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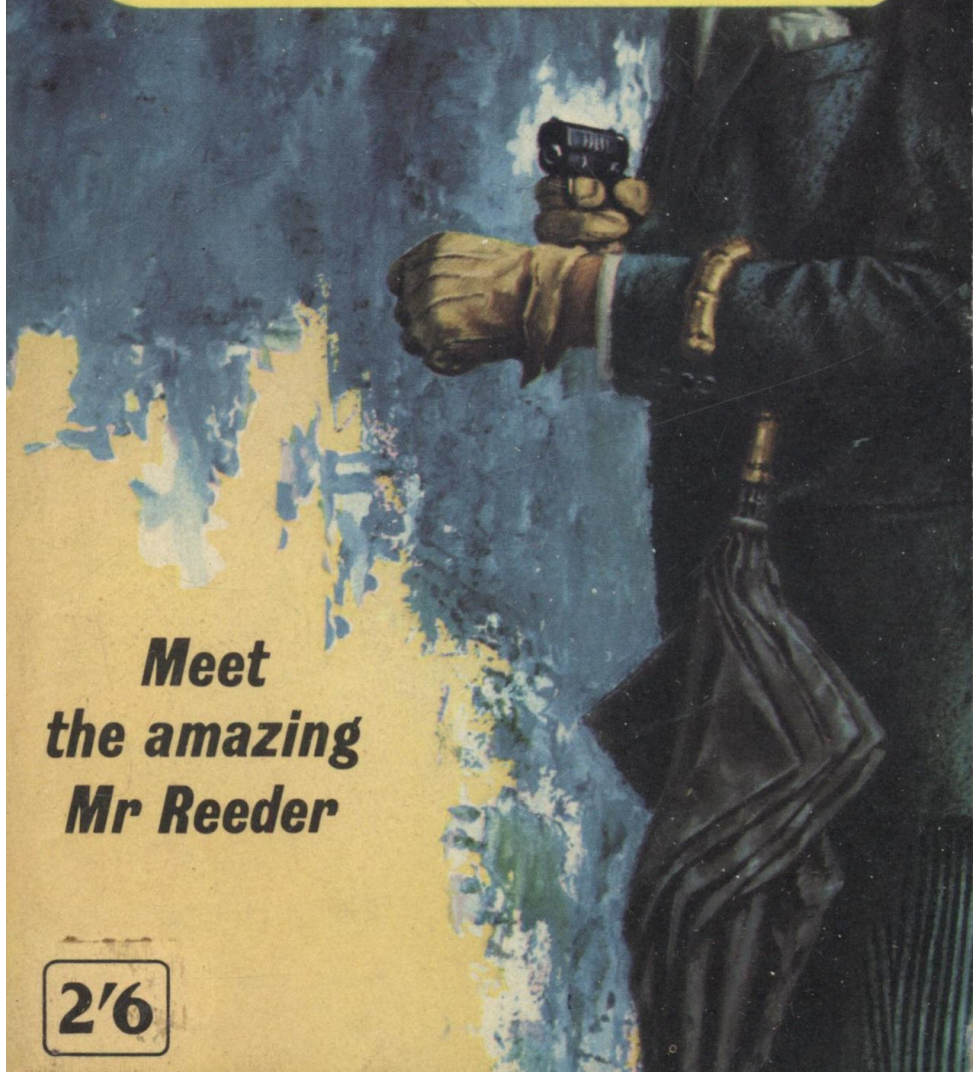


Red Aces

Edgar Wallace

*Meet
the amazing
Mr Reeder*

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AGAIN THE RINGER
THE MIND OF MR. J. G. REEDER
THE INDIA-RUBBER MEN

RED ACES

EDGAR WALLACE

UNABRIDGED

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TO
MY FRIEND AND SECRETARY
R. G. CURTIS

*Printed in Great Britain by
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Red Aces

RED ACES

CHAPTER 1

When a young man is very much in love with a most attractive girl he is apt to endow her with qualities and virtues which no human being has ever possessed. Yet at rare and painful intervals there enter into his soul certain wild suspicions, and in these moments he is inclined to regard the possibility that she may be guilty of the basest treachery and double dealing.

Everybody knew that Kenneth McKay was desperately in love. They knew it at the bank where he spent his days in counting other people's money, and a considerable amount of his lunch hour writing impassioned and ill-spelt letters to Margot Lynn. His taciturn father, brooding over his vanished fortune in his gaunt riverside house at Marlow, may have employed the few moments he gave to the consideration of other people's troubles in consideration of his son's new interest. Probably he did not, for George McKay was entirely self-centred and had little thought but for the folly which had dissipated the money he had accumulated with such care, and the development of fantastical schemes for its recovery.

All day long, summer and winter, he sat in his study, a pack of cards before him, working out averages and what he called 'inherent probabilities', or at a small roulette wheel, where, alternately, he spun and recorded the winning numbers.

Kenneth went over to Beaconsfield every morning on his noisy motor-cycle and came back every night, sometimes very late, because Margot lived in London. She had a small flat where she could not receive him, but they dined together at the cheaper restaurants and sometimes saw a play. Kenneth was a member of an inexpensive London club which sheltered at least one sympathetic soul. Except Mr Rufus Machfield, the confident in question, he had no friends.

"And let me advise you not to make any here," said Rufus.

He was a military-looking man of forty-five, and most people found him rather a bore, for the views which he expressed so vehemently, on all subjects from politics to religion, which are the opposite ends of the ethical pole, he had acquired that morning from the leading article of his favourite daily. Yet he was a genial person and a likeable man.

He had a luxurious flat in Park Lane, a French valet, a couple of hacks which he rode in the park, and no useful occupation.

“The Leffingham Club is cheap,” he said, “the food’s not bad, and it is near Piccadilly. Against that you have the fact that almost anybody who hasn’t been to prison can become a member——”

“The fact that I’m a member——” began Ken.

“You’re a gentleman and a public school man,” interrupted Mr Machfield a little sonorously. “You’re not rich, I admit——”

“Even I admit that,” said Ken, rubbing his untidy hair.

Kenneth was tall, athletic, as good-looking as a young man need be, or can be without losing his head about his face. He had called at the Leffingham that evening especially to see Rufus and confide his worries. And his worries were enormous. He looked haggard and ill; Mr Machfield thought it possible that he had not been sleeping very well. In this surmise he was right.

“It’s about Margot . . .” began the young man.

Mr Machfield smiled.

He had met Margot, had entertained the young people to dinner at his flat, and twice had invited them to a theatre party.

“We’ve had a row, Rufus. It began a week ago. For a long time her reticence has been bothering me. Why the devil couldn’t she tell me what she did for a living? I wouldn’t say this to a living soul but you—it is horribly disloyal to her, and yet it isn’t. I know that she has no money of her own, and yet she lives at the rate of a thousand a year. She says that she is secretary to a business man, but the office where she works is in her own name. And she isn’t there more than a few days a week and then only for a few hours.”

Mr Machfield considered the matter.

“She won’t tell you any more than that?”

Kenneth looked round the smokeroom. Except for a servant counting the cigars in a small mahogany cabinet, they were alone. He lowered his voice.

“She’ll never tell me any more . . . I’ve seen the man,” he said. “Margot meets him surreptitiously!”

Mr Machfield looked at him dubiously.

“Oh . . . what sort of a man?”

Kenneth hesitated.

“Well, to tell you the truth, he’s elderly. It was queer how I came to see them at all. I was taking a ride round the country on Sunday morning. Margot told me that she couldn’t come to us—I asked her to lunch with us at Marlow—because she was going out to London. I went through Burnham and stopped to explore a little wood. As a matter of fact, I saw two animals fighting—I think they were stoats—and I went after them——”

“Stoats can be dangerous,” began Mr Machfield. “I remember once _____”

“Anyway I went after them with my camera. I’m rather keen on wild life photographs. And then I saw two people, a man and a girl, walking slowly away from me. The man had his arm round the girl’s shoulder. It rather made a picture—they stood in a patch of sunlight and with the trees as a background—well, it was rather an idyllic sort of picture. I put up my camera. Just as I pressed the button the man looked over his shoulder, and then the girl turned. It was Margot!”

He dabbed his brow with a handkerchief. Rufus was lightly amused to see anybody so agitated over so trifling a matter.

Kenneth swallowed his drink; his hand trembled.

“He was elderly—fifty . . . not bad looking. God! I could have killed them both! Margot was coolness itself, though she changed colour. But she didn’t attempt to introduce me or offer any kind of explanation.”

“Her father——” began Rufus.

“She has no father—no relations except her mother, who is an invalid and lives in Florence—at least I thought so,” snapped Kenneth.

“What did she do?”

The young man heaved a deep sigh.

“Nothing—— just said: ‘How queer meeting you!’ talked about the beautiful day, and when I asked her what it all meant and what this man was to her—he had walked on and left us alone—she flatly refused to say anything. Just turned on her heel and went after him.”

“Extraordinary!” said Mr Machfield. “You have seen her since?”

Kenneth nodded grimly.

“That same night she came to Marlow to see me. She begged me to trust her—she was really wonderful. It was terribly surprising to see her there at all. When I came down into the dining-room and found her there, I was knocked out—the servant didn’t say who she was and I kept her waiting.”

“Well?” asked his companion, when he paused.

“Well,” said Kenneth awkwardly, “one has to trust people one loves. She said that he was a relation—she never told me that she had one until then.”

“Except her mother who lives in Florence—that costs money, especially an invalid mother,” mused Rufus, fingering his long, clean-shaven upper lip. “What is the trouble now? You’ve quarrelled?”

Kenneth took a letter out of his pocket and passed it across to his friend, and Mr Machfield opened and read it.

Dear Kenneth: I’m not seeing you any more. I’m broken-hearted to tell you this. Please don’t try to see me—please! M.

“When did this come?”

“Last night. Naturally, I went to her flat. She was out. I went to her office—she was out. I was late for the bank and got a terrible roasting from the manager. To make matters worse, there’s a fellow dunning me for two hundred pounds—everything comes at once. I borrowed the money for dad. What with one thing and another I’m desperate.”

Mr Machfield rose from his chair.

“Come home and have a meal,” he said. “As for the money——”

“No, no, no!” Kenneth McKay was panic-stricken. “I don’t want to borrow from you—I won’t! Gad! I’d like to find that old swine and throttle him! He’s at the back of it! He has told her not to have anything more to do with me.”

“You don’t know his name?”

“No. He may live in the neighbourhood, but I haven’t seen him. I’m going to do a little detective work.” He added abruptly: “Do you know a man named Reeder—J.G. Reeder?”

Mr Machfield shook his head.

“He’s a detective,” explained Kenneth. “He has a big bank practice. He was down at our place today—queer-looking devil. If he could be a detective anybody could be!”

Mr Machfield said he recalled the name.

“He was in that railway robbery, wasn’t he? J. G. Reeder—yes. Pretty smart fellow—young?”

“He’s as old as—well, he’s pretty old. And rather old-fashioned.”

“Why do you mention him?” Mr Machfield was interested.

“I don’t know. Talking about detective work brought him into my mind, I suppose.”

Rufus snapped his finger to the waiter and paid his bill.

“You’ll have to take pot luck—but Lamontaine is a wonderful cook. He didn’t know that he was until I made him try.”

So they went together to the little flat in Park Lane, and Lamontaine, the pallid, middle-aged valet who spoke English with no trace of a foreign accent, prepared a meal that justified the praise of his master. In the middle of the dinner the subject of Mr Reeder arose again.

“What brought him to Beaconsfield—is there anything wrong at your bank?”

Rufus saw the young man’s face go red.

“Well—there has been money missing; not very large sums. I have my own opinion, but it isn’t fair to—well, you know.”

He was rather incoherent, and Mr Machfield did not pursue the inquiry.

“I hate the bank anyway—I mean the work. But I had to do something, and when I left Uppingham the governor put me there—in the bank, I mean. Poor dear, he lost his money at Monte Carlo or somewhere—enormous sums. You wouldn’t dream that he was a gambler. I’m not grousing, but it is a little trying sometimes.”

Mr Machfield accompanied him to the door that night and shivered.

“Cold—shouldn’t be surprised if we had snow,” he said.

In point of fact the snow did not come until a week later. It started as rain and became snow in the night, and in the morning people who lived in the country looked out upon a white world: trees that bore a new beauty and hedges that showed their heads above sloping drifts.

CHAPTER 2

There was a car coming from the direction of Beaconsfield. The horseman, sitting motionless in the centre of the snowy road, watched the lights grow brighter and brighter. Presently, in the glare of the headlamps, the driver of the car saw a mounted policeman in the centre of the road, saw the lift of his gloved hand, and stopped the machine. It was not difficult to stop, for the wheels were racing on the surface of the road, which had frozen into the worst qualities of glass. And snow was falling on top of this.

“Anything wrong——”

The driver began to shout the question, and then saw the huddled figure on the ground. It lay limply like a fallen sack; seemed at first glimpse to have nothing of human shape or substance.

The driver jumped out and went ploughing through the frozen snow.

“I just spotted him when I saw you,” said the policeman. “Do you mind turning your car just a little to the right—I want the lamps full on him.”

He swung to the ground and went, heavy-footed, to where the man lay.

The second inmate of the car got to the wheel and turned the machine with some difficulty so that the light blazed on the dreadful thing. The policeman’s horse strayed to the side of the car and thrust in his nodding head—he alone was unconcerned.

Taking his bridle with a shaking hand, the second man stepped out of the car and joined the other two.

“It is old Wentford,” said the policeman.

“Wentford . . . good God!”

The first of the two motorists fell on his knees by the side of the body and peered down into the grinning face.

Old Benny Wentford!

“Good God!” he said again.

He was a middle-aged lawyer, unused to such a horror. Nothing more terrible had disturbed the smooth flow of his life than an occasional quarrel with the secretary of his golf club. Now here was death, violent and hideous—a dead man on a snowy road . . . a man who had telephoned to him two

hours before, begging him to leave a party and come to him, though the snow had begun to fall all over again.

“You know Mr Wentford—he has told me about you.”

“Yes, I know him. I’ve often called at his house—in fact, I called there tonight but it was shut up. He made arrangements with the Chief Constable that I should call . . . h’m!”

The policeman stood over the body, his hands on his hips.

“You stay here—I’ll go and phone the station,” he said.

He hoisted himself into the saddle.

“Er . . . don’t you think we’d better go?” Mr Enward, the lawyer, asked nervously. He had no desire to be left alone in the night with a battered corpse and a clerk whose trembling was almost audible.

“You couldn’t turn your car,” said the policeman—which was true, for the lane was very narrow.

They heard the jingle and thud of his horse’s canter and presently they heard it no more.

“Is he dead, Mr Enward?” The young man’s voice was hollow.

“Yes . . . I think so . . . the policeman said so.”

“Oughtn’t we to make sure? He may only be . . . injured?”

Mr Enward had seen the face in the shadow of an uplifted shoulder. He did not wish to see it again.

“Better leave him alone till a doctor comes . . . it is no use interfering in these things. Wentford . . . good God!”

“He’s always been a little bit eccentric, hasn’t he?” The clerk was young, and, curiosity being the tonic of youth, he had recovered some of his courage. “Living alone in that tiny cottage with all his money. I was bicycling past it on Sunday—a concrete box: that is what my young lady called it. With all his money——”

“He is dead, Henry,” said Mr Enward severely, “and a dead person has no property. I don’t think it quite—um—seemly to talk of him in—um—his presence.”

He felt the occasion called for an emotional display of some kind. He had never grown emotional over clients; least of all could this tetchy old

man inspire such. A few words of prayer perhaps would not be out of place. But Mr Enward was a churchwarden of a highly respectable church and for forty years had had his praying done for him. If he had been a dissenter . . . but he was not. He wished he had a prayer book.

“He’s a long time gone.”

The policeman could not have been more than two hundred yards away, but it seemed a very long time since he had left.

“Has he any heirs?” asked the clerk professionally.

Mr Enward did not answer. Instead, he suggested that the lights of the car should be dimmed. They revealed this Thing too plainly. Henry went back and dimmed the lights. It became terribly dark when the lights were lowered, and eyesight played curious tricks: it seemed that the bundle moved. Mr Enward had a feeling that the grinning face was lifting to leer slyly at him over the humped shoulder.

“Put on the lights again, Henry,” the lawyer’s voice quavered. “I can’t see what I am doing.”

He was doing nothing; on the other hand, he had a creepy feeling that the Thing was behaving oddly. Yet it lay very still, just as it had lain all the time.

“He must have been murdered. I wonder where they went to?” asked Henry hollowly, and a cold shiver vibrated down Mr Enward’s spine.

Murdered! Of course he was murdered. There was blood on the snow, and the murderers were . . .

He glanced backward nervously and almost screamed. A man stood in the shadowy space behind the car: the light of the lamps reflected by the snow just revealed him.

“Who . . . who are you, please?” croaked the lawyer.

He added ‘please’ because there was no sense in being rough with a man who might be a murderer.

The figure moved into the light. He was slightly bent and even more middle-aged than Mr Enward. He wore a flat-topped felt hat, a long ulster and large, shapeless gloves. About his neck was an enormous yellow scarf, and Mr Enward noticed, in a numb, mechanical way, that his shoes were large and square toed and that he carried a tightly furled umbrella on his arm though the snow was falling heavily.

“I’m afraid my car has broken down a mile up the road.”

His voice was gentle and apologetic; obviously he had not seen the bundle. In his agitation Mr Enward had stepped into the light of the lamps and his black shadow sprawled across the deeper shadow.

“Am I wrong in thinking that you are in the same predicament?” asked the newcomer. “I was unprepared for the—er—condition of the road. It is lamentable that one should have overlooked this possibility.”

“Did you pass the policeman?” asked Mr Enward.

Whoever this stranger was, whatever might be his character and disposition, it was right and fair that he should know there *was* a policeman in the vicinity.

“Policeman?” The square-hatted man was surprised. “No, I passed no policeman. At my rate of progress it was very difficult to pass anything _____”

“Going towards you . . . on horseback . . . a mounted policeman,” said Mr Enward rapidly. “He said that he would be back soon. My name is Enward—solicitor—Enward, Caterham and Enward.”

He felt it was a moment for confidence.

“Delighted!” murmured the other. “We’ve met before. My name—er—is Reeder—R, double E, D, E, R.”

Mr Enward took a step forward.

“Not the detective? I thought I’d seen you . . . look!”

He stepped out of the light and the heap on the ground emerged from shadow. The lawyer made a dramatic gesture. Mr Reeder came forward slowly.

He stooped over the dead man, took an electric torch from his pocket and shone it steadily on the face. For a long time he looked and studied. His melancholy face showed no evidence that he was sickened or pained.

“H’m!” he said, and got up, dusting the snow from his knee. He fumbled in the recesses of his overcoat, produced a pair of eyeglasses, set them crudely on his nose and surveyed the lawyer over their top.

“Very—um—extraordinary. I was on my way to see him.”

Enward stared.

"*You* were on your way? So was I! Did you know him?"

Mr Reeder considered this question.

"I—er—didn't—er—know him. No, I had never met him."

The lawyer felt that his own presence needed some explanation.

"This is my clerk, Mr Henry Greene."

Mr Reeder bowed slightly.

"What happened was this. . . ."

He gave a very detailed and graphic description, which began with the recounting of what he had said when the telephone call came through to him at Beaconsfield, and how he was dressed and what his wife had said when she went to find his boots (her first husband had died through an ill-judged excursion into the night air on as foolish a journey), and how much trouble he had had in starting the car, and how long he had had to wait for Henry.

Mr Reeder gave the impression that he was not listening. Once he walked out of the blinding light and peered back the way the policeman had gone; once he went over to the body and looked at it again; but most of the time he was wandering down the lane, searching the ground with his handlamp, with Mr Enward following at his heels lest any of his narrative be lost.

"Is he dead . . . I suppose so?" suggested the lawyer.

"I—er—have never seen anybody—er—deader," said Mr Reeder gently. "I should say, with all reverence and respect, that he was—er—extraordinarily dead."

He looked at his watch.

"At nine-fifteen you met the policeman? He had just discovered the body? It is now nine-thirty five. How did you know that it was nine-fifteen?"

"I heard the church clock at Woburn Green strike the quarter."

Mr Enward conveyed the impression that the clock struck exclusively for him. Henry halved the glory: he also had heard the clock.

"At Woburn Green—you heard the clock? H'm . . . nine-fifteen!"

The snow was falling thickly now. It fell on the heap and lay in the little folds and creases of his clothes.

“He must have lived somewhere about here?”

Mr Reeder asked the question with great deference.

“My directions were that his house lay off the main road . . . you would hardly call this a main road . . . fifty yards beyond a noticeboard advertising land for sale—desirable building land.”

Mr Enward pointed to the darkness.

“Just there—the noticeboard. Curiously enough, I am the—er—solicitor for the vendor.”

His natural inclination was to emphasize the desirability of the land, but he thought it was hardly the moment. He returned to the question of Mr Wentford’s house.

“I’ve only been inside the place once—two years ago, wasn’t it, Henry?”

“A year and nine months,” said Henry exactly.

His feet were cold, his spine chilled. He felt sick.

“You cannot see it from the lane,” Mr Enward continued. “Rather a small, one-storey cottage. He had it specially built for him apparently. It is not exactly . . . a palace.”

“Dear me!” said Mr Reeder, as though this were the most striking news he had heard that evening. “In a house he built himself! I suppose he has, or had, a telephone?”

“He telephoned to *me*,” said Mr Enward; “therefore he must have a telephone.”

Mr Reeder frowned as though he were trying to pick holes in the logic of this statement.

“I will go along and see if it is possible to get through to the police,” he suggested.

“The police have already been notified,” said the lawyer hastily. “I think we all ought to stay here together till somebody arrives.”

The man in the square hat, now absurdly covered with snow, shook his head. He pointed.

“Woburn Green is there. Why not go and arouse the—um—local constabulary?”

That idea had not occurred to the lawyer. His instinct urged him to return the way he had come and regain touch with realities in his own prosaic parlour.

“But do you think . . .” he blinked down at the body. “I mean, it’s hardly an act of humanity to leave him——”

“He feels nothing. He is probably in heaven,” said Mr Reeder, and added, “Probably. Anyway, the police will know exactly where they can find him.”

There was a sudden screech from Henry. He was holding out his hand in the light of the lamp.

“Look—blood!” he screamed.

There was blood on his hand certainly.

“Blood—I didn’t touch him! You know that, Mr Enward—I ain’t been anear him!”

Alas for our excellent system of secondary education! Henry was reverting to the illiterate stock whence he sprang.

“Not near him I ain’t been—blood!”

“Don’t squeak, please.” Mr Reeder was firm. “What have you touched?”

“Nothing—I only touched myself.”

“Then you have touched nothing,” said Mr Reeder with unusual acidity. “Let me look.”

The rays of his lamp travelled over the shivering clerk.

“It is on your sleeve—h’m!”

Mr Enward stared. There was a red, moist patch of something on Henry’s sleeve.

“You had better go on to the police station,” said Mr Reeder. “I will come and see you in the morning.”

CHAPTER 3

Mr Enward climbed into the driver's seat gratefully, keeping some distance between himself and his shivering clerk. The car was on a declivity and would start without trouble. He turned the wheels straight and took off the brake. The machine skidded and slithered forward, and presently Mr Reeder, following in its wake, heard the sound of the running engine.

His lamp showed him the noticeboard in the field, and fifty yards beyond he came to a path so narrow that two men could not walk abreast. It ran off from the road at right angles, and up this he turned, progressing with great difficulty, for he had heavy nails in his shoes. At last he saw a small garden gate on his right, set between two unkempt hedges. The gate was open, and this methodical man stopped to examine it by the light of his lamp.

He expected to find blood and found it; just a smear. No bloodstains on the ground, but then the snow would have obliterated those. It had not obliterated the print of footmarks going up the winding path. They were rather small, and he thought they were recently made. He kept his light upon them until they led him into view of the squat house with its narrow windows and doorways. As he turned he saw a light gleam between curtains. He had a feeling that somebody was looking out at him. In another moment the light had vanished. But there was somebody in the house.

The footsteps led up to the door. Here he paused and knocked. There was no answer, and he knocked again more loudly. The chill wind sent the snowflakes swirling about him. Mr Reeder, who had a secret sense of humour, smiled. In the remote days of his youth his favourite Christmas card was one which showed a sparkling Father Christmas knocking at the door of a wayside cottage. He pictured himself as a felt-hatted Father Christmas, and the whimsical fancy slightly pleased him.

He knocked a third time and listened, then, when no answer came, he stepped back and walked to the room where he had seen the light and tried to peer between the curtains. He thought he heard a sound—a thud—but it was not in the house. It may have been the wind. He looked round and listened, but the thud was not repeated, and he returned to his ineffectual starings.

There was no sign of a fire. He came back to knock for the fourth time, then tried the other side of the building, and here he made a discovery. A narrow casement window, deeply recessed and made of iron, was swaying to and fro in the wind, and beneath the window was a double set of footmarks, one coming and one going. They went away in the direction of the lane.

He came back to the door, and stood debating with himself what steps he should take. He had seen in the darkness two small white squares at the top of the door, and had thought they were little panes of toughened glass such as one sees in the tops of such doors. But, probably in a gust of wind, one of them became detached and fell at his feet. He stooped and picked it up: it was a playing card—the ace of diamonds. He put his lamp on the second: it was ace of hearts. They had both apparently been fastened side by side to the door with pins—black pins. Perhaps the owner of the house had put them there. Possibly they had some significance, fulfilled the function of mascots.

No answer came to his knocking, and Mr Reeder heaved a deep sigh. He hated climbing; he hated more squeezing through narrow windows into unknown places; more especially as there was probably somebody inside who would treat him rudely. Or they may have gone. The footprints, he found, were fresh; they were scarcely obliterated, though the snow was falling heavily. Perhaps the house was empty, and its inmate, whose light he had seen, had got away whilst he was knocking at the door. He would not have heard him jump from the window, the snow was too soft. Unless that thud he had heard——

Mr Reeder gripped the sill and drew himself up, breathing heavily, though he was a man of considerable strength.

There were only two ways to go into the house: one was feet first, the other head first. He made a reconnaissance with his lamp and saw that beneath the window was a small table, standing in a tiny room which had evidently been used as a cloak cupboard, for there were a number of coats hanging on hooks. It was safe to go in head first, so he wriggled down on to the table, feeling extraordinarily undignified.

He was on his feet in a moment, gripped the handle of the door gingerly and opened it. He was in a small hall, from which one door opened. He tried this: it was fast, and yet not fast. It was as though somebody was leaning against it on the other side. A quick jerk of his shoulder, and it flew open. Somebody tried to dash past him, but Mr Reeder was expecting that and worse. He gripped the fugitive . . .

“I’m extremely sorry,” he said in his gentle voice. “It is a lady, isn’t it?”

He heard her heavy breathing, a sob . . .

“Is there a light?”

He groped inside the lintel of the door, found a switch and turned it. Nothing happened for a moment, and then the lights came on suddenly. There was apparently a small light-making machine at the back of the house which operated when any switch was turned.

“Come in here, will you, please?”

He pressed her very gently into the room. Pretty, extraordinarily pretty. He did not remember ever having met a young lady who was quite as pretty as this particular young lady, though she was very white and her hair was in disorder, and on her feet were snow-boots the impression of which he had already seen in the snow.

“Will you sit down, please?”

He closed the door behind him.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. My name is Reeder.”

She had been terrified for that moment; now she looked up at him intensely.

“You’re the detective?” she shivered. “I’m so frightened. I’m so frightened!”

Then she drooped over the table at which she sat, her face buried in her folded arms.

Mr Reeder looked round the room. It was pleasantly furnished—not luxuriously so but pleasantly. Evidently a sitting-room. Except that the mantelboard had fallen or had been dragged on the floor, there was no sign of disorder. The hearth was littered with broken china pots and vases; the board itself was still held in position at one end by some attachment to the mantelpiece. That and the blue hearthrug before the fire, which was curiously stained. And there were other little splodges of darkness on the surface of the carpet, and a flowerpot was knocked down near the door.

He saw a wastepaper basket and turned over its contents. Covers of little books apparently—there were five of them, but no contents. By the side of the fireplace was a dwarf bookcase. The books were dummies. He pulled one end of the case and it swung out, being hinged at the other end.

“H’m!” said Mr Reeder, and pushed the shelves back into their original position.

There was a cap on the floor by the table and he picked this up. It was wet. This he examined, thrust into his pocket, and turned his attention to the girl.

“How long have you been here, Miss—— I think you had better tell me your name.”

She was looking up at him; he saw her wet her dry lips.

“Half an hour. I don’t know . . . it may be longer.”

“Miss——?” he asked again.

“Lynn—Margot Lynn.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“Margot Lynn. And you’ve been here half an hour. Who else has been here?”

“Nobody,” she said, springing to her feet. “What has happened? Did he—did they fight?”

He put his hand on her shoulder gently, and pressed her down into the chair.

“Did who fight whom?” asked Mr Reeder. His English was always very good on these occasions.

“Nobody has been here,” she said inconsequently.

Mr Reeder passed the question.

“You came from——?”

“I came from Bourne End station. I walked here. I often come that way. I am Mr Wentford’s secretary.”

“You walked here at nine o’clock because you’re Mr Wentford’s secretary? That was a very odd thing to do.”

She was searching his face fearfully.

“Has anything happened? Are you a police detective? Has anything happened to Mr Wentford? Tell me, tell me!”

“He was expecting me: you knew that?”

She nodded. Her breath was coming quickly. He thought she found breathing a painful process.

“He told me—yes. I didn’t know what it was about. He wanted his lawyer here too. I think he was in some kind of trouble.”

“When did you see him last?”

She hesitated.

“I spoke to him on the telephone—once, from London. I haven’t see him for two days.”

“And the person who was here?” asked Mr Reeder after a pause.

“There was nobody here! I swear there was nobody here!” She was frantic in her desire to convince him. “I’ve been here half an hour—waiting for him. I let myself in—I have a key. There it is.”

She fumbled with trembling hands in her bag and produced a ring with two keys, one larger than the other.

“He wasn’t here when I came in. I—I think he must have gone to town. He is very—peculiar.”

Mr J. G. Reeder put his hand in his pocket, took out two playing cards and laid them on the table.

“Why did he have those pinned to his door?”

She looked at him round-eyed.

“Pinned to his door?”

“The outer door,” said Mr Reeder, “or, as he would call it, the street door.”

She shook her head.

“I’ve never seen them before. He is not the kind of man to put up things like that. He is very retiring and hates drawing attention to himself.”

“He was very retiring,” repeated Mr Reeder, “and hated drawing attention to himself.”

CHAPTER 4

Something in his tone emphasized the tense he used. She shrank back.

“Was?” Her voice was a whisper. “He’s not dead . . . oh, my God! he’s not dead?”

Mr Reeder smoothed his chin.

“Yes, I’m afraid—um—he is dead.”

She clutched the edge of the table for support. Mr Reeder had never seen such horror, such despair in a human face before.

“Was it . . . an accident—or—or——”

“You’re trying to say ‘murder’,” said Reeder gently. “Yes, I’m very much afraid it was murder.”

He caught her in his arms as she fell, and, laying her on the sofa, went in search of water. The taps were frozen, but he found some water in a kettle, and, filling a glass with this, he returned to sprinkle it on her face, having a vague idea that something of the sort was necessary; but he found her sitting up, her face in her hands.

“Lie down, my dear, and keep quiet,” said Mr Reeder, and she obeyed meekly.

He looked round the room. The thing that struck him anew was the revolver which hung on the wall near the right-hand side of the fireplace just above the bookcase. It was placed to the hand of anybody who sat with his back to the window. Behind the armchair was a screen, and, tapping it, Mr Reeder discovered that it was of sheet iron.

He went outside to look at the door, turning on the hall light. It was a very thick door, and the inside was made of quarter-inch steel plate, screwed firmly to the wood. Leading from the kitchen was the bedroom, evidently Wentford’s. The only light here was admitted from an oblong window near the ceiling. There was no other windows, and about the narrow window was a stout steel cage. On the wall by the bed hung a second pistol. He found a third weapon in the kitchen, and, behind a coat hanging in the hall, a fourth.

The cottage was a square box of concrete. The roof, as he afterwards learned, was tiled over sheet iron, and, except for the window through which he had squeezed, there was none by which ingress could be had.

He was puzzled why this man, who evidently feared attack, had left any window so large as that through which he had come. He afterwards found the broken wire which must have set an alarm bell ringing when the window was opened.

There was blood on the mat in the hall, blood in the tiny lobby. He came back to where the girl was lying and sniffed. There was no smell of cordite, and having seen the body, he was not surprised.

“Now, my dear.”

She sat up again.

“I am not a police officer; I am a—er—a gentleman called in by your friend, Mr Wentford—your late friend,” he corrected himself, “to do something—I know not what! He called me by phone; I gave him my—um—terms, but he offered me no reason why he was sending for me. You, as his secretary, may perhaps——”

She shook her head.

“I don’t know. He had never mentioned you before he spoke to me on the telephone.”

“I am not a policeman,” said Mr Reeder again, and his voice was very gentle; “therefore, my dear, you need have few qualms about telling me the truth, because these gentlemen, when they come, these very active and intelligent men, will probably discover all that I have seen, even if I did not tell them. Who was the man who went out of this house when I knocked at the door?”

Her face was deathly pale, but she did not flinch. He wondered if she was as pretty when she was not so pale. Mr Reeder wondered all sorts of queer little things like that; his mind could never stagnate.

“There was nobody—in this house—since I have been here——”

Mr Reeder did not press her. He sighed, closed his eyes, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s a great pity,” he said. “Can you tell me anything about Mr Wentford?”

“No,” she said in a low voice. “He was my uncle. I think you ought to know that. He didn’t want anybody to know, but that must come out. He has been very good to us—he sent my mother abroad; she is an invalid. I conducted his business.” All this very jerkily.

“Have you been here often?”

She shook her head.

“Not often,” she said. “We usually met somewhere by appointment, generally in a lonely place where one wouldn’t be likely to meet anybody who knew us. He was very shy of strangers, and he didn’t like anybody coming here.”

“Did he ever entertain friends here?”

“No.” She was very emphatic. “I’m sure he didn’t. The only person he ever saw was the police patrol, the mounted man who rides this beat. Uncle used to make him coffee every night. I think it was for the company—he told me he felt lonely at nights. The policeman kept an eye on him. There are two—— Constable Steele and Constable Verity. My uncle always sent them a turkey at Christmas. Whoever was on duty used to ride up here. I was here late one night, and the constable escorted me to Bourne End.”

The telephone was in the bedroom. Mr Reeder remembered he had promised to phone. He got through to a police station and asked a few questions. When he got back he found the girl by the window, looking between the curtains.

Somebody was coming up the path. They could hear voices, and, looking through the curtain, he saw a string of lanterns and went out to meet a local sergeant and two men. Behind them was Mr Enward. Reeder wondered what had become of Henry. Possibly he had been lost in the snow. The thought interested him.

“This is Mr Reeder.” Enward’s voice was shrill. “Did you telephone?”

“Yes, I telephoned. We have a young lady here—Mr Wentford’s niece.”

Enward repeated the words, surprised.

“His niece here? Really? I knew he had a niece. In fact——”

He coughed. It was an indelicate moment to speak of legacies.

“She’ll be able to throw a light on this business,” said the sergeant more practical and less delicate.

“She could throw no light on any business,” said Mr Reeder, very firmly for him. “She was not here when the crime was committed—in fact, she arrived some time after. She has a key which admitted her. Miss Lynn acts as her uncle’s secretary, all of which facts, I think, gentlemen, you should know.”

The sergeant was not quite sure about the propriety of noticing Mr Reeder. To him he was almost a civilian, a man without authority, and his presence was therefore irregular. Nevertheless, some distant echo of J. G. Reeder's fame had penetrated into Buckinghamshire. The police officer seemed to remember that Mr Reeder either occupied or was about to occupy a semi-official position remotely or nearly associated with police affairs. If he had been a little clearer on the subject he would also have been more definite in his attitude. Since he was not so sure, it was expedient, until Mr Reeder's position became established, to ignore his presence—a peculiarly difficult course to follow when an officially absent person is standing at your elbow, murmuring flat contradictions of your vital theories.

“Perhaps you will tell me why *you* are here, sir?” said the sergeant with a certain truculence.

Mr Reeder felt in his pocket, took out a large leather case and laid it carefully on the table, first dusting the table with the side of his hand. This he unfolded, and took out, with exasperating deliberation, a thick pad of telegrams. He fixed his glasses and examined the telegrams one by one, reading each through. At last he shook one clear and handed it to the officer. It ran:

Wish to consult with you tonight on very important matter.
Call me Woburn Green 971. Very urgent. Wentford.

“You're a private detective, Mr Reeder?”

“More intimate than private,” murmured that gentleman. “In these days of publicity one has little more than the privacy of a goldfish in his crystal habitation.”

The sergeant saw something in the wastepaper basket and pulled it out. It was a small loose-leafed book. There was another, indeed, many. He piled five on the table; but they were merely the covers and nothing more.

“Diaries,” said Mr Reeder gently. “You will observe that each one is dingier than the other.”

“But how do you know they're diaries?” demanded the police officer testily.

“Because the word ‘diary’ is printed on the inside covers,” said Mr Reeder, more gently than ever.

This proved to be the case, though the printing had been overlooked. Mr Reeder had not overlooked it; he had not even overlooked the two scraps of burnt paper on the hearth, all that remained of those diaries.

“There is a safe let into the wall behind that bookcase.” He pointed. “It may or may not be full of clues. I should imagine it is not. But I shouldn’t touch it if I were you, sergeant,” he said hastily, “not without gloves. Those detestable fellows from Scotland Yard will be here eventually, and they’ll be ever so rude if they photograph a fingerprint and find it is yours.”

Gaylor of the Yard came at half past two. He had been brought out of his bed through a blinding snowstorm and along a road that was thoroughly vile.

The young lady had gone home. Mr Reeder was sitting meditatively before the fire which he had made up, smoking the cheapest kind of cigarette.

“Is the body here?”

Mr Reeder shook his head.

“Have they found that mounted policeman, Verity?”

Again Mr Reeder signalled a negative.

“They found his horse. He was discovered on the Beaconsfield Road. It had bloodstains on the saddle.”

“Bloodstains?” said the startled officer.

“Stains of blood,” explained Mr Reeder.

He was staring into the fire, the cigarette drooping limply from his mouth, on his face an air of unsettled melancholy; he did not even turn his head to address Inspector Gaylor.

“The young lady has gone home, as I said. The local constabulary gave you particulars of the lady, of course. She acted as secretary to the late Mr Wentford, and he appears to have been very fond of her, since he has left his fortune as to two-thirds to the young lady and one-third to his sister. There is no money in the house as far as can be ascertained, but he banks with the Great Central Bank, Beaconsfield branch.” Reeder fumbled in his pocket. “Here are the two aces.”

“The two what?” asked the puzzled inspector.

“The two aces.” Mr Reeder passed the playing cards over his shoulder, his eyes still upon the fire. “The ace of diamonds, and I believe the ace of hearts—I am not very well acquainted with either.”

“Where did you get these?”

The other explained, and he heard Gaylor’s exasperated chuckle.

“What’s this, a magazine story murder?” he asked contemptuously.

“I seldom read magazine stories,” said Mr Reeder between yawns, “but these cards were put up after the murder.”

The detective examined the aces interestedly.

“Why are you so sure of that—why shouldn’t they have been put up before?”

J. G. groaned at his scepticism, and, reaching out, took a pack of cards from a little table.

“You will find the two aces missing from this pack. You would have also found that two cards had been stuck together. Blood does that. No fingerprints. I should imagine the cards were sorted over after the untimely demise of Mr Wentford, and the two significant aces extracted and exhibited.”

The inspector made a very careful search of the bedroom and came back to find Mr Reeder nodding himself to sleep.

“What did they do to the girl—these local blokes?” asked Gaylor coarsely.

Reeder’s right shoulder came up in a lazy shrug.

“They escorted her to the station and took a statement from her. The inspector was kind enough to furnish me with a copy—you will find it on this table. They also examined her hands and her clothes, but it was quite unnecessary. There is corroborative evidence that she arrived at Bourne End station at twelve minutes past eight as she says she did—the murder was committed at forty minutes past seven, a few minutes before or after.”

