The Bird Cage

by Eimar Ultan O'Duffy, 1893-1935

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Table of Contents

TO MY FRIENDS
QUENTIN AND RHODA MANSFIELD

Chapter I

A Death in the Night.

The Grand Hotel, Spurn Cove, is not what is called a hotel de luxe—that is to say, a sham palace, all glare, glitter, and jazz music, where everything costs about fifteen times what it is worth,—but it is a very good hotel, with an atmosphere of solid comfort about it, and something of a tradition in cooking. When you enter it on some blustering day after a tramp along the coast, as the swing door cuts off the last wild clutch of the wind at your tingling ears, and you pass over thick-piled carpets to the generous fire burning in the lounge, a sort of heavenly calm seems to lap you round; in the security of which, sunk deep in capacious armchairs, you will have no thought but for tea and muffins.

The hotel is of a piece with the town it belongs to; for Spurn Cove is a resort which has not yet been what is called "developed"; which means that the sea and the hinterland are still its most prominent features, and that it has been sadly neglected by the speculative builder and the entertainment contractor. The main

street has a certain individuality; there are few picture palaces, and only one small theater; the promenade is old-fashioned and of no great extent. Altogether it is not the sort of place to attract really go-ahead people, though the excellent bathing and scenery of the neighborhood bring a sufficiency of visitors whose chief requirement on a holiday is rest. It is very prettily situated on a sickle-shaped sweep of coast, backed by wooded hills, looking out over the North Sea.

One summer's morning, Mr. Latymer, the manager of the Grand Hotel, was sitting at his desk at work on some accounts, when the telephone bell rang.

"Miss Philpot speaking," came a voice along the wire. "Will you come down at once, sir? There's something wrong with number twenty-two. The gentleman hasn't come down to breakfast, and the chambermaid can't get an answer from him. The door is locked on the inside."

Mr. Latymer glanced at his wrist-watch. It was five past eleven. Something must be wrong indeed, and horrible imaginings chilled the discreet soul of the manager. "I'll come down," he said.

A moment later he stood at the bureau in the hall.

"Whose room is it?" he asked.

"Mr. W. Wilson," replied Miss Philpot. "He only arrived last night."

"Give me the master-key," said Mr. Latymer, and, turning, called to a passing waiter: "Stubbs, I want you to come upstairs with me."

With the man following, he hurried to the bedroom marked 22, and knocked at the door. There was no answer, He knocked again. Still no answer. He waited a moment, and knocked a third time, much louder, but with no more effect.

Mr. Latymer paled visibly, for he had made enough noise to waken the heaviest sleeper. After a brief hesitation he inserted the key in the lock, and walked into the room, followed by his subordinate. He had steeled himself for a shock; but even so the spectacle that confronted him wrung a cry of horror from his lips, and made him recoil against the stalwart figure of Stubbs behind him. Upon the bed lay the motionless form of a man, his limbs stiffened in a hideous contortion, his face a ghastly ruin, beaten and smashed out of all semblance of humanity, and masked with clotted blood.

The two men stood, half-stunned by the terrible sight. The manager was the first to recover.

"Look here, Stubbs," he said. "We must get the police at once. Meanwhile, don't say a word about this to anybody. We don't want to create a sensation. Do you understand?"

Stubbs having promised compliance, Mr. Latymer locked the door, and went to the telephone in his private room.

"Is that the superintendent?" he inquired when the police station answered his ring.

"No, sir. The superintendent is away on sick leave. This is Inspector Cranley."

"Well, look here. A dreadful thing has happened." He told the story in quick nervous tones. "You must come round at once," he concluded.

"I'll be over in ten minutes," promised the voice in the telephone.

"One moment." Already, in spite of his recent shock, the manager in Mr. Latymer had risen above the man. "Come in mufti," he said. "Above all things, I don't want a sensation."

In due course arrived Inspector Cranley, an alert young man in a gray flannel suit. Mr. Latymer wanted to hurry him at once to the scene of the crime, but he preferred to begin by taking a survey of the outside of the hotel.

"It's a pretty easy crib to crack," he remarked as they strolled past the south front. And so it was, for along the whole of this side of the hotel there ran a veranda, the roof of which formed a balcony to the first-floor windows, and which offered ample hold to an active climber.

Mr. Latymer agreed ruefully with the detective's observation, and pointed out the window of number 22. Cranley at once went down on his knees to examine the geranium border which lay between the path and the verandah.

"By Jove!" he said. "A careful customer. He stepped on a board or something in getting in, but he must have slipped in getting out again, for he's left us a trace of his heel. There it is. And you see how the earth has been pressed down here by something flat." The young man rose to his feet. "Now what about the grounds? Are they as easy to get into as the house?"

"I don't think anyone could climb our railings," Mr. Latymer replied. "But the main gate isn't shut till midnight. It would be quite easy to slip in unobserved before that, and hide in the shrubbery."

"How about getting out again?"

"Well, the gate is opened at six, and he might slip out then; but it would be risky, as the gardeners are about. Another way would be to climb the gate leading to the beach. It isn't very high."

"Let's have a look at it."

The two men walked down a winding yew-hedged path, which led to a gate through which the sea could be observed dashing in miniature rollers on the beach. It was a perfectly feasible climb, but there were no traces, the path inside being flagged, and the sand without, where it had not been washed clear by the tide, trodden by dozens of feet.

"Nothing to be learned here," said the detective. "Let's go back. I must have a look at the bedroom at once."

The manager led him to a side door, and then by a back stairway to the scene of the crime. But Mr. Latymer did not enter. One view of what was on the bed had been more than enough for him. Inspector Cranley went into the room alone.

Chapter II

On the Trail.

The room was a large and bright one, with heavy expensive-looking furniture and deep-piled blue carpet. Through the long French windows the morning sun shed brilliant slanting rays.

Inspector Cranley turned his attention at once to the corpse. Clad in pajamas, it lay on its back, half-covered by the bedclothes, with the hideously maltreated head on the pillow. The neck showed dark bruises that could only have been made by

throttling fingers, and there was another bruise on the abdomen, as if the murderer had knelt on his victim. The latter had evidently resisted, so far as the disadvantage at which he had been taken allowed, for his fists were clenched, and one of them was badly cut, while a cameo ring which he wore was broken.

Here Cranley's investigation was interrupted by his catching a glimpse of what was obviously the instrument of the crime, a large and heavy hammer, the head of which was dabbed with blood, with some of the victim's hairs adhering. He took it up and scrutinized the handle closely with a lens for finger-marks; but there were none. The nature of the brown smears on the wood told plainly that the murderer had worn gloves: a cool hand, evidently, carrying out a well-premeditated crime.

Putting the gruesome implement aside, Cranley now turned to the dead man's belongings. On the small table by the bedside were a silver watch, which was going, a bunch of keys, and a volume of fiction, with a pair of shell-rimmed glasses between the pages. There was also the large key of the room, with the number plate attached. Other personal accessories lay on the dressing-table: some loose change, a fountain-pen, and a pocket-book containing eleven pounds in Treasury notes, besides the usual toilet requisites. A light raincoat hung from a hook on the door, and the man's other clothes lay on a chair at the foot of the bed, all but the coat, which the inspector found hanging in the wardrobe. Against the wall stood a large black trunk, unlocked, but not yet unpacked. It was marked at both ends with the initials, W. W., in white paint. There was a tie-on label fastened to each of the handles, having the inscription: W. Wilson, passenger to Spurn Cove; but the railway company's adhesive label was missing.

Cranley next went to the windows. The right-hand one was shut and latched; but the other was merely closed; and the detective at once saw that a circular piece had been cut out of the glass near the latch. A moment later he found the piece on the dressing-table. A slight discoloration in the center marked the point of adhesion of the putty with which it had been retained in position during the cutting operation; but the putty itself was not to be found, and the glass, like the hammer, proved to be innocent of finger-prints.

Opening the window, the inspector proceeded to examine the balcony for footmarks, and here at last obtained some reward for his pains. The indications were indeed faint, but one of them was definite enough for exact measurement. For all the violence of his assault on his victim, the murderer was evidently not a man of extraordinary physique, for his foot was only a size seven.

Having come to this conclusion, Inspector Cranley stood for a moment looking out at the prospect below. The town of Spurn Cove, as we have said, is very nicely situated on a curve of the coast, not deep enough to be called a bay, with wooded country behind it. From the balcony of the hotel, which stood on the southern point of the arc, Cranley could see the clustering roofs and spires of the town, and the flash of its windows in the morning sun. Beyond the glittering waters of the bay, now dotted with the heads of swimmers, with here and there the white sail of a pleasure boat, the curvature of the shore terminated in another promontory, with scattered red roofs among a mass of trees. Altogether it was a charming view; but the detective's thoughts were elsewhere. It was evident that the dead man had expected an attack of some kind; for it is unusual in these days for anyone to keep his bedroom windows closed, especially in summer. And the murderer had

obviously come prepared for this. But how, Cranley asked himself, could he have counted with confidence on scaling the balcony, cutting the glass, and opening the window, without disturbing the sleeper? More extraordinary still, how had he succeeded? What catlike tread, what deft unerring fingers, what infinite patience the midnight prowler must have owned. Cranley could picture him, gloved, rubber-soled, lithe-bodied, opening the window inch by inch, then creeping softly as a snake to the bedside to deal his deadly blow.

The fell work had gone without a hitch. No slip by the murderer: no cry from the victim. In the dark too; for the moon was in her third quarter. There was something like wizardry in the achievement, unless the man in the bed had been uncommonly deaf.

Deaf? He had better inquire about that. He went to the telephone in the corner of the room and took up the receiver.

"Hello! Is that Miss Philpot; … Me … Don't you know? … Yes, it's me, darling. I'm working on this murder … Yes … Now, look here. Did you see this man when he arrived last night?"

"Yes," replied Miss Philpot.

"Did you happen to notice if he was deaf?"

"Why, yes. He must have been. How did you guess it? He kept his hand up to his ear when I was speaking to him."

"Good. Did you notice anything else unusual about him?"

"Well, yes. He kept the collar of his coat turned up around his ears, as if it was winter. I didn't much like the look of him."

"Perhaps he had a cold?"

"I don't think so. He had his cap low down on his forehead, too. I have an idea that he didn't want to be recognized."

Cranley whistled softly. "That all you noticed?"

"That's all."

