Unravelled Knots

Baroness Orczy

UNRAVELLED KNOTS

BY

BARONESS ORCZY

Table of Contents

UNRAVELLED KNOTS

I
THE MYSTERY OF THE KHAKI TUNIC

§1

I cannot pretend to say how it all happened. I can but relate what occurred, leaving those of my friends who are versed in psychic matters to find a plausible explanation for the fact that on that horrible foggy afternoon I chanced to walk into that blameless teashop at that particular hour.

Now, I had not been inside a teashop for years, and I had almost ceased to think of the Old Man in the Corner—the weird, spook-like creature with the baggy trousers, the huge horn-rimmed spectacles, and the thin claw-like hands that went on fidgeting, fidgeting, fidgeting with a piece of string, tying it with nervy deliberation into innumerable and complicated knots.

And yet, when I walked into that teashop and saw him sitting in the corner by the fire, I was hardly conscious of surprise, but I did not think that he would recognise me. So I sat down at the next table to him, and when I thought that he was most intent on fidgeting with his piece of string, I stole surreptitious glances at him. The years seemed to have passed him by; he was just the same; his face no more wrinkled; his fingers were as agile and restless as they had been when last I saw him twenty years ago.

Then all at once he spoke, just as he used to do, in the same cracked voice with the dry, ironic chuckle.

"One of the most interesting cases it has ever been my good fortune to investigate," he said. I had not realised that he had seen me, and I gave such a startled jump that I spilt half a cup of tea on my frock. With a long, bony finger he was pointing to a copy of the *Express Post*, which lay beside his plate, and almost against my will my eyes wandered to the flaring headline: "The Mystery of the Khaki Tunic."

Then I looked up inquiringly at my pixy-like interlocutor. It never occurred to me to make a conventional little speech about the lapse of time since last we met; for the moment I had the feeling as if I had seen him the day before.

"You are still interested in criminology, then?" I asked.

"More than ever," he replied with a bland smile, "and this case has given me some of the most delightful moments I have ever experienced in connection with my studies. I have watched the police committing one blunder after another, and to-day, when they are completely baffled and the public has started to write letters to the papers about another undetected crime and another criminal at large, I am having the time of my life."

"Of course, you have made up your mind," I retorted with what I felt was withering sarcasm.

"I have arrived at the only possible solution of the mystery," he replied, unperturbed, "and you will do the same when I have put the facts clearly and logically before you. As for the police, let 'em flounder," he went on complacently. "For me it has been an exciting drama to watch from beginning to end. Every one of the characters in it stands out before me like a clear-cut cameo.

"There was Miss Mary Clarke, a quiet, middle-aged woman who rented Hardacres from Lord Foremeere. She had taken the place soon after the Armistice, and ran a poultry farm there on a small scale with the occasional assistance of her brother Arthur, an ex-officer in the East Glebeshires, a young man who had an excellent war-record, but who seemed, like so many other young men of his kind, to have fallen into somewhat shiftless and lazy ways since the glorious peace.

"No doubt you know the geography of the place. The halfpenny papers have been full of maps and plans of Hardacres. It is rather a lonely house on the road between Langford and Barchester, about three-quarters of a mile from Meere village. Meere Court is another half-mile or so farther on, the house hidden by clumps of stately trees, above which can be perceived the towers of Barchester Cathedral.

"Very little seems to have been known about Miss Clarke in the neighbourhood; she seemed to be fairly well-to-do and undoubtedly a cut above the village folk, but, equally obviously, she did not belong to the county set. Nor did she encourage visitors, not even the vicar; she seldom went to church, and neither went to parties nor ever asked any one to tea; she did most of her shopping herself, in Meere, and sold her poultry and

eggs to Mr. Brook, the local dealer, who served all the best houses for miles around. Every morning at seven o'clock a girl from the village, named Emily Baker, came in to do the housework at Hardacres, and left again after the mid-day dinner. Once a week regularly, Miss Clarke called at Meere Court. Always on a Friday. She walked over in the afternoon, whatever the weather, brought a large basket of eggs with her, and was shown, without ever being kept waiting, straight into Lady Foremeere's sitting-room. The interview lasted about ten minutes, sometimes more, and then she would be shown out again.

"Mind you," the funny creature went on glibly, and raising a long, pointed finger to emphasise his words, "no one seems to have thought that there was anything mysterious about Miss Clarke. The fact that 'she kept 'erself to 'erself' was not in itself a sign of anything odd about her. People, especially women, in outlying country districts, often lead very self-centred, lonely lives; they arouse a certain amount of curiosity when they first arrive in the neighbourhood, but after a while gossip dies out if it is not fed, and the hermit's estrangement from village life is tacitly accepted.

"On the other hand, Miss Clarke's brother Arthur was exceedingly gregarious. He was a crack tennis player and an excellent dancer, and these two accomplishments procured him his entrée into the best houses in the county—houses which, before the war, when people were more fastidious in the choice of their guests, would no doubt have not been quite so freely opened to him.

"It was common gossip that Arthur was deeply in love with April St. Jude, Lord Foremeere's beautiful daughter by a previous marriage, but public opinion was unanimous in the assertion that there never could be any question of marriage between an extemporary gentleman without money or property of any kind and the society beauty who had been courted by some of the smartest and richest men in London.

"Nor did Arthur Clarke enjoy the best of reputations in the neighbourhood. He was over-fond of betting and loafing about the public-houses of Barchester. People said, that he might help his sister in the farm more than he did, seeing that he did not appear to have a sixpence of his own, and that she gave him bed and board, but as he was very good-looking and could make himself very agreeable if he chose, the women, at any rate,

smiled at his misdeeds and were content to call Arthur 'rather wild, but not really a bad boy.'

"Then came the tragedy.

"On the twenty-eighth of December last, when Emily Baker came to work as usual, she was rather surprised not to see or hear Miss Clarke moving about the place. As a rule she was out in the yard by the time Emily arrived; the chickens would have had their hot mash and the empty pans would have been left for Emily to wash up. But this morning nothing. In the girl's own words there was a creepy kind of lonely feeling about the house. She knew that Mr. Clarke was not at home. The day before the servants at Meere Court had their annual Christmas party, and Mr. Clarke had been asked to help with the tree and to entertain the children. He had announced his intention of putting up afterwards at the Deanery Hotel for the night, a thing he was rather fond of doing whenever he was asked out to parties and did not know what time he might be able to get away.

"Emily, when she arrived, had found the front door on the latch, as usual, therefore, she reflected, Miss Clarke must have been downstairs and drawn the bolts. But where could she be now? Never, never would she have gone out before feeding her chickens, on such a cold morning, too!

"At this point Emily gave up reflecting, and proceeded to action. She went up to her mistress's room. It was empty, and the bed had not been slept in. Genuinely alarmed now, she ran down again, her next objective being the parlour. The door was, as usual, locked on the outside, but, contrary to precedent, the key was not in the lock; thinking it had dropped out, the girl searched for it, but in vain, and at one moment, when she moved the small mat which stood before the door of the locked room, she at once became aware of an over-powering smell of gas.

"This proved the death-blow to Emily's fortitude; she took to her heels and ran out of the house and down the road toward the village, nor did she halt until she came to the local police-station, where she gave as coherent an account as she could of the terrible state of things at Hardacres.

"You will remember that when the police broke open the door of the parlour, the first thing they saw was the body of Miss Clarke lying full-length on the floor. The poor woman was quite dead, suffocated by the

poisonous fumes of gas which was fully turned on in the old-fashioned chandelier above her head. The one window had been carefully latched, and the thick curtains closely drawn together; the chimney had been stuffed up with newspaper and paper had been thrust into every aperture so as to exclude the slightest possible breath of air. There was a wad of it in the keyhole, and the mat on the landing outside had been carefully arranged against the door with the same sinister object.

"The news spread like wildfire and soon the entire neighbourhood was gloating over a sensation the like of which had not come its way for generations past."

§2

"The London evening papers got hold of the story for their noonday edition," the Old Man in the Corner went on, after a slight pause, "and I with my passion for the enigmatical and the perplexing, made up my mind then and there to probe the mystery on my own account, because I knew well enough that this was just the sort of case which would send the county police blundering all over the wrong track.

"I arrived at Barchester on the Tuesday, in time for the inquest, but nothing of much importance transpired that day. Medical evidence went to prove that the deceased had first been struck on the back of the head by some heavy instrument, a weighted stick or something of the sort, which had no doubt stunned her, but she actually died of gas poisoning, which she inhaled in large quantities while she was half-conscious. The medical officer went on to say that Miss Clarke must have been dead twelve hours or more when he was called in by the police at about eight o'clock in the morning.

"After this, a couple of neighbours testified to having seen Miss Clarke at her front door at about half-past five the previous evening. It was a very dark night, if you remember, and a thick Scotch mist was falling. When the neighbours went by, Miss Clarke had apparently just introduced a visitor into her house, the gas was alight in the small hall, and they had vaguely perceived the outline of a man or woman, they could not swear which, in a huge coat, standing for a moment immediately behind Miss Clarke; the neighbours also heard Miss Clarke's voice speaking to her visitor, but what

she said they could not distinguish. The weather was so atrocious that every one who was abroad that night hurried along without taking much notice of what went on around.

"Evidence of a more or less formal character followed, and the inquest was then adjourned until the Friday, every one going away with the feeling that sensational developments were already in the air.

"And the developments came tumbling in thick and fast. To begin with, it appears that Arthur Clarke, when first questioned by the police, had made a somewhat lame statement.

"'I was asked,' he said, 'to help with the servants' Christmas party at Meere Court. I walked over to Barchester at about three o'clock in the afternoon, with my suit-case, as I was going to spend the night at the Deanery Hotel. I went on to Meere Court soon after half-past three, and stayed until past seven; after which I walked back to the Deanery, had some dinner, and went early to bed. I never knew that anything had happened to my sister until the police telephoned to me soon after eight o'clock the next morning. And,' he added, 'that's all about it!'

"But it certainly was not 'all about it,' because several of the servants at Meere Court who were asked at what time Mr. Clarke went away that night, said that he must have gone very soon after five o'clock. They all finished their tea about that time, and then the gramophone was set going for dancing; they were quite sure that they had not seen Mr. Clarke after that.

"On the other hand, Miss St. Jude said that the servants were mistaken; they were far too deeply engrossed in their own amusements to be at all reliable in their statements. As a matter of fact, Mr. Clarke went away, as he said, at about seven o'clock; she herself had danced with him most of the time, and said good-night to him in the hall at a few minutes after seven.

"Here was a neat little complication, do you see—a direct conflict of evidence at the very outset of this mysterious case. Can you wonder that amateur detectives already shrugged their shoulders and raised their eyebrows, declaring that the Hon. April St. Jude was obviously in love with Arthur Clarke, and was trying to shield him, well knowing that he had something to hide.

"Of course the police themselves were very reticent, but even they could not keep people from gossiping. And gossip, I can assure you, had enough and to spare to feed on. At first, of course, the crime had seemed entirely motiveless. The deceased had not an enemy, or, as far as that goes, many acquaintances in the world. In the drawer of the desk, in the parlour, the sum of twenty pounds odd in notes and cash were found, and in a little box by the side of the money poor Mary Clarke's little bits of jewellery.

"But twenty-four hours later no one could remain in doubt as to the assassin's purpose. You will remember that on the day following the adjourned inquest there had arrived from the depths of Yorkshire an old sister of the deceased, a respectable spinster, to whom Arthur himself, it seems, had communicated the terrible news. She had come to Barchester for the funeral. This elder Miss Clarke, Euphemia by name, though she could not say much that was informative, did, at any rate, throw light upon one dark passage in her sister's history.

"'For the past four years,' she told the police, 'my sister had an allowance of four pounds a week from a member of the aristocracy. I did not know much about her affairs, but I do know that she had a packet of letters on which she set great store. What these letters were I have not the slightest idea, nor do I know what Mary ultimately did with them. On one occasion, before she was actually settled at Hardacres, she met me in London and asked me to take care of this packet for her, and she told me then that they were very valuable. I also know that she and my brother Arthur had most heated arguments together on the subject of these letters. Arthur was always wanting her to give them up to him, and she always refused. On one occasion she told me that she could, if she wanted, sell that packet of letters for five thousand pounds. "Why on earth don't you?" I asked her. But she replied: "Oh, Arthur would only get the money out of me! It's better as it is."'

"This story, as you may well imagine, gave food enough for gossip; at once a romance was woven of blackmail and drama of love and passion, whilst the name of a certain great lady in the neighbourhood, to whom Miss Clarke had been in the habit of paying mysterious weekly visits, already was on everybody's lips.

"And then the climax came. By evening it had transpired that in Arthur

Clarke's room at Hardacres, the detectives had found an old khaki tunic stuffed away at the bottom of a drawer, and in the pocket of the tunic the key of the locked parlour door. It was an officer's tunic, which had at some time had its buttons and badges taken off; its right sleeve was so torn that it was nearly out at its armhole; the cuff was all crumpled, as if it had been crushed in a damp, hot hand, and there was a small piece of the cloth torn clean out of it. And I will leave you to guess the importance of this fact—in the tightly-clenched hand of the murdered woman was found the small piece of khaki cloth which corresponded to a hair's-breadth with the missing bit in the sleeve of the tunic.

"After that the man in the street shook his head and declared that Arthur Clarke was as good as hung already."

§3

The Old Man in the Corner had drawn out of his capacious pocket a fresh piece of string. And now his claw-like fingers started to work on it with feverish intentness. I watched him, fascinated, well knowing that his keen mind was just as busy with the Hardacres mystery as were his hands in the fashioning of some intricate and complicated knot.

"I am not," he said after a while, "going to give you an elaborate description of the inquest and of the crowds that collected both inside and out of the court-room, hoping to get a glimpse of the principal actors in the exciting drama. By now, of course, all those who had talked of the crime being without apparent motive had effectually been silenced. To every amateur detective, as well as to the professional, the murderer and his nefarious object appeared absolutely revealed to the light of day. Every indication, every scrap of evidence collected up to this hour, both direct and circumstantial, pointed to Arthur Clarke as the murderer of his sister. There were the letters, which were alleged to be worth five thousand pounds, to the mysterious member of the aristocracy who was paying Miss Clarke a weekly pittance, obviously in order to silence her; there was the strong love motive—the young man in love with the girl far above him in station and wanting to get hold of a large sum of money, no doubt, to embark on some profitable business which might help him in his wooing; and there, above all, was the damning bit of khaki cloth in the murdered woman's hand, and the tunic with the key of the locked door in its pocket found in a drawer in

Clarke's own room.

"No, indeed, the inquest was not likely to be a dull affair, more especially as no one doubted what the verdict would be, whilst a good many people anticipated that Clarke would at once be arrested on the coroner's warrant and committed for trial at the next assizes on the capital charge.

"But though we all knew that the inquest would not be dull, yet we were not prepared for the surprises which were in store for us, and which will render that inquest a memorable one in the annals of criminal investigation. To begin with we already knew that Arthur Clarke had now the assistance of Mr. Markham, one of the leading solicitors of Barchester, in his difficult position. Acting on that gentleman's advice Clarke had amplified the statement which he had originally made as to his movements on the fatal afternoon. This amplified statement he now reiterated on oath, and though frankly no one believed him, we were bound to admit that if he could substantiate it, an extraordinary complication would arise, which though it might not eventually clear him altogether, in the minds of thinking people, would at any rate give him the benefit of the doubt. What he now stated was in substance this:

"'The servants at Meere Court,' he said, 'are quite right when they say that I left the party soon after five o'clock. I was rather tired, and after a last dance with Miss St. Jude, I went upstairs to pay my respects to Lady Foremeere. Her ladyship, however, kept me talking for some considerable time on one subject and another, until, to my astonishment, I saw that it was close on seven o'clock, when I hastily took my leave.

"'While I was looking for my coat in the hall, I remember that Lord Foremeere came out of the smoking-room and asked me if I knew whether the party downstairs had broken up. "These things are such a bore," he said, "but I will see if I can get one of them to come up and show you out." I told his lordship not to trouble. However, he rang the bell, and presently the butler, Spinks, came through from the servants' quarters, and his lordship then went upstairs, I think. A minute or two later Miss St. Jude came, also from the servants' quarters; she sent Spinks away, telling him that she would look after me; we talked together for a few moments, and then I said good-night, and went straight back to the hotel.'

"Now we had already learned from both the hall-porter and the head waiter at the Deanery that Mr. Clarke was back at the hotel soon after seven o'clock, that he had his dinner in the restaurant at half-past, and that after spending an hour or so in the lounge after dinner, he went up to his room, and did not go out again until the following morning. Therefore, all that was needed now was a confirmatory statement from Lady Foremeere to prove Arthur Clarke's innocence, because in that case every hour of his time would be accounted for, from half-past three onwards, whilst Miss Clarke was actually seen alive by two neighbours when she introduced a visitor into her house at half-past five.

"The question would then resolve itself into, Who was that visitor? leaving the more important one of the khaki tunic as a baffling mystery, rather than as damning evidence.

"The entire courtroom was on the tiptoe of expectation when Lady Foremeere was formally called. I can assure you that the ubiquitous pin could have been heard to drop during the brief moment's silence when the elegant Society woman stood up and disposed her exquisite sable cape about her shoulders and then swore to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"She answered the coroner's questions in a clear, audible voice, and never wavered in her assertions. She said that her step-daughter had come up to her boudoir and asked her if she would see Mr. Arthur Clarke for a few moments; he had something very important to say to her.

"'I was rather surprised at the strange request,' Lady Foremeere continued with the utmost composure, 'and suggested that Mr. Clarke should make his important communication to Lord Foremeere, but my step-daughter insisted, and to please her I agreed. I thought that I would get my husband to be present at this mysterious interview, but his lordship was having a short rest in the smoking-room, so on second consideration I decided not to disturb him.

"'A minute or two later, Mr.—er—Clarke presented himself, and at once I realised that he had had too much to drink. He talked wildly about his desire to marry Miss St. Jude, and very excitedly about some compromising letters which he alleged were in his possession, and which he threatened to

show to Lord Foremeere if I did not at once give him so many thousand pounds. Naturally, I ordered him out of the place. But he wouldn't go for a long time; he got more and more incoherent and excited, and it was not until I threatened to fetch Lord Foremeere immediately that he sobered down and finally went away. He had been in my room about half an hour.'

"'About half an hour?' was the coroner's earnest comment on this amazing piece of evidence, 'But Mr. Clarke said that when he left your ladyship it was close on seven.'

"'Mr.—er—Clarke is in error,' her ladyship asserted firmly. 'The clock had just struck half-past five when I succeeded in ridding myself of him.'

"You can easily imagine how great was the excitement at this moment and how intensified it became when Lord Foremeere gave evidence in his turn and further confused the issues. He began by corroborating Arthur Clarke's statement about his having spoken to him in the hall at *seven o'clock*. It was almost unbelievable! Everybody gasped and the coroner almost gave a jump:

"'But her ladyship has just told us,' he said, 'that Clarke left her at half-past five!'

"'That, no doubt, is accurate,' Lord Foremeere rejoined in his stiff, prim manner, 'since her ladyship said so. All I know is that I was asleep in front of the fire in the smoking-room when I heard a loud bang issuing from the hall. I went to see what it was and there I certainly saw Clarke. He was just coming through the glass door which divides the outside vestibule from the hall, and he appeared to me to have come straight out of the wet and to have left his hat and coat in the outer vestibule.'

"'But,' the coroner insisted, 'what made your lordship think that he had come from outside?'

"'Well, for one thing his face and hands were quite wet, and he was wiping them with his handkerchief when I first caught sight of him. His boots, too, were wet, and so were the edges of his trousers. And then, as I said, he was coming into the hall from the outer vestibule, and it was the banging of the front door which had roused me.'

"'And the hour then was?'

"'The clock had not long since struck seven. But my butler will be able to confirm this.'

"And Spinks the butler did confirm this portion of his lordship's statement, though he could say nothing about Mr. Clarke's boots being wet, nor did he help Mr. Clarke on with his coat and hat, or open the door for him. Miss St. Jude had practically followed Spinks into the hall, and had at once dismissed him, saying she would look after Mr. Clarke. His lordship in the meanwhile had gone upstairs, and Spinks went back into the servants' hall.

"Of course, Miss St. Jude was called. You remember that she had previously stated that Clarke had only left the party at about seven o'clock, that she herself had danced with him most of the time until then, and finally said good-bye to him in the hall. But as this statement was not even corroborated by Clarke's own assertions, and entirely contradicted by both Lord and Lady Foremeere's evidence, she was fortunately advised not to repeat it on oath. But she hotly denied the suggestion that Clarke had come in from outside when she said good-bye to him in the hall. She saw him put on his hat and coat, and they were quite dry. But nobody felt that her evidence was of any value because she would naturally do her utmost to help her sweetheart.

"Finally, one of the most interesting moments in that memorable inquiry was reached when Lady Foremeere was recalled and asked to state what she knew of Miss Clarke's antecedents.

"'Very little,' she replied. 'I only knew her in France when she worked under me in a hospital. I was very ill at one time and she nursed me devotedly; ever since that I helped her financially as much as I could.'

"'You made her a weekly allowance?' her ladyship was asked.

"'Not exactly,' she replied. 'I just bought her eggs and poultry at a higher figure than she would get from any one else.'

"'Do you know anything about some letters that she thought were so valuable?'

"'Oh, yes!' the lady replied with a kindly smile. 'Mary had a collection of autograph letters which she had collected whilst she was nursing in France. Among them were some by august, and others by very distinguished, personages. She had the idea that these were extraordinarily valuable.'

"'Do you know what became of those letters?'

"'No,' her ladyship replied, 'I do not know.'

"'But there were other letters, were there not?' the coroner insisted, 'in which you yourself were interested? The ones Mr. Clarke spoke to you about?'

"'They existed only in Mr. Clarke's imagination, I fancy,' Lady Foremeere replied, 'but he was in such a highly excited state that afternoon that I really could not quite make out what it was that he desired to sell to me.'

"Lady Foremeere spoke very quietly and very simply, without a single note of spite or acerbity in her soft, musical voice. One felt that she was stating quite simple facts that rather bored her, but to which she did not attach any importance. And later on when Miss Euphemia Clarke retold the story of the packet of letters and of the quarrels which the deceased and her brother had about them, and when the damning evidence of the khaki tunic stood out like an avenging Nemesis pointing at the unfortunate young man, those in court who had imagination, saw—positively saw—the hangman's rope tightening around his neck."

§4

"And yet the verdict was one of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," I said, after a slight pause, waiting for the funny creature to take up his narrative again.

"Yes," he replied, "Arthur Clarke has been cleared of every suspicion. He left the court a free man. His innocence was proved beyond question through what every one thought was the most damnatory piece of evidence against him—the evidence of the khaki tunic. The khaki tunic exonerated Arthur Clarke as completely as the most skilful defender could do. Because

it did not fit him. Arthur Clarke was a rather heavy, full-grown, broad-shouldered man, the khaki tunic would only fit a slim lad of eighteen. Clarke had admitted the tunic was his, but he had never thought of examining it, and certainly, not of trying it on. It was Miss St. Jude who thought of that. Trust a woman in love for getting an inspiration.

"When she was called at the end of the day to affirm the statements which she had previously made to the police and realised that these statements of hers were actually in contradiction with Clarke's own assertions, she worked herself up into a state bordering on hysteria, in the midst of which she caught sight of the khaki tunic on the coroner's table. Of course, she, like every one else in the neighbourhood, knew all about the tunic, but when April St. Jude actually saw it with her own eyes and realised what its existence meant to her sweetheart, she gave a wild shriek.

"'I'll not believe it,' she cried, 'I'll not believe it. It can't be. It is not Arthur's tunic at all.' Then her eyes dilated, her voice sank to a hoarse whisper, and with a trembling hand she pointed at the tunic. 'Why,' she murmured, 'it is so small—so small! Arthur! Where is Arthur? Why does he not show them all that he never could have worn that tunic?'

"Proverbially there is but a narrow dividing line between tragedy and farce: While some people shuddered and gasped and men literally held their breath, marvelling what would happen next, quite a number of women fell into hysterical giggling. Of course you remember what happened. The papers have told you all about it. Arthur Clarke was made to try on the khaki tunic, and he could not even get his arms into the sleeves. Under no circumstances could he ever have worn that particular tunic. It was several sizes too small for him. Then he examined it closely and recognised it as one he wore in his school O.T.C. when he was a lad. When he was originally confronted with it, he explained, he was so upset, so genuinely terrified at the consequences of certain follies which he undoubtedly had committed, that he could hardly see out of his eyes. The tunic was shown to him, and he had admitted that it was his, for he had quite a collection of old tunics which he had always kept. But for the moment he had forgotten the one which he had worn more than eight years ago at school.

"And so the khaki tunic, instead of condemning Clarke, had entirely cleared him, for it now became quite evident that the miscreant who had

committed the dastardly murder had added this hideous act to his greater crime, and deliberately set to work to fasten the guilt on an innocent man. He had gone up to Clarke's room, opened the wardrobe, picked up a likely garment, no doubt tearing a piece of cloth out of it whilst so doing, and thus getting the fiendish idea of inserting that piece of khaki between the fingers of the murdered woman. Finally, after locking the parlour door, he put the key in the pocket of the tunic and stuffed the latter in the bottom of a drawer.

"It was a clever and cruel trick which well nigh succeeded in hanging an innocent man. As it is, it has enveloped the affair in an almost impenetrable mystery. I say 'almost' because I know who killed Miss Clarke, even though the public has thrown out an erroneous conjecture. 'It was Lady Foremeere,' they say, 'who killed Miss Clarke.' But at once comes the question: 'How could she?' And the query: 'When?'

"Arthur Clarke says he was with her until seven, and after that hour there were several members of her household who waited upon her, notably her maid who it seems came up to dress her at about that time, and she and Lord Foremeere sat down to dinner as usual at eight o'clock.

"That there had been one or two dark passages in Lady Foremeere's life, prior to her marriage four years ago, and that Miss Clarke was murdered for the sake of letters which were in some way connected with her ladyship were the only actual undisputable facts in that mysterious case. That it was not Arthur Clarke who killed his sister has been indubitably proved; that a great deal of the evidence was contradictory every one has admitted. And if the police do not act on certain suggestions which I have made to them, the Hardacres murder will remain a mystery to the public to the end of time."

"And what are those suggestions?" I asked, without the slightest vestige of irony, for, much against my will, the man's personality exercised a curious fascination over me.

"To keep an eye on Lord Foremeere," the funny creature replied with his dry chuckle, "and see when and how he finally disposes of a wet coat, a dripping hat and soaked boots, which he has succeeded in keeping concealed somewhere in the smoking-room, away from the prying eyes even of his own valet."

"You mean——" I asked, with an involuntary gasp.

"Yes," he replied. "I mean that it was Lord Foremeere who murdered Miss Clarke for the sake of those letters which apparently contained matter that was highly compromising to his wife.

"Everything to my mind points to him as the murderer. Whether he knew all along of the existence of the compromising letters, or whether he first knew of this through the conversation between her ladyship and Clarke the day of the servants' party, it is impossible to say; certain it is that he did overhear that conversation and that he made up his mind to end the impossible situation then and there, and to put a stop once and for all to any further attempt at blackmail.

"It was easy enough for him on that day to pass in and out of the house unperceived. No doubt his primary object in going to Hardacres was to purchase the letters from Miss Clarke, money down; perhaps she proved obstinate, perhaps he merely thought that dead men tell no tales. This we shall never know.

"After the hideous deed, which must have revolted his otherwise fastidious senses, he must have become conscious of an overwhelming hatred for the man who had, as it were, pushed him into crime, and my belief is that the elaborate *mise en scène* of the khaki tunic, and the circumstantial lie that when he came out of the smoking-room Arthur Clarke had obviously just come in from outside was invented, not so much with the object of averting any suspicion from himself, as with the passionate desire to be revenged on Clarke.

"Think it over," the Old Man in the Corner concluded, as he stuffed his beloved bit of string into his capacious pocket; "time, opportunity, motive, all are in favour of my theory, so do not be surprised if the early editions of to-morrow's evening papers contain the final sensation in this interesting case."

He was gone before I could say another word, and all that I saw of him was his spook-like figure disappearing through the swing-door. There was no one now in the place, so a moment or two later I too paid my bill and went away.

§5

The Old Man in the Corner proved to be right in the end. At eleven o'clock the next morning the street corners were full of newspaper placards with the flaring headlines: "Sudden death of Lord Foremeere."

It was reported that on the previous evening his lordship was examining a new automatic which he had just bought and explaining the mechanism to his valet. At one moment he actually made the remark: "It is all right, it isn't loaded," but apparently there was one cartridge left in one of the chambers. His lordship, it seems, was looking straight down the barrel and his finger must accidentally have touched the trigger; anyway, according to the valet's story, there was a sudden explosion, and Lord Foremeere fell shot right between the eyes.

The verdict at the inquest was, of course, one of accidental death, the coroner and jury expressing the greatest possible sympathy with Lady Foremeere and Miss St. Jude. It was only subsequently that one or two facts came to light which appeared obscure and unimportant to the man in the street, but which for me, in the light of my conversation with the Old Man in the Corner, bore special significance.

It seems that an hour or two before the accident, the chief superintendent of police had called with two constables at Meere Court and were closeted for a considerable time with Lord Foremeere in the smoking-room. And Spinks, the butler, who subsequently let the three men out, noticed that one of the constables was carrying a coat and a hat, which Spinks knew were old ones belonging to his lordship.

Then I knew that the funny creature in the loud check tweeds and baggy trousers had found the true solution of the Hardacres mystery.

Oh, and you wish to know what was the sequel to the pretty love story between April St. Jude and Arthur Clarke. Well, you know, she married Amos Rottenberg, the New York banker, last year, and Clarke runs a successful garage now somewhere in the North. A kind friend must have lent him the capital wherewith to make a start. I can make a shrewd guess who that kind friend was.

II
THE MYSTERY OF THE INGRES MASTERPIECE

§1

I did not see the Old Man in the Corner for several weeks after that strange meeting in the blameless teashop. The exigencies of my work kept me busy, and somehow the sensational suicide of Lord Foremeere which had appeared like the logical sequence of the spook-like creature's deductions, had left a painful impression on my mind. Entirely illogically, I admit, I felt that the Old Man in the Corner had had something to do with the tragedy.

But when in March of that year we were all thrilled by the mystery of the valuable Ingres picture, and wherever one went one heard conjectures and explanations of that extraordinary case, my thoughts very naturally reverted to the funny creature and his bit of string, and I found myself often wondering what his explanation of what seemed a truly impenetrable mystery could possibly be.

The facts certainly were very puzzling in themselves. When first I was deputed by the *Express Post* to put them clearly and succinctly before its readers, I found the task strangely difficult; this, for the simple reason that I myself could not see daylight through it all, and often did I stand in front of the admirable reproduction which I possess of the Ingres "La Fiancée" wondering if those smiling lips would not presently speak and tell me how an original and exquisite picture could possibly have been at two different places at one and the same time.

For that, in truth, was the depth of the puzzle. We will, if you please, call the original owners of the picture the Duc and Duchesse Paul de Rochechouart. That, of course, is not their name, but, as you all know who they really are, it matters not what I call them for the purpose of recording their singular adventure.

His Grace had early in life married a Swedish lady of great talent and singular beauty. She was an artist of no mean order, having exhibited

pictures of merit both at the Paris Salon and at the Royal Academy in London; she was also an accomplished musician, and had published one or two very charming volumes of poetry.

The Duke and his wife were devoted to one another; they lived for the greater part of the year at their beautiful château on the Oise, not far from Chantilly, and here they entertained a great deal, more after the homely and hospitable manner of English country houses than in the more formal fashion. Here, too, they had collected some rare furniture, tapestries, and objects of art and vertu, amongst which certain highly-prized pictures of the French School of the Nineteenth Century.

The war, we may imagine, left the Duc de Rochechouart and his charming wife a good deal poorer, as it left most other people in France, and soon it became known amongst the art dealers of London, Paris and New York that they had decided to sell one or two of their most valuable pictures; foremost amongst these was the celebrated "La Fiancée" by Ingres.

Immediately there was what is technically known as a ramp after the picture. Dealers travelled backwards and forwards from all the great Continental cities to the château on the Oise to view the picture. Offers were made for it by cable, telegram and telephone, and the whole art world was kept in a flutter over what certainly promised to be a sensational deal.

Alas! as with most of the beautiful possessions of this impoverished old world, the coveted prize was destined to go to the country that had the longest purse. A certain Mr. Aaron Jacobs, the Chicago multi-millionaire, presently cabled an offer of half a million dollars for the picture, an offer which, rumour had it, the Duc de Rochechouart had since accepted. Mr. Jacobs was said to be a charming, highly-cultured man, a great art connoisseur and a great art lover, and presently one heard that he had already set sail for Europe with the intention of fetching away his newly-acquired treasure himself.

On the very day following Mr. Jacobs's arrival as the guest of the Duc and Duchesse de Rochechouart at the latter's château, the world-famous picture was stolen in broad daylight by a thief or thieves who contrived to make away with their booty without leaving the slightest clue, so it was

said, that might put the police on their track. The picture was cut clean out of the frame, an operation which must have taken at least two or three minutes. It always used to hang above the tall chimneypiece in the Duchesse's studio, but that self-same morning it had been lifted down and placed on an easel in the dining-hall, no doubt for closer inspection by the purchaser. This easel stood in a corner of the hall, close to one of the great windows that overlooked the gardens of the château.

The amazing point in this daring theft was that a garden fête and tennis tournament were in progress at the time. A crowd of guests was spread all over the lawns and grounds in full view of the windows of the hall, and, as far as the preliminary investigations were able to establish, there were not more than twenty or twenty-five minutes at most during which some servant or other inmate of the château had not either actually been through the hall or had occasion to observe the windows.

The dining-hall itself has monumental doors which open on the great central vestibule, and immediately facing it similar doors give on the library. The marble vestibule runs right through the centre of the main building, it has both a front and a garden entrance, and all the reception rooms open out of it, right and left. Close to the front door entrance is one of the main ways into the kitchens and offices.

Now right away until half-past four on that fateful afternoon the servants were up and down the vestibule, busy with arrangements for tea which they were serving outside on the lawns. The tennis tournament was then drawing to a close, the Duchesse was on the lawn with her guests, dispensing tea, and at half-past four precisely the Duc de Rochechouart came into the château by way of the garden entrance, went across the vestibule and into the library to fetch the prizes which were to be distributed to the victors in the tournament, and which were locked up in his desk. The doors of the dining-hall were wide open and the Duc walking past them peeped into the room. The picture was in its place then, and he gave a glance at it as he passed, conscious of a pang of regret at the thought that he must needs part with this precious treasure. It took the Duc some little time to sort the prizes, and as in the meanwhile the afternoon post had come in and a few letters had been laid on his desk, he could not resist the desire to glance through his correspondence. On the whole he thought that he might

have been in the library about a quarter of an hour or perhaps more. He had closed the door when he entered the room, and when he came out again he certainly noticed that the doors of the dining-hall were shut. But there was nothing in this to arouse his suspicions, and with the neatly tied parcels containing the prizes under his arm, he recrossed the vestibule and went once more into the garden.

At five o'clock M. Amédé, the chief butler, had occasion to go into the dining-hall to fetch a particular silver tray which he required. He owned to being astonished at finding the doors closed, because he had been past them a quarter of an hour before that and they were wide open then. However, he entered the room without any serious misgivings, but the next moment he nearly fainted with horror at sight of the empty frame upon the easel. The very first glance had indeed revealed the nefarious deed. The picture had not been moved out of its frame, it was the canvas that had been cut. M. Amédé, however, knowing what was due to his own dignity did not disturb the entire household then and there; he made his way quietly back into the garden where the distribution of prizes after the tournament was taking place and, seizing a favourable opportunity, he caught M. le Duc's eye and imparted to him the awful news.

Even so nothing was said until after the guests had departed. By the Duc's orders the doors leading into the dining-hall were locked, and to various enquiries after the masterpiece made by inquisitive ladies, the evasive answer was given that the picture was in the hands of the packers.

There remained the house party, which, of course, included Mr. Aaron Jacobs. There were also several ladies and gentlemen staying at the château, and before they all went up to their rooms to dress for dinner, they were told what had happened. In the meanwhile the police had already been sent for, and M. le Commissaire was conducting his preliminary investigations. The rooms and belongings of all the servants were searched, and, with the consent of the guests themselves, this search was extended to their rooms. A work of art worth half a million dollars could not thus be allowed to disappear and the thief to remain undetected for the sake of social conventions, and as the law stands in France any man may be guilty of a crime until he be proved innocent.

§2

The theft of the Ingres masterpiece was one of those cases which interest the public in every civilised country, and here in England where most people are bitten with the craze for criminal investigation it created quite a sensation in its way.

I remember that when we all realised for the first time that the picture had in very truth disappeared, and that the French police, despite its much vaunted acumen, had entirely failed to find the slightest trace of the thief, we at once began to look about for a romantic solution of the mystery. M. le Duc de Rochechouart and his pretty Duchesse had above all our deepest sympathy, for it had very soon transpired that neither the Ingres masterpiece, nor indeed any of the Duc's valuable collection of art works, was insured. This fact seems almost incredible to English minds, with whom every kind of insurance is part and parcel of the ordinary household routine. But abroad the system is not nearly so far-reaching or so extended, and there are numberless households in every degree of the social scale who never dream of spending money on insurances save, perhaps, against fire.

Be that as it may, the fact remained that "La Fiancée" was not insured against theft, and that through the action of an unknown miscreant the Duc and Duchesse de Rochechouart would, unless the police did ultimately succeed in tracing the stolen masterpiece, find themselves the poorer by half a million dollars. With their usual lack of logic, readers of the halfpenny Press promptly turned their attention to Mr. Aaron Jacobs, the intending purchaser. Being a Chicago multi-millionaire does not, it appears, render a man immune from the temptation of acquiring by dishonest means the things which he covets. Anyway, the public decided that Mr. Jacobs was not so rich as he was reputed to be, but that, on the other hand, being as greedy for the possession of European works of art as any ogre for human flesh, he had stolen the picture which he could not afford to buy; and ten, or mayhap fifteen years hence, when the story of the mysterious theft will have been consigned to oblivion, Mr. Jacobs would display the masterpiece in his gallery. How this was to be accomplished without the subsequent intervention of the police those wiseacres did not attempt to explain.

The mystery remained impenetrable for close on two years. Many other sensations, criminal or otherwise, had, during that time, driven the affair of the Ingres masterpiece out of the public mind. Then suddenly the whole

story was revived and in a manner which proved far more exciting than any one had surmised. It was linked—though the European public did not know this—with the death in July, 1919, of Charles B. Tupper, the head of one of the greatest cinematograph organisations in the States—a man who for the past few years had controlled over two thousand theatres, and had made millions in his day. Some time during the war he had married the well-known cinema star, Anita Hodgkins, a beautiful entirely uneducated girl who hailed from Upper Tooting. The will of Mr. Charles B. Tupper was proved for a fabulous sum, and, as soon as his affairs were settled, Mrs. Tupper, who presumably had remained Cockney at heart as well as in speech, set sail for England with the intention of settling down once more in the country of her birth. She bought Holt Manor, a magnificent house in Buckinghamshire, sent for all her splendid furniture and belongings from America, and, early in 1920, when her palatial residence was ready for occupation, she married Lord Polchester, a decadent young nincompoop, who was said to have fallen in love with her when he first saw her on the screen.

Presumably Mrs. Anita Tupper *née* Hodgkins hugged herself with the belief that once she was styled my lady she would automatically become a social star as she had been a cinema one in the past. But in this harmless ambition she was at first disappointed. Though she had furnished her new house lavishly, though paragraphs appeared in all the halfpenny and weekly Press giving details of the sumptuous establishment of which the new Lady Polchester was queen, though she appeared during the London season of 1920 at several official functions and went to an evening Court that year, wearing pearls that might have been envied by an empress, she found that in Buckinghamshire the best people were shy of calling on her, and the bits of pasteboard that were from time to time left at her door came chiefly from the neighbouring doctors, parsons, or retired London tradespeople, or from mothers with marriageable daughters who looked forward to parties at the big house and consequent possible matrimonial prizes.

This went on for a time and then Lady Polchester, wishing no doubt to test the intentions of the county towards her, launched out invitations for a garden party! The invitations included the London friends she had recently made, and a special train from Paddington was to bring those friends to the party. Among these was Mr. Aaron Jacobs. He had known the late Charles

B. Tupper over in the States, and had met Lady Polchester more recently at one of the great functions at the United States Embassy in London. She had interested him with a glowing account of her splendid collection of works of art, of pictures and antique furniture which she had inherited from her first husband and which now adorned her house in Buckinghamshire, and when she asked him down to her party he readily accepted, more I imagine out of curiosity to see the objects in which he was as keenly interested as ever than from a desire to establish closer acquaintanceship with the lady.

The garden party at Holt Manor, as the place was called, does not appear to have been a great social success. For one thing it rained the whole afternoon, and the military band engaged for the occasion proved too noisy for indoor entertainment. But some of the guests were greatly interested in the really magnificent collection of furniture, tapestries, pictures and works of art which adorned the mansion, and after tea Lady Polchester graciously conducted them all over the house, pointing out herself the most notable pieces in the collection and never failing to mention the price at which the late Mr. Charles B. Tupper purchased the work of art in question.

And that is when the sensation occurred. Following their hostess, the guests had already seen and duly admired two really magnificent Van Dycks that hung in the hall, when she turned to them and said, with a flourish of her plentifully be-gemmed hands:

"You must come into the library and see the picture for which Mr. Tupper gave over half a million dollars. I never knew I had it, as he never had it taken out of its case, and I never saw it until this year when it came over with all my other things from our house in New York. Lord Polchester had it unpacked and hung in the library. I don't care much about it myself, and the late Mr. Tupper hadn't the time to enjoy his purchase, because he died two days after the picture arrived in New York, and, as I say, he never had it unpacked. He bought it for use in a commercial undertaking which he had in mind at one time, then the scheme fell through, and I am sure I never thought any more about the old picture."

With that she led the way into the library, a nobly-proportioned room lined with books in choice bindings, and with a beautiful Adam chimneypiece, above which hung a picture.

Of course there were some people present who had never heard of the stolen Ingres, but there must have been a few who, as they entered the room, must literally have gasped with astonishment, for there it certainly was. "La Fiancée" with her marvellously painted Eastern draperies, her exquisitely drawn limbs and enigmatic smile, was smiling down from the canvas, just as if she had every right to be in the house of the ex-cinema star, and as if there had not been a gigantic fuss about her throughout the whole art world of Europe.

We may take it that the person by far the most astonished at that moment was Mr. Aaron Jacobs. But he was too thoroughly a gentleman and too much a man of the world to betray his feelings then, and I suppose that those who, like himself, had thought they recognised the stolen masterpiece, did not like to say anything either until they were more sure: English people in all grades of society being proverbially averse to being what they call "mixed up" in any kind of a fuss. Certain it is that nothing was said at the moment to disturb Lady Polchester's complacent equanimity, and after a while the party broke up and the guests departed.

Of course people thought that Mr. Aaron Jacobs should have informed Lord Polchester of his intentions before he went to the police. But Lord Polchester was such a nonentity in his own household, such a frivolous fool, and, moreover, addicted to drink and violent fits of temper, that those who knew him easily realised how a sensible business man like Mr. Aaron Jacobs would avoid any personal explanation with him.

Mr. Jacobs went straight to the police that self-same evening, and the next day Lady Polchester had a visit from Detective Purley, one of the ablest as he was one of the most tactful men on the staff. But indeed he had need of all his tact in face of the infuriated cinema star when that lady realised the object of his visit.

"How dared they come and ask her such impertinent questions?" she stormed. "Did they imagine she had stolen a beastly picture which she would as soon throw on the dust heap as look at again? She, who could buy up all the pictures in any gallery and not feel the pinch..." and so on and so on. The unfortunate Purley had a very unpleasant quarter of an hour, but after a while he succeeded in pacifying the irate lady and got her to listen calmly to what he had to say.

He managed to make her understand that without casting the slightest aspersion upon her honourability or that of the late Charles B. Tupper, there was no getting away from the fact that the picture now hanging in the library of Holt Manor was the property of the Duc de Rochechouart from whose house in France it was stolen over two years before—to be quite accurate it was stolen on July twenty-fifth, 1919.

"Then," retorted the lady, by no means convinced or mollified, "I can prove you all to be liars, for the late Mr. Charles B. Tupper bought the old thing long before that. He had been on the Continent in the spring of 1919 and landed in New York again on May eighteenth. He told me then that he had made some interesting purchases in Europe, amongst them there was a picture for which he had paid half a million dollars. I scolded him about it, as I thought he was throwing his money away on such stuff, but he said that he wanted to make use of the picture for some wonderful advertising scheme he had in his mind, so I said no more about it. But that is the picture you say was stolen from some duke or other in July, when I tell you that it had been shipped for New York a month at least before that."

Perhaps at this point Detective Purley failed to conceal altogether a slight look of incredulity, for Lady Polchester turned on him once more like a fury.

"So you still think I stole the dirty old picture, do you?" she cried, using further language that is quite unprintable, "and you think that I am such a ninny and that I will give it up simply because you are trying to bully me. But I won't, so there! I can prove the truth of every word I say, and I don't care if I have to spend another million dollars to put your old duke in prison for talking such rot about me."

Once again Purley's tact had to come into play, and after a while he succeeded in soothing the lady's outraged feelings. With infinite patience he gradually got her to view the matter more calmly and above all not to look upon him as an enemy, but as a friend whose one desire was to throw light upon what certainly seemed an extraordinary mystery.

"Very well, then," she said, after a while, "I'll tell you all I can. I don't know when the picture was shipped from Europe but I do know that a case addressed to Mr. Charles B. Tupper and marked 'valuable picture with great

care' was delivered at our house in New York on July eighteenth. I can't mistake the date because Mr. Tupper was already very ill when the case arrived and he died two days later, that is on July twentieth, 1919. That you can ascertain easily enough, can't you?" Lady Polchester added tartly. Then as Purley offered no comment she went on more quietly:

"That's all right, then. Now let me tell you that the case containing this picture was in my house two days before Mr. Tupper died, and that I never had it undone until a couple of months ago, here in this house. I had it shipped from New York, not along with all my things, but by itself; and there is the lawyer over there, Mr. George F. Topham, who can tell you all about the case. I was too upset what with Mr. Tupper's illness and then his death, and the will and the whole bag of tricks to trouble much about it myself, but I told the lawyer that it contained a picture for which Mr. Tupper had paid half a million dollars, and it was put down for probate for that amount; the lawyer took charge of the old thing, and he can swear, and lots of other people over in the States can swear that the case was never undone. And the shipping company can swear that it never was touched whilst it was in their charge. They delivered it here and their men opened the case for us and helped us to place the picture.

"And now," concluded Lady Polchester, not because she had nothing more to say but presumably because she was out of breath, "now perhaps you'll tell me how a picture which was over in New York on the eighteenth of July can have been stolen from France on the twenty-fifth; and if you can't tell me that, then I'll trouble you to clear out of my house, for I've no use for Nosey Parkers about the place."

The unfortunate Purley had certainly, by all accounts, rather a rough time of it with the lady. Nor could he arrive at any satisfactory arrangement with her. Needless to say that she absolutely refused to give up the picture unless she were forced to do so by law, and even then, she dared say, she could make it very unpleasant for some people.

§3

The next event of any importance in this extraordinary case was the action brought by the Duc and Duchesse de Rochechouart here in England against Lady Polchester for illegal detention of their property.

It very soon transpired that several witnesses had come over from the States in order to corroborate tie lady's assertions with regard to her rightful ownership of the picture, and the public was once more on the tiptoe of expectation.

The case came on for hearing in March and lasted only two days. The picture was in court and was identified first by the Duc and Duchesse de Rochechouart and then by two or three experts as the genuine work of Ingres: "La Fiancée" known throughout the entire art world as having been purchased by the Duc's grandfather from the artist himself in 1850, and having been in the family uninterruptedly ever since. The Duc himself had last seen it in his own château at half-past four on the afternoon of July twenty-fifth, 1919.

A well-known peculiarity about the masterpiece was that it had originally been painted on a somewhat larger canvas, and that the artist himself, at the request of the original purchaser, had it cut smaller and re-strained on a smaller stretcher; this alteration was, of course, distinctly visible on the picture. The frame was new; it was admittedly purchased by Lady Polchester recently. When the picture came into her possession it was unframed.

On that lady's behalf on the other hand there was a formidable array of witnesses, foremost amongst these being Mr. Anthony Kleeberger, who was the late Charles B. Tupper's secretary and manager. He was the first to throw some light on the original transaction, whereby "La Fiancée" first came into his employer's possession.

"Mr. Tupper," he explained, "was the inventor of a new process of colour photography which he desired to test and then to advertise all over the world by means of reproduction from some world-famous masterpiece, and when during the spring of 1919 I accompanied him to Europe, one of the objects he had in mind was the purchase of a picture suitable for his purpose. It pretty soon was known all over the art world of the Continent what we were after and that Mr. Tupper was prepared to pay a big price for his choice. You would be surprised if I were to tell you of some of the offers we had in Vienna, in London, even in Rome.

"At last, when we were staying in Paris, Mr. Tupper came to me one

day and told me he had at last found the very picture he wanted. He had gone to the studio of a picture restorer who had written to him and offered him a genuine Ingres. He had seen the picture and liked it, and had agreed to give the owner half a million dollars for it. I thought this a terrific price and frankly I was a little doubtful whether my employer had a sufficient knowledge of art to enter into a transaction of this sort. I feared that he might be badly had, and buying some spurious imitation rather than a masterpiece. But Mr. Tupper was always a queer man in business. Once he had made up his mind there was no arguing with him. 'I like the picture,' was all that he ever said to me in response to some timid suggestion on my part that he should seek expert advice, 'and I have agreed to buy it for half a million dollars, simply because the fellow would not part with it for less. I believe it to be genuine. But if it is not I don't care. It will answer my purpose and there it is.'

"He then gave me instructions to see about the packing and forwarding of the picture and this I did. I must say that I had terrible misgivings about the whole affair. I certainly thought the picture magnificent, but of course I am no judge. It had a worthless frame around it which I discarded in order to facilitate the packing. The picture restorer's studio was up a back street in the Montmartre quarter. He and his wife saw to the packing themselves. I never saw anybody else in the place. I arranged for the forwarding of the case, for the insurance and so on, and I myself handed over to the vendor, whose name was given to me as Matthieu Vignard, five hundred thousand-dollar bills in the name and on account of my employer, Mr. Charles B. Tupper. Of course, I presumed that the snuffy old man and his blousey wife were acting for some personage who desired to remain unknown, and as time went on and there was no talk in the art world or in the newspapers then about any great masterpiece being stolen, I soon forgot my misgivings, and a couple of months later I set out on Mr. Tupper's business for Central America where I remained for close on two years.

"Half the time during those years I was up country in Costa Rica, Venezuela and so on where newspapers are scarce, and when the hue and cry was after a picture stolen from the house of the Duc de Rochechouart, I knew nothing about it. But this picture now in court is certainly the one which Mr. Tupper bought in Paris at the end of June, 1919, and which I myself saw packed and nailed down in its case and forwarded to New York

where it arrived two days before Mr. Tupper's death."

That was the substance of Mr. Kleeberger's evidence, by far the most important heard on the first day of the action. After that the testimony of other witnesses went to confirm the whole story. There was the well-known New York solicitor, Mr. George F. Topham, who took charge of the picture after the death of his client, Mr. Tupper, and the managing director of the Nebraska Safe Deposit Company where it was stored until Lady Polchester sent for it. There were the managers of the shipping companies who forwarded the picture from Paris to New York in June-July, 1919, and from New York to Holt Manor in the following year, and there were the removal men and servants who saw the picture unpacked and taken into the library at the Manor.

It took two days to go through all that evidence, but it was never either conflicting or doubtful. Yet the one supreme, mysterious contradiction remained, namely, that the picture now in court, the wonderful Ingres masterpiece, was bought by Mr. Tupper in Paris in June, 1919, and then and there shipped over to him to New York, and that, nevertheless, it was stated never to have left the Duc de Rochechouart's possession from the day when his grandfather bought it more than seventy years ago until that memorable twenty-fifth of July, 1919, when it was stolen on the very day it was about to pass into the possession of Mr. Aaron Jacobs. One felt one's head reeling when one thought out this amazing puzzle, and the decision of the learned judge was awaited with palpitating curiosity.

But after the second day of the action, just before it was adjourned, counsel on both sides were able to announce that their respective clients had come to an exceedingly satisfactory arrangement. All aspersions as to the honourability of the late Charles B. Tupper or of Lady Polchester would be publicly withdrawn and a notice to that effect would appear in all the leading newspapers of London, Paris and New York; and Lady Polchester would now remain in undisputed possession of the Ingres masterpiece, having paid its rightful owner the Duc de Rochechouart the sum of one hundred and twenty thousand pounds for it.

So both parties we may take it were completely satisfied; at one time it had looked as if the unfortunate duke would be done both out of his picture and out of the money, and another as if Lady Polchester would be so

defrauded. But now all was well and the learned judge declared himself pleased with the agreement. Not so the public who were left to face a mystery which every one felt would never now be cleared up.

I for one felt completely at sea, so much so indeed that my thoughts instinctively flew to the curious creature in the blameless tea-shop who I felt sure would have a theory of his own which would account for what was puzzling us all.

And a day or two later I saw him, weaving a fantastic design of knots in a piece of string. He saw that I wished to hear his explanation of the mystery of the Ingres masterpiece, but he kept me on tenter-hooks for some time, wearing out my patience with his sharp, sarcastic comments.

"Do you admit," he asked me at one time, with his exasperating chuckle, "that the Ingres masterpiece could have been in two places at one and the same time?"

"No, of course," I replied, "I do not admit such nonsense."

"Very well, then," he resumed, "what is the logical conclusion?"

"That there were two pictures," I said coldly.

"Of course there were two pictures. And as the great Mr. Ingres did not presumably paint his masterpiece in duplicate, we must take it that one picture was the original and the other the copy."

Now it was my turn to grow sarcastic and I retorted drily:

"Having done that, we are no nearer a solution of the mystery than we were before."

"Are we not?" he rejoined with a cackle like an old hen. "Now it seems to me that when we have admitted that one of the pictures was a copy of the other, and when we know that the picture which Mr. Charles B. Tupper bought was the original, because that was the one that was produced in court, we must come to the conclusion that the one which was stolen from the château in France could only have been the copy."

"Why, yes," I admitted, "but then again we have been told that the grandfather of the present Duc de Rochechouart bought the picture from the

artist himself, and that it has been in the uninterrupted possession of his family ever since."

"And I am willing to admit that the picture was in the uninterrupted possession of the Duc de Rochechouart until the present holder of the title or some one who had access to it in the same way as himself sold it to Mr. Charles B. Tupper in June, 1919."

"But you don't mean——"

"Surely," the funny creature went on with his dry cackle, "it was not such a very difficult little bit of dishonesty to perpetrate, seeing that Mme. la Duchesse was such an accomplished artist. Can you not imagine the lady being like many of us, very short of money, and then hearing of Mr. Charles B. Tupper, the American business man who was searching Europe through for a world-famous masterpiece; can you not see her during one of her husband's pleasure trips to Paris or elsewhere setting to work to make an exact replica of 'La Fiancée'? We know that it always hung in her studio until the day when it was moved to the dining-hall. Think how easy it was for her to substitute her own copy for the original. The only difficulty would be the conveying of the picture to Paris, but an artist knows how to take a canvas off its stretcher, to roll it up and re-strain it.

"Here I think that she must have had a confederate, probably some down-at-heel friend of her artistic days, a man whom she paid lavishly both for his help and his silence. Who that man was I suppose we shall never know. The so-called Matthieu Vignard and his 'blousey wife,' as Mr. Kleeberger picturesquely described her, have completely disappeared; no trace of them was ever found. They hired the studio at Montmartre for one month, paid the concierge the rent in advance, and at the end of that time they decamped and have never been heard of since, but unless I am much mistaken, they must at the present moment be carrying on a very lucrative little blackmailing business, because it must have been Vignard who conveyed the picture to Paris in the same way as we know it was he who first approached Charles B. Tupper and ultimately sold him the picture."

"But surely," I objected, for the funny creature had paused a moment, and I could not deny that his arguments were sound, "surely it would have been more practical to have sold the copy—which we suppose must have

been perfect—to Mr. Tupper who was a layman and an outsider, and to have kept the original in the château, as the Duc was even then negotiating for its sale, and most of the art dealers were coming to have a look at it."

He did not reply immediately but remained for a while deeply absorbed in the contemplation of his beloved bit of string.

"That," he admitted with complacent condescension, "would be a sound argument if we admit at once that the Duchesse knew for a certainty that her husband intended to sell 'La Fiancée.' But my contention is that at the time that she sold the picture to Mr. Tupper she had no idea that the Duc had any such intentions. No doubt when she knew this for a fact, she must have been beside herself with horror; no doubt also that she had a hard fight with her own terror before she made a clean breast of her misdeed to her husband. Apparently she did not do this until the very last moment, until the day when the picture was actually taken out of her studio and placed upon an easel in the dining-hall for closer inspection. Then discovery was imminent and we must suppose that she made a full confession.

