

Richardson's First Case

Inspector Richardson, #1

by Sir Basil Thomson, 1861-1939

Published: 1933



Table of Contents

Introduction

Foreword



Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 20



The D.D.I. recognized him and smiled. "That was a great case you brought us. You'll be interested to hear that it is a case of mur-r-der!"

Introduction

SIR BASIL THOMSON'S stranger-than-fiction life was packed so full of incident that one can understand why his work as a crime novelist has been rather overlooked. This was a man whose CV included spells as a colonial administrator, prison governor, intelligence officer, and Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard. Among much else, he worked alongside the Prime Minister of Tonga (according to some accounts, he *was* the Prime Minister of Tonga), interrogated Mata Hari and Roger Casement (although not at the same time), and was sensationally convicted of an offence of indecency committed in Hyde Park. More than three-quarters of a century after his death, he deserves to be recognised for the contribution he made to developing the police procedural, a form of detective fiction that has enjoyed lasting popularity.

Basil Home Thomson was born in 1861—the following year his father became Archbishop of York—and was educated at Eton before going up to New College. He left Oxford after a couple of terms, apparently as a result of suffering depression, and joined the Colonial Service. Assigned to Fiji, he became a stipendiary magistrate before moving to Tonga. Returning to England in 1893, he published *South Sea Yarns*, which is among the 22 books written by him which are listed in Allen J. Hubin's comprehensive bibliography of crime fiction (although in some cases, the criminous content was limited).

Thomson was called to the Bar, but opted to become deputy governor of Liverpool Prison; he later served as governor of such prisons as Dartmoor and Wormwood Scrubs, and acted as secretary to the Prison Commission. In 1913, he became head of C.I.D., which acted as the enforcement arm of British military intelligence after war broke out. When the Dutch exotic dancer and alleged spy Mata Hari arrived in England in 1916, she was arrested and interviewed at length by Thomson at Scotland Yard; she was released, only to be shot the following year by a French firing squad. He gave an account of the interrogation in *Queer People* (1922).

Thomson was knighted, and given the additional responsibility of acting as Director of Intelligence at the Home Office, but in 1921, he was controversially ousted, prompting a heated debate in Parliament: according to *The Times*, "for a

few minutes there was pandemonium". The government argued that Thomson was at odds with the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir William Horwood (whose own career ended with an ignominious departure from office seven years later), but it seems likely be that covert political machinations lay behind his removal. With many aspects of Thomson's complex life, it is hard to disentangle fiction from fact.

Undaunted, Thomson resumed his writing career, and in 1925, he published *Mr Pepper Investigates*, a collection of humorous short mysteries, the most renowned of which is "The Vanishing of Mrs Fraser". In the same year, he was arrested in Hyde Park for "committing an act in violation of public decency" with a young woman who gave her name as Thelma de Lava. Thomson protested his innocence, but in vain: his trial took place amid a blaze of publicity, and he was fined five pounds. Despite the fact that Thelma de Lava had pleaded guilty (her fine was reportedly paid by a photographer), Thomson launched an appeal, claiming that he was the victim of a conspiracy, but the court would have none of it. Was he framed, or the victim of entrapment? If so, was the reason connected with his past work in intelligence or crime solving? The answers remain uncertain, but Thomson's equivocal responses to the police after being apprehended damaged his credibility.

Public humiliation of this kind would have broken a less formidable man, but Thomson, by now in his mid-sixties, proved astonishingly resilient. A couple of years after his trial, he was appointed to reorganise the Siamese police force, and he continued to produce novels. These included *The Kidnapper* (1933), which Dorothy L. Sayers described in a review for the *Sunday Times* as "not so much a detective story as a sprightly fantasia upon a detective theme." She approved the fact that Thomson wrote "good English very amusingly", and noted that "some of his characters have real charm." Mr Pepper returned in *The Kidnapper*, but in the same year, Thomson introduced his most important character, a Scottish policeman called Richardson.

Thomson took advantage of his inside knowledge to portray a young detective climbing through the ranks at Scotland Yard. And Richardson's rise is amazingly rapid: thanks to the fastest fast-tracking imaginable, he starts out as a police constable, and has become Chief Constable by the time of his seventh appearance—in a book published only four years after the first. We learn little about Richardson's background beyond the fact that he comes of Scottish farming stock, but he is likeable as well as highly efficient, and his sixth case introduces him to his future wife. His inquiries take him—and other colleagues—not only to different parts of England but also across the Channel on more than one occasion: in *The Case of the Dead Diplomat*, all the action takes place in France. There is a zest about the stories, especially when compared with some of the crime novels being produced at around the same time, which is striking, especially given that all of them were written by a man in his seventies.

From the start of the series, Thomson takes care to show the team work necessitated by a criminal investigation. Richardson is a key connecting figure, but the importance of his colleagues' efforts is never minimised in order to highlight his brilliance. In *The Case of the Dead Diplomat*, for instance, it is the trusty Sergeant Cooper who makes good use of his linguistic skills and flair for

impersonation to trap the villains of the piece. Inspector Vincent takes centre stage in *The Milliner's Hat Mystery*, with Richardson confined to the background. He is more prominent in *A Murder is Arranged*, but it is Inspector Dallas who does most of the leg-work.

Such a focus on police team-working is very familiar to present day crime fiction fans, but it was something fresh in the Thirties. Yet Thomson was not the first man with personal experience of police life to write crime fiction: Frank Froest, a legendary detective, made a considerable splash with his first novel, *The Grell Mystery*, published in 1913. Froest, though, was a career cop, schooled in “the university of life” without the benefit of higher education, who sought literary input from a journalist, George Dilnot, whereas Basil Thomson was a fluent and experienced writer whose light, brisk style is ideally suited to detective fiction, with its emphasis on entertainment. Like so many other detective novelists, his interest in “true crime” is occasionally apparent in his fiction, but although *Who Killed Stella Pomeroy?* opens with a murder scenario faintly reminiscent of the legendary Wallace case of 1930, the storyline soon veers off in a quite different direction.

Even before Richardson arrived on the scene, two accomplished detective novelists had created successful police series. Freeman Wills Crofts devised elaborate crimes (often involving ingenious alibis) for Inspector French to solve, and his books highlight the patience and meticulous work of the skilled police investigator. Henry Wade wrote increasingly ambitious novels, often featuring the Oxford-educated Inspector Poole, and exploring the tensions between police colleagues as well as their shared values. Thomson's mysteries are less convoluted than Crofts', and less sophisticated than Wade's, but they make pleasant reading. This is, at least in part, thanks to little touches of detail that are unquestionably authentic—such as senior officers' dread of newspaper criticism, as in *The Dartmoor Enigma*. No other crime writer, after all, has ever had such wide-ranging personal experience of prison management, intelligence work, the hierarchies of Scotland Yard, let alone a desperate personal fight, under the unforgiving glare of the media spotlight, to prove his innocence of a criminal charge sure to stain, if not destroy, his reputation.

Ingenuity was the hallmark of many of the finest detective novels written during “the Golden Age of murder” between the wars, and intricacy of plotting—at least judged by the standards of Agatha Christie, Anthony Berkeley, and John Dickson Carr—was not Thomson's true speciality. That said, *The Milliner's Hat Mystery* is remarkable for having inspired Ian Fleming, while he was working in intelligence during the Second World War, after Thomson's death. In a memo to Rear Admiral John Godfrey, Fleming said: “The following suggestion is used in a book by Basil Thomson: a corpse dressed as an airman, with despatches in his pockets, could be dropped on the coast, supposedly from a parachute that has failed. I understand there is no difficulty in obtaining corpses at the Naval Hospital, but, of course, it would have to be a fresh one.” This clever idea became the basis for “Operation Mincemeat”, a plan to conceal the invasion of Italy from North Africa.

A further intriguing connection between Thomson and Fleming is that Thomson inscribed copies of at least two of the Richardson books to Kathleen Pettigrew, who was personal assistant to the Director of MI6, Stewart Menzies. She is widely regarded as the woman on whom Fleming based Miss Money Penny, secretary to

James Bond's boss M—the Money Penny character was originally called "Petty" Petteval. Possibly it was through her that Fleming came across Thomson's book.

Thomson's writing was of sufficiently high calibre to prompt Dorothy L. Sayers to heap praise on Richardson's performance in his third case: "he puts in some of that excellent, sober, straightforward detective work which he so well knows how to do and follows the clue of a post-mark to the heart of a very plausible and proper mystery. I find him a most agreeable companion." The acerbic American critics Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor also had a soft spot for Richardson, saying in *A Catalogue of Crime* that his investigations amount to "early police routine minus the contrived bickering, stomach ulcers, and pub-crawling with which later writers have masked poverty of invention and the dullness of repetitive questioning".

Books in the Richardson series have been out of print and hard to find for decades, and their reappearance at affordable prices is as welcome as it is overdue. Now that Dean Street Press have republished all eight recorded entries in the Richardson case-book, twenty-first century readers are likely to find his company just as agreeable as Sayers did.

Martin Edwards

Foreword

A DECADE ago, in his famous book, *My Experiences in Scotland Yard*, Sir Basil Thomson wrote:

"Real life is quite unlike detective fiction; in fact, in detective work fiction is stranger than truth. Mr. Sherlock Holmes, to whom I take off my hat with a silent prayer that he may never appear in the flesh, worked by induction, but not, so far as I am able to judge, by the only method which gets home, namely, organization and hard work. He consumed vast quantities of drugs and tobacco. I do not know how much his admirable achievements owed to these, but I do know that if we at Scotland Yard had faithfully copied his processes we should have ended by fastening upon a distinguished statesman or high dignitary of the Church the guilt of some revolting crime.

"The detection of crime consists in good organization, hard work, and luck, in about equal proportions: when the third ingredient predominates, the detective is very successful indeed. Among many hundred examples the Voisin murder at the end of 1917 may be cited. The murderer had cut off the head and hands of his victim in the hope that identification would be impossible, and he chose the night of an air raid for his crime because the victim might be expected to have left London in a panic; but he had forgotten a little unobtrusive laundry mark on her clothing, and by this he was found, convicted, and executed. That was both luck and organization. Scotland Yard has the enormous advantage over Mr. Sherlock Holmes in that it has an organization which can scour every pawnshop, every

laundry, every public house, and even every lodging house in the huge area of London within a couple of hours.”

This, then, is the book written from within the sacred precincts. It is the lowdown, the inside dope, the detective story that every mystery writer has wanted to write and every mystery reader to read. It is the tale of a detective who works without intuition, without a magnifying glass, without a comprehensive knowledge of ancient Greek art and seven foreign languages; in a word, a detective who works as a detective works. The incomparable common sense of England is at his command, and the incomparable facilities of that magnificent octopus of the sea of crime, New Scotland Yard. And, as the Yard so unfailingly does, he gets his man. In the pages that follow, you will watch him do it.

Only a glacier in its irresistible path down a mountainside is comparable to the Yard in action. From the swift wheels of the famous Flying Squad, pursuing their lightning way across the face of London, to the dusty quiet of the Index Room, every unit operates with deadly effect. Neither fear nor favor affects the strong-faced men in control. No politician calls a halt. The halt comes, but it comes only when a criminal stands before the bar of justice and the Yard goes on to other things.

Out of all this wealth, this flowering of the art and practice of criminology, writers have drawn with increasing frequency and effect since the turn of the century. From the Yard's personnel Edgar Wallace borrowed heavily, for men like Inspector Bliss and the immortal Superintendent Surefoot Smith; H.C. Bailey found there Lomas, Reggie Fortune's hard-hitting foil; there Freeman Wills Crofts must have first seen Inspector French, tracking down some poor wretch of a murderer with the obstinate pertinacity of a demon. There, as a matter of fact, lie the men and machinery of a million tales, in the Big Four, the Flying Squad, the men in the ranks. There lies half the fascination of the detective novel.

There have been, at one time and another, discussions as to whether the efficiency of the Yard created the modern detective story (for in the days of Sherlock Holmes the Yard held no very estimable place in literature), or whether the modern detective story created the Yard. Like the justly celebrated enigma of the chicken and the egg, that is a question no man may answer. But it is safe to assume that the Yard's efficiency, a byword in police circles from Shanghai to Valparaiso, was of its own creating; built out of the mind and character of men like Sir Basil Thomson.

Sir Basil's father was the Archbishop of York, a distinguished, if a strange, ancestry for a criminal administrator. He was educated at Eton and Oxford, and after a time was called to the bar. From that to the far-flung Colonial Service was only a step. Shortly he found himself, at 29, Prime Minister of Tonga, the "Friendly Islands" of Captain Cook. He has farmed in Iowa, and he has been governor of that fabulous prison outside whose walls Dr. Watson shivered on an historic night—the prison of Dartmoor. He has been governor, too, of Wormwood Scrubs, that house of detention whose name rings so oddly in American ears. With this background of administrative and criminological experience, he took over, in June of 1913, the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard. His predecessor was the great Sir Melville Macnaghten, and on the splendid structure he had built, Sir

Basil raised the organization we know today. For eight years, through the difficult and perilous days of the war, his firm hands guided the C.I.D. and the Special Branch (the little-known section that has in its charge such delicate matters as political crimes). Through murders and spy scares, the post-war wave of robbery and violence, the vast spawning of small crimes and great, he pursued his course with skill and efficiency.

Out of his rich experience and his profound knowledge of crime and crime's detection, he has written this tale of young P.C. Richardson, who stood one misty November morning at a corner on Baker Street and decided that he would be a detective in the sacred ranks of the C.I.D. There are few such novels on the long shelves of the literature of crime.

“M.J.”

Chapter 1

ON A depressing November afternoon, when the street lights scarce sufficed to pierce the wet mist, a young policeman stood at his post in Baker Street at the point where Crawford Street joins the main thoroughfare. Moisture dripped from his helmet and glistened on his waterproof cape; the stream of traffic had splashed him with mud to the knees. People have been heard to wonder what passes through the minds of policemen during their long hours of point duty when they gaze on the stream of traffic with the detachment of a cow looking at a passing train. Are there human emotions behind those impassive features? Do they ever unbend? In the case of young P.C. Richardson, posted in Baker Street that November afternoon, we are in a position to answer these questions. Newly posted to the D Division of the Metropolitan Police after a strenuous course of training at Peel House, he was not ruminating upon the frailty of human nature or regretting the change from his native Arbroath to a section house in central London. He was wondering how he could win admission to the Criminal Investigation Department where, as he knew, hours were long, meals irregular, failures frequent, and pay but little higher than he was receiving while in uniform; but the work was varied, interesting, and sometimes exciting, and hard work was what he wanted. From what he had heard from his comrades there was only one royal road into the C.I.D. and that was by putting in his name to be a winter patrol; but winter patrols were posted mostly in the outer divisions of London during the burglary season, and it was too soon for him to apply for a transfer to one of those divisions. His mind then began to explore the future when, by a happy combination of hard work and good luck, he would rise in promotion by rapid steps. He might even solve crime mysteries which puzzled all his seniors as well as the “crime experts” of the Sunday newspapers, just as amateurs are wont to do in the detective stories, for which, by the way, he had a lofty contempt, knowing even from his short experience how far they are from reality.

He had just reached the rank of superintendent when he heard a shout and the grinding of brakes: a big car skidded sideways and stopped dead, blocking the

traffic: a huddled object looking like a bundle of old clothes was lying in the roadway entangled with the spring and the front axle. He was the first to reach the spot and direct the removal of the man, who had been knocked down, to the pavement, and to summon a doctor and an ambulance while he kept the crowd back and inquired into the cause of the accident. The driver of the car protested that it had not been his fault: he said that the old man had dashed off the pavement without looking to right or left to see whether it was safe to cross—"just dashed across as if the devil was after him, as you might say."

The usual particulars went down in the notebook; the car was got into the nearest side street. A crowd had assembled round the policeman; another crowd round the doctor who was examining the injured man. P.C. Richardson had to stride through it and move it back from the prostrate body. While he was doing this a woman said, "I was quite close to him, officer: he was running over to where you were standing. I heard him say, 'Very well, then, I'll call a policeman'—just like that—and then off he ran, right in front of the car, poor old man!"

"Who did he say it to?"

"I don't know. I didn't see anyone with him. In fact, I wasn't taking any particular notice till I heard them words."

Richardson addressed his next question to the crowd at large. "Did any of you see him before the accident happened? Was there someone with him?" There was no reply; these were all people who had stopped on their way at the sight of a growing crowd and the thrill of an accident. Richardson took the woman's name and address down in his notebook; she might have to be called as a witness at the inquest.

The doctor was kneeling over his patient. He looked up when Richardson asked him what the injuries were.

"He's unconscious and I can't get his name, but he's alive. We ought to get him along to the hospital as quick as we can."

"Right, sir; the ambulance ought to be here in less than a minute."

At this moment the crowd gave way and the ambulance was wheeled up to the curb. Willing hands lifted the body gently onto the canvas, and with Richardson at its side it was wheeled off to the Middlesex Hospital. The hospital porter rang a bell to the accident ward and the ambulance drew up at the door, but in that brief journey the passenger had ceased to be a "case" but had taken a longer journey and become a "body." His destination was not the accident ward, but the mortuary. Here P.C. Richardson's work began. The body was carried to a vacant slab; it was that of an old man between sixty and seventy, poorly but respectably dressed, such as may be found by the thousand in London shops. The first thing to do was to search the pockets for any address that might lead to identification—a letter, an addressed envelope, a business card—but there was nothing. A pencil, a bunch of keys, and a slip of paper represented the whole contents of the pockets. The underclothing, which was none too clean, bore a laundry mark and that was all. The slip of paper was the only clue; it bore the address Arthur Harris, 7 Wigmore Street. The hospital telephone was put at Richardson's service, and he rang up the police station to report the accident and obtain leave to visit the address and establish the identity. The house was but a step from the hospital. A butler opened the door and told him that Mr. Arthur Harris lived there and that he

would convey any message if he would be good enough to say what the business was; but Richardson was quite undaunted by the apparent opulence of the surroundings and said firmly that he had come for a personal and private interview with Mr. Arthur Harris.

"Is it a case of dangerous driving?" murmured the butler in concern. "Because if so I think you'd better see the young gentleman in the smoking room without letting the whole house know about it."

"Very well, the smoking room will do." He was shown into a luxurious room on the ground floor—a den apparently sacred to the father and son. Richardson had not long to wait. Apparently Mr. Harris's ordinary gait in descending stairs was to take four or five steps at a bound. He was a little breathless, not because of the exercise, but because the visit of a uniformed constable boded ill for a young man who considered that all public roads were intended for speed trials. He was a thin, weedy kind of youth, who looked as if late hours and cocktails disagreed with him. His pale cheeks assorted ill with his rather gaudy plus fours.

"You wanted to see me, constable?"

"Yes, sir. An old man was knocked over by a car in Baker Street this afternoon."

"It wasn't me, constable. I haven't been in Baker Street today. I can show you my journey on the map and bring a witness to prove it."

"That is not the point, sir. In the old man's pocket we have found this paper. It has your name and address. He was an old man approaching seventy, with a short grey beard and a bald head. He looked more like a shopkeeper than anything else. Perhaps as he was carrying your address you may be able to identify him."

Young Harris's expression showed his relief, but he shook his head and said that he could make no suggestion as to who would be likely to carry his address in his pocket.

"Had you an appointment with anyone this evening?"

"No. If I had I should tell you at once."

"Then, sir, I'm afraid I must ask you to come with me to Middlesex Hospital and see whether you can recognize him."

"Right, constable! I'll do anything you ask me to, but I can tell you beforehand that I shan't be able to recognize anyone of that description. Wait a second while I get my hat and coat."

Richardson watched him narrowly when they entered the mortuary together and thought that his complexion changed from white to green as he came within sight of the body, but he ascribed the change to the surroundings of the grisly building in which derelict human bodies are laid out like the wares in a fishmonger's shop. He looked fixedly at the body for many seconds and then shook his head.

"You've never seen him before, sir?"

"No; never."

"And you can't imagine why he should have your address in his pocket?"

"No, I can't, unless, of course, he'd looked up likely addresses in the directory for new customers."

When Harris had taken himself off in a taxi, Richardson went to the secretary's office to find out what was the ordinary routine about the funeral, seeing that the deceased had never been admitted to the hospital as a patient. He was talking to the secretary when the porter came in with another man—a slight young man of

about thirty with a fair moustache and a fresh complexion. He was accompanied by a depressed, middle-aged woman in a black bugled bonnet and draggled skirt, which seems to be the uniform of the London charwoman. The man looked like an office clerk of some kind, one of those voluble clerks who do all the talking.

The porter announced him. "This gentleman has heard that his uncle has met with an accident this afternoon and been brought to the accident ward."

The secretary referred to a list. "What age was your uncle, sir?"

"Close on seventy. He was to have met me this afternoon at the corner of Portman Square and Wigmore Street, but he didn't come."

The charwoman broke in, "You see, sir, I'd just slipped over to the Crown and Anchor for a glass, and I heard them talking about an old gentleman being knocked down by a car in Baker Street, and he was taken away to the hospital, and Mr. Bloak he said, 'Was it your old gent?' and I said, 'It couldn't have been 'im; he's so careful of the crossings,' and 'e said, 'Well, they're saying it was 'im.' And it's the truth I'm telling you; I didn't stop to finish me glass. I fair ran across to the shop to see whether he was in, and I couldn't get any answer to the bell. I was coming away again when up comes Mr. 'Erbert 'ere and I told him and we come along together."

"Had he a beard?" interrupted the secretary.

"Yes," said the young man, "a grey beard."

The secretary made a sign to Richardson, who came forward. "If you'll both come with me, sir, perhaps you'll be able to identify the body of the gentleman who was knocked down by a car this afternoon."

"The body? Do you mean to say that he's dead? My God!"

"I can't say whether he's the gentleman you are looking for, but if you'll come with me—" The secretary heaved a sigh of relief when the three left him to his work. A man of few words, he did not suffer talkers gladly.

The sight of the body lying on its slate slab was a shock. Richardson pulled out his notebook and asked whether they recognized the body.

"Yes, that is my uncle. His name was John Catchpool of 37 High Street, Marylebone—an antique shop. Poor old man! To be knocked down like that and sent to his Maker without any warning. Terrible, isn't it? Why, only yesterday we were talking—"

The charwoman began to whimper, "E was a hard master at times, but one can't help crying to see him lying on a 'ard stone like that and to think what good all 'is money'll be to 'im where 'e's gone."

The young man patted her on the shoulder. "You go home, Eliza. I'll see to everything."

She went off sniffing audibly. Richardson followed her to the door and took her name and address. Returning to the man, he said, "Now I should like your name and address."

"Yes, of course. There's no mystery about me. My name is Herbert Reece of 28 Great Russell Street, W.C.1. That's where I lodge."

"Occupation?"

"Well, I worked for my uncle looking after his outdoor business, his loans and houses and so on."

"You said he kept an antique shop."

“Quite right; so he did, but he had many other irons in the fire—house property, loans, insurance work, every kind of thing. Kept me busy, I can tell you.”

“Loans? Was he a registered moneylender?”

“He was, and he could drive a hard bargain, you can take my word for that.” He glanced at the body as if to assure himself that life was extinct and sank his voice to a confidential undertone. “Between you and me, many people would have called him a miser. With all that money and no one to look after him but that woman who came in in the mornings, living over the shop in a single room; I’ve often wondered that he didn’t have burglars in, but he’d have put up a fight for it if I knew him.”

“Was he married?”

“Ah! There you’re treading on delicate ground. He was married all right and his wife’s alive, but they didn’t get on and they separated years ago.”

“Do you know her address?”

“Of course I do. She was living in one of his flats in Sussex Square and rent free, mind you. She got that out of him when the solicitor drew up the separation, but I don’t mind telling you that there was no love lost between them—particularly these last few weeks.”

“At any rate we ought to go and break the news to her. What’s her number in Sussex Square?”

“No. 17; second floor, but mind you, the news won’t take much breaking. The old man was trying to get her to turn out and go into another flat not quite so good. That was at the bottom of the row these last few weeks, and I tell you that what with an angry uncle and a spiteful aunt and poor Herbert carrying messages between the two, omitting the swear words, of course, he hasn’t had what you’d call a rosy time.”

Richardson was busy writing his notes. “Well, now, Mr. Reece, I think I’ll go with you to see your aunt.”

“Right you are; we’ll get it over.”

As they went Richardson said, “It was a lucky chance that you met that woman and she knew where to come to.”

“Well, it wasn’t altogether chance. You see, my uncle and I had arranged to meet at the corner of Portman Square and Wigmore Street at five-thirty, and as he didn’t turn up and I’d been there for close on half an hour I went on to his shop to find him, but it was all locked up and I could get no answer to the bell, so I thought he’d gone on without me. To tell you the truth, I didn’t want to be mixed up in the job we were going to do—to make things unpleasant for a young man by telling his father what he’d been up to—so I was kind of relieved to think he’d gone without me. I went on to the young man’s house and walked up and down waiting for my uncle to come out, but he didn’t come, so I went back to the shop once more and there I met Eliza.”

“We shouldn’t have known who he was if you hadn’t come.”

“Hadn’t he anything in his pocket to show who he was?”

“Nothing. The only paper on him was the address of a Mr. Arthur Harris in Wigmore Street.”

“Well, that’s where he was going—that’s the man we were going to see together—the one I was telling you about. He owed my uncle money and he either couldn’t or

wouldn't pay up, so my uncle meant to get something out of him, or tell his father."

Richardson stopped dead, "Do you mean to say that Arthur Harris knew your uncle?"

"Of course he did."

"How many times had he seen him?"

"Three or four certainly; perhaps more."

"Ah!" grunted Richardson with Scottish caution. He said little more on their walk, for he had ample material for thought.

Chapter 2

ON ARRIVING at the house Reece knocked at the door of the housekeeper's room and asked whether Mrs. Catchpool was at home.

"I think so, Mr. Reece, I haven't seen her go out."

But knocking and ringing at the door of the flat produced nothing. Richardson asked whether Mrs. Catchpool lived there alone.

"Yes," replied his companion; "but she has a daily servant—a Mrs. Winter—who lives close by—in the next street."

"Well, perhaps as we are here we'd better go round and ask what time her mistress is expected home."

They found Mrs. Winter to be a brisk, talkative woman. "No, I'm not surprised that you didn't find her in, Mr. Herbert. She sent me off at 2 p.m. as she was going out for the afternoon." She sunk her voice to a meaning whisper. "Said she was going out to see 'im. Pretty tough time she'll have had with him too, with 'im so set on getting her to turn out and 'er so determined not to be put upon."

"Are you talking about her husband?" asked Richardson.

"Yes. Surely 'e hasn't sent you to turn 'er out by force, 'as 'e, officer?"

"No, no, I want to see her on quite another matter. You say she went to see her husband?"

"That's right, officer, and that's where you'll find her."

Richardson turned to Reece. "Perhaps we'd better tell Mrs. Winter what's happened. This afternoon her husband was run over by a motorcar and he died on the way to the hospital."

"Gracious! Then maybe my poor lady's waiting there in the shop for him and knows nothing about it. You go, Mr. Herbert, and break it to her, and come for me if I'm wanted."

As soon as they were out in the street Reece said, "I don't know that it's any good going to the shop. I was there at half-past five and could get no answer to the bell. My aunt is more likely to be visiting friends."

"I shall have to go there in any case," said Richardson. "You can do as you like about it."

"Oh, I'll come with you. We'd better slip onto a bus and get there as quick as we can."

The shop had been a dwelling house in former days, transmuted into a shop by removing the lower part of the front wall and substituting a shop window. By the street lamp one could make out the ordinary stock-in-trade of the vendor of antiques, but, within, all was in darkness. They tried the door, shook it, and rang the bell repeatedly. "Well," said Richardson, "I suppose that's all we can do for the present"

"What makes me uneasy is that the old man kept a lot of money in the house, and when it gets about that he's dead someone may break in and ransack the place. Couldn't the police put a guard on it for tonight?"

"You'll have to see the night-duty inspector about that. You'd better come round to the station with me and hear what he says."

The night-duty inspector had taken charge of the station when they arrived. To him Richardson explained what had happened and added, "This is the gentleman who identified the body of his uncle. He wants to ask whether the police will keep an eye on the shop tonight He says that there's a good bit of money lying loose inside and he's afraid of burglars."

"Very well," said the inspector. "I'll have casual observation kept if you'll give me the address." He turned to Reece. "Has your aunt any friends that she visits? She might be there."

"Well, I believe she has a nephew in London at the present moment—Lieutenant Sharp, a naval officer; he was on leave and I don't think he's gone back yet. Then there is Lieutenant Kennedy; he's an instructor at Greenwich Naval School and a friend of her nephew."

"Do you know their address?"

"I don't know where Sharp is staying, but I know the Kennedys' address."

"Then take my advice, sir. Ring them up and ask if she is there. You can use the telephone in the outer office if you like."

Reece was some little time at the telephone. He returned from it shaking his head. "They say that Lieutenant Sharp was leaving this evening to join his ship at Devonport; that my aunt dined with them last night but they haven't seen her since."

"Then we had better give her time to come home; it's only eight o'clock; she may be seeing her nephew off at the station. But she'll have to be seen by someone tonight or the coroner will be asking why not."

"Well, sir, I'm off duty," said Richardson, "but I'll go round there again about eleven and tell her."

"Then I'll meet you at the door at eleven," said Reece, "and we can go in together."

When they met as arranged, they found the housekeeper still up. "She hasn't come home, Mr. Reece. I've been waiting up for her to tell her you'd been here with a policeman; I'm sure to have seen her come in."

"Perhaps we'd better go up and make sure," said Richardson.

The housekeeper followed them up. When their ringing and knocking failed, she said, "Of course, I've got a pass key in case you want to look round the flat."

"We may as well, as we're here." The door was unlocked.

Richardson looked round with interest. The flat was small, but beautifully furnished; everything was meticulously neat, with a place for everything and

everything in its place—except its owner, of whom there was no sign. There was nothing for it but to return to the police station and let the inspector know.

“It’s a funny thing, her being out so late,” said the housekeeper. “I’ve never known her do such a thing before.”

“Her nephew was going off by the night train,” observed Reece; “probably she went to the station to see him off. I shouldn’t wait up if I were you.”

On the way to the police station Herbert Reece regaled his companion with information about the Catchpool family. “I don’t think we need worry about her, constable. She could look after herself a good deal better than the old man could.”

“Is she younger than her husband?”

“Yes—ten or a dozen years younger, I should say. I may as well tell you the truth, though. I don’t know much about her ways or what friends she has—she hasn’t much use for little Herbert.”

“Well, here we are—we’ll go in and tell the night-duty inspector.”

The inspector listened to the verbal report and said, “Well, of course, she ought to be found, as her husband’s been killed and we may want her evidence at the inquest. You say,” he went on, “that according to her servant she was going to her husband’s shop in the High Street.”

“Yes, but we could get no answer to the bell there.”

“I suppose you’ve a key of the shop, sir.”

“No, I haven’t. My uncle was very fussy about keys. He had a special lock on the door and only one key to it—the key he always carried himself.”

The inspector turned to Richardson. “You searched his clothing. Did you find any keys?” “Yes, sir, the bunch of keys that’s attached to my report.”

“Well, go and get them.” Richardson returned in a few moments with the large official envelope that contained all the portable property of the dead man. He turned out the contents on the table. The inspector pushed the bunch of keys over to Reece. “Now, sir, would any of these open the shop door?”

