No Friendly Drop

HENRY WADE

Title: No Friendly Drop
Date of first publication: 1957
Author: Sir Henry Lancelot Aubrey-Fletcher (as Henry Wade) (1887-1969)
Date first posted: Oct. 6, 2021
Date last updated: Aug. 21, 2022
Faded Page eBook #20211006

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/Lending Library.

A MURDER REVISITED MYSTERY NOVEL: NO. 17

No Friendly Drop

MURDER REVISITED SERIES

The Man in the Queue, *by Josephine Tey*

Heir Presumptive, *by Henry Wade*

Too Many Cousins, *by Douglas G. Browne*

A Shilling for Candles, *by Josephine Tey*

Dead and Not Buried, *by H. F. M. Prescott*

Three by Tey: miss pym disposes, the franchise affair, brat farrar, *by Josephine Tey*

Suicide Excepted, *by Cyril Hare*

The Case of the Seven of Calvary, *by Anthony Boucher*

The Dear Old Gentleman, *by George Goodchild and Bechhofer Roberts*

Death Wears a Mask, *by Douglas G. Browne*

Murder in Trinidad, *by John W. Vandercook*

Grim Grow the Lilacs, *by Marion Randolph*

Murder in Fiji, *by John W. Vandercook*

The Jury Disagree, *by George Goodchild and Bechhofer Roberts*

Fall over Cliff, *by Josephine Bell*

How Doth the Little Crocodile?, *by A. and P. Shaffer*

No Friendly Drop, *by Henry Wade*

What's here? A cup, closed in my true love's hand?
Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end:
O Churl; drunk all, and left no friendly drop
To help me after?
(ROMEO AND JULIET, ACT V, SC. III.)

No Friendly Drop

HENRY WADE

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
New York : 1957

FIRST PRINTING

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 57-6358

Contents

The great hall of Tassart was lit only by the flickering light of burning logs as Lady Grayle came down the wide, uncarpeted staircase. It was early summer, still light out of doors, but the big house was always cold, and Lady Grayle hated twilight, so the curtains were drawn before dinner and the wood fire in the great Tudor fireplace of the hall, like the Vestal Virgins' lamp, was never out from year's end to year's end.

The glow from the fire, reflected from a hundred points in the rich oak panelling, was kind to Lady Grayle as she stood looking down into the flames, one foot resting on the low brick step, her long skirt drawn up to let the heat play upon a slim leg. Lady Grayle was fifty-five; even by daylight no stranger would have thought her fifty and by this mellow light she seemed still in the prime of life, her figure perfect, her skin glowing, and her eyes bright with vitality; only the broad velvet band around her neck betrayed what it was intended to conceal. A close inspection would have revealed tiny wrinkles round the eyes and mouth, but they were the wrinkles that come early to anyone who rides hard to hounds in all weathers; the mouth was too straight and hard for beauty, the mouth of a woman accustomed to pick her own line and follow it.

The small foot on the hearth-step tapped impatiently as its owner looked up at the gallery which connected the staircase with the bedroom corridors. With a quick movement Lady Grayle reached for the old-fashioned tapestry bell-pull which hung by the fireplace and jerked it sharply twice. The bell which rang in the pantry was electric, because Lady Grayle was a modern, but her husband loved the old-world furnishings of Tassart, and would not have the panelling hacked about for electric fittings.

There was an appreciable interval before a door, discreetly shadowed by the staircase, swung open and a butler appeared, carrying a silver salver on which rested a cocktail shaker and three finely cut glasses. Depositing the salver on a small but sturdy oak table which flanked the fireplace, the butler switched on a standard lamp which stood beside it. Giving the 'shaker' a final professional whirl, he took off the top. In silence he poured the rich flame-coloured mixture into one of the glasses and, raising the salver, approached his mistress.

"May I speak to your Ladyship some time in the morning?"

The respectful murmur was almost inaudible, but Lady Grayle's ear was attuned to it. A quick frown crossed her face. Words may be very simple and

yet convey the threat of infinite worry—domestic or otherwise. Lady Grayle, however, was not accustomed to fret herself for long over trifles. Her tone was casual as she replied.

"Yes, after breakfast, Moode. I'll ring for you."

There was even a slight smile on her lips as she watched Moode carefully replace the stopper on the silver contraption which accorded so ill with its surroundings. The butler's movements were so deft, so silent, that it was almost a pleasure to watch them, as it always is to see perfect execution. The man himself was small and inclined to stoutness, but there was dignity, carefully cultivated dignity, in his movements, and his rather pink face, surmounted by greying hair, was not unhandsome.

The clatter of high-heeled shoes on the wooden floor drew Lady Grayle's eyes to the staircase, down which her son and daughter-in-law were now coming. Lady Chessingham was a tall, thin woman, handsome in an uninteresting way—the cold, too-much-nose-and-tooth way that foreigners so much dislike. She looked definitely older than her husband, who, though actually the same height, appeared, with his narrow chest and feeble moustache, insignificant beside her.

"Your own fault if the cocktail's spoilt," said Lady Grayle. "I couldn't wait for you."

"We don't drink cocktails," said her daughter-in-law, a hint of superiority in her voice.

"Don't We? What about Our Consort?" asked Lady Grayle unkindly. "Come on, Charles, it'll do you good, put a little go into you."

She filled a glass and handed it to her son. Charles sipped it and made a wry face.

"It's terribly strong," he said, "tastes of a hairdresser's shop—vanilla or something, I suppose."

"Vanilla! That's Syrop d'Orgeat—a 'Perfect Peach,' Henry's latest."

"I don't like it," said Charles, putting down the glass still half-full and coughing nervously.

"No guts, that's your trouble," said his mother.

"How's father this evening?" said Charles, who, though he was thirty-six and had been a member of Parliament for twelve years, had never lost his dread of his mother's tongue. Lady Grayle's face clouded.

"Rotten, poor dear," she said, and there was a note of tenderness in her usually hard voice. "I don't know what to do with him; none of these doctors

do him any good. I took him to Spavage again last week. He talked of temperament and a sea voyage. Of course I know it's his nerves and I know equally well that he'd be miserable away from Tassart."

"You should take him to Lawton Smythe," said her daughter-in-law. "He's done wonderful things for me."

"Your latest protégé, Catherine? What's become of that Jew-boy you were so keen on last year?"

Lady Chessingham looked down her long nose.

"He failed," she said shortly. Then more eagerly: "Lawton Smythe's a Canadian, trained in America. He's got the most wonderful hands; I'm sure he would . . ."

But Lady Grayle was not listening. She had returned to her comfortable attitude before the fire and was staring down into the flames. With a sharp turn of the head she broke into her daughter-in-law's panegyric.

"Run and see if Henry's coming, Charles," she said, "I'm famished."

"Surely, mother, one of the servants can do that," murmured Lady Chessingham, who was always trying to erect a façade of dignity for her husband.

"He hates being hunted out by Moode," said Lady Grayle. "Charles hasn't seen him for a month; it won't hurt him to run for once."

A door at the end of the hall opened.

"Your leg, mother," said Catherine hurriedly. Lady Grayle stared at her.

"Good Lord, girl; when were you born?" she asked. "We've been showing our knees for the last six years; it doesn't excite anyone to see 'em now."

Lady Grayle had been born and reared in Leicestershire, and though her husband's first and almost only successful task with her had been to cure the clipping of the final "g," her English was still far removed from the purity which her daughter-in-law worshipped.

"It looks different with long skirts, somehow," said Catherine. "I think they're so much more becoming."

"Of course they are, when your legs are like sticks—though I'll admit yours look well enough in a boot. Well, Henry, here you are at last; I was just sending Charles to look for you; I thought you were still dressing."

It was her husband who had entered the hall through the far door—the door of his study. Lord Grayle was nearly sixty and looked his age; his hair and moustache were grizzled and there were lines of suffering about his

mouth, whilst the stoop of his shoulders suggested permanent tiredness. He had a charming, if rather weak face—a face that reflected his career. After leaving Cambridge he had sat in the House for a few years in the Liberal interest, but was unfortunate enough to succeed his father when only thirty. Returning to Tassart, he gave himself up to watching an extremely competent agent manage his estate, and taking a mildly useful part in the county affairs. In the War he played a similar part at Rouen, ill-health rather than timidity keeping him out of the line. The only enterprising thing he had done in his life was to fall in love with and marry Helen Layering during a season's hunting with the Quorn—a performance which had astonished his friends, and which, in spite of the complete difference of their temperaments, had been an unqualified success. Everybody liked Henry Grayle, many people loved him; he had not an enemy in the world—but he was a sad man because he knew that he had not made use of his natural ability and opportunities. He had always been delicate and latterly he had developed a neuralgic 'tic' which, during the attacks of acute pain, nearly drove him off his head and was driving him into a state of neurasthenia far more serious than the disease itself.

"I dressed early, my dear; I thought perhaps a hot bath might stop this thing. Come along; let's go in."

Another door, between the fire and the staircase, had opened and Moode appeared, murmuring his gentle formula. Lady Grayle slipped her arm through Catherine's and led her into the dining-room. She was always trying to like her daughter-in-law, repenting the sarcasms which the latter's cold primness invariably drew from her. After all, Catherine was a good wife for a budding statesman, ambitious, persevering and economical; she had forced him into an under-secretaryship in the last government, an honour which Charles, son of his father, would never have acquired by himself. Lady Grayle realised that she had achieved less for her husband; still, the 'liking' was uphill work.

The mahogany dining-table, reduced to its smallest capacity and appearing like a candle-lit island in the dark sea of emptiness which surrounded it, was yet uncomfortably large for the small family party. When they were alone, Lady Grayle liked to have her husband next to her, so that she was faced now by Lady Chessingham, who looked her best when surrounded by the dignity of the old family plate and portraits. Indeed, she fitted into these surroundings better than did her more vital and restless hostess.

Dinner did not progress very cheerfully. Lady Grayle was worried about her husband, and relieved her feelings by a malicious twitting of her son; this naturally roused Catherine to rather heavy-handed defence of Charles, whose by no means contemptible brain, still moving at departmental pace, was too slow to parry his mother's thrusts. Lord Grayle, who was eating nothing, put in a good-humoured word for his son whenever Catherine was driven from the field, but Charles, accustomed to the dignified respect supplied by his wife and his Civil Servants, was not enjoying himself.

Seeking for a diversion, his eye wandered round the dining-room.

"What's become of the amboyna cabinet, father?" he asked.

Lord Grayle's eyes strayed to the wide space between the tall windows at the end of the room, a space rather inadequately filled by a single chair.

"Don't ask me; what's happening to the furniture in this house is known only to the Almighty and your mother. She's got one of her crazes."

Charles looked enquiringly at his mother, who was smiling indulgently at her husband.

"It's a lucky thing for you, Henry, that I do take the bit occasionally. Tassart and its contents would fall to pieces if they were left to your tender mercies."

Lord Grayle sighed; the twinkle in his eyes had given place to their more accustomed gloom.

"True, my dear, true," he said. Then, turning to Charles: "It comes out of this re-valuation I—we—had done. I was alarmed by all these fires in old houses that have been taking place; I didn't feel sure that the place, and particularly the furniture, was properly covered. I meant to have a new valuation made but, as usual, I let it slide. It wasn't till Vange was burnt down just before Christmas that I said something to Helen about it; within a week she'd got a firm of valuers down and at the end of the month the thing was done. As she says, that's how I look after Tassart."

Lady Grayle patted her husband's hand affectionately.

"We're a well-balanced firm," she said, "you have the ideas and I carry 'em out."

Charles still looked puzzled. His was one of the methodical minds which like explanations to begin at the beginning, work methodically and exactly through intervening stages and wind up with a considered peroration. The crossing of t's should, in his opinion, be done by the writer.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," he said with a slight frown. "What has re-valuation to do with the absence of the cabinet?"

"It's quite obvious, Charles, if you'd only think," said Lady Grayle, a little unjustly. "The valuation showed that everything was absurdly under-insured, and it also showed that almost every stick in the place is falling to pieces for lack of attention—worm, dry rot, and all sorts of horrors. Naturally, it's madness to let that go on, throwing money away. That cabinet's gone to be repaired."

"Yes, and when it comes back you won't find it in the same place," interposed Lord Grayle maliciously. "I spoke of a craze, justly. The house is being turned upside down; the men can't get on with their proper work because they spend their time carrying one lot of furniture downstairs and another up again; the housemaids are all leaving because they're expected to clean dirt off the top of pictures that's been there since the Restoration; I only maintain the *status quo* in my study by keeping a six-shooter on my writing-table when I'm there, and locking the door when I go out."

"Don't be so absurd, Henry," said Lady Grayle, laughing. "You know quite well that Mr. Cristen told us we'd got all our woods and periods mixed. Obviously it's wrong to have amboyna and mahogany and oak all mixed together. We can't move the—do have some chicken, dear; it's very bad for you to drink all that claret and just nibble a bit of toast—oh, well, it'll be your own funeral—we can't move the dining-room table or the panelling, but when that cabinet comes back it's going in my sitting-room with the walnut."

"All that you say, my dear Nell, is right—but it's an expensive game."

Lady Chessingham pricked up her ears.

"Expensive?" she asked sharply. "Why?"

"Item one, the valuation itself; they suggested a percentage basis as being the usual method, but we saw through that and had a fixed sum—£500—pictures, china, and all; item two, increase of insurance premiums to cover increased value; item three, cost of having furniture repaired, worms eradicated, pictures repainted. It means ruin, my dear Catherine, for Charles if not for me. We shall probably have to sell half of it to pay for the rest—the Romney 'Caroline Countess' will be the first to go."

Lord Grayle was chaffing, but his daughter-in-law was in grim earnest.

"Oh, you can't do that!" she exclaimed. "If it must be done at all, it should be paid for out of income!"

"That is debatable, my dear—appreciation of capital value; but in any case, I have no income."

"Mother seems to have enough to spend on her clothes!" flashed Catherine.

Lady Grayle laughed and rose to her feet.

"Come along, Catherine; if we're going to quarrel about my clothes we'll do it in the library and leave these poor men to enjoy their port in peace. Not more than two glasses, Henry."

Lord Grayle patted his wife's shoulder as he opened the door for her and Catherine; then returned to the table and sat down beside his son.

"No port, Charles?" he asked. "Better have a glass; cheer you up. Croft '04; good if not great."

"Thank you, father; I never drink port, and I'm sure . . ."

"You mean your wife doesn't let you. Don't let yourself become a complete echo, my dear boy; you've got a will of your own—or should have."

Charles flushed and, as was usual with him when he disliked a subject, changed it.

"The Romney, father; you're not serious about selling it?"

"Can't," was the laconic reply. "Heirloom, like all the pictures and most of the furniture. I wish I could sell something; with this taxation it's almost impossible to live."

Charles, relieved about the Romney, tried to be sympathetic.

"Is the position really as bad as all that, father? Surely you can't be spending a great deal down here—just the two of you? You don't entertain much."

"We don't, worse luck, because we can't. A place like Tassart eats money, Charles, even if it's empty. There's nothing coming in from the estate—I can hardly keep it going. As you know, I've had to give up my two directorships, and we live on our trustee securities."

"I'm sorry it's so bad; it's not very promising for the future."

"Your future? It's not; you must get a job in the Cabinet next time or go into the City and earn something."

Charles frowned, then screwed up his courage.

"Seriously, father, Catherine and I are a good deal disturbed at mother's extravagance; don't you think it's rather absurd for her—at her age—to

spend so much money on her clothes? Catherine says it must run into four figures; at times like these—the state of taxation, as you say—I mean, any idea of mortgaging the future would be . . .”

Charles, half-way between his House of Commons manner and a childhood inhibition, glanced at his father. The latter was gently swirling his brandy in its large goblet, apparently absorbed in his task. This apparent inattention to his theme irritated the noble member for South Quenshire. His tone became more severe.

“And it’s not only that; we hear that she bets heavily. There was a rumour of her having lost several hundred pounds at the Epsom Spring Meeting. It is really most lamentable. One can understand anyone who goes to a meeting having a pound or two on a horse, but this betting on the wire is sheer gambling.”

Lord Grayle’s eyes were smouldering as he raised them to his son’s face, but his voice was quiet.

“You will oblige me, Charles, by not criticising your mother. Sure you won’t have any brandy? Then we will join them.”

In the library, Lady Chessingham, in a high-backed chair beside the fire, was knitting a silk tie; Lady Grayle was at a writing-table scribbling a note, one knee crossed over the other and a long green cigarette holder between the fingers of her left hand. She threw a quick glance at her husband’s face as he came in and at once went and joined him before the fire. Charles, looking stiff and ill at ease, was pretending an interest in his wife’s work. Lady Grayle slipped her arm through her husband’s.

“Is it bad, old man?” she whispered.

“Hellish.”

“Come and have a game of piquet with me. You mustn’t have anything just yet; too soon after dinner.”

Lord Grayle made a grimace.

“Didn’t have much dinner,” he said.

“No; it was very naughty of you. And you shouldn’t drink a lot of wine when you’re not eating.”

“It helps.”

“It may help at the time, but it must excite your nerves and makes the neuralgia worse afterwards. Was Charles tiresome?”

“Pompous young prig,” growled the proud father under his breath.

Lady Grayle smiled.

"It's that nasty little black hat," she said irrelevantly. "Never mind, they'll be gone on Monday and then I can look after you properly. Would you like the wireless, Catherine?"

"Thank you, mother, we don't care for the wireless."

"My God!" whispered Lady Grayle.

Charles was looking at *The Times*.

"I see that George Blentworth is speaking on 'Contractual Obligations of Dominion Status,' " he said. "We might listen to that."

"We might not!" growled Lord Grayle. "That pin-headed fool! He took Lower Fourth and after six years finished in First Hundred—and they let him talk to the country about Dominion!"

"He will be Secretary of State in the next Conservative Government," said Charles stiffly.

"Then God help the Dominions; they will indeed contract—out! Your 'elder,' isn't it, dear?"

Charles subsided into the *Spectator*, and the game of piquet went quietly on till the door opened and Moode appeared with a large tray. Lord Grayle glanced at the clock.

"Ten o'clock; surely I can have some now, dear?"

"All right, I'll get them when we've finished this hand."

Lady Chessingham looked up from her knitting.

"What is it, mother? Let me get it for you," she said dutifully.

"Thank you, Catherine. Father's tablets; they're in the middle drawer of the writing-table in my sitting-room."

Lady Chessingham carefully finished her row, put down the knitting, and walking across to the card-table, held out her hand.

Lady Grayle looked up.

"M'm?"

"The key, mother."

"It's not locked."

"Not locked? but they're poison!"

"Rubbish; it's only a sedative."

Catherine opened her mouth to contradict, but, thinking better of it, turned and left the room. In five minutes she was back.

"You take it dissolved, don't you, father?"

"Yes, please, dear; in a little brandy."

Catherine went across to the tray, and taking the stopper from one of the decanters, sniffed at it. The tablet apparently took some time to dissolve, as it was a minute before she carried the glass across to her father-in-law.

Lord Grayle thanked her, drank it, and went on with his game. A quarter of an hour later, in the middle of a hand, he put down his cards.

"D'you know, Nell, I think I shall go to bed," he said. "That stuff's done me good; I feel as if I could sleep. Can't afford to miss the chance."

"I'm so glad, dear; go, of course. I'll come up in twenty minutes and tuck you up."

Lady Grayle found her husband already in bed when she went up a quarter of an hour later. He seemed half-asleep, but greeted her with a smile of content.

"I feel lovely," he said. "First time this thing's stopped to-day."

His wife kissed him affectionately.

"You know, dear," he continued, "there's something in what those two prigs say. We *are* spending rather a lot—for an old couple who've had their life. We ought to think about Charles's future."

Lady Grayle stiffened.

"I don't admit that I've had my life," she said, "and I'm not old. We've just as much right to enjoy ourselves as Charles and Catherine—they don't know how to, anyhow. Besides, he's got all the Belchister money. Of course, I know what you mean; it's not 'we' who are spending a lot—it's me!"

"Nonsense! It's me—I—just as much. I could cut down the stable a lot, and probably other things, too. Charles really has got a chance of doing something for the family—though I don't myself think he's good enough. Still, he'll be in the Lords soon and there must be two or three Ministers in the Upper House; they'll be glad enough of anyone with government experience. He'll need money if he gets a job—entertaining and so on; we must think of his career."

"You can leave his career to his wife. She'll push him on; she thinks of nothing else. That woman'd shoot a fox if she thought it would advance Charles's wretched career!"

Lord Grayle laughed.

"You're not very just; she's a good wife."

"It'd be much more use if she were a good mother! What's the use of Charles having a career if they're going to let the family die out? But look

here, you must go to sleep. Don't worry about money; we'll talk about it when you feel better. You're not to worry; promise!"

Lord Grayle smiled sleepily.

"All right, dear; bless you. Leave me those tablets."

"Oh, Henry, you won't want them now. You'll sleep beautifully."

"Sleep better if I know they're there."

Reluctantly Lady Grayle put the little bottle down on the table beside the bed.

"You won't take more than one, will you?"

But Lord Grayle was already asleep.

II • Found Dead

Dr. Norman Calladine was just rising from his solitary breakfast when the telephone bell rang. He had been up most of the night with a diphtheria case and had allowed himself to remain in bed till nine. Methodically he finished rolling his napkin and slipping it into its wooden ring; then walked to the instrument and lifted the receiver.

"Dr. Calladine speaking."

"Oh, sir, is that you? This is Moode speaking, Tassart Hall, sir. Will you please come up at once. His Lordship—we can't wake him. Very much afraid he's dead, sir. Her Ladyship wants you to come at once."

"Of course, but tell me—he is still in bed; is that right? And is there no breathing at all? The pupils—are they dilated? You didn't notice. Well, I'll come straight along. Have hot water ready, of course."

Dr. Calladine hurried into his surgery and started cramming things into his bag. A small cylinder of oxygen had to go separately.

"No hope, I'm afraid," he muttered to himself. "Still, people often make mistakes about breathing. Can't be Cheyne-Stokes anyhow—they'd notice that. It's that Dial of course—overdose—mistake or on purpose. I shall be for it whichever it is. Damn."

Visions of an inquest rose before the doctor as he got his car out of its dark little garage and drove off down the village street. Awkward questions by officious jurymen; insinuations of mistaken dispensing, references in the

Press to the too frequent prescribing of dangerous drugs. It was all in order, of course, but it was bound to do him harm—nervous patients and so on—especially with a prominent man like Lord Grayle.

Norman Calladine was not a man who worried about public opinion for itself, but if it went as far as a serious loss of practice it was another matter. In these days of panel patients, more popular hospitals, and poorer 'big houses,' the lot of the country G.P. was none too easy. Calladine was nearly fifty now and so far he had succeeded in putting very little aside for his old age. He had had an unfortunate love affair with a married woman, which, though luckily it had not become public property, had cost him a good deal of money. It was at an end now, but, though disillusioned, Calladine was not cured.

In a little more than ten minutes from the receipt of the butler's call Calladine was at Tassart. Moode took him straight up to Lord Grayle's bedroom, on the way adding what little more information he had to give. Lady Grayle was standing with her back to the window in her husband's room; Calladine gave her a quick glance and saw that she was deadly pale, the colour drained right out of her face, even from the lips. Her face was expressionless and her only greeting was a slight gesture with her hands towards the bed.

Lord Grayle was lying partly on his side, but with the back of his head on the pillow. Although the pallor of death was already far advanced there were indications of considerable congestion in the face and the pupils of the eyes, as Calladine had expected, were dilated. The doctor went through the formality of examination and then turned to Lady Grayle and nodded.

"About half an hour ago, I think," he said, "but if I may be left alone now I will make a more exact test. I shall have several questions to ask; perhaps I may come down and see you in your sitting-room? Thank you."

It was a quarter of an hour before Dr. Calladine appeared in Lady Grayle's sitting-room. He found her in almost exactly the same attitude as before, only this time she was looking out of the window instead of having her back to it, and her face was still the same white, expressionless mask. She did not move when he came into the room, and when he joined her before the window did not look at him.

"Will you tell me about it, please—Lady Grayle?" Calladine asked gently. "Who found him?"

"I found him," replied Lady Grayle in a toneless voice.

"When, please?"

“Just before we telephoned to you; some time after half-past nine, I suppose.”

“How was it so late? I thought he breakfasted at half-past eight?”

For a moment Lady Grayle did not answer, then for the first time turned, with a quick movement, to look at Dr. Calladine.

“Could you have saved him,” she asked, “if you had come an hour sooner?”

Calladine shook his head.

“I doubt it,” he said, “but I don’t know enough yet to answer that. Why do you ask it? Did anyone know an hour sooner?”

Lady Grayle slowly shook her head and turned again to look out of the window.

“I had my hand on the handle of his door at eight o’clock,” she said. “I was going in to see how he had slept. Then I thought he might still be asleep, and it would be a pity to wake him, so I—I didn’t go in. It might have . . . made all the difference. I came downstairs instead and went into the garden. I had breakfast as usual at half-past eight—with Charles and his wife. They asked me about him, and I said he was probably asleep. I came here to write letters and at about half-past nine Moode came in and said that he—that Henry—had not had breakfast yet; he wanted to know whether he should take breakfast up to him. I went up myself . . . and found him as you saw.” Lady Grayle paused, then asked in a voice so low that Calladine could scarcely hear it: “When did he die?”

“As near as I can say, half an hour before I arrived—about nine o’clock.”

A twinge of agony seemed to pass over Lady Grayle’s face.

“Then he was dying—when I was outside his door. All that time——” Her voice trailed away into silence.

Calladine, though he had known Lady Grayle intimately for twenty years, realised now for the first time the depths of feeling of which she was capable.

“He wasn’t conscious then; you can be sure of that,” he said gently. Then, remembering that there was still much to be asked, he forced himself into a more professional frame of mind. “Why did you think he might still be asleep? He doesn’t . . . didn’t usually sleep late, did he?”

“He had a bad day yesterday. Last night, about ten, he took one of your tablets. He said he felt very sleepy—went to bed quite early and fell asleep while I was talking to him. I knew he had slept badly for two or three nights;

I thought he might be making up for it." Lady Grayle's voice was level and toneless again.

"How many did he take?"

"One . . . at least I suppose so . . . that was what he usually—always took, as far as I know."

"He took it himself last night? You didn't give it him?"

"Catherine—my daughter-in-law gave it him."

"Is she here now?"

"Somewhere, I believe. Do you want to see her?"

The sound of a car outside the house reached Dr. Calladine's ear. He hurried on:

"Lady Grayle; you will understand that I cannot, under the circumstances, give my certificate without a post-mortem examination. I have telephoned to the coroner. And, of course, the circumstances will have to be . . . we shall have to find out . . ." Calladine hated this part of his task, ". . . as a matter of form I have had to notify the police . . always in a case of this kind, even when there can be very little doubt . . . I saw that the bottle of tablets was still by his bed—I meant to ask you more about them, but I think this probably is the police and they may as well . . ." His voice died away lamely as he saw the look of horror and distress on Lady Grayle's face. For a moment he thought she was going to protest—expostulate, but she checked herself and said quietly:

"I understand; of course."

The door opened and the butler came in. He glanced doubtfully at the doctor.

"What is it, Moode?" asked Lady Grayle impatiently.

"Major Faide, my lady; he wishes to know if he may speak to you."

Major Faide was the Chief Constable of Brackenshire.

"In the library, Moode; I will come down," said Lady Grayle calmly.

As soon as the door was closed she turned to her companion and with a quick movement seized his arm; even through the sleeve of his coat her fingers seemed to dig into his flesh.

"Stay with me, Norman! I can't—you don't know . . ."

For the first and last time in his life Norman Calladine heard a note of appeal in the voice that was usually so controlled—even so hard.

* * * * *

Major Roger Faide had been Chief Constable of Brackenshire for eighteen years, ever since his retirement on half-pay from the county regiment. He was a good Chief Constable, as he had been a good officer; conscientious, trustworthy, and sufficiently intelligent, if not over-endowed with imagination. He was extremely popular in his force with the senior officers because he trusted them and supported them through thick and thin; with the rank and file because he took the trouble, as do all good army officers, to know them and to treat them as human beings. In the county generally he was well liked, as a good sportsman and an honest man. He was a good shot and allowed himself the pleasure of, on average, two days' shooting a week during the season, partly because he enjoyed it and partly because it gave him an opportunity of meeting, under unrestrained conditions, practically everybody in the county and getting to know a great deal that would not otherwise have come his way.

Like all of us, he had his faults, one of which is, perhaps, sufficiently well illustrated by the fact that he did not feel, standing in the library of Tassart, quite as completely master of the situation as he would have done in humbler surroundings. The situation itself was sufficiently disagreeable; for the police to poke their noses into the affairs of a newly-bereaved family was a disagreeable duty; when that family was also an extremely noble family the duty became definitely embarrassing—to Major Faide, at any rate.

But if the Chief Constable was nervous and ill at ease, that description did not apply to his companion. Superintendent Clewth, a sturdy, grizzled man of fifty, stood beside his Chief in the library, quietly watching the door by which he had entered. From his appearance of calm self-confidence one would have said that it would take a great deal more than a bereaved Countess, or even a Civil Disturbance, to worry him. So long as he was clear as to his duty, nothing would hinder him from carrying it out; on the present occasion there was no question of doubt.

The door opened and Lady Grayle, followed by Dr. Calladine, came in. Superintendent Clewth noted, as the doctor had done, the white, expressionless face of the widow; he also noted the anxious embarrassed look of her companion. Major Faide took a deep breath and squared his shoulders to help him face the ordeal like a man; then, taking a step forward, held out his hand.

"Lady Grayle, I am so sorry—so deeply sorry. May I offer you my sincere sympathy and that of my whole Force. Those of us who have seen

Lord Grayle's work upon the Bench and at Quarter Sessions will realise what a gap . . ."

Calladine saw a familiar flash appear in Lady Grayle's eye.

"Yes," she said. "Thank you, Major Faide. You wanted to see me, I understand."

"Er, yes, certainly. That is . . . in a case like this, where the cause and the . . . er . . . circumstances surrounding the death are . . . uncertain . . . I understand that Dr. Calladine has not seen his way to give a certificate. The police have to take cognisance and make certain enquiries. I have brought Superintendent Clewth with me." (Clewth bowed slightly and Lady Grayle gave him a pleasant little nod of recognition.) "I myself—that's to say, it's his job," finished Major Faide rather lamely.

Lady Grayle did not speak, but turned her eyes upon Clewth. She remained standing, and Major Faide did not feel that he could ask her to sit down in her own house. Clewth was as happy standing as sitting. He turned to Calladine.

"If you're not in a great hurry, doctor, I'd like to have a word with you before you go," he said, and deliberately walked to the door and opened it.

"I asked Dr. Calladine to stay—here," said Lady Grayle curtly.

"I think it'll be more in order, my lady, if we take each account separately," replied Clewth calmly.

Lady Grayle shrugged her shoulders, and sat down on a high-backed chair by the fire. Calladine walked to the door.

"I'll be up in Lord Grayle's room—one or two things to see to," he murmured.

"Ah, that room's locked now, doctor!" replied Clewth. "I took the liberty of doing that directly I arrived; the butler showed me up."

Dr. Calladine looked rather annoyed.

"Was that necessary?" he asked.

"Matter of routine, sir," replied Clewth quietly. "You'll wait in the hall? Thank you, sir."

He shut the door behind the doctor and, turning back into the room, pulled up a small chair close to Lady Grayle. With a glance of enquiry at his Chief he sat down and pulled out a notebook.

"Now, my lady, if you would kindly tell us first about the finding of the body."

Lady Grayle repeated the account she had already given to Calladine. Clewth jotted down a few notes.

"When the doctor rang us up this morning, he said something about a drug—some sedative tablets, I think. He thought that a possible explanation of the death might be an overdose of this drug—taken accidentally, or otherwise." The Superintendent's tone was so matter-of-fact that the significance of the last two words was hardly noticeable.

"Can you tell us anything about these tablets, my lady?"

"Yes. My husband suffered from a very painful form of neuralgia in the nerves of his face. Dr. Calladine gave him these tablets to take as a sedative when it was very bad; he was to take them as seldom as possible, otherwise they would lose their effectiveness. He had a bad day yesterday, particularly in the evening, and after dinner, at about ten o'clock, he had one of the tablets."

"One was the usual dose?"

"Yes."

"And he only took one last night?"

"Yes—so far as I know."

Lady Grayle's voice was calm, but Clewth, whose eyes were apparently on his notebook, noticed that the hand which was not in her lap was clutched so tightly that the knuckles showed white as bone.

"So far as you know, my lady? Did Lord Grayle keep the bottle of tablets himself?"

"No, I kept them, but last night, as it happened, my daughter-in-law, Lady Chessingham, gave him the tablet. She fetched the bottle from my room. She is still here and will be able to tell you about it."

"Could she have been mistaken about the dose? Given two or three instead of one? But then Lord Grayle would have known, of course, wouldn't he? He wouldn't take more than one."

Clewth was apparently answering his own question, so Lady Grayle remained silent. The Superintendent looked up.

"He would know if he was given more than one, wouldn't he?" he repeated more sharply.

Lady Grayle hesitated.

"He might not," she said at last, "he takes them dissolved—generally in brandy."

Clewth jotted down a note.

"And the point about Lady Chessingham; could she have made a mistake?"

"Oh no; she knows he only has one."

"She might not think that, as he had had a particularly bad day, he might be the better for a stronger dose?"

"She wouldn't be such a fool; she knows more about medicines and things than I do. But why do you ask me about what she did? She can tell you herself."

"So she can; thank you, my lady," said Clewth, as if the idea was a bright one that had not occurred to him. He appeared to ponder over his notes for a time and then continued:

"Do I understand rightly, my lady, that you can neither confirm nor refute the suggestion that Lord Grayle died from an overdose of this drug?"

Lady Grayle appeared to think carefully before replying.

"I really know no more about it than you, Superintendent," she said. "It certainly seems the only possible solution, but I don't see how it can have happened."

"Where are the tablets now, my lady?"

"As far as I know they are in my husband's room."

"In his room!" Clewth appeared genuinely surprised. "But I thought you kept them?"

"I do as a rule, but he asked me to leave him the bottle last night; I didn't want to, but he said he would sleep better if he knew they were there."

Superintendent Clewth exchanged a significant glance with his chief.

"This is a very important point, my lady; how is it that you did not tell us of it before?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lady Grayle. "You've only just asked me the question."

Clewth wisely left this line and returned to the main point.

"Then there is nothing to have prevented Lord Grayle taking more—any amount more—in the night?"

"I suppose not, but why should he? The one he had taken had done its work very effectively. He became extremely sleepy and went to bed early; he actually fell asleep while I was talking to him."

"Oh . . . h?" Superintendent Clewth appeared to find considerable interest in this statement. "The one he took (that's at ten o'clock, I take it?) did its work very effectively? More so than usual, my Lady?"

Lady Grayle thought for a minute.

"I think, perhaps, it did," she said.

"Perhaps you would give me a little more information about the taking of that tablet. Where was it taken, for instance?"

"In here."

"In here. And who else was in the room and where were they all sitting or standing?"

"My husband and I were playing piquet at a card-table near where Major Faide is; Lady Chessingham was in this chair, and my son in that armchair opposite."

"And then?"

"Then my husband decided to take one of the tablets. My daughter-in-law fetched the bottle and gave it to him at the card-table—or rather, she dissolved the tablet first in some brandy. Moode had just brought the tray."

"And the tray was . . . ?"

"On the big table over there."

Clewth walked across to the table against the wall opposite the fireplace and stood with his back to the others.

"Here, in the middle?" he asked.

"Yes."

For half a minute Clewth remained where he was, apparently lost in thought. Then he turned round.

"Take a little time to dissolve, no doubt," he said casually.

Without resuming his seat, he continued.

"Just one more question, my lady; how many tablets were left in the bottle before last night?"

"I haven't the least idea; you don't expect me to have counted them every day, do you?"

"No idea at all, my lady? Was the bottle, for instance, quite full?"

"No, certainly not."

"Practically empty? only one or two left?"

"No, I should say there were more than that."

"About half-full?"

"Perhaps, but I really can't say."

"And when you took the bottle up last night and left it in his Lordship's room, how many then?"

Lady Grayle looked at him steadily.

"I didn't notice," she said.

III • Di-dial

Superintendent Clewth ushered Major Faide and the doctor into Lord Grayle's bedroom and, changing the key to the inside of the door, relocked it. Crossing to the bed he stood looking down, not at the body, but at the table beside the bed. On it stood a reading lamp, a Bible, a pocket edition of *Lavengro*, a photograph of Lady Grayle as a girl, a watch, and a small bottle.

"Know anything about that bottle, doctor?" asked the Superintendent.

"Of course; those are the sedative tablets I told you about."

"Know what they contained?"

"I ought to; I prescribed them myself—in fact, I supplied them."

Clewth shot him a quick glance, but did not at the moment follow up the point.

"Are you his Lordship's regular doctor?"

"That depends on what you mean. I was his regular local doctor, but he used frequently to consult a London man, Sir Horace Spavage."

"But you prescribed these tablets? Why?"

"What d'you mean, 'why'?" Dr. Calladine evidently did not take kindly to questioning. His lined face was slightly flushed and his eyes hard. "Lord Grayle required a sedative when the neuralgia from which he suffered was very acute—as you'd know yourself if you had it. I gave him these."

"What are they?"

"Di-dial—a derivative of barbituric acid and ethylmorphine. It is a hypnotic of somewhat similar character to veronal, but stronger."

"And it is a poison?"

"Certainly, if taken in excess—like all hypnotics."

“And what steps did you take to prevent it being taken in excess, doctor?”

“I told Lord Grayle only to take one at a time and not more than two in twenty-four hours.”

“And he knew they contained poison?”

“Of course he did. He wasn’t born yesterday, any more than I was.”

Calladine’s voice did not disguise his impatience. “No, sir, I suppose not,” replied Superintendent Clewth calmly. “But did you specifically warn him that they contained poison?”

“I may have; I can’t remember.”

“Would it not have been wiser to do so?”

“Why? It’s got the word ‘Poison’ on the label. People can use their eyes, can’t they?”

“So they can, sir. So they can.”

Superintendent Clewth made some deliberate notes in his book. Dr. Calladine watched him with undisguised irritation. The Chief Constable, on the other hand, was enjoying the little scene; he had never much cared for Dr. Calladine.

“Now, doctor,” Clewth continued, “perhaps you’ll tell us how many of these tablets would form a lethal dose.”

“That’s very difficult to say; it depends on circumstances, the condition of the patient concerned, and so on.”

“Quite, sir, but I am referring to Lord Grayle; you know all about his condition, I suppose; what would you regard as a fatal dose with him?”

Calladine frowned; after careful thought he answered.

“I should not expect death from anything under ten grains.”

“How many tablets would that be?”

“Five; each one contains roughly two grains.”

“And the number of tablets in the bottle?”

“Twelve.”

“Are they only supplied in bottles of twelve?”

“So far as I know they are, yes.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

Clewth again applied himself to his notebook before continuing.

"Now, sir, can you give me any idea how many tablets you would expect to find in this bottle this morning if they had been used normally? You know, I suppose, when you supplied it and you may have some idea of how often his Lordship took them, eh?"

"I can't tell you the exact date now, though I can look it up; something like three weeks ago, I should think. The other point I can't answer with any certainty—probably he averaged about one a week."

"So that you would expect to find eight or nine in the bottle now?"

"Something like that, but it's mere guesswork."

"Let's have a look, then."

Picking up the little bottle very gingerly with his handkerchief Clewth gradually wriggled the top off without touching it with his fingers, then tilted the contents on to the table top. Three tablets slid out on to the polished surface. The Superintendent looked questioningly at Dr. Calladine.

"I'm certainly surprised at that," said the doctor, "at least, I should have been if this" (he indicated the bed) "hadn't happened. Probably Lady Grayle can tell how often he has been taking them lately."

"That's a very good suggestion; thank you, sir," said Clewth blandly. "Now about these tablets, is there any possibility of one of them being stronger—a great deal stronger—than the others?"

"No, certainly not. They are all exactly the same."

"No possibility of mistake, sir? Powder, or whatever it is, not quite evenly mixed, so that a lot of the poison got concentrated in one tablet while the others went short?"

"Good heavens, no. No reputable chemist would make a blunder like that."

"Chemist, sir? You didn't make them up yourself, then? I understood you to say you did."

"I said I *supplied* them. Di-dial is a proprietary drug, made up in tablets by manufacturing chemists and supplied by them to retail chemists and doctors. In the country one has to keep a stock of drugs that may be required at short notice. If you take the trouble to look you'll see the name of the manufacturers on the label."

Clewth glanced at the little bottle.

"So it is, sir," he said, "stupid of me. And you think there could be no possibility of error?"

"Out of the question, I should say, but you'd better ask them."

"I will, sir. And have you a large stock of this drug?"

"No. One or two more bottles, perhaps."

"All the same strength? You haven't got any made up to a strength of, say, four or six grains to a tablet?—that could have been supplied to Lord Grayle by mistake for the two-grain tablets?"

"Good God, what a question!" exclaimed the doctor angrily. He turned to the Chief Constable. "Look here, Faide, have I got to put up with this sort of insult indefinitely? Here's this officer of yours accusing me of blundering at my job in a way that'd get a third-year student the sack!"

Major Faide, however embarrassed he may have been downstairs, was quite capable of dealing with Dr. Calladine.

"It's a perfectly proper question to ask, doctor," he said. "We have to eliminate every possibility; error, obviously, is one of them. Naturally nobody likes being asked if he's made a mistake, but we all do make them at times and so one can't ignore the possibility. For the same reason I am sure you will not object to having your poisons checked?"

For a moment it looked as if Calladine were going to object very strongly, but he controlled himself with an effort and, drawing a bunch of keys from his pocket, detached one and handed it to the Chief Constable.

"There's the key of my cupboard," he said. "You'd better have it before I can go back and cook my errors. Now may I go?"

"Just a minute or two more, sir, please," said Clewth calmly. "About the time of death; can you fix it exactly?"

"About nine a.m.; not later, possibly a little earlier."

"And he'd have been unconscious some time before that? unable to call for help?"

"I doubt if he ever recovered what you mean by consciousness after he went to sleep. He would gradually pass from sleep to coma, and coma to death."

"And how long would these various stages take?"

"Coma might begin in anything from one to three hours. Death normally follows in anything from twelve to forty-eight hours, according to dose."

"Twelve to forty-eight? Then this was pretty quick?"

"Well, yes."

"You can't explain that?"

"Not for certain; in certain conditions—if the stomach was inflamed, or even empty, absorption would be quicker and death would follow more rapidly."

"What would you put as the absolute minimum?"

Dr. Calladine thought very carefully before answering.

"I'm not a toxicologist; I hardly like to commit myself; but I should be extremely surprised if under any circumstances death occurred within nine hours."

"Thank you, sir; of course, we mustn't expect you to lay down certainties, but that'll be a rough guide to us. If necessary we can get it checked by the Home Office Analyst. Now there's just one more question, and then I won't keep you any longer; assuming that Lord Grayle took a normal dose—a single tablet—and went to sleep within about an hour, what is the shortest time in which you would expect him to wake up again?"

"I should be surprised if he didn't get three good hours' sleep."

"Thank you, sir."

Having unlocked the door and released Dr. Calladine, Superintendent Clewth rang the bell.

"Getting rather interesting, sir, eh?" he said to his Chief.

Major Faide frowned.

"I don't altogether like the look of it, Clewth," he said. "What do you make of . . ."

There was a knock at the door and Moode appeared. The butler's naturally pink face was rather paler than its wont, but his manner and voice were as quietly dignified as ever. Clewth, who had a private hate for the race of manservants, addressed him brusquely.

"Name?" he asked.

"Moode, sir. James Moode. Age 48. Married, no children. Church of England. Twenty-three years in service with his Lordship, the first seven as first footman, subsequently as butler."

The Superintendent was slightly taken aback by this unsolicited flood of information, but it was what he wanted to know, and he jotted it down.

"Right. Now about calling your master this morning. You did that, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, sir; at seven-thirty, as usual."

“Well, man, and what about his Lordship then? You must have seen he was ill!”

“No, sir; I saw nothing—nothing unusual, that is.”

“But when you drew the curtains surely you looked to see if he was awake?—natural instinct, I should have thought.”

“His Lordship always sleeps with the curtains back, the blinds up, and the windows open, just as you see them now, sir.” There was a faint note of superiority in his voice—as from the fresh-air man to the frowster. He continued: “His Lordship, I observed, was sleeping on his right side—as he is now—with his back to me, so that I could not see his face. I assumed that he was asleep.”

“Then why didn’t you wake him?”

“His Lordship, sir, is troubled with sleeplessness, connected, I understand, with the nervous complaint from which he was suffering. He instructed me, if I found him asleep in the morning, to let him sleep on, as it probably indicated that he had had a sleepless night. I made that assumption this morning.” Moode’s explanation was given with the careful patience of a grown-up—a stupid grown-up—addressing a child. It had its effect upon the usually imperturbable Clewth.

“All that rigmarole means, I take it, that you didn’t notice that your master was dying,” he said bluntly.

The Chief Constable, standing by the window apparently absorbed in the view, thought that this shaft had touched the man. After all, if he was a devoted servant, as was indicated by his twenty-three years’ service, the suggestion that his lack of observation might have cost his master’s life would not be an agreeable one.

Moode did not answer the Superintendent’s last remark, but his eyes hardened.

“What did you come into the room at all for, if not to pull the blinds or wake your master?”

“Hot water, sir. His Lordship uses hot water for shaving and washing.”

Clewth shut his notebook with a snap and pointed to the bed.

“Look there,” he said sharply, “d’you mean to tell me you couldn’t see that your master was ill?”

“That is not how his Lordship was lying when I came in, sir.”

“What? Has the body been moved? Who by, eh?”

"I am not in a position to tell you for certain, sir, but if I may venture a guess it is that her Ladyship, upon discovering that his Lordship was ill, moved him into what she thought would be a more comfortable position. He was like this when I came up in response to her Ladyship's ring."

"I see," said Clewth shortly. "That will do, then, Moode. Wait, though. Can you tell me what your master had for dinner last night?"

"His Lordship ate nothing, sir, except a wafer or two. Her Ladyship was much distressed, and begged him to eat something, but he did not."

The two police officers exchanged glances.

"Did he drink anything?" asked Major Faide.

"Some claret, sir—three or four glasses. A glass of port—possibly two, and some brandy."

The Chief Constable pursed his lips, but made no comment.

As the butler turned to the door, Clewth again checked him.

"Moode," he said sharply, "when did you last handle that bottle of tablets?"

The butler's eyes widened.

"To the best of my knowledge, sir, I've never touched it in my life."

"Never?"

"Never, sir."

"Then you can go and ask Lady Chessingham to see me, in the library or wherever else is convenient to her."

"Very well, sir."

"While you're doing that," said Major Faide, when the door had closed behind the butler, "I'll see if there's anything I can do for Lady Grayle. Probably her son'll see to all the arrangements, but you never know. Anything I can do for you, Clewth?"

"If you'd kindly ring the hospital, sir, and ask them to send their ambulance for the body. If the Coroner orders a P.M., no doubt Dr. Hawkes will do it."

"You'll have to ask Dr. Calladine to be present, it's the etiquette."

"Yes, sir, I'll see to that."

Superintendent Clewth found Lady Chessingham in the library, sitting in the same high-backed chair that, according to Lady Grayle, she had occupied the previous evening. In front of the fire stood an unmistakable

Member of Parliament. Clewth, of course, knew Lord Grayle's heir by sight, but had never spoken to him.

"I am Lady Chessingham," said the lady on the chair. "I understand that you wished to see me."

"That is so, my lady." Clewth turned to her companion. "I think, my lord, if I may take your statement separately . . ."

"That is quite unnecessary," interposed Lady Chessingham coldly. "Lord Chessingham has no statement to make that in any way differs from mine."

Clewth hesitated. As far as possible he liked to take preliminary evidence *in camera*—first statements were of such vital importance. But where a husband and wife were concerned, if they had anything to conceal or any story to concoct they had probably already arranged what each should say, and, besides, there was always the possibility of intercepting a look or a signal that told more than any words. Not that Clewth had any reason to expect anything of the sort in this case, but he always worked on principle. There was, too, another principle involved: "never antagonise a witness, if you can avoid it." On the whole, he decided to acquiesce.

"Very well, my lady," he said. "If you'll excuse my sitting down." He hitched forward the small chair that he had previously occupied, and pulling out his notebook, laid it on his knee. Lady Chessingham watched the operation with disfavour, but made no comment.

"Now, my lady; if you will kindly tell me what occurred last night, so far as you know it."

"Be more precise, please," said Lady Chessingham. "What occurred when, and in connection with what?"

"What occurred in connection with Lord Grayle's illness, my lady, with particular regard to any medicine he may have taken." Clewth's reply was respectful and patient—very patient.

"I see. Lord Grayle suffered, as you may know, from a neuralgic affection. Yesterday evening we were informed that he was having a particularly severe attack. During dinner he ate nothing but drank a good deal. After dinner he asked for a sedative which had been prescribed for him, I understand, by the local doctor. As Lady Grayle was engaged in a game of cards with her husband, I undertook to fetch it. I did so. I shall have more to say about that presently. At Lord Grayle's request, I dissolved one tablet in a small quantity of brandy and gave it to him. He took it. In half an hour he said that he felt sleepy and retired to bed. That is all I have to tell you as regards fact, but I have some comments to . . ."

“Just one moment, please, my lady,” interposed Clewth, “before we pass to comments there are one or two questions I should like to ask. As to these tablets—I understand that they were in a small bottle? Where exactly was the bottle when you fetched it?”

“In a drawer of the writing-table in Lady Grayle’s sitting-room.”

“Was the drawer locked?”

“That is exactly the point upon which I was going to comment when you interrupted me,” said Lady Chessingham coldly. “The drawer was *not* locked, and I understand from my—from Lady Grayle—that it was never locked, or at least not regularly.”

