most sensible things you ever did," Sir Humphrey approved. "Having done it, let us accept it as the truth. Near Hastings, it probably was. Isn't that a good place for a Nursing Home? The sea breezes have completely restored me to health. I have done two hours' work already this afternoon and I have adopted the popular view with regard to the Russian business."

Matterson rose from his chair, came over to the hearthrug, and laid his hand upon Sir Humphrey's shoulder.

"Rossiter, don't let us bluff, please," he begged. "If you have any real solid reason for doing so, well, the whole thing can be kept from the public for a time. But just think—I'm not being egotistical—of what I represent. I represent the entire police system of Great Britain. Whether it's to be given to the Press or not, I should be told the truth. When it happens to be a Cabinet Minister who is involved, one who less than two months ago had a narrow escape from death, I don't ask for information—I demand it."

"Very well put, Colonel," the Home Secretary agreed. "And now here's my reply. I won't bluff with you. Twenty seconds before I did it, I had no more idea of walking out of the window in my dinner clothes than flying. Something happened, however, and I did it. I have been away for ten days and I'm back again. Now I have to think over the whole business. There are several issues involved. I no more understand certain things which are happening around me, or why I am in the business at all, than the man in the moon. Until I understand a little more about it, I'm not going to open my mouth to you or anybody else. I am the Home Secretary, who has been in a Nursing Home, near Hastings if you like, for a certain duration of time. That's quite good enough for the general public."

Colonel Matterson reflected.

"Is it really possible," he suggested, "that you are sheltering criminals?"

"It may be," the other asserted. "On the other hand, if I make a mistake, it will be myself who will pay."

"In plain words," Colonel Matterson went on, "you refuse to give any information or assistance to the men who have been working on your case. You are content to shelve the whole affair. You would like us to preach everywhere the Nursing Home story?"

"Precisely."

"I don't know how on earth we are going to explain matters to our own men," the Subcommissioner remarked gloomily.

"Why try?" Rossiter queried. "Explanations are the most vicious things in the world. I say that, who am going about with a note of interrogation in my brain."

"If we could only be a little more practical for a moment," the Subcommissioner groaned.

Sir Humphrey glanced at the clock.

"We will be," he agreed. "Half-past seven. I think if you will forgive my suggesting it, it is almost time you went home and changed for dinner."

Colonel Matterson reflected for a moment. He had one more thunderbolt to launch, and he decided that his companion was asking for it.

"I was hoping, Sir Humphrey, for more reasons than one," he confided, "that I should find you prepared to be entirely frank with us. If you persist in your present attitude, I think it only fair to tell you that we must go ahead as well as we can without your help."

Sir Humphrey laughed sardonically.

"You have been doing that all the time, haven't you?" he observed. "You haven't got much farther, though, that I can see."

There was a gleam of triumph in Colonel Matterson's eyes.

"Let me tell you this, Sir Humphrey," he said. "At Scotland Yard this morning I had a despatch from Inspector Pank, one of my men—vague, I admit, no definite information, I admit, but still assuring me that you would be back in London some time to-day."

"Rubbish! I didn't know I was coming, myself."

Colonel Matterson smiled once more. He accepted the other's incredulity as a compliment.

"It is perfectly true," he went on. "The little man who, alone of all my staff, has shown any insight in this matter, sent me a message which I received this morning, saying that I might expect to find you back home during the day. The message, by-the-by, came from Norwich."

Sir Humphrey whistled softly.

"My compliments to Inspector Pank," he murmured.

## CHAPTER XXVI

General Sir Harold Moore did not hesitate the next day to speak his mind frankly. He had occasion to pay an official call upon the Home Secretary at Whitehall and, his business finished, he turned the conversation to personal matters.

“I am going, sir,” he threatened, “to take a liberty.”

“I felt sure that you would before you left,” was the brusque reply. “Let’s get it over.”

“You have been the victim of one outrage lately, an outrage committed under most mysterious circumstances. I am glad to be able to tell you that one of my young detectives has pretty well got to the bottom of that.”

“Dear me,” Sir Humphrey remarked, with gentle sarcasm.

“In that matter,” the Chief Commissioner continued, without flinching, “we shall act entirely as though you were a private individual, and the law will take its course.”

“You will do nothing of the sort,” Rossiter pronounced firmly. “My office would lose every scrap of dignity it possesses if that story ever became known.”

“I might point out for your consideration,” the Chief Commissioner observed, a little nettled, “that a man was hanged through that night’s interference with your actions.”

Sir Humphrey’s swift look was steely, almost menacing.

“That was purely accidental. No one could have foreseen my approaching illness. Did you come here to remind me of that, General?”

“That was not in any way the purpose of my visit,” was the uneasy reply. “I have come to point out to you that, although you seem to take the matter very calmly, you have again become the victim of some sort of a plot or outrage, some sort of an illegal action, at any rate, or you would scarcely have disappeared without leaving a word of explanation and have stayed away for so long a period of time.”

“I don’t know,” Sir Humphrey murmured. “I was very comfortable.”

The Chief Commissioner, when he was worked up, was afraid of no one, and he spoke his mind.

“I cannot agree with you, sir,” he said sternly, “that this is a matter for flippancy. I would venture instead to point out to you that at Scotland Yard we are not quite so ignorant of what is going on as you seem to imagine. We know, for instance, that the host of the shooting party which you left at Keynsham—Lord Edward Keynsham—was himself, in some measure,

responsible for that first outrage upon you. We know also—or we have a very shrewd idea—where you have been, during this second disappearance. With these facts in our possession, we feel that we have the right to claim your entire confidence.”

Rossiter felt that he was being hard pressed, but he thought none the worse of his visitor for his pertinacity.

“How do you know that there was anything illegal about my absence?” he demanded. “A man is master of his own actions, even if he happens to be a Cabinet Minister. I can leave home for a few days at any time if I want to.”

“It is not a reasonable supposition,” the General persisted, “that you would leave your house, where you were waiting in a state of great anxiety for a delayed guest, and step out of the window in your dinner clothes without a word to your servants. There is no doubt in the mind of any person with common sense that you were decoyed away somewhere, and there is very little doubt but that your disappearance was associated in some way with the disappearance of Mrs. Brandt. Why do you handicap the course of justice by refusing information to which the police have a right?”

“Let me remind you, General,” Sir Humphrey pronounced, “that you jump to conclusions, when you state definitely that I was decoyed away. I acted that night, and I am acting now, as I think fit and best in my own interests and the interests of others, and I repeat to you what I have told Colonel Matterson—for the immediate present, I have nothing official to say.”

“You will permit me to remark—even if it involves handing in my resignation—that I find your attitude preposterous,” General Moore declared.

“Such a remark does not involve your resignation for one single moment,” was the suave reply. “I agree with you entirely. My attitude is preposterous, but then, you see, I am in a preposterous situation. I claim the right to use my own judgment in my struggle to escape from it alive.”

The Chief Commissioner responded quickly to the more friendly note in Rossiter’s tone. He was, nevertheless, very sad.

“You are notoriously a man of common sense, Sir Humphrey,” he acknowledged. “The position you have taken up is utterly incomprehensible, but no one, of course, can compel you to speak. I hope you will admit that I am only doing my duty in protesting.”

“Certainly I admit it, General. I should feel just the same, if I were you. Let me tell you this, if it makes you feel any more at ease—I may be keeping details back from you, but what the mischief this whole business means, in which I have become an unwilling participator, I can assure you that I don’t know. I am more mystified than any man ever was in this world. It is because I fear to do the wrong thing that, until I get a ray of light, I am keeping silent.”

“But silence means inaction,” the Chief Commissioner protested.

“And action might mean stirring up a hornets’ nest,” Rossiter rejoined. “One has to temporize sometimes to attain the best results.”

“But don’t you feel that you are in any danger?” the Chief Commissioner persisted.

“Possibly,” was the equable reply. “Fate deals out a certain amount of danger into the lives of every one of us. This particular risk which I am running now I am going to run for a short time longer.”

The General rose to his feet.

“I have nothing more to say,” he decided. “I daresay you realise that you have already the Cabinet Minister’s dole.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are under police protection so far as we can afford it. There are detectives in this building, one guarding your house and one will be on the outside of your car, or following it in a taxi whenever you leave here.”

“Have I asked for this sort of thing?” Sir Humphrey demanded.

“A request from you was not necessary,” was the dogged answer. “We have ourselves and our reputation to protect. Any one who has been threatened as you have is guarded as a matter of course. If anything were to happen to you, the first people to be blamed would be Scotland Yard.”

“I’m glad you have told me of this,” Sir Humphrey said, “because it gives me an opportunity to speak plainly. You will be so good as to withdraw these men.”

“I’m sorry,” the Chief Commissioner objected. “They are there in accordance with custom, and the necessity for their presence has already been proved.”

“No misunderstanding about this, please,” Rossiter insisted. “The three men are to be withdrawn. I won’t have my house watched. If any one wants to pay me a visit, as friend or enemy, I want the road to be open. Neither will I be watched here or in the streets. If any one wants particularly to assassinate me, a detective hanging around won’t improve my chances.”

“These are your orders, sir?”

“My definite orders. I will not be guarded. Especially I will not have the avenue to and from my house blocked.”

“Meaning that you actually want to get in touch with the criminals?” the Chief Commissioner suggested shrewdly.

Sir Humphrey shrugged his shoulders. For a moment he seemed at a loss.

“That is my business,” he answered.

There was a brief silence. There were a great many things which the Chief Commissioner was longing to say, but he was beginning to realise their hopelessness.

“Would you mind putting your orders in writing, Sir Humphrey?” he



begged.

The Home Secretary adjusted his eyeglass and scribbled a few lines which he handed over.

“That will let you out officially,” he observed, “if I am removed bodily again or transported to another sphere. Good morning, General. My first day back in harness and a busy one. Interviews are all curtailed. Forgive me.”

He rang the bell. The Chief Commissioner folded up the paper he had received and took his leave. Outside he tore it into small pieces which he dropped into the muddy street out of his taxicab window.

“How are we getting on, Carthew?” Sir Humphrey asked his secretary an hour or so later.

“We have cleared up everything important, sir, when you’ve signed one or two more letters,” was the cheerful reply. “It’s four o’clock now. No need for you to be down at the House until half-past seven or eight. I have ordered the car around. I thought you might like to rest at home for a short time. I can come along, in case there is anything there.”

“That sounds all right,” the Home Secretary agreed. “Bring the letters at once and we’ll get along.”

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Tea and buttered toast in the warm luxury of his study, a pipe of fragrant tobacco and a very comfortable chair. Sir Humphrey relaxed gratefully and shook out the *Times*. The wind was blowing outside but there was little to be heard through the closely drawn curtains. It was the most peaceful hour of the day. Carthew came in from his own room with some papers in his hand.

“Glad to see you looking so comfortably drowsy, sir,” he observed. “Do you good to take a nap. I’m afraid you will have to say a few words to-night about that Maryford affair. Simple business, though. I have all the notes here. There’s nothing else to trouble you about, except one caller.”

“Who is that?”

“A man I think you will have to see, sir. Mr. Debenham of the firm of Debenham, Twiss and Debenham. Excellent firm of lawyers in the West End. He has been asking to see you personally every day for a fortnight.”

“A firm of repute, you say?”

“Without a doubt, sir. Mr. Debenham, the one who is calling to see you, was in the House for some time—member for Wolverhampton. Lost his seat at the last election.”

“I remember,” Sir Humphrey murmured. “Yes, he must be all right. I will have a word with him when he calls. Meanwhile, take the telephone over to your room and leave me undisturbed.”

The period of quiescence was brief, however. It was less than a quarter of an hour afterwards when Carthew reappeared, ushering in the expected visitor.

Mr. Debenham, as a West End solicitor and representative of an old-established firm, conformed to type in every respect. He was fashionably but quietly dressed, pleasant, well-mannered and well-spoken.

“Terribly sorry to disturb you, Sir Humphrey,” he apologised, as he accepted the chair to which the latter motioned him. “It really is in a way, though, an urgent affair. It has to do with the estate of that poor fellow, Cecil Brandt, who was hung.”

“Good gracious!” Rossiter exclaimed. “How am I interested?”

“Well, curiously enough,” the other announced, “you appear to be one of his executors.”

Sir Humphrey frowned. This was a contingency which had never occurred to him.

“Brandt should not have done that without asking my permission,” he muttered. “I’m not at all sure, Mr. Debenham, that I shall feel inclined to accept office.”

“That course is quite open to you, sir,” was the courteous reply. “In your official position you would naturally have every excuse for refusing. I must tell you that Mr. Brandt’s affairs are largely in the hands of a New York firm of lawyers, for whom we in this country act only as agents. They asked us to see you to ascertain whether you would be content to serve and also to put one or two questions to you.”

“Mrs. Brandt is a very old friend of mine, as she was of my wife’s,” Sir Humphrey reflected. “Who is the other executor?”

“Only Mrs. Brandt.”

“Humph! That simplifies matters. What questions were you to ask me?”

“Well, they appear to be based upon the supposition that you were intimate enough with Brandt to know something of his affairs. The estate in New York is of considerable dimensions, but there seems to be an idea on the part of the lawyers that Mr. Brandt also possessed a large fortune over here.”

“I know no more about his affairs than the man in the moon,” Sir Humphrey declared. “He always had the reputation of being wealthy and he has certainly spent large sums at times—the theatre, for instance, which he gave to his wife.”

“Our correspondents speak,” Mr. Debenham confided, “of a large quantity of bonds, or similar securities, deposited on this side. They have no idea where they are, and his bank, although they hold a considerable balance, know nothing of any securities. I naturally called first upon Mrs. Brandt, but unfortunately she was away.”

“I see,” Sir Humphrey meditated. “Well, so far as information about poor Brandt’s estate goes, I’m afraid I am useless to you. I was on no sort of terms of intimacy with him. It was his wife entirely who was our friend.”

“That would make you the more acceptable to her as executor,” the lawyer ventured to remind him.