"The Duc, like a gallant gentleman, at once set his wits thinking how best to save his wife's reputation without endangering his own. To have admitted to Mr. Aaron Jacobs and to the other experts and art dealers who had come to see the masterpiece that a Duc de Rochechouart was trying to sell a spurious imitation whilst having already disposed of the original was, of course, unthinkable; and thus the idea presented itself to their Graces that the copy must be made to disappear effectually. A favourable circumstance for the success of this scheme was the garden fête which was to take place that afternoon, when the house would be full of guests, of strangers and of servants, when surveillance would be slack and the comings and goings of the master of the house would easily pass unperceived.

"The Duc, in my opinion, chose the one quarter of an hour when he was alone in the house to cut the picture out of its frame. He then hid the canvas sufficiently skilfully that it was never found. Probably he thought at the time that there the matter would end, but equally probably he never gave the future another thought. His own position was unassailable seeing he was not insured against loss, and it was the present alone that mattered: the fact that a Duc de Rochechouart was trying to sell a spurious picture for half a million dollars. To many French men and women ever since the war,

America is a far country, and no doubt the Duc and Duchesse both hoped that the whole transaction, including the Ingres masterpiece, would soon lie buried somewhere at the bottom of the sea.

"Fate and Lady Polchester proved too strong for them; they ordained that 'La Fiancée' should be brought back to Europe, and that the whole of its exciting history be revived. But fate proved kind in the end, and I think that you will agree with me that two such daring and resourceful adventurers as their Graces deserve the extra half million dollars which, thanks to Lady Polchester's generosity and ostentation, they got so unexpected.

"Soon afterwards you will remember that the Duc and Duchesse de Rochechouart sold their château on the Oise together with the bulk of their collection of pictures and furniture.

"They now live in Sweden, I understand, where the Duchesse has many friends and relations and where the law of libel will not trouble you much if you publish my deductions in your valuable magazine.

"Think it all out," the Old Man in the Corner concluded glibly, "and from every point of view, and you will see that there is not a single flaw in my argument. I have given you the only possible solution of the mystery of the Ingres masterpiece."

"You may be right——" I murmured thoughtfully.

"I know I am," he answered dryly.

III
THE MYSTERY OF THE PEARL NECKLACE

§1

The Old Man in the Corner had a very curious theory about that mysterious affair of the pearl necklace, and though it all occurred a few years ago, I am tempted to put his deductions down on record, because, as far as I know, neither the police of this or any other country, nor the public, have ever found a satisfactory solution for what was undoubtedly a strange and mystifying adventure.

I remembered the case quite well when first he spoke to me about it one afternoon in what had become my favourite tea-haunt in Fleet Street; the only thing I was not quite certain of was the identity of the august personage to whom the pearl necklace was to be presented. I did know, of course, that she belonged to one of the reigning families of Europe and that she had been an active and somewhat hotheaded and bitter opponent of the Communist movement in her own country, in consequence of which both she and her exalted husband had been the object of more than one murderous attack by the other side.

It was on the occasion of the august lady's almost miraculous escape from a peculiarly well-planned and brutal assault that a number of ladies in England subscribed the sum of fifteen thousand pounds for the purchase of an exquisite pearl necklace to be presented to her as a congratulatory gift.

Rightly or wrongly, the donors of this princely gift feared that a certain well-known political organisation on the Continent would strive by every means in its power, fair or foul, to prevent this token of English good-will from reaching the recipient, and also, as it chanced to happen, there had been during the past few months a large number of thefts of valuables on Continental railways, and it became a question who should be entrusted by the committee of subscribers with the perilous risk of taking the necklace over for presentation; the trouble being further enhanced by the fact that in those days the Insurance Companies barred one or two European countries from their comprehensive policies against theft and petty larceny, and that it

was to one of those countries thus barred that the bearer of the fifteen thousand pound necklace would have to journey.

Imagine the excitement, the anxiety, which reigned in the hearts of the thousands of middle-class English women who had subscribed their mite to the gift! Their committee sat behind closed doors discussing the claims of various volunteers who were ready to undertake the journey: these worthy folk were quite convinced that certain well-known leaders of anarchical organisations would be on the lookout for the booty and would have special facilities for the theft of it at the frontier during the course of those endless customs and passport formalities for which that particular country was ever famous.

Finally the committee's choice fell upon a certain Captain Arthur Saunders, nephew of Sir Montague Bowden, who was chairman of the ladies' committee. Captain Saunders had, it seems, travelled abroad a great deal, and his wife was foreign—Swedish so it was understood; it was thought that if he went abroad now in the company of his wife, the object of their journey might be thought to be a visit to Mrs. Saunders's relations, and the conveying of the pearl necklace to its destination might thus remain more or less a secret.

The choice was approved of by all the subscribers, and it was decided that Captain and Mrs. Saunders. should start by the ten a.m. train for Paris on the sixteenth of March. Captain Saunders was to call the previous afternoon at a certain bank in Charing Cross, where the necklace was deposited, and there receive it as an almost sacred trust from the hands of the manager. Further, it was arranged that Mrs. Saunders should, immediately on arrival in Paris, send a wire to Mrs. Berners, a great friend of hers who was the secretary of the committee, and in fact that she should keep the committee informed of Captain Saunders's well-being at all the more important points of their journey.

And thus they started.

But no news came from Paris on the sixteenth. At first no anxiety was felt on that score, every one being ready to surmise that the Calais-Paris train had been late in, and that the Saunderses had perhaps only barely time to clear their luggage at the customs and catch the train de luxe which

would take them on, via Cologne, without a chance of sending the promised telegram. But soon after midday of the seventeenth, Sir Montague Bowden had a wire from Mrs. Saunders from Paris saying: "Arthur disappeared since last night. Desperately anxious. Please come at once. Have booked room for you here. Mary. Hotel Majestic."

The news was terrifying; however, Sir Montague Bowden, with commendable zeal, at once wired to Mary announcing his immediate departure for Paris, and as it was then too late for him to catch the afternoon Continental train, he started by the evening one, travelling all night and arriving at the Hotel Majestic in the early morning.

As soon as he had had a bath and some breakfast he went in search of information. He found that the French police already had the "affaire" in hand, but that they had not so far the slightest clue to the mysterious disappearance of le Capitaine Saunders. He found the management of the Majestic in a state of offended dignity, and Mrs. Saunders, in one that verged on hysteria, but fortunately, he also found at the hotel a Mr. Haasberg, brother of Mrs. Saunders, a Swedish business man of remarkable coolness and clearness of judgment, who promptly put him *au fait* with what had occurred.

It seems that Mr. Haasberg was settled in business in Paris, and that he had hoped to catch a glimpse of his sister and brother-in-law on the evening of the sixteenth at the Gare du Nord on their way through to the East, but that on that very morning he had received a telegram from Mary asking him to book a couple of rooms—a bedroom and a sitting-room—for one night for them at the Hotel Majestic. This Mr. Haasberg did, glad enough that he would see something more of his sister than he had been led to hope.

On the afternoon of the sixteenth he was kept late at business, and was unable to meet the Saunderses at the station, but towards nine o'clock he walked round to the Majestic, hoping to find them in. Their room was on the third floor. Mr. Haasberg went up in the lift, and as soon as he reached No. 301 he became aware of a buzz of conversation coming from within, which, however, ceased as soon as he had pushed open the door.

On entering the room he saw that Captain Saunders had a visitor, a tall, thick-set man, who wore an old-fashioned, heavy moustache and large,

gold-rimmed spectacles. At sight of Mr. Haasberg the man clapped his hat —a bowler—on his head, pulled his coat-collar over his ears, and with a hasty: "Well, s'long, old man. I'll wait till to-morrow!" spoken with a strong foreign accent, he walked rapidly out of the room and down the corridor.

Haasberg stood for a moment in the doorway to watch the disappearing personage, but he did this without any ulterior motive or thought of suspicion; then he turned back into the room and greeted his brother-in-law.

Saunders seemed to Haasberg to be nervous and ill-at-ease; in response to the latter's inquiry after Mary, he explained that she had remained in her room as he had a man to see on business. Haasberg made some casual remark about this visitor, and then Mary Saunders came in. She, too, appeared troubled and agitated, and as soon as she had greeted her brother, she turned to her husband and asked very eagerly:

"Well, has he gone?"

Saunders, giving a significant glance in Haasberg's direction, replied with an obvious effort at indifference:

"Yes, yes, he's gone. But he said he would be back to-morrow."

At which Mary seemed to give a sigh of relief.

Scenting some uncomfortable mystery, Haasberg questioned her, and also Saunders, about their visitor, but could not elicit any satisfactory explanation.

"Oh, there is nothing mysterious about old Pasquier," was all that either of them would say.

"He is an old pal of Arthur's," Mary added lightly, "but he is such an awful bore that I got Arthur to say that I was out, so that he might get rid of him more quickly."

Somehow Haasberg felt that these explanations were very lame. He could not get it out of his head, that there was something mysterious about the visitor, and knowing the purpose of the Saunderses' journey, he thought it as well to give them a very serious word of warning about Continental hotels generally, and to suggest that they should, after this stay in Paris, go

straight through in the train de luxe and never halt again until the fifteen thousand pound necklace was safely in the hands of the august lady for whom it was intended. But both Arthur and Mary laughed at these words of warning.

"My dear fellow," Arthur said, seemingly rather in a huff, "we are not such mugs as you think us. Mary and I have travelled on the Continent at least as much as you have, and are fully alive to the dangers attendant upon our mission. As a matter of fact, the moment we arrived, I gave the necklace in its own padlocked tin box, just as I brought it over from England, in charge of the hotel management, who immediately locked it up in their strong-room, so even if good old Pasquier had designs on it—which I can assure you he has not—he would stand no chance of getting hold of it. And now, sit down, there's a good chap, and talk of something else."

Only half reassured, Haasberg sat down and had a chat. But he did not stay long. Mary was obviously tired, and soon said good-night. Arthur offered to accompany his brother-in-law to the latter's lodgings in the Rue de Moncigny.

"I would like a walk," he said, "before going to bed."

So the two men walked out together, and Haasberg finally said good-night to Arthur just outside his own lodgings. It was then close upon ten o'clock. The little party had agreed to spend the next day together, as the train de luxe did not go until the evening, and Haasberg had promised to take a holiday from business. Before going to bed he attended to some urgent correspondence, and had just finished a letter when his telephone bell rang. To his horror he heard his sister's voice speaking.

"Don't keep Arthur up so late, Herman," she said. "I am dog tired, and can't go to sleep until he returns."

"Arthur?" he replied. "But Arthur left me at my door two hours ago!"

"He has not returned," she insisted, "and I am getting anxious."

"Of course you are, but he can't be long now. He must have turned into a café and forgot the time. Do ring me up as soon as he comes in."

Unable to rest, however, and once more vaguely anxious, Haasberg

went hastily back to the Majestic. He found Mary nearly distracted with anxiety, and as he himself felt anything but reassured, he did not know how to comfort her.

At one time he went down into the hall to ascertain whether anything was known on the hotel about Saunders's movements earlier in the evening; but at this hour of the night there were only the night porter and the watchman about, and they knew nothing of what had occurred before they came on duty.

There was nothing for it but to await the morning as calmly as possible. This was difficult enough, as Mary Saunders was evidently in a terrible state of agitation. She was quite certain that something tragic had happened to her husband, but Haasberg tried in vain to get her to speak of the mysterious visitor who had from the first aroused his own suspicions. Mary persisted in asserting that the visitor was just an old pal of Arthur's and that no suspicion of any kind could possibly rest upon him.

In the early morning Haasberg went off to the nearest commissariat of police. They took the matter in hand without delay, and within the hour had obtained some valuable information from the personnel of the hotel. To begin with, it was established that at about ten minutes past ten the previous evening, that is to say a quarter of an hour or so after Haasberg had parted from Arthur Saunders outside his own lodgings, the latter had returned to the Majestic, and at once asked for the tin box which he had deposited in the bureau. There was some difficulty in acceding to his request, because the clerk who was in charge of the keys of the strong-room could not at once be found. However, M. le Capitaine was so insistent that search was made for the clerk, who presently appeared with the keys, and after the usual formalities, handed over the tin box to Saunders, who signed a receipt for it in the book. Haasberg had since then identified the signature which was quite clear and incontestable.

Saunders then went upstairs, refusing to take the lift, and five minutes later he came down again, nodded to the hall porter, and went out of the hotel. No one had seen him since, but during the course of the morning, the valet on the fourth floor had found an empty tin box in the gentlemen's cloakroom. This box was produced, and to her unutterable horror Mary Saunders recognised it as the one which had held the pearl necklace.

The whole of this evidence as it gradually came to light was a staggering blow both to Mary and to Haasberg himself, because until this moment neither of them had thought that the necklace was in jeopardy: they both believed that it was safely locked up in the strong-room of the hotel.

Haasberg now feared the worst. He blamed himself terribly for not having made more certain of the mysterious visitor's identity. He had not yet come to the point of accusing his brother-in-law in his mind of a conspiracy to steal the necklace, but frankly, at this stage, he did not know what to think. Saunders's conduct had—to say the least—been throughout extremely puzzling. Why had he elected to spend the night in Paris, when all arrangements had been made for him and his wife to travel straight through? Who was the mysterious visitor with the walrus moustache, vaguely referred to by both Arthur and Mary as "old Pasquier"? And above all why had Arthur withdrawn the necklace from the hotel strong-room where it was quite safe, and, with it in his pocket, walked about the streets of Paris at that hour of the night?

Haasberg was quite convinced that "old Pasquier" knew something about the whole affair, but, strangely enough, Mary persisted in asserting that he was quite harmless and an old friend of Arthur's who was beyond suspicion. When further pressed with questions, she declared that she had no idea where the man lodged, and that, in fact, she believed that he had left Paris the self-same evening *en route* for Brussels, where he was settled in business.

Enquiry amongst the personnel of the hotel revealed the fact that Captain Saunders's visitor had been seen by the hall porter when he came soon after half-past eight, and asked whether le Capitaine Saunders had finished dinner; his question being answered in the affirmative, he went upstairs, refusing to take the lift. Half an hour or so later he was seen by one of the waiters in the lounge hurriedly crossing the hall, and finally by the two boys in attendance at the swing doors when he went out of the hotel. All agreed that the man was very tall and thick-set, that he wore a heavy moustache and a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. He had on a bowler hat and an overcoat with the collar pulled right up to his ears. The hall porter, who himself spoke English fairly well, was under the impression that the man was not English, although he made his enquiries in that language.

In addition to all these investigations, the commissaire de police, on his second visit to the hotel, was able to assure Haasberg that all the commissariats in and around Paris had been communicated with by telephone so as to ascertain whether any man answering to Saunders's description had been injured during the night in a street accident, and taken in somewhere for shelter; also that a description of the necklace had already been sent round to all the Monts-de-Piété throughout the country. The police were also sharply on the lookout for the man with the walrus moustache, but so far without success.

And Mary Saunders obstinately persisted in her denial of any knowledge about him. "Arthur," she said, "sometimes saw 'old Pasquier' in London"; but she did not know anything about him, neither what his nationality was, nor where he lodged. She did not know when he had left London, nor where he could be found in Paris. All that she knew, so she said, was that his name was Pasquier, and that he was in business in Brussels; she therefore concluded that he was Belgian.

Even to her own brother she would not say more, although he succeeded in making her understand how strange her attitude must appear both to the police and to her friends, and what harm she was doing to her husband, but at this she burst into floods of tears and swore that she knew nothing about Pasquier's whereabouts, and that she believed him to be innocent of any attempt to steal the necklace or to injure Arthur.

There was nothing more to be said for the present and Haasberg sent the telegram in his sister's name to Sir Montague Bowden because he felt that some one less busy than himself should look after the affair and be a comfort to Mary, whose mental condition appeared pitiable in the extreme.

In this first interview he was able to assure Sir Montague that everything had been done to trace the whereabouts of Arthur Saunders, and also of the necklace of which the unfortunate man had been the custodian; and it was actually while the two men were talking the whole case over that Haasberg received an intimation from the police that they believed the missing man had been found: at any rate would Monsieur give himself the trouble to come round to the commissariat at once.

This, of course, Haasberg did, accompanied by Sir Montague, and at the

commissariat to their horror they found the unfortunate Saunders in a terrible condition. Briefly the commissaire explained to them that about a quarter past ten last night an *agent de police*, making his rounds, saw a man crouching in the angle of a narrow blind alley that leads out of the Rue de Moncigny. On being shaken up by the agent the man struggled to his feet, but he appeared quite dazed and unable to reply to any questions that were put to him. He was then conveyed to the nearest commissariat, where he spent the night.

He was obviously suffering from loss of memory, and could give no account of himself, nor were any papers of identification found upon him, not even a visiting card, but close behind him, on the pavement where he was crouching, the *agent* had picked up a handkerchief which was saturated with chloroform. The handkerchief bore the initials A.S. The man, of course, was Arthur Saunders. What had happened to him it was impossible to ascertain. He certainly did not appear to be physically hurt, although from time to time when Mr. Haasberg or Sir Montague tried to question him, he passed his hand across the back of his head, and an expression of pathetic puzzlement came into his eyes.

His two friends, after the usual formalities of identification, were allowed to take him back to the Hotel Majestic where he was restored to the arms of his anxious wife; the English doctor, hastily summoned, could not find any trace of injury about the body, only the head appeared rather tender when touched. The doctor's theory was that Saunders had probably been sandbagged first, and then rendered more completely insensible by means of the chloroformed handkerchief, and that excitement, anxiety and the blow on the head had caused temporary loss of memory which quietude and good nursing would soon put right.

In the meanwhile, of the fifteen thousand pound necklace there was not the slightest trace.

§2

Unfortunately the disappearance of so valuable a piece of jewellery was one of those cases that could not be kept from public knowledge. The matter was of course in the hands of the French police and they had put themselves in communication with their English confrères, and the

consternation—not to say the indignation—amongst the good ladies who had subscribed the money for the gift to the august lady was unbounded.

Everybody was blaming everybody else; the choice of Captain Saunders as the accredited messenger was now severely criticised; pointed questions were asked as to his antecedents, as to his wife's foreign relations, and it was soon found that very little was known about either.

Of course everybody knew that he was Sir Montague Bowden's nephew, and that, thanks to his uncle's influence, he had obtained a remunerative and rather important post in the office of one of the big Insurance Companies. But what his career had been before that no one knew. Some people said that he had fought in South Africa and later on had been correspondent for one of the great dailies during the Russo-Japanese war; altogether there seemed no doubt that he had been something of a rolling stone.

Rather tardily the committee was taken severely to task for having entrusted so important a mission to a man who was either a coward or a thief, or both, for at first no one doubted that Saunders had met a confederate in Paris and had handed over the necklace to him, whilst he himself enacted a farce of being waylaid, chloroformed and robbed, and subsequently of losing his memory.

But presently another version of the mystery was started by some amateur detective, and it found credence with quite a good many people. This was that Sir Montague Bowden had connived at the theft with Mrs. Saunders's relations; that the man with the walrus moustache did not exist at all or was in very truth a harmless old friend of Captain Saunders, and that it was Haasberg who had induced his brother-in-law to withdraw the necklace from the hotel strong-room and to bring it to the Rue de Moncigny; that in fact it was that same perfidious Swede who had waylaid the credulous Englishman, chloroformed and robbed him of the precious necklace.

In the meanwhile the police in England had, of course, been communicated with by their French confrères, but before they could move in the matter or enjoin discretion on all concerned, an enterprising young man on the staff of the *Express Post* had interviewed Miss Elizabeth Spicer, who was the parlour-maid at the Saunderses' flat in Sloane Street.

That young lady, it seems, had something to say about a gentleman named Pasquier, who was not an infrequent visitor at the flat. She described him as a fine, tall gentleman, who wore large gold-rimmed spectacles, and a full military moustache. It seems that the last time Miss Elizabeth saw him was two days before her master and mistress's departure for abroad. Mr. Pasquier called late that evening and stayed till past ten o'clock. When Elizabeth was rung for in order to show him out, he was saying good-bye to the captain in the hall, and she heard him say, "in his funny foreign way," as she put it:

"Well, I shall be in Paris as soon as you. Tink it over, my friend."

And on the top of that came a story told by Henry Tidy, Sir Montague Bowden's butler. According to him Captain Saunders called at Sir Montague Bowden's house in Lowndes Street on the afternoon of the fifteenth. The two gentlemen remained closeted together in the library for nearly an hour, when Tidy was summoned to show the visitor out. Sir Montague, it seems, went to the front door with his nephew, and as the latter finally wished him good-bye, Sir Montague said to him:

"My dear boy, you can take it from me that there's nothing to worry about, and in any case I am afraid that it is too late to make any fresh arrangements."

"It's because of Mary," the captain rejoined. "She has made herself quite ill over it."

"The journey will do her good," Sir Montague went on pleasantly, "but if I were you I would have a good talk with your brother-in-law. He must know his Paris well. Take my advice and spend the night at the Majestic. You can always get rooms there."

This conversation Tidy heard quite distinctly, and he related the whole incident both to the journalist and to the police. After that the amateur investigators of crime were divided into two camps: there were those who persisted in thinking that Pasquier and Saunders, and probably Mrs. Saunders also, had conspired together to steal the necklace, and that Saunders had acted the farce of being waylaid and robbed, and losing his memory; they based their deductions on Elizabeth Spicer's evidence and on Mary Saunders's extraordinary persistence in trying to shield the mysterious

Pasquier.

But other people, getting hold of Henry Tidy's story, deduced from it that it was indeed Sir Montague Bowden who had planned the whole thing in conjunction with Haasberg, since it was he who had persuaded Saunders to spend the night in Paris, thus giving his accomplice the opportunity of assaulting Saunders and stealing the necklace. To these wise-acres "old Pasquier" was indeed a harmless old pal of Arthur's, whose presence that evening at the Majestic was either a fable invented by Haasberg, or one quite innocent in purpose. In vain did Sir Montague try to explain away Tidy's evidence. Arthur, he said, had certainly called upon him that last afternoon, but what he seemed worried about was his wife's health; he feared that she would not be strong enough to undertake the long journey without a break, so Sir Montague advised him to spend the night in Paris and in any case to talk the matter over with Mary's brother.

The conversation overheard by Tidy could certainly admit of this explanation, but it did not satisfy the many amateur detectives who preferred to see a criminal in the chairman of the committee rather than a harmless old gentleman, as eager as themselves to find a solution to the mystery. And while people argued and wrangled there was no news of the necklace, and none of the man with the walrus moustache. No doubt that worthy had by now shaved off his hirsute adornment and grown a beard. He had certainly succeeded in evading the police; whether he had gone to Brussels or succeeded in crossing the German frontier no one could say, his disappearance certainly bore out the theory of his being the guilty party with the connivance of Saunders, as against the Bowden-Haasberg theory.

As for the necklace it had probably been already taken to pieces and the pearls would presently be disposed of one by one to some unscrupulous Continental dealers, when the first hue and cry after them had died away.

Captain Saunders was said to be slowly recovering from his loss of memory and subsequent breakdown. Every one at home was waiting to hear what explanation he would give of his amazing conduct in taking the necklace out of the hotel strong-room late that night and sallying forth with it into the streets of Paris at that hour. The explanation came after about a fortnight of suspense in a letter from Mary to her friend Mrs. Berners.

Arthur, she said, had told her that on the fateful evening, after he parted from Mr. Haasberg in the Rue de Moncigny, he had felt restless and anxious about what the latter had told him on the subject of foreign hotels, and he was suddenly seized with the idea that the necklace was not safe in the care of the management of the Majestic, because there would come a moment when he would have to claim the tin box, and this would probably be handed over to him when the hall of the hotel was crowded, and the eyes of expert thieves would then follow his every movement. Therefore he went back to the hotel, claimed the tin box, and as the latter was large and cumbersome he got rid of it in one of the cloak-rooms of the hotel, slipped the necklace, in its velvet case, in the pocket of his overcoat, and went out with the intention of asking Haasberg to take care of it for him, and only to hand it back to him when on the following evening the train de luxe was on the point of starting. He had been in sight of Haasberg's lodgings when, without the slightest warning, a dull blow on the back of his head, coming he knew not whence, robbed him of consciousness.

This explanation, however, was voted almost unanimously to be very lame, and it was, on the whole, as well that the Saunderses had decided to remain abroad for a time. The ladies especially—and above all those who had put their money together for the necklace—were very bitter against him. On the other hand Sir Montague Bowden was having a very rough time of it; he had already had one or two very unpleasant word-tussles with some outspoken friends of his, and there was talk of a slander action that would certainly be a *cause célèbre* when it came on.

Thus the arguments went on in endless succession until one day—well do I remember the excitement that spread throughout the town as soon as the incident became known—there was a terrible row in one of the big clubs in Piccadilly. Sir Montague Bowden was insulted by one of his fellow members: he was called a thief, and asked what share he was getting out of the sale of the necklace. Of course the man who spoke in this unwarranted fashion was drunk at the time, but nevertheless it was a terrible position for Sir Montague, because as his opponent grew more and more abusive and he himself more and more indignant, he realised that he had practically no friends who would stand by him in the dispute. Some of the members tried to stop the row, and others appeared indifferent, but no one sided with him, or returned abuse for abuse on his behalf.

It was in the very midst of this most unedifying scene—one perhaps unparalleled in the annals of London club life—that a club servant entered the room, and handed a telegram to Sir Montague Bowden.

Even the most sceptical there, and those whose brains were almost fuddled with the wrangling and the noise, declared afterwards that a mysterious Providence had ordained that the telegram should arrive at that precise moment. It had been sent to Sir Montague's private house in Lowndes Street; his secretary had opened it and sent it on to the club. As soon as Sir Montague had mastered its contents he communicated them to the members of the club, and it seems that there never had been such excitement displayed in any assembly of sober Englishmen as was shown in that club room on this momentous occasion.

The telegram had come all the way from the other end of Europe, and had been sent by the august lady in whose hands the priceless necklace, about which there was so much pother in England and France, had just been safely placed. It ran thus:

"Deeply touched by exquisite present just received through kind offices of Captain Saunders, from English ladies. Kind thoughts and beautiful necklace equally precious. Kindly convey my grateful thanks to all subscribers."

Having read out the telegram, Sir Montague Bowden demanded an apology from those who had impugned his honour, and I understand that he got an unqualified one. After that, male tongues were let loose; the wildest conjectures flew about as to the probable solution of what appeared a more curious mystery than ever. By evening the papers had got hold of the incident, and all those who were interested in the affair shook their heads and looked portentously wise.

But the hero of the hour was certainly Captain Saunders. From having been voted either a knave or a fool, or both, he was declared all at once to be possessed of all the qualities which had made England great: prudence, astuteness, and tenacity. However, as a matter of fact, nobody knew what had actually happened; the august lady had the necklace and Captain Saunders was returning to England without a stain on his character, but as to how these two eminently satisfactory results had come about not even the

wise-acres could say. Captain and Mrs. Saunders arrived in England a few days later; every one was agog with curiosity, and the poor things had hardly stepped out of the train before they were besieged by newspaper men and pressed with questions.

The next morning the *Express Post* and the *Daily Thunderer* came out with exclusive interviews with Captain Saunders, who had made no secret of the extraordinary adventure which had once more placed him in possession of the necklace. It seems that he and his wife on coming out of the Madeleine Church on Easter Sunday were hustled at the top of the steps by a man whose face they did not see, and who pushed past them very hastily and roughly. Arthur Saunders at once thought of his pockets, and looked to see if his notecase had not disappeared. To his boundless astonishment his hand came in contact with a long, hard parcel in the outside pocket of his overcoat, and this parcel proved to be the velvet case containing the missing necklace.

Both he and his wife were flabbergasted at this discovery, and, scarcely believing in this amazing piece of good luck, they managed with the help of Mr. Haasberg, despite its being Easter Sunday, to obtain an interview with one of the great jewellers in the Rue de la Paix, who, well knowing the history of the missing necklace, was able to assure them that they had indeed been lucky enough to regain possession of their treasure. That same evening they left by the train de luxe, having been fortunate enough to secure seats; needless to say that the necklace was safely stowed away inside Captain Saunders's breast pocket.

All was indeed well that ended so well. But the history of the disappearance and reappearance of the pearl necklace has remained a baffling mystery to this day. Neither the Saunderses nor Mr. Haasberg ever departed one iota from the circumstantial story which they had originally told, and no one ever heard another word about the man with the walrus moustache and the gold-rimmed spectacles: the French police are still after him in connection with the assault on le Capitaine Saunders, but no trace of him was ever found.

To some people this was a conclusive proof of guilt, but then, having stolen the necklace, why should he have restored it? Though the pearls were very beautiful and there were a great number of them beautifully matched,

there was nothing abnormal about them either in size or colour; there never could be any difficulty for an expert thief to dispose of the pearls to Continental dealers. The same argument would of course apply to Mr. Haasberg, whom some wiseacres still persisted in accusing. If he stole the necklace why should he have restored it? Nothing could be easier than for a business man who travelled a great deal on the Continent to sell a parcel of pearls. And there always remained the unanswered question: Why did Saunders take the pearls out of the strong-room, and where was he taking them to when he was assaulted and robbed?

Did the man with the walrus moustache really call at the Majestic that night? And if he was innocent, why did he disappear? Why, why, why?

§3

The case had very much interested me at the time, but the mystery was a nine days' wonder as far as I was concerned, and soon far more important matters than the temporary disappearance of a few rows of pearls occupied public attention.

It was really only last year when I renewed my acquaintance with the Old Man in the Corner, that I bethought myself once more of the mystery of the pearl necklace, and I felt the desire to hear what the spook-like creature's theory was upon the subject.

"The pearl necklace?" he said with a cackle. "Ah, yes, it caused a good bit of stir in its day. But people talked such a lot of irresponsible nonsense that thinking minds had not a chance of arriving at a sensible conclusion."

"No," I rejoined amiably. "But you did."

"Yes, you are right there," he replied, "I knew well enough where the puzzle lay, but it was not my business to put the police on the right track. And if I had I should have been the cause of making two innocent and clever people suffer more severely than the guilty party."

"Will you condescend to explain?" I asked, with an indulgent smile.

"Why should I not?" he retorted, and once again his thin fingers started to work on the inevitable piece of string. "It all lies in a nutshell, and is easily understandable if we realise that 'old Pasquier,' the man with the

walrus moustache, was not the friend of the Saunderses, but their enemy."

I frowned. "Their enemy?"

"An old pal shall we say?" he retorted, "who knew something in the past history of one or the other of them that they did not wish their newest friends to know: really a blackmailer who, under the guise of comradeship, sat not infrequently at their fireside, watching an opportunity for extorting a heavy price for his silence and his good-will. Thus he could worm himself into their confidence; he knew their private life; he heard about the necklace, and decided that here was the long sought for opportunity at last.

"Think it all over and you will see how well the pieces of that jig-saw puzzle fit together and make a perfect picture. Pasquier calls on the Saunderses a day or two before their departure and springs his infamous proposal upon them then. For the time being Arthur succeeds in giving him the slip, his journey is not yet ... the necklace is not yet in his possession ... but he knows the true quality of the blackmailer now, and he is on the alert.

"He begins by going to Sir Montague Bowden and begging him to entrust the mission to somebody else. Judging by the butler's evidence, he even makes a clean breast of his troubles to Sir Montague who, however, makes light of them and advises consultation with Mr. Haasberg, who perhaps would undertake the journey. In any case it is too late to make fresh arrangements at this hour. Very reluctantly now, and hoping for the best, the Saunderses make a start. But the blackmailer, too, is on the alert, he has succeeded in spying upon them and in tracing them to the Majestic in Paris. The situation now has become terribly serious, for the blackmailer has thrown off the mask and demands the necklace under threats which apparently the Saunderses did not dare defy.

"But they are both clever and resourceful, and as soon as Haasberg's arrival rids them temporarily their tormentor, they put their heads together and invent a plot which was destined to free them for ever from the threats of Pasquier and at the same time would enable them to honour the trust which had been placed in them by the committee. In any case, they had until the morrow to make up their minds. Remember the words which Mr. Haasberg overheard on the part of Pasquier: 'S'long, old man. I'll wait till to-morrow!' Anyway, Pasquier must have gone off that evening confident that

he had Captain Saunders entirely in his power, and that the wretched man would on the morrow hand over the necklace without demur.

"Whether Arthur Saunders confided in Haasberg or not is doubtful. Personally I think not. I believe that he and Mary did the whole thing between them. Arthur having parted from his brother-in-law went back to the hotel, took the necklace out of the strong-room and then left it in Mary's charge. He threw the tin box away, there where it would surely be found again. Then he went as far as the Rue de Moncigny and crouched, seemingly unconscious, in the blind alley, having previously taken the precaution of saturating his handkerchief with chloroform.

"Thus the two clever conspirators cut the ground from under the blackmailer's feet, for the latter now had the police after him for an assault, which he might find very difficult to disprove, even if he cleared himself of the charge of having stolen the necklace. Anyway he would remain a discredited man, and his threats would in the future be defied, because if he dared come out in the open after that, public feeling would be so bitter against him for a crime which he had not committed that he would never be listened to if he tried to do Captain Saunders an injury. And it was with a view of keeping public indignation at boiling pitch against the supposed thief that the Saunderses kept up the comedy for so long. To my mind that was a very clever move. Then they came out with the story of the restoration of the necklace and became the heroes of the hour.

"Think it over," the funny creature went on, as he finally stuffed his bit of string back into his pocket and rose from the table, "think it over and you will realise at once that everything happened just as I have related, and that it is the only theory that fits in with the facts that are known; you'll also agree with me, I think, that Captain and Mrs. Saunders chose the one way of ridding themselves effectually of a dangerous blackmailer. The police were after him for a long time, as they still believed that he had something to do with the theft of the necklace and with the assault on M. le Capitaine Saunders. But presently 1914 came along and what became of the man with the walrus moustache no one ever knew. What his nationality was was never stated at the time, but whatever it was, it would, I imagine, be a bar against his obtaining a visa on his passport for the purpose of visiting England and blackmailing Arthur Saunders.

"But it was a curious case.”

IV
THE MYSTERY OF THE RUSSIAN PRINCE

§1

There had been a great deal of talk about that time, in newspapers and amongst the public, of the difficulty an inexperienced criminal finds in disposing of the evidences of his crime—notably of course of the body of his victim. In no case perhaps was this difficulty so completely overcome—at any rate as far as was publicly known—as in that of the murder of the individual known as Prince Orsoff. I am thus qualifying his title because as a matter of fact the larger public never believed that he was a genuine Prince—Russian or otherwise—and that even if he had not come by such a violent and tragic death the Smithsons would never have seen either their ten thousand pounds again or poor Louisa's aristocratic bridegroom.

I had been thinking a great deal about this mysterious affair, indeed it had been discussed at most of the literary and journalistic clubs as a possible subject for a romance or drama, and it was with deliberate intent that I walked over to Fleet Street one afternoon, in order to catch the Old Man in the Corner in his accustomed teashop, and get him to give me his views on the subject of the mystery that to this very day surrounds the murder of the Russian Prince.

"Let me just put the whole case before you," the funny creature began as soon as I had led him to talk upon the subject, "as far as it was known to the general public. It all occurred in Folkestone, you remember, where the wedding of Louisa Smithson, the daughter of a late retired grocer, to a Russian Prince whom she had met abroad, was the talk of the town.

"It was on a lovely day in May, and the wedding ceremony was to take place at Holy Trinity Church. The Smithsons—mother and daughter—especially since they had come into a fortune, were very well known in Folkestone, and there was a large crowd of relatives and friends inside the church and another out in the street to watch the arrival of guests and to see the bride. There were camera men and newspaper men, and hundreds of idlers and visitors, and the police had much ado to keep the crowd in order.

"Mrs. Smithson had already arrived looking gorgeous in what I understand is known as amethyst crêpe-de-chine, and there was a marvellous array of Bond Street gowns and gorgeous headgears, all of which kept the lookers-on fully occupied during the traditional quarter of an hour's grace usually accorded to the bride.

"But presently those fifteen minutes became twenty, the clergy had long since arrived, the guests had all assembled, the bridesmaids were waiting in the porch: but there was no bridegroom. Neither he nor his best man had arrived; and now it was half an hour after the time appointed for the ceremony, and, oh, horror! the bride's car was in sight. The bride in church waiting for the bridegroom!—such an outrage had not been witnessed in Folkestone within the memory of the oldest inhabitants.

"One of the guests went at once to break the news to the elderly relative who had arranged to give the bride away, and who was with her in the car, whilst another, a Mr. Sutherland Ford, jumped into the first available taxi, having volunteered to go to the station in order to ascertain whether there had been any breakdown on the line, as the bridegroom was coming down by train from London with his best man.

"The bride, hastily apprised of the extraordinary contretemps, remained in the car, with the blinds pulled down, well concealed from the prying eyes of the crowd, whilst the fashionable guests, relatives and friends had perforce to possess their soul in patience.

"And presently the news fell like a bombshell in the midst of this lively throng. A taxi drove up, and from it alighted first Mr. Sutherland Ford, who had volunteered to go to the station for information, and then John and Henry Carter, the two latter beautifully got up in frock-coats, striped trousers, top hats, and flowers in their buttonholes, looking obviously like belated wedding guests. But still no bridegroom, and no best man.

"The three gentlemen, paying no heed to the shower of questions that assailed them, as soon as they had jumped out of the taxi ran straight into the church, leaving every one's curiosity unsatisfied and public excitement at fever pitch.

"'It was John and Henry Carter,' the ladies whispered agitatedly; 'fancy their being asked to the wedding!'

"And those who were in the know whispered to those who were less favoured that young Henry had at one time been engaged to Louisa Smithson, before she met her Russian Prince, and that when she threw him over he was in such dire despair that his friends thought he would commit suicide.

"A moment or two later Mrs. Smithson was seen hurriedly coming out of church, her face pale and drawn, and her beautiful hat all awry. She made straight for the bride's car, stepped into it, and the car immediately drove off, whilst the wedding guests trooped out of the church, and the terrible news spread like wildfire through the crowd, and was presently all over the town.

"It seems that when the midday train, London to Folkestone, stopped at Swanley Junction, two passengers who were about to enter a first-class compartment in one of the corridor carriages were horrified to find it in a terrible state of disorder. They hastily called the guard, and on examination the carriage looked indeed as if it had been the scene of a violent struggle: the door on the off side was unlatched, two of the window straps were wrenched off, the anti-macassars were torn off the cushions, one of the luggage racks was broken, and the net hung down in strips, and over some of the cushions were marks unmistakably made by a blood-stained hand.

"The guard immediately locked the compartment and sent for the local police. No one was allowed in or out of the station until every passenger on the train had satisfied the police as to his or her identity. Thus the train was held up for over two hours whilst preliminary investigations were going on.

"There appeared no doubt that a terrible murder had been committed, and telephonic communication all along the line presently established the fact that it must have been done somewhere in the neighbourhood of Sydenham Hill, because a group of men who were at work on the 'up' side of the line at Penge, when the down train came out of the tunnel noticed that the door of one of the first-class carriages was open. It swung to again just before the train steamed through the station.

"A preliminary search was at once made in and about the tunnel; it revealed on the platform of Sydenham Hill station a first-class single ticket of that day's issue, London to Folkestone, crushed and stained with blood,

and on the permanent way, close to the entrance of the tunnel on the Penge side, a soft black hat, and a broken pair of pince-nez. But as to the identity of the victim there was for the moment no clue.

"After a couple of wearisome and anxious hours the passengers were allowed to proceed on their journey. Among these passengers, it appears, were John and Henry Carter, who were on their way to the Smithson wedding. Until they arrived in Folkestone they had no more idea than the police who the victim of the mysterious train murder was: but in the station they caught side of Mr. Sutherland Ford, whom they knew slightly. Mr. Ford was making agitated enquiries as to any possible accident on the line. The Carters put him *au fait* of what had occurred, and as there was no sign of the Russian Prince amongst the passengers who had just arrived, all three men came to the horrifying conclusion that it was indeed the bridegroom elect who had been murdered.

"They communicated at once with the police, and there were more investigations and telephonic messages up and down the line before the Carters and Mr. Ford were at last allowed to proceed to the church and break the awful news to those most directly concerned.

"And in this tragic fashion did Louisa Smithson's wedding-day draw to its end; nor, as far as the public was concerned, was the mystery of that terrible murder ever satisfactorily cleared up. The local police worked very hard and very systematically, but, though presently they also had the help of one of the ablest detectives from Scotland Yard, nothing was seen or found that gave the slightest clue either as to the means which the murderer or murderers adopted for removing the body of their victim, or in what manner they made good their escape. The body of the Russian Prince was never found, and, as far as the public knows, the murderer is still at large; and although, as time went on, many strange facts came to light, they only helped to plunge that extraordinary crime into darker mystery."

§2

"The facts in themselves were curious enough, you will admit," the Old Man in the Corner went on after a while. "Many of these were never known to the public, whilst others found their way into the columns of the halfpenny Press, who battened on the 'Mystery of the Russian Prince' for

weeks on end, and, as far as the unfortunate Smithsons were concerned, there was not a reader of the *Express Post* and kindred newspapers who did not know the whole of their family history.

"It seems that Louisa Smithson is the daughter of a grocer in Folkestone, who had retired from business just before the War, and with his wife and his only child led a meagre and obscure existence in a tiny house in Warren Avenue somewhere near the tram road. They were always supposed to be very poor, but suddenly old Smithson died and it turned out that he had been a miser, for he left the handsome little fortune of fifteen thousand pounds to be equally divided between his daughter and his widow.

"At once Mrs. Smithson and Louisa found themselves the centre of an admiring throng of friends and relatives all eager to help them spend their money for their especial benefit; but Mrs. Smithson was shrewd enough not to allow herself to be exploited by those who in the past had never condescended to more than a bowing acquaintance with her. She turned her back on most of those sycophants, but at the same time she was determined to do the best for herself and for Louisa, and to this end she admitted into her councils her sister, Margaret Penny, who was saleswoman at a fashionable shop in London, and who immediately advised a journey up to town so that the question of clothes might at once be satisfactorily settled.

"In addition to valuable advice on that score, this Miss Penny seems to have succeeded in completely turning her sister's head. Certain it is that Mrs. Smithson left Folkestone a quiet, sensible, motherly woman, and that she returned, six weeks later, an arrogant, ill-mannered parvenue, who seemed to think that the possession of a few thousand pounds entitled her to ride rough-shod over the feelings and sentiments of those who had less money than herself.

"She began by taking a suite of rooms at the Splendide Hotel for herself, her daughter, and her maid. Then she sold her house in Warren Avenue, bought a car, and, though she and Louisa were of course in deep mourning, they were to be seen everywhere in wonderful Bond Street dresses and marvellous feathered hats. Finally, they announced their intention of spending the coming winter on the Riviera, probably Monte Carlo.

"All this extravagant behaviour made some people smile, others shrugged their shoulders and predicted disaster: but there was one who suffered acutely through this change in the fortune of the Smithsons. This was Henry Carter, a young clerk employed in an insurance office in London. He and his brother were Folkestone men, sons of a local tailor in a very small way of business, who had been one of old Smithson's rare friends. The elder Carter boy had long since cut his stick and was said to be earning a living in London by free-lance journalism. The younger one, Henry, remained to help his father with the tailoring. He was a constant visitor in the little house in Warren Avenue, and presently became engaged to Louisa. There could be no question of an immediate marriage, of course, as Henry had neither money nor prospects. However, presently old Carter died, the tailoring business was sold for a couple of hundred pounds, and Henry went up to London to join his brother and to seek his fortune. Presently he obtained a post in an insurance office, but his engagement to Louisa subsisted: the young people were known to be deeply in love with one another, and Henry spent most weekends and all his holidays in Folkestone in order to be near his girl.

"Then came the change in the fortune of the Smithsons, and an immediate coolness in Louisa's manner toward young Henry. It was all very well in the past to be engaged to the son of a jobbing tailor, while one was poor oneself, and one had neither wit nor good looks, but now...!

"In fact already when they were in London Mrs. Smithson had intimated to Henry Carter that his visits were none too welcome, and when he appealed to Louisa she put him off with a few curt words. The young man was in despair, and, indeed, his brother actually feared at one time that he would commit suicide.

"It was soon after Christmas of that same year that the curtain was rung up on the first act of the mysterious tragedy which was destined to throw a blight for ever after upon the life of Louisa Smithson. It began with the departure of herself and her mother for the Continent, where they intended to remain until the end of March. For the first few weeks their friends had no news of them, but presently Miss Margaret Penny, who had kept up a desultory correspondence with a pal of hers in Folkestone, started to give glowing accounts of the Smithsons' doings in Monte Carlo.

"They were staying at the Hotel de Paris, paying two hundred francs a day for their rooms alone. They were lunching and dining out every day of the week. They had been introduced to one or two of the august personages who usually graced the Riviera with their presence at this time of year, and they had met a number of interesting people. According to Miss Penny's account, Louisa Smithson was being greatly admired, and, in fact, several titled gentlemen of various nationalities had professed themselves deeply enamoured of her.

"All this Miss Penny recounted in her letters to her friends with a wealth of detail and a marvellous profusion of adjectives, and finally in one of her letters there was mention of a certain Russian grandee—Prince Orsoff by name—who was paying Louisa marked attention. He, also, was staying at the Paris, appeared very wealthy, and was obviously of very high rank for he never mixed with the crowd which was more than usually brilliant this year in Monte Carlo. This exclusiveness on his part was all the more flattering to the Smithsons, and, when he apprised them of his intention to spend the season in London, they had asked him to come and visit them in Folkestone, where Mrs. Smithson intended to take a house presently and there to entertain lavishly during the summer.

"After this preliminary announcement from Miss Penny, Louisa herself wrote a letter to Henry Carter. It was quite a pleasant chatty letter, telling him of their marvellous doings abroad and of her own social successes. It did not do more, however, than vaguely hint at the Russian prince, his distinguished appearance and obvious wealth. Nevertheless it plunged the unfortunate young man into the utmost depths of despair, and according to his brother John's subsequent account, the latter had a terrible time with young Henry that winter. John himself was very busy with journalistic work which kept him away sometimes for days and weeks on end from the little home in London which the two brothers had set up for themselves with the money derived from the sale of the tailoring business. And Henry's state of mind did at times seriously alarm his brother, for he would either threaten to do away with himself, or vow that he would be even with that accursed foreigner.

"At the end of March, the Smithsons returned to England. During the interval Mrs. Smithson had made all arrangements for taking The Towers, a

magnificently furnished house facing the Leas at Folkestone, and here she and Louisa installed themselves preparatory to launching their invitations for the various tea and tennis parties, dinners and dances which they proposed to give during the summer.

"One might really quite truthfully say that the eyes of all Folkestone were fixed upon the two ladies. Their Paris dresses, their hats, their jewellery, was the chief subject of conversation at tea-tables, and of course every one was talking about the Russian Prince, who—Mrs. Smithson had confided this to a bosom friend—was coming over to England for the express purpose of proposing to Louisa.

"There was quite a flutter of excitement on a memorable Friday afternoon when it was rumoured that Henry Carter had come down for a week-end, and had put up at a small hotel down by the harbour. Of course, he had come to see Louisa Smithson; every one knew that, and no doubt he wished to make a final appeal to her love for him which could not be entirely dead yet.

"Within twenty-four hours, however, it was common gossip that young Henry had presented himself at The Towers and been refused admittance. The ladies were out, the butler said, and he did not know when they would be home. This was on the Saturday. On the Sunday Henry walked about on the Leas all the morning, in the hope of seeing Louisa or her mother, and as he failed to do so he called again in the early part of the afternoon: he was told the ladies were resting. Later he came again, and the ladies had gone out, and on the Monday, as presumably business called him back to town, he left by the early-morning train without having seen his former fiancée. Indeed people from that moment took it for granted that young Henry had formally been given his congé.

"Toward the middle of April Prince Orsoff arrived in London. Within two days he telephoned to Mrs. Smithson to ask her when he might come to pay his respects. A day was fixed, and he came to The Towers to lunch. He came again, and at his third visit he formally proposed to Miss Louisa Smithson, and was accepted. The wedding was to take place almost immediately, and the very next day the exciting announcement had gone the round of the Smithsons' large circle of friends—not only in Folkestone but also in London.

"The effect of the news appears to have been staggering as far as the unfortunate Henry Carter was concerned. In the picturesque language of Mrs. Hicks, the middle-aged charlady who 'did' for the two brothers in their little home in Chelsea, "e carried on something awful.' She even went so far as to say that she feared he might 'put 'is 'ead in the gas oven,' and that, as Mr. John was away at the time, she took the precaution every day when she left to turn the gas off at the meter.

"The following week-end Henry came down to Folkestone and again took up his quarters in the small hotel by the harbour. On the Saturday afternoon he called at The Towers, and refused to take 'no' for an answer when he asked to see Miss Smithson. Indeed, he seems literally to have pushed his way into the drawing-room where the ladies were having tea. According to statements made subsequently by the butler, there ensued a terrible scene between Henry and his former fiancée, at the very height of which, as luck would have it, who should walk in but Prince Orsoff.

"That elegant gentleman, however, seems to have behaved on that trying occasion with perfect dignity and tact, making it his chief business to reassure the ladies, and paying no heed to Henry's recriminations, which presently degenerated into vulgar abuse and ended in violent threats. At last, with the aid of the majestic butler, the young man was thrust out of the house, but even on the doorstep he turned and raised a menacing fist in the direction of Prince Orsoff and said loudly enough for more than one person to hear:

"'Wait! I'll be even with that —— foreigner yet!'

"It must indeed have been a terrifying scene for two sensitive and refined ladies like Mrs. and Miss Smithson to witness. Later on, after the Prince himself had taken his leave, the butler was rung for by Mrs. Smithson who told him that under no circumstances was Mr. Henry Carter ever to be admitted inside The Towers.

"However, a Sunday or two afterwards, Mr. John Carter called and Mrs. Smithson saw him. He said that he had come down expressly from London in order to apologise for his brother's conduct. Harry, he said, was deeply contrite that he should thus have lost control over himself, his broken heart was his only excuse. After all, he had been and still was deeply in love with

Louisa, and no man, worth his salt, could see the girl he loved turning her back on him without losing some of that equanimity which should of course be the characteristic of every gentleman.

"In fact, Mr. John Carter spoke so well and so persuasively that Mrs. Smithson and Louisa, who were at bottom quite a worthy pair of women, agreed to let bygones be bygones, and said that, if Henry would only behave himself in the future, there was no reason why he should not remain their friend.

"This appeared a quite satisfactory state of things, and over in the little house in Chelsea Mrs. Hicks gladly noted that 'Mr. 'Enry seemed more like 'isself, afterwards.' The very next week-end the two brothers went down to Folkestone together, and they called at The Towers so that Henry might offer his apologies in person. The two gentlemen on that occasion were actually asked to stay to tea.

"Indeed, it seems as if Henry had entirely turned over a new leaf, and when presently the gracious invitation came for both brothers to come to the wedding, they equally graciously accepted.

§3

"The day fixed for the happy event was now approaching. The large circle of acquaintances, friends, and hangers-on which the Smithsons had gathered around them were all agog with excitement, wedding presents were pouring in by every post. A kind of network of romance had been woven around the personalities of the future bride, her mother, and the Russian Prince. The wealth of the Smithsons had been magnified an hundredfold, and Prince Orsoff was reputed to be a brother of the late Czar who had made good his escape out of Russia, bringing away with him most of the Crown jewels, which he would presently bestow upon his wife. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

"And upon the top of all that excitement and that gossip, and marvellous tales akin to the Arabian Nights, came the wedding-day with its awful culminating tragedy.

"The Russian Prince had been murdered and his body so cleverly disposed of that in spite of the most strenuous efforts on the part of the

police, not a trace of it could be found.

"That robbery had been the main motive of the crime was quickly enough established. The Smithsons—mother and daughter—had at once supplied the detective in charge of the case with proofs as to that.

"It seems that as soon as the unfortunate Prince had become engaged to Louisa, he asked that the marriage should take place without delay. He explained that his dearest friend, Mr. Schumann, the great international financier, had offered him shares in one of the greatest post-war undertakings which had ever been floated in Europe, and which would bring in to the fortunate shareholders a net income of not less than ten thousand pounds yearly for every ten thousand pounds invested; Mr. Schumann himself owned one-half of all the shares, and had, by a most wonderful act of disinterested generosity, allowed his bosom friend, Prince Orsoff, to have a few—a concession, by the way, which he had only granted to two other favoured personages, one being the Prince of Wales and the other the President of the French Republic. Of course to receive ten thousand pounds yearly for every ten thousand pounds invested, was too wonderful for words; the President of the French Republic had been so delighted with this chance of securing a fortune that he had put two million francs into the concern, and the Prince of Wales had put in five hundred thousand pounds.

"And it was so wonderfully secure, as otherwise the British Government would not have allowed the Prince of Wales to invest such a sum of money if the business was only speculative. Security and fortune beyond the dreams of thrift! It was positively dazzling.

"No wonder that this vision of untold riches made poor Mrs. Smithson's mouth water, the more so as she was quite shrewd enough to realise that, at the rate she was going, her share in the fifteen thousand pounds left by the late worthy grocer would soon fade into nothingness. In the past few months she and Louisa had spent considerably over four thousand pounds between them, and once her daughter was married to a quasi-royal personage, good old Mrs. Smithson did not see herself retiring into comparative obscurity on a few hundreds a year to be jeered at by all her friends.

"So she and Louisa talked the matter over together, and then they talked it over with Prince Orsoff on the occasion of his visit about ten days before the wedding. The Prince at first was very doubtful if the great Mr. Schumann would be willing to make a further sacrifice in the cause of friendship. He was an international financier accustomed to deal in millions; he would not look favourably—the Prince feared—at a few thousands. Mrs. Smithson's entire fortune now only consisted of about five thousand pounds; this she was unwilling to admit to the wealthy and aristocratic future son-in-law. So the two ladies decided to pool their capital and then they begged that Prince Orsoff should ask the great Mr. Schumann whether he would condescend to receive ten thousand pounds for investment in Mrs. Smithson's name in his great undertaking.

"Fortunately the great financier did condescend to do this—he really was more a philanthropist than a business man—but, of course, he could not be kept waiting, the money must reach him in Paris not later than May twentieth, which was the very day fixed for the wedding.

"It was all terribly difficult; and Mrs. Smithson was at first in despair as she feared she could not arrange to sell out her securities in time, and the difficulties were increased an hundredfold because, as Prince Orsoff explained to her, Mr. Schumann would even at the eleventh hour refuse to allow her to participate in the huge fortune if he found that she had talked about the affair over in England. The business had to be kept a profound secret for international reasons, in fact, if any detail relating to the business and to Mr. Schumann's participation in it were to become known, the whole of Europe would once more be plunged into war.

"To make a long story short, Mrs. Smithson and Louisa sold out all their securities, amounting between them to ten thousand pounds. Then they went up to London, drew the money out of their bank, changed it themselves into French money—so as to make it more convenient for Mr. Schumann—and handed the entire sum over to Prince Orsoff on the eve of the wedding.

"Of course such fatuous imbecility would be unbelievable if it did not occur so frequently: vain, silly women, who have never moved outside their own restricted circle, are always the ready prey of plausible rascals.

"Anyway, in this case the Smithsons returned to Folkestone that day, perfectly happy and with never a thought of anything but contentment for the present and prosperity in the future. The wedding was to be the next day; the bridegroom-elect was coming down by the midday train with his best man, whom he vaguely described as secretary to the Russian Embassy, and the bridal pair would start for Paris by the afternoon boat.

"All this the Smithsons related to the police inspector in charge of the case and subsequently to the Scotland Yard detective, with a wealth of detail and a profusion of lamentations not unmixed with expletives directed against the unknown assassin and thief. For indeed there was no doubt in the minds of Louisa and her mother that the unfortunate Prince, on whom the girl still lavished the wealth of her trustful love, had been murdered for the sake of the money which he had upon his person.

"It must have amounted to millions of francs, Mrs. Smithson declared, for he had the Prince of Wales's money upon him also, and probably that of the President of the French Republic, and at first she and Louisa fastened their suspicions upon the anonymous best man, the so-called secretary of the Russian Embassy. Even when they were presently made to realise that there was no such thing as a Russian Embassy in London these days, and that minute enquiries both at home and abroad regarding the identity of a Prince Orsoff led to no result whatever, they repudiated with scorn the suggestion put forth by the police that their beloved Russian Prince was nothing more or less than a clever crook who had led them by the nose, and that in all probability he had not been murdered in the train but had succeeded in jumping out of it and making good his escape across country.

"This the Smithson ladies would not admit for a moment, and with commendable logic they argued that if Prince Orsoff had been a crook and had intended to make away with their money he could have done that easily enough without getting into a train at Victoria and jumping out of it at Sydenham Hill.

"Pressed with questions, however, the ladies were forced to admit that they knew absolutely nothing about Prince Orsoff, they had never been introduced to any of his relations, nor had they met any of his friends. They did not even know where he had been staying in London. He was in the habit of telephoning to Louisa every morning, and any arrangements for his

visits down to The Towers or the ladies' trips up to town were made in that manner. As a matter of fact Louisa and her future husband had not met more than a dozen times altogether, on some five or six occasions in Monte Carlo, and not more than six in England. It had been a case of love at first sight.

