

THE SECRET OF SHEEN



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THE SECRET OF SHEEN

BY
JOHN LAURENCE

AUTHOR OF
"THE PURSUING SHADOW," "THE PERFECT ALIBI,"
"THE FANSHAWE COURT MYSTERY," ETC.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I CHARITY SHEEN.....	7
II BILSITER PROPOSES.....	17
III CHARITY SHEEN ACTS.....	23
IV MURDER.....	28
V INSPECTOR LANNER INVESTIGATES.....	38
VI LORD ROWMANDS TALKS.....	49
VII AT CROSS PURPOSES.....	55
VIII AVRIL BECOMES ENGAGED.....	69
IX THE STRANGE WOMAN.....	74
X TWO AND TWO MAKE FOUR.....	79
XI AVRIL ABBLEWAY GETS A SHOCK.....	90
XII THREE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING.....	96
XIII BLOOMSBURY 99684.....	104
XIV AVRIL TURNS DETECTIVE.....	112
XV AVRIL GOES TO LONDON.....	123
XVI AVRIL MEETS THE STRANGE WOMAN.....	135
XVII IN MRS. HOLLISTER'S FLAT.....	144
XVIII LANNER GETS A SURPRISE.....	151
XIX LANNER GOES TO LONDON.....	159
XX MRS. HOLLISTER LEARNS THINGS.....	165
XXI LULWORTH RECEIVES VISITORS.....	179
XXII SIR RICHARD LULWORTH INVESTIGATES.....	189
XXIII MRS. HOLLISTER THREATENS.....	207
XXIV LULWORTH EXPLAINS.....	211
XXV LANNER HEARS NEWS.....	219
XXVI "WRONG NUMBER".....	228
XXVII CHARITY SHEEN AGAIN ACTS.....	237
XXVIII BRANDT TALKS.....	245
XXIX JESSON TALKS TO LULWORTH.....	252
XXX LANNER IS PUZZLED.....	259
XXXI LULWORTH EXPLAINS.....	266
XXXII THE MURDERER OF BILSITER.....	273
XXXIII THE END.....	285

THE SECRET OF SHEEN

CHAPTER I

CHARITY SHEEN

AVRIL ABBLEWAY and her companion found a secluded seat in the old world garden of Rowmands, or rather Avril Ableway's companion found the seat and she acquiesced in sitting there that brilliant June evening.

"Nothing you say, Sir Richard," she remarked decisively, her blue eyes sparkling, "will ever convince me that out of any evil action there can come good."

"My dear Miss Ableway," laughed Sir Richard Lulworth, "you are making a very sweeping statement. War, for example, is an evil thing, yet sometimes it results in great good. The Great War, for example."

"The Great War was Great Misery, and it has left an immense amount of evil in its train. Look at Europe now. It is merely waiting and preparing for the next war, the war of Revenge."

"But you are not suggesting that if you are hit upon one cheek you should turn the other to the smiter?" he asked. "Isn't that rather an old-fashioned doctrine?"

"It is two thousand years old-fashioned," she flashed back.

"And as many years out of date," he declared. "Miss Ableway, what would you do if a man hit your mother? Would you suggest—"

"He wouldn't be a man," she interrupted with the perversity of her sex.

Sir Richard Lulworth threw up his hands in mock despair.

"I was foolish to have started the argument," he said gravely. "But perhaps some day I will resume it and you will have changed your mind."

"Why do you take such an interest in this man Charity Sheen?" she demanded suddenly. "This is the second time you have defended him, a man who is an admitted thief, a man my father once said he'd give half his next year's income to arrest."

"Have I defended him?" he prevaricated. "Naturally, as the daughter of a Commissioner at Scotland Yard, you only look upon him as some debased wretch who probably thinks of nothing but his ill-gotten gains. Yet you must admit his methods are unusual, and the unusual is always interesting."

"You are unusual yourself, Sir Richard," said Avril, leaning back. "Yet you don't rob other people. Indeed, I am always hearing how good you are, though you try to hide it."

A slight flush tinged the other's face.

"But you don't suggest, I notice, that if I am unusual I am interesting."

"Oh, but you are, one of the most interesting men I have ever met," she replied naively. "Do you think I should be sitting out here with you if there were any more interesting men in the house?"

Her companion stood up and bowed. There was a grave look in his face as he sat down again.

“Yet I don’t suppose I am half so interesting really as—well, as Charity Sheen, for example,” he said slowly. “A man who has pitted his wits against the police for the last two years, and is still as much a shadow as ever.”

“But he’ll be caught yet,” she cried. “Father says he is bound to make a slip soon and then nothing can save him.”

“Except his own native wit,” he laughed. “No, no. Miss Ableway, he is not likely to be caught. May I point out to you that many of his crimes would never have been known, because his victims would never have complained of their losses, if he had not written and told the police himself?”

“That is bravado,” she replied. “He is an egoist, and *that* will get him, father says. You see, father is convinced that Sheen is an educated man, perhaps some man we actually know under another name. Wouldn’t it be fun if I happened to be the first to suspect him?”

“Would it be such great fun after all, if you did, and your father was right and it was someone you knew? Even when buoyed up with the sense of justice, I suppose it is not always pleasant to think that one’s own actions have sent a man to prison.”

The two relapsed into silence for a little while. Sir Richard looked at the flushed, eager face of the girl by his side. It was the most attractive face in the world to him. Those bright blue eyes, those delicately-curved lips, the rose of her cheeks, the dainty little retroussé nose, they held him as their slave, though he had sternly put them from him time and time again. But like a moth to the candle he came to have his heart seared, though he knew he could never marry her, that she would scorn him as she scorned—well, Charity Sheen—if she knew the whole truth about him.

And she?

Avril Ableway was undecided. She liked the man by her side immensely, but whether she loved him she could not decide. He puzzled her, for at times he appeared to her to be a fierce cynic, at war with the world and everything in it. Yet she knew from various sources that the timely help of Sir Richard had saved more than one man from disaster and put him on his feet again. Of these things, however, she could never get him to speak.

He was a man who seemed to have no definite object in life, a *dilettante*, a man who had inherited great wealth, but who did not apparently put to any good use the brains which had been given him. It was his cleverness which appealed to her more than anything. He not only seemed to know most people worth knowing, to have been to most places worth going to, but to have the trick of picking out the weaknesses of the people he had met. His deep grey eyes were a little too closely set, his nose a little too large, for him to have been called good-looking, but there was a firmness about his lips which very much belied the *dilettante* attitude which he adopted, and made her feel that when he chose to exert himself there would be but little he could not do.

No man of her acquaintance, indeed, irritated Avril more, no man interested her more. She could never be indifferent to him, she knew. He seemed interested in her,

too, but if his feelings for her were greater than those of mere interest, she had yet to make the discovery.

She had been irritated by the stand he had taken up in defending the mysterious criminal who signed himself "Charity Sheen," a man for whom Scotland Yard had been searching unsuccessfully for two years, "Another Settlement by Charity Sheen" had been a headline of the newspapers at least once a month for the last two years. The unknown's methods were certainly, as her companion had said, unusual. Always after every crime he committed he sent an account to the newspapers and to the Chief Commissioner, Sir John Ableway, at Scotland Yard. Moreover, he stated what he had done with the proceeds.

Take this last affair, for example, the stealing of the Duchess of Westshire's famous pearl necklace. Three days after the robbery Sir John Ableway, in common with the chief newspapers, had received a short typewritten message which read as follows:

"The Duchess of Westshire is now bemoaning the loss of her pearl necklace. I estimate that by selling these pearls separately I shall get somewhere in the neighbourhood of £15,000 for them. This sum I shall distribute anonymously in due course to various charities. I have taken this particular necklace because the insurance has just run out and has not yet been renewed, so the loss will fall on the Duke and Duchess themselves; because both have privately declared many times that charity begins at home—the Westshire home; and because both refused to subscribe to the Central Hospital for Children when it made its recent urgent appeal for funds with which to carry on. They both have now the satisfaction of knowing that in due course they will subscribe to many deserving charities.

"Received in settlement, £15,000.

"With thanks,
"CHARITY SHEEN"

Most papers printed the announcement in facsimile, not so much because they wanted to advertise Charity Sheen's signature, as because it was an excellent item of news and the Westshires were so notoriously closefisted that it was printed as much to draw everyone's attention to the fact as anything else.

Every one of Charity Sheen's crimes was based, according to Charity Sheen, on doing good, and it was that rock on which Sir Richard Lulworth and Avril Ableway had split. Sometimes the mysterious Sheen gave the names of those who were benefited, sometimes not. But he always gave the name of his victim, always held him up to scorn or ridicule. To many, in consequence, his crimes gave a secret and intense pleasure.

It had been two years ago, almost to the day, since Sheen had begun his operations, and after each crime the question, "What are the police doing?" had become more and more insistent. In particular Sir John Ableway had come in for a great deal of criticism. A new type of criminal had arisen, and he was employing methods which did not leave any clue which could be followed up.

Avril was not among those who secretly sympathised with the unknown Sheen. It could hardly be expected, indeed, that the daughter of a commissioner would sympathise. She knew, as only very few others did, that pressure had been brought to bear on her father from the very highest quarters; that there had even been a talk of superseding him.

“Even if it were a friend of mine,” she said at last, “I think I should be glad that I had been in any way responsible for capturing him. But don’t you think, Sir Richard, we had better find ourselves again? Dinner will be served in half an hour, and we have got to dress.”

Her companion nodded.

“Ah, well, I hope you are never put in the position you contemplate so lightly,” he said as they came in sight of the house. “Why, it might be your old friend Bilsiter,” he added jestingly. “I see he has just crossed the threshold, attracted by the prospects of a meal.”

Avril laughed.

“You are only saying that to try to make me angry,” she said. “You know Mr. Bilsiter is no friend of mine.”

“Though he has proposed to you twice.”

“He wouldn’t be a friend of mine if he had proposed fifty times,” she retorted. “I am not marrying a moneylender who hides his real occupation under the pretence of being a financier.

“I have heard rumours that he has half the peerage under his thumb,” he said with a smile. “See what high society you would move in.”

With a toss of her head Avril turned and ran lightly up the staircase.

“I shall sit next to him at dinner, then,” she called out, with a light-hearted laugh.

To her late companion’s disgust it was exactly where she did sit. Sir Richard found himself beside young Reggie Rowmands and Tommy Ableway, Avril’s brother. Both had been to Brooklands the previous day, and both had only one topic of conversation—speed. He listened, outwardly polite, inwardly bored. Avril sat nearly opposite to him, and her eyes had a mischievous twinkle in them whenever she looked across at him. She seemed to be paying special attention to the financier, and he was obviously flattered. Leonard Bilsiter was not a very possessing man, with his beady eyes and heavy jowl, and Lulworth wondered why Lord Rowmands had invited him down. He could make a pretty shrewd guess. Either Rowmands wanted money or owed money to Bilsiter. For his own sake Bilsiter would certainly never get invited anywhere.

There came one of those sudden half silences which descend so unexpectedly upon a dining table, when one person speaking seems to be doing so in unnaturally loud tones. The solitary voice was Bilsiter’s. His face was slightly flushed.

“Of course I have been threatened by this man Sheen,” he was saying. “I should have felt out of it if I hadn’t.”

Instantly the silence was complete, and every eye was turned on the financier. Everyone at that table, with perhaps, the exception of Avril, devotedly hoped that whatever the threat the mysterious Sheen had made he would make it good—this time. Bilsiter evidently thoroughly enjoyed the attention which was suddenly focussed on him, and he needed but little prompting from a number of those sitting near to give details.

“My business doesn’t always bring me friends,” he began ponderously. “And I have been threatened by more than one man who has asked for money and has had it refused. If I didn’t refuse sometimes I might as well go out of business,” He laughed heavily and stroked the moustache which ill-concealed his loose mouth. “This man Sheen—well, I mustn’t say too much, but he wants a little paper I have got. He told me——”

“He *told* you,” interrupted several voices.

“He telephoned me yesterday,” continued Bilsiter. “And said he was going to take the paper unless I posted it to—er—the person whose name is on it by this morning. Well, gentlemen, he has not got it, and I have.”

He tapped the pocket of his dinner jacket significantly.

“I do not let it out of my possession,” he added. “And Mr. Sheen, he will find I am prepared. Leave it to me, my friends,” he finished unctuously. “I am not afraid of Mr. Charity Sheen.”

The buzz of conversation round the table was slowly resumed. The name of Sheen cropped up again and again as one person or another recalled one of his exploits.

“Well, as for me,” said young Rowmands, “I don’t mind admitting I rather envy him. He’s a sport. What do you think?” he added, turning to Sir Richard.

“I am rather inclined to agree with you,” answered the other with a smile. “Though I am afraid most people will not.”

“I think it is a shame that anyone should have any good word for a criminal. It’s a false sentiment.”

Avril’s quick ears had heard the conversation across the table, and her clear, ringing tones made all turn towards her. Her face was flushed and her blue eyes sparkled with the anger she was feeling.

“Sir Richard’s always defending this man,” she continued. “Anyone would think a criminal was a hero.”

“I am sure, Miss Ableway, I don’t think he is a hero,” replied Lulworth slowly, as all eyes were turned on him. “Far from it. But I suppose even a criminal has a point of view, though it may be a warped one. This man Sheen is not an ordinary criminal. He is a man who appears to desire nothing for himself, who attempts to divert useless possessions into useful channels.”

“Stealing another person’s property for any purpose is wrong,” cried Bilsiter. “Perhaps if this man Sheen robs you, Sir Richard, holds you up to ridicule in the papers, you won’t be so eager to defend him.”

“I hope I shall have enough sense of humour left to retain my point of view, if Sheen does rob me,” said Lulworth with a laugh.

“Well, frankly, I would rather have Sheen’s point of view than some people’s,” interrupted young Rowmands. “There are people who steal and keep inside the law, steal from the helpless, widows and orphans and people with no sense of business, and they’re worse than a man like Sheen who only steals from people who can afford it.”

He looked across at the financier as he spoke, and Bilsiter flushed. There was a feeling of tension round the table.

“Well, if he can steal anything from me he’s welcome,” he said sharply.

Avril opened her mouth to speak again, and caught an amused smile on the face of Sir Richard. She felt, suddenly, that he was inwardly laughing at her. With an effort she turned the conversation into a lighter channel—the prospects of the English competitors at Wimbledon—and slowly the conversation drifted for the rest of the meal to other topics than Charity Sheen.

When the men joined the ladies later in the drawing-room, Bilsiter came straight to Avril and spoke in a low voice.

“May I have a word with you alone, Miss Ableway?” he asked.

“What is it, Mr. Bilsiter?”

She spoke coldly. It had been in a fit of pique that she had chosen to sit beside the moneylender, and she had no intention of being his companion for the rest of the evening, much as Bilsiter would have liked it.

He shook his head at her question.

“I can’t tell you here,” he replied in a low voice, fixing his beady eyes on her face. “Come into the garden. I shall not detain you for very long. You may—may be sorry —”

She looked at him with startled eyes. There was an underlying threat in his unfinished sentence which puzzled her. For a moment her whole nature rose in revolt. Then curiosity overcame her, and with it an idea that she might have put a wrong construction on his words. She knew of no reason at all, indeed, why the moneylender should threaten her, though he had pestered her with his attentions.

“I’ll give you ten minutes, Mr. Bilsiter,” she cried with forced gaiety in her tone. “After that I really must come in. I have promised to make a four at bridge.”

“Ten minutes will suffice,” he replied politely. “And I hope that what I have to say to you will not upset your play at all.”

Avril shrugged her shoulders. As she passed through the French windows she caught sight of Sir Richard standing on the lawn talking to Lord Rowmands. The former brought his closed fist down on his open palm as he said something emphatically in a low voice, and then turned quickly at the crunch of Bilsiter’s feet on the gravel. With the defiant air of a child caught in some overt act, Avril walked by the peer and his companion, uttering some commonplace, conventional words to the man by her side.

Lulworth laid a hand on the other’s arm as the two passed out of sight.

“Run along and look after your guests,” he said quietly. “And don’t worry about what you have told me. Things are never as bad as they seem. To-morrow morning—well, by to-morrow morning anything might have happened.”

Lord Rowmands opened his mouth to speak. There was a strained, anxious look on his face and his hands were clenched. He shook one fist angrily in the direction taken by Avril and her companion. Sir Richard’s hand tightened on his arm.

“Control yourself,” he said quietly. “Bilsiter will overreach himself yet. I will have a talk with him and see what can be done.” The elder man passed his hand slowly over

his forehead.

“You’re right, Richard,” he said slowly. “My duty is with my guests. But to-morrow _____”

“Why, to-morrow you will be wondering what you made all the fuss about,” cried Lulworth cheerfully. “Bilsiter will always give in where money is concerned. You can pay me back when things turn. You’re not the only one in the house who is not looking forward to to-morrow as far as Bilsiter is concerned.”

Rowmands half turned back, as though he was going to ask a question, but Lulworth nodded his refusal with a smiling face.

“You think about your own affairs,” he said. “And don’t worry about anyone else’s.”

“Somebody else has confided in you, though,” said the peer.

“I seem a sort of human magnet who attracts all people in trouble,” returned Lulworth with a laugh. “I suppose it’s because I’ve got a reputation for it, somehow.”

“You’re a good man, Richard,” said Rowmands fervently. “And if the day ever comes when I can help you——”

“I may remind you of it,” interrupted Lulworth swiftly.

He looked thoughtfully after the receding form of the peer. Lord Rowmands had a heart bigger than his pocket, he reflected, and he had run up against a man whose pocket was greater than his heart. Yet by no sign, no inflexion of his voice, even, had he betrayed that Leonard Bilsiter was not so welcome a guest at the big house near Beaconsfield as any of his many friends who delighted in accepting the peer’s hospitality.

As he flicked away the ash of his cigar, Sir Richard Lulworth turned again and looked in the direction in which Avril Ableway and the moneylender had gone. His mind was full of conflicting emotions. It appeared to him that it was a sacrilege that this girl, of such fine clay, should be alone anywhere with Bilsiter. His very presence was poisonous. He wondered why she had deliberately chosen such a companion for her after-dinner stroll, and he drew the wrong conclusion, that she had done it to make him angry, as she had sat beside Bilsiter at dinner.

He smiled grimly to himself. He was good psychologist enough to know that her attitude showed one thing very definitely, that she was not indifferent to him. But with the thought his smile faded. He might be in love with the girl, was in love with her, in fact, but he could never marry her—now. What curse was it that caused that unreasoning desire for adventure, adventure of any kind, to run through his veins? Two years ago—well, two years ago he had not met her. Now it was too late. Even if he turned back now, turned back instantly, he would be bound to tell her of that episode in his past, and her attitude left no doubt in his mind what she would do. She would scorn him, put him on a level with any common criminal.

He couldn’t stop now, but there was one thing he could do. He would keep out of this girl’s way, could avoid being tortured by the dancing light in her blue eyes, by the mockery of her lips, by the alluring perfume of her presence. To-morrow he would go away, would bury himself, he reflected, where their paths were not likely to cross. He

had been like some poor dazzled moth attracted to the light, and he knew that he had burnt himself badly.

He threw away his half-finished cigar and walked slowly up the path towards the house. There came the sound of quickly-moving feet behind him, and he turned round to see Avril's slim figure. Her face was white, her eyes wide open, staring, frightened, and she hurried by without a word.

CHAPTER II

BILSITER PROPOSES

“NOW what the devil’s the matter?” muttered Lulworth. “If that insufferable pig——”

He left the sentence unfinished. He could draw only one conclusion, that Bilsiter had said something to Avril which had brought a look of fear into her eyes, and for that Bilsiter would have to pay. That, he reflected, made it a personal score, but he must be very careful how he made the moneylender liquidate it.

He stood there undecided what to do. He had not the slightest intention of being mixed up in a wordy brawl with Bilsiter. The man was not worth it, for one thing, and for another the moneylender was not the kind of man who would keep the affair to himself. Lulworth knew only too well that Bilsiter would spread the news, in some salacious manner, that there was more between Avril Ableway and Sir Richard Lulworth than met the eye. That possibility Lulworth could not afford to risk. He did not want Avril’s name coupled with his. He was too much in love with her for that.

He turned and walked slowly into the house and made his way into the card-room. To his surprise he saw that Avril was seated at one of the tables, playing bridge as though the game was all that mattered.

“Come and stand beside me, Sir Richard,” she cried gaily, “and bring me luck. I feel I shall want it to-night.”

“Lucky at cards,” he began.

“When I am in love,” she interrupted, “I shall give up playing cards and be on the safe side.”

“Perhaps,” he said in a low voice, “you are playing cards because you are unlucky in love.”

For a moment her eyes met his and her lips tightened. He had a queer feeling that his words had a deeper significance to her than he meant them to have, that her gaiety was forced, to deceive those with whom she was playing. He was watching her narrowly and he saw how big an effort it was for her to make some laughing reply. He said nothing more. He wanted her confidence, though he was afraid of it in a way. Avril Ableway was the one subject upon which he found it difficult to think clearly and coolly. Although he contemplated drifting away, breaking away, indeed, he knew that always he must keep in touch with her, though she might not be aware of it, that he must always be prepared to come forward and help, whatever the cost might be to himself.

“You are very silent, Sir Richard,” said Lady Rowmands, who was partnering her son against Avril and a Mr. Sturridge, one of the under-secretaries in the Government. “I suppose you look upon us as desperate gamblers?”

“I am sure, Lady Rowmands, I don’t look upon bridge as a gamble when you are playing it,” he replied politely.

“Now that is nicely put. You ought to have been a courtier in the good old days.”

“It’s a pity you don’t play,” remarked Sturridge. “I’m sure you would make a fine player.”

Lulworth shook his head.

“There’s no real risk in it,” he answered.

“You like taking risks?” asked Sturridge, as Rowmands dealt the cards afresh.

“Isn’t life itself a risk?” parried the other with a smile. “I think without some spice of adventure life is hardly worth living.”

“Sometimes the risks one takes lead to things which make life not worth living,” remarked Sturridge picking up his cards.

Lulworth lit a fresh cigarette—carefully. What the devil did Sturridge mean by that, he reflected? Did he mean anything, or was it just one of those casual shots which accidentally hits the target? If it were not casual, if Sturridge had made the remark deliberately, Lulworth reflected that he might have to do some serious thinking. Decidedly, in any case, a few cautious inquiries about Sturridge would not be out of place.

It was Avril who was the first to speak when the hand was finished.

“May I be excused at the end of the rubber?” she asked. “I have really a splitting headache. I think there must be thunder in the air.”

There were murmurs of sympathy from Lady Rowmands and her son.

“Of course, my dear,” said Lady Rowmands. “I did not think you were quite your usual sunny self when you sat down.”

For another twenty minutes the game continued, and when, at its finish, Avril again made her excuse, Sir Richard directed her to a comfortable settee in one corner of the room.

“If you will sit there, Miss Ableway, I will see about some wine for you.”

“I will drink it outside,” she replied. “It is cooler on the lawn.”

It was not until the servant had placed the tray on the small garden table and receded out of earshot that she spoke again.

“Did you see Mr. Bilsiter come back?” she asked.

“No, I did not,” he replied. “Has he been annoying you?”

“He has asked me to be his wife.”

The words came quickly, as though she hated saying them, and as she replaced her glass on the table Lulworth saw that her hand shook. She avoided meeting his eyes.

“He has asked you that twice already,” he said. “If he won’t take ‘No’ for an answer then——”

“This time I shall say ‘Yes.’ ”

Though she spoke in a tone which was almost inaudible, her words acted on him, as he was sitting there, like an electric shock.

“You’re going to say ‘Yes?’ ” he cried in amazement, crushing his cigarette beneath his heel.

She looked at him without speaking. She had no need to repeat her words. The agony and shame of them were plain to read in her face. He was mentally stunned. That she had been a free agent never occurred to him. Avril Ableway was not the sort of girl ever to give herself willingly to a man whose notoriety had reached even her ears. He searched his mind for words to say to her, ruthlessly crushing back the words which he wanted to say.

“You are going to marry Bilsiter?” he said slowly, at last. “But—but it’s madness!”

“He has half the peerage under his thumb,” she quoted him. “I shall move in high society.”

She spoke jestingly, but he brushed her words aside.

“My dear,” he said gravely. “You are in trouble. May I have the privilege of helping you?”

“You can’t help me; no one can help me—you least of all.”

Avril buried her face in her hands. When she looked up again her companion saw that her eyes were wet.

“What is it?” he asked. “If it’s a question of money——”

Avril Ableway shook her head vigorously.

“Oh, why,” she began, and then suddenly broke off. “No, no, it’s not money. It’s—it’s greater than money. Nothing can buy it.”

“You surely haven’t definitely promised to marry that bounder?” he demanded.

“I have promised him a decision to-morrow morning,” she answered steadily. “It can only be ‘yes,’ and he knows that.”

“Tell me all about it.”

“I can’t,” she replied obstinately, avoiding his glance. “I can’t. No, no, please.”

“But how can I help you if I have no idea what is the matter?” demanded Lulworth.

“You can’t help me. Don’t you understand,” she reiterated incoherently. “I can’t ask anybody for help now. I can’t explain. I—I—to-night—Oh, how can I tell you, please, please go away.”

“I’ll get the truth out of Bilsiter if I have to wring his neck,” he cried with sudden anger. “Don’t you understand too, that I want to help you, that I would take any risk to help you? You are in trouble. If you won’t let me help you, go to your father. You can’t possibly marry this man. You don’t know what you are doing. You——”

She stopped him with a gesture, and a new note came into her voice.

“Perhaps—perhaps I did not understand,” she answered. “I must think. Please, please promise me that you won’t speak to him till I give you permission. He has given me a great shock.”

Lulworth, like all who have the power of sympathy, knew the value of silence. He sat there racking his brains for some clue to the hold which Bilsiter might have obtained over her. He knew Avril well enough to know that she was not a girl to yield easily: that only some overwhelming terror of the consequences to some other person would make her yield. She would not yield because of the consequences to herself.

Yes, that was it, he reflected. Some other person. And that person, he knew, was her brother.

“Will you give me permission to speak to Bilsiter before—before you give him your answer?” he asked at last.

“No, no,” she replied. “I want to make up my own mind first. You must promise not to speak to anyone.”

She bent forward quickly as he hesitated.

“Don’t you understand?” she added. “I have told you because—because——”

She stopped as though searching her mind for the right words to use.

“Because?” he echoed.

“Because I had to,” she continued in desperation. “You were the one person I had to tell. I couldn’t tell father or Tommy. They wouldn’t understand. You—you——”

“I understand,” he said gravely. “But I shall not let you make this sacrifice. You are young, you do not know what you are doing. It would be better for you if you died to-night than you should become the wife of that man.”

“What are you going to do?”

She was staring through him, as though she scarcely saw him, and her voice seemed hardly part of herself. She was dazed with the conflict of her emotions, yet she managed to keep back the torrent of entreaties which was on her lips. She might break, but when she did it would be in the solitude of her own room. In the last two hours Avril had come into the knowledge that Sir Richard Lulworth was her man, and that very knowledge prevented her from opening her mind to him. Now she knew why she had always looked forward to seeing him, why, in a very few weeks, nay days, she would never see him again.

The knowledge that she loved him terrified her for the action he might take. He had never looked at her quite as he looked at her now, now that she had told him she was contemplating marrying Bilsiter. Nor had he spoken to her before with that authority in his voice. She was beginning to understand what that *dilettante* attitude hid, and it left her trembling.

“What are you going to do?” she repeated fearfully.

“That question I am afraid I must be rude enough to refuse to answer,” he replied. “But I am not going to let you marry Leonard Bilsiter, and I am not going to betray your confidence.”

His tones were final.

“You have no right to interfere in my affairs because I have given you my confidence,” she cried desperately, as she rose from her chair.

“Will you please make my excuses to Lady Rowmands?” she added. “Good night, Sir Richard.”

“And now, I think, action, before *she* takes it,” muttered Lulworth grimly to himself. “She is more wonderful than she will ever know.”

But for once he found action was not so easy. Visits to the billiard-room, the card-room and the library did not bring him in contact with Tommy Ableway. Though he had agreed to say nothing to anyone about the confidence Avril had given him he hoped that the information would be given to him. There were ways of obtaining information without directly asking it, and once the information he sought was in his possession he could act upon it and act swiftly.

He did not want to draw any attention to the fact that he was looking for Avril's brother. That might afterwards involve explanations, and explanations might lead anywhere.

When, at twelve o'clock, he retired to his room he had not seen either Leonard Bilsiter or Tommy Ableway.

CHAPTER III

CHARITY SHEEN ACTS

SOMEWHERE in the big house a clock had just finished chiming the hour of three. As the last stroke died away Leonard Bilsiter woke with a start and sat up.

The room felt stuffy and was intensely dark and he had a vague idea that the heavy curtains had been drawn, shutting out the half light of the June night. He made a movement to put his hand under his pillow. As he did so an electric torch flashed out and was directed full in his face, blinding him. He jerked his hand automatically and swiftly under his pillow, and there came a subdued laugh from the darkness behind the torch.

“I think, Mr. Bilsiter, you had better accept defeat quietly.”

The words were spoken sharply and the moneylender caught the glint of a revolver barrel as the other moved it forward.

“You see I have got your revolver. I thought, perhaps, it was wiser to get that first. Revolvers have a nasty habit of going off. I’ve drawn the blinds, too, in case my light shows outside. To save you the trouble of wasting your energies I have blown the main fuse, so that none of the lights in the house work. Candles are so difficult to see with, aren’t they, when you’re running after a man? The door is also locked and the key is in my pocket. Altogether a very unpleasant situation for you. Now then, get up.”

“What do——”

“Get out of bed!” interrupted the other curtly. “I’m having no monkey tricks, and I’m going to be obeyed, and talk afterwards.”

Slowly Bilsiter climbed out of bed. His beady eyes were half shut, to allow himself to get accustomed to the light. His brain was working quickly. To give him his due, he was no coward, but the business end of a revolver, held by a man whom he could not see, was a powerful argument for obedience.

“What do you want?” he demanded evenly.

“I want all the contents of all your pockets, as a beginning, Bilsiter,” came the voice from the darkness. “And I want them quickly. Now then, start with your dress clothes. Pile all the things in the pockets on the floor there, and be quick about it. Turn the pockets inside out. I don’t trust you.”

The moneylender moved away from the bed, the light following him.

“I suppose you are the man who calls himself Charity Sheen?” said Bilsiter coolly, as he put his hand in the inside pocket of his dinner jacket. “If so, you won’t get much for charity this time.”

“I dare say I shall get all I want, all the same,” replied the other. “Now your trouser pockets.”

Charity Sheen watched the moneylender from behind the screen of darkness as the latter placed the contents of his pockets on the floor beside him. A cigarette case, a

gold-mounted cigarette-holder, a small pocket-book, some silver, a key, and a handkerchief appeared to be all.

“Now what next, Mr. Sheen?” asked Bilsiter, with a slight trace of sarcasm in his tones. “The cuff-links out of my shirt?”

“May as well have them while I am about it,” replied Sheen.

He moved suddenly forward as he spoke and kicked the pocket-book and the key towards him with his foot.

“I fancy these will be more valuable,” he remarked.

He was narrowly watching the other, and he saw a momentary tightening of his lips. But Bilsiter spoke calmly enough.

“And I fancy not,” he said easily. “The notebook merely contains a few notes of my engagements, though I am afraid I failed to put down Mr. Sheen, 3 a.m. June 19th, and the key is merely the key of one of my trunks, which contains spare clothing.”

“And the things I want,” snapped Sheen. “It is usual to hand over your keys to the man who is looking after you, as you did not bring your own man with you. The fact that you kept the key back, that you carry it about with you, suggests the trunk is worth looking into, Mr. Leonard Bilsiter. Where is that trunk, eh?”

The moneylender was on one knee beside his property, half turned away from the man with the light. His eyes were getting accustomed to the glare which had dazzled him, and he was now purposely refraining from looking directly at it. Dimly, through half-shut eyes, he could make out the form of Charity Sheen, though he could not see his face.

All the time Bilsiter had been emptying his pockets his brain had been working. He had not the slightest intention of allowing Sheen to get away with his property. He picked up his dress shirt and started to take the cuff-links out.

“The trunk is over there by the window,” he said slowly. “You still want the links, I suppose.”

He stood up as he spoke and then, without warning, flung the shirt straight at the hand holding the torch, and stepping swiftly aside, lunged forward in the semi-darkness with his closed fist. It met the barrel of the revolver which he heard drop to the floor. He opened his mouth to shout at the precise moment the fist of Sheen met his body somewhere about the waistline Bilsiter gave an unexpected grunt of agony, and, winded, struck out wildly. He was fighting a losing battle, for immediately afterwards Sheen’s fist caught him full in the face. The moneylender spun half around, flung up his arms in a vain effort to save himself, and then dropped to the floor.

“And that’s that,” muttered his opponent grimly. “And now, I think, Mr. Bilsiter, we’ll tie you up before you cause further trouble.”

Bilsiter did not answer, for the simple reason that he was, temporarily, beyond answering. He was half unconscious from the two blows he had received, and by the time he had recovered he found himself firmly tied up with cord from his dressing-gown and one of the straps from his bags. His own handkerchief, stuffed in his mouth, completed his discomfiture.

After that Charity Sheen worked methodically and rapidly. The key the moneylender had turned out of his dress clothes he promptly tried in the small box on the dressing-table.

“So that was your trunk, eh?” he said softly as he lifted the lid and disclosed a number of papers inside. “It was rather a foolish kind of tale, especially as this key is obviously not a trunk key. I am a bit of an authority on keys. I knew you were contemplating some monkey trick when you told me that lie.”

He switched his light on the face of the man lying on the bed. Bilsiter’s eyes were glaring the rage he felt and Charity Sheen laughed.

“There is no need for me to search further,” he continued. “I fancy these are the papers I want, and perhaps there are a few more which will prove useful.”

Nevertheless, he turned them all rapidly over under the light of his torch before he placed them in his pocket.

“And now good night, Mr. Bilsiter,” he said mockingly. “I am sorry to inconvenience you, but I must have a little time to make a safe exit. I think I will take this revolver with me in case you have any other visitors and turn nasty.”

He slipped a single sheet of paper on the dressing-table. It bore the words, “Received with thanks, in full settlement. Charity Sheen.”

“Happy days,” he added.

He unlocked the door, and closing it softly behind him stepped into the corridor, listening keenly, and then chuckled to himself as he thought of Bilsiter lying there on the bed. He wondered how long it would take the man to free himself. The story would be public property to-morrow afternoon. He laughed again to himself as he remembered how he had bluffed his victim, prevented him from attempting to switch on the electric light by the story that he had blown the main fuse.

“It’s an idea to remember, though,” he murmured to himself. “Makes things safer. No one thinks of candles and matches in an emergency till too late.”

He moved rapidly and noiselessly over the heavy carpet, as noiselessly turned the handle of one of the bedroom doors and stepped inside. As he turned to close it his strained ears caught the sound of a door opening farther down the corridor, and he stood there in the semi-darkness of early dawn. The shadows were still too deep for him to see. He listened, his hand on the handle of the door, and heard the soft pat pat of someone passing. Cautiously he opened the door and looked out. He could see but a dim shadow as it disappeared round the bend in the corridor—someone in a dressing-gown—and quickly he closed the door.

“Whew! That was a narrow squeak. A minute later——”

He shrugged his shoulders. A miss was as good as a mile. If the other had met him, had recognised him, it would have been difficult for him to explain his presence in the corridor at that time in the morning, and inevitably when the story Bilsiter would have to tell became known suspicion would fall on him. He wasted no time considering who the other was or what he might want, wandering about at that time of night. It did not occur to him that it was for any reason but some perfectly legitimate one.

The man who called himself Charity Sheen locked his bedroom door, turned on the light of his torch again, and looked through the papers he had taken, one by one. At one he stopped and stared thoughtfully for some time. It began: "I promise to pay . . ." and bore the signature "John Ableway."

"If that's Sir John Ableway's signature," he murmured to himself, "then I don't know it when I see it. I could have done it better myself. So that's Bilsiter's game, is it? By Heaven, if I'd known I don't think I should have hit him quite so softly."

Dawn had fully broken before he had finished reading the papers and had placed them where he did not intend they should be found in a hurry. Charity Sheen had not evaded all the powers of Scotland Yard for two years by being careless. He unlocked the door and a few minutes after his head had touched the pillow he was fast asleep. And as he slept there was a smile on his face.

CHAPTER IV

MURDER

JOHN PELLINGTON was as well trained a servant as any man could wish to have. In fact the possession of Pellington by Sir Richard Lulworth made more than one of the baronet's wide circle of acquaintances break the tenth commandment. Several things made the baronet's manservant stand out above all other menservants. First, his physical characteristics. Pellington wore a monocle. His left eye had been partly blinded at Ypres when pulling Major Sir Richard Lulworth out of the way of a well-aimed hand grenade.

If Pellington's monocle attracted attention it is no less certain that his moustache attracted nearly as much. Red, waxed, pointed, and of inordinate length and straightness, it filled small boys with terror and inspired retired major-generals to a temporary fierceness of manner entirely foreign to their natures. Add to that that Pellington had a backbone like a piece of steel tubing, and a sound eye that the Ancient Mariner would not have been ashamed of, and you have the chief physical characteristics of the man. The only incongruity about him was his voice, soft and quiet, where one would have expected something strident, something which would carry against a hundred mile an hour wind.

But if Pellington's physical characteristics were remarkable, his other qualities were even more so. He was methodical in everything and therefore punctual to the minute. He could drive a car more safely on two wheels round a hair-pin corner than the average man could drive at ten miles an hour on four wheels at Brooklands. What Pellington did not know about the art of wrangling and the niceties of *suppressio veri, suggestio falsi* on occasions, had long ago ceased to be knowledge. And with it all he was as unruffled in an emergency as one expects a man with a monocle to be, a valet who had been sent down from heaven to a waiting world in general and for the exclusive use of Sir Richard Lulworth in particular, and a man who had only one enduring thought in the world, to serve that master as he deserved to be served—well.

When Pellington, however, entered the baronet's bedroom as the clocks of the big house were striking eight the following morning his face wore a worried look, and his moustache sagged just a trifle at the ends as he placed the tray of tea and toast on the table at the bedside. He pulled the curtains back with an unusual rattle and opened wide the French windows on to the narrow balcony with a bang which threatened to shatter the glass in them.

Plainly John Pellington was ruffled.

As it has just been said that he was as unruffled in an emergency as one expects a man with a monocle to be, the only thing to add is that Pellington was not wearing his monocle as he entered his master's bedroom.

At the noisy opening of the windows the baronet opened his eyes and for a moment gazed lazily at the ceiling. Then he sat up in bed and stared with astonishment at his valet.

“Hallo, Pellington, broken your eyeglass?”

“No, sir. I forgot to put it on, in a manner of speaking.”

“Forgot—to—put—it—on?” repeated Sir Richard jestingly. “Do my ears deceive me, Pellington, when you say you’ve forgotten something? What on earth is the matter? Has there been an earthquake, or have you fallen in love with the cook?”

“Neither, sir,” replied Pellington. “Mr. Leonard Bilsiter was found murdered this morning.”

The keen grey eyes of Sir Richard Lulworth looked steadily into the face of his servant. If they had flickered at all it was so little that even Pellington, who knew every movement of his master’s face, could not have sworn to it. There was a look of distress on the valet’s face as Lulworth flung back the bedclothes.

“Give me my dressing-gown,” he said quickly, “and tell me what you know.”

“He was found a quarter of an hour ago, sir, by Culvering, who went to call him. Stabbed through the heart, I understand. His lordship asks if you will be so good as to join him in the library as soon as possible, with the other gentlemen. Her ladyship is breaking the news to the ladies.”

“Bilsiter murdered!” cried the other. “You are sure it is murder, Pellington? It’s unbelievable!”

“I am repeating his lordships words,” answered the valet. “Dr. Bessbury has been telephoned for, and Inspector Lanner from Beaconsfield. His lordship has locked the door after he viewed the body.”

Lulworth suppressed a shudder at the words.

“I’ll dress at once, Pellington,” he said slowly. “This is dreadful news. Tell his lordship I shall be down in ten minutes.”

Swiftly the other turned and walked towards the door. There he half-swung round as though about to speak, but the baronet was bending over the dressing-table, looking into the glass, and with a shake of his head the valet went out.

As the door closed behind him Lulworth turned swiftly and whistled softly to himself.

“Now what the devil’s the matter with Pellington?” he muttered to himself. “And what was he going to say when he stopped at the door? It takes more than murder to upset him, and he’s pretty badly upset if I am any judge of him. Well, I suppose he will tell me later on.”

Lulworth gulped down his tea as he dressed and ruminated about the news the valet had brought. His first thoughts were, frankly, of relief—relief for Avril’s sake. It was better that the man should be murdered than she should marry him, he reflected. He recalled his words of the night before, “By to-morrow anything might happen.” Well, that was the one thing he did not expect to happen. He had no false ideas about the dead man. If any man deserved to be murdered, undoubtedly Bilsiter was the man. At least two deaths were to his discredit, and though the coroners’ juries had brought in verdicts of suicide in both cases, there was no doubt that the moneylender was morally

responsible for their deaths. If half the ugly stories going round about him were true it was surprising his life had not been attempted before.

Lulworth wasted little time in dressing, nor did he allow his thoughts to speculate too much upon the man, except in so far as his death affected Avril. He could imagine the mingled relief and horror with which she would receive the news, horror that any man should meet his end as Bilsiter had done, relief that she was not called upon to give an answer to his proposal of marriage.

Lulworth wondered if she would now tell him what the dead man had said to her the previous evening, wondered how her brother would take the news. Somehow, at the thought of young Ableway, his heart sank within him. He had no doubt in his own mind that Tommy Ableway was the cause of the whole trouble between Avril and the murdered man, and inevitably he linked the names of Bilsiter and Avril's brother. The significance of his thoughts jarred on him, and he forced himself to pay attention to the actual details of his dressing, to keep himself from thinking things which brought a chill to his heart.

As he entered the library he found Lord Rowmands already there, talking to Sturridge, and to another guest named Penricarde, a retired K.C.

"Good morning, Richard, this is a bad business," said the peer.

His face was drawn and he spoke in subdued tones as though death itself was in the room.

"Dreadful," replied Lulworth. "I have only heard the bare news from my man. It has come as a shock."

"Culvering came and told me, just as I had finished dressing," continued Rowmands shakily. "I went up immediately. He must have been dead some time. His hand was perfectly cold. I—I came away and locked the door and sent for the police and Doctor Bessbury."

"How was he—murdered?" asked the baronet.

"Stabbed. Knife in his chest, awful."

Lord Rowmands finished at a gulp the glass of whiskey he was holding.

"It's shaken me more than a little, I must admit," he continued.

"No—idea who—"

Lulworth left the rest of the sentence unspoken as Rowmands shook his head.

"Culvering reported that one of the windows of the pantry was open," he said. "So a burglar might have got in that way. But there's no report of anything missing."

"He may have entered Bilsiter's room first," commented Sturridge quietly. "Or it may have been someone who had a grudge against him. There were some nasty tales going round about him. Plenty of people, if half the tales I have heard are true, had motive enough."

"Good Heavens, Sturridge, you don't suggest because someone owed Bilsiter money they would murder him," cried Rowmands. "It's unbelievable."

“I am afraid I must agree with Sturridge,” broke in Penricarde, the K.C. “My experience has taught me that, at any rate. Money is one of the biggest motives for murder. Not so big as the eternal triangle, but big. I expect, in fact, that one of the first things the police will do will be to make inquiries who those people are who were under Bilsiter’s thumb, if there is no other obvious solution.”

Lulworth was the only one who noticed the sudden change of expression on Rowmands’ face. He had little doubt in his own mind what the cause was. The dead man had not been admitted as a guest to the great house because he was a welcome guest. It was doubtful if he were that anywhere. To a man of Lulworth’s keen perception, and indeed to many of his guests who were thicker skinned, it was clear that Lord Rowmands was not exactly happy over the presence of Bilsiter in the house. Lulworth realised at once that inevitably, in the beginning, at any rate, suspicion might be directed towards the peer, revolting though the whole idea might be to those who knew Lord Rowmands intimately, knew his fine instincts, his great character. But, like many of the great men of England who had a stake in her soil and was part of her soul, he had been hit by the coming of the Great War and the aftermath of commercialisation. It would not be difficult to put two and two together—that Bilsiter had been invited because Lord Rowmands wanted money.

Not that the baronet could conceive for one moment that the peer could be guilty of murder. But the mere suspicion, even temporary, was bad enough.

The conversation revolved itself into one or two groups standing about awkwardly talking in low tones, as other guests drifted down into the library. The shock of a murder so close at hand affected them in many different ways. Some seemed awed into silence by the very presence of death in the house. Others, like Penricarde, discussed the probabilities of the murderer being caught, discussed them in a cold-blooded judicial fashion as though they were summing up the pros and cons of a case.

For Lulworth, who had seen death in many forms, the main feeling was for the living left behind, and he felt a sense of relief when one of the servants came in and announced Inspector Lanner and Dr. Bessbury, who had arrived at the house simultaneously.

“Show them into the morning-room, Culvering,” said Lord Rowmands. He turned towards the baronet, and added in a low voice, “Breakfast is ready, Richard. Will you look after things for me while I go along?”

In the pleasant morning-room the peer found Dr. Bessbury and the inspector standing by the window talking, and both turned sharply when he entered the room.

“Good morning, my lord. Your message—” began Lanner.

“I am sorry to give you both so much trouble,” interrupted Rowmands courteously, “but I am afraid one of my guests has been murdered. If you will come with me—”

He spoke wearily, and Dr. Bessbury looked at him keenly.

“If—if you will tell us where to go we shan’t trouble you further,” he said quietly. “The inspector and I are more hardened to this kind of thing. It has been a shock to you. Have you had any breakfast? If not, eat something, no matter how little.”

“I’ll show you first upstairs,” replied the peer. “I must confess it has been a shock to me—and to my guests.”

He led the way up the wide oak-paneled staircase, and halted in front of the bedroom of the dead man.

“Here is the key,” he said quietly. “As soon as Culvering, one of my servants, brought me the news, I—I verified it, and then locked up the room without disturbing anything. You are sure—”

“Quite sure,” interrupted Bessbury firmly. “Please take my advice—breakfast.”

As Rowmands turned away Inspector Lanner inserted the key briskly in the lock and opened the door. He was the modern type of policeman, well-educated, keen, intelligent, a man who had received rapid promotion, and was clearly marked out, in the long run, for the highest post his profession could offer. He stood by the door for a moment, looking round the bedroom, before he stepped full inside, followed by the doctor, and closed and locked the door behind him.

“Don’t want any interruptions,” he said quickly. “Unpleasant sight.”

He nodded towards the bed. The clothes had been partly thrown back, just as if the dead man had begun to get out of bed when he was struck. One leg dangled horribly over the side of the bed, and the two arms were spread out almost at right-angles to the body. He was lying on his back, and the heavy handle of some kind of knife could be seen sticking out of his chest. The blade had been driven through the pyjama jacket. There was hardly any sign of blood.

Bessbury picked up one limp, cold hand thoughtfully, looked into the glassy staring eyes, and then at the position of the knife.

“Must have died at once,” he cried in his deep resonant tones. “The knife in the wound has prevented the blood from flowing.”

“Don’t touch it,” exclaimed Lanner hastily.

“Curious kind of knife,” continued the doctor, pointing with one finger. “Look at that catch there, and the cross-piece. Pretty heavy, I should judge.”

The inspector nodded his agreement.

“We’ll have that out later,” he remarked. “Have to examine it first for prints. How long has he been dead?”

The doctor continued his examination for a few minutes before he replied.

“I should judge between five and six hours,” he said at last.

Lanner looked at his watch.

“A quarter to nine,” he announced. “That would make it between a quarter to three and a quarter to four.”

“Say between half-past two and four o’clock,” continued Bessbury. “It’s not wise to be too definite over these things, especially in the case of sudden death like this. Most people think that doctors can tell the hour of death within a minute or so. Personally, if I guess it within an hour I think I’m coming much nearer than perhaps the signs warrant,” he added cautiously.

The inspector smiled. He was rather glad to have the co-operation of someone who was not too definite in his statements. Definite statements, he had found, were wont to lead off the track, to narrow down the field of investigation. Lanner liked to have the field as wide as possible, as open as possible, so that he could see what was going on in it and not be confused by a multitude of things happening right under his nose, as it were, and distracting his attention.

“I shan’t make the mistake of fixing the hour too closely,” he said.

Inspector Lanner stood looking thoughtfully at the dead man for a few moments.

“Tell me if you agree with me,” he said at last to Dr. Bessbury. “Look at that depression there.” He pointed to the edge of the bed.

“I am arguing on these lines,” he continued. “That depression makes it seem to me the dead man was sitting on the edge of the bed when he was struck. I feel it is confirmed by the fact that on his right foot, the one on the bed, is his slipper. The other slipper is on the floor there, just where it might have fallen from the other foot.”

Doctor Bessbury followed the other with keen attention. He had been associated with the inspector on one or two cases in the neighbourhood, and he knew the value of Lanner’s deductions from quite slight premises. The inspector was a man with imagination, and though he used it freely to start various lines of investigation, he did not allow it to run away with him. Every line was investigated carefully in turn, and the results of his imagination accepted or rejected as they fitted in with the known facts of the case.

“It is my belief,” continued Lanner, “that the dead man was sitting on the edge of the bed when he was struck. He had his slippers on. He fell back, partly through the actual force of the blow, partly from its effects.”

“In that case *both* feet would be dangling over the edge of the bed, and he would be lying more across the bed, more at right-angles to it, that is to say,” objected the doctor.

“Yes, I agree, if the murderer had left him so, and fled immediately, and then he might have slipped to the floor,” returned Lanner. “Yes, that’s it, I think. I’m trying to put myself in the murderer’s place. Supposing he was slipping to the floor? There was the danger that the thud would attract attention. A cool murderer would think of that almost automatically, and immediately partly lift the dead man back on to the bed. You see, he’s partly across the bed and partly along it. His head is not on the pillow.”

“It is possible you are right,” said Bessbury thoughtfully.

“If he had just sprung out of bed, or sat up, he wouldn’t have his slippers on. What I am driving at is this: He sat there, on the edge of the bed, talking to his murderer. The man who killed him was a man he knew,” Lanner added triumphantly.

“I think that’s going too far,” objected his companion.

“Maybe, maybe not,” returned Lanner cheerfully, well-pleased with himself. “But it’s something to go upon. And if I am right it rather augurs someone in the house, eh? Someone whom Bilsiter had no apparent cause to fear.”

“He may have heard someone trying his door and sat on the edge of the bed waiting,” said Bessbury.

“In the dark?”

“Of course.”

“Well, the murderer was very lucky in his aim,” pointed out the inspector. “No, no, I don’t agree with you. And if he had switched on the light it would have warned the murderer he had been heard. The chances are he wouldn’t have taken the risk of the alarm being given before he could carry out his purpose.”

“You haven’t even found out the motive yet,” pointed out Bessbury.

“No, that may alter things quite a lot,” agreed the inspector. “Help me to straighten him out a little on the bed, now, will you? We had better pull the clothes over him.”

The two lifted the dead man farther on the bed, and the inspector pulled the turned back clothes over him to hide the staring eyes. As he did so he gave an exclamation:

“Hallo, what’s this?”

Lying on the top of the counterpane, until then hidden by its folds as it had been turned back, was a sheet of paper. The inspector whistled as he read the words on it and passed it over to his companion.

“The problem is not so easy after all,” he said.

On the sheet of paper Doctor Bessbury held were the typewritten words, “Received with thanks, in full settlement. Charity Sheen.”

“That’s the first time he’s committed murder,” cried the inspector sharply. “And by Heaven we’ll get him now.”

“Rather spoils your theory that it is someone in the house, someone the dead man knew,” pointed out the doctor.

Inspector Lanner did not reply at once. His face had a faraway look on it. He was recalling some of the theories which had been formed by the police of the mysterious Charity Sheen, some of the suggestions which had come from Scotland Yard as to his probable identity. One of these had been, “Sheen is probably an educated man, a man about town accustomed to moving in good circles. . . .”

“I am not so sure it does,” he said slowly. “I am rather inclined to think it strengthens my theory.”

CHAPTER V

INSPECTOR LANNER INVESTIGATES

DOCTOR BESSBURY, his chief task accomplished, had left Rowmands over an hour before Inspector Lanner came out of the bedroom and carefully locked the door behind him. During that time the inspector had gone over the room minutely, not only to discover, if possible, any direct clues to the murderer of Leonard Bilsiter, but to obtain what were equally important to him—impressions.

In a way he had come out rather content than otherwise, though many another man would have been profoundly dissatisfied with the results of that patient search. A thorough investigation of the dead man's belongings had brought to light several things which were useful, which threw a certain amount of light on his character. His clothes were expensive, but the patterns were rather on the loud side. A diamond tie pin, diamond cuff-links and a diamond ring on the dead man's finger added to the notion the inspector received.

"Liked to make an impression," he muttered to himself. "And made it in the wrong way, I don't doubt. Kind of man who considered himself a gent, at one time, and when money came to him tried to become a gentleman. Never got over his early habits. Must make a few inquiries into his past. Wonder how he's got into this crowd?"

A find he pounced upon eagerly, in a pocket of a coat, was a diary in which the dead man appeared to have noted down all his appointments. All were brief, nearly all references were by initials, but that did not detract very much from their importance in the eyes of Lanner. He turned immediately to the last day's entries and whistled cheerfully as he saw the very last note in the book, a note made in the crabbed handwriting which was characteristic of all the entries. It was quite short.

"Told A.A. about Sheen. Had expected effect."

"Now who's A.A. and what did the dead man tell him about Sheen?" asked Lanner of himself. "If A.A. is in the house——"

He allowed himself to speculate on the possibilities for a while. It was rather a remarkable coincidence that the last entry in the murdered man's diary, he reflected, should be about the man who had murdered him.

"It's more than a coincidence," he said aloud. "It's significant, that's what it is. What effect did he expect on A.A.? To frighten him, eh? Or did he guess who Sheen was and is that why Sheen murdered him? If so it looks to me that Sheen was too late, and at least one other person knows who he is. Very well, I'll know in that case."

Just above the entry which had aroused his interest to such an extent there appeared two other entries.

One ran, "R. agrees to my terms," and the other, "T.A. midnight. No decision."

"'Rowmands agrees to my terms,'" expanded Lanner glibly. "T.A. visited him at midnight, and the two didn't come to terms. We shall see what we shall see."

He slipped the diary into his pocket. A further search of the dead man's clothing brought to light nothing further likely to shed a light on the mystery of Bilsiter's death. Loose money, keys, a pocket-book filled chiefly with notes, and some personal cards, a cheque book, a cigarette case, and other odds and ends which most men carry were the inspector's garnering.

It was not until he turned his attention to a search of the room itself that he made his second discovery: a genuine Egyptian scarab in a gold setting. It had rolled under the bed, and Lanner placed it in his pocket. He did not allow himself to speculate whether it belonged to the dead man or not. That was something he could soon find out, and if it did not belong to Bilsiter its presence underneath the bed would need explaining.

There were one or two other things which rather puzzled him, which he noted without thinking too much about them. They were minor points in his investigation which might have been overlooked by most men, but Lanner overlooked nothing he could not explain. Lying on the foot of the bed were two things; one the cord from the dead man's dressing-gown, and the other a strap from one of his trunks.

"Curious," he muttered.

And that was all the comment he made mentally until other events called his attention once more to them and threw a fresh light on their presence there.

On his way downstairs he passed one of the servants, who looked at him in a scared way. She was evidently one of those who always associate the police with the possibilities of prison, even when they are fully conscious that they have done nothing which could possibly bring them within reach of the law.

"Please tell his lordship that I have finished upstairs," said Lanner. "I will go into the morning-room if it is empty."

"Yes, sir," answered the girl, flushing as she turned away quickly and ran along the passage.

"May I use the telephone?" asked the inspector as soon as Lord Rowmands entered the room. "There are one or two things I should like to talk to the station about, one or two formalities to arrange."

"Of course," replied the other. "If there is anything we can do to help, please count it as done. Have you found out anything?"

"Not very much," replied Lanner guardedly. "It is very kind of you to offer to help. I expect your guests are very upset? I must see them all, of course, before they leave. It is purely formal, but someone may have heard something in the night or have some suggestions to make which might help me."

"I quite understand, Inspector Lanner," replied Rowmands. "I am afraid we shall all find it disagreeable, but murder is not a pleasant thing anyway. I have been talking to my guests, naturally, while you have been upstairs, but none of them seems to have the slightest idea why the unfortunate man should have been murdered."

"Is there anything missing?" asked the inspector.

"Nothing at all, apparently."

"Any signs of forced entry into the house?"

“The only thing is that Culvering this morning reported that one of the windows leading into the pantry was open. The house is fitted with burglar alarms, including that window.”

“Ah, I’ll have a look presently. Meanwhile, while I am telephoning, my lord, I should be glad if you will draw up a list of the full names of all your guests and servants. I’ll be better able to talk to them. Perhaps you might tell them I will see them one at a time here as soon as I have finished telephoning and have examined the pantry window. I shall have a general look round the house as well, if I may.”

“I will get the names for you immediately and instruct the servants to place themselves entirely at your disposal,” returned Rowmands quickly, evidently relieved at having something definite to do.

Over the telephone Lanner told his second in command the brief facts of the murder and instructed him to make the necessary arrangements for informing the coroner, sending up a photographer and the finger print apparatus.