Reece shook his head. “No, I’ve seen that door key; it’s a good deal bigger than any of those.”

The inspector scratched his head. “I don’t see that we can do any more tonight. People do stay out late sometimes, and it’s not very likely that there should be two street accidents to knock down a husband and wife on the same day. I’ll leave a report on the desk, and the superintendent can deal with it when he comes in—about getting into the shop, I mean. I daresay you won’t be sorry to get to bed, sir.”

“No, I shan’t be sorry to turn in.”

“Of course, if you find that your aunt didn’t return home at all you will let us know.”

P.C. Richardson spent a restless night in his bunk in the section house. Just as the case was becoming absorbing it would be snatched from his hands and he would find himself on point duty again wondering whether others were making a mess of it. Of course they would make a mess of it. They wouldn’t know that this young Arthur Harris had denied all knowledge of the old man, while the old man’s nephew said that he knew him quite well, and then he cudgelled his brains for a solution of that small mystery. He fell asleep over it at last, but a troubled slumber

for under an hour does not turn out a man at his best in the early morning. It was some solace to him to find that he was posted for relief duty.

His name was called; he was wanted by the chief inspector. "You were the officer in charge of that Catchpool accident yesterday, weren't you? Well, the nephew has just telephoned to say that his aunt never came back last night. He's on his way here now. I think we'll have to get into the shop in High Street, but we must do as little damage as we can. You'd better go with him, and if he can't tell you where to get the key you must get a locksmith to pick the lock. The station sergeant will give you a locksmith's address."

It was thus that P.C. Richardson found himself still in charge of his first case. He was resolved to quit himself with honour. His first difficulty was that Reece could not tell him who had supplied the lock.

"My uncle used to say that the lock was burglar proof. He was awfully pleased when he got it made and was very cunning about the key—I've seen it, but he'd never even let me unlock the door if we'd come in together, and he wouldn't ever tell me the name of the man who made the lock."

"Well, then, we'll have to try what a locksmith can do."

The locksmith, a keen, ferret-faced craftsman, seemed quite pleased to hear from his visitors that the job was difficult. "Glad you told me; now I know what tools to take. But you needn't worry. I've never met a lock yet that I couldn't turn in five minutes." He proved to be as good as his word; there was scarcely time for a few errand boys to collect before the shop door swung back. "I'll tell you what I'll do if you like. While you're looking round the shop I'll slip back and get another door lock and key to take the place of this one; that'll give me time to make another key, and you'll be able to go in and out just when you like."

He shut the door behind him.

"Now," said Reece. "This is the shop and there's the staircase up to the living room. The office is behind that door with the red blind."

"I think we'll go upstairs first, sir." They found the two little rooms incredibly poor and mean, and they wasted no time in them. Richardson led the way down again. "I suppose this door into the office won't be locked, sir."

"I don't think so; we'll try it." He pushed past Richardson and opened the door. "My God! What's this?" Richardson looked over his shoulder. On the floor lay the body of a tall woman—a lady, he judged from her clothing—dressed in outdoor things. She was lying on her face; her hat had fallen off, exposing her grey hair. A chair had been overturned, otherwise there was no disorder.

"That is my aunt," said Reece, sinking limply into a chair.

Now that Richardson was face to face with what he felt to be a great case, all his preconceived ideas seemed to have left him. One thing he did remember from the teachings at Peel House—he must not touch the body; also that it had become a case for the C.I.D. in which a uniformed constable could take no further part, and that he must not touch anything for fear of leaving fingerprints behind him. One thing, however, he felt that he must do, even if it was only for his own satisfaction: he must satisfy himself whether there had been any burglarious entry. He took the precaution of putting on his gloves before he tested the window fastenings. They were intact and so were the thick window bars outside. He went back to look at the shop window; that also was intact. "This is a bad business, sir," he said.

“There is no doubt but that the poor lady’s dead. You say that no one had a key to this shop except your uncle. Surely your aunt must have had a key too.”

“No, I’m sure she hadn’t,” replied Reece in a hollow voice, “I can’t think how she got in unless—”

“Unless what?”

“Well, unless she came in before my uncle left the shop.”

It was a new light to Richardson. “You mean that she died here while he was still on the premises and that he locked the door and went off without reporting the death to anyone?”

“I don’t see how else it could have happened. That seems to me the only possible explanation. What do we have to do now?”

“There’s a lot to do, sir. I’ll have to go and report this at the station. They’ll send for the police surgeon; the body will be moved down to the mortuary, and then, I suppose, the matter will be put into the hands of the divisional detective inspector, but first I must take a few notes on the state of the room.” He went into the office again; Reece watched him from the door. “Only one drawer open,” he said, “do you think there’s money gone?”

“My uncle didn’t keep money in that drawer; only notes of hand. He was a registered moneylender, you know.”

Richardson paused with a word half written. “Oh! Then quite a lot of people would have liked to get at that drawer.” He glanced at the papers, but did not touch them. “Well, now, Mr. Reece, I think I’ve got all that I need. We’ll lock up the shop and take the key down to the station if you’re ready, but we must wait till the locksmith comes back with the new lock.”

They had not many minutes to wait. The locksmith screwed on the new lock with a practised hand and gave the two keys to Richardson.

While they were on their way to the police station Richardson asked his companion what the exact relationship was between him and the dead woman and learned that she was his aunt by marriage. He made his report orally to the chief inspector, who sent for the divisional detective inspector from upstairs. The latter officer was a soft-spoken Scotsman of slow speech. To him Richardson was bidden to repeat what he had said.

“You say that you looked at all the windows and they had not been tampered with?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And that the nephew says that the dead man had the only key?”

“Yes, sir, he’s outside if you’d like to see him.”

“We shall have to see him, of course, but not yet. The first thing is to get down the police surgeon and let us make a thorough search of the house; then the coroner will have to be told. Oh, there’s plenty to do.”

“Will you want me any more?” asked Richardson in a tone of disappointment.

“Not just at present, but we shall want you,” he added with a twinkle.

And so poor Richardson returned disconsolate to his seat, thinking that he had dropped out of the picture. He heard telephones being used; he saw the D.D.I. with two of his men bustling off with the key of the shop and handbags, and an hour or two later he saw them returning from their quest—the D.D.I. in close conversation with Dr. Macnamara the police surgeon. Richardson stood up as they

passed to the stairs. The D.D.I. recognized him and smiled. "That was a great case you brought us; you'll be interested to hear that it is a case of mur-r-der!"

Chapter 3

NEXT DAY Divisional Detective Inspector Foster of D Division might have been seen at the main entrance of New Scotland Yard, his overcoat bulging with papers. He nodded to the messenger in the hall, turned sharp to the left, and rapped on the third door—the office of Chief Constable Beckett, an officer who had risen to his present position after years of service in the same capacity as Inspector Foster, and knew more about the arts of criminal London and the wiles of detectives than anyone in the building. "Come in," cried a gruff voice.

It was a tiny little office for so important a functionary. The writing table, piled high with official files, and a couple of chairs seemed to fill all the space. In a sense it was no more than a passage, for one communicating door led into the office of the superintendents and the other into that of the deputy assistant commissioner.

"Good morning, sir," said Foster. "I thought I'd better bring down my report on that Catchpool affair, in case you'd like to talk it over with me."

"It'll take me an hour to read through all this," growled Beckett, fingering the report. "I'd rather you told me the main facts or—stop! It's no good telling the story twice over." He knocked at one of the communicating doors and ushered Foster into a room a little larger than his own, where a man of about forty was sitting immersed in papers. He was a fair, studious-looking man with a gentle voice and a mild eye. Perhaps it was these characteristics, which are unimpressive in open court, that had led Charles Morden to exchange the Temple and the Midland Circuit for his present post. He was the legal light of the building.

"I thought you would like to see Mr. Foster yourself, sir. He has brought his report with him."

"On the murder of that woman in Marylebone?"

"Yes, sir," replied Foster. "Mrs. Catchpool."

"You've no doubt it was a murder, then?"

"I have the surgeon's report with me, sir. He says that the woman died from shock resulting from strangulation. He found the marks of fingers on her throat; the hyoid bone was fractured."

"I suppose you've formed some theory."

"It's a puzzling case, sir. The husband and wife had separated years ago and were on bad terms. The husband had given her notice to quit her flat, and she didn't want to move; that accounts for her having been to his shop. The husband was knocked down and killed by a motorcar at five-thirty on Tuesday afternoon. He had the only key to the shop, but no key was found on him, nor were there any marks of breaking in; yet the body of his wife was found in the office behind the shop. How did it get there?"

“That seems an easy question to answer; she must have visited her husband before he left the shop and either he or a third person must have strangled her. I take it that that is the police view that you will put before the coroner?”

Beckett broke in. “The coroner has already had that view from the press—double headlines and all. As the husband’s dead they haven’t to think of the law of libel; they pitched it hot and strong. They’ve interviewed the dead woman’s servant and the housekeeper, who both played into their hands. Now if the jury finds that it was murder and suicide we can wash our hands of the case.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Beckett,” said Foster mildly. “There are one or two complications. First, we haven’t found the key of the shop; second, P.C. Richardson found a witness in the street who said she heard the old man cry out, ‘Very well, then, I’ll call a policeman,’ just before he dashed into the road. I’ve seen the woman myself and I’m sure she’s telling the truth. She didn’t see who the old man was speaking to—the pavement was crowded at the time—but she heard him say that. Thirdly, there’s this young man, Arthur Harris. Catchpool was a registered moneylender. He had Harris’s address in his pocket, and the nephew says that his uncle was going to that address when he was knocked down and killed. I’ve seen young Harris, and he sticks to it that he didn’t know the deceased; the nephew says that he knew him quite well. Fourthly, we found the moneylender’s ledger—pretty well kept, it was—with a page headed ‘Arthur Harris’ and an entry of a loan of £200. On the other side there were two payments on account. Now the only drawer open in the desk was the drawer containing the notes of hand. We compared them with the ledger; they were all there except Arthur Harris’s. On the other hand, he’s brought a witness to prove that he had motored down to Oxford that afternoon.”

“Harris is a liar, then, but he may have had another motive for lying. Young men who slip off to moneylenders are generally shy about letting their parents know about it,” said Morden.

“Yes,” Beckett agreed; “and as to the witness who heard Catchpool say ‘Very well, then, I’ll call a policeman,’ she may be telling the truth. He was an eccentric old man by all accounts; probably he was brooding over what he’d done and may have intended to give himself up. This evidence of the nephew, Reece, and the dead woman’s maidservant about the quarrels between the husband and wife seems to me convincing evidence of motive. I don’t see that you want any more for the coroner, Mr. Foster.”

“There’s one other thing, sir, that I ought to mention. On the floor of the shop itself we found a big sheet of brown paper folded in two just as it’s sold, and beside it a length of string made up of short pieces of different thicknesses knotted together. It looked, of course, as if it was intended for wrapping up a biggish parcel. I should have attached more importance to it if there had been evidence of a burglary, but every shopkeeper has brown paper, and string knotted together like that is just the sort of string that a miser would use. Still I’ve mentioned it in my report.”

At that moment there was a tinkle of the office telephone bell. Morden put the receiver to his ear. “Yes, yes,” he said in his gentle voice. “Mr. Foster is here in this room. He’s just been telling us about the case. Yes, Mr. Beckett and myself. You’d

like us all to come. Now? Good." He put down the receiver. "The A.C.C. wants us to come round to his room."

They trooped along through the swing doors to the room facing the big granite stairway. It was a larger room than the others and the Office of Works, with a nice discrimination in the relative ranks of the hierarchy, had accorded it an armchair, a turkey carpet, and a mahogany writing table which had been furnished during the war with a miniature telephone exchange and private wires to various government departments. Sir William Lorimer, the assistant commissioner, was an active and intelligent-looking person of about fifty with an easy manner and a sense of humour. He was not alone. In the leather armchair sat a long-legged young man, deeply bronzed and entirely unimpressed by his surroundings.

"Good morning, everybody," said Lorimer.

"Hallo, Morden!" exclaimed the young man in the chair, jumping up and shaking hands. "I haven't seen you for an age. I asked for you when I came in, but they told me you were engaged, and so I asked to see your chief."

"All the better," said Lorimer. "Please bring up those chairs and let us sit in conclave. I want to talk to you about this Catchpool case. I suppose that you've formed a theory?"

"We were talking it over when you rang me up," said Morden. "Mr. Beckett thinks that the case is ready for the inquest. Mr. Foster is not so sure. I have an open mind so far, but, of course, if the inquest is held we don't want an adjournment."

"The stunt newspapers seem to have tried the case already and found the jury's verdict for them," observed Lorimer. "Why do you think the case complete, Mr. Beckett?"

"Well, Sir William, there was only one key to the shop—the key which Catchpool had. There was no evidence of breaking in. The dead woman could only have entered the shop when the husband was there to let her in."

"And the husband was killed at five-thirty? Well, I've a bombshell to burst on that theory. This gentleman, Lieutenant Kennedy, a naval officer from Greenwich, who knew Mrs. Catchpool, tells me that she was seen alive after six o'clock."

Beckett's jaw dropped. "Did you see her, sir, may I ask?"

"No, I didn't, because I wasn't there. The person who did see her was her nephew, Lieutenant Michael Sharp, who is a personal friend of mine."

"Did he tell you that he'd seen her?"

"No, he didn't; he was coming down the steps of a bus at Marble Arch when he saw his aunt passing. He was saying good-bye to a lady who was going on by the bus, and he turned round to her and said, 'There's Aunt Emily; I'll try and catch her.'"

"And he caught her?" asked Beckett eagerly.

"We don't know: he's on his way to the Mediterranean."

The three professionals wilted at this unexpected reply. "Excuse me, sir," said Foster, "did the lady who was with him see the aunt?"

"She didn't. There were hundreds of people on the pavement, but she's ready to swear that Michael Sharp saw her, and so for the matter of that am I."

"I don't think that you're likely to be called upon to do that," observed Lorimer dryly. "The rules of evidence—"

“Oh, I know all about that,” broke in the visitor, “but when I saw in some damned sensation paper that old man Catchpool was supposed to have done the poor lady in and I knew he hadn’t, I thought it my duty to come round and keep you people straight.”

Morden spoke for the first time. “You say that Lieutenant Sharp is on the way to the Mediterranean. Where’s his first port of call?”

“Oh, they’ll put in at Gib, but he’ll have just the same evidence to give as I’ve given you.”

“He may have mistaken some other lady in the crowd for his aunt,” was Beckett’s observation.

“Now, how could he? She was his only aunt—the aunt who took him across her knee and smacked him from the cradle; the aunt who sent him to Osborne and Dartmouth; who watched over him like a mother. He couldn’t have been mistaken.”

“Not if he caught her up and spoke to her,” said Morden, “but we don’t know that he did. We shall have to get the Admiralty to stop him by telegraph at Gibraltar and send him home, but it’ll hang things up terribly. I think that Inspector Foster had better see this young lady first.”

“Well, it’s rather a delicate matter. You see Michael is sort of engaged to her, and the aunt, poor woman, didn’t exactly smile on the match—said he was far too young to be hampered with a wife or some such rot. Well, if you must see her I’ll give you her address.” He wrote it out and tossed it over. “You’ll have to call in the evening; she’s teaching in a school all day. I’ll tell you what: I’ll phone to her to come round to our flat this evening, and you can see her there.”

“Can I see her alone, sir?”

“Of course you can if you want to, but none of your third-degree methods, or you’ll put the wind up. You’ll probably find it better to have me in the room to help her out.”

“No, Kennedy,” said Morden firmly. “We must keep to the rules. Mr. Foster must see her alone.”

“Just as you like, but it would save you all a lot of trouble if you called me at the inquest.”

Lorimer laughed. “I think I can see the coroner’s face if we did. No, I think we are doing the only possible thing; we must find out whether your friend caught up his aunt and spoke to her. We can only do that by bringing him home. In the meantime, Mr. Foster had better go over the ground again.” He rose to intimate that the conclave was at end.

“Come into my room before you go,” said Morden as they went down the passage, “and tell me all about yourself.”

Inspector Foster accompanied Beckett to his room. “This is the woolliest kind of mare’s nest, Mr. Foster. It’s the kind of thing that’s always happening to us—sidetracking us when a case is complete. You’ll see when that young man is brought home that he never overtook the woman he saw, and we shall be exactly where we were before.”

“Well, Mr. Beckett, I can’t say that I’m convinced that the husband did that murder. I can’t help thinking that something will come along to upset that theory.”

“That’s your Scotch caution, Mr. Foster. Have you forgotten your own report on what the dead woman’s servant told you? Let me refresh your memory by reading it to you.”

“You mean Sergeant Reed’s report, sir. I didn’t see the woman myself.”

“No, but you read it. Here it is—the statement of Katharine Winter. ‘I was daily help to Mrs. Catchpool. She was as kind a mistress as any woman could have, but she had a lot to put up with from her husband, who was a violent-tempered old man that never said a civil word to anyone. He was here on the afternoon of the day before her death and was in one of his vilest tempers. You see, the lawyers had made him give her a flat rent free to live in, and he wanted to sell the whole house, but instead of a flat he wanted her to move into what was no better than a couple of attics in another house. Naturally, she wouldn’t turn out. I heard him say, ‘I’ll give you till tomorrow to agree, and if you don’t I’ll have you out if I have to throw you out into the street with my own hands.’ Those were his very words. He was the cruellest and the meanest old man I ever met—the sort that would skin a flea. Well, on the day of her death she told me that she was going to see him and she was determined to defy him. I tried to dissuade her. I said with a man like that you never know what he might do—why not go to the magistrate about it? But you couldn’t shake her when once she was set on a thing; she was determined to defy him to his face, and we know what happened.’”

Beckett put down the report. “Now, in the face of that woman’s statement, what have we more probable than that the husband had a violent quarrel with her and strangled her? I suppose she struck Reed as a reliable witness?”

“Yes, sir, but he said that she was strongly prejudiced against Catchpool, and you know what women of that class are when they are prejudiced.”

“She may be, but how else can you account for the wife having got into the shop when the husband carried the only key.”

“Well, sir, you remember the evidence about that young man, Arthur Harris; he was the man Catchpool was on his way to see; his was the only note of hand missing from the file. One witness of the accident declared that he heard Catchpool say ‘Very well, then, I’ll call a policeman.’ Suppose—it’s only a suggestion—that Arthur Harris, who, mind you, told a lie about not knowing the old man—suppose he met him in the street, snatched the key from him, ran to the shop, leaving the door open in his hurry, and started looking for his note of hand and, just as he found it, the wife walked in and began to scream for the police, as she would when she saw a strange man ransacking the drawers. Then, seeing what he’d done when he took her by the throat to stop her screaming, he had the sense to lock the door after him and take the key.”

“Very ingenious,” said Beckett. “It does you credit, but I think you’ll admit that there are a few missing links in your chain.”

“I know there are, sir; that is what I’m working on now.”

Chapter 4

“THAT GANG of yours,” said Kennedy when he was alone with Morden, “didn’t seem much impressed with the valuable stuff I brought them. That’s the worst of you professionals: you’ve no vision. Good Lord! What a heap of papers you’ve got on your table. That’s the way you waste your time. How can a man have vision with his nose buried all day in documents? One has to be out among men to solve mysteries.”

“I suppose that you’ve never heard of such a thing as the law of evidence.”

“Thank God, no! You want to get at the truth, and you tie yourselves up with a lot of musty laws. Look here, Morden, I don’t mind betting you an even bob that if you took me to the scene of that murder I’d put you in the way of solving the whole bally mystery in five minutes. Seriously, why not leave your office table for an hour, run me up to the shop in your car, and then come and lunch with me at the Savoy afterwards? You see, mine will be a fresh eye. All you fellows here get stale dealing with detectives’ reports day after day.”

Morden seemed amused. He toyed with the idea of reducing his volatile friend to humility; he toyed with the idea of his hospitality at the Savoy; he picked up the telephone and called for his car. “Come along, then, I’ll take you at your word.”

They had scarcely started when a rather dingy visiting card was brought to Sir William Lorimer: *Mr. J. B. Settle, Solicitor, 7 John Street, Adelphi.*

“Did he say what his business was?” he asked the messenger.

“Yes, sir, it was about the Catchpool case.”

“Take him to Mr. Morden.”

“Mr. Morden has just gone out, Sir William, I heard him tell the driver to go to High Street, Marylebone.”

“Very well, show the visitor in.”

Mr. J. B. Settle proved to be an aged person dressed in professional black, carrying a tall hat much in need of ironing. Sir William put his age at at least seventy. “Sit down,” he said hospitably. “You’ve come to give us information?”

“Rather to ask you for information, Sir William,” the visitor replied in a high, quavering voice. “I was solicitor both to the late John Catchpool and his wife. I drew their wills, and I am the sole executor. You may not know that the late Mr. Catchpool was a man of considerable property.”

“I thought he kept an antique shop in Marylebone.”

“He did, but he was also a registered moneylender, and all his savings were invested in house property. I have not yet been able to make an exact valuation, but on a rough computation I should say that his estate will prove to be at least £80,000.”

“Indeed, and who is the heir?”

“That is the very point that I have come about. His will was made many years ago, and I believe that it still stands. He left everything to his wife if she survived him; otherwise, everything was to go to his nephew, Herbert Reece. The point which I, as executor, have to be guided by is which of the two, the husband or the wife, died first. I read in this morning’s paper the theory that the husband killed the wife at some time before 5:30 p.m. and afterwards met his death in a motor accident; but, naturally, I do not attach much importance to newspaper theories. That is why I’ve taken the liberty of coming to you.”

"The inquest has not yet been held, Mr. Settle. Why not wait for the jury's verdict?"

"I was afraid you might say that, Sir William. Of course, the will cannot be proved until after the inquest, but I wish, if possible, to avoid litigation. Under Mrs. Catchpool's will her property is bequeathed absolutely to her nephew, a lieutenant in the navy, and if she survived her husband, even by a minute, her estate will include all her husband's property as well."

"What is the nephew's name?"

"Lieutenant Michael Sharp."

Sir William Lorimer was betrayed into emitting a low whistle. "Why is there any need for haste?"

"I may tell you confidentially, Sir William, that I am being rather pestered by Mr. Catchpool's nephew, Herbert Reece, who regards himself as the sole heir and wishes me as executor to advance money to him to be charged against the estate. Personally, any advice you may be able to give me will greatly relieve me."

"I think I can say offhand that it would be unwise at this stage to do anything on the supposition that either the husband or the wife died first. In your case I should wait for the evidence given at the inquest, which cannot be long delayed; but what you tell me about the wills is very interesting, and I am much obliged to you."

Sir William Lorimer felt a passing irritation that Morden should have chosen this moment for leaving the office. It was the kind of situation in which his man of law revelled.

The man of law with his naval friend had caught Foster as he was leaving the office and taken him with them as a guide. He had the key of the shop in his pocket. "Now, sir," Foster said on unlocking the door, "perhaps you'd like me to lead the way and I can show you exactly where we found the body." He led them into the dingy little office at the back, overturned one of the chairs, threw open a drawer in the writing table, and showed them chalk marks on the floor which indicated the position of the body. Kennedy listened attentively and moved towards the window. "You'll be careful not to touch anything, sir," said Foster. "We want to leave everything just as we found it until after the inquest."

"Keep your hair on, Inspector, I'm not going to splash my fingerprints all over the place. By the way, I suppose you've been over the room with a microscope looking for fingerprints? They always do that in the books."

Inspector Foster smiled indulgently. "That has all been attended to, sir, but you wouldn't find fingerprints on anything in this room. You see, there's no glossy surface anywhere."

"What about the window?"

"Yes, sir, there might have been a fingerprint on the glass if a man had entered by the window, but he didn't. That desk isn't smooth enough for a print and, in any case, the prints you get on furniture are very seldom of any use."

"Why not? I thought that if you found a fingerprint you found your man."

Foster chuckled. "They do that in the books, sir, but in real life you find most of the fingerprints left on furniture or glasses are blurred or smudged, without any core or any delta, and so they are useless for identification purposes." The Scottish itch for educating had taken hold of him. "You see, sir, what we want for

identification is a rolled fingerprint like this, and a criminal does not roll his fingerprints when he touches an object.”

“No, but when he grips a woman by the throat and strangles her, then you’ve got something to work upon.”

Foster smiled with the patience practised in the kindergarten. “The human fingers leave no impression on the flesh except a bruise. You see, sir, the impression left on a smooth surface is due to the perspiration ducts—”

“We’ll have to put you through the instruction class, Guy,” interrupted Morden. “You’ll learn a lot of things there that will put you off detective shockers for the rest of your life.” He looked at his watch. “Now we mustn’t keep Mr. Foster any longer. He’s got his work to do; and I am devilish hungry.”

Kennedy’s expression registered disappointment as he allowed himself to be piloted back through the shop. “What a lot of worthless junk these blighters collect. I suppose you’ve turned them all over for evidence? Hallo! How the devil did that get here?” He was staring at a canvas begrimed with varnish and dirt.

“It is clever of you to recognize it,” said Morden. “I can’t even see what it’s supposed to represent.”

“Nor could I until my wife gave me an art lesson. Under that black patch there there’s a Dutch village. I had to take that on trust, and so must you. You see these blighters in the foreground: you wouldn’t think it, but they are licentious Spanish soldiers come to knock hell out of the virtuous Dutchmen in the village. You see that dull red: that’s flames from a burning house, and there in the corner you notice a lady of opulent charms with her clothes half torn off her by the licentious soldiery.”

“Does the picture belong to you?”

“No, it belongs to a friend of ours, Lady Turnham. By Gad! It’s an extraordinary coincidence. I meant to speak to you about this picture this very morning, only the murder put it out of my head.”

“You mean it’s been stolen, sir?” asked Foster, pricking up his ears.

“Well, yes, I suppose you’d call it stolen. My wife knew a lame dog in the picture line, and with the owner’s consent she gave it to him to clean. He tied himself in knots when he saw it and said that it was an old master of the Dutch school and worth God knows what. My wife’s protégé has had it for months and she can’t get it back. I always told her that he’d pawned the damned thing.”

“That’s a criminal offense, sir—illegal pawning. What does he say about it?”

“Oh, always the same thing—that it’s getting on nicely; but whenever she asked to see it, he made an excuse and I didn’t believe that he had it. I was going to ask you, Morden, what we’d better do about it.”

“In other words you wanted professional advice out of me for nothing.”

“You ought to feel flattered.”

“Will you give me the name and address of the picture cleaner, sir?” said Foster, pulling out his notebook.

“Frank Cronin, Elizabeth Building, King’s Cross Road. But I don’t want to prosecute him. All I want is the picture. If I can’t take it now, I hope you won’t let anyone else take it.”

“No, sir, but I shall have to see the man to find out how it got here.”

“Well, then, rub it in and scare him out of his boots—the old rascal—and if you find that he committed the murder, I’ll thank Mr. Morden for the sum of one shilling for having solved the mystery. Come along, Morden, and we’ll take the edge off your appetite. Good-bye, Inspector. You’ve taught me more about fingerprints than I ever dreamed of.”

When they had exhausted reminiscences of their old days together and cigars had been lighted, Morden remarked quietly, “What sort of a fellow is your friend, Michael Sharp? I suppose he couldn’t have been playing games with the girl he’s engaged to when he said that he’d seen his aunt in the street.”

“Good Lord! No. Michael is one of the most shameless truth tellers in the navy—the sort of young man who’d walk up to a post captain and tell him, with due respect of course, that he’d missed a tuft on his chin with his razor. George Washington was a child in the vice of truth-telling compared with Michael. You know the type—the strong, silent man who knows what he’s talking about.”

“Of course, in a big crowd, as there is at Marble Arch at six in the evening, it isn’t easy to distinguish one woman from another.”

“Ah! You never saw Mrs. Catchpool. She was the grenadier type of old lady, about six foot high and gaunt. You couldn’t miss her in a crowd of Londoners.”

“The trouble is that until we see Sharp there’s no means of knowing whether he caught her up. The Admiralty must have already been asked to send a wireless to the ship and bring him back.”

“Good! Then he’ll be here next week. We can give him a bed in our spare room.” Morden rose. “You’re not going yet?”

“I must. Your visit this morning is going to give us a lot more work over this case, and I’ve got to arrange with the coroner about the inquest.”

“I wish you joy of it. Should I be indiscreet in asking you whether that bevy of talent I listened to in your chief’s room this morning are what the papers call the ‘Big Five’?”

“You weren’t impressed with them?”

“Indeed I was, but I’d always imagined that the Big Five were pale, studious-looking persons, addicted to drug-taking, and these were hefty-looking specimens that one meets in the street.”

“Yes, because if they were all geniuses like you and the heroes of the novels we should never get anywhere. Crime detection, my dear Guy, is common sense, hard work, and strokes of luck in equal proportions, with a big machine behind them. Now I must go.”

Morden was stopped by the messenger on his way to his room. “Sir William told me to say that he would like to see you as soon as you came in, sir.”

“Any letters or telegrams for me while I’ve been out?”

“Only what Mr. Beckett is dealing with.”

“Is Sir William alone? Good! Then I’ll go straight in.”

“Oh, there you are, Morden,” said his chief. “I had a legal conundrum for you just before lunch, but you were out.”

“Yes, I went up to look at the scene of that Marylebone murder.”

“Anything fresh?”

“No, except that I’ve started a new line of inquiry, which may come to nothing.”

“Well, I have something new for you in the same case. The executor to the wills of Catchpool and his wife has been in to ask me which of the two died first. He says that Catchpool’s estate is worth £80,000 at least, and the wills were so drawn that if the wife died first all the property goes to Herbert Reece, the husband’s nephew; but if he died first it will go to the wife’s nephew.”

“You mean the naval lieutenant, Sharp?”

“Yes.”

“A nice little case for the Probate Court. There have been quite a lot of precedents. I remember one case in which everything turned upon whether a husband was likely to be a better swimmer than his wife—a case of shipwreck—and the court gave judgment on the presumption that a drowning man would live longer than a drowning woman. But I wish we weren’t going to be mixed up in it. I was going to ask the coroner this afternoon to open both inquests and adjourn them to give the police time to get further evidence.”

“The complication is that two of your witnesses are interested parties and are not likely to forget it in the witness box. Reece has been round to the executor already trying to borrow money in advance out of the estate.”

“The deuce he has! His evidence will have to be watched.”

“So will any dealings he may have with the other witnesses.”

“Yes, I remember now a passage in the report of the uniform constable, Richardson, when he went to the shop and first found the body. Reece was with him, and he was the first to suggest that the dead woman entered the shop and died there before his uncle left it. He made no suggestion of murder against his uncle, because at that time they didn’t know that she had been murdered.”

“That view was supported by the dead woman’s servant, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but, of course, it was only conjecture in both cases. If you approve I’ll get on to the coroner myself.”

“Do, but keep on the right side of him. He’s a peppery man.”

“I don’t think he’ll mind when he understands our difficulties. Besides, I think that another week or ten days ought to be enough for our purposes.”

Chapter 5

THAT EVENING Joan Summers was dining with the Kennedys at their flat in Sloane Square. She was a pretty girl of twenty, without any of the arid graces that are apt to cluster about the school teachers of maturer years. She looked up in alarm on hearing the bell.

“That’s our sleuth,” remarked Guy. “I’m under bond, Nan, that you and I shall keep out of it until he’s turned poor Joan inside out.”

“Is he a very terrible person?” asked Joan.

“He’s a mild, paternal Scotsman from the northern wilds. He coos at you like a sucking dove.”

