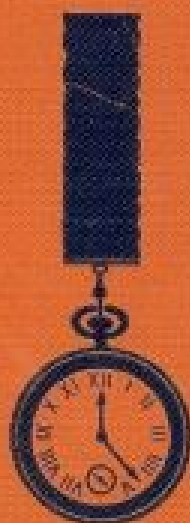


THE VENETIAN KEY

ALLEN UPWARD



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THE VENETIAN KEY

BY
ALLEN UPWARD

AUTHOR OF
"THE CLUB OF MASKS", "THE HOUSE OF SIN", ETC.



PHILADELPHIA & LONDON
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CHAPTER I

SIR FRANK TARLETON, BART., M.D., F.R.S., MEDICAL Adviser to the Home Office, and many other things that denote high distinction in the medical world, was just finishing a generous breakfast when his keen ear caught the sound of a motor slackening speed as it approached his modest door in Montagu Street. He got up and walked to one of the windows of the old-fashioned dining-room, which looked out on the street.

He was in time to see a taxicab draw up beside the pavement, containing a passenger whose proceedings were well worthy of attention. The unknown did not at once open the door and alight. Instead a face appeared at the window peering out cautiously for some moments; then the window was lowered, and the head to which the face belonged was thrust out, and turned this way and that, as if to ascertain who was in sight. Only after the most searching glances up and down the street did the passenger open the door with a stealthy movement, get out, and cross the pavement hurriedly to the doctor's bell.

Sir Frank Tarleton's peculiar practice had accustomed him to callers of more than one class. His official visitors were numerous. Messengers from government departments desiring his advice on matters connected with the public health; police officers sent to fetch him, often in extreme haste, to cases which had baffled the local medical officer; and the bearers of similar messages from the great London hospitals; all these were in daily attendance at his door. Less frequent were the visits of other doctors coming to consult him in confidence as to symptoms in their patients which they were half afraid to recognize, lest they should find themselves unveiling dreadful secrets and breaking up the peace of families. The rarest class of visitors, however, were the private patients who came to the great authority on poisons, with blanched faces and shaking hands, to whisper in his ear terrible suspicions concerning those whom they loved best; perhaps the sons who had anticipated their inheritance, perhaps the wives who had been tempted to forget their marriage vow.

Something about the man whose nervous ring was now resounding through the doctor's house seemed to mark him out as distinct from all these. The brief glance that Tarleton had obtained through the wire blind of his window had shown the caller to be a man of aristocratic bearing, well

preserved for his age, which could not be much more than fifty, and scrupulously dressed. But the curious precautions with which he had emerged from the cab could not be attributed to nervousness as to his health. It was impossible not to read in them a dread of being seen, if not of something worse.

The doctor stepped through the hall into his consulting room before the bell had ceased to peal. He was seated in his armchair with his case-book open before him, and his manner was quite inscrutable when the stranger was ushered in.

Now that Tarleton was able to examine him closely he found it still more difficult to place him. In spite of his well-bred air and almost handsome features he showed the marks of one who had seen a good deal of life, not always on the pleasant side. He stooped slightly, and was beginning to be bald, while what hair he had was nearly gray. His hands seemed to have been coarsened by rough usage or exposure; and his mouth, so far as it could be seen under an overhanging moustache, was also coarsened in a more ugly way. But what the doctor liked least about him were his eyelids. They reminded the observer of the black, wrinkled eyelids of the eagles and vultures in the Zoölogical Gardens, and they were kept lowered over the eyes like shutters. Now, as he came into the room, the shutters went up for a moment, and he shot a distrustful glance at Sir Frank as though he half expected to find an enemy in him.

None of these signs was entirely new in Tarleton's experience. He had seen them in more than one bankrupt member of a noble family who stood to gain a fortune by the death of some unsuspecting relative, perhaps a woman or a child. He had learned to look out for eyelids like that, and to see them lowered before his gaze. Men of that stamp were accustomed to give a wide berth to the famous specialist who had detected more secret crimes than any other living man. What was new in the doctor's experience was to have one of the class coming to him of his own accord; and he waited with a good deal of curiosity to hear what his visitor had to say.

It was evidently something not very easy to say. In taking the patient's chair the stranger had contrived to shift it slightly so that he need not face the physician when speaking, and he sat with his head bent down.

"May I ask you to treat this consultation in very great confidence, Sir Frank?"

It was an ominous beginning. The expert frowned and compressed his lips.

"My patients usually take it for granted that their confidences will be respected," he said with a touch of severity.

The caller fidgeted rather uneasily in his chair.

"Yes, yes, of course," he murmured in a tone of apology. "I didn't mean — —" He broke off and added, in a more hesitating voice, "I only wanted to make sure that you would treat me as a patient."

Tarleton lifted his eyebrows. What possible meaning could there be in such words as those? It was incredible that any man could have come to him, to the official head of the medical police service, on any but a lawful errand. He took up his fountain pen before he spoke again.

"May I have your name, please?"

There was a moment's hesitation, too slight to have been worth noticing but for that previous remark, and that singular little scene outside the house.

"Sir Rowland Caythorpe—Baronet."

As Tarleton wrote down the name in his case-book it suddenly struck him that he had heard it before, although he could not recollect when or where. It mattered little; it would be easy enough to find out afterwards all that there was to find out about a man whose name must be in so many books of reference. It was not worth while to ask such a patient for his address. Sir Frank laid down his pen, and took out his magnificent watch, which he began swinging gently by its well-worn black ribbon.

He was aware, as he did so, that the wrinkled eyelids had gone up for a moment, but they were lowered again swiftly before he could turn round. Caythorpe might have been anxious to see if his name was familiar to the consultant. But there was not much to be learned in that way from such an old hand.

"I have come to ask you if you can give me an antidote against poison."

At last the secret was out. This was the explanation of the caller's remarkable embarrassment; this was the reason why he had approached the doctor's house with the precautions of a hunted man. Tarleton was fairly startled now, and the watch swung faster between his fingers. It would not have surprised him if Caythorpe had come to consult him about a poisoning case with another victim; in fact, he had been half expecting some attempt to obtain information which he had made up his mind beforehand to refuse. But this was an altogether novel experience. If the expert could trust his own judgment the man before him belonged to the class of the hunters rather than the hunted. There must be some very queer circumstances at the back of this appeal.

“Am I to understand that you think you have been poisoned?” he inquired in a voice that remained perfectly calm.

So far as his eye could tell him the baronet was a fairly healthy subject. He certainly showed no symptoms of having taken any poison known to the specialist in any quantity likely to do mischief.

“I can’t be sure.” The answer was given rather unwillingly. “I fancied my heart was affected, but my doctor assured me that there was nothing the matter with it. He put my symptoms down to nervousness.”

Tarleton felt little doubt that Sir Rowland’s doctor was right. However, he said, “If you feel any doubt you should go to Doctor Braidlaw. He is our soundest authority on the heart.”

“I know—I mean my own doctor told me so. I have been to him, and his opinion is the same.” Again the admission seemed to be made grudgingly. “But I thought perhaps there might be some special poison known to you, some poison that affected the heart in a way that another doctor couldn’t detect.”

Sir Frank Tarleton became rigid, and the golden pendulum ceased to vibrate. Was this the attempt he had been on the lookout for? Was Caythorpe trying to extract from him the name of a poison that could be used with comparative safety? Had it been all acting from the beginning—the performance outside the house, the nervous manner, and all the rest? Without a moment’s hesitation he answered in his most freezing tones.

“There is no such poison as you suggest, Sir Rowland. There is no poison whose action on the heart could escape the notice of such an authority as Doctor Braidlaw.”

Sir Rowland looked mortified.

“It would be a relief to me if you would examine my heart,” he urged.

“I shouldn’t dream of it. It would be presumption on my part to examine a patient of Doctor Braidlaw’s.” The doctor spoke impetuously under the influence of his suspicion. He was to regret his hasty refusal before many hours had passed.

Caythorpe did not venture to press him further.

“I suppose I ought to be satisfied,” he said with resignation. “Well, then, is there anything you can give me as a preventive against poisoning?”

Tarleton began to feel puzzled. The request sounded genuine, and this time it was difficult to see any sinister motive in it.

“I hardly understand you. Do you mean an antidote to some particular poison that you think you have taken?”

"No, not exactly. I mean some general prophylactic—I think that's the medical term, isn't it?"

In spite of the gravity of the question the authority on poisons could hardly keep back a smile.

"A prophylactic against all the poisons in the world! My dear sir, if there were any such drug I shouldn't be sitting here. You must be thinking of Mithridates."

It became evident that Sir Rowland Caythorpe had been thinking of the celebrated King of Pontus.

"Didn't he keep himself immune from poison by taking it in small quantities every day?" he inquired.

"So the story goes; but it can hardly be true, unless there was only one poison in use in his time. It is more likely that he set the story going himself to discourage prospective poisoners."

The wrinkled eyelids went up for a moment. The visitor seemed to be struck by this suggestion, and to be considering whether he could make any use of it.

"Hadn't you better be frank with me, Sir Rowland," the physician put in, pocketing his watch, and at the same time closing his case-book with emphasis. "I can do nothing for you as a doctor, that I can see. You show no symptoms of poisoning at present, or you may be pretty sure the medical men you have consulted already would have found them. But I am a government official, and it is my duty to assist in the prevention of crime. If you feel yourself in danger why not ask for police protection?"

There was no mistaking the effect of this hint on the baronet. He at once rose to his feet and began to feel for his pocket-book.

"I am much obliged to you, Sir Frank. I have private reasons that I needn't trouble you with for thinking that I might do well to be on my guard just now; but it is only my own suspicion. I have no evidence that I could put before the police."

He counted out five notes and laid them on the table. Tarleton looked at the money in some doubt. His practice was too various for him to have any fixed fee, but five pounds was a very liberal one for a consultation that had consisted of no more than a question and answer, and he was inclined to regard it as a bribe.

"I hardly think I ought to take a fee from you as I haven't examined you," he said.

Sir Rowland was visibly concerned.

"I beg of you, Sir Frank! I want, if I may, to feel that I am under your care. I may be coming again; I may have to send for you at short notice. If you will let me, I shall give your address to my niece, who lives with me, for her to send for you in case of any sudden attack. She is very much attached to me," he wound up rather pathetically.

Tarleton was softened at once. The man before him ceased to be only a suspicious character probably deserving of whatever fate might be in store for him, and became a human being. An uncle who gave his niece a home, and who had her affection, must have a little good in him somewhere. The doctor's one weakness was an interest, which he persuaded himself was strictly fatherly, in pretty women; and he was naturally ready to believe that here was one.

He hastened to give his full consent to come in answer to any summons from the niece and he did so with such a change of manner that the uncle ventured to speak again.

"My niece is outside in the taxi," he said with a look of invitation. "Poor little girl, she will be anxious to hear your verdict. Of course she doesn't know anything except that I have been anxious about my heart."

Tarleton was not slow to grasp the situation. Whatever shady side there might be to the uncle's life, it had been carefully hidden from the niece. His visitor rose still more in his regard. "I will come out and speak to her myself, if you like," he answered cordially.

There was a momentary return of the other's uneasiness.

"My niece's name is Lowless," he said, speaking with an effort. "In fact she knows me by that name. We live very quietly in a suburb, Harlesden, and it suits me in many ways to drop my title out there."

The explanation was given as indifferently as possible, but, coupled with all that had gone before, it left the Home Office adviser in little doubt that his visitor had strong reasons, and not very creditable ones, for passing under two different names. However, he made no comment, and the two men went out of the house together.

The first thing Sir Frank caught sight of outside was a most delightful face of eighteen or thereabouts, framed in a mass of red-gold hair, gazing anxiously at the doorway. The uncle's introduction was worded lightly:

"Sir Frank Tarleton has kindly offered to tell you himself that I am all right, my dear. Poppy will be glad to know that she can send for you in case of need."

Poppy's bright smile rewarded the physician better than his fee. He was guilty at that moment of wishing that the baronet's fears might not prove

quite groundless. He did not want the niece to be deprived of her protector, but he felt it would be anything but disagreeable to have to attend him for some not too serious injury. He bowed over the little hand held out to him with old-fashioned courtesy; and he stood watching the taxi as it drove away with a touch of compassion that surprised himself.

A very unexpected sequel to Sir Rowland Caythorpe's visit came the same day. Tarleton was rung up on the telephone and asked to fix a time for receiving a call from Inspector Charles of New Scotland Yard; and he responded by asking the officer to dine with him at eight o'clock.

He made the appointment without attaching any importance to it. The Honorable Captain Charles and he were old friends, and frequent collaborators. Charles, as a retired army man and a peer's younger son, was the officer generally entrusted with those cases in which people of high position were involved, and more than usual tact and discretion were called for on the part of the police. The cases in which the doctor and he met were generally delicate ones, so that there was nothing extraordinary in the inspector's refraining from saying anything about his business over the wire.

But when Captain Charles walked into the dining-room with military punctuality as the clock struck, his usually stolid face showed an embarrassment that roused the doctor's curiosity. Sir Frank had instructed the servant not to wait in the room between the courses; and as soon as they were left alone with the soup the inspector offered an apology.

"I hope you won't mind, Sir Frank, but perhaps I ought to have told you why I wanted to see you. I have had a report that you had a visit this morning from a man who goes under more than one name—I don't know which he gave you."

The host laid down his spoon and stared at his guest.

"Are you asking me a question? A question about a private patient!"

Captain Charles looked confused.

"No, no, I didn't mean to do that. But this man isn't an ordinary patient. He is under police surveillance."

The consultant returned to his soup. He was quite prepared for hearing something of the kind about the man with two names. It struck him at once that Caythorpe might have discovered that his movements were watched, and taken fright in consequence, in the belief that an enemy was on his track. He answered with mild sarcasm.

“So I should have gathered from what you have just said. He was seen coming into my house, I suppose, and you would like me to tell you what he came for?”

The inspector hung his head.

“Of course I shouldn’t think of asking that. But I thought I ought to let you know what the police know about him, in case — —”

He broke off rather awkwardly. The specialist became still more sarcastic.

“In case I should have supplied him with the means to commit a murder, I suppose you mean.”

The return of the maidservant saved the unlucky guest from replying. He fixed a reproachful look on Sir Frank while the soup was being removed and a delicious salmon steak was being placed on the table. The host was the first to speak again.

“It may comfort you to know that Sir Rowland Caythorpe, otherwise Mr. Lowless, had been to two other medical men before he came to me, and that all I did was to confirm their opinion.”

“Thank you.” Charles emptied his glass with relief. “I really thought you might like to know something about him. He is a dangerous man.”

The retort on the tip of the doctor’s tongue was that dangerous men might sometimes be in danger themselves. But he held it back, and begged his guest to go on.

“Perhaps you remember hearing his name a good many years ago in connection with a card scandal in a West End Club. He was expelled for cheating.”

Tarleton nodded. This was the clue he had been trying to recapture.

“Since then he has been out in Mexico. We don’t know what he did out there, and we haven’t troubled to inquire as there is no extradition with Mexico. Since he came home . . .”

There was another interruption. The servant came in without anything in her hands this time, and she looked flustered.

“There’s a lady, sir, at the telephone. She gave her name as Miss Lowless, and she says her uncle has disappeared.”

Tarleton threw down his napkin and sprang to his feet.

CHAPTER II

CAPTAIN CHARLES was almost as much dismayed as his host, though he kept his seat. The exclamation that escaped him showed that he felt no doubt as to what had happened.

“So the rascal has bolted! I hope to goodness he hasn’t shaken off my men.”

Tarleton compressed his lips. His own fear was different, but it was too soon for him to say so to his colleague without a breach of professional confidence. He hurried out of the room to the telephone.

The voice on the wire was tremulous.

“I hope it wasn’t wrong for me to ring you up, Sir Frank. My uncle told me I was to, if anything happened to him.”

“You were quite right, my dear. Tell me exactly what has happened.”

“I can’t think. I haven’t seen him since tea-time. We were going out to dinner to-night, but when it was time for us to start, and I went into his study to look for him, he wasn’t there. We have searched the whole house without finding him.”

The voice faltered and failed for a moment.

“Can he have had some sudden call, and gone out without letting you know?” It began to look as if Charles had guessed rightly, and his bird had flown.

“I don’t think so. His dress clothes are all laid out in his room ready to put on, so that he must have meant to come to the dinner. And his hat and stick are both in the hall.” There was another pause, before the frightened girl gathered courage to say, “Mrs. Maggitts, the housekeeper, says he must be in the strong room. We have knocked and called, but we can’t get an answer, and the door is locked. She thinks he must have fainted inside.”

Tarleton’s first fear returned. It was now that he began to wish he had not declined to examine his mysterious patient. He could scarcely believe that such a man as Braidlaw had overlooked any weakness of the heart; but what if there had been some occult mischief elsewhere? A man might collapse suddenly from other causes than heart disease. Hardly from poisoning; the specialist racked his memory in vain for any case of the kind but from paralysis or apoplexy or some obscure trouble in the brain. And there was another more terrible possibility about which no hint must be given yet to the missing man’s niece. He put a very cautious question.

"Is there any way of getting into the room you call the strong room? Could the door be opened by a skeleton key?"

"No, I feel sure not. It's in the cellar; my uncle had an iron door put to it when he bought the house, with a burglar-proof lock."

This answer did not quite dispose of Tarleton's dread. It was just possible that an assassin might have presented himself in peaceful guise, entered the strong room in company with his victim, and come away after striking him down, locking the door behind him. But he refrained from asking any question that might suggest such an idea to the girl.

"I have a friend here who is connected with the police," he told her. "If you will wait a moment I will consult him, and he may be able to bring out a man who can force the door."

He went back to the dining-room and briefly explained the situation to his colleague. The inspector had wisely taken advantage of the interval to swallow every morsel he could, foreseeing that he would not have much chance of finishing his dinner in peace. Now he was all eagerness.

"It's a stroke of luck as far as I'm concerned," he cried cheerfully. "I've heard all about that strong room from my men, and I've been waiting to get a look inside it for weeks. I hadn't enough evidence to apply for a search warrant, and this is just the chance I was waiting for."

He rubbed his hands with professional glee at the prospect. Clearly it had not occurred to him yet that anything grave had happened.

The physician frowned. It was anything but pleasant to think that Poppy's appeal to him would result in the unmasking of her uncle's secrets to the police. Yet there was really no alternative. It was evident that the room must be broken into, and that she herself would apply to the police if he did not. Apart from that, Caythorpe was already under surveillance, and the fact of his disappearance would have been sufficient in any case to bring Charles to the spot armed with the necessary warrant. On the whole, Tarleton persuaded himself that it was the kindest thing he could do in the poor girl's interest to let the inspector appear on the scene in the character of a friend, called in by her own request.

He put in a word on her behalf.

"Caythorpe's niece is a thoroughly nice young girl who knows nothing of the seamy side of her uncle's life. She doesn't even know his real name; he has always been Mr. Lowless to her. I shall take it as a favor if you will spare her as much as possible."

Captain Charles gave his friend a sly smile. He was well aware of Sir Frank's amiable weakness, and felt pretty sure that Miss Lowless must be a

very charming young woman.

"I'll do my best, of course," he said, "but I expect she'll have to know something. I have my own idea as to what we shall find in that strong room. However, I can tell you all that afterwards."

Both men were too well accustomed to emergencies of a similar kind to lose any time. Tarleton had only to tell the waiting girl that they were coming to her aid, and to obtain the address of the house; which she gave as 77 Drysdale Park, a turning out of the main road to Wembley. In another minute his car was at the door, and the bag that he always kept packed in readiness was brought down and placed inside it. Scotland Yard meanwhile had been warned by the inspector through the telephone to send out an expert smith with everything necessary to force the locked door.

Only when they were well on their way did Tarleton raise the question of what had really happened within the locked room.

"I think I ought to tell you in confidence that I'm afraid this is something worse than a fainting fit. When Caythorpe came to consult me this morning he was in real fear of his life. In fact, he as good as told me that he thought he had been poisoned, or was going to be."

The inspector whistled softly, yet he seemed rather struck than surprised.

"Murder?" he ejaculated. "Well, I don't know that I ought to see anything strange in that. He had enemies enough. And it wasn't very easy for them to get at him through the law."

"You were going to tell me something about him," the consultant said.

"Yes; it's a secret at present, but it looks as if it wouldn't be one much longer. I can take credit to myself for discovering his game. For the last two or three years he has been a broker in heirlooms."

"Heirlooms!" Visions of rich family treasures, paintings by old masters, ancient tapestry and priceless gems flashed before the listener's eye. He began to grasp the meaning of that iron door put in by the owner of the house in Drysdale Park.

"I dare say you know," Charles went on, "that heirlooms are in the entail with the estate and the title, if there is one, and can't be sold lawfully without the order of a judge in Chancery. Sir Rowland Caythorpe knew that, of course, and he also knew that there were a good many tenants for life who would be only too glad to sell their heirlooms if they could do it under the rose. He made it his business to find out what people were hard up—he could easily do that through the moneylenders—and approach them privately with offers. He bought the heirloom, for a good deal less than its value, and smuggled it out of the country, generally to America where such

things fetch a fancy price. You see he was comparatively safe, because as long as the tenant in possession was alive no one else had any right to the custody of the heirloom. There was no law actually forbidding him to let it go out of his own hands; and there was no one who had any right to ask questions about it. When he died, and the loss of the heirloom was discovered by the next heir, it would be too late to find out what had become of it."

Tarleton considered this information carefully. He saw the advantages offered by such a scheme to an aristocratic adventurer. As the inspector had remarked, the victims of such a form of theft had very little chance of legal redress. Caythorpe might well have had enemies, and have gone in fear of them. It was more than possible that he might have received threatening letters, demanding the return of stolen property. But it was a long way from that to believing that a defrauded heir would revenge himself by deliberate murder.

"You think it possible that Caythorpe has been killed by one of the heirs he has robbed?" he asked in a tone of doubt.

The police officer drew in his horns. "I won't go as far as that," he said guardedly. "I've really no right to say anything at present." And he sat bolt upright with the air of a man whose lips were sealed.

And now the car was coming out of the crowded lights of Willesden, and rolling through a district that had hardly yet put off the village and put on the suburb. Drysdale Park, when it was reached at last, proved to be the ambitious name of what had once been an ambitious avenue intended doubtless as the beginning of what house agents term a residential centre. It branched off with some pretence to dignity from the main road, and expired in a melancholy way among a forlorn group of cottages and workmen's dwellings on the edge of a lonely region of bleaching grounds and allotments. All round it on both sides had sprung up a growth of narrow streets of close-packed houses of the kind that seem to let themselves, since no house agent deems them worth his attention. By contrast the houses in Drysdale Park had the air of mansions, although their battered gates and shabby woodwork indicated that most of them had sunk to be boarding-houses, or else the homes of that class which is content to live on single floors. One exception Tarleton was quick to notice as they turned into the road, in a smart enough house which bore a doctor's brass plate on one gatepost. Another exception was the house before which the car stopped.

The baronet's retreat was at the far end of the road, which it looked down from an isolated frontage of its own, like a chairman at the head of a table, so that any approaching vehicle could be seen some time before it

reached the gate. The lower part of the house was screened by a shrubbery round which a short drive led up to the front door.

As soon as the chauffeur drew up before the closed gate Inspector Charles gave a low whistle. Instantly a shadow detached itself from the mass of shrubs, and a man in plain clothes came through the gate.

“Is that you, Roberts?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Caythorpe has been missing for about four hours. Can he have left the house?”

Roberts shook his head with decision. “He must be hiding inside, sir. I have been here all that time.”

“Is there an exit behind?”

“Tucker is behind, sir. There’s no gate; there’s a hedge, but it would show at once if anyone had broken through.”

“Very good. I’m expecting a locksmith to force the strong-room door. Bring him in when he comes; you may be wanted as well.”

Roberts saluted and held open the gate for the car to pass in.

The front door was standing wide open, and there came out of it one of the most extraordinary figures Tarleton had ever seen.

It was a woman, so much the dress conveyed, although the bearing and the walk were more like a man’s. The features bore some resemblance to those of the famous Duke of Wellington, but their symmetry was marred by an unsightly blaze which the physician soon perceived was due to disease instead of drink. The creature’s hair, if she possessed any, was completely covered by a black bonnet of most forbidding shape, which subsequent experience showed was never taken off by day, whatever might become of it at night. This virago raised a red and bony hand to arrest the car, and advanced to the window where Tarleton sat.

“What’s your name?”

The voice was as masculine as the face and figure, and hardly less repellent.

“Sir Frank Tarleton. Miss Lowless is expecting me.”

“Who’s that with you?” She pointed a hostile finger at Charles, who was wearing a light overcoat above his evening dress.

“Inspector Charles. He has come with me in case— —”

“I know.” The woman nodded. “You think the master is dead. So do I. But you’re not to say so to Miss Poppy yet. I won’t have her frightened.”

The kind-hearted physician forgave everything to this rough guardian angel. As soon as he had assured her that he was as anxious as she was to spare her young mistress, she suffered them to alight, and stalked in front of them into the house.

Poppy was already in the entrance hall, and even the stolid Charles was moved to pleasure at the radiant sight. She seemed to be one of those who are born happy, and born to shed happiness around them; one of those blithe natures whose every movement is an unconscious dance in very joy of life. Even now her trouble could not altogether darken the brightness of the spirit within.

While she was pouring out her grateful thanks to the distinguished visitor for his prompt response to her appeal, a more sober form coming from behind silently appeared at her side.

“This is Mr. Cyril Bunting, my uncle’s solicitor,” the girl quickly explained. “I thought he ought to be here if the strong-room door had to be forced.”

There was something in the quiet air of protection with which the young man—and he was astonishingly young for a solicitor—had placed himself beside his pretty client, and something also in the blush with which Miss Lowless introduced him, that made Sir Frank suspect that his presence might be accounted for by other than purely legal considerations. But of course there was nothing in that to rouse even a momentary envy in a dry old scientist.

Mr. Bunting looked very honest as well as very young. If ever there was a solicitor who did not know that scoundrels existed in this wicked world, Mr. Cyril Bunting was certainly he. He seemed such a youth as pious mothers long for, and only maiden aunts in the reign of Queen Victoria really believed in. And yet he did not look a fool. There was something very self-possessed in his manner as he looked the two visitors in the face, and he spoke with firmness.

“Mr. Lowless came to me a short time ago to make his will, and I am the executor. I’ll take it on me to authorize the opening of the strong-room door if there is reasonable cause for fearing that he has been taken ill inside.”

The words were cautious, but the young man’s eyes told Tarleton that he had made up his mind about what had become of the missing man.

“I’m afraid there is cause. He came to me this morning to consult me about his health, and he seemed to anticipate whatever has happened to him. I thought his fears were groundless, from what he told me, and therefore I didn’t examine him—unfortunately.”

Poppy's protector clearly understood what lay beneath this non-committal statement. He gave the specialist a look of intelligence as he said, "Very well, Sir Frank, then I'll take the responsibility. The next thing is to find someone to break open the door."

He looked at the inspector this time. Tarleton spoke swiftly.

"My friend, Inspector Charles, happened to be dining with me when Miss Lowless called me up, and he has been good enough to order a locksmith to come out here, as well as coming himself."

The youthful solicitor showed no signs of any feeling but satisfaction at the police officer's presence. Like his charming little client he appeared to welcome Captain Charles as a friend. The whole party passed into a dining-room to wait for the locksmith's arrival. Tarleton staved off the girl's anxious questions about the cause of her uncle's collapse, by questions of his own. He learned from her that she and Sir Rowland had been engaged to dine at the Aldwych Hotel with a man named Costello, her uncle's old partner in Mexico, with whom he had some business to transact.

"Mr. Bunting knows more about it than I do," Poppy said, with a look at the lawyer that brought a mild blush to his face.

"I only know that Mr. Lowless"—he pronounced the name a little awkwardly as though he knew it was a false one, and felt uncomfortable in using it—"that Mr. Lowless owned some mining shares that Mr. Costello wanted to buy from him."

He spoke with a certain reserve, which the physician thought natural in a young man without much experience, who found himself in a rather difficult situation. There was a general feeling of uneasiness in the whole party. Until Caythorpe's fate was ascertained, no one could speak openly about him and his affairs. It was a relief to everyone when the sound of wheels outside announced the arrival of another car, the one bringing the expected locksmith.

There were two smiths in fact, and they had come provided with all the appliances necessary to deal with the iron door. The weird housekeeper brought candles, and led the way down a gloomy flight of stone steps into a flagged passage at the end of which stood the formidable barrier. Bunting went through the form of hammering at the door, and shouting his client's name. Then he stepped out of the way, and the two workmen came forward.

A glance decided them that the only practicable method was to melt the steel round the lock till it was soft enough to be cut through. By the light of the candles held by the onlookers they brought a powerful blowpipe to bear, and after what seemed an interminable labor, the locks and bolts fell with a

clang on the stones. A warning gesture from Tarleton caused Poppy's protector to lay a detaining hand on her arm, while the doctor pressed forward into the room beyond, closely followed by Inspector Charles.

There was just room for them to stand upright within. Against one whitewashed wall stood a large, old-fashioned cabinet of oak, fitted with numerous shelves and drawers, which was open. The only other furniture consisted of a small table and a common kitchen chair. On the table lay a case lined with white velvet, with the lid thrown back, revealing a truly glorious tiara dazzling with gold and pearls; and on the chair sat Sir Rowland Caythorpe, his body bent over the table, and one hand still touching the gorgeous coronet.

CHAPTER III

THE physician was instantly at the side of that stooping form. But there was no real need for him to feel the motionless wrist and thrust his hand through the clothing to the silent heart. There was no need even for him to declare his verdict. The signs were too plain to be mistaken even by a layman. Sir Rowland Caythorpe had been dead for at least three hours.

The dreadful stillness that followed on the entrance of the two investigators told its own tale to the girl who stood trembling in the doorway. Breaking away from the compassionate clutch of the young man beside her, she rushed forward with a heartbroken cry.

“Uncle! O Uncle!”

Tarleton drew a sharp breath. Fortunately there was nothing shocking in the spectacle beyond the grim signs of mortality. There was no mark of violence anywhere. There was no such distortion of form and feature as usually accompanies the action of those poisons that deal sudden death. To all appearance the victim had yielded his life with hardly more than a passing sigh. The youngest medical student, the least experienced nurse, could scarcely have hesitated in pronouncing that the death was due to nothing else than heart failure of the most ordinary kind. All this was the man whom the famous Braidlaw, and his own doctor as well, had assured that he had nothing of the kind to fear!

Poppy’s first sob brought a comforter better able to deal with her than the most kind-hearted stranger. Mrs. Maggitts was already on the scene, and she drew a motherly arm round the weeping girl.

“Come away, my pet; come with me,” she murmured in tones of surprising softness. “You shall see him again presently, when they’ve brought him upstairs.”

Poppy yielded without a struggle, and the fiery-faced housekeeper bore her off, soothing her with a gentleness that moved every man there to silent wonder and respect. Not till the sound of the girl’s sobs had died away did anyone venture to speak. Then the inspector turned to Tarleton.

“Can the body be moved before you examine it any further? I must take possession of the contents of this room in the name of the law.”

Mr. Cyril Bunting stepped forward. He gazed at the jewelled coronet in what appeared to be sheer bewilderment. Whatever else he had known about his late client, it was difficult to doubt his complete ignorance of Sir Rowland’s clandestine calling.

"I don't understand the position," he said with sufficient manliness. "By what right do you claim possession of anything here?"

Captain Charles regarded him with a certain pity, due to his extreme innocence.

"I'm afraid you didn't know very much about your client," he returned. "The police have been on his track for some weeks. He was suspected of dealing in heirlooms that the people he bought them from had no right to sell. I identify this"—he placed his hand on the glittering tiara—"as the Eardisley coronet, which has been missing for the last six months. And I expect to find other stolen property in that cabinet."

The young solicitor gasped.

"*Stolen!* Are you sure of what you say, inspector? I confess I knew very little about Mr. Lowless; in fact, I doubt if I should have consented to become his executor if it hadn't been for the sake of his niece. But I hadn't the least idea of anything like this."

Tarleton kept his eyes quietly fixed on the young man while this dialogue was proceeding. Mr. Bunting was naturally embarrassed and disturbed at finding himself in the painful position of executor to a man accused of theft. There seemed no reason to doubt his perfect good faith. And yet there was something in his manner to suggest to a shrewd observer that he had a secret of his own, independent of the startling revelation just made to him, a secret which he had not yet made up his mind to disclose.

The inspector was less observant. His experience of cases of sudden death was quite enough to convince him that Caythorpe had died from heart disease, and, that being so, he felt no more interest in anything but the recovery of the stolen goods.

"Did your client tell you his real name?" he asked Bunting sharply.

The executor was guilty of another blush. It was truly a trying situation for a model young man.

"Yes; he had to do that when he gave me his instructions for the will. I suppose it must come out now, whatever happens. But you see how I am placed. I can't let you take possession of anything here unless you have a warrant."

"I can get a warrant fast enough, if you put me to it," the Captain was retorting, when Tarleton put in a restraining word.

"I don't think that ought to be necessary. Now that Caythorpe is dead there is no object in making the criminal side of his doings too plain to the public, and I think Mr. Bunting will agree with me that this business should

be settled peacefully, if possible, for Miss Lowless's sake. But first let us have the body removed before we do anything more."

The detective and the two smiths were called in, and under Tarleton's superintendence the corpse of Sir Rowland Caythorpe was carried up the dark steps and laid on the table in the dining-room. Then the physician descended into the cellar again to take part in the examination of its contents. All this time not a word had escaped him on the cause of death.

He found Inspector Charles holding out to the troubled executor on the subject of Sir Rowland's dealings.

"This," he said, pointing to the coronet, "was his first serious blunder, and but for it he might never have been caught. When the late Earl of Eardisley died, six months ago, it was in the possession of his Countess, and she seems to have hoped that the new Earl would not know of its existence, or would not know of his right to it as an heirloom. He was a distant cousin, and had had very little intercourse with the late Earl; I don't think he had visited at the family seat since her marriage. The Dowager wanted money badly, her settlement had been very small, and so she decided to sell the heirloom, and risk it. When the family solicitor applied for it on behalf of the heir she made all sorts of excuses, denied that it was an heirloom, said that the late Earl had pawned it, and so forth. Lord Eardisley didn't want a scandal if it could be avoided; he put on a private inquiry agent who did nothing, and at last he had to come to us.

"When the matter was placed in my hands I didn't waste time in going round the pawnbrokers, as the inquiry agent had done. I had the Dowager Countess shadowed. I knew that an object of this kind couldn't be disposed of in a hurry, and I expected to find her in communication with the person she was employing to find a purchaser for it. My man tracked her to this house, and then the clue was in my hands. I came out myself and recognized Lowless as Sir Rowland Caythorpe."

"You knew him by sight?" Tarleton asked.

"I knew him quite well. He was one of those men whom I make it my business to keep an eye on, those men on the shady side of society who are always likely to be in trouble some time or other. He belonged to one or two second-rate clubs, where his title made him welcome, I have seen his name on the prospectus of doubtful companies, and companies about which there wasn't any room for doubt."

Mr. Cyril Bunting looked more and more uncomfortable as he listened. He withdrew his opposition at last.

“Very well; I shall raise no objection to your searching here, and taking possession of anything you suspect to be wrongfully acquired. But I shall expect you to give me a receipt for everything you take, and to return it to me unless you have found a rightful owner for it, say, within the next twelve months.”

Charles assented to these conditions. He produced his official note-book, and made the first entry, as he took possession of the heraldic treasure on the table. The coronet was of some antiquity, as was shown by the setting being of pale guinea gold. Each of the spikes was tipped by a large single pearl, and the strawberry leaves between them were modelled with old-fashioned art. It was a precious curio such as would have fetched a high price across the Atlantic.

The cabinet stood open, and no precaution had been taken to hide the contents. Most of them consisted of jewels of a similar character, owing their chief value to the rarity of their settings and the historical associations most of them doubtless possessed. There was a set of ivory chessmen, exquisitely carved, on a board whose squares were of mother-o’-pearl and ebony. There were daggers of the finest steel, the sheaths of velvet sewn with emeralds and rubies. There was what looked like a sword of state, perhaps a national gift to some famous general or admiral, or possibly part of the plunder of some revolution. Inspector Charles shook his head over some of these trophies.

“It will be difficult to find owners for all these things,” he observed. “They must have passed through several hands before coming here— But what is this?”

He had opened a small round box of silver, chased with figures of birds and foliage, and he held up to the light of the candles a rough pebble the size of a large filbert nut in which a dull gleam seemed to lurk.

Tarleton stretched out his hand and snatched it eagerly.

“It is an uncut diamond! It must be worth thousands!”

The other two men stared. “But who on earth would keep a diamond of that size uncut?” the inspector exclaimed.

The physician raised his eyebrows.

“A Hindu would. Surely that is a matter of common knowledge. The Koh-i-Noor was never cut till it came to Europe. There are numbers of uncut stones in the treasuries of the great rajahs. And this box is of Indian workmanship.”

“By Jove, you are right! I ought to have thought of that. The Anglo-Indian Club is one of the clubs that Caythorpe belonged to. It was started to

bring Indians and English together, but they don't get a very good class of Englishman. This must have been another line of his, buying Indian State jewels. I don't wonder that he went in fear of his life."

The solicitor looked up quickly. This was the first allusion that had been made in his presence to the dead man's extraordinary terror.

"How did you know that? Who told you?" He closed his lips abruptly, as if his surprise had carried him too far.

Tarleton gave him a very searching glance as he answered for the inspector.

"It was I who told Captain Charles. Sir Rowland came to me this morning to consult me about his health. And he let me see that he was afraid that someone had poisoned him, or was going to do so."

Bunting received this information with a thoughtful air, as though there were something in it that he failed to understand, but he offered no comment on it. It was Charles who remarked doubtfully, "But you don't expect to find his death was due to poison, do you, Sir Frank? I took it for granted that his heart had failed."

"The greatest authority on the heart in London examined him the day before he came to me, and found his heart as sound as yours and mine," was the grave answer.

Again the specialist watched the young lawyer closely while he spoke, and saw a look of something like satisfaction come into his face. The police officer was thoroughly confounded.

"Good heavens! You don't mean to say that you think it is a case of murder after all!" He threw his eyes round the dark cellar with a new keenness. "If so, he must have been poisoned outside. No one could get at him in here."