“Send up as well,” he finished, “the docket dealing with Sheen.”

For another half hour he wandered about the house, with Culvering in attendance, learning the lie of the rooms and who had been sleeping in particular bedrooms the previous night. It was striking eleven o’clock when he returned to the morning-room. On the table his eye immediately caught sight of a sheet of paper on which was a list of names, and as he looked them over two at once caught his attention.

“Avril Ableway and Thomas Ableway,” he said in a tone of surprise. “They’re the children of the Commissioner. Surely——”

He broke off and looked thoughtfully out of the window, as there came back to him that entry in the dead man’s diary: “Told A.A. about Sheen.”

There was no other name in the whole list with those initials. But the daughter of a Commissioner at Scotland Yard! And yet, why not? It was natural for Bilsiter to have told her who he suspected Sheen to be. But Lanner did not feel quite satisfied. The reasoning was faulty somewhere.

He sat down at the table for some minutes to think out his general plan of campaign. This cross-examination he meant to be brief in the first instance, more to gain impressions and certain facts as quickly as possible. If, as a result of his investigations, anything more definite appeared, he could then follow it up.

He began by examining the servants, and from them learnt only one fact—that one and all who had come in contact with the dead man did not like him. But he did not progress any further so far as solving the mystery was concerned, nor did he with the first few guests who appeared.

It was not until the son of the Commissioner entered the room that the inspector felt he was making progress.

“I fancy I have met you before, Mr. Ableway,” he said with a smile. “Up at Scotland Yard once. You were in your father’s room when I happened to have come up about some document or other.”

“Very likely,” answered Ableway. “Though I don’t often go to Scotland Yard. I haven’t enough brains to be a policeman.”

“Don’t say that,” replied Lanner. “Did you know the dead man?”

“Well, I have met him before,” said the other. “Met him in town once or twice, chiefly in other people’s houses.”

“Know much about him?”

“Frankly, all I know about him is that he was a shady customer. He’s not a personal friend of mine, if that’s what you mean.”

“In what way a shady customer?”

“He lent money to people and then put the screw on,” answered Ableway. “There were some nasty tales going round.”

“Well, the son of a Commissioner is hardly likely to have had the screw put on him,” said the inspector, idly tapping the table with his forefinger.

“No,” answered Ableway shortly. “Anything more I can tell you?”

“Yes, you can tell me a lot more,” reflected the inspector to himself, “particularly how he has been putting the screw on you, but you probably won’t without a little screwing on my part.”

“When did you see him last?” he said aloud.

“Sometime during the evening,” answered Ableway, looking out of the window. “I think he drifted into the billiard-room while I was playing with Lord Rowmands’ son.”

“By the way, I found this in the passage,” said the inspector. “I expect one of the guests dropped it. Those who have been in do not recognise it, however.”

He held out the Egyptian scarab.

“Looks like my sister’s,” answered Ableway at once, as though glad to get off the topic of Bilsiter. “She carries it about because it brings her luck. Shall I give it to her?”

“Oh, I will when I see Miss Ableway,” replied Lanner casually. “Women are superstitious about these things, eh?”

“She got it from some Arab in Cairo. They’re as common as the sand out there.”

“I don’t think there is anything more I need ask you for the moment, Mr. Ableway,” added Lanner. “If anything does crop up I know how to get in touch with you.”

“What do you think is likely to turn up?” asked Ableway, rising from his chair. The inspector fancied he detected an anxious note in his voice.

“I haven’t any particular thoughts on the subject at present,” he replied. “But you know it is often the unexpected which happens in these cases. Bilsiter’s papers will have to be examined pretty carefully, for one thing. They’ll throw a light on some of the people who were under his thumb, if all I hear is correct, and we shall then be having some startling revelations.”

Ableway gripped the back of the chair and his face went white.

“But—but you wouldn’t have to make known all you find?” he asked. “A man—may have owed him money without—murdering him.”

“Oh, no, but naturally there’s a motive of a sort there, eh?”

Ableway nodded and then turned quickly and walked out of the room.

“Now I wonder what paper Bilsiter had about him?” commented the inspector to himself. “If I know anything, young Ableway’s thoroughly frightened about something. If he’s got anything to do with it, it will be deuced awkward for Sir John—devilish awkward. And awkward for me, too.

“So the scarab belongs to his sister,” he continued. “What the dickens was it doing under Bilsiter’s bed? I don’t like it.”

His ruminations were cut short by the appearance of Sturridge, who eyed the inspector coldly. But Lanner affected his usual genial manner.

“Sorry to take up your time, Mr. Sturridge,” he said suavely. “But mine is a necessary if painful duty. Did you know the dead man at all?”

“Only by meeting him here,” answered Sturridge in his curious uninflected tones. “I’ve heard a lot about him, of course. Most people have.”

“You heard nothing in the night?”

“Nothing at all. I went to bed just after twelve. I played bridge after dinner and went to bed when the table broke up.”

Lanner inspected a rough plan of the bedrooms on the table in front of him.

“I see, Mr. Sturridge, that your bedroom was in the same corridor as that of the dead man, though almost at the other end. You would pass his room on the way to your own.”

“Well?”

“Did you by any chance hear anyone speaking in Bilsiter’s room as you passed?”

Sturridge eyed the other without any change of expression. He did not reply at once.

“It is curious you should ask that,” he replied at last. “Because I did hear Bilsiter and someone else talking. Their tones were rather high pitched.”

“Ah, that is helpful. Did you recognise the other man’s voice?”

“I can’t say I did,” replied Sturridge. “It was only as I walked by. I was thinking about bridge and I didn’t pay much attention. It was only when I was in my bedroom that it occurred to me as a little curious. I hadn’t seen Bilsiter all the evening, that is to say, after dinner.”

“It may have been his murderer you heard,” remarked Lanner.

“The doctor, I suppose, fixed the hour of death?”

“Approximately.”

“It’s a pity I didn’t go in then,” observed Sturridge. “But why did you think there was someone with Bilsiter?”

“Guesswork,” replied the inspector, with a smile.

Penricarde, the K.C., who followed; Frampton, an elderly cheerful man who seemed incapable of taking anything seriously; and Hickson, the head of the famous iron and steel firm—they were unable to throw much light on the mystery. The K.C. proved to be the most useful, in that he told the inspector of the conversation at the dinner table during which Bilsiter had announced that he had been threatened by the man who called himself Charity Sheen. From him Lanner obtained a fairly accurate summary of what had been said.

“The son and daughter of Sir John Ableway are staying here,” finished Penricarde. “And Miss Ableway was very vehement about Sheen, attacking him for all she was worth and backing up Bilsiter, while Sir Richard Lulworth openly, and I fancy some of the rest of us secretly, rather defended him. Bilsiter, you see, wasn’t popular. Did you find the paper he had, by the way?”

“I found several things which may help,” fenced the inspector, who had not the slightest intention of telling the K.C. or any of the other guests exactly what he had found. “And of course a number of papers.”

The last man to undergo the inspector’s cross-examination, with the exception of Lord Rowmands himself, was Sir Richard Lulworth.

“I am afraid I can’t help you much, inspector,” he said quietly. “This is a terrible business for Lord Rowmands.”

“A still more terrible one for Mr. Bilsiter,” pointed out the inspector.

“Yes, that is only too obvious,” replied the baronet.

“When did you last see the dead man, Sir Richard?”

The inspector had asked the same question of all who had entered that room.

“Shortly after dinner,” replied the other, after a moment’s hesitation.

“Where?”

“In the garden. I was talking to Lord Rowmands when he went by.”

“Alone?”

“No. He was walking with Miss Ableway. A few minutes afterwards I saw her returning alone. She went in to make up a four at bridge.”

“You didn’t hear anything in the night, Sir Richard?”

Lulworth shook his head.

“Not a sound,” he replied.

“I thought, perhaps, you might have heard something,” continued the inspector. “You didn’t hear anyone talking to Bilsiter as you went to bed?”

“No,” replied Lulworth.

“Well, now I have got the task of interviewing the ladies,” said Lanner with a wry smile. “That’s always rather difficult.”

“I don’t envy you,” remarked Lulworth over his shoulder, as he walked towards the door. “But don’t be too rough on them. I don’t suppose they had anything to do with it.”

To one woman and one only did the inspector pay particular attention, and that was Avril. He was struck at once by her complete self-possession when she entered the room, and as he placed a chair for her he felt that here, at any rate, he would find that he had not got an easy task.

“I don’t expect you can help me much, Miss Ableway,” he said easily. “But I understand that Mr. Bilsiter went for a stroll with you in the garden after dinner. Did he say anything further than he had said at the dinner table about the threat made against him by this man Sheen?”

“He did not,” answered Avril quietly.

“May I ask what he talked about?” asked Lanner, keeping his eyes fixed on her face.

Boldly her eyes met his.

“It was nothing important. I really don’t think I can remember what it was.”

“Try to remember, please. Every word Bilsiter said last night might be important, Miss Ableway.”

Avril sat silent for a moment. The inspector did not fail to notice that her fingers were lacing in and out of one another nervously, though her face betrayed no signs of the agitation he was sure she was feeling. Only caution prevented him from challenging her outright, telling her that he knew what the conversation had been about.

“Now I come to think of it,” she answered at last, in a low voice, “Mr. Bilsiter did say something about Sheen. He was grumbling that Scotland Yard had done nothing, and he asked me if my father had not told me anything. Naturally, I replied that my father never spoke to me about what he did at Scotland Yard. Mr. Bilsiter was rather insistent that I should try to find out as he had been threatened, and I am afraid I was rather indignant, and left him in a bit of a huff.”

“He had no suggestions to make about Sheen himself?”

Avril looked up sharply, but the inspector was apparently looking out of the window.

“None, except that the police were incompetent,” she replied.

The inspector took no notice of the sly dig.

“Oh, well, it doesn’t matter, Miss Ableway. It just struck me that he might have said something which would help in the investigation, that is all. The threat by Sheen rather points, for the moment, to the fact that he is the murderer.”

“Sheen is not that type of man, Inspector Lanner,” cried Avril quickly. “You are making a great mistake thinking that.”

“I am not,” he replied slowly.

From Penricarde he had learnt that only the previous evening she had nothing good to say about the man who called himself Sheen. This sudden outburst surprised and puzzled him. Now she was defending him. What had happened in the meanwhile to change her attitude? And then, as an inspiration, it flashed across his mind what *had* happened. She had learnt who Charity Sheen was, and the knowledge had come as a shock to her. She was defending him because he was someone she knew, someone she

cared for. And inevitably Inspector Lanner's thoughts turned to Avril's brother. But he allowed no sign of his surprise to escape him. He must think the whole situation out carefully lest he make a mistake. Good heavens, what a sensation if the criminal who had been hunted for the last two years should turn out to be the son of a Commissioner at Scotland Yard!

He took the Egyptian scarab out of his pocket and put it on the table.

"Is that yours?" he asked quietly.

Lanner flattered himself that he had his voice under control, but something in his tones put Avril sharply on her guard.

"Yes," she answered. "Where did you find it?"

"In Mr. Bilsiter's bedroom," he answered, and this time his eyes made no pretense of leaving her face. The flush which suffused her cheeks told him that his reply had moved her deeply, and he saw that it was only by a supreme effort that she kept control of herself.

"In Mr. Bilsiter's bedroom," she echoed slowly. "I—I must have dropped it in the garden. He—he must have found it."

And though Inspector Lanner nodded his agreement with her as he handed her the charm, he knew that Avril Ableway was lying. With that knowledge there came to him, too, a realization of the task he had got before him.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered as the door closed behind her.

CHAPTER VI

LORD ROWMANDS TALKS

INSPECTOR LANNER, in the course of his examination of the guests of Lord Rowmands and his search of the bedroom of the murdered man, had learnt many things which were not only to worry him considerably before he fitted them into their proper places in the jig-saw puzzle, but were to make him proceed with the greatest possible caution.

There were the positions of Avril Ableway and her brother, for example, perhaps the most worrying of all. Lanner was not the type of man to shirk his duty, but he knew that sometimes a too strict attention to duty might lead to disastrous results, so far as his future was concerned.

He found it hard to believe that the son and daughter of the Commissioner at Scotland Yard had anything to do with the murder of Bilsiter. But he did not make the mistake of thinking it to be impossible. The inspector had had more than one shock in the course of his official life, and he had grown a little cynical.

That Egyptian scarab under Bilsiter's bed, now. How did it get there? Not for one moment did Lanner believe that Avril Ableway had lost it as she suggested, or that Bilsiter had found it and had later dropped it there. Nor did he believe her statement that the murdered man had only grumbled at the incompetence of Scotland Yard over their failure to discover the identity of the mysterious Sheen. Avril's sudden defence of Sheen, her quick denial that he was the kind of man to commit murder had, Lanner was convinced, put him on the right track. Tommy Ableway and Charity Sheen looked like being one and the same man. There were several things pointing that way.

First all, it was clear that Ableway had had an appointment with the dead man at midnight. The entry in Bilsiter's notebook pointed definitely to that. No other member of the Rowmands household shared those initials. Somehow or other Bilsiter had made the guess which the police had failed to make, but, unlike the police, he made use of his knowledge for his own ends. The inspector had no doubt at all, knowing Bilsiter's record, that some threat, some *quid pro quo* for his silence, had been held out to Avril Ableway and to her brother. Before Avril had strolled in the garden with Bilsiter she had attacked Sheen vehemently at the dinner table. Now she was defending him. The conclusion he had reached seemed to the inspector, on the whole, to be sound. The attitude of young Ableway when it was suggested that papers incriminating Bilsiter's victims might be found, was the attitude of a frightened man, a man who had overlooked a vital point against himself.

And here, in his reasoning, the inspector pulled himself up sharply, as he repeated the last phrase in his own mind, "a man who had overlooked a vital point against himself."

"That is exactly what Sheen has never done," he murmured to himself. "The trouble is he has never overlooked any point which might really tell against him. He's not

likely to make a slip where murder is concerned. That paper would be a mistake, then, so why the devil did he leave it behind and risk his neck?"

He spread the paper out that he had found on Bilsiter's bed:

"Received with thanks, in full settlement, CHARITY SHEEN."

There was no mistaking the signature. Lanner, like most of the chief police officials throughout Great Britain, knew the signature too well to mistake it. But a thought had occurred to him which, if true, would upset all the theories that had begun to form in his mind. He opened the folio of Sheen which he had had sent to him from the police station. In it were a number of facsimile reproductions of the messages Sheen had brazenly sent to the police and the newspapers after each of his exploits. He compared the typewritten slip, with its bold signature below, carefully with those in the official dossier.

"The same broken capital 'R,' " he murmured to himself. "The same 'e' and 's' out of alignment, the same uncrossed 't.' No, it's not a forgery, to put the suspicion on him. That's genuine enough. And as Charity Sheen never makes mistakes, where have I gone wrong?"

For the first time doubt crept into the inspector's mind. He began to realise that the problem he had to solve was not quite so simple as he had tried to make it appear. He put away the papers again and tabulated briefly, in his notebook, the results of his morning's work. The entries read as follows:

1. A.A.—Avril Ableway. Scarab. When lost? Why change of attitude towards Sheen? What did Bilsiter say to her.
2. T.A.—Thomas Ableway. Sheen? Doubtful. What did he and Bilsiter talk about at midnight?
3. If Sheen is not T.A., is Sheen a guest?
4. Who opened the pantry window?
5. What was the paper Bilsiter had that Sheen wanted and is now apparently missing?
6. To whom was Bilsiter talking when he was killed? Ableway?
7. Whose knife killed him?

"That will do for a beginning," he murmured, closing his notebook.

As he did so the door opened and Lord Rowmands entered.

"I have ordered some lunch to be brought in here, inspector," he said quickly. "I thought perhaps you would prefer to stay on rather than——"

"Rather than go down to the station yet?" continued the inspector. "I would. I am grateful to you for thinking about my inner man, my lord. I hope I did not worry your guests too much this morning?"

"I don't think so," replied Rowmands, "though of course it is all very upsetting, to say the least of it. Have you made any arrangements?"

"About the inquest and so on?" asked the inspector. "Yes. Kintock, who came up from the station to bring me some things, has all that in hand. I expect they will hold it Monday morning. I am afraid I must ask your guests to stay till then, in case the coroner wishes to ask them any questions. But I expect it will be purely formal—just identification of the body so that it can be moved as soon as possible. There will have to be a post-mortem."

The other shrugged his shoulders and frowned. He was much too courteous to make even a suggestion of interfering, but it was plain that he felt very greatly the publicity which Bilsiter had brought upon his house. Lanner was quick to notice the expression on the peer's face.

"After Monday I don't suppose you will be troubled much, my lord—here, at any rate," he said soothingly. "It has made it worse coming at the week-end, as it were."

"I am surprised the dead man did not attempt to defend himself," said Lord Rowmands. "He told me he was a light sleeper, and kept a revolver under his pillow, and——"

The inspector looked up sharply.

"He kept a revolver under his pillow?" he interrupted. "I found no revolver in his room, and I can assure you I searched pretty thoroughly."

"He told me about it last night," continued the other. "There had been some talk round the dinner table about the man who calls himself Charity Sheen. Bilsiter said that he had been threatened over a letter he was carrying."

"Did Bilsiter mention the revolver at the dinner table?" asked Lanner.

"No. He said something about being prepared, that was all. I had a chat with him later in the evening, and it was then he told me he always kept a loaded revolver under his pillow. I pointed out to him that I thought it was a dangerous habit. He might wake up suddenly and use it half unconsciously before he was fully awake."

The inspector nodded. The news that the murdered man carried a revolver came as a surprise to him, and added to the puzzle. What had happened to it? Where was it now?

"Do you mind telling me exactly what Bilsiter said to you, my lord?" he asked. "Even the smallest hint might put us on the right road."

Lord Rowmands hesitated for some moments before replying.

"Your question puts me in some difficulty," he said at last. "And I should like to reply to it with another. Do you suspect anyone at all, even in the slightest way?"

Lanner shook his head.

"At present I have no more idea who murdered him than you, my lord. But why do you ask?"

"When I talked to—to Mr. Bilsiter last night," he replied slowly, "he told me something I—I rather wished he hadn't told me. He told me that the paper he had in his pocket concerned one of his fellow guests."

"Did he give you the name?" asked the inspector eagerly.

"I am sorry to say that I did not learn the name of the person concerned," said Lord Rowmands, "especially as Bilsiter was a guest of mine and now is dead; but—but he wasn't a gentleman."

"So I gathered," answered Lanner in disappointed tones. He wanted to add that he was wondering why this courteous gentleman had invited Bilsiter to stay the week-end.

“You are sure he threw out no hint who it was? What I mean is this, that something he might have said might have half suggested who it was.”

Lord Rowmands shook his head.

“I have worried about it myself,” he confessed. “And I have thought carefully over all he said, considered all my guests in turn. I do not believe any of them would have committed this terrible crime.”

Inspector Lanner had different beliefs, but he did not allow his face to betray his thoughts. He was well aware what it had cost the other to say what he had said. Lord Rowmands was clearly the kind of man who did not believe evil of any man until the evidence was overwhelming. The inspector was all the more puzzled, therefore, why Bilsiter should have been asked to stay at Rowmands. The next remark of his companion, however, enlightened him.

“I expect you are wondering why I asked Bilsiter down,” he said at last, speaking slowly and labouring under emotion. “Sooner or later that question will be asked, and I—I would rather it were not asked in public, if that is possible.”

Lanner waited without making any comment. He was not going to commit himself to keeping silent if what the peer was going to tell him was vital evidence.

“I—I owed him money,” continued Rowmands, avoiding Lanner’s eyes. “I ought to have parted with this house some years ago but—well, it has been in the family since the days of Elizabeth, and I struggled on to keep it despite heavy taxation. Finally I was compelled a few years ago to raise a heavy mortgage on it. The money was advanced by Bilsiter, whom I did not know and did not actually meet at the time. Little by little the interest became too heavy for me, and Bilsiter threatened to foreclose. Last week he asked me to invite him down for the week-end, telling me that he had a suggestion to make which would enable me to pay off the interest owing to him and perhaps some of the capital sum.”

Lord Rowmands paused for a minute and walked up and down the room agitatedly. His hands were clenched and once he shook one angrily, involuntarily as it were at some recollection, and his eyes blazed. Then, almost as quickly as it had arisen, his anger seemed to subside, and he regained control of himself. But the episode had left its impression on the inspector, left him with the knowledge that even the most gentlemanly of men held hidden fire which might momentarily become beyond their control. When he spoke again, however, it was in the same calm, kindly tones which were more natural to him.

“Last night he made an infamous suggestion to me—before dinner,” he continued. “It was no less than that I should act as his—his tout, introduce him to friends of mine who were in need of money. And for that he offered to forego the interest on the mortgage, offered even to lessen the amount. I—I told him that I could not entertain the suggestion for one moment.”

“And then?” asked the inspector quickly.

“He told me I could have till Sunday night to think it over. If I didn’t agree he—he would use the power he had.”

He stopped suddenly, looked in front of him with unseeing eyes for a moment, and then added: "If you will excuse me I must see to my guests. Luncheon will be waiting."

When Rowmands had closed the door behind him Lanner opened his notebook again and added to it:

8. Where is Bilsiter's revolver? Who, besides Rowmands, knew he kept it under his pillow?
9. Who is the guest Bilsiter was threatening?

Over his solitary lunch he pondered on the questions he had put down, trying to form a theory which would fit in with the facts he had gleaned. As he drank his coffee and smoked his pipe he came to one, and only, one conclusion, which he voiced aloud:

"It's a devil of a tangle," he said, idly drawing geometrical figures on the paper in front of him. "And I don't fancy yours truly is going to unravel it in a hurry."

CHAPTER VII

AT CROSS PURPOSES

AVRIL ABBLEWAY had spent a wakeful night, the night Bilsiter was murdered. She was dazed with the surging conflict of her emotions and as she tossed to and fro in her bed, heard every hour strike till dawn heralded the coming of another perfect June day. She found herself in a state of mind so confused that she felt she had lost all power of clear thinking.

Richard Lulworth—Leonard Bilsiter; the man she loved—the man she would be forced to marry. Backwards and forwards her mind ranged seeking some way out of the morass in which she found herself. Once there had come to her the wild idea of going to the moneylender's room, at any risk to herself, to plead on bended knees for his mercy. And then had come to her a clear vision of that man with his loose mouth, his heavy jowl, his restless, insolent beady eyes.

"Why, why, why," she wailed to herself, "I can't marry him, and I must marry him. Richard, my dear!"

She hid her face in her pillow as she sobbed his name. It was the bitter irony of Fate that she had learnt to love at the very instant when that love was to be tested to its full without even the sweet memories of a past to give her courage to go forward.

Whatever Richard Lulworth might have been in the past, indeed whatever course he might take in the future, Avril knew that she would love him, though it was against all her preconceived ideas. She was a woman of strong character, one who made up her mind slowly as a rule, and whose opinions, so formed, were much more difficult to alter than the more easily, more lightly formed opinions of many of her friends. Such a slowly-formed, firm opinion she had built up about Charity Sheen. Even now she would not admit that anything could justify breaking the law. Perhaps the fact that she was a daughter of a Commissioner of Police had made her harder on this point than she would have been if she had not been reared in an atmosphere of law and order.

But Leonard Bilsiter had given her mind such a shock that all her opinions had been overwhelmed by it. A week ago, if someone had told her that she would be in love with a criminal, in love indeed with the one man whom it had been her secret ambition to unmask, she would have laughed at the suggestion and would have forgotten it almost immediately as something not worth remembering.

There came to her mind Richard Lulworth's reply when she had said, "Wouldn't it be fun if I happened to be the first to suspect him?"

She could see now the look in those grave grey eyes as he had replied to her lightly spoken question.

"Would it be such great fun after all if you did? Even when buoyed up with a sense of justice, I suppose it is not always pleasant to think that one's own actions had sent a man to prison."

Fun! Justice! What a travesty the words were now that she knew who Charity Sheen was, knew that she could never send him to prison.

“God help me to do what is right,” she prayed through her tears. “Oh, isn’t there any justice in the world? Why should I be punished? My dear, my dear, I love you so.”

Nearly all her thoughts were of Richard Lulworth. To save him was her only object; but she fought against the sacrifice she would have to make: prayed to herself that there might yet be a way out. It was not till dawn had come that she fell into a fitful, uneasy sleep, from which she woke with a start to find one of the maids placing a tray on the table beside her bed.

Avril sat up and yawned. A brilliant shaft of sunlight came in through the window as though a mocking herald of the day which held for her nothing but black gloom. She was thankful that her face was in the shadow. She knew that her glass would reveal the torment of the night, and, woman-like, she did not want her face to betray her. As the maid turned away, the door opened and Lady Rowmands entered. She was fully dressed, to Avril’s surprise, for the motherly, kindly hostess of Rowmands, who was such an excellent complement to her husband, was not usually such an early riser.

“My dear, a terrible thing has happened,” she cried and took Avril’s hand in hers as she sat on the edge of the bed. “I want you to have breakfast here. I am having breakfast sent up to all the rooms, except the gentlemen.”

“Why, what is the matter?” asked Avril. “I hope—not your husband?”

“Thank God for all His mercies, no child. Mr. Bilsiter was found dead in his bed this morning.”

Involuntarily Avril’s hand tightened in that of her companion. She could not trust herself to speak for a moment and she was glad that Lady Rowmands continued speaking, quickly, as though she were relieved to have broken the news.

“I thought, my dear, it would be better if you had breakfast in bed like the rest. I am so afraid everybody would be upset, and if we all met and talked at the breakfast table, we would hardly eat anything. I was looking forward to such a pleasant week-end with you. Now we shall have to be very quiet. I am so sorry. Get up just when you like. There is not the slightest hurry, my dear. I must go away now and explain to the others. Eat a good breakfast now.”

With a smile and a kiss she had gone before Avril could ask her a single question. As she sat up in bed Avril stared at the closed door for some minutes without moving. Leonard Bilsiter dead! She could hardly grasp the news. She felt numbed by it, by the shock of the man’s sudden death, by the overwhelming answer Fate had given to her distracted prayers. Death had been furthest from her thoughts, and now that the release had come that way she was frightened. She was young, full of animal spirits, and death was always something from which she had shrunk.

With an effort she turned her eyes from the door and poured herself out a cup of tea, and as she drank it, the relief which was bound to come, brought with it tears. They were but momentary, for tears of relief seldom last long. She found herself eating the hot-buttered toast with avidity, and when she had finished, her thoughts had turned from the dead man to Richard Lulworth. She wondered idly what had been the cause of

Leonard Bilsiter's death, but the real cause never entered her mind. He had left her, however, with a secret which she knew she would find it increasingly difficult to bear—the secret of the identity of Sheen.

Bilsiter had given Avril no definite proof of the identity of Sheen, but he had told her certain things which left her with no doubt who Sheen was, left her with no doubt that if Bilsiter had chosen to communicate with the police he would add the necessary proof.

"Thank God it never will be known now," she whispered to herself. "Oh, my dear, you must never run those risks again."

She stood by the window in her dressing-gown and looked out over the drive bathed in the morning sunlight. Her eyes caught sight of a car turning in through the great wrought-iron gates, and she moved back slightly as she gave a little gasp of astonishment. At the wheel was a sergeant of police, and sitting beside him was a keen-faced alert-looking man whose bearing told Avril that he also belonged to the police. She felt a sudden sinking. The police always meant that something was wrong. They would never be called in so quickly just because someone had died suddenly in the night.

With quick decision she rang the bell, the pretext in her mind to ask for more toast. But the agitated way in which the maid entered gave her a natural opening for the question she wished to ask—an opening she was quick enough to seize upon.

"What is the matter, Elsie?" she asked with a friendly smile. "You seem upset."

"Haven't you heard, miss?" replied the maid. "About Mr. Bilsiter?"

"That he died in the night? Yes, and I am very sorry to hear it," replied Avril gravely. "He didn't look as though he had anything the matter with him."

The maid looked at her with a white face and staring, goggling eyes and then burst out: "Mr. Bilsiter was murdered, miss—stabbed!"

"Murdered!—stabbed!" repeated Avril in horror-stricken tones.

"The police are here, miss. What shall we all do?"

She put her apron up to her eyes and began to whimper.

"Come, tell me all about it," said Avril, controlling her own agitation with an effort. "There's surely been some mistake."

"Culvering found him, miss. He was frightened out of his life. Inspector Lanner is here and Dr. Bessbury."

Little by little Avril dragged from the terrified maid the story of Culvering's discovery. While the maid was speaking there had flashed into Avril's mind the words of Sir Richard Lulworth the previous evening:

"It would be better for you if he died in the night than you should become the wife of that man."

For one stupendous moment there came the thought that this was the way he had taken to prevent her from marrying Bilsiter, and then she dismissed it contemptuously, ashamed of herself that the thought should have come to her at all. But she must dress and go down and find out exactly what had happened. She knew uncertainty would

only make things worse. Uncertainty was the greatest weapon in the armoury of the little god of doubt, and if she once allowed him to influence her she might not be able to keep her mind clear. She forced herself to refrain from thinking about the news she had learnt, and resolutely put aside one after the other the thoughts which kept coming to her, thoughts of Richard Lulworth, of the dead man, of the arrival of the police, of what the future might hold. When she went downstairs she had regained control over herself and found, indeed, that outwardly at any rate, she was much calmer than many of the men.

Everyone seemed confused, speaking in unnatural tones, and it was some time before Sir Richard Lulworth came across to where she was talking with a number of others.

“This must have upset you as much as the others, Miss Ableway,” he said conventionally. “Though, I suppose, as a daughter of Sir John, you appear outwardly more calm.”

“I expect Avril will be let into the inner secrets later on, Sir Richard,” said Mrs. Penricarde, the wife of the K.C.

“I’m afraid not, Mrs. Penricarde,” replied Avril with a smile. “Father’s just as silent about what happens at Scotland Yard as I suppose most business men are about the secrets of their businesses, as far as their family is concerned.”

“Well, I hope they get Mr. Charity Sheen this time,” said Mrs. Penricarde. “Now he has taken to murder none of us will be safe.”

“Charity Sheen—what—what has he got to do with it?” Avril forced herself to ask. She felt as though her face was drained of its blood and she avoided looking at Lulworth, who stood by her side.

“Why, you’ve gone all white at the thought of it,” cried Mrs. Penricarde. “Didn’t Mr. Bilsiter—poor man—say last night he was threatened by this man Charity Sheen? Isn’t it obvious—”

“I don’t think it is obvious at all, Mrs. Penricarde,” interrupted Lulworth quietly. “I dare say Mr. Bilsiter was threatened by quite a large number of people. And there is a great difference between threats and murder. Besides if you remember, he only threatened to take a paper Mr. Bilsiter had. We don’t even know that the paper is missing yet.”

“A woman’s intuition,” replied Mrs. Penricarde with a smile. “I dare say you are right logically, Sir Richard, but my husband talked so much about Sheen last night that I can’t get him out of my head. He thinks Sheen may be someone we all know quite well.”

“Then it’s rather dangerous to talk so openly about him, Mrs. Penricarde,” replied Lulworth. “It might put him on his guard.”

One of the ladies standing by gave a little shriek of apprehension.

“You think he is here, Sir Richard,” she cried. “I can’t stay in this house any longer.”

“Nonsense,” said Lulworth sharply. “We are all talking through our hats about Sheen, Miss Cameron, because we have got nothing else to talk about and we are unstrung at the moment. Come, let us talk about something else. Inspector Lanner will tell us who the murderer is, I expect, shortly.”

His sharp, decisive tones had their effect and Avril breathed a sigh of relief as the conversation was diverted into less dangerous channels. Everyone turned eagerly, a little later, towards Lord Rowmands, who had entered the room and announced that the inspector wished to examine each of them in turn. It relieved the tension and gave them all something definite to think about.

When her turn came, Avril entered the morning-room with complete self-possession. She had, naturally, met many police officials, and, truth to tell, she had not an overwhelming opinion of their abilities.

But she had not faced Lanner for five minutes before she found her self-possession slipping away from her. This man was different from most policemen she had met. He was more quietly spoken and in his clear grey eyes she detected a depth which told her that here was a man who was not likely to be bluffed easily. His first statement, that she had walked alone in the garden with the murdered man, and his question, “What did you talk about?” began to break the control she had over herself when she entered the room. And when she left it, she left it broken, conscious that she had deliberately lied for the sake of Charity Sheen, for the sake of the man whom, less than twenty-four hours previously, she had denounced forcibly. She felt, too, behind the mask of his face, behind the apparent courteous acceptance of all her statements, that Inspector Lanner had known all the time she was lying—and she was afraid.

Outwardly Avril tried to behave normally. Lanner had so quickly found out that she had talked to Bilsiter on the night of his death, had so quickly detected that she was not being quite frank, that she knew the only possible way to quiet his suspicions was to behave exactly as the others were behaving.

At lunch Lord Rowmands intimated that Lanner had expressed a desire that all the guests would remain in the house till after the opening of the inquest on Monday.

“I see the police surgeon’s arrived and one or two other officials,” remarked Sturridge, the under-secretary in the Government. “I suppose they will be all to-day and to-morrow preparing their evidence. Maybe they know who the murderer is, and are only waiting their opportunity. I suppose, Rowmands, they found where the burglar entered the house?”

“I am afraid I can tell you nothing,” replied Lord Rowmands. “Inspector Lanner has been as reticent with me as he has been with you all. He didn’t even suggest there had been any startling developments. He’s made a thorough examination of the inside of the house this morning, and all of us who were inside last night, and I expect he will begin on the outside this afternoon—the grounds, my gardeners and chauffeur and—”

“And, if I am not mistaken,” interrupted Sturridge, nodding towards the dining-room windows, “there goes the amiable Lanner on his inquiries already.”

“What kind of record has he got?” asked Lulworth, as the inspector disappeared round the shrubbery.

Avril listened eagerly for any reply. She wanted to know as much about the inspector as she could learn.

“Lanner will go far, I fancy,” said Rowmands. “He is one of the new type of police which has come on so strongly since the war, well-educated, keen, intelligent. I doubt if the investigation into poor Bilsiter’s death could be in better hands. He has only recently been promoted after solving the Merstham Cross murder.”

Avril Ableway involuntarily nodded. She remembered now who Lanner was, remembered that her father had spoken highly of the remarkable way he had followed up the slight clues which had been afforded him. So this was the man! She wondered if he had any theories at all about the identity of Sheen, and as the thought came to her she glanced across at Lulworth. His eyes were on his plate, however, and he was apparently only half listening to what was being said.

“We are not confined to the house and grounds till Monday, I suppose?” asked Penricarde.

“The inspector did not ask that,” replied Rowmands. “I think it will be much better if you all try to carry on and amuse yourselves as quietly as you can in the circumstances. I had arranged, as you know, for those who wished it, a round or two of golf this afternoon and to-morrow, and there is no reason why the arrangements shouldn’t stand. And, of course, you all know where the tennis courts are.”

Their host’s words put the whole party in better spirits. The morning had been very depressing, and the lead he had given them, to carry on quietly, was a lead for which they were grateful, for which they had been waiting, in fact.

“Perhaps you will give me a game of tennis, Miss Ableway,” said Lulworth a little later. “I think the more we do the easier it will be for us to forget the shadow which is hanging over us.”

“I will be ready in half an hour,” replied Avril. “But if I play badly, don’t blame me too much. We can’t all keep as calm as you, Sir Richard, inside as well as outside.”

Both were exceptionally good players, and many of the guests sat round in the shade watching the rallies. Despite her suggestion that she might do badly, Avril played with unexpected energy and brilliance. She was naturally an outdoor girl, and the sunshine and the game made her forget for a while the fears which had been dominating her thoughts. Before her was Richard Lulworth, his clean-built figure a joy to watch as he made his returns surely and with little apparent effort.

“I must congratulate you, Miss Ableway,” he said, after their third set, “and plead for a little rest. I see Miss Cameron and Sturridge are waiting in the shade with their rackets. Perhaps we can take their places, and they ours. You really ought to enter for Wimbledon, you know.”

There was no mistaking the admiration in his eyes as he looked at her flushed and happy face. As they stood there for a moment, more than one of Lord Rowmands’ guests, sitting round out of earshot of the two on the court, made the same comment.

“If Sir Richard were the marrying kind,” said Mrs. Penricarde to her husband, “he and Avril would make a wonderful pair. Doesn’t she look beautiful with that flush on her cheeks when she laughs?”

“Just like you women, my dear,” replied her husband with a smile. “You have no sooner captured a man for yourself than you look round to see how you can help in the capture of some other man for one of your friends. I believe all you women from birth belong to a secret society for the hunting of husbands.”

“Well, why not?” retorted his wife. “Not that I think Avril will want much help, or have to go far.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I ever gambled,” said Mrs. Penricarde, “I think I should bet upon Avril being Lady Lulworth some day.”

The eminent K.C. chuckled quietly to himself as Avril and her companion sat down in the chair vacated by Miss Cameron and Sturridge. For a little while the two watched the game in silence. It was Lulworth who spoke first.

“Would you care for a stroll through the grounds?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered Avril readily. “I want to have a look again at the pergolas. They’re a perfect mass of bloom now.”

“We might see the Lanner sleuth-hound at work,” said Lulworth with a laugh as they went along the pathway. “I wonder how much he will tell us? Just as much as is good for us to know, I expect, and no more.”

“I think he is very clever,” replied Avril slowly. “He knew that I had gone for a stroll in the garden with Mr. Bilsiter last night. He asked me what we had talked about.”

“Did you tell him?”

“I told him what I thought was good for him,” replied Avril.

She hesitated before she spoke again.

“There’s a seat by those pergolas,” she said at last. “Do you mind if we sit down there for a little while? I have something important to say to you, Sir Richard.”

“And what is the something important?” he asked with a grave smile as he sat down beside her.

Avril cast round her mind what to say. She wanted to choose her words carefully. She was treading on uncertain ground.

“Inspector Lanner,” she continued, “particularly asked me if Mr. Bilsiter had spoken about Sheen.”

“Well, you could easily answer that, Miss Ableway. Did he tell you why he asked? He must have had some reason for doing so.”

“No, he didn’t tell me why. But he seemed to think that Mr. Bilsiter must have talked to me about Charity Sheen, and as I didn’t want to tell him exactly what he did talk about, I—I said Mr. Bilsiter was grumbling that Scotland Yard had not done anything to capture Sheen, that he had asked me to influence my father to get the authorities to make special efforts.”

“But why?” asked Lulworth. “Why not have told him the truth, that Bilsiter had asked you to marry him? It would have been quite natural. He had some definite object,

I am sure, in asking if Bilsiter had talked about Sheen, and it can only mislead him not to tell him—well, all the truth that matters.”

Avril looked at her companion in astonishment. Did he really mean what he said or was he pretending? He must know, she reflected, that the very fact Bilsiter had been threatened by Charity Sheen only the day before would direct suspicion towards the man. But suspicion and proof were two very different things, thank God. She was puzzled at the complete command her companion appeared to have over his emotions. He spoke just as though he had not the slightest idea who Charity Sheen was, as though it were a matter of utter indifference to him even if his identity were discovered. Then she, like Inspector Lanner, began to doubt the evidence which, in the first instance, had appeared to be overwhelming, though the apparent identity of Sheen was not the same to them both.

“Don’t you understand?” she cried. “If I had told him that Mr. Bilsiter had proposed to me he would have wanted my answer. It was better to tell a direct lie than to tell a half-truth. Somehow or other he would have found out the other half of the truth and— and——”

She buried her face in her hands. The words would not come. She felt his hand on her shoulder, and it gave her a thrill, as his touch always did. His voice was very low, very gentle as he spoke.

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth last night?” he asked softly. “Even if Bilsiter had not been killed I was determined you should not sacrifice yourself to him. You are worth a finer man than most women. Shall I tell you what he said to you to force you to marry him?”

“You—you know what he said?” she whispered, looking up, looking into his eyes. He was gazing at her as she had never seen him look at her before, and despite her agony of mind she felt her blood course through her veins. She would not have been the woman she was if she had misinterpreted the message his eyes gave.

“Perhaps not word for word, but near enough,” he replied, thinking of her brother. “And I can assure you no man is worth the sacrifice, not even a man you love as you love him.”

They were talking at cross purposes and inevitably the mistake led to a climax as unexpected by both as it was dramatic.

“I am glad you know,” she whispered, looking full into his eyes. “And you talk foolishly”—a happy note came into her voice—“I shouldn’t have offered to make the sacrifice if I hadn’t known you were worth it.”

Suddenly, as she spoke, she saw the expression in his face change, harden. He moved slightly away from her and then stood up.

“There’s some mistake,” he cried harshly. “You—you are making it very hard. I—I was referring—I thought Bilsiter held out a threat about someone else—you loved—loved not in that way.”

He spoke jerkily, so unlike his usual self, that it was clear to her he was labouring under some powerful emotion, that he had been shaken to the very depths by her words, her confession of love for him. Her face went a deep crimson as she realised that

Lulworth had some other man in his mind when he had said that no man was worth the sacrifice, that he thought she loved some other man. With an effort she obtained control over herself.

“You have put me in a false, in a cruel position, Sir Richard,” she said coldly, rising from her seat. “Please—please, leave me.”

Her companion half turned away, and then swung round again sharply. He spoke rapidly, almost curtly.

“We have got to clear this up,” he began. “It is no use shirking it. It——”

“Then why did you lead me to believe you loved me?” she cried. “Why did you pretend you knew what was said last night to me? Oh, go, go, please, and leave me alone! You have shamed me!”

“It is I who am ashamed,” he interrupted. “Listen—I—God help me, Avril!—but I love you—and it came as a shock to me to learn in this way that you love me. I must leave——”

He broke off. There had come the crunch of a step on the gravel path, and both turned in the direction of the sound. Coming round the bend was Inspector Lanner, and as he looked up and caught sight of them he quickened his pace.

“Good afternoon, Miss Ableway. Good afternoon, Sir Richard. These are wonderful roses—are they not? I don’t think I have ever seen a finer show anywhere.”

He did not appear to notice their strained attitude, nor the rather curt reply Sir Richard Lulworth made.

“We are getting nearer the solution of the mystery, I fancy,” continued the inspector, bending over a rose and smelling it. “I made a rather remarkable discovery this morning which will, perhaps, explain why I was so interested in what the dead man said to you last night, Miss Ableway.”

Avril stared at Lanner without speaking. She did not trust herself to speak and she was thankful that her companion asked the question which her tongue refused to formulate.

“And what is that remarkable discovery, inspector?” he asked.

“The murderer left his card on the bed of the dead man,” said Inspector Lanner.

He had turned away from the roses as he spoke, and both Avril and Lulworth knew that he was not now speaking idly, that his keen grey eyes missed nothing in the expressions on their faces.

“It was the card of a man I very much want to lay hands on,” he said. “You may like to see it?”

He held out a slip of paper, held it out to Avril. She took it slowly and as she read the words, “Received with thanks, in full settlement, Charity Sheen,” it fluttered from her shaking fingers and fell to the ground. Sir Richard Lulworth bent down quickly and picked it up, read it, and handed it back to the inspector.

“So you think Charity Sheen is the murderer, Lanner?” he asked in even tones. “That simplifies your task considerably, doesn’t it? I suppose all these criminals

descend to murder or attempt murder sooner or later. Have you any other clues besides that?"

"Several, sir," answered the inspector. His eyes were on Avril. "But, of course, I can't mention them all. I dare say one or two other points will crop up at the inquest. I fancy I have a very good idea who Sheen is now, and if he escapes it won't be for the want of keeping an eye on him. Well, I must be getting along. I have one of the under-gardeners to talk to yet."

He raised his hat politely, and turned and continued his walk along the pathway. At the end of it he bent casually over another rose and smelt it lingeringly. And out of the corner of his eye as he did so he did not fail to notice that Avril Ableway was sitting down, her hands to her face, sobbing convulsively, while her companion was bending over her, his head very near hers.

CHAPTER VIII

AVRIL BECOMES ENGAGED

RICHARD LULWORTH was facing a situation which was strange to him, one of which he had no previous experience. To him a sobbing woman was a complete puzzle, and as he sat beside Avril, his arm round her yielding, warm body, and felt it shake with her sobs, he found himself at a loss for words. From his silence Avril drew more comfort than perhaps she would have done from any words he might have spoken. He was completely bewildered, completely at a loss for the cause of her tears. What, after all, was the hold Bilsiter had over her? From the beginning he had assumed that he had threatened her with the folly of her brother, the silly, insensate folly of a boy who had been more thoughtless than criminal. Could he have been mistaken, after all? Had Bilsiter got some other hold over her?

She turned helplessly towards him after a while, and buried her face in his shoulder as he held her tightly to him. He knew the situation could not last for long, knew that when he told her the whole truth she would shrink from him as she now clung to him. The cup of happiness was in his hands to raise to his lips and drink to the full if he wished, but he would have to put it down untasted. He cursed himself for his folly in ever coming to Rowmands, in accepting the invitation because he knew she was going. But if he hadn't come, what then?

Suddenly Avril lifted her tear-stained face.

"My dear," she whispered, "what—oh, what shall we do?"

"Come, tell me what is the matter?" he said quietly. "You are in trouble—and I don't seem to know what it is."

"You are all my trouble," she replied with a faint smile, wiping away her tears. "And now that dreadful policeman——"

Lulworth turned and placing his hands on his companion's shoulders looked her in the face.

"Listen," he said slowly. "There is some misunderstanding. I don't want to make any more mistakes. Tell me, what hold did Bilsiter have over you? I thought I knew, but evidently I did not."

Avril raised her eyes bravely to his and did not lower them as she answered, as she took one of his hands in hers and held it.

"He told me who Charity Sheen was," she said simply.

She felt the hand in hers move, felt him trying to withdraw it, and her hands tightened on his slim brown fingers.

"He told you who Charity Sheen was?" he repeated dully. "Told you he was——"

"You," she finished, as he hesitated.

"And you—you were willing to sacrifice yourself for me—for a criminal wanted by the police?" he cried hoarsely. "No, no, you——"

“For the man I love I will do anything, my dear,” she interrupted swiftly, and bent over and kissed the brown hand she held so firmly. “You are no criminal, Richard mine. You did not do it for gain to yourself, though God knows I wished you never had begun it. You must never run those risks again.”

He did not speak. Her words had moved him deeply. Although he was a man who was popular with women, he knew very little about them. Adventure in other ways had been his lot, and sacrifice had been part of his training of his nature. He had looked upon women as rather selfish creatures, pleasant companions perhaps, but that was all. It had not occurred to him that they, too, were capable of sacrifice, continual sacrifice day in and day out as part of their natural lives. But the sacrifice Avril had offered was something he came nearer to understanding. That the death of Bilsiter had prevented her from carrying it through made no difference. He saw clearly that she was determined to face the consequences of her love for him, and he knew that he must do all he could to repair the folly of the past.

“Avril”—the name came easily from his lips, for hadn’t he whispered it a hundred thousand times to himself—“Avril, it is impossible. You know it is impossible. I shall go away as soon as I can, right out of England. We must forget. Meanwhile I shall keep away from you as much as possible——”

Avril laughed as she patted his hand.

“Don’t be dramatic,” she cried. “We’re living in the twentieth century now, not the tenth. You’ll not go away and if there’s trouble I’m sharing it with you, so make up your mind to that.”

Avril was recovering her spirits rapidly. Her fears for the future were forgotten for the moment in the knowledge she had just learnt, the only thing she wanted to learn. Richard Lulworth loved her; she loved him. That was all sufficient. There might be difficulties in the way, there were bound to be, but she was a modern young woman with a determination which required a lot of shaking. When he began to protest again she deliberately leant forward and kissed him.

“It’s your business to kiss me, not mine to kiss you, Richard, my dear. But you’ll find I’m an awfully good teacher!”

“Little one, won’t you be serious?” he asked, taking her dainty hands between his. “It is serious you know.”

“Yes, I know, dear heart. But I’m not going to be serious until you promise two things.”

“And they are?”

“One, that I am allowed to share all your troubles and help you; and the other—the other is that you will take me at once, this afternoon, into Beaconsfield and buy me an engagement ring. I want the world to know.”

“Avril, you are wonderful!” he cried, and kissed her. “The most wonderful woman in the world. But you don’t, you cannot know what you are doing, what you are asking me. You only make it harder for me because you are so wonderful. I have knocked about the world and I know its hardships. I know the petty meanness of it all. You are made in too fine a mould to run risks. It is because I know there can never be another

woman like you, that I want to go away. Circumstances have forced me to speak, or I would have gone away and you would never have known. Now I shall go away gladly, with the memory of this hour to guide me. You will learn to forget; there will come a time when you will be thankful you never married the man who was once Charity Sheen. I have no defence for that, save that it was the way I took to make certain people pay some contribution towards their right to live. To me you will be always the only woman. I am—”

“I always wanted to be a lady,” she interrupted with a mocking smile. “A real live lady. If I don’t marry a knight I shall be a tomboy all my life. Lady Lulworth! I wish my name were Lily Lucy. Wouldn’t Lily Lucy Lulworth sound nice?”

Richard Lulworth threw up his hands in surrender and laughed.

“You little darling,” he said softly. “We’ll take the car out straight away and get that ring. But I warn you it will bring you trouble—perhaps worse than trouble—social ruin.”

As the car swung out through the wrought-iron gates into the road towards Beaconsfield, Lulworth turned towards Avril.

“So Bilsiter told you I was Charity Sheen,” he said. “And threatened if you didn’t marry him he would denounce me? Now how did he know you were in love with me?”

“I don’t know, dear heart,” she confessed happily. “Indeed I didn’t know I was in love with you myself until—until I thought I had lost you. I cried myself to sleep last night.”

“Please don’t do that again,” he said quietly. “It hurts me to see you cry, to know you have been crying.”

“You know that Egyptian scarab I gave you—for luck?” she said a moment later, as the car breasted a hill.

He looked at her sharply.

“I have lost it,” he said at once. “And I wish I knew where.”

“I do—and so does Inspector Lanner,” replied Avril. “My dear, Lanner found it under the bed in Mr. Bilsiter’s room.”

“Good Lord!” ejaculated her companion. “That’s bad. Tell me how you found out.”

“Inspector Lanner asked me if it were mine. I said ‘Yes’ at once. There was no use denying it. When he told me he had found it in that room I nearly lost control of myself. I told him I had dropped it and I supposed Mr. Bilsiter had found it. I don’t think he believed it.”

It was characteristic of her, in her new-found trust in him, that she did not ask Richard if he had lost it in Bilsiter’s room.

“I had a bit of a struggle with Bilsiter, my dear, and I suppose it dropped out of my pocket then.”

He told her exactly what had happened in the murdered man’s bedroom the previous night.

“You left him tied up?” she asked. “And you left that paper with your name on it, with Charity Sheen’s name on it? Oh, my dear, if—”

He could feel her tremble and he pressed her hand reassuringly.

“If ‘ifs’ and ‘ands’ were pots and pans,” he quoted. “Don’t climb your hills till you get to them. Lanner has a long way to go before he finds who murdered Bilsiter. He’s not a fool. I am going to find out who murdered Bilsiter before he does. I must, for my own sake.”

“He said he has a very good idea who Charity Sheen is,” she pointed out fearfully.

“If he had he wouldn’t have told me,” retorted her companion confidently. “No, no, I refuse to worry yet, Avril, dear. See, I have ever so much more confidence than you, and I am more concerned.”

“You are no more concerned than I am,” she said firmly. “Never forget that, my dear. What affects you affects me just as much in the future. But I am afraid of Lanner.”

“He’s clever, I don’t doubt,” he agreed.

“What was the paper you told Mr. Bilsiter you wanted? Did you get it?” she asked.

For a moment he was silent.

“I hoped you wouldn’t ask that, my dear. Must I tell you now, or will you trust me a little longer?”

“Well, who was the man you thought I loved?” she asked with a smile.

“He was the same man who was concerned with that paper,” he answered. “That’s why I don’t want to answer for the moment.”

Avril did not press her lover any further. The car was coming into Beaconsfield, and a few minutes later she was shyly trying on engagement rings.

“I don’t think it’s usual to go to the jeweller’s and choose your own ring,” she whispered happily as they were driving back. “But I don’t believe I could have trusted you to get it if I hadn’t come with you, dearest.”

“I should have won my bet,” said Mrs. Penricarde triumphantly to her husband after tea, an hour later.

“I shouldn’t have been so foolish as to bet with you, my dear,” replied her husband. “But now I suppose his troubles will begin.”

The eminent K.C. was nearer the truth than he thought.

CHAPTER IX

THE STRANGE WOMAN

INSPECTOR LANNER had wondered considerably at the obvious confusion shown by Avril Ableway and her companion when he had broken the news to them that afternoon of his discovery of the paper left behind by Charity Sheen in the murdered man's bedroom. He had deliberately made the announcement of his discovery to Avril that he could watch the effect it had on her. There was no doubt about her agitation, and he wondered how she accounted for her sudden burst of crying to Sir Richard Lulworth. He wondered, too, if she were trying to capture him. With the money he had, he reflected grimly, Lulworth could put up a stiff fight on behalf of Avril's brother. The inspector was not surprised in the least, therefore, when he heard later in the afternoon that Avril and Lulworth had become engaged.

"Lord, she's deeper than I thought," he commented to himself. "And I shall have to keep well on my toes. I think I'll keep back that diary till I've got some more tangible proof. It's a little too risky. Yet it's risky keeping it back."

The inspector was in a cleft stick. To bring forward the diary and state his conclusions from it—that young Ableway was the last person to see Bilsiter alive—that he might very well be Sheen, might bring a storm about his head if he were mistaken. To hold back the diary might, on the other hand, mean the holding back of a vital clue.

"It's against my common sense to believe Ableway did it, or at any rate that he is Charity Sheen," he commented to himself. "I'll go over Sheen's record and square it up with Ableway's movements. That's the only safe method."

Another aspect of the case had considerably puzzled him early that afternoon. The police surgeon had made a very careful examination of the murdered man, and had pointed out marks on his wrists, arms and legs.

"It looks to me, Lanner, as though he had been bound," he observed. "That mark across his wrist is the mark of a cord or rope of some kind."

"My God, that's foul work," exclaimed the inspector. "Binding him first and then deliberately killing him. It makes my blood boil. I'll get him if I have to spend half my life on it."

He was genuinely indignant.

"It's a pity that knife shows no prints," continued the police surgeon. "I should be inclined, frankly, to search every inch of the house. You might find the missing paper and the revolver. Clearly it is not an ordinary case of burglary. I shouldn't be surprised to learn it's an inside job."

"It looks like it to me," confessed Lanner. "I have some inquiries to make outside the house this afternoon, and if I don't get any nearer I think I shall put up your suggestion to Lord Rowmands. It won't be pleasant, however."

"What about the Yard?"

"I have instructed Kintock to telephone and get in touch with Sir John Ableway himself," replied Lanner. "He's particularly asked all police forces if they will inform the Yard at once where Charity Sheen is concerned. And he appears to be very much concerned here," he added grimly.

"I expect Sir John himself will come down," said the police surgeon.

Lanner's first step that afternoon, after he had left the police surgeon, had been to make a quick survey of the grounds of Rowmands as a whole, to make himself thoroughly acquainted with the lie of the land. The open pantry window he had examined immediately, and had come to certain conclusions about it. It was certainly big enough to admit a man, but that would have meant a certain amount of scrambling up the wall outside, which showed no signs of such climbing. True, he reflected, a short ladder might have been used, but if it had he had no means of verifying it. The ground beneath the window was hard concrete. The head gardener, in reply to his question, stated quite definitely that as far as he knew no ladders had been moved.

And with that Lanner had to be content.

On general considerations Lanner was inclined to think that the window had either been left open accidentally or had been opened deliberately from within as a blind. Something new, he reflected, would have to crop up to make him revise his opinion.

Before a single hour had passed something new had cropped up which, though it did not cause him to revise his opinion, made him feel that the maze in which he found himself was becoming more complicated. It was provided for him by the under-gardener, whom he had gone to interview after leaving Avril Ableway and her companion. He proved to be an aged man, whose bent back, sunburn, wrinkled, healthy face, and gnarled hands spoke eloquently of his life-long occupation—gardening.

"You've heard about the murder of Mr. Bilsiter, Pollard?" began the inspector.

"Oh, ay," replied Pollard, as he bent over the grass with his swap hook in one hand and a small wooden rake in the other. "It be a turribl' thing, murder. 'E waur a fine gentleman, waur Mr. Bilsiter."

The inspector pricked up his ears. This was the first time he had heard a good word said for the dead man.

"You liked Mr. Bilsiter?" he asked.

"'Them roses,' 'e says to me, 'them roses be the finest I've ever seen, Pollard'; an' I growed them roses, Mr. Lanner."

"Ah, I quite agree with Mr. Bilsiter," said the inspector with a smile. "If everybody round here knew how to grow roses as well as you evidently do, Beaconsfield would have the finest roses in the world."

The gardener gave a grunt of satisfaction. Roses were his weakness, and for some minutes Lanner talked nothing else to him, listening respectfully to the old man's advice about them. Nor did he listen with his tongue in his cheek. The inspector was always genuinely interested in anyone who was master of his subject, and there was no doubt that the under-gardener knew most things there were to be known about rose growing.

“Seen any strangers in the grounds lately?” asked Lanner at last. “Barring visitors, of course, staying up at the house.”

“I waur a-comin’ to that, Mr. Lanner,” replied Pollard, straightening up and looking critically over the stretch of grass he had just finished. “I bain’t ’ad time to tell ’e before, but there waur a stranger in this very garden last night a’talkin’ to Mr. Bilsiter.”

“You don’t mean Miss Abbleway?”