“Mr. Foster to see Miss Summers,” announced the parlourmaid.

“Show him into the drawing room.”

“Now, Joan, you’ve nothing to fear. Just tell him simply what happened. Here, go through that door.” Inspector Foster rose as she came in. “Have I the pleasure of speaking to Miss Joan Summers?” he asked.

“Yes,” faltered Joan.

“Perhaps Lieutenant Kennedy may have told you the object of my visit. On Tuesday evening I think that you were near the Marble Arch with a gentleman named Sharp at a little after six.

“Yes.”

“And you parted from him there?”

“Yes. We were on a bus, and he had to get off at Marble Arch, as he was going to see his aunt in Sussex Gardens.”

“And he got off there?”

“Yes.”

“And he went off in the direction of Sussex Gardens?”

“No; he didn’t. Just before the bus stopped, he caught sight of his aunt in the street and tried to point her out to me. ‘I must catch her now,’ he said. ‘She may be going out for the evening.’ And he jumped off the bus.”

“Which direction did he take?”

“By the time he got off I think that his aunt must have passed us and he followed her.”

“And overtook her?”

“I don’t know. The crowd on that pavement where the bus stops is very thick, and you can’t see what becomes of people.”

“Yes,” said Foster with a reminiscent eye. “I’ve often had occasion to notice that myself; but probably you have heard from him?”

Joan Summers blushed. “I have had just a line posted in Devonport, but it said nothing about whether he overtook his aunt or not.”

“You saw the lady yourself?”

“Well, no, I can’t say I did. You see, there were hundreds of people on the pavement, and the street lights were dimmed by the fog.”

“She is described as a tall, striking-looking old lady.”

“I know, and I looked hard for her, but I didn’t see her.”

“Do you know why Mr. Sharp was so anxious to see her?”

“Well, he was going away next morning to the Mediterranean. She was like a mother to him. It was natural that he should want to see her,”

“To say good-bye to her?”

“No—not exactly to say good-bye. He’d done that already—” She hesitated and then added rather lamely, “He just wanted to see her again.”

Her hesitation was not lost upon Foster. “You mean that when he said good-bye they had not parted quite amicably, or was there some other reason?”

She blushed and hesitated. “As a matter of fact—”

“You were going to say?”

“No—nothing.”

“You were going to say that as a matter of fact he had had words with her when they last met, were you not?”

To that seductive tone Joan could offer no resistance. “Well, if you call it having words. I think there had been some slight dispute between them.”

“Ah! It’s very expensive for officers in the navy, with the small pay they get. One doesn’t wonder that they have to draw on their relatives sometimes to help them out.” Joan looked unhappy, “I don’t know how you knew that it was about money, but I fancy that Mr. Sharp had incurred a few debts and he wanted to get them cleared off.”

Foster adopted his most father-bountiful manner. “I suppose it wouldn’t be fair to ask you, Miss Summers, for an opinion on Mr. Sharp.” This with an arch smile.

“How do you mean—an opinion?”

“Well, whether he is the kind of man who might jump to conclusions on slender evidence, or whether he is careful not to form an opinion until he is sure.”

“If you mean did he mistake some other woman for his aunt, or did he make up the story of seeing her, I can say positively, certainly not. We had been out to tea, and on the way back in the bus he told me how he had dined with his aunt the night before and they had had an argument about money matters. He said, ‘This is the first time in my life that I’ve gone to sea without being on affectionate terms with Aunt Emily. If you don’t mind going home alone, I’ll jump off the bus at Marble Arch and go and make it up. I was a brute to her last night, worrying her just when she’s being turned out of her flat.’ And then just before he jumped off he turned round in great excitement and said, ‘There is Aunt Emily!’”

“You watched him, naturally, to see whether he overtook her?”

“Yes, but I soon lost sight of him in the crowd; people were crowding onto the bus, and they obscured my view.”

“When you last saw him which direction was he taking?”

“He was going towards Baker Street, shouldering his way through the crowd. When my bus started I looked out of the window for him, but I didn’t see him. At the pace he was going I think he must have overtaken her.”

“And so when you read about Mrs. Catchpool’s death in the paper you asked Mr. Kennedy to come round to the Yard and tell us?”

“No, I didn’t ask him to do anything, but when I saw in the papers that she was supposed to have been murdered just after five, I told Mr. Kennedy that Mr. Sharp had seen her alive and pointed her out to me at a little after six.”

“Thank you very much, Miss Summers,” said Foster, rising and putting away his notebook. “I won’t take up your time any longer.” As he reached the hall, Kennedy intercepted him.

“Oh, come, Mr. Foster, we can’t let you run away like that. Come in and have a drink and make the acquaintance of my wife. No, it’s no good shaking your head. You come from Scotland, so you can’t be a teetotaller, and you can say *when* before I’ve poured out enough to cover a sixpence.”

Nan made a charming hostess; Guy Kennedy was stricken with deafness when the first “when” was given, and Inspector Foster took his place in the family circle as if he had known them all his life. He decided to improve the occasion. “I’m afraid that I’ve put Miss Summers through a terrible cross-examination.”

“She seems to have thrived on it. I’ve often wondered what the third degree felt like. I suppose when she fell asleep you shouted *boo* in her ear.”

“How can you, Guy!” Joan expostulated. “How could one fall asleep! Besides, I’d nothing to tell Mr. Foster except the fact that Mike owed money.”

“Owed money? Well, of course he did. All naval officers do that at times: their tastes are high, and their pay is so scandalously low.”

“You were a brother officer of Mr. Sharp, were you not, Mr. Kennedy?” cooed Inspector Foster.

“I was, and if he kept out of serious trouble it was due to my fatherly eye. He had a distressing habit of blurting out the truth to his seniors.”

“You didn’t teach him to lie, Guy?” interposed Nan.

“To lie! What do you take me for? I taught him to handle the truth diplomatically.”

“And you knew poor Mrs. Catchpool?” asked Foster.

“Of course we did: she dined here last Monday. And, by the way, when is the funeral to be? We want to attend it.”

“I will let you know as soon as the date is settled. The inquest will open tomorrow, sir, but the proceedings will be only formal and the coroner will adjourn it. The funeral will take place, I suppose, on Saturday. She was going to leave her flat, was she not?”

“Not if she could help it, I can tell you that. Her husband wanted to turn her out after she’d had it for nearly twenty years. However, *de mortuis*... I’ll say no more about him. He loved money, and he’s gone to a place where money melts.”

“Guy!” protested his wife. “You see, Mr. Foster, her husband had had an offer for the entire house; he was getting rid of the other tenants, and he offered Mrs. Catchpool another flat in exchange, but she didn’t like it as well as the old one, and that was all the trouble.”

“She might have gone to a solicitor,” said Guy; “but she wouldn’t do that. I think she rather enjoyed fighting the old man.”

Inspector Foster rose to go.

“By the way, Mr. Foster, I suppose you haven’t had time yet to see the old rascal who sold that picture that we saw in the shop?”

“I called at Elizabeth Buildings this afternoon noon, but the man was out. I’m going on there now.”

“Don’t be hard on him,” pleaded Nan. “He is very poor and miserable. He wasn’t always like that. I knew he was fond of liquor, but when I first began to get him work he took a pull on himself; it’s only within the last three or four months that he’s gone downhill. All we want is to get the picture back for Lady Turnham.”

“No, I won’t be hard on him, but I must find out how he came to see that picture.”

They parted with mutual expressions of good will. Foster looked at his watch when he reached the street. Yes, there was still time for another visit to Elizabeth Buildings.

This time he was more fortunate. A feeble voice replied to his knock, and the door was opened by a scarecrow of a man wearing a dilapidated overcoat over his shirt; apparently he had just risen from the pallet bed in the corner. The room was littered with canvases, pots of paint, and oil and brushes; on the easel stood a canvas half cleaned: it was evident that this broken-down wreck was able still to obtain commissions and that he did sometimes fulfil his engagements, for Foster’s eye was caught by a brown paper parcel of the shape and size of a canvas, lying near the door.

"I must introduce myself, Mr. Cronin. I am Detective Inspector Foster of the Metropolitan Police." The old man shivered and sat down heavily on the bed. Foster took the only chair. "I have one or two questions to put to you. I think that you were entrusted by Mrs. Kennedy with a Dutch picture to clean. Here is a description of it, as far as it was possible to make out the subject under the layer of old varnish and dirt: it measured forty inches by twenty-three and represented what seemed to be a Dutch village in flames, with a windmill in the background; soldiers in armour are looting the houses and dragging off the women."

"Yes, sir, I know the picture," faltered the old man. "The subject belonged to the Spanish occupation of the Low Countries. It was a good picture."

"And you admit that it was entrusted to you to clean?"

"Yes, sir, but I've been so busy these last few weeks—" he waved his hand at the canvases about the room—"that I haven't had time."

"You mean that you have the picture here in this room?"

"Well, no sir, not exactly."

"Then where is it?" There was no answer. "Where is it?" Foster had dropped his softer manner. "Come, out with it: you must know where it is."

There was still no reply. Cronin was shivering, and tears dimmed his eyes. At last he spoke, scarcely above a whisper: "I haven't been feeling myself, sir, for some weeks past—not eating or sleeping well—and with all this work to do I've had to take stimulants. If you want to know the truth, sir—it's a habit that grows on me."

"I can see that for myself, but since you won't tell me where the picture is I'll tell you. We found it this afternoon in the antique shop in High Street, Marylebone. I suggest to you that you sold it, but before you reply I must caution you that I shall take down in writing what you say, and it may be used against you in any proceedings that may be taken against you for larceny as a bailee."

"I know I did wrong, sir, but surely Mrs. Kennedy wouldn't be so cruel as to have me up in court for a thing like that: it was a sudden temptation."

"You admit having sold it, then?"

"Yes, sir, they told me that the old man who kept the shop had an eye for a good picture and would pay a fair price for it and that he asked no questions. He took it, but he didn't pay anything like a fair price. I meant, of course, to buy it back from him as soon as I'd got the money for my other work. There was no criminal intention."

"That will be a matter for the court, not for me. Did you sell the old man any other pictures?"

"No, sir, that I can swear."

"What was the date when you sold this one?"

"Well, sir, I don't keep a diary; it was some weeks ago."

"Try to remember. Was it three months ago?"

"Oh, not as long as that, sir."

"Two months? One month?"

"I should think it was between four and eight weeks ago, but I couldn't swear even to that."

"Do you often go down High Street?"

Cronin was seized with another fit of shivering; Foster ascribed it to his recent potations, of which the room reeked. "I went down there once, sir, and saw the picture exposed in the window."

"Tell me how lately you have been down to that shop. When was the last time?"

The old man began to cry; it was a pitiful sight. The idea crossed Foster's mind that possibly this wretched creature had been concerned in the tragedy, but looking at him now he felt sure that such a human wreck could not have killed a fly, let alone a tall, vigorous woman. The creature filled him with pitying disgust.

"Are you going to arrest me, sir?"

"Not this evening: it all depends upon whether the owner of the picture signs an information against you."

"I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself. I owe a great deal to that lady. Indeed, I owe my livelihood to her; it was she who got me some of these commissions. She trusted me, and now she knows what I am. When I think of my ingratitude, I'd rather go to prison."

"As I said, it's not come to that yet, but I may have to see you again. You mustn't change your address without letting me know at the Marylebone police station, and if you'll take the advice of a man who can speak with knowledge, you'll take a pull on yourself and not touch another drop of liquor." Foster rose to go. He longed to breathe the comparatively pure air of the King's Cross Road. As he was going out, his eye rested on the parcel propped against the wall near the door. It caught the light from the naked kerosene lamp, and he saw that it was tied up with little lengths of string of unequal thickness knotted together—just the same kind of string as they had found on the floor of Catchpool's antique shop in Marylebone High Street. That set him thinking: it seemed certain now that he would have to see the artist again.

Chapter 6

THE CORONER had fallen in with the suggestion that he should open the inquest and adjourn it. Evidence of identity was all that he required, and one witness, the nephew, Herbert Reece, could provide that. He proved to be an excellent witness; the formalities of the law restrained his natural loquacity. Inspector Foster was favourably impressed by the conciseness of his replies and the tone of blended sorrow and respect with which he spoke of the two dead people. The press was present in force, but the coroner was not disposed to satisfy their thirst for a sensation; medical evidence was called to show that Mrs. Catchpool had died from shock consequent upon having been seized violently by the throat, and the coroner then adjourned the inquest with an intimation that the police were pursuing their inquiries.

As Inspector Foster was leaving the court, he was overtaken by Herbert Reece. "Excuse me, Mr. Foster, I want to ask your advice. I have been trying to get some sense into the head of the executor to my uncle's will; now that the first part of the inquest is concluded, surely he ought to read the will or tell me its contents. Besides, I have to arrange about the funerals and I want to do them in some style;

surely the executor ought to advance money out of the estate for the funeral expenses. Is he entitled to put the brake on like this?"

"I'm afraid you've come to the wrong person, Mr. Reece, I'm not a lawyer."

"No, of course you're not, but in a simple matter like this I don't want to run to the expense of a solicitor."

"Well, sir, it's quite outside my province. If you think the police are in a position to help you, I should advise you to go down to the Yard and ask to see Mr. Beckett, the chief constable."

"Thank you; that's a very good suggestion. I'll go at once."

When Beckett read the name on the interview form, he had the visitor shown in, for he remembered that this was the man who could throw more light on the Catchpool case than anyone else. He received him with grim civility and invited him to sit down. "You are, I think, the nephew of Mr. and Mrs. Catchpool, on whom the inquest was held this morning. What can I do for you?"

"You can do a great deal for me, sir, if you will. I can't bear to think of my uncle and aunt being given pauper funerals. I'm the nearest relative, and it's my duty to have their funerals done in style, but I'm a poor man and I cannot get any sense out of my uncle's executor. Surely he ought to provide the money out of the estate."

"If your uncle left a will, that was probably included. Have you seen him about it?"

"I've been to see him every day—not perhaps about the funeral expenses, but about advancing me something out of the estate. But not a bit of it: he won't budge. He's an old man, and I think he's barmy."

"Did your uncle leave much property?"

"Oh, yes; he was fairly well-to-do! Apart from the moneylending business he had a lot of house property and a biggish deposit in the bank."

"Was he on bad terms with his wife?"

"Well, it was this way: She was the daughter of Mr. Alston, the senior partner in that big house-agent firm—Alston & Catchpool. There were two daughters; the elder one married a man who rose to be a colonial governor out in the East and was knighted. The younger one, my aunt, got engaged to my uncle, the junior partner, and her father didn't like it—thought, I suppose, that she ought to do better for herself. Anyway, she married him and the partnership dissolved. My uncle took out his share and invested it in house property. The business grew, and the richer he got the more miserly he became in his habits. His wife always treated him like dirt under her feet, if you know what I mean, and fifteen or twenty years ago they agreed to separate. She had a small income from her father, and my uncle was induced by the solicitor to agree in the deed of separation to let her live, rent free, in one of his flats. A year or two later her sister sent her little boy home to be educated for the navy, and she took charge of him. About the time he was to go to Osborne his father, Sir Walter Sharp, died in Singapore, and within three months Lady Sharp followed him, so the boy was left to the guardianship of my aunt."

"Did he get a commission in the navy?"

“Did he not? Oh, he’s quite the naval officer—looks down his nose at me whenever we are unlucky enough to meet—quite the affectionate cousin is Lieutenant Michael Sharp, I can assure you—”

“Did your uncle and aunt often meet after their separation?”

“Not oftener than they could help. Whenever they did I was careful to keep out of the way. It was no place for little Herbert.”

“Why?”

“Well, people don’t often improve with age, do they? My uncle had become miserly and short-tempered; my aunt had grown faultfinding and grand—seemed to think she belonged to another world and that we were not good enough for her. Her airs and graces used to drive the old man into a furious rage, and I used to keep out of his way until he’d had time to get over it.”

“Do you know why she should have gone to his shop that evening?”

“I don’t know, but I can guess. You see, he had given her notice to leave her flat for another nearly as good. He had had a good offer for the house and he wanted to close with it. He made me do all the preliminaries, and I can tell you I wouldn’t do it again for a hundred pounds. She made me feel as if I was something that the cat wouldn’t eat. Then the old man went to tackle her himself, and he talked to her straight—threatened to throw her out, he said—and I suppose she went down to the shop to get some of her own back. That’s what it seemed to me. I know he didn’t expect her to come, because he had an appointment with me that afternoon.”

“You think that a dispute arose between the two and that your uncle was responsible for her death?”

“I don’t know what else to think. I wish I did.”

“Why are you so anxious to get the executor to advance you money? Do you know that you are inheriting anything from the will?”

“The will was made years ago when I was a small boy, so my uncle told me. He was always talking about revoking it and making a new one, but he kept putting it off. He did hint to me once that he’d not forgotten me. You see, with his death my little salary for managing his house property came to an end. I thought that the police might just give the executor a hint to hurry up.”

“It’s not quite so easy as you think. There can be no harm in my telling you what we know. Your uncle’s will made your aunt sole legatee, if she was alive at the time of his death; if not, you were to become sole legatee. If she outlived him her will left everything to your cousin, Lieutenant Sharp. Suppose that a witness came forward to swear that he saw your aunt alive after your uncle’s death?” Beckett was watching him closely. He saw him start and change colour.

“I should say that he was a liar,” said Reece confidently. “But the executor might not: naturally he has to be careful.”

“Has anyone come forward?”

“Yes.”

“You mean that there’ll have to be a law case about it?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Then you can do nothing for me?”

“Not as the case stands at present—not unless some new fact comes to light. You needn’t worry about the funeral: the executor will see to that.”

Herbert Reece left the office in a chastened spirit. He narrowly missed meeting Inspector Foster, who knocked at Beckett's door five minutes later. As usual his pocket was bulging with reports. "I thought I'd better come round with my reports, sir, and talk to you about them. Yesterday afternoon I had an interview with that young man, Arthur Harris—a rather unsatisfactory interview—about that alibi of his. He stuck to it that on the day of the murder he went down to Oxford in his car and gave the name and address of a friend who was with him. He said that he got back soon after dark—say at half-past five. Of course, that was not an alibi at all if he killed the woman in the course of the evening, but there was something in the way he made his statement that seemed rather fishy. He contradicted himself twice and got his times all mixed up. So I thought I had better see the man whose name he gave me before they had time to make up a story between them. His name is Henry Vivian—a young man whose parents are in a good position living in Pont Street. I asked him if he'd been out motoring with Harris that afternoon. He said yes. I asked him where they'd gone, and he said to Oxford and back. Was he sure? He began to stammer and look sheepish, and I pressed the point. 'Because,' I said, 'it may be very serious for you if you're telling an untruth.' That did it. He broke down and admitted that he'd never been out in the car at all with Harris that afternoon, but Harris had asked him as a friend to say that he had."

Beckett laughed sardonically. "Oh, these alibis!"

"Now, sir, don't you think it queer that Harris should have thought it worth while to manufacture a false alibi unless he had something to hide?"

"It certainly looks fishy."

"I went straight back to Wigmore Street to shake up Harris again, but he was out, and the butler told me that he didn't know when he'd be back. I fancy that young Vivian must have telephoned to him after my visit and scared him."

"Oh, he may have been hiding upstairs. Better leave him alone for a day or two."

"Yes, sir, that's what I thought. Well, then, after that I took a statement from that young lady, Miss Summers; she was perfectly frank and open, but she couldn't tell me whether Lieutenant Sharp overtook his aunt, or whether he found that he had mistaken another woman for her. Well, sir, that wasn't all I did yesterday. I hunted up that picture cleaner—a wretched, broken-down whisky-sodden creature living in a single room in King's Cross Road. He owned up that he'd sold that picture to Catchpool and, of course, committed larceny as a bailee. He didn't look as if he had the strength to kill a sparrow, but I did notice one thing. You remember the brown paper and string found in the shop? Well, he had a picture done up ready for delivery and tied with just the same kind of string—bits of different thicknesses joined together. Of course, it might have been the paper and string in which he had brought down that picture for sale, except for one thing. The brown paper we found in the shop had never been folded: it had just been rolled up."

"You think he may have been in the shop just before or just after the murder, or do you suggest that he was concerned in the murder? How did he get in if there was only one key?"

"That is what I am going to work upon, sir: that and Arthur Harris's motive for a false alibi."

“Right. Before you go I’ll see whether Mr. Morden would like to have a word with you.” He knocked at the communicating door and then looked in. “The D.A.C.C. is out of his room. I’ll read your report and tell him what you say.”

Morden had just been summoned to his chief’s room. “I’ve been thinking over that Marylebone murder case,” said Sir William. “We don’t seem to be getting on with it. What about putting one of the superintendents of C.O. in charge of it?”

“Foster seems to be doing very well. I don’t like swapping horses in midstream.”

“Nor do I, but the list of our undiscovered murders is getting uncomfortably long. One of the sensation rags published a list of them this morning, hinting that the Marylebone murder would have to be added to it. If a superintendent is put in charge it may keep them quiet for a bit.”

“But have we one to spare? Shelburn’s still away in Gloucestershire over that poisoning case; Smith is less than half through with the Bank of England note forgery; Cossett is tied up with the G.P.O.—the mailbag robbery case; Gay is still down in Eastbourne and is getting home on that highway robbery and murder. We have only Graham available, and I put him onto that coining case. If we take him off just when he is on the point of finding the plant, the rascals will get to work again. Besides, he’s better at that sort of job than he is with a murder.”

“All right; then let Foster carry on. Is he making progress?”

“He will if he isn’t hustled. You know what those Scotsmen are—slow and sure. He’s a whale for work—about sixteen hours a day is his ration, and I like his quiet way of handling witnesses. If we give him another week I believe he’ll get home all right.”

“You remember old Bertillon’s dictum about detective work. He talked a lot of rot in his time, did Bertillon, but he was right when he said that criminal investigation was fifty per cent, perspiration, ten per cent, inspiration, and forty per cent luck. In this case we seem to have had the first two, but little of the third.”

“I don’t despair. The luck will come.”

“As I know the case, everything seems to turn upon that key. Are you satisfied that there really was only one key to the shop?”

“So far we have only the nephew’s word for that, but Foster is to see whether the man who supplied the door lock kept any record of the number of keys supplied with it.”

“Are you satisfied with that nephew? Both he and his cousin may have thought that they stood to benefit by the death of their aunt—in fact, so far as motive was concerned, there were only three people with a motive—the old man who hated her and wanted to get her out of his flat, the nephew Reece, and that naval officer whom we’ve sent for.”

“You’ve forgotten Arthur Harris, who had borrowed money from him and whose receipt was missing from the file, to say nothing of that artist chap who wanted to get back the picture he’d sold to him for fear of exposure and prosecution. Foster is getting on with the process of elimination. I fancy he lies awake at night suspecting new people and clearing them out of the way. It takes time.”

“It does, and this sort of case has a nasty way of rounding on one by turning out that someone whom we never suspected at all did the murder from the vulgar motive of robbery.”

The door opened and the messenger brought in a card. Sir William read it and tossed it over to Morden. "Mr. Charles Harris? I never heard of the gentleman. Take him to someone else, Willis."

"He seems very anxious to see you, Sir William. I told him you were busy. He seemed rather hot and angry and said that if he couldn't see you he'd go straight to the Home Secretary and make a complaint."

"Then let him go to the Home Secretary."

Morden was studying the card. "Wait a bit. His address is given as 7 Wigmore Street. That's the address of the young man who'd been borrowing money from Catchpool. It may be his father."

"How is he dressed, Willis?"

"Very well, Sir William. He looked like a City man."

Sir William groaned. "I wish that the architect of this building had constructed an oubliette in the passage with a spring trap for timewasters."

"You might get something useful out of him," said Morden, soothingly.

"You think so? Well, take that chair like a good fellow and be prepared to act as chucker-out. Show him in, Willis."

Chapter 7

THE MESSENGER had not overstated either the personal appearance or the heat and anger of the visitor. He was a florid, stout person, attired in what was the uniform of the stockbroker before the war—tall hat, black coat, striped trousers, patent leather boots and spats. His temper, thought Sir William, had not been improved by stagnation of business on the Stock Exchange. He declined the chair courteously brought forward for him by the messenger.

"No, I'd rather stand," he said, breathing hard. Sir William and Morden rose from their seats at once. "Oh, if you are going to stand I'll sit down. Am I addressing Sir William Lorimer, who I am told is head of the C.I.D.?" He hissed the initials venomously.

"That is my name," admitted Sir William, taking up the card, "and you are Mr. Charles Harris? What can I do for you?"

"Do for me? The point is, what have you done for me and what are you going to do next? I have a very serious complaint to make. I have a son—a poor nervous lad—and your men have had the cruelty and impudence to bully him—to force their way into my house and put him through the third degree, if that's what you call it, and all because he borrowed money—an ordinary business transaction which did not concern the police at all. It's scandalous!"

"I'm afraid, Mr. Harris, that you have been misinformed about the object of the inquiry. The man from whom he borrowed money was killed early in the week by a motorcar, and there was a murder in his house. Your son was visited in common with everyone else who had had dealings with him."

"I know all about that: my son told me that he had been foolish enough to go to this moneylender, but what of that? I should have settled and paid up, and that would have been the end of it. No, this man you sent to my house forced his way

in two or three times yesterday. I don't know what he said to the lad, but unless he accused him of murder how can you account for what has happened?"

"You mean—?"

"I mean his going off without a word to anybody and without luggage. I've wired and telephoned to all his relations and friends; none of them has seen him."

The two officials exchanged glances: the visitor continued: "Now your man frightened him away and you have got to find him."

"Certainly, we shall do our best to find him. We have a description of him to circulate. Have you any objection to our getting the B.B.C. to broadcast him?"

"Urn! The loss-of-memory stunt, I suppose?"

"You think that's not better than the all-will-be-forgiven stunt?"

"I don't like either of them. The boy would never forgive me if his pals nicknamed him *loss-of-memory* Harris. No, I won't have publicity. You people have your own machinery for finding people. Just find him and bring him home. And, of course, if you have expenses send the bill to me."

"Very well, Mr. Harris," said Sir William, rising to intimate that the interview was at an end. "And, of course, you'll let us know by telephone if your son returns home."

"Of course I will," said the other, as he stumped out of the room.

"So the bird's flown, Morden. What do you make of that?"

"I'd like to know what Foster said to him before I start guessing. I believe I heard his voice in Beckett's room when you sent for me. Let's see whether he's still in the building."

Sir William rang for the messenger, who returned with Inspector Foster immediately. "I was just leaving, sir. I gave my report to Mr. Beckett," he explained to Morden.

"I'm glad we caught you in time," said Sir William. "Did you know that this young man Harris has bolted?"

Foster's face exhibited no surprise. "I didn't know it, Sir William, but I'm not altogether surprised to hear it."

"Why?"

Foster related the facts about Harris's false alibi and how he had taxed him with it.

"I suppose that you never said anything to him that might lead him to think that he was suspected of the murder."

"Not a word, sir."

"Has any other police officer seen him?"

"Not since the evening of the murder, Sir William. The uniform constable, P.C. Richardson, saw him then, and young Harris assured him that he had never seen the dead man in his life. When I taxed him with that, he said that he didn't want his father to know that he'd been borrowing money."

"I wonder whether we could get Richardson down here."

"Yes, Sir William, quite easily. He's on relief this afternoon."

"Then will you go and telephone to Marylebone to send him down at once? Say that I want to see him."

When Foster had left them alone, he said, "I can understand why his father came down and tried to be rude to us. Probably he's having a thin time at home."

These bullying turkeycocks are generally being bullied by someone else; this time it's the doting mother. The turkeycock's tail gets lower with every step he takes from his office to his front door, and he slinks in with all the bounce out of him like a deflated tire. But why should the boy have tried to prove that false alibi if he was innocent? He must know more than he cares to tell us. Anyhow, we must circulate his description by A.S. message and the provinces. You'll see to that?"

Foster slipped quietly into the room at this juncture. "P.C. Richardson is on his way down, Sir William. I've asked Mr. Beckett to let me have my report in case you would like to glance through it."

There was silence for a few minutes while Sir William Lorimer read the report. "This will interest you, Morden, especially the part about the picture cleaner. I see, Mr. Foster, that you describe him as a weak, drunken old man, but even a weak, drunken old man may be driven by fear to commit violent crimes. I don't think that you can dismiss him entirely from the case on account of his physical appearance."

"That's very true, Sir William, and I haven't dismissed him. That paper and string we found in the shop needs explaining. I shouldn't be surprised to find that he was on the premises either that day or just before it."

They discussed the various aspects of the case for some minutes, when the house telephone tinkled on the desk. "It's Richardson," said Sir William, putting down the receiver. "I told them to send him in." The door opened and P.C. Richardson stood at attention; though oppressed by the feeling that this was the greatest opportunity of his life, he maintained his Scottish composure.

"I want to ask you a few questions, Richardson," said Sir William, kindly. "You were the first police officer to see that young man Harris?"

"I was, Sir William."

"How did he strike you?"

"Not at all favourably, sir. He seemed frightened, and as you will remember, he lied to me. He seemed to have something he wished to hide."

"Yes, he lied all the way through—rather stupidly, it seems. You may not have heard yet that his alibi for that afternoon has broken down."

"I didn't know that, sir, but I understand that his alibi only covered the afternoon up to five. If I may say so, sir, and if it's true that Mrs. Catchpool was seen alive just after six o'clock, I've got the best alibi for him. He was with me about that time."

Sir William looked towards Morden, who nodded.

"That is certainly a point, Richardson. It reminds me of that false alibi in the Camden Town murder, which went a good way towards getting Wood acquitted."

"Yes, sir, I've read of the case. If Harris had been guilty of this murder, he would have known what time it was committed and made his false alibi cover it."

"Probably you have not yet heard that Harris has disappeared."

A light seemed to break in upon Richardson, but he held his peace.

"Does that suggest anything to you, Richardson?"

"Yes, sir, it seems to support what struck me last night when I was thinking over the case. Harris had something to hide when he produced that alibi. Did he think that the police were after him for some other offense? He had his car out that afternoon, and said that he had been to Oxford. Suppose that he had been on

another road altogether and knocked someone down and went on without stopping, thinking he had killed him?"

This was a new light upon Harris's motive for disappearing. "What do you say to that, Mr. Foster?" The inspector's face wore a quizzical expression. His Scottish caution was tempered with indulgence for a young fellow countryman.

"It's worth inquiring into, I think, Sir William. We might ascertain whether any of the A.A. scouts on the Oxford road recorded the number of Harris's car: if not, we might inquire whether any accidents occurred on the other roads out of London. Will you see to that, Morden? I suppose that you have formed some view of the case yourself, Richardson."

"One can't help forming views, sir; when I'm on point duty, the servant of the old man is always pestering me. She comes up and asks whether the police have found out who did the murder and keeps on insisting that there was only one key to the shop and that the old man wouldn't even allow his nephew to have one."

"Yes, that key would unlock the whole mystery if we could find it. I suppose, Mr. Foster, that the bodies of the two dead people and every corner of the shop were searched for that key?"

"Yes, Sir William; we couldn't find a trace of it."