“How the dickens do you know that?” asked the astonished officer. “Is there any proof?”

Mr Reeder shook his head.

“A romantic surmise.” He sighed heavily. “You have to realize, my dear Gaylor, that I have a criminal mind. I see the worst in people and the worst

in every human action. It is very tragic. There are moments when”—he sighed again. “Forty minutes past seven,” he said simply. “That is my romantic surmise. The doctor will probably confirm my view. The body lay here,” he pointed to the hearthrug, “until—well, quite a considerable time.”

Gaylor was skimming two closely written sheets of foolscap. Suddenly he stopped.

“You’re wrong,” he said. “Listen to this statement made at the station by Miss Lynn. ‘I rang up my uncle from the station, telling him I might be late because of the snowy road. He answered “Come as soon as you can.” He spoke in a very low tone; I thought he sounded agitated!’ That knocks your theory about the time a little bit skew-wiff, eh?”

Mr Reeder looked round and blinked open his eyes.

“Yes, doesn’t it? It must have been terribly embarrassing.”

“What was embarrassing?” asked the puzzled police officer.

“Everything,” mumbled Mr Reeder, his chin falling on his breast.

CHAPTER 5

“The trouble about Reeder,” said Gaylor to the superintendent in the course of a long telephone conversation, “is that you feel he does know something which he shouldn’t know. I’ve never seem him in a case where he hasn’t given me the impression that he was the guilty party—he knew so much about the crime?”

“Humour him,” said the superintendent. “He’ll be in the Public Prosecutor’s Department one of these days. He never was in a case that he didn’t make himself an accessory by pinching half the clues.”)

At five o’clock the detective shook the sleeper awake.

“You’d better go home, old man,” he said. “We’ll leave an officer in charge here.”

Mr Reeder rose with a groan, splashed some soda-water from a syphon into a glass and drank it.

“I must stay, I’m afraid, unless you have any very great objection.”

“What’s the idea of waiting?” asked Gaylor in surprise.

Mr Reeder looked from side to side as though he were seeking an answer.

“I have a theory—an absurd one, of course—but I believe the murderers will come back. And honestly I don’t think your policeman would be of much use, unless you were inclined to give the poor fellow the lethal weapon necessary to defend himself.”

Gaylor sat down squarely before him, his large gloved hands on his knees.

“Tell papa,” he said.

Mr Reeder looked at him pathetically.

“There is nothing to tell, my dear Mr Gaylor; merely suspicion, bred as, I said, in my peculiarly morbid mind, having perhaps no foundation in fact. Those two cards, for example—that was a stupid piece of bravado. But it has happened before. You remember the Teignmouth case, and the Lavender Hill case, with the man with the slashed chest? I think they must get these

ideas out of books,” he said, bending over to stir the embers of the fire. “The craze for that kind of literature must necessarily produce its reaction.”

Gaylor took the cards from his pocket and examined them.

“A bit of tomfoolery,” was his verdict.

Mr Reeder sighed and shook his head at the fire.

“Murderers as a rule have no sense of humour. They are excitable people, frightened people, but they are never comic people.”

He walked to the door and pulled it open. Snow had ceased to fall. He came back.

“Where is the policeman you propose leaving on duty?” he asked.

“I’ll find one,” said Gaylor. “There are half a dozen within call. A whistle will bring one along.”

Mr Reeder looked at him thoughtfully.

“I don’t think I should. Let us wait until daylight—or perhaps you wish to go? I don’t think anybody would harm you. I rather fancy they would be glad to see the back of you.”

“Harm me?” said Gaylor indignantly, but Reeder took no notice of the interruption.

“My own idea is that I should brew a dish of tea, and possibly fry a few eggs. I am a little hungry.”

Gaylor walked to the door and frowned out into the darkness. He had worked with Reeder before, and was too wise a man to reject the advice summarily. Besides, if Reeder was entering or had entered the Public Prosecutor’s Department, he would occupy a rank equivalent to superintendent.

“I’m all for eggs,” said Gaylor, and bolted the outer door.

The older man disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a kettle, which he placed upon the fire, went out again and returned with a frying-pan.

“Do you ever take your hat off?” asked Gaylor curiously.

Mr Reeder did not turn his head, but shook the pan gently to ensure an even distribution of the boiling fat.

“Very rarely,” he said. “On Christmas Days sometimes.”

And then Gaylor asked a fatuous question; at least, it sounded fatuous to him, and yet subconsciously he felt that the other might supply an immediate answer.

“Who killed Wentford?”

“Two men, possibly three,” said Mr Reeder instantly; “but I rather think two. Neither was a professional burglar. One at any rate thought more of the killing than of any profit he might have got out of it. Neither found anything worth taking, and even if they had opened the safe they would have discovered nothing of value. The young lady, Miss Margot Lynn, could, I think, have saved them a lot of trouble in their search for treasure—I may be mistaken here, but I rarely fall into error. Miss Margot is——”

He stopped, looked round quickly.

“What is it?” asked Gaylor, but Reeder put his finger to his lips.

He rose, moving across the room to the door which led to the tiny lobby through which he had made his entrance. He stood with one hand on the knob, and Gaylor saw that in the other was a Browning pistol. Slowly he turned the handle. The door was locked from the inside.

In two strides Reeder was at the front door, turned the key and pulled it open. Then, to the inspector’s amazement, he saw his companion take one step and fall sprawling on his face in the snow. He ran to his assistance. Something caught him by the ankle and flung him forward.

Reeder was on his feet and assisted the other to rise.

“A little wire fastened between the door posts,” he explained.

A bright beam shot out from his electric torch as he turned the corner of the house. There was nobody in sight, but the window, which he had fastened, was open and there were new footprints in the snow leading away into the darkness.

“Well, I’m damned!” said Gaylor.

J. G. Reeder said nothing. He was smiling when he came back into the room, having stopped to break the wire with a kick.

“Do you think somebody was in the lobby?”

“I know somebody was in the lobby,” he said. “Dear me! How foolish of us not to have had a policeman posted outside the door! You notice that a pane of glass has been cut? Our friend must have been listening there.”

“Was there only one?”

“Only one,” said Mr Reeder gravely. “But was he the one who came that way before—I don’t think so.”

He took the frying-pan from the hearth where he had put it and resumed his frying of eggs, served them on two plates and brewed the tea. It was just as though death had not lurked in that lobby a few minutes before.

“No, they won’t come back; there is no longer a reason for our staying. There were two, but only one came into the house. The roads are very heavy, and they may have a long way to travel, and they would not risk being anywhere near at daybreak. At six o’clock the agricultural labourer of whom the poet Gray wrote so charmingly will be on his way to work, and they won’t risk meeting him either.”

They had a solemn breakfast, Gaylor plying the other with questions, which in the main he did not answer.

“You think that Miss Lynn is in this—in the murder, I mean?”

Reeder shook his head.

“No, no,” he said. “I’m afraid it isn’t as easy as that.”

Daylight had come greyly when, having installed a cold policeman in the house, they plodded down the lane. Reeder’s car had been retrieved in the night, and a more powerful machine, fitted with chain-wheels, was waiting to take them to Beaconsfield. They did not reach that place for two hours, for on their way they came upon a little knot of policemen and farm labourers looking sombrely at the body of Constable Verity. He lay under some bushes a few yards from the road, and he was dead.

“Shot,” said a police officer. “The divisional surgeon has just seen him.”

Stiff and cold, with his booted legs stretched wide, his overcoat turned up and his snow-covered cap drawn over his eyes, was the officer who had ridden out from the station courtyard so unsuspectingly the night before. His horse had already been found; the bloodstains that had puzzled and alarmed the police were now accounted for.

Gaylor and Reeder drove on into Beaconsfield. Gaylor was a depressed and silent man; Mr Reeder was silent but not depressed.

As they came out into the main road he turned to his companion, and asked:

“I wonder why they didn’t bring their own aces?”

CHAPTER 6

The most accurate account of the double tragedy appeared in a late edition of the *Evening Post-Courier*.

At some hour between eight and ten James Verity, a member of the Mounted Branch of the Buckinghamshire Constabulary, and Walter Wentford, an eccentric, and, it is believed, a rich recluse, were done to death in or in the vicinity of a lonely cottage in the neighbourhood of Beaconsfield. At a quarter past nine Constable Verity was patrolling the road and came upon a body which was afterwards identified as that of the late Mr Wentford, who lived in a small cottage some hundred yards from the spot where the body was found. Mr Wentford had been brutally bludgeoned, and was dead when the discovery was made. Simultaneously with the discovery there appeared upon the scene Mr Walter Enward, a well-known Beaconsfield solicitor, and his clerk, who, at Mr Wentford's request, were on their way to visit him. It is believed Mr Wentford intended making a will, though no documents were found in the house to support this supposition.

Leaving Mr Enward to watch the body, Constable Verity rode toward Beaconsfield to summon assistance. He was never seen alive after that moment.

The dead man's niece, who also acted as his secretary, Miss Margot Lynn, had been summoned from London, and she, arriving at the cottage a few minutes after the body had been taken away by the unknown murderers, discovered the place in disorder, though she did not at that time suspect a tragedy.

The mystery was still further complicated in the earlier hours of the dawn, when a cow boy, on his way to work, discovered the dead body of Constable Verity on the Beaconsfield side of the lane where Mr Wentford's body was found. He had been shot through the heart at close range. No sound of the shot had been heard, but it may be explained that there are very few houses in the neighbourhood, and snow was falling heavily. A carter in the employment of a neighbouring farmer thought he had heard a shot fired much earlier in the evening, but this may be accounted for by

the fact that snow was falling so thickly on the railway line, which is situated a mile away, that fog signals were being used.

Chief Detective-Inspector Gaylor has been called in by the Buckinghamshire police, and he is being assisted by Mr J. G. Reeder, of the Public Prosecutor's Department.

The timetable, so far as can be ascertained, is as follows:

7.0 Constable Verity left police station on patrol.

9.14. Constable Verity discovers the dead body of Mr Wentford.

9.15. Mr Enward and his clerk drive up by motor car, and are stopped by the constable, who rides into Beaconsfield for assistance.

6.45 am. The body of Constable Verity is found shot dead 120 yards north of where the body of Mr Wentford was found.

Mr Kingfether, the sub-manager of the Beaconsfield branch of the Great Central Bank, read this account and was rightly agitated. He got to the bank very early that morning, for he had a letter to write, and his managerial office gave him the privacy he required. He was a serious man, with serious-looking spectacles on a pale, plump face. He had a little black moustache and his cheeks and chin were invariably blue, for he had what barbers call a 'strong beard.'

The newspapers arrived as he was writing. They were pushed under the closed outer door of the bank, and, being at the moment stuck for the alternative to an often reiterated term of endearment, he rose and brought the newspapers into the office, put a new coal on the fire and sat down to glance through them. There were two papers, one financial and one human.

He read the latter first, and there was the murder in detail, though it had only occurred the night before. The discovery of the constable's body was not described, because it had not been discovered when the paper went to press.

He read and re-read, his mind in a whirl, and then he took the telephone and called Mr Enward. That gentleman was also in his office that snowy morning, though the hour was eight.

"Good morning, Kingfether . . . Yes, yes, it's true. . . . I was practically a witness—they've found the poor policeman . . . dead . . . yes, murdered . . .

yes, shot. . . . I was the last person to speak to him. Dreadful, dreadful, dreadful! That such horrors can be—I say that such horrors can be. . . . I said that such . . . What’s the matter with your phone? He banks with you? Really? Really? I’ll come over and talk with you . . .”

Mr Kingfether hung up the telephone and wiped his face with his handkerchief. It was a face that became moist on the least provocation. Presently he folded the newspaper and looked at his unfinished letter. He was on the eighth page and the last words he had written were:

. . . can hardly live the day through without seeing your darling face, my own . . .

It was obvious that he was not writing to his general manager, or to a client who had overdrawn his account.

He added ‘beloved’ mechanically, though he had used the word a dozen times before. Then he unfolded the paper and read of the murder again.

A knock at the side door: he went out to admit Enward. The lawyer was more important than usual. Participation in public affairs has this effect. And a news agency had telephoned to ask whether they could send a photographer, and Mr Enward, shivering at the telephone in his pyjamas, had said “Yes” and had been photographed at his breakfast table at 7.30 am, poisoning a cup of tea and looking excessively grave. He would presently appear in one hundred and fifty newspapers above the caption ‘Lawyer Who Discovered His Own Client Murdered.’

“It is a terrible business,” said Mr Enward, throwing off his coat. “He banked with you? I’m in charge of affairs, Kingfether, though heaven knows I am ignorant about ’em! I don’t know how he stands . . . what is his credit here?”

Mr Kingfether considered.

“I’ll get the ledger from the safe,” he said.

He locked the centre drawer of his desk, because his letter to Ena Burslem was there and other documents, but Mr Enward saw nothing offensive in the act of caution; rather was it commendable.

“Here is his account.” Kingfether laid the big ledger on the desk and opened it where his thumb marked a page. “Credit three thousand four hundred pounds.”

Mr Enward fixed his glasses and looked.

“Has he anything on deposit? Securities—no? Did he come often to the bank?”

“Never,” said Kingfether. “He used the account to pay bills. When he wanted ready money he posted a bearer cheque and I posted back the money. He has, of course, sent people here to cash cheques.”

“That six hundred pounds withdrawn five days ago.” Mr Enward pointed to the item.

“It is strange that you should point that out—it was paid over the counter four days ago. I didn’t see the person who called for it—I was out. My clerk McKay cashed the cheque. Who is that?”

There was a gentle rapping at the door. Mr Kingfether went out of the room and came back with the caller.

“How fortunate to find you here!” said J. G. Reeder. He was spruce and lively. A barber had shaved him, somebody had cleaned his boots. “The account of the late Mr Wentford?” He nodded to the book.

It was generally known that J. G. Reeder acted for the Great Central Bank, and the manager did not question his title to ask questions. Mr Enward was not so sure.

“This is rather a serious matter, Mr Reeder,” he said, consciously grave. “I am not so sure that we can take you into our confidence——”

“Hadn’t you better see the police and ask them if they are prepared to take you into *their* confidence?” asked Mr Reeder, with a sudden ferocity which made the lawyer recoil.

Once more the manager explained the account.

“Six hundred pounds—h’m!” Mr Reeder frowned. “A large sum—who was the drawer?”

“My clerk McKay said it was a lady—heavily veiled.”

Reeder stared at him.

“Your clerk McKay? Of course—a fair young man. How stupid of me! Kenneth—or is it Karl—Kenneth, is it? H’m! Heavily veiled lady. Have you the number of the notes?”

Kingfether was taken aback by the question. He searched for a book that held the information, and Mr Reeder copied them down, an easy task since the tens and the fives ran consecutively.

“When does your clerk arrive?”

Kenneth was supposed to arrive at nine. As a rule he was late. He was late that morning.

Mr Reeder saw the young man through a window in the manager’s office and thought that he did not look well. His eyes were tired; he had shaved himself carelessly, for his chin bore a strip of sticking plaster. Perhaps that accounted for the spots on the soiled cuff of his shirt, thought Mr Reeder, when he confronted the young man.

“No, I will see him alone,” said Reeder.

“He is rather an insolent pup,” warned Mr Kingfether.

“I have tamed lions,” said Mr Reeder.

When Kenneth came in:

“Close the door, please, and sit down. You know me, my boy?”

“Yes, sir,” said Kenneth.

“That is blood on your shirt cuff, isn’t it? . . . cut your chin, did you? You haven’t been home all night?”

Kenneth did not answer at once.

“No sir. I haven’t changed my shirt, if that is what you mean.”

Mr Reeder smiled.

“Exactly.”

He fixed the young man with a long, searching glance.

“Why did you go to the house of the late Mr Wentford last night between the hours of eight-thirty and nine-thirty?”

He saw the youth go deathly white.

“I didn’t know he was dead—I didn’t even know his name until this morning. I went there because . . . well, I was blackguard enough to spy on somebody . . . follow them from London and sneak into the house——”

“The young lady, Margot Lynn. You’re in love with her? Engaged to her, perhaps?”

“I’m in love with her—I’m not engaged to her. We are no longer . . . friends,” said Kenneth in a low voice. “She told you I had been there, I

suppose?" and then, as a light broke on him: "Or did you find my cap? It had my name in it."

Mr Reeder nodded.

"You came down on the same train as Miss Lynn? Good. Then you will be able to prove that you left Bourne End station——"

"No, I shan't," said Kenneth. "I slipped out of the train on to the line. Naturally I didn't want her to see me. I got out through the level crossing. There was nobody about—it was snowing heavily."

"Very awkward." Mr Reeder pursed his lips. "You thought there was some sort of friendship between Mr Wentford and the young lady?"

Kenneth made a gesture of despair.

"I don't know what I thought—I was just a jealous fool."

A very long silence, broken by a coal falling from the fire on to the iron bottom of the fender.

"You paid out six hundred pounds the other day to a lady on Mr Wentford's cheque?"

"I didn't know that Wentford was——" began Ken, but Mr Reeder brushed aside that aspect of the situation. "Yes, a veiled lady. She came by car. It was a large sum of money, but the day before Mr Kingfether had told me to honour any cheque of Mr Wentford's no matter to whom money was paid."

"Will you tell me something about your quarrel with the young lady?" Mr Reeder asked. "It is, I realize, a delicate subject."

Kenneth hesitated, then told his story as he had told it to Mr Machfield.

"Miss Lynn called on you that night—did she ask you to destroy the photograph you had taken?"

The young man was surprised at this query.

"No—I had forgotten all about the photograph till the other day. I must have sent the pack to be developed or put them aside to send them. Would the picture of Mr Wentford be any good to you?"

J. G. Reeder shook his head. He asked very little more. He was, it seemed, the easiest man in the world to satisfy. Before he left he saw the sub-manager alone.

“Did you tell Mr McKay that he was to honour any cheque of Mr Wentford’s, no matter to whom the money was paid?”

The answer came instantly.

“Of course not! Naturally I should expect him to be sure that the person who presented a cheque had authority. And another curious thing which I have not mentioned. I lunch at the inn opposite and I usually have a seat in the window, where I can see these premises, but I have no recollection of any car drawing up to the bank.”

“H’m!” was all that Mr Reeder said.

He made a few inquiries in Beaconsfield and the neighbourhood and went on to Wentford’s house, where Gaylor had arranged to meet him. The inspector was pacing up and down the snowy terrace before the house and he was in very good spirits.

“I think I’ve got the man,” he said. “Do you know anybody named McKay?”

Mr Reeder looked at him slyly.

“I know a dozen,” he said.

“Come inside and I’ll show you something.”

Reeder followed him into the room. The carpet had been taken up, the furniture moved. Evidently a very thorough search had been in progress. Gaylor swung back the bookcase: the safe door was ajar.

“We got the keys from the maker—quick work! They were down here by eight-thirty.”

He stooped down and pulled out three bundles. The first was made up of bills, the second of used cheques, the third was a thick bundle of French banknotes, each to the value of 1000 francs.

“That is surprise No. 1,” began the detective, flourishing the money. “French money——”

“I am afraid it doesn’t surprise me,” said Mr Reeder apologetically. “You see, I’ve been examining the gentleman’s bank book. By the way, here are the numbers of notes drawn from Mr Wentford’s account.” He handed over a slip of paper.

“Six hundred pounds is a lot of money,” said Gaylor. “I’ll phone these through. Well, what else did you find in the bank book?”

“I observed,” said Mr Reeder, “though I did not emphasize the fact, that all the money he paid was in French bank notes. Number two is——?”

The inspector extracted a sheet of headed paper from one heap. Written in pencil was what was evidently a memorandum from somebody who signed himself ‘D. H. Hartford’.

“I have found that the man who is employing a detective to find you is George McKay of Sennet House, Marlow. I don’t know what his intentions are, but they’re not pleasant. There is nothing to worry about, he is employing one of the most incompetent private detectives in the business.”

“Extraordinary!” said Mr Reeder, and coughed.

“The first thing to do is to find Hartford——” began Gaylor.

“He is in Australia,” Mr Reeder interrupted. “At the time that letter was written his office address was 327, Lambs Buildings. He became bankrupt and left the country hurriedly.”

“How do you know?” asked Gaylor, astonished.

“Because I—um—was the incompetent private detective engaged to find Mr Lynn, or, as he called himself, Mr Wentford. And I did not find him,” said Mr Reeder.

“Why did McKay wish to find this man?”

“He owed him money. I know no more than that. The search fell off because—um—Mr McKay owed me money. One has to live.”

“Then you knew about Wentford?”

Mr Reeder took counsel with himself.

“Um—yes. I recognized him last night—I once had a photograph of him. I thought it was very odd. I also—er—drove over to Marlow and made inquiries. Mr McKay—Mr George McKay did not leave his house last night, and at the moment the murder was committed was entertaining the—um—vicar to dinner.”

“You’re a killjoy,” he said, and Mr Reeder sighed heavily.

“I’m going to have these developed.” He held up a little film pack. “I found them in the old man’s bedroom. I don’t suppose they’ll tell us anything.”

“I fancy they will be very instructive,” said Mr Reeder, “especially if you are interested in natural history. There will also be a picture of Mr Wentford or Lynn, with his arm about the shoulder of his niece.”

Gaylor sat down.

“Are you pulling my leg?” he demanded.

“Heaven forbid!” answered Mr Reeder piously.

Gaylor got up and stood squarely before him.

“What do you know about these murders, Reeder?” he challenged.

Mr Reeder spread his hands wide. His glasses, set askew, slipped a little further down his nose, he was not a very imposing figure.

“I am a queer man, Mr Gaylor; I am cursed, as you are aware, with a peculiarly evil mind. I am also intensely curious—I have always been. I am curious about criminals and chickens—I have perhaps the finest Wyandottes in London, but that is by the way. It would be cruel to give you my theories. The blood on the policeman’s horse: that is interesting. And Henry—I suppose Mr Enward’s clerk has another name—the blood on his coat, though he did not go near the body of the late Mr Wentford, that is interesting. Poor Henry is suffering from a severe chill and is in bed, but his mother, an admirable and hardworking woman, permitted me to see him. Then the two aces pinned to the door, all very, very, very interesting indeed! Mr Gaylor, if you will permit me to interview old George McKay I will undertake to tell you who committed these murders.”

“The girl told you something—the girl Lynn?”

“The girl has told me nothing. She also may be very informative. I propose spending a night or two in her flat—um—not, I hope, without a chaperon.”

Gaylor looked at him, amazed. Mr Reeder was blushing.

CHAPTER 7

The last page of the letter which Mr Eric Kingfether had begun with such ease in the early part of the morning was extremely difficult to compose. It had become necessary to say certain things; it was vital that he should not put his communication into writing.

In desperation he decided to make a break with practice. He would go to town. It was impossible to leave before the bank closed, but he could go immediately afterwards, though there was urgent work which should have kept him on the bank premises until six, and some private work of serious importance that should have occupied him until midnight. When the bank closed he handed over the key of the safe to Kenneth.

“I’ve been called to town. Balance up the books and put them in the safe. I’ll be back by six; I’d like you to wait for me.”

Kenneth McKay did not receive the suggestion favourably. He also wished to get away.

“Well, you can’t!” said the other sharply. “The bank inspector will be in tomorrow to check the Wentford account. It will probably be required as evidence.”

Mr Kingfether got out his little car and drove to London. He parked his machine in a Bloomsbury square and made his way on foot to a big mansion block behind Gower Street. The elevator man who took him up grinned a welcome.

“The young lady’s in, sir,” he said.

The ‘young lady’ herself opened the door to his ring.

“Look who’s here!” she said in surprise, and stood aside to let him in.

She was dressed in an old kimono and did not look as attractive as usual.

“In another half hour I’d have been out,” she said. “I didn’t get up till after lunch. These late nights are surely hell!”

She led the way to a sitting-room that was hazy with cigarette smoke. It was a large room, its floor covered with a soft carpet that had once cost a lot of money but was now mottled with stains. Before the fire was a big divan, and on this she had been reclining. The furnishing and appointments of the room were of that style which is believed to be oriental by quite a large

number of people. The whole room was half way to blowsiness. It had a stale, sweet scent. Before the fire, in a shallow basket lined with red silk, a Pekinese dog opened his weary eyes to survey the newcomer, and instantly closed them again.

“Well, my dear, what brings you up to town? I told you to snatch a few hours sleep—round about one you looked like a boiled owl, and that’s not the state to be in when you’re chasing money.”

She was dark and good-looking by certain standards. Her figure was robust, and nature had given generously to the amplification of her visible charms. The red of her full lips was a natural red; the clear skin was of fine texture; her face was scarcely powdered.

For a very long time they talked, head to head. She was an excellent listener; her sympathy had a sincere note. At half past five:

“Now off you pop and don’t worry. The governor will be seeing you tonight—talk it over with him. I think you’d better, in case anything turns up . . . you know what I mean.”

He took a letter out of his pocket and gave it to her with an air of embarrassment.

“I wrote it, or rather started it, this morning . . . I couldn’t finish it. I mean every word I say.”

She kissed him loudly.

“You’re a darling!” she said.

Mr Kingfether came back to his office to find only a junior in charge. McKay, despite instructions to the contrary, had gone, and the sub-manager sat down to a rough examination of important books in no condition to do justice to his task. He possessed one of those slow-starting tempers that gathers momentum from its own weight. A little grievance and a long brooding brought him to a condition of senseless and unrestrainable fury.

He was in this state when Kenneth McKay returned.

“I asked you to stay in, didn’t I?” He glowered at his subordinate.

“Did you? Well, I stayed in until I finished my work. Then the bank inspector came.”

Mr Kingfether’s face went white.

“What did he want? Redman didn’t tell me he called.”

“Well, he did.” Kenneth passed into the outer office.

Kingfether sat scribbling oddly on his blotting-pad for a moment, and then for the first time saw the letter that had been placed on the mantelpiece. It was marked ‘Urgent. Confidential. Deliver by hand’, and was from head office.

He took it up with a shaking hand, and, after a long hesitation, tore the seal. There was a little mirror on the wall above the fireplace, and he caught sight of his face and could hardly believe that that ghost of a man was himself.

There was no need to read the letter twice through. Already he knew every word, every comma. He stood blinking at his reflection, and then went into the outer office. He found Kenneth collecting some personal belongings from his desk.

“I suppose the inspector came about the Wentford cheque?” he said.

The young man looked round at him.

“Wentford cheque? I don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t mean the cheque I cashed for the woman?”

It required an effort on the manager’s part to affirm this.

“What was wrong with it?”

“It was forged, that is all.”

“Forged?” Kenneth frowned at him.

“Yes . . . didn’t the inspector say anything? He left a letter for me, didn’t he?”

Kenneth shook his head.

“No. He was surprised to find that you weren’t here. I told him you had gone up to the head office. I’m getting a bit sick of lying about you. What is the yarn about this cheque?”

Again it required a painful effort on the manager’s part to speak.

“It was forged. You’ve to report to head office tomorrow morning . . . some of the banknotes have been traced to you . . . the cheque was out of your office book.”

It was out, yet he felt no relief.

McKay was looking at him open-mouthed.

“You mean the cheque that was changed by that woman?”

The word ‘woman’ irritated Mr Kingfether.

“A lady was supposed to have called, a veiled lady——”

“What do you mean by ‘supposed?’” demanded Kenneth. “You say that the notes were traced to me—I issued them: is that what you mean?”

“You have them—some of them—in your private possession; that’s all.”

Incredulity showed in Kenneth’s face.

“*I?* You mean that I stole them?”

Kingfether had reached the limit of endurance.

“How the hell do I know what you did?” he almost shouted. “Head office have written to say that some of the notes you paid over the counter have been traced through a moneylender named Stuart to you.”

The young man’s face changed suddenly.

“Stuart . . . Oh!” was all that he said. A moment later he went blundering out of the side door, leaving Mr Kingfether to continue his aimless scribbles on his blotting-pad.

Kenneth reached Marlow just before the dinner hour, and he came into the study where old George McKay was usually to be found, working out his eternal combinations. To Kenneth’s amazement, his father greeted him with a smile. Instead of the cards, his table was covered with packages of documents and the paraphernalia of correspondence.

“Hullo, son—we’ve had a stroke of luck. The arbitrators have decided in my favour. I knew jolly well I hadn’t parted with my rights to the dyeing process when I sold out, and the company has to pay close on a hundred thousand back royalties.”

Kenneth knew of this wrangle between his father and his late company that had gone on through the years, but he had never paid very much attention to it.

“That means a steady income for years, and this time I’m going to look after things—here!”

He pointed to the grate. The fireplace was filled with half-burnt playing cards.

“They’ve asked me to rejoin the board as chairman. What is the matter, Kenny?”

Kenneth was sitting on the opposite side of the table, and his father had seen his face.

Briefly he told his story, and George McKay listened without comment until he had finished.

“Wentford, eh? He is going to be a curse to me to the end of my days.”

Kenneth gasped his amazement.

“Did you know him?”

Old George nodded.

“I knew him all right!” he said grimly. “Reeder was here this morning _____”

“About me?” asked the other quickly.

“About me,” said his father. “I rather gathered that he suspected me of the murder.”

Kenneth came to his feet, horrified.

“You? But he’s mad! Why should you——”

Mr McKay smiled dourly.

“There was quite a good reason why I should murder him,” he said calmly; “such a good reason that I have been expecting the police all the afternoon.”

Then abruptly he changed the subject.

“Tell me about these banknotes. Of course I knew that you had borrowed the money from Stuart, my boy. I was a selfish old fellow to let you do it—how did the money come to you?”

Kenneth’s story was a surprising one.

“I had it a couple of days ago,” he said. “I came down to breakfast and found a letter. It was not registered and the address was hand printed, I opened it, never dreaming what it contained. Just then I was terribly rattled over Stuart—I thought head office might get to know about my borrowing money. And when I found inside the letter twenty ten-pound notes you could have knocked me out.”

“Was there any letter?”

“None. Not even ‘from a friend.’ ”

“Who knew about you being in debt?”

One name came instantly to Kenneth’s mind.

“You told your Margot, did you . . . Wentford’s niece? His real name was Lynn, by the way. Could she have sent it?”

“It was not she who drew the money, I’ll swear! I should have known her. And though she was veiled, I could recognize her again if I met her. Kingfether’s line is that no woman came; he is suggesting that the cheque was cashed by me. He even says that the cheque was out of a book which I keep in my drawer for the use of customers who come to the bank without their cheque books.”

George McKay fingered his chin, his keen eyes on his son.

“If you were in any kind of trouble you’d tell me the truth, my boy, wouldn’t you? All this worry has come through me. You’re telling me the truth now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, father.”

The older man smiled.

“Fathers have the privilege of asking ‘Are you a thief?’ without having their heads punched! And most young people do stupid things—and most old people too! Lordy! I once carried a quarter of a million bank at baccarat! Nobody would believe that, but it’s true. Come and eat, then go along and see your Margot.”

“Father, who killed that man Wentford?”

There was a twinkle in McKay’s eyes when he answered:

“J. G. Reeder, I should think. He knows more about it than any honest man should know!”

CHAPTER 8

When her visitor was gone, Ena opened the letter he had left with her, read a few lines of it, then threw letter and envelope into the fire. Funny, the sameness of men . . . they all wrote the same sort of stuff . . . raw stuff dressed up poetically . . . yet they thought they were being different from all other men. She did not resent these stereotypes of passion, nor did she feel sorry for those who used them. They were just normal experiences. She sat clasping her knees, her eyes alternately on the fire and the sleeping dog. Then she got up, dressed quickly, and, going into Gower Street, found a cab.

She was set down at a house in a fashionable Mayfair street, and a liveried footman admitted her and told her there was company. There usually was in the early evening. She found twenty men and women sitting round a green table, watching a croupier with a large green shade over his eyes. He was turning up cards in two rows, and big monies, staked in compartments marked on the green table, went into the croupier's well or was pushed, with additions to the fortunate winner.

The usual crowd, she noted. One pretty girl looked up and smiled, then turned her eyes quickly and significantly to the young man by her side.

Ena found the governor in his room. He was smoking alone and reading the evening newspaper when she came in.

“Shut the door,” he ordered. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing much. Only Feathers is a bit worried.” She told him why.

Mr Machfield smiled.

“Don't *you* worry, my pet,” he said kindly. “There has been a murder down his way—did he tell you anything about that? I've just been reading about it. I should be surprised if old Reeder didn't get to the bottom of it—clever fellow, Reeder.”

He picked up his newspaper from the floor and his cigar from the ashtray where he had laid it.

“Rather a coincidence, wasn't it, Ena? Feathers pickin' on that account—Wentford's?”

She looked at him thoughtfully.

“Was it a coincidence?” she asked. “That is what is worrying me. Did he pick on this poor man’s account because he knew that he was going to be dead in a few days? I got a horrible creepy feeling when he was sitting beside me. I kept looking at his hands and wondering if there was blood on them!”

“Shuh!” said Mr Machfield contemptuously. “That rabbit!”

He opened a panel in the wall—it was nothing more romantic than a serving hatch when it was built—and glanced at the gamesters.

“They’re playing for marbles!” he said in fine scorn. “But they never do play high in the afternoon. Look at Lamontaine: he’s bored sick.”

And certainly the croupier did not look happy. He closed the panel.

“I suppose you’ll be raided one of these days?” she said.

“Sure!” he answered easily. “But I’ve got another couple of houses ready for starting.”

“What do you think about Feathers? Will he squeal when they find him out?”

“Like a stuck pig,” said Mr Machfield. “He’ll go down for nine months and get religion. That’s the kind of fellow who gives the prison chaplain an interest in life. Ena, I’ve got a little job for you.”

She was alert, suspicious.

“Nothing much. I’ll tell you all about it. Shall I open a bottle?”

“Yes, if it’s milk,” she said. “What’s the little job and how much does it carry?”

“Would you faint if I said a thousand?” he asked, and opened the hatch again, looking through and closing it.

“Who are you expecting?” she asked. “. . . all right, don’t be rude. No, thousands never make me faint. Especially when they’re talked about——”

“Now listen.”

Mr Machfield was too good a talker to be brief. He led from a preamble to sections, into sub-sections. . . .

“One minute.”

He interrupted his explanation to lift the hatch. She saw him bringing it down; then unexpectedly he raised it again. Was it the effect of odd lighting,

or had his face changed colour? He dropped the hatch softly and gaped round at her.

“Who let him in? That doorman has ‘shopped’ me——”

“Who is it?” she asked.

He beckoned her to his side, lifting the panel an inch.

“Stoop!” he hissed. “Look . . . that fellow with the side-whiskers.”

“Oh—is he anybody?” She did not recognize the visitor. Possibly he was a bailiff; he looked hopelessly suburban, like the people who serve writs. They always wear ready-to-wear ties and coloured handkerchiefs that stick out of their breast pockets.

“Reeder . . . J. G. Reeder!”

She wanted to raise the hatch and look, but he would not allow this.

“Go out and see what you can do . . . wait a bit.”

He lifted a house telephone and pressed a knob.

“Who was that fellow . . . the old fellow with side-whiskers? . . . Got a card . . . what name . . . Reeder?”

He put down the phone unsteadily. Mr Machfield gave small membership cards to the right people. They were issued with the greatest care and after elaborate enquiries had been made as to the antecedents of the man or woman so honoured.

“Go and get acquainted . . . he doesn’t know you. Go round through the buffet room and pretend you’ve just come in.”

When she reached the gaming room, Ena found Mr Reeder was sitting opposite the croupier. How he got that favoured chair was a mystery. His umbrella was between his knees. In front of him was a pile of Treasury notes. He was ‘punting’ gravely, seemingly absorbed in the game.

“*Faites vos jeux, messieurs et mesdames,*” said the croupier mechanically.

“What does he mean by that?” asked Mr Reeder of his nearest neighbour.

“He means ‘Make your bet’,” said the girl, who had drawn up a chair by his side.

Mr Reeder made ten coups and won six pounds. With this he got up from the table and recovered his hat from beneath his chair.

“I always think that the time to—um—stop playing cards is when you’re winning.” He imparted this truth to the young lady, who had withdrawn from the table at the same time.

“What a marvellous mind you have!” she said enthusiastically.

Mr Reeder winced.

“I’m afraid I have,” he said.

She shepherded him into the buffet room; he seemed quite willing to be refreshed at the expense of the house.

“A cup of tea, thank you, and a little seed cake.”

Ena was puzzled. Had the whole breed of busies undergone this shattering deterioration?

“I prefer seed to fruit cake,” he was saying. “Curiously enough chickens are the same. I had a hen once—we called her Curly Toes—who *could* eat fruit and preferred it . . .”

She listened—she was a good listener. He offered to see her home.

“No—if you could drop me at the corner of Bruton Street and Berkeley Square—I don’t live far from there,” she said modestly.

“Dear me!” said Mr Reeder, as he signalled to a cab. “Do you live in a mews too? So many people do.”

This was disconcerting.

“Perhaps you will come and see me one day—I am Mrs Coleforth-Ebling, and my phone number—do write this down——”

“My memory is very excellent,” murmured Mr Reeder.

The cab drove up at that moment and he opened the door.

“Ena Burslem—I will remember that—907, Gower Mansions.”

He waved his hand in farewell as he got into the cab.

“I’ll be seeing you again, my dear—toodle-oo!”

Mr Reeder could on occasions be outrageously frivolous. ‘Toodle-oo!’ was the high-water mark of his frivolity. It was not remarkable that Ena was both alarmed and puzzled. Brighter intellects than hers had been shaken in a

vain effort to reconcile Mr Reeder's appearance and manner with Mr Reeder's reputation.

She went back into the house and told Mr Machfield what had happened.

"That man's clever," said Machfield admiringly. "If I were the man who had killed Wentworth or whatever his name is, I'd be shaking in my shoes. I'll walk round to the Leffingham and see if I can pick up a young game-fish. And you'd better dine with me, Ena—I'll give you the rest of the dope on that business I was discussing."

The Leffingham Club was quite useful to Mr Machfield. It was a kind of potting shed where likely young shoots could be nurtured before being bedded out in the gardens of chance. Even Kenneth McKay had had his uses.

When Mr Reeder reached Scotland Yard, where they had arranged to meet, he found Inspector Gaylor charged with news.

"We've had a bit of luck!" he said. "Do you remember those banknotes? You took their numbers . . . you remember? They were paid out on Wentford's account!"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes," said Mr Reeder. "To the veiled lady——"

"Veiled grandmother!" said Gaylor. "We have traced two hundred pounds' worth to a moneylender. They were paid by Kenneth McKay, the bank clerk who cashed the cheque—and here is the cheque!"

He took it from a folder on his desk.

"The signature is a bad forgery; the cheque itself was not torn from Wentford's cheque-book but from a book kept at the bank under McKay's charge!"

"Astounding!" said Mr Reeder.

"Isn't it?" Mr Gaylor was smiling. "So simple! I had the whole theory of the murders given me tonight. McKay forged and uttered the note, and to cover up his crime killed Wentford."

"And you instantly arrested him?"

"Am I a child in arms?" asked Gaylor reproachfully. "No, I questioned the lad. He doesn't deny that he paid the moneylender, but says that the money came to him from some anonymous source. It arrived at his house by registered post. Poor young devil, he's rattled to blazes! What are we waiting for now?"

“A Gentleman Who Wants to Open a Box,” said Mr Reeder mysteriously.

(“Reeder releases his mysteries as a miser pays his dentist,” said Gaylor to the superintendent. “He knows I know all about the case—I admit he is very good and passes on most of the information he gets, but the old devil *will* keep back the connecting links!”

“Humour him,” said the superintendent.)

CHAPTER 9

Margot Lynn had spent a wretched and a weary day. The little city office which she occupied, and where she had conducted most of her uncle's business, had become a place of bad dreams.

She had never been very fond of her tyrannical relative, who, if he had paid her well, had extracted the last ounce of service from her. He was an inveterate speculator, and had made considerable monies from his operations on the Stock Exchange. It was she who had bought and sold on his telephoned instructions, she who put his money into a London bank. Over her head all the time he had held one weapon: she had an invalid mother in Italy dependent on his charity.