“I’m not saying that I will refuse the post,” Sir Humphrey confided. “I shall ask you to give me a day or two to consider it. I should say there is no doubt but that Brandt had money on this side somewhere. Only last year he offered to settle five hundred thousand pounds upon his wife if she would promise to leave the stage finally.”

“All the information we have been able to gather,” the lawyer observed, “points to Mr. Brandt having been a man of great wealth. The position will no doubt elucidate itself.”

“I gather the will is an American one?” Sir Humphrey asked.

“The only will we have knowledge of at present. We wondered, as there seems to be some mystery about the English estate, whether perhaps it was deposited in some way to avoid death duties. It seems certain, however, in that case that Brandt would have left a letter explaining things, and so far as I can gather, no one has received anything of the sort. You don’t happen to know of any intimate friend with whom Brandt might have left it?” the lawyer asked, as he rose to his feet.

“Not one,” Sir Humphrey confessed. “I used to see his name in the papers, with his wife’s as attending a great many of these social gatherings, but I myself have been somewhat of a recluse for the last few years. Good afternoon, Mr. Debenham. You shall have my reply very shortly.”

Sir Humphrey sat back once more in his chair with a little shiver of distaste. It was not a pleasant position. Executor to the hanged man!—And a large estate missing. He summoned Carthew.

“No one else, I hope?” he enquired.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” his secretary apologised. “A young American gentleman has been waiting for some time on the chance of seeing you. I know him slightly and didn’t like to turn him away altogether—Mr. Van Pleyden.”

“What does he want?” Sir Humphrey demanded a trifle irritably.

Carthew shook his head.

“He knows that I am your confidential secretary, sir, but he would not tell me. I explained that you were most unlikely to see him without knowing his business, but he decided to take his chance. For what it’s worth, sir, I might tell you that I met him in Washington, when I was at the Embassy. He was their best man at polo, almost good enough for the international game, and he put me up for the Racquet Club in New York when I came across him there.”

“So he’s that sort, is he,” Sir Humphrey observed, “and you feel under certain obligations to him. I quite understand, Carthew. I will see him for a few minutes. Afterwards tell Parkins to get a bath ready. I will change into another morning suit and go down to the House. No dinner at home, tell him. I will

have a cutlet there when I find out how things are going.”

Carthew picked up the letters which his Chief had signed and disappeared for a brief space of time. When he returned, he brought with him a tall, broad-shouldered young man, pleasant-faced, clean-shaven, of rather boyish appearance, but with several significant lines in his face.

“This is Mr. Van Pleyden, Sir Humphrey,” he announced.

“Sir Humphrey Rossiter,” the young American said, crossing the room with footsteps which seemed to eat up the ground, “I am proud and glad to know you, sir.”

## CHAPTER XXVII

Sir Humphrey liked the warm clasp of the young man's hand, and he liked too his frank expression. He had rather a weakness for Americans and this one seemed to be of a pleasant type. He welcomed him affably and pointed to a chair.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Van Pleyden?" he enquired.

"I have come on rather a curious errand, sir," the young man announced bluntly. "I want something you have in your possession."

Sir Humphrey felt a sudden chill. Vaguely the voice seemed to him to be familiar. He was conscious too of a vague odour, pleasant enough in itself, but reminiscent of throbbing moments of agony, the odour of aromatic soap or toilet water. His mind drifted back to those awful moments of his ordeal in Norfolk. He was oppressed with a sense of danger.

"First tell me who you are and then what you want," he suggested.

"That is simple enough," the other replied. "You know my name—Richard Van Pleyden. My people are well known in Washington and New York. I served for a time during the war and was afterwards in the Intelligence Department of Washington. When the war was over, they wanted me to become a bond salesman, but I couldn't stick it, so I became instead a secret service agent."

"What does that mean in America?" Sir Humphrey asked.

"Oh, we have secret service work of a sort there, and plenty of it," the young man confided. "I've been to Ecuador, for instance, twice, and to Mexico once. There wasn't excitement enough about it, though. Now I'm working for a syndicate—a very different matter. You have been away for some days, have you not, Sir Humphrey?"

"I have," the latter admitted. "Came back yesterday."

"Noticed nothing about your belongings?"

"My belongings? No. What should I notice?"

"Haven't looked in your safe, I suppose?"

"Good God, no! I don't open that once a month."

"Open it and have a look," Van Pleyden suggested.

Sir Humphrey rose to his feet and every instinct he possessed warned him to ring the bell and summon Carthew. He resisted, however, out of sheer obstinacy, crossed the floor of the room and opened the safe.

"Everything as you left it?" the young man enquired.

Sir Humphrey, who was genuinely startled, made no reply for a moment. He stared in dismay at the disordered chaos of papers.

“Rather an untidy mess, I’m afraid,” Van Pleyden continued. “We left the safe till the last and fancied we heard some one coming. Try your desk.”

Sir Humphrey unlocked his desk and looked through its contents, usually a miracle of neatness, now in obvious disorder. In a very few minutes he returned to his place.

“My papers, both in the safe and the desk, appear to have been disturbed and the contents of both thoroughly ransacked. Have you had anything to do with this?” he asked sternly.

“Certainly I have,” the young man assented. “You’re up against a pretty difficult proposition, you know, Sir Humphrey. Whilst you’ve been away, there is scarcely an inch of this house that has not been searched, and yet I’ll take a bet that your servants are as honest as the day. Well, I’ll own up, sir. You’ve put one over all of us. You’ve been too clever for us.”

“I’m glad of that,” Sir Humphrey remarked. “Quite reassuring.”

“So was the lady. There isn’t one of her boxes that has not been gone through, and the rooms she has been occupying have been searched just as thoroughly as yours. No luck. However, the situation at the present moment is slightly improved. We are here alone together, under favourable circumstances, and you have to sit there and face the question which I am going to ask you. Where is it, Sir Humphrey?”

“So you’re a secret service agent,” Sir Humphrey meditated, leaning back in his chair. “Forgive me for taking rather a professional interest in this matter.”

“Not in these days,” the young man replied. “That was what we used to call ourselves when we were in government employ. I quit Washington some years ago.”

“For whom are you working now, then?” Sir Humphrey enquired.

“Myself,” was the cool reply. “I am one of the syndicate.”

“What syndicate?”

“It’s just a little too early to ask that question,” Van Pleyden regretted. “We want something that either you or Mrs. Brandt must have. We have had a pretty good search for it and failed. During the last few hours, we’ve had absolutely definite information. We know now that we need not bother about the lady. It is you, sir, who have what we want. I am here to get it.”

“Your manner is good,” Sir Humphrey acknowledged; “original too. You might make yourself more comprehensible, though. For instance—what is it that you want?”

“You know that perfectly well, sir.”

“I can assure you that I do not.”

Van Pleyden smiled incredulously.

“We want the key,” he confided.

Sir Humphrey drew his bunch of keys from his pocket.

“Any particular one?” he asked.

“Cheap bluff,” the young man scoffed, shaking his head. “Cut that out. We want the key. We were inclined to think that Madam had it. We know now that you have. You’ve got us beaten as to where your hiding place may be, but it doesn’t matter. We want the key and you’ll have to produce it.”

The Home Secretary was beginning to feel that he liked this young man less and less. The gaiety and *bonhomie* of youth had left his face. Something more menacing and formidable had taken its place. After all, it would have been much wiser to have rung for Carthew when he was on his feet.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “I have no key that belongs to anybody else except myself.”

“Sir Humphrey,” his visitor said, “I came here hoping for a peaceful interview and that you would have sense enough not to make trouble. You see, the key is not yours. It did not belong personally even to the man who sent it to you. It belongs to us all and we are going to have it.”

“You could not tell me what it is the key of, I suppose?” Sir Humphrey enquired. “I am beginning to believe that if you would only be a little more confidential with me—”

“You lawyers are great word-makers,” the young man interrupted ruthlessly. “I am a doer and that is why I was chosen to come and see you tonight. I have no more time to waste. You are supposed to be an honest man, English Cabinet Minister and all that sort of thing. Give me that key and I’ll guarantee that the whole matter shall be dealt with fairly.”

Sir Humphrey leaned towards the bell and in a few seconds he knew what the Harvard tackle was like. He was back in his chair and his wrists were held in a grip such as he had never before experienced. He would have shouted for help but he was too late. His assailant had his fingers upon his throat. He was no longer such a nice-looking young man. He looked more like a murderer.

“Sir Humphrey, I’m a getter, I tell you. I’m going to choke you if you don’t give me that key. I mean it!”

The grip upon his throat was becoming a torture. Once more it seemed to Rossiter that he was looking death in the face. He could neither speak nor hear distinctly. The rumble of traffic seemed farther and farther away, the honk of a passing taxicab a faint muffled sound. He made a desperate effort at speech. The young man slackened his grip.

“Are you going to give it me?” he demanded.

“All that I want to know is—what the hell key you are talking about?” Rossiter gasped.

“You’ll be able to guess in a minute,” was the brutal reply. “You’re in the way, anyhow. We might square things with the key—without it you are

going.”

The brief respite was over. The fingers were back upon his throat and waves were beginning to flow before his eyes. Then, as once before the telephone had saved him, came another even more dramatic interruption. A brief command was snapped out from only a few feet away.

“Put your hands up. Quick!”

The young man stepped back. He was taken wholly by surprise. From between the curtains behind Sir Humphrey’s chair a man in dark clothes and a peaked cap had stepped out, and, although he was considered some gunman himself, Mr. Van Pleyden realised that he had never seen a revolver held by steadier fingers. His hands went up to the limit.

“Keep them there,” was the brisk command. “Don’t move an inch forward. Now take a pace backwards—one pace. Don’t let your hands even twitch.”

Van Pleyden obeyed. He recognised the voice of authority, and this was no fool who had seen the bending and twitching of his knee, who had seen him getting on the balls of his feet for a spring. Detective Pank thrust his left hand into his pocket and drew out a whistle. He blew it loudly and insistently. In less than ten seconds there was a thunderous knocking at the outside door and the pealing of the bell. The Home Secretary sat up in his chair.

“Who’s that?” he asked. “My neck is so stiff I can scarcely look around.”

“Inspector Pank, in charge of your night shift, Sir Humphrey. Just come on duty. The Commissioner’s strict orders were that we were to keep out of sight unless we were wanted. Seems to me we’re needed pretty badly just now.”

There was the sound of the front door being opened, of heavy footsteps in the hall. An eager light shone in Rossiter’s eyes. He felt his heart beating quickly. With the arrest of this young man must come the answer to that terrible query which had been making havoc of his life for the last two months. But the young man had not the slightest idea of being arrested. His backward step taken at Pank’s command had brought him almost into line with Rossiter. He suddenly ducked. In less than a second Sir Humphrey was exactly between his rescuer and his assailant. The latter, stooping low, pushed the easy-chair before him, and Pank, leaning forward, met the chair full in his stomach. He gasped for a moment. Still he dared not shoot.

“Crouch down, sir,” he shouted to Sir Humphrey. “Crouch down in the chair!”

It was too late. With one spring Van Pleyden, shielding himself to the last moment with the easy-chair, was through the window with a crashing and splintering of glass into the street. Crouching on his knee, Pank fired two low shots at the figure crossing the square and watched him stumble. The door of the room had been thrown open. Two plain-clothes men were by Pank’s side. He waved them on through the debris of the window.



“He’ll take the south side of the square for certain,” Pank shouted. “He cut his face and hands going through, and I got him in the calf of the left leg. If he turns to the left, one of you follow him directly and the other take the next turn and double back. You’ll get him between you then.”

The men were already out of hearing. Sir Humphrey staggered to his feet.

“Where on earth did you come from, officer?” he gasped.

“I was on duty, watching the house, sir,” Pank replied. “As soon as the young gentleman called, I opened this window softly from the outside, and I clambered through when I thought I was wanted. I should have been on hand before, but the orders at the Yard were very strict about keeping out of sight.”

“God bless my soul!” Rossiter muttered thickly, his fingers still lingering about his throat. “Parkins,” he added to the butler, who had hurried in, “whisky and soda for the Inspector and for me. . . . And I thought that young man was one of the nicest young fellows I had ever spoken to!”

Pank was busy tying up his finger, which had been cut by a piece of the flying glass.

“If he was one of the gang we have news of, sir, you’ve been lucky,” he remarked drily. “They’re killers, every one of them. What was he after?”

“A key,” Sir Humphrey replied. “The whole wretched business seems to centre now around a key. He would not believe that I didn’t know anything about it. My safe and my desk have apparently both been gone through whilst I was away.”

There was a startled exclamation from the background. Parkins had disappeared. Presently he came in again. He was carrying a silver salver and upon it, side by side with the whisky and syphon, was a soiled square envelope of cheap quality. It obviously contained something heavy.

“Sir Humphrey,” he said in great agitation, “I’m truly and deeply sorry. What with the excitement of the last few days and your coming back and everything being so upset, things seem to slip out of one’s mind. It was early one afternoon some two months ago—it was the day Mr. Brandt was hung down at Wandsworth—a warder from Wandsworth Prison brought across this envelope and left it for you. I put it on the kitchen dresser and there it has been ever since.”

Sir Humphrey opened the envelope. It contained no word or message of any sort, only a medium-sized key, fashioned out of what seemed to be oxidised silver, of strange shape and with an inscription down the shaft. Sir Humphrey and Pank both bent over it.

“Grimmett 1431,” Pank spelt out.

Parkins was pouring out the whisky. His hand trembled with agitation. Sir Humphrey patted him on the shoulder.

“Thank God, Parkins, you didn’t give me the key before,” he said

ferently. “I don’t know whose it is or to what it belongs, but that young fellow’s fingers were so infernally strong I really believe that I would have parted with it.”

## Chapter XXVIII

Lord Edward Keynsham detached himself from the little group of friends with whom he had entered the dining room of the Carlton Club on the following day, and, with a brief word or two of excuse, crossed the room to the solitary table where Rossiter was lunching. The latter laid down his newspaper and greeted him with imperturbable expression.

"I thought you were abroad, Keynsham," he remarked.