"Well, sir, if I may be allowed to speak," said Richardson, "I questioned the woman this morning as to who made the lock; she told me that it was a locksmith in King's Cross Road. During this dinner hour I made a round and found three locksmiths and an ironmonger who might have supplied it, and fortunately one of them—a man named Pleydell—remembered supplying and fixing the lock about eighteen months ago. He gave a pretty good description of the customer who ordered it, and I have no doubt that it was Catchpool himself. I asked him how many keys he supplied. He said that all these locks are supplied with two keys, but that this customer would only take one and made him destroy the other in his presence by heating it red hot in the forge and beating it out of shape with a hammer. I have his address here, sir."

"Thank you," said Sir William, handing the address to Foster. "Let me see, you are not long out of Peel House, are you?"

"About two months, sir."

"So you haven't had time yet to apply for the C.I. Department?"

"No, sir, but I've always wanted to."

"Because of the higher pay?"

"Not altogether that, sir, but because I am keen on the work."

"Well, then, you shall have your chance. Instead of doing winter patrol I shall attach you to Inspector Foster for this case and see how you get on. You can apply for the plain-clothes allowance."

"Thank you, sir." Richardson's face reddened with joy. It was more than he had ever dared to hope for.

"Wait for me outside," murmured Foster, as his new assistant saluted and turned to go.

"You think I am playing fast and loose with the system of choosing patrols, Mr. Foster, but new blood with talent is badly wanted. If young Richardson makes good, we'll send him through the instruction class. All that will depend upon your report upon his work. Now you good people have your work cut out, and you must

be longing to get on with it. There's the finding of young Harris, the verifying of Richardson's report about that key and the new hare he started about a possible motor accident. Let me know how the case goes on."

It was a polite dismissal. The A.C.C., as they both knew, had a remarkable gift for seizing the essential point in the papers put before him. That was why his table was never littered with files of official papers. When Morden rallied him about his empty table, he replied that it was because his business habits had never been impaired by practice at the bar, though, as a matter of fact, he had been "called" and was, like Morden, a member of the Inner Temple. He stopped Morden as he was leaving the room.

"Unless I'm a very poor judge, that young constable may go far. You might keep a fatherly eye on him."

"I will. I admire your courage in breaking all the routine rules. There'll be a lot of grumbling among the winter patrols if this lad is passed over their heads."

"I haven't done it yet, but if he comes to the front over this case I shall. Then they can grumble as much as they like. That's what I'm here for—to get the best available men into the department and promote them by talent. When they get to understand this they'll all buck up. Promotion by routine is the ruin of every public service. I know only one thing worse, and that is the promotion of a *dud* into some other service because he stands in the line of promotion. All the public offices, from the F.O. downwards, are guilty of it."

Inspector Foster found his new recruit waiting for him. "You've had a stroke of luck today, young feller-me-lad; don't get your head turned."

"No fear of that, Mr. Foster. If you notice anything of that kind, I hope you'll pull me up sharp. All I want is to make myself useful to you."

"You might have told me about that lock."

"You'll find a note on your table telling you all about it when you get back, Mr. Foster. I came straight down to tell you at the station, but you were out. And there's another thing I meant to tell you. That charwoman of Catchpool said this morning that a young gentleman called at the shop on that Tuesday morning and had a longish talk with her master. She was dusting out the shop and must have kept her ears flapping. She said that she distinctly heard her master call him 'Mr. Harris,' and just before he came out of the office she heard him say, 'I'll give you till five o'clock this evening to pay up. If you don't I shall call at the house and ask to see your father. This shilly-shally has been going on long enough.'"

"Did she say that? Then the first thing you can do when you've got into plain clothes is to take a statement from her and get her to sign it. That and the fact that his receipt is the only one missing from the file are against our dismissing young Harris too readily. I wonder—" He fell into a train of speculation as they walked together to the tube station. "Do you think it possible that Harris met the old man and robbed him of his key, and when Catchpool ran across the road to complain to you and was knocked down, he made for the shop and abstracted his receipt? That would account for what that bystander told you she overheard: 'Very well, then, I'll call a policeman.'"

"I thought of that, sir, but a highway robbery of that kind in a crowd would have caused a considerable disturbance, and I must have noticed it. The crowd would have grabbed Harris as a pickpocket, as a London crowd always does."

“Well, we’ll see what Harris says when we find him. We must see whether he took his car. You’d better clear that up before taking the statement from that charwoman.”

Chapter 8

INSPECTOR FOSTER was engaged with his first-class sergeant checking the diaries of his staff when he heard a halting step upon the stairs—evidently not that of any police officer. There was a timid rap on the door; he recognized his visitor as the artist picture cleaner, Frank Cronin, whom he had last seen attired in nothing but his shirt and overcoat. Today he was respectably but not extravagantly dressed in a suit of threadbare garments decked out with the kind of necktie that used to be flaunted in the Chelsea studios.

“Good morning, Mr. Cronin,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

The artist looked doubtfully at Sergeant Reed. “Could I see you alone, sir?” Reed took the hint and retired to the adjoining room with his pile of diaries.

“Sit down, Mr. Cronin, and take your time.”

“The fact is that I was so much upset that I omitted to tell you something last night that may be important. You know, sir, I’d been very anxious to get back that picture entrusted to me by Mrs. Kennedy to clean. It was so important that I should have it, that last Tuesday afternoon I made up my mind to go to that shop in High Street and ask Mr. Catchpool to let me have it back.”

“Had you the money to buy it back?”

“No, sir, I hadn’t; that was the trouble. I thought I might be able to prevail on him to treat the money as a loan. You see, sir, he’d exposed the picture in his window, so that anyone who knew it and happened to be passing that way might recognize it and make trouble.”

“And you went to the shop on that Tuesday afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“At what time?”

“When I got down to the shop, sir, it must have been about three minutes to five. I remember the clock striking five as I opened the shop door.”

“The shop door was unlocked then?”

“Yes, sir, but there was a light coming through the red curtain on the inner door. I was just crossing the shop to knock at the door when I heard voices, and as I wanted to see Mr. Catchpool alone I shrunk back thinking I’d wait until his visitor came out. Don’t blame me too much, sir, if I confess that the idea came into my head to take the picture and clear out with it, hoping that the old man wouldn’t notice that it was gone. After all, sir, in a sense it was my picture, for it had been left with me to clean. I think that I should have taken it, but just at that moment I heard a woman screech in the back shop and then a scuffle and a fall, and I was so scared that—”

“That you dropped your paper and string on the floor?”

“Did I, sir?” Fosters unexpected question seemed to throw him off his balance. “I’m sure I was too much frightened to notice it. I got out of the shop somehow into the street and as far away from it as I could.”

“Did you recognize either of the voices you heard?”

“No, sir, the door was shut.”

“And you say that you can swear to the time as two or three minutes after five?”

The old man gulped before he answered in a faint voice, “Yes, sir.”

“This statement of yours, Mr. Cronin, ought to have been made as soon as you heard of the murder.”

“I know, sir, but I was very badly shaken, and besides, I thought that if I came forward to say that I’d been in the shop that afternoon I might be accused of the murder.”

“Well,” said Foster, judicially, “if your story is true it is of importance—I say, if it is true in every particular. You understand that I shall have to take a written statement from you, which you will have to sign, and that you will be called later as a witness and will have to swear to it. I need not tell you that to swear to any statement that is not true in every particular is to commit perjury—a very serious offense.” The old man was trembling, but whether it was from fear or from drink Foster could not at that moment be sure.

He took up his pen and wrote out the statement in the first person, reading it aloud as he wrote. Detective officers are so practised in taking down statements that have been given to them verbally that it was quickly done. He read it over and asked Cronin whether he had omitted anything.

“No, sir, it is quite full and accurate.”

“And you don’t wish to add anything?”

“I think not, sir.”

“Well, before you sign I should like to ask you one or two questions. When you opened the shop door did a bell ring?”

“No, sir.”

“Quite sure?”

“Quite, sir. A bell would have upset me badly, my nerves being as they were.”

“Was there a light in the shop?”

“Only the light that came through the red blind and a little light from the street lamp farther up the road.”

“And the light that came through the red blind, was it from an electric light near the ceiling?”

“No, sir, it seemed to me to come from an oil lamp on the table. At any rate it was low down.”

“Did it throw any shadow on the red blind as if some person was standing between the lamp and the door?”

“Yes, sir, it did; it threw a tall shadow as if the person was standing, not sitting.”

“Did the shadow appear to be that of a man or of a woman?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. You know how shadows are distorted. All I could see was the outline of the shoulder and arm and they moved a little. Whichever it was—man or woman—it seemed to me to be tall.”

“In the voices you heard did you distinguish the voices of a man and a woman?”

"I believe that I heard a woman's voice cry out two or three words before she screamed, but I was so frightened that I find it difficult to remember exactly what I did hear."

"You didn't stop within view of the shop to see whether anyone came out?"

"No, I went home as fast as my legs could carry me." Foster embodied these replies in a few sentences which he added to the statement, read them over to Cronin, and pushed the paper towards him for his signature. He signed it in a rather tremulous script.

"Now, Mr. Cronin, we must keep in touch with you; you must not change your address without letting me know."

"Shall I have to give evidence, sir?"

"Yes, if the coroner decides to call you, but if your statement is true, as you say, that need not upset you."

"There's one thing I wish you would do for me, sir—let me have that picture back. I could repay what the old man gave me for it and even a little more. I've just delivered some work and got paid for it."

"That's a matter for the executor to the dead man's will, not for the police. If you like to call in here tomorrow about this time I may be able to tell you whether you can have it."

"Oh, thank you, sir; if only you can do that for me I shall be grateful to you for the rest of my life."

As soon as the footsteps had stumbled down the steep stairs, Inspector Foster looked into the sergeant's room. "I can't touch those diaries tonight, Reed; I've got to go down to C.O. with a statement I've just taken. You might put them on my table and I'll run through them last thing."

Fifteen minutes later he found himself in Beckett's room.

"Well, how are you getting on with that case of yours?"

"If you'll kindly read that statement, Mr. Beckett, you'll see that things are moving."

Beckett read it through with attention, and his brow cleared. "I see he fixes the time at five o'clock. That brings us back to the opinion I've held all through. Would he make a good witness under cross-examination, do you think?"

"Well, sir, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Of course, I warned him of the danger of putting in anything that wasn't true, and he stuck to it that he hadn't, but if he was taken on by a sharp counsel his nerves are in such a state that he might say anything."

"Well, after all, that's a matter for the D. of P.P.—not for us. We find him the evidence, and he can take it or leave it—that is, if it comes to a criminal prosecution. At the inquest there's not likely to be any cross-examination, so he will do, but we must get something better than this to put before the coroner."

"I quite see that, sir. He wants very badly to get that picture back, and I promised that I'd put his request forward."

"No good coming to me; I'm no lawyer. Here, take the statement in to the D.A.C.C. and ask him."

This time Morden was in his room. He read the statement and looked doubtful. "How did he strike you, Mr. Foster?"

“Well, sir, he’s a bit shaky with drink, but the answers he gave to my test questions about the bell on the door and the lamp and the situation of the street lamp were all correct, and if he’d made up the story and never been there at all he would have slipped up on one of them.”

“Did you ask him why he came forward at this late date?”

“I did, sir. He said it was because he must get that picture back. He’s ready to give the price paid for it and even a little more. He’s afraid, I think, that Mr. Kennedy will prosecute him.”

“Well, the picture is the property of the executor, and if he gives leave for it to be handed over it will make three or four people happy. I don’t mind going round to ask him. But before I go let us thresh out the question of this statement. Cronin is prepared to swear that he heard a woman scream in the back shop between five and five-thirty, therefore Harris’s alibis don’t clear him. The first alibi covering the time up to five o’clock broke down. Richardson can only cover him from 6 p.m. Therefore the man Cronin heard in the shop might have been young Harris or, as Mr. Beckett says, it might have been Catchpool. Personally, I can’t help thinking that that naval officer, Sharp, did see his aunt alive at six-ten. It’s not because Mr. Kennedy is a personal friend of mine, but I judge from the way he told the story, confirmed as it was by that young lady’s statement that you took. We shall know more about that when Lieutenant Sharp comes home, but in the meantime there’s a doubtful smell about this statement. It doesn’t seem quite healthy to me. Of course, I didn’t see the man and you did, but as it reads, there is an atmosphere of the put-up job about it. And he had a motive in making it: he was bargaining with you to get that picture back.”

“At the same time, sir, he was corroborated by that paper and string we found in the shop.”

“He was, but, speaking as man to man, would you like your case to rest upon this uncorroborated statement?”

Foster smiled. “I don’t know that I should, sir, though I feel pretty sure that the main part of it is true. If we could get that picture back for him it would go a long way towards making him useful.”

Morden rose and put on his overcoat. “I’ll go now, if you’ll tell the messenger to get my car round as you go out, and don’t forget that our next step is to find young Harris.”

“P.C. Richardson is out on that now, sir.”

Morden was in time to find Mr. Settle still in his office. He introduced himself and explained that he had come about the Catchpool affair.

“Are you in a position yet to tell me which of those two people died first? I attended the funerals this morning and, of course, young Herbert Reece buttonholed me, though I tried to escape. In one respect he was quite right: the will ought to be read to the persons concerned, and I as executor ought not to withhold its contents. When he spoke to me this morning he said that the police had told him the dispositions of the will.”

“You have a good excuse for waiting, Mr. Settle; we are expecting the other nephew home. He ought to be here within two days. Do you know him?”

"I haven't seen him since he was a small boy—a very nice small boy with good manners. I should think that by now he must be an agreeable contrast to his cousin; they are not at all of the same class."

"We got the Admiralty to recall him because it appears that he pointed out his aunt to a lady at ten minutes past six on the evening of her death."

"Indeed!" The solicitor realized the gravity of this statement.

"Of course at the moment we only have hearsay evidence of this. Young Sharp ran after her in the street, and we don't yet know whether he overtook her. He may have been mistaken."

"I should doubt that very much. She was a woman of rather commanding appearance—one that would attract attention in the street—and you must remember that she had brought up Mr. Sharp like a mother from the age of six. He could scarcely have made such a mistake. To me the important point is that Michael Sharp could not have known the importance to him personally of seeing his aunt alive after six that evening, since he didn't know that his uncle died before half-past five, nor of the provisions in the two wills. If he had known this it might, of course, be said that he pretended to see his aunt at that vital hour; now all that the other side could say would be that he was mistaken. But all this is less interesting to you than it is to me as executor."

"On the contrary, it is of the greatest interest to the police in their search for the murderer; but this was not the object of my visit to you this afternoon. I came on another matter altogether." He then related the incident about the Dutch picture found in the shop. "You see, Mr. Settle, as executor you are the legal owner of that picture, your client having bought it in good faith, and I've come to you to ask you to hand it over to the police, acting for its rightful owner, who, I understand, is Lady Turnham."

"Is it a valuable picture?"

"Personally I should have declined it at three and sixpence, but this drunken artist man maintains that it is an old master of the Dutch school."

"I have to think of my responsibility as executor. Suppose that the beneficiary, whoever he may be, were to bring an action against me for parting with it?"

"There are, I understand, only two possible beneficiaries—the two nephews. Probably I could get you a written indemnity from each of them as soon as Michael Sharp arrives."

"I shall not want one from young Sharp, but the other—well, I'm not so sure of him. He passed for a scrupulous man of business when his uncle was alive, but, between ourselves, I may tell you that I've been waiting for days for an account he promised of the sale of a house, and I haven't got it yet. He is behaving as if it was already proved that he was heir to the property, whereas, if Michael Sharp's statement is true, he will inherit nothing. Well, if you undertake to get me the indemnity from Reece you can take the picture."

"One more question, Mr. Settle, and I have done. Has Mrs. Catchpool ever consulted you about being turned out of her flat?"

"She mentioned it to me a few weeks ago, but she appeared to treat the proposition with some levity. She said that she wanted no lawyers' letters; she could deal with the old man herself."

"I ought to tell you that Herbert Reece makes no secret of his belief that Catchpool himself strangled his wife in a quarrel about this question."

The solicitor laughed. "From what I know of them both, that suggestion seems to me ludicrous. If it came to a tussle between the two, I should have backed the wife."

Chapter 9

POLICE CONSTABLE RICHARDSON had lost no time in changing into plain clothes in the section house, while Foster was settling matters with the chief inspector, who wondered what things were coming to when a probationer could be snatched from him and attached to the C.I.D. without first going through the mill.

"I've nothing recorded against him, mind you, but that's what he is—a probationer—and when you've done with him he'll be too big for his boots, a promising constable spoilt. But there it is—C.O. butting in again and all discipline going to the dogs." But Foster had a quiet way with him, and he could count upon the superintendent to back him up.

In fifteen minutes Richardson was on his way to make a round of the garages nearest to Wigmore Street. Representing himself as a possible purchaser of Arthur Harris's car, he drew blank at the first two garages and ran his quarry to earth in the third. Here he learned that Mr. Arthur Harris certainly garaged his car in the establishment, but had given no instructions about selling it; that they would not be justified in letting it go out for a run, but the visitor could have a look at it if he liked. Richardson was conducted to a scarlet-painted terror, made up to look like a racing car, and he noticed at once a dent on the off-side wing. He shook his head, verified the distance run from the speedometer, and observed that the last run had been fifty-five miles.

"She's hit something," he said.

"Yes, did that the last time she went out—early in the week—but that can easily be blocked out and made as good as new."

"Do you know where he took her the last time?"

"He didn't say. He's a wild driver—is young Harris—goes like hell. I've often told him that the car would end in the scrap heap if he wasn't more careful." Richardson thanked the man, but said that it wasn't the car for him, especially at the price asked for her, and took his leave.

His next visit was to Catchpool's charwoman, who looked doubtful about making a signed statement, "not," she hastened to explain, "because I can't write my name, but I shouldn't like to be made to go and swear in court. I've never been in a police court in me life, except once and then the police officer made a mistake about me singing and dancing in the street when I was as sober and quiet as the old duck on the bench, who gave me five shillings or seven days innocent."

Richardson overcame her scruples, wrote out the statement, and read it over to her.

“Did I say all that? Well, if you say so I suppose I did. Not that it isn’t true—every word of it. Yes, I’ll sign it to oblige you. I wouldn’t do it for any other officer in the force, but I will for you.”

Information began to come in from the A.A. scouts. Nothing had been seen of a car numbered AA 6493 on the Oxford road on the day in question, but a car bearing that number had passed a scout on the Portsmouth road at about 3 p.m. going very fast in the direction of Guildford. As far as the scout could remember, the car was empty except for the young man at the wheel. An hour or two later came a message from the Surrey police. No accident had been reported on the afternoon in question, but a bicycle, since identified as having been stolen from Leatherhead, had been crumpled up as if by collision with a car; the police had found the tracks of the wheels locked by brakes for some ten feet and a little blood on the ground. But early the next morning there was a later message: the cycle thief had been traced to Leatherhead. He was a boy of fifteen, who confessed that he had stolen the bicycle outside the post office; that he had been knocked down by a red motorcar which had driven on without stopping; that not being an experienced cyclist he had wobbled towards the car; that he heard the screech of the brakes, and then he was shot off the bicycle into the side of the road, but being only bruised and scratched he had managed to limp home, where he pretended that he had hurt himself jumping over a hurdle.

“That sounds like Harris’s driving,” said the first-class sergeant when he read it. “We must get hold of him somehow. Here, Richardson, you’re the man for this. You know him by sight. Let us see what you are made of.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll do my best.” It was one of the jobs that Richardson had been told off to do, but he did not say so; he had already noticed a certain reserve towards him on the part of his new colleagues, as well as of the chief inspector and the station sergeant downstairs, as if they resented the favour shown to him by the mandarins at C.O., as the Central Office was called. He had a definite plan in view. He knew that it would be useless to apply to any member of the Harris family, but now that the father had himself asked the police to find his son, a visit to the house in Wigmore Street in quest of further information could not be resented. What the family upstairs did not know, the servants might guess at. He looked at his watch. It was ten o’clock, the hour at which the family would scatter—the father to his City office, the mother to her shopping or her daily conference with the cook. He walked rapidly to Wigmore Street. As he had hoped, the door was opened by the butler, to whom he introduced himself as the police officer who was employed to find the missing son and heir.

“You may be able,” he said, “to give me a hint about Mr. Arthur’s friends. It would save a lot of publicity and trouble. Had he any lady friends?”

The butler’s air of professional discretion melted into a smile of reminiscence, but he made the noncommittal answer that most young men of Mr. Arthur’s age had friends of the other sex.

“I don’t mean only friends of his own station in life.”

The butler looked behind him cautiously for possible eavesdroppers. “Come into the smoking room for a moment. I may be able to tell you something, but we can’t talk here.” He showed him into the room on the ground floor and shut the door.

"I've been round to the garage and seen Mr. Arthur's car. He didn't take that with him," said Richardson.

"No, I know that. I've been round there myself. I have an idea where he may have gone, but being, as you might say, to some extent in the young gentleman's confidence, it wouldn't have been cricket to tell them upstairs. But I want him to be found, and if you give me your word never to say where you got the information, I think I should be doing right in telling you. Did you ever hear of a young woman named Stella Martin? No? Well, she's one of the typists in his father's office—quite a respectable girl, I believe—and they are both very much attached to one another. He used to take her out for runs in his car, and he's hinted to me more than once that they're engaged. I advised him to tell his father and have no more hole-and-corner business about it, but he said that if he did that she would lose her job, and he would be bound in honour to find her another, which is none too easy in these days."

"Where does she live?"

"Down at Abbey Wood with her mother. Her salary keeps them both."

"Did he tell you her address?"

The butler looked down his nose. "I can't say that he actually told me her address, but I happen to know it."

"I see. You have to post the letters in the pillar box?"

"Exactly. The address is 'Miss Stella Martin, 13 Rosewear Road, Abbey Wood.'"

Richardson noted the address, shook hands warmly with the butler, and took his leave, murmuring his hope that his young master would return within the next twenty-four hours.

No. 13 Rosewear Road proved to be one of a row of semi-detached little red-brick houses, all exactly alike, each with its little front garden and its hen house behind it. An enterprising builder had provided them for the aristocracy of the Arsenal foremen, and they were all tenanted. The door was opened by a middle-aged lady, whom he rightly assumed to be Miss Martin's mother. She seemed to take him for a commercial drummer of some kind, and as life is monotonous in Rosewear Road in the mornings, she was quite ready for a chat and even invited him into the sitting room. He found himself regretting that he had not brought a sample carpet sweeper with him. When he said that he had come to see her daughter, "Miss Stella," she bridled. Miss Stella, it appeared, was not at her office in the City that morning. She was not very well.

Richardson expressed concern, but explained that his business would not take him more than three minutes if she was well enough to come down.

"Can't I take her a message?" asked the mother.

"I would rather see her myself if you don't mind. It is about something rather private," explained Richardson.

"Well, I'll go and see," said the mother reluctantly.

Left alone, Richardson sniffed the air. The mother did not look like a woman who smoked good cigarettes, yet there, in the fireplace, lay a half-smoked cigarette with a gold tip, still emitting the incense that perfumed the room. He rose and approached the fireplace. On the shelf above it, among the dried flowers and the pottery, lay a cigarette case bearing the initials "A. H." His spirits rose at the sound of a light step running down the stairs. He had just time to get back to his

chair when the door opened and a tall, fair girl entered the room. She was very pretty, and if she had risen from a bed of sickness, she must have gone to bed in a very neat costume and with her nose delicately powdered.

“You wish to speak to me?”

Richardson had risen to his feet. “Yes, Miss Martin. May we sit down?” Whoever he might be, there seemed to be nothing terrifying about this mysterious visitor. She sat down.

“May I smoke a cigarette,” he asked pleasantly, “or does your mother object to the smell of tobacco? Oh, no, I see that she smokes too.” He pointed to the half-smoked cigarette in the fender. “It was alight when I first came into the room. I see that she smokes better cigarettes than mine.” He saw her change colour, and her eyes grew wide with alarm. She laughed nervously. “She didn’t expect a visitor,” she said lamely.

“No, and I must apologize for bursting in upon you like this. The fact is that I have been asked by the Harrises to find their son, Arthur, who left home the day before yesterday without saying where he was going. They are in great trouble about him—especially his poor mother.” This was a random shot, but it seemed to tell. Richardson had an intuition that Arthur was the kind of youth that owed his instability of character to the indulgence of a doting mother.

“Why do you come to me? How should I know where he is?”

“I came to you because you often meet him and I thought he was sure to write to you. I think, Miss Martin, that you have seen him since he left home.”

She flushed angrily. “What makes you think that?”

“Only because his cigarette case is lying on that mantelpiece.” This remark threw her into confusion.

“I don’t see what right you have to question me like this,” she stammered. “My only right is the anxiety of his poor mother. For all she knows he may have been run over and killed by a motorcar. Think of that poor woman not sleeping at night for anxiety about him!”

“Oh, he’s all right.”

“It will relieve her very much to know that you have told me this.”

“Oh, you mustn’t tell her that I said so. It would cause endless trouble.” There was real alarm in her tone. “Promise me that you won’t.” She laid her hand on his arm in her anxiety.

“I need say nothing at all about you if you can manage for me to speak to him for a moment.” Richardson knew now that he was actually in the house.

“I know how I can communicate with him. If you could come back at about five o’clock, I could give you his answer.”

“That would make me rather late, Miss Martin. Can’t you make it earlier? It’s nearly twelve now. Shall we say half-past two?”

“Very well, half-past two—that is, if I can find him in the time.” She seemed nervously anxious to get away.

Richardson rose. It was awkward having to go without his lunch, but duty was duty, and he did not intend to lose sight of the house for an instant in the intervening two hours and a half.

She came to the door with him to show him out. “Let me see, do I turn to the right or left?” he asked. “Is there a way out at the bottom of the road?”

“No, you can’t get out that way,” she laughed. “There is only one way out of Rosewear Road. Turn to your left.”

He took off his hat in farewell and strode off to the left without looking back. What she had told him about Rosewear Road made his task easier. He had only to watch one end of the road and need not risk discovery by keeping the house in sight, and if the young man attempted to bolt he would be ready for him. He smiled to himself as he thought of the conversation now in full flow in No. 13 and hoped that the artless Stella would not be unduly blamed by the object of her affections. The foremen now began to pass him by twos and threes from the Arsenal to their homes for dinner. They seemed too hungry to notice him, or perhaps they took him for a young man waiting to walk out with a neighbour’s daughter. After that the time hung heavily. When the foremen, full-fed and pipe in mouth, came back from dinner he avoided them by walking down the road in the opposite direction from the Arsenal.

At three minutes before the appointed time he rang the bell at No. 13. He must have been seen from the window, for the door was opened instantly, not by the mother this time, but by the daughter, who was in a nervous flutter.

“He thought it better to come back with me,” she whispered mendaciously. “He’s in there!” She opened the sitting-room door for him and fled upstairs. Arthur Harris, looking like a condemned prisoner, rose from his chair.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Harris. You remember me? No? I was the constable who took you to the mortuary at the hospital. Let us sit down and talk things over comfortably.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not at all. I came down here to find you and bring you back to London. Your parents are in a great way about you. They think that you may have met with an accident.”

“I’m not going back.”

“Oh, come, Mr. Harris, there you’re mistaken; you’re coming back with me. In fact”—looking at his watch—“we’re going to start in ten minutes.”

“Where are you taking me to?”

“To Marylebone police station to make a statement and then back to your home in Wigmore Street—at least, I hope so.”

“Is he dead?”

“You mean the boy that you knocked off his bicycle on the Guildford Road last Tuesday? I can relieve your mind on that score: he’s not dead.”

“It was entirely his fault; he wobbled into me.”

“Yes, it’s always the other fellow’s fault, but you drove on without stopping.”

Harris bit his lip; there was no answer to that. “Well, what were you doing down at Guildford?”

“I went there to see a friend.”

“Was that after or before you saw Mr. Catchpool that day?”

“After, of course. I saw the old boy in the morning, and he told me that unless I paid up twenty pounds before five he’d go round and tell my father. So I ran down to Guildford and got a pal to lend me twenty pounds. Of course, I had to drive fast; I had to get to the old man before he started for Wigmore Street, and naturally I couldn’t afford the time to stop when that young fool wobbled into me.”

“Did you go to the shop when you got back?”

“I did, but I was too late. I suppose the old blighter had started; at any rate, the shop was locked up. So I went back home and lay in wait for him with my twenty pounds, and I was going to give the old swine a bit of my mind, and the next thing I knew was that you blew in.”

“Then why did you say that you’d never seen old Catchpool before?”

“What did you expect me to say? Hadn’t I been taking all this trouble to keep it from my father?—dashing down to Guildford, worrying my pal for a loan, risking my life as you might say—and then you expect me to give the whole show away by saying I knew him! Now look here, if I do come with you will you give me your word of honour never to say where you found me?”

“I give you my word that I’ll tell nobody but my chief, and, of course, all such information is confidential. It won’t get to your friends, if that’s what you mean. Get your hat now: we’ll start.”

Getting his hat seemed to be a more complicated process than usual. Unless Richardson’s ears deceived him there were sounds of osculatory exercises from the back regions, but at last the young man tore himself away and joined him.

Chapter 10

“SIT DOWN there,” said Richardson, when they arrived at Marylebone police station, and as he passed the station sergeant’s table he murmured, “Don’t let him leave.”

He found Inspector Foster in his room. “Back already? No luck, I suppose?”

“I’ve brought Arthur Harris with me, sir.”

“You haven’t! Where did you find him?”

“Down at Abbey Wood, sir, staying with his young lady.”

“Did he come willingly?”

“Not very eagerly, sir. He says he ran away because of that boy he knocked over on the Guildford Road; thought he might have killed him.”

“Then that’s one up to you, Richardson: that was your theory from the start. We’ll have to go into all that presently. What we have to do now is to take a statement from him. You’d better be in the room, and if he goes back on what he said to you, you can nudge me. Bring him up.”

But Arthur Harris went back on nothing. To Foster, his statement did not sound like a made-up story. He answered every question readily and without reservation; he had every address on the tip of his tongue and, what seemed more convincing, there was a sense of injury in his tone; clearly, he thought that he had been shabbily treated.

“Did you sign any acknowledgment of your loan from Catchpool?” asked Foster.

“Trust the old Shylock for that; he made me sign a blue paper.”

“Which you took away with you?”

“How could I take it away? He stuck to it.”

“And you’ve never seen it since?”

“Never.”

“Well, now, Mr. Harris, you must go home, and as your father applied to the police to find you, Constable Richardson will accompany you to the door.”

Arthur Harris looked sheepish. “Perhaps you won’t mind telling me what sort of mood my father was in when you saw him about me.”

“I didn’t see him myself, sir, but I understand that he did not seem resentful against you.”

“Put the whole blame on the police, you mean? Just like him; he always must blame somebody.” He turned to Richardson. “Well, I’m ready if you are.”

As he led the way downstairs, Foster detained Richardson to say, “I’m going down to C.O. with this statement. Come on there when you’ve seen him safely into the house.”

The chief constable was busy with expense sheets when Foster knocked at his door. He growled at the interruption but pushed his work aside when he saw who the visitor was. “Oh, it’s you, is it? Anything new?”

“Yes, sir, we’ve found young Harris.”

“H’m! That hasn’t taken long. Who found him?”

“P.C. Richardson, sir. It was smart work. I’ve taken a statement from Harris, if you’d like to look at it.”

Beckett read the statement, initialled it, and threw it into the registry basket. “Well, that seems to clear Harris out of the way.”