“You thought that odd?”

“I thought it unwise. Poisons should always be locked up.”

“Ah, you knew it was poison?”

“Of course it was poison. All hypnotics are poison and dangerous to life if taken in excess.” Lady Chessingham’s contempt for the apparent ignorance of the police was not concealed.

“Now as to the number of tablets taken. You said, I think, that you dissolved one; can there have been any mistake about that?”

Lady Chessingham’s fine eyebrows were raised.

“I do not understand?”

“Is it possible that more than one slipped into the glass by mistake?”

Lord Chessingham stirred uneasily and cleared his throat. His wife made a slight gesture to him with her hand.

“No, Charles,” she said, “I will deal with this. I am sure, Inspector, that you are doing your duty according to your idea, but your question is an absurd one. Nobody with any experience of drugs could be so careless as you suggest. I placed one tablet in the brandy.”

“And can you give me any idea, my lady, how many tablets were left in the bottle after you had given that one?”

“There were three left.”

Clewth looked up from his notebook.

“Are you sure?” he asked quickly.

Lady Chessingham drew in her breath sharply.

“I must ask you to understand, Inspector, that when I give you an answer it is correct.”

"Thank you, my lady; I am sorry to query it, but the point is important. Now—as I understand you have experience of drugs—can you tell me whether you thought it . . . peculiar that this drug should have taken effect so quickly? I understand that within a quarter of an hour of taking it Lord Grayle began to feel sleepy, and within half an hour of that he actually fell asleep while talking to Lady Grayle. In your experience, is that peculiar?"

"It is unusual, but it is not inexplicable. The fact that Lord Grayle had eaten nothing and drunk a great deal would explain the rapidity of the drug's action."

Superintendent Clewth leant forward.

"Would it explain the fact that a normally harmless dose resulted last night in—death?"

For the first time Lady Chessingham's confidence seemed to falter. Her eyes turned for a moment to her husband—but only for a moment.

"That I am not prepared to answer," she said decisively. "It is a question for a doctor."

"And . . . er . . . Superintendent," broke in Lord Chessingham, "I think it very undesirable that any reference should be made to the quantity of wine drunk by Lord Grayle. Lady Chessingham was speaking relatively. Under ordinary circumstances the quantity was not . . . er . . . abnormal—to a man accustomed to drink wine regularly. But if it . . . if the expression used by my wife . . . I observed that you were taking notes . . . if that expression was made public—at, for instance, an inquest—there might be misunderstanding. In these times . . ."

Superintendent Clewth rose to his feet.

"Quite, my lord," he said. "It probably will not be necessary to refer to the matter in public, but your Lordship will understand that no suppression of evidence of an important nature will be possible."

He bowed politely and left the room. Major Faide was waiting for him in the hall.

"Finished here, Clewth?"

"For the moment, sir, I think. I want to see if we can eliminate suicide before I do any more here."

The Chief Constable looked questioningly at Clewth but did not speak till they were in the car on their way back to Headquarters.

"Tell me what you think of things, Clewth."

The Superintendent was silent for a time, as if marshalling his thoughts.

"I'm afraid this is going to be an unpleasant business, sir," he said at last. "The two easiest assumptions are accident and suicide. By accident, I mean rather 'mistake'; either in the dispensing, or in the administering. But both witnesses to that were very emphatic; you heard the doctor yourself—of course, we've still to check his poisons, and question the manufacturing chemists, but I don't expect much there—and Lady Chessingham was even more . . . emphatic."

A slight smile appeared on Clewth's face, evidently caused by some recollection.

"Then, 'suicide'; without going further, there's evidence of motive in his Lordship's health; he might have felt he couldn't stand this 'tic'—whatever it is—any longer and taken the easy way out. But there are two definite bits of evidence against suicide, and I may be able to find a third. In the first place, the number of tablets left in the bottle. Dr. Calladine expected about eight, but it was a mere guess; he didn't know how often Lord Grayle has been taking them. I can get more definite information about that, if necessary, from Lady Grayle and the butler. But Lady Chessingham said quite definitely that after she had given him his dose there were only three tablets left in the bottle, and that's the number there now. So it doesn't look as if he took any more in the night."

The Chief Constable considered the point for a minute, and then turned to his subordinate.

"That's not conclusive, Clewth," he said. "If he had been contemplating suicide it is quite possible that he had taken some opportunity of extracting a number of tablets from the bottle previously—in case he didn't get another chance to handle the bottle himself. That would explain the difference between Calladine's 'eight or nine' and Lady Chessingham's 'three.' "

Clewth nodded.

"I follow, sir; that's a good point; but there is another—the question of time. The doctor said coma in one to three hours, death in twelve to forty-eight. I'm not quite clear, now I come to think of it, whether the 'twelve to forty-eight' was from the taking of the dose or the beginning of coma, but he died at 9 a.m. and he only took Lady Chessingham's dose at 10 p.m."

"Ah, yes, but Calladine reduced it afterwards to nine hours, if certain conditions prevailed—which we now know was the case—an empty stomach and a lot of wine which might inflame it."

"Yes, that's right, sir, but even if you take the absolute minimum, see how it works out. There were eleven hours between dose and death. The

doctor's minimum time was nine hours, even assuming that that ran concurrently, so to speak, with coma—and I'm not at all sure that he didn't mean that it was nine hours from the beginning of the coma; but then, if we're looking for suicide by more tablets taken in the night, there's another period of time to be fitted in: the genuine sleep induced by Lady Chessingham's tablet—a period, according to the doctor, of at least three hours. So that, if we want suicide, we get this: harmless dose, 10 p.m.; harmless sleep, 10.45 p.m. to 1.45 a.m.; suicidal dose taken 1.45 a.m.; death nine hours later, 10.45 a.m., and he was dead at 9 a.m.!"

"Oh, come, Clewth, you can't work things out to exact hours like that."

"I know you can't, sir, but I've worked that out on what the only expert evidence we've got so far calls 'absolute minima'; in actual fact, probably all those periods should be extended, which makes the suicide idea even more absurd."

"Then you think it's murder?"

"I think it looks like it," said the Superintendent cautiously.

There was silence for five minutes; then Major Faide gave his characteristic gesture with his shoulders.

"Clewth," he said, "what you say confirms me in the decision that I have been for some time contemplating."

"I know what you're going to say, sir: 'the Yard.' "

The Chief Constable nodded.

"Yes. This is going to be an extremely awkward case. Here is one of the best known and most respected families in the country, involved in the death of its head under mysterious circumstances. Some very unpleasant questions will have to be asked, and asked particularly from two ladies: the wife—widow rather—and daughter-in-law. If, as you think, it's murder, some very foul mud will be stirred up—and I'd rather Scotland Yard did the stirring. Eh?"

"I see what you mean, sir. Of course, I won't deny that I don't like admitting, or seeming to admit, that we aren't up to the job, but it's for you to decide, sir, and, of course, I'll do my best to help the Yard if you call them in."

"Thank you, Clewth. I knew I could rely on your loyal support."

"There's just one thing I'd like to do, sir, before you settle," said Clewth, "if you'll give me ten minutes."

"Of course," said Major Faide, pulling the car up in front of Headquarters.

It was only seven minutes later that Superintendent Clewth appeared in his office.

"I took Lord Grayle's finger-prints before I came away, sir," he said. "I thought if we found his finger-prints on the tablet bottle it might point to suicide, and if they weren't there . . . well, it would confirm what Lady Chessingham said about the number of tablets. But I can't get a decent print of any sort—just a blur; he may have touched it or he may not."

The Chief Constable sighed.

"It's a tragic business, Clewth," he said. "Still, we've got our duty to do. You must make your report to the Coroner, and I'll . . ."

He reached for the telephone.

IV • A Nasty Mind

Sir Leward Marradine, Assistant Commissioner (Crime), New Scotland Yard, had just returned from an early lunch at his club when Chief Constable Thurston came to his room. These two men together were responsible for the work of the Criminal Investigation Department; Marradine—a soldier without previous police training—for broad principles of policy and administration; Thurston—at the pinnacle of a life's service in the Force—for the technical and executive side of the work.

"The Chief Constable of Brackenshire was on the 'phone just now, sir," said Thurston. "The Earl of Grayle died this morning at his house in Brackenshire . . ."

"Good God! Brownie Grayle? By Jove, I'm sorry to hear that; we were at Eton together. At Tassart, was it?"

"That's right, sir. The doctor has asked for a P.M. and the County Police have been out there. They suspect poison and they don't think he gave it to himself. They want us to take a hand."

"Do they? I wonder why—so early on; but it's a pleasant change not to be called in when the scent's a month old. I'll have a talk to the Chief Constable—Faide, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir; Major Faide. I wanted to ask your advice as to who I should send down."

Marradine smiled.

"You don't often need that," he said.

The Chief Constable coughed deprecatingly.

"In a case of this kind, sir, with a gentleman of Lord Grayle's position . . . ? as a matter of fact, I'm not quite sure about it myself. Wannock's the only Chief Inspector disengaged at the moment; Coles, of course, is practically finished with that New Prosperity swindle, but I don't much want him out of London just now; the Public Prosecutor's sure to be sending for him twice a day. The others have got all they can manage."

"Why not Wannock, Thurston?"

"Well, sir, you remember that Fawston inheritance case two years ago? he was in charge of that; and if you'll recollect, they weren't very pleased with the way he handled it. He's a good man, Wannock; we haven't a better man in the way of ability, but he's a bit rough in his methods. I doubt if he's quite the man for this case, if what I hear from Major Faide is true."

"What did you hear from him?"

Chief Constable Thurston gave a brief résumé of what Major Faide had told him over the telephone. Sir Leward whistled.

"Sounds a bit ticklish, certainly. I know both those ladies; they won't be easy to tackle if they're not out to help, or if they don't like our methods. Light hands are what are wanted, Thurston."

"I thought that would be your idea, sir."

Sir Leward remained silent for some minutes, evidently pondering the problem; then he looked up.

"Look here, Thurston," he said, "how would it be for you to keep this case in your own hands and send Poole down to Tassart to do the work on the spot? He can handle a job of this kind, as he proved in the Fratten case."

Chief Constable Thurston repressed a smile.

"I think that's a very good suggestion, sir."

Detective-Inspector Poole was rather a protégé of Sir Leward's—an 'experiment' in whom the A.C.C. took a great deal of interest. His training had been very different from that of his colleagues, but it had been none the less thorough. Inspired by an address given to the Criminologists' Club at Oxford by the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, young Poole had deliberately adopted the post of Head of the Criminal Investigation

Department as his objective in life. The training he mapped out for himself for that objective included a short period of legal work at the Bar—he worked for a year after qualifying in the chambers of that celebrated criminal pleader, Sir Edward Floodgate—and then recruitment in the Metropolitan Police Force. Ability and luck earned him, first a position in the C.I.D. and then rapid promotion; his work, and his unusual training, had attracted the attention of the head of the Department, who had accelerated his promotion to Detective-Inspector, and John Poole, still in the early thirties, was considered to have justified Sir Leward's experiment by his success in the case which the A.C.C. had quoted, the murder of Sir Garth Fratten at the Duke of York's Steps.

Inevitably this rapid promotion had given rise to a certain amount of jealousy and ill-feeling among some of his colleagues; "the A.C.C.'s boy" and "Gentleman Johnny" were, under the circumstances, names which Poole could hardly expect to escape, but by his quiet manner and good temper he had disarmed criticism and the nicknames were now only applied in good-humoured chaff.

On returning to his own room, Chief Constable Thurston sent for Poole and put him in possession of such facts connected with the case as he himself knew.

"You'd better mug up this family a bit before you go," he advised. "I don't know whether Tassart Hall is near Windon or not; if it is, you'd better get a room in the town so as to keep close touch with the Brackenshire police. Send a report to me every night; if necessary I'll run down and give you a hand, but I expect you and Superintendent Clewth will be able to manage that end of the business. I've asked them to have the organs sent straight up here for analysis—no good having two lots of doctors messing about with them."

The house-telephone on the desk rang; Thurston picked it up.

"Chief wants to see you before you go," he said. "Well, good-bye and good luck."

"I thought I'd give you a hint or two about these people, Poole," said Sir Leward when Poole reported to him. "Lord Grayle himself I used to know well, though I haven't seen him since he took to living down at Tassart. He was a charming fellow, even though he didn't make much of a success of life—too gentle and unselfish for that, probably. I shouldn't have thought he'd got an enemy in the world, but you never know. His son has less than half his character and none of his charm—and he'll probably be a Cabinet Minister. Such is life! Or I might say: 'such is wife,' because it's his wife's

doing. She was a Varrant—West Country family, old as the hills and about as hard—the family, I mean, not Lady Chessingham, though I shouldn't say there were many soft spots about her—psychologically, of course."

Sir Leward was fond of talking and not disinclined to air his knowledge of—the Lord Grayles and Lady Chessinghams.

"Yes, if Chessingham makes a name for himself he'll owe it to his wife. Lady Grayle, on the other hand, has done nothing for her husband. Not that she lacks ability—I believe she's got any amount of brains; during the War she ran Tassart as a Lying-in Hospital for unmarried mothers—they were the fashion then. Did it very well, too, I'm told. There's no doubt she could have done a lot for Lord Grayle if she'd liked—but I suppose she's not ambitious in the way her daughter-in-law is. She's been perfectly content to live at Tassart and enjoy herself, with a London season when she felt inclined. Hunting and racing are what she cares for; I believe she keeps two or three horses at Melton and motors over there from Tassart—it's only thirty or forty miles. Of course, the Brackenshire are of no use to a woman who was born and bred in the Quorn country. They say she's extravagant, but I don't know much about that, though if she bets she's not the sort to do it in fivers. There, that's all I can tell you about them; I hope it'll be some use."

"It will be of great use; thank you, sir," said Poole quietly, and took his leave.

Poole reached Windon soon after four and found Superintendent Clewth waiting for him. The county town of Brackenshire, though of considerable historic interest, is of no great size, and the two police officers did not take much longer than five minutes to walk to Headquarters. Here Poole was introduced to the Chief Constable and a preliminary conference took place. At the detective's request, Clewth went through the conversations he had had with Lady Grayle, Lady Chessingham, Dr. Calladine, and the butler, in great detail; the Superintendent's skill as a shorthand writer had enabled him to take a considerable part of these down verbatim, whilst his notes on the bearing and manner of his witnesses were so graphic that at the end of an hour Poole knew almost as much about these interviews as if he had been present himself.

"I should be glad, sir, if you would tell me what conclusions you have come to so far," he said.

Clewth repeated the gist of the conversation he had had with the Chief Constable on the drive back from Tassart, and explained the arguments which had led him practically to discard the suicide explanation. He spoke, too, of his failure to identify any finger-prints on the tablet bottle.

"Of course, I suppose it's possible," he said, "that a real fingerprint expert might be able to make something of it. I thought I'd send it up to the Yard for them to have a shot at. Then I'll run out this evening and take finger-prints of the two ladies and the household—we know, of course, that Lady Grayle and Lady Chessingham handled the bottle; it would be useful to have their prints."

Poole was silent for a moment.

"If I might make a suggestion, sir," he said at last, "would it perhaps be wiser not to do that for a start? From what you've told me, and from what I gathered from my Chief in London, both these ladies have very decided characters. They strike me as being the sort of people who might become rather 'difficult' if they were annoyed—not deliberately hindering, but on the other hand, not really willing helpers. There's something about the taking of finger-prints, I've always found, that seems to put persons' backs up; I suppose it's some defensive instinct. As a matter of fact, the mere sight of a policeman affects many people—perfectly innocent people—in the same way. Of course, I know that there are ways of taking prints without the subject realising it, but they're not as easy in practice as on paper. Most people know all about them from reading Edgar Wallace, and if these ladies realised we were tricking them they'd be more difficult than ever."

Superintendent Clewth sucked at his pipe.

"Something in that, of course," he said, "but surely we can't leave a possible line of investigation unexplored just for fear of hurting people's feelings?"

Poole smiled.

"I wasn't really thinking of their feelings, but of the effect of their feelings on our work. I'm not sure at the moment that identifying any prints will help us at all. You've boiled down that bottle of tablets pretty thoroughly yourself, sir; according to Lady Chessingham's evidence of the number of tablets, none were taken from it after she'd given him the dose at ten o'clock. If she's telling the truth, that bottle after ten p.m. had nothing to do with the death of Lord Grayle. If she's lying . . . well, why should she lie unless she poisoned him herself? in which case it won't help us to find her print on the bottle, because it's one of the two that ought obviously to be there."

Superintendent Clewth, whose brain-work was thorough rather than quick, took a little time to work this out.

"What about her telling a lie to shield somebody else?" he suggested at last. "Supposing she found out, or guessed, that someone she was fond of handled that bottle afterwards; she might think she could put us off by saying there were only three tablets after she'd given him the dose last night —when there were really eight or nine."

"Then how did she know that three was the right number to say?" asked Poole. "Did you tell her there were only three this morning?"

"No, but she might have seen herself if she went up to his room before we arrived, or someone might have told her."

Poole smiled.

"It sounds rather clumsy," he said. "Personally I shall be surprised if we find that the murderer handled that bottle last night at all, certainly not after the ten o'clock dose."

"How d'you mean?"

"Your time problem for one thing, sir. It definitely rules out, to my mind, the idea of the lethal dose being taken, either suicidally or murderously, *after* Lord Grayle woke up from the sleep Lady Grayle saw him go into. But what is there to prevent his having taken a second and much stronger dose when he went up to bed—not from the bottle (because—apart from Lady Chessingham's evidence about the tablets—the bottle didn't go up to his room till Lady Grayle took it up at half-past ten), but from some private supply, as you suggested? That would have given him plenty of time to die by 9 a.m. if it was strong enough."

"By Jove!" said Clewth, "I believe you're right. Why didn't I think of that? Then it's suicide, after all?"

Poole shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said. "That theory puts suicide back on the map, but I don't believe that Lord Grayle would kill himself in a way that would be bound to throw suspicion on his wife or his daughter-in-law. No letter or anything."

"That's exactly what the Chief said this morning!" Superintendent Clewth scratched his chin. "Well, pointer's back to murder again. And you think that bottle of tablets wasn't used?"

"I doubt if the murderer touched it last night, though it's just possible that the lethal dose came out of it."

"You're taking me a bit out of my depth," said Clewth with a laugh. "Explain, young man."

“I mean I think it’s just possible that the tablet which Lady Chessingham gave Lord Grayle last night might have contained not two but ten grains of di-dial—whatever the lethal dose is.”

“Oh, that? I thought of that myself and asked the doctor about it.” The Superintendent sounded quite disappointed to find that the Scotland Yard man’s bright idea was no brighter than one of his own. “He said it was impossible. These tablets are only made up in two-grain doses. I checked that myself over the telephone with the manufacturers. They only make them up in strong doses to a doctor’s special prescription, supplied direct to the doctor himself—not to the patient. They’ve done nothing of that kind for Dr. Calladine, they say. Besides, we’ve been through his poisons and the only dial he’s got is two bottles of two-grain tablets, like these of Lord Grayle’s. The manufacturers say there’s no possibility of error in their dispensing.”

Poole laughed.

“I wasn’t suggesting error,” he said. “But isn’t it possible for a doctor to get hold of the raw material of di-dial—whatever it is—and make up some tablets . . . perhaps only one tablet . . . himself? A tablet containing a lethal dose? You certainly wouldn’t find any trace of it if it was done deliberately.”

Superintendent Clewth whistled.

“You’re suggesting that Dr. Calladine murdered him?”

“Oh no, sir; I’m only suggesting that that’s one way in which he might have if he’d wanted to. As a matter of fact, I don’t believe the lethal dose came out of that bottle at all last night. It’s much too obvious; everyone’s attention is at once turned to that bottle of tablets and everyone known to have handled it would be suspected. No, I believe that a poisoner is too subtle in his methods to give himself away like that.”

Superintendent Clewth rumpled his hair.

“I’d like to know what you really do think,” he said. “You keep on suggesting theories, and then when you’ve convinced me that they’re sound, you knock ’em down again.”

Poole laughed.

“That’s only a trick, sir—a method of working; set up all the possibilities in turn, make out the best case you can for each, and then pull it to pieces. It’s a good way of clearing one’s mind of prejudice. If one has a favourite theory and tries to prove it, one is inclined to turn one’s back on anything that doesn’t fit in.”

"Well, I suppose you've got to justify your reputation for brains at the Yard," said the county policeman with a grin. "What it amounts to now is that you've set up all the possibilities in turn, made a good case for them all, and knocked them all down again. So we're where we started."

"Not quite that, sir. I've got another theory that I'm rather fond of and haven't knocked down yet—though, of course, it's only a theory so far."

"Come on, let's have it."

"That the lethal dose was given to Lord Grayle in some other form—some other vehicle, if you like—not just taken out of an obvious bottle of poison and dissolved in brandy under everyone's nose. What about . . ."

"Hold on a minute," interposed Clewth, "that's just what it wasn't—under everyone's nose—I tried that myself. I stood where Lady Chessingham stood when she was mixing the drink; she had her back to the room; nobody could see what she was doing. Lord Chessingham was in an armchair by the fire, Lord and Lady Grayle were at a card-table near by—all fixed, not moving about; no mirror to reflect the tray. Lady Chessingham could have put anything she liked into that glass without their seeing her."

Poole nodded.

"Yes, I see that, sir," he said; "but isn't it open to the same objection of being too obvious? Of course, I know that one mustn't shut one's eyes to the possibility of 'second degree' deception—deliberately doing the obvious because everyone will say it's too obvious—Poe's letter hidden in a letter-rack and Agatha Christie's done up as a spill. We must bear that in mind—just as we must bear in mind that someone's probably telling lies—for instance, we've only Moode's word for it that he did not notice his master was ill or dead at half-past seven, and Lady Grayle's word that her husband went to sleep while she was talking to him; our theories are based on evidence of that kind, so far, but it's not sound. In the first place, though, we must work on it, and on the assumption of only what one might call 'simple' deception. That's why, for the moment, I'm cutting out the obvious."

"Well, go on then—where I cut in."

"My point was, sir, that the lethal dose didn't come out of the tablet bottle last night, but that someone had got hold of some of it beforehand—apparently it was left lying about pretty casually—and had it already mixed, either in food or drink."

"It wasn't food; he ate nothing at dinner except a biscuit."

"Drink, then—you said he drank a lot; that's the easiest way of concealing it, too."

“By Jove, in his wine! That means the butler!”

“Possibly.”

“But look here; if he had all that poison at dinner, surely he’d have felt it before ten o’clock?”

“If he had it at dinner, yes.”

“But . . . what d’you mean, then?”

“It wasn’t only at dinner he drank wine—or rather, spirits.”

Clewth stared at him.

“You mean . . the brandy at ten o’clock?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“But I thought you said it wasn’t done then—too obvious or something?”

“Oh, no, sir; what I said was that it probably wasn’t mixed then—didn’t come out of the bottle of tablets then. But there’s no reason why it shouldn’t have been already mixed in the brandy when it came in.”

“But wouldn’t it have taken an awful lot of stuff to poison a whole bottle of brandy?”

“If it was a whole bottle—yes. But you’ll very likely find that this was quite a small quantity left at the bottom of the decanter. One doesn’t know, of course, how much of this stuff the poisoner had at his disposal; they may not have got it from the tablets at all; they may have had a supply of ‘neat’ poison—then it wouldn’t be difficult to poison a considerable amount of brandy in a decanter, and throw it away directly afterwards. Whoever did it must have known the habits of the family pretty well—known that nobody else drank brandy at ten o’clock—not many people do.”

“Gosh! Then you think it’s that butler—Moode?”

“Not necessarily. This decanter probably stands in the dining-room all day long—either in a tantalus or in the sideboard. It’s not old brandy, mark you, that the butler would keep under lock and key and only bring out at the end of dinner; it’s ordinary three-star stuff that you drink with water or take as medicine. Anyone might have slipped the poison into it at any time of the day or evening—anyone who knew the ways of the family. Probably, though, it wasn’t put in till it was known that Lord Grayle had got a bad go of his neuralgia that evening and would be pretty certain to take a tablet after dinner. It makes an ‘inside’ job of it, but that was pretty certain in any case—and it remains to be seen which of the ‘insides’!”

"Well," said Superintendent Clewth, "that sounds a pretty plausible theory, but, profiting by experience, I'll wait till you've knocked it about a bit before I accept it. One thing I can say, though, Detective-Inspector Poole, C.I.D., and that is that you've got a thoroughly nasty mind!"

V • Local Colour

"So much for theories, then," said Superintendent Clewth, knocking his pipe out in the grate. "Now, how are we going to get the facts?"

"Routine work for a start, sir, I suppose. Have a look at his will and his banking account, if possible; question everybody closely connected with him for possible motives—either of suicide or murder. I rather doubt if we shall get much from the 'opportunity' line; that's a great help in murders of violence, but with poison—a slow-working poison like this—well, you don't know when he was killed—when the 'blow,' so to speak, was struck!"

"You might be able to fix the 'vehicle,' as I think you called it, in which the poison was given, and then try and find out who could have got at it."

"That's the idea, sir. We must try and get the medical people to give us more exact limits of time; as soon as they find out how much of the stuff there is in him they ought to be able to say how long he took it before becoming comatose."

"Yes, I'll ask Dr. Hawkes—though, now we're sending everything up to the Yard, I don't know that he'll have much news for us."

"No, sir. I'll get on to my Chief about it. I . . ."

There was a knock at the door and a tall, thin man with drooping shoulders and a moustache in harmony with them, strolled into the room.

"Evening, Clewth," he said. "Done that job. Thought I'd let you know."

"Ah, there you are, doctor," said Clewth rising. "Let me introduce Detective-Inspector Poole, just down on this case from the Yard. This is Dr. Hawkes, our police surgeon, Poole. We were just talking of you, sir."

"Ah, devil, eh?" said Hawkes laconically.

"We should be glad of some news about what amount of poison there was in the body, sir, and when it probably got there."

"Can't tell you that. Whole digestive tract has to go up; downstairs in bottles now; one of your men must take it to the H.O. analyst. He'll tell you all that. We just took it out." Dr. Hawkes chuckled, as at an amusing memory. "Calladine in a hair about it," he said. "Insult to get him there if not to examine! Deep end."

"We invited him to attend because we understood it was etiquette for the subject's own doctor to be present, if possible."

"Quite right; quite right. Damn nonsense, though; waste of time."

"Then there's nothing you can tell us, doctor; you made no examination at all?"

"Only with the naked eye, so far as the digestive tract is concerned; it showed nothing unusual. I opened the skull and had a look at the brain; there was slight congestion—symptomatic of an overdose of narcotic. There's nothing wrong with the heart, but there was congestion in the base of both lungs." Superintendent Clewth followed the police surgeon downstairs to arrange for the despatch of the organs to London. By the time he returned, Poole had settled on his immediate line of action.

"I don't think I'll go to Tassart this evening, sir—not to the Hall. You got in all the 'quick impression' work this morning, and it'd be rather hard to worry them again so soon. There's nothing to be got from bankers or lawyers this evening either. I thought I'd run out and have a talk with your local constable; is there one at Tassart?"

"Yes, Bunton—quite a good chap. His Sergeant, Wenner, is at Franton, and Inspector O'Connell's here in Windon with me; I'll introduce you to him some time. If you want to see Bunton I'll drive you out."

"Thank you very much, sir, but there's no need for you to bother. If I might borrow a push-bike—the exercise will do me good; it's only about eight miles, isn't it?"

Poole's apparent eagerness for exercise was largely due to the fact that he thought the local police-constable would talk more freely without the restraint imposed by the presence of so senior an officer as the Divisional Superintendent. It was a lovely evening and the young green leaves on hedge and tree, unsullied yet by dust and heat, glowed in the mellow light of the descending sun. Birds were singing cheerfully on every side, and in the distance church bells—practising for Sunday—added their gentle note to the harmony of nature. After the rattle and roar of London traffic, the stench of petrol fumes and the discomfort of overcrowded streets, the detective would not have been human if he had not given himself up to enjoyment of his

surroundings and allowed himself to forget for a time the ugly business upon which he was engaged.

Poole had no great difficulty in finding the neat cottage labelled "County Police" that was strategically situated between the post office and the principal public house, nor in identifying in the shirt-sleeved figure hoeing early potatoes in the back garden, the local representative of the law, Police-Constable Herbert Henry Bunton. The detective leaned his bicycle against the gate and, skirting the cottage, approached the busy cultivator.

"Police-Constable Bunton?" he asked.

The sturdy figure straightened itself and revealed a good six feet of prime manhood.

"That's me. What can I do for you, sir?"

Poole stepped carefully into a furrow between two ridges of fresh green leaves and handed over a note of introduction from Superintendent Clewth. The constable read it, stiffened himself to an even more erect attitude, and eyed the Scotland Yard man with mingled respect and suspicion.

"Sir," he said.

Poole held out his hand.

"As we're going to work together I thought I'd come over and make your acquaintance," he said.

Bunton flushed with pleasure and the suspicion disappeared from his eyes—leaving the respect behind it. He wiped a huge hand upon the seat of his 'discarded' uniform trousers and, seizing Poole's by no means negligible one; wrung it vigorously.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," he said. "First time I've had the privilege of working with the Yard. Bad business this—up at the Hall." A look of solemn gloom forced itself on to his cheerful face.

"Bad business indeed," agreed Poole. "I don't want to interrupt your gardening, but perhaps you could spare me ten minutes just to give me the lie of the land."

"With pleasure, sir. If you'll step indoors I'll put on my jacket."

The London man eyed the sun-tipped branches above him regretfully.

"Pity to go indoors, isn't it?" he said. "I see you've got a very comfortable bench over in that corner; couldn't we have a talk there?"

"We could that, sir." Bunton eyed the Detective-Inspector doubtfully. He knew Inspectors—and his place with them, but this one seemed a pretty

human sort of chap. “You look a bit hot after your ride, sir; wouldn’t care for a glass of something, I suppose.”

Poole laughed.

“Wouldn’t I?” he said. “If you’re going to have one—you’ve earned it more than I have.”

Police-Constable Bunton put two still earthy fingers into his mouth and emitted an ear-splitting whistle. A window in the cottage was pushed open and a smiling face appeared.

“Bring us a couple of glasses up the end, will y’, mother?” called the host.

The face disappeared, and Bunton hitched an old khaki jacket—evidently not the one to which he had, in a more formal moment, referred—off a tree and insinuated his large arms and torso into it.

“Gets a bit chilly when the evening falls,” he said apologetically. “One has to watch it when one’s been sweatin’.”

The two men strolled up the narrow path towards the rustic bench at the end. Poole stopped to admire some tulips.

“That’s a nice lot of May-flowerers you’ve got there,” he said; “what are they; ‘Flamingo’?”

“That’s right, sir,” said Bunton eagerly. “ ‘Flaming O’; getting a bit over now; you should have seen them a fortnight ago. And those ‘Scarlet Flames,’ sir,” he jerked a large thumb towards a patch of brilliant snapdragon, “they’re the best I’ve grown this five years.”

“Lucky man to have a garden,” said Poole. “I have to put up with a window-box. Mignonette I’ve got in it now.”

“Pretty stuff it is, too, sir,” said the man of half an acre, anxious to show his sympathy for the town-dweller. “I must think to grow some next year.”

By the time they had reached the bench, admiring here, deprecating (on the part of Bunton) there, they were joined by the lady of the lattice, a comfortable, smiling body, with a tray, two glasses and a large brown jug.

“Thank you, mother. This is Mr. Poole, of London.”

Poole shook hands and expressed his pleasure at making the acquaintance of Mrs. Bunton and her garden, whilst to himself he admired the tact of her husband in not disclosing his visitor’s identity. Mrs. Bunton soon left the two men to the enjoyment of their beer, and Poole drew a pipe from his pocket.

“Mind if I smoke?”

"Of course, sir."

"What about yourself?"

The constable grinned and pulled a foul briar out of his jacket pocket. Poole handed over his pouch.

"Care to try that?" he asked.

When the two pipes were alight and Bunton had duly praised the tobacco, the detective got to business.

"I shall have to put in a formal visit to the Hall to-morrow," he said, "but you can give me a tip or two that'll be useful. In the first place, what does the family consist of? anyone besides Lord and Lady Grayle?"

"Not regular, sir. The Viscount's away in London all the time, though he comes down on a visit occasionally—he's here now, as I expect you know. No other children. There's a secretary, works for both his Lordship and her Ladyship, I understand; young lady, name of Hollen. His Lordship, the Viscount's got a secretary, too, I hear—another young lady, but I don't call to mind her name. That's all there is at all regular, sir. Of course, there's visitors from time to time, but not what there used to be. They say his Lordship's feeling the taxation."

"I don't doubt he is—was," said Poole. "Was there much talk in the place about that?"

"Not such a great deal, sir. His Lordship kept up his subscriptions regular; gave a dinner to the men's club every year and that sort of thing. Nobody here went short because his Lordship was hard hit—and that's all that people talk about."

"I expect you're right. What about her Ladyship? You don't know anything about how she stood, I suppose?"

Bunton scratched his chin.

"Not to say *know*, sir; but I've seen no sign of her going without anything she wanted. I never heard tell that she brought much money into the family, so I reckon his Lordship's able to do that for her."

"And Lord Chessingham, d'you know him?"

"Knew him as a lad, sir, but we don't see much of him in these parts now. Goes past occasionally when he's down here, but he's not one of the affable sort, like his father."

"I fancy that applies to a good many Members of Parliament—outside their own constituencies," said Poole with a laugh. "What about Lady Chessingham?"

"Never met 'er," said Bunton shortly. "Missus might be able to tell you something there, sir, but I can't vouch for it."

Poole gathered that there might be some personal ground for the constable's remark. He made a mental note to sound Mrs. Bunton in private at some time.

"Know anything about Miss Hollen, the secretary?"

"Nice friendly young lady, sir. Never heard a word against her. Plays tennis with the girls at the village club; they all like her."

"And the butler, Moode; what sort of chap is he?"

The constable pondered some time over his reply.

"I've known Jim Moode these twenty years," he said at last, "and yet I wouldn't like to say now that I know him. He's a cheerful, friendly, pleasant-spoken fellow. He don't mix much with the village folk, but when he does he's affable enough, without being what you might call familiar. Nothing wrong there; nothing at all. And yet—he's a restless sort of fellow, I suppose; given to crazes. He takes up a hobby of some kind, very keen—gardening it was at one time; the wireless; now it's a motor-bike; you never know where you are with him quite. One time he was in and out of this garden twice or three times a week, getting hints—and cuttings too; then, all of a sudden he dropped it and took up something else. We didn't see him for a month; when we did meet he was pleasant enough, but you felt he'd never been on more than casual nodding terms. Unaccountable chap, I call him."

"Sounds interesting," said Poole, puffing at his pipe. "Is he married?"

"Oh, yes, he's married—been married ten or fifteen years. But there again, one time he's a regular Darby, never away from his Joan—must get back to his old woman. Then the next time you meet him he's casual about her as if she was his aunt. Present moment he's not even living with her—not proper; sleeps up at the Hall and only comes home to do a bit o' gardening now and then. It's hard on the woman; she never knows where she is."

"Very hard, I should think." Poole knocked out his pipe. "Well, Bunton, you've given me a very useful picture of things up at the Hall; I expect I'll come again to you for more. You can't tell me anyone else I ought to see for information, can you?"

Police-Constable Bunton rose, preparatory to accompanying his guest to the gate.

"Depends on what information you want, sir," he said. "If it's *gossip*, I can put you on to half a dozen—of both sexes—Toothe at the 'Grey Dog';

Barkind, the postmaster; Miss Pennyfill, who keeps the shop there; they'll all give you plenty of gossip. But if it's *information* you want, I've got that."

Poole thanked him gravely.

"Of course, about the gentry, you'll probably get more from the Chief. He knows all about them."

"Major Faide? Good; I'll try him."

The constable's eyes strayed to the road, where a tall, black-coated figure was just passing.

"Of course," he said, "there is the vicar—the Rev. Lambe. He might know a thing or two."

"Ah, has he been here long?"

"Not so very, sir. Matter of ten years, perhaps."

"Then I think I'll tackle him. Thank you, Bunton; you've been the greatest help. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Wheeling his bicycle, Poole followed the vicar at a respectful distance. He did not want, if it could be avoided, to accost him in the village street. At the same time, if Mr. Lambe showed signs of doing any 'visiting,' Poole was prepared to make a bicycle dash and intercept him. The vicar, however, strode steadily on, exchanging a friendly word or two with passers-by—mostly men, coming to or from their allotments. In five minutes he was clear of the village and presently Poole saw him stop and lean over a gate, evidently enjoying the lovely sunset view.

The detective approached.

"I beg your pardon, sir; may I speak to you a minute?"

The tall clergyman turned round and surveyed the speaker with a critical but friendly eye.

"Of course. Have we met before?"

"No, sir. I'm a newcomer here, and I'm afraid not a very welcome one."

Poole handed the vicar his card. Mr. Lambe's eyebrows rose.

"I didn't realise . . . you're here about Lord Grayle's death?"

"Yes, sir."

The vicar frowned.

"But surely they don't think . . . there was anything 'criminal' about it?"

"You don't think that yourself, sir?"

“Good heavens, no. It must have been an accident—a mistake in dispensing or in the size of the dose. If you knew Lord Grayle as I do, Inspector, you’d realise that anything else is inconceivable. Suicide? that’s being talked of, of course. It’s out of the question, Lord Grayle was a Christian gentleman, in the real sense of both words; the code of neither would allow him to take such a cowardly way out of his troubles.”

“He had troubles, sir?”

“Of course; who hasn’t? He had this very trying nervous complaint—the doctor can tell you all about that. And I know he was greatly troubled about his financial position; a big estate is a great burden nowadays—it is taxed out of existence, and the cost of running it has doubled. But those are troubles that a man faces.”

“He had no others, sir—no family troubles?”

Mr. Lambe had been studying Poole carefully all this time.

“Are you *sure* we haven’t met before?” he asked. “I thought I knew your face the moment I saw you, and now I’m certain I know your voice.”

Poole shook his head.

“I don’t think we can have, sir; anyhow, I’ve never been to Tassart before.”

The vicar looked again at the card he was still holding.

“Poole—John Poole. You’re not a relation of Ned Poole—Doctor Poole—by any chance?”

“I’m his son, sir.”

“ ’Pon my word, you don’t say so? Ned’s boy?” The vicar seized and wrung Poole’s hand. “We were at King’s together, shared digs. I was going to be a doctor in those days, but I turned blood-shy and had to give it up—take to another form of healing. It may sound an odd thing for a clergyman to say, but I’ve never ceased to regret it—my failure. We clergy are—we try to be—God’s mouthpiece; I hope we do some good; but doctors and surgeons are His hands. And I’ve always believed in the deed rather than the word. You’re like him, you know—like your father. Not quite so much twinkle in your eye, perhaps, but then I don’t suppose you see the funny side of life as often as its tragedies. But I mustn’t keep you gossiping about my childhood; you’re here on business—and a sad business it is, God knows.”

The vicar sighed and looked across the green fields of his parish with eyes that no longer saw the sunset glow.

“I hate asking you these questions, sir,” said Poole, “but I’ve got to get information. You may be right about accident, but we’ve got to eliminate the other possibilities. Will you think me very impertinent if I ask you about Lord Grayle’s family? About Lady Grayle particularly?”

Mr. Lambe remained silent for a minute.

“I’m glad I know who you are,” he said at last. “I don’t think I could have . . . discussed Lord and Lady Grayle with a complete stranger, even though I realise it’s my duty to help the police. There’s not much I can tell you—certainly nothing sensational—but what I do tell you is what I believe to be absolute truth. You want to know about Lady Grayle; naturally. She is a woman for whom I feel, in many ways, a great admiration. She is quite fearless, both physically and morally—and courage is the quality of all others I admire. She would never quibble or prevaricate—though she might tell a downright lie. There is no nonsense about her; she does nothing for effect; nothing to curry favour—not even with the poor, and that is a very rare virtue among people of her class. Above all, she loves her husband, simply and without disguise. I believe her love for him is the central feature of her life.”

The vicar paused.

“And the other side, sir?”

“Ah; you realise there is another side! I suppose in your work, as in mine, there always is. The other side in this case is an ugly one. I do not like Lady Grayle, John, though I admire her. She is a woman who lives entirely for herself. She knows what she wants and sees that she gets it, no matter what effect it has on other people. I told you that Lord Grayle was in financial difficulties—finding it extremely hard to keep his estate and his house going in the way that they ought to be kept. Lady Grayle has done absolutely nothing to help him. She keeps up exactly the same standard of life as when they had twice the income and a quarter of the taxation. And he—I’m perfectly certain—has never said one word of reproach to her.”

“You think she is largely responsible for his money troubles?”

“Oh no, not that; the war’s responsible, of course, but she’s an irritant factor, and, loving him as she undoubtedly does, she ought to be his rod and staff. I don’t know that it’s altogether her fault; she may have been brought up to think only of herself. It’s not only with him that one sees it, but with everyone she comes in contact with. If she thinks that a man or woman can be of any use to her, or if she finds them amusing, she’s as charming as anyone can be, but directly they cease to be amusing or useful—that’s the end—she drops them. She’s quite frank about it; she knows what people

think of her; she just doesn't care. As for thinking about what effect her behaviour has on other people's happiness, I don't suppose she ever gives it a thought. In these days, I know, sympathy is thought 'soft'; to me it is a quality that comes second only to courage. Lady Grayle has the one, and I admire her for it; she is completely lacking in the other—and I do not like Lady Grayle."

VI • The Second Barrel

At an early hour on the following Saturday morning, Poole presented himself at the door of the County and Colonial Bank in Windon and asked to see the manager. Within a minute he was shown into the comfortable little office in which Mr. Haycombe worked. Without beating about the bush, the detective explained that he had been sent down to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of Lord Grayle, that murder could not be ruled out, that if there had been murder he (Poole) had got to find a motive for it, and that he had come to the manager of the County and Colonial Bank for information concerning the dead man's financial position, on the principle that money was one of the roots of all evil.

"I understand from the Chief Constable that Lord Grayle banked with you," Poole concluded. Mr. Haycombe nodded.

"That's quite right; he did. And curiously enough, I anticipated your visit. I've had some experience of Scotland Yard methods, and I felt pretty sure that somebody would be here before very long. Of course, I can't disclose a client's account without authority, but I got on to our Head Office yesterday and obtained the necessary permission. You may wonder, Inspector, at my being so—shall I say, officious, but I make no bones of the fact that if Lord Grayle was murdered I shan't be happy till his murderer's at the end of a rope. I can't conceive why anyone should want to kill a man like that—as white a man as any you'll meet in a year's march—but I'm quite sure that if he was murdered it was not from motives of revenge or hate, but of greed—in some form or other. And, of course, the form of greed that comes first to my mind is greed for money."

Mr. Haycombe rose from his chair, and going to a safe in the wall, unlocked it and took out a large, flat ledger, which he laid upon the table in front of Poole.

"I don't know what sort of thing you're looking for," he said, "but here are the facts, so far as we know them. If you can find a scent there—well, I'd like to help you find it."

Poole was not a little amused at the bank manager's keenness. Mr. Haycombe was short and sturdy, with a fierce moustache and an eager manner—an unusual type to find in such a position. Perhaps this investigation, for all its tragic background, provided him with a not unwelcome change from the routine of business.

Carefully the two men waded through the columns of figures, debit and credit. Every item was apparently simple and accountable. On the receipt side were regular payments from the Tassart Estate Account, regular but steadily diminishing, together with dividend payments from various securities, almost all of the trustee brand. On the other side were equally regular payments *to* the Estate Account, for maintenance—amounts which in the last few years tended to outweigh the receipts. There were the usual cheques drawn to firms and tradesmen, most of them easily identifiable, payments in respect of rates, of charity—subscriptions, allowances; once a month there was a cheque drawn to self for the payment of wages—a practically unvarying amount, large enough, Mr. Haycombe believed, to provide Lord Grayle, after the wages had been paid, with the petty cash necessary for a man in his position. These amounts had been considerably larger four or five years ago, as had many of the tradesmen's cheques—but of late they had been more or less regular.

There was nothing unexpected, nothing suggestive; no cheques to "self" for large amounts (other than the regular monthly ones), which might suggest blackmail or some secret form of expenditure likely to provide a clue to the present mystery.

Poole leant back in his chair and frowned.

"Nothing jumps to *my* eye," he said. "Can you suggest anything, Mr. Haycombe? For instance, can you give me your estimate of Lord Grayle's position—was he running on the rocks, or still comfortably off?"

"He was, I should say, just keeping his head above water. Provided taxation does not increase, I think he may—might have been able to keep going—but only just. Another sixpence on the income-tax and the balance would dip on the wrong side at once; something would have to come off."

"What do you think he could reduce? Staff? personal expenditure?"

Mr. Haycombe eyed the detective doubtfully for a moment.

"I don't know that I'm not exceeding my instructions here," he said, "but I suppose . . . well, anyway, I'll answer your question. You'll have noticed, no doubt, that although there has been a considerable reduction in Lord Grayle's expenditure, to meet the falling off of his net income, there has been no reduction at all in the amount paid to Lady Grayle; that those amounts—an allowance, I suppose you would call it—are now a quite exceptionally high percentage of his total expenditure. There have even been one or two extra amounts—not large ones, but still showing that the allowance was, if anything, being slightly exceeded. I only refer to that because you asked me in what direction Lord Grayle's expenditure might be reduced; that seems the obvious one."

Poole nodded.

"Might I have a look at her account, too?" he asked.

"Ah, there I can't help you. Lady Grayle doesn't bank with us—with the Union and National, across the square."

After a few more suggestions and promises of help on the part of Mr. Haycombe, Poole took his leave.

"Wish you luck," said the bank manager, after he had pointed out the handsome new building of the Union and National Bank.

Five minutes later, as he sat opposite the manager of the rival house, Poole wondered whether Mr. Haycombe's last words applied particularly to his immediate quest. Certainly it looked as if nothing less than exceptional luck would help him here. Mr. Lidge was a man of a very different type from his opposite number: thin, sallow, austere, and of few words. The detective explained once more his interest in Lord Grayle's financial position, but this time he was on much more delicate ground.

"I understand that," said Mr. Lidge, coldly, "but what has Lady Grayle's banking account got to do with it? It is not she who is dead."

"No, sir, but the financial position of husband and wife are in a sense interdependent. As you know, the law regards husband and wife as one in that respect."

"The law as regards taxation, yes. That is no reason why I should disclose my client's accounts to you; in fact, it is my duty to regard them as confidential."

Poole, no mean judge of character, knew that nothing in the way of appeal, no application of tact, would be any use in this case. Only his official position would move Mr. Lidge.

"The law can over-ride the position of confidence as between banker and client, lawyer and client, in the interests of justice," said the detective in his most official voice.

"After certain formalities, yes. Bring me an order of the Court and I will produce my client's books, not before."

The bank manager was perfectly right; Poole not only knew that, but he also knew that as things stood at present he had no ground for asking for an order.

He rose to go.

"I must ask you, sir, at any rate, not to reveal that these enquiries are being made," he said.

"As to that I shall use my own discretion," replied Mr. Lidge.

"No, sir; that won't do. I am investigating a crime, and I ask for your co-operation. If you reveal what I have said to you, you may hinder the course of justice; the Court would hold you responsible."

"That may or may not be so; I shall take advice."

Poole left the bank in a decidedly disgruntled frame of mind. He had learnt nothing; he had—if the manager were to tell Lady Grayle of his enquiries, and Poole thought he might—definitely antagonised an important witness. Not only this, but the detective felt that he had so far failed to make any progress at all. His conversation with Superintendent Clewth, with Police-Constable Bunton, with the vicar, and with Mr. Haycombe, had given him an excellent picture of the life of Lord Grayle and those around him; he had got the 'atmosphere' of the case; but he had—apart from what Superintendent Clewth had told him—not discovered one single fact of definite significance to the solution of the problem. Nor did he expect to find much until he had the report of the Home Office analyst and knew just how much of the di-dial Lord Grayle had been given, and so gained at least a rough idea as to when it had been given him. When he had that knowledge he might be able to fix the 'vehicle' in which it had been given, and so be able gradually to get at the possibilities of 'access' and 'opportunity.'

There was, of course, the question of motive, which would not be affected by the medical report; the will might give him a line on that. But there again he was faced by delay; he had learnt from Mr. Haycombe that Lord Grayle's solicitors were a London firm: Steeple, Claypole and Steeple, of Lincoln's Inn, and as to-day was Saturday he would not be able to see the will before Monday. As he walked back to Police Headquarters he turned that matter over in his mind. After all, he thought, why wait till Monday;

why not run up to London now, see the will, and return in the afternoon? There was no immediate hurry about going to Tassart; if he went there with a knowledge of the contents of the will he would have a better basis on which to frame his questions.

Back at Headquarters, he asked leave to use the Superintendent's telephone, and was soon through to Steeple, Claypole and Steeple. Could he speak with whichever of the partners dealt with the affairs of Lord Grayle? That would be Mr. Steeple, senior, but he was not in. When would he be in? Not to-day; he was down at Tassart Hall.

Poole hung up the receiver. After all, things might have been worse; he was saved a journey to London; but on the other hand it was at least doubtful whether the solicitor would have the will with him. He would, however, probably know the gist of it.

The Chief Constable had expressed a wish to take Poole out to Tassart when he decided to go, and introduce him to Lady Grayle and the new Earl; not that it was a job that Major Faide looked forward to, but he thought it his duty to account for the presence of the Scotland Yard man. On the way out, Poole took the opportunity of sounding Major Faide as to his personal opinion of the principals in the case. He gathered that the Chief Constable held the late Lord Grayle in the same high esteem as did everyone else he (Poole) had consulted; that he also admired Lady Grayle, the reasons given being—in this case—her personal appearance, her wit, and her extreme efficiency; that he knew little of the new Lord Grayle, but thought him colourless and unnecessarily pompous; that the new Countess was also efficient, did her best to be agreeable on social occasions, and was the type of woman which the Chief Constable disliked most in the world. On the whole, Poole gathered nothing new from the conversation, except the fact that Major Faide had a much higher opinion of Lady Grayle than had either the vicar or Mr. Haycombe.