"I returned this morning," was the somewhat weary reply. "I rather wanted to see you. In fact, I want to see you very particularly, so I rang up Whitehall. They told me that you might be lunching here. May I sit down with you?"

"By all means," Rossiter acquiesced. "As a matter of fact, I should be rather glad to have a few words with you myself."

Keynsham drew out the opposite chair, gave an order to the waiter and leaned across the table. He had evidently not recovered from the fatigue of his journey, for there were lines under his eyes and there was a general air of strain about his appearance and manner.

"Humphrey," he confided, "I am going to make an appeal to you."

"An appeal?" Rossiter repeated gravely. "That sounds quaint."

"You will think so before I have finished," Keynsham went on. "I will start by making a confession. That fellow Brandt who was hung—I knew a great deal more of him than people ever imagined. He was one of my partners in the great enterprise of my life."

"Was that the reason," Sir Humphrey asked severely, "that you became involved in that disgraceful outrage at Norwich—an outrage which might have cost me my reason?"

Keynsham winced.

"That had something to do with it, of course," he admitted. "I was only one of half a dozen. We were all in the same boat. We didn't want Brandt hung until one of us had seen him."

"And therefore you put me to the torture—"

"It couldn't be helped," Keynsham interrupted doggedly. "Brandt had done a hellish thing. No ordinary brain could have conceived anything so utterly malicious. You only half believed us, Humphrey—Louise and me—when we carried you and Katherine Brandt out of the picture for a time, but when you got back, you must have understood better. You can guess what would have happened to you if you had been around when they searched your house. Van Pleyden probably gave you an idea."

"So he is one of your gang, is he?"

"He is one," Keynsham confessed. "He's not the worst, though, as I'm afraid you will find out, unless you will listen to me. Humphrey, you have got to listen to me. I want to save your life and there is only one way."

A waiter bustled up with some dishes and Keynsham leaned back in his chair to allow himself to be served. He sipped a glass of sherry which had been placed by his side.

"Is this ours?" he asked the wine waiter confidentially.

"I am afraid not, your lordship," the man acknowledged. "To my mind, it is nothing like so good as your Amontillado. This is a sample bin we had in from another source."

"I must remember to speak to some one on the wine committee," Keynsham reflected. "I agree with you, Henry, it is not so good as ours. . . . Forgive my talking shop," he apologized to his companion. "I have the name, I'm afraid, of being one of the keenest tradesmen who ever took up his job rather late in life."

Sir Humphrey smiled.

"You need not apologise," he said. "I would sooner talk about wine than murder—at luncheon time, at any rate. This port, for instance"—he sipped the wine with which he had just been served, held the glass up to the light and sipped it again. "Now I wonder," he went on, "do you supply the club with this wood port? They've been having the same, so far as I can remember, for about ten years, and it seems to me to get better every time I drink it. Suits me better in the middle of the day than a vintage wine."

"The club have four different brands of tawny port," Keynsham confided, after a moment's pause. "Two of them are ours. I couldn't tell you about the wine you are drinking because I don't know which it is. I am not much of a judge of anything except vintage wines."

"It's very good, anyway," Rossiter murmured. "Now, Edward, if you have anything to say to me—anything that spells sense, I mean—out with it, because I must be off in a few minutes."

"What I want," Lord Edward said firmly, "is for you to refuse the executorship."

"Why should I?" Sir Humphrey asked. "Katherine Brandt is an old friend. I feel that I ought to help her in any way I can. If being Brandt's executor means that I'm going to stumble against some things about you and your friends which you don't want known, well, any other man who was put in my place would probably be equally objectionable to you."

"Yes. But the trouble is," Keynsham explained, "that you are Home Secretary and quixotically conscientious."

"You flatter me," Sir Humphrey observed drily.

"Will you give up the executorship?" Keynsham persisted.

“Certainly not,” Sir Humphrey replied. “I am sorry, Edward, but you are asking me a foolish thing and you are not attempting to explain it. Some one has to be the man’s executor and that some one should be a friend of Katherine Brandt’s. If she would rather I retired, I will, but not if she’s frightened into persuading me to give it up. As to you, Edward, I don’t know who your friends are or what in God’s name you have been up to, but we have known each other a good many years and I am going to warn you—I’m not taking all this business lying down, you know. Scotland Yard know everything that I know and have been waiting pretty anxiously for you to come back from abroad. All your friends have been proud of you and your success and it would break Louise’s heart if anything ugly were to turn up. I put the Norwich affair into their hands, naturally, but I am not vindictive, and I sha’n’t go any further with it than I am compelled to. But—you leave me alone, Edward, and see that your friends do. Unless Katherine objects, I shall be proving Brandt’s will and going into the matter of his estate within a week.”

Keynsham shrugged his shoulders and turned back to his lunch. More than once in his life he had faced a mortal crisis with apparent indifference.

“Then God help us all!” he said.

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That afternoon the Home Secretary spoke with dry, but convincing eloquence for an hour and three quarters upon the new Housing Bill. He also accorded a couple of interviews in his official apartment, sat upon a commission for half an hour, and, successfully evading several other callers, left the House just before six. He drove first to his solicitor’s, whom he put in touch with Messrs. Debenham, Twiss & Debenham, with instructions to investigate the estate of the late Cecil Brandt and to announce his probable acceptance of the executorship. He then drove to Angels’ Court, Chelsea, where Katherine Brandt was once more safely established in the delightful little maisonette where she had lived before her marriage. He found her waiting to receive him in the orange-coloured salon which had been approved by every gossiping newspaper in London.

“You get later and later,” she complained, as she gave him her hand.

“My dear Katherine,” he explained, “these meteoric disappearances for which you are, I fancy, a little more responsible than I am, interfere somewhat with my regular activities. I wonder how long we are going to be left alone now.”

“But are we being left alone?” she demanded. “What’s this about a burglary? It’s in all the papers.”

She handed him a news sheet and he glanced through the headlines.

BURGLARY AT THE HOME SECRETARY’S

HOUSE IN CHESTOW SQUARE  
SHOTS EXCHANGED BETWEEN UNKNOWN  
BURGLAR AND DETECTIVE  
NOTHING OF VALUE STOLEN

“The headlines tell most of the story,” he observed, sinking into the easy-chair which she had drawn over to the fire. “The most important sentence is the last—‘Nothing of value was stolen’.”

“Was it those mysterious enemies of yours again, do you think?” she asked anxiously.

“For the moment,” he confided, “we can only indulge in speculation. One of the most engaging young men I ever met in my life called to see me yesterday afternoon, and, after making courteous conversation for a few moments, suddenly demanded, on behalf of himself and an unknown array of friends, that I yield up a key!”

“Humphrey!” she cried. “My dear Humphrey!”

“At any rate, we know now what they’re after,” he remarked.

“A key?”

“Precisely. I failed altogether to convince that obstinate young man that I possessed no key which was not my own property. He called my attention to the fact that during my absence from home my belongings had already been ransacked in search of this article, as yours had been, and in kindly but forcible fashion gave me to understand that unless I parted with it, I was likely to come to a violent and untimely end.”

“But didn’t you tell him that you knew nothing about any key?”

“I did. He disbelieved me entirely. He showed signs, in fact, of laying violent hands upon me, when suddenly the detective, whom I had forbidden Scotland Yard to place anywhere near the premises, made a melodramatic appearance and stopped the whole business.”

“Did he arrest the young man?” Katherine asked eagerly.

“No such luck,” Sir Humphrey groaned. “He went off through the window with a great crashing of glass, and so far as I know, they’ve not caught him yet. . . . Now comes the humorous part of the whole thing.”

“Humorous! What a brick you are, dear!”

She rose to her feet and paced the room restlessly, coming to a standstill finally by the side of his chair.

“Well, I appeal to you—isn’t it humorous?” he demanded. “The world’s finest burglars have opened my safe and bureau with the utmost ease. They have ransacked my belongings in every quarter of the house. They have done the same to your trunks and your belongings, and all the time—where was the key?”

“You don’t mean to say that you know?” she cried.

“The key,” he confided, “was, during the whole of the time, in a soiled square envelope which I rather fancy had ‘Wandsworth Prison’ at the back of it, slipped behind a dish on a shelf in my butler’s pantry!”

She let go his shoulder, which her fingers had been gripping, and stood away from him. The light faded from her face. There was fear in her eyes.

“Then we have it, after all,” she faltered.

“You have not,” he replied. “I have. I can’t blame Parkins. It was left by a messenger at the door in the ordinary way on the evening after the Wandsworth affair. Parkins looked upon it, and I don’t blame him, as being of no particular consequence, and he pushed the envelope on the shelf of the dresser, meaning to bring it out with the evening batch of letters. It was the day I was taken ill, so you can imagine that in the confusion he forgot all about it.”

“But you have it now?” she persisted, still with that light of fear in her eyes.

He smiled reassuringly.

“It is in my official safe,” he told her, “in my official room in the House of Commons. No admittance to burglars. We can therefore deliberate about it.”

“What I want to know,” she cried passionately, “is—who are these men—people of consequence they must be—who are holding this rod of terror over our heads? What is it the key of? Does it belong to me or does it not? Did it belong honestly to Cecil or did it not? Do these men want to steal or have they a claim on it? How are we to get at the truth, Humphrey?”

Sir Humphrey glanced towards the sideboard, a perfect little Queen Anne affair with twin curved sides.

“It would assist my deliberations,” he confided, “if you were to remember that it is half-past six. . . .”

She rang the bell. A parlourmaid appeared with a silver salver on which was a pail of ice, a cocktail shaker and two beautifully cut glasses. From the cupboard were produced several bottles. Katherine mixed the cocktails.

“It is we moderate drinkers,” Sir Humphrey pronounced, as he sank back into his delightful easy-chair, “who get the full measure of joy out of alcohol. Nothing this morning. A glass of water with my luncheon, a glass of port afterwards (I must tell you about that luncheon), several hours of steady work, and what in the world could seem more attractive to me—gastronomically, of course—than this delicious cocktail? The very thought that nothing in the world would induce me to take more than two makes every drop precious.”

“Your words come too readily,” she laughed. “I shall begin to believe that you’ve been speaking this afternoon.”

“Quite right,” he admitted. “An hour and a half. . . . A dull speech, but the words came. I hope they were the right ones. That is the one thing I’m

sometimes afraid of—the curtailment of my vocabulary. . . . To hell with the House of Commons and speeches on the Housing question! My love, Katherine! And may you always be wearing that particular shade of dull rose whenever I come to see you.”

“Flatterer,” she laughed. “Now tell me about the luncheon, Humphrey.”

“The point about it was this,” he recounted. “Edward Keynsham suddenly reappeared again, came over to my table at the club and asked if he could lunch with me.”

“What did he want?” Katherine asked with subdued eagerness.

“He wanted me to renounce the executorship.”

She moved a little nervously. Her eyes became very intent and compelling.

“Any reason?”

“He was not exactly candid. One had to read between the lines. He seems to have been associated with your husband in certain enterprises which a respectable person like a Home Secretary should know nothing about. Shall I give up the executorship, Katherine?”

“Would they leave you alone if you did?” she asked.

“I don’t know that I want them to. After all, you know, I am an officer of the Crown. I have been very badly treated by these men and I should like to know what it’s all about.”

“I wish I could tell you,” she sighed. “I never dared ask Cecil anything. He was jealous of Lord Edward, just as he was of you or any one else who came near me.”

“Keynsham struck me as being far more natural to-day, at any rate,” Sir Humphrey remarked, sipping his cocktail. “He may be perfectly honest. If he is, he seems to have got himself into a most unholy mess, somehow or other. Probably I shall understand all about it when I go into your husband’s affairs. That, I suppose, is what they are so desperately afraid of. . . . The one great and terrifying reflection just now is that I actually have in my possession the object of their desperate searches.”

“The key?”

“The key,” he assented. “Now listen. Did Cecil ever say anything to you about owning a safe anywhere or having a key which was valuable?”

“Never in his life, that I can remember.”

“Of course, that makes it all the more inexplicable,” he sighed. “On the morning, or some time on the day, of his death, a warder from Wandsworth Prison, bribed, I suppose, brought up and left at the house for me in an ordinary envelope a key, which Parkins mislaid and forgot all about. Not a line of writing, not a single elucidating word—just a key. A plain flat key of oxidised silver. It has the name Grimmett stamped upon one side of the shaft and 1431 in figures on the other side. Did you ever hear of any one called



Grimmett?"

"Never."

"In that case," Sir Humphrey sighed, "I am terribly afraid that I shall have to get back and see my friend Colonel Matterson again, after all. I cannot do my duty to you as your husband's executor, with a possession like this sent to me at the last moment, and remain ignorant of what it means."

She left her chair again as though with a sudden impulse and came and stood by his side.

"Humphrey," she begged, "let these terrible people have it; then perhaps we shall be left alone. They tell me there is plenty of money in America, as well as what there is here. The theatre is mine and I can earn what I choose. I cannot bear the thought of the danger that key seems to bring. Let them have it."

"What?" he exclaimed. "Hand it over to that disagreeable murdering young ruffian whose fingers I can still feel on my throat! Not on my life! I'm going to find out a little more about this business before I part with it. I was very rude indeed to them all down at Scotland Yard the other day, but I'm going to eat humble pie. I am going to have Matterson come and see me this evening when I get home."

"May I be there too, please?" she begged. "You might let me share your cutlet."

He considered the matter.

"I wonder whether I ought to deny myself," he reflected. "You must remember, through all his vagueness, Edward was very definite on one point. He wanted me to give up the executorship, and the more I think of it, the more I am convinced that his reason is the secret he fears I shall discover with the aid of that key."

"Bother the old key," she laughed, rising to her feet. "I'm going to put on my hat."

## Chapter XXIX

They found Inspector Pank, looking very harmless and benevolent, waiting on the doorstep of the house in Chestow Square. He came forward to open the door of the car, having first rung the bell, and unobtrusively shepherded them into the house.

“If I might suggest it, Sir Humphrey,” he said, as Parkins was divesting the latter of his coat, “I think it would be an excellent idea if you wouldn’t mind spending the evening in the drawing-room upstairs.”