"The question of Mr. Schumann's vast undertaking was first discussed at The Towers. After that the ladies wrote to their bank to sell out their securities, and subsequently went up to town for a couple of days to draw out their money, change it into French currency, and finally hand it over to Prince Orsoff. On that occasion he had met them at Victoria Station and taken them to a quiet hotel in Kensington, where he had engaged a suite of rooms for them. All financial matters were then settled in their private sitting-room.

"In answer to enquiries at that hotel, one or two of the employees distinctly remembered the foreign-looking gentleman who had called on Mrs. and Miss Smithson, lunched with them in their sitting-room that day, and saw them into their cab when they went away the following afternoon. One or two of the station porters at Victoria also vaguely remembered a man who answered to the description given of Prince Orsoff by the Smithson ladies: tall, with a slight stoop, wearing pince-nez, and with a profusion of dark, curly hair, bushy eyebrows, long, dark moustache, and old-fashioned imperial, which made him distinctly noticeable, he could not very well have passed unperceived.

"Unfortunately, on the actual day of the murder, not one man employed at Victoria Station could swear positively to having seen him, either alone or in the company of another foreigner; and the latter has remained a problematical personage to this day.

"But the Smithson ladies remained firm in their loyalty to their Russian Prince. Had they dared they would openly have accused Henry Carter of the murder; as it was they threw out weird hints and insinuations about Henry who had more than once sworn that he would be even with his hated rival, and who had actually travelled down in the same train as the Prince on that fateful wedding morning, together with his brother John, who no doubt helped him in his nefarious deed. I believe that the unfortunate ladies actually spent some of the money which now they could ill spare in

employing a private detective to collect proofs of Henry Carter's guilt.

"But not a tittle of evidence could be brought against him. To begin with, the train in which the murder was supposed to have been committed was a non-stop to Swanley. Then how could the Carters have disposed of the body? The Smithsons suggested a third miscreant as a possible confederate; but the same objection against that theory subsisted in the shape of the disposal of the body. The murder—if murder there was—occurred in broad daylight in a part of the country that certainly was not lonely. It was not possible to suppose that a man would stand waiting on the line close to Sydenham Hill station until a body was flung out to him from the passing train, and then drag that body about until he found a suitable place in which to bury it: and all that without being seen by the workmen on the line or employees on the railway, or in fact any passer-by. Therefore the hypothesis that Henry Carter or his brother murdered the Russian Prince with or without the help of a confederate was as untenable as that the Prince had travelled from Victoria to Sydenham Hill and there jumped out of the train, at risk of being discovered in the act, rather than disappear quietly in London, shave off his luxuriant hair, or assume any other convenient disguise, until he found an opportunity for slipping back to the Continent.

"But the Smithsons remained firm in their belief in the genuineness of their Prince and in their conviction that he had been murdered—if not by the Carters, then by the mysterious secretary to the Russian Embassy or any other Russian or German emissary, for political reasons.

"And thus the public was confronted with the two hypotheses, both of which led to a deadlock. No sensible person doubted that the so-called Russian Prince was a crook, and that he had a confederate to help him in his clever plot, but the mystery remained as to how the rascal or rascals disappeared so completely as to checkmate every investigation. The travelling by train that morning and setting the scene for a supposed murder was, of course, part of the plan, but it was the plan that was so baffling, because to an ordinary mind that disappearance could have been effected so much more easily and with far less risk without the train journey.

"Of course there was not a single passenger on that train who was not the subject of the closest watchfulness on the part of the police, but there was not one—not excluding the Carters—who could by any possible chance

have known that the Prince carried a large sum of money upon his person. He was not likely to have confided the fact to a stranger, and the mystery of the vanished body was always there to refute the theory of an ordinary murderous attack for motives of robbery.”

§4

The Old Man in the Corner ceased talking, and became once more absorbed in his favourite task of making knots in a bit of string.

"I see in the papers," I now put in thoughtfully, "that Miss Louisa Smithson has overcome her grief for the loss of her aristocratic lover by returning to the plebeian one."

"Yes," the funny creature replied dryly, "she is marrying Henry Carter. Funny, isn't it? But women are queer fish! One moment she looked on the man as a murderer, now, by marrying him, she actually proclaims her belief in his innocence."

"It certainly was abundantly proved," I rejoined, "that Henry Carter could not possibly have murdered Prince Orsoff."

"It was also abundantly proved," he retorted, "that no one else murdered the so-called Prince."

"You think, of course, that he was an ordinary impostor?" I asked.

"An impostor, yes," he replied, "but not an ordinary one. In fact I take off my hat to as clever a pair of scamps as I have ever come across."

"A pair?"

"Why, yes! It could not have been done alone!"

"But the police..."

"The police," the spook-like creature broke in with a sharp cackle, "know more in this case than you give them credit for. They know well enough the solution of the puzzle which appears so baffling to the public, but they have not sufficient proof to effect an arrest. At one time they hoped that the scoundrels would presently make a false move and give themselves away, in which case they could be prosecuted for defrauding the Smithsons

of ten thousand pounds, but this eventuality has become complicated through the master-stroke of genius which made Henry Carter marry Louisa Smithson."

"Henry Carter?" I exclaimed. "Then you do think the Carters had something to do with the case?"

"They had everything to do with the case. In fact, they planned the whole thing in a masterly manner."

"But the Russian Prince at Monte Carlo?" I argued. "Who was he? If he was a confederate, where has he disappeared to?"

"He is still engaged in free-lance journalism," the Old Man in the Corner replied drily, "and in his spare moments changes parcels of French currency back into English notes."

"You mean the brother!" I ejaculated with a gasp.

"Of course I mean the brother," he retorted dryly, "who else could have been so efficient a collaborator in the plot? John Carter was comparatively his own master. He lived with Henry in the small house in Chelsea, waited on by a charwoman who came by the day. It was generally given out that his reporting work took him frequently and for lengthened stays out of London. The brothers, remember, had inherited a few hundreds from their father, while the Smithsons had inherited a few thousands. We must suppose that the idea of relieving the ladies of those thousands occurred to them as soon as they realised that Louisa, egged on by her mother, would cold-shoulder her fiancé.

"John Carter, mind you, must be a very clever man, else he could not have carried out all the details of the plot with so much sang-froid. We have been told, if you remember, that he had early in life cut his stick and gone to seek fortune in London, therefore the Smithsons, who had never been out of Folkestone, did not know him intimately. His make-up as the Prince must have been very good, and his histrionic powers not to be despised: his profession and life in London no doubt helped him in these matters. Then, remember also that he took very good care not to be a great deal in the Smithsons' company—even in Monte Carlo he only let them see him less than half a dozen times, and as soon as he came to England he hurried on

the wedding as much as he could.

"Another fine stroke was Henry's apparent despair at being cut out of Louisa's affections, and his threats against his successful rival: it helped to draw suspicion on himself—suspicion which the scoundrels took good care could easily be disproved. Then take a pair of vain, credulous, unintelligent women and a smart rascal who knows how to flatter them, and you will see how easily the whole plot could be worked. Finally, when John Carter had obtained possession of the money, he and Henry arranged the supposed tragedy in the train and the Russian Prince's disappearance from the world as suddenly as he had entered it."

I thought the matter over for a moment or two. The solution of the mystery certainly appealed to my dramatic sense.

"But," I said at last, "one wonders why the Carters took the trouble to arrange a scene of a supposed murder in the train: they might quite well have been caught in the act, and in any case it was an additional unnecessary risk. John Carter might quite well have been content to shed his role of Russian Prince, without such an elaborate setting."

"Well," he admitted, "in some ways you are right there, but it is always difficult to gauge accurately the mentality of a clever scoundrel. In this case I don't suppose that the Carters had quite made up their minds about what they would do when they left London, but that the plan was in their heads is proved by the hat, pince-nez, and railway ticket which they took with them when they started, and which, if you remember, were found on the line: but it was probably only because the train was comparatively empty, and they had both time and opportunity in the non-stop train, that they decided to carry their clever comedy through.

"Then think what an immense advantage in their future plans would be the Smithsons' belief in the death of their Prince. Probably Louisa would never have dreamed of marrying if she thought her aristocratic lover was an impostor and still alive: she would never have let the matter rest; her mind would for ever have been busy with trying to trace him, and bring him back, repentant, to her feet. You know what women are when they are in love with that type of scoundrel, they cling to them with the tenacity of a leech. But once she believed the man to be dead, Louisa Smithson gradually got

over her grief and Henry Carter wooed and won her on the rebound. She was poor now, and her friends had quickly enough deserted her: she was touched by the fidelity of her simple lover, and he thus consolidated his position and made the future secure.

"Anyway," the Old Man in the Corner concluded, "I believe that it was with a view to making a future marriage possible between Louisa and Henry that the two brothers organised the supposed murder. Probably if the train had been full and they had seen danger in the undertaking they would not have done it. But the *mise en scène* was easily enough set and it certainly was an additional safeguard. Now in another week or so Louisa Smithson will be Henry Carter's wife, and presently you will find that John in London, and Henry and his wife, will be quite comfortably off. And after that, whatever suspicions Mrs. Smithson may have of the truth, her lips would have to remain sealed. She could not very well prosecute her only child's husband.

"And so the matter will always remain a mystery to the public: but the police know more than they are able to admit because they have no proof.

"And now they never will have. But as to the murder in the train, well! —the murdered man never existed."

V
THE MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY IN BISHOP'S ROAD

§1

The Old Man in the Corner was in a philosophising mood that afternoon, and all the while that his thin, claw-like fingers fidgeted with the inevitable piece of string, he gave vent to various, disjointed, always sententious remarks.

Suddenly he said:

"We know, of course, that the world has gone dancing mad! But I doubt if the fashionable craze has ever been responsible before for so dark a tragedy as the death of old Sarah Levison. What do you think?"

"Well," I replied guardedly, for I knew that, whatever I might say, I should draw an avalanche of ironical remarks upon my innocent head, "I never have known what to think, and all the accounts of that brutal murder as they appeared in the cheaper Press only made the obscurity all the more obscure."

"That was a wise and well-thought-out reply," the aggravating creature retorted with a dry chuckle, "and a non-committal one at that. Obscurity is indeed obscure for those who won't take the trouble to think."

"I suppose it is all quite clear to you?" I said, with what I meant to be withering sarcasm.

"As clear as the proverbial daylight," he replied undaunted.

"You know how old Mrs. Levison came by her death?"

"Of course I do. I will tell you, if you like."

"By all means. But I am not prepared to be convinced," I added cautiously.

"No," he admitted, "but you soon will be. However, before we reach

that happy conclusion, I shall have to marshal the facts before you, because a good many of these must have escaped your attention. Shall I proceed?"

"If you please."

"Well, then, do you remember all the personages in the drama?" he began.

"I think so."

"There were, of course, young Aaron Levison and his wife, Rebecca—the latter young, pretty, fond of pleasure, and above all of dancing, and he, a few years older, but still in the prime of life, more of an athlete than a business man, and yet tied to the shop in which he carried on the trade of pawnbroking for his mother. The latter, an old Jewess, shrewd and dictatorial, was the owner of the business: her son was not even her partner, only a well-paid clerk in her employ, and this fact we must suppose rankled in the mind of her smart daughter-in-law. At any rate, we know that there was no love lost between the two ladies; but the young couple and old Mrs. Levison and another unmarried son lived together in the substantial house over the shop in Bishop's Road.

"They had three servants and we are told that they lived well, old Mrs. Levison bearing the bulk of the cost of housekeeping. The younger son, Reuben, seems to have been something of a bad egg; he held at one time a clerkship in a bank, but was dismissed for insobriety and laziness; then after the war he was supposed to have bad health consequent on exposure in the trenches, and had not done a day's work since he was demobilised. But in spite, or perhaps because, of this, he was very markedly his mother's favourite; where the old woman would stint her hard-working, steady elder son, she would prove generous, even lavish, toward the loafer, Reuben; and young Mrs. Levison and he were thick as thieves.

"What money Reuben extracted out of his mother he would spend on amusements, and his sister-in-law was always ready to accompany him. It was either the cinema or dancing—oh, dancing above all! Rebecca Levison was, it seems, a beautiful dancer, and night after night she and Reuben would go to one or other of the halls or hotels where dancing was going on, and often they would not return until the small hours of the morning.

"Aaron Levison was indulgent and easy-going enough where his young wife was concerned: he thought that she could come to no harm while Reuben was there to look after her. But old Mrs. Levison, with the mistrust of her race for everything that is frivolous and thriftless, thought otherwise. She was convinced in her own mind that her beloved Reuben was being led astray from the path of virtue by his brother's wife, and she appears to have taken every opportunity to impress her thoughts and her fears upon the indulgent husband.

"It seems that one of the chief bones of contention between the old and the young Mrs. Levison was the question of jewellery. Old Mrs. Levison kept charge herself of all the articles of value that were pawned in the shop, and every evening after business hours Aaron would bring up all bits of jewellery that had been brought in during the day, and his mother would lock them up in a safe that stood in her room close by her bedside. The key of the safe she always carried about with her. For the most part these bits of jewellery consisted of cheap rings and brooches, but now and again some impoverished lady or gentleman would bring more valuable articles along for the purpose of raising a temporary loan upon them, and at the time of the tragedy there were some fine diamond ornaments reposing in the safe in old Mrs. Levison's room.

"Now young Mrs. Levison had more than once suggested that she might wear some of this fine jewellery when she went out to balls and parties. She saw no harm in it, and neither, for a matter of that, did Reuben. Why shouldn't Rebecca wear a few ornaments now and again if she wanted to?—they would always be punctually returned, of course, and they could not possibly come to any harm. But the very suggestion of such a thing was anathema to the old lady, and in her flat refusal ever to gratify such a senseless whim she had the whole-hearted support of her eldest son: such a swerving from traditional business integrity was not to be thought of in the Levison household.

"On that memorable Saturday evening young Mrs. Levison was going with her brother-in-law to one of the big charity balls at the Kensington Town Hall, and her great desire was to wear for the occasion a set of diamond stars which had lately been pledged in the shop, and which were locked up in the old lady's safe. Of course, Mrs. Levison refused, and it

seems that the two ladies very nearly came to blows about this, the quarrel being all the more violent as Reuben hotly sided with his sister-in-law against his mother."

§2

"That then was the position in the Levison household on the day of the mysterious tragedy," the Old Man in the Corner went on presently; "an armed truce between the two ladies—the lovely Rebecca sore and defiant, pining to gratify a whim which was being denied her, and old Mrs. Levison more bitter than usual against her, owing to Reuben's partisanship. Egged on by Rebecca, he was furious with his mother and vowed that he was sick of the family and meant to cut his stick in order to be free to lead his own life, and so on. It was all tall-talk, of course, as he was entirely dependent on his mother, but it went to show the ugliness of his temper and the domination which his brother's wife exercised over him. Aaron, on the other hand, took no part in the quarrel, but the servants remarked that he was unwontedly morose all day, and that his wife was very curt and disagreeable with him.

"Nothing, however, of any importance occurred during the day until dinner-time, which as usual was served in the parlour at the back of the shop at seven o'clock. It seems that as soon as the family sat down to their meal, there was another violent quarrel on some subject or other between the two ladies, Rebecca being hotly backed up by Reuben, and Aaron taking no part in the discussion; in the midst of the quarrel, and following certain highly offensive words spoken by Reuben, old Mrs. Levison got up abruptly from the table and went upstairs to her own room which was immediately overhead at the back of the house, next to the drawing-room, nor did she come downstairs again that evening.

"At half-past nine the three servants went up to bed according to the rule of the house. Old Mrs. Levison, who was a real autocrat in the management of the household, expected the girls to be down at six every morning, but they were free to go to bed as soon as their work was done, and half-past nine was their usual time.

"Two of the girls slept at the top of the house, and the housemaid, Ida Griggs by name, who also acted as a sort of maid to old Mrs. Levison,

occupied a small slip room on the half-landing immediately above the old lady's bedroom. On the floor above this there was a large bedroom at the back, and a bathroom and dressing-room in front, all occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Aaron, and over that the two maids' room, and one for Mr. Reuben, and a small spare room in which Mr. Aaron would sleep now and again when his wife was likely to be out late and he did not want to get his night's rest broken by her home-coming, or if he himself was going to be late home on a holiday night after one of those country excursions on his bicycle of which he was immensely fond and in which he indulged himself from time to time.

"On this fateful Saturday evening Aaron was kept late in the shop, but he finally went up to bed soon after ten, after he had seen to all the doors below being bolted and barred, with the exception of the front door which had to be left on the latch, Mrs. Aaron having the latchkey. Thus the house was shut up and every one in bed by half-past ten.

"In the meanwhile the lovely Rebecca and Reuben had dressed and gone to the ball.

"The next morning at a little before six, Ida Griggs, the housemaid, having got up and dressed, prepared to go downstairs: but when she went to open her bedroom door she found it locked—locked on the outside. At first she thought that the other girls were playing her a silly trick, and, presently hearing the patter of their feet on the stairs, she pounded against the door with her fists. It took the others some time to understand what was amiss, but at last they did try the lock on the outside, and found that the key had been turned and that Ida was indeed locked in.

"They let her out, and then consulted what had best be done, but for the moment it did not seem to strike any of the girls that this locking of a door from the outside had a sinister significance. Anyway, they all went down into the kitchen and Ida prepared old Mrs. Levison's early cup of tea. This she had to take up every morning at half-past six; on this occasion she went up as usual, knocked at her mistress's door, and waited to be let in, as the old lady always slept behind locked doors. But no sound came from within, though Ida knocked repeatedly and loudly called her mistress by name.

"Soon she started screaming, and her screams brought the household

together: the two girls came up from the kitchen, Mr. Aaron came down from the top floor brandishing a poker, and presently Mrs. Aaron opened her door and peeped out clad in a filmy and exquisite nightgown, her eyes still heavy with sleep, and her beautiful hair streaming down her back. But of old Mrs. Levison there was no sign.

"Mr. Aaron, genuinely alarmed, glued his ear to the keyhole, but not a sound could he hear. Behind that locked door absolute silence reigned. Fearing the worst, he set himself the task of breaking open the door, which after some effort and the use of a jemmy, he succeeded in doing: and here the sight that met his eyes filled his soul with horror, for he saw his mother lying on the floor of her bedroom in a pool of blood.

"Evidently an awful crime had been committed. The unfortunate woman was fully dressed, as she had been on the evening before; the door of the safe was open with the key still in the lock, but no other piece of furniture appeared to be disturbed; the one window of the room was wide open, and the one door had been locked on the inside; the other door, the one which gave on the front drawing-room, being permanently blocked by a heavy wardrobe; and below the open window the bunch of creepers against the wall was all broken and torn, showing plainly the way that the miscreant had escaped.

"After a few moments of awe-stricken silence Aaron Levison regained control of himself and at once telephoned—first for the police and then for the doctor, but he would not allow anything in the room to be touched, not even his mother's dead body.

"For this precaution he was highly commended by the police inspector who presently appeared upon the scene, accompanied by a constable and the divisional surgeon; the latter proceeded to examine the body. He stated that the unfortunate woman had been attacked from behind, the marks of fingers being clearly visible round her throat: in her struggle for freedom she must have fallen backwards and in so doing struck her head against the corner of the marble washstand, which caused her death.

"In the meanwhile the inspector had been examining the premises: he found that the back door which gave on the yard and the one that gave on the front area were barred and locked just as Mr. Aaron had left them before

he went up to bed the previous night; on the other hand the front door was still on the latch, young Mrs. Levison having apparently failed to bolt it when she came home from the ball.

"In the backyard the creeper against the wall below the window of Mrs. Levison's room was certainly torn, and the miscreant undoubtedly made his escape that way, but he could not have got up to the window save with the aid of a ladder, the creeper was too slender to have supported any man's weight, and the brick wall of the house offered no kind of foothold even to a cat. The yard itself was surrounded on every side by the backyards of contiguous houses, and against the dividing walls there were clumps of Virginia creeper and anæmic shrubs such as are usually found in London backyards.

"Now neither on those walls nor on the creepers and shrubs was there the slightest trace of a ladder being dragged across, or even of a man having climbed the walls or slung a rope over: there was not a twig of shrub broken or a leaf of creeper disturbed.

"With regard to the safe, it must either have been open at the time that the murderer attacked Mrs. Levison, or he had found the key and opened the safe after he had committed that awful crime. Certainly the contents did not appear to have been greatly disturbed, no jewellery or other pledged goods of value were missing: Mr. Aaron could verify this by his books, but whether his mother had any money in the safe he was not in a position to say.

"There was no doubt at first glance the crime did not seem to have been an ordinary one; whether robbery had been its motive, or its corollary, only subsequent investigation would reveal: for the moment the inspector contented himself with putting a few leading questions to the various members of the household, and subsequently questioning the neighbours. The public, of course, was not to know what the result of these preliminary investigations was, but the midday papers were in a position to assert that no one, with perhaps the exception of Ida Griggs, had seen or heard anything alarming during the night, and that the most minute enquiries in the neighbourhood failed to bring forth the slightest indication of how the murderer effected an entrance into the house.

"The papers were also able to state that young Mrs. Levison returned from the ball in the small hours of the morning, but that Mr. Reuben Levison did not sleep in the house at all that night.

§3

"Fortunately for me," my eccentric friend went on glibly, "I was up betimes that morning when the papers came out with an early account of the mysterious crime in Bishop's Road. I say fortunately, because, as you know, mysteries of that sort interest me beyond everything, and for me there is no theatre in the world to equal in excitement the preliminary investigations of a well-conceived and cleverly executed crime. I should indeed have been bitterly disappointed had circumstances prevented me from attending that particular inquest. From the first, one was conscious of an atmosphere of mystery that hung over the events of that night in the Bishop's Road household: here indeed was no ordinary crime; the motive for it was still obscure, and one instinctively felt that somewhere in this vast city of London there lurked a criminal of no mean intelligence who would probably remain unpunished.

"Even the evidence of the police was not as uninteresting as it usually is, because it established beyond a doubt that this was not a case of common burglary and housebreaking. Certainly the open window and the torn creeper suggested that the miscreant had made his escape that way, but how he effected an entrance into Mrs. Levison's room remained an unsolved riddle. The absence of any trace of a man's passage on the surrounding walls of the backyard was very mysterious, and it was firmly established that the back door and the area door were secured, barred and bolted from the inside. A burglar might, of course, have entered the house by the front door, which was on the latch, using a skeleton key, but it still remained inconceivable how he gained access into Mrs. Levison's room.

"From the first the public had felt that there was a background of domestic drama behind the seemingly purposeless crime, for it did appear purposeless, seeing that so much portable jewellery had been left untouched in the safe. But it was when Ida Griggs, the housemaid, stood up in response to her name being called that one seemed to see the curtain going up on the first act of a terrible tragedy.

"Griggs was a colourless, youngish woman, with thin, sallow face, round blue eyes, and thin lips, and directly she began to speak one felt that underneath her placid, old-maidish manner there was an under-current of bitter spite, and even of passion. For some reason which probably would come to light later on, she appeared to have conceived a hatred for Mrs. Aaron; on the other hand she had obviously been doggedly attached to her late mistress, and in the evidence she dwelt at length on the quarrels between the two ladies, especially on the scene of violence that occurred at the dinner-table on Saturday, and which culminated in old Mrs. Levison flouncing out of the room.

"'Mrs. Levison was that upset,' the girl went on, in answer to a question put to her by the coroner, 'that I thought she was going to be ill, and she says to me that women like Mrs. Aaron were worse than —— as they would stick at nothing to get a new gown or a bit of jewellery. She also says to me——'

"But at this point the coroner checked her flow of eloquence, as, of course, what the dead woman had said could not be admitted as evidence. But nevertheless the impression remained vividly upon the public that there had been a terrible quarrel between those two, and of course we all knew that young Mrs. Levison had been seen at the ball wearing those five diamond stars; we did not need the sworn testimony of several witnesses who were called and interrogated on that point. We knew that Rebecca Levison had worn the diamond stars at the ball, and that Police Inspector Blackshire found them on her dressing-table the morning after the murder.

"Nor did she deny having worn them. At the inquest she renewed the statement which she had already made to the police.

"'My brother-in-law, Reuben,' she said, 'was a great favourite with his mother, and when we were both of us ready dressed he went into Mrs. Levison's room to say good-night to her. He cajoled her into letting me wear the diamond stars that night. In fact he always could make her do anything he really wanted, and they parted the best of friends.'

"'At what time did you go to the ball, Mrs. Levison?' the coroner asked.

"'My brother-in-law,' she replied, 'went out to call a taxi at half-past nine, and he and I got into it the moment one drew up.'

"'And Mr. Reuben Levison had been in to say good-night to his mother just before that?'

"'Yes, about ten minutes before.'

"'And he brought you the stars then,' the coroner insisted, 'and you put them on before he went out to call the taxi?'

"For the fraction of a second Rebecca Levison hesitated, but I do not think that any one in the audience except myself noted that little fact Then she said quite firmly:

"'Yes, Mr. Reuben Levison told me that he had persuaded his mother to let me wear the stars, he handed them to me and I put them on.'

"'And that was at half-past nine?'

"Again Rebecca Levison hesitated, this time more markedly; her face was very pale and she passed her tongue once or twice across her lips before she gave answer.

"'At about half-past nine,' she said, quite steadily.

"'And about what time did you come home, Mrs. Levison?' the coroner asked her blandly.

"'It must have been close on one o'clock,' she replied. 'The dance was a Cinderella, but we walked part of the way home.'

"'What! in the rain?'

"'It had ceased raining when we came out of the town hall.'

"'Mr. Reuben Levison did not accompany you all the way?'

"'He walked with me across the Park, then he put me into a taxicab, and I drove home alone. I had my latchkey.'

"'But you failed to bolt the door after you when you returned. How was that?'

"'I forgot, I suppose,' the lovely Rebecca replied, with a defiant air. 'I often forget to bolt the door.'

"'And did you not see or hear anything strange when you came in?'

"'I heard nothing. I was rather sleepy and went straight up to my room. I was in bed within ten minutes of coming in.'

"She was speaking quite firmly now, in a clear though rather harsh voice: but that she was nervous, not to say frightened, was very obvious. She had a handkerchief in her hand, with which she fidgeted until it was nothing but a small, wet ball, and she had a habit of standing first on one foot then on the other, and of shifting the position of her hat. I do not think that there was a single member of the jury who did not think that she was lying, and she knew that they thought so, for now and again her fine dark eyes would scrutinise their faces and dart glances at them either of scorn or of anxiety.

"After a while she appeared very tired, and when pressed by the coroner over some trifling matters, she broke down and began to cry. After which she was allowed to stand down, and Mr. Reuben Levison was called.

"I must say that I took an instinctive dislike to him as he stood before the jury with a jaunty air of complete self-possession. He had a keen, yet shifty eye, and sharp features very like a rodent. To me it appeared at once that he was reciting a lesson rather than giving independent evidence. He stated that he had been present at dinner during the quarrel between his mother and sister-in-law, and his mother was certainly very angry at the moment, but later on he went upstairs to bid her good-night. She cried a little and said a few hard things, but in the end she gave way to him as she always did: she opened the safe, got out the diamond stars and gave them to him, making him promise to return them the very first thing in the morning.

"'I told her,' Reuben went on glibly, 'that I would not be home until the Monday morning. I would see Rebecca into a taxi after the ball, but I had the intention of spending a couple of nights and the intervening Sunday with a pal who had a flat at Haverstock Hill. I thought then that my mother would lock the stars up again, however—she was always a woman of her word—once she had said a thing she would stick to it—and so as I said she gave me the stars and Mrs. Aaron wore them that night.'

"'And you handed the stars to Mrs. Aaron at half-past nine?'

"The coroner asked the question with the same earnest emphasis which he had displayed when he put it to young Mrs. Levison. I saw Reuben's shifty eye flash across at her, and I know that she answered that flash with a slight drop of her eyelids. Whereupon he replied as readily as she had done:

"'Yes, sir, it must have been about half-past nine.'

"And I assure you that every intelligent person in that room must have felt certain that Reuben was lying just as Rebecca had done before him."

§4

The Old Man in the Corner paused in his narrative. He drank half a glass of milk, smacked his lips, and for a few moments appeared intent on examining one of the complicated knots which he had made in his bit of string. Then after a while he resumed.

"The one member of the Levison family," he said, "for whom every one felt sorry was the eldest son Aaron. Like most men of his race he had been very fond of his mother, not because of any affection she may have shown him but just because she was his mother. He had worked hard for her all his life, and now through her death he found himself very much left out in the cold. It seems that by her will the old lady left all her savings, which, it seems, were considerable, and a certain share in the business, to Reuben, whilst to Aaron she only left the business nominally, with a great many charges on it in the way of pensions and charitable bequests and whatever was due to Reuben.

"But here I am digressing, as the matter of the will was not touched upon until later on, but there is no doubt that Aaron knew from the first that it would be Reuben who would primarily benefit by their mother's death. Nevertheless, he did not speak bitterly about his brother, and nothing that he said could be construed into possible suspicion of Reuben. He looked just a big lump of good nature, splendidly built, with the shoulders and gait of an athlete, but with an expression of settled melancholy in his face, and a dull, rather depressing voice. Seeing him there, gentle, almost apologetic, trying to explain away everything that might in any way cast a reflection upon his wife's conduct, one realised easily enough the man's position in the family —a kind of good-natured beast of burden, who would do all the work and never receive a 'thank you' in return.

"He was not able to throw much light on the horrible tragedy. He, too, had been at the dinner-table when the quarrel occurred, but directly after dinner he had been obliged to return to the shop, it being Saturday night and business very brisk. He had only one assistant to help him, who left at nine o'clock, after putting up the shutters: but he himself remained in the shop until ten o'clock to put things away and make up the books. He heard the taxi being called, and his wife and brother going off to the ball; he was not quite sure as to when that was, but he dared say it was somewhere near half-past nine.

"As nothing of special value had been pledged that day in the course of business, he had no occasion to go and speak with his mother before going up to bed and, on the whole he thought that, as she might still be rather sore and irritable, it would be best not to disturb her again, he did just knock at her door and called out 'good-night, mother.' But hearing no reply he thought she must already have been asleep.

"In answer to the coroner Aaron Levison further said that he had slept in the spare room at the top of the house for some time, as his wife was often very late coming home, and he did not like to have his night's rest broken. He had gone up to bed at ten o'clock and had neither seen nor heard anything in the house until six o'clock in the morning when the screams of the maid down below had roused him from his sleep and made him jump out of bed in double-quick time.

"Although Aaron's evidence was more or less of a formal character, and he spoke very quietly without any show either of swagger or of spite, one could not help feeling that the elements of drama and of mystery connected with this remarkable case were rather accentuated than diminished by what he said. Thus one was more or less prepared for those further developments which brought one's excitement and interest in the case to their highest point.

"Recalled, and pressed by the coroner to try and memorise every event, however trifling, that occurred on that Saturday evening, Ida Griggs, the maid, said that, soon after that she had dropped to sleep, she woke with the feeling that she had heard some kind of noise, but what it was she could not define: it might have been a bang, or a thud, or a scream. At the time she thought nothing of it, whatever it was, because while she lay awake for a

few minutes afterwards, the house was absolutely still; but a moment or two later she certainly heard the window of Mrs. Levison's room being thrown open.

"'There did not seem to you anything strange in that?' the coroner asked her.

"'No, sir,' she replied, 'there was nothing funny in Mrs. Levison opening her window. I remember that it was raining rather heavily, for I heard the patter against the window-panes, and Mrs. Levison may have wanted to look at the weather. I went to sleep directly after that and thought no more about it.'

"'And you don't know what it was that woke you in the first instance?'

"'No, sir, I don't,' the girl replied.

"'And you did not happen to glance at the clock at the moment?'

"'No, sir,' she said, 'I did not switch on the light.'

"But having disposed of that point, Ida Griggs had yet another to make, and one that proved more dramatic than anything that had gone before.

"'While I was clearing away the dinner things,' she said, 'Mr. Reuben and Mrs. Aaron were sitting talking in the parlour. At half-past eight Mrs. Aaron rang for me to take up her hot water as she was going to dress. I took up the water for her and also for Mrs. Levison, as I always did. I was going to help Mrs. Levison to undress, but she said she was not going to bed yet as she had some accounts to go through. She kept me talking for a bit, then while I was with her there was a knock at the door and I heard Mr. Reuben asking if he might come in and say good-night. Mrs. Levison called out "good-night, my boy," but she would not let Mr. Reuben come in, and I heard him go downstairs again.

"'A quarter of an hour or so afterwards Mrs. Levison dismissed me and I heard her locking her door after me. I went downstairs on my way to the kitchen: Mrs. Aaron was in the parlour then, fully dressed and with her cloak on; and Mr. Reuben was there, too, talking to her. The door was wide open, and I saw them both and I heard Mrs. Aaron say quite spiteful like: "So she would not even see you, the old cat! She must have felt bad." And

Mr. Reuben he laughed and said: "Oh well, she will have to get over it." Then they saw me and stopped talking, and soon afterwards Mr. Reuben went out to call a taxi, and we girls went up to bed.'

"'It is all a wicked lie!' here broke in a loud, high-pitched voice, and Mrs. Aaron, trembling with excitement, jumped to her feet. 'A lie, I say. The woman is spiteful, and wants to ruin me.'

"The coroner vainly demanded silence, and after a moment or two of confusion and of passionate resistance the lovely Rebecca was forcibly led out of the room. Her husband followed her, looking bigger and more meek and apologetic than ever before; and Ida Griggs was left to conclude her evidence in peace. She reaffirmed all that she had said and swore positively to the incident just as it had occurred in Mrs. Levison's room. Asked somewhat sharply by the coroner why she had said nothing about all this before, she replied that she did not wish to make mischief, but that truth was truth, and whoever murdered her poor mistress must swing for it, and that's all about it.

"Nor could any cross-examination upset her: she looked like a spiteful cat, but not like a woman who was lying.

"Reuben Levison had sat on, serene and jaunty, all the while that these damaging statements were being made against him. When he was recalled he contented himself with flatly denying Ida Griggs's story, and reiterating his own.

"'The girl is lying,' he said airily, 'why she does so I don't know, but there was nothing in the world more unlikely than that my mother should at any time refuse to see me. Ask any impartial witness you like,' he went on dramatically, 'they will all tell you that my mother worshipped me: she was not likely to quarrel with me over a few bits of jewellery.'

"Of course Mrs. Aaron, when she was recalled, corroborated Reuben's story. She could not make out why Ida should tell such lies about her.

"'But there,' she added, with tears in her beautiful dark eyes, 'the girl always hated me.'

"Yet one more witness was heard that afternoon whose evidence proved

of great interest. This was the assistant in the shop, Samuel Kutz. He could not throw much light on the tragedy, because he had not been out of the shop from six o'clock, when he finished his tea, to nine, when he put up the shutters and went away. But he did say that, while he was having his tea in the back parlour, old Mrs. Levison was helping in the front shop, and Mr. Reuben was there, too, doing nothing in particular, as was his custom. When witness went back to the shop Mrs. Levison went through into the back parlour, and, as soon as she had gone, he noticed that she had left her bag on the bureau behind the counter. Mr. Reuben saw it, too; he picked up the bag, and said with a laugh: 'I'd best take it up at once, the old girl don't like leaving this about.' Kutz told him he thought Mrs. Levison was in the back parlour, but Mr. Reuben was sure she had since gone upstairs.

"'Anyway,' concluded witness, 'he took the bag and went upstairs with it.'

"This may have been a valuable piece of evidence or it may not," the Old Man in the Corner went on with a grin, "in view of the tragedy occurring so much later, it did not appear so at the time. But it brought in an altogether fresh element of conjecture, and while the police asked for an adjournment pending fresh enquiries, the public was left to ponder over the many puzzles and contradictions that the case presented. Whichever line of argument one followed, one quickly came to a dead stop.

"There was, first of all, the question whether Reuben Levison did cajole his mother into giving him the diamond stars, or whether he was peremptorily refused admittance to her room; but this was just a case of hard swearing between one party and the other, and here I must admit, that public opinion was inclined to take Reuben's version of the story. Mrs. Levison's passionate affection for her younger son was known to all her friends, and people thought that Ida Griggs had lied in order to incriminate Mrs. Aaron.

"But in this she entirely failed, and here was the first dead stop. You will remember that she said that, after she left Mrs. Levison, she went downstairs and saw Mrs. Aaron and Mr. Reuben fully dressed in the back parlour, and that afterward she heard Mr. Reuben call a taxi: obviously, therefore, Mrs. Aaron had the diamonds in her possession then, since she was wearing them at the ball, and it is not conceivable that either of those

two would have gone off in the taxi, leaving the other to force an entrance into Mrs. Levison's room, strangle her, and steal the diamonds. As Mrs. Aaron could not possibly have done all that in her evening-dress, making her way afterwards from a first floor window down into the yard by clinging to a creeper in the pouring rain, the hideous task must have devolved on Reuben, and even the police, wildly in search of a criminal, could not put the theory forward that a man would murder his mother in order that his sister-in-law might wear a few diamond stars at a ball.

"It was, in fact, the motive of the crime that seemed so utterly inadequate, and therefore public argument fell back on the theory that Reuben had stolen the diamond stars just before dinner after he had found his mother's handbag in the shop, and that the subsequent murder was the result of ordinary burglary, the miscreant having during the night entered Mrs. Levison's room by the window while she was asleep. It was suggested that he had found the key of the safe by the bedside and was in the act of ransacking the place when Mrs. Levison woke, and the inevitable struggle ensued resulting in the old lady's death. The chief argument, however, against this theory was the fact that the unfortunate woman was still dressed when she was attacked, and no one who knew her for the careful, thrifty woman she was could conceive that she would go fast asleep leaving the safe door wide open. This, coupled with the fact that not the slightest trace could be found anywhere in the backyard of the house, or the adjoining yards and walls of the passage, of a miscreant armed with a ladder, constituted another dead stop on the road of public conjecture.

"Finally, when at the adjourned inquest Reuben Levison was able to bring forward more than one witness who could swear that he arrived at the ball at the Kensington Town Hall in the company of his sister-in-law somewhere about ten o'clock, and others who spoke to him from time to time during the evening, it seemed clear that he, at any rate, was innocent of the murder. Mr. Aaron had not gone up to bed until ten o'clock, and, if Reuben had planned to return and murder his mother, he could only have done so at a later hour, when he was seen by several people at the Kensington Town Hall.

"Subsequently the jury returned an open verdict and that abominable crime has remained unpunished until now. Though it appeared so simple

and crude at first, it proved a terribly hard nut for the police to crack. We may say that they never did crack it. They are absolutely convinced that Reuben Levison and Mrs. Aaron planned to murder the old lady, but how they did it, no one has been able to establish. As for proofs of their guilt, there are none and never will be, for though they are perhaps a pair of rascals, they are not criminals. It is not they who murdered Mrs. Levison."

"You think it was Ida Griggs?" I put in quickly, as the Old Man in the Corner momentarily ceased talking.

"Ah!" he retorted, with his funny, dry cackle, "you favour that theory, do you?"

"No, I do not," I replied. "But I don't see——"

"It is a foolish theory," he went on, "not only because there was absolutely no reason why Ida Griggs should kill her mistress—she did not rob her, nor had she anything to gain by Mrs. Levison's death—but as she was neither a cat, nor a night moth, she could not possibly have ascended from a first floor window to another window on the half-landing above, and entered her own room that way, for we must not lose sight of the fact that her bedroom door was the next morning found locked on the outside, and the key left in the lock."

"Then," I argued, "it must have been a case of ordinary burglary."

"That has been proved impossible," he riposted—"proved to the hilt. No man could have climbed up the wall of the house without a ladder, and no man could have brought a ladder into that backyard without leaving some trace of his passage, however slight: against the walls, around the yard, there were creepers and shrubs—it would be impossible to drag a heavy ladder over those walls without breaking some of them."

"But some one killed old Mrs. Levison," I went on with some exasperation—"she did not strangle herself with her own fingers."

"No, she did not do that," he admitted, with a dry laugh.

"And if the murderer escaped through the window, he could not vanish into thin air."

"No," he admitted again, "he could not do that."

"Well then?" I retorted.

"Well then, the murder must have been committed by one of the inmates of the house," he said; and now I knew that I was on the point of hearing the solution of the mystery of the five diamond stars, because his thin, claw-like fingers were working with feverish rapidity upon his beloved bit of string.

"But neither Mrs. Aaron," I argued, "nor Reuben Levison——"

"Neither," he broke in decisively. "We all know that. It was not conceivable that a woman could commit such a murder, nor that Reuben would kill his mother in order to gratify his sister-in-law's whim. That, of course, was nonsense, and every proof, both of time and circumstance, both of motive and opportunity, was entirely in their favour. No. We must look for a deeper motive for the hideous crime, a stronger determination, and above all a more powerful physique and easier opportunity for carrying the plot through. Personally, I do not believe that there was a plot to murder; on the other hand, I do believe in the man who idolised his young wife, and had witnessed a deadly quarrel between her and his mother, and I do believe in his going presently to the latter in order to try to soothe her anger against the woman he loved."

"You mean," I gasped, incredulous and scornful, "that it was Aaron Levison?"

"Of course I mean that," he replied placidly. "And if you think over all the circumstances of the case you will readily agree with me. We know that Aaron Levison loved and admired his wife; we know that he was very athletic, and altogether an outdoor man. Bear these two facts in mind, and let your thoughts follow the man after the terrible quarrel at the dinner-table.

"For a while he is busy in the shop, probably brooding over his mother's anger and the unpleasant consequences it might have for the lovely Rebecca. But presently he goes upstairs determined to speak with his mother, to plead with her. Dreading that Ida Griggs, with the habit of her kind, might sneak out of her room, and perhaps glue her ear to the keyhole, he turns the key in the lock of the girl's bedroom door. He knows that the

interview with his mother will be unpleasant, that hard words will be spoken against Rebecca, and these he does not wish Ida Griggs to hear.

"Then he knocks at his mother's door, and asks admittance on the pretext that he has something of value to remit to her for keeping in her safe. She would have no reason to refuse. He goes in, talks to his mother; she does not mince her words. By now she knows the diamond stars have been extracted from the safe, stolen by her beloved Reuben for the adornment of the hated daughter-in-law.

"Can't you see those two arguing over the woman whom the man loves and whom the older woman hates? Can't you see the latter using words which outrage the husband's pride and rouses his wrath till it gets beyond his control? Can't you see him in an access of unreasoning passion gripping his mother by the throat, to smother the insults hurled at his wife?—and can you see the old woman losing her balance, and hitting her head against the corner of the marble wash-stand and falling—falling—whilst the son gazes down, frantic and horror-struck at what he has done?

"Then the instinct of self-preservation is roused. Oh, the man was cleverer than he was given credit for! He remembers with satisfaction locking Ida Griggs's door from the outside; and now to give the horrible accident the appearance of ordinary burglary! He locks his mother's door on the inside, switches out the light, then throws open the window. For a youngish man who is active and athletic the drop from a first floor window, with the aid of a creeper on the wall, presents but little difficulty, and when a man is faced with a deadly peril, minor dangers do not deter him.

"Fortunately, everything has occurred before he has bolted and barred the downstairs door for the night. This, of course, greatly facilitates matters. He lets himself down through the window, jumps down into the yard, lets himself into the house through the back door, then closes up everything, and quietly goes upstairs to bed.

"There has not been much noise, even his mother's fall was practically soundless, and—poor thing!—she had not the time to scream; the only sound was the opening of the window; it certainly would not bring Ida Griggs out of her bed—girls of her class are more likely to smother their heads under their bedclothes if any alarming noise is heard. And so the

unfortunate man is able to sneak up to his room unseen and unheard.

"Whoever would dream of casting suspicion on him?

"He was never mixed up in any quarrel with his mother, and he had nothing much to gain by her death. At the inquest every one was sorry for him; but I could not repress a feeling of admiration for the coolness and cleverness with which he obliterated every trace of his crime. I imagine him carefully wiping his boots before he went upstairs, and brushing and folding up his clothes before he went to bed. Cannot you?

"A clever criminal, what?" the whimsical creature concluded, as he put his piece of string in the pocket of his funny tweed coat. "Think of it—you will see that I am right. As you say, Mrs. Levison did not strangle herself, and a burglar from the outside could not have vanished into thin air."

VI
THE MYSTERY OF THE DOG'S TOOTH CLIFF

The Old Man in the Corner was more than usually loquacious that day: he had a great deal to say on the subject of the strictures which a learned judge levelled against the police in a recent murder case.

"Well deserved," he concluded, with his usual self-opinionated emphasis, "but not more so in this case than in many others, where blunder after blunder is committed and the time of the courts wasted without either judge or magistrate, let alone the police, knowing where the hitch lies."

"Of course, *you* always know," I remarked dryly.

"Nearly always," he replied, with ludicrous self-complacence. "Have I not proved to you over and over again that with a little reasonable common-sense and a minimum of logic there is no such thing as an impenetrable mystery in criminology. Criminology is an exact science to which certain rules of reasoning invariably apply. The trouble is that so few are masters of logic and that fewer still know how to apply its rules. Now take the case of that poor girl, Janet Smith. We are likely to see some startling developments in it within the next two or three days. You'll see if we don't, and they will open the eyes of the police and public alike to what has been clear as daylight to me ever since the first day of the inquest."

I hastened to assure the whimsical creature that though I was acquainted with the main circumstances of the tragedy, I was very vague as to detail, and that nothing would give me greater pleasure than that he should enlighten my mind on the subject—which he immediately proceeded to do.

"You know Broxmouth, don't you?" he began, after a while—"on the Wessex coast. It is a growing place, for the scenery is superb, and the air acts on jaded spirits like sparkling wine. The only drawback—that is, from an artistic point of view—to the place is that hideous barrack-like building on the West Cliff. It is a huge industrial school recently erected and endowed by the trustees of the Woodforde bequest for the benefit of sons of temporary officers killed in the war, and is under the presidency of no less a

personage than General Sir Arkwright Jones, who has a whole alphabet after his name.

"The building is certainly an eyesore, and before it came into being, Broxmouth was a real beauty spot. If you have ever been there, you will remember that fine walk along the edge of the cliffs, at the end of which there is a wonderful view as far as the towers of Barchester Cathedral. It is called the Lovers' Walk, and is patronised by all the young people in the neighbourhood. They find it romantic as well as exhilarating: the objective is usually Kurtmoor, where there are one or two fine hotels for plutocrats in search of rural surroundings, and where humble folk like you and I and the aforesaid lovers can get an excellent cup of tea at the Wheatsheaf in the main village street.

"But it is a daylight walk, for the path is narrow and in places the cliffs fall away, sheer and precipitous, to the water's edge, whilst loose bits of rock have an unpleasant trick of giving way under one's feet. If you were to consult one of the Broxmouth gaffers on the advisability of taking a midnight walk to Kurtmoor, he would most certainly shake his head and tell you to wait till the next day and take your walk in the morning. Accidents have happened there more than once, though Broxmouth holds its tongue about that. Rash pedestrians have lost their footing and tumbled down the side of the cliff before now, almost always with fatal results.

"And so, when a couple of small boys hunting for mussels at low tide in the early morning of May fifth last, saw the body of a woman lying inanimate upon the rocks at the foot of the cliffs, and reported their discovery to the police, every one began by concluding that nothing but an accident had occurred, and went on to abuse the town Council for not putting up along the more dangerous portions of the Lovers' Walk some sort of barrier as a protection to unwary pedestrians.

"Later on, when the body was identified as that of Miss Janet Smith, a well-known resident of Broxmouth, public indignation waxed high: the barrier along the edge of the Lovers' Walk became the burning question of the hour. But during the whole of that day the 'accident' theory was never disputed; it was only towards evening that whispers of 'suicide' began to circulate, to be soon followed by the more ominous ones of 'murder.'

"And the next morning Broxmouth had the thrill of its life when it became known throughout the town that Captain Franklin Marston had been detained in connection with the finding of the body of Janet Smith, and that he would appear that day before the magistrate on a charge of murder.

"Properly to appreciate the significance of such an announcement, it would be necessary to be oneself a resident of Broxmouth where the Woodforde Institute, its affairs and its personnel are, as it were, the be-all and end-all of all the gossip in the neighbourhood. To begin with the deceased was head matron of the institute, and the man now accused of the foul crime of having murdered her was its secretary; moreover the secretary and the pretty young matron were known to be very much in love with one another, and, as a matter of fact, Broxmouth had of late been looking forward to a very interesting wedding. The idea of Captain Marston—who by the way was very good-looking, very smart, and a splendid tennis player—being accused of murdering his sweetheart was in itself so preposterous, so impossible, that his numerous friends and many admirers were aghast and incredulous. 'There is some villainous plot here somewhere,' the ladies averred, and wanted to know what Major Gubbins's attitude was going to be under these tragic circumstances.

"Major Gubbins, if you remember, was headmaster of the school, and, what's more, he, too, had been very much in love with Janet Smith, but it appeared that his friendship with Captain Marston had prompted him to stand aside as soon as he realised which way the girl's affections lay. Major Gubbins was not so popular as the Captain, he was inclined to be off-hand and disagreeable, so the ladies said, and, moreover, he did not play tennis, and, with the sublime inconsequence of your charming sex, they seemed to connect these defects with the terrible accusation which was now weighing upon the Major's successful rival.

"The executive of the institute consisted, in addition to the three persons I have named, of its president, General Sir Arkwright Jones, who, it seems, took little if any interest in the concern. It seemed as if, by giving it the prestige of his name, he had done all that he intended for the furtherance of the institute's welfare. Then there were the governors, a number of amiable local gentlemen and ladies who played tennis all day and attended innumerable tea-parties, and knew as much about administering a big

concern as a terrier does of rabbit-rearing.

"In the midst of this official supineness, the murder of the young matron, followed immediately by the arrest of the secretary, had come as a bombshell, and now wise heads began to wag and ominous murmurs became current that for some time past there had been something very wrong in the management of the Woodforde Institute. Whilst, at the call of various august personages, money was pouring in from the benevolent public, the commissariat was being conducted on parsimonious lines that were a positive scandal. The boys were shockingly underfed, and the staff of servants was constantly being changed because girls would not remain on what they called a starvation régime.

"Then again, no proper accounts had been kept since the inception of the Institute five years ago; entries were spasmodic, irregular and unreliable; books were never audited; no one, apparently, had the slightest idea of profit and loss or of balances; no one knew from week to week where the salaries and wages were coming from, or from quarter to quarter if there would be funds enough to meet rates and taxes; no one, in fact, appeared to know anything about the affairs of the Institute, least of all the secretary himself, who had often remarked quite jocularly that he had never in all his life known anything about book-keeping, and that his appointment by the governors rested upon his agreeable personality rather than upon his financial and administrative ability.

"As you see, the Captain's position was, in consequence of this, a very serious one; it became still more so when presently two or three ominous facts came to light. To begin with, it seemed that he could give absolutely no account of himself during the greater part of the night of May fifth. He had left the Institute at about seven o'clock; he told the headmaster then that he was going for a walk which seemed strange as it was pouring with rain. On the other hand the landlady at the room where he lodged told the police that when she herself went to bed at eleven o'clock, the Captain had not come in: she hadn't seen him since morning, when he went to his work, and at what time he eventually came home she couldn't say.

"But there was worse to come: firstly, a stick was found on the beach some thirty yards or less from the spot where the body itself was discovered; and secondly, the police produced a few strands of wool which

were, it seems, clinging to the poor girl's hatpin, and which presumably were torn out of a muffler during the brief struggle which must have occurred when she was first attacked and before she lost her footing and fell down the side of the cliff.

"Now the stick was identified as the property of Captain Marston, and he had been seen on the road with it in his hand in the early part of the evening. He was then walking alone on the Lovers' Walk; two Broxmouth visitors met him on their way back from Kurtmoor. Knowing him by sight, they passed the time of day. These witnesses, however, were quite sure that Captain Marston was not then wearing a muffler, on the other hand they were equally sure that he carried the stick; they had noticed it as a very unusual one, of what is known as Javanese snake-wood with a round heavy knob and leather strap which the Captain carried slung upon his arm.

"Of course, the matter interested me enormously; it is not often that a person of the social and intellectual calibre of Captain Marston stands accused of so foul a crime. If he was guilty, then indeed, he was one of the vilest criminals that ever defaced God's earth, and in the annals of crime there were few crimes more hideous. The poor girl, it seems, had been in love with him right up to the end and, according to some well-informed gossips, the wedding-day had actually been fixed.

"The unsuccessful rival, Major Gubbins, too, was an interesting personality, and it was difficult to suppose that he was entirely ignorant of the events which must of necessity have led up to the crime. Supposedly there had been a quarrel between the lovers; sundry rumours were current as to this and in a vague way those rumours connected this quarrel with the shaky financial situation of the Institute. But it was all mere surmise and very contradictory; no one could easily state what possible connection there could be between the affairs of the Institute and the murder of the chief matron.

"In the meanwhile the accused had been brought up before the magistrate, and formal evidence of the finding of the body and of the arrest was given, as well as of the subsequent discovery of the stick, which was identified by the two witnesses, and of the strands of wool. The accused was remanded until the following Monday, bail being refused. The inquest was held a day or two later, and I went down to Broxmouth for it. I

remember how hot it was in that crowded court-room; excited and perspiring humanity filled the stuffy atmosphere with heat. While the crowd jabbered and fidgeted I had a good look at the chief personages who were about to enact a thrilling drama for my entertainment; you have seen portraits of them all in the illustrated papers, the British army being well represented by a trio of as fine specimens of manhood as any one would wish to see.

"The President, General Arkwright Jones, was there as a matter of course. He looked worried and annoyed that the even tenor of his pleasant existence should have been disturbed by this tiresome event; he is the regular type of British pre-war officer with ruddy face and white hair, something like a nice ripe tomato that has been packed in cotton wool. Then there was the headmaster, Major Gubbins, well-groomed, impassive, immaculate in dress and bearing; and finally the accused himself, in charge of two warders, a fine-looking man, obviously more of a soldier and an athlete than a clerk immersed in figures.

"Two other persons in the crowded room arrested my attention: two women. One of them dressed in deep black, thin lipped, with pale round eyes and pursed-up mouth was Miss Amelia Smith, the sister with whom the deceased had been living, and the other was Louisa Rumble who held the position of housekeeper at the Woodforde Institute. The latter was one of the first witnesses called: and her evidence was intensely interesting because it gave one the first clue as to the motive which underlay the hideous crime. The woman's testimony, you must know, bore entirely on the question of housekeeping and of the extraordinary scarcity of money in the richly-endowed Institute.

"'Often and often,' said the witness, a motherly old soul in a flamboyant bonnet, 'did I complain to Miss Smith when she give me my weekly allowance for the tradesmen's books: "'Tisn't enough, Miss Smith," I says to 'er, "not to feed a family," I says, "let alone thirty growin' boys and 'arf a dozen working girls." But Miss Smith she just shook 'er 'ead and says: "Committee's orders, Mrs. Rumble, I 'ave no power." "Why don't you speak to the Captain?" I says to 'er, "'e 'as the 'andling of the money, it is a scandal," I says. "Those boys can't live on boiled bacon an' beans and not English nor Irish bacon it ain't neither," I says. "Pore lambs! The money I

'ave won't pay for beef or mutton for them, Miss Smith," I says, "and you know it." But Miss Smith, she only shook 'er 'ead and says she would speak to the Captain about it.'

"Asked whether she knew if deceased had actually spoken to the secretary on the subject, Mrs. Rumble said most emphatically 'Yes!'

"'What's more, sir,' she went on, 'I can tell you that the very day before she died, the pore lamb 'ad a reg'lar tiff with the Captain about that there commissariat.'

"Mrs. Rumble had stumbled a little over the word, but strangely enough no one tittered; the importance of the old woman's testimony was impressed upon every mind and silenced every tongue. All eyes were turned in the direction of the accused. He had flushed to the roots of his hair, but otherwise stood quite still, with arms folded, and a dull expression of hopelessness upon his good-looking face.

"The coroner had asked the witness how she knew that Miss Smith had had words with Captain Marston: 'Because I 'eard them two 'aving words, sir,' Mrs. Rumble replied. 'I'd been in the office to get my money and my orders from Miss Smith, and we 'ad the usual talk about American bacon and boiled beans, with which I don't 'old, not for growing boys; then back I went to the kitchen, when I remembered I 'ad forgot to speak to Miss Smith about the scullery-maid, who'd been saucy and given notice. So up I went again, and I was just a-goin' to open the office door when I 'eard Miss Smith say quite loud and distinck: "It is shameful," she says, "and I can't bear it," she says, "and if you won't speak to the General then I will. He is staying at the Queen's at Kurtmoor, I understand," she says, "and I am goin' this very night to speak with him," she says, "as I can't spend another night," she says, "with this on my mind." Then I give a genteel cough and...'

"The worthy lady had got thus far in her story when her volubility was suddenly checked by a violent expletive from the accused.

"'But this is damnable!' he cried, and no doubt would have said a lot more, but a touch on his shoulder from the warders behind him quickly recalled him to himself. He once more took up his outwardly calm attitude, and Mrs. Rumble concluded her evidence amidst silence more ominous than any riotous scene would have been.