On the way through Tassart village, Poole's bag was dropped at the "Grey Dog" and a room engaged for him; five minutes later the two police officials were led by Moode out into the garden, where Lady Grayle was attending to some early roses.

Summer sunlight is not kind to women who are getting old—but are trying to retain their youthful appearance. The vivid light reveals all too clearly the colour and texture of the skin; the heat calls for clothes, light in colour and in weight, which are more becoming to the young. Lady Grayle's figure was still perfect, but after the Chief Constable's glowing description of her Poole was surprised to find so old and haggard a woman. Lady Grayle

was wearing a dress of striped grey silk, against which her skin, even under its rouge and powder, showed yellow and withered; her eyes had lost their accustomed vitality; even the corners of her mouth, when in repose, were inclined to droop. A great deal of this change was no doubt due, thought Poole, to the terrible shock of her husband's death—particularly the manner of it.

Major Faide got through his introduction safely, if not very convincingly, and hurried away on a plea of urgent duty. Poole found Lady Grayle eyeing him with some interest.

"You look very young," she said.

"I'm over thirty, madam," replied Poole.

"Ah; a terrible age. Nearly as old as my son—but not quite." Lady Grayle sighed. "Well," she asked, "what do you want me to tell you? I went through it all with Major Faide's policeman yesterday. Must I say it all again?"

"Oh no, that's not necessary—now, at any rate. Later, when I get some line to work on, I may have to go into details again. I wondered whether you had got any ideas yourself—anything that might explain your husband's death?"

Without appearing to do so, Poole was watching Lady Grayle very carefully. She had an expressive face that might reveal more than her words were intended to convey. At their first words, when she was evidently intrigued for a moment by the personality of the young detective, her eyes had been alive with interest; now when the talk turned to the tragedy they became empty and lifeless.

"I really have no idea, Inspector," she said in a flat voice.

"Do you think it can have been an accident—a mistake of some kind?"

"I suppose it must have been."

"You don't think it likely that your husband deliberately took an overdose—that he couldn't bear the neuralgia any longer? I'm afraid it's a dreadful question to ask, Lady Grayle, but I must try and find out what you really think."

"But I don't know what to think, any more than you do."

"The other alternative is murder; you don't know of anyone who might have any conceivable grounds for wanting your husband out of the way?"

"No, nobody. How could there be? Everybody loved him."

That was all—just nothing. Poole felt sure that these lifeless, almost stupid answers could not represent the mind which everyone told him was so alive, so quick, even so brilliant. After all, though, what could he have expected from his questions? If Lady Grayle knew anything and intended to tell, surely she would have told already? Was it any good going on questioning her? Not till he had some line to work on. There was just one point upon which Superintendent Clewth had omitted to get information.

"Can you tell me, Lady Grayle," he asked, "how often your husband was in the habit of taking these tablets?"

For the first time Poole saw a look of intelligence light up in Lady Grayle's eyes. She was thinking.

"When he first had them," she replied, after a very slight pause, "he only took about one a fortnight; then gradually the neuralgia seemed to grow worse, or, at any rate, the acute attacks came more frequently, and he took the tablets oftener. With this last bottle—it's the third he's had—he was taking two or three a week."

"How long had he had this bottle?"

"Not very long—about a fortnight, perhaps a little more."

"They were all prescribed and supplied by Dr. Calladine?"

"Yes. Sir Horace Spavage had given him something, but it wasn't any good."

"And I suppose the effect of taking the tablets more often would be to reduce their effect?"

Lady Grayle shot a quick glance at her questioner. The idea seemed new to her.

"Would it? Perhaps so; I don't really understand much about drugs. I'm thankful to say I've never had to take them."

Poole thanked Lady Grayle and asked her whether he was likely to find Lord Chessingham in the house. He was advised to go into the Hall and ring the bell; Moode would know where to find him.

Before interviewing Lord Chessingham, however, Poole thought he would like to have a look at the room in which Lord Grayle had died. He had got the key of this from Superintendent Clewth before starting, and with the help of a footman whom he met in the hall, he soon found what he wanted. The room had by now been straightened, the bed made, but it had been done under the eye of the police and nothing apart from the bedclothes had been removed. Poole tried to visualise the scene as it had appeared to

those who had seen it on Friday morning; first the butler, when he called his master at half-past seven, and then Lady Grayle, when she had come up two hours later and found her husband dead. But the very tidiness of the room made the conjuring up of such pictures very difficult. A room that has been unoccupied and 'tidied' even for a day, with no flowers, nothing 'lying about,' no books or papers or knitting flung down on a chair, becomes at once lifeless and characterless, it ceases to be recognisable as the background for a living drama.

Clewth had told Poole that the room had been thoroughly and fruitlessly searched for an alternative supply of the di-dial; there was no point in searching again, but the detective mechanically pulled out the little drawer of the bedside table. In it were the articles which had previously been on the table top; the watch, the Bible, and the copy of *Lavengro*; the bottle of tablets had been taken by the police and the lamp, of course, was still on the table. Idly Poole turned to the place in *Lavengro* marked by the piece of silk ribbon; he did not know the book and it conveyed nothing to him. The Bible, however, did provide food for thought. Some of the passages were underlined and in the margin were pencilled dates, evidently to mark the limit of each day's reading. The last one was 4.6.31—Thursday—the day before Lord Grayle died. That seemed normal enough until it occurred to Poole to wonder whether Lord Grayle read and dated his Bible in the morning or at night. He could hardly have put that last date—4.6.31—on the *evening* of that day—after taking the dose of di-dial; everyone agreed that he was extremely sleepy and Lady Grayle had said that her husband fell asleep while talking to her. The amount read on that date was a full chapter. Obviously it must have been read and dated in the morning.

Or had he waked again in the night and read that chapter, forgetting when he dated it that the night had become 5.6.31? But the medical evidence —Dr. Hawkes' evidence—showed that with a lethal dose of di-dial inside him Lord Grayle had almost certainly remained in a state of coma all through the night until his death in the morning. No, that date, 4.6.31, must refer to the morning of Thursday, not the night.

Putting the book back into the drawer Poole went downstairs to the hall and rang the bell. It was answered by Moode, and the detective took the opportunity of asking him one or two questions. They were all answered efficiently and quietly; the man gave the impression of knowing the right answer to any question you might ask him. The detective gained no new information because his questions had no particular significance; they gave him the chance of studying the butler without appearing to do so. Not that the study was of much help either, because the man was so completely

hidden behind the servant, his manner so obviously a formal and traditional one. There might be great character here; there might be none.

Moode thought that his master's neuralgia had certainly been getting worse in the last month or two; that he was taking the sedative tablets more often—almost every other day; and that Lord Grayle had had many sleepless nights of late. This last he deduced from the fact that he so often found his Lordship asleep in the morning, whereas it used to be his custom to wake early and read.

"What did he read in the morning?" asked Poole, "his Bible?"

"No, sir, not in the morning; I think he read that at night. He read the other book in the morning."

"As a rule, you mean?"

"Yes, sir; he didn't always read it, I don't think—sometimes he just lay and thought."

"And sometimes he read the Bible—on Thursday morning, for instance?"

"Oh no, sir, I don't think he ever read that in the morning; I never saw him do so—certainly not on Thursday."

It must have been when he dressed for dinner, then, thought Poole; but probably the point was of no importance.

Lord Chessingham had, it appeared, gone out for a walk about ten minutes ago, after an interview with the family solicitor, Mr. Steeple. The butler did not think that his Lordship would be long. He was regular in his habits; he walked every day before lunch, when he was in the country, but never for more than an hour. Poole was not at all sorry; he was at the moment more interested in the lawyer than his client; he got Moode to effect an introduction.

Mr. Steeple, senior—Mr. Alexander Steeple, his full and not very appropriate name—was a very old man. In appearance he was the conventional family solicitor of the Victorian epoch, clean-shaven—save for thin side-whiskers, lean, bent, his clothes subfusc from cravat to dark grey spats, smelling faintly of old books. So much of his appearance had probably not changed in thirty years, but in addition now there were the unmistakable signs of imminent disintegration. He was a doddering, feeble old man, sincerely shaken by his noble client's tragic death.

Poole realised at once that he would get little or nothing from Mr. Steeple himself, apart from his documents. Memory had gone—memory of the present details of his business, though memories of old days might be

more vivid than ever before. After offering his respectful sympathy, Poole had made some reference to Lady Grayle.

"Ah, poor lady; poor dear lady," murmured Mr. Steeple. "Such a beautiful creature, so active, so vivacious! She came of a noble family—a very noble family. I remember her, Mr. . . . Mr. . . . er . . . I remember her when his Lordship first introduced her to Society. She took the town by storm. When she was presented at Court our dear Queen—I remember hearing—remarked on her beauty—called her 'the little Irish rose'—so apt, so gracious."

Mr. Steeple's voice gradually dropped to a murmur; his old head nodded slowly, as if in time with his memories. Gently Poole introduced the subject of the will. Mr. Steeple had not got it with him; it would be read after the funeral. Mr. Steeple did not remember—the detective soon gathered—anything of the details, only the not unexpected fact that Lord Chessingham inherited the property. There were legacies, bequests—they would be made public at the reading of the will.

This was not good enough. With Sunday and the inquest intervening, the funeral could not possibly take place before Tuesday, and Poole wanted to have this vital information at once. He was about to suggest returning to London with Mr. Steeple when he was called to the telephone by Moode. At the other end he recognised the voice of Chief Constable Thurston.

"That you, Poole? I've got Sir Hulbert's report here; there's a catch in it. You'd better come up at once. Sir Hulbert'll wait in town till you come; I want you to talk it over with him. But be quick; it's his week-end."

Poole hurried back to the library. On his way back he met Moode in the hall.

"Could you get me a taxi from Windon, d'you think," he said, "or a car from the village if there is one? I've got to catch the next train to London. D'you know when it is?"

"You'll get the mid-day express if you're quick, sir; twelve-five p.m.—gets you to town at twelve-fifty-five. His Lordship would wish you to be driven to the station; I will attend to it, sir."

"Oh, I can't very well do that; couldn't you get me a taxi?"

Moode brushed aside the suggestion. He knew what his Lordship—even his new Lordship—would wish under all given circumstances; it was not a matter for argument.

In the library Poole hurriedly explained that he was called to London, that it was of the first importance that he should see the will at once; would

Mr. Steeple be so kind as to telephone to his office and give instructions for it to be shown to him when he called? Mr. Steeple looked distressed. Poole guessed at once that the old gentleman had never used a telephone in his life. In the end he got a note of authority, scrawled in a very shaky hand, at his not too patient dictation. He hurried back to the telephone, was lucky enough to get a call through at once, and spoke to Mr. Steeple, junior, himself. He was bringing an important note from his father; he could not disclose its nature over the telephone; he hoped to be at the office by three o'clock at the latest; would Mr. Steeple, junior, very kindly wait for him? Mr. Steeple, junior, did not sound enthusiastic—naturally he did not relish the idea of losing his Saturday afternoon; but Mr. Steeple, junior, knew the importance of the Grayle connection to his not too flourishing firm; he would wait.

At ten minutes past one Poole knocked at the Chief Constable's door.

"Ah, there you are; you've been quick," said Thurston. "I'll send across to Sir Hulbert. Here's his report; he'll explain it himself, but this is the gist of it. There's enough di-dial scattered through the organs to account for about six grains—and that's not a lethal dose."

"Not a lethal dose!" Poole's jaw dropped.

"Hold on, young man. There is also a quantity, though not a large, one, of another drug, called scopolamine!"

VII • The New Development

"I found di-dial," said Sir Hulbert Lemuel, "scattered throughout practically the whole of the digestive tract. There was some still in the stomach, there were traces of it in both the large and small intestines, and it had even got as far as the cæcum. In all I estimate that there must have been between four and six grains, certainly not more. I should not regard that as, in itself, a lethal dose, especially to a subject who had been taking it for some little time. But there was also present a second poisonous substance, of a different genus but having a somewhat similar hypnotic effect—scopolamine, more generally known, perhaps, as hyoscine. It is one of the atropine group of vegetable poisons. I needn't bother you with technical details, but it is important that you should remember that the alkaloids peculiar to this group are present in varying amounts in plants quite commonly found growing in

our countryside; you will appreciate that that means that they can be taken accidentally, or deliberately extracted by people with a little knowledge of chemistry. In fact, it's one of the most deadly poisons which a layman can get hold of without going to a chemist or a doctor."

The celebrated Home Office analyst, his name a household word to millions of newspaper readers, sat on Chief Constable Thurston's table and casually swung a leg while he reeled off toxiocological details which he appeared to consider non-technical. His language, certainly, was rather stereotyped—a habit which was probably due to the constant necessity under which he laboured of talking down to a jury of laymen. But at least he was not guilty of trying to impress his audience by a flood of long words. Poole, at any rate, was thrilled by what he heard, though his brain whirled at the thought of the complications opened up by this new development.

"There's not much of this stuff, either," continued Sir Hulbert, waving the typewritten report, "perhaps one forty-eighth of a grain, nearly all in the stomach—nothing like a toxic dose. And that, Thurston, is the interesting part about this case. Here you have two poisonous substances present in the body, neither of them in sufficient quantity to be toxic, but combined—deadly. I know nothing about the circumstances; I don't know whether it's a suicide case or a murder or an accident, but I should like to know why whoever put them into the subject thought it necessary to use two stones to kill one bird. No doubt there was a reason for it, a very good reason, and it's a peculiarity that ought to help you gentlemen in tracing it. Because, for one thing, these poisons were not taken at the same time."

"The deuce they weren't!" said Thurston. "Does that convey anything to you, Poole?"

"Only that what we've got so far, sir, is all wrong. But I expect Sir Hulbert can tell us rather more exactly what he means."

"I can, of course. I told you that the di-dial was spread all through the digestive tract, with a little still left in the stomach, but that most of the scopolamine was still in the stomach. What I gather from that is not only that the scopolamine was taken after the dial, but that the dial wasn't all taken at one time, either. Is that consonant with the facts as you've got them?"

"No, sir, it most certainly isn't; can you give us some idea as to the times at which these doses were taken?"

"Roughly, yes. I should say that some of the di-dial was taken ten to fourteen hours before death . . . when did he die?"

"About nine a.m., sir."

"Well, say the first lot was taken between seven and eleven p.m. the previous night. The second lot—if there were not more than two—was taken about four or five hours before death—say four to five a.m.; I've got two checks on that which I'll explain presently. The scopolamine, I fancy, was taken not more than two hours before death—perhaps seven a.m. It seems an extraordinary way of giving a chap poison, but there it is."

"You fix all those times by the position of the poison in the organs, sir?" asked Poole. "The distance it had travelled?"

"Partly by that, and partly by the time of death. As I said, the interest in this case lies in the skilful mixing of the two poisons. Whoever did it must have known that the doses were not in themselves enough to kill a man; they only became deadly when they were mixed. But they've got to be mixed quickly enough. The scopolamine, for instance, would have to be taken within three hours of the di-dial at the outside, if it was to have a lethal effect. That's another check on the time of the second di-dial dose. Then I have to fix the limit of time in which these combined poisons would kill the subject; it is a difficult, because an unusual, combination, but I put it at two hours. If death occurred at nine a.m., I should expect, by this line of calculation, the scopolamine to have been taken at about seven a.m. and the second dose of dial at about four a.m. Does that fit in at all?"

"Do I understand then, sir, that the dose given at ten p.m. was a harmless one, after all?"

"In itself, yes."

"And probably he *did* wake again in the night?"

"Must have—to take that second dose—at about four."

"That explains a point that had been puzzling me, sir." Poole told his companions about the dated Bible. "I was going on the medical evidence that he was in a coma all night, but now one sees that he must have read that chapter in the night between the first and second doses. But . . . but this second dose business is a complete upset of the evidence we've got so far. Of course, in a way, the scopolamine is, too, but that's a new factor altogether and we haven't been looking out for it. It's the second dose of di-dial that puzzles me. The evidence—very emphatic evidence too—that we've got at the moment is that after Lord Grayle had been given a dose at ten p.m. he went to bed, but asked that the bottle of tablets should be left on the table beside him—and the number of tablets in the bottle next morning

was the same as the number which was left after he was given the ten p.m. dose—so how can he have taken another in the night?"

"There may have been another supply?" suggested Thurston.

"But why should he have asked for the bottle to be left if he had got another supply?"

"Perhaps someone else gave him another dose in the night—not out of that bottle?"

"I suppose it must have been that, sir, but it seems extraordinarily unlikely."

"Or perhaps," suggested Sir Hulbert, "someone slipped another tablet into the bottle next morning so as to make the number tally. But don't ask me why."

"Well, anyhow, all this is theory. You've got to get down and find out the facts now, Poole. Anything you want to ask Sir Hulbert?"

The detective thought for a minute.

"I'd like to know, sir, what would have been the effect on a person taking those poisons separately without their mixing. The di-dial just sends you to sleep?"

"Depends on the dose, but the normal dose of one tablet would most probably have that effect; he should sleep for five or six hours after the first and rather less after the second."

"And the scopolamine?"

"On a dose commensurate with the forty-eighth of a grain that I found in the stomach I should expect the subject to fall fairly quickly into a coma, which might last for anything up to twenty-four hours, but probably not so much. There would be respiratory difficulty—depression, the face would become flushed and the pupils dilated. That the sort of thing you want to know?"

"Something like that, sir. And he would gradually recover?"

"Yes."

"Would there be much after-effect?"

"No—not a great deal—unless the dose was repeated."

Poole looked quickly at the speaker and opened his mouth as if about to ask another question, but apparently changed his mind. Sir Hulbert rose.

"Well, if you two have done with me," he said, "I think I'll see if there's anything left of this week-end. Good luck to you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Thank you."

After the departure of Sir Hulbert, Chief Constable Thurston and Poole discussed for a further half-hour the significance of the analyst's report, and decided on the lines of investigation to be followed. Poole informed the Chief Constable of his arrangement to call on Mr. Steeple, junior, that afternoon, and reported the gist of his interviews with the two bank managers at Windon. The Chief Constable agreed that no steps could yet be taken to procure access to Lady Grayle's banking account; if, as the case developed, indications pointed in that direction, the position might have to be reconsidered.

Poole reached the solicitor's office in Lincoln's Inn shortly after three-fifteen and apologised handsomely for his infraction of the half-holiday. Mr. Edward Steeple was a very different type of man from his father. Not only was he considerably younger but he was of the modern school; he did not look or smell musty; there were flowers and photographs of his wife and children in his room; there were even six inches of open window.

Mr. Edward Steeple wasted no time. He had evidently guessed what the detective wanted, for he had the will on his table, and handed it over without palaver for Poole to read.

Although the document ran on conventional lines, it was not without its surprises. Subject to a life interest in a sum of £40,000 to his wife, and certain legacies to trustees and servants, Lord Grayle had left Tassart and the whole of his property to his son, who, of course, would now succeed to the earldom. The trustees were Viscount Chessingham, Sir Hugh Willborough (an old House of Commons friend), and Mr. Edward Steeple, the two latter receiving legacies of £1,000 each. The principal legacies to servants were £200 and an annuity of £50 a year to Annie Spent, housekeeper, and £500 each to Thomas Habble, groom, and James Moode, butler.

Poole made no allusion to the last item, but it not unnaturally interested him. What impressed him most, however, was the provision for Lady Grayle, a yearly income of something under £2,000, with no control at all of any capital sum. There was no dower house nor any extra financial provision for a house. All that would have to be done out of the £2,000 a year, a sum which—as Poole had learned from Lord Grayle's banking account that morning—Lady Grayle was accustomed to spend on her personal clothes, charities, and amusements. To be obliged now to stretch it over a house, household, and all the ordinary requirements of life would

mean a drastic change in her Ladyship's standard of living. Poole thought it might be useful to know the lawyer-trustee's opinion of the matter.

"That will mean a big change for Lady Grayle, won't it?" he asked.

Steeple nodded.

"It will, indeed," he said; "and she's not a lady who will find it easy to retire into a cottage."

"Hardly mean that, will it?" asked Poole with a smile.

"Well, of course, it depends on what she chooses to give up. If she likes to buy her clothes in Bayswater and give up her hunters at Melton she'll be able to afford a decent house."

"Provided also she reduces her bets to fivers?" suggested the detective, with a blunt vulgarity that rather shocked himself.

"Ah, you know about that, do you?" said Steeple, eyeing Poole with increased interest. "Do you know how much she's been losing?"

"Do you, sir?"

"No, but I hear that it's more than a trifle. Yes, that'll have to stop, too."

"It certainly doesn't look as if Lady Grayle, at any rate, will benefit by her husband's death. Did she know the contents of the will? Do you know?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure she did. I remember hearing Lord Grayle say to my father that it was most unfair to a wife not to let her know what to expect. Lord Grayle's idea was that Tassart must be kept up by the head of the family, and that in these days it was only possible if he had practically the whole of the income. He tried to give his wife as good a time as possible while Tassart was hers, but on the understanding that at his death she must expect a change. No, Lady Grayle will be very far from benefiting by her husband's death. If you've got anything of that sort in your mind, Inspector, you can get it out, quite apart from the effect of this will. I know Lady Grayle pretty well; in many ways she's a hard, unsympathetic sort of woman, but she absolutely adored her husband. I'm certain of that."

"Thank you, sir," said Poole. "I'm glad to have your opinion. I may say that it confirms everything I've already heard. I should be glad, though, to have some rather more exact information about her . . . origin. I understand that she comes of a Leicestershire family; your father spoke of it as 'noble.' "

Mr. Steeple laughed.

"That's the Italian Countess," he said, "a grandmother. Lady Grayle's father was a parson—a hunting parson in Leicestershire. He had married an

Irish girl, daughter of a small Irish squire, who himself had married this Italian Countess—Ravignani, I think the name was. As you probably know, the sons and daughters of Italian nobles themselves carry titles—so they're rather thick on the ground—and generally rather poor. Lady Grayle always makes rather a joke of her noble Italian blood, but otherwise it's not been much use to her; no money from there any more than from the Irish squireen or the Leicestershire parson—only financial recklessness, as so often happens."

"Yes, I suppose so. I'm afraid it's a bad outlook for her," said Poole. "By the way, Mr. Steeple, you can't make any suggestion that would help me, can you? Of course, you realise that we are having to consider the possibilities of murder—as well as others. You don't know of anyone who could have any reason for getting Lord Grayle out of the way?"

Edward Steeple stabbed at his blotting-pad for an appreciable half-minute before he answered the question.

"I don't know anything more than you do, Inspector," he said; "in fact, I know a great deal less. I've seen the will—as you have; that's all."

The two men looked at each other, Poole waiting for any elaboration of this remark, Steeple apparently satisfied with it as it stood; in any case, he did not add to it. The detective asked leave to jot down one or two particulars from the will and then, with further expressions of apology and thanks, left.

In his anxiety not to spoil other people's Saturday afternoon, Poole had had no lunch. He now filled the worst of the void—and the interval before his return train—with a poached egg and a cup of coffee in an A.B.C. depot, amusing himself by a study of the very ordinary but varied types around him. It was difficult to believe that these humdrum looking people could lead anything but humdrum lives, and yet who knew but that even among them might be numbered a potential or actual poisoner? After all, poisoners probably looked like anyone else, whatever kind of mind they possessed.

Poole was lucky enough to get a compartment to himself on his return journey, the Saturday afternoon rush being well over by then. He spent the time in reviewing what he had learnt that afternoon. The analyst's report he had already considered very carefully with Chief Constable Thurston, but the will was practically virgin ground.

In the first place, it looked as if Lady Grayle—the Dowager Lady Grayle—might be definitely cleared of suspicion. It was inconceivable that a woman of her expensive—almost reckless—tastes would deliberately deprive herself of all possibility of indulging them. There was, of course, the

remote possibility that a really passionate woman—granddaughter of an Italian countess!—might make even this sacrifice for the sake of passion or revenge, but at fifty-five (Poole did not yet know *everything* about life) surely passion might be eliminated; besides, everybody—whatever their opinion about Lady Grayle's other qualities—seemed to be agreed that her love for her husband was the strongest and most genuine feature of her character.

Mr. Edward Steeple's manner had seemed to hint that a motive for murder might be found in the will. The one substantial beneficiary was Lord Chessingham, the new Earl. There again, thought Poole, if character counted for anything, this colourless and pompous politician could hardly be suspected of parricide! His wife, of course, benefited with him, and, until the new development revealed by Sir Hulbert Lemuel, had been first on the 'opportunity' list, but all that was upset now, and in any case Poole, himself a West Countryman, was not prepared to believe that a woman of one of the great West Country families—ambitious though she might be—was going to push her husband into an earldom and the Cabinet over the dead body of her father-in-law. The idea was absurd.

There remained the minor beneficiaries; Mr. Edward Steeple himself and Sir Hugh Willborough, neither of whom had been in the house at the time; the housekeeper, a groom; and the butler. Mrs. Spent and Thomas Habble the detective had yet to meet; he would make a point of doing so; in any case they hardly jumped to the eye as potential murderers. But the butler, Moode, was a very different proposition; on the face of it, £500 did not appear to be a sum for which anyone would risk his neck, to put it at its lowest, though murder had been done before now for smaller sums; but when it came to the question of opportunity, the analyst's disclosure threw a new and lurid light upon the butler, for Sir Hulbert had fixed the time of administering the scopolamine at "about seven a.m."—and Moode, on his own admission, had been in Lord Grayle's room at seven-thirty!

VIII • Domestic Details

Before reaching Windon Poole had decided to ask for leave to keep the discovery of the scopolamine a secret for the time being, both at the inquest and in the police investigations. It seemed probable that the murderer had hoped that the death would be attributed to an overdose, perhaps an

accidental overdose, of the di-dial; all the police enquiries had so far tended to confirm that idea, and Poole hoped that the poisoner might be lulled into a state of false security. Of course, he would himself be compelled to make such enquiries as might show how the scopolamine was administered, but he hoped to be able to do so without giving away the real object of his quest.

It was well after six before he reached police headquarters in Windon. Another hour was spent in acquainting Superintendent Clewth with the latest developments, and by the time he had had some dinner with his hospitable superior, the detective thought he had done his day's work. He again borrowed a bicycle and rode out to Tassart at a leisurely pace, enjoying the after-glow of the early summer sunset. He found the landlord of the "Grey Dog" rather worried about the question of his guest's supper. Poole reassured him, drank a tankard of beer for the good of the house, toyed with the idea of spending an hour among the rustic patrons of the bar with the object of picking up local colour, decided that he was sick of local colour, and went—after a short stroll—to bed.

He was up early the next—Sunday—morning. He wanted to have a talk with the groom, Habble, and decided that the best time to catch him on a Sunday was at the morning feed, which his host, Mr. Toothe, thought would be at seven a.m.

He strolled across the park, enjoying the fresh smell and cheerful sounds of the early country morning. As he passed round the end of Tassart Hall, on his way to the stables, he was mildly surprised to see standing by the side door a covered van of about thirty hundredweight capacity, into which Moode and a house-boy were helping to load some chairs. There was no name on the van, but the detective mechanically noticed that it bore a London registration number.

Poole found Mr. Habble in his stables; supervising the activities of two small be-gaitered lads, who were busily filling the mangers of three well-groomed horses. The late Lord Grayle, though he no longer hunted, liked to ride about his estate in preference to motoring or walking; Lady Grayle often accompanied him, so that even at this time of the year there were generally two or three horses kept up, though Lady Grayle's hunters—summering at Tassart—were now out to grass.

Thomas Habble was a short, sturdy man, with crisp, greying hair and the unmistakable mouth of his calling. He had twinkling blue eyes and, though he spoke an occasional sharp word to horse or boy that misbehaved, it seemed improbable that he could ever lose his temper. Poole gave him a friendly good-morning, and was at once conscious that Habble knew all

about his visitor. After a few words of admiration of the stables and their occupants, the detective edged his way out into the yard—out of earshot of the inquisitive boys—the groom automatically following him.

Poole expressed his sympathy with the man in the loss of so good a master, a sympathy that Habble received with quiet dignity.

"I suppose it's not known yet whether the new Lord Grayle will live down here?" asked the detective. "I suppose with his parliamentary duties—even in the Upper House—there's some risk that he may close Tassart—at any rate, for most of the year."

"He might do that. I couldn't say."

"It'll be dull for you, won't it, if he does?"

"It won't make any odds to me, sir," replied the groom quietly. "I shall be settlin' down now. His Lordship's been very good to me and left me a bit of money to settle down on. I shan't need to start findin' a new master."

Poole looked at his companion with interest.

"Oh, you know that, do you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; I know that. His Lordship told us what was his intention to do for us who had been in his service the best part of our lives—me and Mrs. Spent and Mr. Moode. He said he liked us to know that we'd got no cause to worry about our old age."

"That was very thoughtful of him," said Poole. "I daresay you'll be glad to settle down."

"I don't know that I shall mind, sir," said the groom. Then with a sharp look at his companion he added: "But don't you go gettin' it into your head that I wanted my five hundred in such a hurry that I had anything to do with his Lordship's death. I hadn't any wish for it, and if I had, I shouldn't have had the chance—bein' an *outdoor* servant. I must give an eye to my lads; good mornin' to you, Mr. Inspector."

Poole watched the little man strut back into the stables with the leisurely well-balanced movements of his craft. Had there, he wondered, been any significance in the groom's last remark? Slowly the detective made his way back to the inn, pondering the problem. He had ordered his breakfast for eight o'clock, and by the time it was ready he had a magnificent appetite for the sausages, cold ham, and gigantic slabs of toast which his host produced. After a pipe and a glance at the *Weekly Dispatch*, he was ready for the day's work.

The detective had got, he knew, a very ticklish piece of work in front of him—to discover how the scopolamine was administered without revealing the fact that he knew it had been administered at all. He had a shrewd idea as to the 'vehicle' used, although nothing so far had been said about it; it was his job now to confirm or discredit that idea without letting it be thought that he was particularly interested in the matter.

Arriving at the Hall, Poole found that the household had not yet finished its own breakfast. Asking that the butler might join him when he was disengaged, the detective made his way up again to Lord Grayle's bedroom. The room was as he had seen it on the previous morning, but now the picture that rose to his mind was a different one—that of the sick man waking in the dead of night from his drug-induced sleep—waking perhaps to an even more violent attack of his pitiless enemy, reinforced by its own period of quiescence, now leaping back into renewed violence; Poole pictured the wretched victim tossing and turning in bed, trying by every device—by 'counting,' thinking, reading—that chapter in his Bible—to throw off the attacks and recover the blessed relief of sleep; and then at last, his moral strength worn out by the fruitless struggle, having recourse to yet another of the tablets—taken perhaps from the drawer—if Lady Chessingham's evidence as to the number in the bottle was to be believed. But was it? Had Lord Grayle taken that tablet himself, or had someone else given it to him? That remained one of the problems still to be solved, but in the meantime there was a more urgent one—the scopolamine.

There was a knock at the door, and the butler came in.

"Good morning, Moode."

"Good morning, sir." The butler's manner was respectful, but it conveyed, by the slightest touch of 'easiness,' his recognition of the difference between a police officer, however important, and one of his master's guests.

"I want you to tell me, if you will, exactly how you found Lord Grayle on Friday morning. I understand from Superintendent Clewth that you didn't notice anything wrong at the time?"

"No, sir; nothing wrong. I just thought he was asleep."

"It's important for us to know whether he was unconscious all the night, right up to his death at nine o'clock. You'll remember that I asked you yesterday something about his reading in bed—that was with the same idea in my mind. Now will you tell me just what you did when you came into the room?"

Poole was watching the butler carefully while he spoke. The latter stood in an easy attitude, with one hand resting lightly on his hip, and an expression of mild interest on his face.

"I emptied and wiped the basin, sir, and put the can of hot water in it, covering it with a 'cosy.' I poured water into the tooth-glass and laid a tooth-brush across it. I placed his Lordship's dressing-gown and slippers on that chair. I laid his suit for the day on that other small chair, his shirt, underclothing and socks upon the big chair, and his shoes and shoehorn in front of it. On the dressing-table I placed a collar, tie, and handkerchief. Then I collected his Lordship's evening clothes and left the room."

Moode was amusing himself at the detective's expense, but Poole listened to the rigmarole with gravity.

"That's very clear," he said, "and then I suppose you brought his Lordship's tea?"

For a second, a look of doubt seemed to flicker across the smooth face of the butler, but he answered at once.

"That is so, sir."

"And you put that . . . where? On the bedside table?"

"No, sir, on this other small chair, which I put beside the bed where his Lordship would reach it when he woke."

"And even then you noticed nothing about Lord Grayle, except that you thought he was asleep?"

"No, sir; you see, he was lying on his right side with his back to me. I'm just a touch deaf, so I didn't notice his breathing."

The "easiness" of the butler's manner was no longer evident; he even seemed slightly anxious. And, thought Poole, no wonder. Because this was the first mention that had been made of the early tea. Poole had not questioned Superintendent Clewth on the point, because he wanted for the moment to keep his idea to himself, but he was absolutely certain that if Moode had mentioned it the Superintendent would have had it down in his notebook. The normal course now would be a rather aggressive enquiry as to why this important evidence had been withheld, but that would produce the very result which Poole wished to avoid. Even as it was, he was bound to ask one more question—a very vital one—on the subject. He spoke casually enough.

"No, I don't suppose one would really notice the difference between sleep and coma if one didn't see the face. Just one more point about the tea, though; when you came up again at half-past nine—when Lady Grayle

found that Lord Grayle was dead—did you notice whether he had drunk any tea or not? Because, of course, that would show whether he was conscious or unconscious when you called him."

The butler stared at him; Poole saw amazement—even consternation—slowly spread over his face.

"Good gracious me!" he exclaimed, "I never thought of that, sir! Upon my word I never thought of it!"

"But did you notice?"

Moode puckered his brow as if he were racking his brain.

"I believe he had," he said at last. "I believe he had! Yes, I'm sure of it. Well now, fancy my not thinking of that!"

"I rather wonder Superintendent Clewth didn't notice it when he came. I shall have a joke with him over it," said Poole smiling.

Moode had become thoughtful again; genuinely thoughtful, Poole believed.

"I don't think the tray was here, sir, when the Superintendent came," he said slowly. "If I recollect aright, when her Ladyship told me to go down and telephone for the doctor, I thought I'd put a chair for her to sit on. There was this one next the bed where she was standing, so I took the tray off it so as to leave it clear for her. Then as I was going downstairs I took the tray with me—kind of automatically, I suppose. I don't believe I gave a thought to what I was doing. One gets into the way of doing these things by habit. I suppose I put the tray down in the pantry when I telephoned."

"And, of course, nobody else would have noticed about it either?" said Poole casually.

"No, I suppose not. It was just a thing one saw every day and wouldn't take any notice of it. It would just be washed up with the breakfast things."

Exactly, thought Poole; washed up; with the traces of poison—washed away.

"By one of the footmen, I suppose?"

"That's it, sir, by one of the footmen. I'm very sorry indeed, sir, if I've caused any trouble by not mentioning this before. I can't think how I came to overlook it."

"Oh, I don't think it really matters. It just clears up the point as to whether Lord Grayle was unconscious for long before he died. It just means that he had a relapse soon after you called him and died in an hour or so, poor fellow."

It meant, of course, nothing of the kind. The implication of that tea-drinking would be infinitely more significant to anyone who thought it out, but then ninety-nine people out of a hundred do not think things out. Poole hoped that the butler would put him down as one of the ninety-nine. He asked a few more questions of no great importance, just to give the impression that his mind was no longer running on the early tea and then expressed a wish to see Mrs. Spent, the housekeeper. On the way downstairs to look for her, Poole asked the butler who had been breaking the Sabbath that morning; Moode seemed puzzled by the enquiry.

"I thought I saw a furniture van at the door this morning!" explained the detective. "I wondered why it came on a Sunday."

"Oh, that, sir; that was only some furniture coming back from being repaired. They started from London yesterday morning, but had a breakdown and put up in Windon last night."

"Delivering, were they?" said Poole. "I thought I saw some things going into the van."

"That's quite right, sir. There were some things to go back for repair—chairs and a cabinet. There's always a certain amount of repairing to be done in a house filled with old furniture."

"I suppose there is," said Poole, and dropped the subject.

Five minutes later he was shown into the housekeeper's room. Mrs. Spent was sitting at a small writing-table, apparently checking a tradesman's account with some list of her own. At the detective's entry she rose, shook hands, and offered him a comfortable chair, whilst she herself occupied a rather formal, high-backed one of vague Victorian origin.

Poole saw at a glance that this one of the beneficiaries under Lord Grayle's will might be eliminated from any list of suspects. If ever innocence and honesty beamed from the soft blue eyes of a comfortable old Nannie they did from those of Annie Spent. She was soft, plump, and round; not unlike a humble and benign Victoria—whose portrait in crude oleograph graced one of the pink-flowered walls of the snug little room. A quick glance round at the room itself confirmed the impression made by its owner, and told the greater part of her history. On the walls hung, besides the sovereigns who had successively reigned over Annie Spent, portraits of the late Earl, his father, and his son; wedding groups of noble Grayles, Chessinghams, or Broghuns; social and political gatherings in the grounds of Tassart. So much for Mrs. Spent's career, but it was upon her writing-table, the mantlepiece, and the cottage piano that old Annie's heart stood revealed—portraits of a baby, of a little girl in a white cotton frock, black

stockings and high black boots, of a bigger girl in tight serge dress and tam-o'-shanter, of the same girl in habit and bowler upon a pony; of a young lady in tweeds and a flat motoring cap perched on the top of her head, of the same young lady in habit and top hat upon a lightweight hunter, of a blooming bride with heavily moustached bride-groom, of a still more blooming bride in Court dress, with long train and ostrich feathers, in fact, of Helen Lavering at every stage of her career from cradle to Countess.

Poole could not help smiling at sight of this touching record of affectionate service, but he quickly remembered his errand and offered Mrs. Spent a few words of respectful sympathy in the tragedy that had befallen Tassart. Mrs. Spent received them with quiet dignity, but she was visibly touched.

"You've been with Lady Grayle a long time, haven't you, Mrs. Spent?" asked the detective.

"I nursed her from the month," replied Annie. "I wasn't much more than a child myself then, but the Vicar—her Ladyship's father—wasn't a rich man. If he'd had a full-grown nurse for Miss Helen, he used to say, he'd have had to give up his hunter, and that would have broken his heart."

"And you've been with her ever since?"

"Ever since, Mr. Poole. As nurse, then when her mother died as housekeeper, then when she married his Lordship, as maid, and then when they settled down here, as housekeeper. Fifty-five years come Michaelmas."

"I'm afraid this must have been a terrible shock for her."

"It has, poor lamb. She's a brave woman, Mr. Poole; she doesn't wear her heart on her sleeve, but it's broken. She loved his Lordship dearly; she was a true wife to him."

"And I suppose you've no more idea how to account for it than anyone else?"

"Not an idea beyond that it was some kind of mistake. The hand of God, Mr. Poole, taking His servant in His own time and His own way."

Poole felt sure that this really was Mrs. Spent's view of the problem, but though she could not help him with suggestions she could provide him with information which he did not want to seek elsewhere. He explained that he was trying to find out how and when Lord Grayle had taken the deadly dose, as it was not now thought likely that the one taken at ten o'clock on the previous night had been sufficient in itself to kill; he told Mrs. Spent that the police were still bound to consider the possibility of someone having administered the dose with intent to murder, and he asked her, therefore, to

tell nobody—not even Lady Grayle—about the questions he was going to ask. To all this Mrs. Spent agreed; Poole thought she probably would not understand the gist of his questions, but that she could certainly be trusted not to talk.

What he wanted to know was the exact procedure about early morning tea at Tassart, who had it, who prepared it, where the tea services were kept, and so on. He set the greatest store upon this information, as—if it was definite—it should fine down considerably the number of people who could have access to the 'vehicle' in which he felt sure the scopolamine had been administered. Mrs. Spent did not have to rack her brains in order to give this simple information; Lady Grayle and Lady Chessingham took tea in the early morning, as did Lord Grayle. Lord Chessingham did not; he had a glass of hot water. All the morning tea-sets were normally kept in the pantry, but the ones to be used by the ladies were put in the kitchen the last thing on the previous night by one of the footmen. The set used by Lord Grayle would stay in the pantry cupboard till the footman got it out in the morning.

"Did he always have the same set?" asked Poole.

Oh yes; it was an old-fashioned blue willow-pattern set which he had had ever since his marriage. Pieces got broken occasionally, but it was a stock set at Harrods and they could always be replaced.

"It wasn't like the sets used by Lady Grayle and Lady Chessingham?"

No, there was no other set like it. Lady Grayle had a Herend set which his Lordship brought back from Hungary two years ago and Lady Chessingham one of the Dresden sets which were kept for the "best" visitors.

"So that everybody knew that that blue willow set was the one used by Lord Grayle?"

Everybody who had anything to do with it, yes—the manservants and perhaps the kitchen, perhaps even one or two of the housemaids had seen it in Lord Grayle's room before it was taken down to the pantry to be washed up. Lady Grayle, of course, knew it, too.

"And Lady Chessingham?"

She might. Mrs. Spent thought she was "one who noticed," but there was no particular reason why she should know. Lord Chessingham, having lived in the house with that tea-set for at least thirty years, ought to know, but then men never noticed anything—anything domestic, that was.

"Now about the tea; did they all drink the same?"

No; Lady Grayle and Lady Chessingham took China tea, a Soochong, Lady Grayle with lemon and Lady Chessingham with milk. Lord Grayle liked Indian tea, but he didn't have the ordinary Indian tea in use by the household; he had a special blend from Jackson's in Piccadilly. It was kept in a caddy in the pantry; Mrs. Spent filled the caddy from her store once a week when it was brought to her.

"And the milk?"

That was kept in the larder. One of the girls from the kitchen would fetch what was wanted first thing in the morning and fill a jug for the pantry. A footman would fetch it from the kitchen, the girls were not allowed to go into the pantry.

"And the sugar?"

That was kept in the pantry, Mrs. Spent issuing a strictly rationed supply once a week.

"Now, Mrs. Spent," said Poole, "I want you to tell me *exactly* how that early tea of Lord Grayle's is prepared, from the moment the footman takes the set out of the cupboard to the moment that Mr. Moode puts it on the chair by his Lordship's bed. Of course, I could ask about that in the pantry, but just at the moment I don't want to. I don't want any talk about it. You probably know pretty well what happens."

Mrs. Spent did. The footman would take the tea-set out of the cupboard and put it on its tray on the pantry table. He would fetch the milk from the kitchen and fill the little jug belonging to the set. He would put sugar in the basin. He would take out the tea-caddy and put it beside the tray. That was all. Then Mr. Moode . . .

"One moment, Mrs. Spent. Are you quite sure the footman would not put tea in the pot? Even though it wasn't his duty to, was it not possible that he did it to save Moode trouble?"

Mrs. Spent for the first time looked definitely shocked.

"Oh dear, no! Mr. Poole. The pot has to be warmed! Mr. Moode would do that. When he is dressed he boils the water on his electric ring, puts some in the pot to warm it, empties it out, of course, then puts in the tea and fills up with water. Then it's ready to go upstairs."

"And he takes it up at once? It wouldn't be left in the pantry to draw while Moode took his Lordship's hot water up and laid out his clothes."

Mrs. Spent turned a pitying and patient eye upon the poor ignorant policeman. No, the tea would *not* be allowed to stand and get cold and over-draw for perhaps a quarter of an hour while the butler did all that. It would

be taken straight up to his Lordship's room and any drawing to be done would be done there.

"And everybody in the house knows all that routine—about where the tea's kept and who makes it, and about warming the pot and all?"

"Every woman knows," replied Mrs. Spent tartly.

Exactly.

Poole thanked Mrs. Spent warmly for her help, reiterated his request for silence, renewed his expression of sympathy, and left. He wanted to think, so he made his way out of the house and into the park.

Warming the pot? That surely was the crux of the whole business. He had thought that anyone might have put the poison into the teapot overnight, especially as it was so certain—and so universally known—which was Lord Grayle's teapot. But that warming of the pot—washing it out—by the butler just before making the tea and taking it up to Lord Grayle wiped out the possibility.

It was just conceivable, of course, that the poison was put into the tea itself, or the milk, or even soaked into the sugar, but these seemed remote possibilities. The sugar, according to Mrs. Spent, was put into its basin by the footman, presumably out of a bag—too risky to tamper with sugar in a bag that might be used for other purposes; the milk came straight from a communal supply in the larder. The tea in its caddy was proper to Lord Grayle alone, but it would take a great deal of poison to saturate a whole caddyful of tea. . . . But was it a whole caddyful? Mrs. Spent herself said that she refilled it once a week; on which day? he must find out; perhaps the caddy was practically empty that Friday morning, in which case it would not have been impossible to saturate what was left of it—or mix powder with it. (He must find out from Sir Hulbert Lemuel the form in which the poison would most probably be used.) This possibility still left a door open to outside tampering.

But by far the most probable explanation of it all was that the poison was put into the teapot by the person who prepared the tea. That possibility *must* now be sifted to its utmost limits, and the next line of investigation must be the question of motive.

After his conversation with the housekeeper, Poole felt confident that he now knew how the scopolamine had been administered. A less cautious man would also have felt that he knew who had administered it, but the detective had seen enough of his trade to realise the unwisdom of jumping at the obvious and building a case round it. He would have to get a great deal more evidence about motive before he could ask a jury to believe that a man of Moode's character and position would, for the sake of £500, poison a master whom he had served for the greater part of his working life.

And it was not only a question of motive. He would have to satisfy a jury that the murderer not only had had access to the 'vehicle' in which the poison was administered, but that he had had, or at least might have had, the poison itself in his possession. Certainly if he could not prove that, nor provide a better motive than the £500, his case would have a very thin time at the hands of defending counsel. For it was a thousand to one against his being able to *prove* that the scopolamine was ever in the early tea—the dregs of it had gone down the sink. A jury would require something a great deal stronger than 'a probable conjecture' before they would convict, whatever their suspicions might be.

Motive, then, must be the next line of approach, and for that Poole thought that the county police might be helpful. He walked back across the park, therefore, rang up Headquarters from the "Grey Dog" to say that he was coming, and getting on to his bicycle soon pedalled himself into Windon.

Superintendent Clewth was intensely interested at Poole's account of his morning's work. He would have liked to pull the butler in at once and "third degree" him about his reasons for not mentioning the early tea when he was first questioned. Clewth was absolutely certain that the man had deliberately withheld that information in the hope that it would be overlooked (as, in fact, the Superintendent admitted, it had been by himself). Poole, however, was not quite so sure on this point.

"It looks deliberate, on the face of it, of course," he said, "but you know, Superintendent, that *is* just the sort of slip one might make. To us—looking for the 'vehicle' that the poison was given in—of course, the early tea, and particularly the removing of it before the police arrived—simply leaps to the eye as a fact of terrific importance. But to the butler—assuming for a moment that he knew nothing about poison that morning—the presence of that tea tray was such a matter of everyday routine that I really believe it would be possible for him to think nothing about it, and even to remove it from the room and put it to be washed up, without realising that he'd done

so. The explanation is so thin that I could almost believe it. I don't say I do believe it, because at the moment Moode is the most likely person to have done the poisoning, and if he did then, of course, he'd have to remove the traces of his work (that tea-set points too obviously to him), and then, if he was questioned he'd have to lie about it—and here's the lie."

"Damned obvious lie, too," growled Clewth.

Poole laughed.

"So obvious, sir, that one's tempted to say: 'a clever poisoner would have invented something better.' And yet, what better explanation could there be? I've got rather an open mind on the point myself, sir."

"Well, thank God, I haven't," said the Superintendent. "What are you going to do about it if we're not to scorch him?"

"Keep him thinking we've noticed nothing about that tea and find out a lot more about him."

"Give him rope to hang himself, eh?"

"That's the sort of idea, sir."

"And what if instead of hanging himself he poisons somebody else, eh? These poisoners are very fond of having another go."

Poole's face became grave.

"That's a nasty thought, sir," he said. "I suppose it's always a risk to leave a poisoner out, but I believe in this case we've got to take it for a bit; I don't think we've got anything like enough proof to arrest him on yet. Still, if you think we have, how about consulting the Public Prosecutor?"

"Oh no, I expect you're right," said Clewth. "You've more experience of murder cases than I have. It's the Chief Constable's responsibility, of course, but he'll do what you advise. Now, what do you want to find out about him?"

"His character generally; how he spends his money, where he spends his spare time, where he banks—if he does—what are his habits, does he gamble or bet; in fact, anything that will lead us to his motive—if he's the murderer."

"What about his legacy—£500?"

"Well, sir, that's no motive to a respectable, well-paid, comfortably settled married man with no expensive habits. It only becomes a motive if he *has* got expensive habits and they've got him into serious financial trouble. That's why I want to know all about them."

"All right," said the Superintendent, "we'll look him up, and I take it that you want it done quietly."

"Yes, please, sir; that's very important. I'll probably have a talk to his wife myself, but I haven't seen Lord Chessingham or his wife or the secretary yet, so if your people could do some of the spade work on Moode, it would be a great help."

"Right you are, my lad. Oh, look here, the Chief sent me down this book of 'Medical Jurisprudence' in case you want to look up anything about poisons."

"By Jove," said Poole eagerly, "that's the very thing I want."

Taking the heavy volume, he ran his finger down the table of contents: 'Legal Procedure,' 'Dying Declarations,' 'Rigor,' 'Putrefaction,' 'Post Mortem,' 'Exhumation,' 'Injuries,' 'Bloodstains,' 'Strangulations'—what cheerful subjects to write about, he thought—then hurriedly passed over the next and even more unpleasant section; ah, here was what he wanted: 'Toxicology,' 'Dangerous Drugs Act,' 'Corrosive Poisons,' 'Metallic Poisons,' 'Common Hypnotics'—that was getting warmer; yes, there was the Barbitone group that included di-dial; finally: Chapter XX, 'Vegetable Poisons.'