“Out of harm’s way, eh?” Rossiter observed.

“Precisely, sir. However well guarded they are, your two ground-floor rooms, the dining room and the library, are simply an invitation for intruders. At the present moment, I know where I am. I have searched the house thoroughly and I know that there is no one in hiding. If you will dine and sit in the drawing-room, I can have a man on the back stairs as well as the front, and so far as the thing is humanly possible, you will be safe. It will leave our hands much freer to deal with anything that might turn up.”

“Would you mind that, Katherine?” Sir Humphrey asked.

“Why should I? I always look upon your drawing-room as a beautiful room wasted.”

“We will go straight up there now, then,” Sir Humphrey suggested, leading the way. “Show Colonel Matterson up when he arrives, and I shall want dinner for two served there later on, Parkins.”

“I’m afraid, sir,” the man said dubiously, “that you may find it a little cold. I lit the fire at the Inspector’s suggestion some time ago, but it takes a great deal of warming.”

“According to the Inspector,” Sir Humphrey observed, “we might find our downstairs room even less healthy. Come along, Pank, and settle us down.”

The drawing-room was an apartment of faded beauty, of Victorian hangings and perfumes, with stiff, but not unlovely furniture.

“Haven’t sat up here for donkeys’ years,” Sir Humphrey remarked.

“You will be perfectly safe here, anyway, sir,” Pank assured him.

“Perfectly safe!” Sir Humphrey repeated. “God bless my soul, sounds as though we were back in the Middle Ages! I say, Parkins, can’t you do something to make the room look more human? Bring up the flowers from below, and some decanters and glasses.”

“Certainly, sir. Colonel Matterson has just arrived.”

“Show him up,” Sir Humphrey enjoined. “Katherine, my dear,” he went on, as soon as the door was closed, “I am afraid this sort of thing is going to

get on your nerves.”

“It isn’t that,” she insisted, dropping into a chair a little wearily. “I’m not thinking about myself at all. The one thing I regret is having brought all this trouble and annoyance upon you. Why, I can see the marks of that young man’s fingers upon your throat now.”

“Yes, I can feel them too, when I eat,” Sir Humphrey acknowledged, with a grimace. “To think too that I have been the advocate of ‘No firearms’ throughout the force! I shall get my own revolver out as soon as Matterson has left.”

The Subcommissioner entered the room. It was to his credit that he avoided all signs of self-complacency when he shook hands with Sir Humphrey and was introduced to Katherine.

“We are very sorry to hear of this last trouble, sir,” he said.

“The young fellow nearly throttled me,” Rossiter confided. “If you had not disobeyed orders, Colonel, I don’t know where I should have been.”

Matterson coughed.

“I had not had time to take the men off fortunately,” he compromised, “and I’m afraid you will have to put up with them for a few more days. Pank seems to have an idea that there’s something brewing.”

“I’ll put up with them, all right,” Sir Humphrey decided. “The matter must be cleared up. It is perfectly ridiculous to be going about as though we were in Chicago. I took a wrong view of it at first. I have changed my mind. I want to hear in a few words the result of Inspector Pank’s enquiries in Norfolk and I will offer you a few confidences in exchange.”

Colonel Matterson drew a sigh of relief.

“That’s what we have been hoping for,” he admitted. “We have been working too much in the dark. Pank slipped out of the room just now, I noticed, but I should like to send for him, and then, when you have heard his story, you can ask him any questions you like.”

“Fetch him up,” Sir Humphrey begged, “or rather, ring the bell and Parkins will get him.”

Parkins made due appearance, arranged the evening papers upon a side table, and set out decanters, syphons and glasses upon a side table which had previously held some treasures in the shape of wool-worked flowers and stuffed birds under glass cases. Afterwards he superintended the building up of a more satisfactory fire and, receiving instructions with regard to Inspector Pank, went off in search of him.

“One of your particular stars, is he, this young man Pank?” the Home Secretary enquired.

“I don’t know whether we shall ever be able to proclaim him a star,” Colonel Matterson observed. “He is undoubtedly intelligent and very

tenacious, but in this particular matter he had the great advantage of being a Norfolk man. Very clannish they are in those parts. He asked to be dismissed from the force for a few days so that he could pose as a commercial traveller, and I must say that he did very well. He's at a blank end now, though. What we're needing is just half a dozen words from you."

Sir Humphrey nodded.

"And what I am needing is just half a dozen words from another."

Inspector Pank was shown in. He looked very trim in his neat dark clothes and a great deal of the nervousness of his earlier days had gone. Nevertheless, he had the appearance of a worried man. Lines were beginning to find their way into his face. Intelligence could take him no farther in his quest, and that curious extra sense which the born detective is supposed to possess was all the time warning him that danger was at hand.

"What do you think of the present conditions, Pank?" his Chief asked him.

"Sir Humphrey and the lady are much better off up here, sir," was the quiet reply. "I have the back and front stairs guarded, the street patrolled, and an extra man in the library. I think I can guarantee you against anything in the nature of a surprise attack."

"I should like you," the Subcommissioner directed, "condensing the story so far as possible, to tell Sir Humphrey the result of your investigations in Norfolk. I think when you have done so he will probably be more inclined to help us."

"I sincerely hope so, sir," Pank said, "for his own sake. I am not an alarmist," he added, "but I think that there is a very dangerous gang at work in London just now and they seem prepared to go to any lengths to secure what they want. Our great handicap, of course, is that we don't know what it is they do want. That is where we are hoping for help from Sir Humphrey."

"You shall have all the assistance I can give you," Sir Humphrey promised, "but even then you'll find we shall still be asking one another—why? Get along with your story, Pank."

"It won't take long, sir. I was detailed to go down to Norfolk with two other men to enquire into the circumstances of the outrage upon you after you left Keynsham Hall on the night of December the nineteenth. We didn't get very far at first, simply because my two companions were known to be Scotland Yard detectives. I got a line on the chauffeur, however, and, curiously enough, one night when I was in a little public house which I have always had rather a fancy for, a man came in whom I knew by repute, and he let something fall as to a peculiar job he had had lately—the man, by-the-by, Sir Humphrey, was wearing a soiled grey suit marked with white paint—one of the few things you were able to pass on to us."

"I remember the brute," Sir Humphrey muttered.

“Well, with these two things in my mind,” Pank continued, “I got Colonel Matterson to allow me to go back to Norwich as a commercial traveller and make a few independent enquiries. As a result of them, I discovered who was the employer of the chauffeur who fetched you from Keynsham Hall, and I discovered that the place to which you were taken was no English country house at all, but an artificial series of buildings erected by the staff of a cinema company up near Hellesdon.”

“I always felt there was something unreal about the whole place,” Sir Humphrey exclaimed. “Of course, that was it. Go on, Pank.”

“The man whom I had come across in the public house was the head carpenter, and the first thought that flashed into my mind when I saw the white paint on his grey clothes, and heard from the landlord of the public house that he had been employed by a cinema company, was that six years ago he had been apprenticed to Prince, the hangman. They didn’t keep him because he drank.”

Sir Humphrey shivered, but this time, though Pank had paused, he did not interrupt. For a moment something seemed to stick in his throat.

“I also discovered,” Pank continued, “that the men who were your gaolers that night were members of an international society to which Brandt, the man who was hanged, had also belonged. The proprietor of the studio had been paid a very large sum for his properties, and the morning after you left, the whole place was destroyed and every one of the properties burnt. There was practically not a trace left of the affair. That is why, if I had not chanced to get in touch with the man in the grey suit with the white paint marks, we might have searched Norfolk for ever without finding the place to which you were taken.”

“You followed up, I presume, the man to whom the studio had belonged?” Sir Humphrey asked.

“Certainly, sir,” Pank replied. “We discovered from him the name of the person who had hired the studio for the night. The same person was the employer of the chauffeur.”

“And his name?”

“Lord Edward Keynsham.”

There was a moment’s complete silence. Curiously enough, although Sir Humphrey had been perfectly well aware of what was coming, he seemed to feel all over again his first sensations of amazement. The whole thing seemed so incredible, so impossible—that Keynsham, whom he had known most of his life, should, through the morning and afternoon, have been his courteous and considerate host, as he had been for three preceding days, and that an hour after leaving his house, he should have presided at that grim and sinister farce!

“Let me think this out for a moment,” he said. “They either were going to

kill me or they were not. At first, I looked upon the whole thing as a stupid, flamboyant piece of melodrama. I remember distinctly that during the last sixty seconds I came to the conclusion that they were in earnest. Then came the telephone message that Mrs. Brandt had her story to tell me in London, and, provided it was true, I was honourably enabled to sign the reprieve. I promised them to grant it, if Mrs. Brandt here, who was waiting in my room, as they told me, gave me the information they said she was going to give me. They let me go on that understanding. I was bundled back to the outskirts of London and found that Mrs. Brandt really was waiting for me. I was ringing up the Governor of Wandsworth to tell him to postpone the execution, when I was taken ill. Now I ask myself this question—and I ask it of you too—do you suppose that their subsequent enmity towards me was influenced by the fact that, after all, I failed, through no fault of my own, to keep my word, and that Brandt died?”

“If you will permit me to state my theory, sir,” Pank begged, “I think not. I believe that the only reason for their wish to have Brandt reprieved was that one of them might arrive at an interview with him. They wanted something. I don’t know what it was, but they wanted something. In some way or other, he had treated them badly or robbed them or put them in a dangerous position. They wanted him not to be hung until one of them had got something out of him.”

“It’s a very plausible theory,” Sir Humphrey mused.

“But it is only a theory,” Pank pointed out. “We’re stuck and that’s the long and short of it. You will forgive my speaking plainly, sir. We are doing everything we can to save your life and the life of this lady who seems to be threatened too. You should, I think, give us such assistance as is in your power. We should like to know the story of your disappearance and Mrs. Brandt’s, on the night you were to have dined here together.”

“Our disappearance,” Sir Humphrey announced, “was entirely engineered by Lord Edward and Lady Louise Keynsham.”

There was a brief silence. The faintest of smiles parted Inspector Pank’s lips. Matterson sat like a man dazed.

“My belief is,” Sir Humphrey continued deliberately, “that Lord Edward, and his sister at his instigation, intervened to save our lives. I believe that this gang, whoever they may be, had planned to murder both Mrs. Brandt and myself, as we were sitting at dinner downstairs. I believe that Lord Edward finds himself in a terrible position. He is in a hopeless minority with his associates, and for some reason or other, he dare not break with them. He made sure of getting hold of Mrs. Brandt that Sunday night by having a faked taxi and his own car waiting outside the Savoy. In the park, her chauffeur pulled up on pretence of engine trouble, and Lord Edward arrived. It took him a long

time to convince Mrs. Brandt—but in the end she was convinced—that there was danger in her keeping her appointment with me—danger to both of us. He drove her to his own house, in the first instance, and made her write a few urgent lines to me which Lady Louise brought to Chestow Square. She entered the house with a latchkey—one of those with which the members of this gang seem to have already provided themselves. I happened, by a fortunate chance, to be alone, as you, Matterson, were in the other room telephoning. She showed me the line from Mrs. Brandt. I had about five seconds to make up my mind. Whether I was wise or not, I don't know, but at any rate, I am alive. We should have met you, Matterson, in the hall, so we stepped out of that fatal low window of mine into the car and drove off. . . . Keynsham dared not keep us in his house, but he sent us off to a place of safety and made us promise to stay there for four or five days. He had a belief, for some reason or other, that at the end of that time everything would be in order. . . . Perhaps I can follow what was in his mind, for during those few days' absence of ours, Mrs. Brandt's trunks and belongings were thoroughly and systematically ransacked. My own safe and desk and any place where I would be likely to hide anything were also searched. On thinking it over, I have come to the conclusion that Keynsham knew something of the plans of these people, and believed that they were prepared to go to any lengths to get what they wanted. If they had found the key, their interest in us would have ceased and we should be safe. If they failed to find it amongst our possessions, he believed that they would decide that we neither of us had it and leave us alone. He was wrong, but that is roughly the story of our disappearance."

"Keynsham this time," Matterson meditated, "acting not as your abductor but as your benevolent guardian."

"Quite true. Now we come to yesterday afternoon," Sir Humphrey went on. "That young man—confound him, I thought he was one of the nicest young fellows I had ever met!—told me his name quite frankly. Van Pleyden—Richard Van Pleyden—a well-known Philadelphian family. Carthew actually knew him. He came and was in the act of strangling me because I would not, or rather could not, give him what he wanted. I honestly believe that if Pank had not turned up just when he did, it would have been all up with me."

Colonel Matterson smiled. His sympathy for the Home Secretary was subordinate to his sense of growing vision.

"Now things are getting clearer," he declared cheerfully. "You were abducted in the first place from Keynsham, Sir Humphrey, in order to force you to sign a reprieve for Brandt, that they might have time to get from him something which he still possessed. They failed there by the sheer accident of your illness. You were his executor and, I imagine, a very dangerous one for

their plans. They knew that this article, whatever it was, or document, would eventually come into your possession. That is why you have been looked after ever since. Your young man visitor let out what it was—a key.”

“Precisely,” Sir Humphrey observed, with a sardonic gleam in his grey eyes. “And the joke of it is, if one could find any humour in the situation at all, that I have told more innocent lies about it than I have ever told before in my life! A few hours after Brandt’s execution, a warder from Wandsworth Prison brought that key to this house. My butler, Parkins, received it, pushed it behind a dish in his pantry, and in the shock of my illness, and never imagining that it was of any importance, forgot all about it until yesterday.”

There was a tense, though only momentary, silence.

“So you have had the key all the time?” Pank exclaimed breathlessly.

“I have had it all the time and I have it now,” the Home Secretary acknowledged. “What Brandt wanted me to do with it I can’t imagine, but it was sent to me in his last moments without a word of explanation of any sort.”

“Does Mrs. Brandt know any thing about it?” Pank demanded eagerly. “She has probably seen it at some time or other in her husband’s possession.”