"'I give a genteel cough,' she resumed with unruffled dignity, 'and opened the door. Miss Smith, she was all flushed and I could see that she'd been crying; but the Captain; 'e just walked out of the room, and didn't say not another word.'

"By this time," the Old Man in the Corner went on dryly, "we must suppose that the amateur detectives and the large body of unintelligent public felt that they were being cheated. Never had there been so simple a case. Here, with the testimony of Mrs. Rumble, was the whole thing clear as daylight—motive, quarrel, means, everything was there already. No chance of exercising those powers of deduction so laboriously acquired by a systematic study of detective fiction. Had it not been for the position of the accused and his popularity in Broxmouth society, all interest in the case would have departed in the wake of Mrs. Rumble, and at first, when Miss Amelia Smith, sister of the deceased, was called, her appearance only roused languid curiosity. Miss Amelia looked what, in fact, she was: a retired school marm, and wore the regular hallmark of impecunious and somewhat soured spinsterhood.

"'Janet often told me,' she said, in the course of her evidence, 'that she was quite sure there was roguery going on in the affairs of the Institute, because she knew for a fact that subscriptions were constantly pouring in from the public, far in excess of what was being spent for the welfare of the boys. I often used to urge her to go straight to the governors or even to the President himself about the whole matter, but she would always give the same disheartened reply. General Arkwright Jones, it seems, had made it a condition when he accepted the presidency that he was never to be worried about the administration of the place, and he refused to have anything to do with the handling of the subscriptions; as for the governors, my poor sister declared that they cared more for tennis parties than for the welfare of a lot of poor officers' children.'

"But a moment or two later we realised that Miss Amelia Smith was keeping her titbit of evidence until the end. It seems that she had not even spoken about it to the police, determined as she was, no doubt, to create a sensation for once in her monotonous and dreary life. So now she pursed up her lips tighter than before, and after a moment's dramatic silence, she said:

"'The day before her death, my poor sister was very depressed. In the

late afternoon, when she came in for tea, I could see that she had been crying. I guessed, of course, what was troubling her, but I didn't say much. Captain Franklin Marston was in the habit of calling for Janet in the evening, and they would go for a walk together; at eight o'clock on that sad evening I asked her whether Captain Marston was coming as usual; whereupon she became quite excited, and said: "No, no, I don't wish to see him!" and after a while she added in a voice choked with tears: "Never again!"

"'About a quarter of an hour later,' Miss Amelia went on, 'Janet suddenly took up her hat and coat. I asked her where she was going, and she said to me: "I don't know, but I must put an end to all this. I must know one way or the other." I tried to question her further, but she was in an obstinate mood; when I remarked that it was raining hard she said: "That's all right, the rain will do me good." And when I asked her whether she wasn't going to meet Captain Marston after all, she just gave me a look, but she made no reply. And so my poor sister went out into the darkness and the rain, and I never again saw her alive.'

"Miss Amelia paused just long enough to give true dramatic value to her statement, and indeed there was nothing lukewarm now about the interest which she aroused; then she continued:

"'As the clock was striking nine I was surprised to receive a visit from the headmaster, Major Gubbins. He came with a message from Captain Marston to my sister; I told him that Janet had gone out. He appeared vexed, and told me that the Captain would be terribly disappointed.'

"'What was this message?' the coroner asked, amidst breathless silence.

"'That Janet would please meet Captain Marston at the Dog's Tooth Cliff. He would wait for her there until nine o'clock.'"

The Old Man in the Corner gave a short, sharp laugh, and with loving eyes contemplated his bit of string, in which he had just woven an elegant and complicated knot. Then he said:

"Now it was at the foot of the Dog's Tooth Cliff that the dead body of Janet Smith was found and some thirty yards further on the stick which had last been seen in the hand of Captain Franklin Marston. Nervous women

gave a gasp, and scarcely dared to look at the accused, for fear, no doubt, that they would see the hangman's rope around his neck, but I took a good look at him then. He had uttered a loud groan and buried his face in his hands, and I, with that unerring intuition on which I pride myself, knew that he was acting. Yes, deliberately acting a part—the part of shame and despair. You, no doubt, would ask me why he should have done this. Well, you shall understand presently. For the moment, and to all unthinking spectators, the attitude of despair on the part of the accused appeared fully justified.

"Later on we heard the evidence of Major Gubbins himself. He said that about seven o'clock he met Captain Marston in the hall of the Institute.

"'He appeared flushed and agitated,' the witness went on, very reluctantly it seemed, but in answer to pressing questions put to him by the coroner, 'and told me he was going for a walk. When I remarked that it was raining hard, he retorted that the rain would do him good. He didn't say where he was going, but presently he put his hand on my shoulder and said in a tone of pleading and affection which I shall never forget: "Old man," he said, "I want you to do something for me. Tell Janet that I must see her again to-night; beg her not to deny me. I will meet her at our usual place on the Dog's Tooth Cliff. Tell her I will wait for her there until nine o'clock, whatever the weather. But she must come. Tell her she must."

"'Unfortunately,' the Major continued, 'I was unable to deliver the message immediately, as I had work to do in my office which kept me till close on nine o'clock. Then I hurried down to the Smiths' house, and just missed Miss Janet who, it seems, had already gone out.'

"Asked why he had not spoken about this before, the Major replied that he did not intend to give evidence at all unless he was absolutely forced to do so, as a matter of duty. Captain Marston was his friend, and he did not think that any man was called upon to give what might prove damnatory evidence against his friend.

"All this sounded very nice and very loyal until we learned that William Peryer, batman at the Institute, testified to having overheard violent words between the headmaster and the secretary at the very same hour when the latter was supposed to have made so pathetic an appeal to his friend to

deliver a message on his behalf. Peryer swore that the two men were quarrelling and quarrelling bitterly. The words he overheard were: 'You villain! You shall pay for this!' But he was so upset and so frightened that he could not state positively which of the two gentlemen had spoken them, but he was inclined to think that it was Major Gubbins.

"And so the tangle grew, a tangled web that was dexterously being woven around the secretary of the Institute. The two Broxmouth visitors were recalled, and they once more swore positively to having met Captain Marston on the Lovers' Walk at about eight o'clock of that fateful evening. They spoke to him and they noticed the stick which he was carrying. They were on their way home from Kurtmoor, and they met the Captain some two hundred yards or so before they came to the Dog's Tooth Cliff. Of this they were both quite positive. The lady remembered coming to the cliff a few minutes later: she was nervous in the dark and therefore the details of the incident impressed themselves upon her memory. Subsequently when they were nearing home they met a lady who might or might not have been the deceased; they did not know her by sight and the person they met had her hat pulled down over her eyes and the collar of her coat up to her ears. It was raining hard then, and they themselves were hurrying along and paid no attention to passers-by.

"We also heard that at about nine o'clock James Hoggs and his wife, who live in a cottage not very far from the Dog's Tooth Cliff, heard a terrifying scream. They were just going to bed and closing up for the night. Hoggs had the front door open at the moment and was looking at the weather. It was raining, but nevertheless he picked up his hat and ran out toward the cliff. A moment or two later he came up against a man whom he hailed; it was very dark, but he noticed that the man was engaged in wrapping a muffler round his neck. He asked him whether he had heard a scream, but the man said: 'No, I've not!' then hurried quickly out of sight. As Hoggs heard nothing more, or saw anything, he thought that perhaps, after all, he and his missis had been mistaken, so he turned back home and went to bed.

"I think," the Old Man in the Corner continued thoughtfully, "that I have now put before you all the most salient points in the chain of evidence collected by the police against the accused. There were not many faulty

links in the chain, you will admit. The motive for the hideous crime was clear enough: for there was the fraudulent secretary and the unfortunate girl who had suspected the defalcations and was threatening to go and denounce her lover either to the President of the Institute or to the governors. And the method was equally clear: the meeting in the dark and the rain on the lonely cliff, the muffler quickly thrown around the victim's mouth to smother her screams, the blow with the stick, the push over the edge of the cliff. The stick stood up as an incontestable piece of evidence. The absence from home of the accused during the greater part of that night had been testified by his landlady, whilst his presence on the scene of the crime some time during the evening was not disputed.

"As a matter of fact, the only points in the man's favour were the strands of wool found sticking to the girl's hatpin, and Hoggs's story of the man whom he had seen in the dark, engaged in readjusting a muffler around his neck. Unfortunately Hoggs, when more closely questioned on that subject, became incoherent and confused, as men of his class are apt to do when pinned down to a definite statement.

"Anyway, the accused was committed for trial on the coroner's warrant, and, of course, reserved his defence. You probably, like the rest of the public, kept up a certain amount of interest in the Cliff murder, as it was popularly called, for a time, and then allowed your mind to dwell on other matters and forgot poor Captain Franklin Marston who was languishing in gaol under such a horrible accusation. Subsequently your interest in him revived when he was brought up for trial the other day at the Barchester Assizes. In the meanwhile he had secured the services of Messrs. Charnton and Inglewood, the noted solicitors, who had engaged Mr. Provost Boon, K.C., to defend their client.

"You know as well as I do what happened at the trial, and how Mr. Boon turned the witnesses for the Crown inside out and round about until they contradicted themselves and one another all along the line. The defence was conducted in a masterly fashion. To begin with, the worthy housekeeper, Mrs. Rumble, after a stiff cross-examination, which lasted nearly an hour, was forced to admit that she could not swear positively to the exact words which she overheard between the deceased and Captain Marston. All that she could swear to was that the Captain and his sweetheart

had apparently had a tiff. Then, as to Miss Amelia Smith's evidence; it also merely went to prove that the lovers had had a quarrel; there was nothing whatever to say that it was on the subject of finance, nor that deceased had any intention either of speaking to the President about it or of handing in her resignation to the governors.

"Next came the question of Major Gubbins's story of the message which he had been asked by his friend to deliver to the deceased. Now accused flatly denied that story, and denied it on oath. The whole thing, he declared, was a fabrication on the part of the Major who, far from being his friend, was his bitter enemy and unsuccessful rival. In support of this theory William Peryer's evidence was cited as conclusive. He had heard the two men quarrelling at the very moment when accused was alleged to have made a pathetic appeal to his friend. Peryer had heard one of them say to the other: 'You villain! You shall pay for this!' And in very truth, the unfortunate Captain was paying for it, in humiliation and racking anxiety.

"Then there came the great, the vital question of the stick and of the strands of wool so obviously torn out of a muffler. With regard to the stick, the accused had stated that in the course of his walk he had caught his foot against a stone and stumbled, and that the stick had fallen out of his hand and over the edge of the cliff. Now this statement was certainly borne out by the fact that, as eminent counsel reminded the jury, the stick was found more than thirty yards away from the body. As for the muffler, it was a graver point still; strands of wool were found sticking to the girl's hatpin, and James Hoggs, after hearing a scream at nine o'clock that evening, ran out towards the cliff and came across a man who was engaged in readjusting a muffler round his throat. That was incontestable.

"Of course, Mr. Boon argued, it was easy enough to upset a witness of the type of James Hoggs, but an English jury's duty was not to fasten guilt on the first man who happens to be handy, but to see justice meted out to innocent and guilty alike. The evidence of the muffler, argued the eminent counsel, was proof positive of the innocence of the accused. The witnesses who saw him in the Lovers' Walk on that fateful night had declared most emphatically that he was not wearing a muffler. Then where was the man with the muffler? Where was the man who was within a few yards of the scene of the crime five minutes after James Hoggs had heard the scream—

the man who had denied hearing the scream although both Hoggs and his wife heard it over a quarter of a mile away?

"'Yes, gentlemen of the jury,' the eminent counsel concluded with a dramatic gesture, 'it is the man with the muffler who murdered the unfortunate girl. If he is innocent why is he not here to give evidence? There are no side tracks that lead to the cliffs at this point, so the man with the muffler must have seen something or some one; he must know something that would be of invaluable assistance in the elucidation of this sad mystery. Then why does he not come forward? I say because he dare not. But let the police look for him, I say. The accused is innocent; he is the victim of tragic circumstances, but his whole life, his war-record, his affection for the deceased, all proclaim him to be guiltless of such a dastardly crime, and above all there stands the incontestable proof of his innocence, the muffler, gentlemen of the jury—the muffler!'

"He said a lot more than that, of course," the Old Man in the Corner went on, chuckling dryly to himself, "and said it a lot better than ever I can repeat it, but I have given you the gist of what he said. You know the result of the trial. The accused was acquitted, the jury having deliberated less than a quarter of an hour. There was no getting away from that muffler, even though every other circumstance pointed to Marston as the murderer of Janet Smith.

"On the whole, his acquittal was a popular one, although many who were present at the trial shook their heads, and thought that if they had been on the jury Marston would not have got off so easily, but for the most part these sceptics were not Broxmouth people. In Broxmouth the Captain was personally liked, and the proclamation of his innocence was hailed with enthusiasm; and, what's more, those same champions of the good-looking secretary—they were the women mostly—looked askance on the headmaster, who, they averred, had woven a Machiavellian net for trapping and removing from his path for ever a hated and successful rival.

"The police have received a perfect deluge of anonymous communications suggesting that Major Gubbins was identical with the mysterious man with the muffler, but, of course, such a suggestion is perfectly absurd, since at the very hour when James Hoggs heard the scream, and a very few minutes before he met the man with the muffler,

Major Gubbins was paying his belated visit to Miss Amelia Smith and delivering the alleged message. Even those ladies who disliked the headmaster most cordially had to admit that he could not very well have been in two places at the same time. The Dog's Tooth Cliff is a good half hour's walk from Miss Smith's house, and the Lovers' Walk itself is not accessible to cyclists or motors.

"And thus, to all intents and purposes, the Cliff murder has remained a mystery, but it won't be one for long. Have I not told you that you may expect important developments within the next few days? And I am seldom wrong. Already in this evening's paper you will have read that the entire executive of the Woodforde Institute has placed its resignation in the hands of the governors, that several august personages have withdrawn their names from the list of patrons, and that though the President has been implored not to withdraw his name, he has proved adamant on the subject, and even refused to recommend successors to the headmaster, the secretary, or the matron; in fact, he has seemingly washed his hands of the whole concern."

"But surely," I now broke in, seeing that the Old Man in the Corner threatened to put away his piece of string and to leave me without the usual epilogue to his interesting narrative, "surely General Sir Arkwright Jones cannot be blamed for the scandal which undoubtedly has dimmed the fortunes of the Woodforde Institute?"

"Cannot be blamed?" the Old Man in the Corner retorted sarcastically. "Cannot be blamed for entering into a conspiracy with his secretary and his head-master to defraud the Institute, and then to silence for ever the one voice that might have been raised in accusation against him."

"Sir Arkwright Jones?" I exclaimed incredulously, for indeed the idea appeared to me preposterous then, as the General's name was almost a household word before the catastrophe. "Impossible!"

"Impossible!" he reiterated. "Why? He murdered Janet Smith; of that you will be as convinced within the next few days as I am at this hour. That the three men were in collusion I have not the shadow of doubt. Marston only made love to Janet Smith in order to secure her silence; but in this he failed, and the girl boldly accused him of roguery as soon as she found him

out. It would be inconceivable to suppose that being the bright, intelligent girl that she admittedly was, she could remain for ever in ignorance of the defalcations in the books; she must and did tax her lover of irregularities, she must have and indeed did threaten to put the whole thing before the governors. So much for the lovers' quarrel overheard by Mrs. Rumble.

"I believe that the fate of the poor girl was decided on then and there by two of the scoundrels; it only remained to consult with their other accomplice as to the best means for carrying their hideous project through. Janet had announced her determination to go to Kurtmoor that self-same evening, the only question was which of those three miscreants would meet her in the darkness and solitude of the Lovers' Walk. But in order at the outset to throw dust in the eyes of the public and the police and not appear to be in any way associated with one another, Marston and Gubbins made pretence of a violent quarrel which Peryer overheard; then Gubbins, in order to make sure that the poor girl would carry out her intention of going over to Kurtmoor that evening, went to her house with the supposed message from Marston, and incidentally secured thereby his own alibi. This made him safe.

"Marston in the meanwhile went to arrange matters with Arkwright Jones. His position was, of course, more difficult than that of Gubbins. If there was to be murder—and my belief is that the scoundrels had been resolved on murder for some time before—the first suspicion would inevitably fall on the secretary who had kept the books and who had had the handling of the money. The miscreants had some sort of vague plan in their heads: of this there can be no doubt; they were only procrastinating, hoping against hope that chance would continue to favour them. But now the hour had come, the danger was imminent; within the next four-and-twenty hours Janet Smith, being promised no redress on the part of the President, would place the whole matter before the governors. *Unless she was effectually made to hold her tongue*.

"We can easily suppose that Marston would be clever enough to arrange to meet Arkwright Jones, without arousing suspicion. We do know that soon after he finally quarrelled with Janet Smith he walked over to Kurtmoor; the two witnesses who spoke with him stated that they met him whilst they themselves were walking to Broxmouth. It was then past eight

o'clock. Arkwright Jones had either dined at his hotel or not; we do not know, for it never struck the police to inquire at once how the popular General had spent his time on that fateful evening. You know what those unconventional seaside places are: people spend most of their time out of doors, and there would be nothing strange, let alone suspicious, in any visitor going out for an hour after dinner, even if it rained.

"Then surely you can in your mind see those two scoundrels putting their villainous heads together, and as suspicion of any foul play would of necessity at once fall on Marston, Jones decided to take the hideous onus on himself. He went to the Dog's Tooth Cliff to meet Janet Smith himself, and borrowed Marston's stick to aid him in his abominable deed. He was clever enough, however, to throw it over the edge of the cliff some distance away from the scene of his crime. We do not know, of course, whether the poor girl recognised him, or whether he just fell on her in the dark; she gave only one scream before she fell.

"They were clever scoundrels, we must admit, but chance favoured them, too, especially in one thing: she favoured them when she prompted Arkwright Jones to put a muffler round his throat. This one fact, as you know, saved Marston's neck from the gallows, but for the strands of wool in the girl's hatpin, and Hoggs's brief view of a man manipulating a muffler, nothing but Jones's own confession could have saved his accomplice. Whether he would have confessed remains a riddle which no one will ever solve. But as to the whole so-called mystery, I saw daylight through it the moment I realised that Marston's despair and humiliation during the inquest was a pretence. If he feigned despair it was because he desired *temporarily* to be the victim of circumstantial evidence. From that point to the unravelling of the tangled skein was but a step for a mind bent on logic."

"But," I argued, for indeed I was bewildered, and really incredulous, "what will be the end of it all? Surely three scoundrels like that will not go scot free. There will be an enquiry into the affairs of the Institute: the governors——"

"The governors have talked of an inquiry," the funny creature broke in, with a chuckle, "but if you had any experience of these private charities, you would know that the first thing their administrators wish to avoid is publicity. The President of the Woodforde Institute had sufficient influence

on the committee you may be sure to stifle any suggestion of creating public scandal by any sort of enquiry."

"But the question of the finances of the Institute is, anyhow, public property now, and——"

"And it will be allowed to sink into oblivion. The executive has resigned. Marston and Gubbins will leave the country, and everything will be conveniently hushed up."

"But Arkwright Jones—" I protested.

"You see the papers regularly," he rejoined dryly; "watch them, and you will see..."

I don't know when he went, but a moment or two later I found myself sitting alone at the table in the blameless teashop. The matter interested me more than I cared to admit, but, for once, I was not altogether prepared to accept the funny creature's deductions.

Twenty-four hours later, however, I had to own that he had been right, when the following piece of sensational news appeared in the *Evening Post*.

"TRAGIC SEQUEL TO THE CLIFF MURDER

"An extraordinary sequel to the mysterious tragedy of the Dog's Tooth Cliff near Broxmouth occurred last night, when on the self-same spot where Miss Janet Smith met her death three months ago, General Sir Arkwright Jones lost his footing and fell a distance of two hundred feet on to the rocks below. It was a beautiful moonlight evening, and the tide being low a number of visitors were down on the beach at the time; but those who immediately hurried to the General's assistance found life already extinct. The distinguished soldier, who will be deeply mourned, must have been killed on the spot. Indeed now general public opinion as well as every inhabitant of Broxmouth will bring pressure to bear upon the Borough Council to see that a suitable barrier is erected along the dangerous portions of the beautiful Lovers' Walk. The double tragedy of this year's season renders such an erection imperative."

I was probably the only reader of that paragraph who guessed that the once distinguished soldier had not come accidentally by his death. No doubt

the police had followed up the clue of the man with the muffler, and were actually on the track of the miscreant, when the latter, guessing that exposure was imminent, preferred to put an end to his own miserable life.

I have since heard from friends at Broxmouth that Marston has gone to the Malay States, and that Gubbins is doing something in Germany. Curious creature Marston must have been! Imagine after Jones had returned from his infamous errand and told him that the hideous deed was done, imagine Marston walking back to Broxmouth along the Lovers' Walk in the rain and the darkness, past the Dog's Tooth Cliff, at the foot of which the body of the murdered girl lay! I wonder what would be the views of the Old Man in the Corner on the psychology of a man with nerve enough for such an ordeal.

VII
THE TYTHERTON CASE

§1

"What do you make of this?" the Old Man in the Corner said to me that afternoon. "A curious case, is it not?"

And with his claw-like fingers he indicated the paragraph in the *Evening Post* which I had just been perusing with great interest.

"At best," I replied, "it is a very unpleasant business for the Carysforts."

"And at the worst?" he retorted with a chuckle.

"Well...!" I remarked dryly.

"Do you think they are guilty?" he asked.

"I don't see who else..."

"Ah!" he broke in, with his usual lack of manners, "that is such a stale argument. One doesn't see who else, therefore one makes up one's mind that so-and-so must be guilty. I'll lay an even bet with any one that out of a dozen cases of miscarriage of justice, I could point to ten that were directly due to that fallacious reasoning.

"Now take as an example the Tytherton case, in which you are apparently interested. It was an unprecedented outrage which stirred the busy provincial town to its depths, the victim, Mr. Walter Stonebridge, being one of its most noted solicitors. He had his office in Tytherton High Street, and lived in a small, detached house on the Great West Road. The house stood in the middle of a small garden, and had only one story above the ground floor; the front door opened straight on a long, narrow hall which ran along the full depth of the house. On the left side of this hall there were two doors, one leading to the drawing-room and the other to a small morning-room. At the end of the hall was the staircase, and beyond it, down a couple of steps, there was a tiny dining-room and the usual offices. The back door opened straight on the kitchen, and on the floor above there

were four bedrooms and a bathroom. Mr. Walter Stonebridge was a bachelor, and his domestic staff consisted of a married couple—Henning by name—who did all that was necessary for him in the house.

"It was on the last evening of February. The weather was fair and bright. The Hennings had gone upstairs to their room as usual at ten o'clock. Mr. Stonebridge was at the time sitting in the morning-room. He was in the habit of sitting up late, reading and writing. On this occasion he told the Hennings to close the shutters and lock the back door as usual, but to leave the front door on the latch as he was expecting a visitor. The Hennings thought nothing of that, as one or two gentlemen—friends, or sometimes clients of Mr. Stonebridge—would now and then drop in late to see him. Anyway, they went contentedly to bed.

"A little while later—they could not exactly recollect at what hour, because they had already settled down for the night—they heard the front-door bell, and immediately afterwards Mr. Stonebridge's footsteps along the hall. Then suddenly they heard a crash followed by what sounded like a struggle, then a smothered cry, and finally silence. Henning was out of bed and on the landing with a candle in an instant, and he had just switched on the light there when he heard Mr. Stonebridge's voice calling up to him from below:

"It's all right, Henning. I caught my foot in this confounded rug. That's all.'

"Henning looked over the bannister, and seeing nothing he shouted down:

"'Shall I give you a 'and, sir?'

"But Mr. Stonebridge at once replied, quite cheerily:

"'No, no! I'm all right. You go back to bed.'

"And Henning did as he was told, nor did he or his wife hear anything more during the night. But in the early morning when Mrs. Henning came downstairs she was horror-struck to find Mr. Stonebridge in the dining-room, lying across the table, to which he was securely pinioned with a rope; a serviette taken out of the sideboard drawer had been tied tightly around

his mouth and his eyes were blindfolded with his own pocket handkerchief.

"The woman's screams brought her husband upon the scene; together they set to work to rescue their master from his horrible plight. At first they thought that he was dead, and Henning was for fetching the police immediately, but his wife declared that Mr. Stonebridge was just unconscious and she started to apply certain household restoratives and made Henning force some brandy through Mr. Stonebridge's lips.

"Presently, the poor man opened his eyes, and gave one or two other signs of returning consciousness, but he was still very queer and shaky. The Hennings then carried him upstairs, undressed him and put him to bed; and then Henning ran for the doctor.

"Well, it was days, or in fact weeks before Mr. Stonebridge had sufficiently recovered to give a coherent statement of what happened to him on that fateful night, and—which was just as much to the point—what had happened the previous day. The doctor had prescribed complete rest in the interim. The patient had suffered from concussion and I know not what, and those events had got so mixed up in his brain that to try and disentangle them was such an effort that every time he attempted it it nearly sent him into a brain fever. But in the meanwhile his friends had been busy—notably, Mr. Stonebridge's head clerk, Mr. Medburn, who was giving the police no rest. There was, even without the evidence of the principal witness concerned, plenty of facts to go on, to make out a case against the perpetrator of such a dastardly outrage.

"That robbery had been the main motive of the assault, was easily enough established—a small fire- and burglar-proof safe which stood in a corner of the morning-room had been opened and ransacked. When examined it was found to contain only a few trinkets which had probably a sentimental value, but were otherwise worthless. The key of the safe—one of a bunch—was still in the lock, which went to prove either that Mr. Stonebridge had the safe open when he was attacked, or what was more likely—considering the solicitor's well-known careful habits—that the assailant had ransacked his victim's pockets after he had knocked him down. A pocket-book, torn, and containing only a few unimportant papers, lay on the ground; there had been a fire in the room at the time of the outrage, and careful analysis of the ashes found in the hearth revealed the

presence of a quantity of burnt paper.

"But robbery being established as the motive of the outrage did not greatly help matters, because, while Mr. Stonebridge remained in such a helpless condition, it was impossible to ascertain what booty his assailant had carried away. Soon, however, the first ray of light was thrown upon what had seemed until this hour an impenetrable mystery.

"It appears that Mr. Medburn was looking after the business in High Street during his employer's absence, and one morning—it was on the Monday following the night of the outrage—he had a visit from a client, who sent in his name as Felix Shap. The head clerk knew something about this client, who had recently come over to England from somewhere abroad, in order to make good his claim to certain royalties on what is known as the Shap Fuelettes—a kind of cheap fuel which was launched some time before the War by Sir Alfred Carysfort, Bart., of Tytherton Grange, and out of which that gentleman made an immense fortune, and incidentally got his title thereby.

"This man, Shap—a Dutchman by birth—was, it appears, the original inventor and patentee of these fuelettes, and Mr. Carysfort, as he was then, had met him out in the Dutch East Indies, and had bought the invention from him for a certain sum down, and then exploited it in England first and afterwards all over the world at immense profit. Sir Alfred Carysfort died about a year ago, leaving a fortune of over a million sterling, and was succeeded in the title and in the managing-directorship of the business by his eldest son David, a married man with a large family. The business had long since been turned into a private limited liability company, the bulk of the shares being held by the managing-director.

"The fact that the patent rights in the Shap Fuelettes had been sold by the inventor to the late Alfred Carysfort had never been in dispute. It further appeared that Felix Shap had at one time been a very promising mining engineer, but that in consequence of incurable, intemperate habits he had gradually drifted down the social scale; he lost one good appointment after another until he was just an underpaid clerk in the office of an engineer in Batavia, whose representative in England was Mr. Alfred Carysfort. The latter was on a visit to the head office in Batavia some twelve years ago when he met Shap, who was then on his beam-ends. He had recently been

sacked by his employers for intemperance, and was on the fair way to becoming one of those hopeless human derelicts who usually end their days either on the gallows or in a convict prison.

"But at the back of Shap's fuddled mind there had lingered throughout his downward career the remembrance of a certain invention which he had once patented, and which he had always declared would one day bring him an immense fortune; but though he had spent quite a good deal of money in keeping up his patent rights, he had never had the pluck and perseverance to exploit or even to perfect his invention.

"Alfred Carysfort on the other hand, was brilliantly clever, he was ambitious, probably none too scrupulous, and at once he saw the immense possibilities, if properly worked, of Shap's rough invention, and he set to work to obtain the man's confidence, and, presumably, by exercising certain persuasion and pressure he got the wastrel to make over to him in exchange for a few hundred pounds the entire patent rights in the Fuelettes.

"The transaction was, as far as that goes, perfectly straightforward and above board; it was embodied in a contract drawn up by an English solicitor, who was the British Consul in Batavia at the time; nor was it—taking everything into consideration—an unfair one. Shap would never have done anything with his invention, and a clean, wholesome and entirely practical fuel would probably have been thus lost to the world; but there remains the fact that Alfred Carysfort died a dozen years later worth more than a million sterling, every penny of which he had made out of an invention for which he had originally paid less than five hundred.

"Mr. Medburn had been put in possession of these facts some few weeks previously when Mr. Felix Shap had first presented himself at the private house of Mr. Stonebridge; he came armed with a letter of introduction from a relative of Mr. Stonebridge's whom he had met out in Java, and he was accompanied by a friend—an American named Julian Lloyd—who was piloting him about the place, and acting as his interpreter and secretary, as he himself had never been in England and spoke English very indifferently. His passport and papers of identification were perfectly in order; he appeared before Mr. Stonebridge as a man still on the right side of sixty, who certainly bore traces on his prematurely wrinkled face and in his tired, lustreless eyes of a life spent in dissipation rather than in work, but

otherwise he bore himself well, was well-dressed and appeared plentifully supplied with money.

"The story that he told Mr. Stonebridge through the intermediary of his friend, Julian Lloyd, was a very curious one. According to his version of various transactions which took place between himself and the late Sir Alfred Carysfort, the latter had, some time after the signing of the original contract, made him a definite promise in writing, that should the proceeds in the business of the Shap Fuelettes exceed £10,000 in any one year, he, Sir Alfred, would pay the original inventor, out of his own pocket, a sum equivalent to twenty per cent. of all such profits over and above the £10,000, with a minimum of £200.

"Mr. Shap had brought over with him all the correspondence relating to this promise, and, moreover, he adduced as proof positive that Sir Alfred had looked on that promise as binding, and had at first loyally abided by it, the fact that until 1916 he had paid to Mr. Felix Shap the sum of £200 every year. These sums had been paid half-yearly through Sir Alfred's bankers, and acknowledgments were duly sent by Shap direct to the bank, all of which could of course be easily verified. But in the year 1916 these payments suddenly ceased. Mr. Shap wrote repeatedly to Sir Alfred, but never received any reply. At first he thought that there were certain difficulties in the way owing to the European War, so after a while he ceased writing. But presently there came the Armistice. Mr. Shap wrote again and again, but was again met by the same obstinate silence.

"In the meanwhile he had come to the end of his resources; he had spent all that he had ever saved, but, nevertheless, he was determined that as soon as he could scrape up a sufficiency of money he would go to England in order to establish his rights. Then in 1922 he heard of Sir Alfred Carysfort's death. It was now or never if he did not mean to acquiesce silently in the terrible wrong which was being put upon him. Fortunately he had a good friend in Mr. Julian Lloyd, who had helped him with money and advice, and at last he had arrived in England. It was for Mr. Stonebridge to say whether the papers and correspondence which he had brought with him were sufficient to establish his claim in law. Mr. Medburn remembered Mr. Stonebridge telling him all about these matters and emphasising the fact that Felix Shap had undoubtedly a very strong case and that he could not

understand a man of the position of Sir Alfred Carysfort thus wilfully repudiating his own signature.

"'There is not only the original letter,' Mr. Stonebridge had concluded, 'making a definite promise to pay certain sums out of his own pocket if the profits of the company exceeded ten thousand pounds in any one year, but there are all the covering letters from Sir Alfred's bankers whenever they sent cheques on his behalf to Shap—usually twice a year for sums that varied between one hundred and one hundred and fifty pounds. I cannot understand it!' he had reiterated more than once, and Mr. Medburn, who also had a great deal of respect for the Carysforts, who were among the wealthiest people in the county, was equally at a loss to understand the position.

"However Mr. Stonebridge, after he had seen the late Sir Alfred's bankers about the payments to Shap, and consulted an expert on the subject of the all-important letter signed by Alfred Carysfort, sought an interview with Sir David. From the first there seemed to be an extraordinary amount of acrimony brought into the dispute by both sides; this was understandable enough on the part of Felix Shap, who felt he was being defrauded of his just dues by men who were literally coining money out of the product of his brain; but the greatest bitterness really appeared to come from the other side.

"At first Sir David Carysfort refused even to discuss the question; he was quite sure that if his father had made promises of payments to any one, he was the last man in the world to repudiate such obligations. Sir David had not yet had time to go through all his father's papers, but he was quite convinced that correspondence, or documents, would presently be found, which would set at nought the original letter produced by Mr. Shap. But, of course, the payments to Shap up to and including the year 1916 could not be denied; there was the testimony of Sir Alfred's bankers that sums in accordance with Sir Alfred's instructions, varying between one hundred and one hundred and fifty pounds, were paid by cheque every half year to the order of Felix Shap in Batavia. In 1916 these payments automatically ceased, Sir Alfred giving no further orders for these to be made. Mr. Stonebridge naturally desired to know what explanation Sir David would give about those payments.

"At first Sir David denied all knowledge as to the reason or object of the payments, but after a while he must have realised that public opinion was beginning to raise its voice on the subject, and that it was not exactly singing the praises of Sir David Carysfort, Bart.

"Although Mr. Stonebridge had, of course, been discretion itself, Mr. Shap had admittedly not the same incentive to silence, and what's more his friend, Mr. Lloyd, made it his business to get as much publicity for the whole affair as he could. Paragraphs in the local papers had begun to appear with unabated regularity, and though there were no actual comments on the case as a whole, no prejudging of respective merits, there were unmistakable hints that it would be in Sir David's interest to put dignity on one side and come out frankly into the open with explanations and suggestions. Soon the London papers got hold of the story, and you know what that means. The Radical Press simply battened on a story which placed a poor, down-at-heel inventor in the light of a victim to the insatiable greed and frank dishonesty of a high-born profiteer.

"Whether it was pressure from outside, or from his own family, that suddenly induced Sir David to 'come out into the open' is not generally known; certain it is that presently he condescended to give an explanation of the mysterious half-yearly payments made by his father to Felix Shap, and the explanation was so romantic and frankly so far-fetched that most people, especially men, refused to accept it—notably Mr. Stonebridge. It was not the business of a lawyer to listen to sentimental stories, least of all was it the business of the lawyer acting on the other side.

"The story told by Sir David, namely, was this:

"The late Sir Alfred, when quite a young man, had gone out as clerk to that same engineering firm in Batavia, whom he represented later on; it was then that he first met Felix Shap, who had not yet begun to go downhill. An intimacy sprang up between Alfred Carysfort and Shap's sister, Berta, and the two were secretly married in Batavia. A year later Berta had a son whose birth she only survived by a few hours. The marriage had been an unhappy one from the first, and Carysfort was only too thankful when his firm called him back to England and he was able to shake off the dust of Batavia from his feet, as he hoped for ever. He never spoke of his marriage, nor did he ever recognise or have anything to do with his son. By some

pecuniary arrangement entered into with Felix Shap the latter undertook to provide for and look after the boy, to give him his own name, and never to trouble his brother-in-law about him again. A deed-poll was, Sir David believed, duly executed, and the boy assumed the name of Alfred Shap.

"Some years later there occurred the transaction over the Shap Fuelettes. Alfred Carysfort had come to Batavia on business: he had met Felix Shap again, who by this time had become a hopeless wastrel. The contract for the sale of the patent rights in the Fuelettes was duly executed, but whether, after seeing his son once more, the call of the blood became more insistent in the heart of Alfred Carysfort, or whether he merely yielded to blackmail, Sir David could not say; certain it is that after a while when the profits of the Shap Fuelettes Company became substantial, Sir Alfred took to sending over a couple of hundred pounds every year to Shap for the benefit of young Alfred. Then the war broke out; young Alfred joined the Australian Expeditionary Force, and was killed in Gallipoli in August, 1915. As soon as Sir Alfred had definite news of the boy's death, he naturally stopped all further payments to Shap.

"The story as you see sounded plausible enough, and if it proved to be untrue, it would reflect great credit on Sir David's gift of imagination. Felix Shap, as was only to be expected, denied it from beginning to end; the whole thing, he declared, was an impudent falsehood, based on a semblance of truth. It was quite true that he had adopted and for years had cared for his sister's son, who was subsequently killed in Gallipoli; it was also true that Alfred Carysfort had years ago paid some attention to his sister Berta, but there never was any question of marriage between them, young Carysfort deeming himself far too grand and well-born to marry the daughter of an obscure East Indian trader. Berta had subsequently married a man of mixed blood who deserted her and went off somewhere to Argentina or Honduras —Shap did not know where; at any rate, he was never heard of again.

"In proof of his version of the romantic story, Felix Shap actually had a copy of his sister's marriage certificate, as well as one or two letters written at different times to his sister Berta by her rascally husband. He had, indeed, plenty of proofs for his assertions; but when Mr. Stonebridge asked for confirmation of Sir David's story, the latter appeared either unprepared or unwilling to produce any, whereupon, Mr. Stonebridge, on behalf of his

client, entered an action for the recovery of certain royalties due to him on the sales of the Shap Fuelettes, the amount to be presently agreed on after examination of the audited accounts.

"Thus matters stood when on that Wednesday night in February last, Mr. Stonebridge was found gagged and unconscious, the victim of a murderous and inexplicable assault.

"On the Monday following, Mr. Felix Shap, accompanied by his friend, Mr. Lloyd, called on Mr. Medburn at the office in High Street. They had read in the papers certain details which had filled Shap with apprehension; they had read that the safe in the morning-room in Mr. Stonebridge's house had been obviously ransacked, and that the analysis of the ashes in the grate had revealed the presence of a large quantity of burnt paper.

"'My friend Mr. Shap would like you to put his mind at rest, Mr.—er—Medburn,' Mr. Lloyd said, in an anxious, agitated tone of voice, 'that the papers relating to his case, which he entrusted to Mr. Stonebridge, are safely locked up in a safe at this office.'

"Unfortunately, the head clerk was not able to satisfy Mr. Shap on that point. Mr. Stonebridge had never brought the papers to the office, nor had Mr. Medburn ever seen them. His impression was—he regretted to say—that Mr. Stonebridge had, for the time being, kept all papers relating to this particular case at his private house, just as he had always seen Mr. Shap there rather than at the office. Of course, Mr. Medburn hastened to assure his visitor, Mr. Stonebridge may have kept the documents in some other secure place; Mr. Medburn couldn't say, not having access to all his employer's papers, and in any case he would make a comprehensive search for the missing documents, and if nothing was found he would at once inform the police.

"An evening or two later the papers came out with flaring headlines: 'Amazing Developments in the Tytherton outrage. Missing documents. Sensational turn in the Shap Fuelettes case.' And so on. The head clerk had made an exhaustive search amongst his employer's papers, but not a trace could he find of any documents relative to Mr. Shap's case. One and all had disappeared: the original letter from Alfred Carysfort promising to pay an extra twenty per cent. on the profits of the Shap Fuelette Company under

certain conditions, the letters from the scoundrel who had been Berta's husband, together with the copy of Berta's marriage certificate—everything was gone, every proof of the truth of the story which Felix Shap had come all this way to tell.

§2

"The next exciting incident," the Old Man in the Corner continued glibly, "in this remarkably mysterious case, was the news that Mr. Allan Carysfort, eldest son of Sir David Carysfort, Bart., had been detained in connection with the assault upon Mr. Stonebridge and the disappearance of certain papers, the property of Mr. Felix Shap of Batavia.

"Young Allan Carysfort, who was a subaltern in a cavalry regiment, had come home from India recently, and, as a matter of fact, he had arrived at the Grange, the family seat just outside Tytherton, the very evening of the outrage. Acting upon certain information received, the police had detained him; he was to be brought before the magistrates on the following day; and in the meanwhile it was generally understood that some highly sensational evidence had been collected by the police.

"It has been asserted that Sir David Carysfort and his family were the last to realise how very strong public opinion had been against them ever since Shap's story and the loss of the documents had become generally known. Though there had been no hint of it in the Press, the public loudly declared that the Carysforts must have had something to do with the outrage, seek him whom the crime benefits being a most excellent adage. But imagine the sensation when Allan Carysfort, the eldest son of Sir David Carysfort, Bart., was arrested!

"Need I say that the following day when the young man was brought before the magistrates, the court was crowded. Sir David was a magistrate, too, but of course he did not sit that day. To see his eldest son arraigned before his brother Beaks must have been a bitter pill for his pride to swallow.

"We had the usual formal evidence of arrest, the medical evidence, and so on, after which we quickly plunged into exciting business. Mr. Stonebridge we were soon told had made a statement. He was not yet strong enough to appear in person, *but he had made a statement*, so at last the

public was to be initiated into the mysteries that surrounded the inexplicable assault.

"'After my servants had gone to bed,' Mr. Stonebridge had stated, 'I sat awhile reading in my study. I was expecting a visit from Mr. Shap, as we had talked over the possibility of a quiet chat at my house that evening on the subject of his affairs. He and Mr. Lloyd, who were both of them very fond of the cinema, were in the habit of dropping in after the show, on their way home. At about a quarter to eleven—I am sure it was not later—there was a ring at the front-door bell, and I went to open the door. No sooner had I done this than a shawl or muffler of some sort was thrown over my face, and I was made to lose my balance by the thrust of a foot between my two shins. I came down backwards with a crash.

"'The whole thing occurred in fewer seconds than it takes to describe; the next moment I had the sensation of cold steel against my temple, I heard an ominous click, and a husky voice whispered in my ear, "Your servant is coming out of his room. Speak to him, tell him you are all right, or I shoot." What could I do? I was utterly helpless and a revolver was held to my temple. The muffler was then lifted from my mouth, I could feel the man bending over me, I could feel his hot breath on my forehead, and a few seconds later I heard Henning come out of his room upstairs and switch on the light on the top landing. "If he comes downstairs," the voice whispered close to my ear, "I shoot."

"'Then it was,' Mr. Stonebridge went on to say, 'that I shouted up to Henning that I had only tripped over a rug, and that I was quite all right. I don't think I ever looked death so very near in the face before. The next moment I heard Henning switch off the light upstairs and go back to his room. After that I remember nothing more. I only have a vague recollection of a sudden terrible pain in my head; everything else is a blank until I found myself in bed, and with vague stirrings of memory bringing a return of that same appalling headache.'

"The great point about Mr. Stonebridge's evidence was that he was utterly unable to identify his assailant. He was not even sure whether he had been attacked by two men or one, since he had been blindfolded at the outset, and all that he heard was a husky voice that spoke in a whisper. He was ready to admit that he might have left the safe unlocked when he went

to answer the front-door bell, and he certainly had the papers relating to Mr. Shap's case on his desk as he had been going through them earlier in the evening. Those papers, therefore, had undoubtedly been burned in the grate, and it was obvious that the theft and destruction of those papers was the motive of the assault.

"After that we went from excitement to excitement. We did not get it all the same day, of course; Allan Carysfort appeared, as far as I can remember, three or four times before the local magistrates; in between times he was out on bail, this having been fixed at £1,000 in two recognisances £500 each, with an additional £500 on his own. It seems that when he was arrested he had made a statement, to which he had since unreservedly subscribed. He said that he had arrived in London from Southampton on Monday the twenty-sixth, and after seeing to some business in town, he took the eight-ten P.M. train on the twenty-eighth to Tytherton, where he arrived at nine-fifty, having dined on board. His father met him at the station with the car, but it was such a beautiful moon-lit night Sir David and himself decided that they would walk to the Grange and then sent the car home with a message to Lady Carysfort that they would be home at about eleven o'clock.

"Carysfort had been asked whether it was not strange that after being absent from home for so long, he should have elected to put off seeing his mother till a much later hour.

"'Not at all,' he replied. 'My father wished to put me *au fait* of certain family matters before I actually saw Lady Carysfort. These matters,' he added emphatically in reply to questions put to him by the magistrate, 'had nothing whatever to do with financial business, least of all were they in any relation to Mr. Shap and his affairs. Sir David and I,' he went on calmly, 'walked about for a while, and then Sir David remembered that he wished to see a friend at the County Club. He went in there, but I preferred to take another turn out of doors, as I had not had a taste of English country air for nearly two years.'

"Asked how long he had walked about Tytherton waiting for Sir David, Carysfort thought about half an hour, and when questioned as to the direction he had taken, he said he really couldn't remember.

"The police of course had adduced certain witnesses whose testimony

would justify the course they had taken in arresting a gentleman in the position of Mr. Allan Carysfort. There was, first of all, Felix Shap himself and his friend Julian Lloyd. They deposed that at about half-past ten, or perhaps a little earlier, they were on their way to see Mr. Stonebridge, as the latter had expressed a wish to see them both and have another quiet talk over a cigar and a glass of wine; Shap and Lloyd had been to the P.P.P. cinema in High Street, and they left just before the end to go to Mr. Stonebridge's house. They were within fifty yards of it when they saw a man turn out of the nearest side street and go up to Mr. Stonebridge's house. The man went through the garden gate and up to the front door. Shap and Lloyd saw him in the act of ringing the bell. It was then somewhere between ten-thirty and ten-forty-five. Mr. Stonebridge was so very much in the habit of seeing friends, and even those clients with whom he was intimate, late in the evenings, that Mr. Shap and Mr. Lloyd didn't think anything of the incident; but, at the same time, they made up their minds to postpone their own visit to Mr. Stonebridge until they could be quite sure of seeing him alone. So they turned then and there, and went straight back to the Black Swan where they lodged.

"I may add that with commendable reserve both these witnesses refused to identify Allan Carysfort with Mr. Stonebridge's visitor on that memorable Wednesday evening. The man they saw had an overcoat and wore a Glengarry cap. More they could not say, as they had not seen his face clearly.

"On the other hand the hall-porter at the County Club, another witness for the Treasury, had no cause for such reserve. He said that on the evening of February twenty-eighth, Sir David Carysfort came to the Club a little before half-past ten. Mr. Allan was with him then, but he didn't come in. The hall-porter heard him say to Sir David: 'Very well, then! I'll pick you up here in about half an hour!' And Sir David rejoined: 'Yes; don't be late!' Mr. Allan did return to the Club at about eleven o'clock and the two gentlemen then went off together. The hall-porter remembered the incident on that date quite distinctly, because he recollected being much surprised at seeing Mr. Allan Carysfort, who he thought was still abroad.

"After that there was another remand, Allan Carysfort's solicitor having asked and obtained an adjournment for a week. But by this time, as you

may imagine, not only the county, but London Society too were absolutely horror-struck. To think that a man in the position of the Carysforts should have stooped to such an act, not only of violence, but of improbity, was indeed staggering. Nor did public opinion swerve from this attitude one hair's breadth, even though at the next hearing all the proofs which the police had adduced against the accused were absolutely confuted.

"Fortunately for Carysfort, his solicitors had been successful in finding two witnesses, Miriam Page and Arthur Ormeley, who had seen Mr. Allan Carysfort, whom they knew by sight, strolling by the river at a quarter to eleven. They—like the hall-porter of the County Club—remembered the circumstance very clearly, because they did not know that Mr. Allan was home from abroad, and were astonished to see him there.

"The point of the evidence of these witnesses was that the river where they had seen Allan Carysfort strolling at a quarter to eleven is at the diametrically opposite end of the town to that where lies the Great West Road. Now the hall-porter had seen Allan Carysfort outside the County Club at half-past ten and again at eleven. If Carysfort was strolling by the river at a quarter to eleven, and there was no reason to impugn the credibility of the witnesses, he could not possibly have been the man whom Mr. Shap and Mr. Lloyd saw ringing the bell of Mr. Stonebridge's house at about that same hour.

"Allan Carysfort was discharged by the magistrates, as you know. There was no definite proof against him. But public opinion is ever an uncertain quantity, and it is still dead against the Carysforts. In the public mind two facts have remained indelibly fixed: firstly, that the Carysforts had everything to gain by the destruction of Felix Shap's papers and, secondly, that there was nobody else who could possibly have benefited by it.

"Since then also Mr. Stonebridge has made a declaration that nothing was stolen out of his safe and pocketbook except the papers and letters belonging to Felix Shap. So what would you? Although Allan Carysfort was discharged by the magistrates, really because there was no tangible evidence against him, he did not leave the court without a stain on his character. The stain was there, and there it is to this day. It will take the Carysforts years to live the scandal down; though some friends have remained loyal, there are always the enemies, the envious, the uncharitable,

and they insist that the two witnesses—the only two, mind you, whose evidence did clear Allan Carysfort of suspicion—had been bought and should not be believed, while others simply declare that Sir David and his son employed some ruffian to do the dirty work for them."

He gave a dry cackle, and contemplated me through his huge horn-rimmed spectacles.

"And you are of that opinion, too, I imagine," he said.

"Well, it seems the only likely explanation," I replied guardedly.

"Surely you don't suppose," he retorted, "that a business man like David Carysfort would place himself so entirely in the hands of a ruffian that he would for ever after be the victim of blackmail! Why, it would have been cheaper to buy off Felix Shap!"

"But," I rejoined, "I don't see who else had any interest in doing away with those documents."

"I'll tell you," he rejoined dryly. "Felix Shap himself."

"What *do* you mean?" I queried, with as much lofty scorn as I could command.

"I mean," he replied, "that all Felix Shap's documents were forgeries."

"Forgeries?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, spurious! False affidavits! Forgeries, the lot of 'em. My belief is that Stonebridge began to suspect this himself, and I think he has had a narrow escape of being murdered outright by those two rascals. As it is, they have destroyed every proof of their villainy, and old Stonebridge, I imagine, is content to let things remain as they are rather than admit publicly that he was completely taken in by two very plausible rogues."

"But," I urged, "what about the handwriting expert?"

The funny creature laughed aloud.

"Yes!" he said, "what about the expert? If there had been two they would have disagreed. And mind you at a distance of twelve years a signature would be difficult of absolute identification. Every one's

handwriting undergoes certain modifications in the course of years. Experts," he reiterated. "Bah!"

"But," I went on, impatiently, "I don't see the object of the whole scheme."

"The object was blackmail," the whimsical creature retorted, "and it has succeeded admirably. Already we read that Messrs. Shap and Lloyd are staying at expensive hotels in London, that they have granted interviews to pressmen and written articles for half-penny newspapers. We shall hear of them as cinema stars presently. They have had the most gorgeous, the most paying publicity, and presently Sir David Carysfort will have had enough of them and will put a few more hundreds in their pockets just to be rid of them. That was the object of the whole scheme, my dear young lady! And see how well it was carried out.

"Of course the fuddle-headed Dutchman never thought of it. I imagine that the whole scheme originated in the fertile brain of Mr. Julian Lloyd. And it was thoroughly well thought out from the manufacture of the documents and letters down to the assault on the silly old country attorney. And, mind you, the rascals originally went to a silly country attorney; they would have been afraid to go to a London lawyer, lest he be too sharp for them.

"The only mistake they made were the letters purported to be written to Berta Shap by the husband who is supposed to have disappeared, and the copy of Berta's marriage certificate. It is those letters that gave me the clue to the whole thing; old Stonebridge was too dull to have seen through those letters. If they were genuine why should Felix Shap have brought them over to England? They had nothing whatever to do with any contract about the Shap Fuelettes. If they were genuine, how could he guess that he would have to disprove a story of a secret marriage and of young Alfred being the son of Sir Alfred Carysfort? By wanting to prove too much, he, to my mind, gave himself away, and one can but marvel that neither lawyers nor police saw through the roguery.

"Of course the moment one understands that one set of papers was spurious, it is easily concluded that all the others were forgeries. And the late Sir Alfred Carysfort, anxious only to obliterate every vestige of that

early marriage of his, unwittingly played into the hands of those two scoundrels by destroying all the correspondence that he had ever had with Shap.

"Think it all over, you will see that I am right. Look at this paragraph again in the *Evening Post*, does it not bear out what I say?"

The paragraph in the evening paper to which the Old Man in the Corner was pointing read as follows:

"Among the passengers on the Dutch liner *Stadt Rotterdam* is Mr. Felix Shap, the hero of a recent celebrated case. He is returning to Batavia, having, through a misadventure which has remained an impenetrable mystery to this day, been deprived of all the proofs that would have established his claim to a substantial share of the profits in the Shap Fuelettes Company. Fortunately Mr. Shap had enlisted so many sympathies in England that his friends had no difficulty in collecting a considerable sum of money which was presented to him on his departure in the form of a purse and as a compensation for the ill-luck which has attended him since he set foot in this country. Mr. Shap will now be able to take abroad with him the assurance that British public opinion is always on the side of the victims of an adverse and unmerited fate."

"Yes!" the funny creature concluded with a cackle, "until the victims are found out to be rogues. Mr. Felix Shap and his friend, Mr. Julian Lloyd, will be found out some day."

The next moment he had gone with that rapidity which was so characteristic of him, and I might have thought that he was just a spook who had come to visit me whilst I dozed over my cup of tea, only that on the table by the side of an empty glass was a piece of string adorned with a series of complicated knots.

VIII
THE MYSTERY OF BRUDENELL COURT

§1

"Did you ever make up your mind about that Brudenell Court affair?" the Old Man in the Corner said to me that day.

"No," I replied. "As far as I am concerned the death of Colonel Forburg has remained a complete mystery."

"You don't think," he insisted, "that Morley Thrall was guilty?"

"Well," I said, "I don't know what to think."

"Then don't do it," he rejoined, with a chuckle, "if you don't know what to think, then it's best not to think at all. At any rate wait until I have told you exactly what did happen—not as it was reported in the newspapers, but in the sequence in which the various incidents occurred.

"On Christmas Eve, last year, while the family were at dinner, there was a sudden commotion and cries of 'Stop, thief!' issuing from the back premises of Brudenell Court, the country seat of a certain Colonel Forburg. The butler ran in excitedly to say that Julia Mason, one of the maids, was drawing down the blinds in one of the first-floor rooms, when she saw a man fiddling with the shutters of the French window in the smoking-room downstairs. She at once gave the alarm, whereupon the man bolted across the garden in the direction of the five-acre field. The Colonel and his stepson, as well as two male guests who were dining with them, immediately jumped up and hurried out to help in the chase. It was a very dark night, people were running to and fro, and for a few moments there was a great deal of noise and confusion, through which two pistol-shots in close succession were distinctly heard.

"The ladies—amongst whom was Miss Monica Glenluce, the Colonel's stepdaughter—had remained in the dining-room, and the dinner was kept waiting, pending the return of the gentlemen. They straggled in one by one, all except the Colonel. The ladies eagerly asked for news; the gentlemen

could not say much—the night was very dark and they had just waited about outside until some of the indoor men who had given chase came back with the news that the thief had been caught.

"This news was confirmed by young Glenluce, Miss Monica's brother, who was the last to return. He had actually witnessed the capture. The thief had bolted straight across the five-acre meadow, but doubled back before he reached the stables, turned sharply to the right through the kitchen garden, and then jumped over the boundary wall of the grounds into the lane beyond, where he fell straight into the arms of the local constable who happened to be passing by.

"Young Glenluce had great fun out of the chase; he had guessed the man's purpose, and instead of running after him across the meadow, he had gone round it, and had reached the boundary wall only a few seconds after the thief had scaled it. There was some talk about the gunshots that had been heard, and every one supposed that Colonel Forburg, who was a violent-tempered man, had snatched up a revolver before giving chase to the burglar, and had taken a potshot at him; it was fortunate that he had missed him.

"The incident would then have been closed and the interrupted dinner proceeded with, but for the fact that the host had not yet returned. Nothing was thought of this at first, for it was generally supposed that the Colonel had been kept talking by one of his men, or perhaps by the constable who had effected the capture; it was only when close on half an hour had gone by that Miss Monica became impatient. She got the butler to telephone both to the stables and the lodge, but the Colonel had not been seen at either place, either during or after the incident with the burglar; communication with the police station brought the same result; nothing had been seen or heard of the Colonel.

"Genuinely alarmed now, Miss Monica gave orders for the grounds to be searched; it was just possible that the Colonel had fallen whilst running, and was lying somewhere, helpless in the dark, perhaps unconscious.... Every one began recalling those pistol-shots and a vague sense of tragedy spread over the entire house. Monica blamed herself for not having thought of all this before.

"A search party went out at once; for a while stable-lanterns and electric-torches gleamed through the darkness and past the shrubberies. Then suddenly there were calls for help, the wandering lights centred in one spot, somewhere in the middle of the five-acre meadow near the big elm tree. Obviously there had been an accident. Monica ran to the front door, followed by all the guests. Through the darkness a group of men were seen slowly wending their way towards the house; one man was running ahead, it was the chauffeur. Young Glenluce, half guessing that something sinister had occurred, went forward to meet him.