'Page 391. Vegetable Poisons. Atropic Alkaloids. The Atropine Group. The Solamine Group. The Nicotine Group.' Atropine Group—that was what Sir Hulbert had called it. 'Atropine. Hyoscyamine. Hyoscine (scopolamine).' A lot of terribly technical stuff: 'Isomeric,' 'Laevo—and Dextrorotatory.' How was he to get anything out of that?

A picture of a plant: 'Belladonna'—familiar name. Belladonna appeared to contain from a half to one per cent of atropic alkaloid. What did that imply? Nothing to him, except that the thing had in it the elements of death. Another plant: 'Hyoscyamus Muticus'—full of it apparently. And 'Datura Stramonium.' Did these things grow in one's garden? He must ask the Horticultural Society about them—or perhaps the County Council had a man who would know; they were full of experts—from bees in the hive to bees in the bonnet.

This 'Datura' seemed to be funny stuff—full of seeds that people were always eating by mistake. Why were they? Where did they get them from?

But after all, that was really a chemist's job. He was the chap who made use of those plants—boiled them down into the concentrated essence, or whatever it was called. The poison would be in the form of a powder or

liquid—he had already got a note to find out about that. Except, of course, the datura seeds that people swallowed by the hundred by mistake.

So much for what it was made of. Then followed the effects. *They* really were rather interesting and less unintelligibly technical—"stimulation of the higher centres of the brain." That reminded him of a question he had wanted to ask: Why hadn't Lord Grayle rung for help when he felt the poison beginning to take effect? There was an electric bell next to his bed—Poole had noticed it that very morning when talking to the butler, and though he had not himself rung it, he believed that . . .

Poole came out of his meditations with a jerk, remembering that his superior officer was sitting patiently beside him waiting for the outcome of all this cogitation.

"Did you happen to ring the bell in Lord Grayle's room, sir; the one by his bed?" he asked.

"Yes, I rang for the butler the first morning I was there. We were talking to the doctor up there—Major Faide and I—and when we'd done with him we wanted the butler, so I rang for him."

"And he came?"

"Oh, yes, he came all right—and gave us a bit of lip too, the smooth-faced hypocrite."

It has already been noticed that Superintendent Clewth had a prejudice against men of Moode's calling, and this had naturally not been lessened by the suspicion which now attached to the butler. However, that didn't matter to Poole; all that interested him was that the bell had been in working order that morning. Then why had Lord Grayle not rung? What was this, though?

'In the case of scopolamine there is less initial stimulation of the central nervous system, depression occurring almost at once . . .'

But if he was depressed why didn't he ring the bell?—all the more reason to. Or was 'depression' a technical term there? it was applied to 'respiration' just above. Perhaps it didn't mean 'feeling depressed,' in the sense of being uncomfortable or unhappy, but actually suffering a lowering of the vitality, perhaps even unconsciousness. That might account for his not ringing.

Apparently this 'depression' was followed by coma and death from respiratory paralysis, though some people (did that apply to scopolamine poisoning or only the others? scopolamine seemed to be different in some ways)—some people became giddy, staggered, had fits of laughter, even

became maniacal; but that couldn't have been the case with Lord Grayle—someone would have heard him.

As to the toxic dose, it seemed to vary from half a grain to four grammes, according to the form in which the poison was taken and the circumstances of the subject. The author of this particular book seemed more concerned with the number of datura seeds that it was possible to swallow without dying. One hardy fellow had returned a record of over five hundred—and recovered, whilst another, an apparently healthy young man, had succumbed to a mere one hundred and ten. But Sir Hulbert had said nothing about seeds; he had spoken of one forty-eighth of a grain, which presumably meant that the poison had been taken in some concentrated form.

Poole closed the book with reluctance and handed it back to the Superintendent, who was engaged in drawing up some report.

"That book seems to entertain you," said Clewth. "Would you like to take it along?"

Poole shook his head.

"Better not, sir," he said, "it's hardly the thing to leave lying about, and I've got nowhere to lock it up. The chambermaid at the 'Grey Dog' would be sure to find it, and some of the photographs would give her twenty fits. If I may have a look at it here when I want to, that'll be quite enough."

The detective had told his landlord that he would be back to lunch, but might be late; perhaps he could have something cold. It was well after two by the time he returned, to find a generous supply of cold beef, tongue, and pickles—with potatoes kept hot in the kitchen—awaiting him. A cold tart of young gooseberries crowned his content; to a Londoner these really young berries, fresh from the bush, were an unheard of luxury, and Poole nearly finished it all.

On his ride back from Windon he had thought out his own next steps. He had set in motion the routine enquiry about Moode's private life; he would have liked to have a talk with Mrs. Moode, but did not see how to do so without arousing her husband's suspicions. Then there were still some routine interviews to be done: the new Earl and his wife; he very much wanted to ask her about the number of tablets left in the di-dial bottle—a point upon which her evidence appeared to conflict with that of the analyst. Poole realised that he had been thinking so much of the scopolamine since his talk with Sir Hulbert that he had let the question of the di-dial slide into the background. But was that wise? It certainly looked now as if the di-dial had been taken by Lord Grayle himself in its ordinary, harmless strength,

and that it was only its combination with the scopolamine that had made it dangerous.

But one thing was quite certain; whoever administered the scopolamine must have known that Lord Grayle had already a considerable quantity of hypnotic poison inside him, because that dose of scopolamine would not in itself—Sir Hulbert had said—have been anything like a killing one; it again was only lethal in combination with the di-dial. And, what was far more significant, the dangerous combination of the two drugs must have taken place, according to the Home Office analyst, within a limit of about three hours, otherwise the di-dial would have passed too far on to combine dangerously with the scopolamine. That meant that the ten p.m. dose would have had no effect on the scopolamine taken next morning, so that it followed that the poisoner was *counting* on that second dose of di-dial taken in the night. How could he count upon it? Was it possible that he (or was it she)—had administered it himself?

No, he must not let the di-dial slip into the background.

Then there was the secretary—Miss Hollen. It was not a pleasant job to cross-question a girl about her employers, but she might have picked up something in the course of her work—something that might act as a pointer. Poole thought it possible, too, that she might be able to check the butler's statement about the furniture that had gone to be repaired; although there seemed no particular reason to doubt it, the detective was not quite satisfied; it seemed to him rather odd that the butler in a house like Tassart, should be up and fully dressed at seven a.m. on a Sunday morning, helping a house-boy to load furniture into a van. Was it conceivable that the man was taking advantage of the general confusion to sell some of the furniture? It might be conceivable, but it was extremely improbable. Apart from the butler's early activity the only possibly suspicious point about the affair was the "plainness" of the van; most furniture firms liked to advertise their activities, particularly in connection with noble houses. Poole wished that he had made a note of the registration number; he knew the lettering, and that there was a double seven in the number; if necessary, Scotland Yard should be able to trace it. In the meantime, Miss Hollen might know all about it and so save him the trouble.

Finally, there was Dr. Calladine. Poole's first impression on hearing Superintendent Clewth's report had been extremely unfavourable to the local doctor who had prescribed and supplied the di-dial. It might have been possible for him to have got hold of some of the raw material and made up a tablet of lethal strength to substitute for one of the manufacturer's harmless

ones. But as a lethal dose of di-dial had not been found in the body—only about five grains, the equivalent of two or three tablets—that possibility was wiped out. And what possible motive could he have? He was not mentioned in the will; he would lose a valuable patient, and—whatever the result—he would have to face some awkward questioning at the inquest. No, Dr. Calladine could not be seriously considered. Still, he ought to be interviewed.

When he reached Tassart Hall at half-past three, Poole found that he had again missed Lord Chessingham, who had gone for a walk with his wife. The detective asked for Miss Hollen, and was presently shown into a small square room opening off the library, lined with books and bright with early summer flowers.

Irene Hollen was a pleasant surprise; she provided the only attractive note that Poole had yet struck in this gloomy piece. She was young and slim, and though the detective paid no particular attention to the colour of her hair and eyes, or the shape of her nose and mouth, he did retain sufficient of the old Adam to realise that she was definitely pretty. Although suitably dressed in a grey cotton frock, with a touch of white at wrist and neck, Irene Hollen could not disguise her natural cheerfulness and high spirits. When the detective was introduced to her by Moode, her eyes had perceptibly widened; Poole guessed that she was as pleasantly surprised at his appearance as he was at hers; no doubt she had expected something elderly and square, with heavy boots and heavier manner, whereas Poole was (though he did not himself carry the comparison so far) both young and good-looking.

After the usual formula of sympathetic apology, the detective questioned Miss Hollen about herself and her connection with the family. She was, it appeared, twenty-seven, had been educated at Cambridge and was engaged by Lady Grayle through an agency four years previously. She worked for both Lord and Lady Grayle, typing letters and—in the case of Lord Grayle—doing a certain amount of research work for a history of the Broghun family that he was writing. She also shared with Mrs. Spent the duty of running the house; that is to say, she wrote the orders for goods required by the housekeeper, kept the accounts, arranged for repairs and did the hundred and one odd jobs that normally fall to the master or mistress of a smaller household.

Poole encouraged the girl to talk because he wanted the opportunity of studying her; it would be a great help to him to find someone intimately connected with the family, and yet independent of it, whom he could trust.

He was not long in making up his mind; as far as it was possible to judge anybody, on such short acquaintance, the detective decided that this girl was both reliable and sensible. Having formed his judgment, he acted on it.

"Can you help me, Miss Hollen?" he asked.

"How? By the way, would you like to sit down?"

"I believe I think better standing," said Poole with a smile.

"So do I," said Miss Hollen, and perched herself on the edge of her big writing-table. "Now, how am I to help? Of course I want to."

"Tell me what you think about this business."

Irene Hollen's face clouded.

"I think it's ghastly," she said. "He was such a darling."

"Who do you think killed him?"

The girl's eyes widened.

"You don't really think he was murdered?" she said. "I was sure it was either a mistake of some kind or he couldn't stand the neuralgia any longer and deliberately took an overdose."

Poole shook his head.

"He didn't do that," he said. "Have you any idea—however faint or far-fetched—who could have wanted him out of the way?"

"Good gracious, no. I simply can't believe that anyone could."

"All right, then; let's try another line. What do you think of—for instance—Moode, the butler?"

Miss Hollen stared.

"Good heavens! You don't think he did it?"

"No, no; you misunderstand me. I simply want to know your opinion of everyone in turn. You see, somebody did this, somebody who knew all about Lord Grayle's ways; I've simply got to learn all I can about everybody in this household—including you, Miss Hollen."

The girl whistled.

"Shall I have a *dossier* all to myself?" she asked.

"I'm compiling it now," said Poole with a smile. "Tell me what you think of Moode."

"I don't know. Lord Grayle liked him—trusted him absolutely. Gave him the key of the cellar, left the silver in his charge when he went away, never

checked his books (I did, though)—all that sort of thing. Lady Grayle didn't —like him, I mean."

"How do you know that?" asked Poole quickly.

"Difficult to say. She never talked about him; that's always rather a bad sign with a woman. Once I thought they had a row; I happened to see him come out of her sitting-room one afternoon with a rather disagreeable look on his face—half angry, and half smiling—difficult to describe. When I went into her room she was definitely angry, quite short with me, which she never was ordinarily. Nothing came of it, though, and I don't know what it was about."

"Was that the only time anything of the kind happened, as far as you know?"

"Yes."

"How long ago was it?"

"About a month."

"And you, yourself. What do you think of him?"

"Oh, I think he's all right; quite respectful—servants aren't always to people in my position, you know. Bit oily, perhaps, but that's natural; it must be so difficult to draw the line."

"Between civility and subservience? Yes, I suppose so. Now, what about Lady Chessingham?"

"Well, what about her?"

"Do you like her?" Poole found himself asking questions almost like a human being instead of a detective; it was difficult to be formal with a girl who was herself so natural.

"I do not."

"Why not?"

"Not the sort of woman I like. She's selfish, and conceited—proud, rather; she's unpleasant with people she thinks her inferiors; she thinks of nothing except her position and her husband's career."

"You evidently don't like her," said Poole with a smile. "But you don't think she's capable of poisoning her father-in-law?"

"Oh, yes, I do."

"What! I thought you said you couldn't believe anyone would?"

"So I did, but I was thinking of him—as a subject for being murdered, I mean. But she's quite capable of poisoning people, and what's more she'd

know how to do it."

"What do you mean?"

"She took a stinks degree at Cambridge. Before I was up, of course, but I heard all about her. She was their star female lab. worm; she took a B.Sc."

X • "We Are Satisfied"

"You interest me a good deal, Miss Hollen."

"But, good heavens, you are not jumping to the conclusion that Lady Chessingham's a poisoner just because she got a B.Sc., are you?"

Poole laughed.

"I suppose I mustn't use the word 'inconsistent'?" he said. "No, Miss Hollen, I'm not jumping to any conclusion, but what you tell me is interesting all the same. Now, what about Lord Chessingham?"

"Oh, he's her husband."

"That all?"

"About all—and a Member of Parliament."

"He was fond of his father, I suppose?"

"I never noticed him fond of anything. He goes for walks," said Miss Hollen with some irrelevance.

"I suppose I mustn't ask you about Lady Grayle, as she's your employer?"

"No, I shan't talk to you about her, but if you've got any idea in your head that she poisoned her husband you can cut it right out. She didn't."

"Because?"

"Because she was fond of him."

"Thank you, Miss Hollen; you're not the first person who has told me that. I think I must accept it. That's about all, isn't it, except . . . hasn't Lord Chessingham got a secretary?"

Irene Hollen smiled.

"Sophonia Kew? Yes; there's Sophonia. Do you want to meet her?"

"Perhaps I ought to."

Miss Hollen looked at her wrist watch.

"It's past four. Lord Chessingham will be back by now; he always walks from three to four, not ten minutes to three to a quarter-past four, or anything like that. You won't want more than half an hour with him. Miss Kew has tea in here with me at half-past four, perhaps you'd care to have some with us?"

"That's most awfully kind of you. I should like to very much."

"Right. And after tea I'll discreetly withdraw and you can Third Degree Sophonia. Oh, by the way, what do I call you? Inspector?"

"That is quite correct. I *have* got a name as well—Poole, John Poole."

Miss Hollen looked at the detective with interest.

"John Poole? Surely I've heard that name before?"

Poole laughed.

"I'm afraid you're thinking of John Peel," he said.

Lord and Lady Chessingham were in the library when the detective was shown in to them. Probably, thought Poole with inward amusement, in the same attitude and about to play the same parts as had been the case when Superintendent Clewth interviewed them—the husband in a commanding position on the hearthrug *apparently* controlling the situation, the wife, modestly seated on a chair and *actually* doing all the controlling. But Poole was wrong. Lord Chessingham not only held the stage, he actually had the speaking part.

"You are Detective-Inspector Poole, of the Criminal Investigation Department? I am Lord Grayle. I am at a loss to understand why the Chief Constable of the county should have called in Scotland Yard without consulting me. However, you are not responsible for that. It is as well that you should know what I am about to tell you, in order that further time need not be wasted, nor unpleasantness incurred. Lady Grayle and I—my wife and I, that is—have considered the matter carefully and have decided that these investigations need not be continued. We are satisfied that my father's death was due to an accidental overdose of the sedative drug prescribed for him by Dr. Calladine with a view to alleviating the discomfort caused by his neuralgic affection. We understand, of course, that an inquest must be held—is, in fact, to be held to-morrow; I shall give evidence showing, as I have just said, that we are satisfied that there can have been no question of self-destruction, which is not in consonance with my father's character. There is not, therefore, any necessity for you to remain in Tassart; your presence in the village—at the inn, where naturally gossip centres—is unsettling to the

village people and undesirable. You may feel it your duty to attend the inquest, but that can be done quite well from Windon, and after it you will be able to return to town. I shall send a communication to the Commissioner informing him that you have done your duty with discretion, according to your light."

"Thank you, sir." Poole, who had not been offered a seat, was uncertain whether to be most amused or irritated by this performance. "Perhaps you'd be so good as to tell me on what grounds you have formed the conclusion that the lethal dose of poison was administered accidentally?"

The Earl's eye turned instinctively to his wife, but she was bending over some *petit point* work.

"On general grounds. There is no necessity to go into details."

"Can you tell me when it was administered, sir? Are you referring to the dose given to Lord Grayle by Lady Chessingham at ten o'clock the previous night?"

"Certainly not. There is no doubt that Lord Grayle took a further dose or doses during the night, and that owing to his condition—neurasthenia, an empty . . . er . . . stomach, excess of stimulants, and so on, the effect was fatal."

"But I understand, sir, that Lady Chessingham stated definitely to Superintendent Clewth that the number of tablets found in the bottle in the morning was the same as the number which were left in it after she had administered the dose at ten p.m.?"

Lady Chessingham looked up quickly from her work, but her husband did not wait for her to intervene.

"That is a matter of detail into which, as I said, we need not enter now. We are satisfied on the general principle."

"I see, sir. Now may I have a word with Lady Chessingham alone, please?"

"That is quite unnecessary. Lady Chessingham has nothing to say beyond what I have already said."

Poole knew all about the principles that had caused Superintendent Clewth to yield to this attitude, but he did not think they applied now; there could be no question of "not antagonising a witness"; Lord Chessingham was obviously not out to help. Besides, his manner had annoyed the detective.

"I am afraid I must press the point, sir. I wish to ask Lady Chessingham some questions—alone."

"And I have told you that that is unnecessary," returned Lord Chessingham angrily.

"If you persist in this attitude, sir, I am bound to report it at Headquarters. I must warn you that it would be regarded as obstructing the course of justice."

"I . . . I . . ."

"I will speak to the Inspector, Charles. Will you leave us, please." Lady Chessingham spoke for the first time, and Poole was surprised at the quietness of her voice and manner. Clewth's account had led him to expect something quite different. She seemed almost subdued.

"What is it you want to ask me, Inspector? Won't you sit down?"

The detective complied.

"In the first place about those tablets, madam. Do you still say that there were only three in the bottle after you had given the ten o'clock dose?"

Lady Chessingham bit her lip. Anything like recantation was most distasteful to a woman of her character, and yet . . .

"I don't know. I don't know," she said, hurrying over her words as if in an attempt to slur their meaning. "I may have made a mistake. I thought at the time. . . . I realise, Inspector, that Lord Grayle must have been able to take another, perhaps two more doses. The one I gave him would not in itself have been enough to account for his death, whatever the circumstances —such as my husband referred to. Inspector, must this enquiry go on? It will cause a terrible scandal—if there should be any question of suicide. People talk so loosely nowadays; there is no restraint, no decency. The common people discuss us freely, as if . . . it is these dreadful newspapers that are responsible. What good will come of dragging out such a possibility? At present everyone thinks it was an accident, why not let it remain at that?"

"But yourself, you cut out the possibility of accident or mistake, Lady Chessingham?"

"Oh, no, no; certainly not. Only we do not wish the possibility of suicide to be discussed."

"You realise that if the 'mistake' idea is insisted on, the Coroner's jury—and the public—will assume either that you accidentally gave Lord Grayle too large a dose at ten o'clock . . ."

"That is absurd!" flashed Lady Chessingham.

". . . or that there was a mistake in dispensing—that a toxic dose was concentrated in one tablet?"

"Nobody who had been trained could make such mistake!"

"Exactly. You see, Lady Chessingham, you don't believe in the 'mistake' idea yourself."

"Our idea is that Lord Grayle took more tablets in the night."

"By mistake?"

"A mistake of judgment. Finding that the one I gave him at ten o'clock had not given him a night's sleep, he took an extra strong dose—too strong."

"I see. Dr. Calladine will testify that he warned Lord Grayle against taking more than one at a time or two in the twenty-four hours."

"But a man who is in a desperate state of nerves will ignore warnings."

"There seems to be a very thin line between that and deliberately taking an overdose. You must see, Lady Chessingham, that no Coroner or Coroner's jury will give a verdict without asking all the questions I'm asking; if you try to force 'mistake' on to them it will only rouse their suspicions. I can't understand how Lord Chessingham can entertain the idea for an instant."

"He is so anxious about his father's good name; he thinks that a verdict of suicide would cast a slur on it. I was afraid you would not agree to do what he wanted."

"Lady Chessingham, why do you talk all the time of suicide? The other alternative must have occurred to you."

Lady Chessingham stared at the detective without speaking.

"You must realise that when we get the analyst's report it will tell us exactly what poison was in the body, in what quantities, and . . . when it was administered."

Poole watched his companion very closely as he spoke. Hers was not a face nor a character that would easily betray any emotion, whatever emotion there might be. Lady Chessingham showed none now; she continued to stare at the detective with an absolutely expressionless face; her lips parted slightly as if she was about to speak, but she said nothing.

"There is nothing you want to add to what you have already told us, madam?"

Lady Chessingham slowly shook her head.

The detective rose.

“In that case, I must not keep you any longer. I hope you will explain to Lord Chessingham that what he suggests is impossible—and most unwise.”

Poole bowed slightly and left the room, leaving Lady Chessingham still seated on her high-backed chair and staring before her as if she had forgotten his existence.

Poole made his way back to the secretary’s room. A footman was just coming out, carrying an empty tray; inside, a table had been laid for tea, which appeared to be complete except for the teapot.

“Oh, there you are,” exclaimed Miss Hollen, from an easy chair in which she was reading the *Observer*, sheets of which were scattered over the floor. “Shout after William and tell him we’re ready for tea.”

Poole shut the door behind him.

“I’ll ring for him, Miss Hollen, but I’m afraid I can’t stay to tea.”

The obvious disappointment in the girl’s face would have flattered the young detective at any other time, but he was not thinking of such things now.

“I’ve had rather a row with Lord Chessingham, he’s practically ordered me back to London, and, of course, I’ve refused to go, but I don’t think I can very well have tea in his house now.”

“It isn’t his house,” said Irene hotly, “it’s Lady Grayle’s.”

“Well, that’s a technical point that I’m not lawyer enough to argue about,” said Poole. “But on the ethics of it I’m fairly sound.”

“What was the row about?” asked the girl, switching with characteristic speed to a more interesting side of the question.

Poole laughed.

“I think I’ve told you more than I ought to already,” he said. “I’m not being very official.”

“I should hope not. And Sophonia wouldn’t face you.”

The detective looked his enquiry.

“Says she’s got a headache; having tea up in her room. She must have heard about you.”

“That’s bad luck.”

“That she’s not coming?”

“That I shan’t benefit by her not coming.”

“But you’re not going to leave me to have tea by myself?”

"Yes; I told you."

"But it's nonsense."

"It's . . ."

The door opened and Lady Grayle came into the room. She shot a quick glance at Poole and then at her secretary. Her eyebrows were delicately raised.

"Hullo, Irene, tea party?"

The girl stiffened slightly.

"I did ask Inspector Poole to have some tea, Lady Grayle. I thought he ought to have some and I didn't quite know where . . ."

"Well, we needn't discuss the ethics of where Detective-Inspectors should have their tea. It looks very inviting. I'm a bit lonely myself; can I have some with you?"

"Of course, Lady Grayle; that'll be lovely. Will you ring the bell, Mr. Poole?" There was evident relief in Miss Hollen's voice at the way in which her employer was taking the situation.

"Yes; I think 'Mr. Poole' sounds pleasanter than 'Inspector,' " said Lady Grayle. "What about Miss Kew; doesn't she have tea with you?"

"She's got a headache," said Irene Hollen, blushing slightly.

Lady Grayle laughed but refrained from comment.

William, when he brought the teapot, had some difficulty in not displaying his surprise at the oddly mixed party. Lady Grayle, however, appeared to find nothing unusual in it; she controlled the situation with considerable skill, drawing out both the detective and the secretary, making them talk and even laugh, making them forget, in fact, the circumstances of the tragedy that surrounded them all. She herself was in apparently high spirits; she told stories of her young days in the hunting field, days when her father could only manage the one old screw for himself and she herself had to—and did—raise a mount wherever she could; sometimes a farmer's cob, sometimes the pony out of the butcher's trap, sometimes—when she was growing up and, as she frankly explained, beginning to show her looks—on a real hunter lent by some admiring member of the hunt. It was all very good fun, and Poole soon forgot to feel surprised.

Then suddenly her mood changed. She became quite silent; her eyes, which had been bright with vitality, lost their sparkle and dropped to contemplation of the cigarette which was allowed to smoulder in its long

green holder. Then, without a word, she rose and walked out of the room. Poole looked enquiringly at his companion.

"She's been like that lately," said Miss Hollen. "It seems as if she were trying to force her spirits up, and then suddenly becomes exhausted by the strain."

"When you say 'lately,' do you mean since Lord Grayle's death . . . or before?"

Irene Hollen looked steadily at her companion.

"Must you always be detecting?" she asked.

Poole flushed.

"I know; it's beastly," he said. "But I've got to do it. Which did you mean?"

"I told you I wasn't going to talk about Lady Grayle."

"I know, but you have; I think you'd better go on now."

Miss Hollen sat for some time in silence, looking at her hands. Then with a frown she spoke.

"I'm sorry I said anything, but I supposed I'd better tell you; you might jump to a wrong conclusion if I simply shut up. She's been much more . . . like that, since Lord Grayle died; she's got much older looking and . . . tired. But she has been inclined to do that for some time, as if she was worried. I think she was worried."

"You don't know what about?"

"No, unless it was Lord Grayle's health, or . . . money?"

"Do you know anything about her money troubles?"

"No, Inspector Poole, I don't, and I'm not going to be pumped any longer. Besides, it's time I had some exercise."

Poole's face cleared.

"All right," he said, "I'll stop pumping, but I do want to ask you one more question—nothing personal about Lady Grayle. Did you arrange for some furniture to be sent away yesterday?"

"Furniture? No, why?"

"Because some did go away; I just wanted to know if it was all in order. As a matter of fact, it only went this morning, because the van broke down."

"I daresay Lady Grayle may have arranged it some time without telling me. There has been a lot of furniture repairing and picture restoring going on

lately, ever since the re-valuation."

"What re-valuation?"

"Oh, Lord Grayle was afraid of fire—you know, all these country houses being burnt down—and he didn't think he was properly insured, so he had some valuers down and they did the whole place from top to bottom—silver, pictures, furniture, books, everything. It cost an awful lot, but the place is now properly covered."

"But what's that got to do with repairs?"

"Oh, simply that the man who was doing the furniture valuation said a lot of it was in very bad order—deteriorating—and ought to be repaired. And it has been."

"And still is?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Lady Grayle arranged about it herself with Mr. Cristen."

"Who's he?"

"The man who did the valuing—furniture expert."

"I see; then it's sure to be all right. Thank you, Miss Hollen. You might perhaps just give me the name of the firm."

"I've got the bill somewhere. Half a minute." The secretary extracted a box file from a cupboard and turned over the pages. "Here you are; 'to carefully compiling, etc., etc.' Levish, Caine and Levish, Little Hampden Street, Westminster."

XI • Tea-Leaves

When Poole awoke on the following, Monday, morning, it was with a sense that at last he would be able to get a move on in this enquiry. So far he seemed to have done nothing but question people about their opinions of other people—an essential task in a case where "motive" was so all-important as compared with action. In a poisoning case, action was hardly ever observable as it was in the case of a blow or a shot, so that questions of what people had seen or heard at a particular moment were of less importance than their views on character and the general circumstances surrounding the life of the victim and those connected with him.

But by now, the detective felt, he ought to have got all there was to be known about these people and could apply himself to the following up of such facts as he had discovered. The "week-end"—bugbear of the detective—was over; banks, shops and offices would be open; the ordinary run of life resumed. There was one obstacle to progress still in front of him—the inquest, to be held in Windon that morning, but he had already arranged with Superintendent Clewth to see the coroner and reduce the first stage of the enquiry to a formality.

Bicycling into Headquarters, Poole put a call through from Superintendent Clewth's room to Scotland Yard. He arranged with Chief Constable Thurston for a detective to be sent round to Messrs. Levish, Caine and Levish to enquire whether they had, in fact, sent a van on Saturday to collect furniture from Tassart Hall. Poole explained that the information was only required to check a statement and that he did not expect anything to come of it. He added what he knew of the van's registration number.

The inquest followed the course mapped out for it by the police, much to the disappointment of the curious. The body was identified by the widow and the new Lord Grayle; Dr. Calladine described the illness from which the late Lord Grayle suffered and the steps that had been taken to combat it, including the sedative drug prescribed by himself; the Coroner stated that by his order the organs had been sent to the Home Office pathologist for analysis, but that Sir Hulbert Lemuel's report would not be available for some days. He therefore adjourned the inquest for a week, but gave his certificate for burial.

Many people in Court felt that the Coroner had left unasked many questions which they themselves would have liked to ask; most of them felt that Dr. Calladine should have been more closely questioned about the drug which he had prescribed; those few who understood the procedure of inquests realised that the delay implied serious doubts about the cause of death—and some of those few held their tongues.

On his return to Police Headquarters, Poole found a message awaiting him, telling him to ring up Chief Constable Thurston at once. He did so.

"Look here, Poole," said his Chief as soon as they were connected, "there's something wrong with this van of yours. Those Levish people don't know anything about it; they haven't even got a van. They're valuers. They say they recently did a valuation down at Tassart, but they don't know anything about any repairs."

"They didn't know who the repairs were being done by, sir? The secretary told me that their valuer had arranged for them to be done."

“I don’t suppose Phillips asked about that. I didn’t give him any special instructions; I gathered from you that it was a simple check.”

“I thought it was, sir. It was probably a mistake on my part. I certainly understood the secretary to say that these people were doing the repairs, but she may have meant that they—or rather their valuer who was down at Tassart—advised Lady Grayle where to get them done. You weren’t able to locate the van from the number—as much as we’d got of it—were you, sir?”

“Not definitely, but we can if you think it’s important. When you said ‘double seven’ you meant that the sevens were next to each other, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir, but I can’t say whether they were in the middle or one end.”

“Exactly; well, the registration people say that there are three hundred cars registered in London that that description might apply to—assuming that you’re sure you got the letters right. If there’s any possibility of mistake about the letters, it jumps at once into thousands.”

“No, sir, the letters were right, Y Z.”

“All right. Well, fortunately only one hundred and thirty-five of the three hundred are commercial, and only four of the one hundred and thirty-five have anything to do with furniture. If you think it’s important I’ll have them looked up—or you can make some more enquiries at your end.”

“On the whole, I think I’d rather not do that, sir,” replied Poole. “There’s probably nothing in it, but if there is it would be better not to let the Tassart people know we’re interested. On the same principle, it might be as well not to go, in the first place, straight to the firm itself. If you can identify the van, Phillips might see the driver and cook up some story about enquiring into a breakdown. If there really was a breakdown and the van started on Saturday morning, as the butler said, then it’s probably all right and Phillips can go to the firm and check the order there.”

“What makes you think there may not have been a breakdown?”

“Only because I’ve got the impression that that butler was waiting for the van to arrive early on Sunday morning. I’ve an idea that butlers aren’t usually up and dressed at seven o’clock on a Sunday morning; I may, of course, be wrong about the custom at Tassart, but I don’t think I’ll enquire about it.”

“All right; we’ll fix that up and let you know. Where’ll you be?”

“I expect I shall be in Windon most of the afternoon, sir. If you’ll leave word here I’ll ring you up.”

"Right. How did the inquest go?"

"Very well, sir. The Coroner was quite reasonable and adjourned for a week—nominally to wait for Sir Hulbert's report."

"You can't hold up that scopolamine much longer, you know."

"No, sir, I realise that. I hope to get enough information to act on in a day or two."

Poole hung up the receiver and turned to Superintendent Clewth, who had been listening to one end of the conversation.

"May be something in this van business, sir," he said. "The Yard'll ring through again when they've got anything. Has anything come in about Moode?"

"Only negative so far. He had a banking account with the County and Colonial, but closed it about three months ago."

"Did he? That's interesting. Do they know why, or what he's done since?"

"He seems to have had a bit of an overdraft—nothing very serious. They pressed him a bit and after a time he cleared the overdraft and closed the account. They don't know what he's done since, but he's not got an account with any other bank in Windon; we've tried them all."

"London, perhaps?"

"Perhaps, but why should he bother to do that?"

"No reason that one can see, sir—unless there's a good reason."

"You mean because he didn't want local people to know about his account?"

"Something like that. Banks don't talk, but junior clerks sometimes do."

"D'you want us to draw London?"

"I'll get the Yard to do that, sir. Meantime, I think I'll go and have a talk to Mr. Haycombe and see if I can dig anything out of the account before it was closed."

Poole got very little further information from the County and Colonial Bank. Mr. Haycombe, as before, was eager to help and had already, in imagination, got a halter round the unfortunate butler's neck. Poole had to drop some cold water on the little man's enthusiasm; he was probably discreet enough, but the detective was taking no risks.

James Moode's account with the County and Colonial Bank, covering a period of about twenty years, was modest enough. On the credit side were

his wages, fairly frequent cash payments possibly representing the gleanings from a big Tassart house-party, and dividends from a fair amount of War Loan bought out of savings accumulated during his war service. Altogether, Moode's income averaged from two hundred and fifty to three hundred pounds a year. On the other side were small weekly sums, doubtless for his household expenses, cheques drawn to tradesmen, and occasional lump sums in cash which might represent "luxury" expenditure—betting, holidays, or whatever form of "spree" appealed to Mr. Moode. The man had no children, and even if he had, the rate-and-taxpayer would have educated them for him.

The only at all interesting feature of the account was the fact that in the last four or five years' expenditure he had been more and more inclined to overlap income. The Bank had been obliged on more than one occasion to press for settlement of an overdraft—small but, with no security, not to be encouraged. Within the last twelve months these tendencies to overdraft had increased; more money was being drawn out to "self" than had previously been the case and there had not been a sufficient corresponding increase of income to meet them. Early in the year Mr. Haycombe had been obliged to send for Moode to discuss the situation with him. The butler had not appeared to be much worried, had gradually paid off the overdraft, and then quite suddenly closed his account. That was in March.

"And since then you don't know where he's been banking?" Poole asked Mr. Haycombe.

"No, no idea."

"It's nowhere in Windon," said the detective, "the other banks have been tried. He must have gone to London."

"Much more likely not to be banking anywhere," said Mr. Haycombe. "There's really no need for a man with that income to have a banking account. Lord Grayle used to pay him his wages by cheque, but I think it's quite likely you'll find he's been paying him in cash lately, or else Moode's been getting his cheques cashed by a tradesman. As a matter of fact, of course, I can tell you which it has been, because Lord Grayle's cheques would come to us for clearance."

Mr. Haycombe rang a bell and asked the clerk who answered it to bring him Lord Grayle's ledger. This showed that cheques in favour of Moode had been drawn by his employer as usual up to and including the first of the present month. The cheques were sent for and on examination proved to have been cashed for Moode by Crankham, the Windon butcher who enjoyed the custom of Tassart Hall.

"Probably cashed his War Loan Dividend Warrants for him, too," said the banker.

Poole thought it unnecessary at the moment to bother Mr. Crankham about this point; he saw nothing to be gained by the enquiry, and it would only start the butcher talking. The detective, therefore, made his way back to Headquarters and was lucky enough to arrive just as Scotland Yard rang through.

"We've found your van, Poole," said the voice of Chief Constable Thurston. "It belongs to a firm called Benborough, furniture dealers, small shop in Maddox Street. Phillips saw the driver. He was ordered out just before closing time on Saturday, told to sleep in Windon and deliver at Tassart at half-past six on Sunday morning. Do you want us to find out what it's all about?"

Poole thought for a minute before answering.

"I think, on the whole, sir, I'll come up and see Benborough myself, if you don't mind."

"Quite right, my lad; if you want a job done well, do it yourself. When'll you be up? Rather late to-day, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I may come up to-night and see them first thing in the morning. I'll come along to the Yard and report when I've seen them."

"Good; I'd like to hear how you're getting on. Sir Leward was asking about you this morning."

Superintendent Clewth thought the butler's closing of his bank account "very fishy," but Poole had no great difficulty in persuading him that it did not justify the man's arrest. Every effort must be made to trace the cause of the recent overdrafts; to discover whether Moode had been developing habits of life beyond his means or getting himself into trouble with bookmakers, moneylenders, and the like. The County Police were to see to this.

One factor that was worrying Poole was his inability to *prove* that the scopolamine had been given in the early morning tea. The premature clearance of the tray and the washing up of its contents had swept away all trace of the poison. But had it? The liquid remains would, of course, as he had said, have "gone down the sink." But what about the tea-leaves? What would become of them? Probably they went into an incinerator, or into a pig-tub from which they were cleared by some farmer or small-holder every day. It was worth looking into, though it was too much to hope that somebody's pig had developed symptoms of scopolamine poisoning!

There was another matter in respect of which Poole felt he was inadequately equipped for his task; he had no photograph of the suspected man. Locally that was of no great importance, but if any tracing farther afield had to be done—in connection with this furniture line, for instance—lack of photograph might be a serious handicap. How was he to get one? No doubt Mrs. Moode would have one, but to ask for it—or purloin it—would almost certainly put the butler on his guard. Who else would have one? Mrs. Spent?

Suddenly Poole remembered the groups and photographs of formal occasions at Tassart which hung on the walls of the housekeeper's sitting-room; it was just possible that there was a likeness of the butler which a clever photographer could extract from its surroundings and enlarge. It was worth trying, even though it meant another journey into Tassart that evening.

The detective thought that this time he would give his push bicycle a rest; in any case, he wanted to fetch his bag from the "Grey Dog." A police car ran him out to Tassart and was told to wait for him at the pub.

Mrs. Spent had finished her tea—her solitary, stately tea—when Poole arrived, but she instantly insisted on ordering a fresh supply. Tassart was hospitable in the matter of teas—or perhaps it was that some of its occupants were not adverse from the opportunity of a friendly talk with the young detective. Fortunately Poole was in no great hurry, so he dutifully led Annie Spent on to reminiscences of her young days and those of her adored mistress. The detective realised that, whatever her faults, Lady Grayle was capable of inspiring great affection in the hearts of those whom she herself loved—as she undoubtedly did her husband and her old nurse.

A closer inspection of the pictures on the walls, easily engineered in the course of Mrs. Spent's reminiscences, revealed a very fair portrait of the butler in the centre of a household group, taken on the occasion of Lord and Lady Grayle's silver wedding celebrations. He was a younger man then, by a dozen years or more, but Poole's 'clever photographer' would attend to that. The detective borrowed it for a day without any attempt at explanation, Mrs. Spent being obviously capable of believing that whatever Scotland Yard did was wise, inexplicable and confidential. He also, on the same terms, ascertained from her that the Tassart tea-leaves were not fed to pigs, but preserved for old-fashioned carpet sweeping purposes. This was—or at least might be—a piece of stupendous luck attributable entirely to the housekeeper's Victorian upbringing and her loathing of modern electrical fal-lals.

The tea-leaves were kept in jam jars under the charge of the head housemaid. Mrs. Spent did not think that Friday's supply would have been used yet, but was not certain. It was arranged that she should that evening impound the entire supply, either taking the head housemaid into her confidence and swearing her to secrecy or, better still, giving no explanation at all. Mrs. Spent would herself cover the jars and pack them in a box, while Poole fetched his car from the "Grey Dog" to take them away in.

"Just one more question, Mrs. Spent," said the detective as he prepared to depart. "Does anybody else ever go into the pantry except the butler and footmen?"

"The house-boy, George, does."

"Nobody else? none of the maidservants?"

Mrs. Spent pursed her lips. How ignorant of proper behaviour were the modern generation!

"Certainly not, Mr. Poole. Nobody goes into the pantry except the menservants—and of course, her Ladyship."

"Her Ladyship? Why does she go there?"

"One of her dogs—an Airedale, I think she calls it—sleeps there. She always takes the dogs for a run before breakfast, and I think she fetches Bob herself."

Lady Grayle. Oh, hell! thought Poole; had he got to take her back into the reckoning? Surely she, with her undoubted love of her husband and her heavy loss under his will, must be excluded.

"Did nobody else ever take the dogs? Lord Chessingham, for instance?"

"His Lordship never walks before breakfast. Her Ladyship does sometimes, but I've never heard of her taking the dogs. Of course, it's not impossible. I'm not up that early myself. Mr. Moode could tell you—or her Ladyship—Lady Chessingham—herself."

XII • Benborough

Poole caught an evening train to London and slept in his own lodgings in Battersea, treating himself to the last house of "City Lights" by way of relaxation. A more perfect antidote to sordid crime than this masterpiece of the immortal Charlie's it would be difficult to find, for though it contains

both crime and tragedy, the crime is romantic and the tragedy veiled by that divine humour which is the soul of human courage.

On the following morning, after leaving the jars of tea-leaves at Scotland Yard to be analysed, and the photograph to be manipulated, the detective presented himself at 'Benborough's' soon after nine a.m.—an hour at which he felt sure that he would not be interrupting the activities of ordinary customers. The shop in Maddox Street was a small one, consisting only of a shallow showroom in front and a minute office at the back. A few good pieces of antique furniture, some china and glass, a "curiosity" or two, were displayed in the shop, but to the detective's uninitiated eye the business did not appear large enough to pay a West End rent. A girl in the showroom took Poole's card into the office, from which emerged a slight, middle-aged man, well-dressed and of pleasant appearance.

"What can I do for you, Inspector?" asked the newcomer, flipping Poole's card against his thumbnail.

"Are you Mr. Benborough?" asked Poole.

His companion smiled.

"That's a trade name," he said. "My own is Rankel."

"Perhaps I might have a word with you in private, sir?"

"Certainly. Come into my office."

Mr. Rankel led the way into the tiny compartment—it was little more—at the back of the showroom. He held out a thin gold cigarette case.

"Will you smoke? No? I will if you don't mind."

Instinctively the detective watched his companion's hand as it lighted the cigarette; it was as steady as a rock.

"I understand that your firm has been doing some furniture repair work for Lord Grayle lately. Is that correct, sir?"

"Perfectly."

"And that your van collected a further consignment of furniture on Sunday morning?"

Mr. Rankel carefully tapped the ash from his cigarette into the neat silver tray before him, watching the operation with apparent absorption.

"Why are you asking these questions, Inspector?" he asked, looking up suddenly.

Poole had felt certain that this question would come and he had completely failed to invent a plausible answer.

“In view of his Lordship’s death we have been instructed to make some enquiries into his affairs,” he said heavily.

As an explanation, it was bald and unconvincing to a degree and the fact that Mr. Rankel accepted it without comment definitely strengthened Poole’s conviction that there was something here worth enquiring into.

“I see. Your information is quite correct; we got a telephone message just before we closed on Saturday asking us to deliver some furniture that we had already repaired and to collect some more that was ready to come.”

“A telephone message? May I ask whom the message was from?” This, of course, was news to Poole.

“I understand that it was from Lady Grayle.”

“Did she telephone herself?”

Mr. Rankel touched the bell beside him.

“Miss Lort,” he said to the girl who came in from the showroom, “do you happen to know who it was that telephoned about the furniture at Tassart on Saturday?”

“It was Lady Grayle, Mr. Rankel.”

“She was speaking herself?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Rankel, I understood it was the butler speaking for her.”

Rankel looked at the detective.

“That what you want to know?” he asked.

“Yes, sir, thank you.”

Rankel nodded to the girl in dismissal and rose from his chair. Poole remained seated, looking at his notebook, as if he had not noticed the other’s movement.

“Could you let me have a list of the furniture you have repaired for Lord Grayle, please, sir?” he asked.

Out of the corner of his eye he could have sworn that he saw his companion’s face stiffen. Mr. Rankel sat down again. There was a slight pause before he spoke.

“I haven’t been dealing with the matter myself,” he said. “My partner, Mr. Cristen, has . . .”

“Cristen?” Poole so far forgot his training as to allow his surprise to be apparent. “I beg your pardon, sir, but I thought Mr. Cristen was a member of the firm of Levish, Caine and Levish. But perhaps it’s a different gentleman.”

"Oh no; it's the same one," said Mr. Rankel smiling. "I understand how the mistake arose. Levish employed us to do the valuation of furniture for them, in just the same way that they employed Stensons—or rather a man from Stensons—to do the books. Mr. Cristen did the valuation of the furniture in conjunction with Levish's representative."

"Oh, I see."

Poole's jaw, metaphorically if not literally, had dropped. The whole affair was quite above board, after all, then. The bottom had fallen out of his theory. When he found that the van had not come from Levish, Caine and Levish, he had assumed that the furniture sent off on Sunday had had nothing to do with them, or rather with the Mr. Cristen employed by them, whom Miss Hollen had told him about. But these people had been engaged by Lord Grayle himself, so that it must be all in order.

"And your Mr. Cristen advised Lord Grayle to have the furniture repaired?" asked Poole disconsolately.

"Yes, that is so. You see, Inspector, we aren't only furniture dealers; we do a great deal of valuation work as well—for probate, insurance and so on. Naturally that brings us in touch with a great deal of fine stuff, still in its original homes, stuff very difficult to get in touch with in the ordinary way. In that way we're often able to pick up a valuable piece for some client who is looking out for such a thing; probably the owner wants to make a little money—perhaps to meet a heavy taxation or death duty demand—and is only too glad to find a good market for what he has got to realise. We act as go-betweens and merely take a commission. We sold a piece of furniture—a walnut tallboy—for Lord Grayle in just that way, to a client in America. I can show you the transaction in our books if it would interest you."

It would, and did, interest the detective. Mr. Rankel, with the help of Miss Lort, turned up a file of letters in which 'Benborough' had first told Lord Grayle that they knew of a client in America who was looking for just such a walnut tallboy ("an exquisite piece," said Mr. Rankel) as had just come up from Tassart for repair; would Lord Grayle consider parting with it? Lord Grayle's reply indicated that he might, but only for a fancy price. 'Benborough' thought there would be no difficulty about that; Mr. Cristen had valued it at £270, and they thought their client would not boggle at the price; their own commission would be ten per cent. Lord Grayle had accepted, the client in America had agreed with delight, and a cheque for £243 had gone to his Lordship only two days ago.

"Of course, in addition to that," said Mr. Rankel, "we pick up a fair amount of work in the repair line. I'm bound to admit that some of our

competitors are rather critical of us in that respect. They say that we take advantage of our position as valuers to tout for work as repairers, and it's perfectly true that we do. But why shouldn't we? It's work that ought to be done; even if we did no repair work ourselves we should recommend its being done; so why shouldn't we be the ones to do it? Still, I'll admit that we're a little sensitive about it; if ever we were to get a name for trickery over it—for 'making' work for our repair shops by our valuer's recommendations, we should lose our custom at once—both as repairers and as valuers. That's why I was a little nervous when you first started questioning me, Inspector; a reputation is a very delicate article; once let a breath of suspicion touch it and it will disappear like mist before a wind. A case in the Courts, even if we came out of it with flying colours, would be disastrous for us. For that reason, Inspector, now that you are satisfied of our *bona fides*, I hope that you will allow our conversation to remain confidential."

Mr. Rankel had delivered this considerable speech with much earnestness, and Poole was impressed by it.

These people were treading on delicate ground, though there was nothing dishonest or even dishonourable about their methods. Obviously if it was once said, with any show of justice, that they—as valuers—had recommended for repair anything that really did not need repair, their good faith as valuers would be blown and all that lucrative side of their work lost. This, no doubt, accounted for the nervousness which the detective had observed in Mr. Rankel at the beginning of their interview.

Poole renewed his request, however, for a list of the furniture which had been repaired by 'Benborough' for Lord Grayle, showing which articles had been returned and which were still in hand. Mr. Rankel promised to have this list prepared at once; he would have to go through their papers and possibly consult his partner, who was absent for the day.

Poole made his way to Scotland Yard in anything but a cheerful frame of mind. Without realising it, he had come to rely a great deal on this slender thread of enquiry, hoping that it would lead him to some dishonest scheme of Moode's which might provide a motive for the murder that he was trying to pin on to the man. Now the thread had snapped, and there was nothing to put in its place; the closing of the account at the County and Colonial Bank was more likely to be an act of temper, resulting from the manager's warning, than any subtle act of intrigue. No, he had nothing now against Moode at all.

On this latter point, however, Chief Constable Thurston did not agree with him.

"Don't you get downhearted, my lad," said that veteran investigator, "just because you've had one set-back. It isn't likely that a man would close a twenty-year-old banking account just on a whim. Follow it up; keep on following it up. Find out where he spends his afternoons off, what he does with his spare cash, who his friends are, where he goes for his holidays. You'll drop on something in time, mark my words."

All this Poole was already doing, or rather, he had set it in train by the agency of the County Police, but he was glad to have the encouragement.

"And about the furniture," went on the Chief Constable; "these Benborough people have given you a satisfactory explanation so far as they're concerned, but what about the butler? Why did he tell you the van had broken down? He must explain that."

"I'd forgotten that for the moment, sir," said Poole. "But if I ask him it'll give the show away—let him see I'm suspicious."

"Can't be helped," replied Thurston. "You've got to show your hand some time. You've gone along so far without letting him see you suspect him, and to do that you've had to question other people who don't know, instead of him, who probably does. It's a good method if it works, but if it doesn't you've got to chuck it and try the direct line. What's the alternative? Is there one?"

"Nothing at all tangible that I can see, sir. Lady Grayle is in the habit of going into the pantry in the early morning and so could have access to the teapot, but as the teapot is washed out—'warmed'—every morning by the butler when he makes the tea, I don't see how that helps. Nor do I see how anyone could poison the tea itself, the milk or the sugar."

Poole explained to the Chief Constable, the arguments he had used to himself when considering these possibilities.

"Besides, sir, motive; where in the world is Lady Grayle's motive for killing her husband? It goes plumb contrary to everything I've heard of her."

"Yes, it does seem unlikely. What about the daughter-in-law?"