"There is no poison known to me that could lurk in the system for days without any visible effect, and then suddenly strike the victim down." The specialist glanced at the stone between his forefinger and thumb. "But there may be poisons that haven't yet come under the notice of science—in India."

The hint was enough to produce a breathless silence in which the two listeners could only regard the expert with awe. Only on Bunting's face the shadow of perplexity had come back; and presently he ventured to put a question.

"Is there any way in which a man could be poisoned without knowing it?"

Tarleton drew his brows together. "What do you mean? You don't suggest that anyone lets himself be poisoned knowingly?"

"No, no. I didn't mean that. But would it be possible for an enemy—for someone whom he knew and avoided as an enemy—to poison him by stealth?"

"Ah!" Captain Charles was quick to appreciate the point. "Lord Eardisley, for instance."

The consultant hesitated. "I think we are going too fast. I don't know yet that he was poisoned. When I saw him this morning he appeared to be suffering from nothing but nerves. There was no sign of his being out of health otherwise.—But," he turned to the inspector, "I should hardly be disposed to look in Lord Eardisley's direction, if I were you. The Earl had no motive for resorting to violence, that I can see. He was taking the proper means to recover his property through you, and he had every prospect of succeeding. I can see a good deal more room for suspicion in the case of the Countess."

The inspector's face fell. He was accustomed to receive hints, and sometimes orders, from his distinguished colleague, nevertheless it was a little mortifying to be set right in the presence of the young solicitor whose eyes plainly showed that he looked upon Sir Frank Tarleton as next door to omniscient.

"What is her position?" the elder man resumed. "The coronet is here; consequently it hadn't yet been sold by Caythorpe, and it is extremely unlikely that he had paid her for it before being paid himself. It is quite on the cards that he wasn't going to pay her at all. He may have taken advantage of the fuss made by the heir to pretend that he daren't part with it. I should say he had far more reason to be afraid of her than of the Earl."

Captain Charles was reluctantly convinced. Without prolonging the discussion he hastily completed his work in the strong room. The rough inventory in his note-book was initialled by Sir Rowland Caythorpe's executor, and the various items were gathered together and carried upstairs to be packed in a trunk for removal to New Scotland Yard.

With one exception. When the inspector had made an entry of the uncut diamond, his colleague replaced it in the little silver box and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

"I will take this, if you'll allow me. I have a friend in the India Office to whom I should like to show it. He may be able to tell me where it comes from."

Charles only nodded. He knew that no request on Sir Frank's part was likely to be refused by the authorities of Scotland Yard, for whom the word of the principal medical adviser of the Home Office was law.

Mrs. Maggitts made no difficulty about providing the required trunk. Her young mistress had gone up to her own room, after a few moments in the presence of the dead, so that she was spared the knowledge of what was taking place. Bunting took the housekeeper aside to enjoin secrecy, and she reported to him that while they were below Mr. Costello had telephoned from the Aldwych Hotel to find out what had become of his expected guests. Mrs. Maggitts had given the answer that her master had died suddenly and that the police were in the house.

And now the time had come for the physician to begin his work, and see if it were possible to find out anything more about the cause of the dead man's mysterious end. Before going into the room where the corpse awaited him he addressed a question to the young solicitor.

"When Sir Rowland was with me this morning he told me that he had consulted his doctor recently. Do you happen to know who he is?"

"I don't, but I expect Miss Lowless does. Would you like me to ask her?"

"If you will be so good. If he is within reach I should like him to be summoned. He may be able to tell me something of consequence."

Bunting went off promptly. The consultant gave his friend a warning.

"We must be careful what we say before that young man. He knows a good deal more than he has chosen to tell us yet. He won't speak till he is quite sure that he won't be injuring the girl."

The Honorable Captain Charles was baffled. He was not quick at jumping at conclusions, and he was quite at a loss to think what knowledge Mr. Bunting could possess. Poppy's protector was away a little longer than was quite necessary for ascertaining the doctor's address, and he looked rather doleful when he came down.

"The doctor's name is Nevillson. He lives at the other end of this road. Shall I go and fetch him?"

"Please do. But don't tell him anything except that Mr. Lowless has been found dead, and that I want to see him. Let him think it is a case of natural death."

The solicitor nodded intelligently and hurried off. The other two went into the dining-room, and Tarleton took a long, steady look at the corpse.

"I see no sign of poison there, not a trace."

The inspector followed the direction of his colleague's eye. Without having had a medical training he had picked up an elementary knowledge that enabled him to recognize in the blue-gray pallor of the dead face the ordinary appearance of death from heart failure.

The physician began to strip the upper part of the body, examining coat, waistcoat and shirt with an attention that made his colleague wonder. When the chest was bared he bent over it and scrutinized the skin as closely as the rather dull light from the chandelier above allowed, but apparently without result.

"There's no sign of any violence, that's certain," Charles remarked.

Tarleton moved his shoulders impatiently, as though he resented this expression of opinion from an outsider. He went to his bag, which he had set down on a chair beside the table. Suddenly he looked round.

"Would you mind going to get one of the headlights off my car. This light is abominable."

The inspector marched out of the room with dignity and passed on the request to the patient chauffeur at the front door. On returning with the bright acetylene lamp he found Tarleton with a powerful magnifying glass in one hand, which he was carefully polishing with a clean silk handkerchief.

Sir Frank almost snatched the lamp from his colleague and the next moment he was moving the glass over every inch of the exposed surface of the body in the full glare of the strong light.

"Ah!" It sounded more like a cry of satisfaction than one of surprise. The expert raised his head, and his expression became grave.

"This is no ordinary case. We are in the presence of a very cunning and carefully planned murder—Hush!"

There was a sound of footsteps outside the door of the room.

CHAPTER IV

THE doctor who came into the room with Bunting looked anything but happy. No doubt he had elicited enough to make him fear that he had been guilty of a serious mistake. He appeared to be a capable, successful family practitioner, perhaps a little bumptious with his patients, but evidently in very great awe of the celebrated Sir Frank Tarleton.

"I'm very glad you sent for me, Sir Frank," he began; and took a dismayed glance at the corpse. "Dear me; it does look as though there had been some mistake. Of course you know I sent him to Braidlaw. I hope you think that was the best thing to do."

Tarleton allowed himself the faintest possible smile. It was easy to see that Doctor Nevillson meant to shelter himself under Braidlaw's name.

"Perhaps you won't mind telling me exactly what symptoms your patient complained of when he came to you, if you can remember them?"

Doctor Nevillson plainly found some difficulty in remembering them.

"I didn't pay very much attention to what he said. I examined his heart at once, and it showed no sign of any derangement. I thought he was one of those people who always fancy they are going to die if they get a touch of indigestion; and I sent him to Braidlaw more to relieve his mind than because I wanted a second opinion."

Tarleton nodded. "I can quite understand. You did what any medical man would be likely to do in such a case. At the same time I should like to know if he complained of any pain in the region of the heart."

The other doctor thought a minute.

"Yes, I recollect he did say something. It was quite trifling."

"A sensation of tingling or pricking, perhaps?"

"Pricking—yes, that's the very word he used!" And the Drysdale Park doctor gazed at the specialist with increasing awe.

"Thank you. Now perhaps you will take this magnifying-glass and look here."

Tarleton threw the glare of the lamp on a spot he was pointing to, just underneath the cardiac region.

Doctor Nevillson bent down and stared intently for some moments.

"A minute puncture, not quite healed," he muttered in bewilderment. The next instant he raised his head. "Good heavens, you think a needle has

penetrated the skin, and worked its way into the heart?"

The consultant bowed. "That is what I expect will be found when the autopsy is made. I suspected something of the kind as soon as I saw the corpse. I didn't think it at all probable that Braidlaw and you could both have overlooked any organic disease of the heart, and yet it seemed clear that he had died from heart stoppage. When you examined him no doubt the needle had not yet reached the heart. He must have felt it piercing some tissue on its way."

"Marvellous!" Doctor Nevillson's face showed his relief. He stood acquitted of blame, if his eminent colleague's theory was right. Even the great Braidlaw had not taken into account such an out of the way possibility as this.

"How do you suppose the needle came to get inside him?" the doctor ventured to ask. "One would have thought he would have felt it at the time?"

Sir Frank Tarleton put on his most impenetrable air. He appeared to be weighing the question carefully.

"We can scarcely expect to find an entire needle," he said with deliberation. "It is more likely to be the point of a broken one. A careless tailor or sempstress may have left it in his waistcoat or shirt. As you say, he is likely to have felt it when it first touched the skin. But what would be the natural action of a man who suddenly felt a prick anywhere? It would be to rub the place without stopping to think, by reflex motion—or by instinct, one might say."

The expert illustrated his meaning by pressing the tips of his fingers to his chest. Doctor Nevillson again exclaimed in admiration.

"Wonderful! You make me see exactly what happened. He would have driven the broken point farther in."

Tarleton nodded. "And then forgotten all about it, especially if he was thinking about something else at the time."

He turned round as he spoke to see what impression the explanation had made on the other two listeners. Inspector Charles looked convinced, and not altogether displeased at the prospect of being left to deal with the case as one of stealing only. But the young solicitor's face wore a quite different expression. He looked so doubtful that the consultant gave him a frown full of meaning, to which he responded with an intelligent lowering of his head.

"When do you propose to make the autopsy, Sir Frank?" the inspector asked.

"I shan't make it." The answer was given in a tone of indifference. "This is a case for a surgeon. You had better send for Sir Michael Craig. He is the

best man for a dissection of this kind. It is quite out of my province.”

Captain Charles brightened up. Apparently his distinguished colleague was withdrawing from the case, leaving him in command. The local practitioner evidently came to the same conclusion. He now addressed Charles.

“I shall be glad to attend if I can be of any use,” he said fussily.

The police officer took out his note-book. “I will let you know if Sir Michael Craig wants your assistance. I shall require your evidence at the inquest, as to the mark on the skin, and as to the previous complaint.”

Sir Frank Tarleton put his magnifying-glass back into his bag, and took up the lamp of his car.

“I think you have another man outside,” he said to the inspector. “I suggest you should call him in and leave him in charge of the body till Sir Michael can come out.”

“I was going to do so,” Charles returned rather shortly.

He went off accordingly, and the others followed him out into the hall.

“The next thing to consider is this poor girl,” Tarleton said in a low voice. “She oughtn’t to be left here alone. This house isn’t a fit place for her now. Where is she?”

The youthful executor showed distress. “I left her upstairs with the housekeeper. She hasn’t gone to bed. I promised to let her know the result of the examination.” He hesitated before saying, “I thought of sleeping here myself to-night on the drawing-room couch.”

Tarleton laid a friendly hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t think that would be quite wise. I am an older man than you are, and I would rather take her home with me than leave her here. But I’m only a bachelor, and she ought to be in the charge of a woman. Do you know if she has any friends in the neighborhood?” He glanced at the local doctor as he spoke.

“That’s awfully kind of you, Sir Frank,” the young man said impulsively. “I’m afraid I know very little about her friends, but I can tell her what you say, and ask her.”

Doctor Nevillson saw that he was called on to say something. He first looked at his watch.

“I don’t expect my wife has gone to bed yet,” he said. “I shall be happy to ask her if she can put up Miss Lowless for the night, if she has nowhere else to go.”

The invitation was not too cordial. Poppy's two friends were consulting each other by doubtful glances when they were startled by the sound of a motor coming up to the house.

"Who on earth can this be?" Bunting burst out in some dismay.

The question was answered by the throwing back of the front door, which Charles had left ajar, and the appearance of a big man in a furlined coat over his evening dress. The recognition between him and the young solicitor was mutual.

"Mr. Costello!"

"Mr. Cyril Bunting—that's so." The newcomer looked round him and greeted the two doctors with a hasty and yet ceremonious nod. His face was red, and a pair of shrewd gray eyes, set deep in his head like a pig's, turned rapidly in all directions.

"What's this that has happened to my old pard? Where is he?"

Bunting was so clearly in a difficulty as to what to answer that Tarleton came to his rescue.

"Perhaps you had better tell this gentleman who I am," he said in a tone of authority.

The young man spoke with relief. "This is Sir Frank Tarleton of the Home Office."

"Principal Medical Adviser," the doctor supplemented. "You are the friend with whom Sir Rowland Caythorpe was to have dined this evening, I believe?"

The Irishman, or Irish-American, as he appeared to be, opened his keen little eyes to their fullest extent.

"You have me beaten, stranger. I knew that Arthur had changed his name to Lowless—he was Lewis in Mexico—but I don't tumble to his having changed it to Caythorpe as well. Is he dead, sir?"

"He is dead. I was summoned here in consequence of his having disappeared. The police came with me, and broke open a strong room below. He was found dead, apparently from heart disease, but there is reason to think that his heart was perfectly sound, and that death was really due to a needle point having penetrated his skin at some time and worked its way into the heart."

The big man listened to this explanation with an expression of mingled wonder and consternation.

"You don't tell me whether it was an accident or not?" he remarked, giving the consultant a pretty deep look.

The observation seemed to impress Tarleton in the Irishman's favor. His tone became friendly.

"It isn't easy to see how it could have been anything but an accident. But no doubt the police will make all inquiries that they think necessary."

Doctor Nevillson thought it was due to himself to express an opinion.

"I feel no doubt that it was an accident," he said pompously. "Sir Frank Tarleton has just shown us exactly what must have happened." And he repeated the expert's demonstration, which was followed by the newcomer with close interest, but with some impatience by Sir Frank.

"Perhaps you had better lose no time in going back to see if Mrs. Nevillson can give Miss Lowless a bed for the night."

The consultant spoke sharply.

"What's that? Poor little Poppy?" The big man showed real feeling. "I guess if that little girl wants looking after, it's up to me to take charge of her. I've come out on purpose."

Doctor Nevillson's face betrayed such unmistakable relief at this proposal that Tarleton could not but be glad that Poppy had found a more cordial host. It was only necessary to ascertain if the American had a wife who was equally friendly.

"Does Mrs. Costello— —" he began tentatively.

"My wife has come with me," Mr. Costello broke in warmly. "She's outside in the car. I'll fetch her in."

He hurried down the steps. But when Tarleton turned to congratulate Poppy's official protector on this way out of the difficulty he encountered a very jealous frown on the young man's face.

"It's a long way for her to go so late at night," he said discontentedly. "I should think it would be better if she could be somewhere near at hand."

Doctor Nevillson summoned courage to speak out. "I would have asked my wife if it had been really necessary. But the truth is she is rather nervous, and I'm afraid it might upset her to have a stranger coming in at this hour— under all the circumstances."

There was no more to be said. It was clear that neither the local doctor nor his wife was disposed to welcome a visitor from a house of such doubtful reputation, whose owner had passed under a false name, and where the police had been called in.

Any lingering doubt was settled, as far as Sir Frank was concerned, by the appearance of Mrs. Costello in the doorway. She was many years younger than her husband, a woman of thirty or thereabouts, whose glorious

dark eyes and hair told of Spanish blood, and whose every movement was marked by Castilian dignity and grace. She was in full gala dress, with diamonds sparkling on her bosom, and a black lace mantilla thrown over her head and bare shoulders. Alas for human fickleness!

The elderly physician had no sooner caught sight of this new fascinator than Poppy's charms receded into the background, and his face fairly glowed with admiration.

"This is the Señora," was her husband's introduction. "I guess she'd better go straight to Miss Poppy, and fix things up with her."

The Señora swept a graceful curtsy, in which a vast waving black fan came into play, to the three men before her, and advanced to the solicitor, revealing a row of superb teeth in a smile of recognition.

"Mister Cyril Bunting." And the words flowed slowly like notes of music. "Take me to that poor darling."

The contrast was almost ludicrous between the tall, graceful Spanish woman and the short, awkward young Englishman. Even Mr. Bunting could not resist so much charm. His face softened in spite of himself as he yielded and led the way up to his pretty client's room.

Tarleton watched the Señora till her rustling skirts had swept out of sight. Then he dismissed the ungracious local practitioner with an abrupt good-night, and invited Mr. Costello to take a last look at his dead friend.

The Irishman showed very little emotion at the sight of the body. He was more interested in the cause of death than anything else, and made Tarleton show him the tiny mark on the skin which had revealed the truth to the sagacious adviser of the Home Office.

"I guess it was an accident after all. Let's hope so," he said not too confidently. "He was a bit nervous when I saw him last. Seemed to expect something of this kind."

Tarleton nodded. "The needle must have been inside him for some time. He felt it pricking. And he seems to have had enemies."

"Enemies?" Costello echoed the word in surprise. "What did he tell you, doctor?"

"He told me very little. But as you know so much about him I dare say it won't surprise you to hear that he was engaged in some rather crooked dealings. I think I ought to warn you, as you are so kindly taking care of his niece. The less she hears the better."

"That's right." The assent was given almost gratefully. "You can trust me and the Señora to keep her in cotton wool. I've never seen my wife take to

anyone like she took to that young woman. I shall take her back with me to Mexico if she'll come."

The kind-hearted physician was glad to know that Poppy had found so powerful a guardian, and said so. The American spoke again musingly.

"Arthur was a bit of a crook when I first knew him out there. But he played a straight game with me—saw it wouldn't pay to do anything else, likely." He gave a faint chuckle, the chuckle of the man who has solid reasons for thinking he can hold his own.

Inspector Charles came into the room at this juncture with the detective who was to be placed in charge of the corpse. The sight of the wealthy American brought a light of eager inquiry into his eyes, and Tarleton had no sooner explained that Mr. Costello was the friend with whom Sir Rowland Caythorpe had been engaged to dine that evening than he plumped out a question.

"Do you mind telling me, sir, if you were thinking of buying something from him?"

The big man was amazed. "Why, inspector, however did you guess that? I reckoned it was a private deal."

The captain put on an air of great knowingness.

"Most of his deals had to be private. He wasn't always very particular as to how he acquired the things he sold. I don't suggest for a moment that you had any reason for thinking there was anything wrong. I dare say he told you there were family reasons for secrecy."

"Family reasons?" Costello was plainly at sea.

"That is if I'm right in thinking he was trying to sell you a coronet," Charles added a little less confidently.

The American first stared and then laughed. "I haven't the ghost of an idea what you're talking about, inspector. What use do you suppose I should have for a coronet? I came to London to make my old pard an offer for some old mining shares that he'd brought away with him from Mexico; and precious unwilling he was to part with them, I can tell you."

The worthy captain's face lengthened considerably at this collapse of his pleasing theory. His good-natured senior came to his rescue, briefly explaining to the mine-owner the nature of Caythorpe's transactions.

"He was found with a missing coronet in his hands, and it was natural to think he had been going to take it with him when he went to dine with you."

Caythorpe's host shook his head.

"All this is new to me," he said simply. "I give you my word Arthur told me nothing about his business. I've not been in London three weeks, and it took me some time to find him." He turned to Charles rather sharply. "Say, inspector, while you were poking about that strong room, did you happen to see a bundle of old shares—Mexican mining shares?"

"No." The answer was given with decision. "There were no papers of any kind."

"Sure?" For the first time Costello showed real anxiety. "They were bearer shares, if you know what that means; things that could be passed from hand to hand like banknotes. They were only worth a few cents when Arthur took them away with him, but to-day they're worth well on to a million dollars."

The representatives of the law turned to look at each other. This was a new and very unexpected complication. If the strong room contained something more valuable than any of the jewels, and it had disappeared, it might be necessary to look further than to the owners of lost or stolen heirlooms for the hand that had struck down the dead man.

"Say, doctor, you'll drop that watch of yours!"

The warning was drawn from the Irishman, in the midst of his excitement about the shares, by the sight of Tarleton's gorgeous timepiece almost flying through the air at the end of its scrap of silk. The doctor only looked at him curiously. The revelation that Poppy was an heiress had shown the mining magnate in a new light. His hospitality did not seem quite so disinterested. Poppy was now the owner, in all probability, of the shares Mr. Costello had come all the way from Mexico to London to acquire. Tarleton recalled the young executor's reluctance to let his client become the American's guest. Decidedly Mr. Cyril Bunting must be made to speak.

There was no time to say anything more just then. The sound of voices in the hall announced that the Señora and her charge had come down ready to depart. The three men went out to meet them, and found Poppy with her arm in her new friend's bidding a subdued farewell to Mrs. Maggitts, while the gracious Mexican was completing her subjugation of Poppy's lawyer.

"Every day I shall expect you to come and see her, and bring the news of this unhappy affair." And her smile indicated a perception that the visits would not be paid solely on business grounds.

Poppy raised her head suddenly to Tarleton with a look that went to his heart.

"May I say good-by to him before I go?" she asked in a broken voice.

She was withdrawing her arm as she spoke, but the Señora, after a moment's hesitation, took it firmly again.

“I will say adieu to him also. I knew Arturo very well in Mexico.”

CHAPTER V

THE last farewells had been spoken. The orphan girl had stooped and placed a kiss on the cold forehead of the man who had at least been good to her; and the beautiful Mexican had given him one long gaze from under her sweeping lashes, and turned away with a shiver and a sigh. Mr. Costello had taken advantage of the few moments to urge on Inspector Charles the necessity for a strenuous search for the mining shares he was so anxious to acquire, but the inspector, with some haughtiness, declined the task.

"The police are not entitled to interfere with anything of Sir Rowland Caythorpe's that belonged to him legitimately," he explained. "We are only concerned with what he is suspected of having come by illegally. This gentleman is his executor; it is his business to deal with anything else."

The American looked in some surprise at the youthful executor, who confirmed the inspector's statement with the barest nod. The big man seemed a little doubtful of Mr. Bunting's fitness for his responsibility.

"Do you know what I mean, sir? These are bearer shares that anyone might carry off and dispose of. I advise you to lose no time in hunting for them. I consider I have the first call on them, you understand."

Bunting's manner was perfectly cool and collected. Innocent as he appeared, he was not disposed to take orders from this rather pushful stranger.

"I have my instructions from the late Sir Rowland Caythorpe," he said stiffly. "I cannot dispose of anything till the will has been proved."

Costello looked anything but pleased, but the appearance of the ladies prevented him from saying more. The Señora drew her drooping companion out of the house, dispensing smiles full of fascination on everybody as she passed. The faithful Maggitts saw her young mistress into the waiting motor, and then stalked back into the hall, where she faced Sir Frank Tarleton. Her air had changed to one of marked hostility.

"Who am I to take orders from now?" she demanded sternly.

"The police are in charge of the premises for the present," he answered with a twinkle in his eye. "Inspector Charles is responsible."

Just at that moment the gallant captain looked as if he would be glad to be relieved of the responsibility.

"I shall be much obliged if you will do what you can for my men," he said with deference. "Of course there will be no difficulty about your

wages.”

“I will give them their meals, and make up beds for them,” Mrs. Maggitts proclaimed with the air of a potentate making a treaty against his will with a stronger power. “But I must have some money to go on with.”

“I will attend to all that, as Sir Rowland Caythorpe’s executor,” Bunting put in. “How much do you want?”

The virago gave a sniff.

“So that was his name, was it? I knew there was something wrong about him somewheres. I shall want— —” She went through a brief calculation on her fingers. “This is Friday. I shall want one pound three and sixpence to last till Monday. I know what these policemen eat.”

The executor made no objection to this moderate estimate. He counted out the exact sum into Mrs. Maggitts’ hand. She seemed surprised and pleased.

“I’ll make them a cup of hot cocoa before I go to bed,” she graciously announced. “The poor things have been outside for hours.”

“Do you think you could spare me a cup as well?” Tarleton asked with humility.

Mrs. Maggitts suddenly softened.

“You can order whatever you like that’s in the house, and have it, sir. You’ve showed yourself the gentleman to poor Miss Poppy, you have.” Her baleful eyes rolled round over the others as though forbidding them to hope for a share in Sir Frank’s privileges.

The doctor followed up his advantage.

“Inspector Charles and I both left our dinner half eaten to come here, Mrs. Maggitts. And I expect Mr. Bunting is hungry as well. If you will show us into a room where we can have a few biscuits with the cocoa, you will be doing me a service—and perhaps a service to Miss Lowless at the same time.”

Mrs. Maggitts scowled ungraciously. She went forward, threw open the door of a smaller room behind the dining-room, lit the gas, and went out again, all without another word.

The room in which the three men found themselves had the character of a study. It was very scantily provided with books, but there was a business-like roll-top desk in one corner, with the shutter down.

Tarleton seated himself at a table in the middle of the room, his hand instinctively feeling its way to his watch pocket in search of the mascot. Bunting sat down opposite him, but Captain Charles remained standing.

"I can't stay longer than to swallow a cup of cocoa," he declared with dignity. "I must get back to Scotland Yard at once, and make my report. I shall come back in the morning with Sir Michael Craig."

"Indeed!" Tarleton leaned back in his chair, and Mr. Bunting's eyes became round at the spectacle of the great man drawing out the magnificent toy that had been an emperor's gift, and swinging it recklessly from a scrap of tarnished ribbon that Mrs. Maggitts would not have stooped to pick off a dustheap. "Don't you think it may be worth your while to wait and hear what the housekeeper has to tell us?"

Charles looked a little bewildered.

"That scarecrow! Why, what can she know?" he exclaimed. "You may depend on it Caythorpe didn't let her into his secrets."

"He didn't want to, you mean. But our servants generally know more about us than we suppose. Mrs. Maggitts has let us see that she had a bad opinion of her master. Haven't you been struck by the fact that it was she who first suggested that he was inside the strong room? And she must have had some reason for saying that she was sure he was dead."

The young solicitor listened very keenly to these observations. Captain Charles was rather displeased.

"I can't quite make you out to-night, Sir Frank," he complained. "First you told us that Caythorpe had been murdered; then you explained the whole thing as an accident, and now you seem to think there was something wrong after all. What *is* your opinion?"

"I gave my opinion to you in private before Doctor Nevillson came in, and nothing has happened since to make me change it," was the answer. "The explanation I gave in his presence was meant to produce the impression on him that it did produce, namely, that I thought it was a case of accidental death. He has now adopted that view as his own, and I hope it will be adopted by the coroner's jury."

The inspector still showed some discontent. He was a little out of his depth.

"But if you think it was a murder, after all, surely you don't want to have it hushed up?" he objected.

Tarleton saw that he must explain himself further.

"In my view it is desirable that the murderer should believe that his crime has not been detected. If he knows that the police are on his track, he will be on his guard, and he may slip through your hands. But if he thinks there is no suspicion of anything wrong, and the authorities have dropped the inquiry, he may become careless and give himself away sooner or later."

Charles was still very far from following his eminent colleague's reasoning; it was only clear to him that Sir Frank regarded the case as a highly mysterious one, and consequently he began to feel some misgivings as to his own power to deal with it. Bunting, on the other hand, visibly brightened up as Tarleton spoke, and gave him a look of gratitude.

The expert turned towards him. "I am taking this gentleman into my confidence, because he has shown that he can hold his tongue. I doubt if he has believed for a moment in the theory of accident."

The silent lips were unclosed at last.

"It is very good of you to trust me, Sir Frank," the young man said respectfully. "The reason why I don't think it can have been an accident is because when Mr. Lowless—I mean, Sir Rowland Caythorpe—came to me to make his will, he let me know quite plainly that he thought his life was in danger."

Tarleton received this disclosure with the nod of one who hears what he has expected. The inspector became quite excited.

"That is my theory!" he cried in triumph. "That's what I've said all along. He knew that some one was after him. It all fits together. First he makes his will; then he goes to the doctor about his heart, and then he comes to you for an antidote to poison." He looked eagerly at the lawyer. "Did he tell you anything more? Did he give you his reasons for thinking his life was aimed at?"

Bunting hesitated. His eyes were fixed on those of the consultant whose face had all at once become impenetrable.

"I can hardly say that. He told me he had an enemy, that was all."

"He would hardly be likely to tell you about his dealings in heirlooms," Tarleton observed with a look of significance.

"He told me nothing about that." The response was given quickly. "From what he said to me I shouldn't think he was in any fear on that account. He seemed more anxious about his mining shares."

This was a new light on the situation. Captain Charles looked thunderstruck. Even the physician appeared to be taken by surprise for a moment, and his golden pendulum ceased to vibrate.

A profound silence of some moments was broken by the housekeeper's coming into the room. Mrs. Maggitts had dealt more generously with them than her stern demeanor had promised. In addition to three steaming cups of cocoa, the tray she carried was laden with a cold knuckle of ham, a loaf of bread and some cheese.

As she set down her load on the table Sir Frank addressed her with his most ingratiating smile.

“Many thanks, Mrs. Maggitts. As you have been so good, I should like to tell you something about Sir Rowland Caythorpe’s sudden death. By the way, do you happen to know if any of his clothes have been mended lately?”

The effect of this simple question on the ill-favored housekeeper was startling. She fell back a step, and her face, wherever it was not mottled with the disfiguring stain, turned a natural red. Twice she opened her lips as if to answer, and twice she closed them again. Then, darting a distrustful look round her, she pointed an accusing finger at the police officer.

“If he likes to arrest me, let him do it,” she snapped. “I won’t answer no questions till I know what he means.”

Only a most imperative look from Tarleton restrained the injured Charles from a retort that might have silenced Mrs. Maggitts for good. The elder man knew the right note to strike with the eccentric witness.

“I’m surprised at you, Mrs. Maggitts. Inspector Charles is just off; he has no more idea of arresting anybody in this house than I have. What we are all anxious about is the safety of Miss Lowless. We want to make sure that she is in no danger from the same source as her uncle.”

The astonishment at this declaration was general, but perhaps it was most palpable in the case of Mr. Cyril Bunting. He gazed at the physician as though he were a conjurer.

“How on earth — —” he burst out, and then stopped, ashamed of his self-betrayal.

“I have seen that there was some anxiety in your mind from the first,” Tarleton said quietly, “and you have just shown me how it arose.” He turned to the stricken housekeeper. “You see, Mrs. Maggitts, that Mr. Bunting, here, thinks as I do; and you can’t suppose that he is an enemy of yours, or of Miss Poppy’s.”

Mrs. Maggitts gave way. Still keeping a hostile eye on the baffled Charles, she answered Sir Frank with some amiability.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, sir. I didn’t think Miss Poppy had an enemy in the world. I heard Mr. Bunting tell her upstairs that a needle had been found in the master’s clothes, what had pricked him to death; but I can swear it wasn’t me that put it there, if it was my dying day. And as for putting one in my pet’s, I’d cut my right hand off first, as he ought to know.” And she scowled fiercely at her enemy.

“I assure you, ma’am, I hadn’t the least idea of the kind,” the Honorable Captain protested abjectly.

“What we should like to know,” Tarleton explained, “is whether Sir Rowland had any visitors lately whom he seemed to be afraid of. People who might have had a grievance against him, perhaps?”

The housekeeper began to calm down.

“Why, yes, sir! yes, Sir Frank. He did have one of that sort not so very long ago. A lady it was.”

“Ah! Did she give her name?”

Mrs. Maggitts considered for a moment. “She did, but I don’t seem to remember it.”

“Was it Eardisley?” the inspector’s impatience prompted him to ask, with unfortunate effect on the witness.

“I’m not going to have words put into my mouth that I never said, not by you nor no one,” she replied, with asperity. “Yardsley, it might have been, but I won’t swear to it, so don’t you put it down in that book.”

The police officer had yielded to the force of habit so far as to produce his note-book. He hastily returned the offending volume to his pocket at this stern hint, and wisely left it to Tarleton to pursue the examination.

“I expect you would remember if she had called herself Lady Yardsley, instead of Mrs.?” he suggested.

Mrs. Maggitts shook her head with decision. “She didn’t say Lady, that I will swear; and he can put it down in his book if he likes. Nor yet Miss or Mrs. She just gives her name, Yardsley or Yerdsley it might have been, but I won’t say either on my oath, even to oblige you, Sir Frank, although you are a gentleman.” The unhappy Charles visibly quailed at this stinging allusion. “She looked the lady, I’ll say that for her. And angry as I never see.”

“I wish you could give us an idea of what she came about?” Tarleton was too discreet to ask in plain words if Mrs. Maggitts had listened. But the fiery-faced one was free from false shame.

“I ought to be able to tell you that, sir, seeing as I heard pretty nearly every word she said, her voice was that loud. She had come for her crown—leastway she didn’t call it that, but something like it—what she wore on the top of her head.”

“Coronet, perhaps,” the examiner suggested.

“Cornet it may have been.” Mrs. Maggitts glared at Captain Charles distrustfully, evidently unwilling to commit herself in his presence. “Anyhow, she wanted him to give it back to her, and he wouldn’t; and she called him a thief, and said she’d find a way to deal with him. But she didn’t say nothing about needles, not that I could hear.”

The inspector nodded to Tarleton to signify that he had heard enough. But the witness, once started, was not inclined to stop.

“What he said to her, I don’t know, because he spoke so low, whispering half the time. But he had a job to get rid of her. He let her out of the house himself, turned her out, I might say. I was coming out ready to open the door, and I saw him hustling her along the passage, driving her before him, it looked like. She was near enough to stick any number of needles into him, and angry enough, too, I should say. But I wouldn’t swear she did, Sir Frank, not if I had to go to prison for it.”

Mrs. Maggitts drew herself up, and folded her arms with the resolution of a martyr.

“I shouldn’t dream of asking you to,” Tarleton hastened to respond. “I can answer for Inspector Charles as well. But now perhaps you can tell me if Sir Rowland had any other queer visitors lately?”

Bunting looked up eagerly. The housekeeper seemed trying to recollect something.

“What sort of a visitor do you mean?” she inquired cautiously.

“I mean a foreigner, for instance. One with a very dark face, and perhaps wearing a turban?”

“Oh, him!” The housekeeper’s tone was one of relief, almost of contempt. “Yes, he came here often enough, but there was nothing queer about him, unless you mean his clothes and his black face and hands. He was as meek as meek; and the way he smiled—well, it was more like a baby in the cradle than a human being.”

This favorable description produced different effects on the three listeners. Bunting’s face expressed some disappointment; Charles wore the look of a man whose mind had been unsettled by a new idea; only Tarleton beamed with entire satisfaction.

“Thank you, Mrs. Maggitts. You don’t happen to know what he came for, I suppose?”

The housekeeper shook her head.

“I couldn’t give a guess, Sir Frank, unless it was to ask for money. I should have put him down for a beggar if his clothes hadn’t looked so new. But I never heard a word that passed between him and the master. He never raised his voice above a whisper even when he spoke to me—he seemed afraid of me!”

To judge by Captain Charles’s recent experience this did not seem altogether a proof of unmanly weakness. However, the examiner received the statement with due surprise.

“Were you able to catch his name, at all?”

“No, that I could not, Sir Frank, and it’s no use your asking me. Nor anybody else.” She threw a stern glance of prohibition at the crushed inspector. “It was a heathen name, that’s all I can tell you. But the master seemed to have it quite pat.”

Tarleton looked slowly round him, and his eye rested on Bunting.

“Is there anything else that we need ask Mrs. Maggitts?” he asked invitingly.

The solicitor mustered up courage to address the formidable witness.

“There is just one question I should like to ask you, if I may,” he said deferentially. “Have you seen anything of a man with a black beard?”

Tarleton’s eyes narrowed. The representative of New Scotland Yard displayed the same perturbation as at the introduction of the Hindu to his attention. The face of the witness was blank.

“Why no, Mr. Bunting. You’re welcome to ask; but I haven’t.”

“I don’t mean as a caller,” the lawyer persisted. “He wouldn’t be likely to come to the house openly. I thought you might have seen him lurking about in the neighborhood, perhaps. A foreigner, with a dark face, but not so dark as the man you’d just been telling us about. And with a black beard.”

Mrs. Maggitts saw her chance, and took it.

“No, sir; no, Mr. Bunting. I haven’t noticed any such person. The only men as I’ve seen lurking about is the two detectives that’s now gorging themselves in my kitchen, and bad enough it’s been to have them here spying on me like a couple of tomcats in the garden outside night after night; and I don’t care who hears me say it.”

And with a final glare of the bitterest reproach at her unworthy foe, Mrs. Maggitts stalked out of the room.

CHAPTER VI

THE HONORABLE CAPTAIN CHARLES made a brave effort to laugh as his grim adversary slammed the door.

“So that’s her grievance. It’s very funny that people of that class always look on the police as their natural enemies. However innocent they are they always seem to resent our doings. I suppose she thought my men were watching her. Well, I fancy we’ve got her ladyship now, thanks to you, Sir Frank.”

“Do you think so?” The consultant’s tone was one of indifference.

“Why, don’t you? It’s only circumstantial evidence so far, but it’s pretty strong, surely. We’ve got the motive, we’ve got the threat, and to-morrow we shall have the proof of how it was carried out. You can’t make a case out of that about the Hindu. He seems to have been quite friendly.”

Tarleton smiled gently. “I think it may be worth my while to call at the India Office.”

Charles looked rather vexed. His experience of his colleague was enough to make him uneasy when his own view of a case did not seem to satisfy Sir Frank.

“It won’t be much use you doing that, if you’re right about the diamond being a State jewel,” he objected. “The Indian Office always sticks up for the privileges of the rajahs who come over here. We have instructions to treat them as sovereigns, and not to interfere with them.”

Tarleton suppressed a light yawn behind his hand. The hour was getting late for a man of his age, no doubt.

“I fancy the Indian Office has its own ways of dealing with Indian sovereigns,” he remarked carelessly. “At all events there is this jewel to be returned to its owner.” And he took the silver box from his pocket. It was shaped like a watch, and opened in the same way. He pressed the spring and held up the uncut stone, which emitted a deep ray of light.

Charles turned in some discontent to the youthful solicitor. All this time he had been on his feet, sipping his cocoa as fast as it cooled, and he set down the cup with a rattle as he spoke.

“What was that about a man with a black beard? Have you seen anyone like that lurking round?”

Mr. Cyril Bunting had been watching and listening to the conversation between the two representatives of the law with his usual quiet attention. He

now seemed to have taken his cue from Sir Frank, and said as little as possible in reply.

“No. I haven’t seen anyone suspicious. I knew from Sir Rowland Caythorpe that he was afraid of a Mexican whom he had injured at one time; and he described him to me as a man with a black beard. In fact he asked me to be on the lookout for such a man. I was going to suggest that the police might do the same.”