"What had happened was indeed as tragic as it was mysterious; the search party had found the Colonel lying full-length in the meadow. His clothes were saturated with blood; he had been shot in the breast and was apparently dead. Close by a revolver had been picked up. It was impossible to keep the terrible news from Miss Monica. Her brother broke the news to her. She bore up with marvellous calm, and it was she who at once gave the necessary orders to have her stepfather's body taken upstairs and to fetch both the doctor and the police.

"In the meanwhile the guests had gone back into the house. They stood about in groups, awestruck and whispering. They did not care to finish their dinner, or to go up to their rooms, as in all probability they would be required when the police came to make enquiries. Monica and Gerald Glenluce had gone to sit in the smoking-room.

"It was the most horrible Christmas Eve any one in that house had ever experienced."

§2

"Murder committed from any other motive than that of robbery," the Old Man in the Corner went on after a moment's pause, "always excites the interest of the public. There is nearly always an element of mystery about it, and it invariably suggests possibilities of romance. In this case, of course, there was no question of robbery. After Colonel Forburg fell, shot, as it transpired, at close range and full in the breast, his clothes were left untouched; there was loose silver in his trousers pocket, a few treasury notes in his letter-case, and he was wearing a gold watch and chain and a fine pearl stud.

"The motive of the crime was therefore enmity or revenge, and here the police were at once confronted with a great difficulty. Not, mind you, the difficulty of finding a man who hated the Colonel sufficiently to kill him, but that of choosing among his many enemies one who was most likely to have committed such a terrible crime. He was the best-hated man in the county. Known as 'Remount Forburg,' he was generally supposed to have made his fortune in some shady transactions connected with the Remount Department of the War Office during the Boer War, more than twenty years ago.

"His first wife was said to have died of a broken heart, and he had no children of his own; some ten years ago he had married a widow with two young children. She had a considerable fortune of her own, and when she died she left it in trust for her children, but she directed that her husband should be the sole guardian of Monica and Gerald until they came of age; moreover, she left him the interest of the whole of the capital amount for so long as they were in his house and unmarried. After his death the money would revert unconditionally to them.

"Of course it was a foolish, one might say a criminal will, and one obviously made under the influence of her husband. One can only suppose that the poor woman had died without knowing anything of 'Remount Forburg's' character. Since her death his violent temper and insufferable arrogance had alienated from the children every friend they ever had. Only some chance acquaintances ever came anywhere near Brudenell Court now. Naturally every one said that the Colonel's behaviour was part of a scheme for keeping suitors away from his stepdaughter Monica, who was a very beautiful girl; as for Gerald Glenluce, Monica's younger brother, he had been sadly disfigured when he was a schoolboy through a fall against a sharp object that had broken his nose and somewhat mysteriously deprived him of the sight of one eye.

"Those who had suffered most from Colonel Forburg's violent tempers declared that the boy's face had been smashed in by a blow from a stick, and that the stick had been wielded by his stepfather. Be that as it may, Gerald Glenluce had remained, in consequence of this disfigurement, a shy, retiring, silent boy, who neither played games nor rode to hounds and had no idea how to handle a gun; but he was essentially the Colonel's favourite.

Where Forburg was harsh and dictatorial with every one else, he would always unbend to Gerald, and was almost gentle and affectionate toward him. Perhaps an occasional twinge of remorse had something to do with this soft side of his disagreeable character.

"Certainly that softness did not extend to Monica. He made the girl's life almost unbearable with his violence which amounted almost to brutality. The girl hated him and openly said so. Her one desire was to get away from Brudenell Court by any possible means. But owing to her mother's foolish will she had no money of her own, and the few friends she had were not sufficiently rich, or sufficiently disinterested, to give her a home away from her stepfather, nor would the Colonel, for a matter of that, have given his consent to her living away from him.

"As for marriage, it was a difficult question. Young men fought shy of any family connection with 'Remount Forburg.' The latter's nickname was bad enough, but there were rumours of secrets more unavowable still in the past history of the Colonel. Certain it is that though Monica excited admiration wherever she went, and though one or two of her admirers did go to the length of openly courting her, the courtship never matured into an actual engagement. Something or other always occurred to cool off the ardour of the wooers. Suddenly they would either go on a big-game shooting expedition, or on a tour round the world, or merely find that country air did not suit them. There would perhaps be a scene of fond farewell, but Monica would always understand that the farewell was a definite one, and, as she was an intelligent as well as a fascinating girl, she put two and two together, and observed that these farewell scenes were invariably preceded by a long interview behind closed doors between her stepfather and her admirer of the moment.

"Small wonder then that she hated the Colonel. She hated him as much as she loved her brother. A great affection had, especially of late, developed between these two; it was a love born of an affinity of trouble and sense of injustice. On Gerald's part there was also an element of protection towards his beautiful sister; the fact that he was so avowedly the spoilt son of his irascible stepfather enabled him many a time to stand between Monica and the Colonel's unbridled temper.

"Latterly, however, some brightness and romance had been introduced

into the drab existence of Monica Glenluce by the discreet courtship of her latest admirer, Mr. Morley Thrall. Mr. Thrall was a wealthy man, not too young and of independent position, who presumably did not care whether county society would cut him or no in consequence of his marriage with the stepdaughter of 'Remount Forburg.'

"Subsequent events showed that he had observed the greatest discretion while he was courting Monica. No one knew that there was an understanding between him and the girl, least of all the Colonel. Mr. Morley Thrall came, not too frequently, to Brudenell Court; while there he appeared to devote most of his attention to his host and to Gerald, and to take little if any notice of Monica. She had probably given him a hint of rocks ahead, and he had succeeded in avoiding the momentous interview with the Colonel which Monica had learned to look on with dread.

"Mr. Morley Thrall had been asked to stay at Brudenell Court for Christmas, the other guests being a Major Rawstone, with his wife and daughter, Rachel. They were all at dinner on that memorable Christmas Eve when the tragedy occurred, and all the men hurried out of the dining-room in the wake of their host when first the burglary alarm was given.

§3

"Thus did matters stand at Brudenell Court when, directly after the holidays, Jim Peyton, a groom recently in the employ of Colonel Forburg, was brought before the magistrates charged with the murder of his former master. There was a pretty stiff case against him too. It seems that he had lately been dismissed by Colonel Forburg for drunkenness, and that before dismissing him the Colonel had given him a thrashing which apparently was well deserved, because while he was drunk he very nearly set fire to the stables, and an awful disaster was only averted by the timely arrival of the Colonel himself upon the scene.

"Be that as it may, the man went away swearing vengeance. Subsequently he took out a summons for assault against Colonel Forburg and only got one shilling damages. This had occurred a week before Christmas. There were several witnesses there who could swear to the threatening language used by Peyton on more than one occasion since then, and of course he had been caught in the very act of trying to break into the

house through the French window of the smoking-room.

"On the other hand, the revolver with which 'Remount Forburg' had been shot, and which was found close to the body with two empty chambers, was identified as the Colonel's own property, one which he always kept, loaded, in a drawer of his desk in the smoking-room. And—this is the interesting point—the shutters of the smoking-room were found by the police inspector, who examined them subsequently, to be bolted on the inside, just as they had been left earlier in the evening by the footman whose business it was to see to the fastening of windows and shutters on the ground floor.

"This fact—the shutters being bolted on the inside—was confirmed by Miss Monica Glenluce, who had been the first to go into the smoking-room after the tragic event. Her brother joined her subsequently. Both of these witnesses said that the room looked absolutely undisturbed, the shutters were bolted, the drawer of the desk was closed: they had remained in the room until after the visit of the police inspector.

"After the positive evidence of these two witnesses, the police prosecution had of necessity to fall back on the far-fetched theory that Colonel Forburg himself, before he hurried out in order to join in the chase against the burglar, had run into the smoking-room and picked up his revolver, and that, having overtaken Peyton, he had threatened him; that Peyton had then jumped on him, wrenched the weapon out of his hand and shot him. It was a far-fetched theory certainly, and one which the defence quickly upset. Gerald Glenluce for one was distinctly under the impression that the Colonel ran from the dining-room straight out into the garden, and the young footman who was watching the fun from the front door, and saw the Colonel run out, was equally sure that he had not a revolver in his hand.

"Peyton got six months hard for attempted house-breaking, there really was no evidence against him to justify the more serious charge; but when the charge of murder was withdrawn, it left the mystery of 'Remount Forburg's' tragic end seemingly more impenetrable than before. Nevertheless the coroner and jury laboured conscientiously at the inquest. No stone was to be left unturned to bring the murder of 'Remount Forburg' to justice, and in this laudable effort the coroner had the able and unqualified assistance of Miss Glenluce. However bitter her feelings may

have been in the past towards her stepfather while he lived, she seemed determined that his murderer should not go unpunished. Nay more, there appeared to be in all her actions during this terrible time a strange note of vindictiveness and animosity, as if the unknown man who had rid her of an arrogant and brutal tyrant had really done her a lasting injury.

"It was entirely through her energy and exertions that certain witnesses were induced to come forward and give what turned out to be highly sensational evidence. The police who were convinced that James Peyton was guilty had turned all their investigations in the direction of proving their theories; Miss Monica, on the other hand, had seemingly made up her mind that the murderer was to be sought for inside the house; it even appeared as if she had certain suspicions which she only desired to confirm. To this end she had questioned and cross-questioned every one who was in the house on that fatal night, well knowing how reluctant some people are to be mixed up in any way with police proceedings. But at last she had forced two persons to speak, and it was on the first day of the inquest that at last a glimmer of light was thrown upon the mysterious tragedy.

"After the medical evidence which went to establish beyond a doubt that Colonel Forburg died from a gunshot wound inflicted at close range, both balls having penetrated the heart, Miss Glenluce was called. Replying to the coroner, who had put certain questions to her with regard to the Colonel's state of mind just before the tragedy, she said that he appeared to have a premonition that something untoward was about to happen. When the butler ran into the dining-room saying that a burglar had been seen trying to break into the house, the Colonel had jumped up from the table at once.

"'I did the same,' Miss Monica went on, 'as I was genuinely alarmed; but my stepfather, in his peremptory way, ordered me to sit still. "I believe," he said to me, with a funny laugh, "that it's a put-up job. It's some friend of Thrall's giving him a hand." I could not, of course, understand what he meant by that, and I looked at Mr. Thrall for an explanation. I must add that Mr. Thrall had been extraordinarily moody all through dinner; he appeared flushed, and I noticed particularly that he never spoke either to my step-father, to my brother, or to me. However at the moment I failed to catch his eye, and the very next second he was out of the room, on the heels of

Colonel Forburg.'

"This was remarkable evidence to say the least of it, but nevertheless it was confirmed by two witnesses who heard the Colonel make that strange remark: one was Rachel Rawstone, the young friend who was dining at Brudenell Court that Christmas Eve, and the other was Gerald Glenluce. Of course, by this time the public was getting very excited: they were like so many hounds heading for a scent, and the jury was beginning to show signs of that obstinate prejudice which culminated in a ridiculous verdict. But there was more to come. Thanks again to Miss Monica's insistence, the footman at Brudenell Court, a lad named Cambalt, had been induced to come forward with a story which he had evidently intended to keep hidden within his bosom, if possible. He gave his evidence with obvious reluctance and in a scarcely audible voice. It was generally noticed, however, that Miss Monica urged him frequently to speak up.

"Cambalt deposed that just before dinner on Christmas Eve, he had gone in to tidy the smoking-room before the gentlemen came down from dressing. As he opened the door he saw Mr. Morley Thrall standing in the middle of the room facing Colonel Forburg who was seated at his desk. Young Mr. Glenluce was standing near the mantelpiece with one foot on the fender, staring into the fire. Mr. Thrall, according to witness, was livid with rage.

""E took a step forward like,' Cambalt went on, amidst breathless silence on the part of the public and jury alike, 'and 'e raised 'is fist. But the Colonel 'e just laughed, then 'e opened the drawer of the desk and took out a revolver and showed it to Mr. Thrall and says: "'Ere y'are, there's a revolver 'andy, any way." Then Mr. Thrall 'e swore like anything, and says: "You blackguard! You d—— scoundrel! You ought to be shot like the cur you are." I thought he would strike the Colonel, but young Mr. Glenluce 'e just stepped quickly in between the two gentlemen and 'e says: "Look 'ere, Thrall, I won't put up with this! You jess get out!" Then one of the gentlemen seed me, and Mr. Thrall 'e walked out of the room.'

"'And what happened after he had gone?' the coroner asked.

"'Oh!' the witness replied, 'the Colonel 'e threw the revolver back into the drawer and laughed sarcastic like. Then 'e 'eld out 'is 'and to Mr. Gerald,

and says: "Thanks, my boy. You did 'elp me to get rid of that ruffian." After that,' Cambalt concluded, 'I got on with my work, and the gentlemen took no notice of me.'

"This witness was very much pressed with questions as to what happened later on when the burglary alarm was given and the gentlemen all hurried out of the house. Cambalt was in the hall at the time and he made straight for the front door to see some of the fun. He said that the Colonel was out first, and the other three gentlemen, Mr. Gerald, Mr. Rawstone and Mr. Morley Thrall went out after him; Mr. Thrall was the last to go outside; he ran across the garden in the direction of the five-acre field. Major Rawstone remained somewhere near the house, but it was a very dark night, and he, Cambalt, soon lost sight of the gentlemen. Presently, however, Mr. Thrall came back toward the house. It was a few minutes after the shots had been fired and witness heard Mr. Thrall say to Major Rawstone: 'I suppose it's that fool Forburg potting away at the burglar; hell get himself into trouble, if he doesn't look out.' Soon after that Mr. Gerald came running back with the news that the burglar had fallen into the arms of a passing constable and Cambalt then returned to his duties in the dining-room.

"As you see," the Old Man in the Corner went on glibly, "this witness's evidence was certainly sensational. The jury, which was composed of farm labourers, with the local butcher as foreman, had by now fully made up its silly mind that Mr. Morley Thrall had taken the opportunity of sneaking into the smoking-room, snatching up the revolver, and shooting 'Remount Forburg,' whom he hated because the Colonel was opposing his marriage with Miss Monica. It was all as clear as daylight to those dunderheads, and from that moment they simply would not listen to any more evidence. They had made up their minds; they were ready with their verdict and it was: Manslaughter against Morley Thrall. Not murder, you see! The dolts who had all of them suffered from 'Remount Forburg's' arrogance and violent temper would not admit that killing such vermin was a capital crime.

"What I am telling you would be unbelievable if it were not a positive fact. It is no use quoting British justice and dilating on the absolute fairness of trial by jury. A coroner's inquest fortunately is not a trial. The verdict of a coroner's jury, such as the one which sat on the Brudenell Court affair, though it may have very unpleasant consequences for an innocent person,

cannot have fatal results. In this case it cast a stigma on a gentleman of high position and repute, and the following day Mr. Morley Thrall, himself J.P., was brought up before his brother magistrates on an ignominious charge.

§4

"It is not often," the Old Man in the Corner resumed after a while, "that so serious a charge is preferred against a gentleman of Mr. Morley Thrall's social position, and I am afraid that the best of us are snobbish enough to be more interested in a gentleman criminal than in an ordinary Bill Sykes.

"I happened to be present at that magisterial enquiry when Mr. Morley Thrall, J.P., was brought in between two warders, looking quite calm and self-possessed. Every one of us there noticed that when he first came in, and in fact throughout that trying enquiry, his eyes sought to meet those of Miss Glenluce who sat at the solicitor's table; but whenever she chanced to look his way, she quickly averted her gaze again, and turned her head away with a contemptuous shrug. Gerald Glenluce, on the other hand, made pathetic efforts at showing sympathy with the accused, but he was of such unprepossessing appearance and was so shy and awkward that it was small wonder Morley Thrall took little if any notice of him.

"Very soon we got going. I must tell you, first of all, that the whole point of the evidence rested upon a question of time. If the accused took the revolver out of the desk in the smoking-room, when did he do it? The footman, Cambalt, reiterated the statement which he had made at the inquest. He was, of course, pressed to say definitely whether after the quarrel between Mr. Morley Thrall and the Colonel which he had witnessed, and before every one went in to dinner, Mr. Thrall might have gone back to the smoking-room and extracted the revolver from the drawer of the desk; but Cambalt said positively that he did not think this was possible. He himself, after he had tidied the smoking-room, had been in and out of the hall preparing to serve dinner. The door of the smoking-room gave on the hall, between the dining-room and the passage leading to the kitchens. If any one had gone in or out of the smoking-room at that time, Cambalt must have seen them.

"At this point Miss Glenluce was seen to lean forward and to say something in a whisper to the Clerk of the Justices, who in his turn

whispered to the chairman on the Bench, and a moment or two later that gentleman asked the witness:

"'Are you absolutely prepared to swear that no one went in or out of the smoking-room while you were making ready to serve dinner?7

"Then, as the young man seemed to hesitate, the magistrate added more emphatically:

"Think now! You were busy with your usual avocations; there would have been nothing extraordinary in one of the gentlemen going in or out of the smoking-room at that hour. Do you really believe and are you prepared to swear that such a very ordinary incident would have impressed itself indelibly upon your mind?'

"Thus pressed and admonished, Cambalt retrenched himself behind a vague: 'No, sir! I shouldn't like to swear one way or the other.'

"Whereat Miss Monica threw a defiant look at the accused, who, however, did not as much as wink an eyelid in response.

"Presently when that lady herself was called, no one could fail to notice that she, like the coroner's jury the previous day, had absolutely made up her mind that Morley Thrall was guilty, otherwise her attitude of open hostility toward him would have been quite inexplicable. She dwelt at full length on the fact that Mr. Thrall had paid her marked attention for months, and that he had asked her to marry him. She had given him her consent, and between them they had decided to keep their engagement a secret until after she, Monica, had attained her twenty-first birthday, when she would be free to marry whom she chose.

"'Unfortunately,' the witness went on, suddenly assuming a dry, pursed-up manner, 'Colonel Forburg got wind of this. He was always very much set against my marrying at all, and between tea and dinner on Christmas Eve he and I had some very sharp words together on the subject, at the end of which my stepfather said very determinedly: "Christmas or no Christmas, the fellow shall leave my house by the first available train to-morrow, and to-night I am going to give him a piece of my mind."'

"Just for a moment after Miss Glenluce had finished speaking, the

accused seemed to depart from his attitude of dignity and reserve, and an indignant 'Oh!' quickly repressed, escaped his lips. The public by this time was dead against him. They are just like sheep, as you know, and the verdict of the coroner's jury had prejudiced them from the start, and the police, aided by Miss Glenluce, had certainly built up a formidable case against the unfortunate man. Every one felt that the motive for the crime was fully established already. 'Remount Forburg' had had a violent quarrel with Morley Thrall, then had turned him out of the house, and the latter, furious at being separated from the girl he loved, had killed the man who stood in his way.

"I should be talking until to-morrow morning were I to give you in detail all the evidence that was adduced in support of the prosecution. The accused listened to it all with perfect calm. He stood with arms folded, his eyes fixed on nothing. The 'Oh!' of indignation did not again cross his lips, nor did he look once at Miss Monica Glenluce. I can assure you that at one moment that day things were looking very black against him.

"Fortunately for him, however, he had a very clever lawyer to defend him in the person of his distinguished cousin, Sir Evelyn Thrall. The latter, by amazingly clever cross-examination of the servants and guests at Brudenell Court, had succeeded in establishing the fact that at no time, from the moment that the burglary alarm was given until after the two revolver shots had been heard, was the accused completely out of sight of some one or other of the witnesses. He was the last to leave the dining-room. Mrs. Rawstone and her daughter testified to that. He had stayed behind one moment after the other three gentlemen had gone out in order to say a few words to Monica Glenluce. Miss Rawstone was standing inside the dining-room door and she was quite positive that Mr. Thrall went straight out into the garden.

"On the other hand Major Rawstone saw him in the forecourt coming away from the five-acre meadow only a very few moments after the shots were fired, and gave it absolutely as his opinion that it would have been impossible for the accused to have fired those shots. This is where the question of time came in.

"'When a man who bears a spotless reputation,' Major Rawstone argued, 'finds that he has killed a fellow creature, he would necessarily pause a

moment, horror-struck with what he has done; whether the deed was premeditated or involuntary he would at least try and ascertain if life was really extinct. It is inconceivable that any man save an habitual and therefore callous criminal, would just throw down his weapon and with absolute calm, hands in pocket and without a tremor in his voice, make a casual remark to a friend. Now I saw Mr. Morley Thrall perhaps two minutes after the shots were fired; in that time he could not have walked from the centre of the field to the forecourt where I was standing; and he had not been running as his voice was absolutely clear and he came walking towards me with his hands in his pockets.'

"As was only to be expected, Sir Evelyn Thrall made the most of Major Rawstone's evidence, and I may say that it was chiefly on the strength of it that the charge of murder against the accused was withdrawn, even though the Clerk to the Magistrates, perpetually egged on by Miss Glenluce, did his best to upset Major Rawstone. When the lady found that this could not be done, she tried to switch back to the idea that accused had abstracted the revolver out of the smoking-room before dinner and immediately after his quarrel with Colonel Forburg. The footman Cambalt's evidence on this point had been somewhat discounted by his refusing to state positively that no one could have gone into the smoking-room at that time without his seeing them. But against this theory there was always the argument—of which Sir Evelyn Thrall made the most as you know—that before dinner the accused could not have known that there would be an alarm of burglary which would give him the opportunity of waylaying the Colonel in the open field. With equal skill, too, Sir Evelyn brought forward evidence to bear out the statement made by the accused on the matter of his quarrel with Colonel Forburg.

"'Just before dinner,' Mr. Thrall stated, 'Colonel Forburg told me he had something to say to me in private. I followed him into the smoking-room, and there he gave me certain information with regard to his past life, and also with regard to Miss Glenluce's parentage, which made it absolutely impossible for me, in spite of the deep regard which I have for that lady, to offer her marriage. Miss Glenluce is the innocent victim of tragic circumstances in the past, and Forburg was just an unmitigated blackguard, and I told him so, but I had my family to consider and very reluctantly I came to the conclusion that I could not introduce any relation of Colonel

Forburg into its circle. Colonel Forburg did not stand in the way of my marrying his stepdaughter; it was I who most reluctantly withdrew.'

"Whilst the accused was cross-examined upon this statement, and he gave his answers in firm, dignified tones, Miss Monica never took her eyes off him, and surely if looks could kill, Mr. Morley Thrall would not at that moment have escaped with his life, so full of deadly hatred and contempt was her gaze. The accused had signed a much fuller statement than the one which he made in open court; it contained a detailed account of his interview with Colonel Forburg, and of the circumstances which finally induced him to give up all thoughts of asking Miss Glenluce to be his wife.

"These facts were not made public at the time for the sake of Miss Monica and of the unfortunate, Gerald, but it seems that the transactions which had earned for the Colonel the sobriquet of 'Remount Forburg' were so disreputable and so dishonest that not only was he cashiered from the army, but he served a term of imprisonment for treason, fraud, and embezzlement. He had no right to be styled Colonel any longer, and quite recently had been threatened with prosecution if he persisted in making further use of his army rank.

"But this was not all the trouble. It seems that in his career of improbity he had been associated with a man named Nosdel, a man of Dutch extraction whom he had known in South Africa. This man was subsequently hanged for a particularly brutal murder, and it was his widow who was 'Remount Forburg's' second wife, and the mother of Monica and of Gerald, who had been given the fancy name of Glenluce.

"Obviously a man in Mr. Morley Thrall's position could not marry into such a family, and it appears that whenever there was a question of a suitor for Monica, 'Remount Forburg' would tell the aspirant the whole story of his own shady past and, above all, that of Monica's father. Sir Evelyn Thrall had been clever enough to discover one or two gentlemen who had had the same experience as his cousin Morley; they, too, just before their courtship came to a head had had a momentous interview with 'Remount Forburg,' who found this means of choking off any further desire for matrimony on the part of a man who had family connections to consider. But it was very obvious that Mr. Morley Thrall had no motive for killing 'Remount Forburg'; he would have left Brudenell Court that very evening, he said,

only that young Glenluce had begged him, for Monica's sake, not to make a scene; anyway, he was leaving the house the next day and had no intention of ever darkening its doors again.

"Poor Monica Glenluce or Nosdel, ignorant of the hideous cloud that hung over her entire life, ignorant, too, of what had passed between her stepfather and Mr. Morley Thrall, felt nothing but hatred and contempt for the man whose love, she believed, had proved as unstable as that of any of her other admirers. For charity's sake one must suppose that she really thought him guilty at first, and hoped that when the clouds had rolled by he would return to her more ardent than before. Presumably he found means to make her understand that all was irrevocably at an end between them as far as he was concerned, whereupon her regard for him turned to bitterness and desire for revenge.

"And, indeed, but for the cleverness of a distinguished lawyer, poor Morley Thrall might have found himself the victim of a judicial error brought about by the deliberate enmity of a woman. Had he been committed for trial, she would have had more time at her disposal to manufacture evidence against him, which I am convinced she had a mind to do."

"As it is," I now put in tentatively, for the Old Man in the Corner had been silent for some little while, "the withdrawal of the charge of murder against Morley Thrall did not help to clear up the mystery of 'Remount Forburg's' tragic death."

"Not so far as the public is concerned," he retorted dryly.

"You have a theory?" I asked.

"Not a theory," he replied. "I know who killed 'Remount Forburg.'"

"How do you know?" I riposted.

"By logic and inference," he said. "As it was proved that Morley Thrall did not kill him, and that Miss Monica could not have done it, as the ladies did not join in the chase after the burglar, I looked about me for the only other person in whose interest it was to put that blackguard out of the way."

"You mean——?"

"I mean the boy Gerald, of course. Openly and before the other witness, Cambalt, he stood up for his stepfather against Thrall who was not measuring his words, but just think how the knowledge which he had gained about his own parentage and that of his sister must have rankled in his mind. He must have come to the conclusion that while this man—his stepfather—lived, there would be no chance for him to make friends, no chance for the sister whom he loved ever to have a home, a life of her own. Whether that interview on Christmas Eve was the first inkling which he had of the real past history of his own and Forburg's family, it is impossible to say. Probably he had suspicions of it before, when, one by one, Monica's suitors fell away after certain private interviews with the Colonel. Morley Thrall must have been a last hope, and that, too, was dashed to the ground by the same infamous means.

"I am not prepared to say that the boy got hold of the revolver that night with the deliberate intention of killing his stepfather at the earliest opportunity; he may have run into the smoking-room to snatch up the weapon, only with a view to using it against the burglar; certain it is that he overtook 'Remount Forburg' in the five-acre field and that he shot him then and there. Remember that the night was very dark, and that there was a great deal of running about and of confusion. The boy was young enough and nimble enough after he had thrown down the revolver to run across the field and then to go back to the house by a roundabout way. It is easy enough in a case like that to cover one's tracks, and, of course, no one suspected anything at the time. Even the sound of firing created but little astonishment; it was so very much on the cards that the Colonel would use a revolver without the slightest hesitation against a man who had been trying to break into his house. It was just the sort of revenge that a man of Gerald's temperament—disfigured, shy, silent and self-absorbed—would seek against one whom he considered the fount of all his wrongs."

"But," I objected, "how could young Glenluce run into the smoking-room, pick up the revolver out of a drawer, and run back through the hall with servants and guests standing about? Some one would be sure to see him."

"No one saw him," the funny creature retorted, "for he did it at the moment of the greatest confusion. The butler had run in with the news of

the burglary, the Colonel jumped up and ran out through the hall, the guests had not yet made up their minds what to do. In moments like this there are always just a few seconds of pandemonium, quite sufficient for a boy like Gerald to make a dash for the smoking-room."

"But after that——"

"He took the revolver out of the drawer and ran out through the French window."

"But the shutters were found to be bolted on the inside," I argued, "when they were examined by the police inspector."

"So they were," he admitted. "Miss Monica had already been in there with young Gerald. They had seen to the shutters."

"Then you think that Monica knew?"

"Of course she did."

"Then her desire to prove Morley Thrall guilty——"

"Was partly hatred of him, and partly the desire to shield her brother," the funny creature concluded as he collected traps, his bit of string and his huge umbrella. "Think it over; you will see that I am right. I am sorry for those two, aren't you? But they are selling Brudenell Court, I understand, and their mother's fortune has become theirs absolutely. They will go abroad together, make a home for themselves, and one day, perhaps, everything will be forgotten, and a new era of happiness will arise for the innocent, now that the guilty has been so signally punished. But it was an interesting case. Don't you agree with me?”

IX
THE MYSTERY OF THE WHITE CARNATION

§1

"I suppose that is a form of snobbishness," the Old Man in the Corner began abruptly.

I gave such a jump that I nearly upset the contents of a cup of boiling tea which I was conveying to my mouth. As it was, I scalded my tongue and nearly choked.

"What is?" I queried with a frown, for I was really vexed with the creature. I had no idea he was there at all. But he only smiled and concluded his speech, quite unperturbed.

"... that creates additional interest in a crime when it concerns people of wealth or rank."

"Snobbishness," I rejoined, "of course it's snobbishness! And when the little suburban madam has finished reading about Lady Stickinthemud's reception at Claridge's she likes to turn to Lord Tomnoodle's prospective sojourn in gaol."

"You were thinking of the disappearance of the Australian millionaire?" he asked blandly.

"I don't know that I was," I retorted.

"But of course you were. How could any journalist worthy of the name fail to be interested in that intricate case?"

"I suppose you have your theory—as usual?"

"It is not a theory," the creature replied, with that fatuous smile of his which always irritated me; "it is a certainty."

Then, as he became silent, absorbed in the contemplation of a wonderfully complicated knot in his beloved bit of string, I said with gracious condescension:

"You may talk about it, if you like."

He did like, fortunately for me, because, frankly, I could not see daylight in that maze of intrigue, adventure and possibly crime, which was described by the Press as "The Mystery of the White Carnation."

"The events were interesting from the outset," he began after a while, whilst I settled down to listen, "and so were various actors in the society drama. Chief amongst these was, of course, Captain Shillington, an Australian ex-officer, commonly reputed to be a millionaire, who, with his mother and sister, rented Mexfield House in Somerset Street, Mayfair, the summer before last. It appears that Lord Mexfield's younger son, the Honorable Henry Buckley, who was an incorrigible rake and whom his father had sent on a tour round the world in order to keep him temporarily out of mischief, not to say out of gaol, had met a married brother of Captain Shillington's out in the Antipodes, they had been very kind to him, and so on, with the result that when came the following London season the family turned up in England, and, after spending a couple of days at the Savoy, they moved into the Mexfields' house in Somerset Street.

"Lord and Lady Mexfield were abroad that year, and Henry Buckley and his sister Angela were living with an aunt who had a small house somewhere in Mayfair.

"Although the Shillingtons were reputed to be very wealthy, they appeared to be very quiet, simple folk, and it certainly seemed rather strange that they should have gone to the expense of a house in town, when obviously they had no social ambitions and did not mean to entertain. As a matter of fact, as far as Mrs. Shillington and her daughter were concerned, nobody could have lived a quieter, more retiring life than they did. Mrs. Shillington was an invalid and hardly ever went outside her front door, and the girl Marion seemed to be suffering from a perpetual cold in the head. They seemed to be in a chronic state of servant trouble. Mrs. Shillington was dreadfully irritable, and one set of servants after another were engaged only to leave without notice after a few days. The one faithful servant who remained was a snuffy old man who came to them about a month after they moved into Mexfield House. He and a charwoman did all the work of cooking and valeting and so on. Presumably the old man could not have got a situation elsewhere as his appearance was very unprepossessing, and

therefore he was willing to put up with what the servants' registry offices would term 'a very uncomfortable situation.'

"Captain Shillington, the hero of the tragic adventure, on the other hand, went about quite a good deal. He was certainly voted to be rather strait-laced, not to say priggish, but he was very good-looking and a fine dancer. Henry Buckley introduced him to some of his smart friends and Lady Angela constituted him her dancing partner. The partnership soon developed into warmer friendship and presently it was given out that Lady Angela Buckley, only daughter of the Earl and Countess of Mexfield, was engaged to Captain Denver Shillington, the Australian millionaire. Lady Angela confided to her friends that her fiancé was the owner of immense estates in Western Australia, on a portion of which rich deposits of gold had lately been discovered. He certainly had plenty of money to spend, and on one occasion he actually paid Henry Buckley's gambling debts to the tune of two or three hundred pounds.

"On the whole, society pronounced the match a suitable one. Lady Angela Buckley was no longer in her first youth, whilst her brother, to whom she was really devoted, would be all the better for a somewhat puritanical, strait-laced and, above all, wealthy brother-in-law."

§2

"That, then, was the position," the Old Man in the Corner continued after a while, "and the date of Lady Angela Buckley's marriage to Captain Denver Shillington had been actually fixed when the public was startled one afternoon towards the end of the summer by the sensational news in all the evening papers: 'Mysterious disappearance of a millionaire.' This highly coloured description applied, as it turned out, to Captain Shillington, the fiancé of Lady Angela Buckley. It seems that during the course of that same morning a young lady, apparently in deep distress and suffering from a streaming cold in the head, had called at Scotland Yard. She gave her name and address as Marion Shillington, of Mexfield House, Somerset Street, Mayfair, and stated that she and her mother were in the greatest possible anxiety owing to the disappearance of her brother, Captain Denver Shillington. They had last seen him on the previous Friday evening at about nine o'clock when he left home in order to pick up his fiancée, Lady Angela Buckley, whom he was escorting that night to a reception in Grosvenor

Square. He was wearing full evening dress and a soft hat. Miss Shillington couldn't say whether he had any money in his pockets. She thought that probably he was carrying a gold cigarette case, which Lady Angela had given him, but, as a matter of fact, he never wore any jewellery.

"No one in the house had heard him come in again that night, and his bed had not been slept in. Questioned by the police, Miss Shillington explained that neither she nor her mother felt any alarm at first because there had been some talk of Captain Shillington going away with his fiancée to stay with friends over the week-end, somewhere near Newmarket. It was only this morning, Wednesday, that Mrs. Shillington first began to worry when there was still no sign or letter from him. 'My brother is a very good son,' Miss Shillington continued, explaining to the police, 'and always very considerate to mother. It was so unlike him to leave us without news all this while and not let us know when to expect him home. So I rang up Lady Angela Buckley, who is his fiancée, to see if I could get news through her, as I could see mother was beginning to get anxious. Mr. Henry Buckley, Lady Angela's brother, answered the 'phone. I asked after his sister and he told me that she was staying on in the country a day or two longer. He himself had come back to town the previous night. I then asked him, quite casually, if he knew whether Denver—that's my brother—would be returning with Angela. And his answer to me was, "Denver? Why, I haven't seen him since Friday. And I can tell you that he is in for a row with Angela. She was furious with him that he never wrote once to her while she was away." I was so upset that I hung up the receiver and just sat there wondering what to do next. But Mr. Buckley rang up a moment or two later and asked quite cheerily if there was anything wrong. "Good old Square-toes!" he said, meaning my brother, whom he always used to chaff by calling him "Square-toes," "don't tell me he has gone off on the spree without letting you know. I say, that's too bad of him, though. But I shouldn't be anxious if I were you. Boys, you know, Miss Shillington, will be boys, and I like old Square-toes all the better for it.'"

"Miss Shillington," the Old Man in the Corner went on, "was as usual suffering from a streaming cold, and between spluttering and crying, she had reduced two or three handkerchiefs to wet balls. At best she was no beauty, and with a red nose and streaming eyes she presented a most pitiable spectacle. 'I made Mr. Buckley assure me once more,' she said, 'that

he had seen nothing of Denver since Friday. That night he and Lady Angela and Denver were at a reception in Grosvenor Square. They all left about the same time. Angela and Denver went, presumably, straight home; at any rate, he, Mr. Buckley, saw nothing more of them after they got into their car. He himself went to spend an hour or two at his club and came home about two a.m. The next morning, after breakfast, he drove his sister out to Tatchford, near Newmarket, where they spent the week-end with some friends. And that was all Mr. Buckley could say to me,' Miss Shillington concluded, vigorously blowing her nose: 'He came home last night from Tatchford, and was expecting Lady Angela in a couple of days. Denver had not been at Tatchford at all, and he had not once written to Angela all the while she was away.'

"Of course the police inspector to whom Miss Shillington related all these facts had a great many questions to put to her. For one thing he wanted to know whether she had been in communication with Lady Angela Buckley since this morning.

"'No,' the girl replied, 'I have not, and so far, I haven't said anything to mother. As soon as I felt strong enough I put on my things and came along here.'

"Then the inspector wanted to know if she knew of any friends or acquaintances of her brother's with whom he might have gone off for a week-end jaunt without saying anything about it, either at home or to his fiancée. He put the questions as delicately as he could, but the sister flared up with indignation. It seems that the Captain's conduct had always been irreproachable. He was a model son, a model brother, and deeply in love with Lady Angela. Miss Shillington also refused to believe that he could have been enticed to a place of ill-fame and robbed by one of the usual confidence tricksters.

"'My brother is exceptionally shrewd,' she declared, 'and a splendid business man. Though he is not yet thirty, he has built up an enormous fortune out in Australia, and administers his estates himself to the admiration of every one who knows him. He is not the sort of man who could be fooled in that way.'

"But beyond all this, and beyond giving a detailed description of her

brother's appearance, the poor girl had very little to say, and the detective who was put in charge of the case could only assure her that enquiries would at once be instituted in every possible direction, and that the police would keep her informed of everything that was being done. Obviously, the person most likely to be able to throw some light upon the mystery was Lady Angela Buckley, but as you know, the advent of this charming lady upon the scene only helped to complicate matters. It appears that Henry Buckley, delighted at what he jocosely called, 'Old "Square-toes" falling from grace,' had rung up his sister in order to tell her the startling news over the telephone. Lady Angela being a very modern young woman, her brother thought that she might storm for a bit but in the end see the humorous side of the situation. But not at all! Lady Angela took the affair entirely *au tragique*. Over the telephone she only exclaimed, 'Great Lord!' but at one o'clock in the afternoon she arrived at the flat, having taken the first train up to town and not even waiting for her maid to pack her things. Mr. Henry Buckley was just going out to lunch. Without condescending to explain anything, his sister dragged him off then and there to Scotland Yard. 'Something has happened to Denver,' was all that she would say. 'Something dreadful, I am sure.' In vain did her brother protest that she would only be making a fool of herself by rushing to the police like this, that old Square-toes had only gone on the spree, and that, anyway, she ought to consult with the Shillingtons before doing anything silly; Lady Angela would not listen to reason. 'You don't know! You don't know!' she kept on reiterating with ever-increasing agitation. 'He has been murdered, I tell you. Murdered!'

"By the time that the pair arrived at Scotland Yard, Lady Angela was in a state bordering on hysterics, and her brother appeared both sulky and perplexed. They saw the same Inspector who had interviewed Miss Shillington, and certainly his amazement was no whit less than that of Mr. Henry Buckley when Lady Angela having mentioned the disappearance of Captain Denver Shillington, said abruptly, 'Yes, he has disappeared, and incidentally, he had my pearls in his pocket.' The Inspector made no immediate comment; men of his calling are used to those kinds of surprises, but Henry Buckley gave a gasp of horror.

"'Your pearls?' he exclaimed. 'What pearls? Not——?'

"'Yes,' Lady Angela rejoined, coolly. 'The Glenarm pearls. All of them!'

"'But——' Henry Buckley stammered, wide-eyed and white to the lips.

"His sister threw him what appeared to be a warning glance, then she turned once more to the police inspector.

"'My brother is upset,' she said calmly, 'because he knows that the pearls are of immense value. The late Lord Glenarm left them to me in his will. He made a huge fortune by a successful speculation in sugar. He had no daughters of his own, and late in life he married my mother's sister. He was my godfather, and when he first bought the pearls and gave them to his wife as a wedding present, he said that after her death and his they should belong to me. They were valued for probate at twenty-five thousand pounds.'

"Henry Buckley was still speechless, and it was in answer to several questions put to her by the Inspector that Lady Angela gave the full history, as far as she knew it, of the disappearance of her pearls.

"'I was going to spend the week-end with some friends at Tatchford, near Newmarket,' she said. 'My brother at first had decided not to come with me. On the Friday evening I went with Captain Shillington to a ball at the Duchess of Flint's in Grosvenor Square. I wore my pearls; on the way home in the car, Captain Shillington appeared very anxious as to what I should do about the pearls whilst I was away. He wanted me to take them to the bank first thing in the morning before I left. But I knew I couldn't do this, because my train was at nine-fifty from Liverpool Street. Captain Shillington had once or twice before shown anxiety about the pearls and urged me to keep them at the bank when I was not wearing them, but he had never been so insistent as that night.'

"Lady Angela appeared to hesitate for a moment or two. She glanced at her brother with a curious expression, both of anxiety and contempt. It seemed as if she were trying to make up her mind to say something that was very difficult, to put in so many words. The Inspector sat silent and impassive, waiting for her to continue her story, and at last she did make up her mind to speak.

"'I had a safe in the flat,' she went on, glibly, 'where I keep my jewellery, but Captain Shillington did not seem satisfied. He argued and argued, and at last he persuaded me to let him have the pearls while I was away and he would deposit them at his own bank until my return.'

"Presumably at this point the lady caught an expression on the face of the Inspector which displeased her, for she added with becoming dignity, 'I am engaged to be married to Captain Denver Shillington.'

"'My God!' Henry Buckley exclaimed at this point, and with a groan he buried his face in his hands.

"Mind you," the Old Man in the Corner proceeded, after a moment's pause, "the public had no information as to the exact words, and so on, that passed between Lady Angela, her brother Henry, and the officials of Scotland Yard. All that I am telling you, and what I am still about to tell you, came out bit by bit in the papers. Sensation-lovers were immensely interested in the case from the outset, because, although both public and police are familiar enough with the tragi-comedy of the good-looking young blackguard who gets confiding females to entrust him with their little bits of jewellery, this was the first time that the confidence trick had been played by a well-known man about town—reputed wealthy, since he had gone to the length of paying a friend's gambling debts—on a society lady who was not in her first youth and must presumably have had some knowledge of the world she lived in.

"Lady Angela had concluded her statements by saying that during the drive home in the car she took off her pearls and handed them to her fiancé, who slipped them into his pocket just as they were, although when presently the car drew up at her door she suggested running up to her room to get the case for them. The Captain, however, declared this to be unnecessary. What he said was, 'I will sleep with them under my pillow to-night, and to-morrow morning first thing I will take them round to the bank for you.' After this he said good-night. Lady Angela let herself into the house with her latchkey, and Captain Shillington then dismissed the car, saying that he would enjoy a bit of a walk as the rooms at Grosvenor Square had been so desperately hot.

"And it was at this point," the Old Man in the Corner now said with deliberate emphasis as he worked away at an exceptionally intricate knot in his beloved bit of string, "it was at this point that certain facts leaked out which lent to the whole case a sinister aspect.

"It appears that on the Saturday morning at break of day one of the

boats belonging to the Thames District Police found a grey Homburg hat floating under one of the old steamship landing stages and, stuck to one of the wooden piles close by, a man's silk scarf. There was no name inside the hat or any other clue as to the owner's identity, but both the scarf, which had once been white or light grey, and the hat were terribly soiled and torn, and both were stained with blood. The police had tried on the quiet to trace the owner of the hat and scarf but without success. After Lady Angela had told her story of the missing pearls, the things were shown to Miss Shillington, who at once identified the hat as belonging to her brother; the scarf, however, she knew nothing about.

"But this was not by any means all. It appears that for some reason which was never quite clear, Captain Shillington, after he said good-night to Lady Angela, altered his mind about the proposed walk. It may have started to rain, or he may not, after all, have liked the idea of walking about the streets at night with twenty-five thousand pounds' worth of pearls in his pocket. Be that as it may, he hailed a passing taxi and drove to Mexfield House. The driver came forward voluntarily in answer to an advertisement put in the papers by the police. He stated that he remembered the circumstance quite well because of what followed. He remembered taking up a fare outside Stanhope Gate and being ordered to drive to Mexfield House in Somerset Street. When he slowed down close to Mexfield House he noticed a man with his hands in his pockets lounging under the doorway of one of the houses close by. As far as he could see the man was in evening dress and wore a light overcoat. He had on a silk hat tilted right over his eyes so that only the lower part of his face was visible, and he had a white or pale grey scarf tied loosely round his neck. The chauffeur also noticed that he had a large white flower, probably a carnation, in his buttonhole. After the taxi-man had put down his fare he drove off, and as he did so he saw the man in the light overcoat step out from under the doorway, where he had been lounging, and turn in the direction of Mexfield House. What happened after that he didn't know, as he drove away without taking further notice, but the police were already in touch with another man who had been watching that night in Somerset Street, where a portion of the road was up for repair. This man, whose name, I think, was William Rugger, remembered quite distinctly seeing a 'swell' in a light overcoat and wearing a light-coloured scarf round his neck, loafing around Mexfield House. He

remembered the taxi drawing up and a gentleman getting out of it, whereupon the one in the light overcoat and the scarf went up to him and said, 'Hullo, Denver!' at which the other gent, the one who had come in the taxi, appeared very surprised, for Rugger heard him say, 'Good Lord, Henry, what are you doing here?'

"Rugger didn't hear any more because the gentleman in the light overcoat then took the other one by the arm and together the pair of them walked away down the street. When they had gone Rugger noticed a large white carnation lying on the pavement; he picked it up and subsequently took it home to his missis.

"You may imagine what a stir and excitement this story—which pretty soon leaked out in all its details—caused amongst the public. It seems that although neither the taxi-driver nor the man Rugger had seen the face of the man who had stepped out from under a neighbouring doorway and accosted Captain Shillington, they were both of them quite positive that he was in evening dress, and that he wore a silk hat, a light overcoat, and had a pale grey or white scarf wound round his neck. And besides that, there was the white carnation. But, of course, the crux of the whole evidence was Rugger's assertion that he heard one gentleman—the one who got out of the cab—say to the other in tones of great surprise, 'Good Lord, Henry, what are you doing here?' Questioned again and again he never wavered in this statement. He heard the name Henry quite distinctly and it stuck in his mind because his eldest boy was Henry. He was also asked whether the gentleman, who had stepped out of the taxi—obviously Captain Shillington, since the other had called to him, 'Hullo, Denver'—walked away reluctantly or willingly when he was thus summarily taken hold of by the arm. Rugger was under the impression that he walked away reluctantly; he freed his arm once, but the other got hold of him again, and, though Rugger did not catch the actual words, he certainly thought that the two gentlemen were quarrelling.

"And thus public opinion, which at first had been dead against the Australian Captain, now went equally dead against Henry Buckley. Ugly stories were current of his extravagance, his gambling debts, his addiction to drink. People who knew him remembered one or two ugly pages in his life's history: altercations with the police, raids on gambling clubs of which

he was a prominent member; there was even a fraudulent bankruptcy which had been the original cause of his being sent out to Australia by his harassed parents until the worst of the clouds had rolled by.

"The only thing that told in his favour, as far as the public was concerned, was the bitter vindictiveness displayed against him by Miss Shillington. That the girl had cause for bitterness was not to be denied. For a time, at any rate, public opinion had branded her brother as a common trickster and a thief, and she and her mother had no doubt suffered terribly under the stigma; in consequence of this, Mrs. Shillington's health, always in a precarious state, had completely broken down and the old lady had taken to her bed, not suffering from any particular disease, but just from debility of mind and body, obstinately refusing to see a doctor, declaring that nothing would cure her except the return of her son.

"And on the top of all that came the growing conviction that the son never would return and that he had been foully murdered for the sake of Lady Angela's pearls, which he so foolishly was carrying in his pocket that night. No wonder, then, that his sister Marion felt bitter against the people who were the original cause of all these disasters; no wonder that she threw herself heart and soul into the search for evidence against the man whom she sincerely believed to be guilty of a most hideous crime.

"It was mainly due to her that the police came on the track of William Rugger, the night-watchman, and through the latter that the driver of the taxi-cab was advertised for, because Rugger remembered seeing the gentleman alight from a taxi outside Mexfield House. But Miss Shillington's valuable assistance in the matter of investigation went even further than that. She at last prevailed upon the old man-servant at Mexfield House to come forward like a man and to speak the truth. He was a poor creature, not really old, probably not more than fifty, but timid and almost abject. He had at first declined to make any statement whatever, declaring that he had nothing to say. To every question put to him by the police, he gave the one answer, 'I saw nothing, sir, I 'eard nothing. I went to bed as usual on the Friday night. The Captain 'e never expected me to sit up for 'im when 'e was out to parties, and I never 'ear 'im come in, as I sleep at the top of the 'ouse. No, sir, I didn't 'ear nothing that night. The last I seed of the Captain was at nine o'clock, when 'e got into the car and said good-night to

me.' When he was shown the blood-stained hat, he burst out crying, and said, 'Yes, sir! Yes, sir! That is the Captain's 'at. My Lord! What 'as become of 'im?' He also failed to identify the scarf as being his master's property.

"Then one day Miss Shillington, still suffering from a cold in the head, but otherwise very business-like and brisk, arrived at Scotland Yard with the man—James Rose was his name—in tow. By what means she had persuaded him to speak the truth at last no one ever knew, but in a tremulous voice and shaken with nervousness, he did tell what he swore to be the truth. 'I must 'ave dropped to sleep in the dining-room,' he said. 'I was very tired that evening, and I remember after I 'ad cleared supper away I just felt as 'ow I couldn't stand on my legs any longer, and I sat down in an armchair and must 'ave dozed off. What woke me was the front-door bell which rings in the 'all as well as in the basement. I looked at the clock, it was past midnight. Captain forgot 'is key, that's what I thought. Lucky I 'adn't gone to bed, or I should never 'ave 'eard 'im. Funny 'is forgetting 'is key, I thought. Never done such a thing before, I thought, and went to open the door for 'im. But it wasn't the Captain,' Rose went on, his voice getting more and more husky as no doubt he realised the deadly importance of what he was about to say. 'No, it wasn't the Captain,' he reiterated, and shook his head in a doleful manner.

"'Who was it?' the Inspector demanded.

"'The young gentleman who sometimes came to the 'ouse,' Rose repeated under his breath. 'Mr. 'Enery Buckley it was, sir. Yes, Mr. 'Enery, that's 'oo it was.'

"'What did he say?' Rose was asked.

""E asked if the Captain was in, and I said no, not as I knew, but I would go and see. So up I went to the Captain's room and saw 'e wasn't there. Not yet. And I told Mr. 'Enery so when I came down again.'

"'Then what happened?'

"'Mr. 'Enery 'e told me that 'e wouldn't wait and that I was to tell the Captain 'e 'ad called, and that 'e would call again in 'arf an hour. I said that I was going to bed and I wouldn't probably see the Captain. 'E might be ever so late. Then Mr. 'Enery 'e just said, "Very good," and "Never mind," and

"Good-night, Rose," 'e said, and then I let 'im out.'

"'Well? And what happened after that?'

"'I don't know, sir,' the old man concluded. 'I went to bed and I never seed the Captain again, nor yet Mr. 'Enery—not from that day to this, sir. No, not again, sir.' And Rose once more shook his head in the same doleful manner. Of course the police were very down on him for keeping back this valuable piece of information, and they were even inclined to look with suspicion upon the man. They wanted to know something about his antecedents and why he seemed so frightened of facing the police authorities. Fortunately for him, however, Miss Shillington could give them all the information they wanted. She said that James Rose had been for years in the service of a Mrs. O'Shea, who was a great friend of Mrs. Shillington's. When Mrs. O'Shea died she left him a hundred pounds. But the poor thing had never been very strong, and he was nothing to look at, he couldn't get another place, and the hundred pounds vanished bit by bit. About a month ago Mrs. Shillington, who was requiring a man-servant, advertised for one in the *Daily Mail*. Rose answered the advertisement, and though the poor thing in the meanwhile had gone terribly downhill physically, Mrs. Shillington, remembering how honest and respectable he had always been when he was in Mrs. O'Shea's service, engaged him out of compassion and for the sake of old times. Miss Shillington gave him an excellent character and the police were satisfied.

"I think," the Old Man in the Corner said, amorously contemplating a marvellously intricate knot, which he had just made in his bit of string, "I think that the police were mainly satisfied because at last they felt that 'they had made out a case.' From that moment the detectives and inspectors in charge became absolutely convinced that Henry Buckley had enticed Captain Denver Shillington to some place of evil fame close to the river and there, in collusion probably with other disreputable characters, had robbed and murdered him. To say the least, the case looked black enough against Buckley. His fast living, his mountain of debt, the absence in him of moral rectitude as proved by his fraudulent bankruptcy, all told against him; and now it was definitely proved that he had sought out and actually been in the company of Captain Shillington the night that the latter disappeared. A light grey overcoat similar to the one described by Rugger and by the chauffeur

as worn by the gentleman who was loafing in Somerset Street was found to be a part of his wardrobe; no one could swear, however, as to the scarf, but it turned out that he never went out in the evening without wearing a large, white carnation in his button-hole.

"The fact that he had not stated from the beginning that he had called at Mexfield House that night, and subsequently met the missing man and walked away with him, naturally told terribly against him. Obviously the man lost his head. Questioned by the police, he tried at first to deny the whole thing: he declared that the man with the white carnation and the light-coloured scarf was some other man whose name happened to be Henry, and he tried to upset Rose's evidence by declaring that the man lied and that he had never called at Mexfield House that night. But, unfortunately for him, he had taken a taxi from his club to the house, the taxi-driver was found, and the noose was further tightened round the Honourable Henry Buckley's neck. In vain did he assert after that that Denver Shillington had told him to call at Mexfield House at a quarter-past midnight on that fatal Friday. He was no longer believed. He admitted that he was in financial difficulties, and that he had spoken about these to Captain Shillington earlier in the evening. He admitted, tardily enough, that he went to Mexfield House hoping that Denver would give him some money in order to wipe out his most pressing debts. When he found that the Captain had not yet come home, he left a message with the man-servant and thought he would go on to the club for a little while and return later to see Shillington. Unfortunately, he drank rather heavily whilst he was at the club and never thought any more either about his money worries or about the Captain. In fact, he remembered nothing very clearly beyond the fact that he went home, in the small hours and went straight to bed.

"He then went on to say that he woke up the next morning with a splitting headache. It was pouring with rain and London was looking particularly beastly, as he picturesquely termed it. He recollected that his sister Angela had planned to go down with old Square-toes to some friends near Newmarket for the weekend. He, too, had been asked but had declined the invitation, but now he began to wish he hadn't; while he was out of town money-lenders couldn't dun him, and a breath of country air would certainly do him good.

"And he was just cogitating over these matters at eight a.m. on that Saturday morning, when his sister Angela came into his room. 'She told me,' he went on, 'that old Square-toes was unable to accompany her to these friends in Cambridgeshire, that she didn't want to go alone, and would I hire a car and drive her down. She offered to pay for the car, and, as the scheme happened to suit me, I agreed. We drove down to Tatchford, and on the Tuesday I had an unpleasant reminder from one of my creditors and thought that I must get back to see what old Square-toes would do for me. I got home that same evening, and the next morning early Miss Shillington rang up and told me over the 'phone that they had heard nothing of Captain Shillington since the previous Friday and that they were getting anxious. And that's all I know,' he concluded. 'I swear that I never set eyes on Shillington after he drove off from the Duchess of Flint's, with my sister in his car. I did call at Mexfield House, but it was at Shillington's suggestion, but when the man told me that the Captain was not yet home, I did not loaf about the street, I went straight back to the club and then home.'

"Of course all this was very clear and very categorical, but there were one or two doubtful points in Buckley's statements, which the police—dead out now to prove him guilty of murder—made the most of. Firstly, there was his former denial on oath that he had not called at Mexfield House that night. It was only when he was confronted with the testimony of the taxi-cab driver that he made the admission. The employees at his club, which, by the way, was in Hanover Square, had seen him come in at about half-past eleven. He went out again twenty minutes later and the hall porter saw him hail a taxi-cab. He was once more in the club at half-past twelve, and it is a significant fact that two of the younger members chaffed him subsequently because he had not the usual white carnation in his button-hole.

"Then again it was more than strange that on the Friday he was so worried about his debts that he went in the middle of the night to his friend's house in order to try and borrow money from him, and yet when, according to his own statements, he never even saw his friend, off he went the very next morning to the country, stayed away four days, and on his return did not make any attempt seemingly to see the Captain or to ask him for money. Thirdly, it was equally inconceivable that Captain Shillington should have appointed to see Buckley at that hour of the night, however pressed the latter might have been for money. Why should he? The next morning would

have done just as well, whether he meant to help him or whether he did not, and, according to the testimony of the night-watchman, William Rugger, when he was accosted by Buckley, he exclaimed in tones of great surprise, 'Good Lord, Henry, what are you doing here?' These are not words which a man would say to a friend whom he had appointed to meet at this very hour.

"However, this portion of the taxi-driver's and Rugger's testimony Buckley still strenuously denied. He could not deny the other. He had called at Mexfield House and reluctantly admitted that it had been nothing but 'blue funk' that had prompted him at first to hold his tongue about that and then to deny the fact altogether.

"But, above all, there was yet another fact which to the police was more conclusive, more damning than any other and that was that on the Wednesday morning the Honourable Henry Buckley had called at Messrs. Foster and Turnbull, the well-known pawnbrokers of Oxford Street, and had pledged a pair of diamond ear-rings and a couple of valuable bracelets there for which he received three hundred and fifty pounds.