All day long, people had been calling at the office. A detective had been there for two hours, taking a new statement; reporters had called in battalions, but these she had not seen. Mr Reeder had supplied her with an outer guard, a hard-faced woman who held the pressmen at bay. But the police now knew everything there was to know about 'Wentford's' private affairs—except one thing. She was keeping faith with the dead in this respect, though every time she thought of her reservation her heart sank.

She finished up her work and went home, leaving the building by a back door to avoid the patient reporters. They were waiting for her at her flat, but the hard-faced Mrs Grible swept them away.

Once safely in the flat, a difficulty arose. How could she tactfully and delicately dismiss the guard which Mr Reeder had provided? She offered the woman tea, and Mrs Grible, who said very little, embarrassed her by making it.

"I'm greatly obliged to you and Mr Reeder," she said after the little meal. "I don't think I ought to take up any more of your time——"

"I'm staying until Mr Reeder comes," said the lady.

Very meekly the girl accepted the situation.

Mr Reeder did not come until ten o'clock. Margot was half dead with weariness, and would have given her legacy to have undressed and gone to bed.

For his part, he was in the liveliest mood, an astounding circumstance remembering that he had had practically no sleep for thirty-six hours. In an indefinable way he communicated to her some of his own vitality. She found herself suddenly very wide awake.

“You have seen the police, of course?” Mr Reeder sat on a chair facing her, leaning on the handle of his umbrella, his hat carefully deposited on the floor by his side. “And you have told them everything? It is very wise. The key, now—did you tell them about the key?”

She went very red. She was (thought Mr Reeder) almost as pretty when she was red as when she was white.

“The key?” She could fence, a little desperately, with the question, although she knew just what he meant.

“At the cottage last night you showed me two keys—one the key of the house, the other, from its shape and make, the key of a safe deposit.”

Margot nodded.

“Yes. I suppose I should have told them that. But Mr Wentford——”

“Asked you never to tell. That is why he had two keys, one for you and one for himself.”

“He hated paying taxes——” she began.

“Did he ever come up to town?”

“Only on very wet and foggy days. I have never been to the safe deposit, Mr Reeder. Anything that is there he placed himself. I only had the key in case of accidents.”

“What was he afraid of—did he ever tell you?”

She shook her head.

“He was terribly afraid of something. He did all his own housework and cooking—he would never have anybody in. A gardener used to come every few days and look after the electric light plant, and Mr Wentford used to pay him through the window. He was afraid of bombs—you’ve seen the cage round the window in his bedroom? He had that put there for fear somebody should throw in a bomb whilst he was asleep. I can’t tell you what precautions he took. Except myself and the policeman, and once Mr Enward the lawyer, nobody has ever entered that house. His linen was put outside the door every week and left at the door. He had an apparatus for testing milk and he analysed every drop that was left at the house before he drank it

—he practically lived on milk. It wasn't so bad when I first went to him—I was sixteen then—but it got worse and worse as the years went on.”

“He had two telephones in the house,” said Mr Reeder. “That was rather extravagant.”

“He was afraid of being cut off. The second one was connected by underground wires—it cost him an awful lot of money.” She heaved a deep, relieved sigh. “Now I've told everything, and my conscience is clear. Shall I get the keys?”

“They are for Mr Gaylor,” said Mr Reeder hastily. “I think you had better keep them and give them to nobody else. Not even to the person who calls tonight.”

“Who is calling tonight?” she asked.

Mr Reeder avoided the question. He looked at Mrs Gible, grim and silent.

“Would you mind—er—waiting outside?”

The obedient woman melted from the room.

“There is one point we ought to clear up, my dear young friend,” said Mr Reeder in a hushed voice. “How long had you been in your uncle's house when Mr Kenneth McKay appeared?”

If he had struck her she could not have wilted as she did. Her face went the colour of chalk, and she dropped into a chair.

“He came through the window into the little lobby—I know all about that—but how long after you arrived?”

She tried to speak twice before she succeeded.

“A few minutes,” she said, not raising her eyes.

Then suddenly she sprang up.

“He knew nothing about the murder—he was stupidly jealous and followed me . . . and then I explained to him, and he believed me. . . . I looked through the window and saw you and told him to go . . . that is the truth, I swear it is!”

He patted her gently on the shoulder.

“I know it is the truth, my dear—be calm, I beg of you. That is all I wanted to know.”

He called Mrs Gribble by name. As she came in, they heard the bell of the front door ring. It was followed by a gentle rat-tat.

“Who would that be?” asked Margot. She was still trembling.

“It may be a reporter—it may not be.” Mr Reeder rose. “If it is some stranger to see you on urgent business, perhaps you would be kind enough to mention the fact that you are quite alone.”

He looked helplessly round.

“That——” He pointed to a door.

“Is the drawing-room,” she said, hardly noticing his embarrassment.

“Very excellent.” He was relieved. Opening the door, he waved Mrs Gribble to precede him. “If it should be reporters we will deal with them,” he said, and closed the door behind him.

There was a second ring of the bell as Margot hurried to the door. Standing outside was a girl. She was elegantly dressed, was a little older than Margot, and unusually pretty.

“Can I see you, Miss Lynn? It is rather important.”

Margot hesitated.

“Come in, please,” she said at last.

The girl followed her into the sitting-room.

“All alone?” she said lightly.

Margot nodded.

“You’re a great pal of Kenneth’s, aren’t you?”

She saw the colour come into Margot’s face, and laughed.

“Of course you are—and you’ve had an awful row?”

“I have had no awful row,” said Margot quietly.

“He’s a jealous boy—they all are, my dear. I always say there is no better proof that a man is gone on you. He’s a darling boy, and he’s in terrible trouble.”

“Trouble—what kind of trouble?” asked Margot quickly.

“Police trouble——”

The girl swayed and caught at the back of a chair.

“Don’t get upset.” Ena was enjoying her part. “He’ll be able to explain everything——”

“But he said he believed me . . .” She was on the point of betraying the presence of the hidden Mr Reeder, but checked herself in time.

“Who said so?” asked Ena curiously. “A copper—policeman, I mean? Don’t take any notice of that kind of trash. They’d lie to save a car fare! We know that Kenneth didn’t forge the cheque——”

Margot’s eyes opened wide in amazement.

“Forge a cheque—what do you mean? I don’t understand what you are talking about.”

For a moment Ena was nonplussed. If this girl did not know about the forgery, what was agitating her? The solution of this minor mystery came in a flash. It was the murder! Kenneth was in it! She went cold at the thought.

“Oh, my God! I didn’t think of that!” she gasped.

“Tell me about this forgery——” began Margot, and her visitor remembered her errand.

“I want you to come along and see Kenneth. He’s waiting for you at my flat—naturally he can’t come here. He’ll tell you everything.”

Margot was bewildered.

“Of course I’ll come, but——”

“Don’t ‘but’, my dear—just slip into your things and come along. Kenneth told me to ask you to bring all the keys you have—he said they can prove his innocence——”

“Dear, dear, dear!” said a gentle voice, and Ena flung round, to face the man who had come into the room.

She was trapped and knew it. That old devil!

“The key of the larder now, would that be of any use to you?” asked Mr Reeder in his jocular mood. “Or the key of Wormwood Scrubbs?”

“Hullo, Reeder!” The girl was coolness itself. “I thought you were alone, young lady. I did not know you were entertaining Mr and Mrs Reeder.”

Such an outrageous statement made Mr Reeder blush, but it did not confuse him. Nor did Mrs Grible seem particularly distressed.

“This lady is Mrs Grible, of my department,” he said gravely.

“She must have some use,” said Ena. She picked up her coat which she had taken off. “I’ll phone you later, Miss Lynn.”

“The cells at Bow Street police station are hygienically equipped, but they have no telephones,” said Mr Reeder, and for the first time in many years Ena lost her nerve.

“What’s the idea—cells?” she demanded loudly. “You’ve got nothing on me——”

“We shall see—will you step this way?” He opened the door of the drawing-room. “I should like to have a few words with you.”

He heard a knock at the outer door and looked at Margot.

“I shall be on hand,” he said.

She went to the door—and fell back at the sight of her visitor. It was Kenneth McKay. He looked at her gravely, and without a word took her into his arms and kissed her. He had never kissed her that way before.

“Can I see you?”

She nodded and took him back to her room. The other three had disappeared.

“It is only right that you should know, darling, that I’m in terrible trouble. I’ve just come from home, and I suppose the police are after me. They may be after my father, too. He knew Wentford—hated him. I didn’t dream that——”

“Ken—what about you? Why do the police want you?”

He looked at her steadily.

“It is about a forged cheque. Some of the money has been traced to me. Darling, I’ve come to ask you something, and I want you to tell me the truth. Kingfether as good as told me I was a liar when I said I’d cashed it for a veiled woman. I don’t mind really what he says—he’s a crook, that fellow! Money has been missing from the bank—they sent old Reeder down weeks ago——”

“How did they trace money to you?” she interrupted. “And what do you want me to tell you?”

“You knew that I owed money—I told you.” She nodded. “And how worried I was about it. I can’t remember whether I told you how much I owed——”

She shook her head.

“You didn’t,” she said, and he drew a long breath.

“Then it wasn’t you,” he said.

He described the arrival of the letter containing the banknotes.

“Two hundred pounds, and of course I wanted the money badly.”

“Who else knew that you were short of money?” she asked.

“Oh, everybody.” He was in despair. “I blabbed about it—Kingfether said that he never ordered me to cash any cheque that came, and that the story of a veiled woman who arrived by car from London when he was out at lunch was all moonshine—hullo!”

He saw the door of the drawing-room opening and gasped at the sight of Mr Reeder.

“It wasn’t moonshine, my young friend,” said Mr Reeder. “In fact, I—er—have interviewed a garage keeper who filled up the tank of the lady’s car, and incidentally saw the lady.”

He turned to the room and beckoned Ena. Kenneth stared at her.

“Well?” she said defiantly. “Do you think you’ll know me again?”

“I know you now!” he said huskily. “You’re the woman who cashed the cheque!”

“That’s a damned lie!” she screamed.

“S-sh!” said Mr Reeder, shocked.

“I’ve never seen him before!” she added, and Margot gasped.

“But you told me——”

“I’ve never seen him before,” insisted the woman.

“You’ll see him again,” said Mr Reeder gently. “You on one side—the wrong side—of the witness box, and he on the other!”

Then she lost her head.

“If there was a swindle, he was in it!” she said, speaking rapidly. “You don’t suppose any clerk would pay out six hundred pounds to somebody he had never seen before unless he had his instructions and got his corner! How did I know the cheque was forged? It seemed all right to me.”

“May it continue to seem all right,” said Mr Reeder piously. “May you be consoled through the long period of your incarceration with the—er—comfort of a good conscience. I think you will get three years—but if your previous convictions influence the judge, I fancy you will get five!”

Ena collapsed.

“You can’t charge me,” she whimpered. “I didn’t forge anything.”

“There is a crime called ‘uttering’,” said Mr Reeder. “‘Uttering—knowing to be forged.’ Will you take the young lady’s arm, Mrs Grible? I will take the other—probably we shall meet a policeman *en route*. And did I say anything about ‘conspiracy’? That is also an offence. Mind that mat, Mrs Grible.”

CHAPTER 10

There was some rather heavy play at Mr Machfield's private establishment—heavier than usual, and this gave the proprietor of the house cause for uneasiness. If Mr Reeder had reported his visit that afternoon to the police, and they thought the moment expedient, there would be a raid tonight, and in preparation for this all doors leading to the mews at the back were unfastened, and a very powerful car was waiting with its engine running. Mr Machfield might or might not use that method of escape. On the other hand, he could follow his invariable practice, which was to appear amongst those present as a guest: a fairly simple matter, because he was not registered as the proprietor of the house, and he could trust his servants.

Certainly the car would have its uses, if everything went right and there was no untoward incident. Just lately, however, there had been one or two little hitches in the smooth running of his affairs, and, being superstitious, he expected more.

He looked at his watch; his appointment with Ena was at midnight, but she had promised to phone through before then. At a quarter to nine, as he stood watching the players there came a newcomer at the tail of three others. He was in evening dress, as were the majority of people round the board, and he looked strangely out of place in those surroundings, though his blue chin was newly shaved and his black hair was glossy with pomade, and in the lapel of his coat he wore a dazzling gardenia.

Mr Machfield watched him wander aimlessly around the table, and then caught his eye and indicated that he wished to see him. Soon afterwards he walked out of the room and Mr Kingfether followed.

“You're rather silly to come tonight, K,” said Mr Machfield. “There's just a chance of a raid—Reeder was here this afternoon.”

The manager's jaw dropped.

“Is he here now?” he asked, and Mr Machfield smiled at the foolishness of the question.

“No, and he won't be coming tonight, unless he arrives with a flying squad. We'll keep that bird out at any rate.”

“Where is Ena?” asked Kingfether.

“She’ll be in later,” lied Machfield. “She had a bit of a headache, and I advised her not to come.”

The bank manager helped himself to a whisky from a decanter on the sideboard.

“I’m very fond of that girl,” said Kingfether.

“Who isn’t?” asked the other.

“To me”—there was a tremor in the younger man’s voice—“she is something outside of all my experience. Do you think she’s fond of me, Machfield?”

“I am sure she is,” said the other heartily; “but she’s a woman of the world, you know, my boy, and women of the world do not carry their hearts on their sleeves.”

He might have added, that, in the case of Ena she carried the business equivalent of that organ up her sleeve, ready for exhibition to any susceptible man, young or old.

“Do you think she’d marry me, Machfield?”

Mr Machfield did not laugh. He had played cards a great deal and had learned to school his countenance. Ena had two husbands, and had not gone through the formality of freeing herself from either. Both were officially abroad, the foreign country being that stretch of desolate moorland which lies between Ashburton and Tavistock. Here, in the gaunt convict establishment of Princeton, they laboured for the good of their souls, but with little profit to the taxpayers who supported them, and even supplied them with tobacco.

“Why shouldn’t she? But mind, she’s an expensive kind of girl, K,” said Machfield very seriously. “She costs a lot of money to dress, and you’d have to find it from somewhere—five hundred a year doesn’t go far with a girl who buys her dresses in Paris.”

Kingfether strode up and down the apartment, his hands in his pockets, his head on his chest, a look of gloom on a face that was never touched with brightness.

“I realize that,” he said, “but if she loved me she’d help to make both ends meet. I’ve got to cut out this business of the bank; I’ve had a fright, and I can’t take the risk again. In fact, I thought of leaving the bank and setting up a general agency in London.”

Mr Machfield knew what a general agency was when it was run by an inexperienced man. An office to which nobody came except bill collectors. He didn't, however, wish to discourage his client; for the matter of that, Kingfether gave him little opportunity for comment.

"There is going to be hell's own trouble about that cheque," he said. "I had a letter from head office—I have to report to the general manager in the morning and take McKay with me. That is the usual course."

Such details were distasteful to Mr Machfield. He needed all the spare room in his mind for other matters much more weighty than the routine of the Great Central Bank, but he was more than interested in the fate of McKay.

Kingfether came back to Ena, because Ena filled his horizon.

"The first time I ever met her," he said. "I knew she was the one woman in the world for me. I know she's had a rough time and that she's had a battle to live. But who am I to judge?"

"Who, indeed?" murmured Mr Machfield, with considerable truth. And then, pursuing his thought, "What will happen to Mr Kenneth McKay?"

Only for a moment did the manager look uncomfortable.

"He is not my concern," he said loudly. "There is no doubt at all that the signature on the cheque——"

"Oh, yes, yes," said the other impatiently. "We don't want to discuss that, do we? I mean, not between friends. You paid me the money you owed me, and there was an end to it so far as I am concerned. I took a bit of a risk myself, sending Ena down—I mean, letting Ena go," he corrected, when he saw the look on the other's face. "What about young McKay?"

The manager shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know and I really don't care. When I got back to the bank this afternoon he'd gone, though I'd left instructions that he was to stay until I returned. Of course, I can't report it, because I did wrong to go away myself, and it was rather awkward that one of our bank inspectors called when I was out. I shall have to work all night to make up arrears. McKay might have helped me. In fact, I told him——"

"Oh, he came back, did he?"

"For five minutes, just before six o'clock. He just looked in and went out again. That is how I knew the inspector had called. I had to tell this pup

about the cheque and the banknotes. By the way, that is a mystery to me how the notes came into his hands at all—I suppose there is no mistake about them? If he was in the habit of coming here he might have got them from the table. He doesn't come here, does he?"

"Not often." Mr Machfield might have added that nobody came to that place unless they had a certain amount of surplus wealth, or the means by which easy money could be acquired.

There were quite a number of his clients who were in almost exactly the same position as Mr Kingfether—people in positions of trust, men who had the handling of other people's money. It was no business of Machfield's how that money was obtained, so long as it was judiciously spent. It was his boast that his game was straight; as indeed it was—up to a point. He had allowed himself throughout life a certain margin of dishonesty, which covered both bad luck and bad investments. Twice in his life he had gone out for big coups. Once he had failed, the other time he had succeeded but had made no money.

He was not *persona grata* in all the countries of the world. If he had arrived at Monte Carlo he would have left by very nearly the next train, or else the obliging police would have placed a motor car at his disposal to take him across to Nice, a resort which isn't so particular as to the character of her temporary visitors.

"I'm sorry for McKay in a way, although he is such an impossible swine, but it's a case of his life or mine, Machfield. Either he goes down or I go down—and I'm not going down."

Nothing wearied Mr Machfield worse than heroics. And yet he should have been hardened to them, for he had lived in an atmosphere of hectic drama, and once had seen a victim of his lying dead by his own hand across the green board of his gaming table. But it was years ago.

"You'd better slide back to the room," he said. "I'll come in a little later. Don't play high: I've still got some of your papers, dear boy."

When he returned to the room, the manager had found a seat at the table and was punting modestly and with some success. The croupier asked a question with a flick of his eyelids, and almost imperceptibly Machfield shook his head, which meant that that night, at any rate, Kingfether would pay for his losses in cash, that neither his IOUs nor cheques would be accepted.

From time to time the players got up from the tables, strolled into the buffet, had a drink and departed. But there was always a steady stream of newcomers to take their places. Mr Machfield went back to his study, for he was expecting a telephone message. It came at a quarter past ten. A woman's voice said: "Ena says everything is OK."

He hung up the telephone with a smile. Ena was a safe bet: you could always trust that girl, and he did not question her ability to keep her visitor occupied for at least two hours. After that he would do a little questioning himself. But it must be he, and not that other fool.

There was no sign of raiders. He had special scouts posted at every street corner approaching the house, and a man on the roof (no sinecure this on a night of rain and sleet) to take and transmit their signals in case of danger. If there were a raid he was prepared for it. More likely the police, following their invariable custom, would postpone the visitation until later in the week. And by that time, if all went well, the house would be closed and the keys in the hands of the agents.

Kingfether was winning; there was a big pile of Treasury and five-pound notes before him. He looked animated, and for once in his life pleased. The bank was winning too; there was a big box recessed into the table, and this was full of paper money and every few minutes the pile was augmented.

A dull evening! Mr Machfield would be glad when the time came for his loud speaking gramophone to play the National Anthem. He always closed down on this patriotic note: it left the most unlucky of players with the comforting sense that at least they had their country left to them.

He was looking at the long folding door of the room as it opened slowly. It was second nature in him to watch that opening door, and until this moment he had never been shocked or startled by what it revealed. Now, however, he stood dumbfounded, for there was Mr Reeder, without his hat, and even without his umbrella.

Nobody noticed him except the proprietor, and he was frozen to the spot. With an apologetic smile Mr Reeder came tiptoeing across to him.

"Do you very much mind?" he asked in an urgent whisper. "I find time hanging rather heavily upon my hands."

Machfield licked his dry lips.

"Come here, will you?"

He went back to his study, Reeder behind him.

“Now, Mr Reeder, what’s the idea of your coming here? How did you get in? I gave strict instructions to the man on the door——”

“I told him a lie,” said Mr Reeder in a hushed tone, as though the enormity of his offence had temporarily overcome him. “I said that you had particularly asked me to come tonight. That was very wrong, and I am sorry. The truth is, Mr Machfield, even the most illustrious of men have their little weaknesses; even the cleverest and most law-abiding their criminal instincts, and although I am neither illustrious nor clever, I have the frailties of my—er—humanity. Not, I would add, that it is criminal to play cards for money—far from it. I, as you probably know, or you may have heard, have a curiously distorted mind. I find my secret pleasures in such places as these.”

Mr Machfield was relieved, immensely relieved. He knew detectives who gambled, but somehow he had never associated Mr J. G. Reeder with this peculiar weakness.

“Why, certainly, we’re glad to see you, Mr Reeder,” he said heartily.

He was so glad indeed that he would have been happy to have given this odd-looking man the money wherewith to play.

“You’ll have a drink on the house—not,” he added quickly, “that I am in any position to offer you a drink. I am a guest the same as yourself, but I know the proprietor would be annoyed if you came and went without having one.”

“I never drink. A little barley water perhaps?”

There was, unfortunately, no barley water in the establishment, but this, as Machfield explained, would be remedied in the future—even now if he wished. Mr Reeder, however, would not hear of putting ‘the house’ to trouble. He was anxious to join the company, and again by some extraordinary quality of good luck, he managed to insinuate himself so that he sat opposite the croupier. Somebody rose from their chair as he approached, and Mr Reeder took the vacant seat.

He might have taken a chair on the opposite side of the table, for at the sight of him a pallid Kingfether had whipped out his handkerchief and covered the lower part of his face as though he were suffering from a bad cold.

Stealthily he rose from his seat and melted into the fringe of people standing behind the players.

“Don’t let me drive you away, Mr Kingfether,” said Reeder’s voice, and everybody heard him.

The manager dropped back till he stood against the wall, a limp helpless figure, and there he remained through the scene that followed.

Mr Reeder had produced a bundle of Treasury notes which he counted with great care. It was not a big bundle. Mr Machfield, watching, guessed he was in the ten-pound line of business, and certainly there was no more than that on the table.

One by one those little notes of Reeder’s disappeared, until there was nothing left, and then a surprising thing happened. Mr Reeder put his hand in his pocket, groped painfully and produced something which he covered with his hand. The croupier had raised his cards ready to deal—the game was *trente-et-quarante*—when the interruption came.

“Excuse me.” J. G. Reeder’s voice was gentle but everybody at the table heard it. “You can’t play with that pack: there are two cards missing.”

The croupier raised his head. The green shade strapped to his glossy head threw a shadow which hid the top half of his face.

He stared blandly at the interrupter—the dispassionate and detached stare which only a professional croupier can give.

“*Pardon?*” he said, puzzled. “I do not understand m’sieur. The pack is complete. It is never questioned——”

“There are two cards without which I understand you cannot play your game,” said Mr Reeder, and suddenly lifted his hand.

On the table before him were two playing cards, the ace of diamonds and the ace of hearts. The croupier looked down at them, and then, with an oath, pushed back his chair and dropped his hand to his hip.

“Don’t move—I beg of you!”

There was an automatic pistol in Mr Reeder’s hand, and its muzzle was directed towards the croupier’s white waistcoat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing to be alarmed about. Stand back from the table against the wall, and do not come between me and Monsieur Lamontaine!”

He himself stepped backward.

“Over there!” he signalled to Machfield.

“Look here, Reeder——”

“Over there!” snarled J. G. Reeder. “Stand up by your friend. Ladies and gentlemen”—he addressed the company again without taking his eyes from the croupier—“there will be a few moments of acute unpleasantness. Your names and addresses will be taken, but I will use my best endeavours to avoid police court proceedings, because we are after something much more important than naughty people who play cards for money.”

And then the guests saw strange men standing in the doorway. They came from all directions—from Mr Machfield’s study, from the hall below, from the roof above. They handcuffed Lamontaine and took away the two guns he carried, one in each hip pocket—Machfield was unarmed.

“What will the charge be?”

“Mr Gaylor will tell you that at the police station. But I think the question is unnecessary. Honestly, don’t you, Mr Machfield?”

Machfield said nothing.

CHAPTER 11

Mr Reeder kept what he called a casebook, in which he inscribed a passionless account of all the cases in which he was engaged. Some of these cases had no value except to the technician, and would not interest anyone except perhaps the psychopathologist. Under the heading 'Two Aces' appeared this account, written in his own handwriting.

In the year 1919 (wrote Mr Reeder) there arrived at the Hotel Majestic in Nice a man who described himself in the hotel register as Rufus Machfield. He had a number of other names, but it is only necessary that Machfield should be used to identify this particular character. The man had a reputation as a cardsharp, and, in the pursuit of his nefarious calling, had 'worked' the ships plying between England and New York. He had also been convicted on two occasions as a professional gambler in Germany.

He was of Danish origin, but at the time was a naturalized Englishman, with a permanent address in Colvin Gardens, Bayswater. At the Majestic Hotel he had met with Charles or Walter Lynn, an adventurer who had also 'operated' the ships on the North Atlantic. On one of these trips Lynn had become acquainted with Mr George McKay, a prosperous woollen merchant of Bradford. There is no evidence that they ever played cards together, and Mr McKay does not recall that they did. But the friendship was of value to Lynn because Mr McKay was in the habit of coming to Nice every year, and was in residence at the time Lynn and Machfield met. McKay was known as a resolute and successful gambler, and before now had figured in sensational play.

The two men, Lynn and Machfield, conferred together and decided upon a scheme to rob McKay at the tables. Gambling in Nice is not confined to the recognized establishments. There was at the time a number of *Cercles Privés* where play was even higher than at the public rooms, and the most reputable of these was 'Le Signe' which, if it was not recognized, was winked at by the French authorities.

In order to swindle McKay, a patron of this club, it was necessary to secure the co-operation and help of an official. Lynn's choice fell upon a young croupier named Lamontaine, and he in turn was to suborn two other croupiers, both of whom it was intended should receive a very generous share of the money.

Lamontaine proved to be a singularly pliable tool. He had married a young wife and had got into debt, and was fearful that this should come to the ears of the club authorities. An interview was arranged in Lyons; the scheme was put before the croupier by Lynn, and he agreed to come in, taking a half share for himself and his two fellow croupiers, the other half being equally divided between Lynn and Machfield. Lynn apparently demurred at the division, but Machfield was satisfied with his quarter share; the more so as he knew Mr McKay had been winning very heavily, and providing he had the right kind of betting, there would be a big killing.

The game to be played was baccarat, for McKay could never resist the temptation of taking a bank, especially a big bank. It was very necessary that arrangements should be hurried on before the merchant left the South of France, and a fortnight after the preliminaries, Lamontaine reported that everything was in trim, that he had secured the co-operation of his comrades, and it was decided that the coup should be brought off on the Friday night.

It was arranged that Lynn should be the player, that after play was finished the conspirators should meet again at Lyons, when the loot was to be divided.

The cards were to be stacked so that the bank won every third coup. It was arranged that the signal for the conspirators to begin their betting was to be the dealing of two aces, the ace of diamonds and the ace of hearts. Somebody would draw a six to these, and the banker would have a 'natural'—which means, I understand, that he would win.

Thereafter the betting was to be done by Lynn, and the first was a banco call—which meant, as the cards lay, that the bank would be swept into their pockets. They knew Mr McKay would bid for the bank, but they would bid higher, and Lynn then took the bank with a capital of a million francs. Fourteen times the bank won, and had now reached enormous proportions, so much

so that every other table in the room was deserted, and the table where this high play was going on was surrounded by curious watchers.

There were fourteen winning coups for the bank, and the amount gathered up at the finish by Lynn was something in the neighbourhood of £400,000. Lamontaine states that it was more, but Machfield is satisfied that it was in that region. The money was taken to the hotel, and the following night Lynn left for Lyons. He was to be joined the next day by Machfield, and on the Sunday they were to meet the croupier in Paris and pay him his share.

The night that Lynn left, however, one of the officials of the rooms made a statement to his *chef*. He had lost his nerve and he betrayed his comrades. Lamontaine, with the other croupier, was arrested on a charge of conspiracy, and Machfield only got away from the South of France by the skin of his teeth. He journeyed on to Lyons and arrived there in the early hours of the following afternoon. He hoped that no news of the arrests would have got into the papers and scared his partner, and certainly he did not wire warning Lynn. When he got to the hotel he asked for his friend, but was told that he had not arrived, nor had he made a reservation of the rooms which had been agreed upon.

From that moment he disappeared from human ken, and neither Machfield nor any of his friends were able to trace him. It was no accident: it was a deliberate doublecross. Machfield played the game as far as he was able, and when Lamontaine was released from prison and came to Paris, a broken man, for his young wife had died while he was in gaol, he helped the croupier as well as he could, and together they came to England to establish gaming houses, but primarily to find Lynn and force him to disgorge.

There was another person on the track of Lynn. McKay, who had been robbed, as he knew after the French court proceedings, employed me to trace him, but for certain reasons I was unable to justify his confidence.

I do not know in what year or month Lamontaine and Machfield located their man. It is certain that 'Mr Wentford', as he called himself, lived in increasing fear of their vengeance. When they did locate him he proved to be an impossible man to reach. I

have no doubt that the house was carefully reconnoitred, his habits studied, and that attempts were made to get at him. But those attempts failed. It is highly probable, though no proof of this exists, that he was well informed as to his enemy's movements, for so far as can be gathered from the statement of his niece and checked by the admissions of Machfield, Lynn never left his house except on the days when Machfield and Lamontaine were in Paris—they frequently went to that city over the week-end.

It was Lamontaine who formed the diabolical plan which was eventually to lead to Wentford's death. He knew that the only man admitted to the house was the mounted policeman who patrolled that part of the country, so he studied police methods, even got information as to the times on which the beat was patrolled, and on the night of the murder, soon after it was dark, he travelled down to Beaconsfield by car through the storm, accompanied by Machfield.

Lamontaine at some time or other had been on the French stage (he spoke perfect English) and I have no doubt was in a position to make himself up sufficiently well to deceive Wentford into opening the door. At seven o'clock Constable Verity left the station and proceeded on his patrol. At seven-thirty he was ruthlessly murdered by a man who stepped out of his concealment and shot him point-blank through the heart.

The body was taken into a field and laid out, the two murderers hoping that the snow would cover it. Lamontaine was already wearing the uniform of a police constable, and, mounting the horse, he rode on to Wentford's house. The old man saw him through the window, and, suspecting nothing, got down and opened the door.

He may not have realized that anything was wrong until he was back in his parlour, for it was there that he was struck down. The two men intended leaving him in the cottage, but a complication arose whilst they were searching the place, or endeavouring to open the safe behind the bookcase. The telephone rang, and they heard Margot Lynn say that she was coming on but was delayed. One of them answered in a disguised voice.

The thing to do now was to remove the body. Lifting it out, they laid it over the horse's saddle, and, guiding the nervous

animal down to the road, led it towards Beaconsfield. Here a second complication arose: the lights of Mr Enward's car were seen coming toward them. The body was dropped by the side of the road, and the constable took his place on the horse's back. The animal was smothered with the blood of the murdered man, and the clerk of Mr Enward, the lawyer, taking the bridle quite innocently, must have rubbed his sleeve along the shoulder, for it was afterwards discovered that his coat was stained. That gave me my first clue, and I was able, owing to my peculiar mind, to reconstruct the crime as it had been committed.

The two men joined one another again in the vicinity of the cottage. They were not able to make any further attempt that night. One of them, however, heard that the girl knew where the money was cached. I am afraid I was responsible for this, and it was intended that she should be taken away, with the key of the safe deposit. . . .

Machfield had already become acquainted with the straightened circumstances of young McKay, the son of his victim, and probably to hit at his father, who he must have known was still hunting for him, used an opportunity which was offered by chance, to ruin him, as he believed.

Two hundred pounds, representing a portion of the money obtained from the bank by a fraudulent manager (3 years Penal Servitude; Central Criminal Court) through the instrumentality of his woman friend (5 years PS, CCC) was sent anonymously to the younger McKay by Machfield, and was traced to the young man.

After this came a note, also in Mr Reeder's hand:

'Rufus John Machfield and Antonio Lamontaine (sentence: death, CCC) executed at Wandsworth Prison, April 17th. Executioner Ellis.'

Mr Reeder was a stickler for facts.

KENNEDY THE CON MAN

CHAPTER 1

The man who stood with such an air of ease in the dock of the North-West London Police Court bore himself with a certain insolent dignity. There was a smile which was half contemptuous, half amused, on his bearded face.

If, from time to time, his long white fingers thrust through the mass of goldy-brown hair that was brushed back from his high and narrow forehead, the gesture revealed neither nervousness nor embarrassment. Rather was this a trick of habit.

Though he wore no collar or tie, and his clothes and patent leather shoes were daubed with last night's mud, the clothes were new and well cut; the diamond ring which he wore, and which now sparkled offensively in the early morning light, hinted most certainly at an affluence which might be temporary or permanent.

He had in his possession when arrested (to quote the exact itemization of the constable who had given evidence on the matter) the sum of eighty-seven pounds ten shillings in Treasury notes, fifteen shillings in silver coinage, a gold and platinum cigarette case, a small but expensive bottle of perfume (unopened) and a few keys.

His name was Vladimir Litnoff; he was a Russian subject and his profession was that of an actor. He had appeared in Russian plays, and spoke English with the faintest trace of an accent.

Apparently, when he was in wine, as he had been on the previous evening, he spoke little but Russian, so that the two policemen who supported the charge of being drunk, and guilty of insulting and disorderly behaviour, could adduce no other than the language of offensive gesture to support their accusation.

The magistrate took off his glasses and leaned back in his chair wearily.

“Whilst you are living in this country you must behave yourself,” he said conventionally. “This is the second time you have been charged with

disorderly conduct, and you will pay twenty shillings, and seven and six costs.”

Mr Litnoff smiled, and bowed gracefully and stepped lightly from the dock.

Chief Inspector Gaylor, who was waiting in the corridor to give evidence on a much more serious charge, saw him pass and returned his smile good humouredly. The policeman who had ‘picked up’ the Russian followed from the court.

“Who is that fellow?” asked Gaylor.

“A Russian, sir. He was properly soused . . . drunk, in the Brompton Road. He was quiet enough but wouldn’t go away. Him and his brooches!”

“His whatses?” asked the Inspector.

“That’s what he said when I took him—about the only English thing he did say: ‘You shall have my beautiful brooch—worth ten thousand!’ I don’t know what he was talking about. Another thing he said was that he’d got property in Monro—he shouted this out to the crowd as me and PC Leigh was taking him away.”

“Monro—that’s in Scotland somewhere.”

Just then Gaylor was called into court.

Later in the evening, as he glanced through his evening newspaper, he read an account of the police court proceedings. It was headed:

DRUNKEN MAN’S BRIBE OFFER TO POLICE.
TEN THOUSAND POUND BROOCH THAT WAS
DECLINED

. . . PC Smith stated that the prisoner had offered him a ten thousand pound brooch to let him go.

The Magistrate: Did he have this brooch in his possession?

Witness: No, your Worship, in his imagination (Laughter.)

“Now Reeder would see something very peculiar about that,” said Gaylor to his young wife, and she smiled.

She liked Mr J. G. Reeder, and, quite mistakenly, was sorry for him. He seemed so pathetically inefficient and helpless compared with the strong,

capable men of Scotland Yard. Many people were sorry for Mr Reeder—but there were quite a number who weren't.

Jake Alsby, for example, was sorry for nobody but himself. He used to sit in his cell during the long winter evenings on Dartmoor and think of Mr Reeder in any but a sympathetic mood. It was a nice, large, comfortable cell with a vaulted roof. It had a bed, with gaily coloured blankets, and was warm on the coldest day. He had the portrait of his wife and family on a shelf. The family ranged from a hideous little boy of ten to an open-mouthed baby of six months. Jake had never seen the baby in the flesh. He did not mind whether he saw his lady wife or family again, but the picture served as a stimulant to his flagging animosities. It reminded Jake that the barefaced perjury of Mr J. G. Reeder had torn him from his family and cast him into a cold dungeon. A poetical fancy, but none the less pleasing to a man who had never met the truth face to face without bedecking the reality with ribbons of fiction.

It was true that Jake forged Bank of England notes, had been caught with the goods and his factory traced; it was true that he had been previously convicted for the same offence, but it was not true (as Mr Reeder had sworn) that he had been seen near Marble Arch on the Monday before his arrest. It was Tuesday. Therefore Mr Reeder had committed perjury.

To Jake came a letter from one who had been recently discharged from the hospitality of HM Prison at Princeton. It contained a few items of news, one of which was:

. . . saw your old pal reeder yesterday he was in that machfield case him that done in the old boy at born end reeder dont look a day older he asked me how you was and i said fine and he said what a pity he only got seven he oughter got ten and i said . . .

What his literary friend said did not interest the enraged man. There and then he began to think up new torments for the man who had perjured an innocent man (it was Tuesday, not Monday) into what has been picturesquely described as a 'living hell'.

Three months after the arrival of this letter Jake Alsby was released, a portion of his sentence having been remitted for good conduct: that is to say, he had never once been detected in a breach of prison regulations. The day he was released, Jake went to London to find his family in the workhouse, his wife having fled to Canada with a better man. Almost any man was better than Jake.

“This is Reeder’s little joke!” he said.

He fortified himself with hot spirits and went forth to find his man.

He did not follow a direct path to Mr Reeder’s office, because he had calls to make, certain acquaintances to renew. In one of these, a most reputable hostelry, he came upon a bearded man who spoke alternately in English and in a queer elusive language. He wore no collar or tie—when Vladimir reached his fourth whisky he invariably discarded these—and he spoke loudly of a diamond clasp of fabulous value. Jake lingered, fascinated. He drank with the man, whose language might be Russian but whose money was undoubtedly English, as was his language occasionally.

“You ask me, my frien’, what profession am I? An actor, yes! But it pays nothing. This, that, the other impresario rob—all rob. But my best work? I am ill! That is good work! Delirium—what-you-call-it? Swoons? Yes, swoons—voice ’usky, eh?”

“I know a graft like that,” said Jake, nodding wisely. “You chews soap.”

“Ah—nasty—no . . . *ti dourak!*”

Jake did not know that he was being called a fool, would not have been very upset if he had known. He was sure of one thing, that he was hooked up with a generous spender of money—a prince of fellows, seen in the golden haze of alcoholism. He had not yet reached the stage where he wanted to kick anybody. He was in that condition when he felt an inward urge to tell his most precious secrets.

“Ever ’eard feller call’ Reeder?” he asked profoundly. “Reg’lar old ’ound—goin’ to get him!”

“Ach!” said his new-found friend.

“Gonna get ’im!” said Jake gravely.

The bearded man tilted up his glass until no dreg remained in the bottom. He seized Jake’s arm in a fierce friendliness and led him from the bar. The cold air made Jake sag at the knees.

“Le’s go ’n bump ’um,” he said thickly.

“My frien’—why kill, eh?” They were walking unsteadily along arm in arm. Once Jake was pushed into the gutter by an unanticipated lurch. “Live—drink! See my beautiful brooch . . . my farm . . . vineyards . . . mountains . . . I’ll tell you, my frien’—somebody must know . . .”

This street through which they were passing was very dark and made up of little stores. Jake was conscious that he had passed a milk shop when he became aware that a man was standing squarely in their path.

“Hullo! . . . You want me . . . gotta brooch?”

It was Vladimir who spoke; he also was very drunk. The stranger did not speak.

The crash of the explosion made Jake Alsby reel. He had never heard a pistol fired at close quarters. He saw the Russian swaying on his feet, his head bent as though he were listening . . . he was fumbling at his waistcoat with both hands.

“Here . . . what’s the game?” Jake was sober now.

The man came nearer, brushed past him, thrusting his shoulder forward as he passed. Jake staggered under the impact. When he looked round, the shooter had melted into the thick darkness—there was a narrow opening of a mews hereabouts.

“Hurt, mate?”

The Russian had gone down to his knees, still gripping at his waistcoat. Then he pitched forward and hit the pavement horribly.

Jake himself went white . . . he looked round, and, turning, fled. He wanted to be out of this—murder! That’s what it was, murder.

He raced round the corner of the street and into the arms of a policeman. Whistles were blowing. Even as he fought to escape, he knew the impossibility of such a hope: policemen were running from everywhere.

“All right—I done nothin’ . . . there’s a guy shot round the corner . . . some feller did it.”

Two officers took him to the station, and as a precautionary measure he was searched.

In the right hand pocket of his overcoat was found an automatic pistol that had been recently fired.