"Well, so long, darling."

He sat pensively for a while on the low window-sill, wondering why a deaf man in fear of attack should have been content to latch his windows without bolting them; but at last he left this fruitless speculation to make a further inspection of the dead man's belongings. The pockets of the trousers and waistcoat were empty. So were those of the raincoat, save for a few Southampton bus tickets, and a packet of picture-postcards showing views of the same town. The collar and shirt were marked with their owner's name.

Cranley next opened the trunk, which proved to contain all the usual articles of a man's wardrobe. None were new, and most had been bought at large stores in London and New York. The detective took them out one by one, and then, as he lifted the last layer, gave a sudden start of surprise. At the bottom of the trunk lay a number of heavy slabs of metal, the identity of which he recognized at a glance. They were plates for the printing of bank-notes.

Swiftly the inspector picked one up and brought it over to the light, when, with a thrill such as no incident of his career had hitherto brought him, he deciphered the words: Banco de San Félipe, and realized that he had stumbled into the heart of a mystery which had puzzled the police of two continents for nearly a year. These must be the plates from which had been printed the forged notes by means

of which a gang of international crooks had swindled one of the Central American republics out of more than a million pounds.

Chapter III

A Hot Scent.

It was just a year since the revelation of this gigantic fraud had amazed the world. One fateful morning the directors of the Bank of San Félipe had received messages from no less than three branch managers that notes which had come in over their counters were duplicates of numbers already in their possession; and on the following days similar messages came thick and fast from all over the country. Counterfeiting on a large scale was evidently in progress; but it was counterfeiting of an exceptionally clever kind: for when the directors had passed the notes from one to another in mingled consternation and admiration, they found presently that they could not tell the spurious from the genuine. Neither could the expert who was at once summoned to decide, nor the other experts whom he called to his aid. By no possible test could any distinction be found. Paper, watermark, design, ink, secret markings, all were identical.

No forger ever known had succeeded in achieving such a feat before. There is always a flaw in such productions somewhere. They may deceive the public and the bank cashier, but not the microscope of the expert. There are too many different features in a properly printed note for a perfect copy to be made. Forgery, therefore, was inconceivable. The only alternative explanation seemed to be that a mistake in numbering had been made by the printers, who were communicated with accordingly.

The printers were the great English firm of Bennett and Mowbray. They cabled indignant repudiation of the possibility of any mistake. Their system of checking and counter-checking was proof, they declared, against any such accident. And there the matter had to rest for a fortnight until specimens of the notes could cross the Atlantic for their inspection. Meanwhile, in ever-increasing quantities, the duplicate currency was pouring in across the counters of all the branches of the bank. The directors were in despair. Prodigious numbers of the notes were evidently in circulation, and it was impossible to refuse them without holding up the economic life of the country altogether. Even as it was, though every effort was made to conceal the full magnitude of the calamity, business confidence (to use the meaningless abstract terminology of finance) was badly shaken, thousands of securities were flung on the market by panic-stricken foreign investors, and the public funds slumped heavily. If San Félipe had not been mainly an agricultural country, it would have been ruined.

To talk of ruin, of course, is only to adopt once again the artificial language of the sham science which rules this unreal civilization of ours. In no real sense was there danger of ruin to anybody. The crops still ripened in the sun; the earth still yielded its minerals to the seeker; human hands and brains had not lost their

strength or cunning. San Félipe had not lost a pennyworth of wealth because somebody had been monkeying with the tokens of exchange. In a civilization dominated by money, an altogether disproportionate degree of heinousness has been attached to the crime of counterfeiting. Though his motives are not altruistic, the counterfeiter is in actual fact a public benefactor in a small way. That is to say, he increases the amount of money in circulation: and since, owing to a flaw in our economic system, there is never enough money in the people's pockets to buy more than a part of the generous output of goods produced by modern industry, this is all to the good. When the same thing is done by a government in financial difficulties, it is called "inflation". When it is done (as it is habitually done) by the bankers, it is called "expansion of credit". But the principle is the same.

Be that as it may, the San Félipe forgeries soon spread consternation far beyond the bounds of that primitive republic. All over the world the heads of financial houses were telling each other that what had happened once could happen again. The art of counterfeiting had at last produced its genius; and who could tell where he might next try his hand? What if the Bank of England or the Federal Reserve Board were to find itself in the same position as the Bank of San Félipe? There is no coward like your dealer in money. Honest John Smith, earning five pounds a week, loses his pocket-book on his way home with his wages: and what does he do? Tightens his belt, and goes short for a few months. Sir Gorgius Midas hears that he may have to pay a little more taxation next year: and the world is filled with his bellowings. Sir Gorgius, reaching out for his twentieth million, drops a few hundred thousand that he never really possessed and cannot possibly miss: his losses are trumpeted to the skies, and he may even blow his brains out. John Smith, whose life's savings have been swept away by his manipulations, goes on working in silence. And so forth: not forgetting that when the country is in danger, John gives his life, or has it taken, while Sir Gorgius lends his money at interest. The money dealers, therefore, were flung into such a state of panic as might possibly have been justified by the approach of famine or pestilence; and the best brains in the detective agencies of the world were stimulated with the prospects of high reward to run the counterfeiter to earth.

Meanwhile the directors of the Bank of San Félipe awaited in tense anxiety the explanation of Messrs. Bennett and Mowbray: and when it came it was enough to drive the chief of them to suicide. The mystery was solved with a vengeance. None of the notes submitted had been printed by Bennett and Mowbray at all. Both the supposedly genuine notes and their duplicates were clever imitations of the design of those they had despatched, but the paper was different, and so were some minor technical points, as could be seen from the sample which they were sending out. In some unimaginable way, the consignment must have been changed in transit for an entire set of forgeries, the duplicates of which had been circulated in the country.

Naturally a first-class political scandal followed this revelation, for the fraud could never have been perpetrated without the connivance of persons high in the public service of San Félipe. An order was at once issued for the arrest of the courier who had brought the notes from England, but he had succeeded in escaping from the country, and had not been heard of since. Further attempts to trace the culprits had been hampered by the outbreak of a revolution, and the

affair was generally regarded as one of the insoluble mysteries of the world, like the Green Bicycle case, or the murder of Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey.

Cranley looked at the plates, fascinated; then abruptly remembered his present occupation, and that he had not yet found a clue to the murderer. Glancing once more round the room, his eye was caught by the open wardrobe and the dead man's coat hanging within. He took this down, dived a hand into one of the breast pockets, and fished out a letter. It was sealed and stamped ready for posting, and bore the address:

H. Bronson, Esq.,
Seapoint, Bay Road,
Spurn Cove

Slitting up the envelope with a penknife, Cranley took out a folded sheet of paper. The message it contained was brief, but pointed.

No more palaver, you skunk. I want the full share you done me out of, and I mean to have it. Send me a check tomorrow, or look out for the consequences.

There was no signature.

Cranley's heart beat quick with excitement. Here was his first murder case solved in an instant, and with it an opportunity to arrest the most skilful and elusive forger of the century. The rogues had evidently quarreled over the division of the spoil, and one had fallen. The trail must be followed at once.

Going to the telephone again, Cranley called the manager, and asked that the room should be locked up exactly as it was. Then he hurried back to the police station, picked up two constables, and drove off through the town and out again into the country towards the northern point of the bay.

The road closely skirted the seashore, with open fields on the landward side; but after a while these gave place to the enclosed grounds of a succession of prosperous-looking residences, which stood sedately aloof from the road, screened from vulgar observation by lines of trees and dense shrubberies, through which they were approached by winding avenues. It was to these houses that the red roofs, observed by Cranley from the balcony of the hotel, belonged.

Just after the road took the eastward trend, it abandoned the seashore, which here fell into private possession, and plunged into a veritable tunnel formed by the over-arching boughs of the giant beeches growing in the demesnes on each side of it. Half a mile farther on, however, as the point was approached, the intercepting ground narrowed rapidly, and the coast was touched again.

"Here we are," said Cranley, slowing up and drawing well in to the side of the road some yards away from a white gate.

The house called Seapoint was situated close to the extreme point of the bay, where the road swung round, almost encircling it, to follow the coast-line northwards. Cranley strode to the gate, and, having sent one of the constables to watch the back entry to the grounds a couple of hundred yards beyond the curve of the road, advanced up the avenue with the other. To their left was a plantation of young fir-trees; to their right a garden of an unusual, not to say bizarre, appearance. At first glance it seemed to have been neglected until it had run wild; for the places of the customary garden flowers had been usurped by loosestrife, centaury, and vetch. There was a long border which was a riotous profusion of variegated wild blooms, with the creamy heads of meadow-sweet waving above. On

the lawn, interspersed with yews and laurels, there were clumps of furze and heather, and drifts of yellow-flowered restharrow. The grass was kept close-cropped by a pair of contented-looking goats and their progeny, and one in a mood to sprawl there in the sun would have found it scattered with the humble blossoms of the field—starwort and birdsfoot, cranesbill, gentian, and prunella. That all this was, however, a permitted wildness became quickly apparent; for the avenue and paths were well tended, and even the most vigorous thrusters in nature's battle were kept from encroaching beyond their proper quarters by a presiding hand.

"Queer sort of garden, this," commented Cranley as they marched onwards.

"I don't know so much, sir," replied the constable. "It seems sort of natural like."

"Well, you don't want a garden to be natural." Cranley had very decided views on what was what, and was picturing the owner of the place as a half-savage eccentric, with a lunatic's cunning and resource in the commission of crime.

Just then a bend of the avenue brought them in full view of the house itself, a two-storied building of the chalet type. Cranley walked up to the door with his subordinate and rang the bell, which was promptly answered by a worried-looking woman of fifty or so, who, as soon as she saw the officers, cried out in a voice of alarm:

"Oh, has anything happened to Mr. Bronson?"

"Isn't he here?" asked Cranley.

"No, sir. He seems to have disappeared."

"Disappeared? Since when?"

"I don't know, sir," said the old woman. "I went to call him at nine o'clock—when he usually gets up—and the bed hadn't been slept in. And the place is all topsy-turvy, sir, and I don't know what's been happening."

"May we come in?" asked Cranley.

"Certainly, sir," and the old woman made way.

"You are Mr. Bronson's housekeeper, I presume," said Cranley when the door was shut.

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Dakin is my name, sir."

"Has he any other servants?"