"Lady Chessingham? Well, according to the secretary—Lady Grayle's secretary—she's capable of it, and there is a motive. They say she's ambitious and I gather she dislikes Lady Grayle and thinks she was blueing the family fortunes. And, of course, she's got the knowledge—the Science degree. I don't know whether that would make it easier for her to get the drug?"

"Why don't you go round and see Sir Hulbert? He might give you a tip or two on that. You can explain to him about those tea-leaves, too, though I don't suppose he's had time to do anything about them yet." The Chief Constable pulled some papers towards him; the 'conference' was at an end. "And don't you get downhearted, my lad," were his parting words of advice.

Poole was lucky enough to find the Home Office analyst comparatively disengaged; that is to say, he was able to leave the work he was engaged on in order to attend to the detective. The latter described what he had heard about Lady Chessingham's career at Cambridge and asked whether her work and achievements there would in any way make it easier for her to get—or perhaps prepare—the scopolamine.

"I don't see how it could," said Sir Hulbert, "unless she turned her B.Sc. into a D.Sc., in which case some chemist might have taken her for a doctor of medicine and supplied her with the stuff. But are you sure you aren't looking rather far afield for this scopolamine? From what I've heard, you seem to have overlooked the obvious place all along."

"Really, sir; what's that?"

"Why, that doctor fellow, of course. Why d'you go hunting all over England when you've got it half a mile from the front door."

"Would a local doctor—in a country practice—keep a drug like scopolamine, sir?"

"Of course, he would—just the very man who would—for his maternity work. It's what they use for 'Twilight Sleep,' as it's the fashion to call it. Always liable to be wanted at short notice; must have a supply handy."

"Should we be able to trace from his books that so small an amount had been taken?"

Sir Hulbert rubbed his chin.

"No, probably not," he said. "Precious few doctors keep any record of their drugs at all; they're not like chemists. Still, you might try."

"But there's absolutely nothing pointing at him, sir, apart from the fact that he supplied the di-dial."

"Well, and isn't that something? And what about this combination of two drugs? Who's likely to have thought of that except a doctor—or a chemist? It's devilish unusual—and ingenious. He's got the knowledge; he's got the stuff; he knows Lord Grayle's habits. He may even, for all you know, have given Lord Grayle a capsule of this stuff to take as an emergency measure if he was very bad—and told him not to tell anyone about it—and to be sure

and take it within two hours of the di-dial. All sorts of devilry he may have been up to."

"But why, sir, why?"

"Don't ask *me* to tell you that, Inspector. I know nothing about the circumstances of the case, but there are all the stock reasons: dead man wrongs doctor's daughter—or wife, dead man did doctor dirty trick in Australia eighty years ago, doctor wants dead man's wife for himself, doctor dislikes dead man's taste in neckties—you can give me six and eightpence and take your choice."

Poole laughed.

"Unfortunately none of those seems to apply, sir; still, I'll try and find out about that scopolamine."

"It doesn't necessarily follow, you know, Inspector, that because the poison came from the doctor's cupboard, the doctor *knew* it was from his cupboard. Doctors aren't always very careful about their keys; it's conceivable that somebody else found their way into that cupboard—though I admit it's not very likely—and it would almost certainly have to be somebody with a knowledge of drugs."

The detective began to feel rather appalled at the number of alternative lines of investigation he would now have to follow in his search for a new trail, but he thanked Sir Hulbert for his help, and after hearing that he had not yet had time to analyse the tea-leaves, took his leave. There was nothing more to keep him in London for the moment, so he had an early lunch and caught the twelve-forty-five p.m. train to Windon. After a short talk with Superintendent Clewth, he got out his (borrowed) bicycle and made his way to Tassart.

Poole wanted to get a satisfactory answer out of the butler about the van's "breakdown" before he started off on any fresh lines of investigation. He felt that he must take Chief Constable Thurston's advice in that matter, at any rate, though he did not intend to say anything about the scopolamine in the tea yet if it could be avoided.

When he got to Tassart, however, the detective found that he could not have chosen a more unfortunate time for his further activities in the house. Lord Grayle had been buried that afternoon, and the whole place was still swarming with relations and friends, and the weird assortment of camp-followers who spring from the ground on these occasions. No doubt the will was being read and the house would not settle down for hours yet. It would be beyond the limits of decency for a detective to pursue his investigations

in the centre of such a setting; besides, the butler was fully engaged in attending to the wants of the occasion. There was nothing for it but to wait patiently.

One bit of luck Poole did have. He was doing his waiting with a pipe and a book in a far but sunny corner of the park, when Miss Hollen appeared with the Tassart dogs. The poor things had been shut up all day, she explained, and Lady Grayle had asked her to take them for a run. The pack thoroughly enjoyed a rabbit hunt among the bracken while their 'whipper-in' and the detective sat on a fallen tree-trunk and forgot them.

After the hunt had lasted about half an hour and the rabbit, tired of the game, had betaken himself to his hole, the detective remembered that he had a question to ask Lord Grayle's secretary. From the answer he gathered that Miss Hollen had nothing to do with the arrangements for the furniture repairing, that she was herself under the impression that Mr. Cristen was a member of the firm of Levish, Caine and Levish, and that she had never heard of 'Benborough.' But then, as she had not had anything to do with Mr. Cristen's later activities there was no reason why she should have. In reply to Poole's enquiry, she felt fairly certain that she would be able to check the list of furniture repaired which 'Benborough' were going to supply, as she had the inventory and knew all the valuable furniture in the house fairly well.

Miss Hollen thought that the house would be clear of invasion by now, and as there was some risk of the butler going off duty till dinner-time and possibly disappearing from view, Poole accompanied the pack back across the park to the house. Moode was, in fact, just leaving the back door in a short jacket and bowler hat when they arrived at the kennels. With a muttered farewell, Poole detached himself and caught up the butler on his way down the drive. For a time he talked to the man, as they walked, about the day's ceremony, the butler taking a gloomy pride in retailing a list of the celebrities who had attended it. When they were about half-way across the park Poole thought it time to open his attack.

"By the way, Moode," he said, "I can't quite understand about that furniture van that was here on Sunday; I understood you to tell me that it started early on Saturday and had a breakdown?"

The butler looked calmly at his companion.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Benborough tell me that there was no breakdown and that the van was ordered to deliver on Sunday morning in compliance with a telephone message sent by you."

Moode's inexpressive face remained—inexpressive. Then a slow smile spread across it.

"There's not much escapes you gentlemen of the police," he said.

Poole looked at him enquiringly, but the man did not apparently intend to enlarge on this cryptic remark.

"I want an explanation, please," said the detective, a note of authority in his voice.

"Of why I told you that the van had a breakdown, sir? Yes, I suppose it does demand an explanation now you've found out that it wasn't true. Well, sir, it only shows that deception never pays in the long run. My old mother used to din that into me when I was a lad, and I've often had occasion to think how right she was. But when it's your employer's interest that's at stake, sir, you can't always follow your own conscience."

"I think you'd better explain what you mean by that!" said the detective.

"Yes, sir. It was like this. On Saturday morning her Ladyship asked me whether Benborough had sent back a cabinet—an amboyna cabinet—and some other pieces they'd been repairing. She said that Lord Chessingham had been enquiring about it. I told her it hadn't come back yet, so she said I was to ring up and find out about it. I rang up and Benborough told me the stuff was all ready to come down. I asked them to send it off at once as her Ladyship wanted it. Of course they said it was Saturday and in any case they couldn't get it down before evening, but to oblige her Ladyship they agreed to send it down that day and, as it wouldn't be convenient to carry furniture about in the evening when we were getting ready for dinner—in our evening clothes and so on—they agreed that the van should spend the night in Windon and deliver on Sunday morning. And that's what it did, sir."

"Yes, so I saw," said Poole drily, "but you haven't explained why you told me the van had broken down."

"Oh, that, sir? That was because I was afraid her Ladyship might get into trouble with Somerset House."

"Somerset House?"

"Yes, sir. You see, as the van was there I sent back in it the other pieces of furniture that were waiting to be repaired. Technically, of course, that is a breach of the laws of probate; no property should be removed from the house between death and the proving of the will. When you asked me about that van—'breaking the Sabbath,' you called it, sir—it at once came into my mind that you would think it very odd that we should arrange for the furniture to be collected on a Sunday morning—very suspicious, even; you

might think that we were trying to dodge the probate valuation in some way; so I just said that about the breakdown so that it wouldn't seem so odd. I quite see now that it was a mistake to try and deceive you, sir."

Poole took no notice of this butter.

"Did Lady Grayle know about this furniture going away?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir, she said it had better go. I didn't raise the probate question with her, sir, and no doubt it never entered her mind, but in law she would be responsible."

"I see. And that is all there is to it?"

"That is all, sir," said Moode, calmly meeting the detective's eyes.

At the park gates the butler turned away towards his cottage, while Poole made for the "Grey Dog" and his bicycle.

"That man," he thought to himself, "is either a very efficient and faithful servant, or else the most specious and fluent liar I've ever met."

XIII • Two Moodes

Superintendent Clewth listened to Poole's account of his conversation with the butler with an interest amounting to enthusiasm, but the Public Analyst's theories and suggestions about Dr. Calladine left him quite cold.

"What d'you want to go chasing after a hare like that for?" he grumbled. "We know all about the doctor; he's a funny-tempered fellow, perhaps, but straight as you could want. He's been friends with his Lordship for twenty years or more; why should he suddenly want to do him in? Fantastic idea, I call it. Of course, we'll do what you want about it—go through his poisons, look up his movements and all that—but it's waste of time—and rather hard on the doctor."

Poole was rather of the same way of thinking himself, but he felt that his progress up to date had been so meagre that he must cast about a bit.

"Now this butler fellow," went on the Superintendent, warming to his theme, "he's a prime liar whatever way you look at it. Even if you believe that explanation he gave you—which I don't—he lied about the van breaking down, on his own admission. Laws of probate indeed! He's got some reason of his own for that lie, mark my words, and we've got to find out what it is. I've got a bit of news about him too."

Poole pricked up his ears.

"Have you, sir; what's that?"

"We've got an idea that he puts in a good deal of his spare time at Paslow. Our man at Worle—that's on the main road to Paslow—says he goes through there pretty often on a motor-bike. Hever helped him one day with a puncture and they got talking and so Hever found out who he was. That's four or five months ago, and he says he's seen him pass on an average twice a week since then."

Paslow was the county town of Chassex, which marched with Brackenshire on the north. It lay some forty miles from Windon, but only thirty-five from Tassart, so that a motor-bicycle would do the journey in little over an hour.

"You've no idea what he does in Paslow, sir?"

"No, we haven't traced him there yet. I got on to Mr. Felton, the Chief Constable there—it's a Borough Constabulary—and he's going to make enquiries. I thought it would be worth while looking up the banks, in case he's got an account going there now. Of course, if he's up to monkey tricks of any kind, he may not have got it in his own name. What we really want is a good photograph of him to take round; I wonder how we can get that."

"I've seen about that, sir," said Poole modestly. "They're having some copies made at the Yard; I hope to get them down to-morrow."

Clewth was naturally anxious to hear about the photograph, and when the detective had told him, he laughed.

"You young fellows have the pull over us," he said, "wheedling your way round the hearts of the ladies."

Poole felt slightly uncomfortable at this description of his methods. To "wheedle" a man's life out of an old woman was not a pleasant idea. He changed the subject.

"I think I'll run over to Paslow to-morrow, sir, and see Mr. Felton; perhaps you'd give me a note to him."

"You'll draw the banks yourself?"

"I think so, sir, though I've not much hope from them; you see, he's been cashing his cheques in Windon."

So it was arranged, and on the following morning Poole borrowed a motor-bicycle (the train connection between the two towns was a whole day affair) and made his way over to Paslow. He was armed with half a dozen copies of an excellent representation of Moode. The Scotland Yard

photographer had done his work admirably, detaching the figure of the butler from its surroundings, touching up the face (under directions left by Poole) so as to give the effect of a dozen added years, and mounting his photographs on cabinet-size cardboards, so that the effect was almost that of a studio photograph.

But it was not only the photographs that the detective-constable had brought down from the Yard that morning. In Poole's pocket was Sir Hulbert's report upon the tea-leaves extracted by the faithful (and wheedled?) Mrs. Spent from the head housemaid's cupboard. The analyst had found traces of an appreciable quantity of scopolamine in one of the jars; not only that, but he had been able, with the help of a tea expert specially called in, to isolate the leaves impregnated with the drug and identify them as the Indian blend favoured by Lord Grayle. This report provided Poole with the definite and irrefutable evidence that he wanted—evidence that the scopolamine had been administered to Lord Grayle in his early tea. It was a link in the chain of evidence which at one time he thought he would have no chance of forging; and one which would go a long way towards satisfying the jury of the prisoner's guilt.

The prisoner? Yes, but who was the prisoner going to be? He had got to prove whose hand had put that poison into the tea-leaves—the leaves or the pot. Well, he was not without hope that his morning's work would help in that direction.

But in that hope he was to be disappointed. Armed with his photographs and a further note of introduction from the Chief Constable of Paslow, Poole went the round of the banks in that thriving borough, and drew them blank. Managers were helpful and managers were "difficult"; cashiers and clerks—shown photographs in strictest confidence—were intelligent or dense; it made no difference; in not one bank was Moode's name on the books nor his appearance recognised by the cashiers.

Next, with a skill and patience rarely found outside the personnel of the Criminal Investigation Department, the detective went the round of the hotels, the billiard saloons, the cinemas, using his judgment in each case as to whether his questions should be direct or roundabout, whether to be himself the detective or the "old friend," whether to show his photograph or rely on description, whether to wheedle (how he hated that word of the Superintendent's, but it would keep recurring to him) or to browbeat; whatever his methods, however infinite his patience and resource, no glimmer of light came to cheer him on his way, no trace of Moode could be found, no hint of where to try next.

From ten a.m. till nearly three p.m. he worked, without a rest and without refreshment; then suddenly realised that he was stale, that his luck was out, his keenness dwindling. Wisely he gave it up. Returning to the Headquarters of the Paslow Constabulary he left all but one of his photographs with the Chief Constable, with the request that they should be shown, quietly and confidentially, to every constable and officer in the force, each of whom was to be asked to keep a sharp look-out for the man, and report anything seen of him or his friends. Naturally if any officer already had knowledge of the subject of the photograph he would report it at once.

Gloomily Poole sputtered back towards Windon, stopping on the way to have a word with Police-Constable Hever in Worle—the Brackenshire village on the borders of Chassex. Hever was engaged, when Poole arrived, in taking particulars of a fowl murder case in the village street, but when a couple of pages of heavily stubbed notes had gone down on this engrossing subject, he was able to give his undivided attention to the detective. Yes, he remembered Moode well, as he had reported to Headquarters, saw him go through Worle nearly every Wednesday and most Sundays. Sometimes he came back within a couple of hours, sometimes Hever had not noticed him come back at all, but then, of course, he was not in Worle all the time himself; Poole gathered the impression that Police-Constable Hever's beat was both extensive and important.

Well, there was nothing in all this—nothing that he did not already know. Bidding good-day to the stolid constable Poole slipped his goggles back on to his face and started to wheel his machine out into the road again. As he did so a motor-cyclist, similarly garbed to himself, came quickly down the village street from the opposite direction. The rider's face was goggled, but something about the set of his shoulders caught Poole's attention and he stared after him, then turned enquiringly to the constable. Hever, with a perfectly expressionless face, was watching the machine pass beyond the limit of his authority, over the border into Chassex.

"Nearly had old Mrs. Finch's Winedot," he remarked placidly.

"Was that the man?" asked Poole quickly.

"Eh?"

"Was that the man—Moode?"

"Ah, that was him."

With an oath of impatience Poole swung his heavy machine round in the direction from which he had come and kicked it into life. The opportunity was too good to be missed; what a piece of luck that his face had been

masked when Moode passed; it was a hundred to one against the man having recognised him in this unusual kit. Poole's machine was a powerful one, used for motor patrol work, and within a few minutes he had regained sight of his quarry. Keeping at a respectful distance he followed for mile after mile till, as they approached the outskirts of Paslow, he thought it wiser to close up. He was up within a couple of hundred yards, and the first houses were in sight, when with a loud bang the tyre of his front wheel burst and the machine itself lurched dangerously toward the ditch. The detective pulled up, looked hurriedly around him for following car or telephone, saw there was none, and resigned himself to the inevitable. Inspection of the tyre and road showed that a clean cut from a broken bottle fragment had done the damage and spoilt the chance of a lifetime.

Wheeling his machine to the nearest garage (fortunately not many hundred yards away) Poole guardedly telephoned to Paslow police headquarters that the wanted man was in the town, giving a description of his kit and the number of his bicycle. Then, a new tyre and tube on his wheel, he set off once more on his return journey. At first he had contemplated continuing the search in Paslow himself, but a moment's thought had shown him that the proverbial needle would have been no less easy to find than one man in this, to him, unknown town. Besides, another thought had occurred to him; perhaps, after all, he could make use of this misfortune.

Chief Constable Thurston had urged him to take a bolder line, to come out into the open with his questions, even if it meant putting the butler on his guard. Although he was not yet prepared to follow this advice all the way, Poole thought he would take one step that he had long contemplated—interview the butler's wife. No better opportunity would present itself; the butler himself was away and Poole would be able to approach Mrs. Moode under guise of enquiring for her husband. Getting his machine on the move again Poole quickly covered the thirty-five miles between himself and Tassart.

Before going to Moode's cottage, Poole deposited his motor-bicycle at the "Grey Dog" and removed his overalls and goggles; it would be unwise to let Mrs. Moode see him in that kit; she would probably pass it on to her husband, who might then realise who it was that had followed him into Paslow that afternoon. The detective then walked quickly across the park to Tassart Hall and, asking for Miss Hollen, gave her the list of furniture repaired, or repairing, which had reached him from 'Benborough' that morning. The girl promised to check it—to see that the items down on the list as having been returned really had been returned, and as far as possible

to discover, with the help of the new inventory, whether any valuable pieces had left the house which did not appear on Benborough's list.

The detective had already noted that the walnut tallboy, the sale of which had been described to him by Mr. Rankel, had been marked as 'sold' on the Benborough list. Miss Hollen reported that the cheque for it had now arrived, and Poole realised that if that had happened before he first became interested in the furniture, Miss Hollen would have known all about Benborough and he would not have wasted so much time banging at an open door.

Poole thought of asking Lady Grayle to check the butler's story of the telephone message on Saturday, but learnt from Irene Hollen that she had gone to Melton Mowbray for the day, to see a hunter that was still there, under charge of the vet., with bad feet. That, then, must wait till to-morrow.

Hearing that there was a short cut to Moode's cottage which avoided the village, Poole took it, and in spite of the nature of his errand, enjoyed the peaceful loveliness of the scene through which he passed. His way led at first along a grass track which crossed the park, a track rough with old ant-hills and not innocent of an occasional rabbit hole, but with a mossy surface that gave like thick-piled carpet under his feet. The heavy scent of bracken filled the warm afternoon air, pigeons crooned throatily on oak and lime, young rabbits barely bothered to interrupt their game to let the stranger pass. Poole found it difficult to believe—hateful to believe—that he was on an errand of death.

Leaving the park, his track ran through a little coppice of nut and oak, alive with birds and carpeted with forget-me-nots, late primroses and St. John's wort; on the far side its sunny fence was thick with wild flowers—vetch, dog-rose, convolvulus, and a flower of royal colours—purple and gold—whose name Poole could not remember. It was with a sigh of regret that the detective pushed open the little gate of the butler's cottage garden.

The door was opened to his knock by a woman of rather striking appearance. Mrs. Moode was about forty-five years old and must in her youth have been very good-looking; even now, with her dark smooth hair, well-shaped nose, and neat figure, she retained a semblance of beauty, but her mouth was thin and hard, her skin colourless, and her eyes—lovely in themselves—had a look of suspicion and sullenness that was disfiguring. It was easy to see that this woman's life was not a happy one, but whether the origin of her unhappiness was attributable to herself or to her husband remained uncertain.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Moode,” said the detective, raising his cap. “I heard it was your husband’s afternoon off, and as I wanted a word with him I thought I’d come this way. Is he about?”

“My husband’s not here this afternoon,” said the woman quietly.

“Oh, I’m sorry not to find him, but another time will do. You’ve got a nice house, Mrs. Moode; may I come in a minute? It was hot walking across the park.”

Mrs. Moode hesitated, and unconsciously Poole put on his pleasant smile—then wished he could tear it off his face, as he saw the woman’s own face soften and knew that he was again playing a Judas trick.

“Would you like a glass of something, sir?” she asked, showing him into a small but tidy parlour.

After his hard day’s work Poole really was extremely tired and thirsty, but he felt he could not accept hospitality in this house.

“I’ve just had a drink at the ‘Grey Dog,’ thank you, Mrs. Moode,” he said. “I’ve got a room there, so I’m not law-breaking,” he added with a laugh.

Mrs. Moode looked at him uncertainly. Possibly she was ignorant of the Licensing Laws, but it was not worth bothering about.

“Perhaps I should explain who I am,” said Poole. “I’m Detective-Inspector Poole, of New Scotland Yard. I’m down here investigating the circumstances of Lord Grayle’s death.”

The detective thought that this information was a surprise, perhaps even a shock, to Mrs. Moode. She made no comment, but her eyes became more watchful than ever.

“I’m afraid his death will be a great loss to you. I’m sure he was a good master.”

“So Moode always said.”

“Your husband told me that Lord Grayle had been very generous in his will.” This was untrue; it was the groom, Habble, who had given this information. To his surprise, Poole saw the woman’s eyes flash.

“I suppose ten shillings a week is a generous pension after a life’s work,” she said.

That look, even if not her remark, made the detective wonder whether Moode’s eccentric ideas of domesticity (as described by Police-Constable Bunton) might not be comprehensible. Poole thought he would not discuss the point.

"Will your husband remain in service, do you think, Mrs. Moode?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"I expect you'd be glad if he retired now; it must be very lonely living so much by yourself, especially at night."

Poole was definitely ashamed of this leading question, but he felt it his duty to draw Mrs. Moode out. He was certainly successful up to a point; a look of almost physical pain shot across the woman's face at this reference to her husband's neglect—if not actual desertion. For a moment her eyes dropped; then she raised her head defiantly and stared her tormentor in the eyes.

"He sleeps up at the Hall now because he was asked to—because his Lordship was always getting ill and might want help," she declared.

"I see. That's very kind of your husband—and of you to let him do it."

"It's no question of kindness; we servants have to do what's wanted or lose our job. There's no consideration of our feelings!"

Poole doubted this, but was not inclined to argue about it. "Your husband's a great motor-cyclist, isn't he, Mrs. Moode?" he asked.

"He's generally got a craze of some kind," replied Mrs. Moode glumly.

"Does he go anywhere particular?"

"He goes to his shooting now," she said.

"Shooting?"

"Yes, clay-pigeon shooting; he's got a craze for that now. Goes off twice a week, Sundays included. It's shameful to have such a thing going on on the Sunday, to my way of thinking. Takes all his money, too."

This evidently was a genuine grievance; it was also rather a shock to Poole. If it could be proved that that was where the butler was spending his time and money it would be difficult to find in it a motive for murder. Betting on clay-pigeons could hardly run him into serious debt.

"Where does he do this shooting, Mrs. Moode?"

"Somewhere Paslow way, I believe."

There it was. Probably another of his 'avenues of approach' ending in a *cul-de-sac*. There should be no difficulty in checking this story. Poole felt that little would be gained by continuing the conversation. He rose to his feet.

"I'm sorry your husband's wasting his time and money over a thing like that," he said. "I suppose that means he keeps you short?" What gross

impertinence, thought Poole.

"I didn't say so," flashed the woman.

On his way out, Poole stopped to admire some examples of fretwork and poker work hanging in the little hall.

"Your husband's work?" he enquired.

"He's always messing about with something," was the unappreciative reply.

"I expect he makes a bit of a mess in the house with his woodwork, eh?"

"He doesn't do it in the house; he's got a shed—workshop he calls it—he built it himself. That's it by the wicket gate you came in by."

Poole said good-bye to Mrs. Moode and heard the door shut firmly behind him as he turned down the path. As he passed the well-built hut he noticed that the door was ajar. With instinctive curiosity he pushed it open and looked in. Inside, the place was even roomier and lighter than he had realised. There was a good-sized carpenter's bench under one window, with a small lathe beside it. Under the end window was a table covered with jars and bottles, a small Primus stove, and other odds and ends. On a shelf were other bottles containing snakes and frogs in spirits of wine, whilst others appeared to contain flowers and ferns. Bunches of withered herbage hung from nails on the wall, side by side with animals' skins in process of curing. On a bookshelf lay an assortment of obviously second-hand technical manuals: Gross's *Carpentry and Joinery*, Pitt on *Internal Combustion Engines*, a textbook on taxidermy, Roote's *Herbalism*. Evidently the man was a hobby-rider of violent enthusiasms and varied tastes.

Marks on the floor showed that in here the butler kept his motor-bicycle; the hut was a valuable addition to the cramped space of a small cottage. Poole did not care to stay longer, in case the butler should return; he pulled the door to, as he had found it, and was about to open the wicket gate when he noticed a glove—a woman's glove—lying beside it. Evidently Mrs. Moode's, he thought, and as the loss of a glove is an annoyance with which everyone can sympathise, he picked it up and carried it back to the house.

As he passed the parlour window, he caught a glimpse, through the open door on the other side of the room, of Mrs. Moode standing in the kitchen. She was not looking towards him, but probably out of the kitchen window at right angles to him. The light shining on her face revealed it so clearly that the detective instinctively stopped to look. What he saw sent a thrill of excitement and horror through him. Never had he seen such a play of passions on a human face before: fear, fury, remorse, and a sort of gloating

joy more horrible than all the rest chased one another across that white, almost immobile face.

Forgetting the glove, Poole turned on his heel and almost tip-toed away.

"My God!" he said to himself, "I wouldn't be that woman's husband for all the money—and furniture—in Tassart!"

XIV • Mr. George Mellett

As he walked away from Moode's cottage the detective wondered whether he had done any good by this unpleasant interview with the butler's wife. He had learnt nothing in the way of direct evidence, except that Mrs. Moode attributed her husband's visits to Paslow to his present passion for clay-pigeon shooting—not at all a helpful piece of information. He hardly knew what he had expected, or hoped, to learn from this visit, except that it was bound to add to his knowledge of the 'background' of his case. In that respect it had certainly not been fruitless. Mrs. Moode was evidently a woman of strong character and bitter feelings; she was of the type to drive a man, a normally respectable man, into irregular and perhaps expensive habits just to get away from her bitter tongue and make for himself a little happiness in life.

Alternatively, thought Poole, if her husband was a villain—a schemer—she would encourage him, screw up his courage with taunts, lend her quicker brain to his schemes.

So much for her abstract possibilities, but what was the interpretation of the very definite emotions which he had seen playing across the woman's face in that last unexpected view of her? Fear; fear for what the detective might have learned from her, dangerous to her husband? Fury; with the detective for his prying impertinence? with Lord Grayle, for her husband's enforced desertion of her? with her husband himself, for that desertion—perhaps a worse desertion? Was that the explanation of Moode's constant absence, of his visits to Paslow, of need for money? Some intrigue? Some 'second establishment'? Until he could trace the man's movements in Paslow, it would be difficult to find out, but the idea suggested a definite line of investigation.

What else had he read in Mrs. Moode's face in that moment of unconscious self-revelation? Remorse, he had thought. Remorse for what?

that she had talked about her husband at all, had given the police any possible hint about his life? And that most horrible look of all, that look of gloating joy—difficult to describe, but unmistakable. Was it the reverse of the previous thought that had coursed through her mind, reflecting its passage in her face? The reverse of remorse for what she had told? gladness that she had perhaps put the police on the track of the man who had slighted, had deserted her?

All this, Poole realised, was pure speculation on his part; and not agreeable speculation either. He hated the part that he had played himself, and he knew that he had gone very near the boundary of what was allowable in the collection of evidence. The case against Moode was not yet so clear that he would himself have to be 'cautioned' before he was questioned; if it had been, then there could be no questioning of his wife (who, if he were tried, could not be made to give evidence against him) without an equally definite caution. Under the circumstances he thought he had done enough—and not too much—in telling her that he was a detective-officer, investigating the circumstances surrounding Lord Grayle's death. He had not trapped her into thoughtless talk; if she had anything to hide, she had had the chance to hide it. But it had not been an agreeable part for him to play.

For the rest, he had learnt the ostensible reason for the butler's sleeping at Tassart Hall instead of at his own home, he had gathered a possible feeling of dissatisfaction with Lord Grayle's treatment of the butler, and he had seen something of the latter's varied interests in the hobby line.

Poole had got so far in his meditations when he reached the little coppice which lay between the butler's cottage and the Hall. Unconsciously, he had taken the same way back that he had come, though there was a much shorter route from the cottage to the village. As Poole approached the little wood, he noticed again the riot of wild flowers in its hedgerow, the pinks, the whites, the purple and gold.

That purple and gold flower; what was its name? It seemed to recall some childhood's inhibition—some early dread. It had a sinister look, a sinister memory attached to it. Had it not, perhaps, a sinister name? Something to do with death? deadly . . . ? ah, that was it, of course: 'Deadly nightshade.' He remembered his nurse warning him against it, with the exaggerated horrors of her kind, when he had wanted to pick a bunch to put in his mother's room. From that time, he remembered, the flower had frightened him—almost physically. At night especially he had thought of it as holding some special menace for him; he had even associated it, in some

childish way, with the night-light that burned in his room. ‘Deadly nightshade.’

As he thought of it, the idea gradually formed in Poole’s mind that he had seen the name more recently, in connection with some other name, perhaps in a book. What book could it have been? He had hardly looked at a book for months, except technical books connected with his work. Surely that was it? The name had been connected with some technical subject; it had struck him, though subconsciously, as having a familiar—almost a domestic—association.

‘Belladonna!’

That was it! Poole felt a little shiver of excitement pass through him. If he had been a hound he would have whimpered, at this first whiff of scent.

It was in that book of Medical Jurisprudence lent him by Major Faide that he had seen the names connected: ‘Belladonna (deadly nightshade),’ or something like that. And Belladonna, if he remembered rightly, was one of the Atropine-producing plants that came in the chapter called ‘Vegetable Poisons.’

What was it that Sir Hulbert had said about them?

Something about the alkaloids peculiar to that group being present in common country plants and so get-at-able without going to a chemist.

Was it possible—was it conceivable that this was where the poison had come from that had killed Lord Grayle? here on the edge of his very park?

He must ask the pathologist what really were the chances of a layman extracting poison from a hedgerow plant, however deadly. Surely it must take expert knowledge to do that?

Automatically, Poole’s mind slipped back to the ‘workshop’ which he had just seen—the bottles and jars, the Primus stove, the bunches of herbs hanging from the wall—yes, and there had been a book on herbalism. Had herbalism anything to do with toxicology?

Poole did not know what apparatus would be required to extract the poisonous essences from plants; he thought of gas—a Bunsen burner perhaps; test tubes—he had seen nothing of them. Some means of washing out the vessels used, getting rid of the waste fluids; was it imagination, or had he seen a sink in one corner of the hut? If so, it certainly could not have had water laid on to it.

In any case, the sooner he got back to Headquarters and sent in a report to Chief Constable Thurston the better. He was glad now that he had got a

motor-bicycle and would not have to end his long day's work by eight miles pedalling.

But his day's work was not over—nothing like it. As soon as he got back to Windon, he had a long talk with Chief Constable Thurston over the telephone, the latter promising to get in touch with Sir Hulbert Lemuel at once and find out what the latter thought of the 'Nightshade' theory. Poole had arranged for Superintendent Clewth to listen while he reported to Thurston, so that when the telephone conversation was ended the local man knew as much of the day's happenings as did the London one. Poole had not, however, said very much to Scotland Yard about his work in Paslow, and he now enlarged on this to Clewth, who would, he knew, be very keen to have every detail of that trail. The Brackenshire Superintendent's compliments to him on the thoroughness of his investigations were at least some balm to the detective for their failure.

Poole's account of the chase of the butler and its unfortunate ending lost nothing in the telling, and Clewth listened to it with enthusiasm and very palpable regret. Poole fancied that the Brackenshire man would have much preferred the scent to be picked up by him rather than by the Paslow Constabulary, of whom the County Police had no high opinion, though it would be better still, of course, if they could pick it up themselves.

The detective wanted to know whether the Paslow police had picked up Moode's trail that afternoon as a result of his warning from the garage. He also wanted to check the pigeon-shooting theory put forward by Mrs. Moode. So he put a call through to Paslow. He was answered by the Paslow Superintendent, Vickett.

"Oh yes," replied the latter, in answer to Poole's enquiry, "we've got pigeon-shooting in Paslow all right; clays, you know. They've been all the rage this summer. It was the dogs last year and the year before, but they went out of fashion after it was found that the same two dogs won all the races under different coloured skins. So we've got clay-pigeons this year. It'll be kiss-in-the-ring next, likely enough. Anything for a change. What d'you want to know for?"

"There's some idea that the man I'm looking for spends his time there; d'you think you could look that up? Secretary, or loader, or whatever they have, might recognise the photograph, perhaps."

"They might. I'll look into it. Any idea which day he's supposed to go?"

"Yes; Wednesdays and Sundays."

"Saturdays, you mean."

"No, Sundays. Mrs. . . . I'm sure Sunday was one of the days, because my informant thought it wrong that it should go on on a Sunday."

"Quite right, too; so it would be, but it doesn't. Your informant must have made a mistake. Wednesdays and Saturdays are the days."

"I see," said Poole thoughtfully. "I suppose there has been a mistake, but it's what I was told. Well, perhaps you'll look it up all the same; Wednesday fits anyhow; to-day, for instance."

"Right you are. And look here, Mr. Poole, don't go away. We've got one bit of news—or possible news for you, though I don't set much store by it myself."

"What?" said Poole eagerly, "was he seen this afternoon? on his motor-bike?"

"No," said Superintendent Vickett. "We didn't make anything of that; at least, nothing worth having. The constable at the Windon Street and High Acre crossing thought he saw him come in this afternoon just after you 'phoned, but he wasn't asked about it till after that, you see, so he wasn't particularly noticing; just thought he remembered seeing a motor-cyclist of that description, about that time; thought he went on up Windon Street toward the centre of the town. Of course, we warned them all to be on the look-out for him going out again, but he hasn't been seen yet. No, what I wanted to tell you about was this. One of my constables, a young fellow, not very long joined, thinks he recognises the photograph you left with us. But it's not the name you mentioned; quite a different one; man living in Paslow. Personally I think he's making a mistake."

"Who is the man?" asked Poole. "Is anything known about him?"

"Haven't made enquiries yet, beyond what Constable Sparks tells me. It seems the man's a commercial traveller, living in the same . . . but look here, Mr. Poole, I'm not too fond of talking names and addresses over the 'phone; some of our girls on the exchange are a bit fond of listening in . . . are you there, Miss? . . . not this time perhaps. You wouldn't care to run over and look into this, would you?"

Poole's spirit groaned. He had been hard at work, without a break or a meal, except a sandwich and a glass of beer, since nine o'clock that morning; it was now after seven and he was aching for a good leisurely meal and a pipe—perhaps a book afterwards, or something to give his mind a rest. Instead, he was asked to 'run over' forty miles (and forty miles back) to look into a clue that Superintendent Vickett 'thought was a mistake.' Why shouldn't Vickett do the 'looking into' himself, at any rate, till he felt a bit

more competent to say whether there was anything worth bringing the Scotland Yard man over for. But then Poole remembered Superintendent Clewth's opinion of the Paslow police—a Borough Constabulary, with far less chance of having an efficient personnel, especially in the higher ranks, than had the larger County and Metropolitan forces. Yes, he must go himself; but would it not do if he went to-morrow morning, fresh after a night's rest? Again the words of Superintendent Clewth came to his mind: "these poisoners are very fond of having another go." No, it wasn't safe to wait an hour longer than was necessary; the smallest clue must be followed up at once.

"All right, Mr. Vickett; I'll come," he said.

He explained the new development—if it was worthy such a name—to Superintendent Clewth, who was almost more annoyed than he was himself.

"Why can't the fools know their own minds?" he asked. " 'We've got a clue; we think it's a mistake; will you come and find out for us?' Pah! But you're right not to trust them. Only there's one thing, my lad; you're not going over there till you've had a bite of food, and you're not going on that chattering motor-bike; we'll send you over comfortably in a car, with something warm inside you. Come on; my supper'll be on the table in five minutes, and there's always enough for one extra."

Poole protested, but not very vigorously, and it was not long before he was sitting down in Mrs. Clewth's snug kitchen to a meal that made a new man of him.

A mutton chop, tender as young lamb, with a dash of Worcester sauce to sharpen the appetite; new potatoes and peas from the Superintendent's own garden; a baked apple; a spoonful of Stilton (Clewth's special joy); all this washed down with strong Windon beer, and finally—as Mrs. Clewth said: "to settle it"—a cup of piping hot tea. With his pipe drawing well and a warm overcoat forced on to him by the Superintendent, Poole felt like a city magnate who has lunched as he stepped into the fast police car that was waiting for him. Clewth himself tucked a rug round the detective's knees.

"Evenings have got a nip in them, though it's June," he said. "We've got to take care of our London orchid."

His hearty chuckle removed any sting that there might have been in the words. As he drove through the lovely summer twilight, Poole thought with gratitude of the generosity and friendliness of this County Police Superintendent who had seen an important case taken out of his own hands and put into those of a stranger from London, twenty years his junior, and yet had not only shown him no malice but had gone out of his way to help

him and make him feel at home—had even, Poole felt, begun to take a personal pride in his young colleague's work, and to be eager for his success. It didn't enter Poole's mind to think that this reception was in some part due to his own personality, and might not have been accorded so readily to every member of his department.

It was nearly half-past nine by the time the police car drew up outside the Paslow Headquarters. Poole found Superintendent Vickett in none too good a temper.

"Thought you'd forgotten about us," he growled.

Poole knew that Superintendent Clewth had himself telephoned to his Paslow colleague to say that he was insisting on the Scotland Yard man having some food before he started. Still, perhaps it was natural that the Borough Superintendent should not relish being kept in his uniform so late for the convenience of a London detective; only—it was different to Superintendent Clewth. Poole apologised.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, sir. Is your constable here?"

"Is he here? Of course he's here! Been waitin' like me since seven o'clock."

"That," thought Poole, "is hardly reasonable, and probably untrue," but he said nothing.

Police-Constable Sparks was a young officer who clearly was keen to establish a reputation for smartness, but at the same time afraid of being snubbed by his superior officer. Poole would have liked to talk to him alone, but he could hardly ask Superintendent Vickett to make himself scarce after 'keeping him waiting' all this time.

Sparks' story was that the man whose photograph he had been shown, or at least a man like the man whose photograph he had been shown, had got rooms in his (Sparks') mother's house. Sparks had not seen Mr. Mellett very often as the man was a commercial traveller and away a good deal, but he knew Mrs. Mellett fairly well.

"What's that?" exclaimed Poole. "Is the fellow married?"

"Oh yes, sir; they've got our first-floor suite. Mrs. Mellett doesn't go out much, and has very few visitors; my mother says they're good tenants."

Poole thought for a minute.

"Look here, Sparks," he said, "how sure are you about this being the man I'm looking for? the man in the photograph?"

The constable looked doubtfully at his Superintendent; probably he had already been snubbed for over-confidence.

"Well, sir," he said hesitatingly, "when I first saw that photograph I said to myself at once: 'Why, that's our Mr. Mellett,' and I told the Superintendent so. But Superintendent says it can't be, so . . ."

"I said nothing of the kind," snapped Mr. Vickett. "I said it was damned unlikely; and so it is. How can a man who's butler to Lord Grayle be a commercial traveller in Paslow, eh?"

Poole thought he easily might, but it wasn't worth arguing about; he merely wanted to prove it—one way or the other.

"Go on, Sparks," he said kindly. "You're doubtful about it now, are you?"

"Well, sir; when the Superintendent said it could . . . said it was unlikely, I began to wonder myself; second thoughts, you know, sir. I had another good look at the photo, and it did look rather young for our Mr. Mellett, and, of course, you'll understand I haven't seen him very often, and then generally in bicycling kit."

"Ah, a motor-bike?" queried Poole eagerly.

"I think so, sir, from the kit, but I haven't seen the machine; he never brought it round to the house; left it in a garage, I expect."

"Didn't want the number spotted, no doubt," thought Poole to himself. Then aloud, "I can quite understand your thinking the photograph young; it was taken ten or twelve years ago, though I had it touched up a bit."

He turned to the Superintendent.

"I think it's good enough to look into, sir," he said. "May I take Sparks round with me to introduce me to his mother?"

"I'm coming with you," said the Superintendent. "I don't want my folks upset more than's necessary. You London people are a bit high-handed in your methods, from what I've heard. We don't want another Gertrude Falter case in Paslow."

This was almost more than Poole could stand. To hear the C.I.D. and their methods insulted by a Borough policeman, whatever his rank, was testing discipline very high. But it held.

"It's just as you wish, sir, of course," he said stiffly.

The Superintendent picked up his cap.

"How far's this house of yours, Sparks?" he asked.

"Not more than ten minutes, sir. This way, sir."

The young constable, encouraged by the detective's interest in his story, was regaining confidence. He led the way, followed by his two superiors.

"Nice time o' night to go knocking up respectable people," growled Superintendent Vickett.

Poole doubted whether this description exactly applied to 'Mrs. Mellett,' but he agreed that it was a bit late. Still, remembering Superintendent Clewth's horrible suggestion, he was not going to agree to any delay if he could help it.

Mrs. Sparks, at any rate, was not yet in need of 'knocking up.' She was just finishing the tidying up of her kitchen and opened the door in her apron. Introduction to her son's Superintendent flustered the good lady more than a little, but after wiping her hand vigorously on her apron she was able to accept the great man's gigantic paw. Mr. Vickett was pleased to be affable, if slightly patronising.

"Can we have a word with you, ma'am?" he asked.

Mrs. Sparks looked anxiously at her son, who nodded vigorously.

The little ground-floor room which, when 'the first floor' was let, acted as Mrs. Sparks' parlour, was tidy as a new pin, but it barely accommodated the three policemen and their hostess.

"Now, Mrs. Sparks," said the Superintendent, unbuttoning one of his capacious pockets, "I want you to tell me whether you recognise any of these gentlemen."

The Superintendent produced, very correctly, eight cabinet-size photographs of men of different ages and types. Seven of these photographs were well-thumbed, dingy affairs, obviously used for a similar purpose by the Paslow police for years, if not generations; two of the "gentlemen" actually wore mutton chop whiskers, and a third was collared in the style of Albert the Good. The eighth photograph was, of course, the 'made up' one of James Moode. It did not require a conjuror to choose the photograph that had to be "recognised." Mrs. Sparks picked it up at once, and, after much business with her spectacles, scrutinised it carefully.

Then she looked enquiringly at her son.

"Why, that's him, isn't it, Fred?" she asked.

"Never mind what 'Fred' thinks, Mrs. Sparks," interrupted the Superintendent, "I want *your* opinion."

"Well, sir, I must say it's uncommon like him."

"Like who, eh?"

"Like my tenant, sir—Mr. Mellett."

"Ah. You sure of that?" The Superintendent spoke gruffly and Mrs. Sparks began to look flustered again.

Poole interposed quickly.

"When did you see Mr. Mellett last?" he asked.

"Why, this evening, sir!"

"This evening? Is he here now?"

"No, sir; he left a matter of ten minutes ago."

XV • The Commercial Traveller

"There you are, you see," said Superintendent Vickett. "That's what comes of dilly-dallying. If we'd acted at once we'd have caught the fellow here."

"I'm not sure that it isn't better as it is," said Poole mildly. "We're more likely to get the information we want without him—now we know where to look for it."

Mrs. Sparks was casting anxious looks from one officer to the other.

"There's nothing wrong, is there, Fred?" she whispered to her son.

Superintendent Vickett caught the whisper.

"That's what we're here to find out, ma'am," he replied portentously, "and I'll trouble you to tell us what you know about this case, rememberin' that it's the truth, the whole truth, and nothin' but the truth that we want."

"I'd very much like to hear what Mrs. Sparks can tell us," put in the detective, "but . . . what time does Mrs. Mellett go to bed, Mrs. Sparks?"

"Oh, not till all hours, sir. She's got a wireless, and that's generally going till nigh on eleven—jazz, the last half-hour of it usually is, and I find it difficult to sleep through. But I don't complain, she's a good tenant, and luckily I don't have to have no others."

"So you think there's no hurry for a bit?" Poole looked at his wrist watch. "It's a little after ten now."

"Oh, no, sir. You can hear the wireless now if you listen; it's sure to go on till eleven. There is some nights she goes to bed directly after supper—

with a headache, she says. Or to improve her mind. She reads a lot, generally in bed—improving her mind. But if she was going to do that she'd have done it already."

"Well, if you've quite finished, Mr. Poole, we'll get to business," interjected the Superintendent.

He sat heavily down upon a small cane chair; Mrs. Sparks eyed it anxiously. What would happen if . . .

"Now, ma'am. How long have this Mr. and Mrs. Mellett been your tenants?"

"Since early April, sir. About the fifth it would be; yes, that's it—the fifth, because it was on the first—April Fool's day—that my sister's boy's Mary was taken bad in their very room, and we put her to bed in the first-floor bedroom and she had to go to hospital three days later, and I remember saying what a mercy it was it hadn't happened *after* the new tenants came in, which was on the Saturday—the day before Easter Sunday and a strange time to move I said to Fred here, and Mary she . . ."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Sparks; we mustn't go into Mary's troubles. So they came on the fifth of April. Make a note of that, Sparks. And they've lived here ever since?"

"Yes, sir. At least, she has. Of course, he being a travelling gentleman only stays here now and then when he can get home."

"Ah, and how often is that?"

"Only to sleep about once a fortnight, sir; generally on Sundays, or Saturday and Sunday, and always off very early on Monday morning. But he'd look in generally once during the week—on a Wednesday—and stay to supper and then be off again. A hard life, I thought it, but it seemed to bring money in."

"Oh, it did, did it?" said Poole. "Can you tell us how you know that, Mrs. Sparks?"

"Well, sir, at first when they came here they lived very quiet; never went out, and there wasn't much money to spend that I could see. Then he started bringing home presents, pretty stuffs for the sitting-room, knick-knacks and the like; and she got new clothes—very gay. And when he was here for the night, they'd go out to supper somewhere and make an evening of it. Oh yes, there's been more money coming in the last month or so."

"Thank you, Mrs. Sparks; that's interesting. And you're sure it was he—Mr. Mellett—who had the money?"

“Well, no, sir; of course, I can’t say that; I just took it for granted.”

“Who paid the rent—he or she?”

“Oh, she did that.”

“By cash or cheque?”

“Cash, sir, always. It isn’t much,” added Mrs. Sparks modestly.

“And the tradesmen’s books?”

“So far as I know she paid them.”

“Regularly? Never any trouble about them?”

“Not so as I’ve heard.”

Superintendent Vickett thought it was time he resumed control.

“Now, Mrs. Sparks,” he said severely, “you say these people came to you just before Easter. Did they have any references? Mutual acquaintances? letter of introduction? anything of that kind?”

“Oh, no, sir; I knew nothing about them, but they seemed respectable and they paid a month in advance.”

“Ah, they seemed respectable? You took them for man and wife?”

“Oh, yes, sir; of course. I wouldn’t have had them in my house if they wasn’t.”

“Did they show you their marriage lines?”

“Oh, no, sir.”

“You didn’t ask to see them?”

“Oh, no, sir. I should consider that an impertinence.”

“Well, this’ll be a lesson for you, then. These people are no more man and wife than you an’ me, Mrs. Sparks.”

This illuminating comparison brought a blush of modesty to the cheeks of Fred’s mother. Such a suggestion . . . !

“Of course, it may be a case of bigamy,” went on the Superintendent, unconscious of the flutter he had created, “or it may just be a case of livin’ in sin, but whichever it is we’ve got to know all about it, and I’ll trouble you to keep your mouth shut, Mrs. Sparks. Now we’ll have a talk to this young woman; she is a young woman, I suppose?”

“Well, sir, I couldn’t hardly say about that,” replied Mrs. Sparks guardedly. “She looks young—younger than him, anyway. But you never know nowadays; the best of them does things to their faces.”

Leaving ‘Fred’ below, the two police officers followed Mrs. Sparks upstairs to the first floor. Poole was not at all happy at the presence of Superintendent Vickett, and particularly at his evident desire to take charge of the investigation now that the scent had turned out to be a true one, but it was impossible for him to prevent it; Vickett was his superior and on his own ground. He must trust to a tactful intervention if things took an undesirable turn.

Mrs. Sparks tapped at the sitting-room door, and, being evidently unheard through the activities of the Scratch-Back Band, opened it slightly and said:

“You there, Mrs. Mellett? Here’s two gentlemen to see you, please.”

The wireless was switched off and ‘Mrs. Mellett’ appeared at the door. She was a pretty, fair-haired woman of the gentle, rather ‘helpless’ type best calculated to afford consolation to a man wedded to a bitter tongue. She was probably about thirty and all that she “did to her face,” so far as Poole could see, was a touch of colour on her lips. She looked extremely surprised at this uniformed invasion, but not (the detective thought) at all frightened.

“Good evening, Miss,” began Superintendent Vickett with just the clumsy impertinence that Poole had feared. “I’ve come to make some enquiries about a man passing under the name of Mellett.”

Out of the corner of his eye Poole saw Mrs. Sparks disappearing down the passage.

“Perhaps Mrs. Mellett would like Mrs. Sparks to stay,” he suggested hastily.

“Much more likely not to; much more likely,” was the Superintendent’s opinion.

And, curiously enough, he was right. Mrs. Mellett expressed a disinclination to keep her landlady from her household duties. All the same, the C.I.D. detective thought that such an attitude came oddly from a man who half an hour ago had made slighting reference to the Gertrude Falter case.