“You think so, sir? I’m not so sure. All the early part of the statement may be true; it hangs together, but I’m not so sure about what happened after he knocked at the door of the shop and found it locked. At all hazards he wanted to prevent Catchpool from seeing his father. Suppose that he went down Baker Street pretty quickly in order to get to the house first, and overtook Catchpool, he might have seen that blue paper sticking out of his pocket and snatched it. That would fit in with the eyewitness of the accident who said that he overheard Catchpool say ‘Very well, then, I’ll call a policeman.’ Catchpool would have been taking that blue paper with him when he went to see the father.”

“How you Scotsmen do stick to your theories! Even if you are right there’s no proof of the murder, whatever that old artist of yours said, and besides, he’s not the sort of man you’d care to bring forward as principal witness in a capital case, is he?”

“No, sir, he is not, and besides he never saw the murderer, so he says.”

“Exactly. I keep an open mind myself, but so far you’ve produced nothing to shake my theory that old Catchpool strangled his wife and then got himself run over and killed. By the way, Mr. Morden left a message that he would like to see you if you came in. I’ll tell him you’re here.” He opened the communicating door and passed Foster in.

“Well, Mr. Foster, I hear that you’ve found the missing man and restored him to his sorrowing family.”

“Yes, sir, it was a good piece of work on the part of that young uniformed constable, and I’ve taken a statement from Harris which will come before you in due course.”

“A true statement, do you think?”

“It hangs together, sir. Whether it is all true or only part of it, it is too early to say.”

“Did he explain why he ran away?”

“Yes, sir, he’d knocked over a boy on the Guildford Road, and he thought that the police were after him for that.”

“Young fool! Didn’t he stop?”

“No, sir, he said he hadn’t time. He had to get back to stop Catchpool going to his father.”

“I can see that you still cling to your theory that he was concerned in the murder. You think that Catchpool was taking the lad’s note of hand to the father and that Harris met him in the street and got hold of it. Well, it’s a plausible theory, I admit. The note of hand is missing from the file, and Arthur Harris was the only person who had a strong interest in getting hold of it, and yet I can’t help the feeling that the murder took place after six o’clock, when young Harris was with P.C. Richardson.”

“Well, sir, I suppose we must each have our own theories and see how they fit in with the new bits of evidence that may come in.”

“I saw Catchpool’s lawyer yesterday, and he told me that, if it came to a scrap, the wife would have been a better man than the husband. Of course, a quick grab at the throat may be successful against a prize fighter; but he also said that a man like the nephew, Michael Sharp, could not have been mistaken when he says that he saw the woman alive at six-ten. It seems that the other theory that the husband was guilty originated with the other nephew, Herbert Reece.”

“Yes, sir, and Mrs. Catchpool’s servant thought the same. I think that Mr. Beckett has held that theory all along.”

“Well, Mr. Foster, my advice to you is to keep an open mind and in your further inquiries not to exclude evidence that points to the woman having been alive after six. You see the difficulty. If she was alive at six, how did she get into the shop unless she had a key, or unless someone who had a key got there before her and let her in?”

“Yes, sir, everything seems to turn on that key. The charwoman saw him lock up the shop and go off with the key; no one touched his body except P.C. Richardson after the accident, and Richardson found no key in his pocket. We know that there was only one key which he guarded jealously. In the short distance between the shop and the scene of the accident, he was very unlikely to have dropped it or to have been robbed of it.”

“There is just a chance that it fell out of his pocket when he was knocked down. Sometimes people pick up keys in the street and foolishly take them into the nearest shop in case the owner should come and search for them, instead of taking them to a police station. Wouldn’t it be worth while to make house-to-house inquiries in the shops nearest to the scene of the accident?”

“Perhaps it would, sir,” replied Foster, looking doubtful.

“Even if we don’t find the key we may get some scrap of useful information. Why not put young Richardson onto that?”

“I will, sir; it’s an idea, certainly.”

Richardson was waiting in the passage. Foster explained to him rapidly what he was to do, and the young policeman went off at once with an unhappy feeling that his inquiry would prove fruitless. At the first two shops—a cake shop and a hairdresser’s—he drew blank. They remembered the accident, certainly, but they

had been too busy to notice more than the usual crowd round the injured man and a policeman's helmet in its midst. The next shop specialized in baby linen. The saleswoman, a young lady of unripe years, looked a little surprised at receiving a customer of the opposite sex, but when he explained the object of his visit she summoned a girl rather older than herself.

"What did I tell you, Bertha!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "Here's a gentleman called about that accident on Tuesday week—you remember when that old gentleman was knocked down by a car—wants to know whether anyone came in here with a doorkey he'd picked up."

"No," said Bertha, cautiously. "Someone did call in about the accident, but he didn't leave a key." A hint of suspicion clouded her countenance. "You're not the insurance agent, are you? You've not come about a claim for damages?"

"No, I'm in search of a key which the poor old gentleman must have dropped when the car knocked him down."

"Oh, on a dark afternoon like that, with the streets all muddy, no one would think of picking up a key; probably it got swept up by the broom cart next morning, or got picked up by the scavenger."

"You say that someone did call about the accident?"

"Yes, a gentleman it was."

"Let's be careful about this. I'm going to test your memories, young ladies."

"Test our memories?"

"Yes, I'm going to ask each of you to describe him; it's rather an amusing game, because I fancy that I know the gentleman and I don't mind betting that your description will be quite different."

The flapper entered into the spirit of the game and retired laughing, calling over her shoulder, "All right, you take Bertha first."

"Now then, Miss Bertha, what was he like? I'll write down what you say, so that there can be no mistake, and the one that gives the best description shall have a box of chocolates."

"Well," said the girl Bertha, "of course, one couldn't see him well on a night like that; besides, he had his umbrella up and didn't put it down when he spoke to us through the door; just held it over his shoulder, but he was a man of middle height, youngish, not bad-looking, and spoke rather fast."

"What time was it?"

"About a quarter of an hour after the accident, I should say."

"What did he come about?"

"He said did we know where they had taken the old man who was knocked down by a car, and did we know whether he'd been badly hurt. I told him that we heard someone in the crowd say that he was dead; that they were taking him away in the ambulance to the hospital, but what was the use of taking a dead man there. He seemed a good deal upset and asked what hospital he'd been taken to. I could tell him that, because the man who spoke to us at the time said that it was the Middlesex, and I told him that a policeman went with the ambulance. Then he just said 'Thank you' and went on."

"What was he wearing?"

"Let me see; he had a bowler hat, I remember that, and a dark overcoat. I didn't notice anything else very particular about him."

“What sort of voice had he?”

“Oh, just ordinary.”

Richardson was taking down her answers in his notebook. “Now, I’ll take your sister’s description.”

Bertha shouted for Alice and withdrew; the flapper stood before him bursting with importance.

“Now, young lady, tell me what you remember.”

“I remember quite a lot. He stood in the doorway there with his umbrella open on his shoulder, so that it blocked the shop door. He asked us if we’d seen the accident. Bertha said no, but she’d seen the crowd round it, and that we’d heard people say that the poor old man was for it, and that they’d taken him off in the ambulance to the Middlesex, but he was sure to be dead when he got there if he wasn’t dead already.”

“What did he look like?”

“Well, he was a middle-aged man—fifty, I should think—clean-shaved and very tall.”

“What was he wearing?”

“He was wearing a soft hat and a mackintosh.”

“A black one?”

“No, fawn-coloured—you know the sort—and he had on a blue tie.”

“Did you notice anything about his voice?”

“Oh, he had quite an Oxford accent—like the B.B.C. announcers.”

“How long was it after the accident?”

“Oh, just two or three minutes, I should think. We were still talking about it at the door when he came.”

“Well, now, call your sister and I’ll award the prize.”

“Bertha!” yelled the flapper. “Come on, he’s going to give the prize.”

“I haven’t got it in my pocket, but there’s a shop close by. What kind of chocolate do you like best?”

“Peter’s milk,” said the flapper promptly, “but tell us who’s won before you go and get it.”

“No,” said Richardson; “the prize first and the decision afterwards. Wait in the shop till I come back.” He was not long away. He returned with a packet of “Peter’s milk” in each pocket. The girls were in the midst of a heated argument about the kind of overcoat and the kind of hat that the man with the umbrella had been wearing; each stuck firmly to her own recollection.

“Now, young ladies, I have to award the prize. Your descriptions of that gentleman were so good that it’s impossible to say which is the best.”

The flapper’s eyes grew round with amazement. “But Bertha’s was all wrong.” Bertha tossed her head and scorned defending herself.

Richardson continued, “In my opinion they were both good, and so I shall award a prize to each of you.” He suited the action to the word. “I’m not going to ask for your photographs, but I want you to give me your names, because I keep a diary, and whenever I see the names in it I shall think of you.”

Bertha simpered and gave their names as Bertha and Alice Cunningham.

“You don’t live here?”

"No, but we're here every day. The owner comes in in the evening to lock up, and we come in at nine o'clock in the morning."

"Good evening, Miss Cunningham, I'm very much obliged to you."

Richardson tried two more shops without success and then returned to the police station to report progress. Inspector Foster listened to Miss Bertha's description eagerly. It seemed to fit Arthur Harris, but when Richardson proceeded to read the flapper's version the inspector wilted in his chair.

"Isn't that like the girl witness? One calls him youngish, and the other middle-aged. One says he's wearing a bowler and a dark overcoat, and the other a soft hat and a fawn-coloured raincoat. One says that his voice was just ordinary, and the other that he talked like a B.B.C. announcer. What can you make of it? The elder girl's description would fit Arthur Harris as far as it goes."

"It would, sir, and, after all, the younger one is little more than a child, and to a child any man over seventeen is middle-aged. You notice one point of agreement: they both mention that he was carrying an open umbrella."

"Like thousands of others on a wet night."

Neither could foresee at that moment how important the evidence of that umbrella was to prove.

Chapter 11

AT ELEVEN o'clock next morning Sir William Lorimer received a telephone message from the Admiralty, announcing that Lieutenant Sharp had just reported himself and was on his way to New Scotland Yard. He sent for Morden and suggested that the first interview with him should take place in his room in Morden's presence. "You know exactly how the case stands, and we had better not have too many people in the room."

They had scarcely settled upon the line of questions to be put to the sailor when the messenger came to announce his arrival and was told to show him in.

Morden had pictured him as a debonair young man of the type of his friend, Guy Kennedy; he was not prepared for a serious person, with well-cut features and an air of determination about the mouth. Sir William shook hands with him and introduced him to Morden. "I must ask you to forgive us for dragging you off your ship by telegram like this, Mr. Sharp, but we had no choice. I suppose you know the reason."

"I know nothing except that the Admiralty ordered me home. No one at the Admiralty could tell me anything beyond the fact that Scotland Yard wanted urgently to see me."

The two police officials exchanged glances. Someone had to break the news of his aunt's death to him.

"I hoped that your friends had telegraphed to prepare you for bad news. Your aunt, Mrs. Catchpool, died on the evening you left London."

"Died? Surely there must be some mistake. I saw her alive and well at six o'clock that evening." He had turned very white under his tan, and his eyes were filling with tears.

"I'm afraid there is no mistake. It was worse than a simple death. She was murdered."

"My God! Where? How?"

"She was found next morning in her husband's shop, and the doctors certified that she had been strangled."

Unless the young man was a consummate actor, thought Morden, watching him, he could never have produced so convincing an appearance of shock.

When he had recovered a little he said, "What could have taken her there? Was it about that nonsense of turning her out of her flat? Besides, she had no enemies."

"A great deal turns upon the time at which she was killed, and that is why we asked the Admiralty to send for you. We understand from the young lady, Miss Summers, that you thought you saw her at the Marble Arch at about six."

"I didn't think I saw her; I did see her."

"But in a crowd like that one might easily be mistaken."

"I couldn't possibly have been mistaken. She was a very remarkable-looking woman, taller than most women, and besides, she was wearing clothes that I recognized, and I knew her walk and her way of turning her head. I was so certain of her that I jumped off the bus to overtake her. I had to hustle my way through the crowd."

"What was she wearing?"

"Her new fur coat. I noticed it particularly. I had gone with her to the shop where she bought it, and she was like a young girl trying it on before the glass. I chaffed her about her extravagance, and she said, 'This kind of fur wears for ever; it'll last my time. Besides, I shall only wear it on bright cold days.'" His voice broke for a moment; then he continued, "That is what makes it so certain that I wasn't mistaken; she was wearing the coat on a wet, foggy evening."

"Was it a brown fur coat?"

"Yes. Was she wearing it when you found her?"

Morden nodded. "And you did overtake her?"

"Well, no, I didn't. My God! If I had she might be alive at this moment."

"How did you miss her?"

"I can't tell you exactly. I forced my way through the crowd and thought that I must be ahead of her. I waited a second or two to give her time to come up, and then, as she didn't, I set off after her again. Whether she turned off into Portman Street and into Baker Street by Granville Place or Portman Square I can't tell you. When I lost her I made the round of all those side streets, but if you say that she was found at the shop in High Street, Marylebone, I suppose that she took a bus up Baker Street and that was how I missed her."

"I think that Mr. Morden may like to ask you a few questions about what you did afterwards—that is between six-thirty and the time you left London."

Morden took the hint. He was better posted in detail than his chief. "Did you go on to your aunt's flat to see whether she had gone home?"

"No, she was going in the opposite direction when I saw her, and, she could scarcely have turned back without running into me."

"Well, then, how long did you keep up the search?"

"I didn't look at my watch, but it must have been a good half-hour, to judge from the number of streets I covered."

"Then we will call it half-past six. What did you do then? Go back to your hotel?"

"Well, no, not at once. I walked about."

"At what time did you get to your hotel?"

"Just before dinner. I dined at about a quarter to eight."

"So you were walking about the streets without any definite object for an hour and a quarter."

"Something like that." Lorimer, watching him, noticed that his face flushed under this fire of questions. Morden continued relentlessly:

"You must have covered a considerable distance in an hour and a quarter. Do you remember where you went?"

"Vaguely. I walked about the neighbourhood thinking that I might meet my aunt."

"When were you last at your uncle's shop?"

"My uncle? Oh, you mean old Catchpool. I've never been there in my life."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I've heard my aunt say that it was in High Street, Marylebone, but it didn't interest me."

"Didn't it occur to you, when you saw your aunt going in that direction, that she might be going there?"

"No, because it was the last place I should have expected her to go to."

"Do you know whether she had a key to the shop?"

"No, I feel pretty sure that she hadn't. Her husband wasn't the sort of man to trust anyone with a key—least of all his wife."

"Do you know whether your aunt left a will?"

"No, I don't. She had a solicitor—a man named Settle—somewhere near Charing Cross. He might know, but she had very little to leave. She told me once that most of her income would die with her. It came from annuities bought by her father."

"You had an hour and a quarter on your hands; I can't understand why you did not go to your aunt's flat to see whether she had come home."

The young man thought for a moment, frowning, and then replied, "As I didn't meet her I took a bus."

"You took a bus? Where did you take it, and where was it going to?"

The flush became deeper. "I think that I must have taken it in Baker Street. I was tired of walking, and I wanted a lift on my way to the hotel. The bus was going southward."

Morden noticed that his replies had become evasive in this latter part of his story. He began to press his questions. "Look here, Mr. Sharp, it is necessary for us to have a full and very frank account of your movements after you saw your aunt. It is very important that nothing should be kept back. What happened during that hour and a quarter? What you tell us will be kept quite confidential."

And then the young man proceeded to tell a story so incredible that Sir William Lorimer found it hard to restrain a smile, and harder still to conceal his incredulity. At the end of this story there were no questions left to ask.

“Well, Mr. Sharp,” said Sir William, “we are very much obliged to you. Your coming here has been very useful to us, and no doubt it will prove even more useful in the future. We understand that you are invited to stay with your friends, the Kennedys; they are expecting you. If you make other arrangements, please let us know, as we must keep in touch with you.”

“Thank you; I will. Good morning.”

The two police officials looked at each other and then gave vent to their suppressed amusement. “What I couldn’t get over,” laughed Morden, “was the solemnity and earnestness of the gentleman while he was telling that cock-and-bull story.”

“But, seriously, I don’t like the look of this: no one tells a story like that unless he’s got something to hide. And there could have been so many better stories. Why tell a yarn like that and then let it tail off at the end? He could so easily have rounded it off.”

“You don’t suspect our young friend of murder, I hope?”

“I don’t pretend to say which of the commandments he had been breaking, but I think it must lie between the sixth and seventh.”

Michael Sharp hailed a taxi, picked up his luggage at Victoria cloakroom, and drove to the Kennedys’ flat. He received a boisterous welcome; they had had his telegram from Paris and were expecting him to lunch.

“Where have you been all the morning?” Michael flushed angrily. “Nan, come quick! Here’s Michael in a towering rage. They put him on the rack in the Tower of London.”

Nan greeted her guest prettily; she was accustomed to her husband’s badinage.

“Seriously, Michael, what have they been doing to you?”

“Putting me through the third degree like a common pickpocket. The head man was all right, but he’d got with him a cadaverous, watery-eyed blighter who put me through the hoop.”

“Steady,” said Guy. “You’re talking most disrespectfully of my old friend, Morden, one of the best fellows in the world.”

“I can’t help whose friend he is. He behaved like a blighter of the first water.”

“If it had been possible, Guy would have met you at the station and broken the news to you, instead of leaving you to hear it in that cold-blooded way. I’ve been thinking of you all the morning.”

“Thank you,” said Michael, and couldn’t trust his voice to say more.

“Of course we went to the funeral, and we saw that there was a wreath sent in your name.” She gave him no chance of replying, but went on quickly, “You must be starving. Come to lunch.”

During the meal Guy did most of the talking and described his new life ashore as naval instructor. It was over the coffee and cigarettes that Michael referred to the subject that had brought him home. “I wish you would tell me why I was sent for. I can’t understand it.”

“It was my fault,” said Guy. “Some paper came out with a penny plain and tuppence coloured account of the tragedy, which said that it had taken place at some time before five. Joan came round to us with the paper and told us that you had seen your aunt alive after six, and what ought she to do about it. I stepped into the breach at once; I didn’t want poor old Morden to make an ass of himself

and get pilloried in the press, but when I got down to the Yard they showed me in to the Great Panjandrum himself. So I said my piece and he summoned his privy council—as queer-looking a collection as ever you clapped eyes on. They began running round in circles. Some of them had quite made up their minds that old man Catchpool was the guilty one.”

“Do you mean they seriously thought that he’d killed Aunt Emily?”

“Some of them did, I’m certain. Anyway my revelations weren’t too well received, because it knocked them off their perch and forced them to start all over again and nose about for another culprit.”

“So they thought of me,” said Michael grimly.

Nan cut in: “I’ve been longing to ask you if you overtook your aunt that evening.”

“No, I didn’t. I lost her in the crowd.”

“Look here, old man,” said Guy, “you mustn’t get on your hind legs with them about bringing you back, because it’s all for your own good. There’s a funny legal complication about the business. It seems that at the time of their separation, your uncle and aunt both made wills, and he left everything to her provided that she outlived him. Incidentally—and this is where you come in—she left everything to you. You see my point?”

“No, she had nothing to leave.”

“Hadn’t she? Even the most brilliant naval mind is a little thick on the subject of the law, and, without offense, I should say yours was thicker than most. The old man was passably well-to-do—at any rate, the estate will relieve our burdened finances in death duties. All that remains after the Chancellor of the Exchequer has had his bite out of it goes to my unworthy shipmate—Michael Sharp—if it can be proved that his aunt outlived her husband, even by five minutes, and so inherited what he had to leave. If I know his majesty’s treasury they’ll have two bites out of it—one for your aunt and one for you—but there ought to be enough left to pay your mess bills. Now do you see why poor old Morden put you through the hoop this morning? You’re an interested witness, from his point of view, and the police have had sad experience of the value to be attached to the evidence of interested witnesses.”

“He thought I was lying, did he?” growled Michael.

“That depends on what you told him.”

“Apart from my evidence nobody but a lunatic would believe that old Catchpool could strangle Aunt Emily; he was a poor-spirited money-grubber, and though he had a temper and could say nasty things it wasn’t the kind of temper that would make him do things in a passion. Besides, in his queer way, I believe he was proud of Aunt Emily: she gave him a sort of status that he didn’t deserve.”

“I saw an interview with your aunt’s servant in one of the papers,” said Nan; “she gave a lurid account of threats she professed to have overheard.”

Michael laughed. “That’s Kate Winter all over; she adored my aunt and hated the old man, and none of her stories lost anything in the telling. There’s one thing that puzzles me about this will business. Supposing I hadn’t seen Aunt Emily at six and they’d decided that she was killed before the old man, does his money go to the Crown?”

“Good Lord, no! It goes to his nephew, a fellow called Reece. Do you know him well?”

“No, we’ve met a few times, but he was a funny chap—the wouldn’t-be-friendly sort. I believe he’s a good man of business and looked well after Catchpool’s property. The fact that I saw Aunt Emily won’t cut much ice, I suppose, unless they get another witness.”

“Heaven only knows how these police minds work. Your story held together all right, I suppose?”

“They didn’t seem to think so.”

“Joan will be in directly; she’s longing to hear what happened after you left her that evening.”

Michael’s face clouded a little. “I think I’d rather tell you two what I told the police: Joan might not quite understand.”

“Full speed ahead! We’re listening.”

Chapter 12

“WELL, AS I told them at the Yard, I had a sort of football scrum to overtake Aunt Emily, and somehow I missed her. She must have dodged into one of the side streets, or taken a taxi or a bus or something—anyway I hunted the whole neighbourhood for her and had no luck. It must have been half-past six or later when I gave up the hunt. I think that I should have gone back to her flat to wait for her if a bus had not drawn up just where I was; it was going in the direction of my hotel and looked half empty, so I got in and found a seat between two ladies. The conductor came round for the fares, and the lady on my left began arguing with him. I heard her say, ‘It’s not my fault, my purse has been stolen and I haven’t a penny.’ Naturally, I couldn’t sit there and hear the conductor sneering at her; I touched him on the arm and said that I’d pay the lady’s fare if she’d allow me.”

“Excuse me for interrupting, Mike; was she old and ugly?”

“Well, no, she certainly wasn’t old, and as for looks, she’d have passed in a crowd.”

“I thought so. Go on.”

“Mind you, I hadn’t so much as looked at her until I paid her fare. Well, we got into conversation and, of course, she was all over me for paying—said that her husband would like to reimburse me. Well, then one thing led to another. I told her that I expected to rejoin the ship at Gib, and she said that she loved Gib; her husband had been quartered there and had just come home. He had had quite a lively time there after the Spanish revolution. He could tell me quite a lot. Then she said, ‘I get off here. Our flat is quite close. You’ll really make me very miserable if you won’t just come and meet my husband and let him thank you.’”

“And you went with her? My sainted aunt!”

“Well, I had a couple of hours to spare and she was obviously a lady. You would have done just the same, you know you would.”

Nan braced herself for her husband's reply, but all he said was, "Go ahead. Let's hear the worst."

"Well, it was, as she said, quite close—a big block of flats in a side street. She took me up to the first floor and into a flat furnished with that modern stuff, all metal and leather with ghastly impressionist daubs on the walls. She seemed surprised to find the flat empty, murmured something about going to find her husband and asked me to sit down."

"And then?" Nan appeared to be deeply interested in the unconventional behaviour of one of her own sex.

"Well, I sat down and waited an interminable time and she didn't come back; there wasn't a sound in the flat except the ticking of the clock, which got on my nerves. At last I got up and called out, 'I'm afraid I must be going.'"

"How long had you been there?"

"From twenty minutes to half an hour, I suppose. No one answered me, so I let myself out and came away."

Guy stared at him with his mouth open. "Just came away?"

"Well, what else could I do? The only sound I heard in the building was some sort of domestic row going on in the flat above—apparently two women engaged in a slanging match, but that had nothing to do with my lady. She just vanished."

"Mike," said Guy in a tense voice, "did you tell that story at Scotland Yard when you were accounting for your time?"

"Of course I did."

At this Guy broke down. His laugh, never subdued, went echoing through the room until the tears coursed down his cheeks, and Nan, seeing the indignant flush on Michael's cheek, hastened to call her husband to order. "Guy! How can you!"

"I was thinking of Charles Morden, darling," he said, wiping his eyes. "Surely there's not another man in his majesty's navy, not another man in London, to whom such an adventure could happen."

"Why not?" asked Nan.

"Because it tailed off. Nothing happened; no husband; no lady; nothing, except the ticking of a clock, and he asked two hard-boiled police officers to believe it."

"I shouldn't have told the story at all if that damned policeman friend of yours hadn't dragged it out of me, by making me account for every minute of my time. It was damned impertinence."

"Oh," said Nan, "then you only made it up on the spur of the moment."

Michael flushed again and turned on her hotly. "Every word of it is true; I don't invent stories."

"No, you don't," retorted Guy, "and I hope that if you did you'd invent a better one. However, all's well that ends well. You've only to give the address and the police will verify the story."

"I don't know the address."

"What!" his audience shouted together.

"Well, it was a foggy night, and there were one or two turnings after the bus stop, and I didn't notice the name of the street."

"But when you got out of the flat?" suggested the practical Nan. "You must have noticed where you were."

"I walked quite a good way until I found myself in Oxford Street; then, of course, I knew where I was."

"Could you find the house again?"

"I don't know that I could. I wish I could find it. I left my umbrella there."

"And then you went back to your hotel?"

"Yes, there was nothing else to do. I dined, packed, and caught my train."

"Tell me, Mike, how did they seem to take that story when you told it to them?"

"Well, they didn't say much; they just looked at each other and told me I could go."

Guy Kennedy became suddenly serious. "Look here, old man, we're sitting calmly here and letting things mess themselves up. I must be up and doing, or there'll be serious trouble." He had risen.

"What are you going to do, Guy?" asked his wife, who had less confidence in her husband as a man of action than he had in himself. "I'm going down to see Charles Morden and knock some sense into him."

"Don't do anything rash."

"Shoot him, you mean? No, I've left my weapon in the usual drawer. Good-bye." They heard the door of the flat bang behind him.

"Ought I to go too?" asked Michael.

"Certainly not. You'll sit here until Joan appears. Then we'll have tea and be ready to hear Guy's news when he comes back."

Guy Kennedy learned that Mr. Morden was in his room, but very busy. He sent in his card and was at once admitted.

"They told me you were busy, but they didn't throw me out. I'll be as short as I can, Morden."

"Sit down." Morden pushed back the files before him and blinked at his visitor. "You've come about your friend Sharp, of course. We saw him this morning."

"Yes, he told me, and I suppose, after listening to his story, you put him into the same class as Ananias."

"Did he tell you what he told us?"

"About the lady on the bus? He did."

"And did you believe it?"

"Knowing Michael Sharp, I did. If it had been anybody else, well—"

"Exactly. Now I think I should be justified in telling you what has happened since I saw you last. We have found a witness who says that he was actually in Catchpool's shop when the murder was committed. At any rate, that he heard a woman scream and fall on the floor. The skunk ran away and so is of little value to us as a witness, but he did fix the time. It was not later than half-past five. So you see, if he was telling the truth, Sharp could not have seen his aunt alive at six."

"Your witness may be lying."

"He may, but when Sharp is asked to account for his time and tells an absurd story, evidently made up on the spur of the moment, one wonders what his motive could have been, unless he knew that he would inherit everything if he could prove that Catchpool died before his wife."

"I can relieve your mind on that point. He knew nothing about the wills: there I am certain he is speaking the truth, because he's the worst actor that God ever

made. You know, Morden, we differ on one point: you don't believe his story; I do. Did he tell you that he had left his umbrella in the woman's flat?"

"He did not. That must have been an afterthought."

"A very silly sort of afterthought, because it may be by that umbrella that his story will be proved or disproved. I mean to find that woman unless you will do that for me."

"My dear Kennedy, what do you take me for? It isn't your friend Sharp who is on trial. If we were to start looking for a mysterious female who invited an unknown gentleman to her flat and then bolted and left him there without getting away with anything more valuable than an umbrella, our men would be run off their legs."

"How does one set about finding mysterious ladies?"

"The least expensive way is to advertise."

"Good Lord! That I should have to come down to the agony column! It makes my blood run cold."

Morden had something on his mind. "You say that Sharp left his umbrella in the flat. An umbrella has already cropped up in the evidence." He began searching in a formidable pile of papers. "Here it is. Two girls in a shop near the scene of Catchpool's accident say that a man called to question them and asked them where Catchpool had been taken and if he was badly injured. Their descriptions of him varied, but both were positive that he was carrying an umbrella."

"Good Lord! Do you want to make out now that Mike knew that his uncle had been killed?"

"No, my dear fellow. I draw no conclusions at this stage. I'm only telling you how the evidence stands at present."

"Yes, but I can see that you suspect old Mike in some way, and so I've got to clear him. Now, if I succeed in tracing this mysterious lady and she proves that every word Michael Sharp told you was true, will you own up that you were wrong?"

"I'll do more than that. I'll thank you for helping us out of a difficulty, and I'll believe that he did see his aunt at six o'clock."

"Well, then, help me to draft that infernal advertisement. 'Will the lady who allowed a gentleman to pay her bus fare on November 8th, and invited him to her flat—' no, dash it! If I put that in she won't come forward. Here, Morden, you take a hand."

Between them they concocted the following intriguing contribution to the agony columns of several London dailies.

Will the lady who had her purse stolen on a bus about 6:15 p.m. on 8th November and allowed a gentleman to pay her fare and accompany her to her door communicate with Box X.Y.Z.?

With this in his pocket Guy rushed off to make the round of the newspaper offices in time for the morning editions. Actually he passed Inspector Foster on the steps of the building as he went out, but was too much preoccupied to recognize him.

Foster was carrying something that was destined greatly to affect the conduct of the case. He produced it in Chief Constable Beckett's room.

"I thought you had better see this as early as possible, sir. I found it in the letter box of the shop in High Street less than half an hour ago. It was not there on our last visit." He handed over a common-looking envelope without any address. Beckett took out of it a folded blue paper and read it.

"Aha! The plot's thickening. This is the missing note of hand of that young man, Arthur Harris. Someone has got the wind up." He took up the envelope and examined it through a lens. "What's more, the man who stuck this envelope down has gone out of his way to find the cheapest stationery in the hope of letting it appear that he couldn't afford anything better, but his thumb was clean when he stuck down the flap. What do you make of it?"

"Well, sir, young Harris has the wind up all right; it's the kind of silly trick that would occur to him."

"Yes, but unless he's a bigger fool than I take him for he'd have put it in the fire long ago. No, I should be inclined to look for someone who was going to make some profit out of it. You'd better come in with me; we'll show it to the D.A.C.C." He took him through the communicating door.

"Now," said Morden, "we'll put this paper on the file for future use. What we have to do now is to concentrate on fixing the time of the murder down to five minutes if we can. We have a lot of conflicting evidence, and it must all be tested to the bottom before we go any farther. Are you satisfied that that drunken picture cleaner was telling the truth?"

"I don't think he invented the whole story, sir."

"Perhaps not, but a drunken man is generally vague about the time. There ought to be some way of testing his statement. Make that your next business and find out from the neighbours whether anyone saw him in the street that afternoon."

"Very good, sir. I'll put P.C. Richardson onto it—the officer who found young Harris."

"Yes, do so this evening and let me know at once if there is any result. We questioned that naval officer, Michael Sharp, this morning. He sticks to his story that he saw his aunt in the street after six. We must know whether he was telling the truth about that or not."

"Excuse me asking, sir. Was the rest of his statement satisfactory?"

"Here, you can read it for yourself."