“Bless ’er heart, she bain’t no stranger. She allus ’as summat to say to old Pollard when she come down.”

He chuckled to himself.

“No, Mr. Lanner,” he continued, bending down again. “This waur about nine, maybe, I be walkin’ back along of that path an’ I passes Mr. Bilsiter with a ledly. They waur on t’other side of the ’edge, an’ they don’t see me. They waur ’avin’ words.”

“Ah! Did you hear what they were saying?” asked the inspector.

“I bain’t deaf,” replied Pollard, philosophically. “Though I be seventy-three come October next. She waur fair mad. ‘What will I do?’ her says to him. ‘’E came out on Wednesday an’ ’e says ’e’ll kill you.’ ‘Oh,’ he says. ‘That be fine talk, me ledly. You can tell ’im from me that if I ’ave any trouble ’e’ll find ’isself back again.’

“Then ’er fair seems to lose ’erself,” continued Pollard, who had evidently not hurried along the pathway.

“‘If you was anythin’ like a man,’ she says, ‘which you bain’t, ’e wouldn’t be after you. But if ’e don’t get you, I will!’ I be gettin’ along then, Mr. Lanner. It weren’t no affair of mine.”

“You didn’t see her, then?” asked the inspector.

“I see ’er when I be comin’ back from the shed,” said the other. “Her looks fair mazed like, as if er ’ad been crying. ‘Be this the path to the road?’ she asks, an’ I shows ’er the way out. May be, thinks I, this marnin’, may be you knows more than you can tell.”

Lanner nodded his agreement.

“What was she like, Pollard?”

The old gardener took off his cap and slowly scratched his head. Description was evidently not his strong point.

“Her waur a slip of a woman,” he said slowly, “an’ ’er be in black.”

And, despite patient questioning, that, in effect, was all the description the inspector was able to obtain of the woman Pollard had overheard quarreling with Bilsiter on the night before his death.

“Well, when I have time, Pollard,” he said with a smile, as he gave up the task, “I hope you’ll give me a few tips about cutting roses. None of mine are up to your standard.”

“Be you goin’ back to the ’ouse?” asked Pollard.

The inspector nodded an affirmative.

“Mebba you’ll give that to one of the leddies,” continued the old gardener. “I found ’er round by the pantry winder.”

He fished in his waistcoat pocket and brought out a gold locket. It was attached to a fine gold chain, the clasp of which was broken as though it had been wrenched apart.

“All right, Pollard. I’ll find the owner and give it back to her,” said the inspector, turning away.

He slipped back the catch of the locket when he had turned the corner. Inside were two small portraits. One was of Bilsiter and the other of a dark-eyed, dark-haired woman of a rather flashy type. Lanner judged her to be about thirty-five. On the outside of the locket was engraved “M.H. from L.B.”

The inspector turned sharply on his heel and retraced his steps to where the gardener was bending over cutting the grass. He held out the open locket with his thumb over Bilsiter’s portrait.

“Was that the lady you saw, Pollard?” he asked.

“That be ’er,” replied Pollard. “Ay, that be ’er.”

CHAPTER X

TWO AND TWO MAKE FOUR

DINNER at Rowmands the night following the murder of Leonard Bilsiter was a depressing affair in some respects. There was a general air of uneasiness which had been slowly deepening ever since the morning. The engagement of Avril and Sir Richard had, at tea, turned the attention of most of the guests for a while from the dominating subject of conversation. But even that event had fallen into the background by the time dinner was served.

Just before the meal began Lord Rowmands called Avril aside.

“I have just had a telephone message from your father,” he said, with a smile. “You know how interested he is in the exploits of Charity Sheen. Inspector Lanner telephoned to him, and Sir John has asked if he may come down to-night and stay until the inquest is over. Naturally, I am delighted for him to come and clear up the mystery.”

“Does Inspector Lanner think Sheen is the murderer, then?” asked Avril.

Lord Rowmands shook his head.

“The inspector is far too much of an oyster to let me know what he thinks,” he replied. “But after the finding of that paper what else can anybody think?”

Avril did not reply. She reflected that if she defended Sheen too much after her attack on him the previous evening, sooner or later someone would want to know why—and she could not tell why. She was glad her father was coming down. He might tell her something of what the police were thinking, though as a rule he was reticent over his work, and she learnt very little more than the general public knew.

“Did father say what time he was coming?” she asked.

“Yes. He said he would have dinner in town and be down here about half-past nine.”

Avril resembled her father in many ways. Sir John was a man of iron will who put duty before everything else. He was a Commissioner who was respected by his subordinates, by men of long experience in the detection of crime, for he had an uncanny knack of placing his finger on the weak spot in any case in which he was engaged, or of making suggestions which opened up new and fruitful lines of inquiry. He was, indeed, one of the cleverest Commissioners Scotland Yard had ever had, a man who had a natural flair for police work. He took a justifiable pride in seeing that that work was carried out with the highest degree of efficiency.

It was Sir John who had suggested that the man who called himself Charity Sheen was a man of his own class, educated and with first-class brains; and it was on this theory that a case was slowly but surely being pieced together. Already Sir John had considerably narrowed down the field of inquiry, and locked away in his private bureau was a list of five names with certain comments against each.

One of those names was that of Sir Richard Lulworth.

At dinner Avril found herself seated between her fiance and Sturridge.

“I hear your father is coming down this evening, Miss Ableway,” said the latter. “It must be very interesting sometimes to be the daughter of a Commissioner of Police.”

“Why?” asked Avril.

“Well, isn’t that obvious? You will probably hear before any of us what Sir John thinks of—of this affair.”

“I shall probably be the last to hear,” retorted the girl. “Everybody seems to think I know all the secrets of Scotland Yard. As a matter of fact they don’t interest me much. I have no real sympathy with the average criminal.”

“You certainly haven’t with Charity Sheen,” Sturridge laughed amusedly. “At dinner last night we were most of us inclined, I fancy, to sympathise with him—but nobody can sympathise with a murderer. You were right last night, Miss Ableway, and we were wrong.”

“If this man Sheen is a murderer then he deserves no sympathy,” broke in Sir Richard.

“If?” queried Sturridge with raised eyebrows.

“A criminal doesn’t change his ways quite so rapidly,” Lulworth replied. “Sheen has consistently robbed the rich to give to the poor. There is no record against him of violence in any form.”

“I’m surprised anyone should defend Sheen after what has happened,” said Sturridge. “Do you agree with Sir Richard, Miss Ableway?”

“I have always been against Charity Sheen’s crimes,” Avril answered evenly. “But I think Sir Richard is right. You are rather prejudicing the case, aren’t you?”

“When a man leaves a note behind as Sheen has done, it looks at any rate suspicious,” replied the Under-Secretary dryly.

“Last night Bilsiter said he had a telephone message from Charity Sheen saying he wanted a certain paper,” pointed out Lulworth. “Isn’t it probable, knowing Sheen’s past exploits, that he got that paper, and the murder was committed afterwards?”

“That argument would be rather quickly demolished by a judge,” interrupted Penricarde, the K.C., from the other side of the table. “If, as there appears no doubt, Sheen was in Bilsiter’s bedroom last night and took the paper from him, he will be hard put to it to prove that he did not commit the murder.”

“There is no doubt that he got the paper,” said Sturridge.

“Why?” Lulworth put the question swiftly.

“Well, for one thing, if it had been found by Lanner he would have mentioned it.”

“I expect Lanner has found out quite a number of things he hasn’t mentioned,” replied Lulworth. “I should think the last thing he would do would be to give away his discoveries, especially as we must all be regarded as being under suspicion.”

An audible “Oh!” went round the table at his last words. Each present had felt that the inspector would eye all in Rowmands with suspicion—the very fact that he had

asked them not to disperse until after the opening of the inquest showed that—but this was the first time the thought had been crystallised into words.

“It’s an outside job, Lulworth,” said Sturridge quickly. “The pantry window was found open—”

“Windows can be opened from the inside as well as the outside, and more easily,” returned Lulworth.

The conversation seemed to have drifted into a duel between the two men sitting on either side of Avril, and she tried to intervene, being a little anxious as to the outcome.

“Aren’t we theorising without having all the facts before us?” she suggested. “I am sure—”

“I am sure, Miss Ableway,” said Sturridge sharply, “that Sir Richard doesn’t quite see what follows from his suggestion that we are all under suspicion, that the murderer of Mr. Bilsiter may be in the house. It means this, to my way of thinking. In that case the man Charity Sheen is also in this house, and may be sitting at table with us now.”

Avril, with an effort, steeled herself not to look at her lover. She did not dare meet his eyes. With the control she had inherited from her father she forced herself to smile.

“You’ll be frightening us all to death, Mr. Sturridge,” she cried. “I think both you and Sir Richard are talking for the mere sake of arguing.”

“I think Miss Ableway is right,” came the quiet voice of Penricarde. “It is rather preposterous to suggest that one of us here is Charity Sheen on the evidence we have before us. But one thing has occurred to me about that paper—if it is really missing, and that we don’t know positively yet.”

He paused for a moment and every eye was turned his way. The famous K.C. was fond of the theatrical and at the Bar he had won more than one case by skilfully playing upon the heartstrings of a susceptible jury.

“If Sheen got that paper, and if Sir Richard is right in his surmise that he is not the murderer, then it seems to me that Sheen probably knows who the murderer is. That piece of paper may very well supply the real motive for Bilsiter’s death.”

“Then if Sheen sends the paper to the police he will go a long way towards proving his innocence of—of the murder?” asked Avril quickly.

“If Sheen does that,” Penricarde replied cautiously, “it will, at all events, make the problem more difficult to solve, especially if the name on the paper happened to be that of one of the guests in this house.”

Lord Rowmands opened his mouth to speak and then shut it quickly. He was thinking of his interview with Inspector Lanner, when he had told the police official of Bilsiter’s definite statement that the paper he had in his pocket concerned one of his fellow guests. Rowmands looked round the table reflectively, and tried to sum up the possibilities, and he wondered, too, if Lanner was making inquiries now about those sitting there. To a man of the peer’s kindly temperament the position was intolerable, and he would be thankful when it was over. He had the inherited horror of publicity of any kind which is characteristic of the old squirearchy. While he half listened to what

his guests were saying, he tried to think which one it was who had been in the power of Bilsiter.

First, naturally, he looked at his own son, sitting at the bottom of the table with Lady Rowmands, and he shook his head involuntarily. Reginald, he reflected, was not wild, though he had most of the enthusiasms of youth. He and his son had always been on too good terms for Reginald to hide anything from him. No, the boy could be ruled out.

For a moment the peer hesitated over Tommy Ableway. As he looked at the young man's face he came to the same conclusion again. Tommy Ableway might be reckless, might mix with one or two questionable people, but at heart he was sound. There was nothing vicious about that clean-cut mouth, those smiling eyes, that happy laugh which rang out now and again.

Penricarde? He was the least likely person to be mixed up with a man of the Bilsiter type. He had made a fortune at the Bar, and no breath of scandal had ever been whispered against his name. Jesson, the art expert sitting next to him, was an old friend of Lord Rowmands, and was dismissed at once. Lulworth was another to whom the peer did not give a second reflection. Lulworth's record was clean, and he had inherited sufficient wealth to put him always above the temptation of moneylenders. And then there flashed into Rowmands' mind Lulworth's words the night before:

"You are not the only one in the house who is not looking forward to to-morrow as far as Bilsiter is concerned."

So Lulworth knew! Why hadn't he spoken to Lanner? Or had he spoken? The inspector was so tight-lipped that there was no guessing what he had or had not discovered. He, Rowmands, must ask Lulworth what he had told the inspector. Sooner or later the name was bound to be revealed. He had a right, as host, as having invited this unknown man to be his guest, to know his name as soon as anyone.

His eyes rested on Sturridge. There was something ominous about the thin line of the close lips, the cold, penetrating, unmoving look in the Under-Secretary's eyes as he gazed at anyone to whom he spoke.

"No, I fancy not Sturridge," his host reflected. "I think Bilsiter would have met his match there. Sturridge is too ambitious to risk his reputation that way. Nothing less than the premiership will ever satisfy him."

He heard Sturridge speaking more sharply than was his wont, his voice pitched in a slightly higher key than usual; but it still retained that curious, monotonous lack of inflexion which was characteristic of the man's tones.

"It's a scandal that two years have been allowed to go by and the police have got no nearer to catching Sheen," Sturridge was saying. "If he has stolen this paper it means blackmail, and nothing less. He's got tired of this charity bluff. I don't believe he's given a single farthing of the money he's stolen to charity."

"I've never seen Sturridge so indignant before," murmured Penricarde to his neighbour. "Anyone would think he feared Sheen blackmailing him."

"Sheen would get short shrift," replied the other grimly. "Sturridge is not a man I'd like to come up against."

It was exactly the conclusion that Lord Rowmands had come to, and, indeed, most of those present. The host found, when he had finished his survey of his guests, that he was no nearer a solution of the mystery of the man threatened by Bilsiter than when he began. After dinner he called Lulworth apart.

“Do you mind strolling round the garden with me?” he asked. “I want to ask you,” he continued, as they stepped out on the dewy lawn, “who was the guest threatened by Bilsiter? You remember you told me that I was not the only person who had—er—unpleasant relations with Bilsiter.”

Lulworth puffed at his cigar for some moments before replying.

“Your question puts me in an awkward position,” he said at last, “especially after the conversation at table to-night. If I said who it was, you, like the others, I suppose, would suspect he murdered Bilsiter to get the paper. And I am sure of this, that the man in question is not the type to commit murder.”

“Under stress of emotion, under a threat, it is difficult to say what any man would do,” pointed out Lord Rowmands. “Frankly, for the sake of my other guests, Richard, I think the name should be revealed. We are all more or less under suspicion.”

“To give the name would perhaps concentrate that suspicion on an innocent man.”

“If he is innocent there is nothing to fear.”

“In theory, I agree. In practice, no. Let me put it this way, Rowmands. Supposing the murderer of Bilsiter is never discovered. If the name of the man who confided in me is known he will always be suspected of being the murderer, and if he is not definitely accused it will be suggested that it was only lack of evidence which prevented the police acting.

“Well, let me put it like this,” he continued. “Let me use my own discretion for the next few days. If by then the mystery is brought no nearer a solution I will tell the police what I know. I can’t at present, since what was told me was said in the strictest confidence.”

With evident reluctance Lord Rowmands agreed to this suggestion, and the two turned towards the house.

“It struck me,” the elder man remarked, “that Sturridge was rather heated to-night. It is unusual for him to show any form of excitement.”

Lulworth silently nodded his agreement. It had seemed to him curious, too. He was puzzled over Sturridge, and he had made up his mind to become more closely acquainted with him. There were a number of little reasons he had in his mind which made him think that Sturridge was a man who would require careful watching. He was the one man who might conceivably suspect the real identity of Charity Sheen, and once he began to suspect it would not be long before he turned his suspicions into certainties.

The path they were on led past the French windows of the morning-room. The room was lighted up, and Rowmands drew his companion’s attention to the two men inside, deep in conversation.

“Sir John has arrived a little sooner than I expected,” he remarked. “I see Lanner has already got into touch with him. I didn’t know the inspector was in the house.”

Lulworth looked at the upright figure of the Police Commissioner. Sir John Ableway bore all the marks of the Army which he had once adored so well. He held himself erect and he had the clear look in his eyes of a man who is accustomed to lead.

He had called at Beaconsfield police station on his way to Rowmands, and it was there that he had picked up Lanner, so as to obtain as much information as he could before actually coming in contact with the guests of the big, old-fashioned house. Lanner had not given him, however, all the information in his possession.

There was one thing which the inspector suppressed. That was Bilsiter’s diary with the significant entries, “Told A.A. about Sheen. Had expected effect,” and “T.A. midnight. No decision.”

The detective was in a quandary. To tell the Police Commissioner of Scotland Yard that he suspected that Commissioner’s own son and daughter of knowing more about the crime than they had chosen to admit, that so far as was known Tommy Ableway must have been the last man to see Bilsiter alive, that the inspector had a vague idea, even, that the Commissioner’s son might be Charity Sheen himself—well, frankly, Lanner shirked doing so until he was on surer ground. And when Sir John left him with a “Very good, Lanner. I shan’t interfere, but please keep me posted,” the inspector felt that the time had arrived when he must take more definite steps to settle his position one way or the other.

It was a fine night, the full and brilliant moon throwing deep shadows which seemed deeper and blacker in contrast with the brightness. Several of the guests were wandering about the grounds, and soon, to his satisfaction, Lanner saw Sir John’s son talking to Reginald Rowmands. He strolled in their direction.

“A wonderful night,” he remarked, lighting a fresh cigarette.

“What’s Sir John got to say?” asked Rowmands, with a smile. “Has he solved the mystery yet?”

The inspector shook his head.

“I have placed the facts before him,” he replied. “He’s gone to have a chat with your father, so perhaps——”

“No, I’m not going to butt in,” said young Rowmands, laughing. “But that reminds me, I promised to take my father’s place to make up a four when Sir John arrived. Excuse me, Tommy lad.”

With a wave of his hand, he had gone, and the inspector blessed his luck. He determined to take the bull by the horns.

“I’ve had a very long talk with your father, Mr. Ableway,” he began. “He came down to the station before coming off here, so that he could see my report and the doctor’s. I haven’t told him everything yet, though.”

“Why haven’t you told him?” asked Tommy. “Surely there’s nothing to hide, is there?”

The inspector noted that he spoke with no trace of uneasiness in his tones and for a moment felt uneasy himself lest he were on the wrong track. But he had resolved on a certain course and grimly he brushed aside the doubts in his mind.

"I did not tell him, Mr. Abbelway," Lanner said quietly, "that you kept an appointment with Mr. Bilsiter at midnight, within an hour or so of his murder."

"What makes you say that?"

The words came with the greatest difficulty and Lanner suppressed an exclamation of satisfaction that his shot had gone home.

"Because," he said carefully, "you and Mr. Bilsiter were overheard talking and, judging from the way your voices were raised, quarreling."

"Do you insinuate that I murdered Bilsiter?" demanded Ableway angrily, shaking his fist threateningly in the direction of the inspector. "For, by Heaven, if you do—"

"I am not insinuating anything," interposed Lanner. "That is why I have not told Sir John. If there is any proper explanation—"

"Yes, it's quite true, I was angry with the—with Bilsiter," replied the other, controlling himself. "He—he was pressing me to use my influence with Avril—with my sister. He wanted to marry her."

"And you told him—"

"I told him he could go to the devil, and—well, there was a bit of a wordy shemozzle," the young man owned.

"And he threatened you with exposure, threatened he'd tell Sir John about your—?"

The inspector's tones, his very words, gave that suggestion of knowledge which was calculated to make Tommy Ableway believe he knew everything. Actually, the detective had no idea what hold the murdered man had over Sir John's son, and it was a long shot he had made in suggesting that such a hold existed. The long shot had found its mark. Tommy Ableway stood looking at Lanner, his mouth twitching.

"You—you found the paper?" he said hoarsely. "I—I thought it had been stolen by—by—"

"By this so-called Charity Sheen, eh?" asked the inspector. "What made you think that, eh? Why should he come after that paper? Do you know who Sheen is, then?"

"No, of course I don't, but—but you didn't say anything about the paper when you were talking to me this morning."

"I didn't know then that you had been overheard quarreling," answered the inspector.

He was speaking carefully and thinking hard. He wanted to give the impression that he had the paper in his possession, that he knew its contents, and this he found a little difficult. He was on the alert for any clue which might help him in his questions.

"I didn't murder Bilsiter," continued Ableway sharply. "He wasn't worth murdering. Why, I refused even to help him with my sister. He was an utter outsider."

"Yet you knew the consequences of exposure," said Lanner.

"I thought it wouldn't come to that. Sir—"

Tommy stopped quickly, but the inspector seized like lightning upon the single word.

“Sir Richard offered to help you, eh?” he hazarded.

“Well, he was fond of my sister,” answered the young man, and then flushed as he realised how he had been trapped.

“How many more people have you told besides Sir Richard?” continued Lanner, “or wasn’t it common knowledge?” he added sarcastically.

He purposely spoke in a sneering tone to make the other angry, and to his secret amusement his ruse succeeded.

“Sir Richard was the only one who knew,” young Ableway answered indignantly. “He was the only man I thought would have an influence with Bilsiter. That hound could be induced to do anything for money. That’s why I asked Sir Richard to help me.”

The inspector looked thoughtfully at his companion for a moment before he spoke again.

“Mr. Ableway,” he said at last, “if you will take my advice you will make a clean breast of this to your father before you go to bed to-night. It will come better from you, believe me, than it will from me. And I shall be compelled to tell Sir John all I know to-morrow.”

He turned away quickly. He did not want to have the young man making any appeal to him. He wanted Tommy Ableway to go to his father just as quickly as might be, for that way, the inspector knew, he would learn exactly what the paper was. There was another reason why he had swung round on his heel and walked away. There had flashed across his mind the threat which Bilsiter had received, the threat that if the paper wasn’t returned to the man whose name was on it, Charity Sheen would come and take it. And if Tommy Ableway spoke the truth, only three men knew about the paper, himself, Bilsiter, and Sir Richard Lulworth.

And Bilsiter was dead.

As he walked up the path towards the house, feeling that he was on the edge of a tremendous discovery, a figure slipped out from the shadows near where the inspector and Ableway had been talking. While Lanner went to the front of the house the eavesdropper went to the back, an aristocratic-looking figure with a fierce red moustache and a monocle.

If Inspector Lanner was trying to add two and two together to make four, John Pellington, Sir Richard Lulworth’s manservant, most certainly had performed that arithmetical calculation with results which brought no ease to his mind.

CHAPTER XI

AVRIL ABBLEWAY GETS A SHOCK

SIR JOHN ABBLEWAY'S interview with Lord Rowmands was not a long one. He had learnt all the outlines of the murder of Bilsiter from Inspector Lanner, and he wanted, as soon as possible, to mingle with the guests of the house and gain what impressions he could from their conduct. Whether the crime was an inside one he had not decided in his own mind.

"At first I was strongly of the opinion it was an inside job," the inspector had told him. "But I am not quite so certain now after talking to the gardener and learning about the interview Bilsiter had with that woman."

"She's certainly a cog in the wheels of the mystery, and she must be accounted for before you can come to any definite conclusions," agreed the Commissioner thoughtfully. "I dare say it will turn out to be some vulgar intrigue. Men of Bilsiter's class are rather prone to liaisons. Was he married, by the way?"

"Not so far as is known," replied the inspector.

"You have no suspicions about any of the guests?"

The inspector had hesitated for a fraction of a second before replying in the negative, but if the Commissioner had noticed his hesitation he had given no sign of it.

"Well, Rowmands has been honest enough to admit he was in the hands of Bilsiter," said Sir John. "If we find out anyone in the house who was in the same boat and has not revealed the fact, then we might have some cause for suspicion."

Lanner gave a grimace as he turned away. The only person he had reason to suspect of being in the hands of the dead moneylender was the Commissioner's own son. He wondered what Sir John would say when he learnt the news, and he was glad he was not faced with the same problem.

Sir John Ableway, when he entered the big, pleasant drawing-room where most of the guests had collected, was the cynosure of all eyes. It had been known for some time that he had arrived at Rowmands, that he had been closeted with Inspector Lanner, and many had been the speculations as to what action he would take. Somehow his presence gave them all more confidence that the mystery would not long remain one.

Many there he knew personally, Penricarde, the K.C., with whom he had come in contact in a number of sensational cases; Sturridge, who as a Home Office official had been on a number of occasions to Scotland Yard to convey personal and confidential instructions from the Home Secretary; and Sir Richard Lulworth, whom he had often met at social functions.

But it was to his own daughter, Avril, that he paid most attention after the necessary few formal words of introduction or greeting.

"Come out for a stroll round, my dear," he said. "And tell me what you think about this affair. I have only heard Lanner's version, and that's cold-blooded and official. Perhaps you can give me some warmer impressions."

“Mr. Lanner has been much too cautious to tell us anything, daddy,” Avril replied affectionately, taking his arm. “Even I, as the daughter of a Commissioner at Scotland Yard, was examined like any other guest. I don’t think Inspector Lanner is any respecter of persons.”

“He wouldn’t be so efficient if he were,” replied her father. “If he thought you or Tommy were guilty he would take just the same action as he would with anyone else.”

“Is he so very efficient then?”

“I think he’s one of the best men I have come across. He’s well-educated, is a good type, and has brains. They’ll take him far, if I’m not mistaken. I don’t think this case could be in better hands. If he doesn’t solve it, then it’s insoluble.”

“Does he suspect anyone then?”

“That would be betraying official secrets,” said Sir John with a grave smile. “You don’t usually ask questions, Avril. Why are you more curious in this case?”

“Surely it is understandable, daddy,” replied Avril. “All of us in Rowmands have been overwhelmed by what has happened, and naturally we feel that the sooner the murderer is caught the better.”

“Even though it might be one of the guests?”

“You don’t think that,” cried Avril. “There’s no one——”

“There are very few people who are not capable of committing murder, given the provocation,” interrupted her father. “When you are as old as I am, my dear, you will not be deceived by external appearances, by a pleasant manner, an air of good comradeship, by a smooth tongue.”

Avril was silent for a while. “Did Inspector Lanner tell you what I said to him?” she asked at last.

“Of course. He told me that you and Bilsiter had gone for a stroll that night, that Bilsiter had grumbled to you about the incompetence of Scotland Yard in not capturing Charity Sheen, by whom he had been threatened. I gather, Avril, that you also gave the inspector the impression that you thought the police incompetent. I can assure you they are nothing like so incompetent as—well, as they sometimes appear to be.”

For a moment Avril hesitated and then she determined on a bold course. She resolved to be as frank as she dared with her father, in the hope that she might learn something of what Scotland Yard was thinking or doing about Charity Sheen. Her heart sank at her father’s words, for she knew if he merely hinted that the Yard were at last on the track of the mysterious criminal who had defied them for the last two years it was more than probable the Yard had progressed a very long way towards discovering the identity of Sheen. If she had known then how near they were to the solution of the two-years-old problem she would not have felt quite so easy in her mind over the course she was taking.

“I did not tell Inspector Lanner all that Mr. Bilsiter said to me,” she continued.

“Why not?”

“I didn’t think it would have any bearing on—on what has happened,” she replied. “Mr. Bilsiter asked me to marry him and he was very angry when I refused.”

“My dear, that is something I want to talk to you about,” said her father, and there was an unusual gravity in his tones as he spoke. “Not about your refusing Mr. Bilsiter. I think you did quite rightly there. You couldn’t possibly have married a man of that class. But, in the face of what has happened, do you think Sir Richard Lulworth ought to have proposed to you—just after a murder in the house in which you are staying? It’s a little—well, I don’t quite know how to express it, but he might have waited a little longer.”

Avril’s hand involuntarily tightened on her father’s arm. Put in that way, she realised at once that her father would not be the only one to think her lover might have waited. Yet how could she tell him that it was she who had done the proposing, that she had deliberately forced her lover to become engaged to her, to buy the engagement ring just because she had foreseen just such an emergency? She searched round in her mind for words to say which would put Richard in a new light.

“I—I told him Mr. Bilsiter had proposed to me, daddy, and—and—well—oh, how can I explain? Before I knew what had happened, before Richard knew what had happened, we—we knew we loved one another. Daddy, dear, he wouldn’t have become engaged even then if—if I hadn’t encouraged him.”

“Avril, little one, you are everything in the world to me,” said her father, turning and facing her. “Believe me, I want to see you happy more than I want to see anything else. But—but I wish it had been anyone else except Richard Lulworth.”

She looked up with frightened eyes. Never had she heard her father speak in such serious tones before. His face was as grave as his tones, and with a sinking feeling she realised that there was much more behind the actual words he had used. With an effort she controlled her voice.

“Why, daddy?” she cried.

“What do you know about him, after all?” he parried. “You have met him at other people’s houses, he has been pleasant to you, as I expect he has to other girls whom——”

“Daddy, how dare you?” she interrupted “Richard is not that kind of man.”

She was near tears, but she had too much of her father’s disposition to break down in front of him. For some reason or other he was definitely opposed to their engagement, and she meant to find out why, if she could.

“That’s just what I am saying to you, my dear,” he continued. “How do you know what kind of man he is? Naturally you would be the last to hear. He is a man who has plenty of money, does nothing as far as is known, and so what is more natural than he should take the pleasures of life as they come? He wouldn’t be human if he didn’t.”

“That is not like you, daddy,” she said quietly. “It is not like you to make vague accusations. Can you tell me something definite?”

“He’s too clever for that,” replied her father quickly. “I will give him credit of being one of the cleverest men I know, but I don’t welcome him as a son-in-law,” he added.

“And I should marry him if he were the worst man in the world,” replied Avril defiantly. “I shall marry him because I love him.”

“Even if it brought disgrace upon your father?” he asked in a low voice.

“Even that,” replied Avril. “Oh, daddy, daddy, I thought you would like him. You have never said anything against him before.”

“I have only learnt quite recently,” began her father, when Avril interrupted him swiftly.

“Then you do know something definite?” she cried. “You must tell me; I have a right to know.”

She took the lapels of his coat in her hands and looked up into his face.

“Daddy, you want me to be happy. I want to make you happy,” she said wistfully. “Won’t you tell me?”

Gravely her father put his hand on her shoulder and looked down into her beautiful face, looked at the tense expression on it, saw the slight quiver of her lips. For a moment he hesitated, and then he spoke quietly:

“I can’t tell you now. But for my sake, for all you hold dear, I want to impress upon you that you have never made a greater mistake in your life than becoming engaged to Sir Richard Lulworth. And he never made a cleverer move than by becoming engaged to you, after the murder of Bilsiter.”

Avril stepped back and looked with horror into her father’s face. A terrifying idea had entered her mind. “You—you suspect him of that?” she whispered.

And, as her father nodded almost imperceptibly, she turned without another word back to the house, back to the sanctuary of her own room.

CHAPTER XII

THREE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

FOR the twentieth time Richard Lulworth read the note which had been slipped under his bedroom door just before midnight. It was from Avril, the first letter of any kind he had ever received from her.

"Dear heart of mine," it ran, "do you remember when I proposed so brazenly to you (and it isn't even leap year, so I hadn't got that excuse; but I had a better excuse than any leap year, Richard mine, the excuse that I love you, shall always love you) you tried to frighten me by saying that to be engaged to you might bring me trouble—perhaps worse than trouble—social ruin? I think the blow is going to fall after all. Two days ago I would willingly have done anything to have been the means of proclaiming the identity of Charity Sheen to the world. Two hours ago I knew that I shall just as willingly do all I can to prevent my dear Charity Sheen from suffering. I think I shall always call you Charity in my heart, my dear. 'And now abideth Faith, Hope and Charity, these three.' I have, oh! such faith and hope for the future, Charity, the faith and hope that all will be as we wish it some day. Love that is worth while is worth waiting for.

"My dear, I expect by now you are wondering what I am driving at, but please be patient. I will come to that presently, but before I do so I want to tell you how much I love you, how much you mean to me. You mean all, and if you were the most terrible criminal in the world—which with that great heart of yours, you never can be—I should still love you. Women are made like that. In a way, Richard, I should not mind if our love were tested to the very limit, for it is so easy to love when all the world is smiling. The test comes when all fall away except the loved one. If I were in trouble like that I know you would come to me, would stand by me whatever the world said. And no love of mine would be worthy of the love you have given me if it would not bear the strain you are willing, I know, to bear. Love cannot be a one-sided affair. I love you, dear. You love me.

"To-night I had a talk with daddy—and he has frightened me. He told me that he wished it had been anyone but you, dear. I tried to find out why, and—and he told me he suspected you of murdering Mr. Bilsiter, Oh, my dear, do be careful. You have his revolver and the paper you took. For my sake hide them safely, or get rid of them together. I am frightened, dear love, but I told daddy I should marry you if you were the worst man in the world. And you are the best man in the world, my dear. Act quickly—to-night if you can. Daddy won't wait, even for my sake. All my love. Good night, my dear.—AVRIL."

Lulworth slipped the letter at last under his pillow and switched off the light above his head. As he lay there in the semi-darkness he realised that it would want all his wits to get out of the situation in which he found himself. Over and over again he cursed himself for a fool for ever having taken on the role of Charity Sheen.

"I ought to have known that the odds in the long run would be too great," Lulworth muttered to himself. "There's only one thing. I must go away as I have always said I would. It isn't fair. Avril is young and will learn to forget. But there are things I must do first. No man shall call me a murderer, and if I bolt now there will only be that construction to put on it."

He had little doubt in his own mind that Sir John Ableway suspected him not only of having murdered Bilsiter but of being Charity Sheen. Either, he reflected grimly, would be difficult of proof, and it might be some time before Sir John came to the conclusion to act. But act he would, most certainly, perhaps sooner than he wished to do by the very fact that Avril was engaged to Richard. Lulworth was now well aware that the commissioner would not allow the actual marriage to take place if he could prevent it.

As he lay there thinking, he felt that he was between two stools. On the one hand, if he stayed he was endangering the reputation of Avril, a reputation he valued far more than his own. On the other, if he fled he would most certainly be branded as a murderer. The only solution to the quandary in which he found himself, for which, as he bitterly admitted to himself, he was alone responsible, was to find the murderer of Bilsiter. The papers he had taken from the murdered man provided him with certain lines of investigation and these he must follow up.

The problem was no nearer solution when, at long last, he fell into an uneasy sleep from which he awoke with a start, with a vague feeling that he had heard some sound, some unusual sound. For some seconds he lay there trying to recall it, and then with a sudden exclamation he sprang out of bed. What he had heard was the click of the latch as the door had been closed, the sharp click which comes as the latch slips when someone is trying to close a door without making any sound. He ran to the door and opened it, peering into the darkness of the corridor. But not a sound disturbed the stillness as he stood there with keenly-tuned ears—listening.

Lulworth returned to his room, now lighted up by the full moon pouring into it. Involuntarily he walked to the window and looked out and then sharply drew back. In the shadow of the trees something had moved. He looked at his watch. It showed a few minutes past three o'clock.

“Now, who the devil’s that?” he muttered to himself as he peered carefully through the curtains. “And what’s he doing out there at this time in the morning?” He gave a low whistle of astonishment as the figure he was watching turned and moved momentarily out of the shadow and looked up at the house, almost seeming to look directly at the window where Lulworth was standing. The face he was looking at was the face of a woman, and though he could not recognise who it was at that distance he had the impression that she was good-looking. She was dressed entirely in black, and that was why she had merged at first in the shadows.

His mind reverted to the impression he had received as he woke up that he had heard a door close softly. He had thought then that it was his own door, but now he began to think it must have been one of the doors along the corridor.

“She’s evidently waiting for someone,” he reflected, “and I don’t think I shall be doing any harm finding out who it is.”

He hurriedly slipped on his trousers and shirt and a jacket, keeping an eye on the waiting figure as he did so. Putting his electric torch in his pocket he went out into the corridor, taking the precaution, as he did so, to lock his bedroom door and place the key in his pocket. His slippers made no sound as he moved down the staircase and turned towards the servants’ quarters. Here he would have the advantage of being able to get out of the house through the side door which would then be in shadow. From there he could get under cover of the trees without the risk of being seen, and could make his way round to the other side of the house.

He was not surprised to find the side door unbolted.

“That settles it as being someone in the house,” he said to himself. “Things are beginning to get interesting.”

He moved quickly across in the shadows and made his way round to where he had seen the mysterious woman in black standing. To his satisfaction she was still waiting under the shade of the big beech tree, still looking up towards his window expectantly. It was quite evident that the person for whom she was waiting was someone who slept in the same corridor as his own.

“Tommy Ableway, Sturridge, young Rowmands, Jesson the art expert, and myself,” said Lulworth beneath his breath. “It is certainly not I with whom the appointment is made. I wonder——”

He broke off with a muttered curse. He had been walking in the direction of the beech tree as he had ruminated to himself, and had not been looking down. A dead stick under his foot had gone off with a crack that sounded like a pistol shot in the stillness of the early morning. He was but a few yards from the woman in black, and she wheeled round with a startled expression on her face.

“Who is that?” she cried.

Lulworth had an impression of a pair of dark startled eyes looking at him from out of a small, round, attractive face, and then the whole world seemed to go suddenly black as he pitched forward on his face. There came the startled scream of a frightened woman, and the man standing over the still form of the baronet looked up with an oath.

“Shut up, Madge,” he said in a startled undertone. “You don’t want to raise the whole neighbourhood with your cackle.”

The woman shrank back, her hands raised to her face as though to shut out the sight of the man lying there.

“I thought you were never coming,” she whispered. “Who is that? He gave me a fright. I didn’t see you till—till——”

“Till I hit him, eh?” interrupted the other grimly. “That is Sir Richard Lulworth.”

He bent over and deliberately searched the unconscious man’s pockets from which he took a bunch of keys and the bedroom key.

“You—you haven’t killed him?”

“No,” replied her companion.

He broke off and shrugged his shoulders.

“Now what do *you* want?”

His tone changed. It was almost harsh, and he looked at her angrily as he spoke.

“What the devil do you mean by telephoning?” he demanded, without waiting for a reply to his first question: “Telephones have ears as much as walls. If I didn’t happen to be passing at the time and picked up the receiver, God knows who might have got your message. The police are all over the place.”

He shook his fist at her.

“Any more monkey tricks, Madge, and I’ll open my mouth a damned sight wider than you’ll like. What’s your trouble?”

Her dark eyes flashed as she looked at him, and she bit her lip to prevent an angry retort.

“I only heard this afternoon that Bilsiter had been murdered,” she began, “and it’s frightened me.”

“What the devil have you got to be frightened at, eh? I should have thought you’d be glad to hear he was out of the way,” sneered the other. “There’s no pleasing you women. One minute you’re swearing blue murder and the next you’re shaking all over because the murder’s been carried out.”

“Jack was released on Wednesday,” she continued in a low voice, ignoring his outburst. “And he swore when he came out the first thing he’d do would be to knife Bilsiter.”

The man was silent as he thought about the news she had given him.

“So Jack was released on Wednesday,” he muttered. “And he threatened to knife Bilsiter, did he? Have you seen him?”

She shook her head.

“I believe he’ll kill me too,” she said in a frightened whisper. “Oh, my God, what’s that?”

Her nerves were obviously all on edge and she clutched his arm till the fingers bit into his flesh. Somewhere a dog had started barking.

“Haven’t you ever heard a dog before?” he asked savagely as he shook her hand away. “Look here, I must think about what you have told me. We are not allowed to leave the house till after the opening of the inquest—some time to-morrow, Monday that is. I’ll see you on Tuesday at the old place in town. Eight o’clock sharp. And don’t worry, Madge.”

He tried to put a conciliatory note into his last words, and she was about to speak when the barking of the dog was answered by another and then a third.

“Here, you’d better get away fast,” he said. “Eight o’clock on Tuesday.”

He turned without another word and ran swiftly along in the shadow of the trees as the woman moved away from the house. Neither gave so much as a glance at the form of Lulworth, who lay with sprawled-out arms, breathing heavily.

The sun was half-way up the sky when he opened his eyes again, to find himself in bed with Doctor Bessbury bending over him. His head seemed to be splitting and he gave a sharp cry of pain as he turned it.

“That’s all right. Lie still,” came the soothing tones of the doctor. “You’ll soon be feeling fit again.”

“What’s happened?” asked Lulworth, with an attempt to smile. “I feel like the morning after the night before.”

“You’ve hurt your head in some way,” replied Bessbury cautiously. “Nothing serious. Put you out for a bit, though. Don’t worry—you can tell us all about it later. Come, drink this.”

Eagerly the other gulped down the contents of the glass held out to him. His throat felt as dry as a lime kiln, and the very coolness of the draught seemed to put new life into him. He closed his eyes and tried to think what had happened. Little by little the

events of the day before came back to him, though he found greater and greater difficulty of remembering as he came nearer to the time when he had been struck down.

His last remembrance seemed to be reading the note he had from Avril and mechanically he put his hand under his pillow. The letter wasn't there.

With all the grim determination of his nature he lay perfectly still for some minutes and then opened his eyes again.

"I'm feeling better already, doctor," he said, with a cheerful forced smile. "That tonic of yours has done wonders. Could I see Pellington for a few minutes? He's my man, you know."

"I don't think it's advisable. A nurse——" began Dr. Bessbury.

"I'm not trying to think what has happened," interrupted Lulworth. "I've had concussion once before. Got knocked out by a shell on the Somme. It'll all come back in good time. Pellington knows my ways, that's all, and he won't worry me. A nurse would. I won't ask to see anyone else at present if you don't want me to."

"All right, if you'll promise not to talk," replied the other. "I'll send him up. Perhaps you can see one or two of your friends this afternoon. I shall be round again at two o'clock to see how you are getting on."

"As someone ought to be with me," pointed out Lulworth, "I'd as soon have Pellington as anyone else. Give your orders to him and he'll see they are obeyed. He's a martinet, I can assure you."

Dr. Bessbury was deceived by the lightness of the other's tones, and on his way downstairs, when he met Avril, who had anxiously been waiting news of her lover, he nodded cheerfully.

"He's just recovered consciousness, Miss Ableway," he said. "He'll be as right as rain in another twenty-four hours. But you mustn't go near him till after I have seen him this afternoon. It's the first few hours that matter."

"Thank God!" said Avril. "You are sure he'll be all right?"

The doctor again nodded as he went along in search of Pellington and gave the latter a few instructions.

"Shut the door and lock it, Pellington," said his master as the well-trained servant entered the room a few minutes later. "Now tell me what happened."

"Doctor Bessbury, sir," began Pellington.

"Damn Doctor Bessbury," interrupted Lulworth irritably. "Tell me what happened."

"Very good, sir," replied Pellington imperturbably. "You were found last night, or rather this morning, shortly after four o'clock, lying unconscious under one of the beech trees in the grounds. You had evidently been knocked on the head by someone. All the dogs began barking and that roused us up. You were brought in, and that is all, sir."

"Who actually found me?"

"Young Mr. Ableway, sir. I happened to be near by at the moment, and we carried you into the house and telephoned for Doctor Bessbury. He came immediately. This is

his second visit, sir.”

“You helped to bring me in this room?”

“Yes, sir, after Doctor Bessbury had examined you. You were lying on the couch till then. He ordered you to bed.”

“Listen Pellington. When I left this room last night I left a letter under my pillow. It’s gone. Know anything about it? It was in an envelope addressed to me in Miss Ableway’s writing.”

Pellington shook his head.

“Have a look round. Search the pockets of my clothes I was wearing. Search my dress pockets. In case my memory’s at fault and I put it away somewhere. Search everywhere. It’s vital that letter’s found, Pellington.”

He watched with increasing anxiety as his trusted manservant turned out pocket after pocket with no result, opened drawers in the dressing-table, searched the top of the dressing-table.

“Pellington, you can shut your mouth.”

The overwhelming anxiety in the tones of his master was only too evident.

“What’s the matter, sir?” he asked. “I’m——”

“You’re faithful enough,” interrupted Lulworth with a faint smile. “Bring me my dress pair of boots. That’s right. Take the trees out of them. Let me have that left-hand one and forget what you see, understand? I sometimes keep private papers there temporarily. It’s hollow. See? That’s my last hope.”

As he spoke he pressed one side of the heel of the tree and the end neatly moved between well-fitting grooves, revealing a cavity inside.

With a groan of despair Lulworth turned his face to the wall as the boot tree slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground.

The hollow inside was empty.

CHAPTER XIII

BLOOMSBURY 99684

SIR JOHN ABLEWAY set his mouth firmly, and when he spoke it was more brusquely than usual. But when one of the highest officials at Scotland Yard is told by a very efficient and intelligent inspector of police that that inspector suspects the Commissioner's son and daughter in a murder case it is not surprising if he feels perturbed. He had often, in theory, dealt with the relative merits of love and duty, and, in theory, had always asserted that when the two were pulling against one another duty must come first, second, and third.

Sir John, however, found, as many other people in this world have done, that practice and theory are two very different things. For the first time in his life he was faced with the fact that sooner or later he would have to come to some definite decision about the discoveries Inspector Lanner had made. He had interviewed both his son and daughter, and now he and Inspector Lanner were reviewing the whole position, while Sir Richard lay in bed recovering from his injuries.

"There is no doubt whatever, sir," said the inspector, "that Mr. Ableway believed I had got a paper incriminating him in some way or other."

"Both of them have defied me," said Sir John in a low, weary voice. "Neither of them is a murderer, Lanner, but both are hiding something or shielding someone. You must do your duty."

"There is no need to mention what we know yet, sir," replied the inspector tactfully. "If we can find out in some other way what they are hiding or whom they are shielding we can bring pressure to bear on them."

"Tell me exactly what you have in your mind, Lanner. Speak the truth; it's better."

The other nodded. It had taken a certain amount of moral courage to screw himself up to telling the Commissioner of his finding of Bilsiter's diary, with its incriminating references to Tommy Ableway and his sister, and he could not but admire the way Sir John had taken it. The inspector did not believe that either Avril or her brother had any direct hand in the murder, and he said so at once.

"It's far more likely each is hiding something from mistaken motives," he said. "Your son, sir. Frankly, I think he's signed some paper over money matters, and that paper involves someone else. I think if he were the only one concerned he would speak up at once. But if by speaking he's got to give the other man away he won't tell the truth until it's forced from him or we tell him who the other man is. He's young and quixotic, so his ideas of honour will be a little warped. I don't doubt for a moment that part of this story is true—that part where he said Bilsiter was bringing pressure on him to help his cause with Miss Ableway. Nor do I doubt that Mr. Ableway told Bilsiter to go to the devil."

"My son admits there was a row," said Sir John. "Don't you think it possible he lost his head completely and stabbed Bilsiter?"

Inspector Lanner shook his head.

“No, sir, I do not. The natural thing for a young man to do in the circumstances, a man of Mr. Ableway’s temperament, would be to clench his fists and knock the other down. Not to bind him and then stab him when he’s helpless. There’s no doubt Bilsiter was bound hand and foot before he was murdered. Supposing for a moment that Mr. Ableway did tie Bilsiter up. By the time he had done it his temper would have cooled and he would probably have walked out of the room leaving him to be——”

“That’s an idea,” interrupted Sir John. “It might quite easily have happened that Bilsiter was tied up by one man and murdered by another. Go on.”

“But your son has given me an idea,” continued the inspector. “A wild one perhaps, but one I would like your opinion on, sir. He told me that Sir Richard Lulworth was the only man beside himself who knew about the paper.”

“Except the man my son may be shielding, whose name may be on the paper with my son’s,” pointed out Sir John with quickened interest.

“Excepting that man, of course,” agreed the inspector. “But the point is this. Bilsiter was warned by Charity Sheen that if he didn’t give up the paper it would be taken from him. Now how did Charity Sheen know Bilsiter had it unless—well, unless Sheen is Sir Richard Lulworth?”

Sir John did not reply and the inspector misconstrued his silence. He did not know that the Commissioner himself had come to the same conclusion some weeks ago.

“I know it sounds fantastic,” continued the inspector hastily. “And as he’s engaged to Miss Ableway it makes it more difficult for me to speak. He’s got plenty of money, I understand, but he may be squandering it in some way for all we know. I hope, sir _____”

He hesitated as he saw the Commissioner’s eyes fixed on him. Lanner had taken a bold step, a courageous step, indeed, in formulating his suspicions, and he was steeling himself for a possible outburst of his companion. To his surprise, Sir John spoke very quietly.

“Fantastic or not, Lanner, I have sufficient faith in your judgment to believe that you have some very good reason for thinking as you do. Tell me what it is.”

“Your son told me quite definitely, after he’d let the name slip out accidentally, that Sir Richard was the only man who knew anything about the paper. Charity Sheen most certainly knew about it. There is the possibility, of course, that Charity Sheen is the man whose name we think may also be on the paper.

“But, before Bilsiter was murdered, at dinner that night when I gather most people were secretly rather glad that he had been threatened by Charity Sheen, Miss Ableway denounced Sheen, and quite openly admitted that she for one wouldn’t be sorry if he were caught.

“Then there came that entry in Bilsiter’s diary, ‘Told A.A. about Sheen. Had expected effect.’ Since then Miss Ableway has changed her attitude about Sheen, and is prepared to defend him. I showed to her in one or two ways how everything pointed to Sheen’s guilt and she rather pooh-poohed the suggestions. Sir Richard, also, I have

learned, has defended the man, and declared that from his method of committing crimes in the past he was not the type to commit murder.”

“That is a sound argument as a rule,” admitted Sir John. “We do know this about Sheen, that he has never hitherto offered violence.”

“Well, they are only impressions,” said the inspector half apologetically. “I came across Miss Ableway and Sir Richard in the garden yesterday, and she had been crying. They were both in an agitated state when I came up, though I pretended not to notice it.”

“So it comes to this,” said Sir John. “You believe that Bilsiter in some way or other guessed that Charity Sheen was Sir Richard Lulworth, that he told my daughter his suspicions and threatened to expose Sir Richard if my daughter didn’t marry him, that is, Bilsiter? Then, when Bilsiter’s death is announced, Avril tells Sir Richard what Bilsiter had said to her and he so played on her feelings that she became engaged to him?”

“I am sorry to say I do, sir,” answered Lanner in a low voice.

“You will be surprised, Lanner,” continued his companion with a slight laugh, “to know that I think precisely the same thing. I have told my daughter that she never made a greater mistake in becoming engaged to Lulworth, and he never made a cleverer move than he did when he asked her to marry him.”

“Good heavens, sir, I am awfully sorry,” cried Lanner. “Though frankly I admit it’s a relief to know that my idea wasn’t so fantastic after all.”

It was evident, too, from his tones that the inspector was glad that his ordeal was over. He was never a man, ultimately, to shirk his duty, however unpleasant, and it had been a very unpleasant duty he had performed.

“May I ask, sir, if you have anything else against Sir Richard?”

“Much of what I think is based upon impressions more than anything else,” answered Sir John Ableway. “It was some months after Charity Sheen had begun his robberies—in fact, practically a year—before I came to the conclusion that they were being carried out by an educated man. The wording of his letters to the newspapers, the occasional literary and classical allusions and tags he used first made me think that.

“I worked on the assumption, too, that Charity Sheen was doing exactly what he said he was doing, robbing the rich to give to charity. On those two assumptions I argued that the man was someone who was probably well-to-do, with a fair amount of leisure, and one who moved more or less in the circles of the people he was robbing. It was difficult for me to see, unless the latter fact were true, how he got such accurate information, not so much about the things he stole, but about the private characters of those he robbed.

“I found a number of men who fitted the general vague idea I had in my mind, and my next step was to make cautious inquiries as to the movements of all these men, to see if they had had the opportunity for committing any or all of the robberies. Charity Sheen has carried out seventeen robberies in the last two years, which he has written about to the newspapers. His last was the theft of the Duchess of Westshire’s necklace, if we except Bilsiter, and in this case he hasn’t had time to write to the newspapers.

“Out of these seventeen robberies Lulworth was actually in the houses of the victims in eleven cases. Out of the remaining six, in two I have been unable to trace his movements, and in the other four cases he was within easy motoring distance. In all cases where jewels have been stolen he has shortly afterwards gone on the Continent for a few days’ trip. The last two occasions we had his cabin and luggage searched without his knowledge, and, needless to say, without any result. And in every case he has eluded the man sent after him.”

“Where did Lulworth go to, ostensibly?” asked the inspector, who had followed the Commissioner’s reasoning with intense and obvious interest.

“To Paris,” replied Sir John. “In the last case, the Westshire robbery, a row was faked in the street with one of my agents, and both Sir Richard and his assailant were taken to the police station. I am very friendly with the prefect, and, despite his protests, Lulworth was searched thoroughly, as was his luggage at his hotel and the room in which he was staying. No result again.”

“His flat in town?” asked Lanner.

“Yielded nothing, nor his house. He has a big place at North Chapel, a little village a few miles this side of Petworth in Sussex. I have tried to get hold of the typewriter Sheen uses, which has certain very definite characteristics which would identify it; but he’s too clever to keep it where it can be found in a hurry.”

“In actual fact, sir,” pointed out the inspector, “all the things you have done would go to prove his innocence when handled by a clever counsel?”

“I know that,” answered Sir John ruefully. “Yet I am sure that he’ll make a slip some day, and I have been waiting for it.”

“Do you think he murdered Bilsiter?”

The Commissioner shook his head.

“I can’t, at present, express an opinion one way or the other,” he replied.

The inspector ruminated for a few moments over what the Commissioner had told him.

“You have eliminated all the other men whom you first suspected of being Charity Sheen, sir?” he asked thoughtfully.

“I can’t say I have definitely,” answered the Commissioner. “I have the names of four other possibles about whom inquiries are being made. Two of them are in this house at present.”

“Yes?” asked the inspector eagerly.

“This is in confidence,” said Sir John cautiously. “One is Jesson, the art expert, and the other Sturridge, the under-secretary at the Home Office. They move very much in the same circles as Lulworth, both are well-educated men, both have been in the majority of the houses concerned when the robberies took place. But neither has made the regular trips to Paris or anywhere abroad which Lulworth has, and neither has quite so much leisure to plan and carry out schemes. Frankly, it is more a matter of general precaution than anything else that I have had inquiries made about them, with negative results. Now we’d better give Lulworth a rest and have a look at some other ideas.”

“What about that attack on him?” asked Lanner, loth to leave the prospect the Commissioner’s story had conjured up in his mind.

“That is certainly puzzling,” answered his companion. “And we can do nothing until Doctor Bessbury allows him to be examined. Certainly I should like to know his reasons for being out in the grounds dressed as he was. It is quite evident that he had slipped on a few things hurriedly and gone out——”

“To keep an appointment?” suggested Lanner.

The Commissioner nodded thoughtfully.

“There is one other point,” he said. “There is a telephone in this house. Have you _____”

Lanner stood up quickly and brought his clenched fist down on his open palm.

“I’m a fool, sir!” he cried. “I’d forgotten the telephone. Of course, I ought to have arranged at once that all messages out or in should be tapped till after the inquest, at any rate.”

“I should make some inquiries who has used the telephone and when,” said Sir John dryly. “Or who has received any messages.”

“I’ll go at once, sir,” replied Lanner.

“Come and tell me the results when you’ve got them, Lanner.”

It was nearly an hour later when the inspector found Sir John Ableway chatting with the head gardener at Rowmands.

“I’ve got a list here, sir,” he said, as he pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket.

“Besides the local messages,” he began, “there were, of course, the telephone messages to the police and Dr. Bessbury as soon as the discovery was made, my own messages as well as one sent on my behalf. Only two other messages were sent during the day, or rather one was sent and one received. About the one received I have no information I can act upon. It came from a local call office at Uxbridge just before tea time, at 4.10 to be precise. I have made exhaustive inquiries in the house, but all the servants deny having answered the telephone at that time. I have not yet inquired of the guests, for obvious reasons, and I wanted your opinion on that first, sir.”

“I have a feeling, Lanner,” said the Commissioner, “that when you do make inquiries you will find that none of the guests answered the telephone either.”

“But it was answered,” pointed out Lanner. “The exchange told me that.”

“Yes, but the man—or woman—who answered it won’t own up,” said his companion. “But go on. What about the message that was sent? That’s your tit-bit of information,” he added, with a smile.

“That was sent at half-past eight in the morning, a few minutes before I arrived,” said the inspector. “The number called was Bloomsbury 99684.”

“You have found out who has that number?” asked Sir John.

“Yes, sir,” answered the inspector, and this time the triumph in his voice was unmistakable. “The man whose number is Bloomsbury 99684 is Mr. Leonard Bilsiter.”

“That is interesting,” commented the Commissioner. “Very interesting. His private address or his office?”

“His office, sir. I learnt from the telephone people that there’s a big block of offices there. Evidently he rents a suite.”

“You see the significance of the message?”

“I haven’t considered it fully yet,” replied Lanner cautiously.

“The significance of the message is this: It was sent at half-past eight. How many City offices do you know that begin work as early as that? Very few, and certainly not a moneylender’s office. That message was expected, Lanner.”

“Collusion,” said the inspector.

“Precise,” answered the Commissioner. “And I think there the Yard will come in useful, Lanner. I shouldn’t be at all surprised if the scene of action shifts to London.”

“What about the person who sent the message?” asked the inspector. “There was such confusion that I have not been able to find out who it was.”

“I’ll make a guess,” answered Sir John. “It was the same person who received a message at four o’clock, and when you find out who that is you’ll have taken a pretty long step towards solving the mystery of Bilsiter’s murder.”

CHAPTER XIV

AVRIL TURNS DETECTIVE

RICHARD LULWORTH, after the first few moments during which the shock of discovering the loss of Avril's letter had staggered him, recovered his self-possession. He realised at once what the loss of that letter might mean if it fell into certain hands. The references Avril had made to Charity Sheen were far too definite to be misconstrued by the meanest intelligence. The letter, in effect, was a clear statement that Avril knew he was Charity Sheen, and, worse than that, knew he had taken the missing papers and revolver from Bilsiter's room. If the letter fell into the hands of Inspector Lanner there would—nay, could—be only one outcome. Within ten minutes of the inspector reading it, Charity Sheen, alias Sir Richard Lulworth, would be under arrest, charged with a series of burglaries and the murder of Leonard Bilsiter.

The situation was made a thousand times worse, harder to bear in every way, since he was lying in bed, forbidden to get up for another twenty-four hours at least, though he was feeling fit enough except for the throbbing of his head. He could not act for himself, so he must rely upon other people.

"There are two people in the world I can trust," he muttered to himself. "Avril and Pellington."