"Here again, if Buckley had volunteered this statement, all might have been well, but it was the pawnbrokers who gave information to the police. It turned out that the ear-rings and the two bracelets were the property of his sister, Lady Angela. Buckley declared that she had given them to him, and she, very nobly, did her best to corroborate this statement of his, but it had become impossible to believe a word he said. Lady Angela's valiant efforts on his behalf were thought to be unconvincing, and, as a matter of fact, the public has never known from that day to this whether Henry Buckley stole his sister's jewellery, or whether she gave it to him voluntarily.

§3

"Mind you, there can be no question but that the police acted very injudiciously when they actually preferred a charge of murder against Henry Buckley. There were two such damning flaws in the chain of evidence that had been collected against him that the man ought never to have been arrested. Even the magistrate was of that opinion. As you know, if there is the slightest doubt about such a serious charge, the magistrates will always commit a man for trial and let a jury of twelve men pronounce on the final issue rather than decide such grave matters on their own. But in

this case there were really no proofs. There were deductions: the accused was a young blackguard, a moral coward and a liar. There was the blood-stained scarf, the hat and the white carnation, there was the testimony of the taxi-driver and the night watchman that Henry Buckley had been in the company of Captain Shillington that night, but there was no proof that he had murdered his friend and stolen the pearls.

"To begin with, if there had been a murder, where was it committed, and what became of Captain Shillington's body? Of course, the police still hope to find traces of it, but, as you know, they have not yet succeeded. Various theories are put forward that Henry Buckley was a member of a gang of ruffians with headquarters in some obscure corner of London close to the river, and that he enticed the Captain there and murdered him with the help of his criminal associates with whom he probably shared the proceeds of the crime. But over a year has gone by since Shillington disappeared and the police are no nearer finding the body of the missing man.

"The magistrate dismissed the case against Henry Buckley. There was not sufficient evidence to commit him for trial. What told most in his favour in the end was the question of time. He was able to prove that he was at his club in Hanover Square at half-past midnight on the fateful night. Now, according to James Rose's testimony, it was after midnight when he, Buckley, called at Mexfield House. Even supposing that Shillington had arrived in the taxi five minutes later, it was inconceivable that a man could entice another to an out-of-the-way part of London, murder him—even if he left others to dispose of the body—and walk back unconcernedly to Hanover Square, all in less than half an hour. Nor were the pearls or any large sum of money ever traced to Henry Buckley. He was just as deeply in debt after the disappearance of Captain Shillington as he had been before. Now he has gone on another tour round the world, and the Shillingtons—mother and daughter—have given up all hopes of ever seeing the gallant Captain, who was such a model son, again. A little while ago the illustrated papers published photos of the two ladies on board a P. and O. steamer bound for Australia, but the public had forgotten all about Lady Angela's pearls and the mysterious white carnation. No one was interested in the old lady with the white hair and stooping figure, who was carried on board in a chair, and who obstinately refused to be interviewed by newspaper men eager for copy. The case is relegated, as far as the public is concerned, to

the category of undiscovered crimes."

"But," I argued, as the Old Man in the Corner became silent, absorbed in the untying of an intricate knot which he had made a little while ago, "surely the police have found out who the man was who accosted Captain Shillington in Somerset Street that night, the man with the light-coloured scarf, which was subsequently found in the river by the side of the missing man's hat, the man who called the Captain 'Denver,' and whom the latter called 'Henry,' and was so surprised to see. If it was not Henry Buckley, who was it?"

"Ah!" the exasperating creature retorted with a fatuous smile, "who was it? That's just the point—a point just as dark as that a man like Captain Shillington could be enticed at that hour of the night to an out-of-the-way part of London, and at a moment when he had his fiancée's jewellery worth twenty-five thousand pounds in his pocket. Don't you think that *that* point is absolutely inconceivable?"

"Well," I said, "it does seem——"

"Of course it does," he broke in eagerly. "I ask you: Is it likely? At one moment we are told that Captain Shillington was a pattern of all the virtues and that his business acumen and abilities had earned for him not only a fortune but the admiration of all those who knew him; and the very next we are asked to suppose that he would meekly allow a young blackguard, whom he knew to be dishonest and unscrupulous, to drag him 'reluctantly' to some obscure haunt of a gang of criminals. Surely that should have jumped to the eyes of any sane person who had studied the case."

"I don't suppose," I retorted, "that Captain Shillington allowed Buckley to drag him very far. Most people believed at the time that he was attacked directly he rounded the corner of Somerset Street. There are one or two entrances to mews just about there——"

"Yes," the funny creature rejoined excitedly, "but not one nearer than fifty yards from Mexfield House. And do you think that the immaculate Australian would have walked ten at night with young Buckley and with those pearls in his pocket? Why should he? He was outside his own door. Wouldn't he have taken Henry into the house with him if he wished to speak to him? No! No! The whole theory is inconceivable...."

"But Captain Shillington disappeared," I argued, "and so did the pearls, and his hat was found floating in the river, torn and blood-stained. You cannot deny that."

"I certainly cannot deny," he replied, "that a blood-stained hat will float on the water if it is thrown—say, from a convenient bridge."

"But the scarf?" I retorted.

"A scarf will obey the same laws of Nature as a hat."

"But surely you are not going to tell me——?"

"What?"

"That the whole thing was a confidence trick, after all?"

"I am certain that it was. A clever one, I'll admit, and even I was puzzled at the time. I couldn't think who 'Henry' could possibly be. It wasn't young Buckley, that was obvious. The alibi was conclusive as to that: the miscreants who had planned to throw dust in the eyes of the police by trying to fasten a hideous crime on that unfortunate young Buckley set their stage rather too elaborately when they devised the trick about the scarf. By identifying the murderer with the wearer of the scarf, they saved Buckley from the gallows; without it, there might have remained some doubt in the mind of some of the jury. But, of course, it raised a tremendous puzzle. Who was the 'Henry' of Somerset Street? And was it not a curious coincidence that he should be wearing an overcoat similar to the one habitually worn by Henry Buckley and a white carnation, which many friends would at once associate with that unfortunate young man? From the examination of the puzzle to its solution was but a step. I came at once to the conclusion that here was no coincidence, but a deliberate attempt to impersonate Henry Buckley, the man most likely in the eyes of the public to waylay, rob, and even murder a man whom he knew to be in possession of valuable jewellery. Such a deliberate attempt, therefore, argued that Captain Shillington himself must have been in it. 'Good Lord, Henry, what in the world are you doing here?' was obviously intended for any passer-by to hear in the same way that the white carnation was intended for any chance passer-by to pick up. Having established the *mise en scène*, the two scoundrels walked off, having previously provided themselves with a

blood-stained hat, which presently Miss Shillington would identify as the property of her brother."

"Miss Shillington?" I broke in eagerly, "then you think that the whole Australian family was in the conspiracy? And what about the man Rose?"

"The whole family," he rejoined, "only consisted of two. Man and wife most likely."

"But the man Rose?" I insisted.

"An excellent part, alternately played with remarkable skill by the Captain and his female accomplice."

"Do reconstruct the whole thing for me," I pleaded. "I own that I am bewildered."

And from my bag I extracted a brand-new piece of string which I handed to him with an engaging smile. Nothing could have pleased the fatuous creature more. With long, claw-like fingers twiddling the string, he began leisurely:

"Nothing could be more simple. Captain Shillington takes leave of his fiancée, having her pearls in his pocket. It is then about half-past eleven. Henry Buckley has gone to his club, Shillington having appointed to see him at Mexfield House soon after midnight. There is, therefore, plenty of time. Shillington hurries home, changes his personality into that of James Rose, as he often has done before, and subsequently interviews Henry Buckley on the door-step. You can see that, can't you?"

"Easily," I replied.

"Then as soon as he has got rid of Buckley, our friend the Captain quits the personality of a snuffy, middle-aged man-servant, and becomes himself once more. He goes back to the neighbourhood of Mayfair, hails a taxi and drives to Mexfield House. But in the meanwhile the female confederate—we'll call her Miss Shillington for convenience' sake—in male attire and evening dress, wearing a light overcoat, a light-coloured scarf and a white carnation in her button-hole, lounges under a doorway in Somerset Street, waiting to play her part. Now do you see how simple it all is?"

"Perfectly," I admitted. "As you said before, they had provided themselves with a blood-stained hat, which presently they threw into the river, together with the scarf; and what happened after that?"

"They walked home quietly and went to bed."

"What? Both of them? ... But the mother?"

"I don't believe in the mother," he retorted blandly. "Do you?"

"I thought——"

"She takes to her bed—she never sees a doctor—she and her daughter never see any one—they have no friends—no servants save the man Rose; put two and two together, my dear," the funny old man concluded as he slipped the piece of string in his pocket. "Captain Shillington was the only one in that house who ever went outside the doors. The mother never did—no one ever saw her—the daughter had a perpetual cold in the head—the man Rose had no one to speak for him, no one to relate his past history, except Miss Shillington. Where is he now? What has become of him? There's nobody to enquire after him, so the police don't trouble. The two Shillingtons—supposed to be mother and daughter—went back to Australia last year, but not the man Rose. Then where is he? But I say that the two passengers on board that P. and O. boat were not mother and daughter, but male and female confederates in as fine a bit of rascality as I've ever seen. And the man Rose never existed. He was just a disguise assumed from time to time by Captain Shillington. It is not difficult, you know, to assume a personality of that sort. The police inspectors who questioned him had never seen Captain Shillington, and dirt and shabby clothes are very perfect disguises. Now the pair of them are knocking about the world somewhere, they will dispose of the pearls to Continental dealers not over scrupulous where a good bargain can be struck. If you will just think of Captain Shillington impersonating James Rose and a decrepit old woman alternately, and of Miss Shillington impersonating Henry Buckley on that one occasion, you will see how conclusive are my deductions. I have a snapshot here of the two Australian 'ladies,' taken on board the boat. This muffled-up bundle of bonnet and shawl is supposed to be Mrs. Shillington; it might as well be M. Poincaré or the Kaiser, don't you think? And here is a snapshot of James Rose giving evidence in the magistrate's court.

Unfortunately, I have no photo of Captain Shillington, or I could have shown you just how to trace the personality of the handsome young man about town under that of this snuffy, dirty, ill-kempt, unwashed, and badly clothed, stooping figure of an out-at-elbows servant."

He threw a bundle of newspaper cuttings down on the table. I gazed at them still puzzled, but nevertheless convinced that he was right. When I looked up again, I only saw a corner of his shabby checked ulster disappearing through the swing doors.

X
THE MYSTERY OF THE MONTMARTRE HAT

§1

"It was during a foggy, rainy night in November a couple of years ago," the Old Man in the Corner said to me that day, "that the inhabitants of Wicklow Lane, Southwark, were startled by a terrible row proceeding from one of the houses down the street. There was a lot of shouting and banging, then a couple of pistol-shots, after that nothing more. It was then just after midnight. The dwellers in Wicklow Lane are all of them poor, they are all of them worried with the cares of large families, small accommodation, and irregular work, all of which we must take it make for indifference to other people's worries, and above all, to other people's quarrels. Rows were not an unknown occurrence in Wicklow Lane, not always perhaps at dead of night and not necessarily accompanied by pistol-shots, but nevertheless sufficiently frequent not to arouse more than passing interest. Half-a-dozen tousled heads—no more—were thrust out of the windows to ascertain what this particular row was about; but as everything was quiet again, as no police was in sight to whom one might give directions, and as the mixture of rain and fog was particularly unpleasant, the tousled heads after a few minutes disappeared again, and once more peace reigned in Wicklow Lane.

"Of course the next morning the event of the night was mentioned and mildly discussed, both by the men whilst going to their work and by the ladies whilst scrubbing their doorsteps. Every one agreed that the pistol-shots were fired soon after midnight, but no one seemed to be very clear in which particular house the row had occurred. Two or three of the people who lived in No. 11 and No. 15 respectively would have it that it occurred 'next door,' but as the house next door to them both could only be the one between them, namely No. 13, and as No. 13 had been empty for months, this testimony was at first strongly discounted.

"Presently, however, a helmeted and blue-coated representative of the law came striding leisurely down the lane. Within a minute or two he was surrounded by a number of excited ladies, all eager to give him their own version of the affair. You can see him, can't you?" the Old Man in the

Corner went on with a grin, "stalking up the street, his thumbs thrust into his belt, his face wearing that marvellous look of impassivity peculiar to the force, and followed by this retinue of gesticulating ladies, dressed in what they happened to have picked up in neighboring 'ole clo" shops, and by a sprinkling of callow youths and unkempt, unshaven men. You can see him solemnly plying the knocker on the dilapidated front door of No. 13, while for the space of a minute or two the gesticulating ladies, the youths, and the men were silent and motionless. But not a sound came in response to the Bobby's vigorous knocking. The house was silent as the grave; just above the front door a weather-worn board, swaying and creaking in the wind, mutely gave it out that the lease of these desirable premises was to be sold, and that the key could be had on application to Messrs. J D. Whiskin and Sons, of Newnham Road, S.E. The ladies, with cheeks blanched under the grime, looked aghast at one another; the youths tittered nervously, the men swore. No one appeared altogether displeased. Here was a real excitement at last to vary the monotony of life, something that would keep gossip alive at the White Lion for many a day to come. The majestic representative of the law then blew his whistle. This broke the spell of silence and voluble tongues started wagging again. Soon the second representative of the law appeared, as ponderous, as impassive as his mate. He was quickly put in possession of all the known and unknown facts connected with the mysterious occurrence. Leaving his mate in charge, he stalked off to get assistance.

"Well, you remember no doubt what happened after that. A police inspector called straightway on Messrs. Whiskin and Sons, and elicited from them the information that effectively No. 13 Wicklow Lane was for sale, had been for some time, and that on the previous morning—it was, of course, Thursday—a well-dressed gentleman had called to make enquiries about the house. Young Mr. Whiskin gave him the key and asked him to be sure and return it before 1 p.m. as the office closed early on Thursdays. Well, the gentleman hadn't come back yet with the key, but Mr. Whiskin was not troubling much about that, there being nothing in the house—nor for a matter of that in the street—likely to tempt a thief. Young Mr. Whiskin thought that he would be able to identify the gentleman if he saw him again. He had rather a red face and a thick nose, which suggested that he was accustomed to good living, rough ginger-coloured hair, and a straggly

ginger beard and walrus moustache, all of which gave him rather a peculiar appearance. He wore a neat brown lounge-suit, a light overcoat, and grey Homburg hat, and he was carrying a large parcel under his arm. Mr. Whiskin added that he had never seen the man before or since.

"As soon as these facts became known there was more voluntary information forthcoming. It appears that one or two of the residents in Wicklow Lane remembered seeing a man in light overcoat and soft grey hat, and carrying a parcel under his arm, enter No. 13 with a latchkey. No one had taken 'pertikler notice,' however, chiefly because the occurrence was not an unusual one. Often people would go in to look at the empty house and come out again after inspection. Unfortunately, too, because of this there was distinct confusion of evidence, some witnesses declaring that the man carried a large parcel, and that he went away again, but not until the evening; others would have it that he had a very small parcel, and that he wore a bowler hat; others that the man with the bowler hat was another person altogether, and did not call till the evening, whilst this, again, was contradicted by another witness who said that the man who called in the evening had very conspicuous ginger-coloured hair and beard, but that he certainly wore a bowler hat. And through this mass of conflicting evidence there was always the fact that the fog was very thick that night and that no one therefore was able to swear very positively to anything.

"This, then, being all the information that could be gathered for the moment from the outside, the police next decided to force an entry into the empty house. Its unlucky number justified, as you know, its sinister reputation, because the first sight that greeted the inspector when he entered the front room on the ground floor was the body of a man lying in a pool of blood. At first glance he looked like a foreigner—youngish, and with jet-black hair and moustache. By the side of him there was a damp towel, also stained with blood. Closer examination revealed the fact that he was not dead, but he seemed in a dead faint, and the inspector sent one of the men off at once to telephone for the divisional surgeon.

"The wounded man was dressed in a dark suit. He had on a gold watch of foreign make, twenty pounds in notes, and some loose silver in his pockets, and a letter addressed to 'Allen Lloyd, Esq.' at an hotel at Boulogne. The letter was a private one, relating unimportant family events;

it was signed by a Christian name only, and bore a London postmark, but no address. The police inspector took charge of the letters and the money, and as the divisional surgeon had now arrived and was busy with the wounded man, he proceeded to examine the premises.

"The houses in Wicklow Lane all have small yards at the back. These yards end in a brick wall, the other side of which there is a railway cutting. It was obvious that No. 13 had been untenanted for some time. The dust of ages lay over window and door-frames, over broken mantelpieces and dilapidated stoves. There was not a stick of anything anywhere; even the rubbish in the basement—such as is found in every empty house, residue left over by the last tenant—had been picked over until there was nothing left but dust and a few empty bottles.

"The front room in which the wounded man lay revealed very little. Two bullets were found lodged in one of the walls; one, quite close to the ceiling, suggesting that it had been fired in the air, and the other at a height of seven feet from the ground. The dust on the floor had certainly been disturbed, but by how many pairs of feet it was impossible to say. On the other hand, the back room on the same floor had quite a grim tale to tell. It gave on the small backyard with the wall as a background, beyond which was the railway cutting. The window in this room was open. In one corner there was an ordinary sink which showed that water had been running from the tap quite recently; there was a small piece of soap in the sink which had also recently been used. On the mantelpiece a small oak-framed mirror was propped up against the wall and beside it on the shelf there was the remnant of a burnt-out candle and a box of matches, half empty. And thrown down on the floor, in a corner of the room, were a black Inverness cape and soft black hat with a very wide brim, such as are usually affected by French students.

"It was, of course, difficult to reconstruct the assault just at present, the wounded man being still in a state of stupor and unable to give any account of himself, but the revolver was found lying at the bottom of the yard close to the end wall.

"In the meanwhile the divisional surgeon had concluded his examination. He pronounced the wound to have been caused by one of the bullets that had lodged in the wall of the front room. It had been fired at

very close range, as the flesh was singed all round the wound. The bullet had gone right through the left deltoid, front to back, and slightly upwards, just grazed the top of the shoulder, and then lodged in the wall. The surgeon was inclined to think that the wound was self-inflicted, but this theory was thought to be untenable, because if a man was such an obviously poor shot he would surely have chosen some other way of putting an end to himself, unless, indeed, he was a lunatic, which might account for any incongruity in the known facts, even to the noise—the shouting and the banging—that all the neighbours agreed had preceded the revolver shots.

"But there certainly was one fact which discounted the attempted suicide theory, and that was the undoubted presence of another man upon the scene—the man with the ginger hair and the thick nose who had called for the key at Messrs. Whiskin and Sons, and whom several witnesses had actually seen entering the empty house, the man with the parcel. Now no one saw him come out again by the front door. He must have been in the house when the foreigner with the jet-black hair came and joined him, and he must have slipped out later on in the dark, under cover of the fog and rain, either by the front door when nobody happened to be passing by, or over the wall and then by the railway cutting. Now what had brought these two men together in an empty house, in one of the worst slums in London? One man was wounded; where was the other? Had the revolver been dropped by one of them in his flight or flung out of the window by a lunatic? Was it attempted suicide by a madman, or murder consequent on a quarrel, or blackmail? None of these questions was ever answered, nor was the man with the ginger-coloured hair ever found. There was absolutely no clue by which he might be traced; the earth just swallowed him up as if he had been a spook.

"Nor was the identity of the wounded man ever satisfactorily established. Who he was, where he came from, who were his associates and what were his antecedents, he never revealed. He was detained in hospital for a time, as he certainly was suffering from loss of memory. But presently they had to let him go. He had money and he was otherwise perfectly sane, but to every question put to him he only answered, 'I don't know! I can't remember!' He spoke English without the slightest trace of foreign accent; all that was foreign about him was his jet-black hair and beard. Nor was the history of the revolver ever traced to its source. Where was it bought? To

whom was it sold, and by whom? Nobody ever knew."

"But where did the man go after he left the hospital?" I now asked, seeing that the funny creature looked like curling himself up in his corner and going to sleep. "Surely he was kept under observation when they let him out!"

"Of course he was," he replied glibly, "and for some time after that."

"Then where did he go," I reiterated, impatiently, "when he was discharged from hospital?"

"He asked the way to the nearest public library and went straight there; he looked down the columns of the *Morning Post*, scribbled a few addresses on a scrap of paper, then he took a taxi and drove to one of the private hotels in Mexborough Gate, where he engaged a room, paying a fortnight's board and lodging in advance. Here he lived for some considerable time. He was always plentifully supplied with money, he bought himself clothes and linen, but where he got the money from was never discovered. For a time he was watched both by the police and by amateur detectives eager for copy, but nothing was ever discovered that would clear up the mystery. From time to time letters came for him at the hotel in Mexborough Gate. They were addressed to 'Allen Lloyd, Esq.' which may or may not have been a taken-up name. Presumably these letters contained remittances in cash. They were never traced to their source. Anyway he always paid his weekly bills at the hotel; but he never spoke to any one in the place, nor, as far as could be ascertained, did he ever meet any one or enter any house except the one he lodged in.

"Then one fine day he left the hotel, never to return. He went out one afternoon and nothing has been seen or heard of him from that day to this. The mysterious Mr. Allen Lloyd has disappeared in the whirlpool of London, leaving no trace of his identity. He had paid his bill at the hotel that very day. He left no debts and just a very few personal belongings behind. To all intents and purposes the matter was relegated in the public mind to the category of unsolved and unsolvable mysteries."

§2

The Old Man in the Corner had paused. From the capacious pocket of

his tweed ulster he now extracted a thick piece of string; his claw-like fingers set to work. The problem which police and public had never been able to solve had, I had no doubt, presented few difficulties to his agile brain.

"Tell me," I suggested.

He went on working away for a little while at an intricate knot, then he said, "If you want to know more, you will have to listen to what will seem to you an irrelevant story."

I professed my willingness to listen to anything he might choose to tell me.

"Very well, then," he said. "Let me take your mind back to that same winter two years ago. Do you remember the extraordinary theft of a valuable collection of gems, the property of Sir James Narford?"

"I do."

"Do you know who Sir James Narford was?"

"I would prefer you to tell me," I replied.

"Sir James Narford," the funny creature went on glibly, "was a young gentleman who had been employed during the war in one of the Government departments; he was the only son of his father who was an impoverished Irish baronet. Soon after the Armistice, Sir James went to South America to visit some relations. He must have made a very favourable impression on one of these—an eccentric old cousin who died a very few months later and left to his English relative a marvellous collection of pearls and other gems. Some of these were of priceless value, and as is the way with anything that is out of the common, all sorts of stories grew around the romantic legacy. The great worth and marvellous beauty of the jewels were told and retold, with many embellishments no doubt, in the English papers. It was asserted that the Brazilian Government had valued them for probate at a million pounds sterling; that there were diamonds—some still uncut—that would make the Koh-i-noor or the Orloff look like small bits of glass, and so on. I daresay you can remember some of the legends that gathered around Sir James Narford's gems. By the time

the lucky owner of the fabulous treasure, who had gone out again to Brazil in order to fetch away his jewels, had returned to England, he was the object of universal interest and he and his gems were photographed and paragraphed all over the place.

"But as I told you, the recipient of this princely legacy had always been a poor man. We may take it that the payment of legacy duty on forty thousand pounds' worth of gems had impoverished him still further. Busybodies, of course, tried to persuade him to sell the gems; he had numberless letters from diamond and pearl merchants, asking for permission to see them with a view to purchase, but, naturally enough, he didn't want to do anything in a hurry; he deposited his treasure at the bank and then thought things over. He didn't want to sell, for he was inordinately proud of his new possession and of the notoriety which it had conferred upon him. It was even rumoured that he had received more than one hint from fair lips that if he proposed marriage, the owner of such beautiful jewels would be certain of acceptance.

"I don't know who first suggested the idea to Sir James Narford that he should exhibit the gems for the benefit of disabled soldiers and sailors. It was a splendid idea; 2s. 6d. was to be charged for admission, and after deducting expenses of rent and attendants, the profits were to go to that very laudable charity. Suitable premises were secured in Sackville Street. These consisted of a shop with a large plate-glass front and a small room at the back; the entrance was through a front door and passage, which were common to the rest of the house, and there were two doors in the passage, one of which gave into the shop, and the other into the back room. Sir James spent a little money in getting up the place in modern style, and he had some cases made for the display of the gems. The door which gave from the passage into the shop was condemned, and a heavy piece of furniture placed against it. The back room was only to be used as an office and ante-room with communicating doors leading into the shop.

"In the daytime the gems were displayed in glass cases ranged right and left of the shop; at night they were locked up in a safe which stood in the middle of the shop, facing the plate-glass window and with a blazing electric light kept on all night, just above the safe. This is a very usual device with jewellers in a smaller way of business. The policeman on night

duty can see at once if there is anything wrong.

"Everything being ready, Sir James Narford asked a distinguished lady friend of his to declare the show open, and for the first fortnight—this, I must tell you, was in October—there was a steady stream of visitors, ladies for the most part, who came to gaze on the much-advertised gems. You might wonder what pleasure there could be in looking at things one could never hope to possess, especially at loose gems, however precious, which, to my mind, only become beautiful when they are mounted and set in artistic designs. However, I do not profess to understand feminine mentality; all I know is that Sir James Narford declared himself on more than one occasion satisfied with the result of his little venture. True that after the first fortnight the attendance at the show fell off considerably, and a few people did wonder why Sir James should continue to keep it open for so long. Those who had been most curious to see the gems of fabulous value had flocked in the first few days, after that there was only a very thin sprinkling of people up from the country, or foreigners, who paid their 2s. 6d. admission for the sight. But be that as it may, the jewels were certainly getting an additional amount of advertisement, and when presently the owner would put them for sale, as no doubt he intended to do, they would fetch a higher figure in consequence. In the meanwhile Sir James went on living very quietly in a small service flat in George Street, waited on by a faithful servant, a man named Ruggles, whom he had known for years. Every day he would stroll round to Sackville Street to look at his treasure and to talk to one or two friends. At six o'clock the exhibition would be closed, and Sir James would himself deposit all the gems into the safe, lock up the premises, and take the keys back with him to his flat. He went out very little in society, and only occasionally to his club. His one extravagance appeared to be a mania for travelling in all sorts of out-of-the-way places; he had been seemingly in every corner of Europe—in Czecho-Slovakia and Yugoslavia, in Montenegro, Bosnia, and Bessarabia. Before this whenever he went off on his travels he would take his man with him and shut up the flat, but on the occasion which presently arose he left Ruggles in charge of the exhibition in Sackville Street. This was early in November, about a fortnight after the opening of the exhibition; and when Sir James had gone it was Ruggles who every night at six o'clock put the gems away in the safe and locked up the premises. He then made a point of

going for a brisk walk, and returned to the flat at about half-past seven, had his supper, read his paper, and then went to bed at about ten o'clock with the keys of the safe and of the Sackville Street premises underneath his pillow.

"One of the staff in the flats at George Street always got his supper ready for him—some cold meat, bread and cheese, and half a pint of beer, which the lift-boy invariably fetched for him from the Crown and Sceptre round the corner. He prepared his own breakfast in the morning, and his other meals he took in Sackville Street. They were sent in from one of the cheaper restaurants in Piccadilly.

"Every morning the charwoman who cleaned the steps outside the block of flats in George Street would see Ruggles come out of the house and walk away in the direction of Sackville Street. Even on Sundays he would stroll round as far as the shop to see that everything was all right.

"It was on a snowy morning in January that the charwoman failed to see Ruggles at his accustomed time. As the quiet neighbourhood did not as a rule lend itself much to gossip, the present opportunity was not to be missed. The charwoman, on meeting with the lift-boy, imparted to him the priceless news that Mr. Ruggles must either be ill or had gone and overslept himself. Whereupon the lift-boy was ready with the startling information that he had just observed that one of the glass panels in the front door of Sir James Narford's flat was broken. 'The glass wasn't broke in the evening, ten-thirty,' he went on to say, 'when I took a party down who'd been visitin' Miss Jenkins.'

"It seems that Miss Jenkins was maid to a lady who had a flat on the same floor as Sir James Narford. But there was the length of a passage with staircase and lift between the two flats, and neither the lady nor the maid, when spoken to by the lift-boy about the broken glass panel, had heard anything during the night. Now all this seemed very strange, more especially as the morning hours wore on and there was still no sign of Mr. Ruggles. The lift-boy was kept busy for the next hour taking the staff of the service flats up and down in his lift, as every one wished to have a look at the broken panel, and wanted to add their quota of opinion as to what had gone on last night in Sir James Narford's flat. At ten o'clock the housekeeper, more responsible or more enterprising than the rest of the staff, resolved to knock at the flat door. No answer came. She then tried to

peep through the broken glass panel, and to apply her ear to it. For a time all was silence. The charwoman, the lift-boy, the scullery-maid, and the head housemaid stood by on the landing, holding their breath. Suddenly they all gave a simultaneous gasp! A groan—distinctly a groan—was heard issuing from inside the flat! The group of watchers looked at one another in dismay. 'What's to be done?' they murmured.

"The lift-boy had the key of the flat, but as the front door was bolted on the inside, the key in itself was no use. The housekeeper with the air of a general in command about to order a deathly charge, said resolutely, 'I shall force my way in!' And it was the lift-boy who gasped, awe-stricken, 'You kin put your 'and through the broken panel, mum, and pull the bolt.'

"Somehow this bright idea which had occurred to the lift-boy made every one there feel still more uncomfortable. The housekeeper, who had been so bold a while ago, stammered something about fetching the police, and when at that precise moment the lift-bell rang, the head housemaid declared herself ready to faint. But it was only Sir James Narford who had rung for the lift from below. He had arrived by the night mail from Paris, and had only his small suit-case with him. The lift-boy had the satisfaction of being the first to impart the exciting news to him. "E took it badly, 'e did!' was that young gentleman's comment on Sir James's reception of the news. Without taking the slightest notice of the group of excited women on the landing, Sir James went straight to his front door, thrust his hand through the broken panel, drew back the inside bolt, and stepped into his flat. The next moment the agitated crowd on the landing heard him cry out, 'My God, Ruggles, what has happened?' A feeble voice which was scarcely recognisable as that of Ruggles was then heard talking in short, jerky sentences, and a few moments later Sir James's voice could be distinctly heard speaking on the telephone.

"'He is telephoning for the police,' the housekeeper solemnly announced to the staff.

"Well," the Old Man in the Corner continued after a while, "let me shorten my tale by telling you briefly the story which Ruggles told the police. It did not amount to a great deal, but such as it was it revealed a degree of cunning and of daring in the ways of burglary that have seldom been equalled. Ruggles, it seems, had as usual put away the gems in the safe

and locked up the premises in Sackville Street and then walked home to the flat, very glad, he declared, that his responsibility would cease before another day went by, as he expected Sir James home from abroad the following morning. He had his supper as usual, but when he settled down to read his paper, he felt so sleepy that he just went and bolted the front door, placed the keys underneath his pillow, and went straight to bed. He remembered nothing more until he felt himself roughly shaken and heard his master's voice calling to him. It took him some time to collect himself; he felt dazed and his head ached terribly. When Sir James told him that it was past ten o'clock he could not conceive how he could have overslept himself in this way. Through force of habit he put his hand under his pillow to grope for the keys. They had gone! Then Sir James telephoned to the police. That was all that Ruggles could say. His condition was pitiable; alternately bemoaning his fate and cursing himself for a fool, he knelt at his master's feet and with hands clasped begged for forgiveness.

"'I'd have done anything in the world for Sir James,' he kept reiterating to the police officer, 'and 'ere I've been the ruin of 'im, just through over-sleepin'.'

"The police inspector got quite impatient with him, and at one time, I think, he thought that the man was acting a part. But Sir James Narford himself indignantly repudiated any suggestion of the sort. 'I would trust Ruggles,' he said emphatically, 'as I would myself. I have known him for thirty years, and he was in my father's service before that. I trust him with my keys, with money, with everything. He would have plenty of opportunity to rob me comfortably if he had a mind. What would a man of his class do with valuable gems?'

"All the same I fancy that the police did not altogether lose sight of the possibility that Ruggles might know something about the affair, but in spite of very clever questioning and cross-questioning, his story never varied even in the minutest detail. All that he added to his original statement that was of any value was the description of a foreign visitor at Sackville Street whom, in his own words, he 'didn't like the looks of.' This was a youngish man, with very sallow complexion, jet-black hair and moustache, and wearing a peculiar-looking caped overcoat and black soft hat with a very wide brim, who had remained over half an hour in the shop, apparently

deeply interested in the gems. At one time he asked Ruggles whether he might have the glass cases opened, so that he could examine the stones and pearls more closely. This request Ruggles very naturally refused. The young man then put a lot of questions to him: 'Where did the gems come from? What was their value? Were they insured? Where were they kept at night? Was the safe burglar-proof or only fireproof?' and so on.

"It seems that two ladies who were visiting the exhibition at the same time noticed this same young man with the sallow complexion and the jet-black hair. They heard him questioning Ruggles and remarked upon his foreign accent, which was neither Italian nor Spanish; they thought he might be Portuguese. His clothes were certainly very outlandish. The ladies had noticed the caped coat, a kind of black Inverness, and the hat *à la* Montmartre. The presence of this foreigner in the shop in Sackville Street became still more significant later on, when another fact came to light—a fact in connection with the half-pint of beer which the lift-boy from the flats in George Street had fetched as usual on the evening preceding the robbery, from the Crown and Sceptre public house. A few drops of the beer had remained in the mug beside the remnants of Ruggles's supper. On examination the beer was found to contain chloral. The lift-boy at first was probably too scared to throw any light on this circumstance. He had, he declared, fetched the beer as usual from the Crown and Sceptre, taken it up to No. 4, Sir James Narford's flat, and put it upon the table in the sitting-room, where Mr. Ruggles's supper was already laid for him. After repeated questions from the police inspector, however, he recollected that on his way from the public house to the flats, a gentleman accosted him and asked him the way to Regent Street. The boy, holding the mug of beer in one hand, pointed out the way with the other and probably turned his head in the same direction as he did so. He couldn't say for certain. The gentleman seemed stupid and didn't understand the directions all at once; the boy had to repeat them again and again, and altogether was in conversation with the gentleman quite a while. It was dark at the time, but he did see that the gentleman wore a funny sort of coat and a funny hat, and as the boy picturesquely put it, "E spoke queer-like, as if 'e wor a Frenchman.' To a lift-boy presumably every foreigner is a Frenchman if he be not a German, and though the lad's description of the coat and hat only amounted to his calling them 'funny,' there seemed little doubt but that the man who visited the shop

in Sackville Street and the one who accosted the lift-boy in George Street were one and the same. There was also little doubt but that he poured the drug into the mug of beer while the boy's head was turned away. And finally all doubts were set at rest when the 'funny coat and hat' were discovered tied up in a bundle in the area of an empty house, two doors higher up the street.

"Unfortunately, although these few facts were definitely established, all traces of the man himself vanished after that. How he got into the block of flats could not be ascertained. He might have slipped in after the lift-boy, while the latter went upstairs with the beer, and concealed himself somewhere in the basement. It was impossible to say. The street-door was kept open as usual until eleven o'clock, and until that hour the boy was in attendance at the lift; he had been up and down several times, taking up residents or their visitors, and while he ran to fetch the beer one of the maids saw to the lift, if the bell rang. At eleven o'clock every evening the street-door was closed, but not bolted; it was provided with a Yale lock and every resident had one key, in case they came in late; the lift was not worked after that hour, but there was a light kept on every landing. These lights the housemaid switched off the first thing every morning when she did the stairs, and as a matter of fact she remembered that on that memorable morning the light on the top floor landing—which is the landing outside Sir James Narford's flat—was already switched off when she went to do it.

"And those are all the facts," the Old Man in the Corner went on slowly, while he paused in his work of fashioning intricate knots in his beloved bit of string, "all the facts that were ever known in connection with the theft of Sir James Narford's gems. Of course, as you may well suppose, not only the official but also the public mind at once flew to the mysterious personage, originally found wounded in an empty house in Wicklow Lane. There could be no shadow of doubt that this man and the one who visited the shop in Sackville Street, who accosted the lift-boy, drugged Ruggles's beer and robbed him of his keys, were one and the same. There was the black caped coat, the Montmartre hat, the jet-black hair and foreign look. True, the wounded man of Wicklow Lane spoke English without any foreign accent, but the latter could easily be assumed. Indeed, it all seemed plain sailing, and as soon as the word went round about the robbery in Sackville Street

and the description was given of the foreign-looking individual with the jet-black hair, the police thought they had a perfectly clear case.

"A clear case, yes!" the funny creature went on, with a grin, "but not an easy one, because when the police called at the hotel in Mexborough Gate they learned that the mysterious Mr. Allen Lloyd had been gone three days. Having paid his bill, he had walked out of the house one dark afternoon and not been seen or heard of since. He went off carrying a paper parcel, which no doubt contained the few belongings he had bought of late.

"Of course he was the thief and a marvellous cunning one. Just think what it meant. It meant, first of all, immense presence of mind and daring to accost the lift-boy and engage him in conversation whilst pouring a drug into a mug of beer; then it meant sneaking into the block of flats in George Street, breaking the glass panel of a door, entering the flat, stealing the keys, sneaking out of the building again, going round to Sackville Street, watching until the police on duty had passed by, entering the house, opening the safe, collecting the gems—all in full view of the street, mind you, or else in absolute darkness—then relocking the safe and again watching for the opportunity to sneak out of the house until the man on duty was out of sight. Clever? I should think it would have been clever, if it had ever been done!"

"How do you mean, if it had ever been done?" I ejaculated, with some impatience. "Whoever the thief was—and I suppose that you have your theory—he must have done all those things."

"Oh no, he did not!" the funny creature asserted emphatically, "he merely put all the gems away in his own pocket after the exhibition was closed for the night, instead of locking them up in the safe."

"Then you think it was Ruggles?" I exclaimed.

"In conjunction with his master."

"Sir James Narford? But why?"

"For the sake of the insurance money."

"But, man alive!" I ejaculated, "that was the tragedy of the whole thing. I remember reading about it at the time. I suppose that it was either out of

meanness or because he had so little ready money, but Sir James Narford had only insured his treasure for £20,000, whereas the jewels——"

"Were not worth a penny more than that," the Old Man in the Corner broke in with his bland smile. "The public may have been bamboozled with tales of fabulous value—nowadays people talk as glibly of millions as the past generation did of thousands—but insurance companies don't usually listen to fairy tales."

"But even so," I argued, "the jewels must have been worth more than the insurance after all the advertisement they got. Why shouldn't Sir James have sold them, rather than take the risk of stealing them?"

"But, my dear young lady," he retorted, "can't you see that the jewels can still be sold and that they will be—abroad—presently—one by one? Twenty thousand pounds insurance money is good, but you double the amount and it is better."

"But what about the wounded man in Wicklow Lane?" I asked.

"A red herring across the trail," he replied, with a smile, "only with this difference, that it was dragged across before the hounds were on the scent. And that is where the immense cleverness of the man comes in. To create a personality on whom to draw suspicion of a crime and then make that personality disappear before the crime is committed, is as clever a bit of rascality as I have ever seen. It needed absolute coolness and a knowledge of facial make-up, in both of which we must take it Sir James Narford was a past-master. Think then how easy everything else would be for him.

"Just let me reconstruct the whole thing for you from beginning to end, that is from the moment when Sir James Narford first conceived the idea of doubling the value of his gems, and took his man Ruggles as partner in that fine piece of rascality. He couldn't have done it without a partner, of course, and probably this was not the first villainy those two scoundrels had carried through together. Well then, Narford having given instructions to Ruggles and arranged certain matters of detail with him, begins his campaign by ostensibly starting on a journey. He crossed over to France probably and then back to England. It is easy enough for a man to disappear in crowded trains or railway stations if there is no one on his track; easy enough for him to stay in one hotel after another in any big town if he chooses hotels whose

proprietors have reason to dread the police, and will not volunteer information if any of their visitors are 'wanted.' A month only of such wanderings and Sir James Narford, habitually a very dapper man, with sleek, sandy hair cropped very close, a tiny tooth-brush moustache and shaven cheeks and chin, can easily be transformed into one with shaggy hair and beard and walrus moustache. Add to this a nose built out with grease-paint and highly coloured, and cheeks stained a dull red, and you have the man who called for the key of the empty house at Messrs. Whiskin and Sons, with a parcel under his arm, which contained the black cape and Montmartre hat purchased abroad at some time previously, during the course of his wanderings. That's simple, is it not?" the funny creature continued, while his thin, claw-like fingers worked away feverishly at his piece of string. "Now, all that our rascal wants is to change his clothes and his face; so, late that evening, by preconcerted plan, Ruggles meets him at the empty house under cover of the fog. Here he and his precious master change clothes with one another. Narford then completes his toilet by applying to his shaggy hair and beard one of those modern dyes that are so much advertised for the use of ladies desiring to possess raven locks. And so we have the explanation of all the conflicting evidence of the witnesses who saw a man with a parcel, and yet were so much at variance both as to the time when they saw him, as to his appearance, and even as to the size of the parcel.

"Having thus *created* the personality of a foreign-looking individual in black clothes, you will easily see how important it was for the general scheme that the comedy of the row and the pistol-shots in the empty house should be enacted. Attention had to be drawn to the created personage, attention coupled with mystery, and at this stage of the scheme there was not the slightest danger of the wounded man in Wicklow Lane being in any way connected with Sir James Narford of George Street, Mayfair. Time was no object. The mysterious Mr. Allen Lloyd of Wicklow Lane might be detained days, weeks, even months, but he would have to be let out some time or other. He was perfectly harmless apparently, and otherwise sane; he could not be kept for ever at the country's expense. He was eventually discharged; went to an hotel, and lived there quietly a while longer until he thought that the time was ripe for complete disappearance. In the meanwhile we must suppose that he was in touch with Ruggles. Ruggles

made a point of taking a brisk walk every evening. Well, winter evenings are dark and London is a very crowded place. Ruggles would bring what money was required. What more easy than to meet in a crowd?

"Then at last the two rascals thought that the time was ripe. The mysterious Mr. Allen Lloyd disappeared from the hotel in Mexborough Gate; he went to Sackville Street, where he shaved off his shaggy moustache and beard, and cut his hair once more so close that nothing of the dyed ends could be seen. He changed into his own clothes, which Ruggles kept there ready for him. Then he slipped round to Victoria Station and crossed over to France, only in order to return to England, openly this time, as Sir James Narford, and just in time to find Ruggles just aroused from a drugged sleep and the whole flat seething with excitement. But it was he who in black cape and Montmartre hat visited the shop in Sackville Street, it was Ruggles who the following night spoke to the lift-boy, even while Narford was procuring for himself a perfect alibi by crossing over quite openly from France.

"Ruggles's task was, of course, much easier. All he had to do was to put the gems in his pocket, and these Narford took over from him in the morning at the flat before he telephoned for the police. To put on the black cape and hat and to accost the lift-boy was easy enough on a dark, snowy night in January. And now all the excitement has died down. The whole thing was so cleverly planned that the real rascal was never suspected. Ruggles may have been but nothing could really be brought up against him. The gems haven't been found and to all appearances he has not benefited by the robbery. He is just the faithful, trusted servant of his master.

"Sir James Narford has got his money from the Insurance Company and since then has left for abroad. By the way," the Old Man in the Corner concluded, as he gathered up his precious bit of string and slipped it in the pocket of his ulster, "I heard recently that he has bought some property in Argentina and has settled down there permanently with his friend Ruggles. I think he was wise to do that, and if you care to publish my version of that mysterious affair, you are at liberty to do so. I don't think that our friend would sue you for defamation of character, and, anyway, I'll undertake to pay damages if the case comes into court."

XI
THE MISER OF MAIDA VALE

§1

"One of the most puzzling cases I ever remember watching," the Old Man in the Corner said to me that day, "was the one known to the public as that of 'The Miser of Maida Vale.' It presented certain altogether novel features, and for once I was willing to admit that, though the police had a very hard nut to crack in the elucidation of the mystery, and in the end failed to find a solution, they were at one time very near putting their finger on the key of the puzzle. If they had only possessed some of that instinct for true facts with which Nature did so kindly endow me, there is no doubt that they would have brought that clever criminal to book."

I wish it were in my power to convey something of that air of ludicrous complacency with which he said this. I could almost hear him purring to himself, like a lean, shabby old cat. He had his inevitable bit of string in his hand, and had been in rapturous contemplation of a series of knots which he had been fashioning until the moment when I sat down beside him and he began to speak. But as soon as he embarked upon his beloved topic he turned his rapturous contemplation on himself. He just sat there and admired himself, and now and again blinked at me, with such an air of self-satisfaction that I longed to say something terribly rude first, and then to flounce out of the place, leaving him to admire himself at his leisure.

But, of course, this could not be. To use the funny creature's own verbiage, Nature had endowed me with the journalistic instinct. I had to listen to him; I had to pick his brains and to get copy out of him. The irresistible desire to learn something new, something that would thrill my editor, as well as my public, compelled me to swallow my impatience, to smile at him—somewhat wryly, perhaps—and then to beg him to proceed.

I was all attention.

"Well," he said, still wearing an irritating air of condescension, "do you remember the case of the old miser of Maida Vale?"

"Only vaguely," I was willing to admit.

"It presented some very interesting features," he went on, blandly, "and assuming that you really only remember them vaguely, I will put them before you as clearly as possible, in order that you may follow my argument more easily later on.

"The victim of the mysterious tragedy was, as no doubt you remember, an eccentric old invalid named Thornton Ashley, the well-known naval constructor, who had made a considerable fortune during the war and then retired, chiefly, it was said, owing to ill-health. He had two sons, one of whom, Charles, was a misshapen, undersized creature, singularly unprepossessing both in appearance and in manner, whilst the other, Philip, was a tall, good-looking fellow, very agreeable and popular wherever he went. Both these young men were bachelors, a fact which, it appears, had been for some time a bone of contention between them and their father. Old Ashley was passionately fond of children, and the one desire of his declining years was to see the grandchildren who would ultimately enjoy the fortune which he had accumulated. Whilst he was ready to admit that Charles, with his many afflictions, did not stand much chance with the fair sex, there was no reason at all why Philip should not marry, and there had been more than one heated quarrel between father and son on that one subject.

"So much so, indeed, that presently Philip cut his stick and went to live in rooms in Jermyn Street. He had a few hundreds a year of his own, left to him by a godmother. He had been to Rugby and to Cambridge, and had been a temporary officer in the war: pending his obtaining some kind of job he settled down to live the life of a smart young bachelor in town, whilst his brother Charles was left to look after the old man, who became more and more eccentric as his health gradually broke up. He sold his fine house in Hyde Park Gardens, his motor, and the bulk of his furniture, and moved into a cheap flat in Maida Vale, where he promptly took to his bed, which he never left again. His eccentricities became more and more pronounced and his temper more and more irascible. He took a violent dislike to strangers, refused to see anybody except his sons and two old friends, Mr. Oldwall, the well-known solicitor, and Dr. Fanshawe-Bigg, who visited him from time to time and whose orders he obstinately refused to obey. Worst of all,

as far as the unfortunate Charles was concerned, he became desperately mean, denying himself (and, incidentally, his son) every luxury, subsisting on the barest necessities, and keeping no servant to wait on him except a daily 'char.'

"Soon his miserliness degenerated into a regular mania.

"'Charles and I are saving money for the grand-children you are going to give me one day,' he would say with a chuckle whenever Philip tried to reason with him on the subject of this self-denying ordinance. 'When you have an establishment of your own, you can invite us to come and live with you. There will be plenty then for housekeeping, I promise you!'

"At which the handsome Philip would laugh and shrug his shoulders and go back to his comfortable rooms in Jermyn Street. But no one knew what Charles thought about it all. To an outsider his case must always have appeared singularly pathetic. He had no money of his own and his delicate health had made it impossible for him to take up any profession: he could not cut his stick like his brother Philip had done, but, truth to tell, he did not appear to wish to do so. Perhaps it was real fondness for his father that made him seem contented with his lot. Certain it is that as time went on he became a regular slave to the old man, waiting on him hand and foot, more hard-worked than the daily 'char,' who put on her bonnet and walked out of the flat every day at six o'clock when her work was done, and who had all her Sundays to herself.

"All the relaxation that Charles ever had were alternate week-ends, when his brother Philip would come over and spend Saturday to Monday in the flat taking charge of the invalid. On those occasions Charles would get on an old bicycle, and with just a few shillings in his pocket which he had saved during the past fortnight out of the meagre housekeeping allowance which he handled, he would go off for the day somewhere into the country, nobody ever knew where. Then on Monday morning he would return to the flat in Maida Vale, ready to take up his slave's yoke, to all appearances with a light heart.

"'Charles Ashley is wise,' the gossiping acquaintances would say, 'he sticks to the old miser. Thornton Ashley can't live for ever, and Oldwall says that he is worth close on a quarter of a million.'

"Philip, on the other hand, could have had no illusions with regard to his father's testamentary intentions. The bone of contention—Philip's celibacy—was still there, making bad blood between father and son; more than once the old miser had said to him with a sardonic grin: 'Let me see you married soon, my boy, and with a growing family around you, or I tell you that my money shall go to that fool Charles, or to the founding of an orphan asylum or the establishment of a matrimonial agency.'

"Mr. Oldwall, the solicitor, a very old friend of the Ashleys, and who had seen the two boys grow up, threw out as broad a hint to Philip on that same subject as professional honour allowed.

"'Your father,' he said to him one day, 'has got that mania for saving money, but otherwise he is perfectly sane, you know. He'll never forgive you if you don't gratify his wish to see you married. Hang it all, man, there are plenty of nice girls about. And what on earth would poor old Charles do with a quarter of a million, I'd like to know.'

"But for a long time Philip remained obstinate and his friends knew well enough the cause of this obstinacy; it had its root in a pre-war romance. Philip Ashley had been in love—some say that he had actually been engaged to her—with a beautiful girl, Muriel Balleine, the daughter of the eminent surgeon, Sir Arnold Balleine. The two young people were thought to be devoted to one another. But the lovely Muriel had, as it turned out, another admirer in Sir Wilfred Peet-Jackson, the wealthy shipowner, who worshipped her in secret. Philip Ashley and Wilfred Peet-Jackson were great friends; they had been at school and 'Varsity together. In 1915 they both obtained a commission in the Coldstreams and in 1916 Peet-Jackson was very severely wounded. He was sent home to be nursed by the beautiful Muriel in her father's hospital in Grosvenor Square. His case had already been pronounced hopeless, and Sir Arnold himself, as well as other equally eminent surgeons, gave it as their opinion that the unfortunate young man could not live more than a few months—if that.

"We must then take it that pity and romance played their part in the events that ensued. Certain it is that London society was one day thrilled to read in its *Times* that Miss Muriel Balleine had been married the previous morning to Sir Wilfred Peet-Jackson, the wealthy shipowner and owner of lovely Deverill Castle in Northamptonshire. Her friends at once put it about

that Muriel had only yielded to a dying man's wish, and that there was nothing mercenary or calculating in this unexpected marriage; she probably would be a widow within a very short time and free to return to her original love and to marry Philip Ashley. But in this case, like in so many others in life, the unexpected occurred. Sir Wilfred Peet-Jackson did not die—not just then. He lived six years after the doctors had said that he must die in six months. He remained an invalid and he and his beautiful wife spent their winters in the Canaries and their summers in Switzerland, but Muriel did not become a widow until 1922, and Philip Ashley all that time never looked at another girl; he was even willing to allow a fortune to slip away from him, because he always hoped that the woman whom he had never ceased to worship would be his wife one day.

"Probably old Ashley knew all that; probably he hated the idea that this one woman should spoil his son's life for always; probably he thought that threat of disinheritance would bring Philip back out of the realms of romance to the realities of life. All this we shall never know. The old man spoke to no one about that, not even to Mr. Oldwall, possibly not even to Charles. By the time that Sir Wilfred Peet-Jackson had died and Philip had announced his engagement to the beautiful widow, Thornton Ashley was practically a dying man. However, he did have the satisfaction before he died of hearing the good news. Philip told him of his engagement one Saturday in May when he came for his usual fortnightly week-end visit. Strangely enough, although the old man must have been delighted at this tardy realisation of his life's desire, he did not after that make any difference in his mode of life. He remained just as irascible, just as difficult, and every bit as mean as he had always been; he never asked to see his future daughter-in-law, whom he had known in the past, though she did come once or twice to see him; nor did he encourage Philip to come and see him any more frequently than he had done before. The only indication he ever gave that he was pleased with the engagement was an obvious impatience to see the wedding-day fixed as soon as possible, and one day he worked himself up into a state of violent passion because Philip told him that Lady Peet-Jackson was bound to let a full year lapse before she married again, out of respect for poor Wilfred's memory.

§2

"Of course a good deal of gossip was concentrated on all these events. Although Thornton Ashley had, for the past three years, cut himself adrift from all social intercourse, past friends and acquaintances had not altogether forgotten him, whilst Philip Ashley and Lady Peet-Jackson had always been well-known figures in a certain set in London. It was not likely, therefore, that their affairs would not be discussed and commented on at tea-parties and in the clubs. Philip Ashley was exalted to the position of a hero. By his marriage he would at last grasp the fortune which he had so obstinately and romantically evaded: true love was obtaining its just reward, and so on. Lady Peet-Jackson, on the other hand, was not quite so leniently dealt with by the gossips. It was now generally averred that she had originally thrown Philip Ashley over only because Peet-Jackson was a very rich man and had a handle to his name, and that she was only returning to her former lover now because Thornton Ashley had already one foot in the grave, and was reputed to be worth a quarter of a million.

"I have a photograph here," the Old Man in the Corner went on, and threw a bundle of newspaper cuttings down before me, "of Lady Peet-Jackson. As no doubt you will admit, she is very beautiful, but the face is hard; looking at it one feels instinctively that she is not a woman who would stand by a man in case of trouble or disgrace. But it is difficult to judge from these smudgy reproductions, and there is no doubt that Philip Ashley was madly in love with her. That she had enemies, especially amongst those of her own sex, was only natural in view of the fact that she was exceptionally beautiful, had made one brilliant marriage, and was on the point of making another.

"But the two romantic lovers were not the sole food of the gossip-mongers. There was the position of Charles Ashley to be discussed and talked over. What was going to become of him? How would he take this change in his fortune? If rumour, chiefly based on Mr. Oldwall's indiscretions, was correct, he would be losing that reputed quarter of a million if Philip's marriage came off. But in this case gossip had to rest satisfied with conjectures. No one ever saw Charles, and Philip, when questioned about him, had apparently very little to say.

"'Charles is a queer fish,' he would reply. 'I don't profess to know what goes on inside him. He seems delighted at the prospect of my marriage, but

he doesn't say much. He is very shy and very sensitive about his deformity, and he won't see any one now, not even Muriel.'

"And thus the stage was set," the funny creature continued with a fatuous grin, "for the mysterious tragedy which has puzzled the public and the police as much as the friends of the chief actors in the drama. It was set for the scene of Philip Ashley's marriage to Muriel Lady Peet-Jackson, which was to take place very quietly at St. Saviour's, Warwick Road, early in the following year.

"On the twenty-seventh of August old Thornton Ashley died, that is to say he was found dead in his bed by his son Charles, who had returned that morning from his fortnightly week-end holiday. The cause of death was not in question at first, though Dr. Fanshawe-Bigg was out of town at the moment, his *locum tenens* knew all about the case, and had seen the invalid on the Thursday preceding his death. In accordance with the amazing laws of this country, he gave the necessary certificate without taking a last look at the dead man, and Thornton Ashley would no doubt have been buried then and there, without either fuss or ceremony, but for the amazing events which thereupon followed one another in quick succession.

"The funeral had been fixed for Thursday, the thirtieth, but within twenty-four hours of the old miser's death it had already transpired that he had indeed left a considerable fortune, which included one or two substantial life insurances, and that the provisions of his will were very much as Philip Ashley and his friends had surmised. After sundry legacies to various charitable institutions concerned with the care of children, Thornton Ashley had left the residue of his personalty to whichever of his sons was first married within a year from the time of the testator's death, the other son receiving an annuity of three hundred pounds. This clearly was aimed at Philip, as poor misshapen Charles had always been thought to be out of the running. Moreover, a further clause in the will directed that in the event of both the testator's sons being still unmarried within that given time, then the whole of the residue was to go to Charles, with an annuity of one hundred pounds to Philip and a sum of ten thousand pounds for the endowment of an orphan asylum at the discretion of the Charity Organisation Society.

"There were a few conjectures as to whether Charles Ashley, who, by

his brother's impending marriage, would be left with a paltry three hundred pounds a year, would contest his father's will on the grounds of *non compos mentis*, but, as you know, it is always very difficult in this country to upset a will, and the provisions of this particular one were so entirely in accord with the wishes expressed by the deceased on every possible occasion, that the plea that he was of unsound mind when he made it would never have been upheld, quite apart from the fact that Mr. Oldwall, who drew up the will and signed it as one of the witnesses, would have repudiated any suggestion that his client was anything but absolutely sane at the time.