Foster retired to the window with the document while his seniors conversed about another case. His eyes grew rounder as he read. He handed the paper back to Morden with a twinkle in his eyes.

"What do you think of it, Mr. Foster?"

"Well, sir, the latter part of it takes some swallowing."

"It does, but some steps are being taken to find the alleged lady. If she comes forward I will let you know. In the meantime, please get on with the inquiry about the picture cleaner's story."

Chapter 13

INSPECTOR FOSTER'S first act on returning to his office was to send for P.C. Richardson.

"Now, young man, it's up to you to make good. They're getting the wind up at C.O. That young naval officer seems to have convinced some of the higher-ups that he saw the murdered woman alive after 6 p.m. It's his word against the word of our drunken friend Cronin and, of course, the naval officer is preferred. We are not getting on, they think, and I have orders to make it my first business to establish the time at which the murder was committed. The doctor who made the post-mortem said that the woman might have been dead from six to twenty-four hours when he examined the body. It had time to cool and to stiffen. For all we know, then, the woman may have been strangled at any hour during the night."

"Well, sir, I was at her flat with the nephew at half-past seven and she wasn't there then."

"I know, but we have somehow to fix the time on trustworthy evidence. That is to be your next job. Let's hear how you propose to set about it. I suppose you'll say 'interview Cronin again and drag the truth out of him.'"

"No, sir, I would rather attack that brown paper first, if you would let me have it. I remember you noticing that the sheet looked quite new and clean."

Foster unlocked his drawer and tossed the sheet over to him. "Do it your own way. If you draw blank you can come to me for help, but get to work this evening."

Into the roaring street went young Richardson, feeling that his future career depended on a mere sheet of brown paper neatly folded away in the breast pocket of his overcoat. It was a sheet like many thousand others that are used daily for packing purchases in every kind of shop. The quest looked hopeless enough, but orders being orders, he was not going to spare shoe leather that evening. He had his plans mapped out in his mind. Starting from east of Cronin's lodgings in the King's Cross Road, there were some thirty streets that had to be searched for stationers' and news-agent shops that might sell brown paper of this quality. He visited them all and consumed two valuable hours in doing it. His method never varied. He walked into the shop, took out the sheet of paper from his pocket, and asked whether they sold sheets exactly of that quality and dimension. The answer was always the same: they would show him samples of the brown paper they sold. He was hard to please, and one woman at the counter lost patience.

"What do you want it for that you are so particular?"

"It's this way. I've a friend who's an artist, and does the cleverest drawings on brown paper you ever saw; he's promised to do one for me, but only on condition that I get him a sheet exactly like this sample and bring it back rolled up, not folded like this is, because that makes creases."

Some received this explanation with interest and did their best for him; others lost patience and said coldly that they did not stock artists' materials: he had better apply to a shop that did. At one shop samples of exactly the same texture and size were produced and he inquired whether they had sold any to an artist within the last few weeks; they answered in the negative and said that they used that quality of paper for wrapping up soap. In common decency he had to buy a sheet, which he dropped in the gutter when no one was looking.

Quite undaunted by failure, he was returning towards the Euston Road, when a sudden thought caused him to slap his thigh and ask himself why he hadn't

thought of it before. When Cronin was paid for any work he did, the money must all have gone in the same way; his artistry had Bacchus as its patron deity, and sacrifice in Christian England can only be made to Bacchus in temples licensed therefor by a committee of the London magistrates. Why had he not thought earlier of locating Cronin's particular temple? It was an expensive kind of quest, but if faithfully recorded in his expense sheet under the head of "inquiries" he would be reimbursed at the end of the month. He must have visited five licensed houses, and left his beer untasted, before he found himself in a snug bar parlour, furnished with more than the ordinary taste. He was served with the usual half-pint and he sat down, for his eye had been caught by a series of spirited sketches on brown paper affixed to the walls by drawing pins. They represented a variety of subjects—a coach of pre-railway days, drawing up at this very hostelry, the Red Lion, beautified by medieval architecture that could never have belonged to it; the Green Park, with ladies of quality in Restoration costume feeding the ducks; the great fire of London, a blaze of horror with an affrighted mob chasing a fugitive Papist in the foreground. The artist had a historical bias throughout, but what moved Richardson most was the discovery of a minute F.C. in the corner of each of these works of art. He strolled into the bar, where he found the landlord taking his turn of duty in serving customers.

"Nice set of drawings you have in that parlour I don't know that I've ever seen drawings like that done on brown paper."

The landlord laughed. "Glad you like them. I'm not going to part with them if that's what you're driving at."

"I was, but perhaps you wouldn't mind giving me the name and address of the artist. I might get him to do one or two for me."

"Lord bless you! He don't work for money, and if he did he'd never finish a job. Liquid refreshment is the stuff to set him to work." And to his stout, beaming helpmate, who was bustling in with a tray full of washed glasses, he said, "Here's a gent talking about our pictures in the bar parlour. I told him that they weren't for sale, and now he wants the address of the old boy."

"I see that they're signed F. C.," put in Richardson placatingly.

"That's right. F. C. for Frank Cronin, but as to where he lives I know no more than the dead."

"You might almost say that he lived here except during closing hours," laughed the wife. "Poor old man! I feel sorry for him, with a talent like that all going in beer."

"The missus is soft-hearted, you see. I've known her go so far as to preach the old man a temperance lecture, but it didn't go down with the old boy. He said that he wanted his beer or he couldn't work—that if I looked it up in the books I'd find that beer was a food. All those sketches in there were paid for in free drinks. He just dashes them off on that table in the corner. It's wonderful to see him."

"Where does he get the paper?"

"Oh, we give him that, don't we, missus?"

"Yes, it's the paper we use for wrappings, and he says that it's the best drawing paper anyone could have."

"I believe I used to know a man called Frank Cronin—a tall, thin, seedy-looking cove."

“Yes, that’ll be him.” The landlord looked round the bar. “He ought to be here tonight; he generally comes in before this.”

“He wasn’t here last night,” said the wife; “nor the night before. I hope nothing’s happened to him. One can’t help liking the old man; he’s so old-fashioned in his manners. A wonderful education he must have had.”

“Could you spare me a moment in the bar parlour, landlord?” asked Richardson.

The landlord looked towards his wife, who appeared to rule the establishment.

“Yes, run along, George,” she said; “I can look after the bar.”

“It’s this way,” explained Richardson, when they were alone in the bar parlour, for most of the customers appeared to prefer the social amenities of the bar. “I am a police officer inquiring into that case of murder in High Street, Marylebone.” The landlord winced at the thought that he had been nursing a viper in his bosom. “I can tell you confidentially that a good deal turns upon a sheet of brown paper like that”—he pointed to the nearest sketch—“which was found lying in the shop.”

“You don’t mean—?”

“No, I don’t mean that this artist chap is suspected of the murder, but we want to know where he got that sheet of brown paper which we believe belonged to him.”

“Here, you sit down while I call the missus.” The landlord was breathing fast; it is not every day that the routine is broken by getting oneself mixed up in a murder case. “Don’t you tell her anything; we’ll just ask her a few questions.” He returned almost immediately with the stout lady.

“Annie,” he said, “this gentleman is asking whether we ever gave a sheet of that brown paper to Mr. Cronin.”

“Of course we did. Don’t you remember that evening when he came round to the side door and asked for one?”

“You’re right. I remember it now.”

“Do you remember what evening it was?” asked Richardson.

“I remember what time it was, if that’s any use to you, but as to what day it was—I remember the time because my husband had been listening to the first news bulletin on the wireless, and he was just coming downstairs when Mr. Cronin called, so it must have been about a quarter past six.”

Richardson turned to the landlord. “Can you remember what news there was on the wireless that evening? Was there anything special?”

“Bless you!” said his buxom wife. “He don’t listen to the news. I’ll let you into a secret. My George has a weakness; it’s the description of missing persons he listens to—you know—the folks that have wandered off from home from loss of memory. Loss of memory! My aunt! Did you ever know anyone leave home because he’d forgotten where it was? Not much. When folks leave home like that they’ve got a reason. If it’s a man—well, then, there’s a woman at the bottom of it, and if it’s a woman, there’s a man. And if there’s neither a woman nor a man, then it’s because they’ve had words and they can’t stand it any longer. It’s loss of temper, not loss of memory.”

“That’s what my wife says,” interposed the landlord. “I listen in for the descriptions of missing persons, because one never knows whether they won’t walk into the bar and take a drop just to restore their memories, and though my

wife won't admit it, I believe I spotted one once—spotted him by his plus fours and checks, just as they said on the wireless."

"Can you remember what evening that was?"

The landlord scratched his head. "No, you see there's someone missing nearly every evening and one gets them mixed up."

"Well, you remember the murder I've been speaking about—the murder in the High Street."

The wife's eyes glistened with excitement. Of all the world happenings murders interested her most. She had become a specialist in murders. "You mean that poor lady that they throttled to death. Did they find out anything?"

"Take care what you say, Annie; you're talking to a detective."

"My! What have I said? Is that why you're here, sir? Do you think we can help you in any way? I'm sure we'd both be glad to, wouldn't we, George? To go and strangle a poor lady like that! Hanging's too good for the likes of them."

"That's why the gentleman wants to find out about that brown paper." The lady's face hardened. "That's all very well, George, but if you think I'm going to say anything to get poor old Mr. Cronin into trouble with the police, well, you're making a mistake. I'm sorry, sir, but we don't remember anything about the date."

"I'm sorry, too; it might have helped Mr. Cronin if you did."

"Besides, if we did remember we wouldn't be so certain as to swear to it, and I'm sure George doesn't want to go into court as a witness."

"I don't know," said the landlord dreamily; "it would be a wonderful thing for business."

"I sometimes listen in myself," said his wife—"not so much to hear the news, though that's very nice, too, but to listen to that announcer's voice—such a nice man he is."

"I'm getting quite jealous," remarked the landlord slyly. "She's fallen in love with the voice and some day—you know what women are when they get things into their head—she'll find out who he is and hunt him down." At which he received a playful dig in the ribs that would have felled an ox. Richardson recalled them sternly to the business in hand. "Can't you remember whether Mr. Cronin called on the evening before the murder was discovered?"

They thought, breathing deeply, but had to confess that their memories were blank.

"If you could remember hearing the description of any particular missing person that evening, I could fix the date by going to the B.B.C. office." But even this suggestion failed to fire their memories. The potman looked in at the door to know when one or other of his employers was coming to lend a hand at the busy time. Customers were dribbling into the bar parlour.

"You'll excuse me, Inspector," said the landlord, deferentially, "but business is business: we're wanted."

"Inspector!" thought Richardson. When would he reach that giddy height in his profession? The unsolicited compliment warmed his heart towards this landlord, but here he was on the very brink of an important discovery without much prospect of being able to establish its most important feature—the date. He thought bitterly of the luck which he had heard was fifty per cent of a detective's success. The jade, Fortune, had smiled upon him for a moment and then turned

her back. He cudgelled his brains for some original method of arriving at this elusive date. He knew from intuition that these two people would make admirable witnesses, if once they were clear in their own minds that the date was Tuesday, the 8th. As he drank his beer gloomily he did not know that the jade was about to smile upon him again.

The stout landlady stood in the doorway smiling on him. She advanced still smiling, and whispered, "If you'll step this way, Inspector, I think there's someone in the bar who can fix that date for us." She led the way through the bar into a dark, stuffy little apology for a hall. "Now you just stand there while I fetch me husband." Through the doorway he could see the whispered colloquy between husband and wife. She motioned with her chin towards a man wearing a railway company's cap, who was standing chatting in the crowd. The landlord reached over the bar to touch him on the shoulder. He detached himself, swallowed the remainder of his beer, set down his glass, and followed the landlady. Into the hall they came, and Richardson found himself facing a stout, hefty man with a jolly face.

"Now, Jim, you can settle an argument we've been having with this gentleman about what evening it was that you delivered that parcel of perishables you brought about a fortnight ago—you remember—the chicken that my sister sent me from down in the country."

"Why, what's up? Anything wrong with the chicken?"

"No, none of yer fooling, Jim. This gentleman and me has a little bet on what day it was."

"Now you're talking. Of course I can fix the date. I've got it in my book." He fished out a memorandum book from one of his capacious pockets. "Here you are! It was on the 8th—a Tuesday it was." Richardson suppressed an inclination to shake hands with him.

"And you remember me telling you that my husband was upstairs listening to the wireless?"

"And you had to call him down! Yes, I remember that."

"Well, there you are, mister. You've won your bet. Mr. Higgins has never made a mistake yet."

"I'd lose my job if I did," laughed the parcels delivery man.

The least that Richardson could do was to return to the bar and stand his benefactor a drink, and this he did without disclosing the fact that he was a police officer and that his new friend's memory for dates might cost him a visit to a police court as a witness. He had established the fact that Cronin, the artist in historical drawings, had got his brown paper after six o'clock and was lying when he said it was nearly an hour earlier.

His success with the landlord of the Red Lion and his wife had elated him more than the beer he had been obliged to drink. On his way back to Marylebone Road he walked on air, and he took the narrow staircase in three bounds. He found the "D.D. Inspector," as Foster's rank was always referred to, just finishing a report. Richardson stood at attention in the doorway. "Oh, it's you, Richardson. Have you brought in anything useful?"

"I think so, sir. I've found the place where Cronin got that brown paper."

"Good, but what we want is the date and the time."

“I’ve got that too, sir, and three witnesses who can swear to it. It was six-fifteen on the evening of the murder.”

Foster leapt in his chair. “Then that old rascal was lying to us. Get your report written out before you go off duty. I’ll take it down with me to C.O. tomorrow morning. You’ve done well.”

The concluding sentence sent Richardson to his table in a glow. It was rare that the D.D. Inspector allowed himself to commend his subordinates. He might even aspire to receiving ten shillings out of the reward if there was one. His foot was now on the lowest rung of the ladder.

Chapter 14

THEY BREAKFASTED at eight in the Kennedys’ flat to give Guy time to catch his train for Greenwich, but this morning his class was destined to continue its studies without its naval instructor. A letter lay beside his plate: he slit open the envelope, while Nan led Michael to the side table and uncovered each of the three dishes that sizzled over the spirit lamps to tempt his appetite.

“What’s your letter, Guy?” she called over her shoulder. Her husband made no reply. He was reading his letter. Two strides took him to the telephone: he called a Greenwich number.

“Is that you, Watson?” they heard him ask. “Look here, I want to take a day’s leave—urgent private affairs. Pitch it strong, my boy, and if the old man digs his toes in give him the soft answer and all that sort of rot. You will? Good boy. I’ll do the same for you one of these days.”

“He’s going to shirk his work again,” remarked Nan to her guest. “The day is at hand when he’ll be thrown out of his job, and we shall be begging our bread in the streets. Now, Guy, tell us the worst. What has the post brought you?”

“A letter from a lady. Here, you can read it aloud, Nan. It will interest Michael, I fancy.” He tossed the letter over to her. She read it to herself, with knit brow.

“What an awful sprawling fist! I can scarcely read it. Listen, Michael.

DEAR SIR,

Having read your advertisement in the morning paper, I hasten to tell you that I am the lady you befriended the other evening, and I can’t express my disappointment when I found that you had not waited for me in the flat. I was suddenly called away and was detained longer than I expected. What can you have thought of me?

Now, if you will forgive me and let me explain the circumstances which caused me to leave you alone for so long, I know you will understand. Will you come tomorrow morning at about eleven? You will find me alone, but I know you will not mind that. And, by the way, I found an umbrella in the room when I came back. I hope you didn’t get wet without it. You must come tomorrow if only for that!

Yours sincerely,
MYRTLE WARING

“Did your unknown lady answer to the name of Myrtle, Mike?” asked Guy, in honeyed tones.

“How should I know what name the woman answered to?” replied Michael crustily. “Where does she write from?”

“No. 9 Essex Mansions, Eastcastle Street, W.C.”

“What a nuisance! I suppose I shall have to go, if I’m to get my broolly back.”

“No, you don’t, my boy; not if I know it. The man who’s going for your broolly is me.”

“You? She’ll throw you out.”

“You’re not serious, Guy?” protested his wife. “I won’t have you keeping trysts with any female who calls herself Myrtle. It’s not respectable. Let Michael go. It’s his funeral.”

“It’s his umbrella, I admit, but, without a kindergarten mistress to look after him, I’ll be no party to it. Don’t be alarmed, my dear. I’m going to be properly chaperoned.”

“Who by?”

“A bandit from the Yard, bearded like the pard, complete with notebook in hand.”

“You mean that Myrtle is going to be arrested?” There was a ring of joyful anticipation in Nan’s tone.

“I mean that I am going to save the honour of the service. Michael’s adventure that evening has tarnished its honour. Even those case-hardened sleuths won’t swallow it. I’m going to prove to them that it was true. With any luck I shall be back to lunch, whereas if Michael went he’d miss Joan; so he can sit here and help you housekeep.”

Guy’s first visit was to New Scotland Yard, where he was admitted at once to Morden’s room. “Don’t look so sour, Morden. I never come to worry you except when I bear important tidings. I’ve found the lady.”

“What lady?” So many ladies took passage across Morden’s office table every day in one file or another that he was inclined to lump the entire sex together as having been created solely for the purpose of hampering public work.

“The mysterious lady that you fellows don’t believe in—the lady who enticed Michael Sharp from the narrow path of a motor omnibus to an unknown flat, and left him sitting there like Tannhäuser waiting for Venus—at least, that is what wicked men of the world like you must have thought, if you believed the story at all. Our advertisement did the trick. Read this.”

Morden read the letter and gave it back to him. “All right, I see that he was telling the truth and that he’s accounted for his time. May I keep this letter for our file?”

“Not yet, my boy. We haven’t done with the lady. I came down this morning to suggest that you and I should go and see her together.”

Morden pointed mutely to the stack of papers on his desk and said that he was snowed under. “But,” he added, “it would be well to have a statement from her. I’ll tell you what we’ll do. It is now half-past ten. You go on there ahead, and at eleven-fifteen I’ll arrange for the D.D. Inspector, Foster, to ring the bell and join you. By that time you ought to have the lady weeping on your shoulder, and

Foster can take down her statement. You have seen him, I think, in Lorimer's room—a quiet, soft-spoken Scotsman.”

“I know him. He came to the flat to put the thumbscrews on Joan Summers. Yes, failing you, he'll do very well. I'll take this letter with me in case the ogress bites, and give it to Foster when we've done.”

A taxi carried Guy to Eastcastle Street, and the lift carried him up to No. 9, on the first floor of Essex Mansions. His friends had never had cause to reproach him with diffidence, but, with his finger almost on the bell-push, he did feel a little anxious about his reception. The door was opened by a lady whom he judged to be in the early thirties—a very personable lady, with a coy, kittenish manner, which froze as she surveyed her tall visitor; her lips trembled.

“I'm afraid you were expecting my friend,” said Guy, pleasantly. “Unfortunately he could not come this morning and he asked me to come instead. It was most kind of you to answer his advertisement.”

“I did so want to see him to apologize for what happened. Did he tell you—but won't you come in? It's so much more comfortable to sit down and talk, don't you think?” She led him into the little sitting room furnished with the latest extravagances of simplicity. “Did he tell you what happened here when he came? I wanted my husband to thank him for what he did for me, but he wasn't in the flat, and so—well—so I didn't come back for the moment, and when I did your friend had gone. He must have thought it dreadfully rude of me.”

“Not at all. He thought that you were busy, and he would be very much in the way.”

“I should so like to see him again.”

Guy felt that the moment had come for throwing his brick. “Poor fellow! That chance visit here is likely to cost him dear.”

“What do you mean? Surely they're not going to serve him with papers. It's monstrous!”

Guy felt that there was more in this than met the eye. He resolved to play for time. “I think, Mrs. Waring, that it would help matters very much if you could tell me what was happening while my friend was sitting in this room.”

She looked at him with pleading eyes. “I see that I can trust you. Are you happily married?”

“Yes,” said Guy emphatically, feeling that when embarked upon a sea of mendacity it is comforting to have one firm rock to stand on.

“Then you can realize the horror of what I'm going to tell you. Of course, I expected to find my husband here. I must tell you that there is a woman on the floor above—a perfectly awful woman—I know her slightly—and I thought that possibly he might be calling upon her. Well, I ran upstairs, and at first I could get no answer to the bell. I kept on ringing and knocking, and at last someone came. It was my husband, and he was furious. Well, I did what I think any wife would do under the circumstances. I forced my way past him into the flat. I won't tell you what I found. It's enough to say that I put the matter into the hands of my solicitor to start divorce proceedings. That, of course, is my private affair, but to think that my husband has had the audacity to drag your friend in on a counter-petition is more than I can bear, and he was so good to me.”

“What you’ve told me, Mrs. Waring, quite accounts for your having been kept, while my friend was here, but it isn’t divorce proceedings that are worrying him. The fact is he had to account for his time that evening, and I ought to tell you that he’s engaged to a very charming girl—” He felt rather than saw a wave of disappointment.

“Fancy a fiancée asking him to account for every moment of his time.”

“No, it is not she, but the police.”

“Good heavens!”

“Well, he happens to be a witness in a murder case.”

“A murder case!” Every trace of natural colour left the poor woman’s face, leaving only the product of the beauty specialist; it imparted a ghastly aspect to her countenance,

Guy continued: “He’s in great trouble, poor fellow. He told the police all about meeting you and coming here, but he didn’t know your name, or the name of the street, and so they didn’t believe him. Now you can do a great deal to help him.”

“How?”

“By telling these fat-headed policemen that his story is quite true.”

She looked doubtful. “It puts me in a very delicate position. Of course, I don’t say that a murder case isn’t a great deal more respectable than a divorce case to be mixed up in—but still, if I have to admit that we’d been alone together in the flat, it might prejudice my case, mightn’t it?”

“Oh, I can relieve your mind on that score. Anything you say to the police will be treated as quite confidential.”

“Well, in that case of course—” She leaned towards him pleadingly. “It’s terrible for a woman in my position—I feel that everyone is against me—that even at this moment I am being watched—that perhaps you and I are running a serious risk—”

“Good Lord!” thought Guy. “I hadn’t bargained for this. When will my Scotch chaperon come to my rescue?” and at that moment the front-door bell rang.

“My husband’s solicitor!” gasped the lady.

“You stay here. I’ll see who it is.” In a moment he found himself face to face with Divisional Detective Inspector Foster on the doormat, and that officer was surprised by the warmth of his welcome. “Come this way, Inspector. I’ll introduce you to Mrs. Waring.” Ushering him into the sitting room, with a reassuring smile he made the formal presentation, adding, “We can take Mr. Foster into our confidence, Mrs. Waring. Everything you tell him will be treated with entire discretion.”

The lady responded with a wan smile, only half convinced. “I shouldn’t like being dragged into a murder case. It would be very awkward for me at this moment.”

“You see, Mr. Foster, this lady is petitioning for a divorce against her husband, but she is quite ready to tell you the whole story of what happened that evening when my friend paid her fare on the motor bus.” Foster assumed his best bedside manner. “I understand that you had your purse stolen, and that the gentleman was kind enough to pay your fare?” He pulled out his notebook. “I’ll take down what you say if you’ll allow me, madam.”

Thereupon the lady retold her story exactly as Michael Sharp had already told it. Foster abstained from interrupting her before she had finished. Then he asked, "Had you ever met this gentleman before?"

"Never."

"Nor seen him since?"

"No. I expected to see him here this morning in reply to his advertisement in the *Morning Post*, but this gentleman came instead."

"And the umbrella he said that he left here? Can I see it?"

"Oh, yes, how stupid of me! I'll run and fetch it."

"I'm glad you came, Inspector," murmured Guy, when she had left the room. "You didn't come a moment too soon. I might have found myself involved in a counter-petition. She says that her husband is watching her." Foster smiled but refrained from replying for his quick ear had caught the sound of returning footsteps.

"Here it is," said the lady.

Foster turned it round until he saw the initials "M.S." engraved on the silver collar. "You had better take charge of this, sir, and take it back to your friend." He rose to indicate that the interview was at an end.

"I'm so much obliged to you, Mrs. Waring," said Guy, taking her hand. "You've helped my friend out of an awkward hole, hasn't she, Inspector?"

"And I suppose I shall see neither of you again?" murmured the lady tearfully—"neither you nor your friend, and I feel so friendless and helpless."

"One never knows," replied Guy cheerfully. "One is always running into old friends in this little village. Good-bye, Mrs. Waring; I can't thank you enough."

Foster was waiting for him at the front door, and they went down the stairs together. "I'm sorry for that poor lady, sir."

"So am I, but we can't help her, can we?"

"No, sir. When divorce proceedings begin, every wise man keeps as clear of the parties as he can."

"Where are you going, Inspector? Let me give you a lift in my taxi." He gave the destination of Marylebone police station to the driver and took his place beside Foster. "I suppose you are now satisfied that Mr. Sharp gave you a truthful account of his movements that evening? I suppose I ought not to ask you whether you believe that he did see his aunt alive at the time he said?"

"I feel sure that he was speaking the truth, sir. I wish that anybody could be sure on the point of recognizing a person in a crowded street. Our work would be so much easier." And that was all that Guy could get out of him. If he could have followed him to his den on the upper floor in Marylebone Road and listened to his conversation with his first-class sergeant, his feeling would have been relieved.

"Well, that's that," said Foster. "Get this statement typed out, will you? That young naval officer is cleared. He's accounted for all his time, and I believe that he saw his aunt, Mrs. Catchpool, alive after six."

"Then that disposes of Mr. Beckett's theory. He won't like it, will he? Sticks to his guns, does Mr. Beckett."

"Yes, but even he has never heard of a woman being strangled by a dead man. Mr. Beckett will have to stand by for surprises."

Guy let himself into his flat and strolled into the room, where Nan and her guest were sitting impatiently waiting for him.

“Joan not turned up yet?” said Guy, casually.

“Don’t be exasperating, Guy,” protested his wife. “Tell us what happened. We’re dying to hear.”

“Well, everything went according to plan, and if you doubt it, Mike, here’s your broolly.”

“Oh, you irritating man!” exclaimed his wife. “Why won’t you tell us what we really want to know. What’s your Myrtle like—a painted Jezebel?”

“I’ve seen the paint laid on thicker. She does credit to Mike’s taste—in fact she’s rather a houri.”

“Oh, is she? And I suppose your bearded chaperon failed to turn up?” remarked Nan scornfully.

“Oh, yes, he did, but I had a good half-hour alone with her before he came. She wanted Mike, not me, and she gave me a rather frigid reception. But we made it up afterwards, and she was ready to sob on my neck. Poor girl! She’s having a rotten time.”

“Pah!” ejaculated Nan.

Michael put the question that was uppermost in his thoughts. “Did she explain why she went off and left me sitting there like a stuffed image?”

“She did. She wept on my shoulder as she told it to me.” He sunk his voice to a sepulchral wheeze. “She discovered that her h-husband had been unfaithful to her-r. She was detained by having to tell the other lady what she thought of her, and it took some time. And now she has filed her petition for divorce, and private sleuths are watching her flat to ascertain the names of all the gentlemen who visit her—”

Nan rose to the fly at once. “I felt sure that something of this sort would happen. Really, Guy, you’re incorrigible. The next thing that will happen will be to read your name in all the papers as co. in a divorce case. You’ll have to chuck your job; we shall have to give up this flat and—” She stopped, for she had seen Guy’s hand grip Michael’s knee, though the look of horror on his features remained fixed like a mask. She knew him in this mood. “How do you know that the flat was being watched? Did you see the private detectives?”

“Well, now that I come to think of it, I didn’t.”

“Then how do you know?”

“She told me.”

“Pah!” said Nan with disgust.

“She wants to see you, Mike.”

“To cry on his shoulder, too. Michael, unless you promise never to go near that woman, I shall tell Joan.”

Chapter 15

AT TEN o’clock next morning Foster found himself closeted with the chief constable. Beckett skimmed through the statement of Mrs. Waring with a grunt,

but when he came to Richardson's report his eyes scanned every line. "This P.C. of yours seems to have some go about him," he said. "I heard Mr. Morden come in. We'd better catch him before someone else does. He's got that Wimbledon murder on his table, and it's difficult to get hold of him."

Foster followed his chief into the room through the communicating door and stood by the overloaded table, while Morden read his reports. The first was quickly dismissed with the words, "That naval officer comes out of this all right, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir, I think he does, but whether he saw his aunt as he says, or only thought he saw her, we can't be sure yet."

"We are getting on, though. Now let's see the other report." He began to breathe hard as he read. "This is serious. What reason could that picture-cleaner man have had for lying? There's something behind this, and if you succeed in finding out what it is, I believe you'll solve the riddle. The first thing you have to do, Mr. Foster, is to fetch him down and put him through the hoop. A man who seems to be perpetually on the verge of D.T. will probably cough up the truth." He looked at the report again. "Richardson? Isn't that the uniform constable who was turned over to you?"

"That's the man, sir."

"It was a smart piece of work. What do you think, Mr. Beckett? Wouldn't he be a useful man for the department?"

"He's better than most of the young patrols, certainly."

"Well, then, if he doesn't make any bad gaff before the end of the case we'll take him in. Get hold of that picture cleaner today, Mr. Foster, and let me know what he says—on the telephone if it's not too late."

"Very good, sir."

During the morning Richardson had been engaged in trying to establish the identity of the man with the umbrella who had called at the shop in Baker Street on the night of the accident to Catchpool. He called first upon his friend the Harris butler, in Wigmore Street. He found him in the undress livery of the baize apron which he used when cleaning the plate. "I saw you coming up the steps, so I didn't stop to change. I'm glad to see you again. That was a smart bit of work of yours, finding my young gentleman so quick."

"How did his parents take it?"

"Step in here." He threw open the door of the den and shut it quietly behind them. "There was a bit of a dust-up with his dad, as you may imagine, but his ma was all over him. Forgiven and forgotten is the word now. No more questions as to where he had been, you understand, and now he's to be given a job in his dad's office to keep him out of mischief! Think of it—in the office where his girl works! Why, it's asking for trouble. But you didn't come only to ask after his health."

"No, I didn't. I came to ask you whether he took an umbrella with him when he motored down through Surrey that afternoon and knocked down a boy."

"More trouble about that? I thought it was all over and done with. Never mind, I can answer that question. He hasn't got one. He uses his car instead, like most young men in these days."

"You're sure?"

“Quite, because I remember telling him when he was starting that it looked like rain, and I offered to lend him one. ‘Not if I know it, Perkins,’ he said. ‘If it rains I’ve got the hood, haven’t I?’ No, he took no umbrella, on that or any other trip.”

“Thank you; that’s all I wanted to know.”

“Well, Inspector, if that’s been of any use to you, one good turn deserves another. If there’s anything hanging over my young gentleman, I’d be glad if you’d give me a hint of it.”

“If there is—and I don’t think there is—I’ll let you know. But there is one other thing you can do for me—get me a specimen of the cheapest kind of commercial envelope used in the house.”

“I’ll get you anything in that line I can find, but my people are rather particular about their stationery.”

He left the room furtively, and while he was away Richardson took the liberty of running through the paper rack and drawers of the writing table. He found nothing in the least like the envelope in which the blue paper so mysteriously placed in the letter box of the shop in the High Street had been enclosed. He had just time to shut the drawers and get back to his chair when the butler returned with half a dozen envelopes of different sizes—all, he said, that he had been able to find. They were all of stout paper of the expensive kind. Richardson selected one and put it in his pocket, thanked the man, and took up his hat to go.