He looked across to where his manservant was busily folding and arranging the clothes, which he had searched at his master's request, in the hope the letter had unconsciously been placed in one of the pockets. John Pellington, with his monocle which partly concealed his damaged left eye, the eye he had nearly lost pulling Major Richard Lulworth out of the way of a well-aimed hand grenade in the great war, had resisted many temptations to leave the master whom he had served so faithfully for the last ten years. Unruffled always, apparently without nerves, methodical, he was the kind of man who could rise to an emergency.

"Pellington," Lulworth began quietly. "When you came into my room the other morning and told me Mr. Bilsiter had been murdered you were more upset than I have ever seen you before. You had even forgotten to wear your monocle."

"Yes, sir," replied the valet, a little uneasily, as though he wondered what was coming. "Murder, in a manner of speaking, is upsetting. I hope, sir, I did not——"

"Come, now, Pellington," he said. "You and I have known one another a good many years. You have not served me for ten years without letting me get a very good insight into your character. I know more about you than you give me credit for and I dare say you know more about me than I realise."

"That's just it, sir," jerked out the valet. "I wish sometimes I didn't. It fair gives me the creeps when I think it over."

Lulworth looked keenly at the other. There was a look of distress on John Pellington's face, his usually well-trained, well-waxed fierce red moustache was

sagging a little at the ends, and the clothes brush he was holding was being nervously twisted backwards and forwards.

“What gives you the creeps?” asked Lulworth, quietly. “Mr. Bilsiter’s death? Or something to do with me? Tell me, what were you going to say that morning when you were going out of the door?”

“I—I thought there might be trouble, sir, and—and I wanted to say that whatever the trouble was I—I should ’ang on—I mean, sir, I should stick by you, if I may use the expression.”

“Come on, Pellington, out with it. What’s on your mind? I know you’re faithful enough. There’s no man in the world I’d sooner trust, John Pellington. What’s worrying you?”

“This murder of Mr. Bilsiter, sir,” answered the valet. “The footman who waited at table the night before he was murdered told me he heard Mr. Bilsiter say he was threatened by—by Charity Sheen.”

“Well?” asked Lulworth as the other suddenly stopped. He had a dim idea what was coming.

“I—er—when I heard Mr. Bilsiter had been stabbed I—I thought Charity Sheen must have done it; I thought there must have been a quarrel or something, sir, or Sheen would never have done it. He’s not that kind of man, sir.”

“Ah, then you know who Charity Sheen is?” asked Lulworth grimly.

“I have known almost from the beginning, Sir Richard,” replied Pellington. “I’ve been scared to death every time I knew someone had been warned. And now—Mr. Bilsiter——”

“I didn’t kill Bilsiter,” interrupted his master.

“Thank the Lord above for that, sir,” cried Pellington fervently. “I never did believe you did, but——”

“But you think others may, eh, Pellington? You’re a fine man. I’m proud to have you as a servant and—and as a friend.”

He held out his hand, and there was a suspicion of tears in the eyes of the manservant as he took it. His voice was husky as he spoke.

“They’re after you already, sir,” he said. “I overheard Inspector Lanner talking to young Mr. Ableway in the grounds last night. He told the inspector that you offered to help to get a paper from Mr. Bilsiter. I think the inspector suspects you of being Charity Sheen, sir. He’s clever—too clever for my liking.”

“He’s not the only one who suspects,” replied Lulworth with a smile. “Shortly I fancy the fun will begin finding people who don’t suspect me. Sir John Ableway suspects, so does Lanner. Miss Ableway knows who I am, knew it before we were engaged, and you know. Goodness knows how many more know or suspect. But suspicion is not proof, eh?”

“Once they start a-going, sir, nothing will hold them back,” said Pellington. “And now you’re lying here, helpless—oh, sir, can’t I do something? If I had that man Lanner in the battalion——”

His master laughed. It would certainly be amusing to see Lanner as a private and John Pellington as the company-sergeant-major! There was a fierce look in the one sound eye of his man as he gave an unconscious twirl of the ends of his moustache, which boded ill for Lanner if the situation ever did materialise.

“I’m afraid you won’t have that happy chance,” he said. “But there are plenty of things you can do. You can find out who has got that letter I left under my pillow last night.”

Briefly he outlined that part of the contents which mattered.

“So you see if that gets into the hands of Lanner it is definite proof, Pellington, not only that I am Charity Sheen but that I have taken Bilsiter’s papers and revolver. He was a wrong one, one of the worst type. But that doesn’t make my position any easier. I’m glad, you know. I can rely on you. Listen. When I was found last night it was some time before I was brought up here, wasn’t it?”

“About three-quarters of an hour, sir,” answered the other. “Then Doctor Bessbury himself and I carried you up. I undressed you and put you to bed.”

“How did you open the door?” demanded Lulworth suddenly.

“The usual way, sir,” replied Pellington in surprised tones. “That is to say, it wasn’t locked, if that’s what you mean.”

“I locked it when I went downstairs and out into the grounds,” said Lulworth thoughtfully. “And I had the key in my pocket, as well as my other keys.”

“The key was in the lock as usual, and your other keys are on the dressing-table where they have been all the time,” said the valet.

“Was the bed remade?”

“Yes, sir. One of the maids, I believe, was sent up to put it right while Dr. Bessbury was examining you.”

“Then the letter may have been found by her—or by whoever stole my keys and afterwards replaced them. Lanner——”

“Inspector Lanner is with Sir John now,” interrupted the manservant. “I don’t think he had anything to do with it. He went down to the police station last night, and knew nothing about it until he was telephoned for this morning.”

“What about the maids?”

“If any of the maids had found the letter, I think I should have known, sir,” answered Pellington. “In a manner of speaking I get on very well with the womenfolk.”

“I am remembering what happened to me last night,” continued his master. “I woke up thinking I heard a door close. I happened to go to the window and I saw a woman in black waiting under one of the trees. I put on some clothing and went down to find out who she was. I was very near her—when—well, I suppose I must have been struck down, for that’s all I remember.”

“What do you want me to do, sir?”

“Go and see Miss Ableway. Tell her what I have told you, tell her all you know. Keep your eyes and ears open and come and tell me anything you find out. I’ll ring if I

want anything.”

Pellington drew himself up stiffly and saluted formally.

“I’ll do my best, sir,” he said as he turned away.

“And Pellington,” continued his master, as the manservant reached the door; “there’s no need to worry too much. I’ve done with Charity Sheen for good.”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard since the Armistice, Sir Richard,” said Pellington.

He found Avril sitting under the shade of a tree in the grounds with a book lying open on her lap. She had tried hard to read, to distract her mind from her fears for the safety of her lover, but his face came continually between her and the printed page. The minutes seemed to pass by infinitely more slowly than usual, and she welcomed with an air of relief the approach of Pellington. At any rate he had been in her lover’s room; he could tell her something.

“You have come from Sir Richard?” she asked eagerly. “How is he? Has he said anything to you?”

“Yes, miss. Sir Richard has expressly asked me if I would speak to you. He is progressing very favourably and is now in his right mind. He is in no danger at all, and is only chafing at the delay in being compelled to remain in bed. For a man of Sir Richard’s activities, if I may say so, that must be rather—rather——”

“Rather galling, eh, Pellington?” finished Avril with a laugh. She was amused at the other’s quaint paraphrase of Dr. Bessbury’s report. “But I am glad he is feeling better. Did Sir Richard give you any special message?” she added wistfully.

“Yes, miss.”

He looked round carefully as he spoke. Several of the visitors to Rowmands were idly and uneasily wandering about the grounds, evidently at a loss what to do.

“I have a very special message,” continued Pellington. “And it will take some time to give it to you. As Sir Richard wishes to keep it strictly private——”

“I understand, Pellington,” interrupted Avril quickly. “I’ll walk down to the garage. I can always be doing something to my car, and as you are passing by I shall want your help. It is unlikely there will be any body there at this time of day.”

There Pellington told her all that Sir Richard Lulworth had said to him. She listened quietly, listened with no outward sign of the conflict of emotions within her, until he had finished.

“First of all, Pellington,” she said, “let me thank you for believing in him. You must have had a very worrying time the last two years, knowing what he was doing and never knowing when he would make a slip. I think I should have gone off my head with anxiety. You and I have got to save him. He’s not a murderer.”

“Of course not, miss. But it will go hard with him if that letter falls into Inspector Lanner’s hands.”

“Ah, that letter,” cried Avril, clasping her hands together. “I shall go at once to the housekeeper and ask her if one of the maids has found it. It is quite possible that he did not leave it under his pillow, as he thinks, that he slipped it in his pocket and it fell out.

If it is in its envelope whoever found it may be waiting an opportunity to give it back to Sir Richard.”

“I am afraid not, miss,” replied Pellington bluntly. “If one of the maids found it like that she would have been sure to have given it to me. Begging your pardon, miss, it’s no use blinking facts.”

“Well, I shall try that first,” replied Avril. “You mustn’t adopt a counsel of despair or we shall get so worried that we shan’t do anything. You do as Sir Richard suggests. Keep your eyes and ears open, keep an eye on all the guests. That strange woman, now. She must have communicated with someone in the house to make an appointment at three o’clock in the morning. You have the run of the house. There may be a note somewhere——”

She broke off significantly. Pellington nodded with a wry smile as he moved away. If that note existed, which he very much doubted, he would search until he found it.

Avril Ableway was one of those persons who are almost worshipped by servants. She always had a pleasant word for them, always treated them as human beings, and often had their troubles confided to her. She felt that she had a much greater chance of learning anything from the servants than—well, Inspector Lanner, for example. She had soon found out, indeed, that Lanner, despite his genial manner, was feared by the servants at Rowmands. They had the inborn suspicion of the police which many servants, especially those in the country, have, and resented his prying into their movements as though he thought they might have something to do with the murder. As a consequence, the inspector had learnt nothing more from the servants than he had obtained by direct examination. Hardly any information had been volunteered. There was just a hope, Avril reflected, that someone might be able to tell her something the inspector had overlooked, and it was with renewed hope in her heart that she entered the housekeeper’s room.

“Busy, Mrs. Musgrove? I don’t want to intrude.”

“No, miss,” answered the pleasant-faced, grey-haired, motherly woman who acted as housekeeper at Rowmands. “What can I do for you, miss?”

“I have lost a letter, a very private and confidential one,” explained Avril. “And I wondered if you or one of the servants had picked it up.”

“Where did you lose the letter, miss?” asked the housekeeper.

“I think somewhere in the house, in one of the corridors,” replied Avril. “But I really am not certain. I think I must have lost it in the confusion last night, when Sir Richard was found unconscious in the grounds.”

“I am sure you must be thankful to hear that Sir Richard is getting on so well,” said Mrs. Musgrove. “If you will excuse me a moment, miss, I will make inquiries.”

“I don’t want everyone in the house to know,” said Avril, with a smile. “Inspector Lanner——”

Mrs. Musgrove gave a little sniff.

“If Inspector Lanner knew one half of what he thinks he knows, he would know twice as much as he ought to, miss,” she said. “If *he’d* found your letter now, I dare say

he would have kept it, pulled it to pieces and proved from it who murdered Mr. Bilsiter. I don't like the police nosing about, miss."

"But my father's a policeman," said Avril, laughing at the outburst. "They are really not as terrible as all that, Mrs. Musgrove."

"Sir John is not an ordinary policeman, Miss Avril," replied the housekeeper. "Besides, he's your father."

"I wonder what difference that makes?" asked Avril of herself as Mrs. Musgrove disappeared. "But I'm glad she doesn't like policemen. If she doesn't then the rest of the servants won't."

It was some ten minutes before the housekeeper returned, and she immediately shook her head in the negative.

"I have asked all the maids and they have found nothing, miss," she said. "I am sure they would have told me if they had, especially when they knew it was you who was inquiring. Nor will they say anything to Inspector Lanner. I got Mr. Musgrove to make inquiries among the menservants and they have not found anything either. Of course, we don't know anything about Pellington and one or two others who came down with their masters. We keep ourselves to ourselves." Avril hid her disappointment, and immediately began her new line of attack.

"I think Pellington is all right, Mrs. Musgrove," she said. "I was talking to him a few minutes ago. He told me that Sir Richard told him that he had seen a strange woman in the grounds about three o'clock, and he had gone out to investigate. He was awakened by hearing a door close, by the way. It was when he was walking up to the woman waiting under the trees that he was struck on the head by somebody."

"It looks like somebody in the house, miss," said the housekeeper thoughtfully. "Does Inspector Lanner know?"

"Not yet, at any rate," replied Avril. "When Pellington told me, he rather implied that it was confidential, so I shall not tell Inspector Lanner. Doubtless if Sir Richard wants to he will do so."

"There was a strange woman in the grounds talking to Mr. Bilsiter the night he was murdered," remarked the housekeeper. Avril listened eagerly while Mrs. Musgrove repeated the gossip of the servant's hall.

"Of course, Pollard told Inspector Lanner," she sniffed indignantly as she finished. "But Pollard always was a gossip. He's one of the outside servants."

"And you think it might have been the same woman?" she asked.

"No doubt about it, miss," replied Mrs. Musgrove complacently.

"Wouldn't it be fun," continued Avril with a laugh, "if you and I could find out something Inspector Lanner doesn't know, something which might suggest who it was met this strange woman and knocked Sir Richard senseless?"

The housekeeper's eyes gleamed their amusement.

"Yes, but how, miss?" she asked. "I'll help, fast enough, but then I'm not accustomed to prying into other people's affairs. I shouldn't know how to start."

“Ask the maids up one by one,” suggested Avril quickly, determined not to lose any opportunity. “They might have heard some unusual noise in the night or something. They’ll tell you fast enough, when they wouldn’t tell the inspector unless he dragged it from them. I don’t like the inspector any more than you do, Mrs. Musgrove.”

She had no compunction in playing upon the feelings of the servants when it was a question of saving her lover. If it had been necessary she would have stood there and villified the inspector for the next ten minutes. She was glad the housekeeper was on her side without any further argument.

To her astonishment Avril found that the servants, once they realised what was wanted of them, were not only eager to help her to the best of their ability, but were quite free in relating the gossip of the servants’ hall. And in the course of the questioning by the housekeeper and herself she learnt many odd points of view which she digested at leisure afterwards.

One question she asked of all the servants, under the seal of secrecy—that was whether they liked or disliked any particular guests. Avril knew how shrewdly the upper classes were summed up by their servants, and she hinted to each in turn, without actually saying it, that she thought someone in the house had a grudge against Sir Richard.

Three of the men and two of the women guests she found were no favourites with the servants at all. They were, first of all, the dead man. Bilsiter was one of those men who treated servants as so much dirt, to be ordered about. The other two were Jesson, the art expert, whose chief fault apparently was that he practically ignored the existence of servants and never spoke to them unless he wanted something; and the other was Sturridge, the under-secretary at the Home Office.

“He’s always so domineering, miss,” explained one of the housemaids; “though he isn’t rude like Mr. Bilsiter, or familiar. But he always makes me feel as though I couldn’t think for myself. Only last night he spoke like that to me.”

“When was that, Elsie?” asked Avril.

“After Sir Richard had been brought in, miss,” replied Elsie Shepherd. “Doctor Bessbury asked if his bed had been slept in, and, if it had, it had better be remade to make the poor dear—I mean to make him as comfortable as possible. I was standing by Mr. Pellington at the time, and he asked me if I would mind running upstairs and putting everything right. I was only too glad to do something, miss.”

“Yes, of course you were, Elsie,” said Avril. “I am sorry you don’t like Mr. Sturridge, though,” she added, tactfully.

“I didn’t mean no harm, miss, but I didn’t think anybody was in the room,” replied Elsie, innocently. “And I went straight in. Mr. Sturridge was just coming out and I am afraid I banged his foot as I opened the door. I was in a hurry.

“Well, it wasn’t your fault,” said Avril. “I expect he was as surprised as you were.”

“Yes, miss. He told me to knock the next time I entered a gentleman’s room, and then he asked me if I knew where Sir Richard’s dressing-gown was, as he had come up to get it for him. He’d only got—he hadn’t much on——”

“Do you mean Mr. Sturridge or Sir Richard?” asked Avril, suppressing a smile.

“Sir Richard, of course, miss. His dressing-gown was hanging over a chair, and I gave it to Mr. Sturridge.”

Avril carefully asked one or two more questions before she allowed the servant to go. She did not want her or Mrs. Musgrove to have the slightest suspicion against Sturridge, for that would lead to gossip of the wrong kind, and sooner or later that gossip might reach the ears of the under-secretary.

But the news which Elsie Shepherd had revealed so inadvertently gave her an inward thrill. What was Sturridge *really* doing in her lover’s room, with the door closed? It was most unlikely that he would have shut the door behind him if he had merely gone up to get Lulworth’s dressing-gown as he had suggested. The natural thing to have done would have been to have dashed upstairs into the bedroom, leaving the door wide open as he looked round for what he wanted.

There was another curious circumstance which had flashed across Avril’s mind as the servant had related her story. If her lover’s account was true, if his recollection of the previous night’s events was accurate, he had locked his bedroom door and taken his key with him. How had Sturridge got in? Was he Richard’s assailant, or was he in league with the actual assailant? Whatever the explanation, Avril came to the very definite and quick decision that Sturridge was a man who should be watched.

“I never did like him,” she reflected when the last of the servants had gone. “And now I think I like him less than ever. Elsie is quite right. He’s too domineering. If he has got my letter—”

She broke off, for she dare not think what would happen if Sturridge had found the fatal letter.

CHAPTER XV

AVRIL GOES TO LONDON

AS AVRIL walked away from the housekeeper's room thinking over what she had learnt and entered the deserted great oak-panelled hall, the telephone bell rang.

Automatically she picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Is that Beaconsfield 48906?"

It was a man's voice speaking. It seemed rather muffled and to Avril he appeared to pronounce Beaconsfield "Beaconfield."

"Yes," she replied. "Whom do you want to speak to?"

"Mr. Sturridge," came the reply.

Again Avril noticed the slurring of the s, as though the man at the other end of the wire had a lisp.

She looked quickly round. No one had appeared to overhear the call, and she spoke softly into the receiver.

"Mr. Sturridge is out playing golf at present," she replied. "But he left a message with me—I am the housekeeper speaking"—she hoped Mrs. Musgrove would forgive her if she ever knew how she had taken her name in vain—"to say that if anyone telephoned I was to take the message down and give it to him privately. He said it would be something confidential—something to do with the Government—so I wasn't to say anything to anybody about it. Do you understand? Can you hear me?"

Her heart was beating fast. She had talked half at random, half in the hope that something she was saying might induce the man at the other end to talk. If half what she was beginning to think about Sturridge were true, if he received any telephone message it would be from a confederate, and the latter would not talk if he had any suspicion. She felt that her thoughts were becoming wild, that she was jumping to all sorts of unjustifiable conclusions without any possible proof, just because she had found out that the Under-Secretary had been in her lover's bedroom. Supposing his story were true and he really had gone up for the dressing-gown and shut the door mechanically behind him? Supposing—

The mad rush of her thoughts stopped suddenly. The man at the other end, after what had seemed an interminable pause, had begun speaking again.

"Tell Mr. Sturridge, pleath," he said, "that I have had an inquiry from the poli—from the postmaster-general about the last trunk call he made which he was disputing. Tell him also that I don't think the account can be settled amicably. There may be trouble over it and I want his advice urgently. Got that?"

"Yes, thank you," replied Avril. "Who shall I say rang him up?"

"He'll know when he gets the message," came the reply, and Avril heard the sound of a receiver put on the other end.

Rapidly she wrote down on the telephone pad the message she had received and slipped it down her dress.

"I am sure he was going to say 'police' when he altered it to postmaster," she said to herself. "Now what does it mean? I—"

She broke off. Coming through the open door of the hall was Inspector Lanner.

"I thought I heard the telephone bell ring," he said mendaciously. "I rather expected a call from Scotland Yard."

"Yes, it was the telephone," answered Avril sweetly. "But I am afraid it wasn't for us. Somebody had asked for 48096 and got this number, 48906. I happened to be passing. Have you seen my father, Mr. Lanner?"

"I have just left him in the grounds," replied the inspector carelessly. "I am glad to hear that Sir Richard is not seriously injured and is on the road to recovery, Miss Ableway. Last night must have been an anxious one for you."

"Yes, it was, thank you," replied Avril as she passed through the door.

The inspector stood there for a few minutes and watched her until he saw her speaking to Mrs. Penricarde.

"She's safe for a few minutes," he said, and walked swiftly to the telephone.

"The supervisor, please," he asked. "Inspector Lanner speaking, from Rowmands. A telephone call was received here a few minutes ago. Was it a local call or a trunk?"

"A trunk call," came the reply a few minutes later.

"Then there will be a record of where it came from," replied the inspector. "Will you get on to London at once, please, and find out who was calling. I'll hold on. It's urgent. Please hurry."

Five minutes later the message for which he waited came through. "The number calling was Bloomsbury 99684," said the supervisor.

"Thank you," said the inspector putting on the receiver.

Bloomsbury 99684 was the number of Leonard Bilsiter's London office. It was the second time Rowmands had been in touch with that number since Bilsiter had been murdered.

"Now what the devil's the game?" muttered the inspector. "This is getting beyond me. What the dickens has Miss Ableway to do with Leonard Bilsiter, that's what I want to know? I suppose it was she who rang the office up at half-past eight the other morning. This will make the Commissioner sit up when I tell him."

As he stood there trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle the telephone bell rang again.

"We're busy this morning," he muttered jocularly to himself as he picked up the receiver.

"Is that Inspector Lanner?"

"Speaking."

"This is Farquarson speaking," came the reply.

Farquarson was one of the men at Beaconsfield police station.

“We have just had a message from London,” he continued. “The papers there have been out several hours with reproductions of the locket and the woman you are inquiring about with the initials M.H. Information has been received at Scotland Yard that she is a Mrs. Marjorie Hollister, the wife of John Hollister, who was sentenced to three years for the attempted murder of Leonard Bilsiter.

“The Yard go on to say that John Hollister was released from prison last Wednesday. They are pursuing inquiries into his movements and are sending down a full description, photographs, and finger-prints on the next passenger train from Marylebone. I am arranging to have them picked up. They are expected in about forty minutes’ time. The Yard also state that while in prison Hollister was heard on a number of occasions to say that he wished he had done Bilsiter in completely, and that the next time he’d make a good job of it.”

“That all?” asked Lanner, as the other stopped.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m coming straight down to the station,” returned the inspector. “Be ready to get the description circulated in the district at once, in case Hollister has been seen.”

“And that’s that,” he said cheerfully. “Inspector Lanner, what with Charity Sheen, mysterious women, the Ableways, and now Hollister, I suppose you’ve got a pretty fair tangle to unravel.”

For a moment he hesitated whether to see Sir John or not and tell him the news he had received.

“I’ll tell him this afternoon when I have looked over Hollister’s record,” he decided finally.

He called to a passing servant.

“Tell Sir John Ableway, please,” he said, “that I have gone down to the station and will come in again some time this afternoon.”

A few minutes later he was driving in the police car down to the sleepy old town in Bucks, and that decision of his was to cause a very definite delay in solving the mystery of the death of Leonard Bilsiter, for when he returned he learned that Avril had gone up to London by the three o’clock train and was not expected back until the last train from town—close on midnight.

It was shortly after two o’clock that Avril had made her decision, for it was at that hour that she had been allowed to enter her lover’s room.

“There is no objection to Sir Richard receiving one or two visitors,” Doctor Bessbury had announced after his visit. “He is making a very good recovery. But he must only have one visitor at a time, and he must not be asked questions about what happened to him. It puts too much of a strain on the brain, after the shock it has received.”

“There is no objection, I suppose, if he can tell his own story?” asked Sir John. “It may have an important bearing on the death of Bilsiter.”

“All I ask you is to be careful in pressing him,” replied the doctor. “If he shows the slightest effort in trying to remember, don’t press him. He’ll probably be able to give a fairly clear account by to-morrow.”

It was only natural that Lady Rowmands should make the suggestion that Avril should be the first visitor, and as the latter eagerly assented she caught—and deliberately ignored—the disapproving look which her father gave her.

“My dear—my dear—I’m so glad you are better,” she whispered as she sat down beside the bed. “I have heard all from Pellington, so you needn’t tell me again.”

“Is there any news?” he asked anxiously, as she bent over and kissed him.

Rapidly Avril told her lover of the discovery she had made about Sturridge and the telephone message she had received.

“You have done better than you think, my dear one,” said her lover, holding her hand in his. “I think I shall continue to lie here in peace as long as you are in charge.”

“But if Sturridge has got that letter—”

“He would have acted on it by now if he intended to go to the police,” pointed out Lulworth. “He’s playing some deeper game than that. If he doesn’t get rid of it quickly, Pellington will get it. Tell him what you know. We must act quickly. Tell me, can you go to town to-day on any reasonable excuse?”

“I’ve got the most horrible toothache,” replied Avril promptly. “I shall go mad with pain if I don’t go up to town at once and see my dentist. I have been nearly driven off my head with the pain, though I have bravely not shown it, Richard mine.”

Lulworth laughed cheerfully.

“I shouldn’t have thought of that,” he cried. “I really shall have to take a back seat. Charity Sheen is nothing like so clever as he thought he was.”

“Charity Sheen is dead, my dear,” said Avril gravely. “You must put him right out of your mind. You’ve got yourself into an awful mess, but we’ll get you out of it some way or other. Why do you want me to go to town?”

“Those papers and Bilsiter’s revolver,” replied her lover quietly. “I want you to go and get them. When I took them from Bilsiter I made them up into a small parcel and put them on the hall table with the other letters and parcels to go off by the morning post. It was the simplest way, and I reckoned its very boldness was its safeguard. Those papers are important. I did not digest them properly.”

“But they won’t be safe here, my dear,” objected Avril.

“Yes, they will,” replied Lulworth a little irritably, his face flushing. “No one will think of searching you, my darling. I am uneasy about them. They are addressed to Dick Worth, don’t forget the name, at a stationer’s in the Clerkenwell Road. Number 2862. Reeves is the name.”

Avril kissed him, and put her hand on his forehead. He was a little hot and feverish, she reflected at once. She did not like to take the risk of refusing directly, but at the same time the proposal he had made to her seemed to be one involving an unnecessary risk.

“All right, my darling, I will go, of course,” she said soothingly.

Pellington drove her to the station and waited on the platform until the train came in, and she told him why she was going to town, as well as the discoveries she had made about Sturridge.

“Don’t bring them, miss,” he urged. “Sir Richard’s lost his head, I think. He wouldn’t run that risk if he could think properly. Tell him you saw you were being shadowed and daren’t go near the shop. Tell him anything, but don’t bring them back. He’ll think better of it to-morrow. And as for St—Mr. Sturridge,” he added, and there was a sudden viciousness in his tones which startled Avril. “If he’s got that letter—well, he won’t have it to-morrow morning.”

“Be careful, Pellington,” said Avril anxiously as the train began to move out. “Remember Inspector Lanner is very clever.”

John Pellington made no reply, but there was a look on his face which might have startled the man he was thinking about, if Sturridge had happened to see it.

John Pellington was very thoughtful as he drove back from Beaconsfield Station to Rowmands. His thoughts centred chiefly round Sturridge and the letter, the incriminating letter, which his master had lost. To understand Pellington’s point of view, his attitude of mind generally, two things must be grasped. One is that Sir Richard Lulworth’s valet was more devoted to his master than he was to anyone else in the world. The other was that he was prepared to stick at nothing if he thought it would serve his master’s interests. If Sturridge had got the letter which meant so much to both Avril and Sir Richard, then Pellington considered it was as good as recovered again. But *had* Sturridge got it?

“If he has, what’s his game?” he said to himself. “What was he doing in Sir Richard’s room but pinching that letter or anything else he could find? And what does that message mean, I wonder? I’d like to know who sent it, and I’d like to get my hands round Mr. Sturridge’s neck.”

As the valet had particularly strong hands, the result, to the Under-Secretary, would be distinctly unpleasant not to say dangerous.

He garaged the car and made his way upstairs to his master’s room. As he came to the door he heard voices inside, and he stood there for a fraction of a second trying to place them. But the sound through the closed door was too muffled, and with a preliminary knock he opened it and entered. Sitting beside the bed was Inspector Lanner.

“Hallo, Pellington, so you have returned?” Inspector Lanner said pleasantly. “I shall only be a few minutes and then you can resume your duties, as I understand you have charge in this room for the present.”

There was no mistaking the hint in the inspector’s voice, nor the underlying sarcasm in his tones. The valet inwardly writhed as he said quietly, “Very good, sir,” and closed the door behind him.

He went downstairs. Lanner was always a good subject of conversation below stairs and there he could speak freely.

“Cross-examining Sir Richard before he’s hardly recovered consciousness,” he said bitterly to Culvering. “They’ll kill him between them. Fat lot they care once they get

their bloomin' noses to the ground after a scent."

"'Eard about the woman that's been seen about?" asked Culvering.

"Why, that woman that was talking to Mr. Bilsiter?" replied Pellington. "Yes, I've heard about her. I reckon if Mr. Nosey Parker found out who she was—"

"That's exactly what he has done," interrupted his companion eagerly. "He came back full of it. Sir John 'appened to be in the 'all when Lanner came in and 'e couldn't hold himself. 'I found out the name of that woman, Sir John,' 'e says. 'Oh,' says Sir John. 'Come in the mornin'-room and tell me all about it.'"

"And that's all you heard, I suppose?" asked Pellington in disappointed tones.

"Knowin' Lanner, it was lucky I 'eard that," replied Culvering philosophically, "An' I wouldn't if his lordship 'ad seen me before he spoke. He's as artful as a wagonload of monkeys, I can tell you."

"I don't want no telling," replied Pellington gloomily. "Hallo, there's my bell."

He moved away quickly, and, to his relief, he did not meet the inspector on his way upstairs.

"I saw Miss Avril off, sir," he said as he closed the door behind him. "She asked me to tell you not to worry, as she's sure everything will come out all right, in a manner of speaking."

"I am sure, with two such very good friends, I shall not have much to worry about, Pellington," replied his master with something of his old smile. "You've not heard anything further?"

"No, sir. Except, sir, that Inspector Lanner has found out who the woman is—the lady who was talking to Mr. Bilsiter the other night," replied the manservant.

"So he told me," said Sir Richard. "That was very largely the reason he came to see me. He showed me her photograph and it was the same lady I saw last night. The inspector told me her name was Marjorie Hollister. She is the wife of a man named John Hollister, who was recently released from prison breathing fire and vengeance against Mr. Bilsiter. I gather Inspector Lanner thinks he might have had something to do with the murder."

"What was he sent to prison for?" asked Pellington.

"I gather from Inspector Lanner it was because he had threatened to murder Bilsiter. I fancy it was the old story of the other man's wife, and Bilsiter had plenty of money to flash in front of any woman's eyes."

"So Inspector Lanner thinks the husband might be the murderer," said Pellington slowly. "So long as he doesn't think it is you, sir."

"I am not prepared to state what Inspector Lanner thinks really, Pellington. He is making inquiries in all directions, and he won't make up his mind until he has gathered all the facts together."

"That will take him some time, sir," said the manservant. "But the murder has nothing to do with your letter, if I may say so. Miss Avril hopes very much we shall find that letter."

“You mean that *you* will find it, Pellington. I’m not much use at the present moment,” pointed out Lulworth. “What are you going to do about it?”

“If I may be so bold, sir, I’d rather not say,” replied the other. “If there’s any trouble I’d rather you knew nothing about it, Sir Richard, and then Inspector Lanner can’t hold it up against you.”

“All right, Pellington,” Lulworth said. “I’ll leave it to you to carry on as you think fit. But remember one thing. Inspector Lanner is a clever man.”

“That’s what Miss Ableway told me at the station, sir,” replied his man with a grin.

He busied himself making his master comfortable, and did not leave the room except when Lord Rowmands came in. Downstairs, then, he made certain inquiries about the movements of the guests, and in the course of them he learnt that Sturridge had arranged to make a four at bridge after dinner. And after dinner John Pellington made as thorough a search of Sturridge’s bedroom as only he knew how, a search that yielded no result of any kind.

“Then if he’s got it, he’s got it on him,” he muttered in disappointed tones as he closed the door carefully behind him. “And that makes it easy.”

He did not report his non-success to his master. Time enough to do that when he was certain of failure, and John Pellington was far from being assured of that. He found Sir Richard dozing, but though he had entered the room without making a sound, his master woke up almost immediately.

“Hallo, Pellington, what’s the time?”

“Ten minutes to eleven, sir.”

“Miss Ableway—”

“Is coming on the eleven forty-five. I am meeting her, sir.”

“Then I shall keep awake until I hear your report and get those papers,” said his master decisively. “If by any chance I am asleep, Pellington, you’re to wake me up, and tell me what Miss Ableway says.”

It was eleven-thirty precisely when Pellington drove through the gates of Rowmands and swung out in the main road towards Beaconsfield station. As the car pulled up at the bottom of the slope leading to the entrance he chuckled softly to himself. Standing in the shadow by the booking-office was Inspector Lanner. Deliberately Pellington got down from the car, lighted a cigarette, and then strolled through the entrance. His respectful air of surprise would have deluded an even more acute observer than the police inspector.

“Come to fetch Miss Ableway, Pellington?” asked the inspector genially.

“Yes, sir,” replied Pellington.

“There’s a very good dentist in Beaconsfield— Stanton,” continued the inspector. “I wonder Miss Ableway didn’t have her tooth seen to there.”

“Yes, sir,” repeated Pellington, flicking the ash from his cigarette. He wondered what the inspector was driving at.

“Between you and me,” continued Lanner, and he gave a confidential wink, “I’m not at all sure Miss Ableway had toothache.”

“It’s not for me to say,” replied the other. “Miss Ableway, if I may say so, knows her own teeth best.”

“And her own business,” he added under his breath.

“She was allowed to see Sir Richard?”

“Yes, sir. But she didn’t stop long, as her tooth was hurting her so much,” said Pellington. “And Dr. Bessbury—”

“Did Sir Richard tell you anything about his adventure?” interrupted the inspector, as though the subject of Avril’s toothache no longer interested him.

He was asking questions rather at random, in the hope of picking up a stray hint. But to get a stray hint from Pellington was as likely as getting blood from a stone. Lulworth’s manservant was very guarded in all his replies.

“Only that he had seen a woman in the garden and had gone out to find out who she was, sir. I understand from him that you have found out her identity.”

“Between you and me, Pellington, I have; and I think we’re on the right track at last,” said Lanner. “I had her photograph published in the London papers and got a quick result. Somebody recognised her and passed the information on.”

He pulled a paper out of his pocket and opened it and pointed to a paragraph at the top of a column. It was headed “Do You Know This Woman?”

“The police are anxious to get in touch with the woman whose photograph appears below,” read Pellington. “Her initials are believed to be M. H., and the photograph may be two or three years old. Information should be given at once to the nearest police station, to New Scotland Yard, or to Inspector Lanner, at Beaconsfield Police Station, Bucks.”

“Rather a pretty woman, sir,” said Pellington, as his monocle fell from his eye. He made a grab for it and saved it from breaking on the floor of the booking-office. “Do you think she murdered Mr. Bilsiter, sir?”

“That remains to be seen,” replied the inspector cautiously. “Stabbing’s more like a woman than a man, eh?”

“If you say so, I suppose it is, Mr. Lanner,” replied the other slowly.

Pellington was thinking, thinking hard, racking his memory. He felt sure that he had seen the face of the unknown woman before; but where? The face looking out from the page of the newspaper had, indeed, given him a momentary shock, for he had instantly recognised it as being that of someone he had seen in real life.

“You’ve not seen her about the grounds, I suppose, or in Beaconsfield, by any chance?” asked the inspector. His eyes had never left his companion’s face, and he had not failed to notice Pellington’s puzzled frown.

“I don’t think so,” replied the latter carefully, “though I have a fancy I’ve seen her—somewhere. But I’m jiggered if I can say where for the moment.”

There came the distant rumbling of the approaching train from London, and Pellington, with a sudden air of surprise, threw away the stub of his cigarette. The sound of the train had jogged his memory in an unexpected way.

“Why, yes, sir,” he cried. “I remember. She was sitting in the corner of the carriage Miss Ableway was in.”

Inspector Lanner’s eyes lighted up instantly.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?” he asked sharply. “This afternoon?”

“Because you didn’t ask me, for one thing,” replied Pellington, in resentful tones. “And for another, I hadn’t seen her photograph; and for a third—”

“Oh, stop it, man,” interrupted Lanner irritably. “I know that. I forgot for a moment you didn’t know. Here’s the train. I’ll ask Miss Ableway if by any chance they spoke to one another.”

But though Inspector Lanner and John Pellington waited till the train drew out again on its journey to High Wycombe, waited till all the passengers had passed through the barrier, there was no sign of Avril Ableway.

CHAPTER XVI

AVRIL MEETS THE STRANGE WOMAN

WITH a sigh of relief Avril sank back in the cushions of the first-class railway carriage as the train drew out of Beaconsfield. She wondered idly how she would pass the time in London till she was due to return. For appearance's sake she determined, in any case, to visit her dentist. Inspector Lanner was quite clever enough to find out who her dentist was and make sure she had visited him. She determined to make that her first call.

"Luckily, one of my back teeth is beginning to go," she reflected to herself. "I'll have it stopped. If I don't go Lanner will begin to think all sorts of things. I am glad he wasn't at Rowmands when I left, or he'd have had me shadowed. In any case, he might find out before I get to London and telephone someone to pick me up at Marylebone. No, my dear inspector, I'm taking no chances."

It was much too dangerous, she decided, to go to the newsagent's shop in the Clerkenwell Road and collect the packet of papers, unless she was absolutely sure that she was not being followed. Even if she were sure, she had no present intention of bringing them back to Rowmands. Now both her father and the inspector suspected her lover of being Charity Sheen, she knew she must step warily, very warily. She knew enough of her father to realise that just because she was engaged to Lulworth, Sir John Ableway would not hesitate to act if he decided he had sufficient evidence to convict. He had given her a plain enough warning that she had done a thing she might very much regret by becoming engaged to the man under suspicion. She would have to use all her wits to win through.

Avril did not make the mistake of underestimating the forces arrayed against her lover. She had a strong suspicion that Scotland Yard knew very much more about Charity Sheen than it had allowed the world to think, and was only waiting the opportunity to strike.

"At any rate they haven't got all they want," she murmured to herself, as she looked out of the window. "If they had they would have arrested him. Daddy's much too cautious to risk anything. Oh, Richard, my dear, there *must* be a way out, and I'll find it."

Tears came involuntarily to her eyes, and she pulled herself together.

"I mustn't brood, or I'll go mad."

She drew out her cigarette case, and as she smoked she eyed her sole travelling companion, a woman. She noted that the other was dressed in black, relieved only by a chain of pearls round her throat. She was decidedly well-dressed, reflected Avril, and wise enough to know that black suited the rather warm creaminess of her complexion. Her hands were shapely and well manicured, and her fingers bore only one ring, a wedding ring. She was reading a magazine, apparently utterly oblivious of Avril's scrutiny.

“Now why didn’t I bring something to read?” demanded Avril of herself. “If I had I could keep my mind off things. Worrying about them won’t do any good. I’ll get a paper at the next stop. I wish I could do something in town to help Richard.”

The next stop proved to be Ruislip and Avril bought a magazine and a newspaper.

“It will be interesting to see what the papers make of the Great Rowmands Mystery,” she whispered to herself with a laugh.

She opened the paper at the middle pages and with an effort she suppressed a gasp of surprise. The paper she had bought had splashed in black the request of the police in their search for the mysterious woman. In bold black letters she read the announcement: “Do you know this woman?”

Underneath appeared a photograph, the photograph of her travelling companion!

For a while Avril could hardly believe her eyes. Her heart seemed to be beating faster, thumping so loudly that she almost believed her companion would hear it. She held the paper up before her flushed face as she read the paragraph through half a dozen times before she felt she had sufficient control over herself to lower it and take fresh stock of the other.

There was no doubt about the identity of the woman in the corner with the photograph in the newspaper. There were the same dark bold eyes, the same oval face and rather sensuous, full lips, the same full-swelling throat. In the photograph, as far as it showed, she had been more flashily dressed than she was now, but that was the only real point of difference.

Avril went over her conversation again with her lover and Mrs. Musgrove, the housekeeper, before she had left Rowmands. From one she had learnt that a strange woman had been seen talking to Bilsiter on the night he was murdered, and from the other that he had seen a strange woman waiting in the shadow of the trees when he was struck on the head. And now the police, Inspector Lanner in particular, were asking for information about a strange woman, a woman whose initials they gave as M.H. With a shock Avril realised that Lanner’s investigations had already brought to light much more than she or anyone else in Rowmands, for that matter, suspected. How he had got so quickly on the track of the strange woman, even obtained her photograph, Avril did not know. But chance had thrown into her hands an opportunity she was determined not to miss. There, sitting within a few feet of her, was the woman whose face was blazoned in all the London newspapers, wanted by the police in connection with the murder at Rowmands.

“Well, she doesn’t know,” reflected Avril. “If she did she wouldn’t be sitting there quietly reading a magazine with no attempt at disguise. She evidently hasn’t seen a paper yet. When she does she’ll panic for a moment at any rate.”

For a moment the daring idea occurred to her to offer the other the paper she had bought, but only for a moment. Avril realised that if the unknown got any warning before she reached London she might decide to get out at one of the intermediate stations.

“That will make it more difficult to follow her,” she reflected. “If she doesn’t suspect she will act naturally, probably go home in the ordinary way, and then I shall

know where she lives. If she was the woman Richard saw, she will know who made him unconscious, she may know who killed Bilster, she may have killed him herself.”

The more she ruminated over the possibility of the situation in which she found herself, over the identity of the unknown woman and her connection with the murder at Rowmands, the more Avril became determined not to lose sight of her.

“She knew Mr. Bilster, knew him pretty well, since he met her in the grounds at night,” she reflected. “And she knows someone else in Rowmands. If she doesn’t actually know who is the murderer she may be able to tell something which will clear Richard.”

That was the key to the whole of Avril’s actions afterwards. Despite her apparent outward calm, despite, too, the control she kept over herself, she was thoroughly frightened about the future of the man she loved. She knew that once suspicion was directed towards Richard Lulworth, a hundred and one things, each negligible in themselves, would crop up to strengthen that suspicion in other persons’ minds. Her lover had been quite right when he said that the only possible solution to the difficulty was to find out who actually killed Bilster.

As the train neared Marylebone, Avril began to feel strangely elated. She was keyed up with the hope that she was to prove the instrument by which her lover would be cleared. Her faith in Richard Lulworth was supreme, unquestioning. She believed implicitly all he had told her, and nothing would shake her in that belief, not even all the evidence Scotland Yard, her father, or Inspector Lanner could produce. To beat the police on the post, to confound both her father and Lanner, *to save her lover*—the thought of these things made her eyes sparkle, brought back a glow to her cheeks, a happy look in her face which had been absent these past few days.

At Marylebone she walked boldly through the barrier a little in front of the woman in black, and turned and stood by the bookstall, watching her quarry. The latter almost touched her as she came up and bought a paper, and with it folded in her hand went down the steps of the Underground Station, in the company of a number of other passengers who had arrived by the same train.

“British Museum.”

Avril’s quick ears caught the two words given in a low, rather musical voice, and she, too, booked to the same station. In the carriage she carefully chose a seat on the same side as the woman in black, but several seats away. The reflection in the windows of the opposite side of the carriage enabled her to keep watch on the other without the slightest appearance of doing so.

“I wonder what she’ll do when she opens the paper?” she asked herself. “Get up and go out at the first station? Lose her head completely? Or just do what she intended to do from the first?”

Avril had not long to wait, for immediately the train began moving out of the station the woman in black unfolded the paper she was holding. It was some minutes before she turned to the page for which Avril was eagerly, almost breathlessly, waiting. Then she saw the other start suddenly, and hurriedly turn over the page. She looked

covertly round the carriage, and Avril lowered her eyes to the magazine she had had the foresight to keep open on her lap.

“Then she is the woman,” the latter said to herself. “She wouldn’t have done that if it had only been a casual likeness. She would have gone on reading all about the murder or some other news on the same page. She certainly would not stop reading altogether.”

She was glad she had not been mistaken when she had first decided that the woman in black was the same mysterious “M.H.” for whom the police were searching. When she slowly raised her eyes again she saw that the other had folded her newspaper up and was staring straight ahead of her with wide-open eyes and set lips.

“She’s frightened,” whispered Avril to herself. “And that means she may get out at the next station and take a taxi home to avoid being seen. That will make it more difficult.”

At the next station—Regent’s Park—however, the other merely changed her seat, to one of the cross seats, so that her face to some extent fell in shadow.

“She’s frightened, but she’s got plenty of nerve,” soliloquised Avril.

The next station was Oxford Circus, and there both changed to get on the Central London Railway for the British Museum Station. At that station Avril went quickly past the waiting lift and ran up the stairs, arriving breathlessly at the top before the lift had discharged its few passengers.

Without any hesitation Avril immediately crossed the road, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the woman in black turn up towards Holborn and then, as she followed on the other side of the road, turn down Southampton Row. Just past the corner where Southampton Row and Theobald’s Road met, stood a big, modern building let out in offices, and Avril saw her quarry disappear through the revolving doors.

For a moment Avril hesitated before she followed. The other woman had evidently come all the way from Beaconsfield to enter that building, and just as evidently to see someone in it, for it was certainly not a residential building at all. Wherever the woman in black lived she certainly did not live there. Should she wait until she came out and take up the trail once more, or should she enter the building in the hope of finding out who it was the other had come from Beaconsfield to see?

After only a moment’s thought Avril decided on the latter alternative. There was always the risk that the woman in black might come out unexpectedly and recognise her, but Avril came to the conclusion she must take that risk. She had now got a fixed idea in her mind that in that building she might obtain some if not all the information she sought.

As soon as she entered the building she realised that she had a hopeless task before her in finding out, without raising suspicion or causing gossip, where the other had gone. The building was a seven-story one, and on each side of the entrance, by the lift, a long string of names showed her at once that over a score of people used the building for business purposes.

Almost without thinking she allowed her eyes to wander down the list of names of the occupants, and when she reached the names on the fourth floor she stopped with a

little gasp of surprise. There she read in plain, white, bold capital letters, “Leonard Bilsiter, Financial Agent.”

There was no need to look any further. The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fit together. Somebody in that office was waiting to see the mysterious “M. H.,” as somebody in Rowmands had seen her at three o’clock the previous morning. And then like a flash Avril connected the two.

“This is where that telephone call came from,” she whispered excitedly to herself. “And she’s acting as a go-between. Somebody in Bilsiter’s office—somebody in Rowmands.”

She repeated the words to herself again and again, thinking over all the people she knew in Rowmands.

“Of course, of course. I *am* a fool not to have thought of that at once,” she cried suddenly. “Someone at Rowmands—Sturridge. Who else can it be?”

All she had got to go upon to bring her to that conclusion was the fact that Sturridge had been seen in her lover’s room on the night he was struck down—nothing more. For that he had a perfectly legitimate excuse, but it was not one that satisfied Avril. Sturridge was not the kind of man she liked, and she was quite ready to twist anything against him to bolster up the conclusion to which she had come. Whether she was right or wrong did not matter. For the moment she was convinced she was right, and only direct proof to the contrary would convince her that she had guessed wrongly. As she stood there, undecided what to do, she felt the eyes of the lift man upon her, and as her eyes met his, he asked, “Anybody in particular you want, miss?”

Avril looked carefully at him. He was quite a young, pleasant-looking fellow, and evidently susceptible to feminine charms. She had a sudden inspiration.

“It’s all right,” she said, with a dazzling smile. “Can I trust you?”

Few people could have said “No” to Avril Ableway when she smiled in just that way, when she spoke in that wheedling, half-confidential tone, and the lift man at Newbolt Mansions was certainly not one of them.

“Try me, miss,” he said complacently. “What’s your trouble?”

“I’m a reporter on the *Evening Monitor*,” began Avril promptly, coming a little closer. “I’ve come to make inquiries about this murder of Mr. Bilsiter.”

Her voice dropped to a confidential whisper.

“Lord love a duck, miss, but you ain’t the first that’s been here, by a long chalk,” replied the lift man. “Though you’re the first lady. It ain’t much of a woman’s job.”

“Well, I don’t have to see the dead body,” replied Avril. “My job”—she chose her words carefully for the benefit of the lift man—“my job is to keep an eye open for the feminine interest. Where there’s a murder there’s very often a woman in the case.”

“Now you’re talking, miss,” replied the other. “Mr. Bilsiter was a rare ’un for the ladies. One of his old flames has just gone up. I’d like to have a quid for every time I’ve seen them go out together. I’d be a bloated millionaire.”

“But surely nobody’s allowed in his office, now?” asked Avril naively. “Aren’t the police in charge?”

“They wasn’t in charge ten minutes ago, miss, unless they sneaked up the stairs. They’ve been nosing about all day, and there’s a couple of them outside in the street in plain clothes keeping an eye on everybody who enters the building.”

“Who is in charge then?”

“Some Yid,” replied the lift man. “Don’t know his name, but he’s as nippy as they make ’em, and they make ’em pretty nippy, I give you my word. The coppers won’t get no change out of him in a hurry.”

“Well, it’s the feminine side I’ve got to write up,” returned Avril. “I should be ever so grateful if you can help me. It’s easy for those who’ve only got to write about the murder. Do you know the name of the—er lady who has just gone up? What’s she like?”

“Oh, I can tell you all about her, miss,” said the other. “Joe’s a friend of mine.”

“And who’s Joe?”

“I was forgetting Joe Tamson. He’s their office boy. Now he ought to’ve been in your line. Nose like a bloomin’ ferrit’s. Nothin’ you can ’ide from Joe Tamson.”

“ ‘Who’s ’is lordship’s latest fancy?’ I says to him one day. ‘The one with the goo-goo eyes?’

“ ‘ ‘Er?’ says Joe. ‘That’s Mrs. Hollister, Mrs. Madge Hollister, Madge darlin’. Why you ain’t ’alf behind the times, Jim, if you don’t know ’er. There weren’t ’alf a row about ’er.’ ”

Little by little, at great length and with many queer phrases and analogies which made Avril smile, she learnt what Inspector Lanner had found out that morning, that Mrs. Hollister was the wife of a man who had been sentenced three years ago for threatening to murder Leonard Bilsiter.

“An’ if you ask me, miss,” he added, “I shouldn’t be surprised if her husband knows more about the murder than most people. Joe, ’e tells me that the husband was let out last Wednesday. I wouldn’t be in his shoes, not for all the gold mines in the world.”

“Had Mr. Bilsiter got any other—er—ladies?” asked Avril.

“Dozens, miss, saving your presence,” replied the lift man. “Though Joe says that Mrs. Hollister was the queen of the harem. He weren’t a man you’d have liked to know, miss. But she’s the pick of the bunch. She’s a real lady, she is. Like you, miss, none of your high and mighty airs.”

Avril mentally shuddered at the comparison. The lift man’s words had been a revelation to her, and she felt thankful that Fate had intervened to prevent her from marrying Leonard Bilsiter. The little she had learnt from the man in uniform had shed a lurid light on the type of man he was, had made her realise how easy it was for a perfect brute to cover himself with the veneer of a gentleman.

“Well, there’s the bell, miss,” said the lift man. “Fourth floor. Shouldn’t be surprised if it’s her ladyship coming down again.”

“Not a word if it is,” said Avril. “You’ve been a wonderful help to me.”

“You’re welcome, miss,” called out the other as the gates clanged to. “Smith’s my name—Jim Smith. Wednesday’s my day off.”

Avril, with a nod and a smile, turned and promptly went out through the main doors.

From the other side of the street she saw that the lift man’s prophecy had proved correct.

Without glancing round, Mrs. Hollister, now no longer a mysterious woman in black, but a very definite person, walked rapidly up Southampton Row and at the top engaged a taxicab from the rank. Avril saw her lean out and speak to the man who closed the door for her, and the latter in turn gave some address to the driver. She rushed up breathlessly as the taxi turned away.

“I’ve just seen a friend of mine enter that taxi,” she cried, pointing to the disappearing vehicle.

She opened the door of the next taxi and slipped a coin in the waiting hand of the tout.

“Tell the driver the same address,” she said calmly. With a sigh of relief she heard the other speak to the driver. For one desperate moment she thought all had been lost, but now, as the taxi pulled slowly into the stream of traffic, she knew that the time was not far distant when she and the woman in black would be face to face.

CHAPTER XVII

IN MRS. HOLLISTER'S FLAT

AS the taxi turned down New Oxford Street Avril quickly recovered her spirits.

"After all," she said to herself, "I have won the first round, thanks largely to Jim Smith and Joe Tamson."

She laughed at the recollection of the quaint way the lift man had spoken, and his last words that "Wednesday is my day off." He and Tamson must be an amusing pair when they got together and discussed other people's affairs. And, she reflected, they were the type which did not miss much.

"If I have won the first round, why not the second?" she asked herself hopefully. "I wonder what Mrs. Hollister will do?"

There was a certain element of risk in following the woman in black to her flat, she admitted to herself. Mrs. Hollister would be a woman at bay, and therefore dangerous. Avril was at a disadvantage, too in that she did not know how much the other knew of the murder at Rowmands, did not know who the man was she had met at three o'clock in the morning.

"It's no use planning out what I am going to say to her, how I am going to act," she decided. "I must be guided by what happens at her flat."

"I suppose she does live in a flat," she continued a moment later. "Curious I should assume that."

The taxi turned at Marble Arch across Hyde Park, and down the Buckingham Palace Road, and finally began to slow up outside a large block of flats overlooking Victoria Station. Looking eagerly through the window, past the driver, Avril saw that the taxi she had been following was just turning away. Mrs. Hollister had already entered the building, and for that Avril felt thankful, for the one thing she had dreaded was arriving in time for her quarry to see her. She wanted to spring as big a surprise on her as possible.

With fast-beating heart, her nerves keyed up to the highest pitch, she entered the lift and said calmly: "Mrs. Hollister, please."

The lift shot up to the fifth floor.

"No. 29, miss," said the lift attendant.

Once she had made up her mind, Avril was not going to be deterred by any feeling of fear, though now the crisis had come she admitted to herself that she *was* feeling afraid. Without any hesitation she pressed the electric bell and heard it whirr from somewhere inside the flat. She had not long to wait. The door opened and a prim-looking maid stood there inquiringly.

"Is Mrs. Hollister in?" asked Avril.

"Yes, madam. What name, please?"

“Mrs. Hollister won’t know my name,” replied Avril. “Please tell her I have some important news for her from—from Mr. Bilsiter’s office,” she added on the spur of the moment.

“If you will come this way, madam, Mrs. Hollister will see you in a moment,” said the maidservant on her return.

She led the way into a comfortably—almost luxuriously—furnished sitting-room, and as the door closed behind her Avril looked quickly round to try to obtain some impression of the other’s personality before she entered the room. The dominating effect undoubtedly was comfort. Mrs. Hollister was evidently a woman who liked the flesh pots of Egypt. The chair into which Avril sank seemed almost to envelop her and gave her at once a feeling of calm and rest. The pictures on the walls were, however, out of keeping with the room, garish, gold-framed popular prints which are sold by the hundred thousand.

“A woman who likes comfort, but whose taste is not up to the standard of comfort she demands,” reflected Avril, as her eyes wandered round the room. Then, suddenly, her body stiffened as her eyes rested on a framed portrait on the mantelpiece.

“Sturridge!” she cried. “Then we are right! Oh, if——”

Her thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the door and she stood up and faced the woman in black, who looked at her curiously.

“I understand you have come from Mr. Bilsiter’s office,” began the other—and then stopped suddenly. A look of recognition came into her eyes.

“Why, you are the lady who was in the railway carriage, who got in at Beaconsfield,” she cried.

There was a note of fear in her voice and her eyes narrowed.

“Who are you?” she demanded, and there was a change in her tones. “What do you mean by spying upon me?”

“I have come from Beaconsfield to ask you some questions, Mrs. Hollister,” replied Avril coolly. “My name is Tamson. I am a reporter on the *Evening Monitor*.”

She had no intention of giving away her real name—yet. It might be useful later to spring that as a surprise on the other, to frighten her with the sudden knowledge that she had been talking to the daughter of a Commissioner of Police.

The look of fear died out of Mrs. Hollister’s face, and she smiled ingratiatingly.

“So it was just a trick to say you had come from Mr. Bilsiter’s office,” she said sweetly. “I suppose they gave you my address there?”

“No,” replied Avril truthfully. She thought it better to stick to the truth where possible. “I happened to be making some inquiries there on behalf of my paper, and I saw you come out and followed you. It was easy to find out your name before I rang.”

“There’s not much use in trying to hide anything from the newspapers, is there?” asked the other, with a forced laugh. “Perhaps you will have a cup of tea with me and we can talk better.”

Without waiting for an answer she rang the bell.

“Serve tea for two, Jeannette,” she said.

“It must be very exciting to be on a newspaper, Miss Tamson,” she continued. “Getting to know all sorts of secrets. I suppose you have come about the murder of my friend Mr. Bilsiter?”

Avril nodded. She was surprised at the amazing control the other had over herself, and she felt that this spelt danger for her, though she could not see exactly how. “How did you know I was a friend of Mr. Bilsiter’s?” continued the woman in black.

“I am afraid I cannot tell you that,” replied Avril. “The information was given me and that is all I can tell. I think we are the only newspaper to know at the moment, and that was why I was sent along to try to trace you and get your story.”

“But I have nothing to tell,” replied the other quickly. “Mr. Bilsiter was a very close friend of mine, that is all. His death has been a great shock to me. I don’t want to be in the limelight.”