“Never,” she assured them all. “I never saw my husband with any special key. I never even heard him speak of any of his possessions. I have no more idea than any of you what it is the key of or what he wanted Sir Humphrey to do with it.”

Colonel Matterson was the first to ask a not unreasonable but somewhat obvious question.

“Where is it now?”

They all looked at one another. The Home Secretary smiled.

“Well,” he said, “after that nice young Harvard man and Keynsham, one rather loses confidence in one’s fellows, but I think I can trust you three. It is in the official safe in my official room in the House of Commons.”

“Not a bad place,” Matterson approved.

“Can you describe the key at all, Sir Humphrey?” Pank enquired.

“It is very plain but quaintly shaped, flat, and apparently made of oxidised silver,” Sir Humphrey told him. “I feel almost sure that it was not made in this country. It has a number on one side of the shaft—1431—and on the other just a name—Grimmett.”

There was a half-stifled exclamation from Colonel Matterson. Pank for a moment remained grimly silent. Then he pointed towards the papers spread out on the table.

“Seen the *Evening News*?” he asked.

“I have not seen any evening paper,” Sir Humphrey replied.

“The manager of Grimmetts’ and one of his watchmen were both murdered this afternoon in the vaults of their establishment. They were shot down by two



men who tried to get their pass-keys.”

“Who on earth is Grimmett?” the Home Secretary gasped.

“Grimmett is the patentee and director of a marvellous new safe deposit system,” Pank explained. “They opened a branch in Lombard Street about twelve months ago. That key is the key to one of the safety chambers.”

## Chapter XXX

There was a tense and momentous silence in the Chestow Square drawing-room of faded splendours. Sir Humphrey was the first to recover himself. He snatched at an evening paper and, adjusting his eyeglass, read rapidly for a few moments.

“Tell us about it,” Katherine begged nervously.

“Beastly affair,” he pronounced with a shiver. “Two men, one elderly and the other younger, very well dressed and of superior appearance, called upon the manager of Grimmetts’ and asked to see some of the steel cabinets they let out. Most invulnerable safes in the world, they are supposed to be, I believe. The manager seems to have been rather impressed by his visitors and took them himself down in the lift to the underground quarters. As soon as they were round the corner of the first corridor, one of the two men pushed a revolver into the manager’s ribs and demanded either his pass-key or a key which would open a certain cabinet. The lift man tried to give the alarm and was at once shot. He only lived long enough to give these few particulars to the police. The manager was a weakly man and fainted on the spot. He collapsed on to the floor and they actually shot him whilst he lay there unconscious.”

“But they didn’t get the pass-key?” Matterson observed.

“Apparently not. The account here says that the only key the manager had with him was for an empty cabinet which had just been built and which he was going to show to his prospective clients. Whoever they were, they seem to have made their search without having been disturbed, worked the lift themselves and left the place before the alarm was raised.”

“Horrible!” Katherine exclaimed, trembling.

Some instinct besides his official interest in the crime was aroused in the Subcommissioner’s mind.

“What can that man Brandt have left behind him of such enormous value?” he speculated.

“Money, I should think,” Sir Humphrey pronounced. “He was probably the treasurer of the gang.”

“I think there must be something else concerned besides just money,” Plank ventured. “There’s no sense in keeping a huge sum like that locked away where no one could get it. I don’t know whether you knew it, Madam,” he went on, turning to Katherine, “but your husband booked his passage for Australia a few days before the tragedy happened.”

“Yes, I knew it,” she admitted. “He had been in a highly nervous state for

weeks. He thought the sea voyage might do him good.”

“Evidently these extraordinary people had come over to take him to task about something or other,” Sir Humphrey observed. “A blood-thirsty crew they must be. Even the sacred body of a Cabinet Minister doesn’t seem to be immune!”

The Subcommissioner glanced at his watch.

“May I ring up the Yard?” he begged.

Sir Humphrey leaned towards the bell.

“No telephone up here, I’m afraid. You’d better use my private line in the library.”

“Shall I go, sir?” Pank suggested.

“You may as well,” Matterson agreed. “Bring up the news as soon as you have it and then we’ll decide upon the next step. We are getting face to face with realities now, at any rate. The three things we have to solve are—firstly, who are these men? Secondly, what is Lord Edward Keynsham’s position with regard to them? And thirdly, what are the contents of the safe? I shall never believe that money alone would account for the almost frantic desperation of these men.”

“There is a simple way of finding out,” Sir Humphrey reminded him, “and that is by using the key and opening the cabinet. That clearly forms one of my duties as executor, and it seems to me the sooner I get to work, the better.”

“Under our surveillance,” Matterson said hastily.

Sir Humphrey smiled.

“I am by nature bland and ingenuous,” he observed, with faint sarcasm, “but if you think you will see me strolling up Lombard Street, twiddling the key upon my finger and loitering on the doorstep of the Grimmett building to look at the time, well—you’re wrong, my dear fellow, that’s all! I admit I seem to have walked into trouble pretty easily up to now, but it is not my custom. We will talk about opening the cabinet later on. I have one suggestion to make to you first, and that is that you take the obvious course and put Lord Edward Keynsham through it.”

“I shall send for him to-morrow morning,” Matterson promised. “Apart from Keynsham, however, there is another aspect of the matter which gives me to think. Cecil Brandt deliberately, on the morning of his death, sent the key to you, Sir Humphrey, after having appointed you his executor.”

“He certainly did.”

“Well, of course, if the cabinet contains a few million dollars belonging to his estate, that’s all right. If it contains something entirely different, and I cannot think that the most avaricious company of men in the world would be taking these risks for money alone, then there seems something very sinister to me in the thought of that man, on his way to the scaffold, imposing a charge

upon you which he must have believed would cost you your life.”

Katherine shivered in her place.

“Has that only just occurred to you?” she exclaimed. “It has been in my mind all the time.”

“Had your husband any feeling against Sir Humphrey?” Matterson asked.

“I believe that he hated him,” she replied passionately. “I believe that is why he made him his executor, and why he sent him the key. I believe it was firmly in his mind that the possession of that key by any outside person meant certain death.”

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Detective Inspector Pank followed the stately Parkins down the broad staircase with its delightful little curve at the end, across the square hall and into the library. The latter turned on the lights from the single controlling switch, soft and radiant lights which sprang out from unexpected places, all shaded but nevertheless amply illuminating.

“The telephone instrument is there, sir,” the man announced, indicating the writing table. “That is Sir Humphrey’s private line. The telephone on the other side of the room can be used for general purposes. The one you have in your hand there is always through to Scotland Yard.”

“I quite understand,” was the brief reply. “I have often answered it from the other end.”

Parkins bowed a little stiffly and withdrew. Personally he had had quite enough of these detective people around the place. He knew of one other upon the back staircase, he had come upon one a few minutes ago in the little cloak closet, leading from the hall, there were two parading the streets, and he had an idea there was still another mislaid somewhere. This mystery business was getting on his nerves. A Cabinet Minister, of course, was a Cabinet Minister, but after all, it seemed to him that there was no occasion for Sir Humphrey, in his position, to get mixed up in these murdering affairs. He made off to air his sentiments to the cook and to inquire about dinner. . . .

Pank unhooked the telephone receiver, murmured a word to the exchange, and found himself connected with the department he desired.

“Pank speaking,” he announced, “speaking for the Subcommissioner. Any one brought in for the Grimmatt affair?”

“Not a soul,” was the disconsolate reply.

“Anything doing at all?”

“Nothing. There was a great crowd in Lombard Street just at the time the affair took place. Two respectably dressed men would have no difficulty whatever in slipping away, so long as they got a start. Smithers has just come in, tired out.”

“Ring up if there’s anything within the next ten minutes or a quarter of an

hour,” Pank directed. “The Home Secretary’s line to Chestow Square. The Chief is here.”

“Very good, Inspector.”

Then there was silence. Pank hung up the telephone a little wearily. He himself had plodded on steadily enough, but the case was full of disappointments. Suddenly there was darkness. Every light in the room went out. There was just sufficient illumination for him to see a tall, shapeless figure who, in some mysterious fashion, had glided between him and the door.

“You’re covered, young fellow, and I’m not particular how soon I shoot. Put up your hands!” a savage voice ordered.

Pank obeyed. He had felt one little stab at the heart when the darkness had come, otherwise he was cool enough. They did not mean to kill him or they would have shot first.

“You’ve been upstairs with the Subcommissioner of Scotland Yard, the Home Secretary and Mrs. Brandt,” the unfamiliar voice continued. “You have been talking about a certain key. Sir Humphrey has probably told you where it is. You had better tell me.”

“If we are to discuss that key,” Pank remarked coolly, “you know much more about it than we do. Why not satisfy our curiosity? What is it that it opens? And what is inside when we get there?”

There was the sound of a chuckle through the darkness.

“You’re a cool customer, aren’t you? You’re not by any chance that little terror Pank, who has been barking around our heels, are you?”

“That is my name,” was the bold reply.

“What a nerve! You know what I’m holding, don’t you?”

“So far as I can see, it looks like some sort of a firearm.”

“It’s an automatic. I never carry a revolver now. I feel hampered with only six cartridges. I like to make sure of a job—shoot straight and shoot often, you know. We’re like that where I come from.”

“Where do you come from?” Pank enquired. “We’re getting rather curious about you fellows up at Scotland Yard.”

“What a nerve!” the other repeated admiringly. “So you’re Pank, eh, and they’re getting curious about us up at Scotland Yard?”

“Go on talking,” Pank begged. “I like to hear you. Criminals have been identified before now by their voices.”

“Have they? Well, you won’t hear many more words from me or any one else in this world,” was the sneering retort. “If you tell the truth, and it sounds like the truth, and I’m sure of getting away comfortably, well—I shan’t promise anything, but I might let you go. Otherwise you’re for the narrow box and the white flowers.”

“You’re very generous.”

"I'm not. I'm proposing a deal but you'll have to be darn slick about it. I came here to find out where that key is and I guessed I should find one of you hanging around the telephone. You know where it is. Cough it up."

"Know where what is?"

"The key. You may think these stupid questions save time, but they make no difference. If I hear a step on the stairs, the turning of the handle of a door, if that curtain rustles, or there is the slightest suspicious sound, I shall make sure of you, Pank. There's nothing can save you but the key. Where is it?"

"Where you can't get at it," Pank assured his unseen cross-examiner.

"There's no place in the world we can't get at," was the scornful reply. "You don't know who you're talking to. Listen, you have three chances. This is the first one. Where is the key?"

There was a brief, pulsating silence. Pank thought of many things. He wondered whether the report of a gun would be heard upstairs. He wondered whether the plain-clothes policeman, whose steady footsteps he could hear every now and then upon the pavement, would notice that the lights had been turned down. He wondered—

"For the second time—where is the key?" the voice barked out.

"How the devil should I know?" Pank protested. "And what would you think of me, I wonder, if I told you? Shoot if you want to and get it over. There are plenty more dangerous men at the Yard than I."

"For the third time, Pank—where is the key? Remember Grimmett this afternoon. We keep our word."

There was menace, steel-like and convincing, in that deep voice, Pank thought. He sprang desperately forward at the immovable, mocking figure. There was a sheet of flame, a muffled report, a sharp pain in his shoulder. Who said the room was dark? There were lights all round him, flaming lights. No, that was fancy. His brain had lit the lamps. His fancy had triumphed for a moment. He was going down, sinking somewhere. The shapeless body a few feet away was moving towards him. His brain was working in earnest now. Softly he relaxed his limbs. He crumpled up face downward upon the floor. He heard the quick breathing of the man leaning over him. He knew, as surely as though he could read the thoughts forming in the brain of that stooping figure, that he was hesitating whether to shoot again or not. Pank choked the groan which nearly escaped from his lips. He lay motionless. In a few seconds he heard the other's retreating footsteps. He heard the door open. A moment later the front door opened and closed. . . .

"What was that?" Colonel Matterson asked in the drawing-room upstairs.

"It was either a door slamming or a gun," Sir Humphrey replied, springing to his feet.

"Worse than that," Matterson groaned, leading the way towards the door.

“It was one of those new automatics with a silencer. They were testing them for us last week. Keep back, Sir Humphrey; this is my job, not yours.”

Nevertheless, they both reached the library about the same moment. It was Sir Humphrey’s fingers which found the switch first and turned on the lights. Pank was lying there, all doubled up, a motionless, pathetic figure. Otherwise the room was empty.

## Chapter XXXI

Adrienne, the very smartest of French maids, in her neat black frock and white collar and cuffs, came swiftly but noiselessly across the great hall of Keynsham House in Grosvenor Square, as Rossiter was handing his coat and hat to a footman.

“Her ladyship is in her small sitting room, Sir Humphrey,” she announced. “May I take you there?”

Sir Humphrey nodded and followed his guide to a room cut off from the main reception apartments by a broad and heavily carpeted corridor. Louise welcomed him with a little cry of pleasure. She gave him her hands but her eyes watched his anxiously.

“So you have come to see me at last,” she said, as she led him to a comfortable chair, “and I am not feeling at all flattered.”

“Why not?” he asked. “I am a very busy man.”

“I know that,” she answered, “but I feel that you have only come because you want something.”

“Quite right,” he assented. “I do.”

She sank into a chair by his side.

“I hear that terrible things keep on happening,” she said sadly.

“Inexplicable things,” her visitor admitted. “However, my friends at Scotland Yard assure me that we are within sight of the end now.”

“Is it true,” she asked, “that the detective who has been doing so well was shot the other night at your house?”

Sir Humphrey stroked his chin and looked at her thoughtfully.

“How did you hear that?”

“No questions, please,” she begged. “Just tell me whether it is true?”

“He was shot, all right,” Sir Humphrey confessed, “but he had a remarkable stroke of luck. He crouched down when he realised what was happening, and he merely got a flesh wound on the top of the shoulder.”

“Oh, I am glad,” she declared, with an only half-stifled sob of relief.

“So am I,” Rossiter agreed. “The fellow meant murder, right enough, but as it happens Pank is not seriously hurt. He wouldn’t even stay in hospital. He is at the Yard again to-day. Now, shall I tell you what I came for?”