The inspector frowned. It looked as if he had a clear case before him against the Countess of Eardisley, and it was rather disturbing to have to entertain one alternative possibility after another. He cast a questioning eye on Tarleton to see if he thought Mr. Bunting’s suggestion worth taking seriously; but the specialist, absorbed in his Indian gem, appeared to pay no heed to what was passing.

“I don’t see anything in that,” Charles said slowly. “Why should a Mexican, whom he had made an enemy of years ago, be turning up in London at this time of day? Caythorpe had the jumps, that’s about it; he saw someone in the street who reminded him of one of his victims—he seems to have had plenty of them—and he rushed to the conclusion that he was after him. No,” the captain went on with increasing decision, “if there was such a man, and he was up to any mischief, the first thing he would do would be to shave off his beard, you may depend on it.”

The lawyer was struck by this argument, and nodded in assent. “Still, it can do no harm to be on the lookout for a Mexican,” he pleaded.

“Well, I don’t mind that. I’ll certainly tell our men to keep their eyes open. But I’m afraid it’s rather like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay.”

“You are expecting to find one needle already, in this case.”

The quiet retort came from Tarleton, as he pocketed his Indian treasure. Captain Charles was startled.

“Well, well, we’ll leave it at that,” he said amicably. “I shall follow up the dowager for the present, and leave it to you to make what you can of the diamond, and Mr. Bunting to find his man with the beard. We shall see which of us is on the right scent. Meanwhile I must get back now, and report. I’ve recovered the Eardisley coronet anyway, and that’s all my instructions cover at present.”

He moved towards the door as he spoke, Tarleton silently cut himself a slice of ham, a sufficient indication that he meant to remain where he was for sometime longer; and Bunting showed equally little disposition to move.

“I shall see you at the inquest, I suppose?” Charles threw back from the doorway to Tarleton.

“I may turn up if I have nothing else to do. But I don’t propose to give evidence. Craig and this local man between them will be able to satisfy the jury as to the cause of death.”

The other stopped in surprise.

“But it was your discovery! No one would have dreamed anything about a needle but for you. Surely you aren’t going to let them have the credit for it?”

The solicitor showed equal surprise. He turned an anxious look on the great man, though he prudently said nothing.

Tarleton shook his head slightly.

“I should be only too pleased if the credit were given to you, my dear fellow, but I’ve no doubt Sir Michael will do me full justice. Personally I should be glad if my name could be kept out of the case. You see I am really off my ground. I am a specialist in poisons, and as this has turned out not to be a poisoning case my connection with it is over, officially speaking. However, I shall be interested to hear how you get on, if you care to let me know.”

The Honorable Captain looked as if he could hardly believe his ears. The famous Tarleton, after discovering the crime, and putting the clue into his hands, was proposing to retire into the background, and leave him the honor of bringing the case to a successful conclusion. Nothing could have better suited his book—always provided that his colleague remained willing to help him with advice and suggestions. He muttered a few words by way of farewell, and hurried out to where the car that had brought out the locksmiths was waiting.

As soon as he was out of the room Tarleton laid down his knife and fork with relief, and drew out his priceless toy. He first composed his nerves by setting it going with the steady motion of a pendulum, and then addressed the expectant young solicitor.

“And now, Mr. Bunting, suppose you tell me your story.”

Bunting sat up, and his eyes opened wider than they had done yet.

“Then—then, Sir Frank, you’re not retiring from the case?”

The specialist in poisons answered him with a smile.

“I have retired from it officially, as you have heard. As the medical adviser of the Home Office, my part is over. But I am an inquisitive old man, and I have certain ideas of my own as to what may have happened. One of them is my reason for keeping this stone in my possession.” He tapped his pocket. “I am not quite so satisfied as Captain Charles seems to be about Caythorpe’s Indian visitor. From what I know of the Hindus, if I had robbed

one of them I should feel rather safer when he scowled at me than when he smiled. But now it seems to me that there is another problem to be dealt with, apart from the question of how Caythorpe met his death. You have let me see that you are rather anxious about our little friend Poppy.”

“You seem to have read my thoughts, sir,” the young man said modestly.

“If I have, it wasn’t by means of telepathy, I can assure you. I have done nothing but put two and two together. As Sir Rowland Caythorpe’s executor it is your duty to aid the police in every possible way in their inquiries, but instead of doing so you have told them as little as you could. And as far as I can judge, your motive has been the fear of injuring your ward. Apparently you have no confidence in Captain Charles, and the question is how much you have in me?”

“I assure you, Sir Frank, I shall be only too grateful if you will let me speak to you in confidence,” Bunting said earnestly. “Poppy and I both trust you. The fact is I have been feeling all at sea, I don’t mind confessing; so many things have come out that I hardly knew what to do or to say. You see I’m not a criminal lawyer, only a conveyancer, and this is my first experience of the kind. I think my chief idea was the same as yours, if I may venture to say so; I was afraid to say anything that might put the murderer on his guard.”

Tarleton nodded approvingly.

“Quite right. I think you have acted admirably so far. You seem to me the most discreet young man I have ever met.” Mr. Bunting became red. “I don’t want you to undervalue Inspector Charles. He is an old friend of mine, and there is no man whose assistance I am more glad to have in an ordinary case. But my experience, or my instinct if you like, tells me that this is not an ordinary case, and that is why I am leaving him to take his own way by himself, while I look round quietly by myself. If Lady Eardisley is guilty, so much the better; if not, the fact that the police are pursuing their inquiries in that direction ought to make the real criminal think himself safe. And that is what you and I desire.”

“I’m not quite sure of that,” Bunting ventured to say. “What I’m afraid of is that he won’t rest till he has got hold of the missing shares. I believe the murder was committed to obtain them, not the jewels.”

“Go on. You had better begin at the beginning and tell me everything you know.”

Tarleton settled himself back in his chair to listen, but he was nearly starting up again at his young friend’s opening words.

"I never knew of Sir Rowland Caythorpe's existence till he walked into my office in Theobald Road a week or two ago."

"Bless my soul! You don't mean to tell me that you have only known our little friend for that time? You seem to have made a good deal of progress, young man."

Mr. Cyril Bunting presented a pleasing spectacle of confusion. His modesty was being severely tested.

"I didn't say that," he stammered. "I have known her for nearly a year. But I had never heard of her uncle. We met in a casual way at a lawn tennis club in Willesden, but we weren't really intimate. She generally chose me for her partner, but it was all in a chaffing sort of way. I called her Poppy, and she called me Owl, because of my spectacles, I suppose." Mr. Bunting wore glasses of a full, round pattern that certainly gave some excuse for the nickname. His grave air showed that he was quite unsuspecting of any other reason for Poppy's playfulness. "She never told me anything about her people. I used to see her on to the tram at Wembley sometimes, but she never asked me to come any farther with her, and I had no idea where she lived. I assure you I never dreamed that she looked on me as a friend. It was all nothing but fun between us. She used to make the other girls laugh by blowing kisses to me from the top of the tram."

The older man listened with a curious mixture of amusement and sympathy to this quaint revelation of innocence. He had hardly believed it possible that such shyness could be found in the days of short skirts and jazz. It sounded like a page from a romance published by the Religious Tract Society in its palmy days. The youthful conveyancer blushed painfully as he recalled his trying experience.

"I was never more taken aback in my life than when I found out that Sir Rowland Caythorpe was her uncle. He gave no name to my clerk; and when he first came in I took a strong dislike to him. His manner was very unpleasant. He peered round the room as if he expected to see an enemy in every corner, he kept stealing sly glances at me, while he was talking, without once looking at me in the face."

Tarleton nodded. The description tallied with his own recollection of Caythorpe. The young solicitor had been shrewd enough in his judgment of his client.

"I disliked his manner so much that I had pretty well made up my mind to refuse his business, whatever it was, when he amazed me by saying, 'I believe you are a friend of my niece, Miss Lowless.' I hardly know which surprised me most—that Poppy should have such an uncle, or that she

should have recommended me to him. She never seemed to take me seriously, I thought.”

“Perhaps she understood you a little better than you understood her,” Tarleton suggested.

Mr. Bunting looked gratified. “I felt it a tremendous compliment,” he said modestly. “Of course, after that, I didn’t think of refusing to act for Mr. Lowless. I called him by that name till it came to my making his will; and he let me. I found afterwards it was the name he was living under out here, and the only one that Poppy knew him by.”

“He had reasons for using more than one name,” the physician observed.

“Yes, I wasn’t long in finding that out. As soon as he saw that I was friendly he gave me a newspaper he had brought with him, and asked me to read an advertisement in the agony column. It was one of quite an ordinary kind, addressed to Arthur Lewis, formerly of Mexico, and telling him that he would hear of something to his advantage by calling on a firm of solicitors, Messrs. Freebody & Sons, of Essex Street, Strand. I couldn’t understand why he had shown it to me till he said, ‘That’s meant for me. I was in Mexico some years ago, and Lewis was the name I was known by out there.’

“Of course that sounded fishy, and I suppose my face must have shown him that I thought so. Anyhow, he tried to explain it by telling me that the Mexicans found it difficult to pronounce the name Lowless, and so they shortened it to something more like the Spanish name Luiz. It was rather a thin explanation, and it didn’t account for the Arthur, which turned out to be equally false. However, for Poppy’s sake I tried to look as if I believed him. Then he came to the point.

“‘I want you to find out who is behind that ad,’ he said. And he said it anxiously, like a man who was really afraid.

“I began to feel a bit uneasy myself. It wasn’t that he was asking me to do anything unprofessional, but it was certainly rather unusual for anyone to come to a solicitor about an advertisement like that, instead of answering it himself. I looked at it again, and it read like a quite friendly one. The solicitors were a very respectable firm; I had heard of them before, and I didn’t believe they would be mixed up in any shady business. I asked him, ‘Haven’t you been to Freebody’s?’

“He started back, scowling as if I had made some dangerous suggestion. ‘Not I! I don’t go near them till I know what this means. I want you to go and find out who they are acting for, before I show myself.’

“He spoke so excitedly that I saw there must be something seriously wrong. I wasn’t sure if we had an extradition treaty with Mexico, but it

looked as though he had done something out there that had driven him to leave the country, and was afraid of being discovered. What worried me all the time was the thought of Poppy, and the fear that her uncle might be in some trouble that would bring disgrace on her.

“However, I offered to go round to Freebody & Sons on his behalf, and ask them for the name of their client and the object of the advertisement. But even that didn’t satisfy him altogether.

“‘You must do more than that,’ he said in an earnest sort of whisper. ‘You must make absolutely certain. I shan’t sleep till I know who it is. You must contrive to find out somehow, by hook or by crook.’

“That was a bit too much for me. Even for Poppy’s sake I couldn’t see my way to go on. I said to him, ‘I’m afraid you’ve made a mistake in coming to me. I should advise you to employ a private inquiry agent.’

“I can see now that he had very strong reasons for not taking that advice. A private inquiry agent might have found out too much about him and his life in London, as well as in Mexico. He became excited again, and cried out, ‘What! Do you want me to entrust my life to some man of whom I know nothing?—who might give me away for a bribe? I came to you because my niece told me I could trust you. She said you would be sure to do anything you could for her sake.’”

The young man’s voice softened insensibly as he repeated the words. It was clear that he was not a little proud of them.

“I couldn’t well refuse to go on after that. In the end he saw that he must tell me something more if I was to be of any use to him, and he said, ‘I’ll tell you exactly where I stand. There are just two men whom I used to know in Mexico who might be behind that advertisement. One is my old pardner; I helped to make his fortune, and if he’s over here I can guess what he wants, and I’m willing to meet him. The other is a man whom I helped to ruin, and I left Mexico because I heard that he had sworn to take my life.’”

“That is the man with the black beard,” Tarleton put in quietly.

“Yes, that is the man. He had to describe him to me for a reason you’ll see presently. At first I thought he only wanted me to go round to Freebody & Sons and ask them the name of their client; but that wasn’t enough for him. First he seemed to think that they might deceive me by giving a false name; and when I told him I was sure they were incapable of doing anything of the kind, he suggested that they might be deceived themselves. His point was that his enemy might make use of a false name to get in touch with him. I have never seen anyone so suspicious. It was plain that he was in real fear.

“The upshot was that we arranged that I was not only to make inquiries of Freebody’s, but I was also to go on to the advertiser himself and interview him. Even then I wasn’t to tell him anything about my own client, I was to come out here by myself and report to him, before he decided to appear. And he asked me to take precautions against being followed. I thought he was half crazy at the time, but I don’t think so now.”

The young man shivered slightly. Tarleton nodded with sympathy. For a youth of Bunting’s simple character it must have been a considerable shock to find himself playing a responsible part in such a tragedy.

“All this time you haven’t mentioned the names of the men whom Caythorpe regarded as his friend and his enemy.”

The narrator lowered his voice.

“He only told me that at the last moment. He said, ‘The man I’m willing to meet is a white man named Sam Costello. The other man’s real name is Mendoza, but if he’s after me he’s pretty sure not to give it. What you’ve got to look out for is a dago, a man with a yellow skin and a black beard.’”

“And you think that Mendoza is actually in London?”

“Yes, Sir Frank. I haven’t seen him myself, but I’m convinced that Mr. Costello has.”

The gold watch began to go to and fro very softly.

CHAPTER VII

SIR FRANK TARLETON watched the young lawyer closely as he went on with his story. It was plain Bunting was trying to tell the exact truth, and yet he appeared to be in some difficulty, as though there were some things in his mind that he did not want to bring out. It might be that he was merely restrained by the habit of professional caution. Or it might be that he was afraid to commit himself to anything in the way of a suggestion or theory of his own in the presence of the great man.

The next incident he had to tell of was the making of the will.

"I had no sooner agreed to carry out his instructions than he astonished me by asking me if I could draw up a will then and there, for him to sign before he left my office. That showed me his nerves had gone to pieces. I pointed out to him that Mendoza couldn't possibly be on his track till I had gone to answer the advertisement, but he seemed to think his life wouldn't be safe for another hour."

The specialist shook his head a little doubtfully.

"Doesn't that suggest to you that Mendoza wasn't the only enemy he was afraid of? I am inclined to think that his affairs had come to a crisis. As you put it, his nerves had gone to pieces. He thought he was surrounded by enemies, and it rather looks as if he was right."

Bunting did not venture to express any dissent from this view, but it was clear that his own mind was not shaken.

"I consented to what he asked, of course. The will was a very short one, leaving everything to his niece. But it gave me one or two shocks. The first was when he gave me his real name. He sprang it on me suddenly, and gave me a curious look as if to see if I had heard it before."

"I can account for that." And Tarleton repeated the story of Sir Rowland's social fall.

"I was afraid it was something like that," Bunting admitted. "The fact that he was living under a false name was enough for me. I should have turned him out of my office at once if it hadn't been for Poppy. But he really had been good to her. She was his only near relation, he told me, the daughter of his sister, who had married a Colonel Lowless, and both her parents were dead. She was quite young when he adopted her, and she had never known him by any name but Lowless. He took it because it was hers, and she never seems to have been struck by its being the same as her

father's. He said he had dropped his title because he couldn't afford to live up to it."

"Even that may have been partly true."

"It sounded reasonable enough at the time. Then came the next surprise. He appointed me sole executor and trustee—and—and guardian."

Mr. Bunting was covered with confusion as he came to this delicate avowal.

"He couldn't have made a better choice, I'm sure," the kindly listener said with a rather wistful smile.

Poppy's guardian hung his head. "It makes me look so foolish," he complained. "I know I shall be laughed at in the club as soon as it gets out. And Poppy's sure to tell everybody. She'll think it a good joke."

It looked to Sir Frank a joke that might have a happy ending if the youthful guardian's eyes could be opened, and his extraordinary bashfulness overcome. But he thought it better to say nothing just then.

"I told him I was only twenty-four," the aggrieved one resumed. "I pointed out to him that that was too young, and that he knew hardly anything about me; but he wouldn't listen to any objection. 'Poppy likes you, and that's enough for me,' was all I could get out of him."

"What about the heir to the title?" the other inquired suddenly.

"I asked him that, but I could see he didn't like the question. I expect, from what you have just told me, his family must have cast him off. All he said was, 'My heir is a canting parson living at the other end of England. I desire to have nothing to do with him.'"

The consultant drew his brows together. "You will be hearing from the new baronet as soon as this death is reported," he foretold. "I don't suppose he will challenge the will, but he is the proper person to offer your ward a home for the present."

The youthful guardian acknowledged this truth with a sigh.

"I shall see what he is like if he comes up for the funeral," he said with some reserve.

There was a short silence till Tarleton prompted him to go on. "And now what did you find out about the mysterious advertiser?"

"It was a more awkward business at first than I had expected. When I went round to Essex Street I saw one of the partners, the one who had the matter in hand, and I found him inclined to be suspicious. When I asked him to give me his client's name he asked me what proof I could give him that my client was the Arthur Lewis advertised for. Of course his position was

quite reasonable. I might be acting for an impostor whose object was to fish for information that would help him to personate the real Arthur Lewis. I was really in a difficult position, because I had nothing but my client's word for it that he had ever been in Mexico, or passed under that name. Mr. Freebody put it to me that my client ought to know the name of the man who wanted him; and I had to explain that I had been given two names, one of a friend and the other of an enemy, and I had to ascertain which of the two he was acting for.

"It wasn't very pleasant for me. Freebody drew himself up pretty stiffly, and said, 'It comes to this, Mr. Bunting, that one of us seems to have a rogue for his client. I am very much tempted to wash my hands of the whole business, and to advise you to do the same.'

"I should have been only too glad to take the advice, if it hadn't been for Poppy. However, at last he agreed to communicate with his client, and let me know the result. He must have been very quick about it. I walked back to my office, and when I got there I found Costello waiting for me.

"It was a great relief to me to see him, of course. Sir Rowland had described him to me pretty carefully beforehand, so that I could make no mistake. And he showed at once by his manner that he felt no doubt of his welcome. He had come expecting me to give him my client's address at once, and he was a good deal put out when I told him that my instructions were not to let him have it, but to report to Sir Rowland. Naturally I didn't use that name. I simply used the one he did, the one in the advertisement."

"'Arthur seems blamed suspicious of me,' he said. 'That isn't like my old pard. He wasn't afraid of me in Mexico.'

"He began to look suspicious in his turn, so much so that I thought I had better give him some explanation. I was very careful what I said. I told him that my client wasn't afraid of him, but of another man who had known him in Mexico, and wanted to be very sure that he had nothing to do with the advertisement. I was careful not to mention Mendoza's name, but he guessed it directly."

"You mean, he knew it," Tarleton corrected.

Bunting nodded. "He asked me at once if it was a man named Mendoza, and I had to admit it. And I didn't like the look on his face when I had."

"He looked as if he knew something about Mendoza?"

The solicitor hesitated a moment.

"He looked anxious; I can't say more than that. He evidently didn't think that Sir Rowland was foolish or fanciful to take precautions; in fact he told me the contrary. He said, as far as I remember, 'My old pard is quite right to

be shy of that man. I don't know what the trouble between them was, but Mendoza isn't the sort to forget.' He went on to caution me almost in the same way as Sir Rowland himself. I mean he advised me to look about me, when I was going to see my client. It was this that gave me the first idea that Mendoza might actually be in London, or that Mr. Costello had some reason for thinking so."

"I understand." Tarleton's expression had become deeply thoughtful. "Did he give you any description of the man?"

"Yes. It was much the same as Sir Rowland's, except that he didn't call him a dago. He described him as a Mexican, about forty, dark, and wearing a black beard."

"Did it occur to you that this man might have followed Costello over from Mexico, with the hope of finding out Caythorpe through him?"

"That was my idea at first. I made that very suggestion to Mr. Costello. But he seemed to think it was out of the question. He told me that he hadn't come straight to England. He said he was really over on a wedding trip with the Señora, and they had gone first to Paris, and then knocked about Europe for months before coming on to London. I think he was anxious to convince me that he hadn't done anything to bring danger on Arturo, as he called him. He said to me, 'Tell Arturo I'll be as careful as can be not to give him away. Let him come to my hotel if he likes. He can't be in any danger there.'"

Tarleton looked up suddenly, a gleam of interest in his eyes. "Did he tell you whereabouts in Europe he had been?"

"No." The solicitor answered in some wonder. "Why; do you think anything turns on that?"

The expert relapsed into indifference. "They are likely to have visited Spain," he answered evasively. "Never mind, let us come to the shares."

Bunting's tone became respectful, as he realized that it was not for him to question Sir Frank Tarleton.

"I beg your pardon, sir. He spoke freely about the shares. As I understood him, they were shares in old mines that had been closed down years ago, because they were supposed to be worked out; but owing to the introduction of new machinery and methods it had now become possible to work them again at a profit. I gathered from him that Sir Rowland had foreseen this coming, and had held on to the shares in consequence, and brought them away with him when he left Mexico, though he sold everything else. There is no doubt that he told me the truth. Sir Rowland himself confirmed it when I saw him afterwards."

Tarleton looked at the speaker curiously. Bunting appeared to be struggling with a certain prejudice against the American, and forcing himself to be fair to him in spite of it.

“All that sounds quite straightforward,” the doctor observed. “Costello told us to-night that the shares had now become valuable, and it was natural for him to take advantage of a trip to Europe to look up his old partner and make him an offer for them.”

“Yes, but the offer was refused,” was the quick rejoinder, which Tarleton received with a look of surprise.

“I am not saying anything against Mr. Costello,” Bunting went on quickly, “but I want to tell you how the case stands. If he knew that Sir Rowland had kept these shares, others may have known it as well, and may have come to London to obtain them. And I think that is what Sir Rowland really feared.”

The young executor’s position was becoming clear at last. Tarleton nodded to him to proceed.

“Costello was extremely keen to get the shares, I could see; more than he was to meet his old partner, it seemed to me. He naturally thought I was Sir Rowland’s regular man of business, and he actually suggested that if my client made any difficulty about coming to him, or letting him come here, the transaction might be carried out through me. He ended by inviting me to dine with him at the Aldwych Hotel.”

“He wanted you to meet the Señora, perhaps.” The elder man’s eyes twinkled as he made the insidious thrust, which brought another blush on to Mr. Bunting’s modest cheek.

“I thought I had better go, as the more I could tell Sir Rowland the better satisfied he would be,” he said a little awkwardly. “The Señora was very kind. She told me that Arturo was an old friend of hers, and that she was looking forward to seeing him again, but I noticed that she didn’t say much about him when her husband was in the room. I fancied there might have been something between them at one time, and she was afraid of making her husband jealous. When he had gone upstairs to dress we had quite a long talk, and she soon found out about Poppy, and was very interested. She pretended to think——” Mr. Bunting’s shyness overcame him at this point, and he left the sentence unfinished. “She made me promise to bring Poppy to see her, whether her uncle came or not.”

It was evident that the Señora’s wiles had made an easy conquest of Sir Rowland’s man of business. Tarleton smiled at the picture of the bashful

young man being cajoled by the fascinating Mexican. He put his own construction on the husband's temporary retreat from the field.

"So you took Caythorpe an offer for the shares?" he observed. "Go on; I am anxious to hear how he received your report."

Bunting resumed his business air with a start.

"He was quite satisfied with what I had done. But he was still very suspicious and nervous. He wasn't much inclined to believe that Costello had come to Europe on a wedding trip, and when I told him I had seen Mrs. Costello he didn't much like it. He said, 'It's one thing to trust a man, and quite another to trust his wife. I would have let Sam Costello have my address, if he had been alone, because I know he can hold his tongue, but I don't know that about her. It may be all over Vera Cruz as soon as they get back.'"

"He had lived in Vera Cruz?"

"I expect so, Sir Frank. He didn't tell me more than that. I told him the Señora was a friend of his out there, and gave him a message from her that she was looking forward to meeting him again, and that softened him a little. He asked me if I had learned her Christian name, but I couldn't tell him. I had only heard her husband call her Señora. 'I had more than one lady friend out there,' he said, 'but only one that is likely to remember me. Her name was Dolores.' He sighed as he said the name, as though it had some sad association for him." The youthful lawyer seemed to recognize that he was giving way to his romantic sympathies, and he pulled himself up promptly.

"I felt it my duty to let him know that I wasn't altogether satisfied about Mendoza; and you should have seen the way he took it. When I told him of Costello's warning he turned as white as a sheet, and cried out, 'That devil is in London! I have known it from the first; I can feel it in my bones!' He went straight to the sideboard and poured himself out a stiff glass of brandy, and drank it. His hand shook so that he spilt some of it on the carpet. I have never seen anyone so badly scared. I fancy he had been drinking heavily all day, ever since he read the advertisement."

There was nothing to surprise the listener in this. The evidence before him already showed that Caythorpe had had many causes for anxiety. The Eardisley coronet was in his strong room, still undisposed of, and the Dowager Countess was beginning to use threats. The Indian diamond was a still more dangerous booty. By this time the police were on his track, and if he had not actually noticed the watch placed on his house he may have become aware of it in that unconscious way in which the threatened often do become aware of their peril. Coming on the top of these risks, the

advertisement that reminded him of a deadly enemy he had shaken off before, and warning him that he might yet have to reckon with the man with the black beard, was enough to reduce him to the state described by Bunting. There was one consideration that Tarleton thought it worth while to put before his young friend.

“Everything you have told me, Mr. Bunting, suggests that we need not look further than Mendoza for the murderer. But we must bear in mind that Sir Rowland Caythorpe may have had an object in producing that impression on your mind. He was dealing with you as the solicitor who had made his will, and whom he wanted to act as his niece’s trustee and guardian, if anything happened to him. For that reason he naturally wished you to regard him as a respectable member of society. It would have been very different if he had come to you as a criminal lawyer to undertake his defence in the courts. In that case he would have told you all about his doubtful transactions, and his fears in other quarters. As it was he kept you in the dark as much as possible. He had every motive for leading you to think his only reason for anxiety was something that had happened years ago in Mexico, perhaps a mere private grudge arising out of some personal quarrel.”

The young solicitor shook his head stubbornly.

“He didn’t give me that impression, Sir Frank, except at the beginning, when he first came to me. When I saw him the second time he let me see that the real cause of the trouble was the shares. It is my belief now, after what has come out about his dealings, that he must have obtained them dishonestly, and that he thought Mendoza had come over here to get them back by force.”

It was Tarleton’s turn to show doubt.

“Can you tell me exactly what he said to give you that idea?”

“He didn’t say anything distinct that night; he was too much upset, and I got away as soon as I could. The next morning he came to my office again. He told me he had made up his mind to go and see the Costellos—I rather thought he was drawn by the wish to see the Señora—and he was on his way to their hotel. He told me at the same time that he thought of changing his address and going into hiding for a time, as he was afraid this house was being watched— —”

“We know he was right about that,” the consultant put in.

“Yes; he deceived me there, I admit. I thought he meant that he believed Mendoza had found him out already. Then he showed me a locked suitcase

he had brought with him, and said, 'I want you to take care of this for a time. It contains Poppy's fortune.'"

"Did he tell you what was in it?"

"No, Sir Frank, I didn't ask him. I felt sure it contained the shares."

The medical adviser of the Home Office ceased to swing his watch, and regarded the young man with unfeigned respect. Innocent as he seemed, simple as he had shown himself in his relations with his charming little ward, Mr. Cyril Bunting had played his part that night with a discretion worthy of a graybeard. He had been present when the mining magnate was eagerly inquiring after the missing shares, he had received Costello's somewhat peremptory instructions to search for them, and he had never betrayed by the turn of an eyelash that they had been in his own custody for some days past.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Bunting. And I congratulate Miss Poppy on having such a trustee."

The trustee hung out another signal of distress.

"I haven't said one word about this to anyone else," he said, "I don't want even Poppy to know anything yet. I'm convinced that Sir Rowland brought the shares to me because he was afraid of their being stolen from him. He pledged me to secrecy at the time."

"I see you don't want Costello to know."

"I don't want anyone to know till I see what is going to happen," was the rather evasive reply.

"And you consider that Caythorpe was murdered for the sake of those shares?"

The young man nodded. "You see, he had refused to sell them. I know that, because Costello has been at my office, asking me to try and make him change his mind."

"So that in your opinion the murderer found that his only chance of obtaining them was to get rid of Caythorpe, when he would only have a young girl to deal with."

"That is what I am afraid of, Sir Frank."

Mr. Cyril Bunting's voice sank still lower as he answered. His opinion was only too plain now. But it was not less plain that he was too scrupulous to put it into words.

CHAPTER VIII

THE following morning Sir Frank Tarleton dressed himself with unusual care. Not only did he put on a nearly new suit, and an almost dazzling tie, but he took especial pains with his hair, brushing it artfully over a bare spot on the top of his head. His programme for the day was a full one, including an appointment with the distinguished surgeon who was to perform the autopsy at Harlesden, and another with a not less eminent man at the India Office. Yet it did not seem probable that he was so particular about his appearance on account of either of those engagements. The discreet personage who served him in the double capacity of butler and valet in the modest household beside the British Museum viewed the preparations with deep inward misgiving. A misogynist himself, he had for some time been haunted by the dread that his employer's mind was beginning to weaken on the subject of matrimony, and he now feared the worst.

After breakfast the medical adviser to the Home Office hurried through his correspondence at a great rate, and disposed of all the pressing business. By eleven his motor was at the door. When his saturnine attendant saw him draw on a pair of pearl-gray gloves preparatory to stepping into it, he made up his mind to look out for another situation without much delay.

But Providence was watching over the infatuated man, it appeared. At the very moment he was passing through the hall the peremptory voice of the telephone arrested him. He turned to his satellite in irritation.

"Just see what that is, Weldon."

Weldon darted into the consulting room, and speedily returned with triumph written on his brow.

"Mr. Cyril Bunting, sir, wishes to see you as soon as possible, either here or at his office, 92 Theobald Road."

The consultant's face fell. "Tell him I am coming round to him at once."

He frowned as he went out to his car. He had listened patiently to the young solicitor's story the night before with its rather inconclusive ending, and did not want a repetition of it. At the same time Bunting had shown enough common sense to make it unlikely that he should have asked for another interview unless he had something new to tell.

Tarleton was not long in reaching Mr. Bunting's office, a very modest one of two rooms on the third floor. A minute clerk, whose age would have excited suspicion in a school attendance officer, received him with dignity and marshalled him into the presence of his principal.

Tarleton's confidence in the young man's discretion had not been misplaced. Sir Rowland Caythorpe's executor had an interesting story to tell. Only an hour before he had received a visit from a swarthy Hindu, magnificently attired in Indian costume, who had introduced himself by the name of Ram Chundra, as nearly as Bunting and his clerk could make it out. And he had come to ask for the return of the uncut diamond which reposed at that moment in Sir Frank's waistcoat pocket.

The Hindu had read of Caythorpe's mysterious end in the morning's papers, all of which contained a fairly sensational account of the affair, evidently supplied in part by Inspector Charles, who figured as the hero throughout. According to these reports, the vigilant inspector had traced the Eardisley coronet to the possession of the deceased; he had entered the house and broken into the strong room to search for it, and had carried it off in triumph. Nothing was said to indicate that the baronet's death was not a natural one, and no allusion was made to the other contents of the strong room. Captain Charles had been perfectly discreet.

Ram Chundra had gone in the first place to the house in Drysdale Park. There he had been referred by Mrs. Maggitts, of whom he spoke with extreme respect, and by the detectives in charge, to Mr. Bunting, as the executor of the deceased. He had come on to him accordingly, apparently in the full expectation of receiving the diamond on application.

His manner had been so courteous, and at the same time so commanding, that Bunting had hardly known how to deal with the demand.

"If I had had the diamond here I really think I should have handed it over to him," the lawyer confessed. "I should never have suspected anything wrong. I didn't tell him where it was, of course; I understood that was confidential. I didn't even let him know that it had been seized by the police. All I could think of to do was to pretend that there were legal difficulties in the way of my giving it up. I asked him if he had a receipt for it from Sir Rowland Caythorpe. He asked me to explain what that was, and then offered to go and fetch it."

"Or go and forge it," commented the expert.

"I daresay that was it, sir. I daren't let him think he could have the diamond even then, so I told him the will must be proved before I could deal with anything in the possession of the deceased. He asked me how long it would take to prove the will; and when I said that I couldn't fix a definite time, I think he saw that I was fencing with him." Mr. Bunting flushed guiltily. "He offered me a bribe, Sir Frank."

The medical adviser to the Home Office looked amused.

“People have offered bribes to me before now, my young friend. You mustn’t mind that. How much was it?”

“A thousand pounds! He didn’t go as high as that all at once. He put it very cunningly, talked about the cost of legal proceedings, and said if the matter could be hurried on he should be glad to make it worth my while. He began with £100, and raised it by degrees.”

“He didn’t threaten you, I suppose?”

“Not openly—I should have been more comfortable if he had. I should have known how to deal with him then. He was as polite as possible to the end. He just turned round as he was going out of the room, and gave me a look.”

The young solicitor hunched his shoulders as he recalled it. Tarleton cheered him up.

“I don’t think you need feel nervous. He won’t run any more risk till he is sure of getting the diamond. He may set a watch on you to find out where it is. But I fancy that won’t last long. I am going to divert his attention from you.” The expert consulted his wondrous timepiece. “I am just due at the India Office.”

There was to be no chance for the new suit and the pearl-gray gloves just yet. In the India Office they produced no sensation whatever. Their wearer was conducted along the tomb-like corridors of the massive building off Parliament Street, into a severe room tenanted by a severe official whose reception of the great Tarleton was almost patronizing. Mr. Howard was only a C.B., and his official status was that of Assistant Secretary, but for all practical purposes he exercised as much authority over the four hundred millions of the Indian Empire as Lenin ever exercised in Russia or Signor Mussolini in Italy. His official chief blindly approved of every minute laid before him by the strong-willed, prudent subordinate, whether it related to the appointment of a new Viceroy or the expulsion of an Indian student from a London hospital.

Tarleton wasted no time in conversation. He took the little silver box out of his pocket and laid it on Mr. Howard’s table.

“I thought you might be able to tell me something about that.”

The assistant secretary glanced at the box in wonder, took it with an air of disdain, and opened it. The next moment he was staring in something like consternation at the great uncut stone.

“Good heavens, Tarleton! How did you come into possession of this?” He lifted the diamond gingerly, and held it between his finger and thumb as if it might dissolve before his eyes.

“Do you recognize it?”

Howard barely moved his head in denial. “I have never seen it before. But there are not a dozen stones such as that in the whole of India.” He turned it gently to let the soft lustre play on his writing-pad. “This must be the famous Keeper of Khattipur.”

Tarleton nodded with satisfaction. He had expected to hear something of the kind. He was aware that most of the celebrated State jewels of India were catalogued, and that the Imperial Government kept a watchful eye over their safety.

“I thought you would know something about it,” he said. “Did you know it was in England?”

The other’s manner had lost all its condescension by this time. He got up, walked across the room to a steel safe let into the wall, opened it with a small key attached to his watch chain, and after rummaging for a moment came back with a file of papers.

“This is a secret service report,” he explained, as he ran quickly through the file. “The Ranee of Khattipur arrived in London three weeks ago. You must have seen it in the papers. She has been to Buckingham Palace.”

The specialist shook his head. “No time to read them for nonsense. I confine myself to scientific news. As a taxpayer I pay you to attend to Indian affairs.”

“You don’t pay me very well,” grumbled the ruler of India. “Why, the Ranee has been in Pathé’s Gazette—veiled, of course.”

“I envy you, Howard, if you can still go to the pictures. I gave them up when they left off showing cow-boys on ponies and began to specialize in divorce.”

The secretary had just found what he wanted in the file.

“Listen to this, Tarleton. It’s in your line:— ‘The Ranee’s people give out that she has come to Europe for medical advice. She has placed herself in the hands of Sir Philip Blennerhasset, the specialist in nerves, but nothing is known of her disorder. She has with her a great quantity of jewels, including the famous Keeper, a diamond believed to weigh over two hundred carats. Great secrecy has been kept up as to this, as the diamond is venerated by the people of Khattipur, and there might be trouble if it was proved that it had been taken out of the country. *She must not be allowed to part with it.*’”

Howard thrust the document across the table for the other to see. The last sentence was added in red ink.

“That is my own note,” he observed. “Really I am very much obliged to you, Tarleton. Now tell me how it came into your hands.”

The representative of the Home Office told his story, ending with the dramatic sequel in the solicitor's office that morning.

"It is pretty clear," he went on to say, "that this Ram Chundra came across Caythorpe at the Anglo-Indian Club, and entrusted the stone to him to sell. It's equally clear that he didn't sell it, and it looks as if the Hindu or his mistress got uneasy, and wanted it back."

"Why didn't he, do you suppose? How do you account for this rascal Caythorpe keeping so many valuables in his strong room without attempting to sell them, apparently, when he was being threatened by their owners?"

Tarleton rubbed his hands briskly. The man who controlled the destinies of India had given a proof of his capacity, by raising a point that had escaped everybody else; and it was a pleasure to confer with him.

"My opinion is that he couldn't bring himself to part with them. I think the handling of so many treasures had gradually worked on him unawares, and he had become a miser. He was found with the Eardisley coronet in his hands, for no conceivable reason but that he had gone down into the strong room to take it out and gloat over it. In the same way with his mining shares; he was willing to sell them at first, but when it came to the point he couldn't bring himself to part with them, either. He took them to his lawyer for safety, and asked him to hide them."

It required no long argument to convince a man like Howard.

"You are right, undoubtedly," he pronounced. "Well, you have done us a service; now what can we do for you?"

The specialist became grave.

"You must introduce me to the Ranee. I have to find out if she knows anything about the way in which Caythorpe died."

The official held up his hands in dismay.

"My dear sir, you can't know what you ask. The Ranee is a sovereign who can't be questioned, to say nothing of the purdah."

"She can be questioned by her doctor," the physician answered. "Blennerhasset has seen her in spite of the purdah. You must arrange for him to call me in for consultation."

"Upon my word you have hit it! Yes, we ought to be able to manage that, I think." Howard gazed at his friend in admiration. "Tell me, would the governorship of Bombay and a peerage tempt you to leave the Home Office?"

The principal medical adviser of the Home Office shook his head very decidedly.

“Better a thousand pounds a year in England than ten thousand in India at my age.” Tarleton took up the diamond. Without a protest the other saw him restore it to the silver box, which he slipped into his pocket as before. “From what I know of Blennerhasset, you won’t have much difficulty. His practice is largely a sham one. I shouldn’t wonder if the Ranee’s illness was nothing but a pretext for coming to Europe.” He pointed to the secret file. “Does that report say what route she came by?”