“Yet you will have to tell all you know,” pointed out Avril. “The police have had your photograph published in all the papers and others are bound to recognise you, as I did.”

“I tell you I have nothing to say,” retorted Mrs. Hollister. There was a note of anger in her tones. “It is disgraceful that the police should have done that. People will begin to think I had something to do with the murder.”

“Inspector Lanner, of Beaconsfield, who has charge of the case, might be thinking that now,” said Avril. “Frankly, Mrs. Hollister, you are in grave danger unless you tell the whole truth. You were in Beaconsfield on the night Mr. Bilsiter was murdered, you were seen in the grounds that night talking to Mr. Bilsiter, you were overheard quarrelling.”

She was determined to frighten the other, if she could, in the hope that, by doing so, she would force the truth from her. Avril had no intention of being lenient. The only way to clear her lover was to find out the truth, and if it were necessary to make the woman standing there suffer to obtain the truth, Avril would not hesitate. Nothing mattered to her now compared with the safety of the man she loved, the man who was at that moment lying in bed, struck down by someone this woman knew.

There was no doubt that her words had frightened Mrs. Hollister. She sat down and looked at Avril with wide-open eyes.

“I—I must have time to think,” she said slowly. “What you say has come as a shock to me. I——”

“You don’t want any time to think to tell the truth,” interrupted Avril. “If you don’t like to tell me the truth, then I shall go straight to the police and they will force you to tell it.”

The other wrung her hands despairingly.

“Why, why should I be made to suffer?” she cried. “You are a woman, Miss Tamson. You will understand, where a man wouldn’t. I—I will tell you the truth, if you will not publish my name, nor tell everybody where I am living. I couldn’t bear that,

everybody coming round here, prying into all my secrets and publishing them broadcast for all the world to jeer at.”

There were tears in her eyes. With an effort, Avril refrained from uttering any words of sympathy. She would do that quickly enough if she were convinced there was any valid reason why she should sympathise with the other.

“We shouldn’t publish your address, Mrs. Hollister,” she pointed out, “if you tell me the truth and help bring the murderer of Mr. Bilsiter to justice. Of course, the police will have to know, and I think your best plan would be to go direct to them.”

“Oh, no, no, no, not yet,” cried the other. “I must get over the shock of it all first. I can tell you, Miss Tamson. Let it be a secret between ourselves for a little while. Yes, I was in Beaconsfield that dreadful night, and I stayed there till to-day. But I swear before God I know nothing about the murder. Oh, don’t you understand? Mr. Bilsiter was my lover.”

She stopped and buried her face in her hands.

“I went down to Beaconsfield to warn Mr. Bilsiter,” she continued tearfully. “I had just heard that my—my husband was released from prison. He—he had threatened to kill Mr. Bilsiter when he came out, and I was frightened. It is not true we were quarrelling. I was excited, worried, and Mr. Bilsiter wouldn’t believe there was any danger. He made me angry by pooh-poohing all my fears. And now he is gone.”

“Do you think, then, that your husband killed Mr. Bilsiter?” asked Avril.

The story the other was telling was consistent, as far as it went, with the knowledge Avril had got.

“What else can I think?” replied the woman in black. “I know my husband. He was a man who had no control over himself, a man with an overbearing temper. It was because he threatened Mr. Bilsiter that he was sent to prison. I always dreaded the time when he would be released.”

The door opened and the maidservant entered and brought in the tea tray.

“Don’t forget my digestive tablets, Jeannette,” said her mistress. “That’s another of my troubles, Miss Tamson,” she added with a smile, as the maid returned with the bottle of tablets. “Do you like sugar in your tea?”

“Two lumps, please,” replied Avril.

“Do you mind bringing up that little table?” asked the other, as she poured out the tea. “We can put our plates and cups on it. It will be more convenient.”

“What else have you found out?” she continued with a smile as Avril placed the table in position. “I am beginning to believe you know all about me, and are only just verifying it. I wonder the newspapers ever take the trouble to ask the police anything.”

“Sometimes the police are first and sometimes the newspapers,” replied Avril. “In this case the newspapers are first. But we don’t know everything or I shouldn’t be here.”

“What don’t you know?” asked Mrs. Hollister, sipping her tea slowly.

“We don’t know,” replied Avril—and as she spoke she fixed her eyes on the other’s face—“we don’t know who the man was whom you met in the grounds of Rowmands

at three o'clock yesterday morning, the man who tried to murder one of the guests."

The hand holding the cup of tea shook. The lips of the woman in black tightened. As Avril drank her tea, while she waited for Mrs. Hollister to speak, she realised with an inward thrill that her last words had moved the other as nothing she had previously said had done. But as she put down her empty cup she was surprised to see the expression on her companion's face change swiftly. She was smiling, and there was a look of triumph in her face.

"So you don't know that, Miss Interfering Tamson?" she cried. "And now you never will know. What do you want to interfere with other people's affairs for, you paid spy? You thought yourself very clever, I don't doubt, finding out where I lived, but you're not half so clever as you think. You thought I was frightened, eh? You thought I was crying, eh? You, with your innocent little baby face, thinking you would worm everything out of me."

Avril looked at the other in astonishment. Her whole manner had changed, the whole tones of her voice. She was speaking as though she held the whip hand, contemptuously, as though she did not care what Avril said or did.

And then, quite suddenly, fear came to Avril, for she realised why the attitude of the other had changed, why she was no longer afraid. She tried to get up, but her limbs felt heavy. Her eyes involuntarily seemed drawn to the bottle of digestive tablets. She felt as though she were choking. The dark eyes of the woman opposite seemed to grow bigger and bigger and more menacing, until everything became black as Avril fell listlessly forward across the arm of her chair.

CHAPTER XVIII

LANNER GETS A SURPRISE

INSPECTOR LANNER looked thoughtfully at John Pellington when at last the pair had made certain that Avril had not arrived by the last train from London.

“Now, what do you make of that, Pellington?” he asked.

Pellington made no reply. He was worried—very worried—but he had no intention of letting the inspector see it. Inspector Lanner was the last person he wanted to know that. If the inspector once suspected that the manservant was anxious over the non-return of Avril Ableway, he would go much farther and suspect there was a very strong reason for that anxiety, the reason that Pellington knew more than—as a servant—he would be expected to know.

“Was Miss Ableway certain she was coming back by the last train?” continued the inspector.

“That I cannot say, sir,” replied the other. “I can only tell you that she asked me to meet this train, and I believe told Sir John that she would be coming back by it. Beyond that I know nothing, Mr. Lanner.”

“Well, I think I’ll come back with you,” said the inspector. “It’s just on twelve o’clock. She may have telephoned to say she missed the train.”

But there was no message of any kind from Avril.

“Frankly, I feel worried, sir,” said the inspector to Sir John Ableway. “And, with all due respect, I don’t believe she went up to see her dentist. It is significant, as far as I can gather, that Miss Ableway did not complain of toothache until after she had seen Sir Richard. And then she went up to town almost immediately, without giving the pain any chance to die away.”

There was a new note in his voice which the Commissioner did not fail to detect. At first Inspector Lanner had been very diffident about suggesting to the head of New Scotland Yard that the latter’s own son and daughter might know more about the murder of Bilsiter than they had chosen to tell. But events had become too strong for him to keep up that attitude for long. He was convinced that Avril had gone up to town with some definite object, some definite mission on behalf of Sir Richard Lulworth, just as he was convinced that she had lied to him over her conversation with Leonard Bilsiter, and about the discovery of the Egyptian scarab which belonged to her, and had been found in the murdered man’s bedroom. The inspector had drawn the wrong conclusion from that latter clue, for he naturally thought that it had been dropped there by Avril herself. He had not yet ascertained that she had given it beforehand to Lulworth. If he had known that fact it would have altered his viewpoint considerably, and it is more than likely he would have pressed to be allowed to take positive action against the baronet. But of definite facts, definite proof, against Sir Richard Lulworth, he had to confess gloomily to himself, there were none, at least none which would stand the searching criticism of a trial.

“I am not going to defend my daughter,” said the Commissioner. “At least, Lanner, I am not going to make use of my official position to hamper any inquiries you may choose to make. But I do not think, for one moment, she knows any more about the murder of Bilsiter than you and I do. My daughter would not defend murder in any circumstances.”

“Love——” began the inspector, when the other swiftly interrupted him.

“No, not even for that,” he said. “After all, Lanner, don’t forget she *is* my daughter, and I can, I think, speak with a certain amount of knowledge of her character. Avril has an ingrained horror of crime. This is what makes me hesitate when I think about Lulworth. I cannot believe that she even suspects he might be Charity Sheen, let alone knows. She has said to me quite frankly that if he were the worst criminal in the world she would still be faithful to him, but that, I think, is mere bravado. It is because he has told her some specious tale—probably he has posed as an unjustly suspected man, and nothing gets a woman’s sympathy quicker than that—that she so firmly believes in him and is feeling that we are in the wrong.”

Inspector Lanner made no comment. It was only natural, he reflected, that a father should defend his daughter, but he had seen too many instances of women clinging to criminals, even murderers, and defending them to the last, to be convinced by the arguments the Commissioner had brought forward. He determined to try a new tack.

“What do you make of this attack on him, sir?” he asked. “I showed him the photograph of Mrs. Hollister, and he recognised it at once as being that of the woman he had seen waiting under the trees. I had a chat with Doctor Bessbury. There is no doubt he wouldn’t have knocked himself unconscious. He was struck down. Why?”

“That’s rather in favour of Lulworth,” parried the Commissioner. “What steps are you taking in her direction?”

“Well, of course I have warned all stations, as well as the newspapers,” returned the inspector. “This evening I had a message from the Yard reporting that they had been able to obtain no satisfaction at Bilsiter’s office. I have asked them to apply for a search warrant and I shall go up to London to-morrow to see it executed.”

“Yes. You will have plenty of time, as the inquest is only formal,” agreed Sir John. “Are you having the office watched?”

“I believe, in a general way, an eye is being kept on it and a note being made of everyone who enters the building,” replied the inspector. “The police can’t do more than that at the moment, until the warrant is out.”

“Who is in charge of Bilsiter’s office?”

“A man named Brand. I strongly suspect, from what I have heard, that it should be Brandt—but he has dropped the ‘t.’ He’s evidently up to all the tricks and dodges of his late master. By the way, sir,” he added quickly, “do you know the address of your daughter’s dentist?”

Sir John Ableway winced at the other’s question, with its implication that Lanner did not feel convinced by Avril’s story and intended to verify it as far as possible.

“Yes,” he answered slowly. “It’s Stanton—Philip Stanton, of Portman Square. I think, though—to ease our minds, I’ll get through to my house. I suppose there are

arrangements to use the telephone all night?"

"Oh, yes," said the inspector.

"My daughter may have missed the last train, or not have felt well enough to travel," continued the Commissioner hopefully. "And in that case she would naturally have gone home. She would have had plenty of time to get there by now, even if she had gone for the last train and missed it. There's a telephone in my manservant's room, so that, if I am away, I can communicate with him or he can take any messages intended for me at any time."

"And I dare lay my next year's income to a brass farthing," murmured the inspector, as Sir John left the room, "that he'll learn his daughter hasn't been near the house all day. I know that type of woman. When they go over the top they go over whole-heartedly, and she'll stick to Lulworth even if he has already confessed to being Charity Sheen, the murderer of Bilsiter and half a dozen other things. If she had toothache this afternoon, then I had earache, that's all I can say. I'll bet when I ring up Stanton he'll tell me he's not seen Miss Ableway for weeks."

Sir John Ableway's face, on his return, immediately confirmed the reflections of the inspector. The Commissioner was very plainly worried.

"Miss Ableway may have gone to stay with a friend or a relation," said the inspector soothingly.

"It's unlike her," replied Sir John. "In fact the whole of her conduct the last twenty-four hours is unlike her, since she has become engaged."

"People who are newly engaged are apt to be strange in their conduct," commented the inspector dryly. "But I think, sir, if anything serious had happened you would have had a telephone message by now. It's too soon to worry. Time enough in the morning."

"How are you going back to Beaconsfield?"

"Walking," replied the inspector laconically.

"You'd better take my car," began Sir John.

"I think I'll walk all the same, thank you, sir. The fact is the walk will do me good for one thing, and I want to review the whole position for another. Lulworth is not the only one implicated in this affair. There's some other man in Rowmands, and I haven't the slightest inkling who, at present. Perhaps I shall, though, after we've executed that warrant at Bilsiter's office."

"What about his private address, by the way, Lanner?"

"He hasn't got one. I've already ascertained that. For the last eight years, at any rate, he has had a private suite at the Royal Hotel, off Holborn. He never did any of his work there, though he entertained fairly freely, I gather, women of sorts chiefly. But the servants were well tipped to hold their tongues."

As the inspector went through the hall on his way out he passed a group of guests saying their good nights.

"Any news, inspector?" asked Sturridge.

"Nothing new, sir," replied the inspector.

“You have reached an impasse?” said Jesson, the art expert.

“Not exactly,” returned Lanner. “We are following up one or two clues which may bring about unexpected developments.”

“The police always hint at unexpected developments, don’t they?” continued Jesson. “Confess, now, except for Charity Sheen, you have nothing whatever to go upon.”

“If I confessed that, sir,” said the inspector, “I should be misleading you gentlemen. I shouldn’t be surprised if Charity Sheen had nothing whatever to do with the affair—if the message left behind in his name was only a blind.”

“Someone suggested Charity Sheen was one of us,” said Jesson, who seemed inclined to pursue the conversation.

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” agreed Lanner. “I’ve known more unlikely things to happen. Good night, gentlemen. I’ve got to get some beauty sleep in before the inquest.”

With a genial smile and a nod he had gone.

He walked sharply to the main gateway, his feet crunching loudly on the gravel, and turned up the road along which he walked for a couple of hundred yards until a bend put him out of sight of Rowmands. Then he turned swiftly and climbed through a gap in the hedge, back again into the grounds.

Lanner was getting more and more puzzled over the murder of Leonard Bilsiter. The attack on Sir Richard Lulworth had proved almost a knock-out blow to his theories. There was no reason for it, as far as he could see, unless his unknown assailant was afraid of what he might say to Mrs. Hollister. There were too many suspects in this case, he reflected. Lulworth, John Hollister, Mrs. Hollister, Avril Ableway and her brother.

Soon he was nearing the house, and he proceeded with great caution as he worked his way round in the shadow of the trees. He did not come to a halt until he had taken up a position from which he could see Sir Richard Lulworth’s bedroom window.

With one exception all the bedroom windows along the same corridor on that side of the house were lighted up. The exception was the window of the room which had been occupied by the murdered man.

“Let me see,” said the inspector to himself, ticking off his statements on his fingers. “Bilsiter’s room, then Jesson’s then Lulworth’s, and finally Sturridge’s. On the opposite side, young Ableway, young Rowmands, the Penricardes and an empty room.”

The first light to go out was Lulworth’s, almost immediately followed by that in Sturridge’s room. Ten minutes later the light of the art expert followed and the whole of that side of the house was in darkness. The rising moon was on the other side of the house, but in its diffused light the waiting inspector could dimly see the windows. All of them opened out on a narrow balcony, and he had already considered this as a possible means by which the murderer had entered Bilsiter’s room, though its height above the ground and its narrowness must, in that case, have made the journey a rather perilous one.

“I am probably wasting my time,” commented the inspector. “But somehow——”

He shrugged his shoulders. He could give no reason to himself why he should be watching the house, save that he felt in his bones one of the occupants of that corridor held the solution to the mystery—and that one Sir Richard Lulworth. It was with a sigh of satisfaction that, nearly an hour later, he saw the window of the latter’s room open cautiously and a man climb out on the balcony.

“Pretty good for an invalid,” commented the inspector. “I don’t think I should like to risk it. A man with a nerve like that is not going to be convicted in a hurry. Hallo—what’s he doing?”

He could dimly make out the form of the man he was watching moving along in the direction of Sturridge’s window.

The window of Sturridge’s room was partly open, and the watching inspector saw the form step off the balcony and disappear in the room of the Under-Secretary. He had an uneasy feeling that he ought to raise the alarm, that now was the time to strike, to catch Lulworth redhanded, when to his astonishment the light in the baronet’s room was suddenly switched on and the detective saw Lulworth himself come to the open window and peer out into the darkness. For ten minutes the baronet stood there, almost motionless, and then the unknown figure reappeared again through Sturridge’s window. He seemed, to the inspector, to hesitate for a moment as he saw the light streaming through Lulworth’s window, and then he came along the balcony. As he stepped into the light the inspector whistled softly to himself. For a moment the light had shone on his face, and it was the face of John Pellington.

“That puts the tin hat on it,” said Lanner. “What the devil have they got to do with Sturridge? What are they looking for in his room, I wonder? I think, Pellington, you’ll have a little trouble to explain this night’s work.”

But the night had not finished its surprises for the detective. In a few minutes Lulworth’s light had once more been switched off, and ten minutes later the inspector was preparing to move away, when his strained eyes fancied he detected a movement of another window. So slowly was it being opened that it was not until he saw a face peering through it, saw the form of a man leaning out and looking in the direction of Sir Richard Lulworth’s room, that he realised it had been fully opened.

“Now what the devil does Jesson want?” he asked himself. “Are all the household watching one another or what? Or is this their method of visiting one another, now they have all taken to locking their doors since Bilsiter was murdered?”

Nor was his mystification made any the less as he watched Jesson go through precisely the same performance that Pellington had done, with the exception that the room he had entered was that of Sir Richard Lulworth instead of Sturridge.

“Sturridge was probably asleep when Pellington entered his room,” muttered the detective. “But I don’t think Lulworth can have been. It was only ten minutes after switching off his light before Jesson called on him. Therefore there’s something up between them, though why the devil he didn’t take the easier and safer way by the door I can’t make out.”

The inspector was quite correct in part of his surmise. Sturridge was certainly asleep when Pellington entered his room and thoroughly searched the clothing the Under-Secretary had been wearing in a vain attempt to find the letter which his master had lost, the letter which, in Lanner's hands, would prove fatal. It was the slight sound of his manservant opening his window which had first disturbed Lulworth out of an uneasy sleep, and he had quickly jumped to the correct conclusion as to the movements of Pellington. It had been with a certain grim satisfaction that he had waited by the window for his man's return.

"You are asking for trouble, Pellington," he said sharply, as the latter stepped into the room once again. "Supposing Mr. Sturridge had woke up?"

"He'd have gone to sleep again, sir," replied Pellington. "I am sorry to say, sir, the letter is not in his room."

"I didn't expect it would be," replied his master. "Sturridge is much too clever to carry it about or hide it in his room—if he has got it. Now you go along to bed before you rouse up half the house."

And when, ten minutes later, Jesson had entered through the partly opened window, Lulworth, with grim amusement, had watched him through half-closed eyes as the art expert went through his pockets and read superficially every document they contained by the light of an electric torch before he replaced them. Once the light had flashed for an instant on Lulworth's face, but his eyes had closed instantly.

"First Sturridge, now Jesson," he said as the latter stepped once more out on the ledge. "I hadn't thought of Jesson. I wonder what he was looking for?"

He was still wondering when he fell asleep. And the art expert, too, was occupying quite a large share of Inspector Lanner's thoughts when, an hour later, he too drifted into slumber.

CHAPTER XIX

LANNER GOES TO LONDON

INSPECTOR LANNER ran down the slope to Beaconsfield Station as he saw the smoke of the London train appear round the curve. He had cut it fine, but the formal opening of the inquest on Leonard Bilsiter, and its adjournment, had taken a little longer than he had expected. One or two jurors, disappointed at being robbed of a first-class sensation, had pressed him with questions, and had, with evident reluctance, fallen in with his suggestion that the interests of justice would be best served by not answering those questions at that hearing. Most of the guests at Rowmands had returned to town by car immediately they had heard the inquest was adjourned. One or two were staying on till after lunch, and when the inspector arrived on the platform as the train drew up, he could see only one man from the great Beaconsfield house—Fraser Jesson.

The art expert turned round just as he was entering a carriage, and, catching sight of the detective, beckoned to him.

“Going up to London, inspector?” he asked. “Come along in my carriage, unless you wish to be alone.”

“Two’s company,” replied the inspector cheerfully. “Though I expect we shan’t be alone all the way.”

“The train’s half empty,” said the other. “I wonder they run a train at all at this hour. Most people are having their lunch at a quarter to one, or at least getting ready for it. Had yours, by the way?”

“No; I shall get a nibble in town,” replied the inspector. “We are due in just after half-past. This is a quick train.”

“Perhaps you will join me then,” said Jesson. “You didn’t let much out at the inquest.”

Lanner made a monosyllabic reply as he slowly filled his pipe and lighted it.

“So he wants to pump me,” he thought. “And I want to pump him; so we start level.”

Since the remarkable events of the previous night, the detective had made one or two cautious inquiries about the art expert. Lord Rowmands had told him that he had known Fraser Jesson for some years, and if he had a fault it was taciturnity. It struck the inspector as significant, therefore, that Jesson was not only willing to talk but eager to do so.

“These silent men, when they begin talking, generally manage to give themselves away,” he reflected. “The trouble is they speak so little that they don’t know how to use words to hide their thoughts. It’s a funny thing, but I shouldn’t have given him a second thought, at least not for some time, if it hadn’t been for last night.”

“I’ve given quite a lot of my time thinking about the death of Bilsiter,” continued Jesson. “I’m a detective in a way, you know,” he added with a laugh. “I have spent most of my life watching the tricks of other people to deceive in art, and I can tell you

there are some pretty clever people in the world. If they only turned their talents towards honest work they'd make more money than they do by deceit, and run less risk, of course."

"That's where the criminal falls down every time," said Lanner. "Every criminal thinks he is so clever that he has arranged things in such a way that he can't be detected. That's where he always falls down in the long run. Even if he is successful at first he becomes conceited, overreaches himself, and makes that little slip for which we have been waiting. Once we are on the right track it is extraordinary how pieces of the puzzle begin to dovetail into one another to make a complete picture."

"I can quite understand that in the case of a criminal who is always carrying out the same form of crime—a burglar or swindler, for example," said the art expert.

"But in the case of a single crime the solution of the problem becomes more difficult. I don't suppose the person who murdered Bilsiter, for instance, is looking round to murder somebody else."

"Well, of course, we have certain clues already," pointed out Lanner, watching the other carefully as he spoke. "And we are very hopeful that they will lead to the right man—or woman."

"You think it might be a woman?" asked Jesson quickly. "That's a new point of view to me. I heard about the strange woman who had been seen talking to Bilsiter, but I thought that was one of his many little conquests. To tell you the truth, Inspector, I have got rather obsessed with the idea that the murderer is this so-called Charity Sheen."

"If you could tell me who Charity Sheen is," answered the inspector, "it would help more than any other information."

Jesson shook his bullet-shaped head and laughed.

"You can't expect me to succeed where the police have failed for two years, Lanner. But I shouldn't be at all surprised if the suggestion made at the dinner table the other night wasn't true."

"What suggestion?" asked the other.

"That Charity Sheen was one of the guests at Rowmands."

"Do you know who made the suggestion?"

"It was either Sturridge or Lulworth," answered Jesson. "Let me think a moment. Yes; it was Lulworth. He didn't make it in so many words. He was arguing about Charity Sheen and the threat the latter had made to take a certain paper from Bilsiter. I forget how the argument was framed, but Sturridge took him up and pointed out that a necessary consequence of the argument was that Charity Sheen must be someone actually present at the table. Naturally everybody pooh-poohed the suggestion, and the conversation turned on to other subjects."

"Evidently you don't pooh-pooh the suggestion," said the inspector.

"Well, I know it seems absurd," pointed out Jesson. "And perhaps it is hardly the thing to argue on these lines about one's fellow guests. But hasn't it ever struck you that this man Charity Sheen is someone who mixes in pretty good society?"

“Go on,” said the inspector, refusing to be drawn.

“I have thought that for some time,” continued the other. “Most of Sheen’s crimes have shown such an extraordinary knowledge of the personalities of his victims that it seems to me he must have been acquainted with them. That’s one thing. Suppose, for another, his story is true that he does it purely to give the proceeds to charity. That’s not a criminal outlook, is it? It’s more the outlook of a fanatic on the subject of charity, or of a man who is jaded with life and has invented this form of amusement to keep himself from becoming too bored.”

“That seems to me a very fair argument,” said Lanner, “and one which has probably already occurred to Scotland Yard. I have not been concerned with the search for Sheen, except during the last few days, of course, so I don’t know exactly what theories the Yard may have. But if your theory is true, it doesn’t seem to me he is the type of man to take to murder.”

“I argued on these lines there,” continued Jesson. “He entered Bilsiter’s room to get the paper. Bilsiter woke up and recognised him as a fellow guest and threatened to expose him. There was only one thing to do and Sheen did it.”

The inspector saw a gleam of satisfaction in Jesson’s eyes as he again agreed with his argument. Lanner was silent for a few moments as he busied himself with his thoughts.

“Now, Mr. Jesson,” he reflected. “You are beginning to give yourself away. For some reason or other you want me to believe that Sheen murdered Bilsiter. You want me to believe Sheen was one of the guests at Rowmands. I believe Lulworth is Sheen, and you took the trouble to visit Lulworth in the dead of night along a narrow balcony when you might equally have gone by the very much less risky corridor. Why, I wonder?”

“You ought to have been in the Force, Mr. Jesson,” he said aloud, and there was a note of admiration in his tones. “Perhaps you have gone still further and come to some conclusion about the identity of Sheen.”

To his surprise, however, the other refused to be drawn.

“I’ve got my suspicions, but I absolutely refuse to say what they are, Lanner,” Jesson replied. “Even in confidence. There is such a thing as the law of scandal, you know, and if I am wrong you may start a hare and I shall have to pay for it.”

“Still,” reflected the inspector, “you have given me a pretty strong hint that you know, and you’ve got a strong reason, I don’t doubt, for giving me that hint. I believe you think it is Lulworth, and I am beginning to believe that you entered Lulworth’s room in the hope of finding some clue which would confirm your suspicions. Then you would have come along, as the amateur detective, and taken all the kudos. No, Mr. Jesson, you are a little too transparent.”

“Let us change the subject,” said Jesson after a pause. “Heard anything about Miss Ableway? I fancied she was expected back last night.”

“I haven’t thought much about it,” replied the other untruthfully. “You know what ladies are for changing their minds. If her tooth was hurting her badly I expect she went home.”

“I wonder if she’s struck lucky; I mean I wonder if she’ll be happy with Sir Richard,” said Jesson slowly. “I am surprised she became engaged with such a tragedy so near.”

“We don’t know how long it was working up,” replied the inspector. “There’s no accounting for people when they are in love.”

He purposely made no comment on Jesson’s half question as to Avril’s future happiness. The very question, indeed, inclined him more strongly to the belief that the other suspected Lulworth of being Charity Sheen.

“I wonder you didn’t hear anything on the night Mr. Bilsiter was murdered,” he said suddenly.

“Why should I?” asked Jesson, leaning forward.

“You were in the bedroom next to him,” pointed out the inspector suavely. “And I thought—”

“Well, I heard nothing,” said Jesson abruptly. “I am rather a heavy sleeper and once I turn the light out I don’t move till the morning.”

“And that I know in at least one instance is not the truth,” thought Lanner. “I wonder if it were true on that night?”

“Mr. Sturridge told me that he heard the sound of voices in Bilsiter’s room,” he said aloud. “Two people, and they seemed to be quarreling.”

“Well, if I had I should have told you, Inspector,” returned the other. “Not that I am, or, rather, was, particularly interested in what Bilsiter had got to say. He was no friend of mine, thank God.”

There was a bitterness in his tones which surprised the inspector.

“Very few people seemed to have liked Mr. Bilsiter,” he remarked.

“Very few people had cause to,” added Jesson. “Here’s Marylebone. I’m dying for something to eat.”

“I wonder if you had cause not to like Bilsiter?” said the inspector softly to himself.

Inspector Lanner was beginning to become interested in Fraser Jesson, art expert.

CHAPTER XX

MRS. HOLLISTER LEARNS THINGS

THERE was a gleam of satisfaction in Marjorie Hollister's eyes as she saw Avril lapse into unconsciousness in her chair. She had no idea that the girl lying there was the daughter of a Commissioner at Scotland Yard, or else she might have pursued a very different course. She had taken Avril at her own valuation, had looked upon her as an interfering reporter from one of the newspapers, as Miss Tamson. The coincidence of the name with that of Bilsiter's office boy had not penetrated her mind—yet.

She did not want the publicity which the newspapers were evidently only too willing to give her. When she had caught sight of her own face beneath the bold black heading, "Do you know this woman?" she had been terrified for the moment, fearful that someone would recognise her before she got to her flat. It had taken her all her nerve to make the call at Bilsiter's office, and now she cursed herself for her folly, for not returning direct to her flat and telephoning. If she had only done that, she reflected, she would not have been traced so easily.

"Pretty little fool, too," she said to herself, looking at Avril's unconscious figure. "She'd make more money out of her looks than she ever would nosing round for a newspaper, if she'd only play her cards properly."

That was the keynote of Marjorie Hollister's character. She was ambitious, greedy for money, greedy for power and she was prepared to risk much to satisfy her vaulting ambitions. There were cruel lines about her mouth, a hard look in her dark eyes, which were sufficient warnings in themselves, to a close observer of character, of her nature. But few men would have noticed these warnings, for Marjorie Hollister was undeniably good-looking and, when she chose, had a charm of manner which brought most men, and not a few women, under her spell.

She had an ardent admirer and helper in her maid Jeannette. It was not the first time she had asked Jeannette to bring her "digestive tablets," and one well-known man had been thoroughly compromised by their means and had added considerably to Marjorie Hollister's investments to buy her silence.

And then Leonard Bilsiter had fallen under her spell. Though she professed to love him, though she allowed him to make love to her, she thoroughly despised him. The moneylender held many secrets, and it was to learn these secrets that Marjorie Hollister first began that intrigue with Bilsiter, which was not ended when an enraged and blindly devoted husband was sent to three years' penal servitude for assaulting and threatening to murder the man who, he believed, had alienated his wife. It would have been far better for John Hollister if he had realised that his wife had no affections to alienate that she was utterly indifferent to everything except her desire for money and power. She had married Hollister in the mistaken belief that he would provide her with both and she raged when he took up a studious appointment at one of the museums and refused the offer of a political secretaryship which might have led him anywhere.

She pressed the bell sharply.

“Help me to carry her into the spare bedroom, Jeannette,” she said when her maid appeared. “We’ll undress her and put her to bed, and she can sleep it off. Remember, if she wakes up and I am not here, that she must have fainted. But she’s not likely to move much before the morning. Take her feet.”

They carried Avril into the bedroom, and as Jeannette began to undress the girl a thought suddenly struck Mrs. Hollister. She turned and walked quickly into the sitting-room. By the chair, where it had fallen, was Avril’s handbag. Eagerly she opened it and began turning over its contents.

But the bag contained nothing for which she was searching, no letters or visiting cards; only a slip of paper bearing the note, “Richard Worth, c.o. Reeves, stationer. Clerkenwell Road.”

“Curious,” Mrs. Hollister said to herself. “I thought all reporters would carry cards, plenty of them.”

She crossed to the telephone, and, after searching through the pages of the telephone directory, called a number.

“Is that the *Evening Monitor*?” she asked. “I want to speak to one of your women reporters, a Miss Tamson.”

She had to repeat her message before the man replied to it.

“Sorry,” he said. “There must be some mistake. There’s no Miss Tamson employed here.”

“But she’s investigating this—this murder of Mr. Bilsiter,” continued Mrs. Hollister. “I was talking to her only a few minutes ago, and she told me she was going straight back to the office. There was something I wanted to tell her, something I had forgotten.”

“There’s some mistake,” repeated the voice at the other end of the wire. “Women are never sent out on those kind of jobs. At least, not by the *Monitor*. Who is that speaking, please?”

But he got no reply to his question, for Mrs. Hollister had slammed down the receiver angrily.

“Now, who is she?” she said aloud. “Jeannette, come here.”

“Bring me that woman’s clothing,” she cried when her maid appeared.

When she had the bundle on her lap she soon found what she was searching for, the initials “A.A.”

“‘A.A.’ doesn’t stand for Tamson,” she cried. “That woman was lying. Why? You hear that, Jeannette? She told me her name was Tamson, and her clothing is marked ‘A.A.’ When she does wake up—”

She broke off.

“I understand,” said Jeannette slowly. “Madame doesn’t want her to know anything?”

“Precisely,” replied her mistress grimly. “And she’s not to move until I have found out who she is—understand? Give her another dose to keep her quiet if necessary.”

The maid nodded. She did not question her mistress's actions. She was too well paid for that. If her mistress had told her it was necessary for Avril to lie there for a month hovering between unconsciousness and semi-consciousness she would have seen that her orders were carried out. She was very well satisfied with her position, being well paid, not over-worked and partly in the confidence of the woman she served. What more could she want? And her little stocking was growing fatter every month. It would not be very long now before she would have saved enough money to enable her to go back to her beloved France and start that little milliner's business which had always been Jeannette's ambition.

Whether Jeannette approved of her or not, Mrs. Hollister never knew, nor, for that matter, would she have cared very much either way. She paid her servant well to ensure a silent tongue.

At ten o'clock the following morning, when Mrs. Hollister went out, Avril was still sleeping heavily. Avril's hostess was no longer dressed in her favourite black. She wore a well-fitting smart tailor-made coat and skirt of dove grey, with grey shoes and stockings and a grey hat pulled well down on her head.

Her first act when she went out was to buy a newspaper, and she saw with ill-concealed annoyance that the *Monitor* had again printed her photograph. No longer, however, did there appear above it the wording, "Do you know this woman?" Underneath it was printed "Mrs. Marjorie Hollister."

"So they have found out already!" she breathed. She considered carefully how great the risk was. She had never made friends with any of her neighbours, and indeed most of them she did not even know by sight, so it followed that it was unlikely that they had paid much attention to her. There was the lift attendant, of course. He had seen her hundreds of times, but there she was lucky. He had lost the sight of one eye in the war and the sight of the other had been so badly impaired that he had been forbidden to read. No, on the whole, she reflected, the risk wasn't so great as at first sight it appeared.

She took an omnibus to Kensington Gardens, and there she sat down in the sunshine and read what the *Monitor* had to say.

"A sensational turn has been given to the Rowmands mystery," ran the account. "Yesterday afternoon information was received at Scotland Yard that the woman for whom the police are searching in connection with the mystery has been identified as Mrs. Marjorie Hollister. Her photograph, reproduced in our editions of yesterday, was copied from that in a brooch found in the grounds of Rowmands House. The brooch bore the inscription 'M.H. from L.B.' and contained also a photograph of the dead man. From the first Inspector Lanner, of the Beaconsfield Police, who is in charge of the case, has attached considerable importance to getting in touch with 'M.H.', or Mrs. Marjorie Hollister. Inspector Lanner believes that the missing woman can throw a considerable light on the murder."

Mrs. Hollister's lips curled as she read this sentence.

"Inspector Lanner is entitled to his belief," she said calmly.

"The police are actively following up the information they have received, and sensational developments may be expected in the next few hours. A number of promising clues as to the movements of Mrs. Hollister are now being followed up.

"A remarkable feature of the mystery is that Mrs. Hollister is the wife of John Hollister, once chief assistant in the department of zoology at the National Museum. Hollister was sentenced to three years' penal servitude for assaulting the murdered man and for uttering threats against his life. He was

released from prison last Wednesday—three days before the murder. A photograph of Hollister, taken at the time of his conviction, appears on page 7.”

Those were the essentials of the report which Marjorie Hollister read. There was much more, which she skipped over for the moment: an account of the trial of her husband; theories by the crime specialist of the *Monitor* about the murder; and a brief notice that the opening of the inquest was fixed for eleven o’clock that morning.

“Perhaps they think John did it,” she reflected, as she put down the paper. “Well, he’s perfectly capable of having done it, if he wanted to. Why didn’t he give me my freedom, the fool? It would have saved all that fuss. He never knew how to manage me—always thinking I’d settle down and become the meek and patient wife in some miserable little flat in Streatham. Bah! What fools men are. And I’m tied to him for life unless—unless—”

She stopped as a thought came to her mind. She knew her husband too well ever to believe that he would divorce her—knew his religious scruples on the subject were much too strong for that. She had, indeed, gone on her bended knees when all other methods had failed and pleaded for her freedom without success.

“Unless,” she repeated slowly, “unless he died before me.”

She sat staring steadily in front of her—almost motionless. At the back of her mind a possibility had occurred to her. Like some black cloud on a far-away horizon, almost unnoticed at first, but growing swiftly as the storm approached until it covered the whole sky, the possibility grew in her mind until it dominated all her thoughts.

Supposing her husband had been in Beaconsfield that night? Supposing he had been seen by someone?

She turned back to the newspaper and read feverishly the reprinted report of her husband’s trial, re-read what the paper had described as “Dramatic Outburst from the Dock.”

“The prisoner, when asked if he had anything to say, defiantly shook his fist at the judge.

“‘My lord,’ he cried, ‘there is no justice in this world if this man’—here Hollister pointed to Mr. Bilsiter sitting in the well of the court—‘is allowed to go free and I am to be punished. But the law of the Lord is a just one. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I shall serve cheerfully whatever sentence you may pass on me, confident that as the years pass my strength will grow—to punish. The time will come when I may be standing in this dock charged with a greater crime in the sight of man than the mere threat of murder—with murder itself. My life is done. Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder. Whatever term of imprisonment you may deem fit to impose upon me, that is the term which that man shall live, if the Almighty God has not seen fit to remove him before.’”

“The judge, without any comment, passed sentence of three years’ penal servitude.”

“So much for John,” said Mrs. Hollister to herself. “All I hope now is that he was at Beaconsfield that night—though I don’t see why he should be, or how he should know Leonard was there. But if he was, perhaps I—I shall be free!”

She whispered the last words to herself and her face flushed as their full consequence came to her understanding. With a sudden gesture she rose from her seat and looked at the time.

“Eleven o’clock. I suppose they’re starting the inquest now. I shall have to let the police know where I am, or else—”

She opened her handbag and began to powder her nose before she moved away. As she did so she caught sight of the slip of paper she had taken from Avril's handbag, the paper which bore the words, "Richard Worth, c.o. Reeves, stationer, Clerkenwell Road."

"I can't make her out," she reflected, "and I am beginning to believe she's not a reporter at all. Funny. I have an idea I've seen somebody like her; but I can't think where. I wonder who this man Worth is? I think I'll go along and see."

Mrs. Hollister took an omnibus up to Holborn and walked down the Gray's Inn Road to where it met the Clerkenwell Road. But a dozen doors down she saw the little stationer's shop with the name George Reeves above it. There was nothing to distinguish it from half a dozen similar small stationers' and newsagents' in the neighbourhood, and she stood looking idly in at the window wondering what she should do. Then she caught sight of a small, hand-written card: "Letters may be addressed here."

Mrs. Hollister smiled to herself. She was quick-witted and she at once jumped to the right conclusion what "Richard Worth, c.o. Reeves," meant. It meant that Richard Worth, whoever he might be, had his letters addressed there. She had no scruples. If there were any letters addressed to Worth she meant to see them. It had instantly occurred to her that Worth was probably an acquaintance of the woman who called herself Miss Tamson, and the latter wrote to him at this address. If a letter were waiting it would very likely give a clue to the real identity of the so-called woman reporter on the *Monitor*.

"I don't believe she's ever seen the inside of a newspaper office in her life," said Mrs. Hollister to herself as she walked boldly into the shop.

"Is there anything for Mr. Worth?" she asked.

The shopkeeper turned and looked through a pile of miscellaneous letters and small parcels on a shelf behind the counter.

"Parcel, madam," he said shortly. "Twopence, please."

The other took the parcel with a word of thanks, and as she walked towards Gray's Inn Road again, she hailed a passing taxicab and directed him to drive her to her flat.

"Now, my lady, perhaps we shall find out who you are and what your game is," she said grimly.

It was characteristic of her nature that she looked carefully at the postmark and the writing on the parcel before she made any attempt to untie the string with which it was fastened.

"Beaconsfield postmark. And she was in Beaconsfield. Doesn't look much like a woman's handwriting though."

She undid the string and turned back the sheet of brown paper. Inside she saw at once were a number of papers and another package tied up with string. She gave a little "Oh!" of astonishment as she turned over the papers rapidly. Among them she noticed at once a cloak-room ticket, and she picked up the speaking tube.

“Drive me to Victoria Station first,” she directed. “There’s a parcel there I want to pick up.”

Mrs. Marjorie Hollister was taking no chances. She meant to act and act quickly. She opened the inner parcel, and this time her “Oh!” was very much louder. When she had undone the wrappings she held in her hand a revolver. And on the butt were the initials “L.B.”

“Leonard’s revolver!” she whispered. “He told me he always carried one. What is it doing in a parcel addressed to Richard Worth? Who is he? And those papers?”

She had only glanced through the papers she had found, but a glance had been quite sufficient to tell her what they were. She had seen too many in Leonard Bilsiter’s office not to know what a promissory note looked like, and what it meant.

“They’ll do later,” she murmured as she hurriedly tied up the parcel again. “I wonder what the find will be at Victoria? I must think before I go back to the flat. It wouldn’t do to go there with this little lot and find clever Mr. Lanner waiting to ask me a few questions. There are a few I’d like to hear the answers to first. I’d like to know who that girl is and what she knows about these papers and Leonard’s revolver. I dare say she knows more about Leonard than I think. He was close enough in a good many ways, and I’m not fool enough to think I was the only woman in his life.”

At Victoria she dismissed the taxi, instead of telling the driver to wait as had been her first intention, and presented her ticket at the cloak-room.

“Two and threepence to pay,” said the attendant. “You’ve left it here a long time.”

He put a portable typewriter case on the counter in front of her. Marjorie Hollister could hardly believe her eyes, nor did she believe the case contained a typewriter until, in the waiting-room she opened it and saw the machine it contained.

“That’s a fat lot of use,” she said vulgarly. “At least I don’t see how it helps me.”

She went out of the station carrying the machine, and, walking along Victoria Street, called in at a large stationer’s.

“I want a cardboard box to take this parcel just as it is,” she said. “Will you please also wrap it up and seal it properly, as I shall want to send it by registered post?”

In actual fact she took the sealed parcel to her bank and there deposited it.

“That’s safe enough. And now I’ll have some lunch and then go home. That girl should be awake by now. I shall have something to say to the little liar. I suppose I must drag this typewriter about with me.”

She lingered over her lunch, and it was not until shortly after three o’clock that she arrived once more at her flat. During that time she had learnt from the newspapers that the inquest on Leonard Bilsiter had been formally opened for identification purposes only, and adjourned for a fortnight at the request of the police.

“So that they can pursue their investigations,” she quoted from the report. “Well, good luck to them!”

“Anybody called?”

It was always her first question when she returned.

“Yes, madam,” replied Jeannette. “Mr. Ableway is here.”

“He can wait a little longer,” said her mistress. “What about the girl?”

“She woke up about eleven,” replied Jeannette. “I told her she had fainted and persuaded her to eat some dry toast and drink a cup of tea. She went to sleep again,” she added significantly.

“The sooner she wakes now the better I shall be pleased,” said Mrs. Hollister.

Mrs. Hollister took some trouble over her toilet before she entered her sitting-room where Tommy Ableway was waiting. She always did take trouble over her appearance where a man was concerned. She had learnt very early in life that most men, and particularly young men, judge solely by externals, and she played up to their common failing.

“Well, Tommy, this is an unexpected pleasure,” she cried as she came forward with outstretched hands. “I thought you had given me up.”

“Good heavens, Marjorie, have you seen the newspapers?” he burst out.

Mrs. Hollister put on a little puzzled frown and then smiled.

“Good gracious, what’s the matter?” she asked. “You positively frighten me with that expression. No, I haven’t seen a paper for two days. I can’t bear to read about poor Leonard’s death.”

“The police are searching for you.”

There was fear in Tommy’s tones. He was frightened, indeed, chiefly through his own imagination. He still had that reverence for and belief in women which enabled him easily to put any pretty woman on a pedestal and keep her there. The very fact that the police were advertising for the whereabouts of the woman who stood there smiling frightened him, for he inevitably jumped to the conclusion that they wanted her definitely in connection with the murder of Leonard Bilsiter. That they should merely wish to question her in the hope that she might throw some light on his movements and his friends and acquaintances did not occur to him. He jumped at once to the worst possible conclusion, and with all the natural chivalry of his nature he did not believe the accusation he had built up from his own fevered imagination. He felt he wanted to protect her, to face the accusers himself, and force them to leave her alone. He did not know that Marjorie Hollister was far more capable of looking after herself than he was.

“The police are searching for me?” she echoed, and then broke into a silvery laugh. “Come, sit down, Tommy, and tell me all about it. What wild story have you got hold of now?”

She took his arm and led him to the comfortable settee. And there, jerkily, he told her the story she already knew.

“And is that all?” she asked calmly. “I wish I had known yesterday, Tommy. I should have saved you all this worry. You poor dear, I’m not worth worrying about really.”

She patted his hand, and Tommy Ableway, as he looked into her bold eyes with sudden impetuosity, bent over and kissed her fingers.

“Aren’t you just wonderful?” he whispered.

“Not really,” she replied, a little more truthfully than he realised. “I shall go to the police after tea, Tommy. I have nothing to hide.”

“But that isn’t all,” he continued, and hesitated.

She was instantly on the alert. It was just for this that she had listened so patiently to his story. He might have information which had not yet appeared in the newspapers, and it was this knowledge which she wanted. She had always thought, when she first accidentally met Tommy Ableway in Leonard Bilsiter’s office, that the son of the Commissioner at Scotland Yard might some day prove useful. That was partly why she had cultivated his acquaintance, exerted the power of her charms upon him. And she had found out something about him, about his relations with the moneylender, which she hoped might prove more useful still to help her to climb the ladder of gold and power.

“Well, what’s the next scare?” she asked, with a slow smile.

“Lanner knows you met Mr. Bilsiter in the grounds that night,” he cried.

“I know that,” she said quickly. “That’s when I dropped my brooch. I can easily explain it. You know, Tommy, that I came down to warn Leonard that my husband had been released from prison. I was afraid he might kill Leonard. Has he been seen in Beaconsfield?”

“I don’t know,” replied Ableway. “But you were seen as well at three o’clock in the morning——”

“Waiting for you, Tommy,” she interrupted quickly.

“I know,” he groaned. “That’s what makes it so bad.”

“In what way?” she asked. “Bad for you or for me? Tell me, how did Lanner find out it was me?”

“Sir Richard Lulworth saw you before—before——”

“Before you knocked him on the head, Tommy,” she finished. “Don’t be afraid to say it.”

“I wish to goodness I hadn’t,” he continued. “It’s all bound to come out and—and it will ruin my father.”

“Nonsense,” replied Mrs. Hollister decisively. “The man you’ve got to fear is Lulworth. I’ve told you that once, but you don’t believe it.”

“But why?” he asked. “He’s engaged to my sister. There’s nothing wrong with Lulworth.”

“Did he get that promissory note for you?” she asked. “Where is it now, eh? What will happen to you if it is found, with your father’s signature on it?”

Tommy Ableway buried his face in his hands and when he looked up again he was white.

“I must have been off my head,” he said brokenly. “I must have been mad to do that, even for a pal. And I must have been madder still the other night. I hardly remember hitting Lulworth, hardly remember what I did. If it hadn’t been for you——”

“That is hardly fair, is it, Tommy, to blame a woman?” she asked quietly.

Immediately he was penitent.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know what I was saying. I was off my head. I thought at one time Lanner had got hold of the paper. He practically told me he had."

"You were very rude to me that night, Tommy," she said softly. "Very rude. You told me to shut my mouth because I was frightened. I didn't hear Lulworth coming, nor you, until you hit him."

"You told me he'd got the paper and would hold it over me," he answered. "You told me you thought he was Charity Sheen, that Leonard Bilsiter had told you. I seemed to go mad when I saw him prowling along like some burglar, and that's why I hit him and took his keys. I had a wild idea of searching his room."

"And did you?" she asked eagerly.

"No," he answered. "When all those dogs began barking and raising the alarm I went back to my bedroom. I opened Lulworth's room and left his other keys on the dressing-table. Then I went downstairs and found Pellington, his manservant. He and I found Lulworth and brought him in. I thought I'd killed him. Good heavens, Marjorie, you don't know what I felt like when I saw his face in the light. I wonder I didn't burst out with the truth there and then."

"You'd have been a fool if you had done," she replied calmly.

"Well, what are you going to tell Lanner?" he asked bitterly.

"Don't you worry about what I'm going to tell the police," she replied. "I shall tell them just what is good for them to know and no more. And I shan't bring you into it. I like you too much for that, Tommy."

Tommy Ableway was like clay in her hands. There was an evident relief in his face at her words, and he did not ask her what she was going to tell Lanner.

"I have got that paper you are worrying about," she continued.

"Thank heaven," he said fervently.

"And I am going to keep it," she added, "as a pledge of your good conduct."

"What do you mean?" he asked in astonishment.

"I mean, Tommy, that I don't want anyone to know that it was you who hit Sir Richard Lulworth that night, that it was you who met me."

She paused for a moment, and then said slowly, "I saw someone else in the grounds after you had run into the house."

He stared at her, waiting for her next words.

"I believe it was my husband," she added.

"And that is what you are going to tell Lanner?" he asked. "I——"

"I've got that paper," she interrupted. "If you want me to go to your father with it—don't be foolish. Do you want to compromise me to save your skin? Let's talk about something else. No, I refuse to say anything more, Tommy, so it's no use," she added as he began to protest. "I had an adventure yesterday."

She talked rapidly. She knew her man, knew that as the idea she had given him became more familiar he would agree to it, especially in face of the threat which she was holding over his head. Tommy Ableway was not a rotter, but he was undeniably weak in some ways and took the line of least resistance. He had panicked badly when he thought that Leonard Bilsiter was going to reveal the fact that he had forged his father's name to a promissory note, and though he had blustered to the moneylender, he knew it was only bluster, and that under pressure he would yield. The fact that he obtained nothing out of the forgery, that he had only done it to save a friend, he now realised only too fully did not make the position any the less serious. He knew his father only too well, knew that he was not likely to forgive.

"You don't seem very much interested in my adventures, Tommy," said his companion, as he sat there silent. "There was a time—"

She gave a little pout.

"Of course, I'm interested," he said absent-mindedly. "Tell me about it."

"It wasn't quite true when I said I didn't know the police wanted to see me," she continued. "A woman recognised me yesterday in the street and followed me here, and threatened to give me away to the police, and I am afraid I lost my head a little. She got very excited, and then—then she fainted."

"Fainted—what did you do?"

"She seemed to be quite ill, and I put her in the spare bedroom," continued the other. "She's in there now, sleeping."

"What's she like?" asked Tommy. "Don't you know her?"

Mrs. Hollister shook her head.

"No. But she comes from Beaconsfield, so she told me," she lied. "Perhaps you might have seen her there, Tommy."

"Hardly likely," he replied. "I am afraid I've not had much time to notice girls the last few days."

"Well, come and see," she said with a smile. "Only you mustn't fall in love with her, Tommy. She's very pretty."

He rose and followed her listlessly. He was still in a state of bewilderment, a state of uncertainty as to his course of action.

"All right, I'll look at her, if you want me to," he replied indifferently. "Though I don't see what good it will do."

As he bent over the bed he stared for one wild moment at the unconscious form there, and then turned round with a blazing look of anger in his eyes.

"You devil!" he cried. "What trick have you been up to now? That is my sister!"

"Your sister?" said Mrs. Hollister, and for the first time that afternoon there was a look of fear in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXI

LULWORTH RECEIVES VISITORS

WHEN INSPECTOR LANNER left Fraser Jesson, he was wondering how much the latter knew, especially about the identity of Sheen. He was convinced of this—that the art expert had not taken the trouble to talk to him at such length without a very good reason. Fraser Jesson was, normally, a taciturn man, and the fact that he had talked so much was sufficient proof to the inspector that Jesson had, quite recently, obtained some definite clue, or what he thought was a clue, to the identity of Sheen. But think as he might, Lanner was not able to imagine in what way Jesson had learnt anything.

He had asked Scotland Yard to help him to obtain as much information about Jesson as he had about every member of Lord Rowmands' household on the night of the murder. Lanner was taking no chances. Though he had his own suspicions, he was perfectly well aware he had nothing absolutely definite to go upon, if it came to making an arrest.

The three who interested him most were, apart from Mrs. Hollister, undoubtedly Avril Ableway, her brother, and Sir Richard Lulworth. He was genuinely puzzled over Avril. He recognised in her a woman who had courage as well as brains, a woman who would not hesitate to carry out any plans she might have formulated. He could not bring himself to believe that she knew anything about the murder of Leonard Bilsiter. But, on the other hand, on no other hypothesis could he account for her actions and the deliberate way in which she had tried to mislead him.

“She was lying about that Egyptian scarab, that’s certain,” he reflected. “Just as she was lying about her conversation with Bilsiter. And why should she lie, if she knows nothing about the murder? Because, I think, she suspects who the murderer is and is trying to shield him. There are only two men whom she would shield in that way, at least who were in Rowmands that night—her brother and her lover. Finally, she was lying yesterday when she said she had toothache, and went up to town. It was too quick after seeing Lulworth. And that points to the fact she suspects Lulworth, if she doesn’t actually know, and is attempting to shield him in some way or other. But why the devil should she go to London?” he demanded irritably. “What is there in London to do with the murder?”

At Scotland Yard he found Sir John Ableway in a state of agitation.

“I have made inquiries in every possible direction, Lanner, of all her likely friends and my own relations,” he said in worried tones. “And since my daughter left Pellington at Beaconsfield Station, not a soul, as far as I can find out, has seen her. She has disappeared as completely as though the earth had swallowed her.”

“I don’t think any harm has come to her,” said Lanner soothingly.

“She may—her toothache—”

“I don’t believe she had toothache, sir,” said Lanner bluntly. “It came on too quickly after she had seen Lulworth. Did you telephone Stanton, her dentist, and find

out if she had been there?"

"Yes. I—I feel you are right about the toothache, Lanner. Stanton has not seen my daughter for a month, since her last regular visit to him, in fact."

"I think Miss Ableway went up to town on Lulworth's account, and if he likes to tell the truth we should soon find out where your daughter is, sir."

"Then, by Heaven, he shall be made to tell," cried Sir John, rising from his chair and pacing the room in his agitation. "She seems to have gone mad since she met that man, Lanner. Now is the time to strike. Once we arrest him we shall be free to search all his possessions, and I shouldn't be surprised if we come across something which will very quickly open my daughter's eyes."

The inspector vigorously shook his head.

"No, sir," he said. "I can't agree with you. I don't believe Miss Ableway is the kind of woman to throw him over just because he is in trouble. It's no use blinking the facts, sir, because they happen to be near home. I am in a difficult position, sir, as you must realise, and, with a man different from yourself, I think I should have hesitated about carrying on with the case. It isn't just because Lulworth is a criminal that Miss Ableway will throw him over. We shall have to go deeper than that," he added shrewdly. "Prove to her that he is deceiving her as well as everyone else, and we can't do that until we know the tale he has told her. As for searching, that has already been tried without any success. Lulworth's too clever to give himself away like that. If we make a mistake now it might be fatal, and he might make us a laughing stock. A man with his money could afford to buy the very best talent at the bar to defend him. We haven't got a shred of real evidence against him yet, only suspicions. A clever counsel would pull all these suspicions to pieces. From the other point of view we have got to face Mrs. Hollister, and she will have some difficulty, I don't doubt, to explain why she was wandering about the grounds at three o'clock in the morning—"

"You are assuming that Lulworth's story is true," interrupted the Commissioner, sharply. "I don't believe a word the man says unless it is corroborated by someone whose word I can rely upon. He and Mrs. Hollister and some other man may be confederates, may have had a quarrel."

Lanner smiled to himself. There was always the possibility that Lulworth was not telling the truth about the affair the other night, but the inspector was pretty sure of one thing—that the recognition of Mrs. Hollister from her photograph was a perfectly spontaneous thing on the part of the baronet. The inspector was a pretty shrewd judge of men, and he judged accurately enough about Lulworth. He was more in an outside position than the Commissioner, whose judgment was warped by recent events.

"Yes, I believe part of it is true, at any rate," he said. "I am sure, for one thing, that he had never seen Mrs. Hollister before. He was too genuinely surprised when I showed him her photograph."

"I suppose you are right," said the Commissioner with a groan. "But, frankly, I am upset. When one's own flesh and blood—"

"I shouldn't urge staying your hand, sir," continued the inspector, "if I didn't feel in my bones that your daughter was safe. She is a very capable woman, if I may say so,

and quite able to look after herself.”

“I shall go to Lulworth in any case, as all other methods have failed, and tell him my daughter has disappeared,” said Sir John firmly. “I can judge from his attitude, perhaps—”

“There’s no harm in that, sir,” agreed Lanner, “if he’s in London I should like to come with you.”

He was not so certain in his own mind that the Commissioner could judge correctly anything from Lulworth’s attitude. Lanner preferred to draw his own conclusions from first-hand knowledge. Second-hand information he always distrusted unless it was evidence he could check in several ways. But opinions were very different things.

“Yes, he’s in London,” said the Commissioner. “He’s staying at his house in Gloucester Terrace. We’ll go at once.”

Sir Richard Lulworth’s house in Gloucester Terrace was very much in keeping with the man himself. It was expensively furnished, but in exquisite taste. Lanner felt at once, as a quietly-moving manservant asked them to wait in one of the rooms of the ground floor, an atmosphere of solidity and confidence which was a reflection of the man against whom his suspicions were directed.