"Only my daughter Polly."

"Where is she now?"

"Working in the kitchen, sir."

"May we sit down for a moment, Mrs. Dakin, while I ask you a few questions?"

"Certainly, sir. This way." She ushered the officers into a room on the right-hand side of the hall. "This is Mr. Bronson's study, sir. It's all in a mess, as I said."

And so it was. The grate was full of the ashes of burned paper, and the drawers of the bureau had been pulled out, and their contents thrown about the floor.

"It certainly looks as if he had gone in a hurry," said Cranley, surveying the scene.

"Has anything happened to him, sir?" asked Mrs. Dakin anxiously.

"I don't know," replied Cranley. "That's what I've come to find out, and I hope you'll do your best to help me. You say that you discovered his absence at nine this morning. When did you see him last?"

Mrs. Dakin seemed to collect her scattered wits.

“It must have been about half-past seven last night, sir. I served his dinner at seven. Then I went to my room to get myself ready to go out. It was my night off, you see, and Polly and I were going to see some friends in the town. Just before starting I took in his coffee, and that was the last I saw of him.”

“It was your regular night off, I suppose?” said Cranley. “Mr. Bronson hadn’t suggested your going specially?”

“Oh, no, sir. We have every Wednesday regular.”

“Mr. Bronson isn’t married, of course?”

“No, sir. But engaged to be.”

“A young man, I take it?”

“Yes, sir. And a very nice young man too. Always keeps himself to himself. Oh, I do hope nothing has happened to him.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Dakin. We’ll soon find him. You say he’s rather a stay-at-home sort?”

“Yes, sir. All the time I’ve been with him—it’s five years now—he hasn’t spent half a dozen nights away from home.”

“I see. Well now, Mrs. Dakin, you say you went out at half-past seven. Was Mr. Bronson alone in the house then?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And when did you return?”

“It was near midnight. Mr. Bronson wasn’t about, so we thought he’d gone to bed. But just after I’d gone to bed myself I heard him come in and go to his room.”

“Oh! Did you hear him leaving it again?”

“No, sir. It doesn’t take me long to get to sleep.”

“And this morning, when you went to call him, you found him gone?”

“Well, strictly speaking, sir, it was Polly that went to call him, and when she found he wasn’t there she called me up.”

“I should like to have a word with Polly, then, if I may.”

In answer to Mrs. Dakin’s summons, a tousle-headed girl of about sixteen made her appearance. She had a good deal to say, but nothing to add to her mother’s story except that she had heard Mr. Bronson leave his room and go downstairs about ten minutes after he had entered it. But she had thought nothing of that, and had fallen asleep almost immediately.

“Has Mr. Bronson a car?” was Cranley’s next query.

“Yes, sir,” replied Mrs. Dakin. “It’ll be in the garage at the back.”

Cranley turned to the constable. “Potts, you might go around and see if it’s there now. Have you any objection to my looking over the house, Mrs. Dakin?”

Mrs. Dakin had none. In fact, being really anxious about her master’s safety, she was ready to give the law every assistance in her power, and led the way forthwith. Upstairs all proved to be as she had stated. Except that the drawers of the dressing-table and wardrobe had been ransacked like those of the desk below, the owner’s bedroom was in perfect order. Cranley at once walked over to a row of shoes which stood under the dressing-table, looked at their soles, took some measurements, and asked of Mrs. Dakin: “Were the shoes that Mr. Bronson was wearing rubber-soled also?”

Mrs. Dakin replied that they were, as he had no other sort.

Taking a shoe with him, Cranley went through the remaining rooms on the same floor, but there was nothing else to be learned there. They were all unfurnished. Returning to the hall with Mrs. Dakin, he encountered Potts, who had just come back from the garage with the news that the car was gone.

"I thought as much," said Cranley. "Now, Mrs. Dakin, what about the rooms on this floor?"

The first into which they looked was the dining-room, where the principal object of interest was a canary in a cage in the center of the table, which was laid for one person. The bird chirruped a welcome as the door opened, but fell into a disappointed silence at sight of the visitors.

"He's a great pet," Mrs. Dakin explained. "Mr. Bronson always has him to chat with at meals, and he chirps back, like as if he understood every word.... Polly, go back to the kitchen and turn off the stove, and wait there till I send for you."

The girl, who had been lingering in the background agog with curiosity, took herself off reluctantly.

"Very fond of animiles is Mr. Bronson," went on Mrs. Dakin. "Not cats and dogs, though, like most people keeps, because he says they're carniverish, but there's an old donkey out in the stable that he bought from a tinker that wasn't treating it right, and the squirrels out in the plantation there—they'll come and sit on his shoulder. And he never would let me keep a mousetrap."

Cranley next decided to have a second look at the study, which, apart from its present disorder, was a very comfortable little den indeed. There was an armchair by the fireplace, with a well-filled pipe rack on the wall close at hand. On the mantelpiece was a plaster cast of the Winged Victory of Samothrace in the midst of a disarray of old letters, bills, seashells, bits of rock, matchboxes, and ink bottles. There were also two photographs in frames, one of a middle-aged woman, the other of a very handsome girl ("Mr. Bronson's mother and young lady," Mrs. Dakin explained). The bureau, which was of mahogany, stood near one of the windows, and there was a book-case stocked with sober-looking volumes.

The detective took a brief glance through the contents of the bureau drawers, but it was evident that any papers of importance had been consigned to the flames. He bent down and turned over the mass of ashes in the grate, carefully collecting what few fragments remained unburned. These he spread out on the leaf of the bureau, and studied them carefully. Most of them bore scraps of writing, but not enough to convey any meaning. Two, however, were significant. One of them, evidently the corner of a sheet of notepaper, was inscribed with the words, more of the slush, in the handwriting of the deceased Mr. Wilson. The other was a piece of drawing paper bearing what was evidently a portion of a rough draft for a bank-note design. Cranley whistled a low note of pleasure, but, even as he did so, the charred paper fell to dust between his fingers.

"Good evidence gone west," he reflected ruefully, and with meticulous care gathered up the other fragments and placed them in his pocket-book. He then walked over to the book-case and took a survey of its contents.

"Mr. Bronson is interested in science, I see," he remarked.

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Dakin. "He's a chemist. Not the sort that sells medicines, you know. What they call an experimentalist. If you'll step this way I'll show you

his laboratory.... You haven't found a clue to his disappearance yet, sir, I suppose?"

"Perhaps the laboratory will give us one," Cranley suggested as they crossed the hall.

"This room here is unfurnished," said Mrs. Dakin, opening a door on the same side as the study. "And here's the laboratory opposite."

She showed them into a long, carpetless, white-washed apartment which had formerly been a drawing-room. It had two large bay-windows looking across a neglected tennis court at the fir plantation. The fire-grate had been removed and replaced by an ugly furnace, and in the middle of the room stood a long chemistry bench, with cupboards below, and the usual rows of bottles, containing liquids and powders of various colors, ranged on a double line of shelves above. There was an oak desk, open like that in the study, at one of the windows, and there were bookshelves along the opposite wall. Beside the furnace was a huge standing rack, whose tiers of shelves were packed with flasks, retorts, pneumatic troughs, and all the other varied apparatus of the experimental chemist.

"Nothing to be learned here, I'm afraid," said Cranley, after searching the numerous cupboards with a faint hope of finding further specimens of the work of the San Félipe forgers. "I don't think I need trouble you any longer, Mrs. Dakin, unless you can give me a photograph of Mr. Bronson."

"I don't think he ever had one taken, sir. At any rate, I never saw one."

"That's a pity. Perhaps you could describe him for me then?"

"Well, sir, I suppose he was about middle height, with a bit of a stoop about the shoulders. He had mouse-colored hair, as you might say, and gray eyes. A good-looking young man on the whole, sir."

"Not a very remarkable type to pick out in a crowd, though," opined Cranley ruefully. "By the way, Mrs. Dakin, do you happen to have a hammer about the house? I want to tighten up something in my car."

Mrs. Dakin went to the kitchen and returned with a small tack hammer.

"Haven't you got a larger one?" asked Cranley.

"Yes. There's one in the laboratory, but I thought it might be too large." She went in and began to rummage in a tool-box in a corner of the room.

"Bless my heart, that's queer," she said presently. "It isn't here. Just wait a moment, sir, and I'll have a hunt for it."

"Don't trouble, thanks," replied Cranley. "It's of no importance"; and, wishing the old woman good morning, he went out to his car.

Chapter IV

Doubts.

The verdict of the inquest, which was held two days later, was a foregone conclusion; and little public interest was aroused in a case which, though distinguished by one or two unusual features, was almost devoid of the element of

mystery,—especially as the attention both of the press and its readers was held by an earlier and more sensational crime with markedly sexual characteristics.

In spite of the early start gained by the police, Bronson was still at large. His car had been found abandoned in a side street of Grantwich, the nearest large town to Spurn Cove, barely ten miles away, whence it was believed that he had taken train to London. No further clue to his whereabouts had been discovered, but a vigorous search by the police was in progress, his description was in every newspaper, and his arrest could not long be delayed.

The only thing in the nature of mystery about the case was the question of the identity of the dead man, Wilson. It was known that he had written to engage his room at the Grand Hotel from a lodging-house in Southampton, where, as Inspector Cranley had ascertained, he had arrived the day before from America, crossing by the liner Pannonia from New York. There the trail ended. The New York police professed ignorance of any crook answering to Wilson's name or description. It was generally felt, however, that, as the former was probably false, and the latter admittedly vague, there was no great significance in their being at fault. It was also known that the police of San Félipe had been communicated with, but, since all their efforts to discover the perpetrators of the famous forgeries had hitherto proved fruitless, not much assistance was expected from them. The public, however, were not aware that the authorities in both countries were following up a useful clue supplied to them by Scotland Yard. The remarkable cameo ring worn by the dead man had been pieced together by Cranley, who had found the fragments among the bedclothes. It was of unusual size and exquisite workmanship, representing Adam and Eve standing under the forbidden tree, round the trunk of which the serpent was coiled. A full description had been dispatched by cable, and it was unlikely that so curious a piece of jewelry would remain untraced for long.