“No. Why?”

“Just find out if she spent any time in Venice, there’s a good fellow.”

The door closed on the mysterious request. Sir Frank Tarleton’s business air dropped from him like a garment as he emerged from the India Office and gave the word to his chauffeur—“Aldwych Hotel.”

From the office of the well-known American resort, the distinguished caller sent up two cards, one for the Señora Costello and the other for her guest, and quickly found himself in a private sitting-room on the second floor of the hotel. The room was furnished with almost oppressive luxury, and lined with mirrors which positively confused the eye as to the direction in which to walk. But he looked in them and out of them in vain for a feminine form.

Mr. Costello emerged from the labyrinth of furniture, holding out a welcoming hand.

“This is real kind of you, Sir Frank. The Señora won’t know what to say when she hears you’ve been here, and I guess Miss Poppy will be just as vexed. But I’m expecting them back any minute. They’ve only gone out to do some shopping. The poor young thing had to get some black clothes at once, you see.”

The Irishman’s manner was as genial as it had been the night before. He pressed his visitor into a sumptuous chair and expressed thankfulness that the bar was open. On Tarleton’s excusing himself from taking refreshment in liquid form, he forced a cigar on him, and begged him to remain for lunch.

“The fact is, I wanted to see you, Doctor. If you hadn’t happened along I should have come round to you. There’s a lot that I don’t understand in this business of my old pard’s death, and it would do me good to talk to you about it.”

The element of distrust, not to say suspicion, with which the mine-owner’s figure had been invested by Bunting overnight became unreal in the face of this openness.

"I've been turning things over in my mind since last night," Costello proceeded, "and I don't quite take to the notion of its being an accident. And after I came away I suspected that you were none too sure about it, yourself."

There was no evading the American's shrewd glance, even if Tarleton had wanted to.

"I must put you on your honor when I answer that question, Mr. Costello. The official view is that it is a case of accidental death, and I must ask you not to repeat anything I say unofficially."

The big man's small eyes glittered with excitement.

"Say, Sir Frank, this is real good of you. I'm just as keen as you are not to talk too soon, but I'd hate to have the whole thing hushed up. You see, I owe Arthur something. I've been a bit afraid that it was my coming here and hunting him out that led to the trouble. And besides that, I consider myself as good as his little girl's guardian. She doesn't seem to have any other friends, as far as I can make out, except that young fellow who was there last night; and he doesn't strike me as over bright. So it seems to me I'm bound to take a hand in the business."

There was a manly ring about this declaration which Bunting himself would have found it hard to resist. The consultant received it with entire cordiality.

"It is natural and right that you should feel a sense of duty in the matter," he returned. "I am quite willing to take you into my confidence as far as I can. The theory of accident is a blind. The police, or rather Inspector Charles, who is in charge of the case, privately considers that Sir Rowland Caythorpe was murdered by a woman—a woman whom he had robbed of the coronet you were supposed to be buying."

"A woman! That beats me!" The surprise in Costello's face was succeeded by the same relief that had marked it overnight when he had listened to the explanation of death by accident. "Well, Doctor, you don't know how pleased I am to hear that. I've been feeling more uneasy than I like about a man that I knew had his knife into Arthur."

"You mean a man with a black beard, named Mendoza."

The big Irishman fairly shrank in his seat.

"By all the holy saints, Doctor, how d'you come to know that! My, but I'm glad I didn't try to pull the wool over your eyes!"

Tarleton smiled amiably. "I am equally glad, Mr. Costello. You forget that Sir Rowland's fear of this man was known to his solicitor. Mr. Bunting has been as frank with me as you have."

“Well, that shows he has some sense,” the other confessed. “It strikes me that it would take an almighty sharp man to keep a secret from you, Sir Frank Tarleton.” He hesitated a moment. “There’s one thing I can tell you that Bunting couldn’t, though; only if the police are sure of their case it doesn’t much matter.”

“I can’t tell that till I’ve heard it.” Tarleton’s tone was mildly inquisitive.

The Irishman realized that he had gone too far to stop.

“Well, it’s this, Doctor. That man Mendoza is in town.”

The specialist lifted his eyebrows ever so little.

“You are sure of that? Have you seen him?”

Costello began to look a little uncomfortable.

“No, I haven’t,” he answered slowly. “But—well, I guess I’ve got to tell you—the Señora saw him last night.”

CHAPTER IX

THIS was news indeed. The figure of the revengeful Mexican, which had been vaguely discernible in the background up to now, was becoming palpable at last. Tarleton's air lost its touch of lightheartedness. The pearl-gray gloves were crumpled up and thrust absently into his coat pocket, while he drew out the unfailing sedative of his intensely working brain and balanced it on its scrap of silk.

The American was quick to see the impression he had produced. He made an effort to soften it.

"Mind, she may have made a mistake," he said. "It came out when we got the news over the telephone that Arturo was dead. Like a fool I blurted out that I thought Mendoza had got at him, and that put her on to asking me questions. I had to tell her how scared Arthur had been, and then she said I ought to have told her before, because she had seen a man that looked like Felipe hanging round the hotel that very afternoon."

"She knew this man in Mexico, I suppose?"

The Señora's husband made a face indicating distaste.

"We all knew him—a darn sight too well at one time. He'd have tasted the toe of my boot before now, if he hadn't made himself pretty scarce. I don't let greasers chalk lines on me, no, sir."

The visitor was polite enough to drop the subject, so evidently painful to his host.

"That was what brought me out so mighty quick," Costello went on to explain. "I can tell you I expected to find Arthur sprawled out with a knife in his back, and that undesirable wriggling in the clutch of those first-class peelers of yours. I was more than glad when the doctor you had there reeled out the yarn you had filled him with, I can tell you."

"I noticed you were," the consultant said.

"Seems to me there's not much you don't notice, Sir Frank."

The big man eyed him almost as respectfully as Bunting had done. "See here," he said abruptly, "I don't want you to say too much about this to the Señora. I fed her with your story of the needle in poor Arthur's clothes, and it's made her happy, and Miss Poppy as well. It would be bad to set them off again."

"I quite see that," the physician assented readily. "Especially as we have no evidence yet against this man. I gather that you are not quite certain that

the man Mrs. Costello saw actually was Mendoza.”

The other hesitated. “Well, I can’t hardly say that. She is positive enough. Says the only reason she wasn’t sure at the time was because she never dreamed he could be in England, but now she knows the whole story she hasn’t a doubt.”

Tarleton made a gesture of indifference.

“I will bear in mind what you have told me. But you may be glad to hear that I am on a different scent at present.”

And, first extracting a promise of secrecy, he unfolded to the deeply interested mine-owner the story of the great uncut diamond, the object of superstition to myriads of Asiatics. He went into the tale of the Ranee’s voyage to Europe for the cure of an unknown complaint, of her presentation at Buckingham Palace, and her appearance on the film. Then he referred to the secret dealings of Sir Rowland Caythorpe and his miserly disposition, the visit of the Hindu to Drysdale Park, and the discovery of the stone in its silver box; winding up with the attempt to bribe the young executor.

The little gray eyes in the listener’s head sparkled with excitement as he drank in the narrative. The close left him fully convinced.

“You’re a marvel, sir, that’s all I can say. There’s not a fly on you, not one. Sakes, how I should like to tell all this to the Señora!”

Sir Frank shook his head in doubt. “I’m afraid that wouldn’t do, Mr. Costello. It isn’t every lady who can keep a secret.”

“I’ll answer for one lady,” her husband protested with enthusiasm. “You can trust the Señora every time. And I’d like to set her mind quite free about that scalawag. She blamed herself for not having told me sooner that she had seen him; and I fancy she’s worrying some.”

“Will you give me till after lunch to think it over?” Tarleton’s tone was reluctant. “If I thought the Señora was really troubled by the idea that she might have saved Caythorpe’s life, I might venture to let you relieve her mind.”

The bargain had not long been struck when a dazzling vision appeared in the doorway. The Señora was in black, as she had been the night before, no doubt because she understood how effectually it set off her ivory complexion and statuesque form; but the dark ground was relieved by silver tracery as delicate as lace, that gave her the ethereal look of a spirit rather than a mortal. Her vast black fan flew open as she caught sight of the visitor and seemed to be a wing lifting her as she rose and fell in a bow worthy of the court of old Madrid. Poppy beside her was utterly eclipsed, like a wild flower of England beside a tropical bloom.

The kind-hearted physician was glad to note that Poppy was looking more cheerful this morning. Her hosts had evidently done their best to comfort her, and her manner towards the Señora was affectionate already. It had been a wise move on the woman's part to distract the girl's mind by a shopping expedition. The choice of frocks and ties had been an absorbing task, and thanks to Costello's generosity Poppy had found herself entering palaces of feminine delight, and acquiring such a wardrobe as she had only longed for, hitherto, as an unattainable dream. A porter of the hotel stumbled in behind them, bursting with parcels like a Santa Claus, and these were but trifles to go on with till the more important articles arrived.

Poppy's greeting of her friend was a little shame-faced, as though she feared he might see something callous in her morning's occupation. Sir Frank encouraged her by a few sympathetic words; however, she soon realized that he had little attention to spare for anyone else in the presence of the beautiful Spaniard.

The Señora took possession of him, as it were, with one royal inclination of her head, and one sweep of her fan. He found himself seated beside her, while Poppy was sent out of the room to put on some touches of mourning before going down to lunch in public.

"I have been longing to see you, Señor." She gave the Spanish *n* that liquid roll which was painfully travestied by her husband's rough pronunciation. "I want so much to hear what you can tell me about this dreadful happening." Such were her words; her glorious eyes intimated that perhaps curiosity had not been her only reason for wishing to see Sir Frank again.

It was as well that the Home Secretary was not there to hear the reply of his principal medical adviser.

"It is difficult for me to think anything dreadful that makes me welcome to you." The eyes were lowered; their lustre was curtained by their dark fringe. Tarleton's tone became sober again. "There is nothing new to tell you just yet. The autopsy was to have taken place this morning. I shall be hearing the result this afternoon."

"And you will come and tell me? For the sake of my sweet little Poppy?" Such, once more, were the words. The black fringe lifted enough for the eyes to add, "And mine."

"I shall seize any excuse to come here." Tarleton could not forbear stealing a look at Mr. Costello as he spoke. But the big Irishman seemed to be enjoying himself. His small gray eyes shone with as much amiability as

the Señora's. He looked proud and pleased at the tribute to his wife's fascination. The guest went on with relief.

"I have been talking about the whole affair with Mr. Costello. He tells me that you think you have seen a man of whom Sir Rowland Caythorpe was afraid, in London."

The Señora glanced rather reproachfully at her husband.

"Well, yes, I did say that, but— — Is it not that you are satisfied that Arturo's death was due to accident?"

"I know no more as to that than I did last night," was the ambiguous answer. "There is no evidence that Mendoza had anything to do with it."

"You can speak out, Señora," the husband threw in. "Sir Frank doesn't take any stock in your notion about Felipe."

The Señora's exquisite teeth revealed themselves in a smile of satisfaction.

"It is not natural that I, a woman, should like to denounce anyone," she pleaded. "But yes, since that is so, I have seen him."

She spoke with emphasis. Costello nodded across to the consultant. "I told you the Señora was fixed on it."

"You think you saw him yesterday afternoon?"

The Señora became excited.

"I tell you I did see him, Señor. I recognized him clearly. And that is not all. I have seen him again this morning."

Both the men started. Tarleton was the first to recover himself.

"Will you tell me exactly where and how you saw him, Señora?"

"It was as I was leaving the hotel with Poppy. He was outside on the pavement. And this time he saw me. He slipped away at once and hid himself among the people."

Tarleton's fingers stole to his watch. "Was he disguised in any way?"

The Señora reflected for an instant. "No, I think he cannot have been disguised, since I recognized him easily. I was not looking for him, you understand. I believed he was still in Vera Cruz."

"He was wearing a beard then?"

"Why, certainly; I knew him best by his black beard." The Señora suddenly exhibited anxiety. "But I tell you all this as a friend, Señor. It is understood, is it not, that I am not willing to repeat anything of this to your police?"

"I quite understand that, Señora. On the contrary, your statement that Mendoza was not disguised is likely to divert suspicion from him in their eyes."

This assurance seemed to content the Señora. Poppy's return prevented anything more being said, and the party descended to the great dining-room of the hotel.

Mr. Costello's delight in the admiration excited by his bride had seemingly dictated his choice of a table. The one selected was in the very centre of the room, and the Señora's transit caused all eyes to turn towards her with a homage of which she showed the gracious consciousness of a queen passing through a crowd of courtiers. Waiters crowded round her like the proverbial moths round a light, and the major-domo himself had the privilege of adjusting her chair and relieving her of the black fan, which he folded with loving care and laid down beside her plate.

Tarleton was pleased by the attention both her hosts showed to the forlorn Poppy. Her dress was now rendered sombre by such means as she had been able to obtain already, and her spirits were depressed. The Señora was also grave, and it was Costello who did most of the talking. He showed a good deal of tact in avoiding any topic that could remind the girl of her loss; and entertained the table with reminiscences of his early life in Mexico. Altogether it was a pleasant enough meal, especially to the doctor, who had ample opportunities of studying his hostess, and conveying his sentiments to her in subtler forms than speech. At the close his refusal of a priceless Havana from his host in favor of a perfumed cigarette from the Señora amounted to a declaration, for which a Spanish husband might have stabbed him on the spot.

When he tore himself away to keep his appointment with Sir Michael Craig, the Señora pressed him to return and dine with them, and her husband was tolerant enough to second the invitation with apparent heartiness. He followed his guest into the cloakroom to ask him if the story of the Ranee's diamond might be repeated to his wife.

"It will ease her mind," he urged. "She thinks she ought to have held her tongue about Mendoza, and she's more troubled than she shows."

It was a weak reason for entrusting Mrs. Costello with a secret, that she had just failed to keep another, but Tarleton gave his consent. Perhaps if the Home Secretary had been lunching with the Señora he would have consented, too.

It was a disagreeable change of atmosphere for Sir Frank to return to his house in the shade of the British Museum to meet the eminent surgeon who

had been engaged in the gruesome task of performing the autopsy on the murdered man. Sir Michael Craig arrived punctually at the hour fixed upon, and with him came the Honorable Captain Charles, his whole look proclaiming that he was filled to the brim with information. However, he exercised a becoming self-restraint while the two medical experts were discussing the anatomical features of the case.

The surgeon himself had an air of suppressed excitement, although he spoke with professional gravity.

“You were perfectly right in your diagnosis, Tarleton,” he began at once. “It was an amazingly shrewd idea of yours to examine for an exterior puncture. I doubt if another man on the Medical Register would have thought of doing so. I found this lodged in the right auricle.”

From a gold match box which had been carefully emptied of matches, he shook out on his palm a small steel bolt about an inch long. One end was a sharp point, the other was comparatively broad and flat like the head of a nail. There was no eye to it, and no sign of having been broken off. The murderous little weapon appeared to have been specially constructed for its purpose. It was useless except as a dagger or a dart.

Tarleton picked up the deadly trifle, which was coated with impure blood and rust. There was no room left for doubt as to the cause of Sir Rowland Caythorpe’s death.

“This looks like fairly conclusive evidence,” he remarked as he handed it back after a careful scrutiny. “You will want this to produce at the inquest. After that I will ask you to let me have it.”

“Well, I suppose you have the best right to it,” Sir Michael conceded rather reluctantly, as though he would have liked to retain the curiosity himself.

“I only want it in case it may come in useful at a later stage,” Tarleton hastened to explain. “As soon as the whole affair has been disposed of I shall be glad to let you keep it if you wish.”

The surgeon looked surprised.

“Thanks; yes, I should value it. But I don’t quite understand. I gathered from Doctor Nevillson that you thought that the case was disposed of already—that the needle had penetrated by accident?”

It would have been foolish to try to hoodwink such a man as Craig. Tarleton made no attempt to do so.

“That is the impression I wanted to create in his mind,” he confessed. “It is not always well to let the truth out too soon. As a matter of fact I have

entertained little doubt from the first that it was a case of murder, as Inspector Charles, here, knows.”

Sir Michael turned to the discreet officer in something like stupefaction.

“And I have been having quite an argument with him as well as Nevillson!” he exclaimed. “He wouldn’t hear a word against the theory of accident.”

The medical adviser to the Home Office rewarded his friend with a grateful look.

“Captain Charles is a loyal colleague. There are not many men on the staff of the Criminal Investigation Department who know better how to keep a secret.”

The inspector justified this praise by continuing to hold his tongue. Craig’s face relaxed into a smile.

“You completely deceived me, Captain.” He turned to the physician. “You notice that this isn’t a sewing needle?”

“Yes, I notice that.”

“That was what first aroused my suspicion. It looked to me as if it had been designed to do mischief. And now what do you say to this?”

He felt in his pocket for a rolled-up envelope, unfolded it, and shook out another of the deadly little bolts, a duplicate of the first, except that the blood in which it was steeped was of a purer shade.

Tarleton seized it with a cry of honest admiration.

“Where did you find this?”

“In the backbone. When I heard that you had only examined the front of the corpse it occurred to me to test my theory by examining it all over. I found another puncture in the back, still on the level of the heart, and dissected for a second needle. This one had evidently been intercepted by the spine. It was stuck between two of the vertebræ. It didn’t seem to me that two such darts could have found their way in by accident.”

The touch of triumph in Sir Michael’s voice was justified. In the face of his discovery it was clear that the coroner’s jury could come to only one conclusion.

“You have knocked my little scheme on the head, Craig,” Tarleton admitted. “You will have to produce both these things at the inquest, and that will let the cat out of the bag at once. I am sorry I asked for you,” he added in grim compliment.

The great surgeon was flattered.

“The whole credit belongs to you,” he declared handsomely. “I should never have looked for anything of the kind myself. Do you mind my asking how you came to suspect the true cause of death? I don’t recollect ever hearing of a case quite like this before?”

The medical adviser of the Home Office appeared to search his memory.

“It seems to me I must have met with some case of the kind in the course of my reading. As you know, most of my cases are poison cases, and the most celebrated modern poisoners are the Italians. I have quite a collection of books describing them and their methods, and I have read others in the Museum. Many of them are popular miscellanies, and they contain accounts of all sorts of crimes, such as the story of the Cenci, and the one on which Browning founded *The Ring and the Book*. I seem to remember having read of a murder committed by means of a needle, at all events it was the first idea that came into my mind when I saw the corpse. You see it was evident that death was due to heart failure, and I knew that Braidlaw had examined the man’s heart within the last few days, and found it perfectly sound.”

The eminent surgeon listened to the explanation with interest, and showed himself satisfied. But the face of the Honorable Captain Charles fell. It was not like his friend to wander in his recollections. He was accustomed to a very different Tarleton, a Tarleton whose memory was exact as an inventory, and who could dive into it with unerring promptitude for every fact that it contained. He asked himself if the investigator was losing his grip, and had really ceased to interest himself in the mystery of the strong room.

He waited impatiently for Sir Michael’s departure to tell his own tale.

“I have seen Lady Eardisley!”

CHAPTER X

INSPECTOR CHARLES had spent a busy morning, and he was anxious for his sagacious colleague to know what he had done. He had begun by taking the recovered coronet to the solicitors of the Eardisley family, and they had readily identified it. He had gone on to Lord Eardisley, and the Earl had overwhelmed him with congratulations. His reception of the good news had been such as to dispel from the inspector's mind any lingering suspicion that his lordship was in any way privy to Caythorpe's sudden end. From there he had gone to interview the Dowager Countess.

He had found her ladyship in rather dismal circumstances. She was staying for the time in Onslow Square in what was to all intents and purposes a boarding-house, although the inmates were entitled paying guests of the proprietress or hostess, the wife of a retired Brigadier-General. It was a haunt of impoverished people of fashion, who clung to London, in preference to a retirement to Bath or Cheltenham, for the sake of an occasional invitation from the really great whom they had once mixed with on more equal terms. Lady Eardisley was too young not to have a good prospect of replacing her first husband, and she was undeniably attractive. She had received her caller, who presented a private card with only his name and military rank on it, in a small and dingy parlor reserved for such purposes. And she had let him see at once that she knew perfectly well what he had come about.

She held out the unofficial card with an air of disdain. "You are a police inspector, are you not? The one who had taken possession of my coronet?"

"I am, your ladyship. The question whose coronet it is will have to be decided by the Court of Chancery, if you persist in your claim."

She had not asked him to sit down, and he spoke sternly.

"Persist! How dare you, sir? Do you know whom you are speaking to? The late Lord Eardisley gave me the coronet as a wedding gift."

"His lordship had no right to give it for more than the term of his own life. Your ladyship denied that it was in your possession when you were applied to for it."

"It wasn't in my possession." The Countess was becoming angry. "I had entrusted it to Sir Rowland Caythorpe as a friend to find a purchaser."

"You told the family solicitors a different story, madam. You pretended to them that your husband had pawned it."

Her ladyship's voice rose. "I am not obliged to tell everything about my affairs to a firm of meddling lawyers. The Earl advised me to raise money on it with his last breath. I was carrying out his wishes on my behalf."

Charles saw that he was getting the worst of it. "There is no charge against your ladyship on that account," he admitted. "But when you knew that the coronet was claimed as an heirloom, you ought to have taken steps to recover it at once, instead of leaving it in Caythorpe's hands."

"I did." The Countess spoke fiercely. "I demanded it back time after time, but he wouldn't part with it. He pretended that it was his duty to hold it till he knew whose property it rightfully was."

There was some truth in this, no doubt, as the inspector and Tarleton agreed in thinking. But it was not at all probable that her ladyship's attempt to get back the heirloom was due to any motive but Caythorpe's failure to convert it into money for her benefit. Unfortunately her truculent attitude goaded Charles into giving her a menacing hint.

"I know that your ladyship went to see him recently. My information is that you used rather violent language to him."

The Countess of Eardisley stared at him with dilating eyes—"like a tigress," according to the captain's account of the scene.

"What do you mean, sir? How dare you? Have you come here to arrest me for murdering that wretched man?"

Charles was sorely tempted to tell her that she was under suspicion, but his professional caution prevailed. He answered quite coolly that the evidence pointed to Caythorpe's death being due to accident, in the opinion of the medical man who had examined the body so far.

Lady Eardisley had laughed hysterically. She had then announced her intention of going to her lawyer immediately to seek his protection against the aspersions on her character, whether as a thief or a murderess, and had wound up by ordering her visitor out of the room.

Tarleton listened to the story with every sign of interest, but he refrained from committing himself to a definite opinion.

"If she is guilty, she has taken a very clever line of defence," was all he said. "I should certainly advise you to have her watched till we know something more."

"I have had a man on that job ever since the first thing this morning," the inspector answered with satisfaction.

"Are you doing anything else?"

Charles looked puzzled. "Why, is there anything else you think ought to be done?"

"If you could manage it without her knowing, I should suggest a search of her room."

The inspector's face fell. "I was an ass not to think of that!" he cried disconsolately. "You mean for a weapon? You don't think those darts were thrust in by hand?"

Tarleton shook his head slowly. "I don't say that isn't possible, but it would call for a good deal of nerve, and the risk of detection at the time would be very great. A man who was maddened by thirst for revenge might do it, but scarcely a woman."

"I wonder what sort of weapon was used," the inspector said thoughtfully. "It would be an air pistol of some kind, I suppose, but it would have to be specially made."

"It would have to be specially made, as you say, but I shouldn't rely on its being in the form of an air pistol. I should advise you to search for something in the shape of a large iron key."

"Sir Frank!" His friend stared at the consultant as though he really feared that his mind had broken down at last. Unless he was a wizard it was surely impossible for him to foretell that the weapon used by the murderer would assume such a fantastic form as a key.

Tarleton enjoyed his friend's consternation for a moment, before dissipating it.

"Perhaps you have forgotten what I was telling Craig just now. I have in my library a book containing an account of a crime so similar to this that I was reminded of it almost as soon as I saw the corpse. It was a murder committed in the sixteenth century, if I remember rightly, by an Italian named Tebaldi. In those days keys were very formidable things, and men went about with them hanging from their girdles, as I believe they still do in the East. This Tebaldi had an instrument made in the shape of a key, but hollow, and fitted with a very powerful spring. It shot very fine darts of steel about an inch long. He was able to play with the key at his waist without exciting suspicion, while he was talking with his enemy. He seems to have shot quite a number into him from time to time before he succeeded in killing him. The victim felt pains inside him, just as Caythorpe did, but the doctors failed to find out what was the matter, as they failed in Caythorpe's case. And if they had discovered it, what could they have done? If I had examined Caythorpe when he came to me, and guessed the truth, I couldn't have saved his life. You can't cut a man open to search for a needle."

It did not sound as if the specialist's faculties were very much impaired, after all. Charles put a respectful question.

"Do you think that Lady Eardisley had come across this story, then?"

"I should doubt it. The book I speak of is very scarce, and not likely to be in any library to which she would have access. The only mention of the Tebaldi key I have come across in popular literature was in one of the early numbers of the snippet papers, I cannot be sure which. But that would be something like forty years ago, and Lady Eardisley was not born when it appeared."

"But I thought you meant that this crime had been suggested by the other—that she had had a key made in imitation of Tebaldi's?"

"Quite so. It was not necessary for whoever murdered Caythorpe to have read of the case. The Tebaldi key itself is on exhibition in the Venice Museum, I believe, and its use is probably explained to visitors by the Museum guides."

The inspector looked and felt delighted.

"I see it all," he exclaimed. "She had been to Venice, she remembered the key, and when she made up her mind to kill Caythorpe, she ordered a duplicate to be made for her."

"She—or whoever committed the murder." Tarleton made the correction quietly. "I should advise you to try to find out from her maid or from someone who knows her if she has ever visited Venice. I shall be having a similar inquiry made through the India Office about the Ranee of Khattipur and her suite."

Charles smote his knees. "Then she is the owner of the uncut diamond! Why, I have seen her on the film!"

"Enviably man! You will be interested to hear that I expect to have Her Highness as a patient within the next few days."

The consultant proceeded to give his colleague a brief outline of his own doings since they had met last, dwelling especially on his interview with Mr. Cyril Bunting.

"I am inclined to think that young man is in some danger," he said seriously. "Danger from two quarters possibly. He is in possession of Caythorpe's mining shares, and that Hindu believes that he is in possession of the diamond. In my opinion he is in most danger from the Ranee's man, but he seems more afraid of the man with the black beard. We shall see which is right; but in any case he ought to be under police protection."

"I will see to that at once," the inspector assented eagerly. "Then you think there is something in the story of this man Mendoza being in

London?"

Tarleton's reply was to continue his narrative by relating what he had heard in the Aldwych Hotel. Charles was convinced.

"I have circulated a description of Mendoza already," he said, "but after what you tell me I will have an inquiry made at all the likely hotels as well. Doesn't it strike you, by the way, that the Señora may be a friend of this man's? They are both Mexicans, and it rather looks as if she didn't much want him to be found."

"It has that appearance, certainly," Sir Frank admitted. He seemed a little put out by his colleague's penetration. "But I hope you will keep that idea to yourself. If he is a friend of hers, it will be all the more painful to her to think that she has put the police on his track. I have practically promised that she shan't be called on to give evidence."

Charles perceived that he must walk warily where the beautiful Spaniard was concerned.

"I don't suppose anything turns on it," he said soothingly. "Well, is there anything else?" He was on his feet as he spoke.

"Only this." Tarleton paused to weigh his words carefully. "It is only fair that I should tell you what is in Bunting's mind, as far as I can see it. He is a very conscientious young man, and he shrinks from making a direct accusation without having grounds for it. But his theory of the crime seems to be that these shares which Costello came to London to buy from Caythorpe were originally obtained by force or fraud from Mendoza, and that Mendoza followed the Costellos to Europe in the hope of finding Caythorpe through them, and so having his revenge."

"Yes, I see there may be something in that."

"In addition, Bunting suspects that there was some kind of understanding between Mendoza and Mr. Costello. He won't say what, and perhaps it is not very clear in his mind. I should put it that Costello was somehow aware that the Mexican was dogging him, and guessed his object. His first intention was to warn Caythorpe, and save him. But he wanted the shares very badly, and when Caythorpe refused to part with them, he put his fingers before his eyes, so to speak, and allowed the murder to take place, thinking it would be easy to obtain what he wanted from the girl."

"By Jove, that's pretty deep!" Captain Charles obviously felt it rather too deep for him.

"Mr. Bunting is deeper than he looks. We must put it down to his anxiety on Miss Poppy's account. Still, it may be worth your while to find out if Costello's wedding trip included Venice."

The Captain promised that the matter should receive his attention, and went off, after making some hasty notes in the book which had moved Mrs. Maggitts to ire.

It was an agreeable change for Tarleton to invest himself in his raiment of state for the dinner at the Aldwych Hotel. He had recently been honored with a knightly order by the King of Slavonia, and knowing that foreigners wear such decorations more freely than is customary in England, he fastened the glittering cross on his breast to dazzle the Señora. He had been rather too oblivious of the effect likely to be produced on the staff of the hotel. He had no sooner taken off his light overcoat in the cloakroom below than a sensation ran through the entire building. He found the manager waiting for him in the hall with a book in which he was requested to inscribe his name, and the crowd of loungers divided before him as before the passage of a crowned head.

Even his host's greeting struck a note of respect.

"Say, Sir Frank, I didn't reckon you were such a big bug. We don't run to such buttonholes as that in the States, 'cept the Pilgrims. I'm sorry now I didn't buy that coronet for the Señora."

The Señora herself expressed her admiration more tactfully by a bow that was all but a curtsy, and a movement of the black fan equal to an oriental obeisance. The party included Mr. Cyril Bunting, as the baronet was slightly dismayed to find, but either the etiquette as regards such matters was unknown to that young gentleman, or his usual discretion kept him from any critical manifestation. Poppy was frankly delighted with the Slavonian jewel.

"Oh, may I look, Sir Frank? I've never seen anything like it before, except in the Jewel Room at the Tower."

The blushing knight of Slavonia was compelled to unfasten his trophy and hand it round for inspection, as well as to explain its nature, and the cause that had moved his Slavonian Majesty to bestow it on him.

"The Crown Prince happened to be present on an occasion when a crime was committed which I was called upon to investigate. I was able to keep it out of the papers, and the King was good enough to thank me in this way."

A momentary gloom fell on the company as they were reminded of the similar investigation on which the speaker was engaged now. Tarleton was much tempted to slip his conspicuous ornament into his pocket, but he

perceived that it would be too great a disappointment to the ladies, and manfully restored it to its place.

The Señora was more queenly than ever as she swept into the crowded dining-room, with her exquisite finger tips resting lightly on the great man's arm. The sensation made was prodigious. A buzz ran through the hall, and every knife and fork was laid down, as the diners turned to stare at the distinguished group. Sir Frank was thankful that so many of the guests of the hotel were foreigners, and that no one was present whom he recognized.

The management of the hotel had risen to the occasion. Short of providing silver plates, it had furnished the table as for a State banquet. The band had evidently received special instructions, and the entrance of the party was the signal for an outburst of barbaric music which was possibly meant for the Slavonian national hymn.

Poppy was almost frightened at finding herself in the centre of such a demonstration, and her youthful guardian looked ready to sink through the floor. But the Señora was in her element. She moved and smiled like a prima donna receiving the plaudits of an opera house. As for her husband, the big Irishman beamed with the satisfaction of a successful impresario beholding the triumph of his plans.

All went swimmingly till the close of the repast. By a common understanding no reference was made to the tragedy of the strong room in Poppy's presence. When the tables were cleared a certain number of the diners left their seats to go elsewhere, but the greater proportion kept their places, and Mr. Costello invited his party to do the same, explaining that a broadcasting entertainment was about to commence.

The first item was orchestral, and the Señora seized the opportunity to exchange a whisper with Tarleton.

"Have you any news for me, Sir Frank? Has anything more been discovered about that terrible affair?"

Tarleton looked round him. Poppy and her guardian had their heads together at the other side of a mountainous mass of flowers and ferns. The Señora's husband was wreathing his amiable countenance in cigar smoke with the restful expression of one who has no more to ask of life.

He yielded gracefully. "I hope I shan't distress you. The surgeon in charge of the case tells me he has found two needles in the body."

"Two!" The languishing eyes were lit by surprise and fear.

"Yes. I'm afraid that disposes finally of the theory of accident. The murderer must have made two attempts, one from behind and the other in front."

The Señora shivered. Even her shiver was alluring. It conveyed to her admirer that she derived comfort from his nearness—that a little more would have made her cling to him for comfort.

“But you no longer think the Señor Mendoza had anything to do with it?” she whispered pleadingly. “You believe it was the Indian, the servant of the Princess, is it not?”

“It is too soon for me to believe.” The words were spoken in answer to the Señora’s question, there could be no doubt of that. Otherwise the expressive look and tone of the speaker might have made them mean that it was too soon for him to believe in the Señora’s friendship.

The lady shot a glance at her contented husband before dropping her splendid eyes. The next moment she had unfolded the black fan and made of it a waving curtain between herself and her companion and the cold outer world.

Tarleton drew a little nearer insensibly.

“I am trusting you to say nothing to anyone else,” he murmured.

“As long as you promise to tell me everything, you can depend on me absolutely,” came from the sorceress with a confiding smile.

Her victim was rescued for the time by a sudden change in the programme. The music ceased, and was followed by a brief summary of the day’s events. Silence was imposed on all. Mr. Cyril Bunting’s head became visible again from behind the flower shelter, and the black fan ceased to banish Mr. Costello from his wife’s presence.

Some eloquent words from a great Labor statesman were succeeded by the name of the winner of a sweepstake, and his plans for spending the money. And then thrilled the news:

“The police are now satisfied that the mysterious death of Sir Rowland Caythorpe, whose body was found in a strong room at Drysdale Park, Harlesden, was the work of an assassin. The deceased man is known to have had enemies, some of them moving in high society. The chief suspicion attaches to a man from abroad whose arrest may be expected at any moment.”

CHAPTER XI

THE announcement made a sensation throughout the large dining saloon. In some underground way it had leaked out in the hotel that the girl with the bright red hair at the centre table was the niece of the man whose singular death in a locked strong room had been a feature in the morning's papers, and hundreds of eyes turned curiously to the group sitting in the full glare of the brilliant lights, to mark the reception of this shocking news.

Each of the five was affected differently. Tarleton was the one who took the startling item most coolly. Only a momentary frown betrayed his vexation at a disclosure which could not have been postponed for many hours. Absorbed in watching his fascinating neighbor, he was oblivious to everything but the changes which passed rapidly across her face, from the first quiver of surprise at the mention of the tragedy to the breathless interest deepening into dread with which she drank in what followed, and the look half of relief and half of reproach that she turned on him at the end. The Señora's white hand alighted on his arm, and she was bending towards him with a nervous inquiry in her eloquent eyes, when the whisper on her lips was drowned in a gasp of horror from across the table.

Poppy had staggered to her feet and was gazing desperately round her like a wild thing that finds itself encircled by the hunters. The only part of the announcement that had not come to her as a complete surprise was the mention of her uncle's real name, which Bunting had wisely disclosed to her on the night of his death. The news that the police believed that he had been murdered, and that he had enemies capable of seeking his life, had overwhelmed her, and the final statement that the suspected assassin was a foreigner had left her bewildered with the feeling that she was among people of whom she knew nothing, and could no longer trust.

Her youthful guardian had been too much taken aback himself by the unexpected incident to come to her rescue. The way in which she had recoiled from his side told him that she considered he had deceived her. It was the big Irishman who saved the situation. He had listened to the words of the broadcaster without turning a hair, and his face only showed compassion as he got on his feet, and after exchanging a swift signal with Tarleton, tucked the arm of the distressed girl in his own.

"Let's come out of this, my dear," he said with great gentleness.

He led the way out into the hall, regardless of the inquisitive looks that bombarded them in their passage, and the indignation of those who were

trying to catch some interesting information about the latest revolution in Portugal.

Poppy was a little calmer by the time the party had made their escape from the dining-room. She still felt indignant with Bunting for having left her in ignorance of the truth about her uncle's death, though she was ready to credit him with good intentions. But her confidence in Sir Frank Tarleton was beginning to revive. She could understand that he was under official obligations, and might have felt it his duty to keep silence. She gave him an entreating look as she detached herself from Costello's hold, a look that asked him to tell her whom she could trust.

Tarleton was able to see what was in her mind. He knew that she had heard nothing yet of the man of whom Sir Rowland had gone in mortal fear, and nothing of the uncut diamond found in her uncle's possession, and its Hindu claimant. She had no clue to Caythorpe's murderer except the words of the broadcast item, "a man from abroad." And the only man she did know answering to that description was the one whose guest she found herself, the man whose arm she had just dropped.

Poppy had shown herself a little shy of Costello all along. His bluff heartiness, that natural friendliness which marks the American citizen, secure in the consciousness that he has no earthly superior, was as disconcerting to her as it is apt to be to most who have been brought up in the tradition of class and caste. And Bunting's jealousy of their host had not escaped her notice. The young man had shown more than reserve; he had shown constraint that evening. His innocence unfitted him to play a double part. He had made up his mind that the mine-owner must be dealt with as an adversary, bent on despoiling Poppy of her inheritance in some way or other, and his attitude towards their genial entertainer was that of a faithful dog watching a stranger whom he suspects of designs on his master's property.

With an air of quiet authority the physician left the sympathetic Señora, and placed himself beside the trembling girl.

"We had better go upstairs," he said to Costello. And to Poppy he added in his most fatherly tones, "You must blame me for keeping you in the dark; I wanted to spare you as long as possible. When you have heard what I have to tell you, I hope you will feel that you are in good hands."

Poppy's uneasiness was gradually dispelled by the story told to her when they were back in the private room above. In telling her of Mendoza, Tarleton confined himself to Sir Rowland's own references to him. He said no word of the Señora's having twice seen the man with the black beard, before and since Sir Rowland's death, a reticence for which she thanked him with an expressive turn of her dark eyes. Again he touched as lightly as

possible on the dead man's dealings with the Eardisley coronet and with the Indian gem, leaving Poppy with the belief that her uncle had kept possession of them from conscientious motives. He conveyed to her quite clearly that the man whom the police were hoping to arrest must be either the Mexican or the Hindu, and that the Dowager Countess of Eardisley was the only other person to whom the faintest suspicion attached.