“He knows how to make himself comfortable,” he remarked, as he sank into a heavily-padded, well-sprung armchair.

“Here, yes,” agreed the Commissioner. “But this room is chiefly for visitors. In his own rooms there is much less comfort. You would hardly believe it, Lanner, but the man is a great student as well as being a good athlete. He’s a curious mixture, a dangerous mixture, the man with first-class brains and first-class body, who keeps himself fit in both ways. If it weren’t for that kink—”

He broke off, and Lanner smiled. If it weren’t for that kink, he reflected, the Commissioner was going to add, “I would rather like him.” And Lanner himself had to admit that Lulworth was a very likeable fellow.

“Here he is, sir, I think,” he said in an undertone, as a step was heard outside.

The inspector felt compelled to admit still more the force of the other’s personality as he entered the room. If, he reflected, Sir Richard was Charity Sheen, he must view with suspicion this visit of the two men most concerned with the unravelling of the mystery of Bilsiter’s death, and with it that of the identity of Charity Sheen.

There was one thing the inspector noticed at once, however. Lulworth was looking more worried than he expected. Lanner put down the cause of the worry to the unexpected visit of the Commissioner and himself. He did not realise, then, the real cause. Lulworth, too, was concerned about the absence of news from Avril. Though he had accepted Pellington’s suggestion the previous night that Avril had missed the last train, he had not been completely satisfied with it. And when the morning brought no news, no letter, no telephone message, even, to break the silence, he began to worry in a very real way.

“Get on the telephone, Pellington,” he said fretfully, “to Sir John’s house and see if she has been home. If not, ask for the names of one or two of her intimate friends. I must *know*. Those papers—”

He broke off and passed his hand uneasily over his head.

"If there is no news," he added, "I am going up to town the moment I can. Inspector Lanner has notified me that I shall not be needed at the inquest. My head's infinitely better this morning, I've got to pull myself together. I'll see my own doctor the moment I'm back."

He spoke jerkily, an evident reflex of the state of his mind. But when Pellington, with downcast face, returned with the news of his failure, he pulled himself together with an effort. The time had come now when he must cease to worry, must act.

He was surprised at the visit of Lanner and Sir John Ableway, but he suppressed outwardly much of the anxiety he was feeling, and there was but a faint touch of the torture in his mind as he spoke.

"Hallo, Lanner," he said with his attractive smile. "I am sorry I missed you this morning. I suppose you were too busy over the inquest. Any news of the mysterious Mrs. Hollister?"

"We're on the track, sir," answered the inspector guardedly.

"Well, I hope when you find her you'll find the man who knocked me out," said Lulworth with a laugh.

"We have not come to discuss Mrs. Hollister," interrupted Sir John testily.

Lulworth looked up sharply.

There was something in the Commissioner's tones which grated on Lulworth's nerves.

"Is there anything the matter, Sir John?" he asked quickly. "Naturally I know you have come round for something definite. What is it?"

"My daughter came up to town yesterday," replied the Commissioner, "and nothing has been heard of her since."

"Nothing has been heard of her since?" repeated Lulworth, taking an agitated step forward. "What do you mean?"

Inspector Lanner was watching him closely. The note of anxiety in his tones was unmistakable. He thought, too, Lulworth had whitened under the healthy brown tan of his skin.

"It is like this, sir," he said quickly, afraid of what Sir John might say, afraid the two men might come to loggerheads. "When Miss Ableway did not return last night, Sir John asked me to make inquiries this morning. I found she had not been to her dentist yesterday, nor had she spent the night with any of her relations or friends. It was my suggestion we came here, Sir Richard. I thought, perhaps, she may have given you some idea of what she might do, in case her—her toothache became worse."

"You have inquired of her relations and friends," said Lulworth slowly, half to himself. He fought hard to keep his control. Whatever thoughts had surged through his mind when his manservant had come upstairs and announced that Sir John Ableway and Inspector Lanner were below, the thought that Avril was really missing had not occurred to him as being the cause of their visit. He still believed that he would either hear from her or see her during the course of the day. But to hear that she had

completely disappeared temporarily unnerved him. He sensed, too, the hostile atmosphere and knew that, despite the blow he had received by the news, he must step warily.

“Have—have you made inquiries at—at the hospitals?” he asked jerkily. “This is terrible, Lanner.”

It was noticeable that he invariably addressed himself to the inspector.

“Inquiries are being made in that direction now,” said the inspector. “But I do not think that she has met with an accident. We hoped you might know something of her movements.”

Lulworth hesitated for a moment and then said firmly: “I am afraid I can shed no light on her movements beyond what you have told me. I understood she was going to make a call on her dentist and intended to return by the last train. I can tell you no more than that.”

His tones were final, and Lanner did not press the point.

“You will, of course, understand, Lanner,” continued Lulworth, “that you need not spare any expense of any kind. I give you *carte blanche*.”

“I think that is my affair, as her father, Sir Richard,” interrupted Sir John sharply.

“And mine, too,” returned Lulworth coldly. “I know you disagree with your daughter’s engagement to me, but this is not the time to quarrel about that. If I could shed any light on her disappearance I shouldn’t let my own feelings stand in the way. I shall make inquiries on my own account as well.”

“You think the police are not competent?” demanded the Commissioner angrily.

“In some ways they are not,” returned Lulworth.

“Then let me tell you, sir,” began the other in rising tones, “that we know more—”

“You must make allowances, both of you,” interrupted the inspector hurriedly. “I implore you, gentlemen, not to lose your tempers. You may both say things you may regret. Sir Richard is quite right, sir,” he continued, turning to the Commissioner. “This is not the time to quarrel.”

Lulworth walked across to the bell-push.

“Every minute is precious to me, now,” he said. “I am anxious to be doing something. Please excuse me. Pellington, please show these gentlemen out,” he added as his manservant appeared.

Pellington looked the relief he felt, and his master smiled slightly. He knew very well that his very faithful man had half-expected him to be led away in handcuffs, that Lanner and Sir John Ableway had learnt something during the last few hours which they deemed conclusive against his master.

“Miss Ableway said nothing to you as to her movements when she went to town, Pellington?” asked the inspector, as the manservant held open the front door.

“Nothing, sir; except that she was visiting her dentist,” said the imperturbable Pellington.

“Well, you have gained nothing there, Lanner,” said the Commissioner sarcastically. “As you seem to have taken charge, perhaps you can suggest the next move.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the unruffled inspector, who had been thinking rapidly. “I think the next move will be up to Sir Richard. There’s a convenient taxi-rank there. I am going to hire a taxi immediately.”

“You think Lulworth knows where she is?”

“No, I do not. I am sure he was taken completely back by the news we brought. But I think he knew what her movements were, and once he believes we are safely out of the way he’ll make inquiries at places where she was going to call.”

The Commissioner nodded his agreement. Though he had lost his temper, out of sheer anxiety over Avril’s safety, he quickly realised that the only way to approach the problem was exactly the way he would have approached it if she had been someone else’s daughter. He was wise enough to recognise that it was better to follow the inspector’s lead than to go off on some wild tangent of his own, led away by his emotions.

Quickly the inspector explained what he wanted to the second driver on the rank, and he and Sir John took their seats.

“We can watch here as well as anywhere else, and with less chance of being seen,” he explained.

The Commissioner’s anger completely vanished a few minutes later when Pellington came rushing eagerly out of the big house in Gloucester Terrace, and signalled towards the taxi-rank. And when, twenty minutes later, he came out of the little stationer’s in the Clerkenwell Road, where he had been sent by his master to make inquiries if Avril had picked up the packet of papers and Bilsiter’s revolver there, it was Sir John who followed him back while Lanner entered the shop and showed the newsagent his card.

“A man entered this shop a few minutes ago and made some inquiries,” he said curtly. “What are they?”

“I hope nothing’s wrong sir,” said the newsagent in a deprecating manner. “The fact is, many of my customers have letters addressed here. The gentleman who has just gone out has been in to ask if a letter has come for Mr. Richard Worth. I told him that there was a parcel, and that was called for yesterday by a young lady.”

“Ah,” said the inspector. “You are sure it was yesterday? What time yesterday?”

“I beg your pardon, sir, I am getting flustered,” returned the newsagent in agitated tones. “She came this morning about eleven o’clock, not yesterday.”

“Well, if any more letters come addressed to Worth, you are to send them to me, at Scotland Yard,” said the inspector sharply.

He turned and hurried out. It did not occur to him then to ask what the lady was like who had called. He jumped to the very natural conclusion that it was Avril, as he had jumped to the conclusion that Richard Worth was Richard Lulworth. It was some time before he learned that it was Mrs. Hollister who had called. It was rarely the inspector

did jump to a conclusion; and when, later, he found out the truth, it taught him anew the lesson he thought he had already learnt, to verify every stage of his inquiries.

He found, as he expected. Sir John waiting impatiently for him at Scotland Yard. From the Commissioner he learnt that Pellington had driven straight back to his master with his news.

“So you see, sir,” said Lanner when he had finished his own story, “Miss Ableway was certainly all right at eleven o’clock this morning. She evidently went to that shop to pick up some important letter on behalf of Lulworth, some letter he could not trust anyone else to get for him, not even himself.”

“Why?”

“Because I think Sir Richard knows he is being watched,” replied the inspector.

CHAPTER XXII

SIR RICHARD LULWORTH INVESTIGATES

“So the packet sent to Reeves has already been called for,” remarked Sir Richard Lulworth thoughtfully. “At eleven o’clock this morning. It is only half-past four now. Miss Ableway knew I wouldn’t be leaving Beaconsfield till mid-day at the earliest. Naturally she would keep out of the way.”

Pellington polished his eyeglass vigorously, and his master stopped speaking. He knew the symptoms well. His manservant’s monocle was an unfailing clue to Pellington’s state of mind. As long as it was fixed firmly in his eye, fixed as though it were part of his face it seemed at times, Lulworth knew that his man was not worrying about much in this world—or the next. But as sure as the monocle was taken out for a polish with his handkerchief, so surely was something worrying Pellington. And the more vigorously the glass was rubbed the greater its owner’s agitation.

“What the devil’s the matter, Pellington?” he continued. “Put that infernal thing in your eye and tell me what is on your mind.”

“Miss Ableway did not stay with any relations or friends—or go home, sir,” pointed out the manservant. “She was going to return last night. All she had with her was her small handbag.”

“You mean you are worrying where Miss Ableway slept and what about her toothbrush and things?” asked his master with a smile. “Don’t let that worry you, Pellington. I don’t doubt Miss Ableway could arrange that sort of thing for one night. Inspector Lanner said inquiries have been made of her likely friends, but there are doubtless a score or so people neither Inspector Lanner nor Sir John have heard of, with whom she might have stayed.”

Pellington breathed on his eyeglass and polished it afresh.

“It isn’t that, sir, if I may speak freely,” he said.

“Say what the dickens you like,” returned his master. “I shan’t be offended.”

“Well, sir, I asked the man in the stationer’s shop what the young lady was like who called. She was dressed all in grey. The shopkeeper said she had dark brown or black eyes, he wasn’t sure which. Miss Avril has blue eyes, sir, and wasn’t dressed in grey when she went to London.”

His master paced up and down the room digesting the information Pellington had given him. The news was serious for two distinct reasons. By far the more important one was that Avril had really disappeared, apparently. Something had gone wrong somewhere. According to her arrangements she had told him she would call and pick up the packet of papers the previous afternoon. Lulworth knew nothing of the decision Avril had come to not to go to Reeves, and not to bring the packet to Beaconsfield. She had told him she would do so to soothe him, and she would have been ready enough with an excuse if she had carried out her original intention of returning to the little Bucks town, an intention frustrated by her unexpected meeting with Mrs. Hollister.

“The woman in grey called at the shop. That means Mrs. Hollister. And that means, Pellington, that Mrs. Hollister must have met Miss Ableway.”

He spoke rapidly as he reasoned out, step by step, what he thought had happened.

“Mrs. Hollister was certainly in the grounds of Rowmands twice. She knew Bilsiter well. It is conceivable that she knew Miss Ableway by sight. She may have seen her in the train.”

“She did, sir,” interrupted Pellington.

“Why the devil didn’t you tell me that before?”

There was an angry gleam in Lulworth’s grey eyes.

“It did not occur to me to mention it, sir,” answered the manservant. “I didn’t think about Mrs. Hollister in connection with Miss Ableway.”

He explained how he had been shown Mrs. Hollister’s photograph by Inspector Lanner.

“She is a woman with brains and nerve,” commented Sir Richard. “I am sure that she spoke to Miss Ableway on some specious excuse or other, and induced Miss Ableway to allow her to get the papers for her. And that’s where we shall find her, Pellington, with Mrs. Hollister or Mrs. Hollister can say where she is. Get the car out at once.”

The baronet slipped a photograph of Avril into his pocket, a photograph which had been for the best part of a year in that rather severely furnished room which he used as a study.

“It might come in better than any description I can give,” he murmured to himself.

He had already mapped out certain lines of inquiries. He was not in the slightest way interested in what Lanner and Sir John had done, except that they had cleared the ground in certain directions and so saved him from wasting valuable time in making useless inquiries.

“Drive to Southampton Row, Pellington,” he directed. “I am going to start with Bilsiter’s office. It seems to me the most likely line of attack. It’s just on five o’clock, and if we’re lucky we shall catch Bilsiter’s assistant. He is pretty sure to know Mrs. Hollister’s address. I know that type of women pretty well,” he added caustically. “She’s out for money. Money will buy most things—except one,” he whispered under his breath.

“Wait here,” he said later when the big car pulled up outside the curious underground tramway entrance at the junction of Southampton Row and Theobald’s Road.

The baronet received his first disappointment when he entered the building and asked the lift attendant to take him up to the fourth floor, “Mr. Bilsiter’s office.”

“Sorry, sir, they’ve just gone, five minutes ago,” said the attendant. “Nothing much doing since this ’ere murder, ’cept answering questions.”

“The man in charge, Mr. Bilsiter’s assistant, do you know his name and address?”

“No, sir.”

Lulworth stood there thinking for a moment.

“Look here,” he said at last. “I want some information. If you can give it to me there’s a pound note for you. You’ve read the newspapers about Mr. Bilsiter’s murder, and seen that the police are advertising for a Mrs. Hollister, a friend of his. Do you know her address?”

The attendant shook his head regretfully.

“If I did, sir, that quid would be yours truly’s for the asking,” he replied. “She was very friendly like with Mr. Bilsiter.”

“She came here often, then?” asked Lulworth quickly.

“Why, bless you, sir, she was ’ere only yesterday, only I ’adn’t read the paper then,” he added. “Or else—”

“Here yesterday. Ah, what time?”

“About half-past four or so,” said the attendant. “Of course I knows all about Mrs. ’Ollister an’ ’er husband, if it comes to that, who got three years for letting Mr. Bilsiter ’ave it in the neck, so to speak. I were remarking that I shouldn’t ’ave been surprised if ’e knows more about it than most men. Calls ’erself Mrs. Murdock sometimes, round ’ere. Don’t like the name ’Ollister, I suppose. Nor should I, I reckon.”

Lulworth let him ramble on. He knew, with this type of man, it was the best way in the long run to get from him all he knew. But he was closely attentive to what the lift attendant was saying.

“Bless you, you ain’t the first to ask me all I knows about Mrs. ’Ollister,” continued the other, who evidently enjoyed gossiping. “First the cops came along, and then the bloomin’ papers. We had a lady reporter in yesterday. I rather took to ’er. ‘Can I trust you?’ she says. ‘With your life, miss,’ says I, ’er ’aving blue eyes, to which I’m partial.

“‘Oh, I’m a reporter,’ says she. ‘Who’s that lady just gone up?’ meanin’ to say Mrs. ’Ollister. She were going to follow ’er home, I reckon, by the way she was talking.”

Lulworth had a sudden inspiration. Supposing Avril had recognised Mrs. Hollister in the train and had followed her? He had assumed the other way round, that it was Mrs. Hollister who had made the first advances, but the inverse might equally have been true. It would be typical of Avril to seize any opportunity and make the most of it. He pulled out her photograph.

“That wasn’t the lady, by any chance?” he asked quietly.

“You’ve hit the bull’s eye first go off,” answered the attendant. “That’s ’er all right.”

So Avril had recognised the woman in black and had followed her—and nothing had been heard of her since! For a moment Lulworth’s heart sank. The woman in black was to him a sinister figure. She had appeared the night Bilsiter had been murdered, and then again when he, Lulworth, had been attacked in the grounds of Rowmands; and now, the third time he had heard of her, as it were, Avril had disappeared.

“Here’s your note,” he said finally. “You have given me some information I wanted. I wish you had seen the way the two ladies went. Here’s my card.”

He scribbled on it his telephone number, and the lift attendant's eyes opened wide as he saw that he had been talking familiarly to a baronet.

"Sorry if I spoke disrespectfully——" he began.

"If either of the ladies come here again, telephone me straight away," interrupted the other. "And try to keep them talking afterwards till I come along. There's a five-pound note if you do, perhaps more."

"You bet—I mean right, sir," answered the attendant, touching his cap.

"And now what's the next move?" said Lulworth to himself, as he walked thoughtfully along Southampton Row towards Holborn. Pellington, he found, had parked the car in the centre of the road with a number of other cars.

"I should try the taxis, sir," said the manservant when he learned the story the lift attendant had had to tell.

He nodded in the direction of the rank, but a few yards away. Lulworth seized eagerly upon the suggestion and here he found the information for which he sought. Both drivers happened to be on the rank who had driven Avril and Mrs. Hollister the day before, and from them Lulworth learnt that the latter lived in a large block of flats near Victoria Station. Within ten minutes of receiving the news Pellington pulled up the car outside the flats and with a thrill of expectation his master entered the building.

"Mrs. Hollister? No. 29."

The attendant spoke crisply, and there was an air of inquiry in his face which Lulworth did not fail to note.

"I suppose she is in?" he asked sharply.

"Lord bless you, sir, yes. Are you a reporter? The police got here ten minutes ago, and the reporters generally follow pretty quick. I can tell you all about it, sir. My wife she spots her picture in the paper, and there you are. I says it was my duty to go round and tell the police. Couple of them arrived ten minutes ago."

"I'll go straight up," said Lulworth curtly.

He was annoyed that Lanner had forestalled him; but he wasn't concerned with the finding so much of the woman in black as in finding Avril. Certainly the inspector would not know yet what he had learnt of Avril's movements, for it was unlikely, he reflected grimly, that Mrs. Hollister would give much away.

Outside No. 29 he saw a man standing who at once spoke to him when he put up his hand to press the bell-push.

"Begging your pardon, sir, do you want Mrs. Hollister? My instructions are——"

"You are from Scotland Yard, I suppose?" interrupted Lulworth. "Inspector Lanner inside? I have come to see him."

The other nodded mechanically, deceived by the sure tones of the baronet.

"I am sorry, sir," he said apologetically, "but Inspector Lanner gave me very strict instructions no one was to be allowed to enter."

"That's quite correct," replied Lulworth easily, pressing the bell-push. "I expect you'll have half the newspaper reporters round here shortly. News like this spreads. Tell

Inspector Lanner—Sir Richard Lulworth,” he continued quickly as a very white and scared-looking maid opened the door.

“Ze inspector, he is with madam in the sitting-room, sir,” said Jeanette.

“I’ll go straight in. You needn’t announce me,” said Lulworth decisively, as the maid hesitated. “The inspector is expecting me.”

Certainly Lanner showed no surprise as Lulworth opened the door and coolly walked in.

“You’ve been quick, sir,” he said genially. “This is Sir Richard Lulworth, Mrs. Hollister.”

Lulworth looked with interest at the bold, dark beauty of the woman whom he had last seen standing under the trees at Rowmands, at three o’clock in the morning. There was no sign of recognition in those dark eyes. She inclined her head formally, without any comment. She was sitting with her back to the window and Lulworth took a chair near the inspector, facing her.

“I was just asking Mrs. Hollister to explain some of her movements and actions during the past few days,” said the inspector easily, as though Lulworth were a coadjutor in his inquiries. “Mrs. Hollister has already told me that she was very friendly with Mr. Bilsiter and came down to Rowmands to warn him he was in danger, as her husband had been released from prison.”

“My husband was a terribly determined man,” said Mrs. Hollister. “I have never known him to go back on his word.”

“So you really believe he was determined to murder Mr. Bilsiter after three years’ reflection?” said the inspector.

“I was frightened enough, at any rate, to take the first train down to Beaconsfield and see Mr. Bilsiter when I learnt the news of my husband’s release,” she retorted. “You don’t know my husband as I do. No one does.”

The last words were said bitterly. She had not definitely replied “Yes” or “No” to the inspector’s question, but she had left the two men with the strong impression that her husband was perfectly capable of murdering Bilsiter, and, in her opinion, had done so.

“I have asked Sir Richard Lulworth to come here,” continued the inspector, looking the baronet calmly in the face as he lied so deliberately, “Because he saw you in the grounds of Rowmands at three o’clock in the morning, when he was struck on the head by someone and knocked unconscious.”

“That is true,” replied Mrs. Hollister in a low voice. “May I explain, please?”

“I shall be very interested to hear any explanation you may have to offer, Mrs. Hollister,” said the inspector politely.

Lanner was certainly interested, though he was by no means so interested as to believe all he heard without verification, if that were possible.

“I was terribly frightened when I heard that Mr. Bilsiter had been murdered,” she began. “You must try to put yourself in my place, please. I was sure that my husband

would never forgive and—and when I heard that Leonard—Mr. Bilsiter—was dead, I thought at once—oh, don't you understand?"

She wrung her hands as her voice broke, a little too artistically thought Lanner, who, however, made no audible comment.

"I was the cause of it all," she continued. "And I was terrified. I had lost the man I loved and saw I should have everyone pointing at me as the wife of—of a murderer. I think I must have lost my head. I wandered about trying to think what to do. I had no idea the police wanted to see me. I did not attempt to hide. I came up to town by an ordinary train in the middle of the day, and I am well known here. It was easy enough to find me."

"You lost your head when you heard the news?" interrupted Lanner quietly, "and wandered about?"

"Rowmands held a terrible fascination for me. I wanted to see Leonard—Mr. Bilsiter—even dead."

She whispered the last two words in such a low voice that the inspector only just heard them.

"That is why I was there," she continued after a pause. "I wasn't waiting for anyone. I had no one to wait for. I wanted to look in at the window of the room in which Leonard was lying. I knew where he slept. He had told me when I warned him, because I asked him if his bedroom was safe. Oh, if only I had known! I could have watched outside all night rather than he should die like that. It's wicked, cruel. Why should I be made to suffer like that? What have I done to deserve it?"

The inspector reflected that the other had done quite a lot which did not entitle her to the pity she seemed to expect. He was wondering, too, how much was acting, how much genuine.

"I couldn't possibly have slept that night. I was overwhelmed," she continued. "As I stood there everything seemed so still and quiet. Then I heard a stick snap quite close to me, and I was frightened. I called out something and turned round. Then I saw two men. One had got a stick in his hand, and was just raising it to strike the other. I think I screamed, I don't know. But I heard a crash behind me, and I turned and ran as fast as I could. I expected to be killed. I was frightened out of my life. I shall never forget the horror of that moment."

There was a strained, anxious look on her face as she ceased, as she took out a daintily embroidered handkerchief and nervously wiped her lips.

"I don't think I can tell you any more," she added slowly, as neither of the two men spoke.

"Didn't you see the faces of the two men?" asked the inspector, after an interval.

Mrs. Hollister shook her head.

"I was standing in the shadow of the trees," she replied. "And they must have been coming along in the shadow as well."

Sir Richard Lulworth was thinking hard. He had intended, when he first entered the flat, to accuse her immediately of knowing where Avril was, but while she had been

speaking he had realised that direct accusation might defeat its own object. It was necessary to use more subtle means. Mrs. Hollister was much too clever not to be ready to give a plausible account of her movements. He had no doubt whatever, clever as her story was, that it was untrue to say she was not waiting for someone. He had felt certain as he had watched her that night that she had been keeping an assignation.

“I have one or two questions I should like to ask Mrs. Hollister,” he said quietly, turning to the inspector. “Unless you want to go on.”

“No. I don’t think I want to ask anymore questions—yet,” returned Lanner.

Mrs. Hollister’s face flushed as he paused before the last word, and she bit her lip to control herself.

“What do you wish to ask me, Sir Richard?”

There was a challenge in her tones, a look in her bold eyes which seemed to convey to him that it would be wise if he did not ask too much.

“I should like to know where you first went when you arrived in London yesterday,” said Lulworth slowly.

“That’s easily answered. I took the tube from Marylebone Station to the British Museum and called at Mr. Bilsiter’s office,” she replied. “I wanted to see Brandt, the assistant there, to find out if he had heard any further news. Then I came home and had tea and stayed in all the evening. My maid, Jeanette, will corroborate me there. To-day I spent the morning in Kensington Gardens, had lunch at a restaurant near Victoria, and came back home to tea. Then Inspector Lanner called.”

It was all very plausible, too plausible from Lanner’s point of view. She was too ready, he reflected, to give an account of her movements, and gave that account without any hesitation. He did not doubt that there was a considerable amount of truth in what she had said, and this would make it more difficult to find out what was not the truth.

As for Lulworth, he made no attempt to refute her story. He knew very well that he could not challenge her with having called at the stationer’s in the Clerkenwell Road, with having taken away a package addressed to Richard Worth. Inspector Lanner was listening, and once he learnt of the existence of those papers—and Bilsiter’s revolver—it would be impossible to prevent him putting his hands on them. And that, reflected Lulworth, would mean that he would find himself in a difficult position, one not easy to explain, to say the least of it, without admitting the identity of Charity Sheen. No, if and when he challenged this woman, he would do it when Lanner was not present.

“The other question I should like to ask you,” he continued, “is this. Was Mr. Bilsiter the only person you knew who was staying at Rowmands?”

“Oh, no,” replied Mrs. Hollister. “I knew Mr. Sturridge as well. There’s his photograph.”

She pointed with a smile to the mantelpiece.

“Yes, I knew that, Mrs. Hollister,” said Inspector Lanner with a smile. “Mr. Sturridge told me last night. I forgot to mention it to you this morning, Sir Richard.”

He grinned in a friendly fashion as Lulworth looked at him in astonishment. The latter was beginning to wonder how much the friendly, genial inspector did know.

The fact that Mrs. Hollister knew Sturridge came as rather a shock to Richard Lulworth. Sturridge was a man who thoroughly puzzled him, a man who had that slow, precise way of speaking, that cautious little pause before he replied, even in ordinary conversation, which showed he was a man who was very careful in what he actually said. That he should know a woman of the type of Mrs. Hollister was unexpected, and he wondered what their relationship was. Sturridge had never struck him as being the kind of man who would have a liaison with any woman. He was, Lulworth knew, a man of immense ambition, a rising man in his party; indeed, a man who would go a long way. He had the political mind, and with it a hatred of committing himself definitely, of compromising himself.

“No,” reflected Lulworth. “I’ll give the man that credit. He is not so stupid as to risk spoiling his reputation with Mrs. Hollister. Yet it is quite evident they are on friendly terms. She wouldn’t have his photograph on her mantelpiece if they were not friendly. I wonder what Sturridge told Lanner about her?”

The question he had asked himself was echoed aloud by Mrs. Hollister.

“So Mr. Sturridge told you I knew him, or he knew me, Mr. Lanner?” she said in a questioning tone “I hope he said something nice about me.”

“He seems to have known you for some years, Mrs. Hollister,” returned the inspector, avoiding a direct reply to her question. “It was not until late last night that he knew we were rather anxious to get in touch with you. When he did he telephoned me and I had a chat with him before I came up to town. He told me——”

There came a sudden ring at the bell, and the inspector paused. A moment later Jeannette appeared and announced that someone from Scotland Yard would like to see Inspector Lanner for a moment.

“Excuse me,” said the inspector, rising.

As the door closed behind him Lulworth leant forward and looked Mrs. Hollister in the face.

“Where is Miss Ableway?” he demanded, without any preamble. “I happen to know she has been here, that she came up from Beaconsfield in the train with you.”

For just an instant he saw a startled look in her eyes, but it vanished immediately.

“Yes, it is quite true that she came up in the train with me, and afterwards came here,” she replied slowly. “Is there anything the matter?”

She spoke quite calmly, as though it were a matter of indifference to her where Avril was.

“Only this, Mrs. Hollister,” said Lulworth sternly, “Miss Ableway was seen to enter this flat yesterday afternoon and she has not been seen since. I am not leaving here until I know what has happened, until I have searched the flat.”

“What right have you to speak to me like that?” she answered with a show of indignation. “I am not responsible for Miss Ableway’s movements.”

“I have this right, Mrs. Hollister, that Miss Ableway and I are engaged to be married,” he replied sharply. “And whether you are responsible for Miss Ableway’s movements or not is beside the point. She was here yesterday and as far as I am

concerned you are under suspicion. I am not satisfied with your account of your movements at Rowmands, or that you did not see the man who struck me down. Nor, I think, is Inspector Lanner. You are putting yourself in a false position by not telling the exact truth. I shall——”

He broke off quickly as the door opened softly and Lanner beckoned to him to step outside in the hallway.

“How did you get hold of her address?” he asked quietly. “I thought you were making inquiries about Miss Ableway.”

Briefly Lulworth outlined how he had arrived at the flat.

“That’s creditable work, sir,” said the inspector when he had finished. “I wonder if you would carry on with it and find out what you can from her?”

“Why not ask Mrs. Hollister yourself?” said Lulworth.

“That’s partly why I called you out, sir,” replied the inspector with a friendly smile. “But I just wanted to hear your story before I asked you what I am going to ask. Mrs. Hollister thinks you are a colleague of mine. I wonder if you would continue with the role for a little while? It’s important that I should know what she said to Miss Ableway yesterday. And you want to find her as well. But I can’t stop now. I was going to examine her on that point when I was called out of the room. Pellington told me yesterday that he had seen Mrs. Hollister in the same carriage as Miss Ableway and that made me suspicious at once when I heard she had disappeared. I have not told Sir John of my suspicions. He is a little difficult at present, sir,” he added with a grin.

“You don’t believe her story?”

“Not much of it,” replied Lanner.

“Why not take her to the station and detain her?”

The inspector shook his head.

“I’m not fond of those methods myself,” he answered. “And if she doesn’t want to speak it will not do much good. We shan’t lose sight of her again, I can assure you. I’ve got a man on the door and another in the street, ready to shadow her if she does go out. But if you talk to her she may make a slip and then you must use your own judgment as to what to do. Sergeant Maxwell outside will give you any advice if you want it. I shall be glad if you will call later at Scotland Yard and tell me what you know. I expect I shall be there most of this evening.”

As he opened the door to let himself out, he added in a low voice: “Don’t let her know, but there’s an important development, and we may be nearer the solution of the mystery of Bilsiter’s death than we were—well, this time yesterday.”

He had gone before Lulworth could frame the question on his lips. He was beginning to have a rising opinion of the inspector. Lanner had shown in a number of ways that he was shrewd, that he could keep his own counsel when he wished, could choose the right moment, too, to become confidential. Lanner had, indeed, quite deliberately decided to ask Lulworth to do his best to extract information from Mrs. Hollister. From Lanner’s point of view, Lulworth was the best man for the job, at the moment, for he had the added incentive of searching for Avril. The inspector had

watched the baronet when he first entered the room and while he was talking to Mrs. Hollister, and he had no lingering doubts that they had not met before.

But it was only important news which would have made him leave so hurriedly. From his point of view the news he had received from the detective who had been sent from Scotland Yard especially to find him was the most important news he had yet had since Bilsiter was murdered. It was no less than that John Hollister had reported himself to the Beaconsfield police that afternoon, and was now well on his way to London, accompanied by a police-sergeant, to interview the man in charge of the investigation.

Lanner had descended the whole four flights of stairs leading from Mrs. Hollister's flat and had stepped into the street before Lulworth walked thoughtfully back to the sitting-room.

"Inspector Lanner has been called away for a short while," he explained. "And now," he added harshly, "you will perhaps explain about Miss Ableway."

"Now that the inspector has so conveniently"—she accented the word deliberately—"absented himself, Sir Richard, I can speak a little more freely," she answered.

There was a greater confidence in her tones than had appeared when the inspector was present.

"Miss Ableway is quite safe," she continued calmly. "And if she hadn't been foolish, if she hadn't overexcited herself, you might not have had the trouble of coming here."

"Where is she?" he demanded, taking a step forward. There was an angry look in his grey eyes.

"You will gain nothing by losing your temper, or threatening me. You may be suspicious of me, but I am suspicious of you. There are two sides to everything. And my side this time is just as strong as yours. If you will wait here I will tell you what you want to know, in a few minutes."

Lulworth took a grip of himself. For one wild moment he felt like making a scene, of taking this woman by the shoulders and shaking the truth out of her. But she was quite right, there was nothing to gain by losing his temper. There never was, come to that: loss of temper only resulted in loss of ability to reason things out calmly. He had no fear of this woman tricking him, of getting out of the flat and away while he sat there. Lanner had seen to that. He wondered what her game was, what object she had in going out before telling him what he wanted so eagerly to know.

Mrs. Hollister was no fool, however. She had felt that if Lulworth had entered that bedroom in which Avril was lying—where Tommy Ableway had gone when Inspector Lanner had been so unexpectedly announced—entered it without warning, Tommy might say something which she did not want him to say. She wanted to prepare him first.

She found Avril awake and talking in low tones to her brother.

"So you drugged my sister?" he demanded when she entered the room. "You might have killed her. I——"

“Drugged your sister?” repeated the other, her eyes opening wide with astonishment. “What do you mean?”

“She has just been telling me what really happened,” said Tommy wrathfully.

Mrs. Hollister, with a smile, came up beside the bed.

“Are you feeling better?” she asked softly, bending over Avril. “I think some terrible mistake must have been made. You fainted suddenly yesterday while you were having tea with me. Don’t you remember? I thought you were a reporter, and I was just going to tell you what happened at Beaconsfield, when——”

Avril looked steadily into the dark eyes of the other. She had no illusions as to what had happened. She was still feeling confused in her mind over certain things. She had not yet learnt how her brother had turned up, for one thing.

“That was twenty-four hours ago, Mrs. Hollister,” she replied slowly. “It isn’t usual to faint for twenty-four hours.”

Mrs. Hollister nodded with what she intended to be a friendly little smile.

“I know that I was very frightened,” she answered. “I tried sal volatile and all sorts of things, and when you didn’t get better I telephoned for a doctor. He told me to put you to bed. He didn’t seem to know what was the matter. You woke up once, my maid tells me, but I told her very strictly she was not to answer any questions in case she frightened you. I looked in your bag to find out where you lived, but there was nothing there. And I telephoned the *Monitor*, but naturally they knew nothing about you, I didn’t know you were deceiving me, did I?”

Mrs. Hollister was finding, as many another person had found before her, that one lie necessarily led to another, if she did not want to be found out. She could be a fluent liar, when necessary and she thought it necessary now. She did not want Avril or her brother to make any stir until she had to some extent consolidated her own position and already in her own mind she had a scheme for doing that. She had little doubt she could make Tommy Ableway do exactly what she wanted but with Avril she had not been so certain, until the arrival of Sir Richard Lulworth on the scene had started her thinking on fresh lines.

Avril made no reply to the other’s question. She did not believe her story, she had too vivid a recollection of her feelings, of the triumphant look on the face of Mrs. Hollister as she had sunk back into unconsciousness. But, she reflected, there was nothing whatever to be gained by accusing the other of not telling the truth.

“I am afraid I am not very fit to think about what happened,” she said slowly. “Only it’s very unlike me to faint, and that’s why I told Tommy you must have given me something. However, now I am beginning to feel better and you know who I am, perhaps you will telephone my father.”

“I have already got a friend of yours here,” replied Mrs. Hollister. “I will send him in. Can you come along with me a moment?” she added, turning to Tommy Ableway.

Out in the hall she turned on him quickly.

“Lulworth is here,” she said rapidly. “He’ll want to know how you got here. You’d better tell him half the truth. Tell him you went to Bilsiter’s office this afternoon and

got my address and came along here to make inquiries about your sister. He's done exactly the same thing himself, so he can't say much to you at the moment. If he doesn't believe it, it doesn't matter. He won't say anything to your father. I'll fix that," she added grimly. "No, don't argue. There's no time for that. If you waste time that way the whole truth may come out."

She took hold of his arm as far as the sitting-room door.

"Go in first, I'll follow."

There was nothing else for Tommy to do, but it was with a flushed face that he entered the room and saw Lulworth standing by the mantelpiece.

"Hallo, Ableway, this is unexpected," said the latter at once. "Are all the people who were in Rowmands yesterday here?" he added in a bantering tone.

"Only my sister, sir," replied the other, glad of the opening which had been offered to him. "I came here early this afternoon and found her. I'll explain how later," he added hurriedly.

"How you found her doesn't matter for the moment," returned Lulworth, with a smile of relief lighting up his face. "Thank God you have found her."

"She has been ill, as I have already explained to Mr. Ableway," interposed Mrs. Hollister.

"Ill? What's the matter?"

The anxiety in his tones was only too evident.

"It's nothing serious," said Tommy. "My sister fainted and Mrs. Hollister has been looking after her."

"May I see her?"

"I came in to ask if you wished to do so," answered Mrs. Hollister.

There was a smile on her face which puzzled him. He wondered if he had misjudged her.

"I'll go along straight away," he said quietly.

His heart was thumping as he entered the room and heard Avril's emotional cry.

"Richard, my dear."

He kissed her trembling lips, and took her slim hand in his as he sat down beside her.

"I knew you would come," she whispered. "And now I have nothing more to worry about. I have been thinking dreadful things. That woman——"

"Don't think about her any more, my little darling," he said soothingly. "You are in my hands now, and not all the Mrs. Hollisters in the world can take you away from me. Let me do all the worrying. Last time, my dear, it was I who was in bed. Now things are reversed. It is my turn to do things for you."

"And you won't make such a foolish mess of them as I have done," she answered with a happy smile. "I feel ever so much better even this last minute or two. You act like a tonic, Richard, my dear. I want to tell you all that has happened."

“I don’t want to listen for the moment,” Richard answered. “I want you to go on feeling better, Avril, and when you are quite well you can tell me all about it. I want to get you away from here just as soon as possible.”

“If Mrs. Hollister’s maid will bring me some tea, a woman’s unfailing last resource, I shall get her to help me to dress immediately. I really am beginning to feel all right, though a bit heavy and sleepy. But a cup of strong tea——”

“Then I shall run away immediately, my little dear,” he said cheerfully. “Pellington, good old faithful Pellington, has been patiently waiting outside for some time with the car, and we’ll drive you straight home.”

“You had better get along and warn your father that Avril has been found and will be home in an hour or so,” he said a few minutes later to Tommy. “I’ll bring her along in my car.”

Tommy was evidently relieved to get away. When Mrs. Hollister had gone out of the room to tell Jeanette to prepare some tea for Avril and help her to dress, he had felt uneasy at being left alone with Lulworth. He did not know what questions the latter might ask, and he did not lie quite so easily as the more practised woman under whose spell he had fallen.

He was infinitely glad that Lulworth had not asked him any questions at all, and he slipped out of the flat without troubling to take a formal farewell of Mrs. Hollister.

“And now, Mrs. Hollister,” said Lulworth, on her return, “I have one or two things to say to you while Miss Ableway is dressing.”

CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. HOLLISTER THREATENS

“YOU have one or two things to say to me,” mimicked Mrs. Hollister as Lulworth’s grey eyes looked into her own. “Say on, Sir Richard.”

“First of all, what have you done with the papers you stole this morning?” he asked sharply.

“And Leonard’s—Mr. Bilsiter’s revolver?” she added, with a defiant smile. “Don’t forget the revolver which he always carried to protect himself, Sir Richard.”

“I’m not forgetting the revolver,” he answered. “We may as well come down to bedrock, Mrs. Hollister. What are you going to do with them?”

“I don’t quite know yet,” she answered. “It depends upon the attitude you and Miss Ableway take up. She’ll tell you the truth, and you may as well know it now. She followed me from Beaconsfield here, posed as a newspaper reporter and tried to worm things out of me. I thought she was a reporter for the moment, I didn’t want the police or anyone else coming round till I had time to think. I was frightened. I lost my head. I thought people would be accusing me of committing the murder. Miss Ableway told me I was in grave danger, she told me I had been seen in Rowmands at three o’clock in the morning. I put something in her tea to make her sleep till——”

“Till you could think out some clever lie,” interrupted Lulworth angrily. “You might have killed her.”

“I might, but she’s still alive,” answered the other coolly. “I was terror stricken, though you don’t believe it, and I took the easiest way out. If she had told me who she really was I shouldn’t have done it. But I thought she was a newspaper reporter, and I had sufficient experience of newspapers during the trial of my husband,” she added bitterly.

“And you’ve only made suspicion worse against yourself by your actions,” he pointed out.

“If you and Miss Ableway choose to tell the truth, perhaps I have,” she answered. “But I don’t think you will.”

He looked at her steadily. So that was it, was it, blackmail. He laughed softly to himself.

“Our silence against those papers? Is that it?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” she replied. “Your silence may not be necessary, won’t be when the murderer of Mr. Bilsiter is discovered. But Inspector Lanner would be very interested to know how those papers and revolver were sent to a stationer’s in London from Beaconsfield, and who sent them.”

“I expect he would,” he replied grimly. “As I expect he would be interested to hear for whom you waited that night in Rowmands. You may as well make up your mind to this, he doesn’t believe for one moment that fantastic story you told him.”

“He may or may not,” she answered indifferently. “I did not murder Leonard, if that is what you think or what Inspector Lanner thinks. I had no reason to do so, while plenty of people had.”

“As for example?”

“Leonard’s business brought him many enemies,” she pointed out. “And my husband had threatened him.”

“How does the keeping of those papers and revolver affect that?” he asked her.

“The man who took those papers, took that revolver, might have taken Leonard’s life,” she answered slowly.

She was watching him closely as she spoke, and in a flash he saw the drift of what she was saying. She was accusing him of having taken the papers, implying that he was the murderer. He realised the danger of his position, and wondered what he should do. To submit to blackmail was unthinkable, to defy her and tell her to do what she liked might put him in such a position that he could not save himself. He was between the devil and the deep sea.

“What exactly do you mean, and what exactly do you want?” he asked quietly. “We may as well know where we are.”

“I mean that you are in just as dangerous a position as I am,” she replied, “and any action taken against me may come back on you. I want nothing at present. I may want a lot in the future. You are rich, you have many influential friends. You can use both.”

“And I tell you here and now,” he said harshly, “that I shall never spend a penny of my money to save you from the consequences of any of your actions. I shall not influence a single friend in your favour.”

“Fiddlesticks,” said Mrs. Hollister rudely. “If you were the only one concerned, I don’t suppose you would. But Miss Ableway may have something to say.”

He opened his mouth to speak, raised his hand as though he would strike her, and then let it fall with a gesture of despair by his side. He hadn’t thought of Avril while she had been speaking, and now the mention of her name brought back to him the full consequences of what might happen if Lanner did make the discovery she threatened he might make in some circumstances.

“Think it over, Sir Richard,” she added with a mocking smile. “I will see how Miss Ableway is getting on.”

He paced up and down the room, thinking hard. His life was no longer his own, he reflected. He could not act without consulting the woman he loved. That, at least, he owed to her for her courage in taking her stand by him when she believed he was Charity Sheen. He would not save her an atom of pain by running away and shirking the issues. He had tried to delude himself once that this was the best way out, that in time she would learn to forget. But he knew better now, knew that Avril was not the kind of woman who ever forgot. For good or ill their two lives were linked together for all time.

He had come to no decision when at last she entered the room, smiling cheerfully despite the whiteness of her face and the tired look in her eyes. And in her wake was

the woman whom Lulworth felt they might both learn to fear.

“I have thanked Mrs. Hollister for all she has done for me, Richard,” she said. “Are you ready to go? I am sure father must be getting terribly anxious.”

“I am only waiting for you,” he answered, and, with a few conventional words to Mrs. Hollister, he linked his arm in Avril’s and the two descended the lift together. Pellington touched his cap with a cheerful grin as he saw the two come out. “Glad to see you again, miss,” he said respectfully. “I thought Sir Richard would know where you were.”

“Thank Heaven I can breathe again,” cried Avril as she sank back on the luxurious seat. “That alone will make all the difference in the world. What story has she told you, Richard?”

“Tell me yours first,” he answered, and by the time he had heard all her adventures the car was pulling up outside Sir John Ableway’s house in Kensington.

“I am afraid you must wait till I see you again before you hear my story, my dear,” he said, as he refused her invitation to enter the house. “Tell me, when will that be?”

“To-morrow morning,” she replied promptly. “If the mountain won’t come to Mahomet, then Mahomet must come to the mountain.”

She understood his refusal and did not press him to alter his decision.

“Let us have some lunch together,” he suggested. “That is if you feel well enough. To-morrow morning, at ten o’clock, I have an appointment with my bankers, and at eleven with my solicitors. I’ll ring you up at twelve, say.”

“You are going to be busy,” she said playfully. “It sounds awfully important.”

“I think those two interviews may be the most important I have ever had,” he answered slowly.

CHAPTER XXIV

LULWORTH EXPLAINS

IT was late that night, after he had seen Avril safely home, before Sir Richard Lulworth went to bed. It had been a greater relief to his mind that she had been found than he perhaps realised. He was not of the worrying kind. Few men of action are. But though he did not consciously worry, unconsciously he had been doing so. He had been uneasy at not hearing from her in the first place, but he had controlled his feelings because he believed, not without reason, that the woman he loved was capable enough to take care of herself in most emergencies. He had not, however, visualised the lengths to which Mrs. Hollister was prepared to go. It had been a definite shock to him when Sir John Ableway and Inspector Lanner had come and told him there had been no trace of Avril since she had left Beaconsfield. It was then that he became the man of action, and when he left her, with thankfulness in his heart, he knew that he had got to act, and act quickly, again, if he wished to escape from the situation in which he found himself—a situation largely of his own creation.

That night he carefully reviewed all his actions of the past two years, figuring and calculating on sheets of paper. When he went to bed it was with the satisfied air of a man who had done the work he intended to do. The results of that work meant an interview with his banker and his solicitor. Both interviews, as he had told Avril, would have an important bearing on the future, and he had prepared for them with meticulous care. And there was a letter, too, he had to write, a letter he intended to be published in all the leading newspapers, as all the letters of Charity Sheen had been.

“Sheen is done with forever,” Lulworth said with a laugh, as he turned in. “His was a great adventure, though a thoroughly foolish one. No man can reform the world, no man can alter people’s natures as once I thought I could do. Avril, my dear, you are right. Nothing really justifies one breaking the Commandments. Stealing from people who have stolen in their turn can’t be justified on that score. It’s the old, old story, two blacks don’t make a white, though I was idiot enough to believe they did at one time.”

Now that he had come to the decision which, but for the spirit of adventure in his veins, he would have come to long ago, he felt happier and easier in his mind. When he woke the following morning he was surprised at himself, how much better he felt, both physically and mentally. At mid-day, the work of the morning done, he rang up Avril, and arranged to meet her for lunch.

“Somewhere quiet, my dear,” she said when she met him. “Somewhere where we can talk. I have a lot to talk about.”

“So have I,” he replied. “Yesterday was like a nightmare to me, when I learnt you had gone.”

“Did you really miss me, then?” she asked with a happy little smile. “But of course you did,” she added, squeezing his arm affectionately.

“Miss you,” he cried fervently. “I thought for a while the bottom had fallen out of the world. I verily believe I would have killed that woman with my bare hands if you’d

come to any real harm.”

She walked into the quiet little restaurant he had chosen, feeling very content. It was wonderful, she reflected, to be loved like that, to see the flashing light in his grey eyes as he looked at her, to hear the anxious intonation of his voice. Whatever faults Richard might have, they were, she knew, not fundamentally bad ones. She was perfectly sure that she had chosen right, that sooner or later even her father and Inspector Lanner would come to believe in him even as she did now, would know that he was utterly incapable of committing a murder.

“They have a delightful coffee lounge here,” he said, when their menu had been chosen, “and we can talk there to our hearts’ content.”

“Well, let’s forget all our troubles till the coffee,” she cried gaily. “Do you realise, Richard mine, this is the first time I have ever lunched with you—alone?”

“The first of many,” he answered, raising his glass and silently pledging her. “Frankly, my darling, it’s a wonderful thing to be in love.”

“It’s the most wonderful thing in the world. But it’s dreadfully wearing, Richard. I am only now beginning to realise what a huge responsibility you are, what a big-hearted, foolish, adventurous baby I have got on my hands.”

“All men are babies, really, to the women who love them,” he answered. “But I can be very cantankerous sometimes. I have a dreadful temper if I’m roused.”

“I don’t mind—and I don’t believe it,” she flashed back. “All nice men like to think they’ve got dreadful tempers and hold out vague threats of what they will do when they are roused. The difficulty is you can’t rouse them. Men who really have got uncontrollable tempers don’t seem to know it. At any rate, they never boast about them.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t give you a fair warning,” he cried. “It is not too late to draw back.”

“I shall never draw back,” said Avril with a sudden seriousness in her tones.

Chaffing one another, like two happy children, lunch seemed all too short a meal, and when the waiter brought them their coffee both, as two minds perfectly attuned, became serious.

“I told you my story yesterday,” she said. “It is your turn to tell me yours. How did you manage to find me so quickly?”

“I think you really owe that to Pellington,” he answered generously. “He remembered who the woman was sitting in the same carriage with you when you left Beaconsfield. All I had got to do was to find Mrs. Hollister.”

He related how he had gone up to Leonard Bilsiter’s office and from there traced the taxi-drivers who had brought Avril and Mrs. Hollister to the latter’s flat near Victoria.

“I was surprised to find Lanner had forestalled me, though only by a few minutes,” he finished.

“That wasn’t due to any brains on his part,” she answered. “Though, to give him credit, I think he would have found out in the same way as you did in the long run. But

he hadn't got your motive for hurrying." She smiled contentedly as she spoke. "The lift attendant at the block of flats gave information to the police. His wife saw her photograph in the newspapers and recognised it."

"What was your brother doing there?" he asked.

A troubled look passed over her face.

"I don't understand Tommy," she said. "He asked me not to tell daddy that he found me in Mrs. Hollister's flat. He said daddy wouldn't understand. I don't understand, either. He told me he had met her once with Mr. Bilsiter, and had been introduced to her. Richard, my dear, I believe he thinks he is in love with her."

"Nonsense. He must be ten years younger than she is."

"Age doesn't make any difference. He kept on telling me what a clever woman she was, how everybody blamed her because her husband had threatened Bilsiter. He talked as though she could do no wrong. And—and—he seems to have taken a sudden dislike to you."

"To me?" echoed the other, in a puzzled voice. "Because I found him in the flat?"

"No, it's not that," she answered, shaking her head. "I found out he disliked you before he knew you were in the flat, while you and Inspector Lanner must have been talking to Mrs. Hollister. I am sure she has poisoned his mind against you in some way or other, because he was always singing your praises at Beaconsfield. Nothing was too good for you then, and I remember him saying, when he first learnt that we were engaged, that he was glad I had chosen you. This morning he told me that he felt it his duty to warn me against you. If it weren't so serious, it would be comic. Have you said anything to him to make him wild?"

Lulworth shook his head.

He puffed silently at his cigarette for some minutes before he replied. He was asking himself the question—should he tell her all he knew, or should he try to carry on as best he could? It was a natural thing for him to shoulder his responsibilities, to decide for himself for good or ill. But that was in the past. Now he had more than himself to consider; he had one whom he had taken into full partnership. He had fallen in love with Avril for some of the very qualities which she possessed, and one of these was that she was not afraid to look events in the face, was not afraid to shoulder responsibilities. Sooner or later she must know, and it was better that she should know from his lips than from someone who might distort the facts.

"I have something serious to say to you about Tommy," he began. "Something which will hurt you. But I think you would rather I told you than—than—"

"Than it all came out without me having heard it before?" she finished.

She leant forward, and her slim fingers rested lightly on his arm. There was a grave and tender look in her blue eyes as she spoke.

"You must always tell me everything, Richard," she said bravely, "whether you think it will hurt me or not. Nothing is ever gained by keeping things back. I may have things to tell you some day which may hurt, but I should not let that stand in the way. I have confidence enough in you, I love you so much, that I know you will understand

whatever I say. And I want you to be the same with me. I shall understand. I want to help you as well as be loved by you.”

He pressed her fingers affectionately.

“You make it as easy for me as you can, little darling,” he whispered. “I will tell you from the beginning. Of course I know you will understand, and you mustn’t blame Tommy too much. He is very young, you know, but there is nothing really wrong with him. I think this will be a lesson to him that he will not forget in a hurry.

“Well, to cut the story as short as I can, about a week before I went down to Beaconsfield, Tommy came to me in a state of great agitation. You see, little one,” he interpolated with a smile, “I had rather cultivated his acquaintance because he was your brother, and I think at times he rather looked upon me as a big brother of his. He told me that he had backed a promissory note for a pal of his who had borrowed from Bilsiter. There was every reason, I believe, to expect that the money would be there when the note fell due. Bilsiter refused to take Tommy’s signature, but suggested that of your father. And——”

“And he forged daddy’s name,” she interrupted quickly, her face going white.

“Just that,” he answered. “Then Bilsiter turned nasty, threatened to go to his father. Tommy pleaded for a week’s grace, and came and told me. It was shortly after that that Charity Sheen telephoned Bilsiter and told him that he intended to get a certain paper from him. You remember how you inveighed against Sheen when Bilsiter announced that threat at the dinner table.”

“Yes,” she said in a low voice. “But I didn’t know then, my dear. Go on, please.”

“I told Tommy not to worry, told him that I would buy the paper from Bilsiter. Naturally I couldn’t say I was Sheen. He might have talked. I don’t think he suspected there was any connection between Sheen’s threat and my suggestion that I would interview Bilsiter and buy the paper from him. Well, as you know, I got that paper, among others.”

“And I never knew,” she cried. “Poor foolish Tommy! But he ought to be immensely grateful to you, Richard. Why should he say things against you? What is wrong? I don’t understand. Have you told him it is all right?”

“It isn’t all right,” he answered gravely. “There is worse to come, Avril.”

He hesitated, but she did not speak, only stared at him with growing fear in her eyes.

“When I began to make inquiries, after your father and Inspector Lanner had failed to find you,” he continued, “I sent Pellington to the stationer’s shop to see what time you called there.”

“But I didn’t. I was afraid I might be followed. I never intended really going there. And I followed Mrs. Hollister.”

“It was Mrs. Hollister who called, yesterday morning, and took away the papers and Bilsiter’s revolver,” he added, “though I don’t know how she found out.”

Avril buried her face in her hands. She was quick-witted, intuitive, and she saw immediately what Lulworth’s news meant. It meant just this, that Mrs. Hollister had got

a stranglehold on Tommy, and she would not leave go until she was satisfied it was safe to do so.

“It was my carelessness,” she said, when she looked up again with drawn face. “I made a note of the name and address on a scrap of paper, instead of relying upon my memory. She must have found it in my bag, and gone there.”

“I tried to get those papers from her, but she refused to give them up,” he continued. “She frankly admitted that she is keeping them because they might prove useful, though she doesn’t quite know in what way yet.”

“She has already begun to use them,” pointed out Avril. “She is holding that one paper over Tommy, using it to influence him against you. What story she has told him I don’t know, but we do know the result. At Beaconsfield he was singing your praises. Now he is not.”

“I fancy he began to avoid me even at Beaconsfield, especially after Bilsiter was murdered,” said Lulworth.

“Well, I am not going to let you suffer, even for Tommy,” said Avril decisively. “Things are quite bad enough for you, Richard, without taking on the sins of the Ableways. I think I shall tell daddy the truth, or Inspector Lanner.”

“I don’t think that is wise, yet. There’s your letter to me. That also is missing, don’t forget, and we haven’t the slightest idea who has got it or how they intend to use it.”

“Sturridge has got it, I feel sure. My dear, you were going to make some inquiries about Mr. Sturridge.”

“I have already started to do so,” he answered. “I was too busy myself to see the man I wanted this morning, so I sent Pellington along. I am employing one of the best private inquiry agents in the country. I have told him that he must be quick, that the cost doesn’t matter. By this time to-morrow I shall know a lot about Sturridge. The detective will have a good deal to start with. The main outlines of his life are, of course, public property, as he is a rising politician. But, frankly, my dear, I think the inquiry will lead to nothing.”

“And I believe just the opposite,” she argued. “He knows Mrs. Hollister well enough to give her his photograph.”

“She could have bought that if she wanted to. His photograph—”

“No, no, he’s not a Rudolph Valentino,” she cried with a smile. “That’s only an excuse in your mind, Richard. They know one another, and—”

“Yes, I must admit they do,” he answered. “In fact, Sturridge told Lanner that he knew her.”

Sir Richard told Avril of the conversation he and the inspector had had with Mrs. Hollister.

“I should like to know exactly what Sturridge *did* tell the inspector,” said Avril, thoughtfully. “There’s quite a lot we can tell Inspector Lanner about him, don’t forget. What was he doing in your bedroom, when you were lying unconscious downstairs? Who telephoned him and warned him? The inspector knows nothing about that message yet.”

“I haven’t your confidence that the inspector doesn’t know. I shall not be surprised to hear that he knows all about it,” said Lulworth. “Lanner is one of the brainiest policemen I have met.”