CHAPTER 2

Mr J. G. Reeder rang his bell and sighed. He sighed because it was the fourth time he had rung the bell without anything happening.

There were moments when he saw himself walking into the next room and addressing Miss Gillette in firm but fatherly tones. He would point out to her the impossible situation which was created when a secretary ignored the summons of her employer; he would insist that she did not bring into the office, or, if she brought, should not in business hours read the tender or exciting fiction which she favoured; he would say, in the same firm and fatherly way, that perhaps it would be better for everybody concerned if she found a new occupation, or a similar occupation in the service of somebody who had less exacting views on the question of duty. But always, when he rose from his chair after ringing four times, determined to settle the matter there and then, he sat down again and rang a fifth time.

“Dear, dear!” said Mr Reeder. “This is very trying.”

At that moment Miss Gillette came into the room. She was pretty and slight and small. She had a tip-tilted nose and a faultless complexion, and her dully golden hair was a little untidy.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Did you ring?”

Between her fingers she held a long, jade-green cigarette holder. Mr Reeder had once asked her not to come into his office smoking: she invariably carried her cigarette in her hand nowadays, and he accepted the compromise.

“I think I did,” he said gently.

“I thought you did.”

Mr Reeder winced as she put her cigarette holder on the mantelpiece, and, pulling a chair forward, sat down at his desk. She carried a book under her arm, and this she opened and laid on the table.

“Shoot,” she said, and Mr Reeder winced again.

The trouble about Miss Gillette was her competence. If she had made mistakes, and put letters in the wrong envelopes or forgot appointments, Mr Reeder would have gone away to some foreign land, such as Eastbourne or Brighton, and would have written to her a sad letter of farewell, enclosing a

month's salary in lieu of notice. But she was devastatingly competent: she had built up a structure of indispensability; she had, in the shortest space of time, developed herself into a habit and a fixture.

"You mean that I am to proceed?" he asked gravely.

Another woman would have wilted under the reproof; there was something very wiltless about Miss Gillette. She just closed her eyes wearily.

"Let's go," she said, and it was Mr Reeder who was reproved.

"This is a report on the Wimbург Case," he said, and began his hesitant dictation.

As he grew into his subject, he spoke with greater and greater rapidity. Never once did Miss Gillette interrupt with a question, to gain time for her lagging pencil. There was a ceaseless snap as the pages of her notebook turned.

"That is all," he said breathlessly. "I trust that I did not go too fast for you?"

"I hardly noticed that you were moving," she said, wetted her fingers and flicked back the pages. "You used the word 'unsubstantial' three times: once you meant 'inadequate' and once 'unreal'. I would suggest that we alter those."

Mr Reeder moved uncomfortably in his chair.

"Are you sure?" he asked feebly.

She was always sure, because she was always right.

It was not true to say that Mr Reeder had ever engaged a secretary. It was Miss Gillette who engaged him. By one of those odd coincidences which are unacceptable to the lovers of fiction but which occur in everyday life, she arrived at Mr Reeder's office on the day and at the hour he was expecting a temporary typist from an agency. For some reason the agency lady did not arrive, or, if she did, was interviewed by Miss Gillette, who, fulfilling the practice of the young queen bee, destroyed her rival—in the nicest possible sense. And when Mr Reeder, having concluded the work for which he had engaged her, would have dismissed her with a ten-shilling note, shyly tendered and brazenly accepted, he learned that she was a fixture. He lay awake for an hour on the following Friday night, debating with himself whether he should deduct the ten shillings from her salary.

“Are there any appointments?” he asked.

There was none. Mr Reeder knew there was none before he asked. It was at this point that his daily embarrassment was invariably overcome.

“Nothing in the papers, I suppose?”

“Nothing except the Pimlico murder case. The funny thing is that the man who was killed——”

“Nothing funny about—um—that, my dear lady,” murmured Mr Reeder. “Funny? Dear, dear!”

“When I said ‘funny’, I didn’t mean ‘amusing’ but ‘odd’,” she said. “And if you are getting back for ‘unsubstantial’, you will be pleased to know that you have got. He was Vladimir Litnoff—you remember, the man who was drunk and said that he had a brooch.”

Mr Reeder nodded calmly. Apparently Litnoff’s death was not startling news.

“It is my—um—mind, my dear young friend. I see evil things where other people see innocent things. And yet, in the question of human relationships, I take the kindest and most charitable views. H’m! The young man who was with you at the Regal Cinema, for example——”

“Was the young man I’m going to marry when we earn enough to support one another,” she said promptly. “But how the devil did you see us?”

“S’sh!” said Mr Reeder, shocked. “Strong—um—language is—um—most . . .”

She was looking at him frowningly.

“Sit down,” she said, and Mr Reeder, who knew little of the rights of secretaries, but was quite sure that ordering their employers to sit down in their own offices was outside the table of privileges, sat down.

“I like you, John or Jonas or whatever the ‘J’ stands for,” she said, with outrageous coolness. “I didn’t realize that you were a detective when I came to you. I’ve worked for successions of tired business men, who bucked up sufficiently towards evening to ask me out to supper, but never a detective. And you’re different from all the men I’ve ever met. You’ve never tried to hold my hand——”

“I should hope not!” said Mr Reeder, going very red. “I’m old enough to be your father!”

“There isn’t such an age,” she said. And then, very seriously: “Would you speak to Tommy Anton if I brought him here?”

“Tommy—you mean your—um——”

“My ‘um’—that describes him,” she nodded. “He’s a wonderful fellow—terribly awkward and shy, and he’ll probably make a bad impression, as you do, but he’s a really nice man.”

Now Mr Reeder had been many things, but he had never acted *in loco parentis*, and the prospect was a trifle terrifying.

“You wish me to ask him—er—what his intentions are?”

She smiled at this, and she had a dazzling and beautiful smile.

“My dear, I know what his intentions are, all right. You don’t meet a man day after day for over a year without finding out something about his private ideas. No—it is something else.”

Mr Reeder waited.

“If you were an ordinary employer,” she went on, “you’d take me by the scruff of the neck and fire me.” Mr Reeder disclaimed such a ferocious quality with a feeble shake of his head. “But you’re not.”

She got up and walked to the window and looked out. What was she going to say? A most ghastly thought occurred to Mr Reeder, one that made a cold shiver down his spine. But it was not that, for she turned suddenly.

“Tommy has been robbed of twenty-three thousand pounds,” she said.

He stared at her owlshly.

“Robbed?” She nodded. “When?”

“More than a year ago—before I met him. That is not why he is selling motor cars on commission. He tries to sell them, but he isn’t very successful. His partner robbed him. They had a motor car business. Tommy and this man Seafield were at Oxford together, and when they came down they started a motor car agency. Tommy went to Germany to negotiate for an agency. When he came back Seafield had gone. He did not even leave a note—he just drew the money from the bank and went away.”

She saw a new light in Mr Reeder’s eyes and could not but marvel that what to him was so small a matter should be of such immediate interest.

“And no message with his wife? . . . Unmarried, eh? H’m! He lived . . .”

“At an hotel—he was a bachelor. No, he didn’t tell anybody there—just said he was going away for a day or two.”

“Left his clothes behind and did not even pay his bill,” murmured Mr Reeder.

Miss Gillette was surprised.

“You know all about it, then?”

“My queer mind,” he said simply.

There was a tap at the outer door.

“You had better see who that is,” said Mr Reeder.

She went to the door and opened it. Standing on the mat outside was a clergyman, wearing a long black overcoat which reached to his heels. He looked at her dubiously.

“Is this Mr Reeder’s office—the detective?” he asked.

She nodded, regarding the unexpected visitor with interest. He was a man of fifty, with greying hair. A mild, rather pallid man, who seemed to be ill at ease, for the fingers that gripped his umbrella, which he held about its middle as though he were all ready to signal a cab, clasped and unclasped in his agitation.

He looked at Mr Reeder helplessly. Mr Reeder, for his part, twiddled his thumbs and gazed at the visitor solemnly. It almost seemed that he was smitten dumb by the uniform of his visitor’s rectitude.

“Won’t you sit down, please?” There was something of the churchwarden in Mr Reeder’s benevolent gesture.

“The matter I wish to speak about—well, I hardly know how to begin,” said the clergyman.

Here Mr Reeder could not help him. It was on his tongue to offer the conventional suggestion that the best way to begin any story was to tell the unvarnished truth. Somehow this hardly seemed a delicate thing to say to a man of the cloth, so he said nothing.

“It concerns a man named Ralph—the merest acquaintance of mine . . . hardly that. I had corresponded with him on certain matters pertaining to the higher criticism. But I can hardly remember what points he raised or how I dealt with them. I never keep correspondence, not because I am

unbusinesslike, but because letters have a trick of accumulating, and a filing system is a tyranny to which I will never submit.”

Mr Reeder’s heart could have warmed to this frank man. He loathed old letters and filing was an abominable occupation.

“This morning I had a call from Mr Ralph’s daughter. She lives with her father at Bishop’s Stortford in Essex. Apparently she came upon my name written on an envelope which she found in a wastepaper basket in her father’s office—he had a small office in Lower Regent Street, where he attended to whatever business he had.”

“What was his business?” asked Mr Reeder.

“Actually he had none. He was a retired provision merchant who had made a fortune in the City. He may have had, and probably has, one or two minor interests to occupy his spare time. He came up to town last Thursday—curiously enough, I had a telephone call from him at my hotel when I was out. Since that day he has not been seen.”

“Dear me!” said Mr Reeder. “What a coincidence!”

Dr Ingham looked a painful inquiry.

“That you should have thought of me,” said Mr Reeder. “It is very odd that people who lose people always come to me. And the young lady—she told you all this?”

Dr Ingham nodded.

“Yes. She is naturally worried. It appears that she had a friend, a young man, who did exactly the same thing. Just walked out of his hotel and disappeared. There may be explanations, but it is very difficult to tell a young lady——”

“Very,” Mr Reeder coughed discreetly, and said ‘very’ again. “She suggested that you should come to me?”

The clergyman nodded. He appeared to be embarrassed by the nature of his mission.

“To be exact, she wished to come herself—I thought it was a friendly thing to interview you on her behalf. I am not a poor man, Mr Reeder; I am, in fact, rather a rich man, and I feel that I should render whatever assistance is possible to this poor young lady. My dear wife would, I am sure, heartily endorse my action—I have been married twenty-three years, and I have

never found myself in disagreement with the partner of my joys and sorrows. You, as a married man——”

“Single,” said Mr Reeder, not without a certain amount of satisfaction. “Alas! Yes, I am—um—single.”

He looked at his new client glumly.

“The young lady is staying——”

“In town, yes,” nodded the other. “At Haymarket Central Hotel. You will take this case?”

Mr Reeder pulled at his nose and fingered his close-clipped side-whiskers. He settled his glasses on his nose and took them off again.

“Which case?” he asked.

Dr Ingham was pained.

“The case I have outlined.” He groped beneath his clerical coat and produced a card. “I have written Mr Lance Ralph’s office address on the back of my card——”

J. G. took the card and read its written inscription; turned it over and read the printed inscription. This gentleman was a doctor of divinity, and lived at Grayne Hall, near St Margaret’s Bay, in the County of Kent.

“There isn’t a case,” said Mr Reeder with the tenderness of one who is breaking bad news. “People are entitled to—um—disappear. Quite a number of people, my dear Dr Ingham, refuse to exercise that right, I am sorry to say. They disappear to Brighton, to Paris, but re-appear at later intervals. It is common phenomenon.”

The Cleric looked at him anxiously, and passed his umbrella from one hand to the other.

“Perhaps I haven’t told you everything that should have been told,” he said. “Miss Ralph had a fiancé—a young man in a prosperous business, as she tells me, who also vanished, leaving his partner——”

“You are referring to Mr Seafield?” But to his surprise, and perhaps to his annoyance, the clergyman showed no sign of amazement.

“Joan had a great friend in your office. Am I right in surmising it is the young lady who opened the door to me? This is how your name came up. We were discussing whether she should go to the police, when she

mentioned your name. I thought you were the least unpleasant alternative, if you don't mind that description."

Mr Reeder bowed graciously. He did not mind.

There followed an uncomfortable lacuna of silence, which neither of the men seemed inclined to fill. Mr Reeder ushered the visitor to the door and went back to his desk, and for five minutes scribbled aimlessly on his blotting-pad. He had a weakness for making grotesque drawings, and was putting an extra long nose upon the elongated head of one of his fanciful sketches when Miss Gillette came in unannounced.

"Well, what do you think of that," she asked.

Mr Reeder stared at her.

"What do I think of what, Miss Gillette?" he demanded.

"Poor Joan, and she is such a darling. We have kept our friendship all through the Seafield business——"

"But how did you know about it?"

Mr Reeder was very seldom bewildered, but he was frankly bewildered now.

"I was listening at the door," said Miss Gillette shamelessly. "Well, not exactly listening, but I left my door open and he talks very loudly; parsons get that way, don't they?"

J. G. Reeder's face wore an expression that was only comparable to that of a wounded fawn.

"It is very—um—wrong to listen," he began, but she dismissed all questions of propriety with an airy wave of her hand.

"It doesn't matter whether it's right or wrong. Where is Joan staying?"

This was a moment when Mr J. G. Reeder should have risen with dignity, opened the door, pressed a fortnight's wages into her hand, and dismissed her to the outer darkness, but he allowed the opportunity to pass.

"Can I bring Tommy to see you?"

She leant upon the table, resting her palms on the edge. Her enthusiasm was almost infectious.

"Tommy doesn't look clever, but he really is, and he's always had a theory about Seafield's bolting. Tommy says that Frank Seafield would

never have bought a letter of credit——”

“Did he have a letter of credit? I thought you told me that he drew the money out of the bank?”

Miss Gillette nodded.

“It was a letter of credit,” she said emphatically, “for £6300. That’s how we knew he had gone abroad. The letter was cashed in Berlin and Vienna.”

For a long time Mr J. G. Reeder looked out of the window.

“I should like to talk with Tommy,” he said gravely, and when he looked round Miss Gillette had gone.

For a quarter of an hour he sat with his hands folded on his lap, his pale eyes fixed vacantly on the chimney-pot of a house on the opposite side of the street, and then he heard a knock on the outer door. Rising slowly, he went out and opened it. The last person he expected to see was Inspector Gaylor.

“The Litnoff murder—are you interested?”

Mr Reeder was interested in all murders, but not especially in the Litnoff case.

“Do you know that Jake Alsby was on his way to see you?”

Jake Alsby—Mr Reeder frowned; he knew the name, and, going over the file of his mind, could place him.

“So far as my own opinion goes, Jake is a dead man,” said Gaylor. “He had been drinking with the Russian, who had quite a lot of money in his possession. A few minutes after they left the bar Litnoff was shot, and Jake, bolting for his life, was found in possession of a loaded pistol. Men have been hanged on less evidence than that.”

“I—um—doubt it. Not the fact that men have been—er—hanged on insufficient evidence, but that our poor friend was the guilty person. Jake is a ‘regular’, and regulars do not carry guns—not in this country.”

Gaylor smiled significantly.

“He was searching for you,” he said. “He admits as much, and that makes his present attitude a little queer. For now he wants you to get him out of his trouble!”

“Dear me!” said Mr Reeder, faintly amused.

“He thinks if he could see you for a few minutes and tell you what happened, you would walk out of Brixton Prison and lay your hand upon the man who committed the murder. There’s a compliment for you!”

“Seriously?” J. G. Reeder was frowning again.

Gaylor nodded.

“It’s rum, isn’t it? The fellow was undoubtedly on his way to give you hell and yet the first thing he does when he gets into trouble is to squeak to you for help! Anyway, the Public Prosecutor says he would like you to see him. Brixton has been notified. They know you there, and if you feel like listening to a few more or less fantastic lies, you ought to have an interesting evening.”

He had in his pocket-book two press cuttings which fairly covered the Litnoff shooting. Mr Reeder accepted them with every evidence of gratitude, although he had very complete particulars of the case in the drawer of his writing table.

Gaylor had one quality which Mr Reeder admired—he was no ‘lingerer’. There were many interesting people in the world who did not know where their interest ended: men who outstayed the excuse for their presence and dawdled from subject to subject. Gaylor was blessed with a sense of drama and could make his abrupt exit upon an effective line. He made such an exit now.

“You needn’t ask him to tell you about the diamond clasp,” he said. “He’ll tell you that! But don’t forget that the last time Litnoff was charged that bizarre note came into the evidence.”

Inspector Gaylor was a well read man and used words like ‘bizarre’ without self-conscious effort.

When he had gone, Mr Reeder fixed his glasses and read the cuttings which the detective had left. He found nothing that he did not already know. Jake Alsby was, as he had said, a ‘regular’, an habitual criminal with a working knowledge of the common law in so far as it affected himself. No old lag carries firearms, especially an old lag who is a convict on licence, and is liable to be arrested at sight. Judges are most unsympathetic in their attitude towards armed criminals, and Jake and his fellows knew too well the penalties of illicit armament to take the dreadful risk of being found in possession of an automatic pistol.

J. G. had a criminal mind. He knew exactly what he would have done had he been Jake Alsby and had shot his companion. He would have thrown

away the pistol before he bolted. That Jake had not done so was proof to him that he was unaware that the pistol was in his pocket.

He was musing on this matter when he heard the door of the outer office open and the sound of low voices. A moment later Miss Gillette came in, a little out of breath. She closed the door behind her.

“I’ve brought them both,” she said rapidly. “I phoned to Joan—she was just going out. . . . Can I ask them to come in?”

He felt that it was almost an act of humility that she should ask his permission, and bowed his assent.

Tommy Anton was a tall young man; the sort that perhaps two women in the course of the years would regard as good-looking, but the rest would scarcely notice. Joan Ralph, on the other hand, was distinctly pretty and unusual. She was dark and clear-skinned, and had one of those supple figures that gave Mr Reeder the impression that its owner did not wear sufficient clothes for warmth or safety.

“This is Tommy, and this is Joan.” Miss Gillette introduced them unnecessarily, for Mr Reeder could hardly have mistaken one for the other.

The moment he saw them, he knew they would have nothing new to tell him if they were left to tell their own stories. He listened with great patience to the repetition of all he knew.

Tommy Anton gave a graphic description of his own amazement, consternation and emotions when he had discovered that his partner had vanished. He paid a loyal tribute to the character and qualities of the missing man——

“Did Mr Seafield ever talk to you about a diamond brooch?” interrupted Mr Reeder.

Tommy stared at him.

“No—we were in the car trade. He seldom discussed his private affairs. Of course, I knew about Joan——”

“Did your father ever speak of a diamond brooch or clasp?” Mr Reeder addressed the girl, and she shook her head.

“Never . . . he never spoke about jewellery except—that was years ago when I first met Frank—Daddy put some money into the Pizarro expedition and so did Frank; they were awfully enthusiastic about it.”

Mr Reeder looked up at the ceiling and went rapidly over the folders of his memory. When she was on the point of explaining, he stopped her with a gesture.

“Pizarro expedition . . . 1923 . . . to recover the buried treasure of the Incas. It was organized by Antonio Pizarro, who claimed to be a descendant of the conqueror of Peru . . . his real name was Bendini—— a New York Italian with three convictions for high-class swindles . . . the company was registered in London, and all the people who put money into the scheme lost it—isn’t that right?”

He beamed at her triumphantly and she smiled.

“I don’t know so much about it as you. Daddy put five hundred pounds into it and Frank put a hundred—he was at Oxford then. I know they lost their money. Frank didn’t mind very much, but Daddy was annoyed, because he was sure there were great treasure houses in Peru that had yet to be discovered.”

“And was there a talk of diamond brooches?” asked Mr Reeder.

She hesitated.

“Jewels—I don’t remember that there was anything said about brooches.”

J. G. wrote down three words, one of which, she saw, was ‘Pizarro’. The second seemed to bear some resemblance to ‘Murphy’. She thought the association of the two names was a little incongruous. He questioned her shortly about her own situation. She had a small private income and there was no immediate urgency so far as money was concerned.

And then she asked if she could see him alone. Mr Reeder had a happy feeling that Miss Gillette entirely disapproved of the request. She could do no less than withdraw, taking her Tommy with her. He found himself being sorry for that dumb ordinary and young man—so ordinary indeed that Mr Reeder for the first time became conscious of his mental superiority to his secretary.

He had even the courage to open the door and look out. The murmur of voices from Miss Gillette’s room assured him that they were safe from the eavesdropping propensities of that curious young lady.

“Mr Reeder,” he realized from her tone that Joan Ralph was finding some difficulty in fitting her thoughts into words, “I suppose it has occurred to you that my father may have gone off with—somebody. I am not stupid

about these things and I know that men of his age do have—well, affairs. But I am perfectly sure that Daddy had none. Dr Ingham hinted tactfully that this might be the situation; the doctor was awfully sweet about it, but I know that the theory is wrong. Daddy had no friends. I used to open all his letters and there was never one that he objected to my seeing.”

“The letters that came to the office too?” he asked.

She smiled at the question.

“Naturally I did not see those—those were very few, and Daddy had nothing furtive in his composition. I did know that he was corresponding with Dr Ingham; my father was what is known as a High Churchman and wrote letters to the Church papers. That is practically the only friend he had outside our little circle at Bishop’s Stortford.”

Mr Reeder looked at her thoughtfully.

“Did you think Frank Seafield had—um—a lady friend?” he asked.

She was emphatic on this point. He would have been surprised if she had not been.

He guided her to Miss Gillette’s room and presently he heard the three go out. That Miss Gillette should have left the office without asking permission was not remarkable.

With great care he composed three telegrams, and, calling at the post office, handed them in. One was certainly addressed to Murphy.

A tramcar deposited him within walking distance of Brixton Prison, where men under remand are segregated.

Mr Reeder was not unknown at Brixton, though his visits were rare, and within a few minutes of his arrival he was taken to a bare waiting-room where he was joined by Jake Alsby.

The man was shaken. The rather defiant impertinent criminal Mr Reeder had known had disappeared, and in his place was a man terror-stricken by the fate which had overcome him.

“You know me, Mr Reeder.” His manner was a little wild, and the hand that emphasized almost every sentence was trembling. “I never had a gun in my life, and I would no more think of shooting a man than I would of cutting my own throat. I bashed a fellow or two——”

“And there are one or two that you intended bashing,” said Mr Reeder, pleasantly.

“It was drink, Mr Reeder,” pleaded Jake. “I suppose Gaylor told you that I was coming to see you. That dirty dog would say anything to put me wrong. Besides, Mr Reeder, I didn’t know this Russian—why should I want to shoot him?”

Mr Reeder shook his head.

“People sometimes shoot the merest acquaintances,” he said brightly. “Now tell me all about it, Alsby, with fewer lies than usual. Maybe I can help you, I don’t say that I can, but it may be possible.”

Alsby told his story as coherently as he could. Occasionally Mr Reeder had to bring him back from rambling side issues, but, on the whole, the tale he had to tell was convincing. He forgot, however, one important detail.

“When that man was charged with being drunk some days ago,” said Mr Reeder, “he talked to the police in his—um—intoxication, of a diamond clasp——”

“That’s right, sir,” interrupted the man eagerly. “He mentioned it to me, too. I’d forgotten all about that. He told me I could see it. I thought it was just being soused that made him speak that way, and, to tell you the truth, I’d forgotten all about it.” And then a new note of anxiety came into his tone: “Has that been lost? I swear I never saw it.”

J. G. Reeder looked at him long and fixedly. A gentle glow of satisfaction came to him. He had spoken of the clasp to Joan Ralph for no other reason than his recollection of the police court proceedings against Litnoff. That reference to the diamond brooch had intrigued him at the time he had read it. Litnoff had no history as a receiver—that fact had been brought out in court.

“Try to remember, Alsby, what other things he said.”

Alsby knitted his forehead in an agony of recollection.

“I can’t remember anything, Mr Reeder. I wasn’t with him long after we left the boozer—the public house. He was going home; he lived in Bloomsbury—Lammington Buildings. That was a funny thing: I had known of Lammington Buildings through a pal of mine, who got five years for slush printing. He had a friend who lived there.”

Mr Reeder was interested mainly because the only address which the police knew in connection with Litnoff was his lodging in Pimlico.

“How did all this come out, that he was living in Lammington Buildings?” he asked.

“He wanted to take a taxi. I told him I was living in Holborn. He said ‘You can drop me at Lammington Buildings’. After that he sort of corrected himself, but I knew he had let his address slip out. You are going to do something for me, ain’t you, Mr Reeder? You have always been fair to me.”

“That is not my recollection of your expressed opinion,” said Mr Reeder acidly.

Going back to town he pondered on the possibility that Litnoff also might have had a ‘friend’ in this block of flats.

It was raining heavily when his bus dropped him at the corner of Southampton Row; but it had been raining more or less all day, and since he wore his shabby yellow mackintosh which, coming almost to his heels, gave him, despite his bent shoulders, a giant-like appearance, he did not think it necessary to unfurl the umbrella which he carried on his arm, summer and winter, although it was never known to be opened.

He found Lammington Buildings without much trouble. It was situate in a side turning off Gower Street.

Mr Reeder opened his inquiries with the hall porter. The name of Litnoff was unknown; but the hall porter was a reader of newspapers and had seen a portrait of the murdered man. Almost before Mr Reeder could put a question, the porter blurted out his suspicion.

“I bet that’s Schmidt. If it isn’t, it’s his twin brother. In fact, I was just writing a letter to the *Daily Megaphone*. I always thought that Schmidt was a queer customer. He only slept here once or twice a month. I was talking to Mrs Adderly this afternoon about him. As a matter of fact, she’s in his flat now, though she’s one of those kind of women who wouldn’t talk. You can’t get a word out of her. I says to her ‘Suppose the police come here and want to know?’ ‘Let ’em come’, she says. What can you do with a woman like that?”

Mr Reeder could supply no reply to this pertinent question, and then, surprisingly, the hall porter said:

“I know you, Mr Reeder, the moment I put my eyes on you. You were in the Orderley Street affair. I was the porter at the hotel, if you will remember, who saw the man getting out of the window. . . .”

He went, with surprising accuracy, into the particulars of a case in which the detective had figured many years before.

Mr Reeder was a good listener. He discovered at the very early stages of his career that the art of listening was the art of detection, and he allowed the porter to continue his reminiscences before he asked:

“Is Mrs Adderly in the flat now?”

The porter pointed dramatically to a door that led to the front of the vestibule.

“Do you want to see her?”

“I should like,” said Mr Reeder.

The porter rang and knocked. After a considerable time the door was opened a little way, and the space was filled by a suspicious looking and bare-armed lady, who wore a soiled apron and had a face which was equally in need of hot water and soap.

“This is Mr Reeder,” said the porter, with such satisfaction that it was evident he had no deep affection for the untidy charwoman. “The well-known detective,” he added.

Mrs Adderly wilted at the word.

“Everything can be explained,” she said, a little incoherently, and as Mr Reeder followed her into the hall, she slammed the door in the face of the outraged porter, who at least expected to participate in the portion of the confidences which hitherto she had withheld from him.

“Will you come in, sir.”

She led the way into a barely furnished little room which obviously had served as a sitting-room. There was a table, a sideboard, a small square carpet on the floor, and a couple of chairs. On one wall was a map printed, as Mr Reeder discovered, of Switzerland. It showed a section of the Canton of Vaud, and there was an irregular patch outlined in red ink from the contours; it evidently stood at some considerable height upon the lake. Its significance Mr Reeder did not grasp till much later.

“I don’t know what to say or what to do next,” said Mrs Adderly. She spoke very rapidly, without full stops, commas, or any other form of punctuation. “The money was honestly come by and is in the post office bank except the rent which I paid and I have a receipt with the stamp on it and I have done what Mr Schmidt told me to do as I can prove by his letter. I am a widow with five mouths to fill . . .”

She went on to explain that they were the property of her five legitimate offspring, that she 'did' for respectable families, and that she had never been in trouble, or accepted out-door relief from the parish even in her most difficult times.

"What money is this?" interrupted Mr Reeder when he thought she had gone far enough.

The money that had come to her on Wednesday. She had found it on the table in the dining-room with a letter. Beneath her skirt she had a pocket. Mr Reeder looked discreetly away while she explored this receptacle, and presently brought out an envelope from which she took a single sheet of notepaper.

Please pay the rent with the enclosed. I am going away to France, and shall not be back for three months. You may take double-wages while I am gone, and I do not wish you to discuss my business.

The letter was written in a neat clerkly hand.

"You found this on the table, you say?"

"On Wednesday morning; I put the money into the Post Office saving bank," she went on even more rapidly. "I paid the rent and I have got a printed receipt with a stamp on it——"

"Nobody doubts that," said Mr Reeder soothingly.

"If you are in the police——"

"I am not," said Mr Reeder. "I really am not a policeman at all, I am——um—an investigator."

She knew very little about her employer. Three days a week she used to come to tidy the flat. For this purpose she was entrusted with a key. She had very strict orders that, if the door did not yield when she turned the key and was obviously bolted on the inside, she was to go away. This had happened three times in the course of the past year. Mr Schmidt, though a very healthy-looking gentleman, was an invalid. Sometimes he had very bad spells, and she had come to find the atmosphere of his bedroom sickly with the smell of drugs. He never spoke about his business, and when he spoke at all, it was with a very strong foreign accent. She had an idea he was an actor, because she had once seen a box containing wigs and moustaches and

theatrical make-up, and she had seen a photograph of him in some theatrical role.

Although it was a ground floor flat, it only consisted of three rooms and a kitchenette. One was entirely bare, except that in a cupboard he found three uncased pillows. Mrs Adderly explained that occasionally Mr Schmidt had a weakness for pillows, though the only time he ever slept there one sufficed him.

The bedroom contained an iron bedstead with a mattress, comparatively new, a small dressing chest, a mirror, a little table and two chairs. The bed was not made, but the blankets were neatly folded at the foot of the bare mattress and covered with a sheet. On the wall was a lithographed portrait of a man in a foreign uniform. Mr Reeder guessed it was Russian. Over the bed was hung a shelf which contained four or five Russian books, and here he made a discovery, for on the flyleaf of one was a long inscription in French:

Presented to me by the Grand Duke Alexander on the occasion
of my performance in '*Revisor*'.

Beneath this was a single letter 'L'.

The main interest for Mr Reeder lay in the fact that the handwriting was not the same as that in the letter.

In the small cupboard he found two medicine bottles half filled. He sniffed one and discovered the unmistakable scent of spirits of chloroform. He was hardly as much impressed by the contents as by the labels, which were those of a Bloomsbury chemist. He left Mrs Adderly and went in search of the disgruntled hall porter.

'Mr Schmidt' had had visitors, but apparently they came after 11 o'clock at night at which hour the porters went off duty; the lift, being an automatic one, was operated by the tenants themselves. He would not have known of this, but for the fact that one of the other tenants in the building had seen people going into or coming from the flat in the middle of the night. They were invariably men.

A chemist's shop on the corner of the block was Mr Reeder's next objective. The chemist was a suspicious man, not inclined to answer readily to the detective's questions. Mr Reeder, however, carried authority in the shape of a small warrant card, for he had definite association with the Public Prosecutor's Department.

Both the chemist and his assistant had seen Mr Schmidt. He had called to have medicines made up and to purchase surgical supplies.

“Surgical supplies?” Mr Reeder was almost excited. “Dear me, how excellently that fits my theory! Pardon me, my dear sir . . . I—um—was rather carried away. Now, could you describe Mr Schmidt?”

They could describe him quite graphically, and Mr Schmidt was undoubtedly the dead Litnoff.

Mr Reeder went home to his house in the Brockley Road, feeling rather satisfied with his discoveries. He had no illusion about his ‘luck’. In a few days the police would discover Litnoff’s home in Lammington Mansions (they found it the next day through the medium of a laundry mark as a matter of fact) and at best he was only those few days ahead of the ‘regulars’. There were no letters for him, and he had his tea and toast reading the evening newspapers the while, and at nine o’clock was in the act of writing up his diary when he heard the tinkle of the street door bell.

The housekeeper left the two visitors in the hall, and announced them to Mr Reeder with bated breath.

“Two young ladies,” she said primly. “I told them you never saw visitors, but one of them said she was going to see you if she had to wait all night.”

If Mr Reeder had harmonized with the tone of sharp disapproval, he would have ordered them immediately to be thrown into the street.

“Show them up, please,” he said.

One, at least, was Miss Gillette. He guessed the other, and guessed correctly, for Joan Ralph came into the room behind his trying secretary.

“I would have telephoned you, but I didn’t think it was safe,” said Miss Gillette almost before she was in the room. “You remember you asked Joan about a diamond clasp, or brooch, or something?”

Mr Reeder offered her a chair.

“Have you seen it?”

A foolish question, he felt, when he saw Miss Gillette’s visible scorn.

“Of course we haven’t seen it. Joan and I went to dine tonight at the Corner House. Then a red-haired young man came up and asked Joan if she ever wore plus-fours.”

Mr Reeder leant back in his chair.

“If she wore plus-fours?” he repeated a little scandalized.

Miss Gillette nodded energetically.

“He was terribly nervous,” said Miss Gillette. “I have never known a red-haired man to be nervous before; they are usually rather, well, you know, the other way about, but he started talking a lot of stuff about his father being a jeweller and being ill, and then he mentioned a diamond brooch. He said he had undervalued it. I thought he was drunk. Joan didn’t.”

“What was his name?”

Joan Ralph shook her head.

“It was extraordinary, because I was once photographed in plus-fours. Daddy took the picture on a day when we had a lot of old Roedean girls down at Bishop’s Stortford and we played a sort of pastoral, and I borrowed my cousin’s plus-fours because I was supposed to represent a man. Daddy was rather amused and took a picture, and said it was the best photograph that he ever had of me.”

Mr Reeder ran his fingers through his scanty hair.

“What did he say about the brooch?”

Miss Gillette was not sure that he said anything that was intelligent. It was not until after she had threatened to call for the manager, and the red-haired young man had retired abashed—“It was only then,” said Miss Gillette, “that we felt that we oughtn’t to have been so stupid and we should have asked him his name and address.”

Mr Reeder nodded his agreement.

“He was a jeweller, his father was ill, he had undervalued a brooch, and he has seen a portrait of my young friend in plus-fours. That’s very remarkable. It is a great pity; you will very likely never see him again——”

“But we have,” interrupted Miss Gillette. “He was on the tram and he followed us right down here, in fact—he is outside the house at this minute.”

Mr Reeder stared at her.

“Did you speak to him?”

“Of course we did not speak to him,” said Miss Gillette scornfully. “How could you speak to a red-haired young man in the street! He didn’t

“speak to us either, and he just sat in the corner of the tramcar and kept looking at us from behind his newspaper.”

Mr Reeder walked to the window, pulled aside the curtain gently, and peered out. Standing under a lamp post, and barely visible, was a figure of a man, and even as Mr Reeder looked, as though aware of the scrutiny, he turned rapidly in the direction of Lewisham High Road.

In a moment Mr Reeder was out of the room, flying downstairs, but when he came to the street it was absolutely empty of pedestrians. A tram was moving towards London. He saw a slim figure of a young man leap upon the footboard. By the time he reached the corner of the road, the car was beyond pursuit. Mr Reeder looked round for a taxicab, but there was none in sight, and with great reluctance and conscious that he was bare-headed and that a drizzling rain was falling, and, in consequence, he must look a little ridiculous, he made his way back to the house.

And yet for all his failure, there was a curious sense of elation in J. G. Reeder's heart, for the mystery of certain strange disappearances was almost solved.

To Miss Gillette he was a great disappointment, for he seemed no longer interested in red-haired young men, or brooches, or even young ladies in plus-fours, and she went back to London, with her friend, her faith shaken in her employer.

With great care Mr Reeder composed an agony column advertisement which he telephoned to four newspapers:

Red-haired young man, please communicate with plus-four girl.

The address that followed was that of his own office.

CHAPTER 3

Miss Gillette arrived an hour late, which was not very remarkable. She had not seen the advertisements, so Mr Reeder had nothing to explain. Her interest in his affairs had apparently waned completely.

At 12 o'clock she came into his room and announced that she had a luncheon engagement, and might not be back till three. He was not very sorry. He rather wished she would not come back till three o'clock on some date to be named by himself, and he wished that he had the courage to tell her so.

There was no response to his advertisement, and he regretted that his telephone number had not been included in his address.

Miss Gillette had hardly left before the first of Mr Reeder's visitors came. Inspector Gaylor was curious to know what had been the result of the visit to Brixton Prison.

"I am inclined to agree with you," he said, when Reeder had sketched the conversation he had had with the prisoner. "At any rate, there is no evidence on which we could get a conviction. The pistol was of foreign make, and we have been able to trace one important fact—that when it was sold in Belgium, Alsby was still in prison. It might, of course, have been resold to him, but that's unlikely."

"Have you ever heard of the Pizarro Syndicate?" asked Mr Reeder unexpectedly.

Gaylor had an excellent memory, possibly the better because he had been on that particular case.

"The Treasure Hunters," he smiled. "It's strange you should mention Pizarro. I was trying to trace a man named Gelpin, who was one of the biggest shareholders and one of the biggest dupes. I wanted him, to get particulars of a former clerk of his, but I just couldn't find him, which is queer, since he was a fairly rich man."

"Dead," suggested Mr Reeder.

Gaylor shook his head.

"No, he is abroad somewhere, I think, anyway he left the Midlands two years ago."

Mr Reeder pursed his lips and looked at the detective tragically.

“Left the Midlands two years ago,” he repeated mechanically. “Dear me . . . Went abroad with a letter of credit, I am sure. How many people were in the Pizarro Syndicate?”

Gaylor was looking at him suspiciously.

“What’s the idea? Has any other member of the Syndicate gone to live abroad?”

“Two, to my knowledge.” Then there was a dead silence which Mr Reeder broke. “One was a young man called Seafield.”

Gaylor nodded.

“I remember that name, yes?”

“The other’s name was Ralph,” said Mr Reeder slowly.

He took from his drawer a written précis that he had prepared that morning and passed it silently to the inspector. Gaylor read very slowly, and naturally so, since J. G.’s writing was not the most legible.

When he had finished, he reached for the telephone.

“I happen to know that Gelpin’s bank was the Scottish and Midland in Birmingham. Do you mind if I put a trunk call through?”

He gave the urgent signal to the long distance operator and within five minutes he was talking to the bank. Mr Reeder only heard the questions and the monosyllabic rejoinders.

Presently Gaylor hung up the receiver.

“£17,500 letter of credit,” he said shortly, “cashed in Paris, Budapest and Madrid. Since then the bank has had three cheques for considerable amounts. They had been cashed in foreign cities, and had been accompanied by letters from Mr Gelpin. The bank manager says that Gelpin is a man who loves travel, so that he is not at all alarmed about it, and he has got a pretty good balance. He said one thing which may, or may not, have some bearing: that when Gelpin left, he announced his intention of going to Montreux.”

Mr Reeder remembered instantly the little map on the wall of Litnoff’s room with the red irregular triangle.

Mr Reeder rose at that moment to go to the door of the outer office to take in a cablegram from a Western Union messenger. He walked to the

window, opened it and read the page of typescript. It was signed ‘Murphy’ and was from the head of the New York Detective Department.

Pizarro gang has not operated for past ten years. Pizarro in Sing-Sing serving life sentence. His right-hand man Kennedy was last heard of in California twelve years ago, believed to be reformed character. Nothing here of new Pizarro enterprise.

Gaylor read the telegram and handed it back to Reeder.

“Do you think this is a Pizarro stunt?”

“My unpleasant mind leads me to that conclusion,” said Mr Reeder.

The Rev Dr Ingham came at two o’clock, at the moment when Mr Reeder was eating one of the two large buns which he invariably purchased on his way to the office, and which as invariably served him for lunch.

He could almost sense the excited condition in which the cleric came by the rapidity and nervousness of his knock.

“My dear fellow . . . the most amazing thing has happened. . . . Mr Ralph has been found!”

J. G. Reeder should have been overjoyed by the intelligence instead he looked a little grieved.

“This is very pleasant news,” he said, “very pleasant indeed, h’m.”

The clergyman fished inside his clerical coat and produced a telegram.

“I happened to call on Miss Ralph this morning and whilst I was in the hotel this telegram came. Naturally the young lady is beside herself with relief—I confess that I also am feeling happier.”