The girl thanked him gratefully. "I often thought my uncle had something on his mind that he didn't want me to know about, but I never dreamed he was in any danger. I put it down to business worries." Her next words showed that she had fixed on the man with the black beard as the true assassin.

"It must have been dreadful for him to know that he had an enemy seeking his life." Her lips tightened, and she clenched her hands. "If he is caught, will he be hanged?"

"If he is arrested and convicted he will, most probably. But if he is a wise man he is on his way back to Mexico by this time."

The Señora drew in her breath. "Oh, do you think so, Señor? Why?"

"Because we have no extradition treaty with Mexico. Once there, he is safe."

Poppy looked indignant. But before she could say anything Mr. Cyril Bunting spoke sharply.

"What about the shares, Sir Frank? Won't he try to get hold of them first?"

Everyone but Tarleton was surprised by the interruption. The Señora questioned Sir Frank with one of her eloquent glances, and Poppy's eyes followed hers. The mine-owner used more forcible language.

"What in the nation are you driving at, young man? If you're going to let any durned dago"—he pulled himself up with a look of apology towards his Spanish wife—"any man that's no business with them walk off with Miss Poppy's belongings, you'll have me to reckon with as well as her."

Tarleton interposed unwillingly. His hand had been forced, as he saw. It was not like Bunting to open his mouth rashly; the solicitor was evidently determined that his ward should know of her inheritance, and should have her eyes opened to Costello's designs on it, or the designs with which he credited the American. The consultant found himself obliged to explain to Poppy that her uncle had left her a fortune in Mexican mining shares, and that Mr. Bunting believed they had been the murderer's object.

The news that she was a considerable heiress made but little impression on the excited girl at the moment. She was far more affected by Bunting's

hint that the murderer's object was not yet achieved.

"Do you mean that this man may make another attempt to steal them? That he may attack someone else? Where are they now?" she demanded breathlessly.

"They are in my custody as Sir Rowland Caythorpe's executor." Bunting's answer was given with a touch of pride.

The American became wrathful.

"Why in thunder didn't you say so before? You think yourself tarnation cute, I suppose, young fellow, but I know something about mines in Mexico, and you don't, and if you want to do your duty by Miss Poppy here you'll let me have a word to say about what's to be done with her property."

But Poppy was in no mood to consider her business interests just then. Her air showed nothing but distress and alarm on another account.

"Then you are in danger—you must be!" she cried out. "If that monster knows you have them, he may be lying in wait for you! Oh, give them up at once! Let Mr. Costello have them, do please!"

The Irishman's face wrinkled in a humorous grin.

"Strikes me this young lady isn't worrying much about my chances of getting a knife into me, as long as you're safe," he remarked to the favored youth.

Even Bunting was obliged to relax his hostility. He hung his head in some confusion, as he muttered, "There's no danger of that kind. The murderer would gain nothing by going for me. The shares are quite safe for the present."

Poppy looked anything but satisfied. She continued to regard her trustee with a flattering anxiety. In her eyes the young solicitor had evidently become a hero, standing guard over her possessions like a knight of old defending a treasure from a dragon. When at length he made a move to go home she followed him to the door of the room with entreaties to take the utmost care of himself. She thanked Costello warmly when he announced his intention of seeing his guest out of the hotel, and extracted a promise from Bunting to telephone to her as soon as he reached his office next day.

Tarleton waited till the young man was out of the room to inform her that the object of her anxiety was under police protection.

"It is better that he shouldn't know it," he cautioned her. "It might worry him, and put him off his work."

The first effect of the disclosure was to increase Poppy's alarm.

"Then you do think that he is in danger!" she cried. "The police think so, or they wouldn't be guarding him."

"I don't think he is in the danger you mean," the Home Office representative answered. "There is not the slightest reason that I can see why this Mendoza should attack him. The only person from whom I think he has anything to fear is the Hindu I have been telling you about. There is just a possibility that he might try to regain his diamond by force. But that danger will be over by this time to-morrow. By then Ram Chundra will have been told that the stone is in other hands."

Poppy and the Señora were both rather mystified. The beautiful Spaniard had scarcely spoken while the girl's affairs were being discussed. She reclined gracefully in the depths of an enormous couch, waving her fan to and fro with the dreamy motion of a swing. Now she roused herself to urge Poppy to go to bed, telling her that she looked fatigued.

"You will have black rings under your eyes in the morning, my sweet girl, unless you go to sleep at once," she said caressingly. "Fie! What will the Señor Bunting say if he sees you a wreck?"

"I don't suppose he would notice it," Poppy said rather ruefully. "He isn't that sort. He only thinks of me as a client. We have never been anything but the merest acquaintances, you see."

But the Señora would not hear of acquaintances. There was no such word in her bright lexicon, it appeared. "You are a cruel girl, or else a very foolish one," she declared. "That poor young man adores your little slippers, an owl could see so much."

Poppy became like the flower whose name she bore. Perhaps she had called Mr. Cyril Bunting an owl too often not to ask herself now whether he was really as blind as she believed or whether his was the only blindness in the case. At all events the Señora's half-malicious raillery accomplished the Señora's end. Her young guest bade them a swift good-night and disappeared.

Instantly the black fan awoke to the fact that its mistress was alone with a Señor, a Señor whose age afforded no guarantee against the allurements of his well-preserved figure and brilliant dress. The fan trembled for the Señora's safety. It fluttered in agitation, it beckoned and warned at the same time. Like a rabbit under the magnetic regard of a stoat, it faltered and failed.

Tarleton approached the couch with the tread of a ravisher rather than a representative of the law.

“Sit down,” pleaded the helpless woman in a tone that seemed to come more from her conscience than her heart.

The daring man placed himself dangerously near, so near that the black fan started to life again, making a faint-hearted effort to wave him further away. The Señora’s eyes fixed themselves on his seriously.

“Sir Frank Tarleton,”—his name had never sounded like that before—“you have not yet told me what you really think. You do not trust me, I find.”

The reproach was altogether personal. It conveyed that the Señora’s curiosity stirred her less than Sir Frank’s coldness. Yet it was clear that a test was being applied. Only the fullest confidence on the man’s part could satisfy the woman that he had really come under her charm. Like the enchanter Merlin in the wood with Vivien, the consultant was being asked to part with his secret as the proof of his sincerity.

Tarleton made a gesture of dismay. He took refuge in his usual resource when under any mental strain. The imperial gift came out of his watch pocket and began to gyrate on its dingy ribbon under the deeply interested gaze of his companion.

It was a duet between the watch and the black fan, a duet—or else a duel.

“I am trying to think of what it is that I have failed to tell you,” the owner of the watch said cautiously. “If there is anything more you would like to know, as long as it is not an official secret— —”

The black fan protested at this point.

“Official! Pah! So it is always with you men, above all you English and Americans. A woman asks you something, you do not wish to please her, and you button yourself up and speak of your duty and your business.”

“But you have not asked me anything yet, Señora. I am waiting to hear what you want me to tell you.” And the watch came to rest for a moment.

The fan did the same. The lovely Mexican raised herself upon the couch.

“Whom is it, then, that you really suspect of this crime? Is it Miladi—I cannot say her name—the one whose tiara was stolen? No? Is it the Indian who has lost his diamond? No? Or is it the man of my country? Yes?”

The questions were flung out one after the other too swiftly for any response beyond what the questioner read, or imagined that she read, in Tarleton’s face. And it was not an easy face to read.

“I can’t answer any of those questions positively just yet. Remember, I have not yet seen one of the three. I only know Mendoza from Mr. Bunting’s

description of him, and that was only at second hand. Neither he nor I know the reason why Sir Rowland Caythorpe feared him so much. It is only a guess of Bunting's that he had robbed him of the shares that Mr. Costello thinks are now so valuable. I have been wondering if you could tell me anything about it. I think I have heard you say that you knew both men at one time."

The black fan had shown some resentment at the evasive way in which the Señora's interrogatories were met. It punished the evader by gliding between him and its mistress, thereby depriving him of the sight of her face. It flickered impatience at the mention of such dull topics as shares and husbands. But it was distinctly excited when the Señora was questioned in her turn. Slowly it sank down till she was again able to hold him with her languishing orbs.

"You are asking me to reopen a chapter in my life which is closed. You understand me . . . closed." The sombre fan fell like funeral shadow on the word. "Alas! You ask me to recall the days when I was young; when it was not a mockery for men to tell me that I was beautiful."

It was imperative for the watch to manifest indignation at this. Tarleton was not the man to suffer such language to pass unproved.

"It is you who are guilty of mockery now, Señora. You know too well that those days are very far from being past. I can't believe they ever will be."

The fan was cheered perceptibly by this assurance. It waved a gracious acknowledgment, and in doing so drew further back, revealing more of the Señora's charms.

"You are not sincere, I know, Señor; still, it is amiable of you to flatter me. Yes, you are right. I knew Arturo Luiz, he called himself in those days. And I knew Felipe Mendoza."

It was not the first time that Sir Frank had heard Mendoza's other name pronounced. It had dropped from Costello earlier in the day. Again he passed it over without remark.

"To tell me that, is to tell me that they were rivals," he insinuated.

The Señora rejected the insinuation, but the black fan accepted it on her behalf. It nodded gently before she began to speak.

"They were rivals in business, yes. Rivals in speculation, rivals in gambling, too. Vera Cruz rang with their wild doings. Felipe was young; Arturo did what he liked with him at first. By degrees they came to hate each other."

The gold watch was dissatisfied with this explanation. It was fidgeting restlessly at the close. Its master ventured another insinuation.

“Sir Rowland, or Luiz, did not spend his whole time in gambling, or in speculation. He told Mr. Bunting the name of a woman he had known in Vera Cruz, a woman whom he remembered very well.”

The Señora’s eyes opened, as though in affright. The fan erected itself for her protection.

“What name?” she breathed.

“Dolores.” The physician’s eyes searched her face keenly as he gave the name, but its effect on the Señora was disappointing. Her momentary agitation passed away, and she inclined her statuesque neck with a sigh.

“So! He remembered me, then, better than I thought. When he came here and found me with my husband, he seemed gloomy rather than pleased.”

“Hadrn’t he some reason?” Sir Frank smiled as he put the question, but it renewed the Señora’s alarm.

“Reason, Señor?” she whispered.

Sir Frank found himself in the mortifying position of having to explain a compliment.

“Surely it was natural for any man who had known you to feel a pang when he found you were happy with another.”

The Señora’s uneasiness subsided somewhat, but she continued to look nervous.

“For the sake of Heaven, Señor, say not a word of this to my husband. His jealousy is inconceivable. If he were ever to suspect that Arturo had admired me my peace would be at an end.”

The warning was calculated to make Tarleton himself nervous. He was sitting considerably closer to the fascinating Spaniard than was necessary to keep up an ordinary conversation, and Mr. Costello might be back at any moment. Indeed he had hardly risen from his chair in the act of vowing secrecy, when the big Irishman came in.

His small, gray eyes twinkled as he turned them from one to the other.

“Where’s Miss Poppy?” he exclaimed. “Seems to me, Sir Frank, you’ve been taking advantage of my trip downstairs to make love to my wife.”

And he laughed an odious husband’s laugh.

CHAPTER XII

THE inquest on Sir Rowland Caythorpe had been fixed for the Monday following the discovery of his death. But Tarleton did not attend it. It was as if he wished to emphasize by his absence from the official inquiry that he had no further concern with the case, except in his private capacity as a friend and protector of the dead man's niece.

The proceedings were conducted by Inspector Charles with a discretion which was apparent to those behind the scenes when they read the ample newspaper reports. From these it appeared that the deceased was an eccentric recluse, who had chosen to drop his title and live under his niece's name for the sake of economy. His dealings with the Eardisley coronet and the other valuables found in the strong room were not represented in the police evidence as initially illegal. The suggestion rather was that Caythorpe had speculated in such curios, buying them from his acquaintances among the impoverished aristocracy, and selling them privately abroad. The case of the Eardisley coronet was treated throughout as an exceptional one, in which the deceased had found himself in a difficult position between his obligations to the Dowager Countess and his duty to respect the law. No reference was made to the great uncut diamond. Charles had evidently taken pains to let nothing come out that could render Tarleton's task more difficult by casting suspicion on the Hindu, and thereby driving him to conceal himself.

Next came the medical evidence, from which Tarleton's name could not well be excluded. The coroner's jury were informed that the great authority on poisons had come out to the house in Drysdale Park in consequence of a fear of poison entertained by the dead man, but that on discovering a puncture in the chest which pointed to death from another cause, he had retired from the case, and a surgeon had been summoned to deal with it.

Sir Michael Craig's evidence was as colorless as he could make it. Not being on the regular staff of the Home Office, and not having much experience in the detection of crime, he showed himself anxious to confine his evidence to the medical aspects of the case, without committing himself to any special opinion as to the probable method or motive of the assassin. He described the finding of the two darts or needles, and attributed the death without hesitation to the one which had lodged in the right auricle of the heart. Answering a question from the coroner, he said that he could not say positively that no other needle was present in the corpse. He had found no

other puncture in the skin, and he had not thought it necessary to extend the dissection after satisfying himself as to the cause of death.

The coroner, who was himself a doctor, asked the witness to describe for the benefit of the jury exactly how the injury had been caused, in his opinion. Sir Michael demurred to this at first, as taking him outside his province; however, he yielded to the coroner's urging so far as to say that he imagined the two darts must have been discharged from an airgun or some similar weapon, one from behind the victim, and one from in front, and with sufficient force to penetrate the clothing and enter the skin immediately. He did not think the murdered man need have felt anything at the time more than a slight prick, which he would be likely to mistake for such a scratch as is sometimes caused by a minute splinter in a coarse woollen fabric. As Tarleton had done, he illustrated the natural action of a man rubbing the spot where he had felt the pain.

The fatal one of the two darts, he considered, had worked its way nearly in a straight line past the right of the breast-bone. It might have taken any time from a day or two up to a week to effect the passage, according to the distance it had penetrated originally. It was probable that death had been accelerated by septic poisoning, due to the rust formed on the steel in the course of its progress through the tissues. Such poisoning, Sir Michael was careful to add, would not give rise to any exterior symptoms capable of detection by the eminent Home Office expert.

The evidence of the Harlesden doctor was little more than a respectful echo of the great surgeon's. The only additional point in it was the account of Sir Rowland Caythorpe's coming to him to have his heart examined. This time it was not necessary for anyone to prompt Doctor Nevillson as to the particular symptoms complained of by his patient. In Tarleton's absence the local doctor ventured to color his former statement considerably. It now appeared that he had paid keen attention to the deceased's description of the tingling and pricking sensations that he felt internally, and had suspected something seriously wrong. Having failed to detect the cause himself he had sent in his patient to the eminent Braidlaw in the hope that he might be more successful. All who heard the evidence were left with the impression that Doctor Nevillson was an extremely shrewd practitioner, and the coroner paid a tribute to his sagacity when he came to charge the jury.

Mr. Cyril Bunting was the next witness put into the box by Inspector Charles. He told his story with characteristic caution, omitting all the personal touches in the narrative he had originally given to Sir Frank Tarleton. All he thought necessary to say on this occasion was that the deceased had employed him to ascertain who was behind the advertisement,

which he produced and read to the court. He repeated Sir Rowland's statement that a Mexican named Mendoza had threatened to take his life. He briefly referred to his discovery that the advertiser was a different person, whom Caythorpe regarded as a good friend. And he wound up by quoting the dead man's emphatic declaration that he believed his enemy to be in London.

Charles did not see any reason for calling on Mr. Costello to give evidence, although the big man was present, following the proceedings with keen ears and eyes. Neither did the inspector say anything about the Señora's private statement that she had twice encountered Mendoza in the street outside the Aldwych Hotel. And the Señora's husband clearly had no desire to betray her confidence.

The case was thus left in a state of considerable uncertainty. The coroner put it to the jury that although the evidence left little doubt that Sir Rowland Caythorpe had been murdered, there was really nothing to show who had committed the crime. The bare statement of the deceased that a certain foreigner had threatened to kill him at some time in the past, unsupported by any proof that the foreigner in question was in the neighborhood when the crime was committed, was not enough to justify them in pointing him out as a murderer. No doubt the police would exert themselves, if they were not doing so already, to find the Mexican, if he was anywhere within reach.

The jury found a verdict in accordance with these directions, of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown. They added a rider recommending Mendoza to the attention of the police in charge of the case.

Thus ran the information supplied to the public. The Fleet Street code of honor is too high to let out anything likely to embarrass the authorities in a serious case, or to facilitate the escape of a criminal. Inspector Charles felt safe in conveying to his friends at the reporters' table that the man with the black beard was not the only person under suspicion, and that sensational developments might be looked for in the course of the next twenty-four hours.

That very morning, in fact, his colleague behind the scenes was engaged in following up the clue supplied by the Keeper of Khattipur. Tarleton had found on his breakfast-table an envelope whose thick paper proclaimed the wealth and dignity of the sender. Moreover, the initials P. L. B. were inscribed across the left-hand corner below the address. The consultant's eye singled it out from his other letters at a glance.

“Blennerhasset,” he said aloud to himself as he picked it up. “That man Howard knows how to pull the strings.”

The sumptuous envelope contained an invitation in the most gratifying terms from the fashionable Court physician, to consult with him in the case of Her Highness the Ranee of Khattipur. Sir Philip professed himself baffled by symptoms new in his experience which he felt certain that his distinguished friend, and only he, could read aright. The note ended with a request that Tarleton would fix an hour for their waiting together on Her Highness.

The medical adviser of the Home Office went at once to the telephone to make the arrangements. Little more than an hour afterwards he was on his way to Stratford Place, where Sir Philip luxuriously resided within easy reach of Mayfair. Privately the specialist in poisons entertained the most profound contempt for Blennerhasset’s medical knowledge, but he was obliged to feel some respect for the talents which had made him the favorite doctor of all the imaginary invalids in the peerage.

Sir Philip’s car, a far more imposing affair than Tarleton’s humble roadster, was standing at the door, and its owner hurried his colleague into it as if he rather shirked the preliminary of going into the case with him.

“I can tell you all that is necessary on the way,” he said, in the strenuous tone of a man whose time is worth a guinea a minute. “There is hardly anything to tell, in fact,” he declared as the car began to move. “I diagnosed the case as one of nervous exhaustion induced by mental strain, and I have administered sedatives, but there is no improvement.”

Tarleton thought this was extremely likely, but he kept his mouth shut. The drive was a short one. The Ranee of Khattipur had taken up her quarters in one of those little family hotels off Piccadilly which are unknown to the plebeian, and are too lacking in modern attractions to please the plutocrat. It was only within the last year or two that Trimmer’s had reluctantly installed a lift. Trimmer’s would have preferred perishing in an earthquake to engaging a band. Trimmer’s was far more particular than the Lord Chamberlain about the character of those whom it received. It tolerated baronets and was friendly as a rule to peers. But its speciality was ancient families, families that had been planted in remote nooks of Wales and Cornwall and Northumberland from time immemorial, and had not yet quite got over the feeling that William the Conqueror was a mushroom adventurer, the sort of man that now rises by means of pills and soap.

Trimmer’s had accepted the Ranee with dignified distrust. It felt distrust for all foreigners; it would have distrusted the Plantagenets, but for that artful move of marrying into the family of King Egbert. But Trimmer’s was,

after all, a business undertaking, and business is but another name for corruption. The Ranee or her agent had overcome the scruples of Trimmer's by engaging the whole of the first floor and part of the second. Trimmer's no longer knew itself. A kitchen had been contrived upstairs, in which turbaned cooks prepared mysterious messes in copper pots which no member of Trimmer's own staff was allowed to touch. Trimmer's found itself in presence of an exclusiveness greater than its own, and Trimmer's was overawed.

The two doctors were received on the first floor by a dignified Hindu speaking perfect English, whom Blennerhasset addressed as Ram Chundra. It was evident that the Ranee's consent had been obtained beforehand to submit herself to the hands of a second physician, but whether because Her Highness was really alarmed about the state of her health, or thought it necessary to seem so in the eyes of Mr. Howard of the India Office, was best known to herself and her domestic minister. The dark eyes of the Hindu rolled their white eyeballs towards Tarleton in a way that suggested suspicion if not downright malevolence. But the consultant had put on a severely professional manner, and his face was like a closed door.

Ram Chundra only waited to learn the name of the new doctor from Sir Philip Blennerhasset and at once went to announce them both at the door of the Ranee's private apartments.

The arrangements for the interview were conducted with due regard to oriental etiquette. The Europeans were of course expected to believe that no man, not of her own family, had ever before been permitted to behold Her Highness unveiled. Accordingly a woman, herself partly veiled, came out to conduct them into the Ranee's presence. Her Highness sat on a divan constructed of piles of rich cushions and shawls against the inner wall of the room, and the two doctors were given seats facing her. Then a little to one side a high screen was interposed, and behind it, where he could hear without seeing his mistress, Ram Chundra, who was needed as interpreter, took his stand.

Tarleton paid little attention to these fastidious preparations. His interest was concentrated on his extraordinary patient. She crouched back in a nest of pillows embroidered in gorgeous colors, wrapped and swathed like a mummy in what appeared to be cloth of gold. When her woman attendant respectfully withdrew the veil from her mistress, her face showed like a mummy's shrivelled mask. It was black with age. The consultant did not know quite enough to judge the years of an oriental; a European who looked like that might have been anything up to a hundred. The motive must have

been powerful indeed that had brought that withered casket of humanity across forbidden oceans to face strange men of alien caste and creed.

The figure made no movement. Only the bleared eyes rose in their shrivelled sockets, and a voice came forth with the sound of a cracked bell.

“Her Highness presents her greetings to Sir Frank Tarleton,” said the invisible interpreter. Ram Chundra had plainly been educated in an English school or college. His grammar and accent were meticulously correct. “Her Highness is willing that he should examine her.”

It appeared that the translator was taking a good deal of liberty with his original. The Ranee’s speech had been much longer than that. Doubtless it had contained compliments to the new doctor which Ram Chundra had sensibly suppressed.

“In that case perhaps we need not detain Sir Philip Blennerhasset,” Tarleton said impersonally. “I think I know all he has to tell me about the trouble Her Highness is suffering from.”

The Home Office adviser had expected his colleague to welcome the chance of escape. He had met Blennerhasset before under rather similar conditions, and had found the fashionable physician more than anxious to wash his hands of any association with a possible scandal. But Tarleton had overlooked the distinction between scandal at home and abroad. It by no means suited Sir Philip’s book to be mixed up in troubles that might make him disliked by his aristocratic connection, but he foresaw popularity at the dinner-tables of the season for the man who had a story to tell about the Ranee of Khattipur. He surprised his colleague by taking out his watch and putting it back again with an expression of content.

“I have half an hour to spare. I kept time for this consultation, as I am very anxious that Her Highness should benefit by our joint advice. Pray do what you think necessary.”

Tarleton was fairly cornered, his only consolation being that if anyone was to blame it was the assistant secretary of the India Office, who ought to have stipulated for a private interview between him and the patient. While he was putting perfunctory questions through the interpreter as to her appetite and power to sleep, his brain was hard at work on the problem of how to introduce the subject of the great sacred gem at that moment reposing in his pocket.

At length he turned to the expectant Blennerhasset.

“I don’t find any symptoms of physical disease. The patient’s condition is what I should expect in one of her apparent age.”

The other nodded. "Your diagnosis agrees with mine. I consider Her Highness is suffering from a purely nervous disorder."

Both observations were repeated in Hindustani by the man behind the screen. At the first the Ranee's eyes gleamed anxiously, at the second they grew dull again.

Tarleton rejected his colleague's varnishing phrase.

"I can't see anything amounting to disorder of the nervous system. In my opinion the patient has nothing the matter with her in a medical sense. She is worried and anxious, that is all."

The interpreter took a little time to convey this blunt pronouncement to the Indian princess, probably softening it by the way. The withered head raised itself with a sharp movement, and the eyes darted a venomous glance at the uncourtly doctor.

"No doubt Her Highness has many causes for anxiety in her responsible position," Sir Philip put in smoothly. "Sooner or later her nerves are bound to feel the strain."

"Medical science has no remedy for whatever the princess is suffering from, that's my point," Tarleton insisted. "It's a case of faith-healing, not drugs."

"Faith . . . healing!" The Court physician prolonged the words with a disapproval worthy of a man whose own practice was substantially that of a faith-healer licensed by the College of Physicians. "I confess you astonish me, Sir Frank."

But it struck Sir Frank that neither the patient nor the invisible Ram Chundra shared his colleague's indignation. The interpreter's voice sounded a note of interest, and the crouching mummy among the pillows had listened eagerly.

"Yes," the consultant pursued, keeping his eyes fixed on the shrivelled old face, "it would be better if the Ranee possessed some amulet in whose virtue she had faith. Is there no sacred image, no magical stone, in the treasury of Khattipur?"

This time there could be no mistaking the excitement of both servant and mistress. Ram Chundra spoke fast, and the Ranee's eyes lit up with expectation as he finished. The cracked voice was heard again; it seemed to repeat the same words more than once with ever-increasing vehemence.

"The Ranee offers many compliments to the doctor with the magical watch," came from behind the screen. Tarleton had yielded to his inveterate habit unconsciously, and the Ranee had no doubt mistaken his favorite plaything for a talismanic charm. He pocketed it with a blush, at the same

time assuring himself by a touch that the hidden diamond was still secure. “She says she is distressed just now by the loss of such a jewel as he has described. It is called the Keeper of Khattipur, and it has protected her from evil till now. She would give very much to regain it.”

Sir Philip Blennerhasset looked keenly from his colleague to his patient and back again. He no longer doubted Tarleton’s medical orthodoxy. He was quite shrewd enough to grasp that the object called the Keeper of Khattipur had something to do with the powerful pressure that had been brought to bear on him to introduce Sir Frank into the Ranee’s presence, and he thirsted to hear more.

Tarleton’s tone deepened to sympathy. “It is evident, I think, that this loss has been preying on the patient’s mind. The best cure would be to help her to regain her jewel. Ask Her Highness if she is willing to describe it, and to tell us in what circumstances it was lost.”

Ram Chundra was plainly prepared for those questions. He spoke a few words in Hindustani to his mistress, and then answered eagerly in English.

“I can tell you everything you wish to know, Excellency.”

CHAPTER XIII

IT was almost painful to watch the strained expression on the ancient woman's parched face as she listened to the voice of her unseen spokesman pouring out a tale of which she could understand no word. She watched Tarleton's face exclusively, evidently having dismissed Blennerhasset from her attention as the man of straw he was. And she watched it desperately, as if her very life hung on the impression being made on him.

Ram Chundra's tale came pat, too pat not to reveal itself to a man of Tarleton's experience as one that had been carefully thought out in advance.

"Her Highness the Ranee brought the Keeper with her to this country, because she feared to travel without its protection. She was breaking the law by crossing the black water, and the priests warned her that the God Vishnu would be angry, and punish her. His anger was indeed terrible; never in her life had the Ranee suffered such pains as she suffered on board the steamer." There was a note of respectful sympathy in the interpreter's voice, as though he himself had not altogether escaped the sea-god's wrath.

"When Her Highness reached this country——" Ram Chundra was going on, when the consultant interrupted him.

"It is desirable that I should know how long this illness lasted. Where did the Ranee leave the steamer?"

"She left it the first moment that it was possible for her to continue the journey by land." There was surprise in the Hindu's voice, but no note of fear so far. "That was at Brindisi."

"Quite so. After that she came by train. Did she stop anywhere on the way?"

Ram Chundra was distinctly puzzled, as much so as the listening Blennerhasset.

"Her Highness stopped when the train stopped. Her carriage was sometimes taken off one train and attached to another."

"That would be so, naturally. I meant, did the Ranee stay and rest anywhere? There are many attractive places in Italy—Rome, Florence, Venice."

The Hindu answered with decision. His manner betrayed no uneasiness.

"No, she remained nowhere longer than the people of the railway compelled her to wait."

The evidence seemed to be conclusive on one point. If the Hindu had been the author of Sir Rowland Caythorpe's death, he could scarcely have gained his inspiration from a visit to the Venice museum.

"Proceed," Tarleton said curtly.

"Soon after reaching London, Her Highness paid a visit to Her Gracious Majesty the Empress. Also she received visits from many English ladies of great rank. All of them wore jewels which had been cut and polished so that they shone with a dazzling light. Her Highness was much struck by the difference between all the other diamonds she saw and her own. Stones that could not be compared with the sacred Keeper for size yet appeared far more splendid. In consequence Her Highness was tempted to have the Keeper made beautiful in the same way."

The expert saw at once what was coming. It was at least an ingenious and plausible story, if it was not the true one. Whether it was likely to impose on Mr. Howard of the India Office was another question, in which Tarleton was not concerned. The Ranee saw herself in danger of being deprived of the custody of the great diamond, on the ground that she had attempted to sell a State jewel without the consent of the Indian Government. Her defence was to be that she had merely parted with it for the purpose of having it cut.

The interpreter behind the screen went on to elaborate his version of the affair. At the command of his mistress he had gone to the Anglo-Indian Club to find someone to whom the task of dealing with the sacred diamond could be safely entrusted. There he had met Sir Rowland Caythorpe, a man of undoubted rank and position, apparently popular and on particularly friendly terms with the oriental members of the Club. Sir Rowland had shown great interest, and had offered himself to take charge of the stone and watch over the process of cutting.

"Did he tell you that the diamond-cutting industry is almost confined to two places abroad, Amsterdam and Antwerp?" Tarleton asked at this point.

The Hindu shook his head. "He told me nothing. I did not know. I thought it was to be done in London."

There were many other questions that the expert was tempted to put, but after all it was not his business to test the truth of the Hindu's story as regards the dealing with the diamond. That task might be left to the India Office. The Home Office was only concerned with the personal relations between Ram Chundra and the murdered man.

It was a difficult process to examine a witness to obtain evidence of his own guilt, and it was rendered doubly difficult by the presence of a screen

between the witness and the examiner. There was no chance of reading in the Hindu's face any of those signs of confusion or dismay that tell the questioner when a question has gone home.

"Very well. You entrusted the diamond to this man Caythorpe to be cut?"

"No, no!" The voice from behind the screen was a little too eager. The note of anxiety in it reached the ears of the venerable relic of womanhood on the divan. She raised her wizened face, and spoke swiftly and sharply in her own language.

Ram Chundra answered with deep respect. Then he took to English again.

"The Ranee wants to know what you are asking. She thinks you have it in your power to obtain the Keeper for her. In her ignorance of English ways and customs she wishes me to offer you a large sum of money if you succeed."

The Home Office adviser turned to his medical colleague with a smile.

"It rather looks as if my diagnosis was correct, after all. It is this diamond that is on the old lady's mind. If she recovers it she won't be in any more need of medicine."

Blennerhasset found himself in an awkward situation. The Ranee of Khattipur had pretended that her sole object in coming to England had been to have the benefit of his advice, and he had pretended to believe her. It was pretty evident now, even to him, that the lost diamond was at the bottom of the whole affair. But the Court physician had some practice in dealing with awkward situations. The official version, as it might be termed, sprang to his lips quite naturally.

"I am glad to hear you say that," he said in a tone of heartfelt satisfaction. "It relieves my fears. My treatment must have been more successful than I thought if Her Highness is now entirely well again, in your opinion."

"My opinion is that you are an extremely clever man, Blennerhasset," was the ambiguous response.

Sir Philip hastily referred to his watch. "My time is up, I see. Well, I must be going. Can I drop you anywhere?"

Tarleton declined the offer. "I think I will stay here a little longer, with the Ranee's permission," he said to the man behind the screen. "I may be of some assistance in recovering the diamond, if you will answer a few questions."

As soon as his colleague had taken leave, the medical adviser to the Home Secretary became business-like.

“Let us drop this pretence,” he said sharply. “The Ranee is no more ill than I am. Ask her to put on her veil, and come out yourself from behind that screen.”

A rapid dialogue in Hindustani had an instant effect. The wizened form among the cushions straightened itself up with a glance at Tarleton which betrayed fear as well as respect. A withered hand like a claw raised the veil an inch or two for form’s sake, apparently, and Ram Chundra stepped into sight. He brought forward a chair for the doctor, and the female attendant hastened to fetch light refreshments in the form of sherbet, sweetmeats and an elaborate arrangement in the nature of a hookah. The hookah was furnished with two tubes with an amber mouthpiece, one of which the Ranee placed between her own blackened lips. After inhaling and exhaling the first mouthful of smoke, she ordered by a gesture that the other tube should be offered to the honored guest. Short of bestowing her hand in marriage on him, or adopting him as her son, the sovereign of Khattipur could hardly have gone further in the way of declaring her sentiments.

Sir Frank was really touched. The sight of the aged creature, dragged out of her seclusion, and forcing herself to violate all the traditions and taboos of her race and religion was a pathetic one. Perhaps he was a little flattered at the same time. He made up his mind then and there that Her Highness should have back her jewel if it could be done.

“Now,” he said to the Hindu, who was standing between them in an attitude of profound submission, “tell me how you came to place the diamond in that man’s hands. I found it myself in his strong room.”

The Hindu started, and swiftly translated the last statement to his mistress, who fixed a longing eye on the doctor.

“Excellency, he persuaded me to let him have it to show to one of those who cut diamonds, so he said. Her Highness the Ranee desired to know what it would cost to have the Keeper embellished.”

Tarleton frowned. “You had better stick to the truth, sir. Tell your mistress that I am perfectly sure she brought this stone to London for the purpose of selling it, I have no doubt for very good reasons. Say that I wish to play the part of a friend, and to have the diamond restored to her, and I invite her to give me her full confidence.”

A further interchange in Hindustani was ended by an imperative gesture on the part of the royal mummy.

“Her Highness thanks you from her heart, Excellency. She requests you to consider her as your mother. She orders me to tell you the exact truth. She wished to sell the Keeper because the Government of the great White

Emperor will not permit her to tax her people as formerly, and consequently she is extremely poor. She found herself unable to procure a husband for her grandson's daughter on that account."

"I can quite believe that. Go on."

"Sir Rowland Caythorpe was extremely sympathetic. He professed sorrow at the Ranee's distress, and he offered to find a purchaser for the diamond. He said he was not rich enough to buy it himself, but he knew of a rich American so enormously rich that he could buy the entire State of Khattipur if the Emperor's Government allowed it to be sold to him."

"Well, that might have been true, but it is more likely that he meant to keep it himself, and trust to the Ranee's being afraid to do anything for fear of the Indian Government."

The Hindu showed his white teeth in a smile of applause.

"Excellency, that was exactly what he did. After he had obtained the stone, he made excuses to me day after day. The rich American was ill; he was having the stone examined by an expert; he had offered a price which Sir Rowland had refused to accept; finally he had been obliged to go back to America by his business affairs, and he had taken the Keeper with him. I knew that every word was a lie."

"Quite so. You found out where he lived and went there to see what you could do with him."

The whites of Ram Chundra's eyes revealed themselves in surprise, possibly in fear.

"His Excellency knows everything. Truly he is a wonderful man!"

An impatient gesture from the keenly attentive figure on the divan compelled the interpreter to turn to her at this point, and translate the gist of what had passed before he proceeded.

"It is true that I went to his house. I was terrified by what I saw. He lived all by himself in a place hidden among dark trees. His only attendant appeared to be a witch. Had I known what his abode was like I should never have had any dealings with him."

The Hindu shuddered, or seemed to shudder, as he recalled the scene. Perhaps he really had been frightened by the lonely house and the unsightly visage of its guardian. In any case he was a skillful actor.

"Well? He gave you no satisfaction, I suppose?"

"He gave me only the same lies. The rich American had not yet reached New York. He expected to hear from him as soon as he had time to write."

Ram Chundra's face worked with anger as he spoke. The physician thought the moment had come to sound him more directly.

"I can understand your feelings. By trusting this man you had deprived the Ranee of an immense treasure. You must have felt that either he or you deserved to die."

The Ranee's minister did not even raise his hands in protest. On the contrary he bent his head submissively.

"I acknowledge it. I made the offer to Her Highness to take my life or his, according to her commands."

In obedience to another peremptory sign he turned to the work of translation again, leaving Tarleton fairly at a loss for once. Either he was on the verge of receiving a most amazing confession, or else the Hindu must be relieved from all suspicion forthwith. A man who had frankly declared himself willing to commit a murder if ordered would hardly boggle over admitting that he had obeyed the order when given.

In a minute Ram Chundra was facing his questioner with a more cheerful expression than before.

"Her Highness the Ranee has bidden me to tell you everything. She refused to accept my life or the life of the robber. She commanded me instead to steal the Keeper from him."

This looked like candor. It also looked like common sense. The death of Caythorpe would have been a poor satisfaction to the Indian princess if it had brought her no nearer to the recovery of her jewel; and the event had actually shown that such was the case. Meanwhile, a whole field of new possibilities had been brought before Tarleton's mind by Ram Chundra's naïve revelation of the Ranee's plan. He could scarcely refrain from smiling as he asked, "Are you a skillful thief?"

The Hindu shook his head with the modesty of one disclaiming a status to which he is not technically entitled.

"I am not a thief at all, Excellency. I am simply a juggler. The Ranee did not believe that I should be able to recover the Keeper by violence. She hoped that I might find where he kept it, and take it without his knowledge."

Instinctively Sir Frank's fingers stole for the second time to the waistcoat pocket in which the silver box was concealed. He was relieved to feel that it was still in its place. Nevertheless, he took an early opportunity of shifting his chair a little further from his candid *vis-à-vis*.

The position as it was now disclosed to him was one that had presented itself more than once in the course of the last day or two as an alternative explanation of some of the most puzzling incidents in the case, particularly

in connection with the mysterious figure of the Mexican, Mendoza. It was remarkable that both the Costellos in describing this man to him, and Caythorpe in describing him to the young solicitor, had characterized him as a man with a black beard. The beard, in fact, was practically the single feature by which they had pointed him out. And the Señora's evidence had been clear to the effect that he was still wearing it. This was the very point that had told most in his favor. A beard is the easiest mark of identity to get rid of, and it had seemed to the last degree improbable that the Mexican should not have taken the simple precaution of shaving it off, if he had really come to London with the intention of approaching an enemy who knew and remembered him well. It was these considerations that had led Tarleton to take the man with the black beard so lightly, and had equally led Inspector Charles to put him forward as a stalking horse before the coroner's jury at the inquest. Neither of them at heart believed that he had anything to do with the crime.