“Now, ‘Mrs. Mellett,’ ” said Superintendent Vickett, with an emphasis even more offensive than his previous “Miss.” “I want a statement from you about this man you’re living with. Inspector Poole here will take it down and then it’ll be read over to you and you can sign it. Now, you’re not asking us to believe that you’re married to him, eh?”

“I’m not asking you to believe anything,” replied the woman quietly. “I haven’t asked you to come here, for the matter of that.”

"No, that you haven't; that you haven't. And yet we're here, eh? Well, and now we are here we want this statement, so don't let's have any back chat. You're not married to him, are you?"

"No, he has a wife living. We aren't breaking any law."

"That depends. That depends. Though I don't say that you are. Now, what's your proper name?"

"Ivy Tuller."

"And this man you're living with; you know his proper name, eh?"

"His name's Mellett; George Mellett."

"Oh, come now; that won't wash. You know better than that."

"Indeed I don't," said the girl, showing some signs of distress "I've always believed that to be his name."

"Well, it ain't. His real name's . . ."

"Excuse me, sir," interjected Poole hastily, "might it not be better not to mention that just now?"

Vickett stared at him.

"Don't know why not," he said. "Still, have it your own way. We'll call him Mellett, then. How long have you known him?"

"Please tell me why you're asking me these questions," said Mrs. Mellett. "Surely I have a right to know?"

Poole was extremely apprehensive of what Superintendent Vickett would say, but his answer was surprisingly correct.

"There's been a serious crime committed, and among other people this man, Mr. Mellett, is suspected of knowing something about it. We're bound to make enquiries about his private life, his money affairs, and so on. And as a citizen you're bound to help us. If you were his wife it would be different, but you ain't—not in law, anyway," added the Superintendent with unexpected feeling, induced, no doubt, by the tears that had sprung into Ivy Tuller's eyes.

Ashamed, perhaps, of even so much show of human feeling, Mr. Vickett went on in his gruffest voice:

"Now, then, how long have you known him? Out with it."

"About a year, I suppose; perhaps not quite."

"You've not been *here* a year?"

"No, we knew each other some time before we . . . we came here. We met at the Scala Picture House; I was an attendant there. Mr. Mellett came several times, and then I used to go out to tea with him between the shows and . . . we got fond of each other. He told me straight away he was a married man. He never deceived me at all."

"Not even about his name, eh? He was deceiving you from the very first, Miss. And what did he tell you his job was?"

"He said he was a traveller from Freeke & Willen—boots, you know. He had to be away nearly all the week, but had half a day off on Wednesdays. Every other week he was away from Wednesday to Wednesday, and the other week he'd get back on Sunday mid-day, but have to leave first thing Monday morning. Every now and then he'd get Saturday as well as Sunday."

"I see. So you set up house here together. Where did he tell you his wife lived?"

"He said she'd gone back to her mother—somewhere in Lancashire."

Superintendent Vickett turned to Poole with a grin.

"He wasn't doin' any deceiving was he? False name and all from the very start. Now, Mr. Poole, anything you want to ask?"

"Just one or two points, sir." The detective turned to Moode's mistress. "I am afraid I must ask some rather impertinent questions, Mrs. Mellett; they really are vital for our enquiry, and, of course, what you say will be absolutely confidential unless we're obliged to prosecute."

"I expect it's all right, sir, if you say so." Mrs. Mellett was quick to respond to the note of sympathy in Poole's voice.

"It'll be mostly about money," went on the detective. "Has Mr. Mellett always appeared to you to have plenty of money?"

The girl looked uneasy, almost for the first time.

"Well, no," she said in a low voice. "At first he didn't have too much to spare. He talked of our . . . coming here, or something of the kind, for some time, but he said he didn't know how to find the money for it. Of course, I was earning a bit at the Scala, but he wouldn't touch that; said I must save up for a rainy day."

Poole's opinion of the butler went up a very long stride. A man who could be so considerate for the girl who was evidently willing to give him everything she had could not be altogether a bad lot.

"Then things improved?"

"Yes, he said he'd had his salary raised a bit and thought he saw prospects of earning more on commission. So we talked it over and eventually decided to live together."

"You never thought to enquire at Freeke & Willen about him and his rise in salary, I suppose?" enquired Superintendent Vickett.

"No, sir; why should I? I had no reason to doubt his word."

The Superintendent sniffed, but made no comment.

"Well, Mrs. Mellett," went on Poole patiently, "you started living together, and the money came in all right?"

"Yes, sir, he never seemed to have any difficulty."

"Who had control of the money, Mrs. Mellett? You, or he?"

"He used to give me enough each week to pay for the rooms and for housekeeping, and a bit over in case it was wanted. Anything else that had to be bought specially he'd either buy himself or give me the money as it was wanted. Of course, anything like going out for a meal or an outing of any kind he'd pay for."

"Did he have a bank account, d'you know?"

"I don't think so. He never mentioned it and I never saw a cheque book. He always gave me the money in cash."

"I see. Now, Mrs. Mellett, I'm afraid I must ask this. Can you give me any idea how much money Mr. Mellett was spending a week, including the rent and housekeeping and all?"

Mrs. Mellett reflected for some time before answering.

"It's a bit difficult to say," she replied at last. "The rooms are two pounds a week, all found. The housekeeping would come to about another thirty shillings, counting things one has to buy like brooms and dusters and soap and all that."

Three pounds ten shillings a week—one hundred and seventy-five pounds a year—from a man whose wages at the outside would be no more than one hundred and fifty pounds; and a wife and cottage to be kept going into the bargain. But was that all? What about 'Mrs. Mellett' herself? It was an awkward question.

"Four pounds a week would cover it all, you think, Mrs. Mellett? Were there no presents, or anything of that kind?"

"Well, yes, sir; Mr. Mellett was very generous. I tried to stop him, but he would give me things—dresses and hats and a bit of jewellery occasionally; nothing much, but still—costing money."

"And you're still working at the Scala?"

"Oh, no; not now. I did for a bit and arranged to have my evening on a Wednesday to fit in with his, but he didn't like my going on working there, and when things got better—he's getting better commission—he persuaded me to give up the work."

"Can you tell me when that was, Mrs. Mellett? It's important."

"Yes, I can tell you that. It was on the twenty-first of April he spoke to me about it. The arrangement with the Scala was a week's notice either side, but I said I'd stay till the end of the month, because it wasn't always easy to find the right girls."

"And did that date correspond at all with his beginning to give you presents—dresses and jewellery and so on?"

"Well, yes. I think it did."

"He seemed to be generally better off then?"

"Yes, his commissions were being paid on a higher scale."

"Thank you, Mrs. Mellett; I think that is all I want at the moment, but I want to ask you once more quite definitely whether you really believed that this man was a commercial traveller of the name of Mellett?"

"On my honour I did, sir."

"You had no suspicion that he was anything or anyone else?"

"Not the very slightest."

Superintendent Vickett, who had begun to show signs of impatience at his long sojourn in the back row, now came into the limelight again.

"Well, if that's all the information you've got to give us, Miss, the Inspector'll read over your statement and you can sign it and initial the pages so that you'll know there's been no hanky-panky."

This formality took the best part of another hour, and when it was over Superintendent Vickett delivered his final peroration.

"Now, Miss Tuller," he said, "this man Mellett's suspected of a serious criminal offence. Mind, I don't say he's done it, or even that he'll be charged with it, but he's suspected of it. Now it's your duty as a citizen to aid the police in the execution of their duty. You've made your statement very properly, but there's one thing more. It won't do for this man Mellett to know that enquiries are being made about him. You keep mum about it and don't let him know that you've seen us. That's your duty. The best thing you can do is not to see him again. My advice to you is to go home to your mother."

With this final astounding piece of advice Superintendent Vickett left the room and stumped off down the stairs. Poole saw that the girl was too dazed to realise what the Superintendent had said. He bade her good night, and was about to follow his superior when Mrs. Mellett seized his arm.

"What's he done, sir?" she begged, her voice husky with anxiety. "What's he done? I can't believe he's done anything bad—anything shameful."

"I can only tell you this, Mrs. Mellett," said Poole kindly, "that he is suspected of a very terrible crime; if he is guilty of it, he is a very different man to what you evidently believe him to be. But I can promise you this, that his guilt or innocence will be established as quickly as ever we can manage it, and if he is innocent nobody shall know of what you've told us to-night."

Poole felt his arm gripped tightly.

"Thank you, sir; oh, thank you, sir," sobbed the girl, and turning, flung herself on to a sofa. Poole left the room and quietly shut the door.

"One thing I'm certain of," he said to himself as he went down the stairs, "that girl'll let him know as quickly as ever she can. She doesn't know where he is now—I'm pretty sure of that—but he's due to come over on Sunday. Whatever's done, has got to be done before then. That leaves me three days."

XVI • Labels

As Poole drove back from Paslow that night he was so tired that he could not get his brain to concentrate upon what he had learned and the problem that lay before him. His thoughts went round and round in a circle, never able to leave the subject and yet unable to grip and pull it into shape.

Two pounds a week for rent, thirty shillings for housekeeping, presents, dinners—all that since early April, must have cost well over fifty pounds—in two months—on a salary for that period of perhaps twenty-five pounds, plus a few tips—and his account at the County and Colonial already overdrawn. But that overdraft had been paid off—how? And Mrs. Moode herself—and her cottage—had been maintained—how? Perhaps she had money of her own. But the liaison with Ivy Tuller had been going on for "nearly a year"; even though the 'establishment' had not been started till two

months ago; that association must have cost money—meals at restaurants, presents—even though modest ones—all such things would help to run the butler into debt. He *had* run into debt—hence the overdraft and the interview with Mr. Haycombe. Then, suddenly, money had begun to come in; the overdraft was paid off; the 'establishment' started. Where had it come from?

That furniture business; could there be something wrong about it, after all? So far he only had the firm's—Benborough's—story to assure him that it was all right. Miss Hollen would have checked the list to-day and he would hear from her to-morrow whether all was in order. He would ask Lady Grayle, too. The butler's explanation of his lie had been so very specious; it stank of dishonesty. And the time corresponded, too; Benborough had been handling the furniture for the last two or three months, and it was during that period that 'Mellett' had suddenly become richer—his 'salary' from Freeke & Willen had been 'increased,' his scale of commission 'improved.' There must be a link between the two.

But if there was? That explained the affluence of Mr. Mellett, but how did it help him (Poole) with the murder? The only conceivable motive that Moode could have had for killing his master was to get the five hundred pounds which he had been told was allotted to him in the will. But if he was getting money from Benborough, why the urgent need for five hundred pounds? The whole conduct of the 'Mellett' episode argued against such need. Not only had he—after a period of restraint lasting nearly a year, and attributed by him to poverty—suddenly decided that he could afford to start the establishment in April, but after another three weeks he had begun to shower presents and entertainments on his friend, and had persuaded her to leave her own quite lucrative employment and live in idleness on his wealth. Was that the conduct of a man who was so desperately in need of five hundred pounds that he must risk his neck to get it?

How had the day's discovery helped? Had it not rather hindered? Even if to-morrow he discovered that there was something crooked about the furniture affair, how would that help? And even if it did help, how much more yet remained to be proved? How had Moode obtained the poison? Was the Belladonna idea practicable? How had he known that a non-toxic dose of scopolamine would, if combined with di-dial within a certain period, become deadly? Surely that postulated expert knowledge? Even if he had the knowledge, how had he known that Lord Grayle would take another dose of di-dial within the two or three hours before the scopolamine that was necessary in order to make the fatal combination? Had he himself given that second dose to Lord Grayle in the early hours of the morning? Could he

have administered it while his master was still asleep—forced it down his throat? in liquid or tabloid form? could it have been given subcutaneously? had that been thought of? looked for?

But what a complication of methods! Why the additional risk? Why not just a lethal dose of scopolamine? or a lethal dose of the dial? The poisoner *must* have known that the post-mortem analysis would reveal the presence of scopolamine even though the first suspicions turned to the di-dial. What was the explanation of it all? Where was he to look for it?

It was a very exhausted detective who staggered out of the police car at one o'clock in the morning, apologised to the constable-driver for keeping him out so late, and dragged himself upstairs to bed in the small Windon hotel to which he had already transferred his modest luggage. Fortunately sleep came to him the moment his head touched the pillow, and six hours of undisturbed and dreamless slumber restored him to a normal and more optimistic frame of mind.

Half an hour after breakfast had to be spent in retailing to Superintendent Clewth the discoveries of the previous night, and a further quarter of an hour in explaining just why those discoveries increased rather than removed the difficulty of pinning the crime to Moode. Even when he had repeated the chain of thoughts that had circled through his head on the drive home, Poole felt that the County Superintendent suspected him of being just a bit too subtle and ingenious. It was decided that a conference should be held with Major Faide upon the detective's return from Tassart that morning, a conference which might have to be transferred to London for the benefit of Chief Constable Thurston's advice and the opinion of Sir Hulbert Lemuel.

Poole drove up to the front door of Tassart in the police car and told the driver to wait in the stable-yard. The door was opened by the second footman, William, who greeted him with a pleasant smile which broadened into a grin when Poole enquired whether Lady Grayle's secretary was in her office. William said that he would enquire, and asked the detective to wait in the hall; before he returned, the butler appeared, coming (Poole thought) from the direction of Lady Grayle's sitting-room. Moode's face was an expressionless mask as he enquired whether the detective was being attended to. It was impossible to gather whether Mrs. Moode had told him of yesterday's visit. Certainly there was not the same benign suavity in the butler's eyes that had been apparent at their first meeting, but in view of the cross-examination on the subject of the furniture van, that was not to be expected. Quite apart from that, knowing what he did now, Poole realised

that the man must be going through a time of considerable anxiety and strain, even if he were completely innocent of his master's death.

Miss Hollen, William reported, was in her office and would be glad to see Mr. Poole. Poole himself was not altogether averse from seeing Miss Hollen; he had already noticed—if subconsciously—that her grace and cheerfulness struck like a waft of fresh air into the sordid atmosphere that he was compelled to breathe.

The girl was eager to prove that she had not been idle in the matter that Poole had entrusted to her.

"I've been through the list Benborough sent," she told him, "and everything they say they've sent back is here all right. But, of course, that doesn't prove that everything that's gone from here is on their list, does it? They may only have put down the things they *have* sent back, and not said anything about some other things."

"I'm afraid you've got the true criminal mind," said Poole with a smile.

"Oh, I don't know about that," replied the girl, obviously pleased at this compliment. "I just put myself in your place. (What are you laughing at?) . . . I just put myself in your place and said: 'Now what may Benborough have done? They may have sent a perfectly true list, or they may have kept or sold some of the things that Lord Grayle sent up and sent a faked list. If they've sent a faked list, how am I to check it? I might check it at the Benborough end by looking at their books and questioning their employees, but that wouldn't be conclusive; they may have covered all those traces. I might check it at the Tassart end by asking Lady Grayle if there's a list of what has been sent up?' But I didn't like to do that, Mr. Poole, without asking you. So I went on: 'I might check it by asking Lady Grayle's clever and industrious secretary—(what *are* you laughing at?)—clever and industrious secretary to go through the whole inventory and see if there's anything missing that ought to be here and isn't on Benborough's list as still being repaired?' And that's what I'm doing."

"By Jove, you are a worker," said Poole. "And the result?"

"Oh, it's not finished yet. I had to knock off this morning to do some letters for Lady Grayle, but I don't believe there's anything missing. I've done all the ground floor and some of the principal bedrooms, but I've had to go rather carefully because I didn't suppose you'd want everybody to know what I was doing."

"I believe there *is* a vacancy for an intelligent, respectable, hard working young woman of—er—pleasing appearance in the plain-clothes branch at

Scotland Yard," said Poole. "Seriously, Miss Hollen, you've done splendidly and I'm most awfully grateful to you. But it looks as if we weren't going to strike anything on that line. There's just one other thing I want to ask you, though; what time off does Moode have?"

"Every Wednesday afternoon and evening, and every other Sunday."

"And what are the limits of the time? What time does he get away and when does he have to be back?"

"Oh, I think he generally gets away about three—I often see him walking across the Park. He's not on duty again that day, so I suppose it doesn't matter what time he gets back—if he can let himself in."

"So long as he is back in time to call Lord Grayle in the morning?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

Allowing for an hour's run on his bicycle, that would give Moode from about four p.m. to six a.m. with his friend in Paslow, though he may not always have stayed overnight. Mrs. Moode presumably thought he was sleeping up at the house.

"How long has Moode been living in the house, do you know, Miss Hollen?"

"Oh, two or three months. He said he was anxious about Lord Grayle's health and wanted to be at hand in case he was needed."

"He said that?"

"Yes, but Lady Grayle says it's because he couldn't stand living with that beastly wife of his any longer."

"She told me that Lord Grayle had practically ordered Moode to sleep in the house," said Poole thoughtfully. "She was very bitter about it."

Miss Hollen laughed.

"That's a pure invention," she said, "on Moode's part, I expect. Lord Grayle didn't want him in the least; said it was absurd, but didn't like to tell him not to."

"No, I suppose not. You don't know whether he ever gets away for a complete week-end, do you; Saturday as well as Sunday?"

"No, I can't say I've noticed it; but if Lord and Lady Grayle were away for a week-end themselves anywhere, no doubt Moode could be if he wanted to."

That seemed to cover all the visits of Mr. Mellett to the first-floor rooms of Mrs. Sparks. Poole asked where he was likely to find Lady Grayle.

"She's probably in her sitting-room; if not, in the garden. Would you like me to go and see?"

"It would be very kind—if she could spare me ten minutes. I'll come with you."

Lady Grayle was in her sitting-room. As Irene opened the door Poole saw her sitting at her writing-table. She did not appear to be writing, but there was a look of intense concentration on her face—the face which had become ten years older in a week. She looked up as the girl spoke, and an expression of pleasure replaced the harder one that had been there before. It was always a pleasure to Lady Grayle to see young people. Though she had herself pursued youth long after it was seemly for her to do so, she had never been jealous of those who had the blessed gift; indeed she sought them out and seemed to draw freshness and vigour from their bloom.

"Of course, bring him in, my dear," she said, "I haven't seen you for days, Mr. Poole," she said. "I believe you've been taking the dogs for a walk all the time."

She glanced maliciously at Irene, who, for all her modern training, was unable to repress a blush.

Poole hated this flippancy. He knew it represented courage, the effort to keep terror and misery in the background, but it jarred him horribly all the same. From the first moment that he had seen her, Lady Grayle had not shown one glimmer of interest in, or curiosity about, his investigations. It was not that she tried to evade him or his questions; she answered frankly whatever he asked her. But she was just not interested. It was as if she knew that he would never solve the riddle—and he was beginning to believe that she was right.

"I wanted to ask you one or two more questions, Lady Grayle, if it's not giving you too . . ."

"One minute!" interjected Lady Grayle, "don't go yet, Irene dear. Mr. Poole, my son and his wife have gone; I'm all alone—and very lonely. Will you take pity on me and lunch with me to-day? You too, Irene? You can tell me all about London. I haven't been there since hansom cabs disappeared—or so it seems. You will? How kind of you. Irene, tell Moode. Now, Mr. Poole."

There it was again. What might be a vital interrogation interrupted by an invitation to lunch. Not that he objected to the latter. It was natural enough that she should feel lonely and that the company of a young man with an interesting career should appeal to her. He was glad, too, to have another

chance of studying his hostess, whose character and manner frankly puzzled him. But did she really not care? However, he must get on with his questions.

"I've been making some enquiries, Lady Grayle, about some furniture which seems to have gone to London from here to be repaired. Do you know about it?"

"Furniture?"

Lady Grayle's eyebrows were raised questioningly. Poole was watching her closely as he asked his question. She seemed genuinely surprised, but nothing more.

"I know about it, of course," she said. "But why are you asking about it?"

"Only because I happened to hear about it in a rather curious way and your butler, Moode, gave me an explanation that turned out not to be a true one."

"Moode? What did he say about it?"

"If you wouldn't mind, Lady Grayle, I should be glad if you will tell me about it yourself."

"But what do you want to know?"

"I want to know what a firm called Benborough has had to do with it, and just what orders you have given about it yourself."

"I see. It's quite simple. Mr. Cristen, who did the valuation for Levish & Co., advised us that a lot of the furniture wanted repairing—treating for worm, mostly. His firm do that sort of thing, so we've been sending it up in relays to be done."

"And it's come back all right?"

"Oh, yes, they seem to have done the work very well. There's some still away."

"When did the last lot go?"

"On Saturday, I think—or rather Sunday. I wanted to get it finished before Charles—my son—takes over Tassart. He'd say it was too expensive to have it done, and then they'd fall to pieces. My husband loved Tassart, Mr. Poole, and everything in it. It seemed a pity not to finish what he had begun."

What, indeed, could be more natural?

“Have you got a list of the pieces that have been to Benborough?” Poole asked.

“Oh yes, Irene—Miss Hollen will have that. No, wait a minute; I’ve kept it myself.”

Lady Grayle went to her writing-table and started rummaging about the heaps of letters, bills, circulars and other impedimenta that covered it.

“I may take a little time to find it,” she said. “Are you in a great hurry? Is it important? Would after lunch . . . ? Ah, here it is.”

She extracted a foolscap sheet from between the pages of a notebook. It was covered, in a large sprawling hand, with a list of items which had evidently been added to from time to time. A quick glance seemed to indicate that it contained very much what Benborough’s list showed, but it would have to be checked. There seemed nothing more to ask. He thanked Lady Grayle and left.

“A quarter-past one. We’ll meet in the hall,” Lady Grayle called after him.

Irene Hollen was just coming down the stairs as Poole emerged.

“I’ve done all the important stuff,” she said, holding out a leather-bound book, “and as far as I can make out everything is all right.”

“And I’ve got Lady Grayle’s list of what’s been sent,” said Poole. “We might check it with Benborough’s.”

Together they returned to the secretary’s office, and in ten minutes the lists had been compared and found correct. Every item on Lady Grayle’s list was on one or other of Benborough’s, either as ‘returned’ or ‘repairing,’ with the exception of the walnut tallboy sold by Lord Grayle to Benborough’s American client, and that was noted in a special memorandum.

“And even suppose things had gone which Lady Grayle had not put on her list, you think you’d have noticed they were missing when you checked the furniture with the inventory?” asked Poole.

“Oh, yes; I think so. Of course, I’m not an inventory expert, and I might have overlooked something, but it would be very odd if I just happened to overlook what was omitted from Lady Grayle’s list.”

“Very odd,” agreed the detective, “always provided that you’re to be trusted.”

The look of consternation on the girl’s face delighted Poole.

“Good heavens!” she said, “what an awful thought! How on earth can you know whether I’m to be trusted?”

“I shall have to chance it,” said Poole gloomily, “for the present!”—a dark addendum. “But meantime will you tell me how you can recognise all this furniture from the descriptions on the inventory? ‘A Queen Anne walnut knee-hole table,’ ‘an eighteenth century Hepplewhite mahogany elbow chair, with pierced trellis splat,’ ‘an Adam girandole.’ It looks to me as if it would take an expert to check it.”

The girl laughed.

“It’s not so difficult as all that,” she said. “Every piece of furniture is numbered. We did that when the inventory was made. We got them to put a number against each item, and then I went round with Mr. Cristen and stuck a label with a corresponding number on the furniture; in the bottom right-hand drawer, wherever there was one, under the flaps of tables, the seats of chairs, and so on. Look.”

She rose from her chair and went to a small rosewood cabinet that stood in one corner of the room.

“As a matter of fact, this is one of the pieces that has been repaired. The drawers—the inside of the drawers—are made of oak and they were full of worm.”

She pulled open the right-hand bottom drawer and showed Poole a small rectangular label with a red border, gummed to the wood. On it was written a number, “F 73.” The girl looked at it more closely; then took the drawer to the light and examined it again.

“That’s a funny thing,” she said. “That’s not my label!”

“What?”

“I wrote all the labels myself, and I’ve never written a ‘7’ like that in my life. Look; it’s got a little downstroke at the end of the cross-piece. I always write mine like this.”

She scribbled a **7** on a sheet of paper.

“Label must have come off when they were treating it,” said Poole, “and they put on another.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Irene Hollen stood for a minute looking at the drawer in her hand.

“Let’s go and look at the other things,” she said.

Out in the hall were two marble-topped consoles. With considerable effort the two investigators screwed their heads under the marble tops till

they could read the label underneath, “C 27.”

“That’s mine all right,” said Irene.

A set of six Hepplewhite chairs bore the number “C 13.”

“Well, I can’t understand that,” said the girl. “You see, there’s the same trick again—a downstroke from the cross-piece. **3** where I write 3.” She scribbled the figures on her paper. “Surely my labels can’t have come off *everything*.”

“Except the marble tops of the consoles,” said Poole, “which presumably didn’t go to be repaired.”

With rising interest the two examined piece after piece that had been to Benborough. Not all had an identifiable 3 or 7, but Miss Hollen became increasingly sure that other figures had not been written by her either. She felt certain that every one of the labels on the repaired pieces was new.

They were examining the drawer of a Chippendale china cabinet when Poole gave an exclamation of excitement.

“Look at that cut, Miss Hollen,” he said. “There, by the dovetail. The drawer’s been varnished over, but the varnish has missed that cut. It’s new wood!”

His companion gasped.

“I mean that that explains why these aren’t your labels; because the pieces themselves are not the same! Every stick of furniture that’s come back from Benborough is a copy—a fake!”

XVII • A Luncheon Party

Poole and Irene stared at each other with eyes sparkling with excitement. Although he had been ten years at his job, the detective was still young and keen enough to be thrilled by a discovery of this kind; as for the girl, it was one of the most exhilarating moments of her life.

“Are you *sure*?” she whispered. “How awful!”

“No, I’m not sure; I’m guessing. But I’ll bet anything you like on it. We’ll have to get an expert to confirm it, of course. But look here, let’s have another look at the rest of the Benborough pieces.”

Again they examined piece after piece of furniture that had come back from Benborough. Poole was no expert—knew, in fact, very little about old furniture—and if his suspicions had not been aroused by the changed labels he would have noticed nothing wrong. But now he was looking for it, he believed that he could recognise the signs of faked work in many of the pieces; too high a polish here, too prominent a grain there—grain that in a two hundred years old piece would have been worn smooth, the sharp edge of a tool-cut which by now should have been blunted. Even so, the work had been brilliantly done; the furniture was beautiful furniture, even if it was 'faked'—the work of a master-craftsman.

"What's all this furniture worth?" asked Poole suddenly. "It must have cost no end to make these fakes."

"I can tell you exactly from the inventory." The girl opened the book in her hand, but Poole checked her.

"In your office," he said. "I don't want Moode to see us doing this if it can be avoided."

Back in the little room, they pulled chairs up to a table and opened the inventory book.

"Oh, Lord," exclaimed Poole suddenly, "I've forgotten that conference!" He looked at the clock. "It's half-past twelve, and I said I'd be there by twelve! May I use your telephone, Miss Hollen; I see there's one on your writing-table."

"Of course."

"It's not through to exchange, is it? How does it get put through?"

"Ring the bell three times—that push-bell on my table. It rings in the pantry, and one of the men'll switch this extension on to exchange."

"And be able to listen in?"

"Well, yes. I believe they can."

"Bother. I don't want Moode to know that I've struck anything. I'd better go to the village."

"No; look here, I'll go and switch it on; the instrument's outside the pantry in the passage. Directly you hear it come alive put your call through and I'll hang about a bit and see that no one listens in. But don't be long about it; I've got no particular reason for kicking my heels outside the pantry."

"I shan't be one half-minute. It's most awfully good of you, Miss Hollen."

"It's my duty to assist the police, Inspector," said Irene and with a laugh, slipped out of the room.

Poole picked up the receiver and almost at once heard a little click and the unmistakable buzz of 'life' in the wire. He rattled the handle.

"Number, please?"

"Police Headquarters, Windon. I don't know the number."

"Hold on, please." A pause. "You're through."

"Hullo, Police Headquarters? Detective-Inspector Poole speaking. Is Superintendent Clewth in? Put me through, please. Is that you, sir? Poole here. I'm most awfully sorry about the conference, but I'm on to something here and it slipped my memory. I can't get back till about three. Shall I send the car back? All right, thank you, sir. I'll see he gets some lunch. No, I'd better not give any details over the wire. I'm not sure yet that it's going to help us much. Good-bye sir."

Poole hung up the receiver and returned to the inventory book. A minute later Irene joined him.

"I've switched it back again," she said. "There was no one about so I listened in myself—hope you don't mind. I just wanted to know if you'd tell the Chief Constable I was a suspicious character."

"Well, as a matter of fact, you are. I don't know that I ought to be seen about with you," said Poole, smiling. "Come on, this furniture. Can you find the Benborough pieces in the inventory?"

"You read out Benborough's list and I'll look them up in the inventory and give you the values."

"An 8 ft. Chippendale mahogany secretaire bookcase.. £425
A 5 ft. mahogany pedestal knee-hole writing-table ... £210
A 3 ft. 9 in. George I. walnut mule chest £125
A 3 ft. 4 in. William and Mary walnut bureau bookcase £250
A 4 ft. 9 in. Chinese Chippendale settee £375
A pair of 4 ft. early 18th-century carved mahogany side-tables ... ... £1,100."

So the list went on; figure after figure of a size which flabbergasted Poole.

"I hadn't the faintest idea old furniture fetched such prices!" he said.

"Oh, it does; especially if it comes straight out of a house it's been in for hundreds of years. Mr. Cristen told me that Americans always like to know

where it comes from, and will pay any amount extra if they're satisfied that it comes from one of what they call the 'Historic Homes'—especially if it's got a crest on it, like those wheel-back chairs on the landing."

"Your Mr. Cristen seems to know a good deal about values," said Poole grimly. "I shall look forward to having a little talk with him—a very interesting little talk."

"Poor man!" said Irene sympathetically.

"Poor m . . . ! my hat, you women are beyond comprehension! Here's a chap robbing a man like Lord Grayle right and left, bribing his butler, selling good English furniture to Pittsburgh bacon-curers, or whatever they are—and you say—'Poor man'!"

"Well, but he was rather nice."

"What was he like?" asked Poole sharply.

"Why do you want to know?" asked Irene innocently.

Poole grinned.

"Tall, dark, oily black hair—or does it curl? A Ronald Colman moustache, a diamond tooth, manicured nails, a waisted coat, silk-handkerchief-not-for-use-hanging-out-of-the-breast-pocket. Does that describe him?"

"Exactly."

"I thought so. Now tell me what he's like."

"Short, sandy hair, tooth-brush moustache, rather bald, a little fat, inclined to be deaf, rather a pet."

"He'll look a pet in a broad-arrow suit with his bald head cropped," said Poole unkindly.

"I think you're a beast."

"I am. You know what they do to female convicts?"

"No; what?"

"They wash them in Scrubbs Ammonia for a start."

"Oh, but I'm quite clean already."

"Doesn't matter. It's the principle of the thing. Then they'll cut your hair round a pudding-basin."

"Like Colleen Moore? that would suit me."

"Then there are the clothes."

"Well?"

"Unbleached calico—next the skin."

"That'll do," said Irene sharply. "Don't you ever do any work?"

"This is work. Third Degree. You'll confess in a minute—King's Evidence—no unbleached calico."

The girl stamped her foot.

"I'm not going to listen to any more of this rot," she said. "Have you finished with these lists?"

"I'm taking them with me."

"Well, the inventory?"

"That, too."

"Well, anyhow, you won't want *me* any more. I've got some work to do if you haven't."

"You'll be Exhibit No. 4—in unbl . . ."

The leather-bound inventory, descending with vicious force on the detective's head, brought tears to his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I apologise. I'll see that Rayon du Sud is provided. I say; it'll be lunch in a minute. I must think."

"Are you going to tell Lady Grayle?"

"That's just what I want to think about. May I think here?"

"Yes, in that corner. Back to the room."

Poole laughed and threw himself into an armchair.

"D'you mind if I smoke?" he asked, holding out his case.

Irene shook her head.

"I'd better start doing without," she said. "I'm told they're not allowed in Holloway."

The detective lay back in his chair and drew great draughts of smoke into his lungs, letting them out after an incredibly long interval in little trickles down his nostrils. His eyes, fixed on a corner of the ceiling, blinked as the smoke curled into them, but he seemed unconscious of it. The fingers of his left hand beat a gentle tattoo on the arm of his chair.

From the writing-table, Irene Hollen watched him out of the corner of her eye, while she continued to address envelopes for a Mothers' Union meeting. The way his hair grew back from his temples was rather attractive. Of course, his nose was too long. Were his eyes grey or blue? they seemed to change.

Poole sprang up from his chair and stubbed the cigarette out on an ash-tray.

"It's a quarter past," he said. "We mustn't keep Lady Grayle waiting."

Their hostess was already in the hall when they appeared. A tray with glasses and cocktail shaker stood on a little table beside the fireplace.

"There you are," said Lady Grayle. "You're reasonably punctual for the modern generation."

She walked over to the table and, twisting the top off the shaker, poured a flame-coloured liquid into each of the three glasses. She handed one to Poole, who offered it to Irene. The girl shook her head.

"I don't like them," she said.

"Oh, Irene, I forgot. No, keep it, Mr. Poole." Lady Grayle picked up another of the glasses and sipped it appreciatively. She watched Poole with a twinkle in her eye.

"I don't believe you like it," she said. "Charles says it's like a hairdresser's shop. That's the almond. 'A Perfect Peach,' Henry's very latest."

She put down her glass empty.

"Pity to waste that one," she said, "but two are bad for the palate—so my husband always said, Mr. Poole."

"It won't be wasted," said Irene. "Moode'll drink it; he's fond of cocktails."

"How d'you know, Irene?" asked Lady Grayle.

"One can't help knowing," said the girl shortly.

The door of the dining-room opened and Moode appeared.

"Come on, children, lunch," said Lady Grayle.

A footman picked up the tray and carried it off to the pantry.

The sun was shining through the mullioned windows of the big dining-room, striking rich notes of colour from the magnificent Aubusson carpet, drawing mellow reflections from the age-old panelling, and giving light and life even to the faces of the long-dead Broghuns who stared down from lofty walls. The silver and glass on the polished table glittered, the red and yellow roses in the great bowl in the centre glowed with warmth; even Lady Grayle's tired face looked younger in the cheerful light, as her eyes sparkled with laughter and exhilaration. She was a wonderful woman, thought Poole, even if a rather terrible one. It was difficult to believe that only a few days

had passed since her adored husband had been snatched from her by a terrible death, and that she herself was faced by poverty and loneliness.

Fond as he was of good food, Poole hardly noticed what he was eating, so absorbed was he in watching his hostess and trying to return adequately the flashes of her witty tongue. The first course—an egg dish of some kind—was taken away and for a minute or two the three lunchers had the room to themselves.

Lady Grayle leaned across to her guest.

"Mr. Poole," she said, "do tell me what you think of Leward Marradine. I used to know him when he was a young man—and a very gay young man, too. I'm sure he hasn't grown out of all that; you must have got some good stories to tell about him. Or are you too discreet to speak of your respected Chief?"

Poole laughed.

"I don't think I'm more discreet than most people, Lady Grayle," he said, "but I don't know . . ."

He stopped abruptly and gripped the arm of his chair. From beyond the closed door leading to the service quarters, not very near but penetrating through wall and door, a high scream of human agony was tearing the stillness of the summer air. Again, and yet again, rising each time to an even shriller pitch of terror and pain, that cry tore through the startled silence, pierced the very hearts and brains of those who heard it.

There was a rush of feet, the door burst open, and one of the footmen flung himself into the room, panting and dishevelled, his eyes staring with horror.

"My lady!" he gasped. "Mr. Moode! It's terrible!"

XVIII • Why Now? Why So?

Poole thrust back his chair and ran out of the room, pushing aside the trembling footman. The screams had ceased but he needed no guide to take him to the scene of the tragedy; frightened girls were standing about the passage, a little knot of them outside the pantry door.

The detective pushed his way into the room and shut the door. William, the second footman, was kneeling by the contorted body of the butler, which

lay behind the pantry table. As he looked down into the agonised face of the dead man, there came to Poole's mind the vision of Ivy Tuller, as he had seen her a few hours ago, sobbing her heart out for this man's safety; he was thankful that she could not see him now.

He glanced quickly round. On the table beside him stood the tray of cocktail glasses and shaker. All three glasses were now empty and one stood on the table, away from the tray. Poole bent down and sniffed, without touching it; the pungent scent of almonds almost sickened him. He sniffed the others; each smelt of almond—the flavouring of the cocktail he had himself drunk, but here not nearly so strong as in the third glass.

He turned to the footman, who was standing watching him with mingled fear and fascination.

"How did it happen, William?" he asked. "Were you here?"

"No, sir, we went to the kitchen for the next course. Mr. Moode came in here alone. We heard him scream and ran in. He'd just fallen but he wasn't quite dead."

"He didn't say anything?"

"No, sir. Nothing but those awful screams." The boy's face was white as the recollection of that agony returned to him.

The door of the pantry opened and Lady Grayle came in. Her face was quite calm.

"Wait outside, William," muttered Poole. "Don't say anything to anyone. Don't let them hang about the passage, but wait there yourself."

He turned to Lady Grayle, who had knelt down beside the body and was feeling for the pulse.

"I think he's certainly dead," she said quietly, "but you probably ought to send for a doctor."

Poole nodded and, going to the door, spoke a word or two to William outside. Lady Grayle was standing now, looking down at the dead man. Poole thought her face looked gentler, almost younger, than he had seen it before; her fingers played with the lace of a handkerchief she was carrying, otherwise she was quite calm.

"You're not surprised, Lady Grayle?" asked the detective.

She shook her head.

"I expected it," she said quietly.

Poole looked at her without speaking for some time, then came to himself with a start.

“I must send for Superintendent Clewth,” he said. “I’m afraid I must lock this room till he comes.”

“Of course. Let me know if anything’s wanted when the doctor comes.”

Lady Grayle walked out of the pantry, stopping to speak a word of sympathy to William, on guard outside. Her graceful figure looked astonishingly young and beautiful as a shaft of sunlight from a window played on it.

“You needn’t wait here now, William,” said Poole. “Be in the hall and bring Dr. Calladine along as soon as he arrives.”

Going to the telephone instrument on the passage wall the detective put a call through. In a minute he heard Superintendent Clewth’s voice at the other end.

“Poole speaking, sir, from Tassart,” said the detective in a low voice. “It’s happened again. What you said might. Yes, sir; the butler. Can you come out at once? Shall I send the car back? quicker, sir, yes. And, sir! Are you there, sir? Can you bring an insufflator and a finger-pad? You’ll bring Dr. Hawkes, won’t you? I’ve sent for Dr. Calladine, but Dr. Hawkes ought to come too. No, sir. I’ll keep the door locked; I’ll be in there myself.”

He hung up the receiver and went back into the pantry, locking the door on the inside. Going back to the body, without moving it he carefully searched round it and in the pockets; the hands were half-clenched, and there was nothing in them. All round the floor Poole crawled on hands and knees, looking under the sink, under tables, chairs, and fender; in the empty fireplace; in the bucket of scraps under the sink. Rising to his feet with a frown, he looked again at the table, at the tray on it, shifted the tray slightly, and there, tucked away under the edge of it, lay a small glass phial.

Poole’s face cleared, but he left the little bottle untouched. Somebody tried the handle of the door, then knocked. Dropping his handkerchief lightly over the phial, Poole went to the door and unlocked it. Dr. Calladine and William stood outside.

“Come in, sir,” said Poole, stepping back.

Dr. Calladine came in, closing the door behind him. Poole, who, curiously enough, had not met Dr. Calladine before, was struck by the harshness and anxiety of his expression. The doctor was evidently greatly shocked by this second tragedy in his own district.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m Detective-Inspector Poole, New Scotland Yard, sir. I’ve been investigating the death of Lord Grayle for some days, and I happened to be

here when this happened."

Dr. Calladine had knelt down beside the body and was deftly examining it without disturbing its position.

"If you're investigating Lord Grayle's death, why haven't you been to see me?" he asked. "I'm his doctor."

"I understood from Superintendent Clewth, sir, that he had had a very complete interview with you, and that you had given him all the information you had to give."

Dr. Calladine sniffed, but made no further comment. He continued his examination.

"Is the police surgeon coming out?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, he's on his way here now."

"Then I won't move him. He's dead, of course," he bent down and sniffed the dead man's lips. "Pah! Hydrocyanic acid, I should say. Plenty of it, too."

He looked at the glasses on the table.

"What was in those?" he asked.

"Cocktail, sir. That one nearest you had the acid in it, I think. Don't touch it, sir, please."

"I wasn't born yesterday," replied Calladine testily. "D'you want me to wait?"

"If you don't mind, sir. In case Dr. Hawkes or the Superintendent want to ask you anything."

Poole did not think this was a suitable moment to question the doctor about his poison cupboard, though it would now certainly be necessary for him to do so some time. Fortunately, before the silence had become awkward the police car had arrived, bringing Superintendent Clewth and Dr. Hawkes. While Poole explained in an undertone to Clewth something of the circumstances, the two doctors knelt down and busied themselves with the body.

"Mind if we move him, Clewth?" asked Dr. Hawkes.

Poole whispered in his companion's ear. The Superintendent nodded.

"All right, sir," he said.

In a minute or two the examination was over.

"Can't say anything for certain, now," said Dr. Hawkes. "It's probably hydrocyanic acid poisoning, but there'll have to be a P.M. before one can be

certain. Whether it was self-administered or not is for you gentlemen to find out; we can't help you there."

"There's just one question I'd like to ask you, sir," said Poole. "How suddenly would he have become unconscious after drinking the stuff?"

"Unconscious? Almost instantaneously, even though he didn't die for two or three minutes."

"Would it be possible for him to put that glass back properly on the table as you see it?"

Dr. Hawkes looked at the glass, pondering his answer.

"Oh, yes, I think so," he said. "What do you say, Calladine?"

"I've never actually seen a hydrocyanic acid death, but I believe the book says that the victim is usually capable of performing a voluntary act—such as this."

"Those fingers, sir; they wouldn't have fastened round the stem of the glass automatically?"

"They evidently haven't," said Dr. Calladine.

"No, sir, they haven't. But—that wouldn't be the natural result—what you'd expect to find?"

"No, it wouldn't. The man's first sensation would be terror; he'd almost certainly put the glass down before the spasms came on. In any case, you can see for yourself what happened. What are you getting at, man?"

"I'm only asking for information, sir," replied Poole quietly.

"There's the ambulance," exclaimed Superintendent Clewth. "We may as well get the body off at once. You don't want it any more, Poole?"

"No, thank you, sir. Only the finger-prints."

"Can you do the P.M. at once, doctor?"

"Yes, I can manage that," said Hawkes. "You join me, Calladine?"

"What's the use?" said the latter. "Organs go straight up to London as they did last time, I suppose?"

"Yes, I suppose so; eh, Clewth? Still, this is different to hypnotic; there's burning in the mouth, and pretty sure to be gas in the brain and the pleural cavities. It's not without interest, Calladine."

"I leave it to you," said the local doctor sourly. "If you've finished with me, I'll be off. I've got patients to attend to."

He stumped out of the room. Dr. Hawkes shook his head.

“Something’s stung that man,” he said. “He used to be cheerful enough.”

With the help of a coloured pad and some shiny cards, excellent impressions were obtained of the dead man’s finger-prints. The body was then removed to the ambulance, and when the police surgeon had gone (he was to drive the Superintendent’s car back, as there was already one police car at Tassart) Clewth turned to the detective.

“What were you getting at about that glass?” he asked.

“I only want to know whether the poison could have been drunk out of it.”

“But you told me it was?”

“I said there was poison in it, sir. It’s possible somebody slipped a drop or two into it to make one think that’s how it was taken.”

“How else can it have been taken?”

“Straight out of this phial, perhaps,” said Poole, lifting his handkerchief from the table, “by force, possibly.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No, sir, I don’t, but if the finger action had been an instantaneous, involuntary clutch, I probably should have.”

Clewth shook his head.

“You’ve got a nasty mind, you know, my lad. I’ve said so before.”

He started to unscrew the top of the cocktail shaker.

“You won’t find any in there, sir, I don’t think,” said Poole.

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve drunk out of that myself.”

“Eh? What?”

Poole explained the circumstances of the luncheon invitation and the pre-luncheon cocktail.

“I saw Lady Grayle pour the stuff out of that myself,” he said, “into the three glasses. I had one, she had another, Miss Hollen didn’t drink hers. I saw the tray carried away too; the poison must have been put in after that. Besides, there’s the phial.”

“Where was the tray carried to?”

“In here, I suppose, but we’ll find out.”

He went to the door. The faithful William was outside.

“Come in, William. Now, tell us about this tray. It was you who took it away from the hall, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. I brought it straight in here, and set it where you see it now, sir.”

“There was one full glass on the tray; did you have any of it?”

“Oh, no, sir!”

Horrified indignation in the voice of William.

“Why not? Don’t you like it?”

“We never touched it, sir. If there was any left over, Mr. Moode had it.”

“Always?”

“Always, sir.”

Miss Hollen had been right then.

“And the tray, with the full glass, remained in here for some little time, then?”

“Yes, sir. When Mr. Moode announced lunch, James—that’s the first footman, sir—went into the kitchen to fetch the egg dish; the plates were already in the dining-room, on the hot-plate. As soon as I’d put the tray down in here, I went back into the dining-room to help with the waiting. We were all in there together while the first course was taken; then we cleared that, carried the plates and the dish in here for washing up after, and went into the kitchen for the second course. Mr. Moode came in here, as we went into the kitchen. Then we heard him cry out.”

“So while you were all three in the dining-room, the tray was standing on the table here by itself for ten minutes or so?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And anyone could have come in here during those ten minutes?”

“I suppose so, sir.”

“All right, William; that’ll do. No talking, mind; not a word.”

“If one’s to believe William, that leaves it rather open,” said Poole, when the door had closed behind the footman. “I can answer for Lady Grayle, Miss Hollen, and myself, but anybody else—it seems to me—might have come in here and dosed that cocktail.”

“What d’you want to find anyone else for?” asked Superintendent Clewth. “Isn’t it obvious enough?”

"Yes, I think it is, sir; but I suppose I've got an inquisitive turn of mind. I like to see what the possibilities are. Anyhow, the finger-prints ought to settle it."

"On the glasses? Yes."

"And on the phial," said Poole.

The two police officers set carefully to work to test the various articles for prints. A layer of fine powder was blown on to each glass in turn and on to the little phial, and then lightly blown off again, leaving distinct impressions of finger-prints on each.

"Are you an expert at reading these things?" asked Clewth.

"Well, we all have to go through a course of it, sir. I understand the principle, and I've done a little of it in practice, but, of course, I'm not an expert; I couldn't hunt up a print amongst thousands of others and recognise it with certainty. But I expect I can do all the identifying that'll be wanted here."

They examined first of all the single glass from which the poison had apparently been taken. It showed clear prints of a thumb and two fingers—prints which obviously corresponded with those taken from the dead man. It also showed fainter prints on the stem, which Poole thought would prove to be those of the footman who had prepared the tray; well-trained servants would not touch the bowls of these glasses.

On one of the other glasses were Poole's own prints above another set which showed on the lower part of the bowl.

"Those'll be Lady Grayle's," he said. "She handed me my glass."

On the third glass were similar prints to those on the lower part of the second and on the stems of these two were further prints which, though difficult to read, appeared to correspond with those on the stem of the first.

"Now for the phial," said Clewth. "That's the crux."

There, sure enough, were the same prints as those on the first glass, a thumb on one side, two fingers on the other, the fingers of the dead man.

Superintendent Clewth heaved a sigh of relief.

"That settles it," he said, "suicide after murder."

Without comment, Poole drew his pipe from his pocket, and, separating the mouthpiece from the bowl, wiped it carefully with his handkerchief; then, holding it as if it were the phial, pretended to tip the contents into the glass. With his other hand he took hold of the socket end and then blew powder over the shiny part he had been holding. The prints stood out clearly

on the dummy phial, and a careful comparison of their position with those on the real phial showed that these positions more or less corresponded.

Superintendent Clewth watched the operation with a grin.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. He held it all right."

"Well, I suppose as a matter of form we ought to check these other prints —Lady Grayle and the footmen, you think?"

"Would you like me to get them, sir?" asked Poole.

Clewth laughed.

"You can hardly eat the lady's lunch and then go and ask her for her finger-prints," he said. "No, my lad, I'll do the dirty work; you go on with the thinking."

Poole wondered whether this remark implied reproof to him for having accepted Lady Grayle's invitation, but veiled sarcasm was so foreign to the Superintendent's character that he rejected the idea.

He set himself out to think what this latest development implied. Obviously, fear of arrest. But why now? Probably he had been warned of the increasing police investigations into his affairs. Had Ivy Tuller known all along who he was and where he lived? Had she written to tell him of the visit which the police had paid to her? Had she even come over herself to Tassart—somehow, in the dead of night—to warn her lover? It should not be impossible to find that out.

Or had Moode noticed Miss Hollen—noticed them both, perhaps—checking the inventory and examining the furniture? Had that, combined with whatever his wife may have told him, been enough to warn the murderer that the net was closing round him?

Then, as to the poison itself? Why a different poison? Had the modest amount of scopolamine which, combined with the di-dial, had been enough to kill poor Lord Grayle, been all that the murderer had got? all that he had been able to distill from the Deadly Nightshade? Was that how he had got the scopolamine? He had not presumably been able to make his own hydrocyanic acid; or had he? Poole did not know how that was made or what it was made of. But it seemed much more likely that the murderer had obtained his supply of both poisons from some chemist, or doctor. Doctor; yes, he must have that talk with Dr. Calladine.

Again, if there had to be a different poison, why hydrocyanic acid? Why such a painful death? Why . . . ?

At this point his meditations were interrupted by the return of Superintendent Clewth.

"Four very nice lots," said the latter, laying a series of cards out on the pantry table.

"Four, sir?"

"Yes, the two footmen, Lady Grayle, and the little secretary; she seemed keen on having hers taken; nice young lady that."