It was expected, as we have said, from the outset that the task of the coroner and jury would be a short and easy one. The body was identified as that of the hotel visitor known as Wilson by the hall porter and Miss Philpot. The latter then gave an account of the man's arrival on the night of the crime. He had written to book a room two days earlier, asking for one on the upper floor if possible. The hotel was full at the time, however, and there would have been no room at all available but for the chance that another gentleman had unexpectedly decided to leave a short time before. The deceased had arrived at a rather late hour, and expressed some objection to this room, as he particularly wanted one that was cheap and quiet. Witness noticed that he spoke with an American accent, and his manner gave her the impression that he did not want to be recognized. The collar of his coat was turned up, his cap was pulled down low on his forehead, and he wore large shell-rimmed glasses.

"That, surely, is not very uncommon—especially in an American," said the coroner, who deemed it his duty to keep witnesses well in hand.

Miss Philpot agreed.

"Then why did you think it suggested a disguise?"

The witness faltered that it had seemed so to her at the moment on account of the other things she had mentioned. She added that the man spoke in low tones, though he was obviously rather deaf.

“When he was writing in the book, did you notice the cameo ring he was wearing?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did he make any attempt to conceal it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“That doesn’t look very like a disguise, does it?”

Miss Philpot admitted that it did not, and blushed.

“Did you see the deceased again,” pursued the coroner, “after he had signed the book and taken away the key of his room?”

The answer was a decided “No.”

Would witness have recognized the deceased if he had come down again without his cap, coat, and glasses?

Probably. He had a very distinctive face, and, owing to the circumstances already stated, she had observed him closely.

“So that was the last time you saw him alive?” the coroner summed up.

“Yes.”

“And what time was it?”

“About half-past ten.”

Miss Philpot was now permitted to retire, and her place was taken by a porter from the Grand Hotel who had carried up the luggage of the murdered man, and was the last person to see him alive. He said that the deceased was in his room when he brought in the luggage. He was sitting at the desk, writing, and still wearing his cap and coat. He had not spoken to witness, who, for his part, had taken little notice of him. Witness had heard the deceased lock his door as he went down the passage.

Two witnesses were now called at the instance of the police in an endeavor to ascertain the moment when the crime was committed. A murder attended by so much violence could scarcely have been carried out without a certain amount of noise. Cranley had therefore interviewed the occupants of all the neighboring bedrooms, but the only one who had heard anything was an old lady in the room on Wilson’s left, and her evidence was not very valuable. She said she had been troubled with uneasy dreams, mainly about burglars. In one of these a window had slammed, and she had awakened with her heart beating violently.

“What time was that?” asked the coroner; but the lady could not tell. She had not looked at her watch.

“Did you hear any more noises after you awoke?”

“I think so. I mean I thought so at the time, but I was so upset that I couldn’t be sure.”

There was nothing more to be got out of the lady, though the coroner did his best. No evidence was taken from the occupant of the room on the other side of the dead man’s, though he was present in court. He was a stout middle-aged bachelor, and had assured Cranley that he had heard nothing. “But there’s nothing odd in that,” he had explained. “I could sleep through an earthquake.” A visitor whose room was on the same corridor, however, testified that, when he was going to his room at about half-past eleven, a door which he believed to be that of number 22 had opened for a moment and then shut again. He had not seen the person inside. A little later, when he was undressing, he thought he heard a noise,

but paid no attention to it, assuming it to be the shutting of some other visitor's door.

"Most likely it was," commented the coroner. "It is most unlikely that the crime could have been committed so early as that."

After Mr. Latymer had described the circumstances of the discovery of the body, Inspector Cranley stepped forward and opened his case. He had no difficulty in demonstrating to the jury that the threatening letter to Bronson, found in the dead man's pocket, was in the same handwriting as the signature in the visitors' book of the hotel, the letter asking for a room, and the burned fragment found in the grate at Seapoint. A guilty connection between the two men was thus clearly established. The word "slush," Cranley explained to the jury, was criminals' slang for forged money, and there could be no doubt of the purpose of the plates found in Wilson's trunk, one of which was handed up to the box for their inspection. It only remained to identify the hammer with which the murder had been committed, and his case was complete.

"I have learned from Mr. Bronson's housekeeper," he concluded, "that a hammer usually present in his house has disappeared, and I would ask her if it is the same as the one now on exhibition in court."

Cranley sat down, and a thrill of interest went through the spectators as the murderer's housekeeper came forward. She stood there, the personification of hard-working respectability, in her Sunday best, a little nervous perhaps, but perfectly self-possessed, and with an expression that said, politely but plainly, that she meant to have her say. Quietly answering the coroner's questions, she described her own and Bronson's movements on the night of the crime exactly as she had done to Inspector Cranley. Then the hammer was brought for her inspection, and it was evident from her look of distress that she recognized it.

"Yes," she said. "It's just like a hammer we used to have, but I couldn't swear it's the same. Hammers is all much of a muchness, you know;" and no amount of cross-examination could wring from her any more definite admission.

At last this ordeal ended, but, as the woman still lingered, the coroner asked if she had anything more to say.

"Yes, sir, I have," she replied, and a strained silence seized upon the court. Somebody tried to suppress a cough. "It's this, sir," said Mrs. Dakin. "I can't believe Mr. Bronson did this murder, and I don't think his going away has anything whatever to do with it."

The coroner cleared his throat. "I'm sure your loyalty to your employer does you credit, Mrs. Dakin," he said, "but I'm afraid that unless you can give us some facts in support of your opinions–-"

"So I can, sir. No end of them. And the first of them is this letter I got from the master this morning."

In the deep silence that followed these words the rustle of the paper unfolding sounded loud and harsh. Mrs. Dakin began to read:

"Dear Mrs. Dakin,

"I have to leave home for a while on urgent business. Please lock up the house, and leave a note of your address at the post office. Take Pete home with you, and please try to get someone to look after Crookshanks.

"Crookshanks," Mrs. Dakin here parenthesized, "is the name of Mr. Bronson's pet donkey, and Pete is his canary. So he goes on:

"I enclose a check for one hundred pounds to enable you to carry on until I return.

"Yours sincerely,

"Henry Bronson."

The coroner at once asked for the letter to be brought to him.

"Posted in Paris on August 28th," he said, after examining the envelope. "That was yesterday. Well, Mrs. Dakin, this is certainly very interesting, but it does nothing to prove your contention just now—I mean about Mr. Bronson's reason for going away. Have you anything further to add?"

"Yes, sir. What I think is that the master went away because there was danger threatening him. He hadn't been himself lately. He seemed to be worried about something ever since the burglary we had last May. He tried to pass it off at the time, and he wouldn't send for the police because there was nothing taken, and he always said putting people in prison never did any good anyway. But I could see he was upset, and, as I say, he's been worrying ever since."

"Can you tell us anything about that burglary, Mrs. Dakin?" asked the coroner.

"No, sir. We all slept through it. When we came down in the morning we found all the papers and books in the study and the laboratory thrown about the place, but there was nothing missing. Well, that's one thing. And the other thing is this. About a fortnight ago my daughter Polly was spoken to on the Promenade by a young gentleman. He made love to her, as you might say, and asked her some questions about the ways of the house, and it's my belief he was our burglar, and what he was after was the plans of Mr. Bronson's invention."

There was what is commonly described as a sensation in court at this point, and the coroner at once asked: "What invention?"

Mrs. Dakin did not know. All she knew was that Mr. Bronson was wrapped up in it, and she believed that he had gone away to find a place of safety for the papers dealing with it.

"Have you ever seen those papers, Mrs. Dakin?" asked the coroner.

"Lots of times, sir. But of course I never read them, because I couldn't understand them."

The coroner smiled at what all the reporters were describing as an Irishism, and then proceeded: "Now, Mrs. Dakin, you have heard the evidence brought forward by Inspector Cranley showing that Mr. Bronson must have had some connection with a gang of bank-note forgers. Could you tell whether the papers had anything of that nature about them?"

"I'm quite sure they hadn't, sir," said Mrs. Dakin, "though, as I've said, I never read them. All that about him being mixed up in a forgery must be a mistake. I've been serving him now for five years, and a nicer, quieter gentleman I never saw. He's hardly ever slept a night away from home, and he was never so happy as when he was working all alone in his laboratory."

The coroner directed that one of the plates for the San Félipe notes should be handed to the witness, and asked her if she had ever seen her master working at such an object.

Mrs. Dakin was positive she had not.

"Did you ever see such an object anywhere about the house?"

"Never, sir."

The coroner intimated that his questions were at an end; but before Mrs. Dakin stood down, the foreman of the jury asked her if she had told Mr. Bronson about the gentleman who had spoken to her daughter.

"No, sir," answered Mrs. Dakin. "I didn't know about that myself until Polly mentioned it to me after the police called."

Mrs. Dakin's evidence was now supplemented by that of Polly, who appeared before the court, red-lipped and powdered, in a pair of shiny flesh-colored stockings. The stockings are mentioned as being the principal features of her attire. She seemed to be all stockings, stretched tight over shapeless legs. Her insteps, striving like the waters of a flood to find their proper level, billowed threateningly over the edges of her shoes. Her suety knees beamed lustrously beneath the hem of her skirt.

This horrible apparition faced the court with the jaunty air of one who has no doubt of her own importance. Polly was indeed a choice product of an age whose newspapers head their accounts of a railway accident with "Girls Badly Shaken" in their boldest type, and casually mention a dozen men killed towards the end of the report. She had been made to believe that her personality and the length of her petticoats were matters of grave public import; she despised her mother; and she knew that the world in general deemed her an advance on that lady. The coroner's was the only eye that looked with any disapproval on this curious phenomenon; and his censure was moral rather than aesthetic. He belonged to a passing generation. Looking over his glasses, he said:

"Can you tell us anything about this young gentleman mentioned by your mother? What sort of gentleman was he?"

"A good-looking young gentleman." Polly's descriptive powers were unequal to anything more illuminating than that. They had got into conversation somehow: she couldn't remember exactly how, but she was sure he had spoken to her first (here Polly gave vent to a giggle, and the reporters made notes to remind them to mention something about the modern girl's delightful frankness in matters of love and sex). The gentleman had been very attentive to her (another giggle) and wanted to know all about her doings, and particularly about her nights off. She had thought at the time that this was because he wanted to meet her again, and it was only when Mr. Bronson disappeared that she got the idea that there might be something more in it.