But if a beard is the easiest of features to shed, it is also the easiest to put on by way of disguise. The Hindu now face to face with the expert was clean shaven, and it was evident that a covering of black hair over the lower part of his face would transform him beyond recognition, by any eye not on the lookout for such a device. Then there was this further point in the case, that both the Indian and the Mexican were swarthy by nature; and the difference in the shade of their skins, partly concealed by the beard, might very well pass unnoticed in a hasty glance from some distance away. The Señora had spoken positively to having seen her fellow-countryman twice, but on both occasions it was in a crowd, and she might very well have caught only a side glimpse of a dark face with a beard. It was at least possible that she had been deceived. The Ranee's agent might very well have been prowling round the Aldwych Hotel if he had been spying on Sir Rowland Caythorpe, and had discovered his intimacy with Costello. The mine-owner was just the man to appear to Ram Chundra in the light of a probable purchaser of the great diamond.

Tarleton proceeded to put a series of questions to the Hindu based on this hypothesis. But he did not succeed in obtaining the confirmation he sought. Either the Ranee's minister perceived some danger to himself in the interrogation, or else he or his mistress thought the interview had lasted long enough. He denied that he had disguised himself in any way, and seemed to resent the suggestion. He professed entire ignorance of Mr. Costello, and the whereabouts of his hotel. The Ranee herself appeared to be equally bored or offended by the examination. She ceased to interrupt by demands for the interpretation of what was being said, and the interpreter himself ceased to

address her of his own accord. At last he took refuge in what, on the part of such a man, amounted to rudeness.

He said, "I ask you to pardon me, Excellency, for telling you that Her Highness the Ranee is very old, and is accustomed to sleep at this hour. Her servant sees that she is in need of repose."

Sir Frank's natural chivalry was instantly stirred. He sprang to his feet, feeling himself to blame as a medical man and a gentleman at the same time. His apologies were swiftly translated to the Ranee, who received them with extreme graciousness. She raised herself into a sitting posture, and even extended her tiny hand. When her visitor bent over it, uncertain whether his kissing it was expected as a courtesy or would be resented as an unpardonable outrage, the venerable dame astonished him by seizing his own hand and shaking it with English freedom, and with the heartiest good will. His ears tingled with the blessings and praises that filtered fast through the interpreter, the least of which implied that he was dearer to the Ranee's heart than the great-granddaughter for whose benefit she had crossed the sea.

The kind-hearted consultant came out of the presence firmly resolved that the ancient relic of humanity should have her treasure restored to her, if he had to brave the wrath of every official of the Indian Government. While he was waiting for the hotel lift he took out the silver box to give its precious contents an exultant glance.

But the Ranee had anticipated his benevolent purpose. The box was empty.

CHAPTER XIV

THE first momentary burst of dismay was no sooner past than Tarleton found himself laughing in the face of the astonished lift-boy.

He was the last man to bear malice for the trick played on him by the Ranee's minister, no doubt with her knowledge and approval. After all, Her Highness had only taken him at his word in effecting the restoration of her property to herself. It was not difficult to follow in imagination all that had taken place. Ram Chundra had evidently spoken the simple truth in describing himself as a juggler, one of the renowned caste whose skill has so long astonished and baffled Europeans. In that character it seemed that he must at some time have attracted the notice and favor of the princess; and his knowledge of English had pointed him out as a fitting agent in the secret disposal of the State diamond. Both mistress and man had been alive to the fact that the doctor's visit was not being made for any medical reason, and had been quite shrewd enough to connect it with the discovery of the lost jewel in the possession of its murdered embezzler. From the moment of Tarleton's coming into the room probably the keen eyes of the juggler had been on the alert for any sign that he carried the Keeper of Khattipur on his person.

Its whereabouts had clearly been indicated to Ram Chundra by an instinctive movement of which the doctor himself had been unconscious at the time, although it was easy enough for him to perceive that he had betrayed himself in some such way. The Hindu had ample opportunity to consult with his mistress in their own language while pretending to interpret between her and the English visitors. The introduction of the hookah, in all probability, had been an ingenious device for enabling him to carry out his purpose. While Tarleton's hands were busy with the tube, and his attention was absorbed in the arduous task of inhalation, the Hindu's deft fingers had found their way to his pocket, taken out the box at the moment of his bending forward, emptied it in less than an instant, and replaced it before he had straightened himself up again. Such a feat would scarcely rank as an extraordinary one in the eyes of an English pickpocket; it would be child's play for an adept in the jugglery of the East.

The representative of the Home Office felt more inclined to blame himself than anybody else, for having put a temptation within the Oriental's reach which he could no more be expected to resist than a habitual toper to refrain from helping himself from an open bottle. The Ranee's expressions

of gratitude had been so profuse as to suggest that in her belief the doctor had deliberately lent himself to the trick. It was a consoling thought in the circumstances.

On full consideration Tarleton decided to let the stone remain where it was for the present. The time for a reckoning with Ram Chundra had not yet arrived. When it did the India Office would have to be told the story, and it would be for Howard to take what steps he thought fit. Very likely the purpose of the Indian Government had been served already. It did not seem probable that the Ranee of Khattipur would venture on another attempt to dispose of her treasure in secret.

Meanwhile, the problem of the murder was little nearer solution. The evidence was against the Hindu's having been in Venice, and consequently against his having borrowed the idea of the key. But a man of his training and resource would not stand in need of suggestions as to the means of effecting such a crime. The scales were pretty evenly balanced as far as he was concerned. However, it was time to follow up a different clue.

Sir Frank Tarleton had friends in more than one Government Department beside his own. During his lunch he had time to master the report of the inquest on Sir Rowland Caythorpe in one of those evening papers which turn day into night by their appearance in the forenoon. As soon as he had finished he made his way to the Foreign Office and sent up his name to a gentleman whose nominal position on the staff was that of Chief Clerk of the Cipher Office. The task of deciphering telegrams from our embassies and legations abroad did not take up his whole time, it appeared; at all events, there were no signs of his being engaged on it when the caller was conducted into his private room.

"I have come to ask you a personal favor," Tarleton explained to him with an air of candor which brought a sharp look of intelligence into his face. "I want you to obtain some information for me about some friends I have lately made. Not officially, you understand—just to gratify my curiosity."

The Chief Clerk of the Cipher Office smiled patiently, the kind of smile that has to be cultivated in that particular branch of the service, and took up a pen.

"They are a man named Costello and his wife. They are on a wedding trip to Europe just now, but I believe their house is in Vera Cruz."

The Chief Clerk noted down the names "Costello" and "Vera Cruz" on a memorandum slip in an absent manner, and remarked, "I have a very good man out there."

"The man is an Irish-American, I fancy, but he seems to have been settled in Mexico for a good many years, engaged in mining, or company promoting in connection with mines. His wife is a very beautiful Spanish Mexican."

The Chief Clerk frowned. Feminine beauty meant only one thing in his branch of the service. It meant feminine wiles.

"I should like a little information about their past life in Mexico, and about their recent marriage. Costello was formerly in partnership with a man who was known out there as Arthur Lewis or Arturo Luiz. His real name was Sir Rowland Caythorpe."

The Chief Clerk's eyebrows just moved as he wrote "Lewis" or "Luiz." He remarked casually, "A very ingenious murder. I shall be interested to read the report of the inquest."

"You won't see Costello's name in it," Tarleton said quickly. "But you will see the name of another man, a Mexican with whom Caythorpe had some dealings at one time—Felipe Mendoza."

The consultant watched his friend closely as he noted this additional name. Then he asked, "If it's a fair question, have you heard from Scotland Yard about him?"

The Chief Clerk shook his head. "It's not a fair question—but I haven't."

The medical adviser of the Home Office looked pleased.

"Well, I had better tell you how the case stands." And he briefly stated the circumstances, not omitting the evidence so reluctantly given by the Señora as to Mendoza's presence in London. The Chief Clerk listened in silence, only scribbling a word from time to time. When Tarleton had finished he spoke without raising his head, as if reading aloud from his notes.

"I am to ascertain if Mendoza has gone to Europe, and if so whether he followed after the Costellos or came direct to London. I am to find if the story of Caythorpe's shares having risen in value is true, and what their real value now is; whether they were the real object of Costello's visit to Europe, and that object was known, or likely to be known, to Mendoza. Anything more?"

"I am rather interested in the old friendship between Caythorpe and the Señora." Tarleton looked a little ashamed of his curiosity on this delicate subject. "And also in her friendship or acquaintance with Mendoza. I should like to know if either or both of them were at one time regarded as rivals for her hand. And I am a little curious about Costello, as well, in that connection. There may have been some jealousy between all three men.

Does Costello really dislike Mendoza as much as he appears to do; and if so, why? By the way, it may help you in finding out whether Costello's journey to Europe was really a wedding trip, or only a pretext, to ascertain if he has only just been married."

The Chief Clerk of the Cipher Office regarded his friend with compassion. He had the utmost respect for Sir Frank as an authority on poisons, but any weakness for the fair sex was fatal to usefulness in his own department.

"You are asking me to compile a romance for you, aren't you?" he said resignedly. "Well, I will do my best."

"Unofficially," Tarleton reminded him.

"Unofficially, of course. The late Sir Rowland doesn't seem to have been a great loss to society."

The two representatives of government shook hands and parted, like two Roman augurs parting in the Forum after having taken part in the solemn inspection of the entrails of a sacrificial steer.

The mystery in which Tarleton seemed bent on concealing his investigations was to be threatened with exposure from a quarter which he had indicated some time before. He had scarcely returned to Montagu Street when he was summoned to the telephone by an urgent appeal from Mr. Cyril Bunting.

The young solicitor showed himself to be in a state of acute distress. He first apologized to Sir Frank for the liberty he was taking, and then informed him that the late Sir Rowland Caythorpe's heir was at that moment in his office. The Reverend Sir Lionel Caythorpe, as he was named, had deemed it his duty to come up to London to be present at the inquest on his late kinsman; he had introduced himself to Bunting at the close of the proceedings, and had attended the funeral, which took place immediately afterwards, in his company. From the cemetery he had followed the solicitor to his office to inquire into the situation, with which he was very far from satisfied, as was pretty evident to Tarleton from the young man's guarded language. The limited accommodation of the office reduced Mr. Bunting to the necessity of using his telephone in the hearing of his caller, so that he was speaking under difficulties. The sum and substance of what he had to say was that he would esteem it as a very great favor if Sir Frank would allow him to bring the new baronet round with him for a joint consultation.

Tarleton had foreseen from the first that the clergyman might prove an awkward factor in the situation. He was clearly within his rights in wanting

to know what was being done to bring his nephew's murderer to justice, and he was no less entitled to interest himself in the situation of his great-niece. The will which constituted a young man of twenty-four her trustee and guardian was, to say the least, an unusual one; and it rather looked as if Bunting had now discovered that he himself could be an object of suspicion.

To the solicitor's great relief, Sir Frank gave his prompt consent to receive the two as requested, and he had not long to wait before a taxi brought them to the door.

It did not take more than a glance to show the shrewd physician that Sir Lionel was a good deal less formidable than he had feared. The new baronet's nervous manner showed that he was ill at ease in the company in which he found himself. Tall and white-haired, with the bewildered look of a sheep which has lost its way on the mountain side, and unexpectedly found itself entering a wolf's cave, the venerable gentleman evidently regarded Mr. Bunting with the utmost distrust, as an unscrupulous legal trickster whose dark designs it was his painful duty to drag to light and frustrate. It was no less clear that Tarleton himself was under some suspicion as a confederate. The unfortunate Bunting looked thoroughly conscience-stricken, as though he had already abandoned all hope of clearing his character. Tarleton endeavored to keep up the brave air of an innocent man.

"It's very good of you to let me see you, Sir Frank," Sir Lionel began with formality. "I trust you will see how I am placed. I have held no communication with my late nephew for many years, owing to my disapproval of his way of life, but I was his nearest kinsman, and so far as I know I am the nearest living relation to his niece—Miss Lowless. As such I naturally feel bound to befriend her, and to offer her a home under my roof."

"I felt sure you would do that. I told Mr. Bunting so," the consultant said pleasantly.

The old clergyman looked greatly surprised.

"I am extremely glad you think as I do," he said. "It has come to me as a shock to learn that the late Sir Rowland has left a will by which my great-niece is placed under the guardianship of a stranger, a young man not many years older than she is. Mr. Bunting tells me that he drew the will himself!"

He turned and glared at the youthful guardian as at one who blushes at no crime.

"A very eccentric proceeding," Tarleton assented gravely.

Sir Lionel's doubts of the physician began to melt away.

"I doubt if it is legal," he pronounced. "I intend to consult my own solicitor as soon as possible. I consider I ought to have the custody of my

young relative till she comes of age.”

“Or marries,” Tarleton added in the same tone of assent.

The great-uncle started. He glanced apprehensively at the unhappy guardian, as if a new light had broken on his mind. Up to now, apparently, his worst fears had only pointed to something like embezzlement as the lawyer’s nefarious purpose, but now he clearly envisaged a yet more daring and unscrupulous plot.

He breathed with difficulty.

“And she is an heiress!” he gasped. “At least I am told so. And therefore in double need of protection.”

“Surely Mr. Bunting has made no objection to his ward’s accepting your kind offer?” The doctor’s look at his young friend was almost as severe as Sir Lionel’s.

The old gentleman winced at the “ward.”

“His opinion seems to be that the young lady should be given a free choice,” he said indignantly. “At the present moment I hear she is staying in a London hotel”—his tone conveyed that all London hotels were of one character, and that such as to render them very dangerous resorts for a well-brought-up girl—“with two foreigners”—this was a still graver count in the indictment—“of whom scarcely anything is known.”

This was a blow for Tarleton to face. “I’m afraid I am to blame for that,” he confessed manfully. “Sir Rowland himself described them to me as old friends of his, and I thought the poor girl would be better with them than alone in a house with a corpse and the police in possession. I fancy Mr. Bunting feels as you do about it.”

But the venerable clergyman was not to be softened where Bunting was concerned. His face indicated that so profound a schemer must have evil and interested motives for whatever attitude he assumed.

“I shall make it my duty to call at the hotel,” he announced with the firmness of a Daniel on his way to the lions’ den. “It would not surprise me to find that they were Roman Catholics.”

After that there was no more to be said. It was plain that Poppy’s rescue from her perilous situation was a matter of urgent necessity. Perhaps Tarleton had motives of his own for wanting to pay another visit to the Aldwych Hotel. He proposed to escort Sir Lionel thither, and the good old man thankfully accepted his protection. He brightened up visibly when the wretched Bunting was dismissed for the time to his sinister pursuits elsewhere.

They were fortunate enough to find the two ladies at home. The meeting passed off quite peaceably. The glories of the Aldwych Hotel had made their due impression on the aged recluse from Cumberland, who had been drawn, as was almost inevitable in the case of such a man, to take up his quarters in a temperance hotel of the worst possible reputation, hard by the Euston terminus. The gorgeously clad dames and their prosperous-looking husbands who crowded the entrance lounge of the American's resort could not all be professional crooks, even if they were all heathens. The liveries of the staff inspired confidence. The hall porter's manner was that of a bishop receiving a very young curate. Sir Lionel breathed more easily as he entered the lift. He no longer suspected that his niece had been trepanned from sordid motives. He was prepared to find in the Señora a Cleopatra perhaps, but not quite a Jezebel.

Poppy's greeting of her new-found uncle went straight to his heart. She seemed to take him in, with all his outward oddities and his underlying goodness, at one swift glance, and love him on the spot. In a moment she was kissing him as trustfully as if she had known him all her life. The old man's eyes beamed with pleasure and pride. He looked ready to face any enemy on her behalf.

His last doubts were dispelled by the Señora. With what appeared the most heartless indifference, she neglected Tarleton altogether in favor of the newcomer. While her lips confined themselves to the language of courtesy and gracious compliment, her eloquent eyes all but confessed her weak yearning to be a niece with a niece's privileges. Failing that, she seemed grateful for those of a handmaiden. She pressed Sir Lionel into the easy chair next to herself—Tarleton's chair—rang for tea, and when it came offered the most tempting delicacies to Poppy's uncle with a tender solicitude that left Poppy herself far behind.

Poor Sir Frank must have yielded to despair if he had not been comforted in time by the black fan. That wonderful agent refused to imitate the fickleness of its mistress. It coyly signalled to him, as it were, behind his rival's back. It conveyed to him by a hundred subtle movements that the scene at which he was looking on was a mere comedy played only for Poppy's benefit. The Señora's sentiments, it assured him, were unchanged. She was secretly impatient to be rid of both uncle and niece, and alone once more with her dear Sir Frank.

As far as lay in its power the black fan did indeed banish the intruders. It seemed to draw a shifting curtain between them on one side and its mistress and the true object of her regard on the other. It might have been an accident that the Señora's ivory fingers lightly touched his as she handed him his

second cup of tea, but, if so, it was a consoling one. The fingers had made no such slip in offering good things to his rival. If the case had been tried in one of the old Provençal Courts of Love the judgment must have been that Tarleton was the favorite.

Unfortunately the powers of the black fan stopped short at excluding voices, and the old clergyman's conscience now bade him remember the business which had brought him there.

"I hope I shan't distress you, my dear," he said to Poppy, "by referring to the unhappy circumstances in which we meet. I decided to come up to London as soon as I read the news of your unfortunate uncle's death in the paper, expecting to find you alone and unprovided for, and meaning to offer you a home."

Poppy gave a grateful look. The Señora's expression was enigmatic.

"I have now seen your late uncle's lawyer, and he informs me that you have been left a considerable fortune, in Mexican mines."

Poppy glanced uncertainly at the Señora who nodded in confirmation. "The Señor my husband declares they are worth a million dollars."

"Mr. Bunting"—the old gentleman pronounced the name in a tone of severe reprobation—"tells me that he is your sole trustee. He strikes me as a very young man for such a position. Have you any idea how your uncle came to confide in him?"

Poppy blushed. "I suppose it was because he had heard me speak of him. He and I have known each other for the last year. We belonged to the same lawn-tennis club."

Sir Lionel looked horror-struck. Even he had not credited Mr. Bunting with such a deep-laid, long-continued plot as now stood revealed.

"How did he get to know that you were an heiress?" he asked in consternation.

Poppy stared. Then she laughed for the first time since her uncle's death.

"He didn't! No one did. I don't think Uncle Rowland had any idea how much his shares were worth till Mr. Costello told him. He has often said to me that he had very little to leave me. I was thinking of taking up typewriting for a living. Why, I once asked Mr. Bunting in joke if he would engage me in his office, and he said he would."

It seemed that Poppy's guardian must be acquitted on this evidence, at least of the infernal cunning of joining the tennis club in order to worm his way into her confidence. The venerable clergyman may have felt that he had been a little wanting in charity towards the unfortunate youth. A sudden thought occurred to him.

“Is he married?”

The anxiety with which the question was put made Poppy laugh again. But she blushed as well.

“If he is he keeps it a very great secret. I have never seen or heard of Mrs. Bunting.”

The Señora smiled with meaning. “I think I can assure you on that point, Señor. I am very certain that our young friend is without a wife at present, and even that he very much desires one.”

Sir Lionel perceived the Señora’s meaning but too well. It was only what he had dreaded to hear.

“Then I trust you will see, my dear,” he said earnestly, “that you cannot possibly go to live with this young man, whether he is your legal guardian, as he pretends, or not.”

Before Poppy had time to disclaim any such unconventional project the Señora interposed again.

“That is not at all possible. I hope, instead that your charming niece is coming with us to Vera Cruz.”

CHAPTER XV

THE SEÑORA'S invitation was received very differently by the three who heard it. Tarleton just moved his head with the quiet acquiescence of one whose anticipation is fulfilled. Nor did Poppy show any surprise; she merely turned to her uncle with a questioning look as though she had been sounded on the subject already, and had not made up her mind.

The Reverend Sir Lionel on the other hand, was plainly taken aback. The prospect of his niece voyaging to Mexico in the Señora's company was even more alarming than the one of her going to reside with her youthful guardian. Sir Lionel no doubt felt himself in a measure able to cope with Mr. Bunting's arts, but he could not but be conscious that he was no match at all for the beautiful Spaniard. He started guiltily, as though aware that he had let himself be charmed too easily by the Circe whose web now seemed to be closing round him. He flushed and stammered.

"I hope not!—I mean I couldn't think of letting my niece take advantage of your kindness, Madame." He gazed at Poppy in apprehension. "My home is a very quiet one, I'm afraid; I'm only an old bachelor; but my curate and his wife are both young people, and there is a dog. And you could have a governess-cart to go about in."

The good man's tone was so distressed that Poppy hardly waited for the bribe of the governess-cart to announce her decision.

"You dear old uncle, I shouldn't dream of going to anyone else, if you really want me." She turned gratefully to the Señora. "Not but what I should very much like to come to Mexico at some time. I don't know how to thank you and Mr. Costello for all your kindness."

The Señora accepted her defeat quite amiably.

"Perhaps you will choose Vera Cruz for your wedding tour," she suggested with an arch smile.

The venerable clergyman breathed heavily like one who had escaped from no ordinary peril. Yet there was still the formidable Bunting to be reckoned with. The Cumberland recluse appeared to think it might be necessary and lawful to resort to strategy where he was concerned. His face assumed an expression of cunning hardly in keeping with his sacred calling, as he spoke again.

"Perhaps it will be the best plan to say nothing to that young solicitor. You can pack your box quietly, and slip off with me by the night mail. It will

take him some time to find your address, and then he will have to apply for a writ of habeas corpus or something of that sort before he can do anything.”

Poppy’s eyes danced at the idea of a clandestine elopement with her aged relation. It smacked of old-fashioned romance; Gretna Green is not far from Cumberland. But it would hardly have been fair to Sir Lionel or to the innocent object of his distrust to let the misunderstanding go on. Between them the others managed to convince the good-hearted old man that he had been unjust to Mr. Bunting, and that at all events there was no likelihood of his opposing the wishes of his ward.

Poppy clinched the agreement by saying, “I don’t feel as if I could leave London till I know that my uncle’s murderer has been arrested.”

It was the first direct reference to the tragedy which had brought them together, and the atmosphere of the room seemed to darken. The Señora’s face instantly became troubled, and the black fan ceased to administer encouragement to her admirer. Sir Lionel shook his head very gravely.

“I made it my business to be present at the inquest this morning.” He turned to the Señora. “But perhaps you would rather not hear the subject discussed in your presence, Madame?”

“On the contrary, I am very anxious to hear everything about it.” She spoke with restrained excitement, and fixed her dark eyes on the clergyman as though she thought he might have something to tell her that she had not yet heard. Poppy meanwhile was turning a troubled gaze from one to the other.

“I had no idea the inquest was being held to-day,” she said reproachfully to her hostess.

“We thought it better not to tell you, for fear of making you unhappy, my sweet girl,” the Señora explained gracefully. “Mr. Bunting was there, and so was my husband.”

Poppy showed that she was displeased at having been kept in the dark. She addressed herself to Sir Lionel.

“What was the verdict? Has anyone been arrested?”

“The verdict was one of wilful murder. But no one has been arrested so far. The police have been very remiss in my opinion,” the old man pronounced. “The evidence pointed clearly to your uncle having been murdered by a Mexican named Mendoza.”

It was only natural that the Señora should show some agitation at this statement. Her wonderful eyes demanded of Tarleton whether he had betrayed her confidence by telling anyone else that she had seen the

suspected man on two occasions outside the Aldwych Hotel. He contrived to reassure her by a slight shake of the head.

The Cumberland hermit realized too late that he was accusing a fellow-countryman of the beautiful woman before him. It is a common habit of mind to expect that anyone who has passed a short time, say, in Kenya Colony must have met every white man in Africa from Cairo to the Cape; and Mexico is much smaller than Africa. Sir Lionel hastened to disclaim any imputation on the Señora herself.

“Perhaps I oughtn’t to have mentioned that before you, Madame. There are bad men in all countries. And I’m afraid my late nephew was not very careful about his associates.”

This was making matters worse. Tarleton stepped in to relieve the Señora from what must have been a painful confession.

“Sir Rowland had some dealings with this man, I believe,” he said lightly. “But Mr. Costello may be able to tell you more about that, as he was in partnership with Sir Rowland at one time.”

The clergyman brightened up. “I should like to meet Mr. Costello. He may be able to give me some advice about your Mexican property, my dear.”

The Señora swooped on the opening.

“Señor Costello will be in despair at having missed you. You must positively return and dine with us. And you too, Señor.” The black fan endorsed the invitation to Tarleton with a subtle assurance that he and not Sir Lionel was the guest whom the Señora was really anxious to secure.

Tarleton hesitated. In spite of the fan’s persuasions, he could not disguise from himself that the Señora might have other motives than personal regard for her flattering attentions to him, and he felt that he was playing a double part in accepting them. At the same time he had taken a strong liking to Poppy’s venerable protector, and the old gentleman was clearly in some need of protection in any business dealings with such a man as Costello. He contrived to reconcile conscience with inclination accordingly, and signified that the Señora’s wishes were laws to her slave.

On leaving the ladies he accompanied Sir Lionel to his hotel, where one glance at the female who opened the door confirmed him in the resolution that the clergyman must be rescued forthwith. He succeeded in persuading him to bring his portmanteau, a relic of Victorian days, to Montagu Street, and made the old gentleman at home. There was still an hour to spare before they returned to the grotto of Circe. The consultant took advantage of it to ring up Scotland Yard and inquire if Captain Charles had any further progress to report.

The inspector, it proved, was impatiently waiting for a chance to consult his colleague. The rider added by the coroner's jury to their verdict had attracted the notice of the Commissioner of Police; Charles had been called upon for an explanation and report of his proceedings, and had incurred something like an official rebuke for not having more to show in the way of results. He had been obliged to shelter himself under Sir Frank Tarleton's all-powerful name, and had been ordered to see the Home Office adviser as soon as possible and obtain his opinion and advice.

It did not take long for the harassed inspector to arrive at the house beside the British Museum. Tarleton introduced him to Sir Lionel, who showed intense gratification at being thus taken behind the scenes and let into the secrets of Scotland Yard. The official air instantly assumed by Charles in his presence was exactly what was needed to set the old gentleman's mind at ease after the atmosphere of doubt and mystery he had been breathing for so many hours.

Meanwhile the inspector's account of his doings to Sir Frank was disappointing, as far as the Dowager Countess of Eardisley was concerned. The history of her ladyship's movements since the late Earl's death had been carefully inquired into, her maid had been skillfully pumped, and practically every day had been accounted for. And the conclusion was that the Countess had not been, and could not have been, in Venice or its neighborhood during that period. An expert female searcher had obtained access to her room in the house in Onslow Square, every receptacle it contained had been opened, and every article thoroughly examined. And nothing in the nature of a key, or anything else in the shape of a possible weapon, had been found.

The evidence was negative only; it remained possible that her ladyship might have been in Venice at some previous time in her life, or might have had the means to commit the murder suggested to her in some other way. She might have used a spring or air pistol and disposed of it as soon as it had done its deadly work. It was not impossible that she had planted the needles in her victim without any such contrivance. Charles was not yet prepared to abandon his theory of the crime entirely. But he was compelled to admit that it was time to consider others.

Tarleton repaid confidence with confidence by telling his colleague the story of the Keeper of Khattipur. Captain Charles was a little shocked by his friend's confession that the diamond had been stolen from his person during his interview with the Ranee. Perhaps he suspected his friend of connivance with the thief. At any rate the story left him in no doubt for the moment that the murderer of Sir Rowland Caythorpe stood revealed at last.

"My dear Sir Frank," he cried, "it's as clear as crystal. An expert juggler like that would have no earthly difficulty in killing a man in just such a way. He wouldn't need any weapon."

Sir Lionel ventured to express the same opinion. His face flushed and his eyes became feverish as he listened to these exciting revelations. It was a change indeed from the peaceful current of life in his remote rectory. He trembled for the Countess, and hailed her temporary acquittal with a sigh of relief. The dark figure of the Hindu was no sooner presented to his mind than it blotted out every other.

Only Tarleton's quiet manner restrained the enthusiasm of his companions. Charles knew better than to feel sure of any conclusion until it was endorsed by his colleague. And the clergyman was beginning to find that his host was the person on whom he could best depend.

"Ram Chundra was perfectly capable of committing the murder, and he had the opportunity," the consultant said deliberately. "But what was Ram Chundra's object? It was not to kill Sir Rowland Caythorpe; it was to recover the diamond. If Caythorpe had been found stabbed to death, and the diamond taken from him, the case would be clear, as you say. But here is a crime committed in such a way that its success brings Ram Chundra no nearer his object than he was before. If anything, it leaves him in a worse position. He no longer knows where the diamond is. He goes to the dead man's executor and applies for it in vain. He could hardly have calculated on my taking possession of it, and bringing it within his reach. It was little more than a chance that I didn't leave it at the India Office. There was every reason to expect that the discovery of a stone of that size in the dead man's possessions would make a public sensation, and that the Indian Government would step in and claim it."

Inspector Charles was obliged to nod gloomily in assent to this reasoning. The venerable cleric could scarcely conceal his disappointment, but he was wise enough not to speak again.

"Then we are thrown back on the man with the black beard," Charles said reluctantly. "By the way, doesn't what you say about the diamond apply to the mining shares?"

Sir Lionel opened his eyes. It was the first hint to him of any connection between the crime and his niece's inheritance.

"It does and it doesn't." Tarleton appeared to weigh his words carefully. "If the murderer's object was to steal the shares he has failed to achieve it, and he should have foreseen that he was going the wrong way to work. If he was acting on behalf of a syndicate determined to acquire them by fair

means or foul, he may be said to have succeeded. Sir Rowland, as we know, had refused to part with them, apparently from caprice. His executor can have no reason for objecting to sell them at a fair price."

The new baronet nodded. "I shall certainly try to make him get rid of them as soon as possible. I intend to consult Mr. Costello about them to-night."

"Costello!" Charles repeated the name in stupefaction. The next instant he saw his mistake and tried to look unconcerned. But it was too late.

Sir Lionel saw there was something wrong. An expression first of doubt and then of dismay spread over his face, as it gradually dawned upon him that the inspector regarded the Señora's husband as a person who might be in some way connected with the crime. It did not call for much acuteness to grasp the connection. Costello came from Mexico; the shares were in Mexican mines; everything pointed to the probability of his being in London on behalf of just such a syndicate as Tarleton had described. Slowly the old man stiffened; his white hairs seemed ready to rise up on his head. He cast an imploring gaze at the doctor, a gaze that asked if he was really going to make him dine with a murderer.

It called for all Tarleton's tact to deal with the emergency, if he meant the engagement to be kept.

"I haven't said anything about Mr. Bunting's suspicion to Sir Lionel," he said to the inspector in his calmest tone. "Perhaps you had better go on now, and let him know how the case stands."

Captain Charles did his best to redeem his error. He explained to the shaken clergyman that it was merely a suggestion of Bunting's that the American had had some previous knowledge of Mendoza's presence in London, and that his anxiety to secure the shares might have held him back from interfering with the assassin's plans.

Unfortunately Sir Lionel's mind was too strongly stirred to be easily set at rest again. All the suspicion he had shown earlier in the day had revived in full force, the only difference being that it was now diverted from the young lawyer to the man whom he had not yet met. He seemed disposed to ignore the man with the black beard altogether, and to attribute the crime to Costello's own hand.

Tarleton found himself obliged to repeat what he had told the inspector already, as to the Señora's having testified that she had twice seen and recognized the Mexican outside her hotel. He felt it necessary to put in a plea for reticence.

“The Señora begged me not to make use of her statement, and as long as the chief weight of suspicion lay on Lady Eardisley and the Hindu I respected her wishes. I thought she might well be spared the unpleasantness of giving evidence at the inquest.”

Captain Charles shook his head in silent disapproval. He had little doubt that the Señora’s charms were influencing his friend’s judgment in the matter. The reverend baronet also looked pained, although he was better able to allow for the power of the Señora’s fascination. Suddenly he looked up to propound a new and startling theory of his own.

“How can you tell that this Mendoza and Costello are not one and the same man? The black beard may have been a disguise.”

Tarleton received this suggestion with the placid resignation of an expert hearing an amateur put forward as novel, theories which he has long ago examined in all their bearings and disposed of. He left it to his colleague to reply, which Charles did with some brusqueness.

“My dear sir, what on earth are you thinking of? Sir Rowland Caythorpe looked on Costello as his friend and Mendoza as his enemy. What possible reason could Costello have for disguising himself as Mendoza? It would be making it ten times more difficult for him to get at his victim.”

Sir Lionel was discomfited. He passed his hand wearily over his brow as if he felt himself unable to deal with the situation, and gave another appealing look at his host.

“I wish I knew whether Mendoza was still hanging about the Aldwych,” the inspector went on regretfully. “He may be in communication with Costello. I must have the hotel picketed, I think.”

“There is another thing you can do if you like,” the consultant said. “If this man has come across in Costello’s wake it may be worth while for you to take a look at their luggage. The hotels are rather fond of sticking labels on their visitors’ trunks as an advertisement, and many tourists like to let them stay on, to show their friends how many places they have been to, Americans particularly.”

“A first-rate suggestion, thanks! You think I may find one from Venice?”

Tarleton nodded. For Sir Lionel’s benefit he repeated the story of the Tebaldi Key, which the old man drank in with a mixture of interest and fear. Then he offered Captain Charles another tip.

“Sir Lionel and I are just off to the Aldwych to dine with these very people. You couldn’t have a better opportunity for making a search.”

This time the aged listener was nearly paralyzed. He saw himself cast for the part of a detective. It seemed that he and Tarleton were to keep their

unsuspecting host in play while his luggage was being ransacked by the police. He uttered a faint groan.

“And while you are about it,” the doctor added, “there may be no harm in keeping your eyes open for anything in the shape of a spring gun.”

The Honorable Captain Charles smiled rather ruefully.

“I’m more likely to find a six-shooter, I expect. Well, I’ll skip off now, and get things in train.”

The moment he was gone the agitated clergyman began to beg off from going to the entertainment, not venturing to refuse the part assigned to him on the ground of its treachery, but pleading that he was quite unequal to it. Sir Frank had to address him very seriously.

“We are dealing with a crime for which we don’t yet know the true motive. Until we do we can only work in the dark. The only ground for suspicion against this man Costello is the fact that the murderer of your nephew followed so quickly after his arrival in London, and that it has probably made it easier for him to get possession of these shares. Unfortunately our young friend, Bunting, has taken a dislike to him which seems to be mutual, and that stands in the way of our finding out what his intentions really are. All he has done up to the present has been to proclaim that these shares are worth a large sum, a million dollars. If that is their actual value, then he is playing the part of an honest man, and a good friend of your dear little niece. Why not give him credit for being that till we have some evidence to the contrary? You can do what Bunting hasn’t done; let this man talk to you as a friend. And try to believe he is one, for Miss Poppy’s sake.”

The good old man gave way. Half an hour later the two were on their way to the hotel. And there in the entrance they found Mr. Costello awaiting them.

The Irishman’s hearty greetings overwhelmed Sir Lionel, and simply ignored and effaced his nervous response. The next moment Costello had drawn his guests into a corner of the lounge, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

“I came downstairs to catch you before you saw the Señora, because I want to ask you two gentlemen not to talk about this business of Arthur’s murder before her. She’s more than a little worried. I’ve tried to keep it from her, but she has found out that the police have it pretty strongly against Felipe Mendoza. And Felipe’s her brother.”

CHAPTER XVI

THERE could be little doubt that Costello had told the truth at last. The man with the black beard, the man for whom the police were searching London at that moment, was the brother of the Señora, and his being so accounted for many things that Tarleton had already noted in the retentive tablets of his brain; her ready recognition of him in the street on two occasions; her unwillingness to have her admission that she had seen him made use of by the police, and her unconcealed anxiety to hear all that Sir Frank could tell her about the investigation that was going on into the death in Drysdale Park.

It accounted also for some features in the case that had provoked Bunting's suspicion against Mendoza's brother-in-law. It was not the Irishman's fault if his wife had an unworthy brother; and the strong language he had used about him was perfectly consistent with a natural desire not to have any hand in bringing him to justice. Costello had played the part of an honest man throughout, as far as could be seen. He had admitted from the first that Mendoza was a dangerous man, of whom Sir Rowland Caythorpe would do well to beware. He had not denied that his brother-in-law might be in London, although he had shrunk from entertaining the idea that the Mexican had secretly followed the wedding party. Neither the Señora nor her husband could be blamed severely for having concealed their relationship to a brother who did them so little credit. At the same time the sympathy and kindness they had both shown to the murdered man's niece might well be attributed to a certain fear that he had met his death at Mendoza's hands, and a desire to atone, as far as in them lay, for the crime, rather than to the mercenary motives they had been credited with by Poppy's guardian.

Tarleton received the information without visible surprise. Sir Lionel Caythorpe was struck speechless. He had come to dine with Mr. Costello feeling himself to be a Judas, and half prepared to see Inspector Charles walk in and arrest his host before the conclusion of the banquet. Now he found himself compelled to take an entirely new view of the situation. The American's hearty manner in itself was enough to make him ashamed of his previous suspicions, and he had spoken like a good-hearted man, divided between a desire to tell the truth, and a tenderness for the feelings of his wife. Instead of pretending ignorance of his supposed confederate he was openly revealing the link between them of his own accord. Sir Lionel was thankful to escape from the atmosphere of doubt, at least as far as Mr.

Costello was concerned. At the same time he felt that it was his duty to watch the Señora. It was evident to him that she was secretly anxious to save her brother from arrest, and was exerting all her arts on his behalf, to fascinate and hoodwink the ministers of justice. So far she had succeeded only too well with Sir Frank Tarleton. The responsibility was cast upon him, Sir Lionel, of playing the part of Ulysses. It was for him to be on his guard against the spells of the enchantress, and, if he could, to open the eyes of his deluded friend.

The Señora's husband gave them a final caution.

"She doesn't know that I am telling you this, gentlemen. I doubt if she would forgive me if she did. I am trusting you not give me away."

The two guests of course undertook to keep silence as they followed their host upstairs. On this occasion Tarleton had left his glittering decoration at home, and their progress through the hotel lounge attracted no great attention. Mr. Costello waved his hand towards the dining-room entrance in a gesture of negation.