"Everything then appeared quite smooth and above board when suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, came the demand from the Insurance Company in which the late Mr. Thornton Ashley had a life policy for forty thousand pounds for a *post-mortem* examination, the company not being satisfied that the deceased had died a natural death. Naturally, Dr. Percy Jutt, who had signed the death certificate, was furious, but he was overruled by the demands of the Insurance Company, backed by no less a person than Charles Ashley. Indeed, it soon transpired that it was in consequence of certain statements made by Mr. Triscott, a local solicitor, on behalf of Charles Ashley to the general manager of the company, that the latter took action in the matter.

"Philip Ashley, through his solicitor, Mr. Oldwall, and backed by Dr. Jutt, might perhaps have opposed the proceedings, but quite apart from the fact that opposition from that quarter would have been impolitic, it probably also would have been unsuccessful. Anyway, the sensation-mongers had quite a titbit to offer to the public that afternoon; the evening papers came out before midday with flaring headlines: 'The mystery miser of Maida Vale.' Also, 'Sensational developments,' and 'Sinister Rumours.'

"By four o'clock in the afternoon some of the papers had it that a *post-mortem* examination of the body of the late Mr. Thornton Ashley had been conducted by Dr. Dawson, the divisional surgeon, and that it had revealed the fact that the old miser had not died a natural death, traces of violence having been discovered on the body. It was understood that the police were already in possession of certain facts and that the coroner of the district would hold an inquest on Thursday, the thirtieth, the very day on which the funeral was to have taken place."

§3

"Now I have attended many an inquest in my day," the Old Man in the Corner continued after a brief pause, during which his claw-like fingers worked away with feverish energy at his bit of string, "but seldom have I been present at a more interesting one. There were so many surprises, such an unexpected turn of events, that one was kept on tenterhooks the whole time as to what would happen next.

"Even to those who were in the know, the witnesses in themselves were a surprise. Of course, every one knew Mr. Oldwall, the solicitor and life-long friend of old Thornton Ashley, and the divisional surgeon, whose evidence would be interesting; then there was poor Charles Ashley and his handsome brother, Philip, now the owner of a magnificent fortune, whose romantic history had more than once been paragraphed in the Press. But what in the world had Mr. Triscott, a local lawyer whom nobody knew, and Mrs. Trapp, a slatternly old 'char,' to do with the case? And there was also Dr. Percy Jutt, who had not come out of the case with flying professional colours, and who must have cursed the day when he undertook the position of *locum tenens* for Dr. Fanshawe-Bigg.

"The proceedings began with the sensational evidence of Dr. Dawson, the divisional surgeon, who had conducted the *post-mortem*. He stated that the deceased had been in an advanced state of uræmia, but this had not actually been the cause of death. Death was due to heart failure, caused by fright and shock, following on violent aggression and an attempt at strangulation. There were marks round the throat, and evidences of a severe blow having been dealt on the face and cranium causing concussion. In the patient's weak state of health, shock and fright had affected the heart's action with fatal results.

"All the while that the divisional surgeon gave evidence, going into technical details which the layman could not understand, Dr. Percy Jutt had obvious difficulty to control himself. He had a fidgety, nervous way with him and was constantly biting his nails. When he, in his turn, entered the witness-box, he was as white as a sheet and tried to hide his nervousness behind a dictatorial, blustering manner. In answer to the coroner, he explained that he had been acting as *locum tenens* for Dr. Fanshawe-Bigg, who was away on his holiday. He had visited the deceased once or twice

during the past fortnight, and had last seen him on the Thursday preceding his death. Dr. Fanshawe-Bigg had left him a few notes on the case.

"'I found,' he went on to explain, 'the deceased in an advanced stage of uræmia, and there was very little that I could do, more especially as I was made to understand that my visits were not particularly wanted. On the Thursday, deceased was in a very drowsy state, this being one of the best-known symptoms of the disease, and I didn't think that he could live much longer. I told Mr. Charles Ashley so; at the same time, I did not think that the end would come quite so soon. However, I was not particularly surprised when on the Monday morning I received a visit from Mr. Charles Ashley who told me that his father was dead. I found him very difficult to understand,' Dr. Jutt continued, in reply to a question from the coroner, 'emotion had, I thought, addled his speech a little. He may have tried to tell me something in connection with his father's death, but I was so rushed with work that morning, and, as I say, I was fully prepared for the event, that all I could do was to promise to come round some time during the day, and, in the meanwhile, in order to facilitate arrangements for the funeral, I gave the necessary certificate. I was entirely within my rights,' he concluded, with somewhat aggressive emphasis, 'and, as far as I can recollect, Mr. Charles Ashley said nothing that in any way led me to think that there was anything wrong.'

"Mr. Oldwall, the solicitor, was the next witness called, and his testimony was unimportant to the main issue. He had drafted the late Mr. Thornton Ashley's will in 1919, and had last seen him alive before starting on a short holiday some time in June. Deceased had just heard then of his son's engagement and witness thought him looking wonderfully better and brighter than he had been for a long time.

"'Mr. Ashley,' the coroner asked, 'didn't say anything to you then about any alteration to his will?'

"'Most emphatically, no!' the witness replied.

"'Or at any time?'

"'At no time,' Mr. Oldwall asserted.

"These questions put by the coroner in quick succession had,

figuratively speaking, made every one sit up. Up to now the general public had not been greatly interested, one had made up one's mind that the old miser had kept certain sums of money, after the fashion of his kind, underneath his mattress; that some evil-doer had got wind of this and entered the flat when no one was about, giving poor Thornton Ashley a fright that had cost him his life.

"But with this reference to some possible alteration in the will the case at once appeared more interesting. Suddenly one felt on the alert, excitement was in the air, and when the next witness, a middle-aged, dapper little man, wearing spectacles, a grey suit and white spats, stood up to answer questions put to him by the coroner, a suppressed gasp of anticipatory delight went round the circle of spectators.

"The witness gave his name as James Triscott, solicitor, of Warwick Avenue. He said that he had known the deceased slightly, having seen him on business in connection with the lease of 73, Malvine Mansions, the landlord being a client of his. On the previous Friday, that is, the twenty-fourth, witness received a note written in a crabbed hand and signed, 'A. Thornton Ashley,' asking him to call at Malvine Mansions any time during the day. This Mr. Triscott did that same afternoon. The door was opened by Mr. Charles Ashley whom he had also met once or twice before, who showed him into the room where the deceased lay in bed, obviously very ill, but perfectly conscious and reasonable.

"'After some preliminary talk,' the witness went on, 'the deceased explained to me that he was troubled in his mind about a will which he had made some four years previously, and which had struck him of late as being both harsh and unjust. He desired to make a new will, revoking the previous one. I naturally told him that I was entirely at his service, and he then dictated his wishes to me. I made notes and promised to have the will ready for his signature by Monday. The thought of this delay annoyed him considerably, and he pressed me hard to have everything ready for him by the next day. Unfortunately, I couldn't do that. I was obliged to go off into the country that evening on business for another client, and couldn't possibly be back before midday Saturday, when my clerk and typist would both be gone. All I could do was to promise faithfully to call again on Monday at eleven o'clock with the will quite ready for signature. I said I

would bring my clerk with me, who could then sign as a witness.

"'I quite saw the urgency of the business,' Mr. Triscott went on in his brisk, rather consequential way, 'as the poor old gentleman certainly looked very ill. Before I left he asked me to let him at least have a copy of my notes before I went away this evening. This I was able to promise him. I got my clerk to copy the notes and to take them round to the flat later on in the day.'

"I can assure you," the Old Man in the Corner said, "that while that dapper little man was talking, you might have heard the proverbial pin drop amongst the public. You see, this was the first that any one had ever heard of any alteration in old Ashley's will, and Mr. Triscott's evidence opened up a vista of exciting situations that was positively dazzling. When he ceased speaking, you might almost have heard the sensation-mongers licking their chops like a lot of cats after a first bite at a succulent meal; glances were exchanged, but not a word spoken, and presently a sigh of eagerness went round when the coroner put the question which every one had been anticipating:

"'Have you got the notes, Mr. Triscott, which you took from the late Mr. Thornton Ashley's dictation?'

"At which suggestion Mr. Oldwall jumped up, objecting that such evidence was inadmissible. There was some legal argument between him and the coroner, during which Mr. Triscott, still standing in the witness-box, beamed at his colleague and at the public generally through his spectacles. In the end the jury decided the point by insisting on having the notes read out to them.

"Briefly, by the provisions of the new will, which was destined never to be signed, the miser left his entire fortune, with the exception of the same trifling legacies and of an annuity of a thousand pounds a year to Philip, to his son Charles absolutely, in grateful recognition for years of unflagging devotion to an eccentric and crabbed invalid. Mr. Triscott explained that on the Monday morning he had the document quite ready by eleven o'clock, and that he walked round with it to Malvine Mansions, accompanied by his clerk. Great was his distress when he was met at the door by Charles Ashley, who told him that old Mr. Thornton Ashley was dead.

"That was the substance of Mr. Triscott's evidence, and I can assure you that even I was surprised at the turn which events had taken. You know what the sensation-mongers are; within an hour of the completion of Mr. Triscott's evidence, it was all over London that Mr. Philip Ashley had murdered his father in order to prevent his signing a will that would deprive him—Philip—of a fortune. That is the way of the world," the funny creature added with a cynical smile. "Philip's popularity went down like a sail when the wind suddenly drops, and in a moment public sympathy was all on the side of Charles, who had been done out of a fortune by a grasping and unscrupulous brother.

"But there was more to come.

"The next witness called was Mrs. Triscott, the wife of the dapper little solicitor, and her presence here in connection with the death of old Thornton Ashley seemed as surprising at first as that of her husband had been. She looked a hard, rather common, but capable woman, and after she had replied to the coroner's preliminary questions, she plunged into her story in a quiet, self-assured manner. She began by explaining that she was a trained nurse, but had given up her profession since her marriage. Now and again, however, either in an emergency or to oblige a friend, she had taken care of a patient.

"'On Friday evening last,' she continued, 'Mr. Triscott, who was just going off into the country on business, said to me that he had a client in the neighbourhood who was very ill, and about whom, for certain reasons, he felt rather anxious. He went on to say that he was chiefly sorry for the son, a delicate man, who was sadly deformed. Would I, like a good Samaritan, go and look after the sick man during the weekend? It seems that the doctor had ordered absolute rest, and Mr. Triscott feared that there might be some trouble with another son because, as a matter of fact, the old man had decided to alter his will.

"'I knew nothing about Mr. Thornton Ashley's family affairs,' the witness said, in reply to a question put to her by the coroner, and calmly ignoring the sensation which her statement was causing, 'beyond what I have just told you that Mr. Triscott said to me, but I agreed to go to Malvine Mansions and see if I could be of any use. I arrived at the flat on Friday evening and saw at once what the invalid was suffering from. I had nursed

cases of uræmia before, and I could see that the poor old man had not many more days to live. Still I did not think that the end was imminent. Mr. Charles Ashley, who had welcomed me most effusively, looked to need careful nursing almost as much as his father did. He told me that he had not slept for three nights, so I just packed him off to bed and spent the night in an armchair in the patient's room.

"'The next morning Mr. Philip Ashley arrived and I was told of the arrangement whereby Mr. Charles got a week-end holiday once a fortnight. I welcomed the idea for his sake, and as he seemed very anxious about his father, and remembering what my husband had told me, I promised that I would stay on in the flat until his return on the Monday. Thus only was I able to persuade him to go off on his much-needed holiday. Directly he had gone, however, I thought it my duty to explain to Mr. Philip Ashley that really his father was very ill. He was only conscious intermittently and that in such cases the only thing that could be done was to keep the patient absolutely quiet. It was the only way, I added, to prolong life and to ensure a painless and peaceful death.

"'Mr. Philip Ashley,' the witness continued, 'appeared more annoyed than distressed, when I told him this, and asked me by whose authority I was here, keeping him out of his father's room, and so on. He also asked me several peremptory questions as to who had visited his father lately, and when I told him that I was the wife of a well-known solicitor in the neighbourhood, he looked for a moment as if he would give way to a violent fit of rage. However, I suppose he thought better of it, and presently I took him into the patient's room, who was asleep just then, begging him on no account to disturb the sufferer.

"'After he had seen his father, Mr. Ashley appeared more ready to admit that I was acting for the best. However, he asked me—rather rudely, I thought, considering that the patient was nothing to me and I was not getting paid for my services—how long I proposed staying in the flat. I told him that I would wait here until his brother's return, which I was afraid would not be before ten o'clock on Monday morning. Whereupon he picked up his hat, gave me a curt good-day, and walked out of the flat.

"'To my astonishment,' the witness now said amidst literally breathless silence on the part of the spectators, 'it had only just gone eight on the

Monday morning, when Mr. Philip Ashley turned up once more. I must say that I was rather pleased to see him. I was expecting Mr. Triscott home and had a lot to do in my own house. The patient, who had rallied wonderfully the last two days, had just gone off into a comfortable sleep, and as I knew that Mr. Charles would be back soon, I felt quite justified in going off duty and leaving Mr. Philip in charge, with strict injunctions that he was on no account to disturb the patient. If he woke, he might be given a little barley-water first and then some beef-tea, all of which I had prepared and put ready. My intention was directly I got home to telephone to Dr. Jutt and ask him to look in at Malvine Mansions some time during the morning. Unfortunately, when I got home I had such a lot to do, that, frankly, I forgot to telephone to the doctor, and before the morning was over Mr. Triscott had come home with the news that old Mr. Thornton Ashley was dead.'

"This," the Old Man in the Corner continued, "was the gist of Mrs. Triscott's evidence at that memorable inquest. Of course, there were some dramatic incidents during the course of her examination; glances exchanged between Philip Ashley and Mr. Oldwall, and between him and the dapper little Mr. Triscott. The latter, I must tell you, still beamed on everybody; he looked inordinately proud of his capable, business-like wife, and very pleased with the prominence which he had attained through this mysterious and intricate case.

§4

"The luncheon interval gave us all a respite from the tension that had kept our nerves strung up all morning. I don't think that Philip Ashley, for one, ate much lunch that day. I noticed, by the way, that he and Mr. Oldwall went off together, whilst Mr. and Mrs. Triscott took kindly charge of poor Charles. I caught sight of the three of them subsequently in a blameless teashop. Charles was indeed a pathetic picture to look upon; he looked the sort of man who lives on his nerves, with no flesh on his poor, misshapen bones, and a hungry, craving expression in his eyes, as in those of an under-fed dog.

"We had his evidence directly after luncheon. But, as a matter of fact, he had not much to say. He had last seen his father alive on the Saturday morning when he went off on his fortnightly week-end holiday. He had bicycled to Dorking and spent his time there at the Running Footman, as he

had often done before. He was well known in the place. On Monday morning he made an early start and got to Malvine Mansions soon after ten and let himself into the flat with his latch-key. He expected to find his brother or Mrs. Triscott there, but there was no one. He then went into his father's room, and at first thought that the old man was only asleep. The blinds were down and the room very dark. He drew up the blind and went back to his father's bedside. Then only did he realise that the old man was dead. Though he was very ignorant in such matters, he thought that there was something strange about the dead man, and he tried to explain this to Dr. Jutt. But the latter seemed too busy to attend to him, so when Mr. Triscott came to call later on, he told him of this strange feeling that troubled him. Mr. Triscott then thought that as Dr. Jutt seemed so indifferent about the matter, it might be best to see the police.

"'But this,' Charles Ashley explained, 'I refused to do, and then Mr. Triscott asked me if I knew whether my dear father had any life insurances, and if so, in what company. I was able to satisfy him on that point, as I had heard him speak with Mr. Oldwall about a life policy he had in the Empire of India Life Insurance Company. Mr. Triscott then told me to leave the matter to him, which I was only too glad to do.'

"Witness was asked if he knew anything of his father's intentions with regard to altering his will, and to this he gave an emphatic 'No!' He explained that he had taken a note from his father to Mr. Triscott on the Friday and that he had seen Mr. Triscott when the latter called at the flat that afternoon, but when the coroner asked him whether he knew what passed between his father and the lawyer on that occasion, he again gave an emphatic 'No!'

"He had accepted gratefully Mr. Triscott's suggestion that Mrs. Triscott should come over for the weekend to take charge of the invalid; but he declared that this arrangement was in no way a reflection upon his brother. On the whole, then, Charles Ashley made a favourable impression upon the public and jury for his clear and straightforward evidence. The only time when he hesitated—and did so very obviously—was when the coroner asked him whether he knew of any recent disagreement between his father and his brother Philip, a disagreement which might have led to Mr. Thornton Ashley's decision to alter his will. Charles Ashley did hesitate at

this point, and, though he was hard-pressed by the coroner, he only gave ambiguous replies, and when he had completed his evidence, he left one under the impression that he might have said something if he would, and that but for his many afflictions the coroner would probably have pressed him much harder.

"This impression was confirmed by the evidence of the next witness, a Mrs. Trapp, who had been the daily 'char' at Malvine Mansions. She began by explaining to the coroner that she had done the work at the flat for the past two years. At first she used to come every morning for a couple of hours with the exception of Sundays, but for the last two months or so she came on the Sundays, but stayed away on the Mondays; on Wednesdays she stayed the whole day, until about six, as Mr. Charles always did a lot of shopping those afternoons.

"Asked whether she remembered what happened at the flat on the Wednesday preceding Mr. Thornton Ashley's death, she said that she did remember quite well Mr. Philip Ashley called; he did do that sometimes on a Wednesday, when his brother was out. He stayed about an hour and, in Mrs. Trapp's picturesque language, he and his father 'carried on awful!'

"'I couldn't 'ear what they said,' Mrs. Trapp explained, with eager volubility, 'but I could 'ear the ole gentleman screaming. I 'ad 'eard 'im storm like that at Mr. Philip once before—about a month ago. But Lor' bless you, Mr. Philip 'e didn't seem to care, and on Wednesday, when I let 'im out of the flat 'e just looked quite cheerful like. But the ole gentleman 'e was angry. I 'ad to give 'im a nip o' brandy, 'e was sort o' shaken after Mr. Philip went.'

"You see then, don't you?" the Old Man in the Corner said with a grim chuckle, "how gradually a network of sinister evidence was being woven around Philip Ashley. He himself was conscious of it, and he was conscious also of the wave of hostility that was rising up against him. He looked now, not only grave, but decidedly anxious, and he held his arms tightly crossed over his chest, as if in the act of making a physical effort to keep his nerves under control.

"He gave me the impression of a man who would hate any kind of publicity, and the curious, eager looks that were cast upon him, especially

by the women, must have been positive torture to a sensitive man. However, he looked a handsome and manly figure as he stood up to answer the questions put to him by the coroner. He said that he had arrived at the flat on the Saturday at about mid-day, explaining to the jury that he always came once a fortnight to be with his father, whilst his brother Charles enjoyed a couple of days in the country. On this occasion, however, he was told that his father was too ill to see him. Charles, however, went off on his bicycle as usual, but contrary to precedent, a lady had apparently been left in charge of the invalid. Witness understood that this was Mrs. Triscott, the wife of a neighbour, who had kindly volunteered to stay over the week-end. She was an experienced nurse and would know what to do in case the patient required anything. For the moment he was asleep and must not be disturbed.

"'I naturally felt very vexed,' the witness continued, 'at being kept out of my father's room, and I may have spoken rather sharply at the moment, but I flatly deny that I was rude to Mrs. Triscott, or that I was in a violent rage. I did get a glimpse of my father, as he lay in bed, and I must say that I did not think that he looked any worse than he had been all along. However, I was not going to argue the point. I preferred to wait until the Monday morning when my brother would be home, and I could tackle him on the subject.'

"At this point the coroner desired to know why, in that case, when the witness was told that his brother would not be at the flat before ten o'clock, he turned up there as early as half-past eight.

"'Because,' the witness replied, 'I was naturally rather anxious to know how things were, and because I hoped to get a day on the river with a friend, and to make an early start if possible. However, when I got to the flat, Mrs. Triscott wanted to get away, and so I agreed to stay there and wait until ten o'clock, when, so Mrs. Triscott assured me, my brother would certainly be home. As a matter of fact he always used to get home at that hour with clockwork regularity on the Monday mornings after his holiday. My father was asleep, and Mrs. Triscott left me instructions what to do in case he required anything. At half-past nine he woke. I heard him stirring and I went into his room and gave him some barley-water and sat with him for a little while. He seemed quite cheerful and good-tempered, and, honestly, I did not think that he was any worse than he had been for weeks.

Just before ten o'clock he dropped off to sleep again. I knew that my brother would be in within the next half hour and, as this would not be the first time that my father had been left alone in the flat, I did not think that I should be doing anything wrong by leaving him. I went back to my chambers and was busy making arrangements for the day when I had a telephone message from my brother that our father was dead.'

"Questioned by the coroner as to the disagreement which he had had with his father on the previous Wednesday, Mr. Philip Ashley indignantly repudiated the idea that there was any quarrel.

"'My father,' he said, 'had a very violent temper and a very harsh, penetrating voice. He certainly did get periodically angry with me whenever I explained to him that my marriage to Lady Peet-Jackson could not, in all decency, take place for at least another six months. He would storm and shriek for a little while,' the witness went on, 'but we invariably parted the best of friends.'"

The Old Man in the Corner paused for a little while, leaving me both interested and puzzled. I was trying to piece together what I remembered of the case with what he had just told me, and I was longing to hear his explanation of the events which followed that memorable inquest. After a little while the funny creature resumed:

"I told you," he said, "that a wave of hostility had risen in the public mind against Philip Ashley. It came from a sense of sympathy for the other son, who, deformed and afflicted, had been done out of a fortune. True that it would not have been of much use to him, and that in the original will ample provision had been made for his modest wants, but it now seemed as if, at the eleventh hour, the old miser had thought to make reparation toward the son who had given up his whole life to him, whilst the other had led one of leisure, independence, and gaiety. What had caused old Thornton Ashley thus to change his mind was never conclusively proved; there were some rumours already current that Philip Ashley was in debt and had appealed to his father for money, a fatal thing to do with a miser. But this also was never actually proved. The only persons who could have enlightened the jury on the subject were Philip Ashley himself and his brother, Charles, but each of them, for reasons of his own, chose to remain silent.

"And now you will no doubt recall the fact which finally determined the jury to bring in their sensational verdict, in consequence of which Philip Ashley was arrested on the coroner's warrant on a charge of attempted murder. It seemed horrible, ununderstandable, unbelievable, but, nevertheless, a jury of twelve men did arrive at that momentous decision after deliberation lasting less than half an hour. What I believe weighed with them in the end was the fact that the assistant who came with the divisional surgeon to conduct the *post-mortem* found underneath the bed of the deceased, a walking-stick with a crook-handle, and the crumpled and torn copy of the notes for the new will which Mr. Triscott had prepared. Philip Ashley when confronted with the stick admitted that it was his. He had missed it on the Saturday when he was leaving the flat, as he was under the impression that he had brought one with him; however, he did not want to spend any more time looking for it, as he was obviously so very much in the way.

"Now, both the charwoman and Mrs. Triscott swore that the patient's room had been cleaned and tidied on the Sunday, and that there was no sign of a walking-stick in the room then.

§5

"And so," the Old Man in the Corner went on, with a cynical shrug of his lean shoulders, "Philip Ashley went through the terrible ordeal of being hauled up before the magistrate on the charge of having attempted to murder his father, an old man with one foot in the grave. He pleaded 'Not Guilty,' and reserved his defence. The whole of the evidence was gone through all over again, of course, but nothing new had transpired. The case was universally thought to look very black against the accused, and no one was surprised when he was eventually committed for trial.

"Public feeling remained distinctly hostile to him. It was a crime so horrible and so unique you would have thought that no one would have believed that a well-known, well-educated man could possibly have been guilty of it. Probably, if the event had occurred before the war, public opinion would have repudiated the possibility, but so many horrible crimes have occurred in every country these past few years that one was just inclined to shrug one's shoulders and murmur: 'Perhaps, one never knows!' One thing remained beyond a doubt: old Mr. Thornton Ashley died of shock

or fright following a violent and dastardly assault, finger-marks were discovered round his throat, and there were evidences on his face and head that he had been repeatedly struck with what might easily have been the walking-stick which was found under his bed. Add to this the weight of evidence of the new will, about to be signed, and of the quarrel between father and son on the previous Wednesday, and you have as good a motive for the murder as any prosecuting counsel might wish for. Philip Ashley would not, of course, hang for murder, but it was even betting that he would get twenty years.

"Anyway, I don't think that, as things were, any one blamed Lady Peet-Jackson for her decision. A week before Philip Ashley's trial came on she announced her engagement to Lord Francis Firmour, son of the Marquis of Ettridge, whom she subsequently married.

"But Philip Ashley was acquitted—you remember that? He was acquitted because Sir Arthur Inglewood was his counsel, and Sir Arthur is the finest criminal lawyer we possess; and, because the evidence against him was entirely circumstantial, it was demolished by his counsel with masterly skill. Whatever might be said on the subject of 'motive,' there was nothing whatever to prove that the accused knew anything of his father's intentions with regard to a new will; and there was only a charwoman's word to say that he had quarrelled with his father on that memorable Wednesday.

"On the other hand, there was Mr. Oldwall and Dr. Fanshawe-Bigg, old friends of the deceased, both swearing positively that Thornton Ashley had a peculiarly shrill and loud voice, that he would often get into passions about nothing at all, when he would scream and storm, and yet mean nothing by it. The only evidence of any tangible value was the walking-stick but even that was not enough to blast a man's life with such a monstrous suspicion.

"Philip Ashley was acquitted, but there are not many people who followed that case closely who believed him altogether innocent at the time. What Lady Peet-Jackson thought about it no one knows. It was for her sake that the unfortunate man threw up the chances of a fortune, and when it came within his grasp it still seemed destined to evade him to the end. In losing the woman for whom he had been prepared to make so many

sacrifices, poor Philip lost the fortune a second time, because, as he was not married within the prescribed time-limit, it was Charles who inherited under the terms of the original will. But I think you will agree with me that any sensitive man is well out of a union with a hard and mercenary woman.

"And now there has been another revolution in the wheel of Fate. Charles Ashley died the other day in a nursing home of heart failure, following an operation. He died intestate, and his brother is his sole heir. Funny, isn't it, that Philip Ashley should get his father's fortune in the end? But Fate does have a way sometimes of dealing out compensations, after she has knocked a man about beyond his deserts. Philip Ashley is a rich man now, and there is a rumour, I am told, current in the society papers, that Lady Francis Firmour has filed a petition for divorce, and that the proceedings will be undefended. But can you imagine any man marrying such a woman after all that she made him suffer?"

Then, as the funny creature paused and appeared entirely engrossed in the fashioning of complicated knots in his beloved bit of string, I felt that it was my turn to keep the ball rolling.

"Then you, for one," I said, "are quite convinced that Philip Ashley did not know that his father intended to make a new will, and did not try to murder him?"

"Aren't you?" he retorted.

"Well," I rejoined, somewhat lamely, "some one did assault the old miser, didn't they? If it was not Philip Ashley then it must have been just an ordinary burglar, who thought that the old man had some money hidden away under his mattress."

"Can't you theorise more intelligently than that?" the tiresome creature asked in his very rude and cynical manner. I would gladly have slapped his face, only—I did want to know.

"Your own theory," I retorted, choosing to ignore his impertinence, "seek him first whom the crime benefits."

"Well, and whom did that particular crime benefit the most?"

"Philip Ashley, of course," I replied, "but you said yourself——"

"Philip Ashley did not benefit by the crime," the old scarecrow broke in, with a dry cackle. "No, no, but for the fact that a merciful Providence removed Charles Ashley so very unexpectedly out of this wicked world, Philip would still be living on a few hundreds a year, most of which he would owe to the munificence of his brother."

"That," I argued, "was only because that Peet-Jackson woman threw him over, otherwise——"

"And why did she throw him over? Because old Thornton Ashley died under mysterious circumstances, and Philip Ashley was under a cloud because of it. Any one could have foreseen that that particular woman would throw him over the very moment that suspicion fell upon him."

"But Charles——" I began.

"Exactly," he broke in, excitedly, "it was Charles who benefited by the crime. It was he who inherited the fortune."

"But, by the new will he would have inherited anyhow. Then, why in the world——"

"You surely don't believe in that new will, do you? The way in which I marshalled the facts before you ought to have paved the way for more intelligent reasoning."

"But Mr. Triscott——" I argued.

"Ah, yes," he said, "Mr. Triscott—exactly. The whole thing could only be done in partnership, I admit. But does not everything point to a partnership in what, to my mind, is one of the ugliest crimes in our records? You ought to be able to follow the workings of Charles Ashley's mind, a mind as tortuous as the body that held it. Let me put the facts once more briefly before you. While Philip obstinately remained a bachelor, all was well. Charles stuck to the old miser, carefully watching over his interests lest they become jeopardised. But presently, Lady Peet-Jackson became a widow and Philip gaily announced his engagement. From that hour Charles, of course, must have seen the fortune on which he had already counted slipping away irretrievably from his grasp. Can you not see in your mind's eye that queer, misshapen creature setting his crooked brain to devise a way

out of the difficulty? Can you not see the plan taking shape gradually, forming itself slowly into a resolve—a resolve to stop his brother's marriage at all costs? But how? Philip, passionately in love with Muriel Peet-Jackson, having won her after years of waiting, was not likely to give her up. No, but *she* might give *him* up. She had done it once for the sake of ambition, she might do it again if ... if ... well, Charles Ashley, obscure, poor, misshapen, was not likely to find a rival who would supplant his handsome brother in any woman's affections. Certainly not! But there remained the other possibility, the possibility that Philip, poor—or, better still, disgraced—might cease to be a prize in the matrimonial market. Disgraced! But how? By publicity? By crime? Yes, by crime! Now, can you see the plan taking shape?

"Can you see Charles cudgelling his wits as to what crime could most easily be fastened on a man of Philip's personality and social position? Probably a chance word dropped by his father put the finishing touch to his scheme, a chance word on the subject of a will. And there was the whole plan ready. The unsigned will, the assault on the dying man, and quarrels there always were plenty between the peppery old miser and his somewhat impatient son. As for Triscott, the dapper little local lawyer, I suppose it took some time for Charles Ashley's crooked schemes to appear as feasible and profitable to him. Of course, without him nothing could have been done, and the whole of my theory rests upon the fact that the two men were partners in the crime.

"Where they first met, and how they became friends, I don't profess to know. If I had had anything to do with the official investigation of that crime I should first of all have examined the servant in the Triscott household, and found out whether or no Mr. Charles Ashley had ever been a visitor there. In any case, I should have found out something about Triscott's friends and Triscott's haunts. I am sure that it would then have come to light that Charles Ashley and Mr. Triscott had constant intercourse together.

"I cannot bring myself to believe in that unsigned will. There was nothing whatever that led up to it, except the supposed quarrel on the Wednesday. But, if that old miser did want to alter his will, why should he have sent for a man whom he hardly knew and whom, mind you, he would

have to pay for his services, rather than for his friend, Oldwall, who would have done the work for nothing? The man was a miser, remember. His meanness, we are told, amounted to a mania; a miser never pays for something he can get for nothing. There was also another little point that struck me during the inquest as significant. If Triscott was an entire stranger to Charles Ashley, why should he have taken such a personal interest in him and in the old man to the extent of sending his wife to spend two whole days and nights in charge of an invalid who was nothing to him? Why should Mrs. Triscott have undertaken such a thankless task in the house of a miser, where she would get no comforts and hardly anything to eat? Why, I say, should the Triscotts have done all that if they had not some vital self-interest at stake?

"And I contend that that self-interest demanded that one of them should be there, in the flat, on the watch, to see that no third person was present whilst Philip spent his time by his father's bedside—a witness, such as Lady Peet-Jackson, perhaps, or some friend—whose testimony might demolish the whole edifice of lies, which had been so carefully built up. And, did you notice another point? The charwoman, by a new arrangement, was never at the flat on a Monday morning, and that arrangement had only obtained for the past two months. Now why? Charwomen stay away, I believe, on Sundays always, but, I ask you, have you ever heard of a charwoman having a holiday on a Monday?"

I was bound to admit that it was unusual, whereupon the old scarecrow went on, with excitement that grew as rapidly as did the feverish energy of his fingers manipulating his bit of string.

"And now propel your mind back to that same Monday morning, when, the coast being clear, Charles Ashley, back at the flat and alone with the old man, was able at last to put the finishing touch to his work of infamy. One pressure of the fingers, one blow with the walking-stick, and the curtain was rung down finally on the hideous drama which he had so skilfully invented. Think of it all carefully and intelligently," the Old Man in the Corner concluded, as he stuffed his beloved bit of string into the capacious pocket of his checked ulster, "and you will admit that there is not a single flaw in my argument——"

"The walking-stick," I broke in, quickly.

"Exactly," he retorted, "the walking-stick. Charles was quick enough to grasp the significance of that, and on Saturday, while his brother's back was turned, he carefully hid the walking-stick, knowing that it would be a useful piece of evidence presently. Do you, for a moment, suppose," he added, dryly, "that any man would have been such a fool as to throw his walking-stick and the crumpled notes of the will underneath his victim's bed? They could not have been left there, remember, they could not have rolled under the bed, as the walking-stick had a crook-handle; they must deliberately have been thrown there.

"No, no!" he said, in conclusion, "there is no flaw. It is all as clear as daylight to any receptive intelligence, and though human justice did err at first, and it looked, at one time, as if the innocent alone would suffer and the guilty enjoy the fruits of his crime, a higher justice interposed in the end. Charles has gone, and Philip is in possession of the fortune which his father desired him to have. I only hope that his eyes are opened at last to the true value of the beautiful Muriel's love, and that it will be some other worthier woman who will share his fortune and help him forget all that he endured in the past."

"And what about the Triscotts?" I asked.

"Ah!" he said, with a sigh, "they are the wicked who prosper, and higher justice has apparently forgotten them, as it often does forget the evil-doer, for a time. We must take it that they were well paid for their share in the crime, and, if the unfortunate Charles had lived, he probably would have been blackmailed by them and bled white. As it is, they have gone scot-free. I made a few enquiries in the neighbourhood lately and I discovered that Mr. Triscott is selling his practice and retiring from business. Presently we'll hear that he has bought himself a cottage in the country. Then, perhaps, your last doubt will vanish and you will be ready to admit that I have found the true solution of the mystery that surrounded the death of the miser of Maida Vale."

The next moment he was gone, and I just caught sight of the corner of his checked ulster disappearing through the swing doors.

XII
THE FULTON GARDENS MYSTERY

§1

"Are you prepared to admit," the Old Man in the Corner said abruptly as soon as he had finished his glass of milk, "that sympathy, understanding, largeness of heart—what?—are invariably the outcome of a big brain? It is the fool who is censorious and cruel. Your clever man is nearly always sympathetic. He understands, he appreciates, he studies motives and understands them. During the war it was the fools who tracked down innocent men and women under pretence that they were spies; it was the fools who did not understand that a German might be just as fine a patriot as a Briton or a Frenchman if he served his own country. The hard, cruel man is almost always a fool; the backbiting old maid invariably so.

"I am tempted to say this," he went on, "because I have been thinking over that curious case which newspaper reporters have called the Fulton Gardens Mystery. You remember it, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, "I do. As a matter of fact I knew poor old Mr. Jessup slightly, and I was terribly shocked when I heard about that awful tragedy. And to think that that horrid young Leighton——"

"Ha!" my eccentric friend broke in, with a chuckle, "then you have held on to that theory, have you?"

"There was no other possible!" I retorted.

"But he was discharged."

I shrugged my shoulders under pretence of being unconvinced. As a matter of fact, all I wanted was to make the funny creature talk.

"A flimsy *alibi*," I said coldly.

"And a want of sympathy," he rejoined.

"What has sympathy got to do with a brutal assault on a defenceless old man? You can't deny that Leighton had something, at any rate, to do with

it?"

"I did not mean sympathy for the guilty," he argued, "but for the women who were the principal witnesses in the case."

"I don't see——" I protested.

"No, but I do. I understood, and in a great measure I sympathised."

At which expression of noble sentiment I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it. In view of his preamble just now his fatuous statement was funny beyond words.

"You being the clever man who understands, etcetera," I said, as seriously as I could, "and I the censorious and cruel old maid who is invariably a fool."

"You put it crudely," he rejoined complacently, "and had you not given ample proof of your intelligence before now I might have thought it worth while to refute the second half of your argument. As for the first..."

"Hadn't you better tell me about the Fulton Gardens Mystery?" I broke in impatiently.

"Certainly," he replied, in no way abashed. "I have meant to talk to you about it all along, only that you would digress."

"*Pax!*" I retorted, and with a conciliatory smile I handed him a beautiful bit of string. He pounced on it with thin hands that looked like the talons of a bird, and he gloated on that bit of string for all the world as on a prey.

"I dare say," he began, "that to most people the mystery appeared baffling enough. But to me ... Well, there was the victim of what you very properly call the cowardly assault, your friend—or acquaintance—Mr. Seton Jessup, a man on the wrong side of sixty, but very active and vigorous for his years. He carried on the business of pearl merchant in Fulton Gardens, but he did not live there, as you know. He was a married man, had sons and daughters and a nice house in Fitzjohn's Avenue. He also owned the house in Fulton Gardens, a four-storied building of the pattern prevalent in that neighbourhood. The ground floor, together with the one above that, and the basement were used by Mr. Jessup himself for his business: on the

ground floor he had his office and showroom, above that were a couple of reception rooms, where he usually had his lunch and saw a few privileged customers, and in the basement there was a kitchen with scullery and pantry, a small servants' hall, and a strong-room for valuables. The top story of all was let to a surgical-instrument maker who did not sleep on the premises, and the second floor—that is the one just below the surgical-instrument maker and immediately above the reception rooms—was occupied by Mrs. Tufnell, who was cook-housekeeper to Mr. Jessup, and her niece, Ann Weber, who acted as the house-parlourmaid. Mrs. Tufnell's son, Mark, who was a junior clerk in the office, did not sleep in the house. He was considered to be rather delicate, and lived with a family somewhere near the Alexandra Palace.

"All these people, as you know, played important parts in the drama that was enacted on the sixteenth of November at No. 13, Fulton Gardens—an unlucky number, by the way, but one which Mr. Jessup did not change to the usual 12a when he bought the house, because he despised all superstition. He was a hard-headed, prosperous business man; he worked hard himself, and expected hard work from his employés. Both his sons worked in the office, one as senior clerk, and the other as showman, and in addition to young Mark Tufnell there was another junior clerk—a rather unsatisfactory youth named Arthur Leighton, who was some sort of a relation of Mrs. Jessup's. But for this connection he never would have been kept on in the business, as he was unpunctual, idle, and unreliable. The housekeeper, as well as some of the neighbours, had been scandalised lately by what was picturesquely termed the 'goings on of that young Leighton with Ann, the housemaid at No. 13.'

"Ann Weber was a very pretty girl, and like many pretty girls she was fond of finery and of admiration. As soon as she entered Mr. Jessup's service she started a flirtation with Mark Tufnell, then she dropped him for a while in favour of the youngest Mr. Jessup; then she went back to Mark, and seemed really in love with him that time until, finally, she transferred her favours to Arthur Leighton, chiefly because he was by far the most generous of her admirers. He was always giving her presents of jewellery which Mark Tufnell could not afford, and young Jessup apparently did not care to give her. But she did not, by any means, confine her flirtations to one man: indeed, it appears that she had a marvellous facility for keeping

several men hanging about her dainty apron-strings. She was not on the best of terms with her aunt, chiefly because the latter noted with some asperity that her son was far from cured of his infatuation for the pretty housemaid. The more she flirted with Leighton and the others the greater did his love for her appear, and all that Mrs. Tufnell could hope for was that Mr. Leighton would marry Ann one day soon, when he would take her right away and Mark would then probably make up his mind to forget her. Young Leighton was doing very well in business apparently, for he always had plenty of money to spend, whilst poor Mark had only a small salary, and, moreover, had nothing of the smart, dashing ways about him which had made the other man so attractive to Ann."

§2

"And now," the Old Man in the Corner continued after a while, "we come to that sixteenth of November when the mysterious drama occurred at No. 13, Fulton Gardens. As a general rule, it seems, Mr. Jessup was in his office most evenings until seven o'clock. His clerks and showmen finished at six, but he would, almost invariably, stay on an hour longer to go through his accounts or look over his stock. On this particular evening, just before seven o'clock, he rang for the housekeeper, Mrs. Tufnell, and told her that he would be staying until quite late, and would she send him in a cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches in about an hour's time. Mrs. Tufnell owned to being rather disappointed when she had this order because her son Mark had arranged to take her and Ann to the cinema that evening, and now, of course, they could not leave until after Mr. Jessup had gone, in case he wanted anything, and he might be staying on until all hours. However, Mark stayed to supper, and after supper Mrs. Tufnell got the tea and sandwiches ready and took the tray up to Mr. Jessup herself. Mr. Jessup was then sitting at his desk with two or three big books in front of him, and Mrs. Tufnell noticed that the safe in which the cash was kept that came in after banking hours was wide open.

"Mrs. Tufnell put down the tray, and was about to leave the room again when Mr. Jessup spoke to her.

"'I expect Mr. Leighton back presently. Show him in here when he comes. But I don't want to see anybody else, not any of you. Understand?'

"It seems that he said this in such a harsh and peremptory manner that Mrs. Tufnell was not only upset, but quite frightened. Mr. Jessup had always been very kind and considerate to his servants, and the housekeeper declared that she had never been spoken to like that before. But we all know what that sort of people are: they have no understanding, and unless you are perpetually smiling at them they turn huffy at the slightest word of impatience. Undoubtedly Mr. Jessup was both tired and worried, and no great stress was laid by the police subsequently on the fact that he had spoken harshly on this occasion. Even to you at this moment I dare say that this seems a trifling circumstance, but I mention it because to my mind it had a great deal of significance, and I think that the police were very wrong to dismiss it quite so lightly.

"Well, to resume. Mr. Jessup was in his office with his books and with the safe, where he kept all the cash that came in after banking hours, open. Mrs. Tufnell saw and spoke to him at eight o'clock and he was then expecting Arthur Leighton to come to him at nine.

"No one saw him alive after that.

"The next morning Mrs. Tufnell was downstairs as usual at a quarter to seven. After she had lighted the kitchen fire, done her front steps and swept the hall she went to do the ground-floor rooms. She told the police afterwards that from the moment she got up she felt that there was something wrong in the house. Somehow or other she was frightened; she didn't know of what, but she was frightened. As soon as she had opened the office door she gave a terrified scream. Mr. Jessup was sitting at his desk just as Mrs. Tufnell had seen him the night before, with his big books in front of him and the safe door open. But his head had fallen forward on the desk, and his arms were spread out over his books. Mrs. Tufnell never doubted for a second but that he was dead, even before she saw the stick lying on the floor and that horrible, horrible dull red stain which spread from the back of the old man's head, right down to his neck and stained his collar and the top of his coat. Even before she saw all that she knew that Mr. Jessup was dead. Terrified, she clung to the open door; she could do nothing but stare and stare, for the room, the furniture, the motionless figure by the desk had started whirling round and round before her eyes, so that she felt that at any moment she might fall down in a dead faint. It seemed ages

before she heard Ann's voice calling to her, asking what was the matter. Ann was lazy and never came downstairs before eight o'clock. She had apparently only just tumbled out of bed when she heard Mrs. Tufnell's scream. Now she came running downstairs, with her bare feet thrust into her slippers and a dressing-gown wrapped round her.

"'What is it, Auntie?' she kept on asking as she ran. 'What has happened?'

"And when she reached the office door, she only gave one look into the room and exclaimed, 'Oh, my God! He's killed him!'

"Somehow Ann's exclamation of horror brought Mrs. Tufnell to her senses. With a great effort she pulled herself together, just in time, too, to grip Ann by the arm, or the girl would have measured her length on the tiled floor behind her. As it was, Mrs. Tufnell gave her a vigorous shake:

"'What do you mean, Ann Weber?' she demanded in a hoarse whisper. 'What do you mean? Who has killed him?'

"But Ann couldn't or wouldn't utter another word. She was as white as a sheet and, staggering backwards, she had fallen up against the bannisters at the foot of the stairs and was clinging to them, wide-eyed, with twitching mouth and shaking knees.

"'Pull yourself together, Ann Weber,' Mrs. Tufnell said peremptorily, 'and run and fetch the police at once.'

"But Ann looked as if she couldn't move. She kept on reiterating in a dry, meaningless manner, 'The police! The police,' until Mrs. Tufnell, who by now had gathered her wits together, gave her a vigorous push and then went upstairs to put on her bonnet. A few minutes later she had gone for the police.

§3

"I don't know," the Old Man in the Corner went on glibly, "whether you remember all the circumstances which made that case such a puzzling one. Indeed, it well deserved the popular name that the evening papers bestowed on it—'The Fulton Gardens Mystery'—for it was, indeed, a mystery, and to most people it has so remained to this day."

"Not to you," I put in, with a smile, just to humour him, as I could see he was waiting to be buttered-up before he would proceed with his narrative.

"No, not to me," he admitted, with his fatuous smile. "If the members of the police force who had the case in hand had been psychologists, they would not have been puzzled, either. But they were satisfied with their own investigations and with all that was revealed at the inquest, and they looked no further, with the result that when the edifice of their deductions collapsed, they had nowhere to turn. Time had gone on, evidences had become blurred, witnesses were less sure of themselves and less reliable, and a certain blackguard, on whom I for one could lay my fingers at this moment, is going through the world scot-free.

"But let me begin by telling you the facts as they were revealed at the inquest. You can then form your own conclusions, and I dare say that these will be quite as erroneous as those arrived at by the public and the police.

"The drama began to unfold itself when Mr. Ernest Jessup, the younger son of the deceased gentleman, was called. He began by explaining that he was junior clerk in his father's office, and that he, along with all the other employés had remarked on the sixteenth that the guv'nor did not seem at all like himself. He was irritable with everybody, and just before luncheon he called Arthur Leighton into his office and apparently some very hot words passed between the two. Witness happened to be in the hall at the moment, getting his hat and coat, and the housemaid was standing by. They both heard very loud voices coming from the office. The guv'nor was storming away at the top of his voice.

"'That's poor Leighton getting it in the neck,' witness remarked to Ann Weber.

"But the girl only giggled and shrugged her shoulders. Then she said: 'Do you think so?'

"'Yes,' witness replied, 'aren't you sorry to see your devoted admirer in such hot water?'

"Again the girl giggled and then ran away upstairs. Mr. Leighton was not at the office the whole of that afternoon, but witness understood, either

from his father or from his brother—he couldn't remember which—that Leighton was to come in late that night to interview the guv'nor.

"Witness was next questioned as to the events that occurred at Mr. Jessup's home in Fitzjohn's Avenue, while the terrible tragedy was enacted in Fulton Gardens. It seems that Mr. Jessup had an old mother who lived in St. Albans, and that he went sometimes to see her after business hours and stayed the night. As a general rule, when he intended going he would telephone home in the course of the afternoon. On the sixteenth he rang up at about five o'clock and said that he was staying late at the office—later than usual—and they were not to wait dinner for him. Mrs. Jessup took this message herself, and had recognised her husband's voice. Then, later on in the evening—it might have been half-past eight or nine—there was another telephone message from the office. Witness went to the telephone that time. A voice, which at first he did not think that he recognised, said: 'Mr. Jessup has gone to St. Albans. He caught the 7.50, and won't be home to-night.' In giving evidence witness at first insisted on the fact that he did not recognise the voice on the telephone. It was a man's voice, and sounded like that of a person who was rather the worse for drink. He asked who was speaking, and the reply came quite clearly that time: 'Why, it's Leighton, you ass! Don't you know me?' Witness then asked: 'Where are you speaking from?' and the reply was: 'From the office, of course. I've had my wigging and am getting consoled by our Annie-bird.' Annie-bird was the name the pretty housemaid went by among the young clerks at the office. Witness then hung up the receiver and gave his mother the message. Neither Mrs. Jessup nor any one else in the house thought anything more about it, as there was nothing whatever unusual about the occurrence. Witness only made some remarks about Arthur Leighton having been drinking again, and there the matter unfortunately remained until the following morning, when witness and his brother arrived at the office and were met with the awful news.

"Both Mrs. Jessup and Mr. Aubrey, the eldest son, corroborated the statements made by the previous witness with regard to the telephone messages on the evening of the sixteenth. Mr. Aubrey Jessup also stated that he knew that his father was worried about some irregularities in Arthur Leighton's accounts, and that he meant to have it out with the young clerk in the course of the evening. Witness had begged his father to let the matter rest until the next day, as Leighton, he thought, had got the afternoon off to

see a sick sister, but the deceased had rejected the suggestion with obvious irritation.

"'Stuff and nonsense!' he said. 'I don't believe in that sick sister a bit. I'll see that young blackguard to-night.'

"The next witness was Mrs. Tufnell, who was cook-housekeeper at Fulton Gardens. She was a middle-aged, capable-looking woman, with a pair of curiously dark eyes. I say 'curiously' because Mrs. Tufnell's eyes had that velvety quality which is usually only met with in southern countries. I have seldom seen them in England, except, perhaps, in Cornwall. Apart from her eyes, there was nothing either remarkable or beautiful about Mrs. Tufnell. She may have been good-looking once, but that was a long time ago. When she stood up to give evidence her face appeared rather bloodless, weather-beaten, and distinctly hard. She spoke quite nicely and without any of that hideous Cockney accent one might have expected from a cook in a City office.

"She deposed that on the sixteenth, just before the luncheon hour, she was crossing the hall at 13, Fulton Gardens. The door into the office was ajar, and she heard Mr. Jessup's voice raised, evidently in great wrath. Mrs. Tufnell also heard Mr. Leighton's voice, both gentlemen, as she picturesquely put it, going at one another hammer and tongs. Obviously, though she wouldn't admit it, Mrs. Tufnell stopped to listen, but she does not seem to have understood much of what was said. However, a moment or two later, Mr. Jessup went to the door in order to shut it, and while he did so, Mrs. Tufnell heard him say quite distinctly:

"'Well, if you must go now, you must, though I don't believe a word about your sister being ill. But you may go; only, understand that I expect you back here this evening not later than nine. I shall have gone through the accounts by then, and...'

"At this point the door was shut and witness heard nothing more. But she reiterated the statements which she had already made to the police, and which I have just retold you, about Mr. Jessup staying late at the office and her taking him in some sandwiches, when he told her that he was expecting Mr. Leighton at about nine o'clock and did not wish to be disturbed by anybody else. Witness was asked to repeat what the deceased had actually

said to her with reference to this matter, and she laid great stress on Mr. Jessup's harsh and dictatorial manner, so different, she said, to his usual gentlemanly ways.

"'"I don't want to see anybody else—not any of you," that's what he said,' Mrs. Tufnell replied, with an air of dignity, and then added: 'As if Ann Weber or I had ever thought of disturbing him when he was at work!'

"Witness went on to relate that, after she had taken in the tray of tea and sandwiches, she went upstairs and found Ann Weber sitting in her room by herself. Mark, the girl explained, had gone off, very disappointed that they couldn't all go together to the cinema. Mrs. Tufnell argued the point for a moment or two, as she didn't see why Ann should have refused to go if she wanted to see the show. But the girl seemed to have turned sulky. Anyway, it was too late, she said, as Mark had gone off by himself: he had booked the places and didn't want to waste them, so he was going to get another friend to go with him.

"Mrs. Tufnell then settled down to do some sewing, and Ann turned over the pages of a stale magazine. Mrs. Tufnell thought that she appeared restless and agitated. Her cheeks were flushed and at the slightest sound she gave a startled jump. Presently she said that she had some silver to clean in the pantry, and went downstairs to do it. Some little time after that there was a ring at the front-door bell, and Mrs. Tufnell heard Ann going through the hall to open the door. A quarter of an hour went by, and then another.

"Mrs. Tufnell began to wonder what Ann was up to. She put down her sewing and started to go downstairs. The first thing that struck her was that all the lights on the stairs and landing were out; the house appeared very silent and dark; only a glimmer came from one of the lights downstairs in the hall at the foot of the stairs.

"Mrs. Tufnell went down cautiously. Strangely enough, it did not occur to her to turn on the lights on her way. After she had passed the first-floor landing she heard the sound of muffled voices coming from the hall below. Thinking that she recognised Ann's voice, she called to her: 'Is that you, Ann?' And Ann immediately replied: 'Coming, aunt.' 'Who are you talking to?' Mrs. Tufnell asked, and as Ann did not answer this time, she went on: 'Is it Mr. Leighton?' And Ann said: 'Yes. He is just going.'

"Mrs. Tufnell stood there, waiting. She was half-way down the stairs between the first floor and the hall, and she couldn't see Ann or Mr. Leighton, but a moment or two later she heard Ann's voice saying quite distinctly: 'Well, good-night, Mr. Leighton, see you to-morrow as usual.' After which the front door was opened, then banged to again, and presently Ann came tripping back across the hall.

"'You go to bed now, Ann,' Mrs. Tufnell said to her. 'I'll see Mr. Jessup off when he goes. He won't be long now, I dare say.'

"'Oh, but,' Ann said, 'Mr. Jessup has been gone some time.'

"'Gone some time?' Mrs. Tufnell exclaimed. 'He can't have been gone some time. Why, he was expecting Mr. Leighton, and Mr. Leighton has only just gone.'

"Ann shrugged her shoulders. 'I can only tell you what I know, Mrs. Tufnell,' she said acidly. 'You can come down and see for yourself. The office is shut up and all the lights out.'

"'But didn't Mr. Leighton see Mr. Jessup?'

"'No, he didn't. Mr. Jessup told Mr. Leighton to wait, and then he went away without seeing him.'

"'That's funny,' Mrs. Tufnell remarked, dryly. 'What was Mr. Leighton doing in the house, then, all this time? I heard the front-door bell half an hour ago and more.'

"'That's no business of yours, Aunt Sarah,' the girl retorted pertly. 'And it wasn't half an hour, so there!'

"Mrs. Tufnell did not argue the point any further. Mechanically she went downstairs and ascertained in point of fact that the door of the office and the show-room on the ground floor were both locked as usual, and that the key of the office was outside in the lock. This was entirely in accordance with custom. Mrs. Tufnell, through force of habit, did just turn the key and open the door of the office. She just peeped in to see that the lights were really all out. Satisfied that everything was dark she then closed and relocked the door. Ann, in the meanwhile, stood half-way up the stairs watching. Then the two women went upstairs together. They had only just

got back in their room when the front-door bell rang once more.

"'Now, whoever can that be?' Mrs. Tufnell exclaimed.

"'Don't trouble, aunt,' Ann said with alacrity. 'I'll run down and see.' Which she did. Again it was some time before she came back, and when she did get back to her room, she seemed rather breathless and agitated.

"'Some one for Mr. Jessup,' she said in answer to Mrs. Tufnell's rather acid remark that she had been gone a long time. 'He kept me talking ever such a while. I don't think he believed me when I said Mr. Jessup had gone.'

"'Who was it?' witness asked.

"'I don't know,' the girl replied. 'I never saw him before.'

"'Didn't you ask his name?'

"'I did. But he said it didn't matter—he would call again to-morrow.'

"After that the two women sat for a little while longer, Mrs. Tufnell sewing, and Ann still rather restlessly turning over the pages of a magazine. At ten o'clock they went to bed. And that was the end of the day as far as the household of Mr. Jessup was concerned.

"You may well imagine that all the amateur detectives who were present at the inquest had made up their minds by now that Arthur Leighton had murdered Mr. Seton Jessup, and robbed the till both before and after the crime. It was a simple deduction easily arrived at and presenting the usual features. A flirty minx, an enamoured young man, extravagance, greed, opportunity, and supreme temptation. Amongst the public there were many who did not even think it worth while to hear further witnesses. To their minds the hangman's rope was already round young Leighton's neck. Of course, I admit that at this point it seemed a very clear case. It was only after this that complications arose and soon the investigations bristled with difficulties.

§4

"After a good deal of tedious and irrelevant evidence had been gone through the inquest was adjourned, and the public left the court on the tiptoe of expectation as to what the morrow would bring. Nor was any one

disappointed, for on the morrow the mystery deepened, even though there was plenty of sensational evidence for newspaper reporters to feed on.

"The police, it seems, had brought forward a very valuable witness in the person of the point policeman, who was on duty from eight o'clock onwards on the evening of the sixteenth at the corner of Clerkenwell Road and Fulton Gardens. No. 13 is only a few yards up the street. The man had stated, it seems, that soon after half-past eight he had seen a man come along Fulton Gardens from the direction of Holborn, go up to the front door of No. 13 and ring the bell. He was admitted after a minute or two, and he stayed in the house about half an hour. It was a dark night, and there was a slight drizzle; the witness could not swear to the man's identity. He was slight and of middle height, and walked like a young man. When he arrived he wore a bowler hat and no overcoat, but when he came out again he had an overcoat on and a soft grey hat, and carried the bowler in his hand. Witness noticed as he walked away up Fulton Gardens towards Finsbury this time he took off the soft hat, slipped it into the pocket of his overcoat, and put on the bowler. About ten minutes later, not more, another visitor called at No. 13. He also was slight and tallish, and he wore an overcoat and a bowler hat. He turned into Fulton Gardens from Clerkenwell Road, but on the opposite corner to the one where witness was standing. He rang the bell and was admitted, and stayed about twenty minutes. He walked away in the direction of Holborn. Witness would not undertake to identify either of these two visitors; he had not been close enough to them to see their faces, and there was a good deal of fog that night as well as the drizzle. There was nothing suspicious looking about either of the men. They had walked quite openly up to the front door, rung the bell, and been admitted. The only thing that had struck the constable as queer was the way the first visitor had changed hats when he walked away.