Medical evidence was now given by a well-known local practitioner, and the coroner proceeded to sum up. He said that this was clearly a case of murder: accident and suicide were alike out of the question. They had abundant evidence to show that the deceased was a member of a gang of criminals; and the statement of Miss Philpot, together with the fact that he kept his bedroom window shut, indicated that he expected that some sort of violence might be used against him. Having dealt with Inspector Cranley's evidence, the coroner said that though it was purely circumstantial it appeared to bear but one interpretation, and it was strengthened by the flight of the person implicated.

"Doctor Henderson has just given you his opinion that death must have taken place from nine to twelve hours before the finding of the body,—in other words,

between eleven p.m. and two a.m. This leaves a fairly wide margin for the commission of the crime, which the very vague evidence of the visitors at the hotel does nothing to narrow. According to the housekeeper and her daughter, Bronson was at home from a little after midnight to about half-past, so that, by taking a car, he had just enough time to accomplish the act before that flying visit, and ample opportunity thereafter."

Before, however, naming this person in their verdict, the coroner went on, the jury were bound to take into consideration the supplementary evidence tendered by Mrs. Dakin. This might conceivably be taken to indicate an innocent reason for Bronson's disappearance: but on the other hand it was hardly possible that he should not since have become aware of the suspicion attaching to him, and his failure to come forward in his own defense was therefore a point against him. As to Miss Polly Dakin, she was clearly a person of unreliable memory, and he would leave it to the jury to decide whether her hazy recollection of a fortnight-old conversation had any sinister significance, or merely represented the string of commonplaces which a young man might exchange with a person of inferior education and social position with whom he had struck up a casual acquaintance.

The jury were absent for twenty minutes: apparently some of them felt that Mrs. Dakin's evidence was worthy of consideration: but they brought in the expected verdict.

Chapter V

What Miss Philpot Thought.

A fortnight after the inquest, Inspector Cranley sat on a bench on the Promenade gloomily gazing over the gray Septembrous ocean. A casual observer would have considered that he ought to be anything else than gloomy, seeing that he had by his side something much better worth gazing at than the sea in any mood: to wit, a very pretty girl, who surveyed his dejected profile with a whimsical smile. This young lady had cheeks of a comely plumpness, with real roses in them. Her eyes were brown, her lips finely shaped and sensitive. Everything about her, from the curls that peeped under the brim of her snug little hat to her silken ankles and dainty shoes, was as charming as femininity can be. It seems incredible that so beautiful a creature could be hired for three pounds a week to attend to someone else's unnecessary business. But so it was; for the girl was no other than Miss Philpot, bureau clerk at the Grand Hotel.

"They'll never get him now," Cranley was saying. "He's probably in Madagascar by this time. And even if they do get him, it won't be much help to me. I've had my chance and missed it, that's all. And two chances like that don't come in one lifetime. Jove, I am an unlucky devil."

"Not in everything, surely?" said Miss Philpot, slipping her hand through his arm; but even this pretty gesture could not raise Cranley from his despondency.

"I made sure I was going to make my name this time," he said bleakly.

“Perhaps you will yet,” said Miss Philpot. “You know, I’ve an idea that there’s a lot more in this case than meets the eye.”

“What a hope!” was Cranley’s ironic response.

“Oh, well, if you’re going to be nasty–-” Miss Philpot moved away from him a little, at which Cranley suddenly roused himself.

“Sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to be nasty,” he said. “But you’re certainly the world’s champion optimist, Doris.”

She was. All her life she had counted on the unexpected happening, and finding fairyland round the corner. Every week she put a shilling in a money-box, not with the ignoble purpose of saving it, but in order to buy a couple of tickets in the Calcutta Sweepstake at the end of the year. And she was quite certain, in spite of Cranley’s statistical exposition of her chances, that she would win it some day. What an orgy of spending she would have then. She had it all planned out to the last detail. Her daddy would be given a nice round sum to retire on—poor old dad, still working as hard as when he was a youngster because the claims of his family had prevented him from putting anything by for himself. Then there would be all sorts of lovely gifts for mummy. And the boys would be taken from their desks as clerks and set on the road to be barristers or solicitors; and Molly would be started in a type-writing business on her own, and pay ever such good wages to the girls under her; and Daisy’s fiancé would be lent just that little bit of capital that he needed. After that she would walk about the streets giving five-pound notes to the pinched-looking men and women selling matches to support large families; and she would come up behind little children gazing hungrily into toyshops, and ask them to choose whatever they liked. Finally she would buy a dream house in the country, not too far from London, where Cranley would set up as a private detective and become as famous as Sherlock Holmes.

She did not tell Cranley all this. He was too fond of throwing cold water about: as witness his reception of her present bright idea.

“Well,” she said, “I think this case isn’t quite so simple as it looks, and if you’ll listen and not interrupt, and promise to be nice, I’ll tell you why.”

“I’ll be good,” said Cranley, putting on a sanctimonious expression.

“Very well then,” said Doris. “Point number one. Why did a murderer who took so much trouble to avoid leaving any finger-marks leave that hammer behind?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” replied Cranley. “No matter how careful a man is he might make one slip—especially with a murder fresh on his conscience.”

“I agree that by itself that doesn’t mean much. But there’s more to follow. Second point: why did Bronson invite suspicion by running away?”

“Nerves, perhaps. Or perhaps because, when he got home, he remembered that he’d left the hammer behind.”

“No. That won’t do. If you had only had the hammer to go upon you wouldn’t have traced him yet. Third point: how did the murderer know where Wilson was? Remember, he had only just arrived, and it was only by chance that we had a room to spare.”

“Bronson may have seen him arrive, and followed him from the station.”

“Possibly. But how did he hit on the right room? That’s a real teaser. And there are more to come. Point number—what is it? Four or five? No matter. What was Wilson doing at Spurn Cove at all? It’s quite obvious that he was afraid of

something or he wouldn't have fastened his window, to say nothing of disguising himself. If he was frightened of Bronson, why couldn't he have negotiated from a distance?"

"The disguise, my dear girl, was to deceive the police, not Bronson. Wasn't the letter an invitation to Bronson to meet him? And it doesn't follow from his bolting his window that he was afraid of Bronson: it was merely a sensible precaution so that he could sleep in safety. To judge by his letter, I should say that he expected that Bronson would be afraid of him, and that he hoped to frighten him into whatever he wanted him to do."

"You may be right, of course," said Doris. "But now for the last point. I paid a visit to Mrs. Dakin the other day. She's in lodgings now. She's the dearest old soul, and thinks no end of Bronson. She insists that he couldn't have committed the crime—told me all sorts of stories to show how kind-hearted he is. He's fond of animals too. She has his canary with her, and she says it hasn't sung a note since he disappeared, and she's afraid it will die."

"That's all very well," said Cranley. "But it doesn't follow at all that a man who's fond of animals couldn't commit a crime. Do you remember that story of O. Henry's about the detective who tracked down a wife-murderer by his fondness for dogs? And what about the profiteers prettily feeding the pigeons in Saint Paul's churchyard? Pff! Slop about animals makes no appeal to me whatever."

"Mr. Bronson wasn't kind to animals only," said Doris quietly.

"Oh, I dare say," said Cranley. "No doubt Mrs. Dakin has fitted him out with a first-class halo, all complete with knobs on. But did she tell you where this paragon gets his money from?"

"No."

"Neither can anyone else, though he's tolerably well off. I had an interview with his banker yesterday, and learned that he pays in a large sum once a quarter in bank-notes. Doesn't that look rather fishy? If a man is earning honest money in that quantity, he gets paid by check; and if he has a private income, he gets dividend warrants. Those notes mean something shady, my dear. Even if your canary fancier didn't commit the murder, it's as plain as daylight that he helped in the San Félipe forgery."

Doris shook her head.

"Don't you know very well," she said, "that people with just as strong evidence against them have often been proved innocent when it was too late—after they'd been hanged, or spent years in prison?"

"Yes, but you'd have to acquit everybody not taken red-handed, on that consideration."

"And quite right too," said Doris.

"Well, that's a girl all over," cried Cranley, and looked up at the sky as if to call the gods to witness that he had nothing in common with such beings.

Doris smiled.

"Didn't some great man once say," she began, "that it was better that a hundred–-"

"—Guilty ones should get off, and the rest of it," cut in Cranley. "I know all that, and I dare say it's all very well in theory. But I'm a practical man, and I know that if the law isn't vindicated it isn't respected. I'm not going to be drawn off into

generalities, though. Tell me this now. If Bronson's innocent, what is he hiding for?"

"I don't know," said Doris. "That's what I want you to find out. You see, I'm not clever. I just happened to notice these points I've told you of, and I thought you'd be able to work out what they mean. Oh, and there's another thing that I'd almost forgotten, though really it's the most important of all. It suddenly struck me yesterday as I was looking over the bay. You can see Mr. Bronson's house from the windows on the north side of the hotel."

"That settles point number three or four, then," said Cranley ironically. "Probably Bronson saw Wilson getting into bed through a telescope."

"Now you're getting nasty again," said Doris reproachfully. "Remember, it was night-time. Don't you think this is more than a coincidence? The moment I realized it, a queer sort of feeling came over me, as if there was some deep and horrible meaning in it that I couldn't grasp."

"That's just your fancy, my dear," said Cranley with sturdy common sense.

"No, it isn't. It was an actual shuddering of the heart, as if I was just on the verge of some frightful discovery. I'll never forget the moment as long as I live."

"I'm afraid I can't see anything in it," said Cranley.

"Oh, all right," said Doris resignedly. "I thought that perhaps the others were all off on a false scent, and that you might follow up these clues and make your name–-"

"That was very sweet of you, darling," Cranley interrupted. "But these notions of yours—what do they amount to against my solid facts? Here's a crime traced to a man's very door. We find the motive for it in the dead man's pocket—as good a motive for murder as ever was. We trace one of the weapons used to the suspect's house. He as good as confesses his guilt by running away and hiding. Oh, and I found his footmarks on the balcony of the hotel. I kept that up my sleeve at the inquest, because I had enough evidence without it. Short of seeing him commit the crime with my very eyes, I couldn't have found a more complete or conclusive collection of evidence. Yet you want me to start on a wild-goose chase in some other direction because he keeps a pet canary, and his house has a distant view of the dead man's bedroom. It isn't reasonable, now, is it?"

Doris shrugged her shoulders.

"You know it isn't," said Cranley. "But look here, darling. This is our day off. We don't want to spend it investigating murders, do we? What about a cup of tea at Bellini's?"