"I've ordered dinner in our own room to-night," he explained. "Miss Poppy doesn't like being stared at, and the Señora isn't in very good spirits."

They found the table laid, and the ladies waiting for them. Poppy flew to embrace her new-found uncle, but the Señora's welcome was restrained. Her dark eyes fixed themselves on Sir Frank with a melancholy that seemed reproachful, and the black fan hung lifeless at her side.

At the table Tarleton found himself installed on the left hand of the hostess, who had Sir Lionel on her right. Her manner delicately conveyed, however, that the place of honor was given to his rival as the stranger of the party, while he was received on the footing of an old friend. The venerable clergyman was alert to mark the difference between the formal homage paid to himself and the more intimate treatment of his companion. Whenever he could snatch a moment from listening to the eager talk of Poppy on his right, he turned to watch with misgiving the subtle arts of Circe on his left. He trembled when Sir Frank passed her the salt-cellar; he blushed at the way in which the Señora accepted it as though it contained a hidden billet-doux.

Yet no attentions on the part of the favored one could lift the shadow from the Señora's brow. Her gravity seemed to deepen as the meal progressed; she became silent, and showed herself impatient for the dragging courses to come to an end. The genial Irishman did his best to dispel the atmosphere of gloom, but even his cheerfulness struck the troubled guests as unnatural in the circumstances. Sir Lionel could not keep his mind from dwelling on the fact that the American's luggage was being

searched at that very moment by Inspector Charles for evidence against his brother-in-law, if not himself. He tried to give his attention to the questions that Poppy was asking him about her future home, but in his distraction his answers were vague and misleading. He informed her that his curate's wife was six feet tall, and the curate himself five feet, which was transposing the facts. When she asked him the name of the dog he was on the point of answering Mendoza, and barely corrected it in time to Jemima, which was the name of his young parlormaid. Poppy could not help seeing that her aged relative had something on his mind, although she was far from guessing its nature, and she fell silent in her turn.

When the last waiter had left the room Mr. Costello roused himself to discuss business.

"The Señora tells me you are going to take charge of this young lady, till she changes her name. It won't be long, I fancy," he said, with rough pleasantry to the clergyman. "And she thinks you would like to have some talk with me about the property she has been left in my part of the world."

Sir Lionel was glad to accept the offer, in spite of feeling half-ashamed to profit by his host's advice while playing a double part towards him. Still, Poppy's interests had to be considered, and no one was better qualified to help her than the mine-owner. He was obliged to remain chained to his seat while the Señora rose with a graceful lift of her white shoulders, and beckoned to her votary with the talismanic fan.

"They are going to talk about their dreary business affairs," she murmured. "Let us leave them to it." And she moved across the room to the couch in the farthest corner, dragging her willing follower in her wake.

Costello had a good deal to say worth listening to, and Poppy's uncle was obliged to give him his full attention, although his eyes strayed from time to time to the enchanted cave in which Sir Frank Tarleton was visibly being lulled into forgetfulness of the world outside by the spells of the sorceress.

The American appeared perfectly candid. He described the situation much as he had done already to Poppy's trustee. He avowed himself to be the head of a syndicate formed to prospect abandoned mines in various parts of Mexico, with a view to finding out if it would pay to reopen and develop them with the latest machinery introduced in South Africa and elsewhere.

"What we can't afford to do," he explained, "is to buy a pig in a poke. We can't give a big price for a mine before we know if it's going to pan out well; and we can't spend money in opening up a mine without having an option on it. Otherwise we might find ourselves left. As soon as we had

proved it was valuable the owners might sell it over our heads to someone else, or work it themselves.”

All this seemed fair and reasonable. Poppy, who was listening with quiet interest, signified that she quite agreed with Mr. Costello.

“I wish you’d tell that young man of yours so,” the American said good-humoredly. “He seems to have made up his mind that I’m too deep a customer for him to negotiate with. I don’t deny that I’m a business man, and that I should have driven as sharp a bargain as I could with poor Arthur. I knew him, and he knew me. But you’re different, my dear, and I’m not going to take any advantage of you. I should be glad to have you come out to Vera Cruz and bring that young man along with you, to see things for himself. The sooner the better.”

Poppy promised to do her best with Mr. Bunting. She ignored the suggestion that they might come to Vera Cruz together. Her uncle also undertook to bring the solicitor to reason. He was still rather sore about Bunting’s privileged position as guardian.

“I was going to get Arturo to sell me his shares, if I could, but I won’t even ask you to do that if you don’t like it,” the kindly Irishman announced. “I’ll have you taken into the syndicate if you’ll promise to come and settle in Vera Cruz. We’ll fix things up for you, the Señora and I, as soon as you say the word.”

Mr. Bunting himself could hardly have held out against such generous good will. The Cumberland recluse felt nothing but remorse for having listened to the young man’s doubts. And all this time he was guiltily conscious of the presence of the police in the adjoining room. He almost fancied that he could hear their stealthy movements. It was all he could do not to betray the confidence placed in him by giving a warning to his unsuspecting host. He fortified himself against the temptation by another glance towards the Señora.

The beautiful Spaniard was scarcely visible. The black fan, as though aware that its mistress had an enemy in the room, was throwing its protecting shadow over her face, and only Sir Frank was permitted to gaze into the depths of those lustrous eyes. The physician’s fixed attitude showed that he was listening to something that interested him to the utmost. The gold watch between his fingers had ceased to move.

The Señora had scorned to keep up the pretence that her object in taking him apart was to escape listening to the conversation at the table. She seemed on the verge of tears.

"Tell me," were her first words, uttered in a whisper, "why is it that you are my enemy?"

The protest that sprang from her admirer's lips was received with a bitter smile.

"I believed you were my friend; I thought that I could trust you, and I find that you have betrayed me. You have repeated what I told you to your police, is it not so? You have assured them that Felipe—that Mendoza—is in London? And everywhere they are searching for him in consequence?"

The questions had the sound of assertions. Tarleton could only defend himself lamely by pleading that he had received no positive command not to repeat the statement made to him; the Señora had only expressed unwillingness to come forward as a witness.

His accuser shook her head mournfully.

"Let us attempt to deceive each other no longer," she said. "From the first I have known that I must tell you everything. Already you read me like a book, yes. You are the first man who has ever understood me." She lowered her exquisite lashes with a deep sigh. "If my husband had been like you I should have been a happy woman."

The avowal was made in too tragical a tone to be received as flattery. A tear glistened in the Señora's eye, a tear or else a pearl. Sir Frank silently let his glance stray towards the table.

"Ah, yes!" The Señora had been swift to note the movement. "Look at him now, thinking of nothing but his miserable syndicate while I am tortured by suspense. But you are right, I must not go on—I dare not tell you all I have to tell you here." The dark eyes put a furtive question. "But I can bear this hateful secrecy no longer. At any moment I may hear that Felipe has been arrested. And he—this man whom you are hunting down—is my only brother."

The confession made Tarleton's position difficult. To tell the Señora that her secret was known to him already would be to betray her husband's confidence. On the other hand, to maintain silence would be to act a falsehood which might be detected at any time. As soon as the Señora learned from Costello that he had given the information in advance—and how long could any husband keep a secret from such a wife?—she would be justified in her complaint that the doctor's friendship for her was insincere.

He was obliged to resort once more to his former tactics in placing his fair accuser on the defensive.

"Only the other day you let me believe that he was one of your victims—that he was a rival of Caythorpe's," he said reproachfully. "And you

accuse me of deceiving you.”

The long lashes were lowered in penitence.

“You must forgive everything to a sister who is trying to save her brother’s life,” she pleaded. “I have even had to deceive my husband. He thinks that I have only seen Felipe in the street by accident. Alas! Before we left Vera Cruz I knew of his intention to follow us.” Again she stopped with a look of fear. “But if I say more your law will condemn me as an accomplice, yes?”

“I can’t say what the law would do if the case ever came before it,” the medical adviser of the Home Office replied. “But I can tell you one thing in which the English law is different from that of most other countries; it doesn’t allow a criminal to convict himself if it can possibly help it. If I were to let you tell me anything dangerous without giving you a caution beforehand no English judge would let me give evidence against you.”

The Señora took this in eagerly. Her face brightened for a moment, but was quickly over-shaded again.

“Ah, you English are just enough; you pride yourselves on that, I know. Just according to your own ideas of justice, that is to say. But you expect every man to be an Englishman. You are incapable of making allowance for the hot blood of the South. You demand that we shall all be such cold, passionless creatures as yourselves.”

Tarleton did not deny the general charge against his countrymen. He rather strove to convey that he was an exception to the rule, if not at all times, at least when he was exposed to an influence like the Señora’s. But the beautiful Spaniard was in no mood to listen to the language of compliment. She threw a glance of fear towards her husband, who had just finished his business explanations, and was moving back his chair to leave the table.

“Hush!” She spoke in a hurried whisper. “I must see you alone. I must tell you the whole story. You will let me come to you—when?” The black fan trembled for his answer.

Tarleton had just time to name an hour for the next day—and he named the tea hour—when the big Irishman noisily bore down on them in company with his other guests.

Sir Lionel listened with secret pity to the infatuated husband as he complacently rallied his wife on her conquest of Sir Frank Tarleton. But the recluse from Cumberland had reason for reproaching himself before the party broke up. The Señora seemed to be conscience-stricken. She abandoned her votary altogether, and devoted herself for the rest of the

evening to Poppy and her uncle. In spite of himself the venerable man was convinced that the Señora was warmly interested in them both. She insisted that they must spend the next day together, leaving her to pass the time by herself as she best could. She made plans for sight-seeing on Sir Lionel's behalf. She ascertained his tastes, and arranged that Poppy should take him to the National Gallery in the morning, and give him tea in the afternoon in the Zoölogical Gardens. And it was all done with a seriousness and simplicity that won the clergyman's regard. The Señora showed herself as a daughter to him and as a mother to Poppy.

When the party broke up he came away with the feeling that he had misjudged her, as he had previously misjudged Mr. Bunting. It became evident to him that he had a suspicious nature, against which it was his duty to be on his guard. Instead of cautioning Sir Frank against the Señora's wiles, he found himself singing her praises in the cab that took them home. He even put in a plea on her behalf. He pointed out to his friend that it was natural for a sister to shut her eyes to the truth where her brother was concerned, and that it was unfair to expect her to aid the officers of the law against him.

Tarleton listened to these excuses with an air of abstraction. His only answer was a remark that the Señora was a fascinating woman.

The aged clergyman was conscious of a slight flush.

"She is more than that," he protested earnestly. "She is a good, kind-hearted woman. She takes a real interest in my niece. And she is thoughtful for others. She wants my dear little girl and me to spend the day together tomorrow. She positively refused to come with us. She wants to give us a chance to become better acquainted before we go down to Cumberland."

Tarleton remarked that the Señora was a very clever woman.

The clergyman was silenced. His feelings were a little hurt on the Señora's account. He asked himself if his distinguished friend might not be a little given to jealousy. Perhaps he was a little sore at being neglected. The Señora's good-night to him had been distinctly cold. We all have our weaknesses.

When they reached Montagu Street the window of the dining-room was lit up from within. The consultant excused himself to his guest in the hall.

"I see someone is waiting to see me on business. If you don't feel disposed to go to bed so early, perhaps you will let me take you into another room."

Sir Lionel declined the offer, expressing himself as anxious to get to sleep at once. He guessed that the caller might be Inspector Charles, but he

was not sorry to be left out of the consultation with him. In his present state of mind, regarding both Mr. and Mrs. Costello as his friends, he found it pleasanter to be spared the knowledge of any proceedings on the part of the police which they might naturally resent.

He took his way upstairs accordingly, leaving Tarleton to pass into the dining-room alone.

The Honorable Captain Charles was there. His face wore a portentous look. He greeted his colleague with unusual respect. His pocket-book was in his hand already, and he drew out of it a round paper disk, printed in staring colors, and silently passed it to Sir Frank.

“Hotel Britannia, Venice.”

Tarleton rarely permitted himself to show any outward sign of satisfaction at his own success, but his eyes brightened, and his voice sounded confident.

“You found this on the luggage?”

“It was plastered on almost everything. I took off this one because it stood out the clearest without any other labels overlapping it.”

“Good, I congratulate you. Did you find anything else?”

The inspector shook his head.

“Only what I told you I should find—a revolver. A heavy, old-fashioned one. I thought it better to leave it where it was. It couldn’t possibly have been used against Caythorpe.”

Tarleton nodded. “You made sure that it was an ordinary revolver?”

Inspector Charles looked a little annoyed.

“I examined it to see whether it had been used recently. It was loaded in every chamber.”

“It was a foolish question for me to ask,” the expert apologized. “A revolver is the last article the murderer would be likely to choose for imitation. And you found nothing else suspicious?”

“There was nothing else to find,” was the aggrieved answer.

“No.” The consultant thought for a few moments. “How about the Ranee’s diamond? I want you to let Ram Chundra know that he may be arrested at any minute.”

The inspector opened his eyes.

“You know that we can’t arrest him without the leave of the India Office; and they won’t give it.”

“The question is whether he knows that. I want you to frighten him.” Tarleton gave his colleague a deep look. “To frighten him into coming here and offering me a bribe.”

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN the hour approached for the promised visit of the Señora, Sir Frank Tarleton was a good deal exercised by the question of how to receive her fittingly. The house in Montagu Street contained no drawing-room, the rooms on the first floor being fitted up as laboratories for his professional research. The choice lay between the dining-room, a rather formal apartment not quite free from the dreary air of a doctor's waiting-room, and the smaller room behind in which he was accustomed to receive most of his callers, and also to spend his few leisure hours. After changing his mind more than once, to the distraction of his apprehensive man, he finally decided in favor of the consulting room. The Señora had plainly intimated that she was going to take him into her confidence, and it seemed to him that the room in which he had received so many tragical confidences would be the one most likely to make her feel that she could unburden her mind freely.

Yet he could not make up his mind to receive her altogether as a patient. The element of romance refused to be quite excluded. He filled the room with a profusion of flowers, and ordered a little tea table to be set out with a service of choice ware and an antique silver teapot that generally ornamented the sideboard in the other room, and also to be loaded with a variety of cakes. These preparations made, and his working clothes exchanged for his society ones, the doctor impatiently awaited his fair guest.

The Señora was late, naturally. She would not have been a Spaniard otherwise. She contrived, moreover, by her hurried air and almost furtive entrance to give the impression that she had escaped with difficulty from her husband's jealous guardianship, and was in some fear of being pursued and discovered. Tarleton, conscious of his own integrity, did his best to ignore these symptoms, and to receive the beautiful fugitive as if her coming to him was a perfectly open and proper proceeding. His manner was almost professional as he inducted her into the patient's chair, and proceeded to soothe her nerves with tea.

Gradually the Señora's agitation subsided. She seemed grateful to the doctor for respecting her unprotected state, and refraining from any demonstration of a sentimental nature. The black fan, after exhibiting some anxiety on behalf of its mistress at the outset, appeared to realize that she was in no real danger, and relaxed its vigilance accordingly.

Tarleton waited for his visitor to speak on the subject that had brought her to see him. It was evidently not easy for her to open her lips. For some

time she interrogated him with her dark eyes as though searching for some weak point of attack. But the physician preserved an air of calm attention which effectually masked his thoughts. When the Señora at last began it was in a tone of discouragement, almost of complaint.

“Ah, how I wish that I could speak to you in Spanish! There is something in your stiff English that makes it difficult to express oneself easily. One has to be so precise, to say exactly what one means. There is no room for romance, no light or shade.”

It would have been to put a harsh interpretation on this language to say that English was a difficult language to lie in. Neither, of course, did the beautiful Mexican mean to convey, that such was her embarrassment. It was evident that she was merely pleading for consideration in telling a story in which some things might have to be softened down, if not omitted.

“First of all,” the narrative began, “you must forget me as I am now, an old woman, as we Spaniards reckon age. You must think of me as a young girl, just released from her convent school, and ignorant of the ways of the world and men.”

The last word was pronounced in the tone of an accusation, although a mild one.

“To you, now, I may seem a schemer, married to a man whom I do not love, and making use of a woman’s arts on behalf of a brother whom I ought to abandon to your justice. But there was a time when I should have been shocked to see myself playing an insincere part. If I have become a woman of the world, if I have learned to regard all men as enemies, and to defend myself against you with the weapons of my sex, I learned it from the man whom I knew as Arturo Luiz.

“Felipe and I were orphans, and we were very poor. Almost our whole property, in fact, consisted of a silver mine which had become nearly valueless, one of those very mines from which my husband and his friends are now extracting fabulous riches. Apart from that we had little more than the house we lived in, in Vera Cruz. It was one of those great old houses built in the days when Mexico was one of the wealthiest possessions of Spain, and when the merchants of Vera Cruz imitated the state of the grandees of Madrid. In those days our ancestors ranked as grandees. The name of Mendoza is one of the noblest of Old Spain.

“Our nearest relation was a cousin of my mother’s, an old woman who lived with us. For the sake of appearances she was called my duenna, but the care she took of me was very slight. She was a devotee, always absorbed in church services and processions, and her one desire for me was that I should

become a nun. And she was right—yes, I see that now that it is too late. Often I curse the hour when I was tempted into rejecting her advice.”

Carried away by her emotion the Señora almost broke down at this point. It cost her a manifest effort to resume the tale.

“My real protector was Felipe. There were ten years between us, so that I looked up to him more as a father than a brother. And he on his part made a pet of me. Perhaps I ought to say he spoiled me, I do not know. Even in our affections we of the South are warmer than you cold northerners. He indulged me in everything. There was no pleasure that he denied me, as far as our scanty means allowed. I was perfectly happy.

“We were living together like that when the Englishman calling himself Arthur Lewis arrived in Vera Cruz.

“As I expect you know, Vera Cruz is a great port, a place in which foreigners are always coming and going, and so a place in which it is comparatively easy for a stranger to make friends. The old Spanish exclusiveness has long broken down before the invasion of Americans from the United States, men like my husband, who bring prosperity in their train, because they possess an energy that we natives of Mexico have lost. Englishmen came also; the world knows how much Mexico is indebted to at least one of your great countrymen. As a consequence the name of England is held in honor among us. To be an Englishman is a passport to the esteem and confidence of my people. It was so in the case of Arturo.

“No one suspected that his name was a false one, or that he had come to Mexico for any reason except a wish to see the country, and perhaps to make a fortune by enterprise. He was good looking, distinguished, altogether the kind of man to impress strangers favorably. He so impressed my brother. They met in the hotels and gaming-houses which abounded in the city. By degrees they became intimate.

“Why should I conceal it?—Felipe was a born gambler. It is very difficult for me to understand your English feeling on this subject above all others. Your betting in horse races is like a national mania, it is carried on openly on your race courses under the very eyes of the police, so I am told. And you play cards in all your clubs, sometimes for high stakes. But the sight of a harmless roulette table or a faro box rouses your horror. You cry out against it as the worst of sins. It is even treated as a crime by your laws. To call a man a gambler is to condemn him in your eyes. Already you think of my brother as the most depraved of men, is it not so?”

Tarleton was obliged to admit that there was some ground for the Señora’s criticism. He might have explained to her, perhaps, that the very

fact that certain forms of gambling were forbidden by the law tended to make them disreputable, so that they only attracted bad characters. But he did not wish to interrupt the story, and therefore contented himself with an assurance that in his mind, at all events, a native of Mexico was none the worse for indulging in the national pastime.

The Señora shook her head as though she only half believed him.

“I know what my husband thinks, and he is not as strict as you. If he has spoken to you of my brother, I feel certain he has denounced him as worthless. He cannot bear me to see him, even. Felipe has not dared to enter our hotel on that account.”

No sooner had the last words passed her lips than the Señora pressed them firmly together, as though realizing that she might be making a dangerous admission. The next moment she returned to her narrative.

“Arturo had no such scruples, there is no need to tell you that. Before long he had gained my poor brother’s entire confidence, so much so that he brought him to the house and presented him to me. Let me tell you that a Spaniard considers he is paying a high compliment to a man when he introduces him to the women of his family, and especially the unmarried ones.

“Young as I was, I was not too young to perceive that the rich Englishman admired me. I call him rich, because that was the effect which he produced on my brother and myself, also on the relation I have spoken of, the Señorita Caterina. She was particularly gracious to him. He made his court to her rather than to me in the first place. He accompanied us both to church. He let it be seen that his religion lay on him very lightly, and that it would take little to make him change it. He could have found no surer way to the old woman’s favor than that.

“As soon as he felt sure of his ground he made a proposition to Felipe that called for some boldness. He asked to be allowed to leave his hotel and take up his quarters in our house. He did not propose to rent an apartment in it; there would have been nothing in that to offend the dignity of even a proud noble in these poverty-stricken days; he proposed to become what is now so familiar in your country, a paying guest. That was quite a new thing in our society, and at first my brother would not hear of it. But he persisted, and he had my duenna on his side—and me.

“You must not imagine, Señor, that I was at once or easily captivated by a man almost old enough to be my father. I was attracted, yes, but only as a romantic girl is naturally attracted by a man of whom she knows nothing, but who appears to her in the glamour of distinction and wealth, set off by

his coming from a distant country, which she has been taught to consider great and glorious. Proud as we Spaniards are we realize that our race's grandeur has undergone eclipse. In the future—who knows?—our sun may rise again, and the New Spain may repeat the triumphs of the Old. I have even read in a scientific work that if a single insect, a mosquito, could be extirpated, Spain and her daughters in the New World might challenge the greatness of the great British Empire itself."

Did the charming Spaniard know that she could have touched on no topic more likely to interest her scientific host? Was she, perhaps, anxious to show herself to him in a more serious and dignified character than that of a feminine schemer, such as she had called herself? A moment afterwards her mood had changed, and her voice sank almost to a whisper.

"Arturo had his way in the end. He came to live with us on the footing of a member of the family. And it was not long before he showed many signs of wishing to become one actually by marrying me.

"I was for some time puzzled by his attentions. As you no doubt know, a girl's marriage is generally arranged for her in our society. There is little of what you call courtship until her hand has been formally asked for, and her parent's consent obtained. Apparently the Señor Luiz, as I still called him, was ignorant of this difference in our manners, or else he deliberately chose to ignore it, and follow the fashion of his own country. He began to offer me little presents of flowers and sweetmeats. He planned excursions, pretending that they were for the benefit of my duenna, but letting me see that his real object was to please me. He took us both to the theatre, but always he managed to sit beside me, and when he could do so without being seen to press my hand. No man had ever had the opportunity to approach me in that way before. I was very young, and I had been brought up in the most complete innocence, the innocence of a convent. You must not wonder if I came to feel for him an emotion which I believed was love."

More than once as the narrative proceeded the black fan had slightly moved in those instinctive gestures that accompany all southern speech, but not otherwise. The Señora was not now a woman seeking to subjugate a man; she was an advocate appealing to a judge. The fan was being held, as it were, in leash, and not suffered to convey any of those subtle messages that had sometimes passed from its mistress to her listener. Only at this point did it add to her confession that she was now ashamed of having once felt a tenderness for another man, a mistake that must injure her in her judge's eyes.

"All this time I was left in ignorance of the increasing hold that my lover, as I had every reason to consider him, was gaining over my brother.

We women heard only vague rumors of wild doings in resorts which were only frequented by men. We knew that Arturo and Felipe were almost inseparable; they left the house and returned together, and seemed to have secrets of their own which they did not share with us. Yet gradually I began to feel that things were going wrong. Felipe became graver than I had ever known him; he sat silent at meals, and hardly ever spoke to me or came into the dining-room where I was so often left alone. An atmosphere of melancholy seemed to be descending on us all. My old cousin noticed nothing. I had no one I could confide in, no one I could so much as talk with about my brother except the man who was ruining him.

“And how treacherous he was! Always when he found himself alone with me he pretended to be as much concerned about Felipe as I was. He professed to fear that he was playing too high and losing too much money. He posed as a protector, whose good influence was being exerted to restrain him from going to excess. He held out hopes of reforming him. And I believed every word.

“Never shall I forget the terrible night on which my eyes were opened at last. It was very late. I had long been in bed, but it was a very hot night, and I had scarcely been able to sleep. I was wakened from a light doze by the noise of their returning home. I caught the sound of angry words, ending in a curse. There were footsteps on the marble stair that mounted up and died away down the corridor in which the two men slept. Then, after an interval, I heard my brother’s steps returning softly, this time in slippers. He tapped at the door of my room and entered. After asking if I was awake, he opened the shutters and let the moonlight stream in. It showed me his face all ghastly with agony. His hair was all disordered; his hands clutched at his throat; he could hardly articulate.

“He gasped out at length, ‘Little one, we are ruined.’

“As your experience has taught you doubtless, Señor, such words sound more lightly in the ears of children than their elders, and I was little more than a child. For my part I had always been told that we were ruined, that our family had once been great and rich, but had now descended to poverty; and I could not conceive of any further descent. Felipe had to tell me much more before I understood the true state of things. He had gambled away our entire property, that silver mine which, exhausted as it was, still yielded sufficient for our daily needs. He had lost not only his own share but mine as well, of which he was naturally trustee. He had lost everything, and he had lost it all to his friend, to my lover, the man Arturo Luiz. That man, who had pretended to be doing his best to keep Felipe out of temptation had, on the contrary, been leading him into it deliberately, with the fixed object of

getting him into his power. For, as you will have guessed already, his secret motive for ruining the brother was to achieve the ruin of the sister.”

So much indeed Tarleton had guessed for some time, or he would not have been the wise man he was. The situation he had apprehended vaguely hitherto stood clear before him now. The tragical scene itself became distinct to him as a picture on the screen. He could see the young girl in her virginal beauty and innocence roused from her sleep in the middle of the night by the brother in whom she believed so blindly, to see his white face of despair, and to listen to his confession that he was an embezzler, if not something worse. The judge waited uncomfortably to hear how much worse from the reluctant sister’s lips.

“When Felipe had made me understand that he owed his ruin to Arturo every spark of affection I had ever felt for him died out instantly, and I began to hate him as I had never hated anyone before. Imagine my stupefaction, then, when my poor brother suddenly informed me that it was necessary for me to take this traitor as a husband.

“I was so ignorant of the world that he was obliged to explain to me that in losing my property as well as his own he had committed a crime against the law. At first I refused to believe him. As if I should have refused to give him everything I possessed, from the very hair of my head to the shoes on my feet! Unfortunately I was not of an age to consent to any dealing with my property. A ward in Mexico does not become of age for such a purpose till twenty-five, and I was just eighteen. All this he explained to me. It was not the loss of our property that had reduced him to extremity. The manner in which he had lost it had placed a lasso round his neck, and the end of the lasso was held by the man who professed to love me. One word from Arturo would be enough to consign my brother to a prison, unless he could contrive to fly the country. Prison or perpetual banishment—such was the fate from which I could save him.

“My brother was dearer to me than anything on earth, dearer than life itself. I wept, I raged inwardly, but I did not dream of refusing the sacrifice.

“And then came something more painful still, though I was far from understanding what was behind it all. Felipe told me that, much as this evil man admired me, much as he wanted me for his wife, he had yet made no formal application for my hand. His excuse was that he doubted if I felt enough affection for him. In his country, he pretended, it was not the custom to marry a girl unless her love was won first. He complained that I was always cold to him, that I showed no sign of returning his love, and therefore he doubted if it was in his power to make me happy. Yes, he had the audacity to say that!

“My poor brother was entirely deceived by this hypocrisy, which he repeated to me in good faith. He implored me to conquer my repugnance to the man who had injured us. He urged me to indulge him in the English method of courting, to give him opportunities of seeing me alone, to suffer his demonstrations, in a word, to encourage him.”

The Señora paused for some painful moments. A dark flush overspread her face. She had long ceased to raise her eyes to those of her judge.

“You will not expect me to tell you very much more. I agreed to do all that my brother required. I bore with the hateful advances of our enemy, every day expecting to hear that he had made the formal demand for my hand. At length came a day when he said to me, ‘I am an unhappy man. I have left in England a wife who does not love me, but of whom the law will not allow me to get rid. I can only be your husband in the sight of Heaven.’”

The Señora’s nervous hands, tightening as she spoke, closed with a loud snap, and the black fan lay in fragments on the floor.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DEAD silence followed the breaking of the Señora's fan.

As if the last shred of artificiality had broken with it, she raised her head and confronted her listener with the outraged dignity of a queen insulted by a revolutionary tribunal. Her eyes, passionate with anger at what she had just recalled, searched his face demanding to know if she had said enough.

Tarleton was deeply shocked. Whatever he had expected to hear he had not foreseen the strain that the Señora's tragical confession would put upon her, and upon himself. He repented having listened to so much. He ought to have anticipated what was coming, and spared her the cruel necessity of putting into plain words the secret of Sir Rowland Caythorpe's guilt.

For there could be no doubt now as to the true cause of that fear which had seized Caythorpe at the sight of the advertisement addressed to Arthur Lewis, formerly of Mexico, the fear that had caused him to take such stringent precautions against being discovered by the man whose sister he had wronged, the fear that had brought him trembling to Tarleton too late to save his life. It was not the loss of the mine, as Bunting had supposed, it was not any financial injury, however great, that had caused the man with the black beard to take the oath that had driven Caythorpe from Mexico. It was one of those injuries which, in the sentiment of almost every southern race, can only be washed out by blood.

Tarleton quickly collected himself to meet the situation.

"You need tell me no more," he said. "I can understand that Caythorpe, or Lewis as he called himself, behaved like a scoundrel. He lied to you. As a matter of fact he had no wife in England. If you look in a peerage you will see that he was never married."

This was news to the Señora, as was evident from her start of amazement. Her eyes flashed more fiercely than before.

"Then he was twice a perjurer! And it is this man, who deserved death over and over again, whom you are working to avenge!"

Tarleton took a moment to consider his answer.

"I don't know that you are right in saying that. So far all I have done has been to ascertain how he was killed. I knew nothing of the motives for the murder, as it is in the eyes of the law. I do not yet know who killed him. More than one person is still under suspicion, as I think you have been told. Caythorpe had more enemies than one."

"I have been told many things by my husband, which he believes but I do not," was the scornful answer. "Should I have come here, should I have told you things that it blisters my lips to repeat, if I believed that you were really looking for the murderer, as you call him, in any of the directions you have pretended in order to blind me?"

She paused to give the doctor an opportunity of denial, but he was too much impressed by the Señora's clear-sightedness to offer any.

"I have come here a sister to plead for a brother's life," she proceeded earnestly. "I have forced myself to tell you the provocation he received, a provocation which would have justified him in the eyes of every Mexican of Spanish blood in killing Arturo Luiz on the spot. Unhappily he believed that it might still be possible to compel him to marry me. He offered him the alternative between that and death. The coward pretended to yield. He swore that he would write to England giving instructions to his lawyers to obtain him a divorce. He kept up the fiction that letters were passing to and fro, that proceedings had been instituted, and so forth. Finally he announced that his presence was necessary before the court could pronounce the decree. He sailed for England, and we never heard of him again.

"All the time he had been simply winding up his affairs in Mexico, as it appeared. He had entered into a partnership with Señor Costello—it was in that way that I came to meet my husband first. He transferred to him the mine of which he had robbed us. I did not know that he possessed any other property in Mexico, but it seems he must have exchanged the mine, which he feared to retain, for shares in others that were not likely to involve him in any trouble.

"Of course neither my brother nor I dared to reclaim our inheritance; that would have been dangerous. For Felipe's sake I submitted to my loss. Señor Costello only knew that the mine had once been ours. No doubt he guessed that we had been deprived of it by treachery of some kind, and he took pity on us accordingly. He offered Felipe a post in which he could earn enough to support me, although he disliked him, as I could see. I could see also very early that he desired to make me his wife.

"He had no suspicion of the wrong I had suffered from his partner, of that I made sure. He believed simply that Arturo had courted me, that I had entertained some affection for him, but that religion had stood in the way. That was the belief of my old cousin and duenna, and she may have conveyed it to him. At all events it was not long before he made his proposal to Felipe, who was willing and eager to give his consent. He urged me to do the same; but I refused. It was the only thing I ever did refuse him. But my

heart was sick. I thought I should never be able to look upon any man without horror.”

The Señora sighed. Her voice had softened perceptibly. She seemed to be struggling with a consciousness that there had been very little aversion in her demeanor towards the man at whom she was looking now.

“Felipe yielded to my entreaties so far as to tell my suitor that his suit must not be pressed for some time to come. It must have been understood between them that I should most likely consent at some future time. On that footing we continued to live as good friends. I came to like the Señor who was so amiable, so devoted, and so entirely respectful to me. As you have seen, he is a man without a single bad quality; a diamond in the rough, perhaps, but still a diamond.”

Tarleton nodded. “I have rarely met a man who impressed me with such a conviction of his sterling worth.”

“I thank you, Señor. I wish you to believe that I also do him that justice. It is due to no fault on his part that I am not happy with him. A woman’s heart is not under her own control.”

The fair speaker looked down a little helplessly at the ruins of her fan. Deprived of the aid of that wonderful instrument she seemed unable to express her most intimate thoughts. She could only sigh again.

“You will have guessed how the matter was arranged. I learned that the Señor was about to go to England, to find his old partner, with whom he had some business to transact. Felipe saw a chance for fulfilling his oath at last. By himself he would have been helpless. We neither of us had any idea that Arturo was a noble, and therefore easily to be discovered. We imagined him to be an adventurer who had only to change his name and disappear. We knew at the same time that he was greedy, and that he was not likely to resist the temptation of disclosing himself to a man who was his friend, and who had a profitable bargain to offer him. Felipe urged me to marry Señor Costello and accompany him to Europe. He was to follow secretly and keep in touch with me. In that way he expected to learn the whereabouts of his enemy, and execute the vengeance so long delayed.”

The Señora seemed to have no more to say. Her statement was completed, as far as was necessary to explain the motives for Caythorpe’s murder and the circumstances which had rendered it possible. She could not fairly be asked to denounce her brother as having actually committed it, or to give information that might assist the police to find and arrest him.

Tarleton only ventured to show curiosity on one point.

“It must have startled Caythorpe to meet you when he came to the hotel.”

The Señora shook her head. “I do not think so. It seemed to me that he had prepared himself to meet me beforehand. You see that we had not parted in any anger. I had continued till the last moment to look upon him as my betrothed—as my husband in all but the name. He had left me expecting his return to make full atonement. And he, perhaps, had suffered from some remorse. I fancied that he felt some relief at finding me married to his friend. He hoped no doubt that I had consoled myself and that the past was wiped out. His behavior to me was that of an old friend who did not wish to revive painful memories.”

That was all. The Señora rose to her feet as if to signify that she had said all she intended to say. Sir Frank followed her example. Then suddenly there came a startling transformation. The proud, beautiful woman threw herself on her knees and snatched the hand of the judge.

“Tell me what you have decided!” she implored. “You have made up your mind by this time. Is it to spare my brother’s life?”

Very gravely Tarleton bent his head in assent. Very gently he raised the passionate suppliant, and after disengaging his own hand, laid a respectful kiss on hers in the courtly fashion of old Spain.

“Your brother has nothing to fear from me. I have only one piece of advice to give you. If he is responsible for that bad man’s death, he should leave this country without delay.”

The Señora’s thanks were inaudible as she was escorted out of the house. When he had seen her drive away, the consultant came back into the room where the tragical interview had taken place. He carefully picked up the pieces of the broken fan, as though every morsel were sacred in his eyes, and locked them away in the cupboard that contained some of his choicest possessions.

It was late that evening, almost too late for a well-conducted clergyman, when Sir Lionel Caythorpe returned to his host’s roof.

The good old man had passed a happy day. His morning had been spent in the National Gallery, renewing his acquaintance with old favorites among the pictures, and pointing out their merits to his niece, and further in recognizing with natural indignation that the Director of the Gallery had had the bad taste to hang more than one new and strange one, which possessed no merit whatever.

Then he had been daring enough to take Poppy to lunch in a restaurant, not even a temperance restaurant, but one of those dangerous resorts in

which foreigners, of course doubtful foreigners, are to be found eating the more than doubtful dishes of their own countries.

Sir Lionel was Briton enough to feel certain that no native of any other country ever settled in England except under the pressure of stern necessity. It added a flavor of almost painful excitement to his repast to look around him and speculate on the crimes that had driven the various guests into banishment. There was one suspicious character whom he put down without hesitation as a Bolshevik emissary, until he heard him address the waiter in idiomatic English. He was rather puzzled to fix on the guilty secret of an extremely respectable looking middle-aged Frenchman, who happened to be, in fact, a professor in the lycée recently established in South Kensington by the University of Lille. But his greatest anxiety was to discover, if he could, the man for whom the police had been searching London during the last two days. Unfortunately every other man in the restaurant was bearded to some extent. The recluse from Cumberland had to give up the task of trying to distinguish the Señora's brother among them, and console himself with the hope that the crime would be traced to the Hindu in the end.

The afternoon was passed in the comparatively harmless society of lions and tigers, elephants and rhinoceroses. The reverend gentleman showed an almost morbid partiality for the most savage animals, and scarcely wasted a moment on the innocent deer and the beautiful waterfowl in the collection. He was fascinated by the cobras and boa constrictors in the reptile house, and refused to pay the smallest attention to the chameleons and lizards. Poppy indulged him to his heart's content. Her sense of humor was aroused. She felt herself more like an aunt escorting a young and bloodthirsty nephew than a great-niece being taken round by an aged uncle. She was sorely tempted to propose a joy ride on an elephant, but she really feared that the offer might be accepted.

Meanwhile a surprise awaited them both. When the time came to enter the enclosure where tea was being dispensed in the open air, Mr. Cyril Bunting rose from a table in the foreground and approached them with the aspect of a felon detected in the commission of a shameful crime.

Sir Lionel's brow grew dark. Here was a proof that his first judgment of the solicitor had been right. Not even Poppy could pretend that this meeting was accidental. It was as clear as daylight that the young man had plotted to follow them in pursuit of his interested designs. Mr. Bunting himself confessed as much. He sought, indeed, to shift the blame from his own shoulders. According to him the encounter was due to treachery on the part of Mrs. Costello. The Señora, it appeared, had informed him over the telephone that morning how and where Poppy and her uncle proposed to

spend the day, and had suggested that it would be a courteous attention on his part to join them. Bunting had yielded to the temptress. He had stooped to deceive his office boy by feigning a business engagement which would take him away from the office for the rest of the day, and had dismissed the unsuspecting child to his home at an early hour. No wonder a sense of guilt sat on him heavily, and gave to his greeting an air of bashful constraint.