"Witness swore positively that no one else had gone in or out of No. 13 that night except those two visitors. How important this evidence was you will understand presently.

"After this young Tufnell was called. He was a shy-looking fellow, with a nervous manner altogether out of keeping with his dark expressive eyes—eyes which he had obviously inherited from his mother and which gave him a foreign as well as a romantic appearance. He was said to be musical and

to be a talented amateur actor. Every one agreed, it seems, that he had always been a very good son to his mother until his love for Ann Weber had absorbed all his thoughts and most of his screw. He explained that he was junior clerk to Mr. Jessup, and as far as he knew had always given satisfaction. On the sixteenth he had also noticed that the guv'nor was not quite himself. He appeared unusually curt and irritable with everybody. Witness had not been in the house all the evening. When his mother told him that neither she nor Ann could go to the cinema with him he went off by himself, and after the show he went straight back to his digs near the Alexandra Palace. He only heard of the tragedy when he arrived at the office as usual on the morning of the seventeenth. His evidence would have seemed uninteresting and unimportant but for the fact that while he gave it he glanced now and again in the direction where Ann Weber sat beside her aunt. It seemed as if he were all the time mutely asking for her approval of what he was saying, and presently when the coroner asked him whether he knew the cause of his employer's irritability, he very obviously looked at Ann before he finally said: 'No, sir, I don't!'

"After that Ann Weber was called. Of course it had been clear all along that she was by far the most important witness in this mysterious case, and when she rose from her place, looking very trim and neat in her navy-blue coat and skirt, with a jaunty little hat pulled over her left eye, and wearing long amber earrings that gave her pretty face a piquant expression, every one settled down comfortably to enjoy the sensation of the afternoon.

"Ann, who was thoroughly self-possessed, answered the coroner's preliminary questions quite glibly, and when she was asked to relate what occurred at No. 13, Fulton Gardens on the night of the sixteenth, she plunged into her story without any hesitation or trace of nervousness.

"'At about half-past eight,' she said, 'or it may have been later—I won't swear as to the time—there was a ring at the front-door bell. I was down in the pantry, and as I came upstairs I heard the office door being opened. When I got into the passage I saw Mr. Jessup standing in the doorway of the office. He had his spectacles on his nose, and a pen in his hand. He looked as if he had just got up from his desk.'

"'"If that's young Leighton," he said to me, "tell him I'll see him to-morrow. I can't be bothered now." Then he went back into the office and

shut the door.

"'I opened the door to Mr. Leighton,' witness continued, 'and he came in looking very cold and wet. I told him that Mr. Jessup didn't want to see him to-night. He seemed very pleased at this, but he wouldn't go away, and when I told him I was busy he said that I couldn't be so unkind as to turn a fellow out into the rain without giving him a drink. Now I could see that already Mr. Leighton he'd had a bit too much, and I told him so quite plainly. But there! he wouldn't take "No" for an answer, and as it really was jolly cold and damp I told him to go and sit down in the servants' hall while I got him a hot toddy. I went down into the kitchen and put the kettle on and cut a couple of sandwiches. I don't know where Mr. Leighton was during that time or what he was doing. I was in the kitchen some time, because I couldn't get the kettle to boil as the fire had gone down and we have no gas downstairs. When I took the tray into the servants' hall Mr. Leighton was there, and again I told him that I didn't think he ought to have any more whisky, but he only laughed, and was rather impudent, so I just put the tray down, and then I thought that I would run upstairs and see if Mr. Jessup wanted anything. I was rather surprised when I got to the hall to see that all the lights up the stairs had been turned off. There's a switch down in the hall that turns off the lot. The whole house looked very dark. There was but a very little light that came from the lamp at the other end of the hall, near the front door. I was just thinking that I would turn on the lights again when I saw what I could have sworn was Mr. Jessup coming out of his office. He had already got his hat and coat on, and when he came out of the office he shut the door and turned the key in the lock, just as Mr. Jessup always did. It never struck me for a moment that it could be anybody but him. Though it was dark, I recognised his hat and his overcoat, and his own way of turning the key. I spoke to him,' witness continued in answer to a question put to her by the coroner, 'but he didn't reply; he just went straight through the hall and out by the front door. Then after a bit Mr. Leighton came up, and I told him Mr. Jessup had gone. He was quite pleased, and stopped talking in the hall for a moment, and then aunt called to me and Mr. Leighton went away.'

"Witness was then questioned as to the other visitor who called later that same evening, but she stated that she had no idea who it was. 'He came about nine,' she explained, 'and I went down to open the door. He kept me talking ever such a time, asking all sorts of silly questions; I didn't know

how to get rid of him, and he wouldn't leave his name. He said he would call again and that it didn't matter.'

"Ann Weber here gave the impression that the unknown visitor had stopped for a flirtation with her on the doorstep, and her smirking and pert glances rather irritated the coroner. He pulled her up sharply by putting a few straight questions to her. He wanted to pin her down to a definite statement as to the time when (1) she opened the door to Mr. Leighton, (2) she saw what she thought was Mr. Jessup go out of the house, and (3) the second visitor arrived. Though doubtful as to the exact time, Ann was quite sure that the three events occurred in the order in which she had originally related, and in this she was, of course, corroborating the evidence of the point policeman. But there was the mysterious contradiction. Ann Weber swore that Mr. Leighton followed her up from the servants' hall just after she had seen the mysterious individual go out by the front door. On the other hand, she couldn't swear what happened while she was busy in the kitchen getting the hot toddy for Mr. Leighton. She had been trying to make the fire burn up, and had rattled coals and fire-irons. She certainly had not heard any one using the telephone, which was in the office, and she did not know where Mr. Leighton was during that time.

"Nor would she say what was in her mind when first she saw her employer lying dead over the desk and exclaimed: 'My God! He has killed him!' And when the coroner pressed her with questions she burst into tears. Except for this her evidence had, on the whole, been given with extraordinary self-possession. It was a terrible ordeal for a girl to have to stand up before a jury and, roughly speaking, to swear away the character of a man with whom she had been on intimate terms.... The character, did I say? I might just as well have said the life, because whatever doubts had lurked in the public mind about Arthur Leighton's guilt, or at least complicity in the crime, those doubts were dispelled by the girl's evidence. For I need not tell you, I suppose, that every man present that second day at the inquest had already made up his mind that Ann Weber was lying to save her sweetheart. No one believed in the mysterious impersonator of Mr. Jessup. It was Arthur Leighton, they argued, who had murdered his employer and robbed the till, and Ann Weber knew it and had invented the story in order to drag a red herring across the trail.

"I must say that the man himself did not make a good impression when he was called in his turn. As he stepped forward with a swaggering air, and a bold glance at coroner and jury, the interest which he aroused was not a kindly one. He was rather a vulgar-looking creature, with a horsey get-up, high collar, stock-tie, fancy waistcoat, and so on. His hair was of a ginger colour, his eyes light, and his face tanned. Every one noticed that he winked at Ann Weber when he caught her eye, and also that the girl immediately averted her glance and almost imperceptibly shrugged her shoulders. Thereupon Leighton frowned and very obviously swore under his breath.

"Questioned as to his doings on the sixteenth, he admitted that 'the guv'nor had been waxy with him, because,' as he put it with an indifferent swagger, 'there were a few pounds missing from the till.' He also admitted that he had not been looking forward to the evening's interview, but that he had not dared refuse to come. In order to kill time, and to put heart into himself, he had gone with a couple of friends to the Café Royal in Regent Street, and they all had whiskies and sodas till it was time for him to go to Fulton Gardens. His friends were to wait for him until he returned, when they intended to have supper together. Witness then went to Fulton Gardens and saw Ann Weber, who told him that the guv'nor didn't wish to see him. This, according to his own picturesque language, was a little bit of all right. He stayed for a few minutes talking to Ann, and she gave him a hot toddy. He certainly didn't think he had stayed as long as half an hour, but then, when a fellow was talking to a pretty girl ... eh? ... what? ...

"The coroner curtly interrupted his fatuous explanations by asking him at what time he had left his friends, and at what time he had met them again subsequently. Witness was not very sure; he thought he left the Café Royal about half-past eight, but it might have been earlier or later. He took a bus to the bottom of Fulton Gardens. It was beastly cold and wet, and he was very grateful to Ann for giving him a hot drink. He denied that he had been drinking too much, or that he had demanded the hot drink. It was Ann Weber who had offered to get it for him. Jolly pretty girl, Annie-bird, and not shy. Witness concluded his evidence by swearing positively that he had waited in the servants' hall all the while that Ann Weber got him the toddy; he had followed her down, and not gone upstairs or seen anything of Mr. Jessup all the time he was in the house. When he left Fulton Gardens he tried to get a bus back to Regent Street, but many of them were full and it

was rather late before he got back to the Café Royal.

"It was very obvious that as the coroner continued to put question after question to him, Arthur Leighton became vaguely conscious of the feeling of hostility towards him which had arisen in the public mind. He lost something of his swagger, and his face under the tan took on a greyish hue. From time to time he glanced at Ann Weber, but she obstinately looked another way.

"Undoubtedly he felt that he was caught in a network of damnatory evidence which he was unable to combat. The day ended, however, with another adjournment; the police wanted a little more time before taking drastic action. The public so often blame them for being in too great a hurry to fasten an accusation on the flimsiest grounds that one is pleased to record such a noteworthy instance when they really did not leave a single stone unturned before they arrested Arthur Leighton on the charge of murder. They did everything they could to find some proof of the existence and identity of the individual whom Ann Weber professed to have seen while Leighton was still in the house. But all their efforts in that direction came to naught, whilst Leighton himself denied having had an accomplice just as strenuously as he did his own guilt.

"He was brought up before the magistrate, charged with the terrible crime. No one, the police argued, had so strong a motive for the crime or such an opportunity. Alternatively, no one else could have admitted the mysterious impersonator of Mr. Jessup into the house, the accomplice who did the deed, whilst Leighton engaged Ann Weber's attention, always supposing that he did exist, which was never proved, and which the evidence of the police constable refuted. People who dabbled in spiritualism and that sort of thing were pleased to think that the mysterious personage whom the housemaid saw was the ghost of poor old Jessup, who was then lying murdered in his office, stricken by Leighton's hand. But even the most psychic-minded individual was unable to give a satisfactory explanation for the ghost having changed hats while he walked away from that fateful No. 13.

"Altogether the question of hats played an important role in the drama of Leighton's arrest and final discharge. The magistrate did not commit him for trial, because the case for the prosecution collapsed suddenly like a pack

of cards. It was the question of hats that saved Leighton's neck from the hangman's rope. You remember, perhaps, that in his evidence he had stated that before starting to interview his irate employer he had been with some friends at the Café Royal in Regent Street, and that subsequently he met these friends there for supper. Well, although it appeared impossible to establish definitely the time when Leighton left the Café Royal to go to Fulton Gardens, there were two or three witnesses prepared to swear that he was back again at a quarter to ten. Now this was very important. It seems that his friends, who were waiting at the Café Royal, were getting impatient, and at twenty minutes to ten by the clock one of them—a fellow named Richard Hurrill—said he would go outside and see if he could see anything of Leighton. He strolled on as far as Piccadilly Circus where the buses stop that come from the City, and a minute or two later he saw Leighton step out of one. He seemed a little fuzzy in the head, and Hurrill chaffed him a bit. Then he took him by the arm and led him back in triumph to the Café Royal.

"Now mark what followed," the funny creature went on, whilst all at once his fingers started working away as if for dear life on his bit of string. "A hat—a soft grey hat—with an overcoat wrapped round it, were found in the area of a derelict house in Blackhorse Road, Walthamstow, close to the waterworks, and identified as the late Mr. Seton Jessup's overcoat and hat. I don't suppose that you have the least idea where Blackhorse Road, Walthamstow, is, but let me tell you that it is at the back of beyond in the northeast of London. If you remember, the point policeman had stated that the first visitor had called at No. 13 Fulton Gardens at half-past eight, and stayed half an hour. He then walked away in the direction of Finsbury. That visitor, the police argued, was Arthur Leighton, who had murdered Mr. Jessup and sent the telephone message to Fitzjohn's Avenue; then, hearing Ann Weber moving about downstairs and frightened at being caught by her, he had put on the deceased's hat and coat and slipped out of the house. Ann, however, had recognised him. She had involuntarily given him away when the housekeeper asked her whom she was talking to, so she invented the story of having seen what she thought was Mr. Jessup in order to save her sweetheart.

"It was a logical theory enough, but here came the evidence of the hat. The man who walked away from Fulton Gardens at nine o'clock, whom the

point policeman saw changing his hat in the street at that hour, could not possibly have gone all the way to Walthamstow, either by bus or even part of the way in a taxi, and back again to Piccadilly Circus all in the space of forty-five minutes. And Leighton, mind you, stepped out of a bus when his friend met him, and I can tell you that the police worked their hardest to find a taxi-man who may have picked up a fare that night in the neighbourhood of Clerkenwell and driven out to Walthamstow and then back to Holborn. That search proved entirely fruitless. On the other hand, Leighton had paid his bus fare from Holborn, and the conductor vaguely recollected that he had got in at the corner of Clerkenwell Road. Well, that being proved, the man couldn't have done in the time all that the prosecution declared that he did.

"After he was discharged, the Press started violently abusing the police for not having directed their attention to the second visitor who called at Fulton Gardens ten minutes or so after the first one had left. But this person appeared as elusive and intangible as the mysterious wearer of Mr. Jessup's hat and coat. The point policeman saw him in the distance, and Ann Weber admitted him into the house and chatted with him for over twenty minutes. She didn't know him, but she declared that she could easily recognise him if she saw him again. For some time after that the poor girl was constantly called upon by the police to see, and if possible identify, the mysterious visitor. Half the shady characters in London passed, I believe, before her eyes during the next three months. But this search proved as fruitless as the other. The murder of Mr. Seton Jessup has remained as complete and as baffling a mystery as any in the annals of crime. Many there are—you amongst the number—who firmly believe that Arthur Leighton had, at any rate, something to do with it. I know that the family of the deceased were convinced that he did. Mr. Aubrey Jessup, the eldest son of the deceased, who was one of the executors under his father's will, and who had gone through the accounts of the business, had noted certain irregularities in Leighton's books; he also declared that various sums which had come in on the sixteenth after banking hours were missing from the safe. Moreover, young Leighton himself had admitted that 'the guv'nor was waxy with him because a few pounds were missing from the till.' All these facts no doubt had influenced the police when they applied for a warrant for his arrest, but there was no getting away from the evidence of that hat and coat found ten

miles and more away from the scene of the crime, and of the bus conductor who could swear that out of forty-five minutes which the accused had to account for he had spent twenty in a bus."

"It is all very mysterious," I put in, because my eccentric friend had been silent for quite a long time, while his attention was entirely taken up by the fashioning of a whole series of intricate knots. "I am afraid that I was one of those who blamed the police for not directing their investigations sooner in the direction of the second visitor. He seems to me much more mysterious than the first. We know who the first one was——"

"Do we?" he retorted with a chuckle. "Or rather, do you?"

"Well, of course, it was Arthur Leighton," I rejoined impatiently. "Mrs. Tufnell saw him——"

"She didn't," he broke in quickly. "The house was pitch-dark; she heard voices and she asked Ann whether she was speaking to Mr. Leighton."

"And Ann said yes!" I riposted.

"She said yes," he admitted with an irritating smile.

"And Leighton himself in his evidence——"

"Leighton in his evidence," the funny creature broke in excitedly, "admitted that he had called at the house, he admitted that he remembered vaguely that Ann Weber told him that Mr. Jessup had decided not to see him, and that to celebrate the occasion he got the girl to make him a whisky toddy. But, apart from these facts, he only had the haziest notions as to the time when he came and when he left or how long he stayed. Nor were his precious friends at the Café Royal any clearer on that point. They had all of them been drinking, and only had the haziest notion of time until twenty minutes to ten, when they got hungry and wanted their supper."

"But what does that prove?" I argued with an impatient frown.

"It proves that my contention is correct; that the first visitor was not Leighton, that it was some one for whom Ann Weber cared more than she did for Leighton, as she lied for his sake when she told her aunt that she was speaking to Leighton in the hall. The whole thing occurred just as the police

supposed. The first visitor called, and while Ann Weber was down in the kitchen getting him something to eat and drink, he entered the office, probably not with any evil intention, and saw his employer sitting at his desk with the safe containing a quantity of loose cash invitingly open. Let us be charitable and assume that he yielded to sudden temptation. Mr. Jessup's coat, hat, and stick were lying there on a chair. The stick was one of those heavily-weighted ones which men like to carry nowadays. He seizes the stick and strikes the old man on the head with it, then he collects the money from the safe and thrusts it into his pockets. At that moment Ann Weber comes up the stairs. I say that this man was her lover; she had returned to him, as she did once before. Imagine her horror first, and then her desire—her mad desire—to save him from the consequences of his crime. It is her woman's wit which first suggests the idea of telephoning to Fitzjohn's Avenue: she who thinks of plunging the house in darkness. And now to get the criminal out of the house. It can be done in a moment, but just then Mrs. Tufnell opens her door on the second floor and begins to grope her way downstairs. It is impossible to think quickly enough how to meet this situation. Instinct is the only guide, and instinct suggests impersonating the deceased, to avoid the danger of Mrs. Tufnell peeping in at the office door. The criminal hastily dons his victim's hat and coat, and he is almost through the hall when Mrs. Tufnell calls to Ann: 'Is it Mr. Leighton?' And Ann on the impulse of the moment replies: 'Yes, it is! He is just going.' And so the criminal escapes unseen. But there is still the danger of Mrs. Tufnell peeping in at the office door, so Ann invents the story of having seen Mr. Jessup walk out of the house some time before. So for the moment danger is averted; the housekeeper does peep in at the door, but only in order to satisfy herself that the lights are out; and the women then go upstairs together.

"Ten minutes later there is another ring at the bell. This time it is Arthur Leighton, and Ann Weber has sufficient presence of mind not to let him see that there is anything wrong in the house. She asks him in, she tells him Mr. Jessup cannot see him, she gets him a drink, and sends him off again. I don't suppose for a moment that at this stage she has any intention of using him as a shield for her present sweetheart; but undoubtedly the thought had by now crept into her mind to utilise Leighton's admitted presence in the house for the purpose of confusing the issues. Nor do I think that she had any idea

that night that Mr. Jessup was dead. She probably thought that he had only been stunned by a blow from the stick; hence her exclamation when she realised the truth: 'My God, he has killed him!' Then only did she concentrate all her energies and all her wits to saving her sweetheart—even at the cost of another man. Women are like that sometimes," the Old Man in the Corner went on with a chuckle, "the instinct of the primitive woman is first of all to save her man, never mind at whose expense. The cave-man's instinct is to protect his woman with his fists—but she, conscious of physical weakness, sets her wits to work, and if her man is in serious danger she will lie and she will cheat—ay, and perjure herself if need be. And those flirtatious minxes, of which Annie-bird is a striking example, are only cave-women with a veneer of civilisation over them.

"She did save her man by dragging a red herring across his trail, and she left Fate to deal with Leighton. Once embarked on a system of lies she had to stick to it or her man was doomed. Fortunately she could rely on the other woman. A mother's wits are even sharper than those of a sweetheart."

"A mother?" I ejaculated. "Then you think that it was——?"

"Mark Tufnell, of course," he broke in, dryly. "Didn't you guess? As he could not go with his beloved to the cinema he thought he would spend a happy evening with her. What made him originally go into the office we shall never know. Some trifle no doubt, some message for his employer—it is those sorts of trifles that so often govern the destinies of men. Personally I think that he was very much in the same boat as young Leighton: some trifling irregularities in his accounts. The deceased, speaking so harshly to Mrs. Tufnell that night, first directed my attention to young Tufnell. He didn't want to see any of them that night: he was irritated with Mark quite as much as with Leighton, but out of consideration for the housekeeper whom he valued he said little about her son. Perhaps he had ordered the young man to come to his office; as I said just now, this little point I cannot vouch for. But if I have not succeeded in convincing you that the first visitor at No. 13, Fulton Gardens was Mark Tufnell, that it was he who went out in Mr. Jessup's hat and overcoat, changed hats in the street, and wandered out as far as Walthamstow in order to be rid of the *pièces de conviction*, then you are less intelligent than I have taken you to be. Mark Tufnell, remember, lives in the north of London; he was supposed to have gone to

the cinema that night, therefore the people with whom he lodged thought nothing of his coming home late."

"That poor mother!" I ejaculated, "I wonder if she suspects the truth."

"She knows it," the funny creature said, "you may be sure of that. There was a bond of understanding between those two women, and they never once contradicted each other in their evidence. A worthless young blackguard has been saved from the gallows; my sympathy is not with him, but with the women who put up such a brave fight for his sake."

"Do you know what happened to them all subsequently?" I asked.

"Not exactly. But I do know that Mr. Seton Jessup in his will left his housekeeper an annuity of £50. I also know that young Tufnell has gone out to Australia, and that if you ever dine with a friend at the Alcyon Club you will notice an exceptionally pretty waitress who will make eyes at all the men. Her name is Ann Weber!”

XIII
A MOORLAND TRAGEDY

§1

The Old Man in the Corner had finished his glass of milk and ceased to munch his bun; from the capacious pocket of his huge tweed coat he extracted a piece of string, and for a while sat contemplating it, with his head on one side, so like one of those bald-headed storks at the Zoo.

"I always had a great predilection for that mystery," he said *à propos* of nothing at all. "It still fascinates me."

"What mystery?" I asked; but as usual he took no notice of my question.

"It was more romantic than the common crimes of to-day; in fact, I don't know if you will agree with me, but to me it has quite an eighteenth-century atmosphere about it."

"If you were to tell me to what particular crime you refer," I said coldly, "I might tell you whether I agree with you or not."

He looked at me as if he thought me an idiot, then he rejoined dryly:

"You don't mean to say that you have never thought of the Moorland Tragedy!"

"Yes," I said, "often!"

"And don't you think that the story is as romantic as any you have read in fiction recently?"

"Yes, I do think that the story is romantic, but only because of its *mise en scène*. The same thing might have occurred in a London slum, and then it would have been merely sordid. Of course, it is all very mysterious, and I, for one, have often wondered what has become of that Italian—I forget his name."

"Antonio Vissio. A queer creature, wasn't he? And we can well imagine with what suspicion he was regarded by the yokels in the neighbouring

villages. Yorkshire yokels! Just think of them in connection with an exotic creature like Vissio. He had a curious history, too. His people owned a little farm somewhere in the mountains near Santa Catarina in Liguria, and during the war an English intelligence officer—Captain Arnott—lodged with them for a time. They were, it seems, extraordinarily kind to him. The family consisted of a widow, two daughters, and the son, Antonio. As he was the only son of a widow, he was, of course, exempt from military service, and helped his mother to look after the farm. His passion, however—and one, by the way, which is very common to Italian peasants—was shooting. There is very little game in that part of Italy, and it means long tramps before you can get as much as a rabbit or a partridge; but there was nothing that Antonio loved more than those tramps with a gun and a dog, and when Captain Arnott had leisure, the two of them would go off together at daybreak and never return till late at night.

"Some time in 1917 Captain Arnott was transferred to another front. He got his majority the following year, and after the war he retired with the rank of Lieut.-Colonel. He hadn't seen the Vissio family for some time, but he always retained the happiest recollections of their kindness to him, and of Antonio's pleasant companionship. It was not to be wondered at, therefore, that when, in 1919, that terrible explosion occurred at the fort of Santa Catarina, which was only distant a quarter of a mile from the Vissios' farm, Colonel Arnott should at once think of his friends, and, as he happened to be at Genoa on business at the time, he motored over to Santa Catarina to see if he could ascertain anything of their fate. He found the village a complete devastation, the isolated farms for miles around nothing but masses of wreckage. I don't know how many people—men, women, and children—had been killed, there were over two hundred injured, and those who had escaped were herding together amongst the ruins of their homes. It was only by dint of perseverance and the exercise of an iron will that Captain Arnott succeeded at last in finding Antonio Vissio. There was nothing left of the farm but dust and ashes. The mother and one of the girls had been killed by the falling in of the roof, and the younger daughter was being taken care of by some sisters in a neighbouring convent which had escaped total destruction.

"Antonio was left in the world all alone, homeless, moneyless; Italy is not like England, where at times of disaster money comes pouring at once

out of the pockets of the much-abused capitalists to help the unfortunate. There was no money poured out to help poor Antonio and his kindred.

"Colonel Arnott was deeply moved at sight of the man's loneliness. He worked hard to try and get him a job in England, right away from the scenes of the disaster that must perpetually have awakened bitter memories. Finally he succeeded. A friend of his, Lord Crookhaven, who owned considerable property in the North Riding, agreed to take Vissio as assistant to one of his gamekeepers, a fellow named William Topcoat. Of course this was an ideal life for Antonio. He could indulge his passion for shooting to his heart's content, and, incidentally, he would learn something of the science of preserving, and of the game laws as they exist in all the sporting countries.

"I don't suppose that Antonio ever realised quite how unpopular he was from the first in his new surroundings. The Yorkshire yokels looked upon him as a dago, and the fact that he had not fought in the war did not help matters. During the first six months he did not speak a word of English, and even after he had begun to pick up a sentence or two, he always remained unsociable. To begin with, he didn't drink: he hated beer and said so; he didn't understand cricket, and was bored with football. He didn't bet, and he was frightened of horses. All that he cared for was his gun; but he went about his work not only conscientiously, but intelligently, took great interest in the rearing of young birds, and was particularly successful with them.

"After he had been in England a year he fell madly in love with Winnie Gooden. And that is how the tragedy began.

§2

"An Italian peasant's idea of love is altogether different to that of an English yokel. The latter will begin by keeping company with his sweetheart: he will walk out with her in the twilight, and sit beside her on the stile, chewing the end of a straw and timidly holding her hand. Kisses are exchanged, and sighs, and usually no end of jokes and chaff. On the whole the English yokel is a cheerful lover. Not so the Italian. With him love is the serious drama of life; he is always prepared for it to turn to tragedy. His love is overwhelming, tempestuous. With one arm he fondles his sweetheart, but the other hand is behind his back, grasping a knife.

"So it was with Antonio Vissio. Winnie Gooden was the daughter of one of the gardeners at Markthwaite Hall, Lord Crookhaven's residence. She was remarkably pretty, and I suppose that she was attracted by the silent, rather sullen Italian, who, by the way, was extraordinarily good-looking. Dark eyes, a soft creamy skin, quantities of wavy hair; every one admitted that the two of them made a splendid pair when they walked out together on Sunday afternoons. Thanks to the kindness of Colonel Arnott, Vissio had succeeded in selling the bit of land on which his farm had stood, so he had a good bit of money, too, and though James Gooden, the father, was said to be averse to the idea of his daughter marrying a foreigner, it was thought that Winnie would talk her father over easily enough, if she really meant to have Antonio; but people didn't think that she was seriously in love with him.

"During the spring of 1922 Mr. Gerald Moville came home from Argentina, where he was said to be engaged in cattle-rearing. He was the youngest son of Sir Timothy Moville, whose property adjoined that of Lord Crookhaven. His arrival caused quite a flutter in feminine hearts for miles around, for smart young men are scarce in those parts, and Gerald Moville was both good-looking and smart, a splendid dancer, a fine tennis and bridge player, and in fact, was possessed of the very qualities which young ladies of all classes admire, and which were so sadly lacking in the other young men of the neighbourhood. The fact that he had always been very wild, and that it was only through joining the Air Force at the beginning of the war that he escaped prosecution for some shady transaction in connection with a bridge club in London, did not seriously stand against him, at any rate with the ladies; the men, perhaps, cold-shouldered him at first, and he was not made an honorary member of the County Club at Richmond, but he was welcome at all the tea and garden parties, the dances, and the tennis matches throughout the North Riding, and in social matters it is, after all, the ladies who rule the roost.

"The Movilles, moreover, were big people in the neighbourhood, whom nobody would have cared to offend. The eldest son was colonel commanding a smart regiment—I forget which; one daughter had married an eminent K.C., and the other was the wife of a bishop; so for the sake of the family, if for no other reason, Gerald Moville was accepted socially and his peccadilloes, of which it seems there were more than the one in

connection with the bridge club, were conveniently forgotten. Besides which it was declared that he was now a reformed character. He had joined the Air Force quite early in the war, been a prisoner of the Germans until 1919, when he went out to Argentina, where he had made good, and where, it was said, he was making a huge fortune. This rumour also helped, no doubt, to make Gerald Moville popular, even though he himself had laughingly sworn on more than one occasion that he was not a marrying man: he was in love with too many girls ever to settle down with one. He certainly was a terrible flirt, and gave all the pretty girls of the neighbourhood a very good time; he had hired a smart little two-seater at Richmond, and motor-excursions, lunches at the Wheatsheaf at Reeth, jade earrings or wrist watches—the girls who were ready to flirt with him and to amuse him could get anything they wanted out of him.

"But it was soon pretty evident that though Gerald Moville flirted with many, it was Winnie Gooden whom he admired the most. From the first he ran after that girl in a way that scandalised the village gossips. She, of course, was flattered by his attentions, but did not show the slightest inclination to throw Antonio over. She was sensible enough to know that Gerald Moville would never marry her, and she made it very clear that though he amused her, her heart would remain true to her Italian lover. But here was the trouble. Antonio was not the man to run in double harness. His fiery Southern blood rose in revolt against any thought of rivalry. He had won Winnie's love and meant to hold it against all comers, and more than once in public and in private he threatened to do for any man who came between him and Winnie.

"You would have thought that those who were in the know would have foreseen the tragedy from the moment that Winnie Gooden started to flirt with Gerald Moville; nevertheless, when it did occur there was universal surprise quite as much as horror, and there seemed to be no one clever enough to understand the psychological problem that was the true key of that so-called mystery."

§3

"Lord Crookhaven's property, you must know," the Old Man in the Corner resumed after a moment's pause, "extends right over Markthwaite Moor, which is a lonely stretch of country, intersected by gullies, down

which, during the heavy rains in spring and autumn, the water rushes in torrents. There are one or two disused stone quarries on the moor, and, except for the shooting season, when Lord Crookhaven has an occasional party of sportsmen to stay with him at the Hall, who are out after the birds all day, this stretch of country is singularly desolate.

"Topcoat's cottage, where Vissio lodged, is on the edge of the moor on the Markthwaite side; about a couple of miles away to the north the moor is intersected by the secondary road which runs from Kirkby Stephen and joins up with the main road at Richmond, and three or four miles again to the north of the road is the boundary wall that divides Lord Crookhaven's property from that of his neighbour, Sir Timothy Moville.

"It was in September, 1922, that the tragedy occurred which made Markthwaite Moor so notorious at the time. Topcoat was walking across the moor in the company of the Italian, both carrying their guns, when about half a mile away, on the further side of the quarry known as the Poacher's Leap, the gamekeeper spied a man who appeared to be crouching behind some scrub. Without much reflection he pointed this crouching figure out to Vissio and said:

"There's a fellow who is up to no good. After the birds again, the damned thief. Run along, my lad, and see if you can't put a shot or two into his legs.'

"Topcoat swore subsequently that when he said this he had not recognised who the crouching figure was. But he was a very hard man where poachers were concerned; he had been much worried with them lately, and a day or two ago had been reprimanded by Lord Crookhaven for want of vigilance. This, no doubt, irritated his temper, and made him rather 'jumpy.'

"Vissio, with his gun on his shoulder, went off in the direction of the Poacher's Leap. Topcoat watched him until a bit of sharply-rising ground hid him from sight. A moment or two later the crouching figure stood up, and Topcoat recognised Mr. Gerald Moville. He had always had exceptionally fine sight, and Mr. Moville had certain tricks of gait and movement which were unmistakable even at that distance. Topcoat immediately shouted to Vissio to come back, but apparently the Italian did

not hear him; and the last thing that the gamekeeper saw on that eventful morning was Mr. Moville suddenly turn and walk towards the high bit of ground behind which Vissio had just disappeared.

"And that was the last," my eccentric neighbour concluded with a chuckle all his own, "that has been seen up to this hour of those two men—Mr. Gerald Moville and Antonio Vissio. Topcoat waited for a while on the moor, and called to the Italian several times, but as he heard nothing in response, and as it had started to rain heavily, he finally went home. Vissio did not turn up at the cottage the whole of that day, and he did not come home that night. The following morning, which was a Thursday, Topcoat walked across to the Goodens' cottage to make enquiries, but no one had seen the Italian, and Winnie knew nothing about him. The gamekeeper waited until the Saturday before he informed the police; that, of course, was a serious delay which ought never to have occurred, but you have to know that class of north-country yokel intimately to appreciate this man's conduct throughout the affair. They all have a perfect horror of anything to do with the police: the type of delinquency most frequent in these parts is, of course, poaching, and the gamekeepers on the big estates look on themselves as the only efficient police for those cases. Half the time they don't turn the delinquent over to the magistrates at all, and administer a kind of rough justice as they think best. They hate police interference.

"In this case we must also bear Topcoat's subsequent statement in mind, which was that at first no suspicion of foul play had entered his head. He had not heard the report of a gun, and all he feared was that the Italian had tried to pick a quarrel with Mr. Moville and been soundly punished for his impertinence, and that probably he did not dare show his face until the trouble had blown over. Topcoat, however, spent a couple of days scouring the moor for the missing man, in case he had met with an accident and was lying somewhere unable to move. On the second day he found Vissio's gun lying in a gully close to the Poacher's Leap; it had not been discharged; and the next day—that is, on the Saturday—he very reluctantly went to the police. Even then he made no mention of Mr. Gerald Moville; he only said that his assistant, an Italian named Antonio Vissio, who lodged with him, had not been home for three days, and that he had last seen him on Markthwaite Moor on the previous Wednesday carrying a gun and walking in the direction of the Poacher's Leap. Poachers, of course, were at once

suspected; Topcoat referred vaguely to Vissio having gone after a man whose movements had appeared suspicious. He was severely blamed for having delayed so long before informing the police; even if the Italian had not been the victim of foul play he might, it was argued, have met with a serious accident, and been lying for days perhaps with a broken leg out in the cold and wet, and might even have perished of exposure and neglect. But this latter theory Topcoat would not admit. He had scoured the moor, he declared, from end to end; if Vissio had been lying anywhere he swore that he would have found him.

"Another three or four days were now spent by the police in scouring the moor, and it was only after a last fruitless search that Topcoat mentioned the fact that he had seen Mr. Gerald Moville the very morning and close to the spot where Vissio disappeared: that, as a matter of fact, he was the man after whom the Italian had gone, and that the two must have met somewhere near the north end of the Poacher's Leap.

"Of course, to the general public—to you, for instance—Topcoat's attitude of reticence all this while must seem positively criminal; but it is useless to measure the conduct of people of that class in remote north-country districts by the ordinary rules of common sense. For a man in Topcoat's position to connect 'one of the gentry' with the disappearance of a gamekeeper's assistant—and a foreigner at that—would seem as preposterous as to imagine that the King of England would go poaching on his neighbour's estate. It simply couldn't be, and when the D.C.C. to whom Topcoat first made this statement rebuked him with unusual severity, the gamekeeper turned sulky and declared that he didn't see he had done anything wrong.

"More than a week you see had elapsed since that Wednesday morning when Vissio had last been seen alive; for the past four days the police had worked very hard, but entirely in the dark. Now at last they felt that they had a glimmer of light to guide them in their search. The public, who had taken some interest at first in the Moorland Mystery, was beginning to tire of reading about this fruitless search for a missing dago. But now, suddenly, the mystery had taken a sensational turn. Topcoat's statement had found its way into the local papers, and Mr. Gerald Moville's name was whispered in connection with the case. And hardly had the lovers of sensation recovered

from this first shock of surprise, when they received another that was even more staggering.

"Mr. Gerald Moville, it seems, had left home on the very day that Vissio disappeared, and his people were without news of him. Just think what this sensational bit of news meant! It evoked at once in the mind of the imaginative a drama of love and jealousy, a real romance such as is only dreamt of in the cinema, with an Italian dago as the jealous lover, and a handsome young Englishman as the victim of that jealousy. The police, holding on to this clue, turned their attention to the investigation of Mr. Gerald Moville's movements on the morning of that eventful Wednesday: they had to go very tactfully to work, so as not to cause alarm to Sir Timothy and Lady Moville. It seems that Mr. Gerald had on the Monday previously announced his sudden intention to return immediately to Argentina. According to statements made by one or two of the servants, he did this at breakfast one morning after he had received a couple of official-looking letters that bore the Buenos Ayres postmark. Lady Moville had been very distressed at this, and she and Sir Timothy had tried to dissuade Mr. Gerald from going quite so soon; but he was quite determined to go, saying that there was some trouble at the farm which he must see to at once or it would mean a severe loss not only to himself, but to his partner. He finally announced that he would have to go up to London on the Wednesday at latest to see about getting a berth, if possible, in a boat that left Southampton for Buenos Ayres the following Saturday. Preparations for his departure were made accordingly. On the Tuesday the chauffeur took his luggage to Richmond and saw to its being sent off to London in advance. It was addressed to the Carlton Hotel. On the Wednesday Mr. Gerald had breakfast at half-past six, as he wished to make an early start; he was going to drive the little two-seater back to the place in Richmond whence he had hired it, and then take the train that would take him to Dalton in time to catch the express up to London. He had said good-bye to his parents the evening before, and, having tipped all the servants lavishly, he made a start soon after seven.

"Two labourers going to their work saw the little car speeding along the road that intersects the moor; according to their statement there were two people in the car, a man and a woman. They thought that the man who was driving might have been Mr. Moville, but the woman had on a thick veil

and they had not particularly noticed who she was. On the other hand, one witness had seen the car standing unattended on the roadside within a hundred yards of a group of cottages, one of which was occupied by Gooden. Whereupon Winnie was taken to task by the police. Amidst a flood of tears she finally confessed that she had seen Mr. Moville on the Wednesday morning. He had called for her in his car very early; her father had only just gone to work, so it could not have been much later than seven o'clock; he told her that he had some business to attend to in Richmond, would she like to come for a run and have lunch there with him. To this she willingly assented. On the way Mr. Moville told her that as a matter of fact he was going away for good, and that he could not possibly live without her. He begged her to come away with him; he would take her to London first, and buy her everything she wanted in the way of clothes, and then they would go on to Paris, and travel all over the world and be the happiest couple on this earth.

"It seems that the girl at first was carried away by his eloquence; she was immensely flattered and thrilled by this romantic adventure, until something he said, or didn't say, some expression or some gesture—Winnie couldn't say what it was—but something seemed to drag her back. Probably it was just sound Yorkshire common sense. Anyway, she took fright, turned a deaf ear to Gerald Moville's blandishments, and insisted on being taken back to her father's cottage at once. Still to the accompaniment of a flood of tears Winnie went on to say that Mr. Gerald 'carried on terribly' when she finally refused to go away with him, and he reproached her bitterly for having played with him, all the while that she was in love with that 'dirty dago.' But Winnie was firm, and in the end the disappointed lover had to turn the car back and take the girl home again. It was then close upon nine o'clock. Mr. Gerald drove her to within half a mile of her father's cottage; here she got out and walked the rest of the way home. She had not seen Mr. Moville since; on the other hand, one of the neighbours told her that soon after she went off in the car that morning, Antonio Vissio had called at the cottage, and seemed in a terrible way when he was told that she had gone out with Mr. Moville.

"As you see the mystery was deepening. Instead of the one missing man, there were now two who had disappeared, and the question was what had become of Mr. Gerald Moville and his car. Enquiries at the garage

where it belonged brought no light upon the subject. The car had not been returned, and nothing had been seen in Richmond of Mr. Moville or the car. Enquiries were then telegraphed all over the place, and twenty-four hours later the car was traced to a small placed called Falconblane, which is about twelve miles from Paisley, where it was left at a garage late on the Wednesday night by a man who had never since been to claim it. The people at the garage could only give a vague description of this man. It was about eleven o'clock, a very dark night, and just upon closing time. The man wore a big motor coat and a cap with flaps over the ears; he had on a pair of goggles, and the lower part of his face looked coated with grime. It would be next to impossible to swear to his identity, but the assistant who took charge of the car said that the man spoke broken English.

"The police searched the car and found a hand-bag containing a number of effects, such as a man would take with him if he was going on a long train journey: brush and comb, a novel, a couple of handkerchiefs, and so on. Some of these effects bore the initials 'G.M.'

"Pursuing their investigations further, the police discovered that a man wearing a big motor coat, goggles, and a cap with flap ears had taken a first-class ticket for Glasgow at Beith, which is a small place on a local branch line, in the early morning of Thursday, and had travelled to Glasgow by the 7.05 a.m. Glasgow being a very busy terminus, no one appears to have noticed him there, but one of the porters found a motor coat, a cap, and a pair of goggles in one of the first-class carriages on the local from Beith, and a certain Mr. Etty, who was a gentleman's outfitter in the Station Road, stated that he had a customer in his shop early on Thursday morning who purchased a tweed cap and an overcoat off the peg. He had come in without either hat or coat, his face and hands were black with grime, and his hair looked covered with coal dust. He explained that he was an engineer who had been engaged all night on some salvage work down the line where there had been a breakdown, and that he had somehow lost his coat and his cap. He paid for the goods with a five-pound note, which he took from a case out of his pocket, and the case appeared to be bulging over with notes. Mr. Etty thought that he might possibly be able to identify the man if he saw him again; one thing he did note about him, and that was that he spoke broken English.

"But from that moment, in spite of strenuous efforts on the part of the police, all traces of the man with the dirty face, who spoke broken English, vanished completely. And what's more, all trace of Mr. Gerald Moville had also vanished. He did not go up to London, and all this while his luggage was at the Carlton Hotel waiting to be claimed. Nor was it ever claimed by him, because about a month after that tragic Wednesday in September the body of Mr. Gerald Moville was found in a 'gruff' or gully about three-quarters of a mile from the Poacher's Leap. When I say that the body was found, I am wrong, for it was only a part of the body, and that, of course, was completely decomposed. The head was missing, and it was never found, in spite of the most strenuous efforts on the part of professional and amateur detectives, and lavish expenditure of money, thought, and trouble on the part of Sir Timothy Moville. It lies buried, I imagine, somewhere on the moor. The clothes, though sodden, were, however, still recognisable, also the unfortunate man's wrist watch which had stopped at five minutes past eleven, his cuff-links, and his signet ring, which had fallen from his fleshless finger and lay beside it in the 'gruff.'

"And about seventy yards higher up the gully a search party found a knife of obviously foreign make, which still bore certain stains, which scientific analysis proved to be human blood. That knife was identified by Topcoat as the property of Vissio."

§4

The Old Man in the Corner had been silent for a little while, as was his habit when he reached a certain stage of his narrative. At such moments it always seemed as if nothing in the world interested him, except the fashioning of innumerable and complicated knots in a bit of string. It was my business to set him talking again.

"Of course, there was an inquest after that," I said casually.

"Yes, there was," he replied dryly, "but it revealed nothing that the public did not already know. A few minor details—that was all. For instance, it came to light that when Mr. Moville left home on that fateful morning he was wearing the coat, cap, and goggles which were subsequently found in the train at Glasgow Station. It was easy to suppose that the murderer had stolen these from his victim; the cap and goggles

being especially useful for purposes of disguise. The same supposition applies to money. Vissio, it was argued, had probably only a few shillings in his pocket when in a moment of mad jealousy he killed Gerald Moville. That, of course, was the universally accepted theory; it was only desperate necessity that pushed him on to robbing the dead. Topcoat and others who knew Antonio well declared that he was quite harmless except where Winnie Gooden was concerned; but it was more than likely that that morning he was tortured by one of his jealous fits. He had hated Gerald Moville from the first, and, according to the girl's own admissions, she must have given him definite cause for jealousy. That very morning he had called at her cottage and found that she had gone out with his rival. Perhaps he knew that Moville was going away for good. Perhaps he guessed that he would try and induce Winnie to go with him. With such torturing fears in his heart, what wonder that when he met his rival on the lonely moor he 'saw red' and used his knife, as Southerners, unfortunately, are only too apt to do?

"The coroner's jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against Antonio Vissio, and the police hold a warrant for his arrest. But more than two years have gone by since then, and Vissio has succeeded in eluding the police. For many weeks the public were deeply interested in the mystery; the evening papers used to come out with the headlines: 'Where is Antonio Vissio?' and one great daily offered a reward of five hundred pounds for information that would lead to his apprehension. But, as you know, it has all been in vain. The public want to know how a man of unusual personality and speaking broken English could possibly lie *perdu* so long in this tight little island.

"And if he did leave the country, then how did he do it? He hadn't his passport with him, as that remained with his effects at Topcoat's cottage. How then did he evade the passport officials at Glasgow or any other port of embarkation? It is done sometimes, we all know that, and in this case Vissio had four days' start before Topcoat gave information to the police, but somehow the newspaper-reading public felt that if Vissio got out of the country, something would have betrayed him, some one would have seen him and furnished the first clue that would lead to discovery.

"And so the disappearance of the Italian has been classed as one of the

unsolved mysteries in the annals of crime. But to me the only point on which I am not absolutely clear (although even there I hold a theory), is why Gerald Moville should have gone wandering about the moor after he had parted from Winnie Gooden, and when he hadn't very much time left to catch his train, if he didn't want to miss his connection at Dalton. That point did strike Inspector Dodsworth of the C.I.D., who had been sent down from London to assist the local police in the investigation of the crime. I know Dodsworth very well, and he and I discussed that point once or twice. Of course, I was not going to give him the key to the whole mystery—a key, mind you, which I had discovered for myself—but I didn't object to talking over one or two of the minor details with the man, and I told him that in my opinion Moville undoubtedly went out on the moor in order to meet Vissio, and have it out with him on the subject of Winnie.

"He wanted Winnie—badly—to come away with him, and I believe that he was just the sort of man who would think that he could bribe the Italian to stand aside for him by offering him money. I believe those half-bred Spaniards and Portuguese out in Argentina are a most corrupt and venal crowd, and Gerald Moville classed Vissio amongst that lot. I have no doubt whatever in my mind that Moville was walking across the moor to see if he couldn't find Vissio in Topcoat's cottage. It was obviously not for me to tell the police that the Poacher's Leap is in a direct line between that cottage and the place where the two-seater was seen at a standstill on the roadside. But Dodsworth had to admit that I was right on that point."

"Then you think," I rejoined, "that Mr. Moville, after he parted from Winnie Gooden, set out to seek an interview with Antonio Vissio with a view to entering into an arrangement with him about the girl?"

"Yes!" my eccentric friend assented with a nod.

"He wanted to bribe Vissio to stand aside for him?"

"Exactly."

"Then," I went on, "he met Vissio on the moor?"

"Yes!"

"Came out with his proposition?"

"Yes!"

"Which so enraged the Italian that he knocked the other man down and finally knifed him in accordance with the amiable custom of his country."

"No," the Old Man in the Corner retorted dryly, "I didn't say that."

"But we know that the two men met and that——"

"And that one of them was killed," he broke in quickly. "But that man was not Gerald Moville."

"He was seen," I argued, "at Falconblane, at Beith, and at Glasgow. The man with the dirty face, the motor coat, and the goggles."

"Exactly," he broke in once more. "The man in the cap with the flap ears, and wearing motor goggles; the man whose face and hair were, in addition, covered with grime. An excellent disguise; as it indeed proved to be."

"But the foreign accent? The man spoke broken English."

"There are few things," he said with a sarcastic smile, "that are easier to assume than broken English, especially when only uneducated ears are there to hear."

"Then you think——"

"I don't think," he replied curtly, "I know. I know that Gerald Moville met the Italian on the moor, that he quarrelled with him over Winnie Gooden, that he knocked him down, and that Vissio was killed in the fall. I can see the whole scene as plainly as if I had been there. Can't you see Moville realising that he had killed the man?—that inevitably suspicion would fall on him? Topcoat had seen him, witnesses had seen his car in the road, he was known to be the Italian's rival in Winnie's affections! Already he could feel the hangman's rope round his neck. But we must look on Gerald Moville as a man of resource, a man, above all, up to many tricks for drawing a red herring across the trail of his own delinquencies. I will spare you the details of what I can see in my own mind as having happened after Moville had realised that Vissio was dead: the stripping of the body, the exchange of clothes down to the vest and shirt, the mutilation of the corpse

with the victim's own knife, and the dragging of the body to a distant 'gruff,' where it must inevitably remain hidden for days, until advanced decomposition had set in to efface all identification marks. Fear, no doubt, lent ingenuity and strength to the miscreant; and, as a matter of fact, Gerald Moville is one of the few criminals who committed no appreciable blunder when he set to work to obliterate all traces of his crime; he left the knife with its tell-tale stains on the spot, and that knife was identified as the property of the Italian, and the head, which alone might have betrayed him, even if the body were not found for weeks, he took away with him to bury somewhere far away—goodness only knows where, but somewhere between Yorkshire and Scotland.

"I can see Gerald Moville after he had accomplished his grim task making his way back to his car—the loneliness of this stretch of country would be entirely in his favour, more especially as it had begun to rain; I can see him driving along putting mile upon mile between himself and the scene of his crime. At one place he stopped—a lonely spot it must have been—where he disposed of his gruesome burden; then on and on, past the borders of Yorkshire, of Westmoreland and Cumberland and into Scotland, till he came close to the network of railway round about Paisley and Glasgow. Falconblane, a village tucked away on a lonely bit of country but boasting of a garage, must have seemed an ideal spot wherein to abandon the car altogether and take to the road, and this Moville did, trusting to the long night, and also to luck, to further efface his traces. Again I can see him wandering restlessly through the dark hours of that night, not daring to enter a house and ask for a bed, determined at all costs to obliterate every vestige of his movements since the crime.

"Then in the morning he takes train for Glasgow, the busiest centre wherein a man can disappear in a crowd; in the train he takes the precaution of divesting himself of the motor coat, the goggles and the cap, but not of the grime that covers his face and hair. We know how he provided himself with a more suitable hat and coat; we know how all through his wanderings he kept up his broken English. At Glasgow all traces of him vanish; he has become a very ordinary-looking man, wearing quite ordinary clothes, and in Glasgow people are far too busy to take much notice of passers-by.

"We can easily conjecture how easy it was for Moville to leave the

country altogether. He had plenty of money, and it is never difficult for a man of resource to leave a British port for any destination he pleases, especially if he is of obviously British nationality. Money, we all know, will accomplish anything, and rogues will slip through a cordon of officials where the respectable citizens will be chivied about and harassed with regulations. Moreover, we must always bear this in mind, that the police were not on his track, nor on that of the Italian, for that matter. Moville was free to come and go, and you may be sure that he was quite clever enough not to behave in any way that might create suspicion."

The Old Man in the Corner paused quite abruptly. A complicated knot was absorbing his whole attention. I felt thoughtful, meditative, and after a few minutes' silence I put my meditations into words.

"That is all very well," I said, "but, personally, I don't see that you have anything definite this time on which to base your theory. Both the men have disappeared; the police say that Vissio killed Moville; you assert the reverse, and declare that Moville deliberately dressed up the body of the Italian in his own clothes, but you have nothing more to go on for your assertion than the police have for theirs."

"I was waiting for that," he rejoined with a dry chuckle. "But let me assure you that I have at least three psychological facts to go on for my assertion, whereas the police only go on two very superficial matters for theirs; they base their whole argument firstly on the clothes, watch, jewellery, and so on found on a body that was otherwise unidentifiable, and, secondly, on a blood-stained knife known to have belonged to the Italian. Now I have demonstrated to you, have I not, how easy it was for Moville to manufacture both these pieces of evidence. So mark the force of my argument," the funny creature went on, gesticulating with his thin hands like a scarecrow blown by the wind. "First of all, why did Moville suddenly declare his intention of leaving England? In order to look after his partner's affairs? Not a bit of it. He left England because of some shady transaction out there in Argentina which was coming to light, and because of which he thought it best to disappear altogether for a time. My proof for this? you will ask. The simple proof that his parents accepted his disappearance for a whole week without making any enquiries about him either in Richmond, or London, or the shipping company that controls the steamers to Buenos

Ayres. Can you imagine that Sir Timothy Moville, having seen the last of his son on the Tuesday evening, would say and do nothing, when he was left eight days without news; he would have enquired in London; he knew to which hotel his son intended to go; some one would have enquired at Richmond whether the car had been left there. But no! There was not a single enquiry made for Gerald Moville by his parents, or his brothers and sisters, until after Topcoat had mentioned his name to the police and the latter had started their investigations. And why? Because his people knew where he was; that is to say, they knew—or some of them knew—that Gerald had to lie low, at any rate for a time. Of course his supposed death under such tragic circumstances must have been a terrible shock to them, but it is a remarkable fact, you will admit, that the offer of a substantial reward for the apprehension of the murderer did not come from Sir Timothy Moville; it came from one of the big dailies, out for publicity.

"My whole argument rests on psychological grounds, and in criminal cases psychology is by far the surest guide. Now there was not a single detail in connection with the Moorland Tragedy that in any way suggested the hand of a man like Antonio Vissio. Can you see an Italian peasant who, moreover, has lived all his life with a gun in his hand, solemnly laying that gun down before embarking on a quarrel with his rival? And yet the gun was found undischarged, lying in a gully. Vissio was much more likely to have shouldered it at sight of the man he hated, and shot him dead; more especially as the Englishman would have an enormous advantage in a hand-to-hand fight, even if the other man had suddenly whisked out a knife. Vissio was not the type of man who would think of the consequence of his crime. Maddened by jealousy, he would kill his man at sight, but in his own country and also in France, there would be no disgrace attached to such a deed—no disgrace and very little punishment. The man who last year shot the English dancing girl on the Riviera because he thought that she was carrying on with another man, only got five years' imprisonment; Vissio would not realise that he would be amenable to English law, which does not look at Homicide quite so leniently.

"Having killed his rival, the Italian would, in all probability, have swanked as far as the nearest village, had a good drink to steady his nerves, and then have boasted loudly of what he had done, certain that he would be leniently dealt with by a judge, and sympathised with by a jury, because of

the torments of jealousy which he had endured until he could do so no longer. You can't imagine such a man sawing off his victim's head and wrapping it up in a newspaper taken out of the dead man's pocket.

"And this brings me to the final point in my argument, and one which ought to have struck the police from the first: the question of the car. How would Vissio know that he would find Moville's car conveniently stationed by the roadside? He would have to know that before he could dare walk across the moor carrying his gruesome parcel. Now Vissio couldn't possibly know all that, and what's more, though he might not have been altogether ignorant of driving, he certainly was not expert enough to drive a car all by himself for over a hundred miles, at top speed, and for several hours in the dark. To my mind, if this fact had been driven home to the jury by a motoring expert they never would have brought in a verdict against Vissio, and if you think the whole matter over you will be bound to admit that there is not a single flaw in my argument. From the point of view of possibility as well as of psychology, only one man could have committed that crime, and that was Gerald Moville. I suppose his unfortunate parents will know the truth one day. Soon, probably, when the young miscreant is short of money and writes home for funds.

"Or else he may return to Argentina and under an assumed name start life anew. They are not over-particular there as to a man's antecedents. They would perhaps think all the more of him, when they knew that where a girl is concerned he will stand no nonsense from a rival. Think it all over, you'll come to the conclusion that I'm right."

He gathered up his bit of string and took his spectacles from off his nose. For the first time I saw his pale, shrewd eyes looking down straight at me.

"I shan't see you again for some time," he said with a wry smile. "Won't you shake hands and wish me luck?"

"Indeed I will," I replied, "but you are not going away, are you?"

He gave a curious, short, dry chuckle:

"I am going out of England for the benefit of my health," he said coolly.

I hadn't shaken hands with him, because the very next moment he had turned his back on me as if he thought better of it. The next morning I read in the papers a curious account of some extensive robberies committed in the neighbourhood of Hatton Garden. The burglar had managed to escape, but the police were said to hold an important clue. A curious feature about those robberies was the way in which a knotted cord had been used to effect an entrance through a skylight. The newspaper reporters gave a very full description of this cord: it was photographed and reproduced in the illustrated papers. The knots in it were of a wonderful and intricate pattern.

They set me thinking—and wondering!

I have often been to that blameless teashop in Fleet Street since.

But the Old Man in the Corner is never there now, and the police have never been able to trace the large consignment of diamonds stolen from that shop in Hatton Garden and which has been valued at £80,000.

I wonder if I shall ever see my eccentric friend again.

Somehow I think that I shall. And if I do, shall I see him sitting in his accustomed corner, with his spectacles on his nose, and his long, thin fingers working away at a bit of string—fashioning knots—many knots—complicated knots—like those in the cord by the aid of which an entrance was effected into that shop in Hatton Garden and diamonds worth £80,000 were stolen?

I wonder!!

THE END