"You think the tea table is a girl's proper sphere, I suppose," said Doris, still unbending.

"You know very well I don't. Listen, Doris. There's nobody looking. Give me a kiss."

"I won't be kissed by a man who despises me."

"I don't despise you, darling."

"Yes, you do. If a man had made these suggestions of mine, you'd have taken them seriously and thought them over. But because I'm a girl you just waved them aside–-"

"No, I didn't. I gave you reasons against each of them."

"Fine reasons! Just the first obvious objection that came into your head. If you've so little respect for my intelligence as that, I can't see why you want me for your wife."

"Don't be silly, Doris. You know very well that I love you, and I couldn't love you if I didn't respect your intelligence. But–-"

"That's all right," said Doris, mollified. "Though I was afraid for a moment that you were going to say that men like stupid girls best."

"It's only women's papers that say that," put in Cranley. "But what I was going to add was that detection is a specialized job, and even the cleverest little girls wouldn't shine at it. It means downright hard thinking—clear, cold, hard logic, and no sentimentality. Now all those points of yours were clever enough: I don't deny that. But they weren't the real stuff at the back of your mind. What mattered to you was Mrs. Dakin's sobstuff about the murderer's kind heart, and you thought out all the rest to bolster it up."

"You're incorrigible," said Doris.

"I'm incorrigibly in love. Do make up and give me a kiss."

"Look at those people by the steps."

"They aren't looking. Please!"

"No. You don't deserve it. No, I say… Oh, well…"

That evening, after tea and the pictures and a very pleasant time generally, Doris would not let Cranley see her home to the hotel, saying that she had some shopping to do first. As soon as he had left her, she turned down an obscure street, and knocked at the door of Mrs. Dakin's humble lodging.

Mrs. Dakin was delighted to see her.

"Polly's out," she said. "At the Pallay de Dongce—as usual. Why can't they call it Dancing Palace, I wonder? There's no sense calling things foreign names that don't mean anything, and you have to twist your face out of shape to pronounce properly. But 'Oh, mater' says Polly when I say that—mater, if you please! 'You are an old back number' says she. 'We've got to be modern in these go-ahead days.' Really, I don't know what young folks are coming to these times. Won't you sit down, Miss?"

"Mr. Cranley wouldn't listen to me," said Doris, taking the proffered chair. "He's quite certain Mr. Bronson is guilty, and nothing I could say would change him."

"Dear, dear," mourned Mrs. Dakin. "Men are all the same. Poor Dakin would never heed a word of advice from me, though I will say he was the best husband a woman ever had. Now what do you think we'd better do?"

"I'm going to do a bit of detective work on my own account," said Doris. "That'll show him. Have you got the key to the house?"

"I have."

"Will you lend it to me?"

Mrs. Dakin looked doubtful.

"I want to go to the house and look into Mr. Bronson's papers," Doris explained, "to see if I can find any reason for his going away so suddenly."

Mrs. Dakin looked more doubtful still.

"I don't know as I've any right to let you, Miss," she said. "The master told me to lock the place up, and didn't say nothing about opening it again."

"He couldn't have known that it might be necessary," said Doris.

"And I don't, neither," said Mrs. Dakin. "Meaning no offense, Miss, but I don't think it's for me to let anybody go reading his private papers after he's trusted me to look after 'em. 'Lock up the house,' his letter said, plain as if he'd spoke it himself, and 'lock up' don't mean 'let strangers pry around' if I knows English."

"Yes, but don't you see, Mrs. Dakin, that when he wrote that letter he can have had no idea that he was going to be accused of murder? You know how black the case is against him. Probably you and I are the only people in England who believe him innocent. Surely you're not going to stand in the way of my proving it?"

"Oh, no, Miss, if you put it that way–-"

"You can come with me if you don't trust me."

"Oh, don't say that, Miss. I wouldn't doubt you for a moment. It's only that I'm not sure of the rights of the matter."

"Well, I shan't press you, Mrs. Dakin," said Doris, making as if to withdraw. "I had an idea that I could help Mr. Bronson, but if you object there's no more to be said."

The sight of her only ally turning away put an end to Mrs. Dakin's waverings.

"Here," she said. "Don't go. I can see that you're all right."

She opened a drawer of a china cupboard, and took something from a box within. "Here's the key," she went on. "Be sure to lock everything up again when you leave. Or perhaps you'd like me to come with you?"

"No, there's no need to trouble you," said Doris. "I can manage all right by myself."

"Well, you'll find the two desks open. They were left that way when Mr. Bronson went, and he has the keys with him. There's one in the study and one in the laboratory," and Mrs. Dakin proceeded to give Doris a description of the lie of the house.

"Where's the canary?" asked the girl at length as she rose to go.

"Gone," said Mrs. Dakin. "Mr. Bronson's young lady—Miss Worthing, her name is—came down last Thursday to fetch him. She had a letter from the master asking her to take care of him."

"Oh? Where did he write from?"

"He didn't say, Miss. Miss Worthing showed me the letter—as a sign of bona fidy—and there was no address on it. But it came from foreign parts, for there was a foreign stamp on the envelope."

Chapter VI

Fresh Forces.

The offices of Investigations, Ltd., are situated at the top of a large building in Regent Street. The business of the firm, like its title, is a comprehensive one. It will investigate anything, no matter what. An obscure Greek quotation, a dark point in Oriental mysticism, the whereabouts of somebody last heard of in Patagonia in 1886, what somebody or other said on the occasion of the introduction of the

Cabhorses (Preservation) Bill,—all such questions, besides odd criminal problems now and then, are dealt with by Investigations, Ltd., promptly, efficiently, and at moderate charges.

The principal, and founder, of the business was Mr. Robert Cardwell, whose career may detain us for a moment. Summoned by the War from his studies for the Bar, he had found himself, when the great interruption was over, at a loose end. The law no longer attracted him; and in any case to sit again as a student among youngsters not out of their teens was distasteful to a veteran soldier. The same objection applied, of course, to all other learned professions; but what else could he do? He had but one asset—the general culture bestowed by a classical education—and that seemed to be in no demand in a world given over more than ever to mere money getting. He had only to look at the advertisement columns of The Times to see that people with exactly the same qualifications as his were begging by the hundred for any little crumb of a job that the business world might fling at them. Cardwell at once resolved that he would not go job-hunting, that most melancholy and humiliating of pursuits. He would stand on his own two feet. Into this scrambling market he would go with his own merchandise, knowledge, and sell that.

The sequel to this decision was the appearance of an advertisement in the principal newspapers to the effect that Investigations, Ltd., were prepared to undertake inquiries into any subject at moderate rates. Cardwell began business in a modest office in Baker Street, and it was the associations of the name that first brought criminal inquiries within his purview; for he had originally envisaged only literary and historical researches. His first client was a gentleman recently elected to Parliament, who, as a big business man, found himself expected to speak in a coming debate on Monetary Reform, a subject on which he was profoundly ignorant. Cardwell knew very little about it either; but a few days' reading in the British Museum library yielded material for a bulky dossier, fortified with which the legislator delivered the remarkable oration that set him in the eminent position among economic thinkers that he now occupies. As an economist the gentleman holds himself excused from talking on less weighty matters, but whenever Monetary Reform crops up, he delivers the fruit of Cardwell's researches all over again with the greatest aplomb.

Cardwell thus found himself launched in business as a universal provider of knowledge. Some of his early clients were of the humblest status—young women who had secured appointments as governesses and found that a lean purse and a hazy recollection of what they had learned at school were not such valuable qualifications as they had hoped; struggling authors in difficulties about the details of big business or the domestic life of the wealthy; and a whole host of ambitious youngsters wanting to know the shortest way to "success." His first case with a criminal complexion was when he was called in by Lady Bleakridge in the divorce proceedings initiated by her husband. The latter, it may be remembered, had possession of indisputable "hotel evidence," and Lady Bleakridge had no effective alibi; but Cardwell succeeded in tracking down the woman who had impersonated her on the occasion in question, and thus secured for his client the doubtful benefit of retaining her husband's name. Thenceforward criminal cases formed an important and growing side-line of Cardwell's business. At the time

when this story opens he was employing two assistants and a staff of clerks, and had been for some months in possession of the thoroughly modern offices in Regent Street.

One September morning there came to these offices a tall, handsome young woman whose card gave her name as Miss Hester Worthing.

"I am the fiancée of Mr. Henry Bronson," she announced when she was alone with the principal.

"Ah! Of the Spurn Cove case," said Cardwell, who had already noted the look about her fine eyes which told of sleepless nights.

"Yes." The girl paused, as it uncertain how to begin, then plunged desperately. "Mr. Cardwell, I want you to take up this case. I know it looks black against Mr. Bronson—hopeless almost—but of course I simply can't imagine him doing such a thing, and I feel that if you would go down and investigate it right from the beginning you might find out something that would show that the police are wrong."

"I shall certainly be very happy to do so," said Cardwell. "But if you are in possession of any evidence in his favor, would it not be better to bring it to the notice of the police?"

"Unfortunately I have none," said Miss Worthing. "But a very curious incident has occurred which I can't make head or tail of, and for all I know it may tell against him rather than in his favor. That's why I have come to you."

She had opened her handbag as she spoke, and she now produced an envelope from it. "Here is a letter," she said, "which I received from Mr. Bronson last week. Please read it."

Cardwell did so. It ran as follows:

Darling,

I have to leave home on urgent business for a little while. Don't worry. I shall write again soon and explain.

Please take care of little Pete.

Best love,

Harry

"Posted in Marseilles last Tuesday, I see," remarked Cardwell. "He hasn't gone very far yet. Pete, as well as I remember, is a canary. It was mentioned at the inquest."

"Yes. Mr. Bronson wrote a letter to Mrs. Dakin, his housekeeper, asking her to take care of it. Well, as soon as I got this letter I went down to Spurn Cove to fetch it. I had already heard from Mrs. Dakin—who is a thoroughly honest and reliable woman—that she had shut his house and taken the bird to her lodgings, so I went there and brought it home with me. And now comes the curious thing. Yesterday, when I was cleaning the cage, I noticed a little knob in one corner, and out of curiosity I pressed it. You can imagine my surprise when the bottom of the cage fell open from a pair of hinges, and a number of papers dropped out. I have them here to show you."