“I feel in my bones that Sturridge doesn’t like you,” continued Avril, not to be swayed from her point of view. “Oh, Richard, what are we going to do?”

“First of all we are not going to worry,” he replied in confident tones. “Secondly we must wait until I get the report on Sturridge, and thirdly I think our next step will have to be to offer to tell Lanner some of the things we know, in return for some of the things he knows.”

Suddenly Avril leant forward and clutched her lover by the arm.

“There is the inspector,” she said in a tense whisper.

He looked up swiftly. Crossing the room, towards them, attired in smart plain clothes, he saw the man he had just described as the brainiest policeman he had met.

CHAPTER XXV

LANNER HEARS NEWS

THE appearance of Inspector Lanner in the quiet little restaurant was by no means accidental. Sir Richard Lulworth had been shadowed from the moment he left Beaconsfield, and constant reports of his movements had been sent to the inspector, who had officially called in the help of Scotland Yard. An hour ago he had received such a report that Lulworth and Avril had been seen entering a restaurant near Piccadilly, and, happening shortly after to be in the neighbourhood, he had learnt from the waiting man outside that the baronet and the daughter of the Commissioner were still inside.

The situation had become increasingly difficult for the Commissioner, for the knowledge that his daughter was engaged to a man whom it had been decided to shadow was, necessarily, becoming more widespread every hour. But he had decided rigidly not to interfere with Lanner, despite the difficulties of the situation. He feared that if he did so he might be accused of using his position to influence the inspector or those working with him. It was a charge which could easily be made, and one which would be very difficult to refute. He was careful, indeed, not to press the inspector too closely with questions, but he found the waiting very trying.

Lanner was profoundly relieved by the Commissioner's attitude, and gained in confidence by the knowledge that whatever action he might choose to take, the head of the Criminal Investigation Department would back him up. At first he had felt a little uneasy in his mind about the information he had already suppressed from the Commissioner, but that uneasiness had passed, and when he entered the restaurant he was not only looking cheerful, but he was feeling it.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said, bowing politely.

"You knew we were here then?" asked Lulworth, motioning to a chair.

"A little bird told me," admitted the inspector. "And unless you show a most violent objection I should like to join you in a cup of coffee."

"Do you think coffee will loosen our tongues, Inspector Lanner?" asked Avril sweetly. "I always understood alcohol was better."

Inspector Lanner laughed.

"To use a well-worn phrase, Miss Ableway," he said, "I don't think I shall get much change out of you. You have guessed quite rightly. I have come here in the hope that you and Sir Richard will tell me one or two things."

"We ought to be very angry with you for following us about," Avril pointed out. "I wonder what my father would say if he knew that Scotland Yard was keeping track of all his daughter's movements? I am sure he would be upset."

"It isn't you——" began the inspector, and broke off short. There was laughter in Avril's eyes, and he realised how neatly he had been trapped into making the admission.

“So it is Sir Richard you are following?” she said in a bantering tone. “How very exciting—for Sir Richard!”

“I feel almost like a criminal,” put in Lulworth, taking her cue. “Have you marked me down as the hero of the Bilsiter mystery, Lanner?”

“No, sir,” replied the inspector. “Not yet, at any rate. There is no knowing what might happen, so I am giving you fair warning.”

He saw the laughter die out of Avril’s eyes, and in its place there came something very much akin to terror.

“You are joking, Inspector Lanner,” she said slowly.

“Some things begin as jokes and end as tragedies,” replied Lanner sententiously.

“Well, inspector, exactly what are the one or two things you think we can tell you?” interrupted Lulworth. “We may as well get down to bedrock immediately. If it is anything which will take time, then come along to my place. This is rather too public for confidences.”

“I should prefer it,” answered the inspector, “that is if Miss Ableway is coming too.”

“Anything Sir Richard may have to tell you I know already,” said Avril. “And perhaps I can help you with one or two ideas of my own. Of course I shall come along.”

She still spoke light-heartedly. She had no intention, if she could help it, of letting the inspector know the fear that was gnawing at her heart. As she sat back in the taxi, beside her lover and facing the detective, she studied him carefully. None of them talked, and for that Avril felt glad. She wanted to collect her thoughts, to gain complete control over herself, before Lanner began dropping his bombshells.

“He’s got the same kind of eyes and the same kind of chin as Richard,” she reflected. “So he can’t be so very bad,” she added without reason. “In fact, if it weren’t that I’m frightened what he might do I should rather like Inspector Lanner. Oh, if he would only understand!”

She had no doubt in her mind that the inspector had either come to an impasse and was hoping to trap her lover or herself into some damaging admission, or he had reached some decision and intended bluntly to tell them so. But Lanner gave no sign at all of what he might be thinking, and, in fact, he did not speak until all three were comfortably settled in cosy armchairs in Lulworth’s house.

“Now, Lanner, have a cigar and fire away,” said the baronet.

“Well, sir,” began the inspector, puffing contentedly at his cigar, “I don’t want to beat about the bush, so I will come straight to the point. I don’t think Miss Ableway and yourself are playing the game quite fairly.”

“In what way have we—cheated?” interposed Avril, leaning forward and resting her chin on her hands.

“By withholding certain information I know you have got,” replied Lanner.

“If you know we have got the information, it shouldn’t be difficult to find out what it is,” pointed out Lulworth.

The inspector shook his head.

“Let me give you an instance, sir,” he continued. “When we were all at Beaconsfield I happened to come into the hall just as Miss Ableway had finished speaking on the telephone. You remember,” he turned towards her as he spoke, “I said I thought I had heard the telephone bell, and you told me that somebody had been given the wrong number. As soon as you had gone out of the hall, Miss Ableway, I telephoned the exchange and through them learnt that the number was quite correctly given, that the call was a London call, that it came from Bloomsbury 99684.”

“You found out more than I did then, Inspector Lanner,” said Avril coldly, as the other ceased speaking.

“That is where you are not playing fair,” pointed out the detective. “You know very well from whom that call came.”

“Do you know?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, from Bilsiter’s office, of course,” he answered.

He was surprised at the effect of his words. Avril sat suddenly upright and stared at the inspector as though she could hardly believe what he had been saying, while there came a startled exclamation from Lulworth.

“From Bilsiter’s office,” said Avril at last, and the inspector noticed that she exchanged a significant glance with Lulworth. “I must have time to think.”

“You didn’t ask for time to think when you took the message,” said the inspector dryly. “Come now, Miss Ableway, why not tell the truth? I am bound to find out sooner or later. Why this pretense of astonishment?”

“It is not pretense,” replied Avril, looking at her lover. “I am astonished and so is Sir Richard. I don’t deny taking the message, but I do deny knowing from whom it came. If I had known I think I should have told you.”

“Well, there’s no doubt it came from Bilsiter’s office,” continued the inspector. “And I accept your statement that you did not know that fact. Can you tell me what the message was?”

“Yes, I shall not forget it,” said Avril. “There was a man speaking at the other end of the wire. He had a lisp, and he thought I was taking his message on behalf of—of someone else in the house. He said I was to tell the person who really ought to have got the message that he had had an inquiry from the Postmaster-General about the last trunk call which he was disputing. I was to tell him also that the speaker didn’t think the account could be settled amicably, that there might be trouble over it and he wanted the advice of the person in the house.”

Lanner looked puzzled. He did not ask for the name Avril had carefully withheld. That could come later. He wanted to puzzle out what the message meant.

“I am sure the man at the other end was just going to say police instead of Postmaster-General,” explained Avril, “but he pulled himself up when only half-way through the word. I took it the police were causing some trouble over a previous call, but I have got no further than that.”

A sudden light broke in upon the inspector. He remembered that Bilsiter's office had called up Rowmands at half-past eight on the morning of the murder, long before there was any possible chance of anyone in London knowing the murder had been committed. He had had instructions sent immediately to have inquiries made. And now he was learning that someone had immediately telephoned to Beaconsfield to warn his—yes, his confederate in Rowmands!

“Whom did you take the message for?” he demanded.

Avril shook her head.

“We'll tell you that, inspector,” she answered slowly, “when you tell us a few things you have found out.”

“Let me explain,” interrupted Lulworth. “You are trying to find out who murdered Bilsiter, Lanner. Miss Ableway and myself are trying to do exactly the same thing. You have got your suspicions, we have got ours.”

“Is there any reason why you shouldn't tell me what you have found out?” asked Lanner. “It is the job of the police to bring a murderer to justice. If you have got any evidence you should reveal it. I must warn you that you put yourself in a serious position by not doing so. You may be acting as accessories after the fact.”

“We'll risk that,” answered Lulworth with a laugh. “I don't think either of us can be compelled to talk by the mere threat of imprisonment. We have a very strong motive for wanting to know the real murderer of Bilsiter.”

“May I ask what it is?”

The inspector was nettled, and he plainly showed it in his tones. He knew very well that if he could not persuade the other two to talk no threats would make them give way.

“Oh! yes; we have nothing to conceal there,” replied Lulworth. “We are acting as we are because we do not want an innocent person to be accused of the crime. And we have very good reasons for knowing that you do suspect an innocent person.”

“I'm damned if I know whom I do suspect!” cried Lanner. “This case is getting beyond me.”

He hesitated for a minute and then boldly began to place his cards upon the table.

“I will tell you why I want to know who that message was for,” he said quietly. “On the morning Bilsiter was murdered, at half-past eight, a telephone message came for someone in Rowmands. That message was sent before even I knew Bilsiter had been murdered, or at any rate before I arrived at Rowmands. Don't you see the significance of it? If the message was for Bilsiter himself, on the assumption the man at the other end of the wire did not know he was murdered, why didn't the person who received it tell me?”

He was watching them both closely as he spoke, for it was quite conceivable that either of them might have received the message, and if they did not choose to tell he would be no further on his way towards the solution of the mystery.

“You think the person who received the first message was the same for whom the second was intended?” asked Avril. “In fact, must have been the same from the very

wording of the message?"

The inspector nodded his agreement with her suggestion.

"Well, I will tell you then. I was asked to deliver the message to Mr. Sturridge," said Avril slowly.

It was the inspector's turn to be surprised.

"Sturridge!" he echoed. "You are sure it was Sturridge?"

"Certain," replied Avril quietly. "And that was why I was so astonished when you said the call had come from Bilsiter's office. I hadn't thought of that. Now we know we should very much like to learn what connection there was between Mr. Sturridge and Mr. Bilsiter."

"So should I," answered Lanner. "You have begun to alter my viewpoint already, Miss Ableway."

It was noticeable that he did not make the slightest suggestion that he did not believe their story. Nor was there any suggestion of that kind in his mind.

"You see, Miss Ableway," he continued, "the folly of not telling the truth. I knew you had received a message from Bilsiter's office, and I learnt this morning that you had paid a visit there and posed as a reporter to the lift attendant. Naturally, without the part explanation you have given now, I was bound to be suspicious."

"I quite see that. I suppose you know where I went afterwards?"

"Oh, yes. You followed Mrs. Hollister," replied the inspector easily. "After you entered that building, however, I don't know exactly what happened."

"There's no harm in telling you what happened," Avril said. "I recognised Mrs. Hollister in the train, and I followed her. She went to Mr. Bilsiter's office. That is how I came to be there."

Step by step she told her story, with the exception of the fact that her brother had also been in Mrs. Hollister's flat.

The inspector was thinking over this information, trying to fit it in with the facts he already knew, when Avril leant forward.

"You saw Mr. Sturridge's photograph on the mantelpiece?" she asked quietly. "And I understand from Sir Richard that Mr. Sturridge has already admitted knowing Mrs. Hollister?"

"Yes, that is true. Mr. Sturridge came to me and told me he had seen Mrs. Hollister's photograph in the paper. He informed me that he was once the friend of her husband, that the latter had been terribly wronged. He had kept in the background at the trial, though he had provided most of the funds for the defence. His explanation of that was simple. He was afraid, that if his name in any way got mixed up with the case his reputation might be spoilt and his political career endangered."

"And afterwards?" asked Avril.

"Afterwards he remained friends with Mrs. Hollister, trying to wean her from the influence of Bilsiter," continued Lanner. "He gave me a considerable amount of information about both Mr. and Mrs. Hollister."

“Why didn’t he give you her address?” demanded Lulworth. “He must have known it.”

“That was exactly what he didn’t,” answered the inspector. “He explained to me that as the time drew nearer for her husband’s release he brought all his influence to bear to make her give up Bilsiter, and she not only refused, but changed her address, so that in the last few weeks he lost touch with her.”

“I believe it was Mr. Sturridge she was waiting for at three o’clock that morning,” Avril declared.

“Have you any reason for that belief?” asked the inspector.

“Only this,” put in Lulworth. “When I saw Mrs. Hollister standing outside waiting, and went downstairs, I locked my bedroom door as I came out and put the key in my pocket, as well as my own private keys. I gathered from Pellington that when I was taken upstairs my bedroom door was open and my keys were on my dressing-table. Whoever bowled me over took the keys from my pocket.”

“That doesn’t make it Sturridge,” pointed out Lanner.

“One of the maids told me she saw Mr. Sturridge in Sir Richard’s bedroom,” said Avril. “She was sent upstairs to put the bed straight again when Sir Richard was being attended to by Dr. Bessbury. She opened the door and found Mr. Sturridge hiding behind it. He said he had come up for Sir Richard’s dressing-gown.”

Inspector Lanner whistled softly to himself. He was certainly getting a very different point of view about the Rowmands mystery from that which he had only an hour ago. If anything, the story Lulworth and Avril had told him only complicated the puzzle rather than simplified it.

“You have been very frank with me,” he said, and there was a cheerful note in his voice. “And I may as well be frank with you in return. On the night before the inquest, the night before everyone left Beaconsfield, I happened to be watching outside the house.”

“I think I know what is coming,” interrupted Lulworth with a laugh.

“Yes, I saw Pellington go along the balcony to Mr. Sturridge’s room, saw you standing by the window waiting his return,” said Lanner.

“He had gone along to search his room,” said Lulworth quietly. “I thought I might get further evidence. I was already beginning to suspect Sturridge of knowing more than he had told.”

The explanation seemed a perfectly natural one to the inspector. He had no knowledge of the incriminating letter which had been lost.

“It was a very risky thing to do sir,” he pointed out. “If Mr. Sturridge had awakened, your manservant would have been in a very awkward position.”

“And so would Mr. Sturridge,” answered the other drily. “You don’t know Pellington as well as I do, Lanner.”

“Ten minutes afterwards I saw someone else come out on the balcony and go into your room this time, sir,” continued Lanner. “Were you asleep?”

“I was not. The man was Jesson, if you didn’t recognise him. And that has puzzled me more than I can think. I pretended to be asleep. He went through all my clothes and looked at the contents of all my pockets, but he didn’t take anything. And he went out just as quietly as he came in. If you can tell me why he came into my room, inspector, I shall be glad to know. Jesson’s a factor I can’t place.”

“I have no more idea than you have, sir,” he answered. “I am having inquiries made about Mr. Jesson. He came up in the train with me. I understood that he was a very taciturn man, but he talked all the way up. That was unusual. The unusual interests me.”

“What did Mr. Jesson talk about?” asked Avril.

“Charity Sheen,” answered the inspector quickly.

He did not fail to notice the quick glance which she gave Sir Richard Lulworth when she heard his reply.

CHAPTER XXVI

“WRONG NUMBER”

INSPECTOR LANNER knew when to leave well alone. The quick glance which Avril had given Lulworth when the name of Charity Sheen had been mentioned had not been lost upon the detective. On Charity Sheen he felt at once that both would dry up. Charity Sheen, as such, could wait for the moment. Lanner was more concerned with finding the murderer of Bilsiter, and if by any chance he also turned out to be Charity Sheen, well, that would be an added feather in the inspector's cap.

“You know nothing about Jesson, I suppose?” he asked Lulworth.

“Not in the way I expect you mean, Lanner,” he replied with a smile. “I have met him on a number of occasions, of course, in various people's houses, and he always struck me as being quite a nice fellow. He very rarely talked much, but when he did it was to the point, and I believe he was, or rather is, really an authority on art. But Lord Rowmands can tell you more than I can. They have been great friends for many years.”

The inspector made a mental note to pursue the suggested line of inquiry.

“Well, I am very grateful to you both,” he said rising. “I dare say I haven't asked all the questions I meant to, and something will occur to me when I am outside. But there will be no difficulty in finding you.”

His words were a direct statement for them to let him know what their movements were likely to be, and both Avril and Lulworth accepted it as such.

“You can always find me at home, Mr. Lanner,” she said with a little laugh. “I shall not wander far away till this dreadful affair has been cleared up.”

“Nor I,” added Lulworth. “And if I do go for a walk I expect I shall be protected like one of His Majesty's Cabinet Ministers.”

Inspector Lanner looked down his nose without replying. He believed the story Avril and Lulworth had told him, but his belief did not justify him in not taking the elementary precaution of keeping an eye on the man whom he believed was Charity Sheen.

“Well, if you will excuse me,” Lanner began, when Avril interrupted. There was a wistful note in her voice.

“If—if you do learn anything which will interest us, please let me know,” she said. “Daddy thinks dreadful things about Sir Richard and—and they are not true, Mr. Lanner.”

“I don't believe much unless I can check it myself,” replied the inspector. “I am glad you know what the Commissioner thinks. But I think he's a little biassed.”

With a nod he was gone. But Avril drew comfort from the last words of the inspector. At any rate, he would not be misled easily. He was not swayed by opinions, but by facts. She felt sure that if only all the facts in this queer case came to light,

instead of only those which appeared to incriminate her lover, Richard would have nothing to fear, at least so far as an accusation of murder was concerned.

Inspector Lanner was more deeply impressed by the news he had learnt than he had allowed his hearers to gather. The Under-Secretary had not entered into his calculations chiefly, as he ruefully admitted to himself, because Sturridge was an Under-Secretary and therefore a personage.

“That once more shows the silliness of taking anything for granted,” he said to himself. “This case has got me out of my stride. In any other case I should have gone over everybody with a microscope, instead of picking out a chosen few. That comes of listening too much to other people, I’m afraid.”

He looked at his watch.

“Half-past four. Bilsiter’s office, I think. See what Master Brandt has to say.”

He tapped his pocket significantly. In it was the search warrant he had obtained and which he intended to use if necessary. Although other police officers had already been in touch with the late Mr. Bilsiter’s assistant, Brandt had given away no really useful information. He had been asked about the early telephone message which had been sent from that office to Rowmands, but he had immediately denied any knowledge of it.

“You’re for it, my lad, if you keep on lying,” said the inspector to himself, as he walked up the flight of stairs, instead of taking the lift in the block of offices in Southampton Row.

Arrived on the fourth floor he passed through the door labelled in neat black lettering “Leonard Bilsiter, Financial Agent,” and knocked at the window marked “Inquiries.”

The frosted window shot up with a bang and Joe Tamson, the office boy from whom Avril had taken her pseudonym, looked out inquisitively. Joe Tamson’s eyes had very rightly been called ferrety, for they were a curious shade of light brown which made them appear almost pink in some lights. But there was none of the ferret in the rest of his face or, as the inspector soon found out, in his nature.

“Is Mr. Brandt in?” asked Lanner.

“Yes, sir. Any pertickler name, sir?”

“Just from Scotland Yard,” said the inspector. He did not want to give Brandt any warning of his real identity before he entered the other room marked “Strictly Private.” Brandt had had a number of visits from Scotland Yard in the last day or so, and from them he would be anticipating no particular danger. But if he heard that a detective had come up from Beaconsfield to see him he might jump to certain conclusions and have a tale ready before he betrayed himself. If there was any change in his manner when Lanner asked certain questions, the inspector wanted to see it.

Brandt proved to be very unlike the type of man the inspector had visualised. He expected to see a thick-set, thick-lipped, big-nosed, sharp-eyed man. Instead he found Cornelius Brandt to be a slim man of about thirty, well-dressed, suave, thin-lipped and with dreamy brown eyes which did not betray themselves easily.

“Sit down, will you?” he asked courteously. “This is an unexpected visit. I thought I had told Scotland Yard all I knew.”

“I am not from Scotland Yard, Mr. Brandt,” replied the other. “I am Inspector Lanner, of the Beaconsfield Police, and in charge of the investigations into Mr. Bilsiter’s death. Scotland Yard has been helping.”

“Ah, yeth, and you wish to get your knowledge first-hand, inspector,” said Brandt, toying carelessly with a paper cutter. “Naturally, I am only too glad to help in any way I can. This has been a very big shock to me, I can assure you.”

His face was turned away from the window, in the shadow, but he appeared to look the inspector openly in the face. There was nothing in the tones of his voice which betrayed to the keenly listening Lanner the slightest anxiety. But the inspector had not failed to notice the slight lisp, and his mind went back to Avril’s statement that the man who had telephoned to Rowmands had a lisp.

“I quite understand the death of your employer was a shock to you,” he answered. “And so, I suppose,” he added evenly, “was the fact that the police discovered you telephoned Rowmands at half-past eight in the morning, before the death of Mr. Bilsiter was generally known.”

“That is a foolish statement, inspector,” replied Brandt. He coolly selected a cigarette from his case and lighted it with a hand that did not shake. “I have already explained to Scotland Yard that I did not telephone. Perhaps as you are so persistent I might be permitted to add that I live in the Rona Hotel in Shaftesbury Avenue. At a quarter to nine I was having my breakfast there as usual. It is easy enough to verify that statement. If the inspector who came from Scotland Yard in the first instance had not been so incredulous to the point of rudeness, I would have told him that. As it was, I left him to find out. May I add, inspector,” he said with a laugh, “that I do not know any means of transport which will bring me from Southampton Row to Shaftesbury Avenue in a quarter of an hour or rather less.”

“It is not more than ten minutes walk,” pointed out the inspector.

He was astonished at the complete control the other had over himself. If Cornelius Brandt were lying, he reflected, it would be very difficult to trap him.

“Yes, I suppose that is true,” returned Brandt, puffing slowly at his cigarette. “But I can give my times closer than that. At a quarter past eight I was shaving, or, rather, I was just beginning to shave. I like real boiling water for shaving. I am a man of very methodical habits and I like doing everything to time, as the hotel people will tell you. I am called at a quarter to eight. I have a bath, partly dress myself, and at a quarter past eight exactly one of the boys brings me in some boiling water. I shave, finish dressing, and come down to breakfast, at a quarter to nine exactly. I leave the Rona at twenty minutes past and arrive at the office at half-past nine. I think if my routine varied everybody in the hotel would notice it.”

The inspector was frankly puzzled. Brandt had made his statement clearly and concisely, as though he knew full well that every word of it could be checked. And Lanner felt that when he came to make inquiries at the hotel every statement would be verified. Yet who else could have telephoned?

“When does this building open?” he asked.

“I see you are wondering if anyone could have got in and telephoned,” said Brandt. “Immediately I heard about this strange call I made that inquiry. It is opened at eight o’clock for the cleaners. I don’t think any businesses start before nine at the earliest, and most not before half-past. The cleaners have keys to all the offices, and I can only suppose that the telephone was made use of then. I can assure you it is as great a puzzle to me as it is to you. Do you know what was said over the telephone that morning, who answered it at Lord Rowmands’ house?”

For a fraction of a second the inspector hesitated, and then he replied quickly.

“No, neither the message nor the receiver is known,” he said. “It would help to clear up things considerably if they were.”

Was it his fancy, he wondered, or did a look of relief pass over the other’s face? He was convinced that Brandt was not telling the truth, but he could not see any flaw in the lie he had told. Yet somewhere there must have been a slip. Even assuming the message was put through in a few minutes, as indeed it most likely would have been at that time in the morning, it would take the best part of half an hour for Brandt to go from his hotel to Bilsiter’s office and back. That he should be away from the hotel for that time without being noticed—assuming he was a man of such regular habits he stated he was—seemed unlikely.

“I’ll check it first before asking him about the second call,” he reflected. “He’ll have just as plausible a story for that. Prove him lying in the first call and it will be easy to break him down.”

“Well, I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Brandt,” he said politely. “I thought I would hear your story first-hand. I think you must be right, that someone slipped in while the cleaners were here. But you can see the importance of tracing that person.”

“If I could help you there I should do so at once,” replied the other, rising from his chair. “Mr. Bilsiter, despite his profession, which sometimes made him appear hard outside, was a very good employer, and no man regrets his death more than I do.”

“It is all very conventional, all very stereotyped,” thought the inspector as he turned into Southampton Row. “But if that man has got an atom of the milk of human kindness in his nature, then I am no judge of men. He made even me feel chilly down the spine. He knows what he wants, and I reckon he’ll get it, no matter how many poor devils have to be trodden on in the getting.”

In his estimate Inspector Lanner was nearer the truth than he really thought. Cornelius Brandt was a man with a fixed ambition, and every action of his life had been planned with a view to attaining that ambition sooner or later. He was a child of parents who had not been able to send him to a good school—who had, indeed, sent him to work at the earliest possible age. But all his spare money had been spent on books, on taking evening classes, on preparing himself for that time when he intended kicking the ladder of a business career from under him and climbing the ladder of his ambition. The serving of Bilsiter had only been a means to an end, and an unexpectedly powerful means. The death of Bilsiter was to mean much to Cornelius Brandt.

At the Rona Hotel, when the inspector revealed his identity, every question he asked was answered with an eagerness to ingratiate which is only inspired by fear of the police.

“M’sieur will understand we want no scandal,” said the manager. “M’sieur Brandt gave us no trouble. He was so regular. I will instruct the servants, the waiters to be at your disposal. It desolates me there should be any scandal.”

He shrugged his shoulders expressively, and everyone whom the inspector questioned appeared to do the same. It was from the boy who always brought the boiling water to Brandt’s room that the first faint clue came.

“Come now, you’re English and sharper than the rest,” he said to the boy who, at first frightened at being examined by an inspector of police, was thawing under Lanner’s genial smile. “Think. Was there anything unusual about Mr. Brandt’s manner that morning? Did he ask you anything out of the way? Remember, the smallest thing might be useful.”

The other ran his fingers up and down the highly-polished buttons of his jacket, as he tried to think of some answer to the inspector’s question.

“Unless you can call having his collar on, sir,” he said nervously, after a while.

“Ah, how does this collar remind you of something?” asked Lanner.

“Well, sir, Mr. Brandt is so regular, so pertickler in his habits,” replied the boy. “He’s been here ever since I ’ave, and I’ve been told off to look after him in the mornings. I always turned on the hot water for his bath, and called him. He was closefisted—beg pardon—and then I brings up his water. He always had his trousers and shirt on when I came in. Open at the neck, sir. When I came in the other morning he’d got his collar and tie on. Funny, I thought, shaving with his collar on.”

“That was the morning of the day you heard about Mr. Bilsiter?” asked the inspector.

“I don’t rightly remember, sir,” answered the boy. “It were either that day or the day after.”

“You are sure he hadn’t shaved?” asked the inspector, an idea dawning in his mind.

“Couldn’t say, sir. Shouldn’t think it likely. Mr. Brandt just ’ated cold water,” he added emphatically.

The inspector wondered if Brandt had surmounted his hatred of cold water that morning and had shaved before his usual supply of boiling water had been brought up to him. In that case he might have slipped out of the hotel and got back in time again for breakfast, if he had been very quick.

“No, sir,” replied the boy when the suggestion was put to him. “There’s always somebody on the door, and they’d have noticed ’im. Mr. Brandt never went out till he’d ’ad his breakfast.”

The bell boy’s emphatic statement was confirmed by the door-keeper.

“I should notice anything unusual, sir,” he said at once. “I’m willing to swear in a court of law Mr. Brandt hasn’t left this building before twenty past nine one morning in the last month.”

Lanner sat down heavily in one of the lounge chairs and lighted a cigarette. He reviewed everything he had learnt, went over the very wording of the replies, without getting any nearer the solution.

“Yet he put on his collar and tie. That is unusual,” he kept on saying to himself. “And anything unusual about Mr. Cornelius Brandt is suspicious. Now why did he do that? To go out? Out of his room, at any rate. It would have looked silly to have no collar and tie on. It was a second’s work to slip on his waistcoat and jacket. Then he wouldn’t be noticed coming downstairs. But how did he get out and back again without being seen?”

He shook his head and gave up the problem, and crossed over to where the manager was standing, ready to speak when spoken to.

“I’ve found out all I wanted to here,” said the inspector. He spoke cheerfully, despite the annoyance he felt. “I don’t think you will be troubled with any scandal, though it is part of our duty to verify the statements of all witnesses. I’d better have your telephone number in case something fresh strikes me.”

“It is here.”

The manager handed the inspector a sheet of notepaper headed “Rona Hotel, Shaftesbury Avenue.”

Idly Lanner looked down at the telephone number before folding the sheet and putting it in his pocket.

“Bloomsbury 99484,” he read.

For a moment he stared at it as though it conveyed nothing to him, and then he seemed galvanised into action as a wild idea crossed his mind.

“Get me a taxi,” he said quickly.

He gave the driver the address he wanted in a low voice, too low to be overheard by the door-keeper, who stood there watching the burly inspector.

“The Bloomsbury telephone exchange,” said the inspector.

“And if I am right,” he muttered to himself as he sank back in his seat, “I shall know why Mr. Brandt put on his collar and tie that morning.”

In a few words he had explained his errand to the supervisor some ten minutes later.

“I’d better get the actual record, to be sure,” said the supervisor.

“Yes, here you are,” she pointed out when she came back. “A call was asked for at 8.23. It was six minutes being put through, and actual connection was made at 8.29. The call was from Bloomsbury 99484.”

“And I got it as 99684,” said the inspector ruefully. “The last is from an office in Southampton Row and the first from a hotel in Shaftesbury Avenue. Now I know why he put his collar on. He was merely waiting to go downstairs to get on the telephone.”

He left the puzzled-looking supervisor without giving her an explanation. He remembered the telephone booth at the hotel well enough. It was at the head of the first floor landing and Brandt could easily have slipped inside there without attracting attention.

“That’s not the first time the wrong number’s been given and caused unnecessary trouble,” said the inspector to himself, as he turned down in the direction of Scotland Yard. “I think we need not trouble any more about Mr. Brandt to-night. But he’ll have a shock in the morning.”

CHAPTER XXVII

CHARITY SHEEN AGAIN ACTS

JOHN HOLLISTER buried his face in his hands, as he sat on the hard wooden bench. He wondered how much longer he was going to be detained under suspicion. He had thought, when he walked out of prison that sunny Wednesday morning, which now seemed to him an age ago, that he was done with prison for ever. It had been a bitter experience to a man of his sensitive nature, and he had looked back during those long months, when he had eaten his heart out with despair, with vain regrets at the action which had brought him into the hands of the police. During that time his mind had grown more composed, he had come to take a calmer view of things.

There had been one bright spot—Sturridge, the only one of all his old-time friends who had written to him regularly at those long periods he was allowed to receive letters by the prison regulations. It was Sturridge, he recalled as he sat there, who had first warned him against Bilsiter, who had suggested that he ought to be more careful over his wife's friends. And it was Sturridge, he felt sure, though he did not know definitely, who had provided the funds for his defence.

And now he was under suspicion of having come straight out of prison and having put into action his wild threats of nearly three years ago! Hollister laughed bitterly to himself. Three years ago he might have killed Bilsiter in his uncontrollable rage if he could, had tried to, in fact, but now, well, three years' reflection inside a prison alters the outlook of any man. Normally John Hollister would not kill a fly, and though the shock of the knowledge of his wife's unfaithfulness had temporarily unbalanced him, he had returned to normality. Even this, to him, senseless detention did not make him rail against the unjustness of the world as he had once railed.

There came the sound of footsteps outside, and the door opened to admit Inspector Lanner.

"I am sorry you have been detained so long, Hollister," he began at once in friendly tones. "But you must understand it takes time to make inquiries. We had to verify the account of your movements, you know."

"Then I am free to go?" asked Hollister, a light of hope in his eyes.

"I can't promise that," replied the inspector cautiously. "It is not really in my province to release you, though I don't think you will be detained much longer. I came in to ask you a question, which may hasten your release."

Hollister looked in a weary way at the other. He was tired of being asked questions, tired of answering them. But he supposed it was necessary, and he waited resignedly for Lanner to speak.

"What made you choose to go to Beaconsfield?" asked the inspector. "I should have thought it would have been more natural to go to London where you used to live."

"I wanted quiet for one thing—time to think," replied Hollister readily. "I was afraid of going to London, afraid I might meet people whom I knew before—before I

went to prison,” he finished defiantly.

“You knew Beaconsfield was quiet?”

“I had never been there before in my life,” returned Hollister. “That was one reason why I agreed to go there. It was unlikely I should meet anyone I knew in the past.”

Lanner was quick to notice the word “agreed.” It implied that it had been suggested to Hollister that Beaconsfield was a suitable spot to choose while he was picking up threads of life again. He proceeded cautiously, however.

“I am glad you had some friends who were willing to help you when you came out,” he said quietly. “A man’s sins should not be held up against him when he has taken his punishment for them.”

“That is exactly what the police are doing now,” returned Hollister, with no trace of anger in his voice. “You are believing, because of some wild threats of mine years ago, when I was in a state of despair, that I am guilty of the murder of Bilsiter. Every man’s hand is against a man who has been in prison, though, thank God, I have still one friend left in Mr. Sturridge.”

“You will find that the police can be your friends as well,” said Lanner softly. “I, at any rate, believe your story, and think you have suffered in some ways unjustly.”

He could afford to be magnanimous, for he had learnt what he had come to learn. So it was Sturridge who had suggested Hollister should go to Beaconsfield, should be near the scene of the murder of Bilsiter! Taken in the light of the story he had been told by Lulworth and Avril, this last piece of information was significant. Sturridge was beginning to loom large in the mind of Inspector Lanner.

That evening in his room at the little Bloomsbury hotel, Lanner spent some time going through his notes, on the assumption that Sturridge was the man he was after.

“That doesn’t explain a good many things, though,” he ruminated. “It doesn’t explain how Charity Sheen got into Bilsiter’s bedroom and left that note, unless Sturridge is Charity Sheen. That’s possible, of course. But why should Miss Ableway want to defend him in that case? What was the parcel she went up to town to get for Lulworth? How did her brooch get in Bilsiter’s bedroom? What did Jesson want in Lulworth’s room? And where do Brandt and Mrs. Hollister come in? And above all, what motive had Sturridge got? It’s no use solving half the puzzle and leaving the other half in the air. If it’s Sturridge he’ll be clever enough to wriggle out of it unless I have got a cast-iron case.” The inspector had to admit to himself that he was very far from having a cast-iron case. There were too many people against whom suspicion was directed, and but for the story of Lulworth and Avril, the suspicion against Sturridge was not strong enough to justify his arrest. Of all the people who were under suspicion, the one who had the strongest motive to all appearances, who had been most wronged, was John Hollister. And he had been near the scene of the murder. It was only his word against Sturridge’s that the latter suggested he should stay in Beaconsfield. “But,” concluded the inspector, after an unsatisfactory pondering over his notes, “Sturridge is a man I’ve got to reckon with.”

When he went to bed he fell asleep while trying to put the parts of the puzzle together in his mind, and at breakfast early the following morning he found another part

had been added. There, in his newspaper, in heavy black prominent letters, he read the words “Charity Sheen’s Astounding Act.”

The inspector’s bacon and eggs were uneaten and cold before he finished reading and digesting the account.

“Charity Sheen, whose exploits for the last two years have baffled the best brains of the police,” began the account—they always did begin that way now, reflected Lanner gloomily—“has once more stepped into prominence, and if the statement he makes in his letter (printed in facsimile below) be true, for the last time. Of all the remarkable episodes in the career of the mysterious criminal, none is more remarkable than this last. Charity Sheen makes a number of startling revelations in the letter he has sent to the press, the most amazing being that he is suspected of having some hand in the murder of Leonard Bilsiter, a fact the police have not officially made public—though it was an open secret that Sheen was suspected. Once more the letter proves that the man who hides his identity behind the pseudonym of Charity Sheen has been too clever for the police, and may, indeed, have placed himself beyond the reach of the law. It is certain, always provided his statements are true—and there is no reason to doubt them—that if his identity ever becomes known it will be extremely difficult to prosecute him with any hope of success.”

Immediately below this opening statement appeared the letter in which Charity Sheen had sent to the usual Press agencies.

“This, I sincerely hope, will be my last letter to the Press,” it began, without any preamble. “And I will make it as brief as circumstances will allow. Two years ago I conceived the idea of robbing the selfish rich to give to the unselfish poor. It appeared to me then that I was justified in taking from those who had abundance and giving to those who were struggling to keep their heads above water. I foolishly imagined that if I made public the robberies I carried out, gave my reasons for carrying them out, and so pilloried my victims for their lack of charity I should put the fear of publicity in all who could afford to give and did not. I have failed. A careful study of the published lists of the amounts given to charity during the past two years reveals the fact that there is no appreciable increase in the amounts received by the chief charitable institutions in this country.

“It seems to me, however, that I cannot let the matter rest there. Always I shall be suspected of not having given to charity the proceeds of my exploits, of being a common thief who has invented an ingenious excuse to whitewash himself. For that reason therefore, I have returned to all whom I have robbed the full amount of which they were robbed, together with five percent. interest. A complete list appears at the end of this letter. Charity, in any case, benefits by over £50,000, but it is the charity of Charity Sheen.

“The police have long suspected, and not without cause, that I am a rich man. This last action of mine will perhaps not only prove that their suspicions are right, that they are not so unintelligent as the uninformed may be led to suppose, but that my exploits were carried out with no ulterior intention of benefiting myself.

“It will be stated, I do not doubt, that I have made restitution, that I have wiped the slate clean, because I am afraid, because I see the day coming appreciably nearer when I might make a mistake and be caught. I believe I know the meaning of fear as well as any man, and it is not fear for myself that has made me take the action I have done. It is the fear which comes to every man sooner or later over an action which cannot be justified on ethical grounds, the fear that his action will be misjudged and others, dependent upon him, will suffer.

“In these two years, which have not been without their amusing side, I have learnt the great lesson that no man is entirely alone in this world, that no man can take the whole burden of failure (or success for that matter) on his own shoulders. There are others, bound to him by ties of friendship, of love and of duty, who must, voluntarily and involuntarily, share his burden. And it is chiefly because of that that I have for ever ceased to attempt to remould the world nearer to my own heart’s desire.

“Finally, I draw the attention of the Press and of anyone who has ever been remotely interested in the exploits of Charity Sheen, to the veiled accusation which has been made against me that I am the murderer of Leonard Bilsiter. Three days before Leonard Bilsiter met his death I warned him that he had in his possession a paper I intended to take. I took that paper, took it on the very night he was murdered, and he was alive then. I shall not rest, whether the police fail or not in their endeavours, until I bring to justice the man or woman who was responsible for this murder. I have every reason to believe

that I know who is guilty of Leonard Bilsiter's death, and when the time comes that knowledge will be transmitted to the police, if they have not already acquired it by then.

“CHARITY SHEEN.”

Below this remarkable letter Lanner found a list of all those who had suffered at the hands of Sheen, with the amounts of which they had been robbed and the amounts which had been returned to them. There followed short accounts of the chief exploits of the man who had provided the newspapers with their chief topic of news that morning, and some sharp comments on the action of the police in withholding the news that Sheen was suspected of the murder of Leonard Bilsiter.

“It's darned easy to criticise,” grumbled the inspector to himself. “But I'd like one of those editors to have my job for a day, with the knowledge that if they made a mistake they will be pilloried all round. But, by George, that's a clever move. Sheen will have the sympathy of the public on his side, and that will make it doubly difficult to get him. If he's not the murderer of Bilsiter we shall never get him for his charity exploits. He's returned all the money in full”—the inspector did not doubt that part of the story for a moment—“and nobody's a scrap the worse; in fact, some people are £50,000 better off! But Lulworth's the only man who's got that amount of money, at least of those whom we suspect, and that proves by implication pretty surely that Lulworth and Sheen are the same man. Yet I feel that if I arrest him I shall make a fool of myself.”

Inspector Lanner was not the only one who read the astonishing account of the action of Charity Sheen with mixed feelings. To Avril the news was as big a surprise as it had been to Lanner, but whereas the inspector was left with a feeling of admiration at this latest move of Lulworth's Avril felt afraid. She did not allow convention to stand in the way of expressing her fear. Immediately she had finished her breakfast—she had had it alone in her own room, as she had not felt equal to the strain of sitting opposite her father—she took out her car and drove round to Gloucester Place.

“Why didn't you tell me, Richard?” she asked. “Oh, my dear, I know all you have said is true, but—oh, don't you see, Inspector Lanner is bound to know who Sheen is now.”

“I don't doubt Lanner has known, or very strongly suspected, for some time, my darling,” he replied with easy confidence. “Do you know, I am beginning to think it is a great mistake not to have told Lanner everything. We have been frightened, my little one, by the thought that he will find out all sorts of things. If we tell him we shan't be frightened any more for that reason, shall we?”

“He won't think the same way we do; he won't believe,” she replied obstinately. “I have mixed with the police so much, Richard, that I know this. Once they have got an idea fixed in their minds it takes dynamite to shift it. And I am sure both daddy and Inspector Lanner think you are Sheen, think you murdered Mr. Bilsiter.”

“Your father does,” he answered slowly. “But I am not so sure Lanner thinks I murdered Bilsiter. And, frankly, both of them will be very cautious,” he added shrewdly, “before they take any positive step. I know they have suspected me, for quite a long time, of being Sheen, or your father has, at any rate. All my belongings have been searched, though I don't think they are aware I know that, and I have been

followed abroad. It was rather fun outwitting them,” he added lightly. “So you see, I am not telling them any more than they know, but they are as far off proof as ever.”

“But don’t you see what you have done?” she cried, and the anxiety in her tones drove the smile from his face. “You have acknowledged that you took a paper from Bilsiter that night. You have acknowledged that you were the last man to see Bilsiter alive.”

“Except the murderer, I was the last man to see Bilsiter,” Lulworth interrupted.

“Your banker, your solicitor know,” went on Avril “Mrs. Hollister will read what you have said. Every——”

“Sturridge will read it as well,” broke in Lulworth, putting his hand on her shoulder reassuringly. “I have said that I have every reason to believe that I know who is responsible for Leonard Bilsiter’s death. If I judge Sturridge rightly, he will think Charity Sheen knows more than I actually do. He will take some action. What kind of action I don’t know, but he will be driven to do something to reveal the identity of Sheen in order to throw a stronger suspicion on him for killing Bilsiter. Sturridge can’t afford to wait in idleness, wondering how much Sheen knows, how much he is finding out. The action he may take will be a subtle one, I don’t doubt, and by his very action he will begin to betray himself.”

“You speak very confidently, my dear,” she answered. “But I am none the less afraid. A woman’s——”

There came a tap at the door and Pellington entered.

“Mr. Jesson is downstairs, sir,” he announced.

“Now, I wonder what Jesson wants?” asked Lulworth, half to himself.

“Perhaps,” said Avril half-jestingly, “he has read the letter in the newspapers.”

Lulworth looked at her for a moment, and there was a curious gleam in his eyes.

“Perhaps you wouldn’t mind amusing yourself downstairs while I talk to Jesson?” he said. “Show him up, Pellington.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

BRANDT TALKS

ASTONISHED and to some extent puzzled as Inspector Lanner was by the letter Charity Sheen had sent to the newspapers, he did not allow it to interfere with the routine he had mapped out for the day. His first act was to get on the telephone to Lord Rowmands.

"I am making inquiries," he said suavely, "into the careers of everyone who was in Rowmands on the night of Mr. Bilsiter's death. It is not because I suspect any particular person, but because it is a necessary routine. I want your help, my lord, in the case of one guest, Mr. Fraser Jesson, because I understand you have known him many years."

"Since his schooldays," answered Lord Rowmands. "You surely don't suspect Jesson!"

"I suspect everybody and nobody," replied the inspector, with a tinge of bitterness in his voice. "The truth is, my lord, we haven't advanced very much, and the only thing to do is to take everyone in turn and eliminate them. If all the guests are cleared, as I expect they will be," he added deliberately, "we can continue our inquiries outside. We are pursuing a number of clues."

"Well, I will relieve your mind about Jesson," said Rowmands, and the inspector could hear him give a smothered chuckle at the other end of the wire. "Jesson and I went to school together at Maplehurst. I went afterwards to Oxford and into the diplomatic service, before inheriting the title. Jesson left Maplehurst and went direct into his father's business as art experts, valuers, and buyers. I have kept in touch with Jesson all my life, sometimes seeing him at short intervals, sometimes not meeting him for months at a time. He has increased the value of the business enormously, and has got, I understand, a very high reputation in the art world."

All that Lanner knew, but he did not interrupt the account Lord Rowmands gave him. He wanted to know a little more about the man himself, his personality.

"He's a man who knows his own mind?" he asked tentatively.

"Very much so," answered Rowmands. "I should say no man better. He used to say when he was at school that when he took control of his father's business he would make things move a little faster, would make a fortune. And I think he has done that, though of course I know very little about his actual business affairs. He is not the kind of man to talk much, even with me."

"Yet he talked quite a lot in the train," reflected the inspector.

"He is not hard up, then, not the kind of man likely to borrow money?" asked the inspector.

"Not from Bilsiter," replied Rowmands.

The inspector fancied he had detected a slight hesitation over the telephone before the other man had replied to his last question.

“Has he ever borrowed it from anyone?” he asked and then added: “Of course, anything you tell me, my lord, is strictly confidential.”

It was quite a minute before Lord Rowmands replied.

“I really don’t know that I ought to tell you,” he said at last. “And, in fact, if I did not know you would not misunderstand, I should refer you to Mr. Jesson.”

“In any case,” interrupted Lanner, “I shall see Mr. Jesson and explain to him, if you wish it. Otherwise he will never know what I am told. We learn many secrets that never go any further.”

“Yes, yes, I know. But really this has nothing to do with the death of Mr. Bilsiter, Lanner. Jesson has borrowed money from me in fact. Some four years ago. It was to complete the purchase of a picture. He had been buying rather heavily at that time and did not want to strain the resources of his firm too much. He paid me back, of course.”

“I don’t think I need trouble you any further, my lord,” said the inspector, preparing to ring off.

“Have you seen Sir Richard Lulworth?” asked Rowmands suddenly.

“Yes, I had a long talk with him yesterday,” answered Lanner. “I have been trying to gain impressions from most of the guests, and of course I am trying to find out who attacked him, as that may help in the solution of the mystery.”

“Did he say anything about any of my other guests?” continued Rowmands.

“Now I wonder what he’s driving at?” asked Lanner of himself. And aloud, he said cautiously: “Yes, he talked about one guest in particular. But he told me in confidence, my lord.”

“I am glad,” came the unexpected reply. “It was rather worrying me. He promised to tell you as soon as possible. It was a great shock to me to learn that one of my guests was in the power of Bilsiter.”

Lanner thought very carefully over the words of the other before he spoke again. Who was the guest, he wondered, and why hadn’t Lulworth told him? Clearly the news was of the greatest possible importance. Was it on account of that guest that Lulworth had threatened Bilsiter, had taken the paper he had from him? Was he keeping silent about it because he thought he might be suspected of being the murderer? Was this the man whom Lulworth had suggested might be wrongfully accused? The inspector had jumped to the conclusion it was Lulworth himself, but might it not have been the unknown? He framed his next question carefully.

“Do you think he is the type of person to carry out a murder?” he asked.

“How can I say?” replied Rowmands. “I don’t—I can’t think any of my guests are capable of that. And, of course, Sir Richard did not tell me who it was, as he has told you.”

“I wish the devil he had,” said the inspector under his breath.

With a few conventional words of thanks he put on the receiver.

“So much for that,” he commented. “The next thing, I think, is Brandt.”

It was characteristic of the inspector that he could pigeon-hole any information he had obtained and forget all about it until he wanted to use it or think it over. Little by little he was adding to his stock of information about this bewildering case, and though it all seemed a hopeless tangle he knew from experience that any moment he might hit upon something which would enable him to sort out the ends and unravel the knot.

Cornelius Brandt, immaculate, cool, received him with a conventional "Good morning, inspector," but his coolness seemed to desert him suddenly when the inspector spoke.

"I have been making certain inquiries, Mr. Brandt. As a result of those inquiries, I have found out why you shaved in cold water on the morning Mr. Bilsiter was murdered," said Lanner. "You used the hotel telephone. We were slightly misled by the wrong number being given to us. I may add that I hold a search warrant for these offices, and I intend to use it. I also warn you that if you don't care to tell the truth about that telephone call, and about the second call you made, I shall feel it my duty to detain you on suspicion of being an accessory after the fact, if not before it."

He spoke sharply and threatened more than he intended to carry out as he saw the growing fear in Brandt's eyes.

"I know nothing about the murder of Mr. Bilsiter," said the latter hoarsely, nervously tapping the top of the table with his finger nails. "I have nothing to hide here. I——"

"Come on," interrupted the inspector roughly. "To whom did you telephone?"

"Mr. Sturridge," answered Brandt sulkily. "But I can assure you——"

"I don't want any of your assurances. I want facts," snapped Lanner. "You telephoned Mr. Sturridge. What about?"

"Business," said the other.

"What had Mr. Sturridge to do with this business?" demanded the inspector.

"Perhaps you will let me explain," protested Brandt nervously. "Mr. Sturridge owned half-shares in this business. He wanted to sell out. I had been making inquiries to see if I could find someone who would buy his shares. He had instructed me to telephone him immediately I learnt any news. I received a letter by that morning's post and telephoned him at once."

"It was very remarkable that he should be on the spot, ready to answer the telephone," pointed out the inspector. "And more remarkable, too, that you should take all those precautions to hide the fact you had telephoned."

"There is nothing remarkable in it at all," answered Brandt. "Mr. Sturridge knew I was in communication with a likely purchaser, and was very anxious to hear any news. I had arranged to telephone him each day, first thing in the morning, and at six o'clock in the evening. My first telephone message was to say that the man I was in touch with had agreed to the price subject to an examination of the books. My second was to warn him that the police had called and were making inquiries about this message. Mr. Sturridge did not want his affairs talked about."

"So you telephoned in secret?"

“I telephoned from the Rona in the first place because there was no need to go to the office for the purpose,” said Brandt. “I shaved because if I had waited it would have been too late to telephone by half-past eight. I lied about it when I saw you were on the wrong track because I did not want to tell you the truth without Mr. Sturridge’s permission.”

“But as soon as your own skin is threatened,” reflected the inspector, “you don’t mind telling the truth, or just as much of the truth as it suits you. I know your kind.”

“Why should Mr. Sturridge want to keep it all secret?” he asked aloud.

“That is easily answered,” replied Brandt with a growing air of confidence. “Mr. Sturridge, when he first took shares in the business was, like Mr. Bilsiter, not very well off, nor had he entered politics. When, three years ago, a relative left him a considerable sum of money, he gave up all active interest in the business and entered parliament. Mr. Sturridge has political ambitions. He offered to sell half his share to Mr. Bilsiter, but the latter refused to buy. Mr. Sturridge realised that it would be detrimental to his career if it became known that he owned half a share in a money-lending business. That’s why he wanted to give it up. Mr. Bilsiter refused. He wanted him, now that he was beginning to mix with people in Parliament and in Society, to use his position to help to obtain more business.”

The inspector smiled grimly to himself. He instantly visualised the position. Bilsiter, naturally, being the type of man he was, would not hesitate to use his partner for his own ends. Sturridge would be in a cleft stick. It was certain that once it became public property that he was connected with a money-lending business, that he was the partner of a man with Bilsiter’s unwholesome reputation, he was politically doomed. There was no doubt in the inspector’s mind that Bilsiter had waited his opportunity and was now bringing pressure to bear. At last, reflected Lanner, he had got a motive which might prove strong enough!

“You seem to know a lot about Mr. Sturridge’s affairs,” he said casually.

“It was natural,” replied Brandt easily. “Mr. Sturridge knew I was dissatisfied with my position. He has promised me a position as his secretary.”

“*Quid pro quo*, eh?” said Lanner. “You help Mr. Sturridge out of this business and he helps you out into politics.”

“Yes. There’s no harm in that, surely?”

“Relations between Mr. Sturridge and Mr. Bilsiter were a little strained, I take it?”

“Mr. Bilsiter was very angry,” replied Brandt slowly. “But I don’t think Mr. Sturridge is the kind of man to have murdered him.”

Lanner was not so sure, but he made no audible comment.

“I suppose Mr. Bilsiter thought it was a suitable opportunity to talk things over at Lord Rowmands’ house,” he asked, “and went down partly for that purpose?”

“Partly for that,” admitted Brandt.

“And anything else?”

“Well, Mr. Bilsiter often did his business direct, in other people’s houses,” replied the other. “Very little actual business was done here. I prepared all the necessary

documents, of course, and got them ready for signature.”

“You were in Mr. Bilsiter’s confidence as well as Mr. Sturridge’s?” asked the inspector in cynical tones.

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps you can tell me if Mr. Bilsiter went down for any other reasons to Rowmands?”

“He went down to talk with several people,” answered Brandt without hesitation. It was evident that once he had made up his mind to tell the truth he was not going to hesitate at any half measures. “For one thing, Lord Rowmands owed him money, and he wanted to talk that over. Young Mr. Ableway was another, and Mr. Jesson was a third.”

The face of the inspector betrayed no surprise. He might have known everything Brandt was telling him for all the change of expression on his face.

“Can you give me details?” he asked in casual tones.

“Lord Rowmands’ amount was interest due on a mortgage Mr. Bilsiter held. Mr. Ableway’s was due because he had backed a promissory note for a friend. Mr. Jesson, well, Mr. Jesson’s was just the usual promissory note. He had just sold a big picture, I believe, and Mr. Bilsiter was pressing for payment on notes which have been overdue for some time.”

“Mr. Bilsiter seemed to have a good many people in his power,” said the inspector dryly.

“I dare say you would find it difficult to find many of the upper classes who have wanted money who have not applied to Mr. Bilsiter at one time or another,” answered Brandt. “He was a very rich man and knew a very large number of people.”

“Did Mr. Bilsiter take the various papers with him? asked Lanner.

“Yes, he always made it a practice to do that,” said the other. “He had a theory that the sight of the paper a client signed in the past always made them more amenable.”

“It might also make them get their backs up,” thought the inspector.

“Well, I’m going to take charge of this office,” he said aloud, “and I warn you you are to hold no communication with any of the people whose names you have mentioned to me. I’ll use your telephone.”

“I was not compelled to give you the information,” began Brandt. “Mr. Sturridge _____”

“Oh, yes, you were,” answered Lanner cheerfully. “You were compelled through sheer funk. I’m not concerned with what tale you tell Mr. Sturridge. Doubtless you can put yourself right in his eyes when the time comes. But it hasn’t come yet, and until it does you’ll keep your mouth shut.”

Twenty minutes later a crestfallen Cornelius Brandt, all the confidence taken out of him, left the office whose secrets had been his own for so many years, and two detectives from Scotland Yard took his place. Nor, did he but know it, was the once efficient right-hand man of Leonard Bilsiter allowed to go to his hotel alone. Inspector

Lanner was taking no chances, and if the other had tried to communicate with Sturridge—well, Lanner would soon have known the fact.

When the inspector left the building in Southhampton Row he was rubbing his hands cheerfully together and whistling a popular tune softly to himself.

It was an indication to those who knew the inspector that he was making progress, great progress, and that he was satisfied things were beginning to shape rightly.

CHAPTER XXIX

JESSON TALKS TO LULWORTH

FRASER JESSON entered the room in which Sir Richard Lulworth was waiting, with a friendly smile of greeting on his face.

"I am glad to see you are looking better, Lulworth. I must say you are recovering quickly."

"It takes a lot to knock me out permanently," replied Lulworth with a laugh. "It's not the first knock on the head I've had, though it's the first in which I didn't know what had hit me. It is very good of you to call and make inquiries," he added politely.

"If you can spare me a few minutes I will tell you the real reason for my call," said Jesson slowly.

Lulworth looked up sharply. There was something in the tones of the other man's voice which made him feel dimly uneasy, something which seemed to crystallise many of his vague reflections about the art expert.

"Anything the matter?" he asked quickly. "Take a chair. Of course I can spare you a few minutes."

The art expert sat down carefully, and blew a cloud of smoke from the cigarette he had lighted before he replied to Lulworth's question.

"Yes, I think something is the matter," he said at last, turning round in his chair and looking the other full in the face. "I shouldn't be surprised if the police are after Charity Sheen for this murder. I am beginning to understand why you recovered from that blow on the head so quickly, Lulworth."

"Meaning exactly?" asked the baronet softly.

"Meaning that I think it was a fake," answered Jesson. "It very conveniently took the suspicion from you."

"I think you've made some mistake, Jesson," said Lulworth coldly. "It is not easy to simulate unconsciousness so as to deceive Doctor Bessbury."

"I've made no mistake," said the other sharply. "You may have been hit on the head, just to show a bruise to Bessbury, but I dare say whoever hit you on the head didn't intend to hurt you very much. Women don't hit very hard, you know, in any circumstances."

"What do you mean?" demanded Lulworth, standing up. "If you've got anything to say, say it and cut out the cackle. Otherwise go and tell Lanner all about it, and while you are about it tell him why you sneaked into my bedroom the other night."

He smiled grimly to himself as he saw the sudden startled look on the face of his companion, a look which vanished almost as soon as it appeared.

"What I mean is this," answered Jesson. "I know you are Charity Sheen. I know Miss Ableway, the daughter of the Commissioner, by the way, knows it. I know you stole papers out of Bilsiter's room that night, that you took his revolver."

“The Jesson Encyclopaedia of Universal Knowledge,” said Lulworth sarcastically. “I suppose all this because you stole a private letter from Miss Ableway to myself? I hadn’t realised before what a pleasant fellow you are, Jesson. This is a new side to your nature, a new aspect of your charming personality. It’s quite refreshing, if I may be permitted to say so.”