Mr Reeder took the telegram. It was handed in at Berlin West and was addressed to Joan Ralph, Haymarket Hotel.

Shall be in Germany for a month. Write to me Hotel Marienbad Munich. Mark letter ‘await arrival’. Love Daddy.

“Remarkable,” said Mr Reeder.

“I thought so. I asked the young lady to let me have the wire to show you.”

“Remarkable,” said Mr Reeder again.

"It *is* remarkable," agreed Dr Ingham. "And yet it isn't. He may have been called away to Germany and had no time to communicate with his daughter——"

"I wasn't referring to that," said Mr Reeder. "When I said it was remarkable, I was thinking that it was both odd and remarkable that he should have wired to her at an hotel where she has never stayed before."

Dr Ingham's jaw dropped.

"Good heavens!" he gasped.

His face had gone pale; it was as though there had come to him a sudden realization of just what this telegram might signify.

"That did not occur to me. . . . She had never stayed there before—are you sure?"

Mr Reeder nodded.

"She mentioned it casually last night just before she was leaving—I presume she told you she called on me? No, usually she stays at the hotel her father patronizes. She stayed at the Haymarket because it was close to Mr Ralph's office. At any rate, he would have telegraphed to Bishop's Stortford."

"It is strange," said the clergyman after a pause.

"It *is* strange," said Mr Reeder. "It has assumed the appearance of—um—a case. Distinctly a case."

For a long time he seemed totally absorbed in the rivulets of rain which trickled down the panes of his window.

"It is certainly bewildering," said Dr Ingham at last. "I confess I am becoming alarmed. This red-haired young man, for example——"

"Miss Ralph told you that?"

"Miss Gillette—your charming secretary. She arrived at the hotel with her brother——"

"Her young man," corrected Mr Reeder, and coughed.

"Really? She did not introduce him."

"She never does anything that she should do," said Mr Reeder bitterly.

He swung round in his swivel chair as though forcing himself from the hypnotic attractions of wriggling rain drops.

“The red-haired young man is also remarkable. I am rather worried about him. He stands as it were on the threshold of—um—life. In a few years’ time he may be in the happy enjoyment of a red-haired wife and—um—red-haired children. To be cut off in his prime, and just because his father was ill and he undervalued a diamond brooch or clasp, would be grossly unfair.”

The doctor stared at him blankly.

“I don’t quite know what you mean. To be cut off . . . You don’t mean that this young man is in *danger*?”

“I wonder!” said Mr Reeder.

For a long while they sat gloomily surveying each other.

“I am bewildered,” sighed Dr Ingham at last. “I feel as if I had strayed into some terrible land of unreality. Mr Reeder”—he leant forward—“are you ever in Kent?”

“I live there,” said Mr Reeder, as indeed he did, for Brockley Road is situated on the London fringe of that county.

“I mean in the country. I have been discussing this matter with my wife—a woman of remarkable acumen. She has a theory which, I must confess, I regard as entirely fantastic. I should not have mentioned it to you, but for the doubts you have concerning this Berlin telegram, which, I imagined, cleared up the mystery. I said to her only last night, ‘My dear, if you told Mr Reeder your theory, he would think you had been reading detective literature!’ She is an invalid—very seldom leaves the house. I feel that it would be asking you a great deal if I suggested you should spend a week-end with us.”

Mr Reeder hesitated.

“I seldom go out,” he said, “but what is your good lady’s theory?”

The doctor smiled.

“I feel I ought to apologize for even advancing such a suggestion. Years ago when I was in America I was swindled. The sum was insignificant, but it was a lesson to me. Here was I, an independent man, thanks to my dear father’s beneficence, and yet the cupidity which is latent in all of us overcame my scruples and I invested in a ridiculous get-rich-quick scheme . . . a sort of treasure hunt, organized by a rascal called Pizarro!”

Mr Reeder nodded, but offered no comment.

“My dear wife has an idea that behind Mr Ralph’s disappearance is some diabolical plot—exactly what it is I am at a loss to explain. The theory, fantastical as it is, has to do with Pizarro. Now I happen to know that Pizarro is in prison—at least that is my belief——”

Mr Reeder raised a long forefinger; it might have been a gesture of warning. It was in truth an indication that he wished to speak.

“On Saturday afternoon I have nothing particular to do,” he said. “May I trespass on your hospitality? May I say with respect that your wife is a very intelligent lady, and I should like to meet her.”

Dr Ingham would send his car to meet the Dover Express. The plan was agreeable to Mr Reeder, but——

“I must return at night. I—um—never sleep in any bed but my own.”

Dr Ingham understood this prejudice against strange beds. He had an alternative suggestion, namely that Mr Reeder should make the whole journey by car.

“It will take a little longer, but it’s a very good road, and I could have you picked up at your place in Brockley which is on the way.”

Here again he found J. G. Reeder agreeable.

For the remainder of the day Mr Reeder waited in vain for some communication from the red-haired youth, but none had come when Miss Gillette returned to the office, which was somewhere in the region of five o’clock. He was not exactly idle; an assistant whom he sometimes employed came to see him at his urgent request, and spent a profitable afternoon searching certain records at Somerset House.

By the time Miss Gillette returned he had a complete list of English subscribers of the Pizarro Syndicate, and, with three exceptions, he had sent telegrams to their known addresses. He did not wire to Mr Ralph, the missing Seafeld, or yet to Mr Gelpin.

Miss Gillette brought one item of news: she had spent the afternoon in committee with her fiancé and Joan Ralph, and they had come to the conclusion that something was wrong. It hardly seemed worth a committee meeting, thought Mr Reeder, but he avoided trouble by refraining from making such provocative comment.

He left the office at six o’clock and wandered off to Scotland Yard and went immediately to Gaylor’s room.

“I could have saved you the trouble,” said Gaylor, when Reeder told him about the telegrams he had sent. “We have already been in touch with the local police and they are making inquiries. We have found two subscribers, but they are very poor people and not likely to be affected. I also had a look at that map in Schmidt’s flat, and have been on the telephone to the Montreux police. They say that the area marked out in red ink is a derelict farm, the property of a Russian. The police chief was very decent; he sent a couple of men climbing about Glion to investigate, and they report there is nobody there, the place is in a state of ruin, and it has not been occupied for a number of years. There used to be a caretaker, but he had been withdrawn. The Russian was of course Litnoff. Apparently he was there only once or twice in his life, and never lived at the farm. It’s a puzzling business.”

“To me it is as clear as the running water in the mountain stream,” said Mr Reeder poetically, “but that, of course, is because I have a criminal mind.”

He returned to his office at nine that evening, after a frugal dinner. No telegrams had arrived. The only letter awaiting him was one from a former client, enclosing a cheque.

CHAPTER 4

The drizzle had turned to rain. It pelted down on Mr Reeder's mackintosh and flowed in spasmodic splashes from the brim of his high-crowned hat, as he trudged towards the nearest tramcar that would take him home.

It was not the sort of night when people would be abroad. Again he found the lounge in a yellow oilskin coat standing at the corner of Brockley Road, and another idler pacing leisurely up and down. This man turned at the sound of his steps and came towards him.

"Have you got a match, governor?" His voice was harsh and common, and did not somehow go with his respectable attire, for he had a blue trench coat buttoned up to his chin and belted about his waist. The point of Mr Reeder's umbrella came up until it pointed just above that belt.

"I haven't a match. If I had, I would not be so foolish as to put my hands in my pocket so as to give it to you," he said harangingly. "Now, if you will kindly stand out of my way, you will save yourself a lot of trouble."

"I asked you civilly, didn't I?" growled the man.

"Your civility doesn't amuse me," said Mr Reeder, and then suddenly his hand shot out and he got the man by the shoulder, exhibiting a strength which none would have suspected in him, and sent him flying towards the road.

He passed through a little iron gate, slammed it behind him.

"And you can tell Kennedy from me he is wasting his time."

"I don't know what you are talking about," snarled the man.

Mr Reeder did not parley with him. He mounted the steps, fitted the key in the lock and entered. He stopped long enough to hang his wet mackintosh in the hall, remove his goloshes, and then went up to his room. He was in darkness. He did not switch on the light, and crossing the room, he pulled aside the heavy curtains and looked out.

The man in the blue trench coat was still standing in front of the house, but now he had been joined by the loiterer in the yellow oilskin coat, and they were talking together.

Mr Reeder was cursed with a sense of humour which was peculiar to himself. He went into his bedroom, and from a shelf in the cupboard he took a small air pistol, and 'breaking it', inserted a pellet. At the distance which separated him from his two watchers an air pistol would not be dangerous, but it should be very painful. Gently lifting the sash, he took aim and pressed the trigger. He heard the man in the yellow oilskin yell and saw him leap into the air.

"What's biting you?" demanded blue trench coat.

"Somep'n bit me."

He was clasping his neck and rolling his head backwards and forwards in pain.

Mr Reeder broke the pistol again, put another pellet in the breech and took even more accurate aim.

"Say listen," said the man in the trench coat. He said no more. His hat went flying, and looking up in his bewilderment, he saw Mr Reeder leaning out of the window.

"Go away," said Mr Reeder gently.

He did not hear the reply because he closed the window quickly. He objected to profanity on principle. But when a few minutes later he looked out again the two men had disappeared.

It was 11 o'clock when he went to bed. He was by no means a light sleeper, or he would have heard the first pebble that struck his window. The second woke him, and for a good reason: the stone was heavier and the pane smashed.

He got out of bed quickly and very cautiously went to the edge of the window and looked out. There was nobody in sight. Pushing open the casement he made a more careful survey: the street was empty. He could see no living soul, and then, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he saw a figure moving in the shadow of the one laurel bush which decorated the front garden of his house.

This time Mr Reeder did not take an air pistol, but a very businesslike Browning in the pocket of his dressing-gown. He went noiselessly down the stairs, unbolted the door, opened it and flashed a concentrated beam of a powerful spotlight into the garden. It was neither trench coat nor oilskin, but a bedraggled youth, hatless, whose wet clothes seemed skin tight.

From the darkness came a beseeching voice:

“Is that Mr Reeder. . . . For God’s sake take the light off me.”

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” said J. G. gently, and a little incongruously it sounded, even to himself. “Did you see my advertisement?”

The young man made a dart through the door into the hall. Mr Reeder followed him, closed and bolted the door. He could almost hear his visitor trembling.

“Which way do I go, sir?” he whimpered.

J. G. led the way up the stairs into the study, and switched on the light.

The red-haired youth was a pitiable sight: his face streaked with blood, the knuckles of his hands were bleeding. He had neither collar nor tie, and as he stood, his soaked clothes formed an ever-growing pool upon Mr Reeder’s shabby carpet.

“I didn’t intend coming here, but after they tried to kill me——”

“I think you had better have a hot bath,” interrupted Mr Reeder.

Fortunately the bathroom was on the first floor, and by some miracle the water was really hot. He left the trembling youth to divest himself of his sodden clothes, and going upstairs, collected a few articles of wearing apparel.

In his study he had a coffee-making machine and in the cupboard a large seed cake. He was partial to seed cake.

The coffee was brewed and the young man came into the room. He was not an attractive young man. He was very pale, he had a very large nose and a long bony chin. He was very thin, and Mr Reeder’s clothes did not so much fit as cover him.

He drank the coffee eagerly, looked at the seed cake, shuddered, but betook of it, whilst Mr Reeder built up the dying fire.

“Now, Mr——”

“Edelsheim, Benny Edelsheim,” said the young man. “I live in Pepys Road, New Cross. Did the young ladies tell you about me? I wish I had not run away that night you chased me. She’s a stunning looking girl, isn’t she? I don’t mean the blonde—the other one.”

“Have you wakened me up in the middle of the night to discuss the attractions of brunettes?” demanded Mr Reeder gently. “Who hit you?”

The young man felt his head gingerly. He had tied about it a large handkerchief which Mr Reeder had supplied.

“I don’t know, I think it was the fellow in the yellow coat. . . . There were two of them. I was just going into my house—my father’s house, when a man asked me if I had a match. I didn’t like the look of him, but I was feeling for the match when he hit me. There was a car halfway down the hill—it used to be called Red Hill once. . . .”

“The topography is familiar to me,” said Mr Reeder. “What did you do when he hit you?”

“I ran,” said the other simply. “I tried to shout, but I couldn’t, and then the other fellow, who was standing by the car, tripped me up.”

He looked at his knuckles. “That’s where I got that. I think there were three of them. The chauffeur was standing by the car and he made a dive at me, but I dodged and doubled up the hill—with the fellow in the yellow coat behind me.”

“What time was this?” asked Mr Reeder.

“About nine. I was coming to see you, in fact I had made up my mind to. I knew where you lived, but I thought I would go home first and talk to the old man—my father. We have got a jeweller’s shop in the Clerkenwell Road, but he has been ill for nearly a year, and I have been running the business.”

“And you got away?” said Mr Reeder, hastening the narrative.

“In a sense I did,” said Edelsheim. “I got over the top of the hill. I couldn’t see a policeman anywhere. It is disgraceful the rates we pay and no policemen! My God, it was awful. I didn’t see them for a bit, and thought I had slipped them, and then I saw the lights of the car coming. If I had any sense I would have knocked at the nearest house and gone in, and no policeman. Mr Reeder!” His voice was thin and hysterical. “That’s what we pay rates and taxes for, and no so-and-so policemen in sight!”

He did not say ‘so-and-so’, but Mr Reeder thought his profanity was excusable.

“As I saw the car, I got over the rails of a recreation ground or something. They must have seen me, because the car stopped right opposite the place where I had jumped. I didn’t see the man following, but I sort of felt him. Then I found I was in a cemetery. My God, it was awful dodging in and out of the crosses and things! I climbed the wall and got out, and then I

did meet a policeman. He thought I was drunk and wanted to take me to the hospital, so I bolted again.”

“Did you see the man in the yellow coat?”

“Not till I got here. It was nearer twelve than eleven. I was just thinking of calling you and of what you would say to me, when I saw them both. They were coming up from the Lewisham High Road, walking together. I dived into your front garden and hid behind the bush. One of them walked up the steps and tried the door. He had a lamp. I nearly died of fright. They were messing about here for an hour.”

“And you were afraid to ring for fear that they saw you?”

“That’s right. I waited until they had gone and I started chucking stones. I have broken two or three windows in this room, too.”

Mr Reeder poured out another cup of coffee, and from the warming effect of the fire and the hot drink Mr Benny Edelsheim grew a little more confident.

“Is she here?” he asked. “The dark haired one?”

“She is not here,” said Mr Reeder severely.

Then suddenly the young man became plaintive again.

“What’s it all about?” he demanded. “I saw your advertisement when I was reading tonight. I did not see how it could be anything to do with that, and yet when I was dodging in and out of the cemetery, the idea came to me that these fellows were after me because of that advertisement and the clasp and everything, and what I said to the young lady. Have I done anything wrong? I am sorry. I do not, as a rule, talk to young ladies without an introduction. I have been brought up as well as any man. If I have offended her relations—you are not her father, are you?”

“I am not a father,” said Mr Reeder emphatically.

“I didn’t think you were,” said Edelsheim, “because I knew about you. You are a detective. My old man—my father says you are the most wonderful detective of the age. I wanted to come and explain to you that I didn’t mean any harm.”

Mr Reeder pushed forward the plate of seed cake.

“You, my dear young friend,” he said, “are no more, as it were, than a cog in a wheel of a very complicated machine. I can quite understand how you had embarrassed the employers of those two ferocious men. Now let us

get to the really important point—just tell me what you said, why you addressed those young ladies in the restaurant.”

Benny munched the seed cake with an agonized expression; it was obvious he did not like seed cake, but his hunger had compelled him to overcome his scruples.

“I recognized her the moment I saw her. She is in my thoughts night and day, Mr Reeder. There are some faces that hit you right in the eye, so to speak, that sort of make an impression upon you—she is not married, is she?” he asked anxiously.

“Practically,” said Mr Reeder.

The young man’s face assumed an expression of acute pain.

“She is engaged,” explained Mr Reeder, in haste to remove any wrong impression he might have created.

“I shall never see another face like that,” said Benny dismally. “I am romantic, Mr Reeder, I don’t mind admitting it. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her photograph. She was wearing plus-fours. Cute! You have no idea what I felt like when I saw that picture. I thought here is the woman for me, and I only saw it for half a tick. He opened his pocket-book on the counter, the gentleman who called at the shop, and he took out the photograph, because the clasp was in the same compartment, wrapped up in tissue paper, so I had a good look at the picture, and I said to myself——”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr Reeder with a certain testiness, “Please don’t bother about your emotions at the moment, Mr Edelsheim. Tell me something about the clasp.”

“The clasp, oh, yes. You want to know about that? It was a very pretty thing, half a buckle of diamonds and emeralds. I know a lot about stones. I was in Hatton Garden for eighteen months. My old man—my father believed in starting me at the bottom of the ladder——”

“Did he want to sell the clasp?”

Benny shook his head.

“No, he wanted it valued. We do a lot of valuation work, and I am supposed to be pretty good at it. We have got a very big business, half a dozen assistants, and we have a branch at Bristol.”

“You valued it?” said Mr Reeder.

“I valued it at £1250, but I made a mistake. Even the best of us make mistakes. I remember once——”

“You have undervalued it by £100?”

“That’s right. I told the young lady so when I met her. I thought she would tell her friend——”

“Her father,” corrected Mr Reeder.

“Oh, was that her father?” Benny was more interested in the parentage of his ideal than in the sordid question of a diamond and emerald clasp.

“Yes, I undervalued it £100. What he really wanted to know was whether the stones were genuine, and, of course, I could tell him that. I don’t think he would have worried about the wrong valuation, and I should not have spoken about it, but I wanted a sort of introduction to the young lady—you are a man of the world, Mr Reeder——”

“What time did he come into the shop?”

Benny, his mouth full of seed cake, looked thoughtful.

“About five o’clock in the evening.”

“And when you valued the clasp, what happened?”

“He wrapped it up and took it away with him. I asked him if he wanted to sell it, and he said no.”

“You never saw him again?”

Benny shook his head.

“That was last Wednesday week?”

“Tuesday,” said Benny promptly. “I happen to know that, because I had a date—an engagement to take a certain party to the pictures, and I was anxious to shut up the shop and get away.”

Mr Reeder jotted down a few notes on his blotting-pad.

“Have you ever valued that clasp before?”

Benny Edelsheim looked at him with an open mouth.

“It’s a curious thing that you should ask that, Mr Reeder. I haven’t, but my father has. I was describing the piece to him, and he said he was certain he had valued the same piece six months ago. Of course, he may have made a mistake, but he has got a marvellous memory.” He enlarged upon the memory of his parent, but Mr Reeder was not listening.

“Why Clerkenwell,” murmured Mr Reeder. “Do you advertise?”

“We are the best advertised valuers in London,” said Benny proudly. “That’s our speciality. I can’t tell you how upset the governor was when I made a mistake. It sort of reflected on the firm. Oh, yes, we carry big ads. in all papers. Valuation of jewellery. You must have seen our name.”

Mr Reeder nodded.

“That accounts for it,” he said.

He looked at the clock. The minute hand pointed to half past two. Picking up the telephone, he called the nearest cab rank and gave his address.

“I am going to take you home,” he said. “You’d better make a bundle of your wet clothes while I dress.”

By the time the cab arrived, Mr Reeder, feeling very much awake, was ready. He went out first, but there was no need of his caution, less need for the Colt automatic that he held in his pocket.

The journey to Pepys Road was uneventful. He waited until the young man had entered his house, then he drove to the nearest police station and had a consultation with the night officer.

When Benny Edelsheim looked out of his window the next morning he found a uniformed policeman standing stolidly before the house, and felt for the first time his rates and taxes were justified.

CHAPTER 5

The morning brought a surprise to Mr Reeder. When he arrived at his office he found Miss Gillette already on duty. That in itself was a notable event. She was entertaining in her room a very early caller in Dr Ingham, and from the solicitude in her tone it almost seemed that she was mothering him. Miss Gillette was one of those uncomfortable people whose maternal instinct was highly developed.

As Mr Reeder paused at the half-opened door, he heard her speaking.

“I shouldn’t worry about it, Dr Ingham. Reeder will put a stop to any of that sort of nonsense. He is much cleverer than he looks.”

Her maligned employer passed softly into his room and rang the bell.

“I didn’t hear you come in—you scare the life out of me sometimes,” she complained, and added: “Mr Ingham is here.”

“Dr Ingham,” said Mr Reeder reproachfully. “You are—um—a little careless about—um—prefixes.”

“He’s been attacked—somebody tried to break into his house last night,” said Miss Gillette. “Poor soul, he has a *terrible* face!”

“Let me see it, please,” said J. G.

The clergyman had evidently passed a strenuous night. The bridge of his handsome nose bore a strip of sticking plaster. One eye, at the moment concealed behind a shade, was blue and swollen, and his lower lip was badly cut.

“I’m afraid I look rather ghastly,” he said, as he shook hands with the detective.

The undamaged portion of his face was white and drawn, and when he said he had had no sleep that night Mr Reeder was not surprised.

He had gone back to St Margaret’s on the previous night, and had driven himself from Dover, arriving at his house at ten o’clock.

“Grayne Hall is built on the site of an old castle,” he said. “There was not enough of the original structure to restore, so I had the walls pulled down and erected a modern residence. Naturally it is very isolated, but there is some very excellent timber, and I have made a good garden. I returned

before midnight, but I had hardly got to bed before my wife said that she heard a noise below. I went down, unarmed, of course, for I do not own so much as a shot-gun. I had reached the hall and was feeling for the light switch, when somebody struck me. I had a fearful blow on the face, but I managed to find an old battle axe which hung on the wall—luckily for me. With this I defended myself. My wife, who had heard the fracas in the hall, screamed, and I heard one of my assailants say: ‘Run for it, Kennedy!’ Immediately after, the hall door was thrown open, and I saw two, or it may have been three, people run into the garden and vanish.”

“Dear me,” said Mr Reeder. “One of them said: ‘Run for it, Kennedy!’ You are sure it was that?”

“I could swear that was the name. Afterwards I remembered, or rather my dear wife remembered, that a man named Kennedy had been a member of the Pizarro gang.”

Mr Reeder was examining the clergyman’s injuries thoughtfully.

“No weapon was used?”

Dr Ingham smiled painfully.

“That’s a poor consolation!” he said with some acerbity. “No, I rather think that I was struck by a fist that was holding a weapon. In the darkness this rascal must have struck wildly.”

He had not sent for the police. Apparently he had no exalted opinion about the Kentish constabulary, and he admitted a horror of figuring in newspapers. Mr Reeder could understand this: he also had a horror of publicity.

“Whether these people were plain burglars who were disturbed at their work, or whether revenge for some fancied injury was at the bottom of their dastardly action, I cannot make up my mind. With Mrs Ingham the Pizarro case is an obsession. She is, by the way looking forward with great eagerness to meeting you. Now tell me, Mr Reeder, what am I to do? I will be guided entirely by your advice. To go to the police now seems to be a fairly useless proceeding. I cannot describe the men—except for a second when they were silhouetted in the open doorway, I never saw them. My butler and my gardener made enquiries this morning, but nobody else seems to have seen them. Not even the coastguard who has a cottage quite close.”

Mr Reeder sat with half-closed eyes, his large hands folded on his lap.

“It is very odd,” he murmured at last. “Kennedy, Casius Kennedy. A bad—um—egg. He inherited it from his mother, a lady with a very—um—unpleasant history.”

He pursed his under lip, his eyes had dropped a little lower.

“It is odd, extremely odd.”

Dr Ingham drew a long breath.

“What am I to do?” he demanded.

“Ask for police protection,” said Mr Reeder. “Have an Officer sleeping in the house and another stationed on the grounds. I hope to see you on Saturday.”

He rose with startling abruptness and jerked out his hand.

“Till Saturday,” he said, and Dr Ingham went out, a very dissatisfied man.

Mr Reeder was no angel that morning. He was in a mood the like of which Miss Gillette could not remember. She discovered this very soon.

“What did you tell the doctor?” she asked.

“When I want you, I will ring for you, young lady,” he snapped.

She went out, a little dazed by his mutiny. She heard the key turn in his lock and when she got through to him by telephone, he was most unpleasant.

“I think I will go home, Mr Reeder,” she said.

“I will send your wages by post,” said he.

She went out of the office, slamming the door behind her, which (apart from the slam) was exactly what he intended she should do.

The door to the corridor he locked in the same fashion before he rang up Inspector Gaylor.

“I want a couple of men,” he said. “I’m nervous, or, shall I say, apprehensive.”

“I wondered when you’d start getting that way,” said Gaylor. “I’m having young Edelsheim shadowed. Thanks for your letter. Is there any other development?”

Mr Reeder told him of the doctor’s unpleasant adventure.

“Oh!” said Gaylor, and then after a silence. “That will keep.”

“So I thought,” said Mr Reeder. “Do you mind if I use your name rather freely today?”

“So long as you don’t try to borrow money on it!” said Gaylor, who had a painful sense of humour.

Reeder spent a long time after that searching a trade telephone directory and ringing up various yachting agencies. He had become suddenly interested in pleasure cruisers. He drew a blank for the first nine enquiries, but the tenth rewarded him. It was not difficult to secure the answers he wanted, but when he called a sticky and uncommunicative agent he used the name of Gaylor with great freedom and invariably secured the information he required.

The tenth call needed this incentive, but the result was beyond expectations. Mr Reeder spent a happy hour with his notes and a nautical almanac. By this time the two Scotland Yard men had arrived, and when soon after lunch a district messenger brought a square and heavy parcel, having the label of a West End bookseller, they were very useful, for one of them had been for a year in the explosives department at Scotland Yard and had a sensitive ear for the faint ticking that came from within the parcel.

“It’s a time bomb, but it may also have a make and break attachment.”

They watched it sink heavily into a pail of water, and when, after half an hour, the Yard man took it out again, the ticking had ceased.

“They’ve been getting ready for this racket for a long time,” said the detective. “That bomb wasn’t made in a hurry——”

The telephone bell rang at that moment and Mr Reeder answered it.

“Is that you, Reeder?” It was Gaylor’s voice and he was speaking very quickly. “I’m coming round to pick you up. We’ve found Gelpin.”

“Eh?” said Mr Reeder.

“Dead—shot through the heart. A ranger found his body in Epping Forest. Be ready.”

The telephone clicked, but Mr Reeder still stood with the receiver in his hand, a terrifying frown on his face.

“Anything wrong, sir?” asked the detective.

J. G. nodded.

“I’m wrong: if I had the brain of a—um—great man, I should have expected this.”

What ‘this’ was he did not elucidate. A few minutes later he was one of a party of five packed in a police tender and was heading for Epping.

It was nearly dark when the car pulled up by the side of a forest by-road. A ranger led them to the spot where the body lay.

It was that of a man above medium height, and more than ordinarily broad of shoulder.

Though George Gelpin was between fifty and sixty, he had been in life a model of a man. He had been rider to hounds, a keen cricketer, something of an athlete.

“Nothing in his pockets—no identification marks of any kind. If we hadn’t got his photograph and his description—they arrived this morning from Birmingham—we should have had the devil’s job in tracing him.”

One of the group they had found standing about the body was a doctor. He supplied certain data which confirmed Mr Reeder in his opinion. But the chief confirmation came when he examined the outspread hands of the silent figure.

There was no mark of car wheels, and the bushes behind which the man was found showed no evidence of crushing. It might have been an ordinary case of suicide, and the doctor ventured this opinion.

A revolver had been found near the body. He must have been shot with the muzzle almost touching his coat, for it was burnt.

“We haven’t got the number of the revolver, but we are making inquiries about it. I don’t think they are necessary. It will be a day or two before we can trace it. Did you get that gun?”

One of the waiting detectives took it out of his pocket. It was a small six-chambered Colt.

One of the detectives who had been on guard over the body when they arrived offered a piece of information.

“There is an initial scratched on the back plate of the butt,” he said. “F. S.”

He took the weapon from his pocket and passed it across to Gaylor.

“F. S.,” frowned the inspector. “That’s a pretty common initial.”

“Frank Seafield, for example,” said Mr Reeder, and Gaylor gaped at him.

“Why should it be Seafield? That’s wildly improbable, Reeder.”

However, when they returned to town and Mr Reeder got into communication with Seafield’s late partner, Gaylor found that the surmise was not so wild. Tommy Anton called at Scotland Yard and saw and identified the weapon.

“That’s Frank’s,” he said immediately. “He always carried a revolver. I used to chaff him about it. He had no reason to, so far as I know, and I rather think that carrying the gun was a bit of swank. He was a little on the theatrical side.”

Joan Ralph had gone back to Bishop’s Stortford. They reached her by telephone. She too had seen the revolver and described it accurately.

“I know Frank carried it, and Daddy used to be very sarcastic about it. Frank used to carry big sums of money about the country, buying second hand cars, and he said he had to deal with some very tough people. Why do you want to know?”

Mr Reeder, who had no desire to alarm the young lady, lied gracefully.

“That beats me,” said Gaylor.

Mr Reeder put down the phone. They were sitting in the inspector’s room at Scotland Yard, where a meal had been brought to them from a neighbouring restaurant.

“It doesn’t beat me, possibly because I am over sanguine,” said Mr Reeder, “possibly because my peculiar mentality leads me astray.”

“But suppose it is suicide——” began Gaylor, and stopped.

“You were thinking that it is quite usual that a suicide tries to remove all marks of his identification?” said Mr Reeder. “That is perfectly true. Will you tell me this: why is the suit he was wearing so old and stained and shabby, and why was he wearing slippers?”

“Boots,” Gaylor broke in. “Elastic-sided boots.”

“Slippers,” insisted Mr Reeder. “And why was there no mud on them? And why was the front of him wet and the back on which he lay almost dry? It rained all last night and he could not have walked through the forest without getting soaked to the skin?”

Gaylor pinched his long upper lip, looked moodily at the remains of his dinner.

“Tennant tells me that they tried to bomb you this afternoon. It’s the Pizarro gang, of course. Kennedy?”

“His very self,” said Mr Reeder, flippantly and ungrammatically. “And I should not be surprised if almost anything happened. I told my housekeeper to go home to her mother. Most housekeepers have mothers to go home to. I shall stay in town tonight.”

“Where?” asked Gaylor curiously.

“That’s my secret,” said Mr Reeder gravely.

They went out of the Yard together, when Gaylor had an idea:

“If you want to get out of the way, I should go down to St Margaret’s Bay. I think you will be safe there.”

“An excellent idea,” said Mr Reeder. “A very excellent idea, but unfortunately the doctor is still in town.”

He went to his office, accompanied by one of the two detectives who had been appointed to watch over him. The other was still in Miss Gillette’s room—Mr Reeder suspected that he was asleep, for it was some time before he opened the door to him.

“There is a wire for you,” he said, and handed it to Mr Reeder. It was from Dr Ingham. Would he (Mr Reeder) come down as soon as he could? There had been remarkable developments at Grayne.

The telegram had been dispatched from Dover. Mr Reeder sent his reply over the telephone. He would arrive on the following afternoon at three o’clock. Then, strangely enough, contrary to all his expressed intentions, he went home to his housekeeperless establishment in the Brockley Road and slept alone in his silent home. And more strangely still, he slept most peacefully.

If he had not gone home he would have missed the letter which came by the morning post. It was from Miss Gillette. She was leaving him. Mr Reeder sighed happily.

“I think I ought to help Mr Anton,” she wrote. “The Rev Dr Ingham has promised to help him start a new business. Dr Ingham has been most kind and I shall never be sufficiently grateful to you for having been unconsciously instrumental in bringing Mr Anton in to touch with him. He

wrote to Tommy before he left London yesterday, suggesting that I might help in creating the new business, and I think you would like to see his postscript so I have torn it off.”

She remained ever his sincerely.

The slip of paper which accompanied the letter was in the doctor’s handwriting.

“P.S. I shall never forgive myself if I have robbed Mr Reeder of his secretary. He is a man for whom I have the highest regard.”

“H’m,” said Mr Reeder, “how very nice . . . how extraordinarily kind!” He spoke aloud to his coffee machine and his electric toaster, but he was never so loquacious as when he was addressing an inanimate audience.

His housekeeper returned during the morning with the ‘daily’ servants who constituted his household, and she packed his battered suitcase under his personal supervision. Mr Reeder had one surprising weakness: dress clothes. However antiquated his daily attire might be, his evening suits were cut by the most fashionable of tailors, and he wanted to look his best at Grayne Hall. He went to town before lunch, met Gaylor by appointment at the office, and handed to him the batch of telegrams which had arrived during the morning. Gaylor examined them casually.

“I know all about these,” he said. “Nine of the seventeen English subscribers to Pizarro’s scheme are missing. I can tell you more—with ’em went the best part of eighty thousand pounds. By the way, I am offering no further evidence against Jake Alsby. I’ve got him inside for his own safety, but he will be discharged next week.”

Gaylor came to the station to see him off.

“Have a good time. If the Pizarro crowd chase you to Dover, send me a postcard.”

Inspector Gaylor, as has already been stated, had a perverted sense of humour.

Throughout the journey Mr Reeder read a book which was entitled *The Thousand Funniest After-Dinner Stories*. He read them all, the whole thousand, and never smiled once.

He had a trick of moving his lips as he read. The military-looking man who sat opposite him had never seen Mr Reeder at close quarters before and was silently amused. Once he tried to start a conversation, but Mr Reeder

was not a great conversationalist on a railway journey and the attempted affability faded to silence.

At Dover station, Mr Reeder got out and his companion followed. Three men lounged up to Mr Reeder's fellow-passenger, and with a nod he indicated the detective, who was passing through the barrier.

"That's your man," he said, "keep close to him."

The car which was waiting for Mr Reeder had scarcely left the station yard, when the four entered a closed limousine and followed.

The drive from Dover to St Margaret's Bay was not a comfortable one. Heavy gusts of wind-borne rain drove across the downs. Below, as the car mounted the cliff road, he could see breakers creaming the yellow-green waters of the Straits, and out at sea a little coasting tramp was taking water over her bows in alarming quantities.

Grayne Hall was not in the residential area of St Margaret's Bay. It stood aloof in a fold of the downs and within a very short distance of the cliff's edge. A red brick building, with squat chimneys that were not at all in harmony with the Elizabethan architecture of the house.

"We used to have high twisted chimneys, but the wind blew them down. You've no idea what the wind is like here," explained Dr Ingham before dinner.

The car passed through a pair of ornamental iron gates and up a broad drive to the portico before the door. The doctor was waiting and with him a tall slight woman, who looked very young waiting until she was seen closer at hand. Even then she might deceive any but the most critical, for her brown hair had a glint of gold in it, and the beauty of her face had not entirely faded.

"Welcome!" Dr Ingham had a bandage over one eye and his injured nose was still covered with plaster. But he was in a pleasantly jovial mood. Perhaps he was relieved at the sight of his visitor, for he subsequently admitted that he had been expecting a wire from Mr Reeder, regretting his inability to put in an appearance.

"I want you to persuade Mrs Ingham that this is not the most forsaken spot on the face of the earth, my dear Reeder. And if you can allay her fears about a repetition of the attack upon me I shall be completely grateful."

Mrs Ingham's red lips curled in a smile. She was, Mr Reeder discovered, a well read, knowledgeable woman. As she showed him round the lovely

grounds (the spring flowers were a joy to the eye) she gave him every opportunity to study her. He himself said little—she gave him no chance, for she never stopped talking. Her voice was low but monotonous. She had definite views on almost every subject. She told him that she was a graduate of a famous New England university—she was obviously proud of this and repeated the information twice. She was pretty, probably nearer forty than thirty. She had deep dark brown eyes, the most delicate of features, and jet black eyebrows which contrasted attractively with the colour of her hair.

“. . . I remember the Pizarro case—I had just left college and naturally I was thrilled because he came from our home town. And, Mr Reeder, I'm sure that all these disappearances have something to do with the Pizarro outfit. I have been racking my brains all day trying to think how my husband has offended them. Maybe he preached against them. I've a kind of recollection that he had a threatening letter when we were in Boston soon after we married. Not that my husband would worry about threatening letters. . . .”

There was much more to see in the grounds: here and there a crumbling ruin of a wall to remind the observer of the dead glories of Grayne Castle. One interesting feature Mr Reeder discovered was a flight of steps leading down the face of the cliff. It was guarded by an iron hand rail and gave the occupants of Grayne Hall a private way to the beach.

“If anybody wants to bathe on pebbles,” said Mrs Ingham.

The room allotted to Mr Reeder's use gave him a beautiful view of the sea and the flower garden before the house. It was furnished with rare taste—he saw in the decorations Mrs Ingham's hand. A pleasant retreat, but in many, many ways a dangerous one. He went up to his room after tea and found his dress clothes laid out for him by his host's valet. Later came the individual to assist Mr Reeder. A bathroom opened from the bedroom and Mr Reeder was under the shower when the valet knocked. He came out, to find the man folding the discarded day clothes and hanging them neatly in the wardrobe.

The contents of his pockets were placed neatly on the dressing table.

“Thank you,” murmured Mr Reeder. “I—um—shall not require you any more. I will ring if I do.”

He closed the door on the retiring valet, turned the key and began to dress at his leisure. Mr Reeder liked the routine of well run country houses and Grayne Hall was extraordinarily well run. He came down to find

himself alone in the drawing-room. A fine aromatic cedar log burnt on the open grate, above which was a picture which might have been a Rembrandt.

The soft hangings of the room, the austere furnishings, the pastel coloured walls, were very soothing. Dr Ingham, wearing the evening dress of the laity, came in to rub his hands before the fire.

“I suppose Elsa gave you the full benefit of her theories? There may be something in them. I’ve been trying to think how I might have offended these birds. A sermon maybe. I used to be a powerful preacher—took current events as my text. Come into my study and have a drink. Elsa won’t be down for hours.”

He conducted Mr Reeder across the panelled hall, through a deeply recessed door into as comfortable a room as the heart of man could desire.

Deep armchairs, a low divan before the fire, walls covered with bookshelves, and a big empire desk were the main features of the room.

“Comfort, comfort, comfort!” said the cleric as he opened a walnut cabinet and took out a silver tray laden with glasses. To these he added a square decanter and a syphon.

“Say when.”

He splashed the soda into the brown whisky and Mr Reeder sipped daintily.

“Elsa wants me to keep firearms in the house. Now you, as a detective, I suppose would think nothing of that. To me it is an abhorrent practice. I may not be a great preacher, but I am, I hope, a good Christian, and the idea of taking life—ugh!”

Mr Reeder tried to raise a complimentary shudder, but failed. For his part he believed in taking life. He was old-fashioned enough to regard the gallows as an instrument of the highest social value.

“I presume you carry a gun?”

Mr Reeder shook his head.

“On occasions that dreadful necessity has been forced upon me,” he said. “I dislike the practice. I have—er—two such weapons, but I have never had to use them. One is at my office and one at my private residence.”

The doctor made a little face.

“You disappoint me, Mr Reeder. I am not a nervous man, but in view of what happened the other night”—he touched his injured face—“I should have felt a little safer. Hello, sweetness.”

Sweetness wore a perfectly cut gown of deep crimson velvet. Mr Reeder thought that she looked twenty-four and not a day over, and had he the courage of a lady’s man—a quality he much envied—he would have said as much.

“What were you talking about?” she asked.

“We were talking of guns,” said Mr Reeder loudly, “um—revolvers.”

She smiled at this.

“And my husband was giving his well-known views of the sanctity of human life,” she said scornfully.

Mr Reeder smiled.

“Rather I was giving a bit of my mind, my dear madam,” he said.

“My dear,” broke in the host, “all this arose from a question I asked Mr Reeder: whether he carried weapons. He doesn’t.”

“I expect poor Thomas was terribly disappointed,” said Mrs Ingham. “When he unpacked your bag he had expected to find it full of pistols and handcuffs.”

She took them back to the drawing-room, but either she thought it was a painful subject, or she wanted to postpone the discussion till after dinner, for she made no reference to her husband’s experience.

It was Mr Reeder who brought up that matter. They were passing through the hall on their way to the dining-room——

“Which axe was it you used?” he asked.

The panelled walls were entirely innocent of armour or battle axes.