The girl went to her handbag again and took out two ancient-looking letters and a much-faded photograph, which she handed to Cardwell. The investigator examined the letters first. Both were addressed to a Mrs. James Reddington, living at Chattering, Essex, from her husband. One, dated 1898, came from a London

hotel, and simply announced that the writer was coming home next day, having done some good business. The other, which was from South Africa, was a soldier's letter written on the eve of battle.

Having read them, Cardwell took up the photograph and examined it with interest. It represented a bride and bridegroom in the costumes of thirty years ago. The bride was very young, small, pretty, and smiling. The groom was a little older, tall, dark and rather solemn. The name of the photographer—J. Pondersham, Chattering—was inscribed on the mounting.

"Do you know who these people are?" Cardwell asked.

"No," replied Miss Worthing. "But Harry—Mr. Bronson—was born at Chelmsford, which is near Chattering, so they might be his parents."

"You never met his parents, I presume?"

"No. They both died long before I became acquainted with him."

"Well, we have the name and address of the photographer, so it should not be difficult to trace the sitters. They might, of course, be the couple to whom the letters belong—Reddington, isn't it? Did Mr. Bronson ever mention anyone of that name to you?"

"Never."

"The letters seem to be of very little interest. The singular thing in this affair is the method Mr. Bronson has taken to convey them to you—if that was his intention; for, of course, he may not have expected that you would discover his hiding-place. I should like to have a look at that cage, by the way."

"Certainly," said Miss Worthing. "It's in my car down below."

Cardwell at once had it fetched up. After a preliminary scrutiny he pressed the knob which Miss Worthing had mentioned, and immediately, with a click, the bottom fell down.

"Most ingenious," Cardwell commented. "Mr. Bronson evidently had strong reasons for preserving these relics and for expecting some attempt to steal them."

"There was an attempt," said Miss Worthing. "Do you remember Mrs. Dakin's story at the inquest?"

"I have some recollection of it," said Cardwell, "though, really, I paid very little attention to the case. Crime, you know, is only a side-line with me, and I did not expect to be consulted in this one. As well as I remember, this woman mentioned a burglary–-"

"Yes. Nothing was taken; but Mr. Bronson's books and papers were thrown about, as if the burglar was looking for something."

"This find of yours certainly throws a new light on that incident," said Cardwell. "There are distinct possibilities about this case, and I shall have the greatest pleasure in taking it up. To begin with, there are one or two questions I should like to ask you."

"As many as you like," said Miss Worthing. "I'm anxious to give you all the help I can."

"Very good. Tell me first, then, when was the last time you saw Mr. Bronson?"

"It was exactly a week before the murder. He came up to London specially to see me, and we spent the day together, and went to the theater."

"What was his manner on that occasion?"

"Just the same as ever. He's rather quiet by nature. Absent-minded in fact. He's a scientist, you know, and quite wrapped up in his work."

"I take it, then, that he was neither more nor less cheerful than usual?"

The girl agreed.

"Well now, Miss Worthing, will you be so good as to tell me all you know about Mr. Bronson—his parentage, history, and so forth."

"I'm afraid it doesn't amount to very much," replied the girl. "It's only a year since I first met him. It was at a charity bazaar down at Spurn Cove, where I was taking a holiday. I had charge of a stall, and he came to buy. We got into conversation and became friends very quickly. We arranged to meet again in London, and it wasn't long before we were engaged. After that we didn't see each other very often, because my parents didn't approve of the engagement, and Mr. Bronson's work kept him down at Seapoint. He was working out some very abstruse chemical problem, and he wanted to get it finished before our marriage. So you see we didn't have much time to talk of anything but our immediate interests. I know that his father died when he was a child, leaving him and his mother very badly off. As a young man he worked in the research department of Elthorne's big works—the steel people, you know—but he had left it before I met him. That's really all I can tell you."

"He appears to have been tolerably well off in recent years," Cardwell observed.

"I suppose so," said Miss Worthing. "He has a very nice house, and he has been able to devote himself entirely to scientific research. But of course I never inquired about his means. My father, who is rather old-fashioned in his ideas, asked him if he could keep me in the style to which I was accustomed; and he simply answered that he couldn't, and that I'd have to chance it."

The girl smiled reminiscently. Cardwell waited for her to continue, but she had nothing more to tell.

"One last question then," he said. "Did Mr. Bronson ever introduce you to this man, Wilson?"

"Never."

"Did he ever mention his name?"

"No."

"You know, of course, that they are supposed to have been associated together in the San Félipe forgery case?"

"So the police seem to think, but it seems utterly impossible to me. It all occurred, I remember, soon after Harry and I met—just when we were seeing most of each other. Quite apart from his character, I don't see how he could have had the opportunity. Mrs. Dakin says he was hardly ever away from home for the last five years, so it's hard to see how he could have got mixed up in a crime in South America."

"Well, you know, as far as that goes, it wouldn't have been necessary for him to go to America. Don't misunderstand me, though," said the detective hastily. "I'm not suggesting he was guilty: only warning you not to rely on that evidence alone. Was it long before the forgery became public that you met him?"

"Not very. Only a week or two, I think."

Cardwell pursed up his lips and looked grave.

“Of course the notes had been printed and circulated long before the discovery,” he said. “You know nothing of his movements up till the time you met him?”

“No. But Mrs. Dakin would.”

“Unfortunately that absorption in scientific research, which she spoke about at the inquest, might easily be interpreted as absorption in forgery—as, in fact, it has been. However, we’ll see what can be done. I’ve nothing more to ask you now—except this. What year was Mr. Bronson born?”

“He was twenty-six last May,” said Miss Worthing.

“Good. I needn’t detain you any longer, then. I shall set to work at once on what material we have, and as soon as there’s any progress to report I’ll let you know.”

When his visitor had departed, Cardwell summoned a typist and dictated a letter to Somerset House, asking for the birth certificate of Mr. Henry Bronson.

“As soon as you have that typed,” he said, “tell Henderson to deliver it by hand and wait for an answer. There’ll be a few shillings to pay, which he can get from petty cash. Do the letter now, but first ask Miss Weston to bring me the files of the Spurn Cove case and the San Félipe affair.”

Newspaper cuttings dealing with noteworthy crimes were regularly kept and indexed in case of need. The documents Cardwell asked for were brought to him neatly pasted on sheets of paper enclosed in numbered folders, and he went through them methodically. When he had finished he took up the telephone.

“Get me the Grand Hotel, Spurn Cove, please,” he said. “It’ll be a trunk call. When you’ve rung, ask Mr. Allingham to come to me at once.”

A moment later a young man entered the room. He appeared to be about twenty-five years of age, good looking, with a rather leisurely manner, but with that sort of untidiness about his dress which goes with an active and impatient mind. He sat down on the arm of the chair vacated by Miss Worthing, and asked: “Why does it take so much longer to answer the queries of a pretty girl than an important politician’s?”

Cardwell smiled.

“In this case,” he said, “the reason is that the lady was consulting me about the Spurn Cove murder, which I’ve come to the conclusion isn’t quite such a clear-as-glass affair as the police seem to imagine. In fact I’m going to set you to work on it right away.”

He gave his subordinate a résumé of what Miss Worthing had told him, and proceeded:

“Now I want you to get down to Chattering by the first train you can catch, hunt up this photographer or his successor, and find out all about these people in the photograph. If the business has come to an end, don’t leave it at that. Hunt around and find out what’s become of the owners. There’ll probably be relatives in the neighborhood. Or you might take the photograph to the clergy or local notables and see if they know anything about it. Anyway, I rely on you to leave no stone unturned.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Allingham.

“After that, find out whatever you can about these Reddington people,—who, of course, may turn out to be the same couple. If they’re still alive, interview them, but be discreet. We may be scratching about on the surface of some deep plot, and we don’t want to give any unnecessary alarm.”

“Right you are,” said Allingham. “I’ll go and look up the trains at once.”

At the same moment the telephone bell rang. Allingham withdrew, consulted the railway guide in the general office, and made rapid preparations for his journey. When these were completed he returned to find the telephone conversation over and his chief pensively smoking a cigarette.

“I’ve just had a conversation with the manager of the Grand Hotel, Spurn Cove,” he said. “In reading the accounts of the murder I noticed one small detail that was not explained, and though it was probably of no importance I thought it well to clear it up. You will remember that Wilson was only able to get a room at the hotel because another man had left unexpectedly. In passing, that looks rather remarkable, because he arrived so late at night that it’s difficult to see how the murderer could have known he was there, or hit on his bedroom so accurately. In fact, if the trail hadn’t led so swiftly to Bronson, I think the police and the coroner would have given some attention to the point.”

“Do you mean,” said Allingham, “that perhaps Wilson was murdered in mistake for the man who had left?”

“That was my idea. So I rang up the hotel to find out who this man was.”

“Who was he?”

“John Elthorne,” said Cardwell.

“And who is John Elthorne when he’s at home?”

“It’s time you acquired some knowledge of the world of big business, young man,” said Cardwell. “John Elthorne is known to fame as one of the biggest men in the steel industry, and ought to be known to infamy as one of the grossest profiteers who did well out of the war. He must have made a quarter of a million selling jerrybuilt villas for ten times their value in the early days of the housing shortage. I notice, too, from Who’s Who that he’s rather coy about his early history.”

Cardwell opened the ponderous red volume and quoted: “Born, Cape Colony. No date, you observe, and Cape Colony is an extensive territory. Married, Helen, dau. of Henry Summerling. Two s; one d. Managing Director of John Elthorne and Sons. Recreation, halma. A joke, I presume.”

“We are not amused,” said Allingham.

“No. It’s like the jest of a man trying to conceal that he’s uneasy.”

“The fellow is evidently self-made, but not particularly proud of it,” observed Allingham. “So this strong pillar of industry occupied Wilson’s room up to the day of the murder. Is there any particular significance in that?”

“There seems to be,” said Cardwell. “Miss Worthing told me that at one time he was Bronson’s employer.”

Allingham sat down abruptly and passed a puzzled hand through his hair.

“This is the queerest case we’ve ever handled,” he said. “The more facts we unearth, the darker it gets. It was simplicity itself at the beginning, but I’m hanged if I can make head or tail of it now.”

“Don’t try,” said Cardwell. “You have your train to catch.”

Chapter VII

What the Photograph Told.