“I shouldn’t like to think that by giving you that envelope I had got my young gentleman into a mess,” said the butler. “Don’t you worry. I’ll let you know in good time if there’s to be any trouble.”

Richardson returned to the office to find D.D. Inspector Foster closeted with a visitor. He scribbled the result of his inquiry on a slip of paper and tapped at the door.

“Come in,” called Foster. “Oh, it’s you, Richardson. Come in. This gentleman doesn’t appear to be satisfied with the progress we are making in the Catchpool case. He wants to help us to clear it up.”

The man in the chair turned round, and Richardson recognized Herbert Reece, the man whom he had taken to the mortuary. “Good morning, sir,” he said.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Foster; “you’ve met before.”

“Yes, Inspector,” broke in the young man; “only, last time we met, this officer was in uniform. I didn’t recognize him in plain clothes at first. I’ve just been telling the inspector how awkward it is for me not knowing where I stand. Time’s getting on; everybody seems to be waiting for someone else to give him a lead, and I want the thing to be settled one way or the other. The executor says he can do nothing about applying for probate of the will until the police give the word, and the police won’t open their mouths. And there’s the cash; there must have been quite a lot of cash in the desk; how do we know that a burglar won’t break in and pinch it?”

“We’d thought of that, Mr. Reece. We got the drawers opened and brought the cash down to the police station. It’s sealed up in the superintendent’s safe.”

“That’s all very well, but the stock in the shop is going to rack and ruin for all I know. Nobody seems to care.”

“I’ve told Mr. Reece that the stock is all right. You were the last to see it, Richardson. Was it all right?”

“Quite, sir.”

“Yes, you say so, but a London shop has to be kept clean, and to keep it clean one must employ someone to clean it—otherwise the stock suffers, if you see what I mean. I’ve just been telling the inspector that I’m quite ready to help you to clear up the mystery if I can, but no one has been near me. For all I know you may have added the case to your long list of undiscovered crimes and turned to work on some other case.”

“And I’ve been assuring Mr. Reece that the case is very much alive,” said Foster, “and that if we find as we go on that he can be of any use to us we shall not fail to come to him. Before you go, sir, I’d like to run over again what you remember about your uncle’s movements just before the accident.”

“I’ve told you all that. He said that I was to meet him and go with him to the house of Mr. Harris in Wigmore Street.”

“When did he make this arrangement with you?”

“In the morning some time—I suppose it would have been about eleven. You see, I had to go out and fix up about the sale of a house out in New Cross, so we arranged that if I got back in time I was to meet him at the corner of Portman Square and Wigmore Street and go with him to the Harrises’.”

“What time were you to meet him?”

“At five-thirty he said, but you know he wasn’t always on the tick with an appointment, and I thought that if I went on to the shop I might miss him and then he’d be ratty about it, so I decided to wait.”

“What, just standing there at the corner?”

“Yes, there or thereabouts.”

“And then you went back to the shop?”

“Yes, because I couldn’t be sure that young Harris hadn’t been round to the shop and paid up before five, but when I found the door locked, naturally I thought that Uncle had missed me somehow and gone on to the Harrises’ alone, so back I went to Wigmore Street and walked up and down waiting for him to come out.”

“You walked up and down before the house?”

“Yes, and I can tell you that it wasn’t what you’d call a summer holiday in that weather.”

“You didn’t ring the bell and ask for him?”

The young man laughed sardonically. “Ring and ask for him! A nice reception I should have had from the flunkey letting two of us in when my uncle was going hammer and tongs at young Harris’s dad upstairs, because I may tell you in confidence that when the poor old man got really going about a debt you could hear him a couple of streets away.”

“You’d been to the house before?”

“Me? Never. My uncle kept all that side of the business to himself, and I don’t think he’d been to the house either. Young Harris always came to the shop.”

“Did you see young Harris or anybody else come out of the house while you were waiting?”

“Not a soul, not even a cat, and I kept it in view practically all the time.”

“Were you on the same side of the street as the house or the opposite side?”

“On the same side.”

“Let me see, that’s the south side—the Oxford Street side.”

“That’s right.”

“Thank you, Mr. Reece, I think that’s all I have to ask you. We’ll come to you if we want any more help.”

“I suppose it’s not my place to ask, Inspector, but have you followed up young Harris’s movements that day? He’s a dark horse—young Harris.”

“I’ll bear in mind what you say, Mr. Reece,” said Foster, rising. Richardson held the door open for him and, pointing to Foster’s umbrella, which was standing in the corner, he said, “Is this yours, sir?”

Reece laughed. “No, I haven’t owned an umbrella for years; the last one I had I left in a bus. Good afternoon, Inspector.”

When his footsteps had died away down the stairs Foster remarked, “A word of warning, young man: you’ll be getting the umbrella maggot in your head if you don’t take care, and besides if you start offering my umbrella to callers I shall be a ruined man.”

“I wasn’t going to let him have it, sir. I just wanted to see what he’d say. People don’t seem to use umbrellas much in London these days. I’ve just come from the Harrises’; young Harris, so the butler tells me, doesn’t possess one. This envelope is the nearest in size to the one dropped into the letter box at the shop, but, of course, it’s much thicker.”

“We needn’t attach much importance to the envelope. If young Harris had returned that blue paper he could have bought a cheap envelope anywhere. As to the umbrella question, the only person connected with the case who seems to have had an umbrella was the young naval officer, and he’s accounted for all his time.”

“You see, sir, now that we know that old Cronin was lying we don’t really know at what hour the murder was committed.”

“Quite true. Your next job is to go and bring him in—not under arrest, of course. We’ve got to get the truth out of that old rascal.”

“I’ll start at once, sir.” As he was going out, he turned. “I suppose that Mr. Reece had left Wigmore Street just before I went to the Harrises’. I must have got to the house at about six-fifteen and come out of it with Arthur Harris five minutes later. I don’t know whether you’d like to ask me anything about that, sir.”

There was a twinkle in the inspector’s eye. “Not at present, thank you, Mr. Richardson. I want you to lose no time in bringing Cronin in.”

“Very good, sir.”

But before he had shut the door Foster called him back. “Can you suggest what motive Cronin could have had for lying? If he lied about the time, his whole story may be lies.”

“No, sir, but I’ve been thinking it over ever since we found that he’d been lying about the time, and I can’t help thinking that he was in the shop when the murder was committed. At the same time, I don’t believe that he did it himself, because that sort of man would never have come near us if he had. He’d have made a bolt for it.”

Foster nodded but said nothing to show whether he agreed with his junior or not.

A motor bus carried Richardson to King’s Cross. He ran up the stairs to Cronin’s room and stayed knocking for two or three minutes. The door of the

opposite flat opened, and the dishevelled head of a woman appeared. "It's no good your knocking, sir, the flat's empty."

"Has the gentleman gone away?"

"Yes, sir; no one's seen him here for two or three days."

"Did he tell anyone he was going?"

"No, he just walked out quite natural and never came back. Did you want to see him particular?"

"No, I just wanted to talk to him about business, but I'd like to know where I could get hold of him."

The face relaxed into a smile. "Well, sir, if I was in your place and wanted to find him very particular, I should make a round of the pubs—he was a bit flush of money the day he left."

"Do you know if he had any particular friends in the building?"

"The poor old gent kept himself to himself. I don't know that I wasn't his only friend, as you might say. Leastways, he used to knock at this door and borrow matches and such like, but always brought 'em back—most particular, he was. Why, the other night he had a caller—a regular toff—and he slipped across to me to borrow a penny to put in his gas meter, and would you believe it, instead of giving me back my penny, he gave me a shilling and wouldn't take no change; said that that penny was a lucky one; that he'd never want for money the rest of his life. He'd seen better days, that poor old man. Do you know what he used to do? He'd take his hat off to me when he met me in the street."

"I'm just wondering whether that caller you say he had was a friend of mine. What did he look like?"

"Well, he wasn't what you'd call a tall man; he was just middle height. He had a short beard and spectacles."

"Was he old or young?"

"That I couldn't say. His beard wasn't grey, if that's what you mean, but I didn't take any particular notice of him."

Richardson set out on a weary round of the public houses, beginning with the Red Lion, where he had a warm welcome from his friends the landlord and his wife. He asked for news of their friend the artist. The landlord sunk his voice and drew him into the empty bar parlour.

"I'll tell you something, Inspector, that I wouldn't tell anybody else, and I'll tell you no lies. He's been here, but he came just after closing time and begged me for a bottle of the stuff. I told him that I had to look after myself, and that I couldn't give it him, not if he was the Prince of Wales. 'If I come round tomorrow night just before closing time will you give it me?' he said, and I said that I would; he could come round to the private door if he liked. Well, he may come and he may not. Why not look in ten minutes before closing time, and if he comes I'll fetch you?"

Richardson followed this advice, but the old man did not come.

Chapter 16

GUY KENNEDY had already left for Greenwich when the bell rang and the maid brought in a visiting card, printed in Gothic capitals—"Mr. Herbert Reece."

"I told the gentleman that you were not at home, ma'am," she said to Mrs. Kennedy, "but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He said he didn't want you: he wanted Mr. Sharp. He said Mr. Sharp was his cousin, ma'am"—this in a tone of incredulity.

"Well, you'll find Mr. Sharp in the dining room. Take the card to him."

The maid obeyed, and a moment later Michael appeared at the dining-room door, beckoning eagerly to his hostess. They carried on their conversation in a sibilant undertone.

"What am I to do, Nan? I don't want to see the fellow. Is it too late to lie and tell him that I'm out?"

"I'm afraid he'd only come again, and you can't always be out."

"Well, then, it might be when Guy is here. He'd make short work of him."

"If I were you I should see him now and hear what he has to say. If he makes a nuisance of himself Guy can deal with him afterwards. Stay here and I'll have him shown in."

Herbert Reece hurried in with outstretched hand and an uneasy hope in his manner that he would find blood thicker than water.

"How do you do? It is years since we met."

Michael Sharp tried hard to impart cordiality to his manner but failed rather miserably. He could only muster a feeble grin.

"We ought to have seen more of one another, Michael, but you have been so much abroad on foreign stations, and I did not always know when you were in England. I suppose that was why we missed. Never mind, we must make up for it now that we are both under the shadow of a great sorrow. I suppose that you have heard all that has happened—Uncle and Aunt cut off on the same day?" There was a false ring in his mournful tone that made Michael long to kick him.

"Yes, I have heard all about it."

"And now things are in an awful tangle with the lawyers and the police. Heaven only knows how long it will be before they will be straightened out! I suppose you haven't heard about the will?"

"I've heard something."

"But I'll bet you haven't heard of the real difficulty. It seems that everything turns upon the question which of the two died first that afternoon. I'd better tell you at once that I am quite satisfied in my own mind which it was. There can be no shadow of doubt that it was Aunt Emily, but I don't want to be grasping. You, naturally, would like to have it the other way. For all I know, you may have been counting upon it being the other way. In any case, I take it that neither of us would like litigation and let these lawyer chaps collar half of what there was to leave, so I've come to make you a sporting offer. You may think it a generous offer, but what I say now I shall never attempt to go back upon. I propose that we share and share alike." He waited for the gasp of gratitude that he seemed to expect, and Michael's silence damped his eloquence a little. "Many people would say that it's quixotic of me to make you such an offer, but I don't care. Blood is thicker than water. And remember that, with the evidence I could bring forward, my offer

amounts to a cool gift to you of about forty thousand pounds, if not more. But I'm like that."

There was silence for a moment. Reece seemed oppressed by it and tried to find relief in a further flood of talk. "I can quite understand what you are thinking. You have been cooped up so long in ships that business is a sealed book to you. You may be wondering whether there may not be some trap for the unwary sailor hidden in my offer. No. I am one of those people who like to put all their cards on the table, and so are you. Tell me, frankly, what you are afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything, but I don't quite see why you have come to me."

"Oh, is that the only trouble? Let me explain, then. I'm not the sort of man who is out for money. I shouldn't know what to do with it if I had it. No, give me just enough to live upon and I'm all right. I can make more if I want it. But to know that there is a fortune waiting for me in the far future, and not to know when I am to have it, or whether the lawyers won't eat it up before it comes to me, puts me off my stroke. Why, there have been cases in which litigation over legacies has dragged on for years and years—going from court to court—even up to the House of Lords—and the poor little litigants have grown old in the process, only to learn in the end that the lawyers have had it all. You must have read of such cases. Now what I propose is to keep all the money out of the maws of these sharks and keep it in the family—that's the point—in the family."

"You want me to agree offhand?"

Reece laughed loudly. "My dear cousin, I want you to do more than that. I want you to agree, of course, and then I want you to jump into a taxi with me and run down to my lawyer, who will put our agreement into proper form. We'll stick our names to it before witnesses and then go down to Mr. Settle, who is sole executor to both wills, and shake it in his face. Lord! It makes me laugh to think of the face he'll make when he sees all his dreams of wealth melting away. Nothing but a hundred pounds for his trouble, and forty thousand each for the young cousins! That's what I want." He caught the sign of hardening on Michael's face and made one last effort at persuasion.

"You see, my dear cousin, this may be your last chance. Things may be moving quicker than we know. That inspector man at Marylebone is a smarter bird than you may think. I see him constantly—indeed, he comes to me for help at times—and he let drop a hint yesterday that he is not far off making up his mind. I've made you this offer, and if you turn it down you may regret it all your life, because when I come into the money you can scarcely blame me for saying, 'No, I made you a square offer: you turned it down; I am not bound to make it again.'"

Michael rose from his chair. For a fleeting moment Reece thought that he had succeeded, but a glance at his cousin's face was enough. He flushed with anger.

"Thank you for the offer. I shall have to take advice about it," said Michael.

"No, you will have to take it or leave it now. We don't want other people butting in."

"Then I leave it. Thank you all the same. You know your way out?"

Reece caught up his hat and went out. He could not trust himself to speak. Nan, hearing the front door bang behind him, looked in with an anxious face.

"You've quarrelled with him?"

"No, but I could scarcely keep my hands off him. He wanted me to sign an agreement to go shares, and I told him to go to hell."

"Don't tell me any more. Wait till Guy comes home."

Guy returned to lunch with a keen appetite.

"Well, what's the news? What have you two people been doing?"

"Ask Michael," said his wife. "He's been fraternizing with his cousin."

"What do you mean? Has that little blighter had the impertinence to come here?"

"Tell him about it, Michael."

Guy heard him out. Then he said, "We must be up and doing this afternoon, Mike. Morden must be told of this, and so must that poor old lawyer Johnny in the Adelphi."

"Why all this fuss? I turned the offer down."

"I know you did, but it's the fact that such an offer was made that counts. It means either one of two things—either that that cousin of yours knows that he has a bad case and was trying to jump your claim, or that he means to bolt and hasn't the necessary cash. Both are important, and I'll have to cut out Greenwich for this afternoon." He went to the telephone and made his peace with someone at the other end of the wire.

"All clear," he said, returning. "Now to lunch. We needn't hurry over it. Unless Morden browses on a ham sandwich at his office table, he won't be back from lunch till about two-thirty."

The messenger admitted that Morden was to be found in his room, when the taxi deposited the two naval officers at New Scotland Yard. They were admitted immediately.

Morden greeted Michael most amiably, as if to make amends for what had happened at their last interview.

"Things are moving, Morden my friend. I've brought Sharp here to tell you about a visit he had this morning from his long-lost cousin, Herbert Reece. Go ahead, Michael."

Morden listened with close attention and did not interrupt the story. Then he said, "You seem to have an excellent verbal memory, Mr. Sharp, but memory is apt to play strange tricks—even the best. If you don't mind I will get you to dictate what you've told me to a shorthand writer. When you've finished, come back to this room." He led him to an empty little waiting room near the entrance and brought in a young policeman who wrote shorthand like a reporter for Hansard. In two minutes he was back in his room.

"Well," said Guy, "what do you think of this latest development?"

"Let me hear your views first."

"Well, if you had a certain eighty thousand pounds waiting for you, would you hunt up a relation whom you hadn't seen for years and offer him half of it as a token of affection?"

"I can't imagine myself doing so."

"Very well, then; Cousin Herbert is feeling shaky about his inheritance—in other words he thinks that you fellows will be able to show that Mrs. Catchpool outlived her husband. Furthermore, he wants some ready cash and plenty of it."

“That’s the point that interests me most. Why should he be so keen upon quickly getting hold of £40,000, unless—”

“Exactly.” Neither speaker thought it necessary to finish the sentence.

Morden was thinking hard. “Look here, Kennedy, I can’t tell you exactly how we stand in this case. I wish I could, but if I were you I should take Sharp on to see the executor to the will, say that you’ve been here, and tell him the whole story. Stop, I’ll ring him up and tell him that you’re coming.” He called a number from his desk telephone and made the announcement. “He’s expecting you. I fancy that you’ll find that even if Sharp had agreed to the proposition it wouldn’t have made a pennyworth of difference. The old man wouldn’t have moved a step towards obtaining probate until we had given him the word. He’s one of the old school and likes to be sure of his ground.”

Mr. Settle received Michael Sharp with fatherly benevolence and recalled their last meeting to his memory. “It’s a bad business,” he said. “I had a great liking and respect for your aunt. Even now it shocks me to think of her end. I suppose that you have come to ask me how long it will be before the executor is able to take steps about the will.”

“Not at all,” interrupted Guy. “He’s come to tell you about an interview he had this morning with Herbert Reece.”

“With Herbert Reece?” exclaimed the old solicitor in astonishment. “Where did you meet him?”

“He came to see me to make a proposal.” Thereupon Michael Sharp narrated the conversation in detail. Even Guy had to admit that his verbal memory was remarkable. He could even reproduce the tone in which Reece had spoken.

“Amazing!” exclaimed the solicitor, when he had heard him to the end. “I’m glad that you declined to be a party to any such proposal, quite apart from the fact that it would not have influenced me in the slightest degree. As executor I am bound to move with the greatest caution. There may be criminal proceedings in which evidence affecting both wills may be brought to light. The jury has not yet given its verdict on the inquest. Tell me, Mr. Kennedy,” he continued, turning to Guy; “you are in closer touch with Scotland Yard than I am, how are they getting on with their investigations?”

“I wish I knew. They seem to spend their time hunting down false clues. If we were to accumulate a pile of papers that thick over every court-martial case, the ship would go to the bottom with the weight of them.”

“Ah!” smiled the lawyer, “The process of elimination. Well, I am glad to know that they are so thorough. I shan’t be sorry, though, when they do arrive at the truth. Between ourselves, that young man, Herbert Reece, is beginning to make my life a burden. He will not understand my position, and he seems to be in a chronic need of money.”

“Why, I wonder?”

“Well, I suppose that everyone needs money, but he is certainly very persistent.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t feel quite so sure of his windfall as he did.”

“Perhaps,” said the lawyer, cautiously.

As they were driving back to the flat, Michael remarked, “You’ve taken up the wrong profession, Guy my boy. You ought to have trained for Morden’s job instead of going to sea.”

“Why? Aren’t I an efficient naval officer? Lock at me—specially selected for my job at Greenwich—see confidential reports on Lieut. G. Kennedy.”

“Yes, and see confidential report of the admiral superintendent when your job comes to an end. ‘Would be an efficient instructor if he were not away half his time on urgent private affairs.’ Whereas, if you’d been a policeman, you’d have nosed out half the crimes in London single-handed and locked up the other half of the population because you could find out nothing against them.”

While they were being driven homeward, Divisional Detective Inspector Foster was closeted with the late John Catchpool’s charwoman. He had sent for her, and so far from being awed by the official aspect of a police station she had greeted each functionary she encountered with a sympathetic grin. Some of them she recognized as acquaintances from having met them on their beats.

Foster found her ready—even over-ready—to impart information, and he found it difficult to keep her from the by-paths of anecdote. “I’ve asked you to come down, Mrs. Hart, to put a few questions to you about your late employer.”

“That’s right, Inspector. The more questions you ask, the better I shall like you. Quite gay they are downstairs! Quite a number of old faces I know. Lor’ bless you, Inspector; when I come into a police station I feel at home. You must find it a terrible responsibility dealing with murderers and such-like. Do you find it prevents you sleeping at nights? It would me, I know. Now I can guess what you wanted me for. To help you over that case in the shop.”

“Yes, I want to ask you who had a key to the shop.”

“Why, no one but the master.”

“Nobody else?”

“Gracious, no! Do you think he would have trusted anyone with a key? Not him. He kept the key in his trousers pocket and wouldn’t even let it go out of his hand.”

“But his nephew must have had a key?”

“Mr. ‘Erbert? Not he. Many’s the time he’s grumbled about it in my hearing. You see, the old master was getting hard of hearing—couldn’t always hear the shop bell. Many’s the time when I’ve had to stand in the street with the rain pouring down, ringing and ringing, before I could get him to come to the door. But do you think he cared? Not he. It was the same with Mr. ‘Erbert.”

“You saw him leave the shop that afternoon when he was run over?”

“Yes, Inspector, I did. You see, it was this way: I’d done a bit of washing in the morning, and I’d hung up the things to dry on a string across the kitchen, it being wet outside, and I thought to myself if he goes into that kitchen and catches his head against that string there’ll be trouble, because you know he’d a nasty tongue sometimes, had the master, over little things like that. Well, I went to the shop, and who should I meet face to face but the master all dressed up to go out. ‘What do you want?’ he said, and I told him. ‘You can’t come in now, Eliza,’ he says, ‘because I’m going out and I’m going to lock up before I go, see.’ ‘Very good,’ I ses, ‘then don’t blame me if you run your head into a lot of linen hanging in the kitchen, because it won’t be my fault.’ ‘Don’t you worry over that,’ he says. ‘Get along, I’m in a hurry.’ Well, out he came, and I saw him take the key out of his trousers pocket, lock the door, and put it back again. Very mean he could be, the old master, Inspector. I’d work me fingers to the bone keeping the place clean. Do you think he’d ever offer me a bite of lunch? Not he! Not a crust of bread, not a

slice of cheese has ever passed my lips since I worked for him. I've had to get me own dinner day after day and slip over to the Crown and Anchor for my drop of beer."

"It was at the Crown and Anchor you first heard of the accident, wasn't it?"

"Yes, they were all talking about it."

"How had they heard of it?"

"A man came in when I was there and said he'd seen it, and he knew the old master. He was quite sure it was him."

"Then why didn't he tell the police?"

"Ah! Now you're talking, Inspector. The people that uses the Crown and Anchor ain't the sort that cares to get mixed up with the police. They'll tell anyone else, but not the police."

"And then you took the news to Mr. Herbert Reece. Where did you meet him?"

"Oh, not far from the shop; he was just going there at the time. I told him what I'd heard and said, 'It's no good your going to the shop, Mr. 'Erbert; your uncle's not there; 'e's been run over and the shop's locked up.' He said, 'Well, then, you and me will go down to the hospital together.'"

"How did you know which hospital he'd been taken to?"

"I didn't know, Inspector. It was Mr. 'Erbert who took me to the Middlesex."

When Foster had checked her flow of conversation and seen her down the stairs, he returned to his desk and made two notes, with lips curling in a smile.

Chapter 17

DIVISIONAL DETECTIVE Inspector Foster found Richardson waiting for him when he entered his office at nine-thirty. He listened to the account of the inquiries overnight and bit his lip when he heard of Cronin's disappearance. He was thinking of what would be said at the Central Office about not having kept the flats under observation.

"Well, we've got to find that man and find him quick, or they'll be having us down on the carpet."

"According to the landlord at the Red Lion, sir, he may come back before closing time this evening."

"We can't wait till this evening. We've got to find him this morning."

"Well, sir, from what the landlord said about his only coming in just before closing time, I fancy he's in hiding all the daytime and only comes out when he thinks that no one's likely to see him. I'll make a round of the Church Army shelters; perhaps I may hear something of him there."

"Right, then get on with it as quick as you can."

But Richardson's passage downstairs was blocked by the station sergeant coming up with a second person in his wake. On that narrow staircase there was no room to pass. He stood aside, and even in that semi-darkness at the top of the stairs he recognized the man he was in search of. He hung up his hat and followed the two into the inspector's office.

“A case for you, Mr. Foster,” said the sergeant. “This man complains that when he was leaning over the parapet of the Embankment last night, someone caught him by the legs and tried to tip him over.” He winked as he gave this brief statement of the complaint as a hint to Foster that the condition of his visitor left room for doubts about the accuracy of any statement he might make. “We’re busy downstairs. I’ll leave him with you.” Foster was on the point of objecting that an Embankment case was a matter either for the A or E Divisions when he recognized the complainant. “Oh, it’s you, Mr. Cronin. Sit down here” (pointing to a chair). “Come in and shut the door, Richardson—or stop! Call the clerk in to take a note,” he added in a lower voice. “Now, Mr. Cronin, let me hear your story.”

The old man appeared to be in a pitiable state of nerves. His hands were trembling, his teeth were chattering, but as far as clothing was concerned he was more sprucely dressed than when they had last seen him.

“They tried to murder me, sir, last night. My life’s not safe; I’ve come to you for protection.” Foster’s spirits rose at this opening to the interview. Cronin was in the state of mind when a witness becomes as clay in the hands of a potter.

“What were you doing down on the Embankment?” asked Foster.

“I was out for a little walk, sir; nothing more.”

“What time was it?”

“Big Ben had struck eleven about five or ten minutes and I was under the Charing Cross railway bridge taking a look at the river—just leaning my elbows on the parapet—when somebody gripped me by the ankles and tried to tip me over into the water. Of course, if I’d lost my balance it would have been all up with me; I’ve never learnt to swim, and you know what the water is at this time of year. Well, sir, somehow or other I got a grip with my fingers in the cracks in the masonry. He must have taken alarm at seeing someone coming, because when I was able to struggle back onto the pavement he had vanished in the darkness. If you doubt my word, sir, look at my fingers.” He displayed bloodstained fingertips with broken nails.

“Have you any idea who it was?”

“No, sir, I’ve no enemies that I know of.”

“Well, before we go any further with this assault upon you, I should like you to answer a few questions and this time to answer them truthfully. Why have you left your lodgings in the King’s Cross Road, after my warning to you not to leave them without informing the police?”

The old man was trembling violently; Richardson thought that he was going to faint and roll from his chair.

“It was the drink, sir.”

“No, Mr. Cronin, it was not the drink. Think again.”

“Well, sir, one of my friends thought I’d better go for a change.”

“What was the name of your friend?” persisted Foster inexorably.

“He asked me not to give his name, sir. I should have called him an acquaintance, not a friend.”

“You mean the man who gave you the money to buy those clothes?”

Cronin looked down at his clothes and began to whimper. “Do you think it’s fair, sir, to badger me like this when I come to you for protection?”

“When you’ve told me a lie and given me your word that what you said was true, it is quite fair to require you to tell the truth. If you had persisted in the statement that you made in this office a few days ago you might have found yourself standing your trial for perjury.”

“It was all true; every word of it, except one. I may have made a slip over the time.”

“You did make a very serious slip over the time, and you made that slip intentionally.”

“It made no difference that I could see, sir. Whether I was in the shop at quarter-past five or half-past six didn’t seem to matter.”

“You think so? Now I want you to make a new statement, starting from the beginning, and I must warn you that if you swerve from the truth in the slightest particular, we shall know it. We know a good deal more about your movements than you think we do.”

“I will tell you the truth, sir. I want to get it all off my conscience. I sold that picture to Mr. Catchpool for fifty shillings, and then when the lady kept sending messages to me I went to him and asked him to let me buy it back and pay by instalments. At first he wouldn’t listen to me, and then when I told him how I was being pressed for it he seemed to soften and said that he would let me have it for fifteen weekly instalments of ten shillings.”

“A profit of 300 per cent.?”

“Yes, sir, I know, but I had to have it back. I agreed, but I hadn’t got the first instalment on me and he told me to go away and get it and call between six and seven. Well, sir, I managed to get the money. I got some wrapping paper at a public house where I knew the people—”

“The Red Lion?”

“Yes, sir. I got it just after six and went on down to the shop. The rest is exactly as I told you before.”

Foster took out the former statement and read over the latter part, sentence by sentence, in order that the clerk might take it down. “You don’t wish to add anything to that?”

“No, sir; it’s the truth.”

“In your first statement you said that you went only once that day to see Catchpool—namely, at five p.m. Now it appears that you went twice—once in the morning to bargain with him about the picture and again in the evening after six o’clock to pay the first instalment and receive delivery of the picture. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“Now tell me this. Who told you to put the time at 5:15 p.m. instead of 6:30? Was it the same gentleman who advised you to go away for a change?”

“Yes, sir, it was.”

“I should like a description of him. Had you ever seen him before?”

“No, sir, never. He was a man of thirty-five to forty I should say, with a short beard and glasses.”

“Coloured glasses?”

“Yes, sir, tinted glasses. He was of medium height and rather slight build.”

“What name did he give?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I can’t break my promise, I can’t give you his name.”

“And yet you come to the police asking for protection. Well, putting the name aside for a moment, what did he say to you?”

“He asked me whether I was the man who had sold a picture to Mr. Catchpool. I thought that he was one of you gentlemen from Scotland Yard and that he’d a right to question me. Then he said, ‘I understand that you want to buy it back.’ I told him that Mr. Catchpool had agreed with me upon terms and that I had actually gone to see him on the evening he was killed. He looked at me very straight through his glasses and said, ‘Were you in the shop when a murder was committed there?’ And I was so frightened, thinking he had come from the police, that I told him everything just as I’ve told you. He asked me whether I’d made a statement to the police, and I said, ‘Do you want me to come down with you and make it?’ That made him laugh. He said, ‘I’m not a police officer, but I think you’d be wise to go down and tell them what you know.’ And then he sat down to talk things over and became quite friendly. He said, ‘If you go down and make a statement, there’s one little point which doesn’t affect the truth at all, but which might put quite a comfortable little sum of money into your pocket. Instead of saying that you were there at half-past six you’ve only to put the time an hour and a quarter earlier and call it quarter-past five and I’ll see you don’t suffer for it. After all, you’ll be telling the truth just the same.’ That’s the history of it, sir, just as it happened.”

“You’ve been seeing him since?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve seen him more than once.”

“And he’s been paying you money?”

“Not a great deal, sir—a pound or two.”

“That suit of clothes cost more than a pound or two.”

“Well, sir, call it from ten to fifteen pounds. I didn’t keep an exact account.”

“And when he recommended you to go away for a change, I suppose that he gave you the travelling money?”

“He gave me something towards my journey, sir.”

“But you didn’t go?”

“No, sir, I didn’t feel equal to a journey. To tell you the truth, I’ve been lodging in a Church Army shelter.”

“And only going out at night—to keep out of the way of the police?”

“To keep out of the way of everybody, sir.”

“I suggest to you that this gentleman knew that you were still in London and that you were on the Embankment last night to meet him by appointment.”

There was no reply. Foster continued, “Remember you have undertaken this time to tell the truth.”

“Well, sir, I did receive a message from him. He asked me to call at the Charing Cross Post Office every morning in case there was a letter from him, and yesterday morning I found a letter card making an appointment for eleven o’clock that night on the Embankment under the Charing Cross Bridge, but he didn’t come, and ten minutes later I was attacked as I told you.”

“Now, Cronin, I want the name that gentleman gave.”

The old man tried to wrap the rags of dignity round him. “I have told you, sir, that I cannot betray a confidence.”

"I want the name he gave you."

"I cannot give it to you, sir."