Poppy exerted herself to soothe his remorse and at the same time to extenuate his conduct in her uncle's eyes. Her spirits rose; she was brighter and gayer than she had yet been since the grave event of the week before. Mr. Bunting had taken it on himself to order their tea beforehand, and she thanked him warmly for his forethought on Sir Lionel's behalf. She found a common topic to bring them into friendly agreement in the subject of Mr. Costello's business offer to herself. Discreetly she opened the young man's eyes to the fact that his best way to propitiate his elder was to bow to his natural claim to a voice in the matter. Sir Lionel was emphatic in proclaiming that the American was to be trusted as a sincere friend, and he was able to cite Sir Frank Tarleton's opinion to the same effect. Bunting had learned by this time by personal experience that appearances may be against the most innocent, and perhaps he had already come to feel rather ashamed of his suspicious attitude towards the genial Irishman. His respect for Tarleton's judgment was unbounded. He listened to Sir Lionel with the utmost deference, and cunningly professed to have less confidence in his own knowledge of the world than in that of the Cumberland recluse.

Poppy's uncle was won by this flattery. He began to see in the lawyer a well-meaning youth whose only real faults were those of ignorance and inexperience, faults of which he was willing to be cured by the advice of a sagacious elder. Under Poppy's treatment it soon became manifest that neither she nor Bunting any longer regarded the awkward matter of the guardianship seriously. The office had been thrust on the young man against his will, in fact against his own protest at the time. He and she were equally thankful that Poppy had now found a real guardian, one able and willing to relieve Mr. Bunting of his incongruous responsibility, one to whom both of them could look up as a guide and patron.

The great-uncle's jealousy was appeased. Insensibly his tone to his young rival changed. He began to see in him a modest youth in need of encouragement rather than repression. He allowed him to pay for the tea without misgiving. Then he graciously invited Mr. Bunting to accompany them in a further exploration of the Gardens. He led the way to the Mappin terraces, and pointed out the fiercest bears, expatiating on their ferocious propensities with the keenest relish. When Poppy artfully inquired whether

there were any wild animals in the neighborhood of his rectory he proclaimed that his glebe was infested with rabbits of untamable character and destructive tendencies. Led away by the recollection of the injuries done by them to his garden crops, he rashly asked Mr. Bunting if he could shoot, and before he knew what he was doing, practically committed himself to an invitation to the fortune-hunter to visit him on a mission of slaughter and revenge.

When they parted for Sir Lionel to take his niece back to the Aldwych Hotel it was understood that the clergyman was invested with full authority to deal with Mr. Costello according to his own judgment of what was best in Poppy's interest, and that Bunting's part would be henceforth merely that of a solicitor carrying out whatever instructions he received.

"An excellent young man," was the verdict pronounced by his elder as they came away. "I feel that I have done him an injustice, and I shall be glad to make it up. In my opinion he is quite a safe friend for you. I don't think there is any fear of his presuming on his position under poor Rowland's absurd will. He is much too modest to consider himself a match for an heiress like yourself. I don't think you will be troubled by his attentions in future."

In this frame of mind the good old gentleman arrived at the hotel, where he found himself expected to dine. Contrary as it was to his notions to go on accepting hospitality without returning it, there was no resisting Mr. Costello's hearty insistence.

"We haven't fixed up our business yet, and this may be our last chance," the American said. "The Señora has had about enough of London; she is hankering to get home again; and I've nothing else to keep me here, once I have fixed up things with you."

Sir Lionel had found London pleasanter than he expected, but in spite of that he would have been glad to carry off his niece to Cumberland, but for the duty that lay upon him to see that his late nephew's murderer was brought to justice. When he hinted at this reason for remaining, Costello looked slightly ashamed.

"I suppose I ought to feel as you do about that, seeing that my coming over here was so unlucky for him. But the fact is I've got it into my head that, whether that scoundrelly brother-in-law of mine did for him or not, he's bolted by this time. The Señora has seen nothing more of him, so she says, but between ourselves I shouldn't wonder if she's given him the office. You can't blame her for not wanting to see her brother hanged, bad lot as he is."

This being the view that the baronet himself had already expressed to Tarleton, he could only acquiesce. Inwardly he was rather relieved than otherwise by the intelligence that the man with the black beard was probably out of the country. It put an end to any lingering idea that he might be lying in wait to obtain the mining shares, perhaps at the cost of another crime. And it left Sir Lionel free to take his charge home with him as soon as the departure of the Costellos left her adrift.

When the ladies came into dinner the Señora was in her most ravishing attire. The black fan had been replaced by a yellow one, and what an unprincipled adventurer is to a priest, such was the yellow fan to its predecessor. The yellow fan knew nothing of uncles and fathers and such uninteresting characters. It knew only of wicked men, dangerous men, in whose fatally attractive company its mistress was not safe for one moment. Even while dinner was proceeding the yellow fan was on the alert. It raised itself between the courses to defend the Señora from her too fascinating guest. When the table was cleared its alarm became profound. It besought Sir Lionel, it adjured him, to spare a heart that was at his mercy.

On the whole it was well that the venerable man was as little able to understand the language of the fan as he would have been to understand its mistress if she had addressed him in Spanish. He perceived that the Señora was nervous, and it was borne in upon him that in spite of his years he was still a man able to excite admiration in a feminine bosom. But the thought that he might be seriously endangering the Señora's peace never crossed his mind. Soothed rather than disturbed by this homage, he was in a mood to bring the business negotiation with Mr. Costello to a prompt conclusion.

On Poppy's behalf, and with her consent, he accepted the terms which Costello was empowered to offer on behalf of his syndicate. The generous proposal to admit Poppy into its ranks was declined in view of the fact that it would entail her going to live in Vera Cruz. It was arranged that Mr. Costello and Sir Lionel should meet at Mr. Bunting's office the next morning and carry out the transfer of the shares.

Tarleton listened to this report from his guest with every sign of satisfaction. At the close he said:

"After you have finished your business, I shall be glad if you and Mr. Bunting will come on to me here. I shall have something to tell you both."

CHAPTER XIX

THE following day Poppy was surprised by having a note brought to her with her early cup of tea, a note marked—*Private*.

On opening it she found it came from Sir Frank Tarleton. The contents were somewhat mysterious. Sir Frank informed her that he should be calling for her in his car in an hour's time, and he begged her to be waiting for him, dressed to go out, in the lounge below. He requested her to say nothing to her host and hostess, if she could manage to get away without seeing them. If not, she might tell them that she had been summoned to go to the house in Drysdale Park on business that would not wait.

Poppy obeyed without hesitation. She had been left in ignorance of the relationship between the man with the black beard and the Señora, but she knew just enough of the situation to understand that Tarleton might have something to tell her which he did not want the Costellos to hear. And grateful as she was for the kindness shown by them to her she had become increasingly conscious that there were reserves in the Señora that she could not penetrate. It had been a relief to her the day before to find herself in the simpler atmosphere breathed by dear old Sir Lionel, and she was looking forward to exchanging her present quarters for his peaceful Cumberland home.

There was no difficulty in carrying out Sir Frank's directions. Mr. Costello was far from being an early riser, and the Señora rarely showed herself much before eleven. The moment Tarleton appeared in the lounge Poppy was by his side, and she slipped with him out of the hotel, little guessing that she was not to enter it again.

As soon as they were in the car the doctor thanked her for her ready compliance with his wishes. Then he proceeded to startle her.

"My object in taking you out to Harlesden is that you may be able to put your things together, and give whatever instructions you like about the furniture. I suppose I am right in thinking that you are never likely to want to live there again?"

The girl shivered at the thought.

"It's very good of you, Sir Frank. No, certainly I don't think I could bring myself to sleep another night there if I had anywhere else to go."

"You won't have any difficulty about that in future," Tarleton said cheerfully. "I hope Sir Lionel will take you down to Cumberland by to-night's mail."

“To-night!” Welcome as the idea was to Poppy, the face she turned to her companion showed some disturbance at this sudden change of prospect, and mutely asked an explanation.

Tarleton’s task was a delicate one. He saw no necessity that Poppy should ever be told the entire truth about her uncle’s death. It could not be told without revealing him to her in a very hateful light, and poisoning her memory of one to whom she was under a debt. It seemed far better that she should be left in the belief that he had been guilty of nothing worse than that sort of legalized robbery that takes place every day in the dignified name of finance, and had perished unjustifiably at the hands of a man not really better than himself.

Accordingly he conveyed to Poppy that the police were now fully convinced that Sir Rowland Caythorpe had been killed by the man with the black beard in revenge for a financial transaction which had brought him to grief. They were now satisfied further that the assassin had made his escape to his own country, where he would be out of reach of the English law. There was reason to fear, unfortunately, that he had been enabled to discover Sir Rowland’s whereabouts, and thus to effect his purpose, by secretly watching Costello, who had thus been an innocent agent in the crime. And as Costello’s trip to Europe had been taken to please his bride, herself an old friend of Sir Rowland’s, the Señora suffered very keenly from the feeling that she was responsible as well. London had become hateful to her in consequence, and it would be doing her a kindness to leave her free to depart at the earliest moment.

Poppy was fairly well satisfied. Her first burst of anger against the assassin had had time to die down. No efforts on her part could bring him to justice now. Her mind was relieved from a burden, and she was glad to be able to turn her thoughts to happier things.

When they reached the house in Drysdale Park they found the formidable guardian in a state of collapse, and ready to welcome them as a beleaguered garrison welcomes a relieving army. Inspector Charles, it appeared, had withdrawn his men two days before, and Mrs. Maggitts had been left absolutely alone. Her sense of duty, stern as that of the Roman sentinel who refused to desert his post when Pompeii was being buried under the ashes of Mount Vesuvius, had forbidden her to quit the house in search of food; and moreover forgetfulness on the part of Mr. Bunting had left her without funds. For the last forty-eight hours she had subsisted on the passing charity of the baker and the milkman. Poppy’s appearance and affectionate greeting moved the faithful creature to tears.

Poppy was horrified, and the kind-hearted physician was not a little distressed. He insisted that Mrs. Maggitts should take a seat in his car and come at once to obtain an ample supply of provisions, while he undertook to send out Mr. Bunting to her relief before many hours had passed. He left it to her young mistress to rejoice her with the news that wealth beyond her wildest dreams would be at her command henceforth, to engage a charwoman to keep her company till the house should be disposed of, and to assure her of a permanent place as soon as Poppy had a house of her own.

When he was going away Poppy inquired when she was to go back to say good-by to her late host and hostess.

“I expect you will have to do that by letter,” was the answer. “I have given orders to have your clothes packed and sent round to my house. I shall be very much surprised if they have not left the hotel by now.”

From Harlesden the expert drove straight to the India Office, where he had a rather humiliating confession to make to his friend Howard.

Fortunately Mr. Howard possessed a sense of humor, and he was besides able to view the situation officially with satisfaction.

“I’m not sure I could have found any better way of dealing with the business,” he was amiable enough to say. “I think I shall have a hint given to the Ranee that you took the diamond to her and let yourself be robbed of it on purpose. It is much better that the old lady should put it back in her treasury than that we should have to take possession of it. There is nothing that irritates Indian opinion more than any interference with the princes. The Ranee has plenty of other jewels that we have no objection to her parting with.” The autocrat of India smiled good humoredly as he added, “But after this you mustn’t expect me to let you walk off with any more State jewels under my eyes.”

Tarleton hung his head.

“I’m afraid I must confess that I rather meant to steal it myself, for a purpose, if Ram Chundra hadn’t been before me. I had pretty well made up my mind to offer to let him have it back as the price of a service I wanted him to render me.”

Mr. Howard stared at him in wonder.

“My dear Tarleton, what a man of mystery you are! Is it anything I mustn’t know?”

“You shall know if you promise me to let him off with a caution. The fact is he has been to see me since in a state of abject terror, to implore

forgiveness. And he has now rendered me the service.”

Howard’s curiosity prevailed. He pledged the good faith of the British Raj that the Ranee’s too faithful retainer should not be harmed, and in return Tarleton told him the story that only four other persons were ever to hear.

One of the four, of course, was the official of the neighboring Foreign Office, who had still to receive Tarleton’s thanks for a very interesting despatch received the previous day from Vera Cruz. Another was the Honorable Captain Charles whom his friend foresaw that he might have some difficulty in reconciling to the course which he had ventured to take. The others were the two whom he found waiting for him when he got back to Montagu Street.

The Reverend Sir Lionel Caythorpe looked excited. He was fresh from an eventful transaction which had caused him to feel like Aladdin when the djinns were flying to and fro to execute his commands and pouring out countless treasures at his feet. He had further witnessed an encounter between the modest Mr. Bunting and the great financial magnate from Mexico that had greatly raised his opinion of the young solicitor, and made him feel that the late Sir Rowland Caythorpe had shown wisdom in the choice of his executor and trustee.

Mr. Costello had walked into the lawyer’s office a few minutes after Sir Lionel, prepared to take over the bundle of mining shares which lay ready for him in Mr. Bunting’s safe, and bringing with him a check for the equivalent in English money for a million Mexican dollars at the current rate of exchange. And Bunting had declined the check.

The American had been first amazed and then indignant. The check, as he pointed out, was drawn on an English bank of the highest standing in the City of London, a bank with important connections in Mexico, and it was made payable to the order of Cyril Bunting. But it was crossed, and the solicitor was firm in his refusal to accept it.

“These shares are bearer shares, as you told me yourself,” he said calmly. “You warned me to be careful with them, and I am only doing my duty to my client. The shares are practically banknotes, as I think you said, and I must have banknotes in exchange for them.”

The big man’s face turned red. The old clergyman was frightened. He thought that Bunting was unreasonable, and that he was showing suspicion which might have the result of breaking off the bargain.

“Do you think I’m going to steal the little girl’s fortune?” Costello demanded. “Do you think my check won’t be met, young man?”

The young man was quite unmoved.

"It's not my business to think," he answered sturdily. "A dozen things might happen. You may be knocked down and killed by a motor the moment you go out of my office. Your partners may have changed their minds by this time and cabled the bank to withdraw your credit. My duty is quite clear, and I can assure you there is no solicitor in England who would not do exactly what I am doing. If I took an unnecessary risk where my client's whole fortune is at stake I should deserve to be struck off the rolls."

The big man gave way. He looked at Poppy's trustee with a certain respect.

"Durned if I don't think you're right, after all," he was generous enough to admit. "Well, I'll slip round to the bank, and fetch you the money. It won't take me half an hour."

He was as good as his word. To the intense relief of Sir Lionel, who had watched him depart with the gloomiest forebodings, he was soon back again with a delightful-looking packet which he handed to the young solicitor to count.

"It's all right, Mr. Bunting," he announced. "The bank people quite understood. They said I had no business to offer you a check; so there's no grudge between us, I hope."

And when the shares had been duly handed over, he shook hands warmly with them both.

"Don't forget that if you can ever make time to get out to Vera Cruz, either of you, and Miss Poppy as well, I shall be more than glad to see you, and so will the Señora. And that reminds me, you must excuse us both to that dear little girl. She had gone out somewhere this morning before we were up, and we're just off ourselves. The Señora's waiting for me at the station, now."

As soon as the American had taken his final departure, Bunting invited Sir Lionel to come with him and see Poppy's fortune safely lodged in a neighboring bank. From thence they had come on together to Sir Frank.

Tarleton listened with pleasure to the clergyman's glowing account of what had happened, and noted with satisfaction the extreme good will that had sprung up between Poppy's uncle and her trustee. Then he took them both into the room in which he had heard the Señora's confession.

But he did not repeat that confession to them. Instead he took out of his desk the despatch he had received the day before from Vera Cruz.

"I think both you gentlemen are entitled to an explanation of my dealing with the murder of Sir Rowland Caythorpe," he began. "Officially my connection with the case ceased when I had ascertained the cause of death.

But there were certain features in the case that interested me strongly, and therefore while the police were taking what steps they thought proper, I carried on my own inquiry independently.

“I started with the conviction that the motive for the crime was not robbery, but revenge. As a matter of fact it is fairly certain now that no robbery was committed. Neither the coronet of which Inspector Charles thought so much, nor the great diamond which it suited my plans to fix attention on, nor the mining shares which Mr. Bunting believed were the criminal’s object, were actually stolen. What is more to the point is that they were never within the murderer’s reach.

“You see what I mean. A man does not risk his life by committing such a crime as murder unless he feels pretty sure that he will gain his end by it. A highwayman doesn’t shoot a traveller if he knows his pockets are empty. A man whose motive was to rob Caythorpe would have gained nothing by giving him a mortal wound of which he might die anywhere and at any time. He would have been much more likely to lie in wait for a chance of finding him in possession of the thing he coveted. He would, if he could, have gone with him into the strong room, stabbed him there, and carried off his booty. As it proved, Caythorpe’s death inside the strong room in the midst of his treasures was a pure accident, which no one could have foreseen. Therefore I ruled out the theory of robbery from the moment I had detected the cause of death. I had already in my mind the story of the Tebaldi key, and I knew that the motive in that case was purely revenge.

“Then came the question of who had a strong enough motive for such a revenge. There were only three figures before me, Lady Eardisley, the Hindu Ram Chundra, and the Mexican Mendoza. There might have been many others in the background; Sir Rowland was a man who deserved to have enemies, and no doubt he had many of whom we haven’t heard and are never likely to hear. But these three were recent ones, or rather two of them had been recently injured and the other had only recently been heard of as within striking distance.

“What I had to consider next was the injury which each had received. The Countess and the Hindu, or rather his mistress, had each been robbed. Both of them were capable, perhaps, of taking vengeance on the robber, but as far as I could see, neither of them had given up the hope of recovering what they had lost, and such a crime as this would be most likely to deprive them of their last chance of doing so. What each of them would be likely to do would be to threaten the robber, to come to him alone with a deadly weapon in their hands, and demand back their property as the price of his life. Merely to kill him, and to kill him in such a way that he wouldn’t even

know who had struck him, would be hardly a sane act. The crime could only be accounted for rationally as a vengeance taken for some injury in the past, an injury that could never be repaired.

“Then again there was the character of the weapon used. It was not a weapon that could have been purchased in any shop, or obtained at short notice. That consideration alone put the Hindu’s guilt out of the question. It was only within the last week or fortnight that he had found out for certain that Caythorpe meant to steal the diamond. It was hardly credible that he had provided himself with such a weapon in advance in the expectation of having to commit a murder, and there hadn’t been enough time to make it even if he could have found anyone in this country to undertake the job. The argument was almost as strong in Lady Eardisley’s case. I ascertained that she had not been abroad since the Earl’s death. It was inconceivable that she could have run the risk of ordering such a weapon to be made, even if she had the patience to wait for it, and thought it would be of any use to her when it was made.

“Finally I had before me Sir Rowland’s own evidence in the shape of his statements to Mr. Bunting. It was very strong evidence that he was in mortal fear of Mendoza, and there was no evidence that he felt any fear of anyone else. His theory, if I may call it so, was practically the same as mine. He knew that neither of the people he had robbed would be foolish enough to put an end to all chance of recovering their property by killing him unawares. And he knew that he had done Mendoza an injury which could never be atoned for except by his death.

“It seemed pretty certain to me from the first that that injury was a graver one than any financial wrong. Consider the position. Mendoza could only have got at Caythorpe by following the Costellos to England. Therefore he must know something of their movements and their plans. In fact it came out pretty soon that there was, or had been, some connection between him and them, that they had all four been associated in some way out in Mexico. It was most probable, therefore, that Mendoza was aware that Sir Rowland’s Mexican properties had now become valuable, and that the result of Costello’s visit would be to make him a rich man. And if so, the same argument that applied to Ram Chundra and to Lady Eardisley would apply to him. If his object had been to obtain the restitution of stolen property, his only reasonable course would be to take Caythorpe by surprise and offer him the choice between making reparation and being killed.

“I was satisfied that only one kind of wrong could be at the back of the whole affair. It must be a wrong to a woman.”

As Tarleton pronounced this sentence his two listeners exchanged looks less of surprise than dismay. They had vaguely perceived what was coming, but now they suddenly realized something else that the speaker was about to put into words.

“There was one woman, and only one woman, already before me of whom I had reason to think that she had some connection with the man whom Sir Rowland feared, and who had openly declared that she had known Sir Rowland himself in Mexico. I had only to put two and two together to come to the conclusion that she was the woman he had wronged, and whose wrong Mendoza had sworn to avenge. It didn’t surprise me to learn a day or two afterwards that he was her brother. Her husband had spoken of him with strong dislike and disgust, but never in her hearing; and he had spoken of him in a way that rather sounded as though he had known him well at one time and hadn’t found it quite easy to shake him off. I decided to make sure. I took the step which my friend Charles has omitted to take. I caused inquiries to be made in Vera Cruz, and this is the report I have received.”

The consultant turned over the papers more to keep his fingers busy than because he had any real need to refer to them.

“It appears that the Englishman Arthur Lewis, or Arturo Luiz, as he called himself out there, is still remembered in Vera Cruz, and the other three are quite well-known figures in the society of the place. Mendoza was one of the first friends that Caythorpe made after his arrival there. They were fellow-gamblers, but it doesn’t seem that Caythorpe cheated him in any way; at all events there was no scandal of that kind. But there was a scandal about his relations with Mendoza’s sister, who was a good many years younger than her brother.

“At first the general opinion was that they were going to marry. Caythorpe was always going to Mendoza’s house. The first thing that gave a shock to the Spanish society at Vera Cruz was his taking up his residence with the Mendozas. They were miserably poor for people of their social standing, and they lived in an old barrack with room in it for half a dozen families. But Caythorpe’s footing seemed to be that of a brother-in-law. It was believed in many quarters that he had privately married the Señorita Dolores, but no one could explain why the marriage had been kept secret. At last a horrid rumor got abroad. It was said that Felipe Mendoza had taken advantage of his young sister’s innocence to sell her to the Englishman. He had played on her feelings by pretending that he had done something that had put him in Caythorpe’s power, and she had sacrificed herself, as she supposed, to save her brother.

“My informant,” Tarleton tapped the paper, “believes that this story is true. It roused such a feeling in the Spanish community that Caythorpe had to fly for his life. Mendoza, of course, denied everything. He asserted that Caythorpe, or Lewis, had led him to believe that he was going to marry his sister. He quarrelled with him openly before he left, and swore to kill him unless he kept his word. But he has never taken any step to carry out his threat.”

“You mean till he came to London?” put in Sir Lionel. Bunting merely gave the doctor a look of intelligence.

“I mean what I say,” Tarleton answered. “My informant tells me that Mendoza has been seen walking the streets of Vera Cruz every day since the Costellos came to Europe, and he is there now.”

CHAPTER XX

THE statement that the man with the black beard, the man whom Sir Rowland Caythorpe had feared so abjectly, the man whose threatening figure had haunted the background throughout, and against whom the coroner's jury had all but found a verdict, the statement that he had been in Mexico all the time came as a shock to both the listeners.

The old clergyman was too bewildered to speak. Bunting, as soon as he got over his surprise, exclaimed, "Why, the Señora herself thought she had seen him twice!"

Tarleton's face relaxed in a deep smile.

"Yes, that is the point. The belief that Mendoza was in London has rested solely on her testimony against her own brother. Testimony given so unwillingly, too, only to her husband in the first place, and repeated to me with a stipulation that it shouldn't be used by the police."

"Then what— —" Bunting broke off, afraid to commit himself by asking the question in his mind.

"The Señora is a fine actress, I think the finest I have ever seen off the stage. She would have deceived me, most likely, but for one consideration. The wound I discovered was in the front. The dart discovered afterwards by Sir Michael Craig in the backbone might have been shot by an enemy from behind. But the shot in front, the one which actually proved mortal, could only come from a friend. I mean, of course, someone whom Caythorpe regarded as a friend, someone able to approach him without exciting his suspicion and discharge the dart from some apparently harmless instrument, as Tebaldi discharged his from his key.

"For that reason I never seriously entertained the theory that Mendoza had any hand in the murder. The Señora herself made the mistake of describing him as wearing his beard, the very feature which Caythorpe had mentioned as his distinguishing-mark, the feature which he was expecting and dreading to see. For Mendoza to approach him in front near enough to make use of such a weapon as I had in view would have been quite impossible. The fatal wound could only have been given by one of two persons, the Señora herself or her husband. Caythorpe's death had followed on their arrival, and after he had met them at least once on friendly terms.

"It may sound rather fanciful, but my suspicion was first directed to the Señora by the idea that a needle was a woman's weapon. A more serious consideration was that she had only just married Costello, and that it would

have been a very extraordinary thing if she had brought herself to tell him of the wrong she had received years before from another man. Assuming I was right in my judgment as to the nature of that wrong, it was the last secret a woman would willingly confide to the man she had married. And I was struck by the fact that the marriage coincided with Costello's voyage to Europe to find out the guilty man. I believed, and I now know that I was right in believing, that the Señora's main inducement to marry had been the opportunity of avenging herself at last.

"Costello's behavior throughout was that of a perfectly genuine straightforward man with nothing to conceal. He was frank even in his business dealing. He made no attempt to take advantage of Caythorpe's death to secure the shares he wanted at a price below their value, as nine out of ten men would have felt justified in doing. It seemed to me that he was convinced that his brother-in-law was the murderer, and that he only refrained from saying so openly out of tenderness for his wife.

"After the first night, therefore, I had very little doubt that the Señora was the author of Caythorpe's death. And unless I am very greatly mistaken, she detected the suspicion in my mind as soon as I had formed it. I may have deceived others into the belief that I suspected the Hindu, or that I accepted the story of the man with the black beard, but I doubt if I once deceived her."

The two listeners could only gasp at this last revelation. They cast their minds back to the scenes they had witnessed in the Aldwych Hotel, when Sir Frank Tarleton had seemed to be blindly worshipping the Señora, and the beautiful Spaniard had seemed to be as much fascinated by him as he had been by her. Tarleton himself sighed rather regretfully as he recalled the experience.

"It was one of the strangest situations in which I ever found myself," he confessed. "There I was, professing to be on the trail of the Indian—and a very interesting trail it proved—and afterwards appearing to be reluctantly convinced that her brother was the guilty man; and there was she, pretending to believe in my pretences, but all the time trying to soften me and persuade me to take a lenient view of her own deed. Up to the last moment she never admitted that it was her deed; she never admitted that she knew herself to be under suspicion. She came here and told me the whole story, much as it is told in this report, but a good deal colored in her brother's favor. But she professed to be telling it in her brother's defence. She appealed to me to spare him, not herself. Yes," Tarleton's tone was one of the sincerest admiration, "it was a superb piece of acting, indeed."

The Reverend Sir Lionel thought it his duty to be shocked.

“And you let her go?” he said reproachfully.

“If you had heard her story, and been in my place, if she had knelt to you for mercy, are you sure that you would have handed her over to the police?” asked the physician. And the clergyman made no answer.

“Remember that I had no official responsibility,” the medical adviser of the Home Office added. “My duty was discharged. I had faithfully reported the cause of death. I did more. Everything that Mr. Bunting told me that had any bearing on the case I passed on to my friend Inspector Charles. I repeated the Señora’s evidence to him for what it was worth. He was in charge of the case. It was within his power to find out everything I have found out as a private individual. He could have cabled to Vera Cruz and learned all I have learned. I think I was more than fair to him. I gave him the hint that the weapon had probably been obtained in Venice, with the result that he found the label of a Venetian hotel on the Costello’s luggage. I invited him to search their luggage for the weapon itself, and he failed to find it. My own agent was more successful.”

Tarleton got up. “Ram Chundra, the Hindu you have heard about and Mr. Bunting has seen, happens to be an expert juggler and thief; and I had a claim on his services. I sent him to the Aldwych Hotel, telling him what to look for, and here it is.”

He walked across to the cupboard, in which he had placed the fragments of the fan the day before, and returned with a long, narrow, cardboard box. He lifted the cover and disclosed a black fan, apparently the duplicate of the Señora’s faithful companion.

“This fan does not open.” He took it out of the box and showed it to his deeply interested friends. “But as you will see, it is a very powerful spring pistol.”

He set up the blotting-pad on his desk as a target, pointed the top of the fan at it, and pressed a small ornament on the handle. There was an almost inaudible click, and a tiny steel dart, exactly like those found by the surgeon in Sir Rowland Caythorpe’s corpse, was lodged up to the head in the blotting-paper.

“I don’t think that leaves much room for doubt,” the expert said with quiet satisfaction. “If I am right in thinking that the Señora saw the Tebaldi key in Venice, or heard of it, and had an imitation made for her, she was shrewd enough to have it made in a shape that would attract no notice. She had to think of her husband as well as the man she meant to kill. She chose an article that her husband was accustomed to see her carrying and using as an aid to conversation.” His voice sank. “It may have been familiar to Sir

Rowland, too. Perhaps there were associations that it was meant to recall—who knows? She told me that they met as friends. Sir Rowland's mind seems to have been in a rather disordered state for some time past. Apparently his whole fear was of the brother; he thought the sister had forgiven him, or forgotten the past in her new position as his friend's wife. We know that he lunched with them both, so that he must have felt quite at his ease. No doubt this fan was on the table beside her. She had only to take it up."

"Do you think she found out that it was gone, and has fled in consequence?" asked the solicitor.

"I gave her a pretty strong hint to be off when she was here," Tarleton answered. "But she knew that this was in my possession last night. She had left a broken fan behind her and I gave it to Ram Chundra with instructions to place it where it couldn't fail to meet her eye. The moment she saw it she must have guessed what it meant, and looked to see if this fan had gone. It was my message to her—and I think she understood it very well."

Again the doctor sighed, as though he had not quite succeeded in shaking off the spell of the fascinating owner of the fan. He put back the deadly weapon in his cupboard in silence. Then he spoke to Sir Lionel, who still looked uncertain whether he ought to approve or disapprove of this ending to the case.

"It is not too late for you to take action, if you think fit. They can't have left for Mexico yet. Most probably they have gone over to France to take a boat from Marseilles. There is nothing to prevent your going to the police and having them stopped even now. But Costello has deserved well of your niece, after all, and it will be rather hard on him."

Poppy's uncle relented. Perhaps he felt grateful to Mr. Costello. And perhaps even he could not quite overcome a certain weakness for the beautiful woman who had made him feel that he was extremely agreeable to her.

Mr. Cyril Bunting showed no disposition whatever to pursue the matter further. He acknowledged frankly that no one but Sir Frank Tarleton had discerned the truth, and no one else had any right to take advantage of his discovery. And besides he had other fish to fry.

As the trustee of an heiress with a fortune of something like two hundred thousand pounds, which it was for him to invest and look after till she came of age, his responsibilities were heavy, and it was clear that they weighed on his mind.

It was with an air of subdued melancholy that he set off to Harlesden in quest of his ward, leaving it to Sir Lionel to make the needful preparations for a night journey to Carlisle. The reverend gentleman spoke well of him behind his back. He confided in Tarleton that he had had fears at one time that Mr. Bunting might presume on his past friendship with Poppy to aspire to her hand, but that he was now convinced that the young man was too sensible and modest to indulge in any such ambition.

Apparently, Poppy had a good deal of packing to do, and a good many directions to give Mrs. Maggitts, for it was rather late when the two young people returned. There was a striking contrast in their demeanor. Poppy seemed to be in excellent spirits, presumably due to the pleasure she was looking forward to as her uncle's guest, and the prospect of meeting the curate and the curate's wife, not to mention the rabbits and the dog and the governess-cart. But Bunting had by no means shaken off his anxieties. He was silent and grave. It was in vain that his ward tried to rally him. Her playful allusions to his position as her guardian only served to deepen his gloom. Sir Lionel himself took pity on the young man. He conveyed to his niece that her levity was not quite becoming, and that the serious business relations between her and her solicitor ought not to be made a matter for jest.

At the same time he cheered up Mr. Bunting by renewing his invitation to him to come on a visit to the rectory. He assured him that he would not find it so dull as he probably feared. In addition to the sport afforded by the rabbits, there was a tolerable trout stream, and the lakes were not too far off for an excursion by rail.

When he had won a hesitating consent from the solicitor he was emboldened to press an invitation on Tarleton as well, which was more readily accepted. After the eventful experiences of the last week the doctor felt that he should be rather lonely when his venerable guest had left him. And he was not a little sorry to see the last of Poppy, when she and her uncle went off to the station escorted by her faithful guardian.

He was sufficiently interested in Mr. Bunting to press the young man to come and see him from time to time, and he was not long in getting him to unburden himself of his fairly transparent secret. Bunting confessed that he had not been quite indifferent to his charming little partner in the lawn-tennis club. He had envisaged the possibility of one day asking her to become his partner for life. That possibility had now vanished for ever. Even if her fabulous wealth had not lifted her far out of his reach, his fiduciary position would have made it a breach of trust on his part to court his ward as long as she was under age.

Sir Frank made no attempt to controvert these scruples. He seemed, indeed, to feel their force as much as Mr. Bunting himself. He gave him sound advice.

"I should think your best course would be to let Miss Lowless see plainly that you only regard her as a client. Deal with her on a strictly business footing. Remember that unless you charge her the full fees you are entitled to you will be putting her in the wrong. It will look as if you were trying to establish a claim on her. Send her in an account for your services, and let it be as high as you can make it. That will set her at ease, and prevent her feeling that she has been the one to create a distance between you."

The advice surprised Mr. Bunting, but he could not but yield to his friend's reasoning. However, he forebore to act on it till he had paid his promised visit to the rectory. There it was at once evident to him that he was in a false position. Poppy manifested an entire oblivion of the gulf that now separated her from her former friend. She drove the governess-cart to the station to meet him, and drove him back through the village before the eyes of all her uncle's parishioners, every one of whom rushed to the absurd conclusion that he was her young man. Sir Lionel, of course, knew better, yet even he was unduly cordial in his reception of the visitor. Everyone knows that a solicitor sometimes has to pass a short time as the guest of his clients at a distance, and that he is entitled to the treatment of a gentleman. It does not follow that his host need come out to the garden gate to receive him, or that he should find his dressing-table covered with flowers, or that a bottle of the choicest port should be opened to do him honor.

It required all Mr. Bunting's firmness of principle to hold out against the temptations of the next fortnight, the time to which he wisely limited his holiday. Poppy's innocence of the world, and her ignorance of her guardian's secret feelings, were amazing, and led her into terrible indiscretions. She came with him to shoot the rabbits, and pitied the rabbits when they were shot. With some inconsistency she made him give her lessons in shooting, and aimed at more than one rabbit herself. But she was never cruel enough to hit one, which might be partly accounted for by the fact that she always shut her eyes tightly before letting off the gun.

Her great-uncle showed some sense of his duty as chaperon, but Poppy circumvented him with ease. She heartlessly took the visitor for long walks beyond the old gentleman's powers. She chose to ascend steep hills at a pace that left him gasping below. He was only comforted by the visible distress caused to the unfortunate Bunting by these unmaidenly tactics. In his heart he suspected his niece of being a flirt, but he would not have said so for

worlds. On the contrary he took occasion to point out to the victim that Poppy meant nothing by her frivolous conduct.

“She is young and thoughtless,” he observed sagely. “She looks upon you as her guardian, and draws no distinction between you and me. It is only her way of showing respect.”

The curate’s wife thought differently, however.

As the days went by poor Poppy began to droop a little. It might have been that her ill-success with the rabbits was preying on her mind; but the curate’s wife did not think so. She considered that Poppy had missed her aim in another direction, and also that she had only got what she deserved. The curate’s wife did respect Mr. Bunting. She praised him to the curate as a young man who was a profound judge of girls, who was not to be entrapped by their arts, and was only revolted by their shameless goings-on.

It was with a sad face that Poppy drove the governess-cart back through the village on the day of her guardian’s departure. Sir Lionel perceived that something was seriously amiss, and his heart misgave him. He followed his little niece into her room and found her in tears. He nearly broke down himself at the sight, and folded her in his arms.

“My dear, my dear, I’m only an old man, and I’m afraid I’m not fit to take care of you. Won’t you tell me what it is?”

Poppy sobbed out that she loved the departed one with her whole heart, and was sure that he loved her, but equally sure that he would never, never tell her so because of her hateful riches.

Almost the same confession was being made not many hours afterwards by the unhappy trustee to his friend in Montagu Street. All that Sir Frank did in answer was to repeat his mysterious advice concerning the solicitor’s bill, and insist that it should be dispatched at once.

“Charge her for your visit,” he said sternly. “Make her pay for taking up so much of your valuable time. Let her see that you are adamant.”

The forlorn one promised; and Tarleton next proceeded to pack up for his own trip to Cumberland. An imploring letter from Sir Lionel the next morning hastened his movements. The next day found him at the rectory. His reception was a warm one. He, also, was met by the governess-cart. He, also, was favored with a bottle of choice port. But perhaps his dressing-table was not quite so closely covered with flowers.

That night he talked seriously with the old baronet. He dwelt on Mr. Bunting’s merits. He reminded him that the two young people had been all but engaged before either of them knew that Poppy was an heiress, and that there would be some dishonor in breaking off the match on that account.

Match-making was almost as great a hobby with the doctor as the detection of crime, and he was equally expert in both. He did not go to bed till he had obtained Sir Lionel's undertaking to write to the young man making him a formal offer of his niece's hand.

In the morning Poppy was overwhelmed by the reception of a formidable sealed envelope containing several sheets of foolscap covered with figures that added up to a sum that frightened her. Bunting had shown thoroughness, indeed. He had charged six-and-eightpence for an attendance at the Zoölogical Gardens. He demanded thirteen-and-fourpence for each interview with Mrs. Maggitts. The account was not sent for settlement, of course. It was receipted. Bunting had settled it himself out of the funds in his hands.

Tarleton silently enjoyed her dismay until she appealed to him for sympathy. Then he spoke seriously to her. He told her that strong measures were necessary in dealing with a man like Mr. Bunting, and that she must put her foot down at once.

"Write to him," he enjoined. "Complain. Tell him that this bill is monstrous. Say that you can see that your whole fortune is going to be swallowed up in law costs. Add that you have consulted your uncle and me, and that we have both advised you that you can't afford to have him as a solicitor, and that it will be cheaper for you to marry him. And let him see that you mean to do it."

Mr. Cyril Bunting would have envied the fee that the doctor received for his advice.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Venetian Key*, by (George) Allen Upward.]