Fraser Jesson leant back in his chair and laughed.

“Well, you’ve got a good nerve, Lulworth,” he said good-humouredly. “I didn’t think you’d take it like that, though I ought to have known that as Charity Sheen your nerves were bound to be sound enough. As a matter of fact I came to give you that letter back. It’s not my job to play spy to the police. Here you are.”

Lulworth looked at Jesson in blank astonishment as he held out the letter which Avril had written. He could not understand Jesson’s attitude in the slightest, though the latter’s action had certainly brought relief to his, Lulworth’s mind. He had jumped to the conclusion, when he had first heard the other’s statement that Jesson had either come to give him a warning that he intended to go to the police or meant to blackmail him. It had not occurred to him that Jesson had called merely to return the letter and to say he intended to keep his mouth shut. Nor yet did he believe that that was Jesson’s real motive. Lulworth was no fool. He was a shrewd judge of men, and he looked upon the art expert as being a man with plenty of brains, a man who could keep his own counsel, a man who said little but thought much.

“You are quite correct,” he said slowly, putting the letter safely in an inner pocket. “I am Charity Sheen. Perhaps you read the papers this morning?”

Jesson nodded.

“It was partly that which brought me round,” he replied easily. “I thought that letter might prove rather incriminating if it fell into the wrong hands. Though it was a bit of a temptation to take it along to Lanner,” he added with a laugh.

“I expect it was. It was very good of you to return it to me, Jesson. You don’t believe that I murdered Bilsiter, of course?”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” answered Jesson, lighting a fresh cigarette.

Lulworth was beginning to wonder if he had misjudged the art expert in any way—beginning to think that, after all, Jesson had played the game. He had had his doubt about him, especially after Jesson’s nocturnal visit and search of his bedroom, but that feeling seemed to be passing. The relief to his mind at getting Avril’s incriminating letter back was so great that he almost felt friendly towards the man who sat there watching him steadily.

“Frankly, I am a little bewildered,” he said. “I was awake when you came into my room that night, and I watched you go through all my clothes searching for something.”

“That is the real reason why I came round,” said Jesson quietly. He leant forward, and there was a look of anxiety on his face. “I dare say you thought I’d come like a thief in the night to rob you, Lulworth,” he continued. “Let me explain. This is confidential.”

Lulworth nodded his agreement. Whatever Jesson told him now he knew he could not repeat it. He felt, in any case, that he owed Jesson that for his act of returning the

letter and for his intimation that he would say nothing to the police. And that was exactly what Jesson wanted him to feel. The art expert knew his man, knew that Lulworth would not betray a confidence, no matter how great the pressure that might be brought upon him. He felt perfectly safe in speaking now, as he had felt sure the only way to gain Lulworth's confidence was by doing what he had done. If he had held out any threats, Jesson knew he would have failed in his ultimate object.

"I don't know how Bilsiter met his death," continued Jesson. "But I do know this—he deserved it. He was a wrong 'un through and through. Women and money were his gods, and he bled his victims to the uttermost farthing. I ought to know. I was one of them."

The last words came very bitterly.

"I don't know how many people were under his thumb at Rowmands," resumed Jesson, after a slight pause. "I shouldn't have been surprised if half of them were. I know Rowmands himself was, because Bilsiter boasted to me that if he liked he could sell up the house, lock, stock, and barrel. The man was a swine. Well, to cut it short, I got into his hands some years ago, and he's put the screw on ever since. The business has been steadily growing and I have had to find money to bid for pictures and things I'd got to buy. If I had ceased bidding things would have dropped down and Bilsiter would have sold me up. It's been a fight to keep above water. All the profits went to pay Bilsiter's interest. But at last I kicked.

"I asked for time, for extension on the last note I had signed. He refused to give it to me, and threatened to show me up, to use his own phrase. I might have been a criminal, the way he stormed. He told me he'd got the note with him, and jeered at me.

"'Cough up by Monday, or I'll put the law in motion,' were the brute's words. I was at my wits'-end, Lulworth. I even thought at one time of applying to you, and—and then there came the news he had been killed.

"At first I felt a sense of overwhelming relief, and then came back the recollection of that promissory note. Bilsiter's executors were bound to call it up. I was no better off. I tell you, the hours when Lanner was in that room looking round were hours of terror for me. Not that I was worrying about being accused of the murder," he explained. "But I knew the moment he found that promissory note he would come along and ask me about it. From that to everyone knowing was but a short step, and that wouldn't help my business any. Perhaps I exaggerated things. One does when one is worried.

"Then, as the day slipped by and nothing happened I began to get calmer. The talk was all about Charity Sheen having robbed Bilsiter, of having murdered him. I didn't know who Charity Sheen was then. My mind eased off a bit until that night when you were attacked. I woke up and heard a commotion going on downstairs, and naturally I popped along to the other rooms in the corridor to see if any of you were awake. Ableway's door was open and I saw at once that he wasn't there. I tapped on your door and getting no reply opened it and switched on the light, half-mechanically. You weren't there."

He stopped for a minute and studied the ash on the end of his cigarette. Lulworth had been following his story with obvious interest. It appeared to him to have the ring

of truth. In fact, part of it, at any rate, he knew quite definitely was true, that Bilsiter had had among his other papers a promissory note signed by Jesson. But Lulworth at the time had attached little importance to it, and subsequent events put it in the back of his mind. He wondered a little at Jesson's hesitation.

"The next part of the story is not creditable to me," continued the other, "and I owe you an apology. Just as I was turning away I saw a sheet of paper sticking out from underneath your pillow. Without thinking what I was doing I pulled it out. I was astonished out of my life when I read it. I could hardly believe my eyes. When I went downstairs with it in my pocket I didn't know what I was going to do with it. Then I found you had just been brought in unconscious.

"As I stood there looking down at you it slowly crossed my mind that the reason why Lanner had never mentioned the promissory note to me was because you had got it, as you must have got some other paper Bilsiter had been holding over some other poor devil in the house. Frankly, I had just made up my mind to take the risk and go upstairs and search your room for it when I heard someone tell one of the maids to put your bed tidy."

"It was to find the paper that you searched afterwards when you thought I was asleep?" interrupted Lulworth.

"Exactly. The sooner I got hold of it and destroyed it the better I should feel. I had no compunction about doing that. Bilsiter has had his principal and interest back a hundred times."

"I don't doubt that," said the other, who was now beginning to see why Jesson had called. "And I suppose now you have come for the paper?"

Jesson leant forward eagerly, a gleam of hope in his eyes.

"You have got it then?" he asked quickly.

"I am sorry to say I haven't."

He explained how he had posted the papers and Bilsiter's revolver to the newsagents in the Clerkenwell Road, how they had been called for there by Mrs. Hollister, and the latter's attitude. Lulworth told only those details bearing upon Jesson's story. He had no intention of discussing anything else with the art expert. In some ways he felt resentful against him for the bad time he had given to Avril and himself. His story had been plausible and straightforward enough, and Lulworth had no reason to disbelieve any part of it.

"The real fault was my own," he reflected, "for being so careless as to leave the letter there in the first instance."

Jesson's face grew more solemn as Lulworth told his story, and when the latter had finished he stood up with clenched fist.

"I am beginning to see it all now," he cried. "That's why the police wanted to get in touch with Mrs. Hollister, I suppose. They suspected her husband, and she's going to hold those papers as a threat against you or me or anyone else whose name happens to be on them. She'll switch the suspicion from her husband. No woman wants to be called the wife of a murderer."

“I didn’t think of it from that point of view,” began Lulworth, when Jesson turned round sharply.

“Have you any objection if I try to get the papers?” he asked. “I think you owe me that.”

“None whatever,” answered Lulworth. “Though I don’t fancy somehow you will get them.”

“It can’t make the situation worse having a try,” Jesson pointed out.

Lulworth reflected for a few moments before replying. After all, Jesson was quite right. It couldn’t do any harm to try, though he thought there was no possibility of succeeding.

“I’ll give you her address,” he said. “Does she know you, by any chance?”

“Not to my knowledge,” replied Jesson. “Perhaps that’s where I shall have a pull over her. I’ll frighten her in some way or other into giving them to me. Naturally, she wouldn’t hand them over to you. She knows you fear publicity as much as she does, at any rate until the murderer of Bilsiter is found.”

He turned at the door as he was going out.

“Queer about that murder, Lulworth,” he said. “It was a very lucky thing for a number of people. Have you any theory who did it? I think Hollister, of course. Don’t forget the pantry window was found open and Mrs. Hollister was known to be about that night. I dare say she knew where Bilsiter’s room was and told her husband. These women have a funny way of going back to their old loves.”

Lulworth shook his head.

“I am afraid I have no theories which will hold water,” he answered. “But as long as the suspicion is on Charity Sheen I shall use all my endeavours to find the real murderer.”

“Well, when you find Hollister I think you’ve got him,” said Jesson. “As for me, I’m off to see her ladyship. And if I get those things you’ll know quickly enough.”

“If—” said the other under his breath.

CHAPTER XXX

LANNER IS PUZZLED

LANNER felt that he was beginning to make real progress at last. His interviews with Avril and Lulworth and finally Brandt had brought him a considerable amount of information which seemed to be crystallising in the direction of Sturridge. The latter, he reflected, had the motive and he had the opportunity. Moreover, the Under-Secretary was a man of great determination who would allow little to stand in the way of attaining his political ambitions. Murder was a serious thing, but the inspector had known murder committed for far weaker motives than Sturridge had got. Decidedly, he reflected, it would be a difficult thing to bring it home to the suspected man, but Lanner was a man who delighted in overcoming difficulties. Once he was on the right scent he would not lose the trail until he had run his quarry to earth.

He determined to strike while the iron was hot, while Brandt's story was fresh in his mind. His action would have the added adventure of lessening the risk of Bilsiter's assistant trying to get in touch with Sturridge. He would get Sturridge's story, and if it did not agree in every particular with that told by Brandt, well, there was another cause for suspicion. If it did agree, the inspector reflected, Sturridge was really no better off. It appeared, indeed, that in either case the Under-Secretary was not in a very comfortable position!

"And after that I think I'll wind up the day by having another chat with Sir Richard," he said to himself. "This is my lucky day and I may as well make the most of it."

As the Houses of Parliament were not sitting the inspector was fortunate in finding the man he wanted at home. He had snatched a hurried lunch, made an appointment with Lulworth to call round at four o'clock, and had made a precis of the information he had gathered before he called on Sturridge.

"Hallo, Lanner! What does Sir John think of Charity Sheen now?" he asked as the inspector was shown into the room. "He seems to know what the police are thinking. You are sure Sheen is not one of your men?"

"Certain, sir," answered Lanner shortly. "In fact—in confidence—I don't mind telling you we are pretty sure of the identity of Sheen. But being pretty sure and convicting him are two different things."

"I can't help admiring the man all the same" said Sturridge. "This last move of his is very clever."

Lanner, however, had not come round to talk of Charity Sheen, and he said so.

"I have come to ask you a few questions, Mr. Sturridge," he said "about the murder of Mr. Bilsiter."

Sturridge darted a quick look at Lanner.

"Anything I can do to help you inspector," he replied suavely. "What can I tell you?"

The inspector believed in the effect of surprise. He did not beat about the bush, but as he spoke he kept his eyes fixed on the other's face, and had a feeling of satisfaction as he noticed Sturridge wince. But the Under-Secretary had far too much control over his emotions to betray himself to any real extent.

"You can tell me why Mr. Brandt telephoned to you at half-past eight on the morning Mr. Bilsiter was murdered," answered the inspector.

"Of course. I didn't know it was of any importance or I would have told you before," replied Sturridge evenly. "I suppose Brandt has been talking?"

"He has told me one or two things, Mr. Sturridge," said Lanner. "But that telephone message?"

He was not going to let himself be examined. He had come there to do that, not to have the tables turned on him.

"Brandt wanted to save his own skin, I suppose," said Sturridge icily. "I hope what I am going to tell you will not become public property, Lanner?"

"Only in certain circumstances," replied the inspector.

For the first time Sturridge flushed. There was no need to ask Lanner what the circumstances were. They were rather too obvious. So the fool suspected him of having killed Bilsiter? He would soon settle that.

"Brandt telephoned me over a business matter," he said coldly. "I don't know that I am called upon to tell you all my private affairs, but as doubtless you have wormed it all out of Brandt, and got a version which will put him right, you may as well have the truth. I owned half a share in Bilsiter's business and Brandt was negotiating to sell that half-share. He telephoned me that morning to say that he thought he'd got the man who would buy."

"So far, so good," thought the inspector. "That agrees with Brandt."

"I wanted to get rid of the shares," explained Sturridge, "because I thought it would damage my political reputation if it were known that I was connected with a money-lending business. Anything more?"

"You're frank enough," admitted the inspector. "Brandt told me the same story."

"He's more likely to lie than I am, inspector," said the other sharply. "I am not accustomed to having my word doubted. The whole thing is painful enough without that. Remember my position."

"I'm not forgetting it, sir," replied the unruffled inspector. "I have my duty, and it doesn't make it any easier for me to come here this way."

To his surprise Sturridge smiled and all trace of anger had gone out of his tones when he next spoke.

"I'm sorry, inspector," he said. "It would be a gross abuse of my position if I took advantage of it in any way to avoid answering your questions. Frankly, I was a little taken back by what you said. My position is difficult, and if you can keep my name out of the inquiry I should be glad, that is all. If you can't avoid doing so, then I have only myself to blame for ever being so foolish as to link myself with such an utter outsider as Bilsiter."

“I understand your position, sir,” said the inspector in a more conciliatory tone. “There are one or two other questions I should like to ask. First, when Sir Richard Lulworth was brought into Rowmands unconscious, a maid went up to his room and found you there.”

There was an expression of sheer astonishment on Sturridge’s face as he listened to the inspector.

“What is the idea, Lanner?” he asked. “I went up there to get Lulworth’s dressing-gown to wrap round him. He had been lying unconscious on the grass for some time and must have been cold. Do you think I was there for any other reason?”

The inspector shook his head negatively. He had no intention in any case of telling the other what he thought.

“It was reported to me by one of the maids, that is all, sir,” he replied. “It is of no real importance, but I thought I would mention it. Hollister has been detained.”

“You are making a mistake there,” said Sturridge sharply. “It is not my duty to give you advice, but if you think poor old Hollister killed Bilsiter you will be doing him a terrible injustice, and God knows the poor devil has already suffered enough for what he has done, and for what Bilsiter thoroughly deserved.”

“Yet Hollister was in Beaconsfield that night,” pointed out the inspector, watching the other keenly.

“I’m sorry you found that out, inspector, sorry because of the construction you will put on it,” replied Sturridge. “I asked Hollister to come down to Beaconsfield, arranged rooms there. At the time I knew I should be staying some days at Rowmands, but I had no idea Bilsiter would be there, no idea of what was going to happen. I am sure of this, too—Hollister had no idea Bilsiter was in the neighbourhood until he heard of his murder. I asked him there because I wanted to talk to him about the future, to cheer him up. Hollister was a friend of mine.”

The inspector was surprised at the feeling the other showed. Sturridge undoubtedly meant all he said, and afterwards, in fact, the inspector learnt that the Under-Secretary had proved to be the greatest friend John Hollister had.

“I’m glad to have your explanation, sir,” he answered, making no comment of the fact that he had already learnt from Hollister himself why he had chosen Beaconsfield. “And I hope what you say about Hollister is true. But I cannot take any risks in face of his threats against the dead man, and the fact that he was in the neighbourhood at the time of the murder.”

“So were a good many other people,” said Sturridge. “I will, at any time, give you my personal bond for Hollister. He’s learnt a bitter lesson. I think if you put your hands on Sheen you’ll learn far more than you will ever learn by worrying Hollister.”

“I think I will take your tip, sir,” said the inspector, rising to go.

“On the whole an unsatisfactory interview,” he commented to himself. “I rather hoped I should catch Master Sturridge tripping, but his story agrees exactly with Brandt’s, as far as it goes, and, as for the rest of it, well, he might be telling the truth!”

He looked at his watch. It was showing a few minutes after three, and he went in to a neighbouring restaurant. He had nearly an hour before his appointment with Lulworth, and he wanted to think things over very carefully. During the next few hours Lanner felt he must come to some decision or other and lay his conclusions before Sir John Ableway.

“What a mess!” he soliloquised. “If they’re all telling the truth it seems to me I’m no nearer telling the Commissioner the truth of the affair myself. The only consolation I have is that as each tells his tale I am able to drag a little more out of the next one. They all seem strangely reluctant to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

Nor had the inspector come any nearer a conclusion when he found himself once more talking to Sir Richard Lulworth. He was not at all surprised to find that Avril was in the room when he entered. He had long realised that neither of these two would say anything to him unless the other were present. And for that he felt glad, for he gained more from their attitude towards one another, their looks and their hesitations when he asked certain questions than he would have gained from either alone.

“So you have seen Sturridge and had a talk with him,” said Lulworth. “May we ask with what result?”

“I have learnt one or two things,” replied the inspector carefully. “He has given me perfectly reasonable explanations of his actions and has answered all my questions freely enough. I think everyone has, Sir Richard, except yourself and Miss Ableway.”

Avril smiled. She was beginning to like the bluntness of the inspector, for he spoke without any rancour. He was, consciously or unconsciously—she did not know which—making an appeal to the sporting side of their natures. If he had been blustering, had tried bullying tactics, he would not have learnt even the amount they had chosen to tell him.

“I don’t think we have any intention to deceive,” said Sir Richard calmly. “Rather let me put it this way, Lanner: We do not think it necessary to tell you everything. Some things, we know, have no real bearing on the murder, though they may appear to you to have.”

“I think I am the best judge,” replied Lanner, “without being actually rude. And if the things have no real bearing on the murder of Bilsiter, then there is no harm in telling me all about them. For example,” he turned to Avril as he spoke, “I should like to know the real truth about that scarab brooch which was found in Mr. Bilsiter’s bedroom; I should like to know why you said you had toothache, why you really came up to town; what was in the parcel addressed to Richard Worth at the newsagents in the Clerkenwell Road, those are just three things I would like to know, Miss Ableway.”

“Before I answer, Mr. Lanner,” said Avril in a low voice, “Tell me, do you believe that Sir Richard killed Mr. Bilsiter, or that either of us knows who did?”

“As an inspector of police,” replied Lanner promptly, “I can’t say. As a private individual, I do not. As Inspector Lanner I think some of the things Sir Richard and yourself have done are highly suspicious. As plain Mr. Lanner if you will pardon me for saying so, I think you are both foolish in not telling me the exact truth.”

“If we could separate the inspector from the civilian we might,” said Lulworth with a laugh. “That’s our difficulty. There are some things I could tell you which I feel you would be bound to take to higher quarters.”

Lanner felt he was treading on delicate ground. He wanted to know badly what they could tell him, but he could clearly make no general promise not to make use of the information they might give him. He chose his words carefully.

“I am not bound to report everything I hear,” he said. “If there is anything I don’t think bears directly on the murder, but which it is necessary to tell me in the course of your story, well, Mr. Lanner will have heard it. Inspector Lanner will have forgotten it.”

“Have you anything special in your mind?” asked Lulworth.

“I think I have in my mind, Sir Richard, that the identities of Charity Sheen and the murderer of Mr. Bilsiter are not the same.”

Sir Richard Lulworth threw the remainder of his cigar into the fire, and stared reflectively at the ceiling for some moments. Both Lanner and Avril watched him with very different feelings, and when he at last spoke it was Lanner who smiled, Avril whose face went white.

“I am Charity Sheen, Lanner, and I will tell you what happened that night.”

CHAPTER XXXI

LULWORTH EXPLAINS

IF either Avril or Richard had expected Inspector Lanner to show astonishment at the dramatic announcement of Lulworth that he was Charity Sheen they were disappointed. He followed a smoke ring from his cigarette as it slowly expanded and dissolved in the air before he spoke, while Avril watched him with tense lips. She wanted to cry out, to protest, to tell the inspector it was not true, that Richard had made a mistake, a terrible mistake. She visualised Lanner jingling a pair of handcuffs, uttering some dreadful words beginning, "I must caution you that anything you might say will be taken down and may be given in evidence against you." She did not know how she managed to stand there without screaming, how she managed to keep control over herself.

But the inspector said exactly what she did not expect him to say.

"I am glad you have told me, Sir Richard," he remarked in quiet tones. "I have suspected it for some time. I am beginning to revise my opinion of you."

"Yes, I am afraid you will think I am pretty bad, Lanner," said Lulworth slowly. "That is the penalty I must pay."

"On the contrary, I thought you were very much worse than you are," continued the other.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—well, I am beginning to learn things. I am not so sure as I was at the start of this case," replied Lanner frankly. "Until the last few days I kind of knew all about Charity Sheen second-hand, as it were. Now I am learning first-hand, and first-hand knowledge is safer. I shall be glad if you will tell me what happened that night, sir. And for the moment, at any rate, I am not concerned with the exploits of Charity Sheen as such, in the past, only what his connection is with the murder of Mr. Bilsiter."

"Oh, Mr. Lanner, Sir Richard didn't do that," cried Avril, wringing her hands. "Please——"

"Let me tell the story my dear," interrupted Lulworth. "It is no use hiding anything in the long run."

"If people would only realise that, that if they told the whole truth and nothing but the truth at the beginning," said Lanner, "they would save themselves an endless amount of worry and trouble, to say nothing of other people. Half the cases before the courts would never have been brought if the truth had been told at the beginning. And half the inspectors of police would be unnecessary," he added with a smile. "Now, sir."

He listened keenly and carefully to Lulworth's story, checking it mentally where he could from the knowledge he already possessed. Step by step Lulworth explained how he had waited until everything was quiet, had entered the moneylender's room, wakened him after removing the revolver from under the sleeping man's pillow, and then had been forced to bind him with the cord from his dressing-gown and one of the straps from one of his bags.

“I found that out,” said Lanner at this point. “And quite made up my mind at the time that the murderer had first of all bound Bilsiter and then stabbed him. I felt pretty sick about it at the time. It seemed to be the height of brutality.”

“I may have contributed to the ease with which the murderer committed his crime,” continued Lulworth. “And that, I admit, has been on my conscience, for it gave the poor devil no chance to fight for his life. I am not offering the suggestion as a defence, but I think that once I was out of the room Bilsiter would have no difficulty in freeing himself.”

“And I am inclined to agree with you, sir, that he did. I think his murderer would have been quite content to leave him bound, if he found him so.”

“I glanced over the papers rather hurriedly, I am afraid,” continued Lulworth, “and made a small parcel of them and sent them by the ordinary morning post to an accommodation address.”

“Richard Worth, eh? Yes, and I know all about *that*, Sir Richard, and that Miss Ableway called for them and took them away.”

“But I didn’t,” explained Avril quickly. “I was going to, Mr. Lanner. That is why I had toothache and came up to town. But Mrs. Hollister got there first. She has got the papers now.”

Inspector Lanner brought his fist angrily down on the edge of the chair.

“I am a fool,” he cried. “I made inquiries there, heard a lady had called for the parcel, and at once jumped to the conclusion it was you, Miss Ableway. That shows the folly of not verifying every step. I might have had those papers by now.”

He nodded to Lulworth to continue his story.

“I think I have told you all that matters,” said the latter. “If there is anything I have not said which will help you——”

“I found an Egyptian scarab belonging to Miss Ableway in Bilsiter’s room,” said the inspector. “Miss Ableway told me she must have dropped it, and the dead man must have picked it up.”

Avril flushed as Lanner looked across at her.

“She told you that because she did not want to give away the fact I had been in the room,” said Lulworth. “Miss Ableway had given me the brooch to have repaired, and I suppose in the struggle with Bilsiter I must have dropped it. Anything else?”

“I found a notebook belonging to Bilsiter,” continued the inspector. “In it were a number of interesting entries. One was ‘Told A.A. about Sheen. Had expected effect.’”

“I wonder if you will believe anything I tell you now, Mr. Lanner,” said Avril in a low voice. “But I did not tell you the truth then because—because I was afraid for Sir Richard. Mr. Bilsiter told me he was convinced that Sir Richard was Charity Sheen. He asked me if I would marry him, and when I refused he threatened he would expose Sir Richard. I am afraid I had rather given myself away by then”—she glanced for a moment at her lover—“and—and—well, I agreed to marry him if he would say nothing. I told Sir Richard that night, but of course I couldn’t tell him why.”

“Did you hear anything more that night, Sir Richard?” asked the inspector. “I gathered you were there about three o’clock, or perhaps a little later, and, according to Dr. Bessbury, Bilsiter was murdered between half-past two and four o’clock. We can rule out the first time for the moment, but even then the murderer must have come along within less than an hour of your leaving the room.”

“I fancied someone went down the corridor just as I entered my room,” said Lulworth. “And I looked out. The corridor bends round just past the room I had, and I caught sight of a dressing-gown disappearing round the corner. I am afraid I did not think much about it at the time, except that I considered I had had a narrow squeak of being seen. Since then, quite candidly, I think it must have been Sturridge, though, again, I did not recognise him in any way. It was too dark to see properly.”

“You believe Sturridge is the murderer?” asked the inspector sharply.

“I’m suspicious, that is all,” pointed out Lulworth. “I have told you why already, but I admit it is not evidence enough to convict, especially considering my own position,” he finished with a smile. “I am afraid I am not making out a very good case for myself.”

“What was the paper you were after?”

It was the question Lulworth was expecting, the question Avril was dreading.

“Is it necessary I should tell you, Lanner?” he asked. “I can assure you it has nothing whatever to do with the murder.”

“Lord Rowmands told me that you knew one of the guests was having pressure brought to bear on him by Bilsiter. Was the name of that guest on the paper? You see the importance of it? If you refuse——”

“No, no; he mustn’t refuse,” interrupted Avril, a little wildly. “We must tell you all the truth now, Inspector Lanner. The name on the paper was that of my brother. He had backed a bill for a friend and the friend was unable to meet it.”

A light began to break on the inspector.

“Most of the people at Rowmands seemed to have been rather heavily involved, Miss Ableway,” he said grimly. “What exactly happened when you came up to town?”

Avril explained how she had followed Mrs. Hollister, that it was Mrs. Hollister who had called at the newsagent’s shop in the Clerkenwell Road, that it was Mrs. Hollister who was now holding the papers as a threat.

“Umph, Mrs. Hollister will have one or two nasty questions to answer,” remarked the inspector. “I suppose she wasn’t by any chance on friendly terms with your brother, Miss Ableway?”

“They knew one another,” answered Avril in a low voice. “Though to what extent I can’t say. He was with me in the bedroom when you called.”

“And that was the man you were shielding, Sir Richard,” commented Lanner. “I suspected that in a sense. I knew Mr. Ableway had an appointment with Mr. Bilsiter at midnight—knew he kept it. They were overheard quarreling, for one thing, and there was an entry in Bilsiter’s notebook for another.”

“Tommy——” began Avril.

“No, I don’t think your brother did it,” interrupted Lanner. “He’s not the type who would do it deliberately. The only chance that he murdered Bilsiter was that he did it in a rage. There was no doubt that Bilsiter was alive after your brother left him, for Sir Richard interviewed him. I think we can cut your brother out, but he may give me some useful information. I believe your story, sir.”

He turned round, and, to the surprise of Lulworth, held out his hand.

“I think you have rather cut the ground from under our feet as Charity Sheen,” he continued with a smile. “Not, as a private citizen, as Mr. Lanner,” he looked with an amused glance at Avril, “that I am going to worry. Some people ask for trouble.”

His words were ambiguous, but Avril did not ask whether Richard was referred to or Charity Sheen’s victims. Her mind was in a whirl at the unexpected attitude of the inspector. She felt an infinite sense of relief, in violent contrast to her feelings but a short time ago, feelings of terror and apprehension when her lover had boldly stated that he was Charity Sheen.

“I think I have given you unnecessary trouble,” said Lulworth. “And now that you know the whole truth as far as we are concerned, I don’t see how you are any nearer solving the problem, unless you agree it is Sturridge.”

“I’ll see Mrs. Hollister and Mr. Ableway first,” replied the inspector guardedly. “And Jesson,” he added as an afterthought.

“By Jove, I had forgotten all about Jesson!” cried Lulworth. “He came round to see me this morning to bring me a letter Miss Ableway had written to me.”

“That accounts for Jesson’s hints about Charity Sheen,” commented the inspector, “and why he entered your room,” he added, when he had heard Lulworth’s story. “Bit by bit the tangle seems to be sorting itself out.”

“He seemed very anxious to get the paper back,” said Lulworth. “Told me he was going to see Mrs. Hollister.”

“Mrs. Hollister seems to be the centre of attraction at the moment,” said Lanner. “I think I will go round and see her myself.”

“And—and—father,” stammered Avril.

“I shall not tell Sir John about Charity Sheen, Miss Ableway,” answered the inspector promptly. “I dare say it’s compounding a felony in law, but it won’t be the first time the police have done that in the cause of charity.”

With a reassuring smile, he had gone, before she could pour out her pent-up emotions. And when Lulworth returned from seeing the inspector out he found her in tears.

“My dear, my dear,” he cried, putting his arms round her. “What is the matter?”

“Don’t you understand?” Avril answered, and as she looked up Lulworth saw there was a smile through her tears. “I am crying because it is all right. I have been very frightened for you, my dear. And we could have saved it all if we had told the inspector at the beginning.”

He smiled to himself at her inconsistency. It was Avril who had been afraid of the inspector in the first place, who would have fought with all the energy of her nature

against any suggestion of telling the inspector anything. In any case, reflected Lulworth, it would have been a mistake to tell the inspector at the time. The psychology of the situation had changed. Lanner was much more prepared now to accept the story they had told him than he would have been within a few hours of Bilsiter's murder. For one thing, that story fitted in with other facts which he had discovered for himself, facts which he might never have elicited if he had once got the idea fixed in his head that Lulworth was the murderer.

And as he talked soothingly to the girl who had risked so much for him he wondered at the back of his mind what Mrs. Hollister was saying at that moment to Lanner.

"I have one confession to make to you, little one," he said after a while.

"Something you've not told Inspector Lanner?" she asked with a happy laugh, kissing him. "I thought we had told him everything."

"It's something which concerns you, my darling, our future," he answered gravely. "I am a poor man."

She looked at him with a puzzled frown on her face.

"Poor?" she echoed. "What does that matter? I don't——"

"I have given away most of my fortune to charity," he interrupted. "My foolishness of the past——"

"Your foolishness of the past!" she cried, a great light of happiness dawning in her blue eyes, "My dear, my dear, what does that matter to me? What does it matter how poor you are? You have made restitution and made it to those who will never appreciate, never understand what you have done. Richard mine, you have done the greatest thing in the world, and I am glad, glad that you will no longer have days of idleness which made you in the past look round for something to satisfy the cravings for adventure which are in you. Work is a great adventure, dear heart of mine."

"And working for you will be the greatest of all adventures," he answered, taking her and crushing her in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MURDERER OF BILSITER

MRS. HOLLISTER had no illusions about Lanner. She was a woman of the world, and she knew that, sooner or later, the inspector would worm the whole story—or, rather, their versions of the story—out of Tommy Ableway, Brandt and Sturridge. She was not very much concerned with that. Nor was she worrying greatly about the chances of her being accused of the murder of Bilsiter. She had no idea who had murdered the man for whom she had once risked her reputation, and she did not care very much who it was, in a sense. At one time she had, quite frankly, quite callously, hoped it was her husband, but her views on that had undergone a change as she began to realise what it might mean to be pointed at as the wife of a murderer.

All Mrs. Hollister was concerned with now was keeping out of the trouble as much as possible. She was, frankly, out for money, and in the papers which she had managed to obtain she saw, or thought she saw, her way to obtain sufficient to make her rich for life.

“That fool Lulworth will pay for them all right,” she said contemptuously to herself as she drank her coffee after lunch in her favourite little restaurant off Holborn. “Though what he can really want with them, unless he killed Leonard for them, I don’t know. And I don’t believe he did kill him, somehow. It isn’t to save Rowmands or Jesson or——”

She was just about to say “Tommy” when it flashed across her mind that this was probably the real reason why Lulworth wanted the papers.

“Of course, I’d forgotten he was engaged to that little fool’s sister,” she muttered. “Naturally he doesn’t want a scandal. Well, well, my fine baronet, you can save the scandal all right—at a price.”

She did not feel like going back to her flat that afternoon. She had got tired of all kinds of people calling, tired of feeling that she was being watched all the time, and looking down the list of matinees she decided to pass the afternoon more pleasantly than sitting waiting and wondering. Mrs. Hollister was not the type of woman to let her conscience override her enjoyments. It is doubtful, indeed, if she had any conscience.

It was nearly half-past six when she once more returned to her flat near Victoria and asked the question of her maid which she always asked mechanically.

“Anyone called, Jeannette?”

“Yes, m’m. Ze inspector he called and went away. He will call again. A gentleman he called twice and he went away and said he would call again. He was very, what you call it, upset? ‘I must see Mrs. Hollister,’ he says, and he will call again. A Mr. Hardman.”

“Some newspaper reporter,” said her mistress. “The next time he calls ask him his business, and if he’s from one of the papers tell him I am out.”

“Mr. Sturridge is in the drawing-room, m’m,” added Jeanette.

"I suppose he's come to talk to me about John," reflected Mrs. Hollister.

It was a subject on which Sturridge had often talked, and though she had affected to listen, it was a subject in which she had no real interest. But she had been careful not to offend the Under-Secretary, for he was a person of influence, and, situated as she was, Mrs. Hollister felt that she never knew when that influence might be required.

"I have only been here a few minutes," he explained when she entered the room, smiling. "I thought I might catch you about this time."

"Is it anything important?" she asked. "I am getting awfully worried about it all. I wish I had never gone down to Beaconsfield to warn Leonard."

"So do I," he answered. "I thought you were going to give him up and go back to your husband."

She suppressed the words on her lips. It was not yet time to tell this man that nothing could induce her to go back to her husband, even if the latter wanted her.

"I was afraid," she answered. "John——"

"John has learnt his lesson," interrupted Sturridge quickly. "And it is up to all of us to try to make up for the past, to give him the chance of forgetting. There have been terrible mistakes all round."

He spoke feelingly. She knew that his friendship for her husband had been a very real thing, and it puzzled her in some ways, for she was not a woman who understood friendship unless it brought something tangible in its train. And how John could ever help this man she did not understand.

"Was it a mistake I went down to Beaconsfield after all?" she demanded. "John apparently went straight there after he was released. Why have the police detained him unless they think he did it?"

"John has a perfectly good explanation why he went to Beaconsfield," replied the other coldly. "He did not murder Bilsiter, nor do the police really think so. Don't forget I am in the Home Office and I can get any information I like. My evidence alone will clear him."

"Your evidence?"

"It was I who asked John there. When I asked him I had no idea Bilsiter was going to stay at Rowmands," he explained. "And I wanted to talk to John over the week-end, talk over the future. I wanted to see if he was still fond of you. A thing you will never understand is the friendship of one man for another. You are too shallow, too fond of yourself. That is a fault of your temperament and you cannot be blamed, I suppose. But John and I were old school friends."

He spoke without any tinge of bitterness in his voice, but she flushed as he summed up her character impersonally as though he were speaking to her about someone else whom they both knew. To her Sturridge had always been a mystery, and she sometimes wondered why he troubled at all about her, why he had spent these long months trying to wean her from her association with Bilsiter.

"And is he still fond of me?" she asked.

"I am glad to say he is not," replied Sturridge curtly. "And that is one of the reasons I came round to see you to-night. From to-night I shall trouble no further about you. You have made your own bed and you can lie upon it. I am sorry to speak brutally, but that is the only kind of thing you understand. You will not be allowed to starve, though I doubt if a woman of your temperament will ever starve."

"How dare you!" she cried. "How dare you!"

"I dare, because I speak the truth," he answered. "And you know it is the truth. And you know I speak impersonally. I never really thought I should alter your nature, but I tried for John's sake, because I did not know what John thought about you."

To his surprise her anger changed to laughter.

"You are the first man who has ever told me the truth about myself," she cried. "I ought to hate you for it, I know, but there is something refreshing about the truth after the way every man I have met flatters for his own ends. It is quite true, women like me were not made to starve. It was a terrible mistake marrying John"—there was a note of genuine regret in her voice—"he had no money, no ambition, and was so full of his own work that he had no time to pay attention to me. The fault was not all on my side, though I dare say I could not convince you of that."

"On the contrary, I know John's faults only too well," answered the other. "He ought never to have married an ambitious woman. He will always be content with some little backwater where he can carry on his work in peace. No, these things are rarely wholly the fault of one of the partners."

"I know," she began, when there came a sharp, impatient ring at the bell.

"I am simply pestered with callers," she cried, glad to have some excuse for changing the subject. "I wonder who it can be."

"Mr. Hardman, m'm," announced Jeanette. "He says it is very important. He tells me he is not from the newspapers."

"Do you know anyone named Hardman?" asked Mrs. Hollister, turning to Sturridge. "I have never heard of him."

"Nor have I," replied the other. "Would you like me——"

"No, please stay. Show him in, Jeanette. I expect he wants to ask me something, and it can't be so private as all that, as I don't know him."

Sturridge glanced half-curiously at the door as it opened again a moment later to admit Mr. Hardman, and then he suddenly stiffened in his chair. Entering the room was Fraser Jesson, the art expert. The latter's eyes, however, were directed at Mrs. Hollister, and he did not see Sturridge until he had spoken.

"I am afraid you don't know my name, Mrs. Hollister," he said politely. "I have come about a very important and private business which may, incidentally, put a large sum of money in your pocket."

And then a look of astonishment came over his face as Sturridge moved forward.

"I didn't expect to see Jesson in Hardman," said the latter, with a faint trace of sarcasm in his voice.

“This is Mr. Fraser Jesson, who was one of the guests at Rowmands when Mr. Bilsiter was murdered,” he continued, turning to Mrs. Hollister. “In fact he had the next bedroom to him.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Jesson sharply.

He was thoroughly taken back by the unexpected meeting with the other, and Sturridge looked at him carefully before replying. He had spoken half-sarcastically, and he was rather surprised at the sharpness in Jesson’s tones.

“Well, it was a fact you had the next bedroom, wasn’t it?” he asked. “What’s the idea, Jesson?”

The art expert deliberately turned his back. He was evidently fuming with rage, though he made a great effort to control himself.

“May I speak to you alone, Mrs. Hollister?” he asked. “I can explain then.”

Marjorie Hollister looked her bewilderment, and she was just about to reply when she caught sight of Sturridge shaking his head vigorously in the negative.

“Mr. Sturridge is a great friend of mine,” she replied coldly. “And if you have anything to say, Mr.—Mr. Jesson you must say it in front of him. It can’t be so private as all that, as this is the first time we have met.”

The Under-Secretary was surprised and not a little puzzled by the obvious emotion under which Jesson was labouring. He had met the art expert on a number of occasions, and had been under the impression that he was a man who had a strong control over himself.

“So Mr. Sturridge is a great friend of yours?” he said. “Yes, I admit I am surprised. You were the last person I expected to see, Sturridge.”

“I hope it is not an unpleasant surprise?”

There was a faint sneer in Sturridge’s tones, and Jesson looked up quickly.

“I am sorry if I am intruding,” he said, controlling himself with an effort. “But I can assure you I shouldn’t have done so if my business hadn’t been extremely urgent. Do you mind if I speak to Mrs. Hollister privately for a few minutes?”

“Mrs. Hollister has already intimated that she would prefer me to be present,” returned Sturridge. “And frankly I cannot see what you can have to say to a stranger which is so private that another stranger can’t overhear.”

It was a perfectly plain hint to Jesson that he did not intend to leave the room, and the art expert bit his lip in his annoyance. He stood there hesitating for some minutes before he came to a decision.

“Do I understand,” he said at last, “that anything I may say to Mrs. Hollister is confidential?”

“I see no reason at all why I should repeat anything you may say,” said Sturridge carefully.

“Very well, then,” answered Jesson with a shrug of his shoulders. “What I have to say won’t wait, I am afraid. It is a business matter.”

He turned to Mrs. Hollister.

“You have some papers which were stolen from Mr. Bilsiter when he was murdered,” he began, without any preamble. He was clearly labouring under strong emotion. “Among them was a paper bearing my name. I am prepared to pay you £1,000 for it if you will give it to me now.”

His eyes were fixed on Mrs. Hollister’s face and neither of them noticed the quick change in Sturridge’s expression.

“How did you know?” began Mrs. Hollister, glancing uneasily at Sturridge. This was an unexpected turn of events, and one in which she would much sooner have been alone with Fraser Jesson. She felt she must go carefully. Those papers she held were becoming more and more valuable and she meant to get the full value for them. First Sir Richard Lulworth and now this man Jesson. She had wondered who Jesson was when she had seen his name on the promissory note.

“A thousand pounds,” she said slowly. “That is not very much, Mr. Jesson, is it, for a promissory note worth——”

Sturridge’s penetrating eyes had been watching Jesson’s face and he saw his expression change.

“This wants some explanation,” he said. “I don’t quite think you know what you are saying, Jesson.”

“It is quite true,” interposed Mrs. Hollister. “I have got some papers which were stolen from Leonard on the night he was murdered, stolen by the man who called himself Charity Sheen. I am keeping them to give to Inspector Lanner,” she lied. “I can’t explain now——”

“I can explain how you stole them,” interrupted Jesson, and there was a rising note of anger in his voice. “You stole them from Sir Richard Lulworth, who told me about them.”

“Are you suggesting Lulworth is Charity Sheen?” asked Sturridge, with a gleam of quick interest in his eyes.

“I know he is,” answered Jesson. “He told me so this morning. I have known it for some days. I thought he had got the paper which rightfully belongs to me.”

“That is a grave charge to bring against Sir Richard,” said Sturridge.

“Grave or not, it’s true,” answered Jesson. “But he can wait. That paper——”

“Did Sir Richard tell you how he got hold of the paper?” asked Sturridge.

“I can tell you something about that,” said Mrs. Hollister. “Sir Richard posted the paper Mr. Jesson wants and some other papers and Leonard’s revolver to a newsagent’s in the Clerkenwell Road, an accommodation address. I happened to find that out, and I went and got them,” she added, half defiantly.

“How did you happen to find out?” asked Sturridge sharply. “You have put yourself in a very awkward position if the police happen to find out as well.”

“I have already told you I was keeping the papers for Inspector Lanner,” she answered. She felt that she was being cornered, and she began to feel angry. Jesson had dangled money in front of her eyes and she saw that, if she were not careful, Sturridge, by his interference, would prevent her from getting it. And where money was

concerned Mrs. Hollister had a habit of clinging very tenaciously. "Why should I tell you any more?" she continued. "I will explain everything at the proper time to Inspector Lanner."

Sturridge turned away with a faint smile on his face.

"There's an explanation I should like to have from you, Jesson," he said curtly. "About this offer to Mrs. Hollister to pay £1,000 for that paper. It is a promissory note, I gather. You owed Bilsiter money, evidently. This money belongs to his estate. What you are doing is to suggest to Mrs. Hollister she should help you commit a felony."

His tones were acid, and a look of fear came into Jesson's eyes.

"How does it affect you?" he asked quickly. "I am not asking *you* to compound a felony. You are mighty thin-skinned all of a sudden. Bilsiter has had his pound of flesh a hundred times. He deserved all he got. He bled me for years while he was alive. Why should he go on bleeding me while he's dead? Why should I be ruined because of that scoundrel? Why should you interfere? Am I to be punished all my life for——"

He stopped suddenly, but the other took him up.

"For what, Jesson?" he asked softly.

"For borrowing money from him," said Jesson. "I tell you——"

"For what, Jesson?" repeated Sturridge. "Shall I tell you for what?"

Fraser Jesson stood rigid, looking full into the face of the other, as though trying to read his thoughts. His face seemed to have aged suddenly. The words which came to his lips he choked back, and then with a sudden gesture he turned to Mrs. Hollister.

"I will call another time," he began. "If——"

"You will call no other time, Jesson," interrupted Sturridge coldly. There was a sudden menace in his tones, and Jesson stood and stared at him while he was speaking as though he were paralysed. Except for a nervous twitching of his fingers he appeared absolutely motionless, like some man who had received an unexpected and severe shock.

"I think this is the last time you will call—anywhere," continued Sturridge. "Shall I tell you, now, for what? Because you palmed a spurious copy of an Old Master off on Mr. Hardcastle, the art collector, because it cost you a small fortune to replace the real picture which you had sold to America. It was to Bilsiter you went to raise the money, and he found you out. And that is not all, Mr. Jesson, art expert. You have made a hobby of selling forgeries of art to wealthy and ignorant collectors, and Bilsiter has connived at it, I don't doubt, and has bled you for an unfair share of the profits. Yes, he has been bleeding you for years, I don't doubt that, and the bleeding has rather sapped your moral outlook, my friend. The calling up of that note, or even the *threatened* calling of it up, was, I think, the finishing touch.

"But don't worry too much. It will be called up all right. I shall——"

Fraser Jesson moved towards the door, but the other stepped swiftly in front.

"Not yet, my friend," said Sturridge easily. "I haven't finished yet. You may as well know the worst before you leave this room. You haven't asked how it is I know so

much about Bilsiter and his methods, and, shall I say, about one of his most remunerative clients?”

It was extraordinary the amount of sarcasm he conveyed in his tones. It seemed as though he were doing everything to goad the other into a wild outburst. If that were his object he was certainly succeeding. Jesson’s eyes were wide open, glaring, almost maniacal in their fury.

“Who the devil are you?” he snarled.

“I was Mr. Bilsiter’s partner,” answered Sturridge with a laugh. “I held half-shares in the business. I expect I have drawn quite a lot of money from you one way and another, Jesson. And, of course, as the surviving partner in the business I shall certainly call up that promissory note of yours. Let me see, it was for £22,000 wasn’t it?”

All the pent-up rage of the man whom he was tormenting seemed to fly loose at Sturridge’s last words.

“You, Bilsiter’s partner!”

The words came in a hoarse scream.

“My God, Sturridge.” As he spoke he half crouched, and then with a sudden shout of “Out of my way, you devil!” he sprang at the other.

Something gleamed in Jesson’s hand and he struck at his tormentor. With a swift movement Sturridge gripped the other’s wrist as Mrs. Hollister screamed and buried her face in her hands. With a desperate effort Jesson wrenched himself free, and as Sturridge flung himself at the art expert the latter slipped. He made a wild effort to save himself as Sturridge’s foot shot out and caught him below the knee, stumbled and crashed over. There came from his lips a sudden cry of agony as he writhed and twisted on the carpet.

“Telephone the nearest doctor,” called out Sturridge sharply, shaking Mrs. Hollister by her shoulders. “He has fallen on his own knife.”

He turned the groaning man over and was horrified to see the handle of the weapon Jesson carried sticking out from his side. On the wounded man’s face great beads of sweat were forming, eloquent of the pain he was suffering. Sturridge slipped a cushion under his head and tried to ease his position.

“Get me a drop of brandy,” he said in a low voice as Mrs. Hollister replaced the receiver. “Is he coming?”

“Immediately,” she replied in shaking tones. “He only lives in the next street.

“I will go and warn Jeannette,” she continued, as she held out the brandy. “I—I _____”

“You’d better have a drink yourself,” interrupted Sturridge. “I expect Inspector Lanner any moment. He knew Jesson was coming. So did I. That is why I was here.”

She looked at him queerly as she went out of the room, and the Under-Secretary smiled grimly to himself. She wouldn’t be the only one to be astonished, he reflected, when the whole truth was known.

He bent over Jesson and tried to force some brandy between his chattering teeth. The wounded man half choked as the liquid trickled down his throat, and then eagerly

grasped the glass in both hands and gulped off its contents.

“Hurts like the devil, Sturridge,” he whispered. “Sorry. Lost my temper. How long will the doctor be?”

“I fancy he’s coming now,” answered Sturridge, as there came a ring at the door.

He watched the doctor with calm eyes as he quickly cut away Jesson’s clothing and prepared a bandage before he pulled out the knife.

“A little warm water,” he said.

“Is it dangerous?” asked Sturridge a few minutes later, when Jesson had been made a little more comfortable.

“I think so,” answered the doctor in a low voice. “You had better get him to hospital as quickly as you can. It’s a bad wound. His wife——”

“He was only a friend,” explained Sturridge. “I don’t know much about him.”

“Well, try to get in touch with his relatives,” continued the other. “I will arrange for an ambulance and his admission to the hospital. I will telephone at once. I am afraid ——”

He broke off, as Jesson groaned with a sudden twinge of pain. The doctor, crossing the room, bent over him again.

“I feel bad, doctor,” he whispered. “God, it hurts. Where is it? It feels——”

“Don’t worry about it now,” said the doctor. “I am going to have you taken to hosp ——”

“My God! then its serious,” cried Jesson, his voice rising. “For the Lord’s sake, tell me the truth. I can bear it. Don’t leave me, Sturridge——”

“It’s all right, Jesson,” said the latter soothingly, “Naturally it hurts. You must lie quiet till the ambulance comes.”

There came a sudden spasm of coughing and a thin stream of blood trickled from his lips. He glared wildly as he caught the glance the doctor gave Sturridge.

“I know,” he muttered. “I—my—I—I’m dying. I know. Where’s Inspector Lanner?”

“Here,” came a soft voice, and the doctor and Sturridge swung round. Neither had heard the quiet entrance of the inspector.

“Ha, ha, Lanner, in at the death!”

Jesson’s voice seemed very far away as the doctor leant over and wiped the blood from his lips.

“I’m dying, Lanner. Haven’t they told you? I know, I know. Bilsiter died more easily, curse—— curse——”

His voice died away for a moment as he clutched at one of the cushions.

When he spoke again there was an ominous calm in his voice.

“You would never have got me, Lanner. You had no evidence. Charity Sheen didn’t get me. But I got Bilsiter, damn him. Tell—tell Rowmands—sorry—let him down. Wish—I’d got—Sturridge. Tell——Rowmands——sorry—— sor——”

They were the last words Fraser Jesson spoke.

“Why should he wish he’d got you, sir?” asked Lanner, when the ambulance had come and gone and the two terrified, hysterical women in the flat had been, to some extent, calmed down.

“Behind that lies the story of Bilsiter’s murder—and its elucidation, Lanner,” replied Sturridge. “I have much to tell you and something, perhaps, to apologise for. I think at one time you thought I killed Bilsiter.”

“It wouldn’t have surprised me to know that anyone who had been in Bilsiter’s clutches had killed him,” said the puzzled inspector.

“Well, come along with me to Scotland Yard, to Sir John Ableway, and I will tell you the whole story,” said Sturridge with a smile.

It was nearly eleven o’clock on the night when Jesson died that Pellington received the shock of his life.

“I am expecting visitors, Pellington,” said his master, and there was a happy ring in his voice. “Inspector Lanner, Sir John Ableway and his daughter, and Mr. Sturridge. Miss Ableway has just telephoned me to say that Mr. Bilsiter’s murderer has been found. They are coming round to tell me how. It was Mr. Jesson.”

“Good Lord!” said Pellington, his monocle dropping out of his eye. “I’m mighty glad, sir. Mr. Jesson! Who’d have believed it?”

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE END

It was a broadly smiling Pellington who opened the door some time later and ushered his visitors into the room where Sir Richard was impatiently waiting their arrival. And it was Pellington who literally danced down the hall after seeing Avril go straight across to her lover and kiss him in front of them all, with a cry of "Oh, Richard, it's all over."

It was Sir John Ableway, however, who did the biggest thing. He held out his hand, as his daughter turned and faced them all, her arm linked happily in her lover's.

"Allow me to congratulate you on my daughter's judgment," he said gravely. "I have sent in my resignation to-night."

"Because of Tommy," whispered Avril, as Lulworth grasped the hand held out to him.

"I don't understand," stammered Lulworth. "I——"

"We have decided that Lanner shall explain, Sir Richard," interrupted Ableway. "May we sit down."

He spoke quietly enough, but Lulworth could see that there was a strained look on his face, the look of a man who had suffered.

"I think Mr. Sturridge ought to explain," began the inspector. "Most of us, except Sir John, forgot he was one of the Under-Secretaries at the Home Office."

"The Home Office," interposed Sturridge, "is in charge of all the police forces in England."

"And as such they can call for reports on any cases they like," continued Lanner. "Mr. Sturridge has always taken an interest in police work, and he was often at Scotland Yard. When Mr. Bilsiter was murdered it seemed to him—pardon me, sir" he turned and smiled at the other, whose expression did not change—"a heaven-sent opportunity to investigate first-hand. Naturally, especially at first, I told Sir John all I had found out and Mr. Sturridge learnt from him."

"That, I admit, was a little unfair," said the Commissioner. "But it was always intended, Lanner, that you should have had the credit. Mr. Sturridge and I agreed that if we hit on any clue you had missed I should drop you a hint."

"Thank you, sir," answered the inspector. "Well you know most things that happened, sir," he continued, turning towards Lulworth. "After I left you I thought I would go along and see Mr. Jesson, but he was out. I learnt later that he was calling on Mrs. Hollister. He called twice, as a matter of fact. My man watching her flat reported that. I called there myself, but she was out for the afternoon, and her maid did not know where. It was then I went and had a chat with Mr. Ableway."

Sir John held up his hand.

“I think it is only fair I should carry on here, Lulworth,” he said in a low voice. “When Inspector Lanner had explained that he knew all about the paper Bilsiter held, Tommy did the one right thing. He came straight to me and told me everything, that he had forged my name, that you had been trying to save him from the consequences of that mad act, that as far as he knew Mrs. Hollister had got the paper in her possession.

“It was then I realised who Charity Sheen was, and I told the Inspector bluntly that it was no longer a case of suspicion against you. You had threatened as Charity Sheen to get the paper, and it was Sir Richard Lulworth who got it. I told Inspector Lanner it was his duty to arrest you, and—he told me what you and my daughter had told him.

“I consulted Sturridge before taking the final step, and he advised me to wait until we had interviewed Mrs. Hollister and Jesson. He decided to interview Mrs. Hollister himself. He was under no illusions as to her real character, though he had tried to alter it, tried to influence her.”

“Though Inspector Lanner is supposed to be telling the story,” put in Sturridge with a gleam of amusement in his face, “perhaps he will pardon me if I take it up here. I am afraid I made one mistake. I did not explain fully to Sir John my connection with Bilsiter.

“I had gone so far as to say I owned half-shares in the business and I was trying to get rid of the shares because of my position, but I did not explain that through Brandt, Bilsiter’s assistant, I kept in touch, learnt the names of Bilsiter’s clients. I had to do that, for at any moment, knowing Bilsiter as I did, there might have been a scandal, and naturally I could not afford to be involved.

“The inspector, I am sure, suspected me at one time of killing Bilsiter because he found out from Brandt and not from me the connection I had with the dead man.

“But to continue,” said Sturridge. “I knew Jesson was one of Bilsiter’s—er—victims, knew, too, why Jesson was responsible for one or two shady transactions in connection with forged works of art, and one at least had cost him a small fortune to hush up. I knew Jesson was being pressed, knew that he was desperate even, and he had the opportunity. Don’t forget his bedroom was next the murdered man’s. But though I suspected him, though I hoped to bring it home to him without telling anyone else, I could get nothing tangible to go upon.

“When he turned up at Mrs. Hollister’s I tried deliberately to goad him into losing his temper, hoping that he would let slip something which would put me on the right track. I knew very well his nerves must be frayed to bits over all his worries, and his self-control mightn’t be too good. Well, luckily, I succeeded. Poor devil he tried to knife me and accidentally stabbed himself.”

“He’s dead?”

Lulworth asked the question.

“Yes,” replied Sturridge quietly. “And dying, he confessed. I do not think we should ever have got him otherwise.

“What about the papers and Bilsiter’s revolver?” asked Lulworth.

“We’re getting those to-morrow morning,” interposed Sir John. “They are at Mrs. Hollister’s bank. I shall, of course, acknowledge my signature to that promissory note.

As for the rest, they are part of Bilsiter's estate. The revolver—well, that is not a necessary part of the story and will not come out in evidence. John Hollister was released this evening. As for his wife——”

He shrugged his shoulders expressively.

“She must work out her own salvation,” said Sturridge quietly. “John and she are incompatible.”

A silence fell upon the room for some moments. It was Lulworth who was the first to speak, and the others noticed that as he did so Avril's hand slipped into his, and she smiled happily into his face.

“And Charity Sheen?”

The three men sitting facing him looked at one another.

“Charity Sheen? Charity Sheen is still a mystery,” replied Sir John. “Charity Sheen has made restitution. I owe much to Charity Sheen. My boy——”

He broke off and buried his face in his hands.

“We have agreed that Charity Sheen shall always remain unknown,” said Sturridge slowly. “And though legally we are doing wrong, morally our consciences are clear.”

“By the way,” cried Lanner, and somehow his words relieved the momentary tension, “I found Charity Sheen's typewriter in Mrs. Hollister's flat. I accidentally dropped it when I was examining it, and broke half the type.”

“That has killed the chief evidence against him,” said Sturridge. “I think it's time we were going,” he added, rising from his chair.

Avril lingered for a moment behind as the three men went into the hall.

“Shall I see you to-morrow?” she asked happily “Oh, my dear, if you only knew _____”

“See you to-morrow, darling heart? Of course, and every to-morrow,” he replied. “Thank God the past is over and life will be all to-morrows for you and me.”

“Dear, dear Charity,” she whispered. “Kiss me.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Secret of Sheen* by John Laurence Pritchard (as John Laurence)]