"You have asked the police to protect you. How are they going to protect you unless you tell them *everything* you know?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"It is quite useless, your attempting to hide it, because we have means of finding it out, but that takes time and trouble, and we haven't at the present moment men to look after you and make the inquiries at the same time. I ask you again for the name."

"Well, sir, I'm in your hands. The name he gave me was Harris."

"Arthur Harris?"

"No, sir: Charles Harris."

"Very well, Mr. Cronin, if you'll accompany that officer into the other room he'll give you your statement to sign. When you have signed it, an officer will accompany you to your home in King's Cross Road and another officer will be posted near the door to see that you are not molested."

"This way, sir," said the clerk.

"You'd better see him home, Richardson," said Foster when they were alone. "You see that the plot is thickening."

"I do, indeed, sir. The curious thing is that Mr. Harris senior has a beard and does wear glasses."

"Yes, and if you will tell me what Mr. Harris senior had to gain by polluting the fount of justice I shall be quite ready, to spend a little time upon him."

"No, sir; the only motive he could have had would have been to provide an alibi for his son, but now that we have fixed the time of the murder at half-past six, young Harris has an alibi already: he was with me."

"Exactly. It isn't the name or the beard or the glasses that we have to look at: it's the motive. Who had a motive for putting the murder an hour earlier?"

"Yes, sir. The man who told you that he had been waiting half an hour outside the Harris house, and when you laid a trap for him he put the house on the wrong side of the street. I didn't like to say so at the time, sir, but by putting two and two together I reached the same opinion two or three days ago."

"You were wise to keep it to yourself, Richardson. I don't mind admitting to you that that idea was suggested to me by a remark of the chief constable three or four days ago. It was about that blue paper we found in the letter box. He said that Harris couldn't have put it there because he'd nothing to gain. What we had to look for was someone who stood to gain from that blue paper being returned to the shop and so being passed into the hands of the executor."

"I didn't know that you were actually working on that line, sir."

"No, you didn't, and I didn't want you to. The beginning and the end of C.I.D. work is the collection of evidence that will be water-tight in a court of law. When you reach my age at the job you will realize that you will slip up unless you sweep up all the ragged ends before you attempt to go forward, otherwise you will have half a dozen lawyers pecking at these ragged ends. We had quite a number of ragged ends—that silly young fool, Harris; that naval officer, Lieutenant Sharp; the old man himself who was dead and couldn't be put up for cross-examination. We

had to clear these all out of the way before we could put up a case for the D. of P.P.”

“The D. of P.P.?” Richardson was puzzled by the initials.

“The Director of Public Prosecutions. In a day or two you will find that we shall be turned over to him, and I can tell you that though Mr. Morden is pretty good at picking holes in a case and telling you what leak has got to be stopped, those lawyers in the D. of P.P.’s office are terrors. If you get through them unscathed, you needn’t worry: your case is water-tight.”

“It’s not quite water-tight yet, sir.”

“Far from it. We’ve a lot of work before us. Tomorrow we shall both be run off our legs. We haven’t more than half the necessary evidence to lay before the D. of P.P., and we’ve got to get it within the next forty-eight hours. Now that we feel pretty sure of our man we know exactly what we have to do.”

Chapter 18

INSPECTOR FOSTER’S next step was to take Richardson back to the shop in High Street and there go over the ground again. “It’s true that Sergeant Reed and you did your job pretty thoroughly; all the papers you found and all the money are sealed up in the superintendent’s safe, but however good the search may be at the beginning of a case one may miss things that become of vital importance towards the end of it. There is that door key, for instance. If it was really the only key to the shop and we were to find it inside—”

“I don’t think you will, sir. We searched everywhere for it.”

“Never mind: if we don’t find that, we may find something else. Anyway, if we don’t it won’t be for lack of looking for it.”

Foster unlocked the shop while Richardson removed the shutters to let in the light. The door was locked behind them. Both took off their coats and rolled up their shirt sleeves. They began with the rooms upstairs—those squalid, smelly little rooms which old Catchpool had called his home. There they turned over all the bedclothes, ransacked all the pockets in the clothing; looked under all the newspapers that lined the drawers; pulled out every stick of furniture from the walls and turned up the strips of carpet. They found nothing.

Down the stairs they went to the office. The desk was empty of papers, but that did not satisfy Foster. Every drawer was pulled out and piled on the floor, in case something had slipped behind one of them. The drawers were turned over in case anything was pinned to the underside. The rest of the furniture was treated as it had been upstairs. The two men’s arms were begrimed to the elbows with adhesive London dust when they turned to the shop itself. The stock was mere junk: a few dirty-looking pictures; a few pieces of old pottery; three or four antique cupboards and a grandfather clock that had long ceased to go. They were putting the things back into their places when Foster spied an umbrella stand containing one dilapidated umbrella.

“Hallo!” he cried. “Was this here when you chaps searched the place?”

“Yes, sir; you’ll find it mentioned in the inventory.”

"Don't touch it, man."

"Oh, if there are any fingerprints on the handle, sir, they'll be those of Sergeant Reed; he took it up and opened it."

"You've been reading detective novels, Richardson. There they always find fingerprints on umbrella handles; in real life you don't, or if you do find a doubtful print it will be too badly smeared to be of any use."

"We asked the charwoman whose umbrella it was, sir; she said it belonged to the old man."

"Never mind that. You go and fetch her."

While Richardson was away, Foster went down on his hands and knees and scrutinized the tray of the umbrella stand with a magnifying glass. He was in that position when Richardson returned with the woman. Foster rose to his feet.

"Lor, sir, it did give me a start, seeing you down on your hands and knees. I didn't recognize your back view. With a microscope too; looking for footprints, I suppose you was."

"Good afternoon. I've been looking at this umbrella."

"Yes, sir."

"You told this officer that it belonged to Mr. Catchpool."

"Yes, sir, so it did."

"Had he another one?"

"No, sir, only that one—always took it with him whatever the weather. I used to chip him about it when the sun was shining, but, Lor' bless you! He didn't care. He'd growl out something about never knowing what the weather might be like before he came home—always looking on the dark side of things, 'e was."

"You're sure this was his?"

She thrust past him to the umbrella stand and snatched up the umbrella before he could stop her. "Well, if you want proof, open it, and you'll find the place where he got me to stitch up a slit in the alpaca. Open it and look. Yes, there it is, where my finger's pointing."

"But you say that he took it with him in all weathers, and yet he couldn't have taken it on the evening of his death, could he?"

"Lor! I never thought of that. You gentlemen's too many for me. Fancy you noticing that. 'E *did* take it; that I can take my Bible oath to, because when he was fumbling with 'is key in the door, locking up, he gave me his umbrella to hold, and I remember opening it for 'im as it was raining."

"The same umbrella?"

"Yes, of course it was the same. Besides, I remember noticing that there was another slit beginning and thinking that next day I'd sew that up too. Look, you can see it."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hart. That's all I wanted to ask you."

"You won't be bringing me down to the police court will you, sir? I don't like them places."

"Not if we can help it. Good afternoon."

As soon as the door was locked behind her, Foster called Richardson to the umbrella stand. "Catch hold of it and bring it to the light. Now if you stoop down with this glass in your hand, you'll see exactly where the point of the umbrella was standing. All round it you will see a rusty stain, which means that when the

umbrella was brought in here it was wet and the water that ran from it made this stain."

"Yes, sir, I see that quite clearly."

"Now I can tell you what the weather was every day since the murder." He took out a rough notebook. "On the 8th the afternoon was wet; on the 9th it was fine all day; on the 10th the same. Now you searched the shop on the 9th and you noticed the umbrella in the stand. The water would have had time to dry up during the night and early morning; therefore the umbrella was brought in wet and put in the stand on the evening of the murder, and yet it belonged to the old man who took it out with him. What do you make of that?"

"He had no umbrella in his hand when he was knocked down, sir."

"I know that."

"Well, sir, someone else must have been holding it over him. He wouldn't have let a stranger do that, but he might let a relative who was a bit taller than he was."

"Exactly. That is what I was coming to. His nephew, Herbert Reece, says that they were to meet and go together to the house in Wigmore Street and that he waited for his uncle at the corner of Wigmore Street. What more likely than that he met the old man near the shop and walked beside him holding the umbrella over him?"

"Quite, sir, and one eyewitness of the accident said that she heard the old man cry out, 'Very well, then, I'll call a policeman' before he dashed into the road towards me. They must have had a quarrel about something. And another thing, sir: the man who called on those young women at the shop knew about the accident, but asked them which hospital he'd been taken to."

"Yes, it's all fitting in. The charwoman told me yesterday that she met Herbert Reece in the street close to the shop and told him of the accident, and when I questioned her further she said that she didn't know which hospital he had been taken to, but Reece said they would go to the Middlesex. Now get some old newspapers and we'll wrap up this umbrella stand and the umbrella and take them down to the station: they may be wanted in court later on."

"Do you think we've got enough, sir, to complete the case?"

"You mean enough to satisfy the D. of P.P.? No, we haven't, but I'm beginning to think that we shall have enough. The next thing to do is to set the stage for a little comedy—author, Charles Foster. When you've dropped these things at the station I want you to go and bring old Cronin down again. You will leave him with me and then call on Herbert Reece and tell him I should like to see him particularly. You needn't accompany him; he'll accept the invitation all right. On your way back call at that shop in Baker Street and bring those two young women with you and keep them in the clerk's office until I touch the bell. Don't economize in taxis."

The plan worked more smoothly than most dress rehearsals. Within twenty minutes of his return to the police station Foster heard old Cronin shambling up the stairs with Richardson in his wake.

"Good evening, Mr. Cronin" said Foster, in his suavest manner. "Sit down! I want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," said the old man with resignation. He felt that, whatever it might be, their talk would not be a pleasant entertainment for him.

“When you came here this morning you told me a remarkable story about a gentleman named Harris having suggested that you should lie about the time when you went to Catchpool’s shop that afternoon. Mind you, I do not doubt that you went there, but I’ve heard so many stories told by people under suspicion about mysterious persons inciting them to commit crimes that I have become rather sceptical.”

“Surely you don’t suspect me, sir, of strangling an old lady? What motive could I have had, quite apart from the horror of such a crime?”

“Well, on your own showing you were in that shop at the very time the murder was committed. You will admit that things look rather black against you.”

The old man broke down and sank back gasping in his chair. He was weakened by days of heavy drinking, and his nerves were unequal to the strain of this new torture. Foster, who was naturally a kind-hearted man, felt a pang of remorse, but he had an imperative duty to perform, and in order to perform it he had to work upon the old man’s feelings. He tapped with his pencil on the desk as if he were meditating some more dreadful question, but his voice and manner remained as gentle as before. He was merely putting arguments before his victim, not accusing him.

“You see the point, Mr. Cronin. You have admitted being there; you admitted hearing the lady scream and fall; you say that you ran away. You did not come to the police and inform them. What would any reasonable man say to those facts, especially if he were told your later story that a bearded man, who gave his name as Charles Harris, called upon you and induced you to tell lies about the time of the murder by a bribe? Do you know that Mr. Charles Harris is a highly respected City gentleman in a large way of business—one of the last men in the world to commit perjury?”

“That was the name he gave me, sir.”

“If he ever existed. Tell that story in court and see how many jurymen will believe it.”

“Surely you’re not going to arrest me for murder, sir?”

“Not yet—not at all if you can produce the man you call ‘Charles Harris,’ but until you produce him, or tell a more credible story than the one you have told, you must not be surprised if we don’t believe in his existence. Have you seen him since this morning?”

“No, sir, he hasn’t been near me since I saw you.”

“I’m not surprised to hear you say that. Shadowy people like ‘Mr. Charles Harris’ seem to appear and disappear at will.”

The old man threw up his hands in a dramatic gesture of despair, and at that moment Foster heard a quick step on the stairs. He rose and pointed to a chair near the door. “Sit down there, Mr. Cronin. I have a gentleman to see, but it won’t take long.”

The door was flung open and Herbert Reece bustled in. Despite his assured and cheerful manner it was evident to Foster that he was ill at ease. “Good evening, Inspector. Your man told me that you wanted to see me, and as you know I’m always ready and anxious to help the police. I just jumped into the nearest taxi and here I am.”

“Thank you, Mr. Reece. Sit down. I want you to throw some light upon your uncle’s latest business transactions. I think that you acted for him with his tenants?” While he was speaking, Foster rose from his chair and moved over to the bookshelf, talking over his shoulder, so that Reece had to turn round towards Cronin. “I have your uncle’s books here.”

An agonized voice from a chair near the door broke in upon the conversation. “Mr. Harris, you know me.” Cronin had risen from his chair and had taken a step towards Reece.

“Know you? I never saw you before in my life. Why do you call me Harris?”

“That’s the name he gave to me, sir,” cried Cronin, trembling with excitement. “This is the man I told you of.”

“But you said he had a beard,” put in Foster, incredulously.

“So he had when he came to me—a beard and dark glasses. He must have shaved off the hair on his face.”

“Who is this tame lunatic, Inspector?”

“Don’t call me a tame lunatic, sir. I know what I’m talking about. I could swear to your identity anywhere.”

“You’ve been drinking.”

“I’ve known this gentleman for a fortnight,” said Foster quietly; “and he had no beard.”

“Then it was a false beard he was wearing.”

“But if he was wearing a false beard, how can you recognize him now?”

“Sir, I am an artist. It is my trade to study people’s faces. I know this man by his ear. He has a very perfectly formed ear, and I remember thinking that I should like to draw it. Besides, I recognize the turn of his head, and I know his voice, although he tried to disguise it when he came to me. This was the man who got me to say I was in the shop an hour and a quarter earlier than I was.”

To Foster’s surprise Herbert Reece broke into a peal of forced laughter.

“Well, that takes the cake, Inspector. I suppose I’ll have to make full confession, but it’s pretty thick if people recognize actors by their ears, you’ll admit.”

Foster went over to the enraged artist and took him kindly by the shoulder. “It’s all right, Mr. Cronin. You’ve justified the story you told me. We shan’t worry you any more than we can help. You’d better get along home.”

When the door was closed he turned upon Reece. “You admit, Mr. Reece, that you called upon that old man and induced him to make a false statement.”

“Well, don’t you think that if you had a sum of £80,000 hanging to it you’d have been tempted to do the same? The executor wouldn’t move without the police; the police were waiting for proofs, so I thought I’d give them proof. It had nothing to do with the murder; it was only a question of an hour’s difference in the time, and that drunken old fool—well, his evidence wasn’t worth much, anyway. Anyone would have done the same.”

“How did you know Cronin’s address?”

“I may as well tell you the truth. My uncle gave it to me. He said that Cronin had sold him a picture and wanted to buy it back. My uncle was always fussy about buying goods that might have been stolen, and he said that he’d arranged with Cronin to sell the picture back to him on the instalment plan; that he was to bring the first instalment that evening at six o’clock and he wanted me to call

there and size him up—see whether he was the sort of man who might have stolen the picture. So I went round a day or two later to see whether Cronin really had come down to the shop that evening, and the old man took me for a police officer and coughed up the whole story. There you are; it was quite natural.”

Foster’s voice became acid. “You professed to be helping the police, and you kept from them a very important piece of information. You did more than that—you induced an important witness to lie and mislead the police.”

“Oh, come, Inspector, that’s putting it too strong. All I did was to look after myself.”

Foster touched a bell. There was a stir in the clerk’s office: Richardson ushered in the two young girls. Reece turned his head towards them at the interruption; the girls whispered together.

“Very well, Mr. Reece, I’ve listened to your explanation. I won’t trouble you with the books this evening.”

“Well, but, Inspector, you’re not going to take a serious view of what I’ve told you? I quite see that it was rather foolish of me to play that practical joke on the old man, but I meant no harm by it and you’ll find that I can be useful.” But as Foster remained standing and silent he laughed and said, “Good evening, think it over. I’ll come whenever you want me.” And he ran quickly down the stairs.

“Well, young ladies, have you seen anyone you knew?”

“Yes,” cried the elder; “that’s the man that came to our shop and stood in the door with his umbrella over his shoulder; there’s no mistaking him, is there, Alice?”

“No, that’s him, sure enough!”

“Thank you very much. I’m sorry that we’ve had to bring you here, but what you say may be very useful.”

Chapter 19

BEFORE THEY separated for the night, Foster gave Richardson orders for the morning. “The passport office opens at ten. Be round there five minutes before and get hold of the head man. You will find him very pleasant to deal with. Take all the necessary steps for seeing that no passport is issued to Herbert Reece, and give them a detailed description of him—voice, manner, and all. Then slip along to King’s Cross Road. I don’t think that Reece would be fool enough to attempt anything tonight, but we are morally responsible for the safety of that poor old creature, and we don’t want to give Reece any chance of getting even with him. In the light of what we know now, I fancy that we can make a shrewd guess at the identity of the man who tried to tip him over the parapet that night.”

“What shall I do, sir, if I see Reece going into the building?”

“You can’t stop him, of course. I should give him the start of one flight of stairs and then quietly follow him up; pass Cronin’s door and stop one flight above, so that if you hear a row going on you can be into the room in under five seconds. I have a job of my own to do connected with the accounts, but you’ll find me here by midday.”

Foster was afoot early next morning. His first errand was to New Cross. In the motor bus from Westminster Bridge, he coned two or three letters he had taken from Catchpool's correspondence, relating to the sale of a lock-up shop in the New Cross Road. One of the letters described it as being nearly opposite the Empire. He had the purchaser's address, and happily he had little difficulty in finding him, for he was actually superintending carpenters who were fitting up the shop. He took him aside and explained that he was a police officer. The man seemed perturbed and said, "I saw in the papers that the man I bought this shop from had been run over and killed, but I don't see how it affects me. He was alive all right when I bought it." Foster reassured him. "It doesn't affect you at all. All I want is information about the form of payment. Was it in cash?"

"No, I gave Mr. Reece an open cheque."

"An open cheque?"

"Yes, a cheque payable to bearer. He said that his uncle, Mr. Catchpool, particularly wanted the cheque in that form."

"Thank you, sir, that's all I wanted to know," said Foster, taking his leave. "You say that the cheque was drawn on the New Cross branch of your bank?"

"That's right. Good day, sir."

It was only a step to the bank. On explaining his errand to the teller, Foster was shown into the sub-manager's room. In less than three minutes he was informed that the cheque had been cashed over the counter in Bank of England notes and that the bearer had signed his name as Herbert Reece. Foster smiled grimly to himself on his way back to his office. This little transaction explained how money was forthcoming for bribing the artist, Cronin; it might even be found to explain the quarrel that had occurred between uncle and nephew in Baker Street on that fatal afternoon.

Back in his office before eleven-fifteen, Foster had time to complete his reports in preparation for the conference that he intended to ask for at C.O. He had scarcely finished them when Richardson knocked at his door.

"Well?" he inquired.

"You were quite right, sir. Reece did come to the building this morning at ten-fifteen. I saw him coming before he saw me, so I kept out of sight until he was well up the stairs. I heard him go in, and I could just hear the sound of talking, but nothing to indicate a quarrel, so I waited until he came out, and when he was well down the stairs I tapped at the door and went in. Old Cronin looked as if he'd just got out of bed. He was apparently looking for a place to stow some treasury notes he had in his hand. He tried to hide them from me, but I was too quick for him. Well, sir, you know the kind of man he is when he has something to hide, but I got the truth out of him in the end. He said that some days ago, when Reece first came to him under the name of Harris, he wanted him to go abroad, and after some persuasion induced him to come down with him to the passport office and apply for a passport. The old man didn't want to go abroad, but he did want the money that Reece was always promising him, so in the end he got the passport, but having got it he wouldn't leave England—kept putting it off from day to day. That may explain why Reece tried to tip him into the river."

"You got the passport?"

“No, sir; that was what the treasury notes were for. Reece bought it from him this morning.”

“Why didn’t you say so at first, man?”

“It’s all right, sir. I took the liberty of ringing up C.O. at once, and they put me on to the Special Branch, who promised to notify officers at all ports. I hope I didn’t do wrong, sir.”

“No, that’s all right as far as it goes. Now go and get your dinner and be ready to go down with me to C.O. immediately afterwards. We may want you down there. I’ve made an appointment with Mr. Beckett for one-thirty.” The two were punctual. Foster had his reports safe in an inside pocket. He recited to the chief constable all that had happened on the previous afternoon; how Reece had been identified by the artist and the two girls; how he had owned up and tried to justify his behaviour in bribing the artist to lie; how he had possessed himself of the artist’s passport. “You see, sir, there’s no time to lose. Reece may be trying to cross to France tonight.”

Beckett seemed to be quite unmoved by the risk. “You think that you’ve enough evidence here,” he tapped the thick file lying on his table, “to put the case before the D. of P.P.? I doubt it.”

“Well, sir, short of a confession, I’m afraid we shan’t get any more, and if the man bolts—”

A slow smile began to break over Beckett’s face. “Do you remember the Crippen case, Mr. Foster? No, you were scarcely through your probation in those days. There wasn’t sufficient evidence against Crippen to hang a cat until he bolted. Old Dew had plenty of suspicions and complaints to work upon, but not a scrap of real evidence; but when Crippen bolted with a girl in trousers, then there was something to go upon. He could go into the house without a search warrant and, of course, when he took up the floor in the cellar he had all the evidence he needed. In a case like this of yours, for instance, I shouldn’t worry too much about the suspect bolting, but we must put the case before Mr. Morden and hear what he has to say.”

Foster spent a good hour in discussing the case with the heads of the department, who were reluctant to send it over to the Director of Public Prosecutions in its incomplete form, but in the end they consented, and he found himself telling the story of the crime, as he conceived it to have been committed, to the assistant director, who had had some years of experience as counsel in the assize courts. The assistant director viewed all cases from the angle of success or failure in obtaining a conviction, and when all the evidence had been laid before him he shook his head.

“You have the motive; you have the idiotic behaviour of the accused in tampering with a witness; but you are terribly weak in direct evidence. I’m not sure that even the finding of that umbrella would be held to be conclusive proof that he was in the shop at the time of the murder. The defense would plead that even if Cronin was telling the truth, the man whose shadow he saw on the blind was someone else altogether. We have no evidence that Reece had the key. No, Inspector, if you take my advice you’ll see whether you can’t find further evidence; it’ll do none of us any good to fail.”

“Very good, sir; I’ll report what you say to the assistant commissioner.”

"I'm sorry, but there it is."

Caution is not one of the qualities that any Scotsman is inclined to find fault with. Foster passed the time of his journey back to Marylebone in deep thought, and he reached his office with his mind made up. Richardson was waiting for him. His face embodied a question.

"Come in here, Richardson, and shut the door behind you."

"Are we to go ahead with the arrest, sir?"

"Not yet."

"Isn't the case to go to the D. of P.P., sir?"

"It's been. He says that there's not sufficient evidence and we must get some more."

"But how can we, sir? Short of finding that key on Reece, there's no more evidence that we can get."

"I'm not so sure. On the way back from C.O. I've thought out a little plan—or rather, I've elaborated a plan suggested to me by a remark of Mr. Beckett. I want you to go off to Reece's lodgings straight away and ask for him. If he's in, give him a message from me that he must not change his lodgings without first notifying me; if he's out, you can tell the landlady that you'll call again."

"Very good, sir, but if the landlady describes me to him when he comes in, he'll know that the police have been making inquiries."

"He will, and I want him to. You've got to keep observation on the house."

"Wouldn't it be better to get an officer that he doesn't know by sight, sir?"

"I want him to know you by sight." A light broke in upon Richardson, and the suspicion of a smile dawned on his face. "I see what you mean, sir."

Rapidly Foster gave him final instructions, and Richardson caught up his hat and ran down the stairs.

At ten o'clock Foster sent an officer to relieve Richardson for the night. He was back in less than half an hour bringing a message that the man under observation had come home at about eleven; that he had passed Richardson quite close, but had made no sign of recognition, and that Richardson himself thanked him for the offered relief but would prefer to be left to see the business through. There was, therefore, nothing more to be done that night.

Chapter 20

FOSTER WAS at his office table at seven next morning, for on this day, as he felt with every case in which he was engaged, his fate was to be decided. He began to run over all the steps that he had taken. He could think of nothing that he had forgotten to do, and if his orders were intelligently obeyed the next hour ought to produce decisive results.

He had only to sit patiently at the end of the telephone wire. The bell rang. It was merely a verbal report about the arrest of a shoplifter in another part of the division. He rang off. What was a case of shoplifting now in comparison with the big game he was in quest of? He kept looking at the clock; eight-forty-five; passengers for the nine o'clock Continental train must now be taking their seats,

and there was not a word from Richardson. He wished that he had insisted on sending a second officer, who might have reported progress instead of leaving him in this suspense.

And now his thoughts began to take on a sombre colour. Like every other divisional detective inspector he had his eye upon the next vacancy among the superintendents at C.O.—the “Big Five” as the newspapers called them. Graham was about to retire, he knew; a successful issue to his case might have brought him near the goal. Once or twice in his career he had enjoyed money rewards as well as commendations—£3 for the D.D.I. and so on down the scale of the officers engaged in the case. Surely those ought to count in his favour. If only this case could have ended in the same way, his promotion would be assured. Why had he been fool enough to trust Richardson, a uniform constable, with a mission that demanded the care and resource of an experienced officer? The train must have steamed out by now, and he would be on tenterhooks for hours longer. He would have gone himself to Reece’s lodgings had he dared to be out of reach of the telephone even for a moment. At last he could bear the suspense no longer. He sent for Calthrop, the junior patrol, and told him to get down to Reece’s lodgings as quick as he could and see what Richardson was doing.

Young Calthrop bustled off, eager to win commendation from his chief, upon whom his future promotion depended, and five minutes later there was a step upon the stairs.

Foster knew that step; two bounds, taking three steps at a time and three or four quick steps at the top of the staircase. He knew the knock too, a little double rap. Richardson walked in quietly and calmly as was his wont and laid a key upon the table.

“Where’s Reece?” asked Foster in the sharpest tone that he had ever used to a subordinate.

“In custody downstairs, sir. That’s the key of the shop, he says, but it would be as well to try it in the lock.”

“How did you get it?”

“He had it in his pocket, sir, and he had this as well.” He produced a half-sheet of notepaper on which was an acknowledgment, signed by Reece, of having received from his uncle in advance a commission of £10 on the sale of a lockup shop in New Cross Road.

“Tell me what happened.”

“I hadn’t a chance of telephoning to you, sir; it all happened so quick. Evidently he’d telephoned for a taxi from the house; anyway, at nine-thirty one drew up, and he came out and loaded it up with suitcases, all new. He didn’t see me. I’d just time to get to the door and hear him direct the driver to the Croydon Aerodrome. I picked up another taxi and got there before he’d finished unloading. I was in time enough to tip the wink to the passport officer. I kept well out of sight when he came up, and I heard part of what was said. The passport officer, Mr. Miller, said, ‘This is not your photograph. Your name’s not Cronin.’ You see, sir, he hadn’t dared to change the photograph on the passport, because of the embossed stamp; I suppose he’d trusted to their stamping it without any scrutiny. Mr. Miller brought him into the little office where I was standing and said, ‘This man has given the name of Cronin, and I believe it to be false; he has presented another

man's passport to be stamped.' When Reece saw me he turned as white as a sheet I told him that I should arrest him for a passport offense and take him back to Marylebone police station, and I searched him. I found those things in his pocket. 'Why,' I said, 'this is the key of your uncle's shop in High Street. We've been looking for this.' For a moment I think he thought of denying it, but finally he owned up. 'My uncle gave it to me,' he said. 'I know what you're after: you're not going to charge me only with a passport offense, but you're all on the wrong tack.' Then I cautioned him, sir, that he was not obliged to say anything, but that anything he said would be taken down in writing and might be used against him at his trial. That seemed to let his tongue loose. He never stopped talking after that, and it was all I could do to get it down. Happily, Mr. Miller stayed with me, and he will be a useful witness if Reece tries to go back on his statement."

Richardson pulled out a sheet of official foolscap closely written on four sides. His chief looked first at the end, "Oh, you got him to sign it."

"Yes, sir, he was anxious to sign it. You'll see as you read it through that the whole sense of the statement is to show that the strangling of his aunt was an accident. All he intended was to stop her from screaming for the police, he says."

Foster held up his hand while he read. When he had finished he heaved a sigh of relief. "You've done very well, Richardson; you've got everything we wanted. Now the case is watertight." Richardson's face beamed with satisfaction. "I must go down now and charge him."

"With wilful murder, sir?"

"Yes, with wilful murder. He may call it an accident, but the judge and jury won't. After that I shall go down to C.O.; you'd better come with me and wait outside in the passage in case you're wanted."

A few minutes later Foster found himself standing before Morden and Beckett, to whom he recounted what had happened. "I have Reece's statement here, sir. There hasn't been time to get it typed out." "Tell us shortly the gist of the statement," said Morden.

"Well, sir, it's pretty much the same as the theory that we formed yesterday. Reece met his uncle near the shop, and they walked together into Baker Street. Reece was holding the old man's umbrella over him. As they turned into Baker Street, the uncle discovered that he had forgotten to bring the blue paper he required for his interview with Harris's father; he pulled out the shop key, gave it to the nephew and told him to get the paper and meet him at the door of the Harris house, but at that moment the uncle remembered that Reece had not paid over to him the cheque he had received for the sale of a shop in New Cross. Reece began to argue with him for a second commission: he had already had one in advance. There was a quarrel; the old man dashed into the road towards a policeman and was knocked over. Reece says that he saw the accident but did not know that his uncle was seriously hurt; that he went to the shop, still carrying his uncle's umbrella, got the blue paper, and then called at a shop in Baker Street and was told there that his uncle was probably dead and had been taken to Middlesex Hospital. On hearing this he went back to the shop. Though he doesn't say so, it was no doubt to abstract money or papers, and while he was searching for what he wanted his aunt came in."

"With a key?"

“No, Mr. Morden, he had left the door unlocked, not expecting to be disturbed. When his aunt walked in and found him at the desk, she began to call for the police. He says he caught hold of her, not to hurt her, but to stop her screaming, and that he was horrified when she fell down on the floor. He ran out, leaving the wet umbrella behind him and locking the shop door. Then he walked about for some time and ran into his uncle’s charwoman, Mrs. Hart; she told him about his uncle’s accident, and he took her to the Middlesex Hospital to identify the body.”

“Well,” said Beckett, “it’s a pretty full statement to have been given voluntarily and without pressure.”

“It is, sir, but that kind of talkative man never knows when to stop when once he begins, and in almost every particular it fits in with the independent evidence that we have.”

Beckett allowed his grim features to relax in a smile. “You haven’t yet told Mr. Morden that I was wrong in my theory and you were right.”

Foster laughed. “No, sir, because I should have to tell him, too, that it was you who gave me the idea that led me to the right man. Of course, the assault on that poor lady must have been much more violent than he admits.”

“Well, that’ll be a matter for the jury,” said Morden. “All you have to do is to get the papers shipshape and take them over to the director: he can’t refuse the case now. By the way, who took the statement?”

“P.C. Richardson, sir; he’s outside if you’d like to see him.”

“Bring him in.”

When the constable was before him, Morden asked him a few questions about how the statement was taken and whether it was read over to the prisoner verbatim and voluntarily signed. To all these questions Richardson could give replies.

“Well, Richardson,” said his chief, “I congratulate you upon an excellent bit of work.” Richardson blushed with pleasure. “I shall send up your name to the A.C.C., and I don’t think that you will have to go into uniform again.”