“Don’t hurry,” she pleaded. “It’s such a relief to have you here to talk to, and perhaps you will want to go away as soon as you have told me.”

He took her hand with an instinctively protective gesture.

“Louise, my dear,” he said, “don’t ever forget that I am your friend.”

“It’s a comfort to hear you say that,” she acknowledged, smiling at him.



“At one time I used to believe it. Lately, well, of course, since these terrible things have been happening, one knows nothing. I have tried so hard, but what can one do?”

Her eyes had wandered away from him and he found himself studying her profile. She was leaning forward, gazing absently into the fire, beautiful in a new and remote sort of way, with her colourless complexion and her deep beringed blue eyes. He felt an added dislike for his errand, or rather the cause of it, when he saw their sudden bedimming, the slow forming of tears.

“I have been so sorry for you, Humphrey, and so worried—more than worried. I have been distracted.”

“My dear child—” he began.

“Leave off calling me ‘your dear child’,” she cried, swinging around in her chair. “Why do you always assume a great bridge of years between us? I know how old you are—you are forty; I am twenty-five. Surely that difference does not entitle you to address me paternally.”

“How shall I address you?” he asked, a little taken aback.

“Anyhow, so long as you are not so utterly repressive,” she went on passionately. “I am not a child in years, outlook or habit. Lately I have begun to feel positively elderly. I seem to be surrounded by most alarming things and every one leaves me out of their confidence. You have at last come to see me, it is true, and that would make me very happy except that I know that you want something.”

“I’m afraid that is so,” he admitted. “I do want something, Louise. I want you to tell me where your brother has disappeared to again.”

“I thought so,” she sighed.

She sat for a moment nervously twisting and untwisting her fingers. Rossiter took one of her hands in his and held it tightly.

“Louise,” he said, “I don’t, I can’t, believe that there is not some explanation for Edward’s extraordinary behaviour lately, but we have come to the point when we must face one fact. Edward is definitely concerned in these recent disgraceful happenings. He was concerned in the first assault upon me after I left your house, for which I shall find it hard ever to forgive him. He was concerned—benevolently concerned, I honestly believe—in the temporary retirement from the limelight of Mrs. Brandt and myself, and he is concerned also in this rigid determination on the part of a little company of men—who at any rate have murderers within their ranks—who are demanding possession of the key sent to me by Cecil Brandt before he was hung. You may not understand all this, but you must understand this main thing—Edward is involved with this company of brutes. The time has come when Scotland Yard is bound to take note of the fact. I daresay you’ve heard that they have been here to enquire for him. I have stopped their issuing a warrant, but only on

condition that he appears and submits himself to examination. I have come to ask you where he is.”

“Thank God, I don’t know,” she declared fervently.

Sir Humphrey was silent for a moment.

“You have no idea?”

“Yes, I have an idea,” she admitted. “I think he flew back to France in the plane he keeps at Keynsham, last Monday. I expect him home almost at once. I’m sure that he is coming back.”

“Well, that’s something, at any rate,” Sir Humphrey muttered.

“He went back to France full of determination,” Louise continued. “And here is some more news for you. He has promised that on his return he will tell me everything. I told him that I could not bear the thought that he was planning evil things against one of my dearest friends—that I should go away, unless he told me what it all meant. He assured me that his one desire, the one thing he was working for all the time, was to save you.”

“To save me from what?” Sir Humphrey demanded. “Whom have I offended? Where have I done ill in the world?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know a single thing,” she sobbed.

“Somewhere in France,” Rossiter mused. “Bordeaux way, I suppose, if there was any truth in what Topps told us. Scotland Yard could find him, of course, but they could do no good without a warrant.”

“Don’t let them issue a warrant,” she implored. “I know that Edward has gone to make the effort of his life. Give him the chance! Nothing has happened for the last few days, has it?”

“Nothing at all,” Sir Humphrey acknowledged.

“The papers this morning,” she went on eagerly. “One or two said such nice things about your speech last night. One of them said what a relief it was to every one to have you back in harness and your old self again.”

Rossiter smiled grimly.

“I recognise the official note there,” he remarked. “They want to make sure that I’m not playing any more pranks.”

“Oh, you are not,” she declared vigorously. “Humphrey,” she added, springing to her feet, “I am perfectly certain of one thing—Edward means at all risks to break up this business. He can do it better than the police, whatever it is. Those are his own words.”

“Louise, my dear,” he begged, “can’t you stop, or at any rate appease, this furious curiosity which is really eating up my brain? Tell me what on earth the affair is which he’s going to break up. Where do I come in?”

“I believe I have guessed,” she confessed, “but I’m not going to tell you. Don’t ask me, Humphrey. I might spoil everything. You might look at the

thing the wrong way, and the trouble then would be worse than ever. Edward will be back this week, I am sure of that. Something will happen then. You admit that things are quite quiet now: wait a few more days.”

A servant entered with a tea tray—perhaps to both of them a somewhat welcome interruption. Sir Humphrey ate muffins, drank rare China tea with an appreciative air, and talked of lighter subjects. Just as the inevitable resumption of their discussion seemed imminent, Adrienne made quiet entrance. She carried a telegram upon a small salver and presented it to Lady Louise, who waved her away.

“I will send a reply if there is one,” the former said.

Louise opened the despatch after a glance at Sir Humphrey, read it eagerly, then passed the form to him. It was handed in at a small town somewhere in the southwest of France.

Please do your utmost induce Humphrey take no action of any sort until Monday. I undertake if alive to present myself in London on that day. Love—Edward.

“‘Take no action of any sort’,” Humphrey repeated thoughtfully. “I suppose he means he doesn’t want me to use the key.”

She shook her head.

“I know nothing about that,” she said, “but I do believe in Edward and I know that he is desperately in earnest. Please do as he asks, Humphrey.”

She came to him appealingly. He took her into his arms, smoothed her hair for a moment and kissed her on both cheeks.

“Hideously paternal,” she complained.

“A shy man,” he replied, “must have a beginning. I will wait. I had better go down to the Yard from here.”

She lit his cigarette, linked her arm through his and led him down the corridors and across the hall to the front steps, below which his car was waiting. The servants fell discreetly back. They stood there for a moment, the fresh south wind carrying a drizzle of rain blowing in their faces.

“There’s a lump in my throat, Humphrey, and I can’t talk,” she said. “I only pray that waiting won’t mean trouble for you officially.”

He smiled, bent over her fingers and kissed them.

“My dear,” he said, as he turned away, “I am not at all sure that I am a very good Home Secretary.”

## CHAPTER XXXII

There were five men seated at the round table in the magnificent dining room of the Château de Lusigny, an ancient palace in the heart of the rich wine-growing county near Bordeaux. The windows were wide open and the sun shone upon the worn tapestries with their mellowed colouring, upon the glass and silver on the table, and upon the drawn and anxious faces of the men who had just finished their luncheon. There was a pleasant caress of the sea in the soft wind that drifted across the plain of vineyards into the room. In the far distance the masts and spires of Bordeaux gleamed through the faint mist.

“What time does the boat sail?” Van Pleyden asked a little abruptly.

“At any hour you wish, my friend,” his host, the Marquis de Lusigny replied. “All is prepared. It is not luxury that one can offer, but it is at least safety. Also, there is three million dollars’ worth of the finest cargo on board that ever left the port.”

“Badly wanted, to judge from my cable advices,” Lord Edward Keynsham remarked, with a smile.

“Let’s get down to hard facts on this matter,” a middle-aged man, with the square jaw and keen eyes of an American, remarked from De Lusigny’s side. “We have met here, I take it, for a final conference.”

“That is so,” Keynsham agreed. “We have to come to a decision. We can’t play about with the matter any longer. Marquis, and you all, gentlemen, have I your permission as chairman of our syndicate to run over the facts once more before I make my appeal to you?”

“It would be a gracious act,” the Marquis said politely. “We, at any rate, have time to spare.”

“Not sure we don’t talk too much,” the American, whose name was Bowman, muttered. “We wasted most of our time in London talking. Will Meadows was the only one who went for the goods.”

“Precisely,” Keynsham interrupted, “and Will Meadows found out that American methods don’t go over here. Dick Van Pleyden, although he had a narrow escape, is beginning to realise that too. That’s why I want you all to listen to me so carefully. I can show you the only way to safety. If you take my advice—and remember, after all, I am the head of our organisation—we will pull through. If you insist upon hiring more of these outside ruffians and going back yourselves to London to start a riot, I tell you frankly you are going to lose. There is no question of one of us going against the others. I and any one else who might disapprove will simply stay idle and wait for what is coming, but we shall know all the time that we are done for.”

“Gentlemen,” the Marquis pleaded, “I am an original member of the organisation. I consider that it was Lord Edward and I who started our wonderful syndicate. I claim therefore to speak with authority. I have never hesitated to use any means to gain my end, and I have stood shoulder to shoulder with all of you, when the time came to fight, but this I say is not the time. Let us listen attentively to our chief.”

A man who was seated by Van Pleyden’s side yawned. He was dressed in rough tweeds, good-looking, although his tired eyes rather contradicted his air of youth. His name was Sam Clowes, and it was only a few years since he had been the most favoured bachelor in New York society.

“Let’s hear what Keynsham proposes,” he suggested. “We all want the same thing, so that we can sleep at night in our heels. If Keynsham can show us how to get it, that’s all we want.”

“I may be a little retrospective,” Keynsham began. “That I cannot help. I want to remind you of the time when Lusigny and I, Sam Clowes and Bowman here, came together in New York the year after the war.”

“If we speak of those days,” the Marquis interrupted, “we will drink my Château Mouton Rothschild 1906. A flask is awaiting us.”

He clapped his hands. A *maître d’hôtel* appeared almost immediately. In response to a whispered order he swept the glasses from the table, replaced them with fresh ones, and produced a curiously shaped decanter, from which he poured a wine which seemed to have the faint perfume and colour of violets. The Marquis smelt his glass anxiously and nodded approval. Lord Edward continued.

“We were all practically on the lookout for adventure. The spirit of the war was still in our blood. We wanted to fight. I am studying how to make my résumé as brief as possible and I need not go into details. We four—Bowman, you, Marquis and you, Sam—started one of the first—I hate the other word, so I shall call it—illegal wine and spirit merchant’s businesses in the States. Sam found most of the capital. I was able to give something which was even more important—the clientele and procedure of one of the oldest established wine merchants in the world, with steamers of their own, which had been used to carry wine and bring back dried fruits, and a far-reaching connection. Presently Van Pleyden joined us—we needed more fighting men in those days—and later on Will Meadows and his brother Tom. Bowman here was with us from the first, but he did not sign on as one of the organisation until later. I won’t dwell upon our success. It has been fabulous. But—there’s always a but—we had to fight for it.”

“Nothing arrives in this world without fighting,” the Marquis murmured.

“I am not attempting an apologia,” Keynsham went on. “We all understand one another. We had to fight and sometimes we had to kill, but there’s not one

of us until this visit to England who ever killed in cold blood. What I want to point out, gentlemen, is that every one of these fights—and we had many others in which extremes did not happen—were honest-to-God fights, with as much right on one side as the other. The only time we were really trapped by the police without any dirty work, and the police came without guns, we parted with the stuff without a blow. The world can call us what they like—pirates, freebooters, anything you please, but we played the game.”

“I interrupt our dear friend for one moment,” the Marquis said, holding his glass in his hand, “to beg your appreciation of this marvellous wine. I want you, while you drink, to think about it. Presently there is a Léoville of even more ancient vintage. That, I am afraid, for those who sail to-night may be our stirrup cup.”

There was a little murmur of praise for the wine, which they sipped almost reverently. They all loved the Marquis and they knew his one hobby in life.

“Some years after we had started,” Lord Edward went on, “Brandt joined us, and the two Meadows. Brandt had not been with us a month before he was up against Commissioner Dane. We have to take Brandt’s word for what happened. According to him, he had stuffed the Commissioner’s pockets three times, but the man got more rapacious every month. Very well. I agree, if that was so, that Dane had to go—and Dane went. The Meadows, as you know, joined the organisation while I was yachting in the East, and I know less about them than any one. This I do know, however, they were hot-headed and nervous at the same time. They refused advice and very often disobeyed actual instructions. They were impossible to handle in London, and they did the most foolish thing they could possibly have attempted, when they tried to raid Grimmett’s and killed the manager. That was a crime in cold blood, differing from any we have ever committed. It may have been that they were more anxious to get at our records than we have been. They certainly had more cause, but they were always killers. Anyhow, it seemed to dawn on them at the last minute that London was not New York, and they dropped out. They must be back in the States by now, and safe I should think.”

Van Pleyden fidgeted nervously in his chair.

“Well,” he intervened, “this is an interesting chat of yours, Keynsham, but what’s it leading to? You have got us all down here. That’s all right. You seem to be in the know, and I daresay they were getting wise to us in London, but you don’t suppose Sam here and I—or Bowman either, for the matter of that—are very anxious to board this steamer to-night and go back to New York, leaving that safe of ours to be opened by an English Cabinet Minister.”

“We are all in the same boat,” Keynsham said gravely, “and let me tell you this—because it is the truth—I never liked Brandt and he never liked me. He was not a man to be trusted. He didn’t understand our code of honour. He

didn't understand my personal code. He knew that for years I have admired his wife. I don't need to tell you that he had no cause for real jealousy in that. No woman could have lived with Brandt and have continued to feel any affection for him. On the other hand, she and I, though we met sometimes, met absolutely as friends and nothing more. For some reason or other, Brandt believed that he would find me in his house that Sunday he returned. He didn't. There was never any question of my being there. He found that poor little actor fellow, engaged in a perfectly harmless discussion with his wife on business matters, and he killed him. He was a foul-tempered, evil-thinking fellow, and I say that, although he's dead. . . . You know what that meant to us—Brandt being locked up. It was his year for taking charge of our safe—we had taken it in turn for years, and there had never been any trouble. Three times I tried to obtain an interview with Brandt to get the key: He refused to see me. Three days before he was hung, with all the influence I could command, I did everything I could to approach him. He still refused to see me. His dying act was the most sinister, the most unsportsmanlike, the most vicious thing possible. He sent that key to the Home Secretary, on pretence of making him executor for his wife. That's how the key came into Sir Humphrey's possession. That is where, for the first time since we started the most amazing enterprise this generation has known, we find ourselves in danger—in real and terrible danger.”