“We have had them moved,” said Mrs Ingham. “It occurred to me afterwards that these dreadful people might have used the battle axe instead of my husband.”

They had passed the broad stairs on which the battle between Dr Ingham and his midnight intruders had been fought, and Mr Reeder tried to visualize the scene. But there were occasions when his imagination failed, and this was one.

The dining-room had been fashioned like an Elizabethan banqueting hall in miniature. There was a big Tudor fireplace, a minstrel gallery, and he noticed with surprise that the floor was of flag stones.

“That is the original floor of the old castle,” said Mrs Ingham proudly. “The builders unearthed it whilst they prepared the foundation, and my husband insisted that it should remain. Of course we had it levelled, and in some cases the flags had to be replaced. But it was in a marvellous state of preservation. It used to belong to the De Boisy family——”

Mr Reeder nodded.

“De Tonsin,” he said gently. “The De Boisys were related by marriage, and only one De Boisy occupied the castle in 1453.”

She was a little taken aback by his knowledge.

“Yes, I have made a study of this place,” Mr Reeder went on. “I am something of a student of archaeology.”

He beamed up and down the room approvingly.

“Dirty work.”

Mrs Ingham lifted her eyebrows.

“I don’t get you?”

“On this floor,” said Mr Reeder almost jovially, “wicked old barons were slicing off their enemies’ heads and were dropping them into the deepest dungeon beneath the—um.” No, he had never heard of a moat. It could not well be that, could it?

As the footman placed a cup of soup before him, and the tall butler poured him out a glass of wine, Mr Reeder looked at the glass, held it up to the light.

“That’s good stuff. I can quite imagine,” he said reminiscently, “that dramatic scene when Geoffrey De Boisy induced his old rival to come to dinner. How he must have smiled as his varlets ended—um—the unfortunate gentleman with wine from a poisoned flagon.”

He finished the scrutiny of the wine and put it down untasted.

Mrs Ingham was amused.

“You have a mediaeval mind Mr Reeder.”

“A criminal mind,” said the gentleman.

He did not drink throughout the meal, and Dr Ingham remembered that he had merely sipped his whisky in the study.

“Yes, I am a teetotaller in a sense,” said Mr Reeder, “but I find life so completely exciting that I require no other stimulant.”

He had observed that the man who had valeted him was also the footman.

He waited till the two servants were at the other end of the room, and then:

“Your man is looking rather ill. Has he also been injured in the fight?”

“Thomas? No, he did not appear on the scene until it was all over,” said Dr Ingham, in surprise. “Why?”

“I thought I saw a bandage round his throat.”

“I haven’t noticed it,” said the host.

The conversation flagged. The coffee was served on the table, and Mr Reeder helped himself liberally to sugar. He refused a cigar, and, apologizing for his bad manners, took one of his own cigarettes.

“Matches, Thomas,” said Dr Ingham, but before the footman could obey, Mr Reeder had taken a box from his pocket and struck a match.

It was no ordinary match: the light of it blazed blindingly white so that he had to screw up his eyes to avoid the glare. Only for a moment, then it died down, leaving the party blinking.

“What was that?” asked Ingham.

Mr Reeder stared hopelessly at the box.

“Somebody has been playing a joke on me,” he said. “I am terribly sorry.”

They were very ordinary looking matches. He passed the box across to his host, who struck one, but produced nothing more startling than a mild yellow flame.

“I have never seen anything so extraordinary,” said the beautiful lady who sat on his left. “It was almost like a magnesium flare. We see them sometimes when ships are in distress.”

The incident of the match passed. It was the doctor who led the conversation to the Pizarros and Mrs Ingham who elaborated her theory. J.

G. Reeder sat listening, apparently absorbed.

“I don’t think he was a really bad man,” Mrs Ingham was saying when he interrupted.

“Pizarro was a blackguard,” said Mr Reeder. “But he had the kind of nature one would have expected in a half-bred Dago.”

If he saw Mrs Ingham stiffen, he gave no sign.

“Kennedy, his confederate,” he went on, “was, as I said this afternoon, a man to be pitied. His mother was a moral leper, a woman of no worth, the merest chattel.”

Dr Ingham’s face had gone white and tense, his eyes glowed like red coals, but J. G. Reeder, sitting there with his hands thrust into his trouser pockets, his cigarette hanging limply from his lower lip, continued as though he had the fullest approval of the company.

“Kennedy was really the brain of the gang, if you can call it a brain, the confidence man with some sort of college education. He married Pizarro’s daughter, who was not a nice young lady. He was, I think, her fourth lover before he married her—if they were married at all . . .”

“Take that back, you damned liar!”

The woman was on her feet, glowering down at him, her shrill voice almost a scream.

“You liar, you beast!”

“Shut up!”

It was Dr Ingham’s voice—harsh, commanding. But the injunction came too late. One of Mr Reeder’s hands had come out from his pocket and it held an automatic of heavy calibre. He came to his feet so quickly that they were unprepared for the manoeuvre.

Mr Reeder pushed the chair behind, and leant back against the wall. Thomas, the footman, had come in running, but stopped now at the sight of the pistol. Mr Reeder addressed him: “I’m afraid I hurt you on Thursday night,” he said, pleasantly. “A pellet from an air pistol can be very painful. I owe you an apology—I intended it to be for your friend.”

He nodded towards the butler.

“It was very stupid of you, Dr Ingham, to allow your two men to come to London, and it led to very unpleasant consequences. I saw the dead man

today. Rather a powerful looking fellow named Gelpin. The knuckles of his hand were bruised. I presume that, in an unguarded moment you went too near him without your bodyguard.”

He reached one of the long windows, and with a quick movement of his hand he drew the curtain aside. The window was open. The military looking man who had accompanied him from London climbed through. Then followed the three who had followed Mr Reeder to the house. Dr Ingham stood paralysed to inaction.

Suddenly he turned and darted towards the small door in a corner of the room. Mr Reeder’s pistol exploded and the panel of the door split noisily. Ingham stood stock still—a pitiable, panic-stricken thing, and he came staggering back.

“It wasn’t my idea, Reeder,” he said. “I will tell you everything. I can prove I had nothing to do with it. They are all safe, all of them.”

Stooping, almost beneath his feet he turned back the heavy carpet, and Reeder saw a large stone flag in which was inserted a heavy metal ring.

“They are all alive . . . every one of them. I shot Gelpin in self defence. He would have killed me if I hadn’t killed him.”

“And Litnoff?” asked Mr Reeder, almost good humouredly.

Dr Ingham was silent.

Mr Reeder wrote in his casebook:

Dr Ingham’s real name was Casius Kennedy. He was born in England, convicted at the age of seventeen for obtaining money under false pretences. He afterwards became a reformed character and addressed many revival meetings, and he was known as a boy preacher. He was again convicted on a charge of obtaining money by a trick, sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment, and on his discharge emigrated to America, where he fell in with Pizarro and assisted him in most of his swindles.

He was very useful to Pizarro, gaining, as he did, the confidence of his victims by his appeals in various pulpits. He either acquired, or assumed, the title of doctor of divinity.

After the biggest of the Pizarro swindles he escaped to California and in some way, which is not known, acquired a very considerable fortune, most of which he lost in speculation subsequent to his arrival in England.

In his statement to me he was emphatic on this one point: that after he had built Grayne Hall on the foundations of the old castle, and he discovered the commodious dungeons which, I can testify, were in a remarkable state of preservation beneath the house, he had no intention of making illicit use of them until his heavy losses compelled him to look around for a method of replenishing his exchequer.

Five years ago he met a Russian actor named Litnoff, a drunkard who was on the point of being arrested for debt, and who was afraid that he might be deported to his own country, where he was wanted by the Tcheka for a number of political offences.

Kennedy and his wife, with the approval and assistance of Litnoff, evolved a scheme whereby big money could be made. Litnoff took a small flat in London mansions, which was cheaply furnished, and it was here that the swindle was worked. Very carefully and with all his old cleverness, Kennedy got into touch with the likely victims, and naturally he chose the credulous people who would subscribe money to the Pizarro Syndicate. One by one the 'doctor' made their acquaintance. He studied their habits, their methods of life, found out at what hotels they stayed when they were in London, their hobbies and their weaknesses. In some cases it took three months to establish confidence, and when this was done, Kennedy mentioned casually the story of the dying Russian who had escaped from Petrograd with a chest full of jewellery looted from the palaces of the nobility.

Mr Ralph's statement may be taken as typical of them all:

'I met Dr Ingham, or Kennedy, after some correspondence. He was very charming and obviously well-to-do. He was staying at the best hotel in London, and I dined with him twice—on one occasion with his wife.

'He told me he was engaged in voluntary mission work, in the course of which he had attended a dying Russian, who put up a most extraordinary proposition, namely: that he should buy a small farm in Switzerland, the property of Litnoff, on which he had buried half a million pounds' worth of jewellery. The story, though seemingly far-fetched, could be confirmed. His brother was living on the farm. Both men had been chased and watched until life had become unendurable.

'“There is something in this story,” said the clergyman. “This fellow, Litnoff, has in his possession a piece of jewellery which must be worth at least a thousand pounds. He keeps it under his pillow.”

‘I was intrigued by the story. It appealed to my romantic fancy, and when the doctor asked me if I would like to see the man, I agreed to meet him one night, promising not to mention to a soul the Russian’s secret.

‘Dr Ingham called for me at midnight. We drove to a place in Bloomsbury and I was admitted to a very poorly furnished flat. In one of the rooms was a very sick-looking man, who spoke with difficulty in broken English. He told me of all the espionage to which he and his brother were subjected. He was in fear of his life, he said. He dared not offer the jewels for fear that the agents of the Russian government traced him. The scheme he had seemed, from my point of view, to be beyond risk to myself. It was that I should go out to Montreux, see his brother, inspect the jewels and buy the farm, the purchase money to include the contents of the chest. If I was not satisfied, or if I thought there was any trick, I needn’t pay my money until I was sure that the deal was genuine.

‘He showed me a diamond clasp, bid me to take it away with me and have it valued.

‘This conversation took a very long time: he spoke with great difficulty, sometimes we had to wait for ten minutes whilst he recovered his breath. I took the clasp with me and had it valued, returning it to Dr Ingham the same night.

‘It was he who suggested that my safest plan was to carry no money at all, but buy a letter of credit. He was most anxious, he said, that I should take no risk.

‘I was much impressed by the seeming genuineness of the scheme and by the fact that the risk was apparently negligible. He asked me to respect the Russian’s urgent plea that I should not speak a word to a soul either about my intentions or my plans. I bought the letter of credit, and it was arranged that I should travel to Dr Ingham’s house by car, spend the night there and go on by the mid-day boat to Calais and Switzerland.

‘I arrived at Grayne Hall at about six o’clock in the evening, and I was impressed by the luxury of the place. I hadn’t the slightest suspicion that anything was wrong.

‘At half past seven I joined Dr Ingham and his wife at dinner. I didn’t drink anything until the port came round, but after that I have no recollection of what happened until I woke and found myself in a small stone chamber. There was a candle fixed to a stone niche, with half a dozen other candles and a box of matches to supply the light, the only light I saw until I was

rescued. There was an iron bed, a patch of carpet on the floor, and a washing set, but no other furniture. Twice in the twenty-four hours the two men, who are known as Thomas and Leonard, and whom I remember having seen wearing the livery of servants, took me out for exercise up and down a long stone corridor which ran the length of the house. I did not see any other prisoner but I knew they were there because I had heard one shouting. My letter of credit had been taken from me. I only saw the man Kennedy once, when he came down and asked me to write a letter on the notepaper of a foreign hotel, addressed to my daughter, and telling her I was well and that she was not to worry about me.'

It was clear that the success of the scheme depended upon the discretion of Litnoff. The man was a drunkard, but so long as he gave no hint as to where his money came from, there was no danger to the gang. It was when he began to talk about the diamond clasp that the Kennedys decided that, for their own safety, they must silence him. They knew the game was up and made preparations for a getaway, but to the end they hoped they might avoid this. I discovered by enquiry that a small yacht had been chartered provisionally a week before their arrest. It was at the time in Dover Harbour, and if their plans were carried out, they were leaving a few days after my arrival at Grayne Hall.

A new complication arose when Kennedy went down to carry food to the prisoners on the night of Gelpin's death. The two servants were away in London. They had been commissioned to stop Edelsheim from seeing me. It is possible that Kennedy over-rated his strength, or placed too much reliance upon the revolver which he carried—one which he had taken from another prisoner—Frank Seafield.

Kennedy states that Gelpin, who was a very strong man, attacked him without provocation, but as to this we shall never know the truth; but he was killed in the corridor, because the other prisoners heard the shot.

In the early hours of the morning the two servants returned, and the body was driven straight away to London and deposited in Epping Forest.

I cannot exactly state when my own suspicions concerning Dr Ingham were aroused. I rather think it was on the occasion of his first visit to me. His obvious anxiety to anticipate the arrival of Joan Ralph, Alsby's statement, my talk with the chemist, and Edelsheim's narrative all pointed to one conclusion; obviously here was a confidence trick on a large scale, and, after I had seen the survey map of the district in which Grayne Hall is

situated, and made a few enquiries about the old castle, the possibility that this was a case of wholesale kidnapping became a certainty.

I had to be sure that 'Dr Ingham' was Kennedy, and on the last occasion we met in my office, I was compelled, I regret to say, to slander his mother. Though he was livid with rage, he kept control of himself, but he showed me enough to satisfy me that my suspicions were correct.

I tried the same trick at Grayne Hall, but I only did it after lighting a magnesium match, which was a signal agreed upon between myself and the police who, I knew, were outside the house, that it was time for them to make a move.

Underneath he wrote:

Casius Kennedy, convicted of murder at the CCC. Executed at Pentonville Prison. (Elford—executioner).

Elsa Kennedy, convicted at CCC. Life.

Thomas J. Pentafard, convicted at CCC. Criminal conspiracy and accessory to murder. Life.

Leonard Polenski, convicted at CCC. Criminal conspiracy and accessory to murder. Life.

THE CASE OF JOE ATTYMAR

CHAPTER 1

In the dusk of the evening the rower brought his skiff under the overshadowing hull of the Baltic steamer and rested on his oars, the little boat rising and falling gently in the swell of the river. A grimy second officer looked down from the open porthole and spat thoughtfully into the water. Apparently he did not see the swarthy-faced waterman with the tuft of grey beard, and as apparently the waterman was oblivious of his appearance. Presently the unshaven man, with the faded gold band on the wrist of his shabby jacket, drew in his head and shoulders and disappeared.

A few seconds later a square wooden case was heaved through the port and fell with a splash in the water. For a moment one sharp corner was in sight, then it sank slowly beneath the yellow flood. A small black buoy bobbed up and the waterman watched it with interest. To the buoy was attached a stout cord, and the cord was fastened to the case. He waited, moving his oars slowly, until the buoy was on the point of being sucked out of sight—then, with a turn of his wrist, he hooked an oar under the cord—literally hooked, for at the end of the short blade was a little steel crook.

Pushing the boat forward, he reached for the buoy and drew this into the stern sheets, fastened the cord round a wooden pin, and, lifting his oars, allowed the tide to carry him under the steamer's stern. Anchored in midstream was a dingy-looking barge and towards this he guided the skiff.

A heavily built young man came from the aft deck, and, reaching down a boat-hook, drew the skiff alongside. The swarthy man held on to the side of the barge whilst the boat-hook was transferred to the taut line astern. The younger man did no more than fasten the soaking cord to a small bight. By this time the occupant of the skiff was on board.

“Nobody about, Ligsey?” he asked gruffly.

“Nobody, cap'n,” said the younger man.

The captain said nothing more, but walked to the deckhouse astern and disappeared down the companionway, pulling the hatch close after him. There he stayed till the estuary was a black void punctured with dim ships' lights.

Ligsey went forward to where his youthful assistant sat on an overturned bucket, softly playing a mouth-organ. He stopped being musical long enough to remark that the tide was turning.

“We going up tonight?” he asked.

Ligsey nodded. He had already heard the chuff-chuff of the motor in the stern of the barge, where the skipper was starting it.

“What we hangin’ around here for?” asked the youth curiously. “We’ve missed one tide—we could have been up to Greenwich by now. Why don’t Captain Attymar——”

“Mind your own business,” growled the mate.

He heard the swarthy man calling him and went aft.

“We’ll get that case in and stow it,” he said in a low voice. “I left a place in the bricks.”

Together they pulled gingerly at the cord and brought the square, soaked packing case to sight. Ligsey leaned over and gripped it with an instrument like a pair of huge ice-tongs, and the dripping case was brought to the narrow deck and stowed expeditiously in the well of the barge.

The *Allanuna* invariably carried bricks between a little yard on the Essex coast and Tenny’s Wharf. Everybody on the river knew her for an erratic and a dangerous steering craft. The loud chuffing of her engine was an offence. Even nippy tugboats gave her yawing bows a wide berth.

The boy was called aft to take charge of the engine, and Ligsey took the tiller. It was five o’clock on a spring morning when she came to Tenny’s Wharf, which is at Rotherhithe.

As a wharfage it had few qualities attractive to the least fastidious of bargees. It consisted of a confined space with room for two builder’s lorries to be backed side by side (though it required some manoeuvring to bring them into position) and the shabby little house where Joe Attymar lived.

Through the weather-beaten gate which opened at intervals to admit the builders’ carts was Shadwick Lane. It had none of the picturesque character of the slum it used to be, when its houses were of wood, and water butts stood in every backyard. Nowadays it consists of four walls, two on either side of the street. Bridging these is an inverted V of slate, which is called a roof, and at frequent intervals there are four red chimney-pots set on a small, square, brick tower. These denote roughly where lateral walls divide one hutch from another. Each partition is called a ‘house’, for which people pay

rent when they can afford it. The walls which face the street have three windows and a doorway to each division.

Joe Attymar's house did not properly stand in the lane at all, and Shadwick Lane was only remotely interested in the barge-master, for the curious reason that he could reach his house and yard by Shadwick Passage, a tortuous alley that threaded a way between innumerable backyards, and, under the shadow of a high warehouse, to Tooley Street. Year after year the swarthy man with the little iron-grey beard and the shaggy eyebrows brought his barge up the river, always with a cargo of bricks. And invariably the barge went down empty and without his presence—for, for some reason, there was neither passenger nor crew on the down-river trip.

The fact was unknown to the people of Shadwick Lane. They were even unaware that Joe Attymar did not sleep in his house more than one night every month. They knew, of course, from the muddy old motor car, that he drove through the wide gates occasionally, that he went abroad, but guessed that he was engaged on the legitimate business of lighterman.

There are certain minor problems which from time to time cause the chiefs of Scotland Yard to move uneasily and impatiently in their padded chairs, and say to their immediate subordinates: 'Do something'. Mr Attymar, though he was blissfully unaware of the fact was one of these minor problems.

There are gaming houses which harass the police, queer little clubs and other establishments less easy to write about in a reputable magazine, but Mr Attymar was not associated with one of these. Such problems are, in one shape or another, perennial! Occasionally they grow acute and just at that moment the question of systematic smuggling was worrying Scotland Yard considerably.

Chief Constable Mason sent for Inspector Gaylor.

"They've pulled in a fellow who was peddling dope in Lisle Street last night," he said. "You might see him after his remand. I have an idea he will squeak."

But the man in question was no squeaker, though he had certainly given that impression when he was taken red-handed. He said enough, however, to the patient detective to suggest that he might say more.

"All that I could find out," said Gaylor, "is that this selling organization is nearly foolproof. The gang that we rushed last year isn't handling the output, but I'm satisfied that it still has the same governor."

“Get him,” said the chief, who was in the habit of asking for miracles in the same tone as he asked for his afternoon tea.

And then a thought struck him.

“Go along and see Reeder. The Public Prosecutor was telling me today that Reeder is available for any extra work. He may be able to help, anyway.”

Mr Reeder heard the request, sighed and shook his head.

“I’m afraid it is rather—um—outside my line of business. Dope? There used to be a man named Moodle. It may not have been his name, but he had associations with these wretched people——”

“Moodle, whose name was Sam Oschkilinski, has been dead nearly a year,” said Gaylor.

“Dear me!” said Mr Reeder, in a hushed voice appropriate to one who has lost a dear friend. “Of what did he die?”

“Loss of breath,” said Gaylor vulgarly.

Mr Reeder knew nothing more that he could recall about dope merchants.

“Haven’t you some record on your files?” suggested Gaylor.

“I never keep files, except—um—nail files,” said Mr Reeder.

“Perhaps,” suggested Gaylor, “one of your peculiar friends——”

“I have no friends,” said Mr Reeder.

But here he did not speak the exact truth.

He was cursed with a community spirit and he had a tremendous sense of neighbourly obligations. Especially would he give up valuable time to diagnosing and curing the mysterious diseases which attacked the chickens in Brockley Road.

Mr Reeder was an authority on poultry; he knew exactly why hens droop and cockerels’ combs go pink. He had a marvellous chicken farm in Kent—not large, but rare. Noble lords and ladies consulted him before they exhibited their birds. He could wash and dry living chickens for the bench: the Poultry Show at the Crystal Palace was an event to which Mr Reeder looked forward for eleven months and two weeks.

He would stand in his back garden for hours discussing with the man next door the eccentricities of laying hens, and his acquaintance with Johnny Southers began in a fowl-house. Johnny lived three doors from Mr Reeder. He was rather a nice young man, fair-haired and good-looking. He had in Mr Reeder's eyes the overwhelming advantage of being a very poor conversationalist.

Anna Welford lived in the house opposite, so that it may be said that the scene was set, for the curious tragedy of Joe Attymar, on a very small stage.

It was through the unromantic question of a disease which attacked Johnny Southers' prize Wyandottes that Mr Reeder met Anna. She happened to be in the Southers' back garden when Mr Reeder was engaged in his diagnosis. She was a slim girl, rather dark, with amazing brown eyes. Her father was a retired fish merchant, who had made a lot of money and had sent her to a high-class school at Brighton, where girls are taught to ride astride, use lipstick and adore the heroes of Hollywood.

In some respects her education had been neglected, for she returned to the dullness of Brockley a very sane, well-balanced young lady.

She did not find Brockley a 'hole'. She did not smoke or do anything which made life worth living, but settled down to the humdrum of a stuffy home as though she had never shared a room with an earl's daughter or played hockey against an all-England team.

Johnny did not fall in love with her at first sight. He had known her since she was so high: when he was a boy she was endurable to him. As a young man he thought her views on life were sound. He discovered he was in love with her as he discovered he was taller than his father. It was a subject for surprise.

It was brought home to him when Mr Clive Desboyne called in his glittering coupé to take Anna to a dinner-dance. He resented Mr Desboyne's easy assurance, the proprietorial way he handed Anna into the car. He thought it was appalling bad manners for a man to smoke a cigar when he was driving a lady. Thereafter Johnny found himself opening and examining packing-cases and casks and barrels at the Customs House with a sense of inferiority and the hopelessness of his future.

In such a mood he consulted his authority on poultry, and Mr Reeder listened with all the interest of one who was hearing a perfectly novel and original story that had never been told before by or to any human being.

“I know so very little—um—about love,” said Mr Reeder awkwardly. “In fact—er—nothing. I would like to advise you to—um—let matters take their course.”

Very excellent, if vague, advice. But matters took the wrong course, as it happened.

CHAPTER 2

On the following Saturday night, as Mr Reeder was returning home, he saw two men fighting in Brockley Road. He had what is called in Portuguese a *repugnancio* to fighting men. When the hour was midnight and the day was Saturday, there was a considerable weight of supposition in favour of the combat being between two gentlemen who were the worse for intoxicating drink, and it was invariably Mr Reeder's practice to cross, like the Philistine, to the other side of the road.

But the two young men who were engaged in such a short silent and bitter contest were obviously no hooligans of lower Deptford. They were both wearing evening dress, and gentlemen in evening dress do not as a rule wage war in the streets of Brockley. Nevertheless, Mr Reeder hardly felt it was the occasion to act either as mediator or timekeeper.

He would have passed them by, and did in fact come level with them, when one walked across the road, leaving his companion—though that hardly seems the term to apply to one who had been so bruised and exhausted that he was hanging on to the railings—to recover as best he could. It was then that Mr Reeder saw that one of the contestants was Mr John Southers. He was husky and apologetic.

"I'm terribly sorry to have made a fuss like this," he said. "I hope my father didn't hear me. This fellow is intolerable."

The intolerable man on the other side of the street was moving slowly towards where a car was parked by the sidewalk. They watched him in silence as he got in, and, turning the car violently, went off towards the Lewisham High Road, and, from the direction he took, London.

"I've been to a dance," said the young man, a little inconsequently.

"I hope," said Mr Reeder with the greatest gentleness, "that you enjoyed yourself."

Mr Southers did not seem disposed at the moment to offer a fuller explanation. As they neared Reeder's gate he said:

"Thank God, Anna was inside before it started! He has been beastly rude to me all the evening. As a matter of fact, she asked me to call and take her home, otherwise I shouldn't have met him."

There had been a dance somewhere in the City, at a livery hall. Anna had gone with Mr Clive Desboyne, but the circumstances under which Johnny called for her were only vaguely detailed. Nor did Mr Reeder hear what was the immediate cause of the quarrel which had set two respectable young men at fisticuffs in the reputable suburban thoroughfare.

To say that he was uninterested would not be true. The matter, however, was hardly pressing. He hoped that both parties to the little fracas might have forgotten the cause of their quarrel by the following morning.

He did not see Johnny again for the remainder of the week. Mr Reeder went about his business, and it is doubtful whether Johnny occupied as much as five minutes of his thoughts, until the case of Joe Attymar came into his purview.

He was again called to Scotland Yard on a consultation. He found Gaylor and the Chief Constable together, and they were examining a very dingy-looking letter which had come to the Yard in the course of the day.

“Sit down, Reeder,” said the chief. “Do you know a man called Attymar?”

Mr Reeder shook his head. He had never heard of Joe Attymar.

“This is a thing we could do ourselves without any bother at all,” interrupted the chief, “but there are all sorts of complications which I won’t bother you with. We believe there’s a member of the staff of one of the Legations in this business, and naturally we want this fact to come out accidentally, and not as the result of any direct investigation by the police.”

Mr Reeder then learned about Joe Attymar, the barge-master, of the little wharf at the end of Shadwick Lane, and the barge *Allanuna* that went up and down the Thames year in and year out and brought bricks. He did not hear at that moment, or subsequently, what part the Legation played, or which Legation it was, or if there was any Legation at all. In justice to his acumen it must be said that he doubted this part of the story from the first, and the theory at which he eventually arrived, and which was probably correct, was that the part he was called upon to play was to stampede Attymar and his associates into betrayal of their iniquity. For this was at a period when Mr Reeder’s name and appearance were known from one end of the river to the other, when there was hardly a bargee or tug-hand who could not have drawn, and did not draw, a passable caricature of that worthy man who had been instrumental in breaking up one of the best-organized gangs of river thieves that had ever amalgamated for an improper purpose.

Mr Reeder scratched his nose and his lips drooped dolefully.

“I was hoping—um—that I should not see that interesting stream for a very long time.”

He sat down and listened patiently to a string of uninteresting facts. Joe Attymar brought bricks up the river—had been bringing them for many years—at a price slightly lower than his competitors. He carried for four builders, and apparently did a steady, if not too prosperous, trade. He was believed locally to be rolling in money, but that is a reputation which Shadwick Lane applied to any man or woman who was not forced at frequent intervals to make a call at the local pawnshop. He kept himself to himself, was unmarried, and had no apparent interests outside of his brick lighterage.

“Fascinating,” murmured Mr Reeder. “It sounds almost like a novel, doesn’t it?”

After he had gone. . . .

“I don’t see what there is fascinating about it,” said Mason, who did not know Mr Reeder very well.

“That’s his idea of being funny,” said Gaylor.

It was a week later, and the *Allanuna* lay at anchor off Queensborough, when a small boat towed by a local boatman, carrying a solitary passenger, came slowly out, under the watchful and suspicious eye of Ligsey. The boat rowed alongside the barge, and Ligsey had a view of a man with a square hat and lopsided pince-nez, who sat in the stern of the boat, an umbrella between his legs, apparently making a meal of the big handle! And, seeing him, Ligsey, who knew a great deal about the river and its scandals, started up from his seat with an exclamation.

He was blinking stupidly at the occupant of the boat when Mr Reeder came up to him.

“Good morning,” said Mr Reeder.

Ligsey said nothing.

“I suppose I should say ‘afternoon’,” continued the punctilious Mr Reeder. “Is the captain aboard?”

Ligsey cleared his throat.

“No, sir, he ain’t.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t object if *I* came aboard?”

Mr Reeder did not wait for the answer, but, with surprising agility, drew himself up on to the narrow deck of the barge. He looked round with mild interest. The hatches were off, and had a good view of the cargo.

“Bricks are very interesting things,” he said pleasantly. “Without bricks we should have no houses; without straw we should have no bricks. It seems therefore a very intelligent act to pack bricks in straw, to remind them, as it were, of what they owe to this humble—um—vegetable.”

Ligsey did not speak, but swallowed something.

“What I want to know,” Mr Reeder went on, and his eyes were never still, “is this. Would it be possible to hire this barge?”

“You’ll have to ask the captain about that,” said Ligsey huskily.

His none too clean face was a shade paler. The stories of Reeder that had come down the river had gained in the telling. He was credited with supernatural powers of divination; his knowledge and perspicuity were unbounded. For the first time in years Ligsey found himself confronted with slowly-moving machinery of the law; it was a little terrifying and his emotions were not at all what he had anticipated. He used to tell Joe Attymar:

“. . . If they ever come to me I’ll give ’em a saucy answer.”

And here ‘they’ had come to him, but no saucy answer hovered on his lips. He felt totally inadequate.

“When are you expecting the captain?” asked Mr Reeder, in his blandest manner.

“Tonight or tomorrow—I don’t know,” stammered Ligsey. “He’ll pick us up, I suppose.”

“Gone ashore for dispatches?” asked Mr Reeder pleasantly. “Or possibly to wire to the owners? No, no, it couldn’t be that: he *is* the owner. How interesting! He’ll be coming off in a few moments with sealed orders under his arm. Will you tell me”—he pointed to the hold—“why you leave that square aperture in the bricks? Is that one of the secrets of packing, or shall I say stowage?”

Ligsey went whiter.

“We always leave it like that,” he said, and did not recognize the sound of his own voice.

Mr Reeder would have descended to the cabin, but the hatch was padlocked. He did invite himself down to the little cubbyhole, in the bow of the boat where Ligsey and the boy slept; and, strangely enough, Mr Reeder carried in his pocket, although it was broad daylight, a very powerful electric handlamp which revealed every corner of Ligsey's living place as it had never been revealed before.

"Rather squalid, isn't it?" asked Mr Reeder. "A terrible thing to have to live in these circumstances and conditions. But of course one can live in a much worse place."

He made this little speech after his return to the fresh air of the deck, and was fanning himself with the brim of his high-crowned hat.

"One can live for example," he went on, surveying the picturesque shore of Queensborough vacantly, "in a nice clean prison. I know plenty of men who would rather live in prison than at—um—Buckingham Palace—though, of course, I have no knowledge that they've ever been invited to Buckingham Palace. But not respectable men, men with wives and families."

Ligsey's face was a blank.

"With girls and mothers."

Ligsey winced.

"They would prefer to remain outside. And, of course, they can remain outside if they're only sufficiently sensible to make a statement to the police."

He took from his pocket-book a card and handed it almost timorously to Ligsey.

"I live there," said Mr Reeder, "and I'll be glad to see you any time you're passing—are you interested in poultry?"

Ligsey was interested in nothing.

Mr Reeder signalled to the boatman, who pulled the skiff alongside, and he stepped down into the boat and was rowed back to the shore.

There was one who had seen him come and who watched him leave by train. When night fell, Joe Attymar rowed out to the barge and found a very perturbed lieutenant.

"Old Reeder's been here," blurted Ligsey, but Joe stopped him with a gesture.

“Want to tell the world about it?” he snarled. “Come aft.”

The thickset young man followed his commander.

“I know Reeder’s been here: I’ve seen him. What did he want?”

Briefly Ligsey told him quite a number of unimportant details about the visit. It was not remarkable that he did not make any reference to the card or to Mr Reeder’s invitation.

“That’s done it,” said Ligsey when he had finished. “Old Reeder’s got a nose like a hawk. Asked me why we left that hole in the bricks. I’ve never had to deal with a detective before——”

“You haven’t, eh?” sneered the other. “Who was that waterman who came aboard off Gravesend the other night? And why did I drop half-hundredweight of good stuff overboard, eh? You fool! We’ve had half a dozen of these fellows on board, all of ’em cleverer than Reeder. Did he ask you to tell him anything?”

“No,” said Ligsey instantly.

Joe Attymar thought for a little time, and then:

“We’ll get up the anchor. I’m not waiting for the Dutch boat,” he said.

Ligsey’s sigh of relief was audible at the other end of the barge.

CHAPTER 3

This visit of Reeder was the culmination of a series of inquiries he had conducted in the course of a few days. He turned in a short report to Scotland Yard, and went home to Brockley Road, overtaking Johnny Southers as he turned from Lewisham High Road. Johnny was not alone.

“Anna and I were discussing you,” he said, as they slackened their steps to match the more leisurely pace of Mr Reeder. “Is it possible for us to see you for five minutes?”

It was possible. Mr Reeder ushered them up to his big, old-fashioned sitting-room, inwardly hoping that the consultation would have no reference to the mysterious workings of the young and human heart.

They were going to get married.

“Anna’s father knows, and he’s been awfully decent about it,” said Johnny, “and I’d like you to know too, Mr Reeder.”

Mr Reeder murmured something congratulatory. That matter of love and loving was at any rate shelved.

“And Desboyne has been awfully decent—I told Anna all about that rather unpleasant little scene you witnessed—he never told her a word. He wrote apologizing to Anna, and wrote an apology to me. He has offered me a very good position in Singapore if I care to take it—he’s terribly rich, and it sounds very good.”

“It doesn’t sound good to me.”

Anna’s voice was decisive.

“I appreciate Clive’s generosity, but I don’t think he ought to give up his Civil Service work except for something better in England. I want you to persuade him, Mr Reeder.”

Mr Reeder looked from one to the other dismally. The idea of persuading anybody to do anything in which he himself was not greatly absorbed filled him with dismay. As a mentor to the young he recognized his limitations. He liked Johnny Southers as he liked any decent young fellow. He thought Anna Welford was extraordinarily pretty; but even these two facts in conjunction could not arouse him to enthusiasm.

“I don’t want much persuading,” said Johnny, to his relief. “I’ve got something else up my sleeve—a pretty big thing. I’m not at liberty to talk about it; in fact, I’ve been asked not to. If that comes off, the Singapore job will be refused. It isn’t so very difficult now. The point is this, Mr Reeder: if you were offered a partnership in a thriving concern, that could be made into something very big if one put one’s heart and soul into it, would you accept?”

Mr Reeder looked at the ceiling and sighed.

“Hypotheses always worry me, Mr Southers. Perhaps, when the moment comes, if you could tell me all about the business, I may be able to advise you, although I confess I have never been regarded as a man whose advice was worth two—um—hoots.”

“That’s what I wanted to see you about, Mr Reeder.” Anna nodded slowly. “I’m so terribly afraid of Johnny leaving the service for an uncertainty, and I do want him to talk the matter over with you. I don’t want to know his secrets”—there was the ghost of a smile in her eyes—“I think I know most of them that count.”

Mr Reeder looked round miserably. He felt himself caught and entangled in a network of dull domesticity. He was, if the truth be told, immensely bored, and, had he been more temperamental, he might have screamed. He wished he had not overtaken these loitering lovers, or that they would apply to one of those periodicals which maintain a department devoted to advising the young and the sentimental in the choice of their careers. It was with the greatest happiness that he closed the door upon their small mystery and devoted himself to the serious business of high tea.

Mr Reeder had many anxieties to occupy his mind in the next few days, and the fact that he had added Joe Attymar to his list of his enemies, even if he were aware of the fact, was not one of these.

In the gaols of a dozen countries were men who actively disliked him. Meister of Hamburg, who used to sell United States bills by the hundredweight, Lefere, the clever wholesale engraver of lire notes, Monsatta, who specialized in English fivers, Madame Pensa of Pisa, who for many years was the chief distributor of forged money in Eastern and Southern Europe, Al Selinski, the paper maker, Don Leishmer, who printed French *milles* by the thousand, they all knew Mr Reeder, at least by name, and none of them had a good word for him, except Monsatta, who was large-minded and could detach himself from his personal misfortunes.

Letters came to Mr Reeder from many peculiar sources. It was a curious fact that a very large number of Mr Reeder's correspondents were women. A sensible number of the letters which came to him were of a most embarrassing character.

His name had been mentioned in many cases that had been heard at the Old Bailey. He himself had, from time to time, stood up in the witness stand, a lugubrious and unhappy figure, and had given evidence in his hesitant and deferential way against all manner of wrong-doers, but mostly forgers.

He was variously described as 'an expert', as 'a private detective', as 'a bank official'. In a sense he was all these, yet none of them entirely. Judges and certain barristers knew that he was at the call of the Public Prosecutor's Department. It was said that privately he enjoyed a status equivalent in rank to a superintendent of police. He certainly had a handsome retaining fee from the Bankers' Association, and probably drew pay from the Government, but nobody knew his business. He banked at Torquay and the manager of the bank was his personal friend.

But the net result of his fugitive appearances in court was that quite intelligent women were seized with the idea that he was the man who should be employed to watch their husbands and to procure the evidence necessary for their divorces. Business men wrote to him asking him to investigate the private lives of their partners; quite a few commissions were offered by important commercial concerns, but none of these appealed to Mr Reeder, and with his own hand he would write long and carefully punctuated letters explaining that he was not a private detective in the real sense of the word.

He was not surprised, therefore, when, some four days after his talk with Johnny Southers, he received a letter addressed from a Park Lane flat, requesting his services. He turned first to the signature and with some difficulty deciphered it as 'Clive Desboyne'. For a moment the name, whilst it had a certain familiarity, was difficult to attach, and then he remembered the quarrel he had witnessed, and realized that this was the other party to that unhappy conflict.

The letter was typewritten and ran:

Dear Sir, I happen to know your private address because Miss Welford pointed it out to me one evening when I was visiting her. I am in rather a delicate position, and I am wondering whether I could employ your services professionally to extricate myself? Since the matter affects Southers, whom I think you know (I have

learned since that you were a witness of a certain disgraceful episode, for which I was probably more to blame than he), I thought you might be willing to receive me. I want you to undertake this task on a professional basis and charge me your usual fees. I shall be out of town until Friday night, but there is no immediate urgency. If I could call some time after ten on Friday I should be eternally grateful.

Yours, etc.

Mr Reeder's first inclination was to take out a sheet of paper and write a firm but polite refusal to see Mr Desboyne, however stringent might be his predicament. He had written the first three words when one of those curious impulses which came to him at times, and which so often urged him to the right course, stayed his hand. Instead he took a telegraph form and sent a laconic message agreeing to the young man's suggestion.

The day of the appointment was a busy one for Mr Reeder. Scotland Yard had made two important discoveries—a small garage in the north of London, which contained nearly 400 lbs. of saccharine, had been raided in the early hours of the morning, and this was followed up by a second raid in a West End mansion flat, where large quantities of heroin and cocaine were unearthed by the police.

"It looks as though we've found one of the principal distributing agents," said Gaylor. "We've got the barge under observation, and we're taking the chance of arresting Attymar as soon as he steps on board."

"Where is it?"

"Off Greenwich," said Gaylor.

Mr Reeder dived down into his pocket and produced an envelope. The paper was grimy, the address was a scrawl. He took from this as dingy a letter and laid it on the table before Gaylor.

Dear Sir, I can give you informacion. I will call at your howse on Sunday morning. From a Friend.

Gaylor inspected the envelope. The date-stamp was 'Greenwich'.

"He had some doubt about sending it at all: the flap has been opened and closed again—I presume this is Ligsey; his real name is William Liggs. He's had no convictions, but he hasn't been above suspicion. You'll see him?"

“If he comes,” said Mr Reeder. “So many of these gentlemen who undertake to supply information think better of it at the last moment.”

“It may be too late,” said Gaylor.