"Quite," replied Poole casually.

"She asked me if it were true that female convicts had their hair cropped," continued the Superintendent placidly.

"We'd better check these prints, sir," said Poole hurriedly, bending down to examine the cards. He felt none too certain where Irene Hollen's enquiries would have ceased.

The prints proved to be as Poole had expected; Lady Grayle's on the same glass as his own, and on the third glass; William's on the stems of all three glasses. Miss Hollen's prints were nowhere identifiable.

"That all works out very nicely," said Superintendent Clewth. "Now we can finish up the first inquest, and have the one on Moode, and it'll all be cleared up, and you'll go back to London with another feather in your cap."

"A feather in my cap? After allowing the fellow to commit suicide? After you'd warned me, too, sir."

"Oh, come, my lad," said Clewth kindly. "You couldn't help that. I quite agreed with you that you hadn't enough evidence to arrest him on. But you were getting it; you were close on his tail; you deserve all the credit for that."

Poole shook his head.

"It's very kind of you to put it like that, sir," he said, "but I can't feel satisfied. I don't know half as much about the case as I ought to."

"Good Lord, man; what's biting you? What don't you know?"

"I don't know why he did it," said Poole doggedly, "nor how he did it."

"Why he killed himself?"

"No; why he killed Lord Grayle. I don't know how he got the poison; I don't know how he knew about combining di-dial and scopolamine, nor how he knew that Lord Grayle would take a second dose of di-dial, just at the right time, and—I don't know why he killed Lord Grayle at all!"

"To get the five hundred pounds from the will!"

"I don't believe it, sir. Moode was spending money right and left, and unless I'm much mistaken he was getting all the money he wanted from Benborough—though just why they should pay him I don't know. I haven't told you about the furniture yet, sir, but there's been a big swindle going on. Moode was drawing money from Benborough, I'm certain; why should he put his neck in the noose to get another five hundred pounds?"

XIX • "I Expected It"

Poole thought that he ought to go and see Lady Grayle. In the absence of her son, there was no man to advise her, and, though she was probably quite capable of doing without advice or help, it would be only civil to offer it. The best way to do this, he thought, would be through her secretary, so to Miss Hollen's room he went. The girl was nominally at work at her writing-table, but Poole thought she appeared glad to have someone to talk to.

"This is pretty awful," she said. "What does it all mean, Mr. Poole?"

The detective shook his head.

"I'm afraid the official formula for that is 'the police have no statement to make at the moment,' " he replied.

Irene looked crestfallen.

"I suppose I oughtn't to have asked you," she said.

"I suppose you wouldn't have been human if you hadn't," replied Poole with a smile. "I came to ask you to find out whether Lady Grayle wanted anything—whether there was anything I could do for her. I suppose her son will come and look after things, won't he?"

"I don't know," replied Irene. "Dr. Calladine's with her now."

"Dr. Calladine? She's not ill, is she?"

"Oh no. I suppose he's just condoling—that sort of thing."

Poole thought for a moment.

"Do they know each other well?" he asked.

"Well, he's been doctor here for ages."

"But are they friends? personal friends?"

"I think so. She calls him 'Norman.' "

"Does she? And he calls her . . . ?"

"I've never heard him call her anything but 'Lady Grayle.' I suppose he thinks that in their respective positions that's more suitable."

"Well, if they're friends and he's with her now, there's no need for me to worry. How has she taken this, Miss Hollen?"

The girl frowned.

"I can't make her out," she said. "She seems perfectly calm—almost cheerful. I knew she didn't like Moode, but . . . I suppose she'd say it was hypocritical to pretend to be sorry when she's not."

"Perhaps so, but one would think it must be a shock. When we heard that scream—I didn't look at her—did you notice how she took it?"

"Not at once. I was so flabbergasted at first that I don't think I looked at anything. Then you rushed out of the room, and I suppose I watched you. Then, I think, I looked at her. She was sitting quite calmly in her place, looking out of the window; she hardly seemed to have noticed anything—not in the least surprised. Then she got up and walked quietly out of the room towards the pantry. Did you see her?"

"Yes," said Poole slowly, "I saw her."

Recollection of that short scene in the pantry was coming back to him. It focussed chiefly upon that calm answer to his question: "I expected it." Obviously that meant that all along she had suspected the butler of murdering her husband; her calmness now, the look—almost of relief—on her face could be understood if that were the case. But if she had suspected him why had she not said so? Why had she done nothing to help the police in their investigations? Was there anything which she did not wish them to find out?

What else had she said in her short visit to the pantry? Only that the man was almost certainly dead, but that a doctor ought to be sent for. He (Poole) had gone to the door and spoken to William, telling him to ring up Dr. Calladine. When he turned back into the room, Lady Grayle was standing looking down at the body; before that she had been kneeling beside it. She was standing, twisting a handkerchief in her hand. It was then that she had said she "expected it." Why?

Suddenly Poole felt the blood drain away from his heart, leaving him cold and shaken.

Had she meant *that*?

With a start, Poole came to himself. All this time that he had been thinking—not that the thoughts had taken long to come—he had been standing in Miss Hollen's room, and the girl herself was standing beside him, watching—no doubt—the expression on his face.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Hollen," he said hurriedly. "I'm wool-gathering. I must go and help Superintendent Clewth."

"What were you thinking of?" asked the girl in a low voice. "Why did you go so white?"

Poole looked at her. He could not put her off now with a flippant answer; she was so obviously moved herself.

"I'll try and see you again before I go," he said. "I can't say anything now, because it's so—uncertain; it may be nothing at all. Don't worry, Miss Hollen; it'll be all right."

Half-unconsciously he held out his hand. Irene gripped it tightly for a minute; she said nothing, but her lip trembled slightly as her eyes tried to read the expression on his face. Poole wondered whether the same thought—the same terrible thought—had come to her as to him.

Out in the hall, he stopped and tried to collect his thoughts. He did not want to spring this wild idea on Superintendent Clewth unless there were real grounds to support it. He must think them out.

Lady Grayle had said that she "expected" the butler's death. Although at the time he had interpreted that as meaning that she expected him to commit suicide, there was obviously a second interpretation possible—that she had expected him to die, because she had herself arranged that he should! Would not that interpretation explain her failure to tell the police that she suspected Moode? her lack of interest in Poole's investigations? Simply, she had intended to take the law into her own hands!

If there was one thing about this case and the characters connected with it of which the detective did feel certain, it was that Lady Grayle had been passionately devoted to her husband and completely heart-broken by his death. Was she not just the type—brave, hard, reckless, possessing (Poole remembered) even the traditional Italian blood in her veins—just the type to take the law into her own hands—to revenge her husband in her own way? And what a revenge! Punishment to fit the crime! Poison for poison! "Hemlock for hemlock!" And not only poison—not the hypnotic that had given her husband a comparatively peaceful death—but a burning, searing poison that meant death in untold agony. A terrible thought, indeed—unspeakable, inhuman cruelty—but what a revenge!

That look of calm unconcern, almost of relief, that both he and Irene Hollen had noticed on her face after the scream of agony which could have but one meaning for her—that her plan had succeeded—did not that mean that her mind, perhaps even her soul, was now at rest?

If this was the truth, how had it been brought about? How had she, almost under his very eyes, put poison into the cocktail that she presumably knew Moode would drink?

Poole thought over again that scene, here, in the hall, only a bare two hours ago. With his own eyes he had seen Lady Grayle pour the cocktail from the shaker into the three glasses; he had seen the tray, with the full, untasted glass, carried away by William; if she had added poison to it between the pouring out and taking away he *must* have seen. She could not have added the poison *after* William took it away, because he himself was with her in the dining-room all the time.

It remained then, that she must have put the poison into the glass *before* he and Miss Hollen appeared on the scene, *before* pouring out the cocktail. She had then handed a glass—a 'safe' glass—to him, Poole, who had offered it to Miss Hollen, who refused it. He had then kept that glass himself and Lady Grayle had taken the second 'safe' glass, leaving the poisoned one on the tray. Of course, Lady Grayle knew that her secretary did not like cocktails; but supposing that the girl had for the nonce decided to drink one that morning, 'for effect,' perhaps? Why, then Lady Grayle would have said that, after all, she wasn't going to have one herself, and by quoting her husband's dictum as to a second cocktail spoiling the palate, would have prevented either of the others drinking that third glass.

Out, then, on the tray, that third glass was logically and mathematically bound to go; that glass of death carried in all ignorance and innocence by the harmless William. She knew, no doubt, the custom about that cocktail perquisite of the butler's; such traditions hold fast in a household like Tassart to an extent that would be incredible to anyone not accustomed to them. It was practically a cast-iron certainty—and yet, what a risk! What a ghastly risk to take with the life of an innocent boy. Supposing that William had for once defied tradition and drunk that cocktail! or even only sipped it! Yet was it a risk? Moode had seen the tray carried out, had seen the full glass on it; and William knew that Moode had seen it; it would have been 'as much as his place (his life, had he but known it) was worth' to touch it.

The whole incident was worked out with fiendish cleverness, and almost mathematical certainty—ignoring, of course, the always possible happening of the unforeseeable. There remained the question of the 'vehicle'; was the

poison, with its familiar almond flavour, chosen because of the cocktail, itself similarly flavoured? or had the cocktail—that particular cocktail—been ordered because it would mask the flavour of the poison? Probably that would never be known; three people might have been aware of how that cocktail came to be in use at Tassart: the master, the mistress, and the man—two of those were dead, and the third was unlikely to tell.

Anyhow, that got the poison into the pantry, ready for the butler to drink. But how had the appearance of suicide been effected? Nothing, now that he was looking for it, could be simpler or more obvious. After pouring the acid from its phial into the empty cocktail glass, Lady Grayle had (might have, it was only theory so far) wrapped it in a handkerchief, after wiping her own prints from it, and put it in her pocket. She was wearing, Poole remembered, a light grey jumper, which presumably had pockets. After the scream—the signal of death—was heard, she had quietly followed him into the pantry and knelt down beside the body. She had then suggested to him to telephone for the doctor—knowing the telephone to be outside in the passage. The presence of William outside had obviated the necessity for his telephoning himself, but he had had to speak to William, and she had had ample time to press the phial between or against the butler's fingers (how ably she had done it, getting the marks in the right position) and then slip the phial under the lip of the tray, where it would almost certainly not have been looked for so far, but must be found eventually.

When he had turned back into the room she was standing, looking down at the body, with (he remembered now) the very handkerchief that had enwrapped the phial in her hand. Then she had told him, with sublime audacity, that she had "expected" the butler's death! And he, though he had actually been on the look-out for a 'planted suicide' (without, it was true, any reason to expect it) had been deceived!

The sound of a car outside roused Poole from his reflections. A glance out of the window showed Superintendent Clewth in the police car driving round from the stable-yard. Poole went out to meet him.

"I've got all those glasses and things carefully packed up in this box," said Clewth, pointing to a wooden case at the back of the car. "I ought to be off now and let the Chief know what's been happening. Are you coming with me, my lad?"

Poole shook his head.

"I want to have a talk to Dr. Calladine first, sir," he said. "I must try and find out where all these poisons have been coming from. What do you think about another inspection of his poison cupboard?"

Superintendent Clewth looked doubtful.

"We shall be getting a bit unpopular if we do that too often," he said, "unless, of course, we've got something to go on."

The Superintendent considered the problem for a minute.

"Look here," he said at last, "you use your tact and see if you can get the doctor to *ask* for an inspection. That shouldn't be too much for a chap with a University education."

Poole stared at him.

"How d'you know I've had a University education?" he asked.

The Superintendent laughed.

"Duty of the police to know things, my lad—even the County Police. Off you go, Peters."

The car began to move.

"I'll warn the P.A.—you telephone if he's wanted. And I'll have a hunt made through all the chemists in Windon and Paslow. I'll send the car back for you," were Clewth's parting words.

Poole stood on the steps of the front door and watched the car disappear across the park. He was becoming very much attached to the kind-hearted Superintendent. A step behind him made him turn round. Dr. Calladine was coming out of the front door.

"Ah, doctor, I wanted to have a talk with you," said Poole.

"You must find some other time, then," said Dr. Calladine. "I've got my rounds to do."

"Are you walking across the park, sir?"

"I am."

"Then, with your leave, I'll come with you," said the detective, falling into step and not bothering to wait for the "leave"—or his hat.

Dr. Calladine walked on in silence. Poole realised that he had got to take the plunge, though he didn't much look forward to it.

"I'm a bit bothered as to where all these poisons are coming from, sir," he said.

The doctor still walked on in silence. Evidently there was going to be no volunteering of information from him. To get at what he wanted, the detective would have to show some of his hand.

"From what's happened to-day, sir," he said, "one's bound to consider the possibility of Moode having been responsible for Lord Grayle's death and of having now committed suicide."

"Oh, that has occurred to you?" There was an unmistakable note of sarcasm in the doctor's voice, but the detective was not to be drawn by that.

"You'll understand that I'm speaking in confidence, sir?"

"You haven't said anything yet that everyone else isn't saying."

"Perhaps not, sir, but I'm going to, and I must ask you again to regard it as confidential."

"Of course, man, of course. Go on; don't be so mysterious."

"I told you I wanted to find out where these poisons were coming from, sir. Somebody at Tassart—and at the moment it looks like Moode himself—has had in his possession lately not only hydrocyanic acid but also some stuff called scopolamine."

"Scopolamine!" Dr. Calladine stopped dead and stared at the detective. "What are you talking about? You mean di-dial! Scopolamine's Hyoscine—something quite different."

"I mean scopolamine, sir," returned Poole quietly. "Lord Grayle didn't die from an overdose of di-dial, but from a combination of di-dial and scopolamine."

The detective thought he had never seen a man look more utterly dumbfounded than did Dr. Calladine at this announcement. For more than a minute he was completely silent, his mouth open in a stare of astonishment; when he did speak, his blustering manner had disappeared.

"Tell me about it, please," he said at last.

Poole told him of Sir Hulbert Lemuel's report and something of the reasons for its suppression at the preliminary inquest. Dr. Calladine was particularly interested at the quantities—the smallness of the quantities—of the two poisons that had been found in the body.

"They must have been taken almost simultaneously to make a killing dose," he said.

"Within three hours of one another, Sir Hulbert thought," replied Poole.

"And did . . . whoever poisoned Lord Grayle . . . give him both doses?" asked the doctor.

"That's what's puzzling me, sir. Unless he did I don't see how he could have known that the scopolamine would be fatal—in that quantity. But where did he get the stuff? That's what I want to ask you about, sir. You

won't think I'm making an offensive suggestion, I hope, but is it at all conceivable that anyone could have got at the key of your poison cupboard without your knowing it?"

"What d'you mean?"

"I wondered whether something of this kind might have happened. If you've ever stayed at Tassart Hall, the butler—or someone—might have had an opportunity of taking an impression of your key. Then, if he had an excuse for calling at your house, and was able to be alone in your consulting room, he might have taken what he wanted from your cupboard. Was Moode a patient of yours, sir? Did he ever come to see you—in your consulting room?"

"He has sometimes, but what of it? You don't suppose I keep stuff like scopolamine about me, do you?"

The detective was rather taken aback.

"I . . . I understood, sir, that it was a drug commonly used for maternity work . . . and would almost certainly be kept by anyone in country practice."

"Rubbish!" said Calladine, with a return to his old manner. "I'm not a society *accoucheur*; I don't go in for fancy tricks. A whiff of chloroform's all I ever use."

"I see, sir. And . . . the hydrocyanic acid, d'you keep that?"

"Good Lord, man, I'm not a vet! What should I keep stuff like that for?"

"I'm afraid I'm very ignorant about poisons, sir," replied the detective, "and what a doctor is likely to keep. I understood that both of these were in fairly common use."

"And you don't believe me when I say I haven't got 'em, eh? You'd better come and have a look for yourself."

Poole smiled.

"I'm afraid I shouldn't be much the wiser, sir," he said.

"Well, get your public analyst to come along and do it then. He'll know his way about my cupboard soon; he turned it upside down last week."

"That's very good of you, sir. I'll do that then."

Not so bad, thought the detective, with an inward smile—though hardly attributable to a "University education."

They had by now arrived at the doctor's house.

"You can telephone from here," growled Calladine, "and then sit on guard so that I shan't play any tricks. You won't want me, eh? I must go my

rounds."

"If you'll just show me where you keep your stuff, sir."

"In that cupboard—over the basin."

"None anywhere else?"

Dr. Calladine threw a ring of keys on to the desk.

"There you are," he said. "Hunt the whole damn place over, but for God's sake don't make more mess than you can help."

Poole went to the telephone, and Dr. Calladine, taking a light coat from a peg, went out to his garage. A minute or two later the detective heard the chug-chug of heavily carbonised cylinders; even the doctor's car, as it snorted down the village street, seemed to be expressing its indignation at the proceedings of an inquisitive police.

Within twenty minutes the public analyst employed by the County Council arrived, and, with the help of the detective, went through the contents of the poison cupboard with minutest care. The doctor's word was taken literally, and the consulting room ransacked from floor to ceiling. There was no trace of either scopolamine or hydrocyanic acid.

XX • Conference

Poole returned to Windon with the County Council analyst. It was a glorious afternoon, and the lack of a hat did not bother him; he did not want to go back to Tassart Hall and risk meeting Lady Grayle until he had discussed the situation with the Chief Constable of the county. For on that luckless individual fell the responsibility of deciding whether, on the information which the Scotland Yard man was able to give him, an arrest should be made without further delay. Major Faide might, of course—and probably would—consult the Director of Public Prosecutions, but the final responsibility rested with him.

The Chief Constable was in his office when Poole got back to Windon, and after Superintendent Clewth had joined them, the conference began. The detective repeated the chain of thought that had passed through his mind that afternoon, and the two County Police officials listened to it with growing consternation. Poole's account of his conversation with the doctor and his

fruitless search for the poisons passed—as an anti-climax—almost unnoticed.

Major Faide sat with his head in his hands, in deepest gloom.

"Good God!" he muttered, and again: "Good God! How awful! How unspeakably awful!"

There was silence for several minutes. The two subordinates watched their chief with silent sympathy. They could well understand his feelings.

At last Major Faide roused himself and squared his shoulders to meet the crisis.

"Well," he said, "what do you suggest, Poole? Arrest?"

For another half-hour the three man talked, and then, as a result of their discussion, Poole put a call through to Chief Constable Thurston at Scotland Yard. After a short and guarded telephone conversation, Thurston promised to ring through again in twenty minutes, and a little before the expiration of that time his call came through.

"Yes, that's all right, Poole," he said. "Sir Graham will see Major Faide at his house at half-past six, if you can get there by then. Don't be late if you can help it, because he's got a dinner engagement. Sir Hulbert Lemuel will come along if he can, and I'll meet you there anyhow. 97, Rutland Terrace. 6.30. Right; good-bye."

Major Faide and Poole had no difficulty in keeping their appointment; the Scotch express picked them up at Windon at 5.15, and deposited them at Marylebone barely an hour later.

Sir Graham France, Director of Public Prosecutions, had had a brilliant career at the Criminal Bar before accepting his present responsible office. His name, as leader for the Crown in a score of *causes célèbres*, had been familiar to almost every household in Britain, and, though now he was no longer in the limelight, his reputation in his own profession as an officer of shrewd judgment, complete impartiality, and unshakable determination had been surpassed by none of his predecessors. He was also celebrated for a sharp tongue and downright manner that made him almost as much feared as he was respected. He was particularly inclined to apply these weapons to the Chief Constables of County Constabularies who had occasion to consult him from time to time and some of whom were, in Sir Graham's opinion, lacking in deference for the distinguished office which he held—a lack which seldom continued for very long.

Sir Graham received his visitors in his study, which he had had arranged for the occasion to resemble as closely as possible his own office. Chairs

were arranged in a semi-circle in front of a massive writing-table, at which he himself would be seated; by this device the atmosphere would be entirely businesslike, he himself would be in a position to control—able to break up the meeting whenever he wished—and free from any suggestion of the position of a host who might have to conform to the conventions of that position—conventions which usually involved undesirable delay.

The Director received Major Faide pleasantly enough, but lost no time in assigning to him one of the chairs—well covered, but definitely not easy chairs—which faced him. Poole took a chair beside Major Faide, whilst Chief Constable Thurston resumed the seat which he was already occupying at the side of the writing-table. One chair remained vacant, as Sir Hulbert Lemuel, the Home Office analyst, had not yet arrived.

"Chief Constable Thurston has already given me the outlines of this case, so far as they are in his possession, Major Faide," began Sir Graham. "I understand that there have been some further developments of which he is not aware, and that you want to consult me as to the advisability of arrest and prosecution. Am I correct?"

"That's quite right, Sir Graham," said the Chief Constable of Brackenshire, who was making a gallant but not very successful effort to conceal his nervousness. "I am sorry to say that a very serious development has taken place this afternoon, involving another death and a very grave suspicion as to whether a . . . er . . . person of the highest . . . the best . . . that's to say whether one of the most distinguished members of our county . . . may not be . . . implicated."

The D.P.P. frowned. He hated beating about the bush.

"D'you mean that you know who killed Lord Grayle?" he asked sharply.

"No, not that, but we . . . Inspector Poole has very grave suspicions as to who killed Lord Grayle's butler this afternoon."

Sir Graham looked at Poole for the first time. Chief Constable Thurston murmured a word in his ear and the great man nodded.

"Well?" he said.

Once again Poole repeated his account of the events of the afternoon, from the drinking of the cocktails to the search of Dr. Calladine's consulting room, but omitting in the first place his own reflections, which had led up to the calling of this conference. He told his story well—as well as ever he could, because he knew that his own career might be affected, favourably or otherwise, by the impression he made upon the Director of Public Prosecutions. He noticed, with some uneasiness but without surprise, that

Sir Graham's eyebrows went up at the very beginning of his story, when he told of Lady Grayle's invitation to himself to luncheon, and his own acceptance. The slightest suspicion of bumptiousness on his own part would, he knew, have an extremely harmful effect upon the opinion of a man like Sir Graham, and he went out of his way to pitch his own tune in a modest key.

Sir Graham listened without interruption. Then:

"Well? Where's your suspect?" he asked.

With that cue, Poole proceeded to give his own 'reflections'—the chain of thought which had led him, unwillingly but unhesitatingly, to the conclusion that Lady Grayle had deliberately taken the law into her own hands and poisoned Moode in revenge for his murder of her husband. It was the second time within a few hours that Poole had related this chain of thought, and he felt himself that it grew more convincing every time he repeated it.

"Well?" said Sir Graham when he had finished. "What's your trouble?"

"The question is, sir, whether we have enough evidence to justify an arrest."

"What more d'you want? You say you practically saw her put the stuff into the glass yourself—and plant the phial afterwards."

"I beg your pardon, sir, no; I didn't quite say that. I didn't see her put the poison in the glass; I only conclude that that must have been how and when it got there. I didn't see her get Moode's finger-prints on the phial or put the phial under the tray, but that is when and how I believe it was done. On the other hand there is no direct evidence at all to support my theory. It seems to me that unless we can trace the poison to her, the defence would say that the suicide theory is just as likely as mine."

"Well, trace the poison to her, then."

"Yes, sir, but when that's done there's still a great deal we don't know."

"What don't you know?"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Sir Graham sharply.

The butler appeared.

"Sir Hulbert Lemuel to see you, sir. I understand he has an appointment, sir."

"Show him in."

Sir Graham rose from his chair to greet the Home Office analyst.

"Glad you could come, Lemuel," he said. "You know Major Faide? Chief Constable of Brackenshire? Thurston, of course, you know."

Sir Hulbert shook hands with Major Faide and Mr. Thurston, and gave a friendly nod to Poole. Sir Graham indicated the vacant chair in front of the desk; Sir Hulbert ignored it and sank into a leather armchair on the far side of the empty fireplace.

"Call me in when you want me, France," he said calmly. "Mind if I smoke?"

He took a cigarette from a thin gold case and lit it, flicking the match into the grate. Sir Hulbert knew the little ways of the D.P.P., and was not going to be overawed by them; in his own sphere he was as big a man as Sir Graham.

With an unconscious frown the latter turned to Poole.

"Go on," he said shortly, "what don't you know?"

"I don't know what her motive was for killing this man."

"But, my good man, you told me ten minutes ago that she killed him to avenge her husband; a melodramatic idea, but I suppose there still are people who would do it."

"Yes, sir; that was the idea in my mind, but why does she think that Moode killed her husband? Or rather, how does she *know* that he killed him? Because, I'm sure she does know. Ever since I've been on the case she has shown no interest at all in what I've been doing, she hasn't questioned me as to how I'm getting on, or what I've found out, or what I suspect. She's answered all my questions; given me all the information I've asked for, but she's not shown the smallest interest or curiosity. That's so unusual in my experience—people, women especially, generally plague one all the time with questions about what one is doing—it's so unusual, that I've felt all along as if she must know what had happened. I've asked her, but she's put me off—never quite a direct denial of knowledge—but just turning my questions aside. She's certainly a very clever woman, if she was doing it deliberately. Well, sir, if she knows how and why Moode killed her husband she knows more than I do."

"Then why not ask her?"

"If we do that now, sir, we shall have to caution her—that's to say, if you agree that she probably committed the second murder."

"You think she wouldn't speak if she was cautioned?"

"It hardly seems likely, sir—it would tell against her, if she had knowledge of the first murder."

Sir Graham France fidgeted in his chair. Time was getting on; he was due at dinner—a particularly attractive dinner—in twenty minutes. Still, he had got his work to do. He concentrated his mind, in an effort to dispose of the problem quickly.

"I take it," he said, "that you're afraid that if you can't prove that Moode killed Lord Grayle, or prove that she knew or suspected or thought that he had killed Lord Grayle, your case against her might break down for lack of motive? Is that so?"

"That is so, sir. That and the lack of proof as to possession of the poison."

"Well, then, you must wait till you *can* prove that Moode murdered Lord Grayle. You suspect him, don't you?"

"I suspect him, sir, yes, because he seems to be the only person who could have put the scopolamine into Lord Grayle's tea. But, as in the second case, I don't know how he got the scopolamine—unless Sir Hulbert can help me there—and . . ."

"What's that?" asked Sir Hulbert, looking up from the *Spectator*, in which he had been apparently absorbed. "How can I help?"

Poole turned his chair, so as to speak to Sir Hulbert, which involved turning his back upon Sir Graham, but that couldn't be helped.

"I don't know whether Mr. Thurston has told you, sir, but I found a quantity of Belladonna—Deadly Nightshade—growing close to Moode's house. And I found that he'd been playing about with plants of various kinds; he's got dried herbs hanging on the wall of a workshop he's built himself, and a book on herbalism and a lot of bottles and jars and apparatus that didn't convey very much to me. I wondered whether it was at all possible that that was where the scopolamine had come from—whether Moode could have extracted the poison from the plants. When you first told us about the scopolamine you told us that one of the great dangers about vegetable poisons was that many of them came from plants that grew wild and could be got at by anybody."

Sir Hulbert frowned and tapped his teeth.

"Yes, I remember saying that," he said at last. "I'm not sure that I wasn't talking rather loosely."

He got up from his armchair and paced once or twice up and down Sir Graham's study, then came to a halt in front of the empty fireplace, his

hands clasped behind his back—an attitude familiar to pupils to whom he was about to deliver a lecture.

"It's quite true," he said, "that Belladonna and one or two allied vegetable growths do contain elements of poison in dangerous quantities and are accessible to all and sundry. But their danger lies more in the berries and seeds, which can easily be eaten—often are eaten accidentally, or—especially in the case of datura seeds—deliberately mixed with other seedy substances, such as figs, rather than in the extraction of the atropic aklaloids from the plants themselves. Belladonna, for instance—which, as you say, grows wild and is quite common in some parts of England—contains from 2 to 7 per cent. of atropic alkaloids, mostly hyoscyamine. The juice can be expressed after mascerating the leaves, but it's a messy business and I should say myself that only a qualified—or rather a trained—chemist could hope to get a sufficient potency in a small quantity to be any use for homicidal purposes. Your bunches of herbs, *qua* herbs, wouldn't be any use for that purpose, though, of course, they might simply be some of the plants left over and gone dry. You haven't got any of them, I suppose?"

"No, sir. I wasn't thinking of them at the time. I hadn't seen the nightshade then. Or rather, I had seen it, but hadn't realised what it was. I could get the stuff now, I daresay. Unless, of course, he destroyed it after hearing I'd been to his house."

"Better get it, but I don't set much store by it. By the way, Inspector, I suppose it *was* deadly nightshade that you saw? What did it look like?"

"A sort of climbing plant, sir, with purple and yellow flowers—rather like a potato."

Sir Hulbert threw himself down into his armchair with a shout of laughter.

"My dear man," he exclaimed, "that's not deadly nightshade at all! That's bittersweet—*Solanum dulcamara*. That's a popular fallacy peculiar to nursery maids and, apparently, policemen!"

Poole flushed hotly. His stock, he realised, had slumped. Sir Graham was frowning, Chief Constable Thurston's face was expressionless, and Major Faide looked unhappy.

"The true Belladonna," continued Sir Hulbert blandly, "is a tall, sturdy plant—not a climber at all—with bell-shaped flowers of pinky lavender colour. However, I take it that that was not what you saw?"

"No, sir," said the abashed detective.

“Then we needn’t bother about that as the source of the scopolamine. It was a hundred to one against it, anyhow.”

“Have you got any theory as to the source, Lemuel?” asked Sir Graham.

The analyst shrugged his shoulders.

“Only what I’ve already suggested to Poole,” he said. “The most common use of this drug is for maternity work; most doctors keep it for that.”

“Dr. Calladine hadn’t got any, sir,” said Poole, “he said he only used chloroform. We searched his cupboard—in fact, his whole consulting room—and his poison book, but there wasn’t a trace of it.”

Sir Hulbert laughed.

“I shouldn’t regard that as conclusive,” he said. “Still . . .”

Sir Graham France had been glancing anxiously at his clock.

“Yes, yes,” he broke in, “we needn’t go into all that. You must make further efforts to trace the scopolamine to the man Moode, Inspector, and the hydrocyanic acid to Lady Grayle. When we have those facts we can proceed with the case. In the meantime . . .”

He pushed back his chair.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” interposed Poole, “but we have no satisfactory motive in the case of Moode’s murder of Lord Grayle.”

“But I thought you said . . . or Chief Constable Thurston said . . . something about furniture being stolen?”

He turned to Thurston, who looked at Poole.

“Yes, that’s quite true, sir. I believe that this firm, Benborough, to whom the Tassart furniture has been going for repair, has been copying it and sending the copies back to Tassart while they keep, and presumably sell, the originals. Moode, the butler, is undoubtedly in it in some way; he told me a lie about it and gave a pretty thin excuse when I found out that it was a lie and taxed him with it. But I can’t make out just what his part is or why they should have been paying him. They undoubtedly have been paying him considerable sums lately; he’s been spending a lot of money on a woman he’s keeping in Paslow.”

“Well, but what have the firm—Benborough, or whatever you call them—got to say about it?” asked Sir Graham irritably.

“They haven’t been asked yet, sir.”

"Haven't been asked?" The Public Prosecutor leant forward and struck his writing-table angrily with the flat of his hand. "D'you mean to say, Inspector, that you've got us all here in conference—myself, and Sir Hulbert Lemuel, and Chief Constable Thurston—and you haven't got your facts complete? Here's a first-class line of enquiry dangling in front of you—and you haven't looked at it? God bless my soul, what's your force coming to, Mr. Thurston, if a bit of scamped work like this . . ."

But this was more than Major Faide could stand. Whatever his limitations, nobody had ever yet accused the Chief Constable of Brackenshire of lack of loyalty to his own men; Detective-Inspector Poole was not a member of the Brackenshire Constabulary, but he was attached to them for the purpose of this case, and Faide was not going to sit quiet and listen to him being abused by anybody, however exalted his position.

"Excuse me, Sir Graham," he said. "This conference is my responsibility entirely. I asked for it. Inspector Poole has had no opportunity of following up the Benborough business since it was discovered. The important development in that line only occurred this morning—Inspector Poole's own discovery that there were faked pieces among the furniture sent back to Tassart by Benborough. Immediately after that, the death of the butler occurred, and Poole has been engaged on that ever since. He has done extremely well—extremely well!"

Chief Constable Thurston was listening to this with a smile—a discreet smile—of the most complete satisfaction on his face. This was a man whom he could appreciate; a man after his own heart. He looked across at Poole and his eyelid quivered.

"I asked for this conference," continued Major Faide, "because I funked the responsibility of leaving a poisoner loose for one day longer, without advice. There have been two murders committed already—by different persons, it's true—but I distrust poisoners, and I didn't feel at all sure of myself in leaving this woman free. God help me; it's an awful business."

Major Faide clasped his forehead between his shut fists.

"Here's the wife of one of our oldest and most respected families" (the Chief Constable was getting a little mixed, but nobody could mistake his meaning)—"a woman of great charm and character; a woman I've admired—we've all admired—for years—suspected of poisoning. . . . I tell you, France, it's upset me, this . . . upset me a lot. I want advice. Am I to let her loose till we've got evidence, or am I to take her at once? Poole's perfectly right; we *haven't* got enough evidence. Think of the to-do there'll be if we charge her and can't produce a case! Wife of a Deputy-Lieutenant! a

peeress! On the other hand, think of what'll be said if she poisons someone else, or takes it herself! I want advice, I tell you, and I'm not ashamed to own it."

Sir Hulbert Lemuel was lying back in his armchair, listening to this outburst, with a smile of amused interest on his lips. This was just what appealed to his medical—his psychological mind; a simple soul, stirred to its depths, shaken by varied emotions of fear, outraged conventionality, sympathy, sense of duty—appealing for help in its perplexity.

Sir Graham France, on the other hand, was shocked. Emotion—other than by the lower or criminal classes—was beyond his comprehension. Problems might be difficult; they must be considered calmly, rationally, logically; emotion could have no part in their solution. As for emotion from a police official, it was unthinkable—an indecency! It was time for him to assert himself.

"This case," he said, in a cold, judicial voice, "has not yet reached a stage where arrest is desirable. Access, or possibility of access, to the poison must be traced in each case; motive in the second case must hang to a certain extent upon motive in the first case; it must be open to proof that Lady Grayle had reason to believe that the man Moode murdered her husband. The position of the firm, Benborough, must be investigated, more particularly with regard to the butler's interest in their transactions. When information on these points has been obtained, I will consider the case again."

He rose to his feet; the conference was ended.

"Applause in court!" murmured Sir Hulbert, flipping his sixth cigarette into the grate.

XXI • Chief Constable Thurston's Joy Ride

"I'm coming with you, Poole," said Chief Constable Thurston. "Not often I get the chance of an outing; all office work for me now; the Chief Inspectors get all the fun. But as I'm nominally in charge of this case at our end it gives me an excuse; besides, I want to see how furniture-faking's done."

"I'm very glad you're coming, sir."

Thurston laughed; the expression on his young subordinate's face was such a complete contradiction of his words. He clapped Poole on the

shoulder.

"Don't worry, my lad; you'll be in charge," he said. "I'm just coming as a spectator, for my own amusement. It'll be good practice for you to run a show like this; as I say, it's generally a Chief Inspector's job. How many men d'you want to take?"

Poole's face had cleared and there was mingled eagerness and gratitude in his voice as he answered.

"I thought four beside myself, sir. If their workshop is in some other part of London I want to keep an eye on the shop while we go there—otherwise they may send a warning."

"One man could do that, couldn't he?"

"There are two telephones, sir; one in the shop and one in the place behind it. If two people remained behind—even if one was only the girl—it would be difficult for our man to watch them both."

"Well, it won't take long; better be on the safe side, perhaps. You go and see about them now—and the car; I'll be ready by the time you are."

"All right, sir. I told Major Faide I'd pick him up at the corner of Maddox Street."

Thurston smiled.

"Oh, he's coming too, is he? Well, I suppose it's as much his pigeon as mine. They can't have a great lot of excitement in those County Constabularies; mostly arson and petty thieving. Off you go, my lad."

It was Friday morning. After the conference on the previous evening the three police officials had discussed their plan of future action and decided on a police raid of Benborough's workshops, in the hope of finding evidence of the furniture-faking that Poole had suggested. Chief Constable Thurston had then returned to Scotland Yard, Major Faide to Windon (after arranging with the detective for an early meeting on the morrow) and Poole had allowed himself an evening off—which consisted of dinner at 'The Welcome Snail' with a happily met friend and a couple of hours at the 'Palladium.'

Early morning meditations had awakened doubts in Poole's mind about the faking business. After all, what had he to go on? Changed stick-on labels (if they really were changed) might be innocently accounted for by the use of some preservative or worm-killing dope which had inevitably destroyed or loosened the original labels written and affixed by Irene Hollen. The observations of recent tool work, the appearance of fresh wood under stain or varnish, were only his own observations—the observations of an amateur—not even an informed amateur. He might be completely wrong. He had

jumped to the ‘fake’ conclusion because at the time it seemed to offer an explanation of the problem that was puzzling him, but now he felt far less convinced of the correctness of his ideas. Still, early morning reflections were notoriously pessimistic; the ‘raid’ might be a complete frost, but it had got to be gone through with now.

So Poole set about the collection of his little team with determination if not with confidence. He was lucky enough to get hold of Detective-Sergeant Gower, with whom he had worked before and whom he trusted. Of the three Detective-Constables one, Rawton, was also an old colleague.

The big police car was fully loaded by the time it set out from New Scotland Yard, a little after nine. The streets were still fairly empty, and it did not take long to drive down Whitehall and up Regent Street; turning from the latter into Maddox Street, the car stopped at the back of St. George’s Church. The six policemen stepped out and, splitting into groups of twos, started walking westwards, trying—with no very marked success—not to look like a plain-clothes police raid. At the corner of George Street Major Faide was standing, apparently consulting a guidebook as to the architectural beauties of St. George’s; he paid no attention to Poole but, apparently satisfied with his studies, closed the book and strolled towards Bond Street on the opposite pavement. As they approached Benborough’s Poole saw what he had been looking for—what, indeed, he should have noticed on the occasion of his first visit—the entrance to a yard or inner court.

“There you are, Rawton,” he muttered to the man walking with him. “In you go; Clapping will follow you. Keep quiet, but don’t let a stick of furniture come out of that yard without letting me know.”

Rawton, followed by Clapping, turned into the dark archway and might presently have been observed deep in consultation over the racing columns of an ‘early evening,’ 9 a.m. edition. Sergeant Gower and Detective-Constable Joint remained on the pavement opposite Benborough’s, with their backs to it, apparently studying the display of pierced bread-baskets and fish-knives in the windows of a silversmith.

Poole, with the two Chief Constables, entered Benborough’s. Miss Lort approached. Her ‘receptionist’ expression changed slightly as she recognised Poole, but she stood her ground.

“Is Mr. Rankel in? or Mr. Cristen?” asked Poole quietly.

“I will let Mr. Rankel know you are here,” replied the girl, turning to the office.

Poole checked her.

"Wait, please," he said, "I will see him myself."

Walking up to the door of the little office, he tapped, turned the handle, and walked in. Major Faide, following, shut the door behind him. Chief Constable Thurston, having spotted the shop telephone, edged towards it and became lost in admiration of an Elizabethan sampler which hung on the wall beside it. Miss Lort watched him with a mixture of embarrassment and amusement.

Inside the office Mr. Joseph Rankel and Mr. Fiennes Cristen, seated on either side of the one writing-table, were staring at the two intruders.

"Good morning, sir," said Poole, nodding to Rankel. Then turning to the other man: "You are Mr. Cristen?" he asked, and, without waiting for an answer, "I am Detective-Inspector Poole, of New Scotland Yard, and this is Major Faide, Chief Constable of Brackenshire. Mr. Rankel may have told you that I was here a day or two ago, enquiring about some furniture that you have been repairing for the late Lord Grayle."

Mr. Fiennes Cristen had quickly recovered from any discomposure which he may have felt. He was a short, sandy-haired man, inclined to corpulence, with protruding blue eyes magnified by very strong pince-nez; in twenty years' time he would probably become a very fair representation of Mr. Pickwick. After the first stare of surprise, he had leant back in his chair and beamed pleasantly upon the detective; the finger-tips of his two podgy little hands gently meeting and separating. At mention of the Chief Constable of Brackenshire, he rose to his feet and pulled a chair forward for Major Faide.

"Sit down, Major," he said. "I'm sorry there's not another chair in here, Inspector; I'll have one brought in."

He stretched his hand out towards a push-bell on the writing-table, but Poole checked him.

"Please don't ring, sir," he said, "I can quite well stand."

Mr. Rankel, meanwhile, was sitting quietly in his chair, leaving matters to his colleague. Poole thought there was a slightly anxious, or at least a watchful, look on his face, but he had thought the same thing last time, and had finished by believing Mr. Rankel's explanation of it. It was to Rankel that Poole now spoke.

"I have to thank you for letting me have that list of furniture, sir. The Chief Constable is anxious to make a few more enquiries about it. . . ."

Rankel glanced quickly at his colleague, who interrupted the detective.

"The list was in order, surely, Inspector?" he said. "I prepared it myself, with great care. I may say that Mr. Rankel handed the matter over to me directly I returned; I have been dealing with the Tassart furniture, both as regards its valuation and repair—and also with regard to the piece which we sold for Lord Grayle. Was it about that that you wanted to see me?"

"No, sir," said Poole. "The list was quite correct, so far as I was able to check it with Lord Grayle's secretary, but there has been a suggestion that some of this furniture may have been copied, and that it is the copies, and not the originals, which have returned to Tassart. The Chief Constable thought that you should have an opportunity of satisfying him that there is no foundation for such an idea."

In the slight, and very natural, movement of the head with which Mr. Fiennes Cristen greeted this "suggestion," his eyes were momentarily concealed by the flash of his convex glasses; so far as the detective could see, however, there had been nothing resembling a look of consternation or alarm. Poole would have preferred to watch Rankel, whose face was easier to read, but he had to look at the man to whom he was talking. Perhaps Major Faide had noticed something.

Cristen leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"You've been consulting Mr. Oppenheim or Mr. Wallace," he said. "No doubt what you suggest sounds very plausible to a layman, but believe me, Inspector . . . or rather you, sir, as I understand the enquiry is yours" (Cristen turned towards Major Faide)—"such a thing is impossible. From a purely technical point of view, the reproduction of pieces of great age and historic interest, such as much of the Tassart furniture is, could only be done approximately; such reproduction would deceive nobody who had any previous knowledge of the furniture—and it would take a great deal of time. A special staff would have to be employed upon it; with all the ordinary repair work we do it would be impossible to undertake complete construction—even if it took the form of reproduction."

Mr. Cristen glanced at his partner, who nodded and gave a non-committal "Quite so."

"I pass over, Chief Constables," continued Cristen, "the ethical side of the matter. I might say a good deal about the impertinence . . . you will excuse me? . . . of suggesting that a firm of our repute might be engaged in a transaction that is shady, if not actually dishonest—I am not clear whether the suggestion is that these copies were being made with Lord Grayle's knowledge or that we ourselves have been stealing his furniture and planting the copies upon him. Either idea is equally absurd—to put it mildly. But

presumably you are doing what you consider to be your duty; I shall not waste time—after all, we are busy men, as no doubt you are—upon righteous indignation. Eh, Rankel?"

Mr. Rankel nodded, a frown of dignified disapproval upon his face.

"Now, Chief Constable, how am I to satisfy you that your suggestion is incorrect?"

Major Faide nodded towards Poole.

"Carry on with the Inspector," he said, "he's in charge."

"We'd like to have a look at your workshops, sir please," said Poole. "Are they here, or somewhere else?"

"They're here." Cristen pointed out of the little window. "That shed is our workshop."

Poole looked out of the window, and on one side of the little yard at the back saw a long black shed, of one story only, with two windows and a door looking on to the yard. He thought he could hear the sound of hammering coming from it. With his face close to the window, and looking to the side of the yard away from the shed, Poole could just make out two figures in bowler hats, leaning against the wall, and arguing heatedly over an evening paper held between them.

"I'll show you the workshop if you like, Inspector," said Mr. Cristen. "You won't want Mr. Rankel to come, too?"

"Oh, no; if you won't mind my leaving one of my men in here in the meantime," replied Poole coolly.

Cristen's eyebrows lifted.

"This is all rather high-handed, isn't it?" he asked. "It might be a police raid on a night club."

"Oh, no, sir; we're not suspecting you of being a night club," replied Poole with a smile. But he did not deny the "police raid."

"Major, I wonder if you'd mind asking Sergeant Gower to come in—with Joint."

The three men waited until the burly form of Detective-Sergeant Gower appeared. Poole introduced him to the partners, and then he and Cristen went out into the shop, whilst Sergeant Gower sank on to Major Faide's chair and blandly gazed out of the window. With a shrug of his shoulders Mr. Rankel resumed the drafting of a letter in which the detectives' arrival had interrupted him. Sergeant Gower, however, noticed that the pencil did

not run very smoothly over the paper, and after a time stopped altogether; Mr. Rankel was thinking—no doubt about his letter.

In the shop Cristen said a word to Miss Lort about both him and his partner being engaged for the next half-hour, and then, opening a small door at the back, led the way out into the yard. Chief Constable Thurston, having handed over the Elizabethan sampler to Detective-Constable Joint, followed.

The shed into which Cristen ushered the two detectives—Thurston still incognito—resembled any ordinary carpenter's shop, except for the absence of vast heaps of shavings on the floor. Two men were at work at the long bench, which was lit by the two windows which Poole had already noticed; in front of each, on the bench, stood a chair—apparently made of walnut and stripped of all covering. In one case it was also stripped of its back, which was leaning against the bench, whilst the workman was apparently forcing some liquid from a 'gun' into the tops of the two remaining legs. Against the other wall stood four other chairs which, when Mr. Cristen had removed the dust-sheet which covered them, appeared to be the same as the ones on the bench, also stripped of covering.

"This is a set of Lord Grayle's chairs," said Mr. Cristen. "George I., about 1720-25, inverted fan back, cabriole legs, claw and ball foot. Exquisite pieces, fit for any museum, but in deplorable condition, riddled with worm, and badly patched by some nineteenth-century bungler."

He lifted one of the chairs on to the bench in front of the window.

"Look at this iron clamp running up the back to mend a break," he said, "did you ever see such an outrage—the man should have been outlawed!"

Cristen spoke with genuine indignation. Poole could see that he was an enthusiast—a lover of his craft—whatever else he might be.

"We shall run a steel rod up the *inside* of the woodwork. It's a ticklish business, because the wood is little more than dust held together by varnish. The worm decay will be stopped by a special preparation of which we hold the secret; Nolling there is injecting it into one of the chairs. They should not get worse, but, of course, they need the most careful handling; they must never be held by the back—always by the seat; and, of course, they must never be sat on."

For some time Mr. Cristen talked, explaining the work that was being done, apparently oblivious of the particular object of the detectives' visit. After a time, Poole drew from his pocket the typewritten list of articles which had been sent up from Tassart on the previous Sunday. It consisted of six chairs—apparently those now being worked on, two Chippendale library

chairs, a Chinese Chippendale settee, a pair of 18th-century mahogany tripod fire-screens, a Queen Anne walnut stool, and a William and Mary walnut cabinet.

"Would you mind showing us the rest of these things, sir?" said Poole. He had looked round the workshop and found nothing in it resembling the other articles on the list. Indeed, there was little but the six chairs.

"Ah, they'll be in the shop—or rather under the shop," replied Mr. Cristen. "Seen all you want to in here?"

He went up to one of the workmen—the one he had called Nolling—and gave him some directions about the work he was doing.

"Don't start on anything fresh till I come in again," he said. "I want to make some needle tests on those legs to see that the stuff's getting down all right."

He led the way back into the shop and down into the basement below it, switching on electric lights as he went.

"Come down and help me find the Tassart pieces, Miss Lort," he called.

The basement was much more roomy than the size of the shop had led Poole to expect; it appeared to run under the pavement; no doubt this had been done with other shops as well in this crowded and expensive locality, in order to provide storage room which could not be spared above ground.

A fair amount of furniture stood about the low room, which was dry and clean. Most of it was covered with dust-sheets which Cristen unceremoniously whisked off one piece after another.

"That's the settee," he said, "Chinese Chippendale; original castors. Atrociously covered, of course. Four-legged stool—Anne. Firescreens—very fine Japanese bird work, faded, of course—lovely lines. And there were a pair of library chairs too, weren't there, Miss Lort? Chippendale? Ah yes, there they are; fine pieces; no worm in them, thank goodness, but badly knocked about and repaired, they'll be all right; original covers."

Mr. Cristen carefully replaced the dust-sheets on the Georgian chairs.

"There you are, Inspector," he said. "Satisfied? Or do you want to take 'em upstairs where you can examine them by daylight. Matter of fact, we haven't touched them since they arrived, but don't take my word for it."

"It must be a difficult business getting furniture up and down those narrow stairs, isn't it?" said Major Faide, speaking for the first time.

"It's wonderful what you can do when you've got the knack," replied Mr. Cristen. "Our men—they've been at it all their lives—could carry a

fourteen by ten bookcase, glass doors and all, up those stairs and out into the van in five minutes without touching anything. Well, come along, gentlemen, if that's all you want."

But it was not all that Poole wanted.

"Just one minute, sir, please," he said. "On this list I see there's a walnut cabinet; we haven't seen that yet."

Mr. Cristen's convex glasses glinted in the electric light, as he turned toward the detective.

"Cabinet?" he asked, frowning. Then his face cleared. "Oh yes, I remember—veneer all coming off; we had to send it away; we don't do that work ourselves. You don't know when we shall be getting that back, do you, Miss Lort?"

The girl shook her head. She seemed to be rather out of her depth.

"Well, well; it'll be back in a day or two, no doubt," said Cristen cheerfully. "I'll let you know and you can come and have a look at it."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be altogether satisfactory," said Poole quietly. "Will you give me the name of the firm where this cabinet is now?"

"Certainly. It's with a man named Vipont—a Belgian—at Witham, in Essex. He specialises in veneer and marqueterie work."