“I had my hands on the fellow's throat once,” Van Pleyden muttered. “If we hadn't been interrupted, he would have told the truth.”

“Probabilities or possibilities are off,” Keynsham pointed out. “That key is now beyond our reach. The only way of attempting even to gain possession of it would be by means of a series of cold-blooded murders. That does not come into our scheme. It never has come into our scheme. It never shall.”

“What are we to do, then?” Sam Clowes drawled. “Sit down and wait for what's coming to us?”

“Nothing of the sort,” Keynsham rejoined. “What you have got to do is to accept the inevitable and trust in me. I want you, Bowman and you, Sam and you, Van Pleyden, to clear off by that boat to-night. I want the Marquis to remain here quietly, where he spends most of his time, on his own estates. I have a plane at the aerodrome here, and I shall leave to-night for Le Bourget and cross over, if I can, at dawn. I shall be in London to-morrow, and I promise you that if there are any means in this world, short of murder, of obtaining that key or of getting our records back, I will adopt them. I have ideas. I have something to go on, because Katherine Brandt, when she knows the whole truth, will be on our side. All that we have to do is to see that the Home Secretary does not turn that key. If it can be done, I shall do it.”

The Marquis clapped his hands. There were more glasses, and a strange

little silence, during which the butler served wine from another flask thick with dust and cobwebs. They sipped it thoughtfully—the Marquis' head thrown back, his eyes closed, his rather prominent Adam's apple protruding, his expression that of a man indulging in a reverent orgy of appreciation.

"It is divine," he pronounced. "There is nothing else like it in the world. The Mouton Rothschild was a wine for the gods; this is a wine for us. . . . Gentlemen, I propose that we leave our business in the hands of Lord Edward Keynsham. He has been the presiding genius of our organisation, he has seen us all restored to fortune and great wealth under his beneficent guidance. Now that trouble has come, we should be fools indeed if we did not trust in him."

"I'm with you," Van Pleyden assented. "We will abandon any further campaign in London and leave the matter in your hands. I will sail to-night with Sam and Bowman. This fruit-carrying craft of ours, Marquis, I presume has wireless?"

"Naturally," the latter agreed. "The best and finest installation."

"We leave then," Van Pleyden continued, "on the understanding that if Keynsham should fail, we are permitted to alter the destination of the steamer. I know a place where we should be safe for a time, until we could hear from England and know how to make our plans."

"It is agreed," Keynsham declared. "I shall leave for England myself in an hour or so. I only regret," he added, "our forthcoming disruption. Against treachery from any living person we were prepared and insured. Against the dead, ours must be a more subtle fight. If the Marquis will lend me a car, I will go and see how my mechanic is getting on. The sooner I am back in London, the better."

They all trooped out to see him off, wrung his hand and watched the car depart down the long ribbon of road, a straight line through the far-reaching plain of vines.

"A great leader of a mighty enterprise," the Marquis murmured, a note of admiration in his tone. "He kept the spirit of warfare alight in us and filled our pockets."

"A fine fellow," Van Pleyden agreed. "All the same, I'm glad that it is he who is going back to beard that old Johnny and not I!"



## CHAPTER XXXIII

Curious passers-by came to the conclusion that the Home Secretary must either be giving an evening party to commence at a later hour, or that he was entertaining the foreign delegates from a particularly restless country who were making London their headquarters for the moment. There were two plain-clothes policemen outside each of those long, low windows abutting almost upon the street, which had been the cause of so much trouble; there were two uniformed policemen at the front door, and, if they had been able to see into the Mews, they would have found another two guarding each of the back entrances. For once, the house in Chestow Square was amply protected.

In the library was an atmosphere of storm. Two men—Colonel Matterson, the Subcommissioner of Scotland Yard, and Sir Humphrey Rossiter, the Home Secretary, both desperately angry, faced each other in significant silence. There were coffee, cigars, cigarettes and liqueurs spread out upon the sideboard. Not a thing had been touched. Neither man was smoking. Sir Humphrey stood on the hearthrug in a characteristic attitude, calmer than his companion but with his mouth set in rigid lines, and a steely look in his eyes. Matterson, with less self-control, was also standing, his face flushed, his hair a little disordered, a dark frown upon his face. Traffic in the square outside was usually negligible towards nightfall, and the silence in the room was all the more noticeable in the absence of any sound from without. It was Matterson who at last resumed a very heated discussion.

“May I take the liberty of asking, Sir Humphrey,” he demanded, “what would be your course of action if I should give orders for the arrest of Lord Edward Keynsham on his arrival?”

“I should look upon such a proceeding,” the Home Secretary replied, “as an act of insubordination on your part. I should at once order your men to release Lord Edward, and if they refused, I should impose upon them the same penalty as I should certainly exact from you. My authority in this matter must not be disputed.”

“Do you realise, sir,” the Subcommissioner proceeded harshly, “that the box which you have in your possession, which Lord Edward is so anxious not to have you open until his arrival, contains, without a doubt, the clue we need to enable us to hunt down the Lombard Street murderers?”

“What it contains is not, for the present, your business,” was the firm rejoinder. “That box is part of the estate of a man for whom I am acting as executor. I intend to accede to Keynsham’s request and open it in his presence. The administration of justice can be in no way affected by a few minutes’

delay.”

“You have forgiven his lordship, then,” Matterson enquired cuttingly, “for putting you through that degrading exhibition at Norwich which brought on your illness?”

“The matter is in abeyance,” Rossiter replied. “I require a fuller statement of his motive.”

“You have forgiven him for your second disappearance, during which your house and the apartment of Mrs. Brandt were burglariously entered and ransacked?”

“My second disappearance was entirely voluntary,” Sir Humphrey explained. “My impression is that Lord Edward, whether rightly or wrongly, acted in good faith with a view to saving my life and the life of Katherine Brandt.”

“The situation is absolutely impossible,” Matterson declared angrily. “Do you realise, sir, that the young man who made his way into this house by means of a stolen key and who shot Pank was in league with Keynsham? Not only that, but the men who brutally murdered Grimmetts’ manager and the liftman in Lombard Street were also members of his gang.”

“I fear that that may be the case,” Sir Humphrey acknowledged calmly. “Nevertheless, I am determined to hear what he has to say.”

“Hear it afterwards, then,” the other begged. “At the present moment, you are under proper and adequate police protection. I take the liberty, Sir Humphrey Rossiter, of saying that it is your duty to open the box and permit us to examine its criminal records before any one else has a chance to tamper with them.”

“I have every sympathy with you, Matterson,” Sir Humphrey said, “and for that reason I am not going to lose my temper again. I look upon Lord Edward Keynsham, notwithstanding the grave suspicion which he has drawn upon himself by his recent behaviour and by his association with criminals, as a man whom we must take seriously into account. If he has nothing illuminating to say, in other words, if he fails to justify himself, he must take his place with the others. He will gain nothing by making me wait. On the other hand, there has always been an unexplained mystery about this business, and that unexplained mystery may be better solved if I wait for his coming.”

“Apart from the official point of view,” Matterson persisted, “you are Mrs. Brandt’s executor. She has expressed her wish to have the box opened at once.”

“She has countermanded it this afternoon. I had a telephone message from her almost at the same moment as I received Keynsham’s despatch, begging me to wait for his arrival, when she herself would be present.”

Matterson clenched his hands.

“Do you realise this, sir?” he demanded. “It would be perfectly possible for Keynsham to produce a small bomb in this room, wreck that box for ever and destroy every record it contains.”

“It might be possible, but he won’t do it,” was the bland reply. “In any case, you and your men should be sufficiently alert to stop any action of that sort.”

The Subcommissioner’s expression was for a moment darker even than before. Twice his lips parted and he was on the point of fatal speech. Twice he restrained himself.

“May I ask whether Lord Edward fixed any hour for his arrival?” he enquired.

“No exact hour. The telegram was handed in at Folkestone. He had had to make a forced descent somewhere near Lympington. I understand that he is coming on by car.”

Again the two men relapsed into silence. Matterson, notwithstanding his military career, or perhaps because of it, possessed a strictly official mind, and the present situation was intolerable to him. Sir Humphrey, who should have been a miracle of correctness, to whom the etiquette of the profession should have been sacred, was plainly inclined to temporise with what could be nothing less than criminal conspiracy. All because of the man’s sister, Matterson told himself savagely! A Home Secretary influenced by a woman! The thing was indecent. . . .

There came at last the sound of a car stopping outside, voices, footsteps in the hall. The door was opened and closed. Detective-Inspector Pank, with his arm in a sling, approached. There was a gleam of excitement even in his pale blue eyes.

“Lord Edward Keynsham and the lady are here, sir,” he announced.

“You can show them in,” Sir Humphrey directed.

“Be careful that they are alone,” Matterson added curtly. “Keep a guard on all the doors and, unless Sir Humphrey has any objection, I should like you to remain, Pank. You can use your right arm?”

“Perfectly well, sir. I trust, however, there will be no necessity. Lord Edward does not look very aggressive.”

“Don’t forget, Matterson,” Sir Humphrey pointed out, as Pank left the room, “that this is our one chance of receiving a reasonable explanation of everything that has happened. That’s my bargain with Keynsham, and I think it’s worth waiting for. The contents of that box, however surprising they may be, might tell us nothing without an interpreter.”

The door was thrown open. Lord Edward entered, and by his side Katherine Brandt. Sir Humphrey gave a little start. Even Colonel Matterson forgot for a moment his fury. Keynsham’s forehead was bandaged, he was still

in his flying clothes, and he walked with the help of a heavy stick. He was paler than any one in London had ever seen him before, but his voice, when he spoke, anxious though it was, was full and strong.

“You got my message, Humphrey? What about it?”

“I have waited,” Rossiter replied.

“Thank God!” was the fervent exclamation.

“You will have a good deal to explain to-day, you know, Edward,” the Home Secretary continued. “I am not guaranteeing you any protection or any immunity. All that I am offering you is freedom of speech. You know Matterson? Here he is, with half the fighting force of Scotland Yard surrounding us. We have been led a pretty dance by some one and he wants to get his own back. Katherine, do let me offer you a chair.”

“It would be much more to the point if you offered Lord Edward one,” she begged. “He has come straight up from the south coast after crashing near Folkestone, and he would not even wait to be bandaged. I had to do it in the car. Do be humane and give him something to drink.”

“Sit down, by all means,” Sir Humphrey invited. “Here’s your drink, Edward,” he went on, mixing a stiff whisky and soda. “We will give you five minutes to pull yourself together.”

Keynsham lingered for a moment, leaning heavily on the stick which he grasped with his left hand, his right on the back of the chair to which Sir Humphrey had pointed. He had the appearance of a man who had met with a more than ordinary accident. His eyes seemed to have receded further into his head, the knuckles of the hand which gripped his stick showed white, his lips parted slowly and falteringly.

“You are sure that you have not opened the box?” he asked, uttering every word as though he feared to part with it.

Sir Humphrey pointed to a green baize-covered receptacle which looked like a portable radio, and which stood upon a table close at hand.

“I have not,” he declared. “More than once I have asked myself, Keynsham, why I should have shown you this consideration. Matterson here is furious with me. Anyhow, I have done it. There is the box unopened. In five minutes, I am going to examine its contents.”

Keynsham sank into his chair.

“Five minutes will be quite long enough,” he muttered, swallowing half the contents of his tumbler. “Only the second crash I have ever had in my life. The worst of luck too. I ran into a fog just this side of the Channel. However, I’m here in time. Thank God for that!”

“For your own sake or for ours?” Matterson asked coldly.

“For every one’s,” was the curt reply. . . .

The minutes ticked on. Presently Sir Humphrey rose quite calmly to his

feet.

“The five minutes,” he announced, “have expired.”

Keynsham dragged his chair to the table and sat down opposite to the box. Sir Humphrey lifted off its green baize cover, disclosing a strongly made coffer of oak with brass corners. On the top of it was stamped in gilt letters

### THE KEYNSHAM TRUST

From a groove underneath the handle Rossiter drew out a key.

“I am now,” he said, fitting the key in the lock, “about to open the box.”

For a moment he paused and glanced quickly around. Matterson and Pank were standing: one on each side of Keynsham in an attitude of intense watchfulness. Outside was silence. In the hall a policeman coughed. There was no sign whatever of any impending disturbance. Rossiter turned the key with firm fingers and pushed back the heavy lid. Every one leaned a little forward. Katherine Brandt was nervously clasping and unclasping her hands. Keynsham, though his face was still unusually pale, was fast recovering his composure. . . . Lying on the top of the box was a large calf-bound volume, also stamped in gold letters THE KEYNSHAM TRUST. Underneath it were seven bulky packets of green American bank notes. Sir Humphrey picked one up and turned it over in amazement. The bills were of the largest denomination he had ever seen.

“Good God,” he exclaimed, “I have never seen so much money in my life!”

“Don’t bother about the notes,” Keynsham begged impatiently. “I can tell you all about those in a few words. There are seven packets there, with a million dollars in each. They are a special reserve fund of the Keynsham Trust. It was money we could find no profitable use for, so we locked it away for an emergency.”

“And what, might one ask,” Sir Humphrey demanded, “is the Keynsham Trust?”

Lord Edward finished the contents of the tumbler of whisky and soda, and leaned forward.

“The Keynsham Trust,” he explained, “is the largest illicit business that has ever been known in the history of the world. It was started after the war as a collateral branch of the firm of Hamilton, Topps & Company, later Hamilton, Topps & Keynsham. In England and throughout Europe, that firm, as you may know, does a large and admirably correct business. In the United States of America, we have made some forty million dollars in the industry commonly known as bootlegging.”