It was at the end of a very heavy and tiring day that Mr Reeder went back to his house, forgetting the appointment he had so rashly made. He had hardly got into the house before the bell rang, and it was then that he realized, with bitter regret, that he had robbed himself of an hour’s sleep which was badly needed.

Mr Desboyne was in evening dress. He had driven down from his club, where he had bathed and changed after his long journey from the West of England, he explained.

“I feel very ashamed to bother you at this hour of the night, Mr Reeder,” he said with an apologetic smile, “but I feel rather like the villain of the piece, and my vanity has made me put matters right.”

Mr Reeder looked round helplessly for a chair, found one and pointed to it, and Desboyne drew it up to the table where the detective was sitting.

He was a man of thirty-three or thirty-five, good-looking, with a very pleasant, open face and a pair of grey eyes that twinkled good humouredly.

“You saw the fight? . . . Gosh! that fellow could punch! I thoroughly deserved what I got, which certainly wasn’t very much. I was very rude to him. But then, like a fool, I went to the other extreme, and have got him a job in Singapore—of course he’ll take it—and I’m most anxious to get out of my offer.”

Mr Reeder looked at him in astonishment, and the young man laughed ruefully.

“I suppose you think I’m a queer devil? Well, I am. I’m rather impetuous and I’ve got myself into a bit of a hole. And it’s a bigger hole than I knew, because I’m terribly fond of Anna Welford, and she’s terribly unfond of me! Southers is rather in the position of a successful rival, so that everything I say or do must be suspect. That’s the awful thing about it!”

“Why do you wish to cancel the appointment?” asked Mr Reeder.

He could have added that, so far as he could recall, the appointment had already been cancelled.

Clive Desboyne hesitated.

“Well, it’s a difficult story to tell.”

He rose from his seat and paced up and down the room, his hands thrust into his pockets, a frown on his face.

“Do you remember the night of the fight? I don’t suppose that’s graven on your memory. It arose out of something I said to our friend as we left the City hall. Apparently—I only discovered this afterwards—there was a man out there waiting to see Southers, but in the excitement of our little fracas—which began in the City, by the way—Southers didn’t see the man, who either followed him to Lewisham or came on ahead of him. He must have been present in the street when the fight took place. When I got home that night the hall porter asked me if I would see a very seedy-looking individual, and, as I wasn’t in the mood to see anybody, I refused. A few days later I was stopped in Piccadilly by a man who I thought was a beggar—a healthy-looking beggar, but most beggars are that way. He started by telling me he’d seen the fight, and said he could tell me something about Southers. I wasn’t feeling so very savage then as I had been, and I’d have hoofed him off, but he was so insistent, and in the end I told him to call at my flat. He came that night and told me the most extraordinary story. He said his name was”—Clive Desboyne frowned—“the name’s slipped me for the moment, but it will come back. He was a mate or assistant on a barge run by a man named Attymar——”

“Ligsey?” suggested Mr Reeder, and the other nodded.

“That’s the name—Ligsey. I’m cutting the story short because it took a tremendous long time to tell, and I don’t want it to bore you as it bored me. They’ve been running some kind of contraband up the river on the barge, for apparently Attymar is a smuggler on a large scale. That was a yarn I didn’t believe at first, though, from the things he told me, it seemed very likely that he spoke the truth. Certain articles were smuggled up the river on the barge, and others were passed through the Customs by Southers.”

Mr Reeder opened his mouth very wide.

“Now I’ll tell you the truth.” Clive Desboyne’s voice was very earnest. “I wanted to believe that story. In my heart of hearts I dislike John Southers—I’d be inhuman if I didn’t. At the same time I wanted to play the game. I told this fellow he was a liar but he swore it was true. He thinks the police are going to arrest Attymar, and when they do, Attymar will spill the beans, to use his own expression. In the meantime I have recommended Southers to a very important and responsible job in Singapore, and naturally, if this story comes out, I’m going to look pretty foolish. I don’t mind that,” he added quietly, “but I do mind Anna Welford marrying this man.”

Mr Reeder plucked at his lower lip.

“Do you know Attymar?”

The young man shook his head.

“I can’t even say that I know Ligsey, but if he keeps his promise I shall know Attymar tomorrow morning.”

“What was his promise?” asked Mr Reeder.

“He says Attymar has documentary proof—he didn’t use that expression but that is what he meant—and that he was going to Attymar’s house tonight to get it.”

Again Mr Reeder thought, staring into vacancy.

“When did you see him last?”

“The morning I wrote to you, or rather the morning you received the letter.” He made a little gesture of despair. “Whatever happens, Anna’s going to think I’m the biggest cad——”

The telephone bell rang sharply. Mr Reeder, with a murmured apology, took up the receiver and listened with a face that did not move. He only asked “What time?” and, after a long pause, said “Yes.” As he was hanging up the receiver, Desboyne went on:

“What I should like to do is to see Attymar——”

Mr Reeder shook his head.

“I’m afraid you won’t see Attymar. He was murdered between nine and ten tonight.”

CHAPTER 4

It was half past twelve when Mr Reeder's taxi brought him into Shadwick Lane, which was alive with people. A police cordon was drawn across the gate, but Gaylor, who was waiting for him, conducted him into the yard.

"We're dragging the river for the body," he explained.

"Where was it committed?" asked Mr Reeder.

"Come inside," said the other grimly, "and then you will ask no questions."

It was not a pleasant sight that met Mr Reeder's eyes, though he was a man not easily sickened. The little sitting-room was a confusion of smashed furniture, the walls splashed with red. A corner table, however, had been left untouched. Here were two glasses of whisky, one full, the other half empty. A half smoked cigar was carefully laid on a piece of paper by the side of these.

"The murder was committed here and the body was dragged to the edge of the wharf and thrown into the water," said Gaylor. "There's plenty of evidence of that.

"We've taken possession of a lot of papers, and we found a letter on the mantelpiece from a man named Southers—John Southers. No address, but evidently from the handwriting a person of some education. At nine twenty-five tonight Attymar had a visitor, a young man who was admitted through the wicket gate, and who was seen to leave at twenty five minutes to ten, about ten minutes after he arrived."

Gaylor opened an attache case and took out a battered, cheap silver watch, which had evidently been under somebody's heel. The glass was smashed, the case was bent out of shape. The hands stood at nine-thirty.

"One of the people here recognized this as Ligsey's—a woman who lives in the street who had pawned it for him on one occasion. It's important, because it probably gives us the hour of the murder, if you allow the watch to be a little fast or slow. It's hardly likely to be accurate. We have sent a description round of Southers, though it isn't a very good one, but it will probably be sufficient. I'm having a facsimile of the writing——"

“I can save you the trouble; here is the young man’s address.”

Mr Reeder took a notebook from his pocket, scribbled a few lines and handed it to the detective. He looked glumly at the bloodstained room and the evidence of tragedy, followed the detective in silence, whilst Gaylor, with the aid of a powerful light, showed the telltale stains leading from the wharf, and . . .

“Very interesting” said Mr Reeder. “When you recover the bodies I should like to see them.”

He stared out over the river, which was covered by a faint mist—not sufficient to impede navigation, but enough to shroud and make indistinct objects thirty or forty yards away.

“The barge is at Greenwich, I think,” he said, after a long silence. “Could I borrow a police launch?”

One of the launches was brought in to the crazy wharf and Mr Reeder lowered himself gingerly, never losing grip of the umbrella which no man had seen unfurled. It was a chilly night, an easterly wind blowing up the river, but he sat in the bow of the launch motionless, sphinxlike, staring ahead as the boat streaked eastwards towards Greenwich.

It drew up by the side of the barge, which was moored close to the Surrey shore, and a quavering voice hailed them.

“That you, Ligsey?”

Mr Reeder pulled himself on board before he replied.

“No, my boy,” he said gently, “it is not Ligsey. Were you expecting him?”

The youth held up his lantern, surveyed Mr Reeder and visibly quailed.

“You’re a copper, ain’t yer?” he asked tremulously. “Have you pinched Ligsey?”

“I have not pinched Ligsey,” said Mr Reeder, patting the boy gently on the back. “How long has he been gone?”

“He went about eight, soon after it was dark; the gov’nor come down for him.”

“The gov’nor come down for him,” repeated Mr Reeder in a murmur. “Did you see the governor?”

“No, sir; he shouted for me to go below. Ligsey always makes me go below when him and the gov’nor have a talk.”

Mr Reeder drew from his pocket a yellow carton of cigarettes and lit one before he pursued his inquiries.

“Then what happened?”

“Ligsey come down and packed his ditty box, and told me I was to hang on all night, but that I could go to sleep. I was frightened about being left alone on the barge——”

Mr Reeder was already making his way down the companion to Ligsey’s quarters. Evidently all the man’s kit had been removed; even the sheets on his bed must have been folded and taken away, for the bunk was tumbled.

On a little swing table, which was a four-foot plank suspended from the deck above, was a letter. It was not fastened, and Mr Reeder made no scruple in opening and reading its contents. It was in the handprint which, he had been informed, was the only kind of writing Attymar knew.

Dear Mr Southers, If you come aboard the stuff is in the engine-room. I have got to be very careful because the police are watching.

When he questioned the boy, whose name was Hobbs, he learned that Ligsey had come down and left the letter. Mr Reeder went aft and found the hatchway over the little engine-room unfastened, and descended into the strong-smelling depths where the engine was housed. It was here evidently that Attymar remained during his short voyages. There was a signal bell above his head, and a comfortable armchair had been fixed within reach of the levers.

His search here was a short one. Inside an open locker he found a small, square package, wrapped in oiled paper, and a glance at the label told him its contents, even though he did not read Dutch.

Returning to the boy, he questioned him closely. It was no unusual thing for Attymar to pick up his mate from the barge. The boy had once seen the launch, and described it as a very small tender. He knew nothing of Mr Southers, had never seen him on board the ship, though occasionally people did come, on which occasions he was sent below.

At his request, Mr Reeder was put ashore at Greenwich and got on the telephone to Gaylor. It was now two o’clock in the morning, and much had

happened.

“We arrested that man Southers; found his trousers covered with blood. He admits he was at Attymar’s house tonight, and tells a cock-and-bull story of what he did subsequently. He didn’t get home till nearly twelve.”

“Extraordinary,” said Mr Reeder, and the mildness of the comment evidently irritated Inspector Gaylor.

“That’s one way of putting it, but I think we’ve made a pretty good capture,” he said. “We’ve got enough evidence to hang him. Attymar’s left all sorts of notes on his invoices.”

“Amazing,” said Mr Reeder, and gathered from the abruptness with which he was cut off that, for some mysterious reason, he had annoyed the man at Scotland Yard.

He sent back a short report with the documents and the drugs to Scotland Yard, and drove home by taxi. It was three o’clock by the time he reached Brockley Road, and he was not surprised to find his housekeeper up and to hear that Anna Welford was waiting for him.

She was very white and her manner was calm.

“You’ve heard about Johnny being arrested——” she began.

Mr Reeder nodded.

“Yes, I gave them the necessary information as to where he was to be found,” he said, and he saw the colour come and go in her face.

“I—I suppose you—you had to do your duty?” she said haltingly. “But you know it’s not true, Mr Reeder. You know Johnny . . . he couldn’t . . .” Her voice choked.

Mr Reeder shook his head.

“I don’t know Johnny really,” he said apologetically. “He is—um—the merest acquaintance, Miss Welford. I am not saying that in disparagement of him, because quite a number of people who aren’t my friends are respectable citizens. Did you see him before he was arrested?”

She nodded.

“Immediately before?”

“Half an hour before. He was terribly disappointed; he had gone to see about this partnership but he had a feeling that he’d been tricked, for nothing

came of it. He had arranged to see me, and I waited up for him . . . he was crossing the road to his own house when he was arrested.”

“Did he wear a blue suit or a grey suit?”

“A blue suit,” she said quickly.

Mr Reeder looked at the ceiling.

“Of course he wore a blue suit; otherwise—um . . .” He scratched his chin irritably. “It was a cold night, too. I can’t understand until I have seen his—um—trousers.”

She looked at him in bewilderment, a little fearfully. And then suddenly Mr Reeder gave one of his rare smiles and dropped a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“I shouldn’t be too worried if I were you,” he said, with a kindly look in his eyes. “You’ve got quite a number of good friends, and you will find Mr Desboyne will do a lot to help your Johnny.”

She shook her head.

“Clive doesn’t like Johnny,” she said.

“That I can well believe,” said Mr Reeder good humouredly. “Nevertheless, unless I’m a bad prophet, you will find Mr Desboyne the one person who can clear up this—um—unpleasantness.”

“But who was the man who was killed? It’s all so terribly unreal to me. Attymar was his name, wasn’t it? Johnny didn’t know anybody named Attymar. At least, he didn’t tell me so. I’m absolutely stunned by this news, Mr Reeder. I can’t realize its gravity. It seems just a stupid joke that somebody’s played on us. Johnny couldn’t do harm to any man.”

“I’m sure he couldn’t,” said Mr Reeder soothingly, but that meant nothing.

CHAPTER 5

Mr Reeder's housekeeper had, since his arrival, behaved with a certain secretiveness which could only mean that she had something important to communicate. It was after he had seen the girl to her house that he learned what the mystery was all about.

"The young gentleman who came to see you last night," she said in a low voice. "I've put him in the waiting-room."

"Mr Desboyne?"

"That's the name," she nodded. "He said he wouldn't go until he'd seen you."

In a few seconds Clive Desboyne was shown in.

"I've only just heard about Southers' arrest—it's monstrous! And I was being so beastly about him tonight. Mr Reeder, I'll spend all the money you want to get this young man out of his trouble. My God, it's awful for Anna!"

Mr Reeder pulled at his long nose and said he thought it was rather unpleasant.

"And," he added, "for everybody."

"They say this man Ligsey is also dead. If I'd had any sense I'd have brought over the note I had of our conversation."

"I could call up for it in the morning," said Mr Reeder, and his voice was surprisingly brisk.

Mr Desboyne gazed at him in startled astonishment. It was as though this weary man with the drooping lips and tired eyes had suddenly received a great mental tonic.

"You made notes? Not one man in ten would have thought of that," said Mr Reeder. "I thought I was the only person who did it."

Clive Desboyne laughed.

"I've given you the impression that I'm terribly methodical," he said, "and that isn't quite exact."

He looked at the watch on his wrist.

"It's too late to ask you to breakfast."

“Breakfast is my favourite meal,” said Mr Reeder gaily.

Late as was the hour, he was standing before the polished mahogany door of 974, Memorial Mansions, Park Lane, at nine o'clock next morning. Mr Desboyne was not so early a riser, and indeed had doubted whether the detective would keep his promise. Mr Reeder was left standing in the hall whilst the servant went to inquire exactly how this strangely appearing gentleman should be disposed of.

There was plenty to occupy Mr Reeder's attention during her absence, for the wide hall was hung with photographs which gave some indication of Desboyne's wide sporting and theatrical interests. There was one interesting photograph, evidently an enlargement of a snapshot showing the House of Commons in the background, which held Mr Reeder's attention, the more so as the photograph also showed the corner of Westminster Bridge across which motor buses were moving. He was looking at this when Clive Desboyne joined him.

“Here is a piece of detective work,” said Mr Reeder triumphantly, pointing to the photograph. “I can tell you almost to the week that picture was taken. Do you see those two omnibuses bearing the names of two plays? I happen to know there was only one week in the year when they were both running together.”

“Indeed,” said Desboyne, apparently not as impressed by this piece of deduction as Mr Reeder had expected.

He led the way to the dining-room, and Reeder found by the side of his plate three foolscap sheets covered with writing.

“I don't know whether you'll be able to read it,” said Desboyne, “but you'll notice there one or two things that I forgot to tell you at the interview. I think on the whole they favour Southers, and I'm glad I made a note of them. For example, he said he had never seen Southers and only knew him by name. That in itself is rather curious.”

“Very,” said Mr Reeder. “Regarding that photograph in the hall—it must have been in May last year. I remember some years ago, by a lucky chance, I was able to establish the date on which a cheque was passed, as distinct from the date on which it was drawn, by the fact that the drawer had forgotten to sign one of his initials.”

It was surprising how much Mr Reeder, who was not as a rule a loquacious man, talked in the course of that meal. Mostly he talked about

nothing. When Clive Desboyne led him to the murder Mr Reeder skilfully edged away to less unpleasant topics.

“It doesn’t interest me very much, I confess,” he said. “I am not a member of the—um—Criminal Investigation Department; I was merely called in to deal with this man’s smuggling—and he seems to have smuggled pretty extensively. It is distressing that young Southers is implicated. He seems a nice lad, and has rather a sane view of the care of chickens. For example, he was telling me that he had an incubator. . . .”

At the end of the meal he asked permission to take away the notes for study, and this favour was granted.

He was at the house in Shadwick Lane half an hour later. Gaylor, who had arranged to meet him there, had not arrived, and Mr Reeder had two men who had had semi-permanent jobs on the wharf. It was the duty of one to open and close the gates and pilot the lorries to their positions. He had also, as had his companion, to assist at the loading.

They had not seen much of Attymar all the years they had been there. He usually came in on one of the night or early morning tides. Ligsey paid them their wages.

“There was never any change,” said one mournfully. “We ain’t had the gates painted since I’ve bin here—we’ve had the same little anvil to keep the gate open——”

He looked round first one side and then the other. The same little anvil was not there.

“Funny,” he said.

Mr Reeder agreed. Who would steal a rusty little anvil? He saw the place where it had lain; the impression of it still stood in the dusty earth.

Later came Gaylor, in a hurry to show him over the other rooms of the house. There was a kitchen, a rather spacious cellar, which was closed by a heavy door, and one bedroom that had been divided into two unequal parts by a wooden partition. The bedroom was simply but cleanly furnished. There was a bed and bedstead, a dressing table with a large mirror, and a chest of drawers, which was empty. Indeed, there was no article of Attymar’s visible, except an old razor, a stubbly shaving brush and six worn shirts that had been washed until they were threadbare. From the centre of the ceiling hung an electric light with an opalescent shade; another light hung over a small oak desk, in which, Gaylor informed him, most of the documents in the case had been found. But Mr Reeder’s chief interest was in

the mirror, and in the greasy smear which ran from the top left hand corner almost along the top of the mirror. The glass itself was supported by two little mahogany pillars, and to the top of each of these was attached a piece of string.

“Most amusing,” said Mr Reeder, speaking his thoughts aloud.

“Remind me to laugh,” said Mr Gaylor heavily. “What is amusing?”

For answer Mr Reeder put up his hand and ran the tip of his finger along the smear. Then he began to prow around the apartment obviously looking for something, and as obviously disappointed that it could not be found.

“No, nothing has been taken out of here,” said Gaylor in answer to his question, “except the papers. Here’s something that may amuse you more.”

He opened a door leading to the bedroom. Here was a cupboard—it was little bigger. The walls and floor were covered with white tiles, as also was the back of the door. From the ceiling projected a large nozzle, and in one of the walls were two taps.

“How’s that for luxury? Shower bath—hot and cold water. Doesn’t that make you laugh?”

“Nothing makes me laugh except the detectives in pictures,” said Mr Reeder calmly. “Do you ever go to the pictures, Gaylor?”

The inspector admitted that occasionally he did.

“I like to see detectives in comic films, because they always carry large magnifying glasses. Do they make you laugh?”

“They do,” admitted Mr Gaylor, with a contemptuous and reminiscent smile.

“Then get ready to howl,” said Mr Reeder, and from his pocket took the largest reading glass that Gaylor had ever seen.

Under the astonished eyes of the detective Reeder went down on his knees in the approved fashion, and began carefully to scrutinize the floor. Inch by inch he covered, stopping now and again to pick up something invisible to the Scotland Yard man, and placed it in an envelope which he had also taken from his pocket.

“Cigar ash?” asked Gaylor sardonically.

“Almost,” said Mr Reeder.

He went on with his search, then suddenly he sat back on his heels, his eyes ablaze, and held up a tiny piece of silver paper, less than a quarter of an inch square. Gaylor looked down more closely.

“Oh, it is a cigarette you’re looking for?”

But Mr Reeder was oblivious to all sarcasm. Inside the silver paper was a scrap of transparent paper, so thin that it seemed part of the tinsel. Very carefully, however, he separated the one from the other, touched its surface and examined his finger-tips.

“Where’s the fireplace?” he asked suddenly.

“There’s a fireplace in the kitchen—that’s the only one.”

Mr Reeder hurried downstairs and examined this small apartment. There were ashes in the grate, but it was impossible to tell what had been burnt.

“I should like to say,” said Gaylor, “that your efforts are wasted, for we’ve got enough in the diary to hang Southers twice over. Only I suspect you when you do things unnecessarily.”

“The diary?” Mr Reeder looked up.

“Yes, Attymar’s.”

“So he kept a diary, did he?” Mr Reeder was quite amused. “I should have thought he would, if I had thought about it at all.”

Then he frowned.

“Not an ordinary diary, of course? Just an exercise book. It begins—let me see—shall we say two weeks ago, or three weeks?”

Gaylor gazed at him in amazement.

“Mason told you?”

“No, he didn’t tell me anything, partly because he hasn’t spoken to me. But, of course, it would be in a sort of exercise book. An ordinary printed diary that began on the first of January would be unthinkable. This case is getting so fascinating that I can hardly stop laughing!”

He was not laughing; he was very serious indeed, as he stood in the untidy yard before the little house and threw his keen glance across its littered surface.

“There is no sign of the tender that brought Ligsey here? The little boy on the barge was much more informative than he imagined! I’ll tell you

what to look for, shall I? A black, canoe-shaped motor boat which might hold three people at a pinch. Remember that—a canoe-shaped boat, say ten feet long.”

“Where shall I find it?” asked the fascinated Gaylor.

“At the bottom of the river,” said Mr Reeder calmly, “and in or near it you will find a little anvil which used to keep the gate open!”

Mr Reeder had a very large acquaintance with criminals, larger perhaps than the average police officer, whose opportunities are circumscribed by the area to which he is attached; and he knew that the business of detection would be at a standstill if there were such a thing in the world as a really clever criminal. By the just workings of providence, men who gain their living by the evasion of the law are deprived of the eighth sense which, properly functioning, would keep them out of the hands of the police.

He made yet another survey of the house before he left, pointed out to Gaylor something which that officer had already noticed, namely, the bloodstains on the floor and the wall of a small lobby which connected the main living-room with the yard.

“Naturally I saw it,” said Gaylor, who was inclined to be a little complacent. “My theory is that the fight started in the sitting-room; they struggled out into the passage——”

“That would be impossible,” murmured Mr Reeder.

CHAPTER 6

John Southers made a brief appearance at the Tower of London Police Court—a dazed, bewildered young man, so overwhelmed by his position that he could do no more than answer the questions put to him by the magistrate’s clerk.

Gaylor had seen him earlier in the morning.

“He said nothing except that he went to Attymar’s house—oh, yes, he admits that—by appointment. He says Attymar kept him waiting for some time before he opened the door, and then only allowed him to come into the lobby. He tells some rambling story about Attymar sending him to meet a man at Highgate. In fact, it’s the usual Man story.”

Mr Reeder nodded. He was not unacquainted with that mysterious man who figures in the narratives of all arrested persons. Sometimes it was a man who gave the prisoner the stolen golds in the possession of which he had been found; sometimes it was the man who asked another to cash a forged cheque; but always it was a vague Somebody who could never be traced. Half the work of investigation which occupied the attention of the detective force consisted of a patient search for men who had no existence except in the imaginations of prisoners under remand.

“Did he see him?” asked Mr Reeder.

Gaylor laughed.

“My dear chap, what a question!”

Mr Reeder fondled his bony chin.

“Is it possible to—um—have a little chat with our friend Southers?”

Gaylor was dubious, and had reason for his doubt. Chief Constable Mason and the high men at Headquarters were at the moment writhing under a periodical wave of criticism which sweeps across Scotland Yard at regular intervals; and their latest delinquency was the cross-examination of a man under suspicion of a serious crime. There had been questions in Parliament, almost a Royal Commission.

“I doubt it,” said Gaylor. “The Chief is feeling rather sick about this Hanny business, and as the kick has come down from your department it isn’t likely that they’ll make an exception. I’ll ask Mason and let you know.”

Mr Reeder was home that afternoon when Anna Welford called. She was most amazingly calm. Mr Reeder, who had shown some hesitation about receiving her, was visibly relieved.

“Have you seen Johnny?” was the first question she asked.

Mr Reeder shook his head, and explained to her that in the strictest sense he was not in the case, and that the police were very jealous of interference.

“Clive has been to see me,” she said when he had finished, “and he has told me everything—he is terribly upset.”

“Told you everything?” repeated Mr Reeder.

She nodded.

“About Ligsey, and the story that Clive told you. I understood—in a way. He is doing everything he can for Johnny; he has engaged a lawyer and briefed counsel.”

For the second time Mr Reeder motioned her to a chair and, when she was seated, continued his own restless pacing.

“If there was any truth in that story, your Johnny should be rather well off,” he said. “The wages of sin are rather—um—high. Yet his father told me this morning—I had a brief interview with him—that young Mr Southers’ bank balance is not an excessive one.”

He saw her lower her eyes and heard the quick little sigh.

“They’ve found the money—I thought you knew that,” she said in a low voice.

Mr Reeder halted in his stride and peered down at her.

“They’ve found the money?”

She nodded.

“The police came and made a search about an hour ago, and they found a box in the toolshed with hundreds of pounds in it, all in notes.”

Mr Reeder did not often whistle; he whistled now.

“Does Mr Desboyne know this?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Clive doesn’t know. It happened after he had left. He’s been terribly nice—he’s made one confession that isn’t very flattering to me.”

Reeder's eyes twinkled.

"That he is—um—engaged to somebody else?" he suggested, and she stared at him in amazement.

"Do you know?"

"One has heard of such things," said Mr Reeder bravely.

"I was very glad," she went on. "It removed the"—she hesitated—"personal bias. He really is sorry for all he has said and done. Johnny's trouble has shaken him terribly. Clive thinks that the murder was committed by this man Ligsey."

"Oh!" said Mr Reeder. "That is interesting."

He stared down at her, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

"The—um—police rather fancy that Mr Ligsey is dead," he said, and there was a note of irritation in his voice as though he resented the police holding any theory at all. "Quite dead—um—murdered, in fact."

There was a long pause here. He knew instinctively that she had come to make some request, but it was not until she rose to go that she spoke her thoughts.

"Clive wished to see you himself to make a proposition. He said that he did not think you were engaged on the—official side of the case, and he's got a tremendous opinion of your cleverness, Mr Reeder, and so of course have I. Is it humanly possible for you to take up this case . . . Johnny's side, I mean? Perhaps I'm being silly, but just now I'm clutching at straws."

Mr Reeder was looking out of the window, his head moving from side to side.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "I really am afraid not! The people on your—um—friend's side are the police. If he is innocent, I am naturally on his side, with them. Don't you see, young lady, that when we prove a man's guilt we also prove everybody else's innocence?"

It was a long speech for Mr Reeder, and he had not quite finished. He stood with his hands deep in his pocket, his eyes half closed, his body swaying to and fro.

"Let me see now . . . if Ligsey were alive? . . . A very dense and stupid young man, quite incapable, I should have thought, of—um—so many things that have happened during the last twenty-four hours."

After Anna had left, he went to Southers' house and interviewed Johnny's father. The old man was bearing his sorrow remarkably well. Indeed, his principal emotion was a loud fury against the people who dared accuse his son.

He led the way to the toolshed in the yard and showed the detective just where the box had been hidden.

"Personally, I never go into the shed. It's Johnny's little cubby hutch," he said. "The lad is fond of gardening, and, like you, Mr Reeder, has a fancy for poultry."

"Is the shed kept locked?"

"No, I've never seen it locked," said old Southers.

The place from which the box had been extracted was at the far end of the shed. It had been concealed behind a bag of chicken seed.

Mr Reeder took a brief survey of the garden: it was an oblong strip of ground, measuring about a hundred yards by twenty. At the further end of the garden was a wall which marked the boundary of the garden which backed on to it. The garden could be approached either from the door leading to a small glass conservatory, or along a narrow gravel strip which ran down one side of the house. Ingress, however, was barred by a small door stretched across the narrow path.

"But it's seldom locked," said Southers. "We leave it open for the milkman; he goes round to the kitchen that way in the morning."

Mr Reeder went back to the garden and walked slowly along the gravel path which ran between two large flower beds. At the farther end was a wired-in chicken run. Mr Reeder surveyed the flower beds meditatively.

"Nobody has dug up the garden?" he asked, and, when the other replied in the negative: "Then I should do a bit of digging myself if I were you Mr Southers," he said gently; "and whether you tell the police what you find, or do not tell the police, is entirely a matter for your own conscience."

He looked up at the sky for a long time as though he were expecting to see an aeroplane, and then:

"If it is consistent with your—um—conscience to say nothing about your discovery, and if you removed it or them to a safe place where it or they would not be found, it might be to the advantage of your son in the not too distant future."

Mr Southers was a little agitated, more than a little bewildered, when Mr Reeder took his leave. He was to learn that the ban on his activities in regard to the Attymar murder had been strengthened rather than relaxed, and he experienced a gentle but malignant pleasure in the thought that in one respect he had made their task a little more difficult.

It was Gaylor who brought the news.

“I spoke to the chief about your seeing Southers in Brixton, but he thought it was best if you kept out of the case until the witnesses are tested.”

Mr Reeder’s duties in the Public Prosecutor’s Department were to examine witnesses prior to their appearance in court, to test the strength or the weakness of their testimony, and he had been employed in this capacity before his official connection with the department was made definite.

“At the same time,” Gaylor went on, “if you can pick up anything we’ll be glad to have it.”

“Naturally,” murmured Mr Reeder.

“I mean, you may by accident hear things—you know these people: they live in the same street: and I think you know the young lady Southers is engaged to?”

Mr Reeder inclined his head.

“There’s another thing, Mr Reeder,” Gaylor evidently felt he was treading on delicate ground, having summarily declined and rejected the assistance of his companion. “If you should hear from Ligsey——”

“A voice from the grave,” interrupted Mr Reeder.

“Well, there is a rumour about that he’s not dead. In fact, the boy on the barge, Hobbs, says that Ligsey came alongside last night in a skiff and told him to keep his mouth shut about what he’d seen and heard. My own opinion is that the boy was dreaming, but one of Ligsey’s pals said he’d also seen him or heard him—I don’t know which. That’s a line of investigation you might take on for your own amusement——”

“Investigation doesn’t amuse me,” said Mr Reeder calmly; “it bores me. It wearies me. It brings me in a certain—um—income, but doesn’t amuse me.”

“Well,” said the detective awkwardly, “if it interests you, that’s a line you might take up.”

“I shall not dream of taking up any line at all. It means work, and I do not like work.”

Here, however, he was permitting himself to romance.

That afternoon he spent in the neighbourhood which Ligsey knew best. He talked with carmen and van boys, little old women who kept tiny and unremunerative shops, and the consequence of all his oblique questionings was that he made a call in Little Calais Street, where lived an unprepossessing young lady who had gained certain social recognition—her portrait would appear in the next morning’s newspapers—because she had been engaged to the missing man. She had, in fact, walked out with him, amongst others, for the greater part of a year.

Miss Rosie Loop did not suggest romance; she was short, rather stout, had bad teeth and a red face; but for the moment she was important, and might not have seen Mr Reeder but for the mistaken idea she had that he was associated with the press.

“Who shall I say it is?” asked her blowsy mother, who answered the door.

“The editor of *The Times*,” said Mr Reeder without hesitation.

In the stuffy little kitchen where the bereaved fiancée was eating bread and jam, Mr Reeder was given a clean Windsor chair, and sat down to hear the exciting happening of the previous night.

“I haven’t told the press yet,” said Rosie, who had a surprisingly shrill voice for one so equipped by nature for the deeper tones. “He come last night. I sleep upstairs with mother, and whenever he used to anchor off the crik he used to come ashore, no matter what time it was, and throw up a couple of stones to let me know he was here. About ’arf past two it was last night, and lord! it gave me a start.”

“He threw up the stones to let you know he was there?” suggested Mr Reeder.

She nodded violently.

“And was it Mr Ligsey?”

“It was him!” she said dramatically. “I wouldn’t go to the window for a long time, but mother said ‘Don’t be such a fool, a ghost can’t hurt yer’, and then I pulled up the sash and there he was in his old oilskin coat. I asked him where he’d bin, but he was in a ’urry. Told me not to get worried about him as he was all right.”

“How did he look?” asked Mr Reeder.

She rolled her head impatiently.

“Didn’t I tell yer it was the middle of the night. But that’s what he said—‘Don’t get worried about anything’—and then he popped off.”

“And you popped in?” said Mr Reeder pleasantly. “He didn’t have a cold or anything, did he?”

Her mouth opened.

“You’ve seen him? Where is he?”

“I haven’t seen him, but he had a cold?”

“Yes, he had,” she admitted, “and so would you ’ave if you ’ad to go up and down that river all day and night. It’s a horrible life. I hope he’s going to give it up. He’s bound to get some money if he comes forward and tells the police the truth. It was very funny, me thinkin’ he was dead. We’d bin to buy our black—hadn’t we, mother?”

Mother offered a hoarse confirmation.

“And all the papers sayin’ he was dead, an’ dragging the river for him, an’ that Captain Attymar. He used to treat Ligsey like a dog.”

“He hasn’t written to you?”

She shook her head.

“He was never a one for writing.”

“What time was this?”

She could tell him exactly, because she had heard Greenwich Church striking the half-hour.

Mr Reeder might be bored with investigation, but he found some satisfaction in boredom.

The *Allanuna* still lay off Greenwich, and he hired a boat to take him to the barge. The disconsolate Master Hobbs was still on board, and even the fact that he was now commander did not compensate him for his loneliness, though apparently the police had supplied him with food and had arranged to relieve him that evening.

He was very emphatic about the visitation of Ligsey. He had rowed alongside and whistled to the boy—the whistle had wakened him. From under the companion steps he had looked over and seen him sitting in the

boat, a big white bandage round his head. Miss Rosie had said nothing about the white bandage, but, calling on his way home, Reeder had confirmation.

“Yes, I forgot to tell you about that,” said Rosie. “I see it under ’is ’at. I said ‘What’s that white round your head?’ Fancy me forgettin’ to tell you that!”

As a matter of form, Mr Reeder, when he got home that night, jotted down certain sequences.

At some time after eight on the night of the murder, Attymar had come in a launch, had collected Ligsey and taken him towards London. At nine-thirty Johnny Southers had called at Attymar’s house, and, according to his story, had been sent on a fool’s errand to Highgate. At some time about eleven o’clock the murder had been discovered——

Mr Reeder put down his pen and frowned.

“I am getting old and stupid,” he said, reached for the telephone and called a number to which he knew Gaylor would certainly be attached at that hour.

It was Gaylor’s clerk who answered him, and, after about four minutes’ wait, Gaylor himself spoke.

“Have you found anything, Mr Reeder?”

“I find I am suffering from a slight softening of the brain,” said Mr Reeder pleasantly. “Do you realize I never asked how the murder was discovered?”

He heard Gaylor laugh.

“Didn’t I tell you? It was very simple. A policeman on his beat found the wicket door open, saw the lantern on the ground and the other lantern burning in the lobby of the house—what’s the matter?”

Mr Reeder was laughing.

“Pardon me,” he said at last. “Are you sure there wasn’t an alarm bell ringing?”

“I didn’t hear of any alarm bell—in fact, I don’t know that there is one.”

Mr Reeder exchanged a few commonplaces, denied that he was making any inquiries about Ligsey, and, hanging up the receiver, sat back in his chair, his hands clasped about his middle and real amusement in his eyes.

Later he had a call from the solicitor engaged to defend young Southers. He also suggested that Mr Reeder should place his services at the call of the defence; but again he refused.

Opening the telephone directory, he found the number of Mr Clive Desboyne, and it was that gentleman who answered his call.

“That’s queer, I was just going to ring you up,” said Desboyne. “Have you taken up the case?”

“I am wavering,” replied Reeder. “Before I reach a decision I’d like to have another talk with you. Could I call at your flat tonight about—nine?”

There was a little pause.

“Certainly. I was going out, but I’ll wait in for you.”

At the conclusion of this call Mr Reeder again leaned back in his chair, but this time he was not smiling; he was rather puzzled. Perhaps he was thinking of Ligsey; possibly he was impressed by the generosity of this man who was ready to spend a considerable part of his fortune to prove the innocence of a man he disliked.

Whatever trains of thoughts started and slowed, switched into side tracks or ran off into tributary lines, they all arrived at one mysterious destination. . . .

“It will be spring cleaning,” said Mr Reeder, as he got up from his chair.

CHAPTER 7

Reeder spent the rest of the afternoon in the West End of London, calling upon a succession of theatrical agents. Some were very important personages who received him in walnut-panelled salons; a few were in dingy offices on third floors; one, and the most important of these, he interviewed in the bar of a public house in St Martin's Lane—a fat and seedy man, with a fur collar and frayed cuffs, a half-stupid tippler with no business but many reminiscences; and, as he proudly claimed “the best collection of old theatrical programmes in London.”

Mr Reeder, who was a good listener and very patient, heard all about the agent's former grandeur, the amount of commission out of which eminent artistes had swindled him, and at last he accompanied his bibulous companion to his lodgings off the Waterloo Road, and from seven till eight was engrossed in masses of dog-eared literature.

Mr Reeder had a meal in a Strand restaurant and drove to Park Lane. As the lift carried him to the floor on which Desboyne's flat was situated——

“I'm sure it's spring cleaning,” murmured Mr Reeder to himself.

He rang the bell of the flat and waited. Presently he heard the sound of footsteps echoing hollowly in the hall. Clive Desboyne opened the door with an apologetic smile.

“I hope you don't mind the place being in confusion?” he said. “We've started our spring cleaning. The truth is, I'd arranged to go away today if this wretched business hadn't turned up.”

The carpet had been taken up from the floor of the hall, the walls had been stripped, and the crystal pendant which lit the hall showed through a gauze covering. Clive Desboyne's own study had, however, been left untouched by the decorators.

“I'm going to clear out to an hotel tomorrow. It'll probably be the Ritz-Carlton, but if you want me urgently my solicitors will be able to put us in touch. Now, Mr Reeder, you're going to do this for Anna and me?”

Mr Reeder shook his head feebly.

“You've got to do it,” insisted the other energetically. “You're the only detective in London in whom I've any confidence. I know you're attached to

the Public Prosecutor's Department, but I've been making a few inquiries too," he said with a little smile, "and I hear that you take outside commissions."

"Banks," said Mr Reeder reverently. "Banks—not private work."

"I shall insist!" Clive was very earnest. "I've told Anna everything—about my beastliness in regard to young Southers. Honestly, I still think that Ligsey's story was true and that Southers *was* making something on the side. A lot of decent fellows, otherwise perfectly honest, do that sort of thing, and I'm not condemning him. In fact, when I expressed my—what's the word for being shocked?"

"Horror, amazement?" suggested Mr Reeder.

"Well, whatever it was—I was being a hypocrite. I myself have not always been rich. I've known what it is to be devilishly poor. If I hadn't made good speculations when I was quite a kid, I should probably be worse off than Southers."

"You're rather fond of the young lady?" said Mr Reeder after an interregnum of silence.

Again Desboyne laughed.

"Of course I am! The fact that a man is engaged to another girl—and the sweetest girl in the world—doesn't prevent him philandering. Of course, it's a caddish thing to do, and it's got me into quite a lot of trouble, but the fact remains, I am terribly fond of Anna. I won't say I love her like a brother, because I'm tired of being a hypocrite. I'm going to try to get Southers out of the mess he's in; and that doesn't mean I love *him* like a brother, either! Now, Mr Reeder, what do you want to see me about, if it isn't to tell me that you're taking up this case?"

All that Mr Reeder wanted to see Clive Desboyne about was spring cleaning, but he could not say this. He had, however, a good excuse for calling: Ligsey was apparently alive, he explained. Clive Desboyne was not impressed.

"I didn't worry whether he was alive or dead," he said frankly. "Naturally, I do not know what theory the police have, but I understood from the newspapers that they were concentrating on the murder of Attymar—that is the charge against John Southers. If Ligsey is alive I'm hardly likely to meet him, unless, of course, he feels, as so many of these crooks do, that once one has given them money they're entitled to a pension! If I hear from him I'll let you know."