"Have you his telephone number, sir?"

Cristen shook his head.

"He's not on the 'phone," he said, "great bore it is, too. One of these working artists who don't like to be disturbed at their work; rather sympathise with him myself."

"If you'll allow me to use the instrument in your office, sir, I'll put a call through to the Witham police and get that checked."

Without waiting for a reply, Poole sprang quickly up the stairs and made for the office. Mr. Cristen laughed.

"Nothing if he's not thorough," he said, turning to the Chief Constable. A chuckle behind him made him turn round; the elderly man who had accompanied the search party so far in silence was evidently amused.

"That's what gets them made Inspectors, sir," he said.

"Ah, while some of their elders and betters are still subordinates, eh?" said Mr. Cristen patronisingly.

"Perhaps so, sir; perhaps so."

The elderly man seemed still to be amused as he followed Mr. Cristen and Major Faide upstairs. Within a minute or two Poole reappeared from the office.

"I'll be back in a minute, sir," he said to Major Faide, and went out into the street. Thurston, who had caught a signal in his subordinate's eye, followed him. Major Faide remained in embarrassed occupation of the shop and Mr. Cristen; he was thankful that the presence of a lady customer for whom Miss Lort was trying to find "a nice little old table" made conversation on any but general topics impossible.

Out in the street Chief Constable Thurston joined his subordinate.

"Well?" he asked.

"There is a 'Vipoint,' all right, sir; a cabinet maker, and not on the 'phone. I couldn't speak very freely in front of Rankel, but I gather that the Witham police don't know much about him. They're going round to enquire and they'll ring up, but, of course, they won't know whether they've seen Lord Grayle's cabinet; if he's crooked he can palm anything off on to them. Of course, we can go down ourselves—take an expert down—but it'll give 'em time to play tricks. I'm not convinced, sir; not a bit."

"But have you seen anything wrong? Because I haven't."

"No, sir, nor have I," acquiesced Poole gloomily, "but I'm dead sure they're faking. Have we seen the whole of their premises? Have they got another workshop somewhere else where they do their fakes? Does Vipont do the fakes for them?"

"Have you measured that workshop?" asked Thurston.

"For a false end? No, sir; I'll do it now."

The Chief Constable smiled with approval at the impetuosity of his colleague, whom he followed through the dark archway into the back yard. Paying no attention to the two plain-clothes men, Poole paced the outside length of the workshop, examined its end and its base; there was no sign of any extension or any basement here—no area light or grating. He went into the workshop and paced the interior; it corresponded (as a glance at the windows showed him it would) with the exterior.

He shook his head; then looked at the two workmen. They were engrossed, as before, in their work, and took no more notice of him than if he had been a fly. One was still forcing liquid into a chair with a gun, the other was still very carefully drilling a hole right up the leg of another. Poole watched them for a moment, and was struck by the silence and concentration with which they worked.

Silence? Yes, but they had not always been silent. He remembered when he first looked at the workshop out of the office window hearing the sound of hammering—or at least tapping, as of wood on wood—mallet on chisel, perhaps. What had they been hammering then? There was no sign of mallet or chisel having been used recently on this job. By the time that he and the others came out to the shed the hammering had stopped. Why had it stopped? Had the men been working on some other piece, perhaps now hidden away in sections? Had there been some signal given in spite of his care in stopping Mr. Cristen from ringing the bell, and in spite of Chief Constable Thurston's sentry-go in the shop?

Still followed as a shadow by Chief Constable Thurston on his busman's holiday, Poole walked back into the shop by the back door, and into the little office, where Sergeant Gower was still pretending not to watch Mr. Rankel.

"Where does that bell ring?" he asked, pointing to the button on the writing-table.

"In the shop," replied Rankel.

Poole pressed it and heard a buzz outside in the shop.

"Go into the workshop and see if you can hear anything," he said to the Detective-Sergeant. He pressed the button at intervals and in a minute Gower was back.

"Couldn't hear anything in the workshop, sir. Heard that as I came back into the shop."

Poole looked at the bell, followed its flex down on to the floor, where it ran along the skirting. Along the skirting also ran, he now saw, another flex; tracing it back he saw that it ran under the writing-table; kneeling down and flashing his pocket-torch he saw the wire emerge again between the two pedestals, and run up to a push just where Mr. Cristen's knee must have been.

Poole did not even look at Mr. Rankel, who was sitting so quietly in his chair on the other side of the table. Nor did he look at the face of Mr. Cristen, whom the ring of the first bell had drawn back into the office doorway, with a Chief Constable looking over each shoulder.

"Back into the workshop, Gower," said the detective sharply, "and keep your ears skinned; it won't be loud."

He sat down in Mr. Cristen's seat and pressed the bell push which he could now feel with his left knee. Again Sergeant Gower returned.

"It's in the workshop somewhere, sir; a buzzer. I can't quite locate it; sounds behind the skirting."

Again Poole went down on his hands and knees and followed the flex from the knee-bell. It did not go far, but dropped through the floor.

"Into the basement from the look of it," said Poole, rising. "Either of you gentlemen want to make a statement now? I warn you that this may lead to a charge of theft or fraud, if nothing worse."

The two partners in Benborough were staring at each other with set, white faces. Neither spoke.

"Stay with them, Sergeant Gower. I'll get Rawton and Clapping in. Don't let them speak. Better keep one in the shop and shut the front door. I must detain you, gentlemen, for the moment," he said to the partners; then, turning to his Chief: "I'm going down into the basement, sir. Come on, Joint."

He descended to the basement, followed by the two Chiefs and Detective-Constable Joint. Switching on the electric light he began to hunt round the ceiling at the back of the basement for the descending bell wire; there was no sign of it.

"Must go out beyond this," he said. "Here, Joint, help me move this cabinet."

A big mahogany china cabinet stood against the wall at the back of the basement. The two detectives pulled one end of it away from the wall, revealing a narrow door. It was not locked, and opened easily and silently; beyond was darkness. Poole again turned on his torch and at once found the electric light switch. The flood of light revealed a small room, unlit and apparently unventilated except for a fireplace. In the middle of the room, on a low stool, sat an old man in a stained white carpenter's apron. In front of him on the floor stood what was evidently the beginnings of a cabinet; beside it stood the completed—the two-hundred-year-old—article from which it was being copied—Lord Grayle's walnut cabinet.

XXII • Within the Law?

"What's your name?" asked Poole.

"Nolling, sir."

"Father of the chap upstairs?"

"Both of them, sir"—with conscious pride.

"You're copying that old cabinet, eh?"

The old man's eyes shifted from the detective's to the piece of furniture beside him; they were slow in coming back.

"I'll say no more, I think, sir," he said at last, "not without my employers tell me to."

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you're within your rights," he said. He looked round the little room; there was no sign of a bell.

"I expect it's between the floors," he said, "then they can hear it in both places. No doubt we're under the workshop now. That chimney goes up into it and brings down some air—precious little, though. I suppose he's been sitting in the dark ever since the signal went—when the hammering stopped."

Poole glanced at the mallet and chisel which lay on the bench beside the cabinet; he had not been far wrong.

"So much for the faking, sir," he said. "Now for the more important part. Shall we let those fellows upstairs talk?"

They were out in the outer basement again; leaving Detective-Constable Joint for the moment in charge of the old joiner and his handiwork.

"Better, if they will," said Chief Constable Thurston. "We don't want to waste any time. If they're difficult, turn them over to me. You start, though."

The three officials returned upstairs and re-entered the little office.

"Two more chairs in here, Sergeant, and then you and Clapping can wait outside. Come in now, Mr. Cristen. I think it might be as well, sir, if you closed the shop for the present; put a notice on the door if you like and give the young lady a day off."

Cristen gave Miss Lort a few instructions and then sank into a chair, his former confidence completely gone. Poole thought that the girl looked frightened, but excited.

"You'd better keep quiet about what you've seen this morning, Miss," he said, "otherwise there might be trouble . . . for you."

When the door was shut, the Detective-Inspector turned to the two partners.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I'm going to put my cards on the table and you may think it advisable to do the same with yours. We've found your second workshop downstairs, with old Nolling copying the walnut cabinet; he was sitting in the dark when we got there, and I don't doubt that you

signalled to him with that knee-bell to keep quiet till we'd gone. We're not particularly interested at the moment in your furniture-faking, but we *are* interested in its connection with Lord Grayle's death. I'm bound to caution you, as I said before, that this may lead to your being charged with theft, and you're not obliged to make a statement; but on the other hand we're in a hurry to get at the truth about Lord Grayle, and particularly the motive for his murder, and you'd be well advised, perhaps, to help us rather than hinder us."

There was a short silence after Poole had finished speaking. Mr. Rankel was sitting back in his chair, staring at his finger-nails, Mr. Cristen was stubbing his blotting paper with a pen. Suddenly the latter looked up.

"Look here, Inspector," he said, "this is all nonsense. You've got nothing against us. You talk lightly about theft and fraud; you'd better be careful what you're saying; there's such a thing as slander, even from the police. I'm going to consult my solicitor as to whether an action doesn't lie against you as it is—raiding my premises—where's your search warrant?—shutting us up like this, behaving in an extremely high-handed manner in front of our employees . . ."

"Excuse me, sir."

Chief Constable Thurston hitched his chair forward to a more central position.

"Excuse me, sir, before you go any further," he said. "Perhaps I'd better introduce myself. I'm Chief Constable Thurston, of the Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard. That may give you some idea that the police are not acting without knowledge or experience of what is legitimate and correct procedure. We have a search warrant for your premises, issued by a magistrate. Show it to Mr. Cristen, Poole."

The detective produced the document from his pocket and handed it over to Cristen. The latter did not look at it, but continued to stare at the new occupant of the leading part.

"There was no need to produce that warrant in the first place, because you showed us over your premises voluntarily, after being warned that fraud was suspected. Strictly speaking, perhaps, the warrant should have been produced before the second inspection of the basement, but you had already put yourselves on the wrong side of the law by attempting to withhold information which you had been asked to give, attempting to deceive the police and so interfering with the course of justice. No court would uphold your plea of slander or unlawful imprisonment, which presumably is what you were getting at."

Chief Constable Thurston picked up the search warrant and put it back in his own pocket.

"Now, gentlemen, having satisfied you on that point," he continued blandly, "I am going to suggest to you that you would be wise to follow Inspector Poole's advice and make a statement. By doing so, you may, of course, incriminate yourselves in the matter of theft or fraud—you must decide for yourselves about that; but I warn you that if you withhold any longer the information we're after you will run the risk of being charged as accessories—either before or after the fact—to murder."

Thurston stopped abruptly and, leaning back in his chair, studied the faces of the two partners. There was no use disguising the fact that this last shot had gone home; even Cristen's usually cheerful face was white and anxious.

"But what more do you want to know?" he asked. "It's perfectly true that we are copying various pieces of furniture for their owner, but there's nothing criminal in that—neither theft nor fraud."

"Then why all the trouble to hide it? Why the secret workshop? and the signal? and trying to deceive us, eh? Come, come, Mr. Cristen; we weren't born yesterday; you can't expect us to swallow all that."

"It's perfectly true, all the same," replied Cristen. "There's nothing illegal in what we're doing, but—as I believe my partner pointed out to Inspector Poole the other day—we've got to do more than keep within the law. If it was known that we did fake work, our customers would fight shy of us. We've established a very high reputation in the trade for honesty; we never sell a modern or a copy as an antique; if we have modern stuff, we say so. Our American connection, in particular, rests largely upon our reputation; collectors know that what comes from us will be genuine. If they knew we faked, they'd begin to suspect us and our reputation would be gone—our custom with it. We've been very reluctant to undertake this work, but there's a big profit in it and we felt we couldn't turn our backs on it. After all, there seemed no risk; our men are absolutely trustworthy, old Nolling's worked for my family all his life, and his sons are chips from the same block. If it hadn't been for the accident of Lord Grayle's death, nothing would ever have come out," said Cristen bitterly.

"Accident! I like your idea of an accident, sir," exclaimed Thurston. "And your idea of what's honest tickles me a bit, too. What about the butler, eh?"

He shot the question at Cristen, evidently hoping to startle him. He did, but not in the way he had expected; Mr. Cristen was not only startled, but—

apparently—completely at a loss to understand the question.

"Butler?"

"Yes, butler, Moode; the man who's been doing your business at the other end."

"My good man; what are you talking about?"

Mr. Cristen's perplexity was positively pathetic. Chief Constable Thurston was slightly irritated by it.

"How much have you been paying Moode to keep his mouth shut?" he said sharply.

Cristen sat up abruptly in his chair.

"Look here, Chief Constable," he said, "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. I know the butler at Tassart, Moode, of course, because I spent some time there doing the valuation; and I've talked to him on the telephone once or twice since then. But I've never had any business dealings with him of any sort or description, shady or otherwise. You've got hold of completely the wrong end of the stick. I can only tell you again that our dealings over this furniture have been entirely legitimate from first to last. We were instructed by the owner to make copies of certain pieces and to sell the originals, taking, of course, a good commission for ourselves and being paid for the replicas which we made. To give you an example: those chairs you've seen to-day; I've had an offer from an American client of £2,500 for the set of six (as a matter of fact, I valued them at £3,000); on that we shall take a commission of £250 and we shall also be paid £500 for the copies which we are making. The repair work, which you saw going on, was genuine repair work covered by the American offer of £2,500, but paid for by the owner to the extent of another £100. The net result will be that the American client pays £2,500 for a unique set of George I. chairs, genuine and in the best restored condition; the original owner parts with the original chairs and receives in exchange excellent reproductions and a net sum of £1,650; we, for our work and influence, receive £850. What is there illegal or dishonest about that?"

"Just a minute, Mr. Cristen, just a minute," replied Thurston. "Who are you referring to as 'the original owner'—Lord Grayle?"

"Well, of course, I know he's dead now and, as I said, it is that fact that has upset everything. Lord Grayle was the owner when the negotiations were started and the instructions given."

Chief Constable Thurston looked across at Poole, his eyebrows raised. The detective took up the running.

"Are we to understand, sir," he asked, "that Lord Grayle gave you these instructions—to copy and to sell—personally?"

"Well, no; not personally. Lady Grayle acted for him throughout. It was she, I understand, who originally got in touch with Levish & Co., through whom we came on the scene. In fact, Lord Grayle told me himself that but for her Ladyship nothing would have been done; he had, he said, been conscious for years that his furniture and effects were under-insured, and had intended to have a re-valuation made, but he kept on putting it off; it was only when his wife realised the position—he said—that she took the whole affair into her own hands and carried it through."

"Yes, sir; I quite understand that, but—if I may say so—that's not the point," said Poole. "Did Lord Grayle, the owner of the furniture, give you *personal* instructions, either verbal or written, to sell his furniture?"

Cristen threw himself back in his chair.

"Heavens above, man," he exclaimed, "haven't I just told you? He left the details in the hands of his wife; what could be plainer?"

"Then you had no authority from the owner to sell?" persisted Poole.

This point of view seemed to dawn slowly upon Mr. Cristen. His tone became less confident—even slightly uneasy.

"Technically, no; I suppose not," he said at last. "But you don't mean to say that the family—the new Lord Grayle—would repudiate a tacit understanding?"

"What proof have you of a tacit understanding—so far as the sale of furniture is concerned?"

Mr. Cristen was silent.

"You have already sold a good deal of this . . . copied furniture, do I understand, sir?"

"A fair amount, yes."

"And the purchase money; did that go direct to the owner, or did it come through you?"

"It came through us and we deducted our commission before passing it on."

"To whom? To whom were your cheques made payable?"

"To Lady Grayle."

"Though you knew Lord Grayle to be the owner and had received no authority of any sort from him to sell?"

Again Mr. Cristen was silent. There was no mistaking the anxiety of his expression now. It was Chief Constable Thurston who broke the silence.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "I don't know that we can do any more now. I can't believe that you don't appreciate the gravity of your position. It's not for me to say whether you've been incredibly foolish or . . . well, I'll leave it at that. I shall have to report all the circumstances of the case in the proper quarter; meantime I must ask you not to leave London without letting me know. I want a full account of your transactions over this copied furniture, details of the amounts received by you and the amounts paid to Lady Grayle. I'll leave Sergeant Gower here to bring them along. Good morning, gentlemen."

Out in the street, Chief Constable Thurston waited for his companions.

"I must get back to work; can't joy-ride all day," he said with a chuckle. "You see where this is tending, Poole? You'd better get along down there and wind up. But before you go down you'd better get an order from a High Court Judge for access to Lady Grayle's bank account. A good deal will turn on that; whether she received these sums—(by the way, I'll send you down a copy of Benborough's figures by special messenger)—and whether she paid them over to her husband. I'm afraid, Major," he added, turning to Faide, "it looks awkward. I'm sorry; it's a nasty business for you. Well, good morning, then."

He had not gone three steps before he turned round and came back.

"You did that job very well, young fellow," he said, giving Poole a pat on the shoulder. "I congratulate you."

The young Detective-Inspector watched the disappearing figure of his Chief with a flushed face and bright eyes.

"Wonderful what a word in season will do," thought the Chief Constable of Brackenshire to himself.

XXIII • The Vehicle

Without undue delay, Poole got his order from Mr. Justice Vastable in Chambers. He returned to Windon with Major Faide, but did not at once put the order into effect; he wanted first to have the figures which Mr. Cristen was preparing and which Chief Constable Thurston had promised to send

down directly they were available. In the meantime he had a job to do at Tassart and he wasted no time in getting out there.

During the last few days he had been so much taken up with the investigation of Moode's affairs—first of his double life and then of his death—that he had allowed the question of the administration of the scopolamine to slip into the background. The case had developed rapidly in these last days, but it was still full of unsolved problems, which would be only multiplied if his increasing doubt as to the guilt of Moode—in the murder of Lord Grayle—proved to be correct. For if Moode had not put the scopolamine in his master's early tea, who had? and, still more, how?

In the detective's mind there arose again the various possibilities which had occurred to him on the day that Mrs. Spent revealed the mysteries of pantry lore. The whole thing turned, he remembered, upon the 'warming of the pot'! Before that complication loomed upon his horizon he had imagined that anyone who knew which teapot Lord Grayle used—invariably used—for his early morning tea could have put the poison in that pot any time during the night, or even during the previous day after it had been washed up. But this ceremony of pot-warming by the butler as the last act immediately before putting the tea into it completely cut out that possibility; the poison would simply be washed out of the pot and down the sink! So—if it proved that his first obvious conclusion, that the butler had put the poison in himself, was incorrect—the poison must have got into Lord Grayle's teacup *via* the milk, or the sugar, or the tea itself.

What had been the objections to those various possibilities? The milk, it seemed, was kept in the larder; the morning's supply was fetched from there by one of the kitchen girls and some of it poured into a jug for the pantry; this jug was then fetched from the kitchen by a footman, who would fill the little jug belonging to Lord Grayle's set. Clearly no poison could have got into the communal milk supply in the larder, or the lesser but still communal supply in the jug filled for the pantry; the only possibility was that it had been put in the little jug of Lord Grayle's tea-set. But surely the amount of milk taken with tea was infinitesimal—just a dash; it would require a high potency of poison to make that dash dangerous. Besides, what would happen to the milk left in the little jug? might it not endanger the lives of other people? an objection which did not apply to the dregs in the teapot. Poole wished that he had thought of this point sooner, when it might have been possible to trace that milk residue. On the whole he thought this possibility an unlikely one, but it could not be altogether discarded.

Then there was the sugar. That was issued as a weekly supply by the housekeeper and the little sugar basin of Lord Grayle's set would be filled as required by the footman, from the bag. Surely it would not be possible to tamper with a supply which might be used for so many other purposes—afternoon tea, for instance, or casual 'cups' drunk in the pantry.

The tea itself was a more likely vehicle; it was a special brand of India tea used only by Lord Grayle, also issued once a week by Mrs. Spent and kept in its own caddy in the pantry. Poisoning that would not be likely to endanger anyone but Lord Grayle, but what a lot of poison would be required to infect a whole caddy full of tea! That, he remembered, had only seemed possible if the supply in the caddy was running low; he must find out on what day it was replenished.

So the problem stood when Poole reached Tassart that Friday afternoon, almost exactly a week after his first arrival in the village.

William, the second footman, was his immediate objective, and William he was lucky enough to find in the pantry, James having just departed for his afternoon off. No new butler had yet been engaged.

"William," said the detective, "I'm going to ask you some questions that you'll probably think rather mad, but there's a good reason for them; only please don't ask me any."

William expressed his utmost willingness to help; the chance of assisting a detective in the unravelling of a crime did not fall to the lot of a second footman every day, even in a *Daily Picture* serial.

"I understand," said Poole, "that Lord Grayle used to have tea every morning when he woke—that Moode used to take him up a tray when he called him. Is that right?"

"Quite right, sir."

"Did anyone else ever take it up instead of Moode?"

"No, sir, never; not unless Mr. Moode was ill, that is. Once or twice he's had a touch of 'flu' or a chill, and then James looked after his Lordship and took up the tea."

"Has that happened lately?"

"Oh, no sir; not since the winter."

"On Friday morning, for instance—last Friday—the day Lord Grayle died, Moode took it up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, William, tell me how that tea is prepared; where is the tea itself kept, the milk, the sugar—and so on?"

William repeated the information that Poole had already learned from Mrs. Spent; it was almost exact confirmation, with the exception that the splendid isolation of the pantry was more honoured in the breach than the observance; 'girls' from the kitchen *had* been known before now to bring the milk jug into the forbidden room. However, William was fairly certain that that had not happened within the last few weeks; there had been some changes in the lower ranks of the kitchen, and relations were still on a formal footing. Probably the housekeeper's account of proceedings was pretty exact. Questioned as to the residue of milk left in the little jug belonging to Lord Grayle's set, William said that it would be poured back into the larger jug brought from the kitchen. That, thought Poole, seemed to eliminate the possibility of the milk having been used as the vehicle for the poison. Besides, he now remembered, traces of scopolamine had been found in the tea-leaves taken from the pot. Those traces could not have got there if the poison had been put into either the milk or the sugar.

The other possibility, that the supply of Lord Grayle's special tea was running low, leaving in the caddy an amount small enough to be easily poisoned, was discounted by the information that Mrs. Spent always issued stores on a Wednesday, so that the caddy would have been practically full. Of course, it was still possible that the top leaves had been infected—still, it seemed a remote possibility.

How then—eliminating Moode as the deliberate agent—had that poison got into the cup of tea from which Lord Grayle had drunk? Had Mrs. Spent misinformed him in any way? There was only one way to find out.

"William," said the detective, "you've seen Moode prepare this early morning tea for Lord Grayle?"

William laughed.

"Times without number, sir."

"Then go through the whole process; *exactly*, mind. Tell me when you're being Moode and when you're being yourself or James."

William stared, then broke into a broad grin. Turning to the china cupboard, he brought down and put on the table a tray already laid with an early morning tea-set of blue willow-pattern. He then filled a small copper kettle with hot water and put it on an electric ring, which he switched on. Then he left the pantry, returning in a minute with a jug of milk, from which he filled the little jug of the blue willow service. Going to another cupboard

he brought out a blue paper bag of cube sugar, from which he filled the sugar basin. Then a small rosewood tea-caddy was brought out and placed, with a spoon, beside the tray. Finally, he knocked at the door of the butler's bedroom, which opened out of the pantry, and disappeared inside.

After a short pause, the bedroom door opened and William reappeared, wearing a short black coat instead of his livery one; his manner for the next scene was evidently founded upon that of his late superior—slow, stately, dignified. Going to the kettle, he put his ear to it to detect signs of boiling, frowned, picked up the caddy and carefully measured three spoonfuls of tea into the pot; then he returned to the kettle and, seeing unmistakable steam emerging from the spout, picked it up and poured the boiling water into the teapot. Then, picking up the tray, he walked solemnly out of the room.

Ten seconds later he returned, his face once more that of a grinning second footman.

"That all right, sir?" he asked cheerfully.

"No," said Poole. "You left out something."

William's face fell.

"Left out something, sir? What?"

"I don't want to suggest it to you. Do the whole thing over again, from after your fetching the tray out of the cupboard. And think very carefully what you're doing; somebody's life may depend upon your being accurate, William."

Distinctly awestruck, William went through the whole performance again; kettle-filling, milk, sugar, tea-caddy beside tray, knock at butler's door; then—as Moode—tea measured into pot, followed by boiling water, and the tray carried out.

Poole's face was very grave when the young man finally returned to the pantry.

"You're absolutely sure you've left nothing out, William?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"What about warming the pot?"

"Warming the pot? What, the teapot?"

"Yes; didn't Moode do that? Before putting in the tea?"

"Never that I saw, sir."

Mrs. Spent had been wrong, then, and the whole case against the butler —or, at least one of its strongest links—collapsed. Somebody else, who

knew well the ways of this household, may have known that the butler omitted this stage of the ceremony; in that case, there would have been no difficulty in putting the poison in Lord Grayle's blue willow teapot at any time during the night! Somebody else, who knew the household! Somebody who wanted Lord Grayle out of the way! Who?

The inevitable answer flashed into Poole's mind. Who knew the ways of this household so well? The habits, privileges, traditions, routine of the staff and its work? Who knew that Lord Grayle might—would—had taken another dose of di-dial in the night, within a few hours of the time when this tea, loaded with a second poison, would be drunk? Who was constantly in the pantry in the early hours of the morning, to take the dog, Bob (Mrs. Spent had told him) for an early run? Lady Grayle!

But why? In God's name, why should she kill the man she loved, the man whom everybody who knew her, whether they liked or disliked her, agreed in saying that she adored with the one true passion of her life? Could it be fear? fear of exposing the intrigue in which she appeared to be embroiled with Benborough? Or jealousy? Nobody had breathed a word against Lord Grayle in that respect. Or had she wanted her own freedom—in spite of the penury that it would bring her? Was there, at this late stage in her life, some other man . . . ?

It seemed impossible; each suggestion more wildly impracticable as the motive for such a murder than the last.

Poole looked down at the quaint, old-fashioned tea-service, the flat, blue teapot, that had been the vehicle of death for the man who had loved it all through his married life. The spout, Poole saw, had got the end knocked off. It must be the devil of a messy job to pour tea out of it. Automatically, Poole picked up the pot and tried to pour tea into the cup; it slobbered down the spout and made a mess in the tray.

William watched him, first with curiosity, then with something stronger; his jaw dropped.

"Good sakes, I'd forgotten that spout," he said. Poole looked up.

"What d'you mean?"

"Why, that was broken the day before—before his Lordship died."

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing, sir; only you told me to be exact. His Lordship didn't have his tea out of that set that morning—not the morning he died."

"WHAT?!"

Poole leapt at the young man and, seizing him by the arm, shook him violently.

"What are you saying, man? Not out of that set? What set did he have, then?"

"The one Mr. Moode usually had—the pink one. He told me to change it when he saw that the spout was broken. And a nice telling off James got for breaking it, too!"

Poole stared at the footman.

"I must get this right," he said slowly, "Moode had early tea, too?"

"Yes, sir; I took it in to him every morning when I called him."

"And on that morning—Friday morning—you took him this set, Lord Grayle's set, because the spout of the teapot was broken?"

"Yes, sir."

"And then you got the pink set, that Moode always had, ready for Lord Grayle?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Moode put the tea into it, and the hot water, just as you've shown me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Without first warming the teapot—washing it out?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you; when you made Moode's tea each morning, did you warm the pot?"

"No, sir."

And whoever knew the habits of this household would know that, too. Whoever was in the habit of coming into the pantry in the early morning, to fetch the dog, often, no doubt, when the tea was being prepared, would have seen that omission; the omission of that item of routine of which Mrs. Spent had said that "Every woman knew." Lady Grayle!

XXIV • Final Conference

“The method seems to have been the same in each case; the poison being conveyed in a vessel of common use, and in an apparently harmless beverage, by a third party who was himself absolutely innocent of what he was conveying. Reliance—that the poison should not miscarry, should not be consumed by the wrong person—was in each case placed in the routine procedure of the establishment, of which the poisoner was intimately aware. In the first case, however, the routine broke down, the unexpected—the unforeseeable—did occur, and the poison did miscarry—in a direction terrible to the poisoner. In the second place, the same risk was deliberately taken, and there was no miscarriage. Am I right, Inspector?”

The speaker was Sir Graham France, the occasion was a further conference on the Grayle case, which was taking place at New Scotland Yard in the room of the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police. Sir Hugh Fallard himself sat at his writing-table, and there were also present Sir Leward Marradine (the Assistant Commissioner), Sir Johnson Homesdale (Permanent Under-Secretary to the Home Office), Sir Graham France (Director of Public Prosecutions), Major Faide (Chief Constable of Brackenshire), Chief Constable Thurston, and Detective-Inspector Poole. The latter had outlined the case, for the benefit—chiefly—of Sir Johnson Homesdale, and was now engaged in reporting the developments which had taken place since the previous evening. The Director of Public Prosecutions had thought it desirable, from time to time, to “pull the case together” by such interpolations as the one above quoted.

“And what about these figures of Benborough’s and Lady Grayle’s bank account? You haven’t told us about them yet, Inspector.”

The Inspector was only waiting for opportunity to do so.

“I inspected Lady Grayle’s account with the Union and National Bank at Windon yesterday afternoon, sir, in company with Superintendent Clewth of the Brackenshire Constabulary, on an order issued by the High Court. The figures submitted by Benborough as sums which they had paid to Lady Grayle, in respect of furniture sold, were traceable in Lady Grayle’s account; there was no evidence of those sums having been subsequently paid over to Lord Grayle.”

“The owner?” interposed the D.P.P.

“Yes, sir.”

“You have satisfied yourself as to that?”

“Yes, sir; I saw Mr. Steeple, the solicitor in charge of Lord Grayle’s affairs, early this morning. With the possible exception of one or two

unimportant items, wedding presents and so on, none of the furniture at Tassart belongs to Lady Grayle; a part of it belonged to the late Lord Grayle absolutely; this has been left to the new Lord Grayle, with the proviso that Lady Grayle is to have the use for her life of sufficient furniture for a small house during her widowhood. The remainder of the furniture, including most of the important pieces, pictures, and so on, was heirloom; this included a great deal of what has been copied and sold by Benborough."

"Did Mr. Steeple say whether Lady Grayle knew this?"

"He said he had no reasonable doubt of it, sir, though he has no proof of her knowledge. He describes her as an extremely shrewd business woman."

"Fraud, then, undoubtedly. What did she do with the money?"

"Considerable sums have been paid to dressmakers and milliners—evidently long-standing debts, though I have not yet had time to go into that with the shops concerned."

"Any signs of gambling? bookmakers?"

"Yes, sir, but that is spread consistently over a long period; there are no particularly large payments to them since this money has been available."

"Not likely to be," said the Commissioner. "You can't run up a debt with a bookmaker as you can with a milliner. At least," he added with a smile, "so I am informed."

"And what about Moode?" asked Sir Graham, "where does he come in?"

"There's no absolute proof of that, sir. Lady Grayle has paid him nothing by cheque, but her account shows that she drew considerable sums out in cash, and the cashier told me that she asked for it in small notes—one pound and ten shillings; that is to say, in notes of which the numbers would not normally be kept. The period during which these cash sums, amounting to about three hundred pounds in less than three months, were being drawn, corresponds roughly with the period of Moode's career as Mr. George Mellett, tenant of Mrs. Sparks at Paslow."

"You can't prove receipt?" asked Sir Graham.

"No, sir, and—short of confession—I don't quite see how it's to be done. She would have seen him every day, in the normal course of his duty; there was nothing to prevent her handing the notes to him at any convenient time, and unless somebody happened to see her actually handing over the notes I'm afraid it would not be possible to prove anything."

"These debts to shops and so on, Inspector; I can't understand why you haven't got on to them sooner, even though the bank refused access to their

books. It appears to me to be an elementary routine investigation."

The Director of Public Prosecutions was not above pin-pricking a junior official under circumstances which made it difficult for him to defend himself. There was, however, no need for him to do so; Major Faide at once jumped into the breach.

"Why should we have investigated them?" he asked, with some show of warmth. "Everybody who knows the circumstances of their lives would tell you that the last person in the world to murder Lord Grayle was his wife! We had far greater reason to believe that Moode had murdered him; Inspector Poole has been on that line practically night and day ever since. Even as it is, we are now only eight days from the time of the first murder, and yet practically all the facts connected with that, and also with the second murder, are in our hands. That hardly seems to call for an official rebuke!"

"I was not administering a rebuke," replied Sir Graham coldly. "And yet, in spite of what everybody knew, the fact remains that Lord Grayle *was* murdered by his wife."

"Surely not, France?" interposed the Commissioner. "She was responsible—criminally responsible—for his death, but obviously without intent. If that case stood alone, you would find it difficult to persuade any jury to bring in a murder verdict against her."

The Director shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no wish to split hairs," he said. "She's a murderess, and responsible for her husband's death. She'll hang all right."

The Commissioner's eyes narrowed; he opened his mouth as if to speak, but catching Sir Johnson Homesdale's eye, refrained. The Home Office official spoke for the first time, addressing Major Faide.

"What is your theory, then, Chief Constable, as to the motive for this murder? I mean the murder of the butler, Moode, because the other was clearly an accident arising out of a first attempt to murder Moode."

"We imagine that Lady Grayle was being blackmailed by Moode," replied Major Faide. "Presumably he discovered in some way that she was having the furniture copied and sold—furniture which didn't belong to her—and saw his way to make an income out of it. Lady Grayle isn't the sort of woman to sit still under blackmail; I should have expected her to tell her husband and face the trouble, but I suppose she couldn't face his knowing what a dirty trick she was playing on him—and so preferred murder."

Sir Johnson leant across to the Commissioner and whispered.

"I quite agree," said the latter, "much the less venial of the two. Well, is that the lot, Inspector?"

"Not quite, sir. There's the question of the poisons. I've traced the hydrocyanic acid, but I don't know how she got the scopolamine."

"Oh, you've traced the hydrocyanic, have you?" said the D.P.P. "That's the important case for the Crown, anyhow. How did she get it?"

"From a vet., sir; something that Dr. Calladine said put me on to it. When I asked him if he'd got any of the stuff, he said: 'Do you take me for a vet.?' I didn't think anything of it at the time, but yesterday morning I remembered that on the day before Moode's death Lady Grayle's secretary told me that she had gone to Melton Mowbray to see a horse of hers that was under the care of a vet. there—she keeps her hunters at Melton Mowbray during the season, and one of them had been lamed and couldn't move to Tassart with the others for the summer. It struck me as a possible connection, so I ran up there yesterday evening—it's only forty miles from Windon. I found the vet. easily enough, and that was what happened; she'd asked for it to kill a dog with."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Commissioner. "What a mad thing to do! After all her cleverness in every other way, to give herself away like that."

"I suppose she counted on everyone accepting the suicide theory," said Major Faide. "Either that, or she didn't care what happened to her, so long as she could kill that blackmailing devil—like a dog! That would appeal to her!"

"Well, that's good enough for us, anyhow," said Sir Graham. "You can get a warrant on that, and then get ahead with the inquests."

"What about this scopolamine?" asked Sir Leward Marradine, speaking for the first time. "Didn't Lemuel give you any idea as to how she could have got that?"

"He suggested that she got it—stole it—from the local doctor's medicine cupboard. He said it was in very common use for maternity work, and that every country doctor would keep a stock of it, but Dr. Calladine said he never used it—and we certainly found none in his house."

"Maternity work?" Sir Leward stared at the detective, then broke into a short laugh. "My dear Inspector, have you forgotten what I told you the day I sent you down to Tassart?"

Poole's face remained blank.

"Why, man, I told you that during the War Lady Grayle ran Tassart as a Lying-in Hospital for Unmarried Mothers!"

XXV • The End

When Poole had given all the information about the case that he had to give, and answered all the questions which even Sir Graham France could think of, he withdrew, leaving the senior officials to conclude the conference *in camera*. It lasted for nearly another hour, at the end of which time Sir Johnson Homesdale and the Director of Public Prosecutions left New Scotland Yard together, their solemn faces evidence of the gravity of their discussions. As they parted Sir Graham said:

"Well, I hope we've done right. I've agreed—but I don't like it."

"I can understand that," said the Home Office official. "I've had experience of it on two previous occasions only, in a fairly long career. I can only say that they never frightened me as a precedent, and I have regretted neither of them."

Major Faide, Chief Constable Thurston, and Inspector Poole also left the Yard together, in a taxi, bound for Marylebone. They travelled down to Windon together in almost complete silence, each engaged in his rather gloomy thoughts.

"I'll do just what you like about coming with you, Thurston," said Major Faide at last. "It's my county; I'm responsible for it. On the other hand, this is a Home Office decision. It's an entirely new experience to me; I'd like to leave it to your judgment."

Thurston nodded.

"It's good of you to put it like that, Major," he said. "I don't really think that, under the circumstances, there's any necessity for you to come out. If you did, you would have to take charge altogether, which must be most unpleasant for you. If you'll let your Superintendent come out with me, that will make it clear—if there's ever any question—that the County Police and the Yard are working together, and at the same time I shall be in charge and will do all the dirty work."

Major Faide was unquestionably relieved at this ruling, but he was too deeply moved to say any more.

It was getting on for three o'clock when the train reached Windon, and as they had had lunch before leaving London, there was nothing to keep the two C.I.D. men in the county town. A police car was soon ready and, in company with Superintendent Clewth, they set out for Tassart. The spell of fine weather had broken, and a heavy downpour of rain was sweeping the countryside, saturating the swathes of early hay, blotting out the landscape, and driving all but the hardiest and most luckless of human beings indoors.

Poole, however, was in no humour to notice the weather. He was still young and human enough to dread the task in front of him, even though his own would be a subordinate part. So much horror and misery had come within the last week to this lovely old English home; he had begun to feel sympathy—almost affection—for it, and, though it was impossible not to feel horror at the callous cruelty that had already destroyed two human lives, it was also difficult not to feel some sympathetic understanding of the provocation that had led to it.

The car pulled up at the front door of Tassart Hall in a downpour so heavy that the sound of wheels on the gravel must have been inaudible to the occupants of the house. The Chief Constable's ring was answered by the first footman, whose eyes widened at the sight of this formidable invasion.

Was Lady Grayle at home? The Dowager Lady Grayle? James would 'ascertain'; in the meantime, would the gentlemen wait?

"We'll come with you, my lad," said Chief Constable Thurston.

As they passed the secretary's room the door opened and Irene Hollen appeared. She looked at Poole and her lips formed a question. Poole checked.

"Is Lord Grayle here?" he asked in a low voice.

Irene shook her head.

"Send for him."

The girl seized his arm.

"What is it?" she whispered, horror in her eyes.

Poole could not meet them; he shook his head, and hurried after his colleagues, arriving just in time to slip past James into Lady Grayle's sitting-room before the door was shut.

Lady Grayle was sitting in a low chair before the fire; at sight of the three men a slow flush spread over her face; then receded, to leave it deadly white. Poole thought she was going to faint, but instead she smiled brilliantly and a sparkle of excitement came into her eyes.

James had made no announcement—he had, in fact, been pushed rather unceremoniously aside. Thurston crossed the room and stood looking down at Lady Grayle.

"I am Chief Constable Thurston, of the Criminal Investigation Department . . ."

"And this is Superintendent Clewth," Lady Grayle interrupted him, "and Mr. Poole I know, too."

She did not move from her chair, leaving the three men to stand awkwardly towering above her.

"I am sorry to say, my lady, that I hold a warrant for your arrest on a charge of killing by poison James Moode, butler, employed in this house."

He held out the warrant, but Lady Grayle did not look at it; instead, her eyes fixed themselves upon Poole's face, while a slow and bitter smile spread over her own.

"You have been more intelligent than I gave you credit for, young man," she said.

"It is my duty to caution you," Thurston hastily interposed, "that you need make no statement, but that if you do it will be taken down in writing and may be used as evidence."

"Oh, I know, I know; in fact, every child knows that in these days." Lady Grayle turned her eyes to Thurston's face. "You're not charging me with the . . . murder of my husband?" Her voice was hardly more than a whisper, and her face had suddenly become haggard again, as when Poole had first seen it.

"No, my lady; not on this warrant." The Chief Constable paused and then added more deliberately, "It is hoped that that may not be necessary."

"You mean, I suppose, if I confess to killing . . . that man? if I plead guilty?" asked Lady Grayle.

Thurston did not answer, but met her gaze steadily. She looked away, looked into the crackling fire, and sat quietly for several minutes, thinking. . . .

At last she gave a little shrug of her shoulders.

"It will be simpler," she said quietly. "I will tell you now."

A look of relief, faint but unmistakable, appeared in Thurston's eyes; he made no further attempt to dissuade her. Poole sat down at the writing-table and flattened out the sheets of ruled foolscap with which he had come provided.

"You probably know," began Lady Grayle quietly, "that I have been getting fairly deeply into debt, spending a good deal more than my income —and even that, most people would tell you, was a good deal larger than my husband could really afford, in these difficult days, to give me. I have always been fond of lovely things, and I have never been able to give up anything I was fond of."

Lady Grayle smiled quietly, as if at her own weakness.

"Then I was unlucky enough to have a good week at the end of the last flat-racing season; I made a lot of money and I thought I should go on doing so. I haven't; I've steadily lost ever since, and as I increased the size of my stakes in order to cover my losses, I have steadily increased my losses. I have had to pay them, of course; Gillon has been quite reasonable, but I couldn't expect him to give me much rope without security. It meant that all my money—my allowance—had to go to him instead of to my dressmakers; they are much more . . . optimistic. But even they began to get restive, and at the end of the year were talking of a summons. I couldn't face that; it would have been such a terrible shock to Henry—our name in court. If I'd told him, he'd have found the money somehow, but . . . to tell you the truth, I was ashamed to tell him; he had been so good to me."

Lady Grayle's voice trailed into silence and she sat for several minutes staring into the fire. Then, with a start, she recollected herself and continued.

"I think I should have told him, only then . . . Cristen came along, to value the furniture. I was astounded when he mentioned some of the values; there was enough lying about in odd corners to get me out of all my difficulties. I needn't bother you with how it happened—I'm not sure now whether he tempted me or I tempted him, but it all came very easily and simply. He had already advised Henry that a lot of the furniture wanted overhauling, repairing; we arranged—Cristen and I—that when it went up to be repaired he should have it copied, send the copies back here, and sell the originals. Henry would never have known the difference; he loved the furniture in Tassart because it had been in Tassart for generations, but he knew nothing about it; so long as it looked the same he would have been just as happy. As for Charles—my son—and his wife, they have no thought for anything but a career. They wouldn't, of course, have agreed to anything being sold that might some day belong to them, simply from the point of view of the dog in the manger."

This line of argument struck Poole as specious to a degree, but it was not his business to question it—only to write it down.

"It would all have gone quite all right, and nobody would really have been any the worse off, if that man, Moode, hadn't found out. How he did I don't know, but he did, and he promptly started blackmailing me—in the most respectful manner, but quite remorselessly. Each time a fresh lot of furniture came back from being repaired—each lot of copies, I mean—he came and asked for a hundred pounds. And I had to give it to him. I'd gone too far then to turn back; it was too late to tell Henry. But I knew that it meant a lifetime of blackmail—long after I'd ceased to get any money for the furniture—but here in the house would always be the proof of what I'd done. There was really only one way out of it; I *had* to get rid of him. Dismissal, of course, was no good; he would have told at once. I had to kill him."

Lady Grayle spoke quite calmly, as if the decision referred to a sick animal.

"I don't know whether you realise it, but this house was a hospital—a maternity hospital—during the War; after it was closed I found in a drawer of one of the cupboards used for drugs a packet of stuff called scopolamine—a drug used for 'twilight sleep.' I didn't think much about it at the time, but I had once asked a doctor what would happen if it was used in too large quantities. He said that probably the patient would sleep for a couple of days and then get over it, but if there was a really serious overdose—there wouldn't be any waking up. I decided to try it on Moode, beginning with small doses and gradually working up to bigger ones till he died. I hoped that it would be thought he had had a stroke. The way I meant to give it to him was in his early morning tea. I was often in the pantry in the early morning to fetch one of my dogs that slept there, and I had often seen his tea prepared by the footman; he always had it in the same tea-set, and the pot was never washed out or warmed after it had once been cleaned the day before. I went in rather earlier than usual and dropped into the teapot an amount that I believed would be about right—a very small amount—I thought I'd see what effect a small dose had for a start and then increase. Then the awful thing happened."

Lady Grayle's face had become quite calm during her relation of the events leading up to her decision to murder the butler; now, at the thought of the tragic accident which had turned her weapon against her own heart, it became once more white and haggard.

"By the most extraordinary stroke of fate, on that one morning the tea-set which Moode always used was used for my husband instead, and it was he who drank the scopolamine. Even then it wouldn't have mattered very

much if he hadn't on the previous night taken a dose of the drug that Dr. Calladine gave him for his neuralgia. I suppose the combination of the two was fatal."

"One minute, please, my lady," said Thurston. "When you say that your husband took a dose of the other drug overnight are you referring to the one Lady Chessingham gave him at ten o'clock?"

"Yes; that was the only one he had."

"What would you say if I told you that he took another early the next morning, and that it was *that* dose that made the fatal combination with the scopolamine?"

Lady Grayle shrank back in her chair, her self-control for the first time definitely shaken.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. "Why do you say that?"

"Because more than a single dose of di-dial was found in the body, and a part of it had only been taken within a few hours of death."

"Then if I hadn't left the bottle of tablets in his room it would never have happened? The scopolamine would not have killed him?"

Thurston nodded.

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Lady Grayle, "and I so nearly refused to!"

She buried her face in her hands, but no tears came to relieve her agony of remorse. Chief Constable Thurston watched the bowed figure for a time, then he said gently:

"We know how that mistake happened, my lady—the changing of the trays—but we must go on to the second . . . to the death of Moode."

Lady Grayle looked up, her face now flushed and hard.

"You wouldn't expect me to leave that devil alive after that?" she exclaimed. "It was he who was responsible for Henry's death! And he thought—he dared to think that I had deliberately poisoned my husband. He didn't know how it was done; he didn't know anything about the scopolamine; he thought I had given him an overdose of the other drug. The fool never realised that the poison was meant for him! He began to press me harder than ever—he had got what he believed was murder against me now. There was no time to waste, because he might get frightened and tell the pol . . . tell you about it—especially after Mr. Poole started questioning him about the furniture. He warned me of that, so when Mr. Poole asked me about it I knew what to say. Moode didn't want me caught—he didn't want you to hang the goose who was laying golden eggs for him."

Lady Grayle gave a high, excited laugh.

"But he was getting frightened, and to save his own skin he might tell. I daren't try any more slow poison; I didn't know what was a killing dose of scopolamine—even whether I had enough. So I decided on acid—that would kill quickly enough."

"Was that the only reason for your choosing hydrocyanic acid, my lady?" asked Thurston.

Lady Grayle hesitated.

"No," she said at last. "I chose it partly for the flavour; I had thought of it before, when I first thought of killing him, because the flavour would be drowned by that cocktail which we had just begun to use, but I had given it up because it seemed too risky. And there was another reason; the scopolamine had killed Henry; I couldn't use the same thing for that man."

Lady Grayle's eyes gleamed. It was easy to see what she was thinking—of the sudden and agonising death that this acid would give to the man she hated. But she did not speak that thought.

"I thought I had arranged it all so cleverly to look like suicide; then everyone would think that it was Moode who had poisoned my husband. I even arranged for an unimpeachable witness to be present to prove that I *couldn't* have poisoned him."

Lady Grayle glanced across at Poole.

"No, it wasn't *altogether* for your blue eyes that I invited you to lunch that day, Mr. Poole," she said maliciously.

Poole flushed, but did not look up from his writing.

"Of course, I over-reached myself there," said Lady Grayle. "I don't know what he saw or how he found out, but he evidently did. Yes, I poisoned Moode, Chief Constable, and I shall plead guilty to it. You will have no trouble."

She sank back in her chair, the excitement dying out of her eyes. She was—and looked—very weary. Thurston waited for a minute to see if she would add anything. Then he said:

"What you have said will be read over to you now, my lady, and then I will ask you to sign it."

She nodded listlessly and Poole started on his task. For half an hour he read, then the foolscap sheets were handed to Lady Grayle, and she initialled each one in turn, adding at the end her bold, characteristic signature. Chief Constable Thurston folded up the sheets and put them in his pocket.

“There’s just one thing more, my lady,” he said. “You have still some of the scopolamine left. I must ask you to give it to me.”

Lady Grayle stared at him for a minute, then, rising slowly to her feet, walked across to the writing-table at which Poole had been sitting. Unlocking the centre drawer she pulled it right out; then, putting her slim arm into the aperture, she appeared to press something inside and then withdrew her hand, holding a tiny secret drawer, little bigger than a pencil box. In it lay a glass bottle. She handed the little drawer to Thurston, who took out the bottle, examined it, and then slipped it into his pocket.

“I am afraid I must ask you to accompany us now, my lady,” he said. “We have a car outside or we could go in your own if you preferred it.”

Lady Grayle’s face looked grey and haggard at this dreadful approach of reality—of the sordid end.

“Can’t I take some things with me?” she asked. “My maid . . . ?”

“Certainly your maid can pack whatever you want, but it would be useless for her to come with you.” He turned to his companions. “Go down and wait in the hall,” he said. Then turning back to Lady Grayle: “I will wait outside this door, my lady, if you will ring for your maid and give her instructions.”

He turned and walked deliberately out of the room. Lady Grayle stared after him. The door closed and she was alone.

For fully a minute she stood motionless, as if unable to grasp the necessity for action. Then her eyes fell from the door to the little table beside which Thurston had been standing.

On it lay the bottle of scopolamine.

Her eyes widened to horror. She opened her mouth as if to scream, but covered it with her hands, staring . . . staring at the little bottle.

Slowly her hand reached out . . .

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this eBook and is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *No Friendly Drop* by Sir Henry Lancelot Aubrey-Fletcher (as Henry Wade)]