There was blank silence—an utter and profound silence. Sir Humphrey held his head. Matterson metaphorically kicked himself. Pank groaned audibly.

“The commencement of the affair was really very simple,” Keynsham continued. “After the war, some of us who still had the fever of excitement in our veins, and the craving for adventure still throbbing in our pulses, happened to come together in New York. To be exact, there was the Marquis de Lusigny, Sam Clowes, a New Yorker named Bowman, and myself. We were all broke and wanted money, but we also wanted adventure. We have had all we wanted of both. De Lusigny possessed the largest vineyards in the southwest of France, and half a dozen steamers, but no ready cash. My firm, which I had just joined, had all the capital that was needed to start with, also a few steamers and a magnificent reputation, with an established business in fruits from South America and the West Indies. We had advantages which none of the others who followed in the same line ever had. We made them look like amateurs. Where other people could land a thousand cases and often have to give away half of them, we landed hundreds of thousands almost without molestation. We landed them in Canada, we landed them in Florida, we landed them in New York itself, in New Jersey and all down the coast. I don’t want to make too long a story of this, but on account of our wonderful facilities and because we were not afraid to fight when fighting was necessary, we flourished whilst our competitors, one by one, faded away. When we took stock a year ago, each one of us was worth something like two million pounds sterling.”

Of all the company in the room, Matterson seemed to be the most bewildered.

“I don’t understand,” he confessed. “I had an idea of something of this sort once or twice, but I put it out of my head because, after all, it is no crime in this country to supply a thirsty neighbour with drink. Why were you prepared to go to the lengths even of murder to prevent Sir Humphrey opening this box? You must have known that its contents were perfectly safe in his hands and that the money would be properly distributed.”

“We had no anxiety about the money,” Keynsham replied slowly. “What we feared was that Sir Humphrey Rossiter would consider it his duty as Brandt’s executor to examine the contents of this book.”

He drew the volume a little nearer towards him. No one moved. No one spoke.

“On the whole,” Keynsham went on, “ours was a company of honourable men. In an evil moment, and when we were all worked to death, we let in a newcomer whom we all grew to hate as much as he seemed to hate us. To him had been allotted the post of clerk to the organisation. He kept an abstract of the accounts, which you will find here, and he kept it with marvellous precision. He kept also a history of our day-by-day doings. I am not going to attempt to excuse any of our actions. I’m not sure that I consider any apologia necessary. Twice we suffered, and suffered badly, from informers. They were

men whom we had invited to join us, men whom we thought our friends. We held a meeting to decide how to deal with this danger. There were seven of us then. We were all, in a sense, strangers, brought together by circumstances, chiefly by the war. We trusted one another, but we had trusted others and been deceived almost to the point of ruin. We decided at that meeting to fight our battles as others fought them—to defend ourselves when we were attacked. That we have done. It was impossible to hold together by entirely peaceful methods. When we were struck at, we retaliated. When we had to fight, we fought.”

The light of understanding flashed into Rossiter’s eyes.

“Stop!” he insisted.

Keynsham looked questioningly at him.

“Take your hand away from that book,” Sir Humphrey enjoined.

“Humphrey,” the other pleaded, “that book is better back in my possession. Let it go at that, I beg of you.”

“Take your hand away.”

Very slowly and very reluctantly Keynsham obeyed. The Home Secretary, with a deft movement, shut down the lid of the box, produced the key and locked it.

“Gentlemen,” he begged, “I shall ask you to excuse me for three minutes.”

He crossed the room towards the writing desk. The eyes of all of them followed him, but curiously enough, as they thought afterwards, no one asked a question. Sir Humphrey deliberately adjusted his monocle, drew out a sheet of paper and wrote a few rapid lines. These he enclosed in an envelope which he addressed and sealed. He turned to the table and handed the letter across to Pank.

“Inspector,” he said, “can I trust you to see that this is delivered at once?”

“Certainly, sir,” was the prompt reply.

Sir Humphrey glanced at his watch.

“You have several cars outside. May I take it that it will be delivered within ten minutes?”

Pank looked at the address.

“I can guarantee it, sir.”

Sir Humphrey nodded, returned to his place at the table and unlocked the box.

“Now you can go on with your story, Edward,” he invited. “Tell us what you were going to say about this book.”

“Just this,” Keynsham proceeded. “At the meeting I have spoken of, it was decided that the best means of keeping us all together, and of guarding against any one of us turning informer against the others, was to place on record in this book of the organisation the deeds or misdeeds, whichever you choose to call

them, of each of its members. They are recorded there. To us, who lived out in the thick of it all, they were, as we knew, just part of the job. To the ordinary human being who did not understand the conditions, they would amount to a series of confessions. To an English Cabinet Minister, controlling the policy of his country, they would present an entirely different aspect: they would probably seem to him to contain absolute and vital information of which it was his duty to make use. That is why, when there appeared to be a chance of this book falling into the hands of the Home Secretary, the organisation of the Keynsham Trust have striven by every means they could think of to prevent it."

"The matter," the Home Secretary pronounced calmly, "begins to present a more rational aspect."

"Sir," Keynsham begged passionately, "I am short of words and breath tonight, but I implore you, for your own sake and for ours, to hand that book over to me as head of the trust. It does not form part of Mrs. Brandt's estate. It is not part of your duty as Mrs. Brandt's executor to look inside it. That it is in that box at all, is simply a devilish act of malice on the part of a dead man."

Sir Humphrey picked up the book. He turned over the pages carelessly. The sense of strain seemed to have passed from his tone and manner.

"Beautiful handwriting," he remarked.

"Cecil's," Katherine confided, with a shiver. "He used to spend hours writing in it."

Keynsham's features seemed to tighten. There was a sullen fire in his eyes. For a moment he had the look of a wounded animal about to spring.

"Sir Humphrey," he implored, "let the book alone."

Rossiter ignored him. In turning over the pages he had stopped at a printed headline consisting of three words

#### ROLL OF HONOUR

The first name upon the list was the name of Lord Edward Keynsham, and underneath in Keynsham's own handwriting was one brief and terrible sentence.

I confess that on January the tenth, 1920, I killed Jake Grogan on Pinder's Wharf, New Jersey.

Signed: Keynsham.

Rossiter started a little as he read. Involuntarily he glanced across the room. Keynsham was sitting back in his chair with folded arms. He had done his best. The worst had happened. Rossiter continued to read.



Armand de Lusigny.

I confess that in a fight at the corner of 122nd Street and 3rd Avenue in Chicago I killed the Chilean, Initos, whose body was found at that spot.

Signed: Armand de Lusigny.

Richard Van Pleyden.

I confess that I killed Rawson who turned informer against us and tried to remove our stores from Merrilees on the Canadian frontier.

Signed: Richard Van Pleyden.

Cecil Brandt.

I confess that I killed Commissioner Dane who, after having accepted a hundred thousand dollars in bribes from us, threatened to withdraw police protection unless we made him a partner in the Syndicate.

Signed: Cecil Brandt.

William Meadows.

I confess that in a fight on 4th Avenue in March 1922 I killed Michael O'Corrigan and wounded a man whose name I never knew, so that he died in hospital.

Signed: Will Meadows.

Samuel Clowes.

I killed Tony Burke on Pinder's Wharf in February 1923 and he got what was coming to him!

Signed: Samuel Clowes.

Sir Humphrey closed the book.

"A very ingenious, though not altogether original idea," he remarked. "You have here the signed confession by each one of the members of your syndicate of certain misdemeanours against the law. I presume your idea was that this made it impossible for any one of them to turn informer?"

"But possible enough," Keynsham rejoined bitterly, "for the one who went out before to sell the rest of us. You know now why Brandt went cheerfully to the scaffold. That was the sort of man he was!"

"I think," Matterson said, taking a step forward—

Sir Humphrey held out his hand.

"Wait!" he enjoined. "There is no hurry. This matter needs consideration."

He reopened the volume and studied once more the whole six entries.

“Now, supposing you tell me about this little affair of yours, Keynsham,” he suggested. “You simply say here that you killed Jake Grogan, whoever he may have been. Tell us about it.”

“There’s not much to tell,” was the bitter reply. “Grogan was one of the old-fashioned type of bootleggers, and he tried to clear us out with hired gunmen. We came up against one another, one night whilst we were landing a cargo. We tried, as we always did, to fight our own way, which didn’t include firearms, but it was useless. They were all armed to the teeth. Grogan had two shots at me and missed me by a hair’s breadth. After that I shot at him and I held my gun straighter.”

“I see,” Sir Humphrey murmured. “And now what about this affair of Mr. Samuel Clowes? He seems to have been rather pleased with himself.”

“He had reason to be. Tony Burke was what they call a ‘go-betweenener.’ He took bribes from us and gave information to the police at the same time. We had him up and charged him with it. When Sam killed him, he had a knife in his hand which was within an inch or two of De Lusigny’s back.”

“And De Lusigny’s little affair? What about that?”

“Initos started the fight—we didn’t,” Keynsham declared. “We offered him a friendly arrangement. He accepted it, then he ambushed a few of us and challenged us to fight it out with his cutthroats. He had three shots at De Lusigny—he can’t use his left arm even now—and De Lusigny killed him.”

Sir Humphrey nodded.

“There’s another man here,” he remarked with a grimace, “whose muscles I have cause to remember—Van Pleyden. He seemed to me rather a brutal sort of person.”

“He’s one of the kindest-hearted men alive normally,” Keynsham replied. “Rawson was one of our own men who double-crossed us. He brought a trolley load of detectives down to our wharf and we lost one of the only shipments that ever went wrong. Rawson was carrying a gun and tried to get at me—for fear of what might be coming to him afterwards, I suppose. Van Pleyden shot him and had to swim across the harbour to get away.”

“This fellow Meadows, I suppose,” Sir Humphrey enquired, his expression hardening, “is one of the two who committed the Lombard Street Murders?”

“We have no excuse to offer for that,” Keynsham admitted, “nor any explanation. A cold-blooded killing we never encouraged or permitted. Personally, I think it was done in a fit of nerves. Meadows had been terrified from the moment he signed that book.”

Matterson could restrain himself no longer. The Scotland Yard fever was in his eyes.

“Sir Humphrey,” he pointed out, “of course, the whole thing is clear enough now. This book of confessions would be worth its weight in gold to the

New York police. You had better give it into our charge at once and we will take the necessary steps.”

Sir Humphrey shook his head.

“I don’t think so, Matterson,” he said firmly.

The Subcommissioner stared at him in amazement.

“But these men are confessed criminals,” he argued. “They broke the civil law of the country they were living in and they broke the criminal law by their killings!”

“They were engaged, no doubt,” Sir Humphrey admitted, “in a hazardous and illegal enterprise, but, after all, their deeds of violence seem to have been committed either against informers, who are the scum of the earth, or against others who were engaged in the same form of law-breaking.”

Matterson’s voice shook with passion.

“Sir Humphrey Rossiter,” he said sternly, “you have been shielding these people for personal reasons too long. I am forced to remind you, sir, that you should be the one person responsible for the due observance of the law. Remember that you are Home Secretary of this country.”

Sir Humphrey turned towards the fire and thrust the book into the middle of the flames.

“I’m nothing of the sort, Matterson,” he confided. “I resigned a quarter of an hour ago.”

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Then they all left, and once more Sir Humphrey was alone in his study. Detective Inspector Pank had hurried back to his lodgings and settled down to write a love letter to Amy. Colonel Matterson had gone furiously to his club, tormented by the bald and ugly fact that the thunderbolt which he had come so near to launching had fizzled out in his hand, and that all these weeks of mortification and nervous anxiety had gone for nothing. The departure of Keynsham and Katherine Brandt had been just a little sheepish. Keynsham for one moment had looked his friend searchingly in the face, but he realised that the latter had reached the limit of his endurance.

“You are a great man, Humphrey,” he said simply. “If only we had dared to trust you before!”

Katherine had scarcely been so happy in her parting.

“I must look after him to-night,” she faltered. “You will never understand what a marvellous thing you have done!”

But Sir Humphrey, watching them both leave the room, thought that he understood very well indeed.

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Chestow Square seemed to have relapsed into its usual state of calm. Policemen, detectives, watchmen of every description had departed. Parkins

came into the library, cleared away and set out the whisky and soda by his master's side.

"Is there anything more you require to-night, sir?" was his stereotyped question.

"Nothing, thank you."

Sir Humphrey helped himself to a whisky and soda, selected a pipe from a rack, filled and lit it. He stretched himself out, enjoying the warmth of the fire. He was in a sense dazed, when he tried to think of what had happened. No longer Home Secretary. No longer a Cabinet Minister. Very soon, in all probability, not even a Member of Parliament. Odd how one's ambitions could fade away in a moment of crisis. There was nothing else he could have done, he told himself. He had destroyed the record of criminal actions committed by a band of adventurers, under the leadership of an Englishman, in a friendly country, actions which were brought to his notice in a foully malicious manner by a dead man. Terrible! The worst of it was, he thought, with a faint smile, as he pushed the tobacco farther down into his pipe, he would probably have done the same thing at any time during his career! It was just the evil chance of a lifetime that the problem should have been put up to him.

There was the sound of a car stopping outside. He listened and glanced at his watch. It was still only twelve o'clock. Very likely Carthew had heard the news. The door was opened. Parkins appeared and behind him a very brilliant vision.

"Lady Louise Keynsham," he announced.

She came forward with a curious smile parting her lips—half of apology, half of subtler things.

"Don't laugh at me, please," she begged. "I had to go to the show at Buckingham Palace, but I only stayed an hour. I got home meaning to change and go on to the D'Arcys', but Katherine and Edward came in and what they didn't tell me I guessed."

"So you came to console me," he asked, wheeling up a chair.

She held out her hands, and somehow their natural place seemed to be around his neck. Her eyes melted into his. Underneath the white satin of her gown he could feel the fluttering of her heart as he drew her towards him.

"I thought you might be lonely," she whispered.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Gallows of Chance* by E. Phillips (Edward Phillips)  
Oppenheim]