As they came out into the hall Mr Reeder's eyes wandered up and down the bare walls.

"You will have this repainted, Mr Desboyne?" he asked. "At present it is rather a delicate cream. If I were you I should have it painted green. Green is a very restful colour, but possibly my views are—um—suburban."

"I think they are," said the other good humouredly.

Reeder had made an appointment to see the bibulous agent at ten o'clock. The agent knew where certain photographs were to be obtained, and had promised to be waiting at the corner of St Martin's Lane at that hour. Mr Reeder arrived as St Martin's Church clock was striking, but there was no sign of Billy Gurther. He had not appeared at half past ten, and Mr Reeder decided to go to his house, for he was very anxious to complete his dossier.

The landlady at Mr Gurther's lodgings had a surprising and disconcerting story to tell. Mr Reeder had hardly left (she had witnessed his departure) before a messenger came, and Billy had gone out. He had returned in half an hour, very voluble and excited. He had been given a commission to collect cabaret turns in Spain. He had to leave London some time after nine, travel all night and catch the Sud Express in the morning. He was plentifully supplied with money.

"He was so excited he was nearly sober," said the uncharitable landlady.

The sudden departure of an obscure music-hall agent, of whose existence he had been unaware until that afternoon, did not at all distress Mr Reeder. It was the circumstances which attended his leaving, its rapidity, and, most important of all, the knowledge that was behind that sudden move, which made him alert and watchful. He might not be *persona grata* at Scotland Yard, but little things like that did not trouble Mr Reeder. He drove immediately to the big building on the Thames Embankment, sought, nay, demanded, an interview with the Chief Constable, who should have been at home and in bed, but was in fact in consultation with his five chiefs when the detective arrived.

The first message sent to Mr Reeder was cold and unpromising. Would he call in the morning? It was Gaylor who was detached from the conference to carry this message.

"Go back to your chief, Mr Gaylor," said Reeder acidly, "and tell him I wish to see him this evening, at once. If I see him tomorrow it will be at the Home Office."

This was a threat: nobody knew it better than Gaylor. The exact extent and volume of Reeder's power was not known. One thing was certain: he could be extremely unpleasant, and the consequences of his displeasure might even affect a man's career. Gaylor returned instantly and summoned him to the conference, and there Mr Reeder sat down and, quite uninvited, expounded a theory, and supported his fantastic ideas with a considerable amount of grimy literature.

"We can stop Gurther at Southampton," suggested Gaylor, but Reeder shook his head.

"I think not. Let him soak into the Continent, and then we may pick him up without any trouble. Send a man to Southampton, and let him shadow him to Paris. In Paris he can blanket him."

Mason nodded.

"If your theory is correct, there must be method of proving it," he said; "not a simple one perhaps——"

"On the contrary, a very simple one," said Mr Reeder.

He turned to Gaylor.

"You remember the bedroom above the one where the murder took place, or where we think it was committed? You probably took a photograph."

"I'll get it right away," said Gaylor, and left the room.

He was back with a sheaf of photographic enlargements which he laid on the table.

"There it is," said Reeder, and pointed.

"The clock? Yes, I noticed that."

"Naturally," said Reeder.

"But most people who go to sea, or even bargees, have it put there."

The little clock was fastened to the ceiling, immediately over the bedstead, so that anybody lying in bed could look up and tell the time. It had luminous hands, Reeder had noticed.

"I want you to have that clock removed and the ceiling plastered. I want you to take away the bed and put a table and chair there. In two days I think I will make the further prosecution of young Southers unnecessary."

“You can do as you like,” said Mason. “You’re well in the case now, Mr Reeder. I’ve put out a special call to get Ligsey, and the river police are searching all the reaches.”

“The river police are more likely to get Mr Ligsey than any other section of the Metropolitan Police Force,” replied Reeder.

Big Ben was striking eleven as he mounted a tramcar that carried him from Westminster Bridge to the end of his road. In the days, and particularly the nights, when Mr Reeder was heavily engaged in his hazardous occupation, his housekeeper remained on duty until he was ready to go to bed. She met him at the door now with a telephone message.

“Mr Gaylor called up, sir. He says he is sending you a little iron box which he wishes you to examine, and will you be careful not to touch it with your fingers because of the prince? He didn’t say which prince it was.”

“I think I know His Highness,” said Mr Reeder, who was a little ruffled that Gaylor should find it necessary to warn him against oversmearing fingerprints. “Has the box arrived?”

“Ten minutes ago, sir.”

“When did Mr Gaylor telephone?”

She was rather vague as to this; thought it might have been half an hour before. In that case, thought Reeder, it must have been immediately after he left the Yard, and the box must have come on by cyclist messenger.

He found it on his table in a service envelope, and took it out: a heavy, oblong box, about six inches long and three inches square. Pen-printed on the lid, which was tacked down, were the words: “Mr Reeder to see and return. Room 75, New Scotland Yard,” Reeder weighed the package in his hand.

Some people remember by smell, some trust to their eyesight, and the recollections of vision. Mr Reeder had a remarkable sense of weight—and he remembered something that weighed just as heavy as this. He put the package carefully on the table and rang through to Scotland Yard. Gaylor had gone. He tried him at his house, but he had not arrived.

“Tell him to phone the moment he comes in,” he said, and went to his desk to examine for the third time that day, the old music-hall programmes and playbills, photographs, cuttings from the *Era* and the *Stage*, the data which he had collected in the course of the day.

At one o'clock his housekeeper came in and asked if anything more would be required.

"Nothing at all," said Mr Reeder. And then a thought struck him. "Where do you sleep?"

"In the room above, sir."

"Above this?" said Mr Reeder hastily. "No, no, I think you'd better stay in the kitchen until I hear from Mr Gaylor. If you could make yourself comfortable there, in fact if you could sleep there, I should be very much obliged. There is nothing to be alarmed about," he said, when he saw consternation dawning in her face. "It is merely that I may want to—um—send a detective upstairs to—um—overhear a conversation."

It was a lame excuse. Mr Reeder was a poor liar; but his housekeeper was a very simple soul, and, except that she insisted upon going up to make the room tidy, agreed to retire to the basement. She had hardly gone when Gaylor came through, and for five minutes he and Reeder spoke together. After this the detective settled down to await his coming, and Inspector Gaylor did not arrive alone, but brought with him two expert officials from the Explosives Department. One of them had a delicate spring-balance, and with this the package was weighed.

"Allow an ounce and a quarter for the wood," said the expert, "and that's the exact weight of a Mills bomb. I'm sure you're right, Mr Reeder."

He held the package to his ear and shook it gently.

"No, nothing more complicated."

He took a case of instruments from his pocket and removed a slither of wood from the lid.

"Yes, there's the lever, and the pin's out," he said after examining it under a strong light.

He cut away the side, and revealed a black, segmented egg shape, grinning as he recognized an old friend.

"You see that?" He pointed to a little hole at the end of the box. "The fellow who brought this was taking no risks: he kept an emergency pin through until it was delivered. I'll have this out in a jiff."

It was no idle promise. Mr Reeder watched with interest as the skilful fingers of the man removed the lid, catching the lever at the same time and

holding it firm against the swelling side. From his pocket he took a steel pin and thrust it home, and the bomb became innocuous.

“You’ve kept every scrap of paper, of course?” said Gaylor. “There was no other packing but this?”

Every piece of paper was carefully folded and put in an envelope, and the two explosive experts went down to pack away Mr Reeder’s dangerous gift.

“There was a lot you didn’t tell the chief,” said Gaylor at parting. “That’s the trouble with you, you old devil!”

Mr Reeder looked pained.

“That is not a very pleasant expression,” he said.

“But it is,” insisted Gaylor. “You always keep back some juicy bit to spring on us at the last moment. It’s either your sense of drama or your sense of humour.”

For a moment Reeder’s eyes twinkled, and then his face became a mask again.

“I have no—um—sense of humour,” he said.

He had at any rate a sense of vanity, and he was irritated that his little idiosyncrasy had been so cruelly exposed to description.

He was up at six the next morning, and by half past seven was on his way to the Thames Valley. On the previous day he had telephoned to eight separate boathouses between Windsor and Henley, and he was satisfied that he had found what he wanted in the neighbourhood of Bourne End. He had telephoned to the boatbuilder on whom he was calling, and he found that industrious man at work in his yard.

“You’re the gentleman who wanted to know about the *Zaira*? I was going to send one of my boys up to see if she was still tied up, but I haven’t been able to spare him this morning.”

“I’m rather glad you haven’t,” said Mr Reeder.

“It was a funny thing you telephoning to me when you did,” said the builder. “She’d just gone past on her way to Marlow . . . No, I’ve never seen her before, but I caught the name; in fact, it was because she was new in this part of the river that I noticed her. She’s a forty-foot cruiser, nearly new, and I should think she’s got pretty powerful engines. As it was, she made a bit of a wash.”

He explained that after Mr Reeder's inquiry he had telephoned through to Marlow, had learned that the boat had not passed, and had sent one of his assistants up the towpath to locate her.

"She's lying at a private quay that runs in from the river to a big red house which has been empty for years. There's nobody on board her, and I suppose the owner's had permission from the agents. Are you thinking of buying her?"

That view had never presented itself to Mr Reeder. He thought for a long time, and gave the boatbuilder the impression that it was only a question of price that prevented him from ownership.

"Yes, it's quite usual for people to tie up and leave their boats for months at a time, especially at a private quay like that. It's not safe: you get a craft full of rats, especially in the winter months. These big boats cost a lot to keep up, and you couldn't afford to have a caretaker on board."

Mr Reeder made a very leisurely way along the towpath, stopping now and again to admire the lovely reach. Although he had explicit instructions, he might have passed the narrow canal which runs in from the river, in spite of the brick bridge across, for the stream was choked with weeds, and ran apparently into a tangle of trees and undergrowth. With some difficulty Mr Reeder reached its bank. He then saw that the canal was brick-lined. Nevertheless, though he had this indication of its edge, he walked gingerly.

It opened to a larger pool, a sort of backwater. Passing a clump of bushes, he came suddenly upon the boat. The bow lay almost within reach of his hand. It was tied up fore and aft and had a deserted appearance. Across the forepart of the boat was drawn a canvas cover, but he was prepared for this by the description of the boatbuilder. Mr Reeder slipped his hand in his pocket and went cautiously along the length of the boat. He noted that all the portholes were not only closed but made opaque with brown paper.

"Is anybody there?" he called loudly.

There was no answer. In midstream a moorhen was paddling aimlessly; the sound of his voice sent it scurrying to cover.

The foremost part of the ship was evidently the engine-room, and possibly accommodation for a small crew. The living saloon was aft. It was these that had their portholes covered. Both cabins were approached from the well deck amidships, and he saw here a canvas-covered wheel. The doors were padlocked on the outside.

Mr Reeder looked around, and stepped on to the boat down a short ladder to the well. He tried the padlock on the saloon door. It was fast; but it was a very simple padlock, and if fortune favoured him, and the boat he sought was really discovered, he had prepared for such an emergency as this.

He tried three of the keys which he took from his pocket before the lock snapped back. He unfastened the hasp, turned the handle and pulled open the door. He could see nothing for a moment, then he switched on an electric handlamp and sent its rays into the interior.

The saloon was empty. The floor of it lay possibly eighteen inches below the level of the deck on which he was standing. And then. . . .

Lying in the middle of the floor, and glittering in the light of his lamp, was a white-handled, silver-plated revolver.

“Very interesting,” said Mr Reeder, and went down into the saloon.

He reached the bottom of the steps and turned, walking backwards with his face to the door through which he had come, the muzzle of his Browning covering the opening. Presently his heel kicked the pistol. He took another step back and stooped to pick it up. . . .

CHAPTER 8

Mr Reeder was conscious of a headache and that the light shining in his eyes was painful. It was a tiny globe which burned in the roof of the cabin. Somebody was talking very distressedly; the falsetto voices Mr Reeder loathed. His senses came back gradually.

He was shocked to find himself one of the figures in a most fantastical scene; something which did not belong to the great world of reality in which he lived and had his being. He was part of an episode, torn bodily from a most imaginative and impossible work of fiction.

The man who sat in one corner of the lounge, clasping his knees, was . . . Mr Reeder puzzled for a word. Theatrical, of course. That red silk robe, that Mephistophelian cap, and the long black mask with the lace fringe that even hid the speaker's chin. His hands were covered with jewelled rings which scintillated in the feeble light overhead.

Mr Reeder could not very well move; he was handcuffed, his legs were strapped painfully together, and in his mouth was a piece of wood lightly tied behind his ears. It was not painful, but it could be, he realized. At any rate he was spared the necessity of replying to the exultant man who sat at the other end of the settee.

“. . . Did you hear what I said, my master of mystery?”

He spoke with a slightly foreign accent, this man in the red robe.

“You are so clever, and yet I am more clever, eh? All of it I planned out of my mind. The glittering silver pistol on the floor—that was the only way I could get you to stoop and bring your head into the gas. It was a very heavy gas which does not easily escape, but I was afraid you might have dropped a cigarette, and that would have betrayed everything. If you had waited a little time the gas would have rolled out of the open door; but no, you must have the pistol, so you stooped and picked it up, and *voilà!*”

His hands glittered dazzlingly.

“You are used to criminals of the stupid kind,” he went on. “For the first time, my Reeder, you meet one who has planned everything step by step. Pardon me.”

He stepped down to the floor, leaned forward and untied the gag.

“I find it difficult if conversation is one-sided,” he said pleasantly. “If you make a fuss I shall shoot you and that will be the end. At present I desire that you should know everything. You know me?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t that pleasure,” said Mr Reeder, and the man chuckled.

“If you had lived, I would have been your chief case, your *chef d’œuvre*, the one man of your acquaintance who could plan murder and—what is the expression?—get away with it! Do you know where you are?”

“I’m on the *Zaira*,” said Mr Reeder.

“Do you know who is her owner?”

“She is owned by Mr Clive Desboyne.”

The man chuckled at this.

“Poor fellow! The lovesick one, eh? For him this boat is—where do you think?—at Twickenham, for its spring repairs. He told you perhaps he had been mad enough to let it for two months? No, he did not tell you? Ah, that is interesting. Perhaps he forgot.”

Mr Reeder nodded slowly.

“Now tell me, my friend—my time is very short and I cannot waste it here with you—do you know who killed Attymar?”

“You are Attymar,” said Mr Reeder, and was rewarded by a shrill chuckle of delighted laughter.

“So clever, after all! It is a good thing I have you, eh? Otherwise”—he shrugged his shoulders lightly. “That is the very best joke—I am Attymar! Do I speak like him, yes? Possibly—who knows?”

He slipped from his seat and came stealthily towards Reeder and fixed the gag a little tighter.

“Where shall you be this night, do you think, with a big, heavy chain fastened around you? I know all the deepest holes in this river, and years and years will pass before they find your body. To think that this great London shall lose its Mr Reeder! So many people have tried to kill you, my friend, but they have failed because they are criminals—just stupid fellows who cannot plan like a general.”

Mr Reeder said nothing; he could not raise his hand far enough to relieve the pressure on his mouth, for attached to the centre link of the handcuffs

was a cord fastened to the strap about his ankles.

The man in the red cloak bent over him, his eyes glaring through the holes in the mask.

“Last night I tried you. I say to myself, ‘Is this man stupid or is he clever?’” He spoke quickly and in a low voice. “So I send you the little bomb. I would have sent it also to Desboyne—he also will die tonight, and our friend Mr Southers will be hanged, and there will be the end of you all! And I will go sailing to the southern seas, and no man will raise his hand against me, because I am clever.”

Mr Reeder thought he was a little monotonous. In spite of his terrible position, he was intensely bored. The man in the red cloak must have heard something, for he went quickly to the door and listened more intently, then, mounting the stairs, slammed the door behind him and put on the padlock. Presently Mr Reeder heard him mount the side of the boat and guessed he had stepped ashore to meet whatever interruption was threatened. It was, in truth, the boatbuilder, who had come to make inquiries, and the grey-haired man with the stoop and the white moustache and twisted face was able to assure him that Mr Reeder had made an offer for the boat, but it had been rejected, and that the detective had gone on to Marlow.

The prisoner had a quarter of an hour to consider his unfortunate position and to supply a remedy. Mr Reeder satisfied himself that it was a simple matter to free his hands from the steel cuffs. He had peculiarly thin wrists and his large, bony hands were very deceptive. He freed one, adjusted the gag to a less uncomfortable tension, and brought himself to a sitting position. He swayed and would have fallen to the floor but for a stroke of luck. The effort showed him how dangerous it would be to make an attempt to escape before he recovered strength. His pistol had been taken from him; the silver-handled revolver had also been removed. He resumed his handcuffs and had not apparently moved when his captor opened the door, only to look in.

“I’m afraid you will have to do without food today—does it matter?”

Now Mr Reeder saw that on the inside of the saloon door was a steel door. It was painted the same colour as the woodwork, and it was on this discovery that he based his hope of life. For some reason, which he never understood, his enemy switched on two lights from the outside, and this afforded him an opportunity of taking stock of his surroundings.

The portholes were impossible—he understood now why they had been made airtight with brown paper. It would be as much as he could do to get his arms through them. Having decided upon his plan of campaign, Mr Reeder acted with his customary energy. He could not allow his life to depend upon the caprice of this man. Evidently the intention was to take him out late at night, loaded with chains, and drop him overboard; but he might have cause to change his mind. And that, Mr Reeder thought, would be very unfortunate.

His worst forebodings were in a fair way to being realized, did he but know. The man who stood in his shirt sleeves, prodding at the centre of the backwater, had suddenly realized the danger which might follow the arrival of a curious-minded policeman. The boatbuilder would certainly gossip. Reeder had something of an international reputation, and the local police would be only too anxious to make his acquaintance.

Gossip runs up and down a river with a peculiar facility. He went into the engine cabin, where he had stowed his fantastic robe and hat, and dragged out a little steel cylinder. Unfasten that nozzle, leave it on the floor near where the helpless man lay, and in a quarter of an hour perhaps . . .

He cold-bloodedly pulled out two links of heavy chain and dropped them with a crash on the deck. Mr Reeder heard the sound; he wrenched one hand free of the cuff, not without pain, broke the gag, and, drawing himself up into a sitting position, unfastened the first of the two straps. His head was splitting from the effect of the gas. As his feet touched the floor he reeled. The second cuff he removed at his leisure. He was so close to the door now that he could drop the bar. It stuck for a little while, but presently he drew it down. It fell with a clatter into the pocket.

The man on the deck heard, ran to the door and tugged, drew off the padlock and tried to force his way in.

“I’m afraid you’re rather late,” said Mr Reeder politely.

He could almost feel the vibration of the man’s fury. His vanity had been hurt; he had been proved a bungler by the one man in the world he wished to impress, whilst life held any impressions for him.

Then the man on the bridge heard a smash and saw some splinters of glass fly from one of the ports. There were five tiny airholes in one of the doors, but four of these had been plugged with clay. Taking the cylinder, he smashed the nozzle end through the obstruction. A wild, desperate idea came to the harassed man. Reeder heard the starting wheel turn, and

presently the low hum of machinery. He heard the patter of feet across the deck and peered through the porthole, but it was below the level of the bank.

He looked round for a weapon but could find none. Of one thing he was certain: Mr Red Robe would not dare to run for the river. There was quite enough traffic there for him to attract attention. He could not afford to wait for darkness to fall; his position was as desperate as Reeder's own had been

Bang!

It was the sound of a pistol shot, followed by another. Reeder heard somebody shout, then the sound of a man crashing through the bushes. Then he heard the deep voice of Clive Desboyne.

“Reeder . . . are you there? How are you?”

Mr Reeder, a slave to politeness, put his mouth up to the broken porthole.

It was some time before Desboyne could knock off the padlock. Presently the door was opened and Mr Reeder came out.

“Thank God, you're safe!” said the other breathlessly. “Who was the old bird who shot at me?”

He pointed towards the place where the backwater turned.

“Is there a house there or a road or something? That's the way he went. What has happened?”

Mr Reeder was sitting on a little deck chair, his throbbing head between his hands. After a while he raised his face.

“I have met the greatest criminal in the world,” he said solemnly. “He's so clever that he's alive. His name is Attymar!”

Clive Desboyne opened his mouth in amazement.

“Attymar? But he's dead!”

“I hope so,” said Mr Reeder viciously, “but I have reason to know that he isn't. No, no, young man, I won't tell you what happened. I'm rather ashamed of myself. Anyway, I am not particularly proud of being caught by this”—he paused—“amateur. Why did you come?”

“It was only by luck. I don't know why I came. I happened to phone through to Twickenham about some repairs to the boat—by the way, you must have seen a picture of it hanging in my hall. In fact, it was in that

picture where you were so smart as to tell the date. I lent the *Zaira* at times; I lent it a few months ago to an Italian or Serbian fellow, but he so ill-used it that I sent a message that it was to be sent back to the yard. They telephoned along the river for news of it, and that's when I learnt you were down here—you look rotten."

"I feel rotten," said Mr Reeder. "And you came——"

"I drove down. I had a sort of feeling in my mind that something was wrong. Then I met a man who'd seen the builder, and he told me about the little old fellow. Until then I didn't know that he was in the boat, and I came along to make inquiries. For some reason, which I can't understand, he no sooner saw me than he pulled a gun and let fly at me, and, turning, went like mad through those bushes."

"Have you a gun?" asked Mr Reeder.

Desboyne smiled.

"No, I don't carry such things."

"In that case it would be foolish to pursue my ancient enemy. Let one of the Buckingham Constabulary carry on the good work. Is your car anywhere handy?"

There was a road apparently within fifty yards.

"By Jove!" said Desboyne suddenly. "I left it outside the gates of an empty house. I wonder whether that's the place where the old bird went—and whether my car is still there?"

It was there, in the drive of a deserted house: the two-seater coupe which had so excited the disgust of poor Johnny Southers. With some difficulty Clive started it up, and the action recalled something to him.

"Did we leave the engines of the boat running?" he asked suddenly. "If you don't mind I'll go back and turn them off; then I'll notify the police, and I'll send a man to bring the *Zaira* into Maidenhead."

He was gone ten minutes. Mr Reeder had an opportunity of walking round the car and admiring it.

Rain had fallen in the night: he made this interesting discovery before Desboyne returned.

"We'll run up to Marlow and I'll get a man to go down and collect the boat," he said as he climbed in. "I've never heard anything more amazing. Tell me exactly what happened to you?"

Mr Reeder smiled sadly.

“You will pardon me if I do not?” he asked gently. “The truth is, I have been asked by a popular newspaper to write my reminiscences, and I want to save every personal experience for that important volume.”

He would talk about other subjects, however; for example, of the fortunate circumstance that Desboyne’s car was still there though it was within reach of the enemy.

“I’ve never met him before. I hope I’ll never meet him again,” said Desboyne. “But I think he can be traced. Naturally, I don’t want to go into court against him. I think it’s the most ridiculous experience, to be shot at without replying.”

“Why bother?” asked Mr Reeder. “I personally never go into court to gratify a private vendetta, though there is a possibility that in the immediate future I may break the habit of years!”

He got down at the boathouse and was a silent listener whilst Clive Desboyne rang up a Twickenham number and described the exact location of the boat.

“They’ll collect it,” he said as he hung up. “Now, Mr Reeder, what am I to do about the police?”

Mr Reeder shook his head.

“I shouldn’t report it,” he said. “They’d never understand.”

On the way back to town he grew more friendly to Clive Desboyne than he had ever been before, and certainly he was more communicative than he had been regarding the Attymar murder.

“You’ve never seen a murder case at first hand——”

“And I’m not very anxious to,” interrupted the other.

“I applaud that sentiment. Young people are much too morbid,” said Mr Reeder. “But this is a crime particularly interesting, because it was obviously planned by one who has studied the art of murder and the methods of the average criminal. He had studied it to such good purpose that he was satisfied that if a crime of this character were committed by a man of intelligence and acumen, he would—um—escape the consequence of his deed.”

“And will he?” asked the other, interested.

“No,” said Mr Reeder, rubbing his nose. He thought for a long time. “I don’t think so. I think he will hang; I am pretty certain he will hang.”

Another long pause.

“And yet in a sense he was very clever. For example, he had to attract the attention of the policeman on the beat and establish the fact that a murder had been committed. He left open the wicket gate on the—um—wharf, and placed a lantern on the ground and another within the open door of his little house, so that the policeman, even if he had been entirely devoid of curiosity, could not fail to investigate.”

Clive Desboyne frowned.

“Upon my life I don’t know who is murdered! It can’t be Attymar, because you saw him today; and it can’t possibly be Ligsey, because, according to your statement, he is alive. Why did Johnny Southers go there?”

“Because he’d been offered a job, a partnership with Attymar. Attymar had two or three barges, and with vigorous management it looked as if his business might grow into a more important concern. Southers didn’t even know that this man Attymar was the type of creature he was. An appointment was made on the telephone; Southers attended; he interviewed Attymar or somebody in the dark, during which time I gather he was sprinkled with blood—whose blood, we shall discover. There was a similar case in France in eighteen-forty-seven. Madame Puyeres . . .”

He gave the history of the Puyeres case at length.

“That was our friend’s cleverness, the blood-sprinkling, the lantern-placing, the removal of Mr—um—I forget his name for the moment, the theatrical agent of unsavoury reputation. But he made one supreme error. You know the house—no, of course, you’ve never been there.”

“Which house?” asked Clive curiously.

“Attymar’s house. It’s little more than a weighing shed. You haven’t been there? No, I see you haven’t. If you would like a little lecture, or a little demonstration of criminal error, I would like to show you at first hand.”

“Will it save Johnny Southers—this mistake?” asked Desboyne curiously.

Mr Reeder nodded.

“Nothing is more certain. How amazing are the—um—vagaries of the human mind! How peculiar are the paths into which—um—vanity leads us!”

He closed his eyes and seemed to be communing with himself all the way through Shepherd’s Bush. Mr Desboyne put him down at Scotland Yard, and they arranged to meet at the end of Shadwick Lane that same afternoon.

“There is no further news of Ligsey,” said Gaylor when Reeder came into his office.

“I should have been surprised if there had been,” said Mr Reeder cheerfully, “partly because he’s dead, and partly because—well, I didn’t expect any communication from him.”

“You know he telephoned to the chief last night?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised at that,” said Mr Reeder, almost flippantly.

They talked about Johnny Southers and the case against him, and of the disappointing results of a careful search of the garden. They had dug up every bed and had done incalculable damage to Mr Southers’ herbaceous borders.

“Our information was that he had a couple of thousand pounds cached there in real money, but we found nothing.”

“How much was there in the box you discovered in the tool shed?”

“Oh, only a hundred pounds or so,” said Gaylor. “The big money was hidden in the garden, according to what we were told. We didn’t find a cent!”

“Too bad,” said Mr Reeder sympathetically. Then, remembering: “Do you mind if I take a young—um—friend of mine over Attymar’s house this afternoon? He is not exactly interested in the crime of wilful murder, but as he is providing for the defence of young Mr Southers——”

“I don’t mind,” said Gaylor, “but you had better ask the chief.”

The Chief Constable was out, and the opportunity of meeting him was rendered more remote when Clive Desboyne rang him up, as he said, on the off-chance of getting him at Scotland Yard, and invited him out to lunch.

“Anna Welford is coming. I have told her you think that Johnny’s innocence can be established, and she’s most anxious to meet you.”

Mr Reeder was in something of a predicament, but, as usual, he rose to the occasion. He instantly cancelled two important engagements to meet this, and at lunchtime he sat between a delighted girl and a rather exhilarated benefactor. The one difficulty he had anticipated did not, however, arise. She had some shopping to do that afternoon, so he went alone with Clive Desboyne to what the latter described as 'the most gruesome after-lunch entertainment' he had ever experienced.

CHAPTER 9

A car dropped them at the end of Shadwick Lane, which had already settled down to normality and had grown accustomed to the notoriety which the murder had brought to it.

There was a constable on duty on the wharf, but he was inside the gate. Mr Reeder opened the wicket and Clive Desboyne stepped in. He looked round the littered yard with disgust visible on his face.

“How terribly sordid!” he said. “I am not too fastidious, but I can’t imagine anything more grim and miserable than this.”

“It was grimmer for the—um—gentleman who was killed,” said Mr Reeder.

He went into the house ahead of his companion, pointed out the room where the murder was committed, “as I feel perfectly sure,” he added; and then led the way up the narrow stairs into what had been Captain Attymar’s sitting-room.

“If you sit at that table you’ll see the plan of the house, and I may show you one or two very interesting things.”

Mr Reeder switched on a handlamp on the table and Clive Desboyne sat down, and followed, apparently entranced, the recital of J. G. Reeder’s theory.

“If you have time—what is the time?”

Clive Desboyne looked up at the ceiling, stared at it for a while.

“Let me guess,” he said slowly. “Four o’clock.”

“Marvellous,” murmured Mr Reeder. “It is within one minute. How curious you should look up at the ceiling! There used to be a clock there.”

“In the ceiling?” asked the other incredulously.

He rose, walked to the window and stared out on to the wharf. From where he stood he could see the policeman on duty at the gate.

There was nobody watching at a little door in the ragged fence which led to Shadwick Passage. Suddenly Mr Clive Desboyne pointed to the wharf.

“That is where the murder was committed,” he said quietly.

Mr Reeder took a step towards the window and cautiously craned his neck forward. He did not feel the impact of the rubber truncheon that crashed against the base of his skull, but went down in a heap.

Clive Desboyne looked round, walked to the door and listened, then stepped out, locked the door, came down the stairs and on to the wharf. The policeman eyed him suspiciously, but Mr Desboyne turned and carried on a conversation with the invisible Reeder.

He strolled round to the front of the house. Nobody saw him open the little gate into the passage. The end of Shadwick Lane was barred, but Gaylor did not remember the passage until too late. It was he who found Reeder and brought him back to consciousness.

“I deserve that,” said Mr Reeder when he became articulate. “Twice in one day! I am getting too old for this work.”

CHAPTER 10

One of those amazing things which so rarely happen, that fifty-thousand-to-one-against chance, had materialized, and the high chiefs of Scotland Yard grew apoplectic as they asked the why and the wherefore. A man wanted by the police on a charge of murder had walked through a most elaborate cordon. River police had shut off the waterway; detectives and uniform men had formed a circle through which it was impossible to escape; yet the wanted man had, by the oddest chance, passed between two detectives who had mistaken him for somebody they knew.

Whilst Reeder was waiting at Scotland Yard he explained in greater detail the genesis of his suspicion.

“The inquiries I made showed me that Attymar was never seen in daylight, except by his crew, and then only in the fading light. He had established buying agencies in a dozen continental cities, and for years he has been engaged in scientific smuggling. But he could only do that if he undertook the hardships incidental to a barge-master’s life. He certainly reduced those hardships to a minimum, for, except to collect the contraband which was dumped near his barge, and bring it up to the wharf he had first hired and then bought in the early stages of his activity, he spent few nights out of his comfortable bed.

“I was puzzled to account for many curious happenings. If Clive Desboyne had not taken the trouble to appear in Brockley at almost the hour at which the crime would be discovered—he knew the time the policeman came down Shadwick Lane—my suspicions might not have been aroused. It was a blunder on his part, even with his clever assumption of frankness, to come along and tell me the story of what Ligsey had told him; for as soon as the crime was discovered and I examined the place, I was absolutely certain that Ligsey was dead, or Clive would never have dared to invent the story.

“Desboyne prides himself on being a clever criminal. Like all criminals who have that illusion, he made one or two stupid blunders. When I called at his flat I found the walls covered with photographs, some of which showed him in costume. It was the first intimation I had that he had been on the stage. There was also a photograph of the *Zaira* when it was going upstream, with the House of Commons in the background. Attached by the painter at the stern was a small canoe-shaped tender, which had been faithfully described to me that day by the boy Hobbs. Desboyne knew he

had blundered, but hoped I saw no significance in those two photographs, especially the photograph of him dressed as a coster, with the identical make-up that Attymar wore.

“I started inquiries, and discovered that there had been a C. Desboyne who worked in music-halls, giving imitations of popular characters and making remarkably quick changes on the stage. I met people who remembered him, some who gave me the most intimate details about his beginnings. For ten years he masqueraded as Attymar, sunk all his savings in a barge, rented the wharf and house, and eventually purchased it. He is an extraordinary organizer, and there is no doubt that in the ten years he has been working he has accumulated a pretty large fortune. Nobody, of course, associated the barge-master with this elegant young man who lived in Park Lane.

“What Ligsey knew about him I don’t know. Personally, I believe that Ligsey knew very little, and could have told us very little. Attymar discovered that Ligsey was communicating with me. Do you remember the letter he sent to me? I told you the envelope had been opened—and so it had, probably by ‘Attymar’. From that moment Ligsey was doomed. Clive’s vanity was such that he thought he could plan a remarkable crime, throw the suspicion upon the man he hated, and at the same time remove Ligsey, the one danger, from his path. I should think that he had been planning Johnny Southers’ end for about three weeks before the murder. The money that was found in the tool house was planted there on the actual night of the murder, while the money in the garden——”

“Money in what garden?” asked Mason. “The garden was searched but none was found.”

Mr Reeder coughed.

“At any rate, the money in the tool house was put there to support the suspicion. It was clumsily done. The message on the piece of paper, the old invoices, as well as the story that Desboyne told me with such charming effect, were designed with two objects. One was to cover the disappearance of Attymar and the other to ruin Southers.

“But perhaps his cleverest and most audacious trick was the one he performed this morning. He had me in his boat; he had been waiting for me; probably had watched me from the moment I arrived at Bourne End. Then, wearing his fantastic get-up, and jealous to the very last that I should suspect him, he planned his scheme for my—um—unpleasant exit. I give him credit for his resourcefulness. As a quick change artist he has probably few equals.

He could go on to the bank and deceive the boatbuilder from Bourne End. Who could believe that he was a little old man with a humped shoulder? He could equally come to my rescue when there was no other way of throwing suspicion from himself. Unfortunately for him, I saw not only that the car had been in the grounds all night, and that his story of having driven down from town was a lie, but—um—certain other things.”

The telephone bell rang, and Mason took up the instrument.

“He went out a quarter of an hour ago—you don’t know where? . . . It was Desboyne, was it? She didn’t say where she was meeting him?”

Reeder sighed and rose wearily.

“Do I understand that Miss Anna Welford has been allowed to leave her house?” There was a quality of exasperation in his tone, and Mr Mason could not but agree that it was justified. For the first request that Reeder had made, and that by telephone from Rotherhithe, was that a special guard should be put over Anna Welford. Certain of Mr Mason’s local subordinates, however, thought that the least likely thing that could happen would be that Desboyne would come into the neighbourhood, and here they were right. Matters had been further complicated by the fact that the girl had gone out that day, and was still out when the police officers called. She had rung up, however, a moment before Desboyne had telephoned, and had given her number, which was transferred to him. Later, when she was called up at the address she had given, it was discovered that she had gone out to meet him; nobody knew where.

“So really,” said Gaylor, “nobody is to blame.”

“Nobody ever is!” snapped Mr Reeder.

It was Mr Clive Desboyne’s little conceit that he should arrange to meet the girl at the corner of the Thames Embankment, within fifty yards of Scotland Yard. When she arrived in some hurry, she saw nothing that would suggest that anything unusual had happened, except the good news he had passed to her over the telephone.

“Where is Johnny?” she asked, almost before she was within talking distance, and he was amused.

“I really ought to be very jealous,” he bantered her.

He called a taxicab as he spoke, and ordered the man to drive him to an address in Chiswick.

“Reeder hasn’t been on to you, of course? I’m glad—I wanted to be the first to tell you.”

“Is he released?” she asked, a little impatiently.

“He will be released this evening. I think that is best. The authorities are very chary of demonstrations, and Scotland Yard have particularly asked that he should give no newspaper interviews, but shall spend the night, if possible, out of town. I have arranged with my cousin that he shall stay at his place till tomorrow.”

It all seemed very feasible, and when of his own accord he stopped the cab and, getting out to telephone, returned to tell her that he had phoned her father that she would not be back before eight, the thought of his disinterestedness aroused a warm little glow of friendship towards him.

“I have been besieged by reporters myself, and I’m rather anxious to avoid them. These damned papers will do anything for a sensation.”

The swift express van of one of these offending newspapers passed the taxi at that moment. On its back doors was pasted a placard.

ALLEGED MURDERER’S DARING ESCAPE

Later the girl saw another newspaper poster.

POLICE OF METROPOLIS SEARCHING FOR MURDERER

The taxi drove up a side street, and, as he tapped on the window, stopped. There was a garage a little farther along, and, leaving Anna, he went inside and came out in a few moments with a small closed coupe.

“I keep this here in case of emergency,” he explained to her. “One never knows when one might need a spare car.”

Exactly why he should need a spare car in Chiswick he did not attempt to explain.

Avoiding the Great West Road, he took the longer route through Brentford. Rain was falling heavily by the time they reached Hounslow.

She was so grateful to him for all the services he had rendered, and which, though she was unconscious of the fact, he had particularized, that she did not resist his suggestion that they should go on to Oxford. She wondered why until they were on the outskirts of the town, and then he explained with a little smile that Johnny had been transferred to Oxford Gaol that morning.

“I kept this as a surprise for you,” he said. “Only about three people in London know, and I was most anxious that you should not tell.”

They went into a teashop on the other side of the city, and she was puzzled why he should prefer this rather poverty-stricken little café to an hotel, but thought it was an act of consideration on his part—part of the general scheme for avoiding reporters. They lingered over tea until she grew a little restless.

“We’ll go to the prison and make inquiries,” he told her.

Actually they did go to the prison, and he descended and rang the bell. When he came back he was grinning ruefully.

“He was released half an hour ago. My cousin’s car picked him up. We can go on.”

It was getting dark now and the rain continued to fall steadily. They took another route towards London, passed through a little town which she thought she recognized as Marlow, turned abruptly from the main road, and as abruptly again up a dark and neglected carriage drive. She had a glimpse of the sheen of a stagnant backwater on her left, and then the car drew up before a forbidding looking door, and, stepping down, Clive Desboyne opened the door with his key.

“Here we are,” he said pleasantly, gave her his hand, and, before she realized what had happened, she was in a gloomy hall smelling of damp and decay.

The door thundered close behind her.

“Where are we . . . this isn’t the place,” she said tremulously, and at that moment all her old suspicions, all her old fears of the man returned.

“It is quite the place,” he said.

From the pocket of his mackintosh he took an electric lamp and switched it on. The house was furnished, if rotting carpets and dust-covered chairs meant anything. He held her firmly by the arm, walked her along the passage, then, opening a door, pushed her inside. She thought there was no window, but found afterwards that it was shuttered.

The room was fairly clean; there was a bed, a table and a small oil stove. On a sideboard were a number of packets of foodstuffs.

“Keep quiet and don’t make a fuss,” he said.

Striking a match, he lit a paraffin lamp that stood on the table.

“What does this mean?” she asked. Her face was white and haggard.

He did not answer immediately, and then:

“I’m very fond of you—that’s what it means. I shall probably be hanged in about six weeks’ time, and there’s a wise old saying that you might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. You for the moment are the lamb.”

The bright, shining eyes were fixed on hers. She almost swooned with horror.

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to murder you or cut your throat or do any of the things I tried to do to Mr Reeder this morning—oh, yes, I was the fantastical gentleman on the *Zaira*. The whole thing happened a few yards away from where you’re standing. Now, Anna, you’re going to be very sensible, my sweet—there’s nobody within five miles of here who is at all concerned——”

The hinges of the door were rusty: they squeaked when it was moved. They squeaked now. Clive Desboyne turned in a flash, fumbling under mackintosh and coat.

“Don’t move,” said Mr Reeder gently.

It was his conventional admonition.

“And put up your hands. I shall certainly shoot if you do not. You’re a murderer—I could forgive you that. You’re a liar—that, to a man of my high moral code, is unpardonable.”

The dozen detectives who had been waiting for three hours in this dank house came crowding into the room, and snapped irons on the wrists of the white-faced man.

“See that they fit,” said Mr Reeder pleasantly. “I had a pair this morning which were grossly oversize.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the eBook edition.

[The end of *Red Aces* by Edgar Wallace]