Gerald Allingham had left college with the ambition to be an author; to which end he had sat down for the best part of a year and inked a vast heap of paper with the feelings and doings of his first twenty years of life in a fashion then much in vogue. This portentous work—two hundred thousand words it ran to—was the first volume of a projected trilogy. It was a portrait of Youth. The second volume, which was to be written next year, would represent Middle Life. The third would show the hero in his old age, tested and purified in the crucible of experience, and grown ever so wise. That would be written the following year, and the author would then be famous.

It was a marvelous compilation, that first volume. All the quaintly significant perceptions and feelings of his infancy; all the tragi-comically significant misadventures of his childhood; all the psychologically significant torments of his adolescence (painted against a college atmosphere done in the half-glowing, half-wistful colors deemed appropriate by his fellow-artists in the same genre)—these, with the gloriously unconscious egotism of youth, he had tricked out for the world in a style creditably imitated from all the best models he had recently read, with a few cultivated mannerisms of his own; and, having added out of his imagination a little sexual experience which he would have liked to have enjoyed, but, owing to shyness or conscientiousness, had not; with a heart full of hope mingled with a not altogether reprehensible pride, he had carried the whole bundle down to the office of one of the best-known publishers in London.

Fortunately for Allingham, the publisher declined the masterpiece. Still more fortunately, instead of sending him the usual formal slip, he invited the young man to come and see him. Allingham kept the appointment, tremulous with the conviction that he was presently going to wake up and find himself famous.

“Young man,” said the publisher, “you can write.” Allingham, though quite sure of that already, glowed all over with the delicious sensation of genius appreciated. The publisher resumed.

“But it’s about all you can do. What’s the good of writing when you’ve nothing to say?”

Allingham’s heart almost died in his breast, and a kind of chill began to creep from his toes upwards.

“Before you write another book,” went on the publisher, “you’d better learn something of life. Get experience. Suffer things at first hand. Find out what it’s like to love someone else more than yourself. Achieve the tremendous adventure of discovering that you don’t know everything. Acquire a little healthy dislike of yourself. Then—perhaps in half a dozen years or so—you might write a book worth printing; or, better still, you mightn’t want to write one at all. As for this remarkable production”—picking up the child of Allingham’s imagination, typed ever so neatly and bound in a series of glossy green folders–-

“I’ll burn it,” said Allingham heroically.

And he did.

Such heroism, however, is difficult to live up to. A year or so later, having gambled a little at Deauville, having dined a little with chorus girls, having danced a little here there and everywhere, and having been nastily let down by an extremely delightful young lady, Allingham had jumped to the conclusion that this sort of thing was "life," and came perilously near to writing a "cocktail" novel. He did actually begin one, but fortune came to his aid again. A sensible young woman of his acquaintance, having picked up the manuscript by chance, told him frankly that it was rot. Allingham, who fundamentally was no fool, agreed with her; and that novel also went to the flames.

To reestablish himself in the good opinion of the same young woman, Allingham now decided that he had better try some more useful career. A few days later, happening to see one of Cardwell's advertisements in a newspaper, he applied for a job. That was a year ago. In the interim he had gained much experience, and had already come to the conclusion that living detective stories was much better fun than writing psychological ones.

It was about four in the afternoon when he emerged from Chattering railway station into the main street of the town. It was a pleasant restful little place, he decided at once. Being fortunately situated well away from any trunk road, it had an air of unspoiled individuality. The shop fronts were nearly all of a sober old-fashioned type. The few modern ones looked like vulgar parvenus put out of countenance by an atmosphere into which they had strayed by mistake. Allingham thoroughly relished the contrast of ideas which they represented. The old-fashioned fronts said: "We have things to sell, in case you want to buy. Here are a few samples. Come in if you want to see more." The new fronts, on the other hand, said, or rather shouted: "Come and buy! Here's this that and the other! Of course you want them! Everybody else has them. So must you. All the latest novelties! Buy them quick before they're out of date!" These fronts were almost the only things in the town that were not out of date. The roads were not even tarred. People crossed them carelessly, without that anxious glance around for death which has become second nature to those who live in civilized places. About a hundred yards from the station there was a disgusting-looking petrol station, for a sign that all-devouring progress was on its way, but there was little else to suggest that Queen Victoria was not still on the throne.

Allingham sauntered along the street, savoring the peace of the place, and blessing the chance that had sent him to so favored a spot. He had not a doubt now that Pondersham or his son or grandson would still be practising his craft at the very address inscribed on the faded photograph in his pocket. And he was right. In a few minutes he sighted the name on a modest little shop between a draper's and a stationer's. A bell clanged as he pushed open the door, and on his entrance a courtly old gentleman with white hair and beard came from an inner room to meet him.

Allingham explained apologetically that he had not come to have his photograph taken, but to obtain a print from a negative taken a long time ago: over twenty years ago in fact. Would that be possible?

"Certainly," replied the old man. "We keep all our negatives. What is the name of the customer?"

“Unfortunately I don’t know,” said Allingham. “But I have the photograph. Would that do?”

Mr. Pondersham looked curiously at his questioner. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “If you had the name it would merely be a question of turning it up in the index, and we could find the negative in an hour or so. But without it we should have to examine the negatives one by one. As a matter of fact we did that for a gentleman a couple of years ago, and it took us several days, so of course we had to charge for our time.”

“Of course,” said Allingham. “I shall be quite ready to pay. Here is the photograph.”

Mr. Pondersham took it, and visibly started. He looked closer at Allingham.

“This is most extraordinary,” he said. “This is the very photograph which the other gentleman inquired about.”

“By jove!” It was Allingham’s turn to be startled. “Who was he?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you, sir,” said the old man in a tone of courtly rebuke for such inquisitiveness about another client’s affairs.

Allingham felt like biting his tongue off at such a lapse into his pet failing—indiscretion. He was pretty certain, too, who the inquirer must have been.

“It wasn’t mere curiosity that made me ask,” he said. “But a good deal hangs on my tracing the people in this photograph. A man’s life perhaps. Here’s my card. We’re a reputable inquiry agency, and we’re working to prevent what may be a serious miscarriage of justice.”

“In that case,” said Mr. Pondersham, “I shall be happy to help you in any way I can. I can’t tell you who this inquirer was, because I don’t know. But the photograph is of a Mr. and Mrs. James Reddington of this town. I have the full particulars here, which I wrote down the time the other gentleman inquired.” Mr. Pondersham had gone to a desk as he spoke, and taken out a large memorandum book. After hunting through the pages for a while, he said: “Yes. Here we are. Mr. and Mrs. James Reddington, of 6 Rosetree Terrace. And the photograph was taken on the fifth of July, 1896.”

Allingham noted these particulars, and asked if Mr. Pondersham knew the lady’s maiden name, or any other details about the couple.

“No. I don’t know who the lady was,” the photographer replied. “But Mr. Reddington was killed in the Boer War. You’ll see his name on the memorial outside the station.”

Mr. Pondersham had no further information to impart, so Allingham thanked him and went his way. His first objective was number 6 Rosetree Terrace; but the young married couple who inhabited it knew nothing whatever about the Reddingtons. He then went on to the local register office, where for a few shillings he obtained a copy of the marriage certificate of James Reddington and Mary Hill; after which, with the satisfying consciousness of work well done, he dined at the best hotel before taking train for London.

As soon as he arrived there, late though it was, he drove out to Cardwell’s flat at Hampstead. His chief welcomed him with a cigar and a whiskey and soda, and listened from the depths of an immense armchair to the tale of his researches. When, however, Allingham announced that Reddington had been killed, he sat up briskly.

“Was the photographer sure of that?” he asked.

“Apparently,” said Allingham. “And I certainly saw his name on the war memorial.”

“There must be some mistake,” said Cardwell, “for I happen to know that the man is still alive.”

“By jove!” said Allingham. “This little mystery thickens at every step. How do you know it?”

“Because I called on him this afternoon. James Reddington is John Elthorne.”

Chapter VIII

Facts and Theories.

“If you’re to make a success of the detective business,” said Cardwell, “you’ll have to acquire a little more self-control. A moderate show of surprise, indicated by a lifting of the eyebrows and an increasing attention to the story, is permissible. But downright dumbfounded flabbergastedness simply won’t do. It gives clients a bad impression.”

Allingham swallowed the rebuke with a gulp of whiskey, and took a long pull at his cigar.

“Are you quite sure of that last revelation?” he asked.

“Quite,” said Cardwell decidedly. “I called at Elthorne’s office this afternoon in the guise of a big business man, and spent an hour with him discussing a deal in steel joists. There’s no doubt he’s the man in the photograph.”

“Of course, mistakes do occur in war,” said Allingham. “Men are reported missing, and never turn up again. Bodies are blown to pieces, or mutilated beyond recognition; or they mayn’t be found till after they’ve rotted. There’s lots of room for mistakes. I noticed, by the way, that Reddington’s name was amongst a few at the bottom of the list without any dates attached. The others all had the date and the name of the battle as well.”

“It looks then as it our friend was reported ‘Missing, believed killed,’ and for good and sufficient reasons used the opportunity to take a new personality.”

“Well, if you’re quite sure it’s the same man, that would explain it all right. But how does all this work in with the crime? You said that Bronson had some connection with Elthorne at one time–-“

“He was employed in his works. But the connection was closer than that. Here’s Bronson’s birth certificate, which I received from Somerset House this afternoon.”

Allingham took the slip of paper and read out: “Father, Jeremiah Bronson. Mother, Mary Bronson, formerly Mary Reddington, formerly Mary Hill. By jove! then he’s Elthorne’s son.”

“Not quite,” said Cardwell with a smile. “Your romantic imagination is running away with you. Bronson was born in 1904, long after Reddington’s supposed death, his mother having married again in the interval.”

“This is the queerest jigsaw-puzzle that ever was,” said Allingham. “The pieces all seem to fit each other so beautifully, but somehow they don’t make any picture. Let’s see exactly where we are now. Elthorne was once Bronson’s employer. Long before that he was Bronson’s mother’s first husband. Long afterwards he occupied a room in which Bronson is supposed to have committed a murder, but he left a few hours earlier. Take it for all in all, he seems to have had a lot more to do with Bronson than the unfortunate Wilson. Have you unearthed any more about him?”

“No, but we learned from Who’s Who that he was married in 1905, and has two sons and one daughter.”

“Ah! Bigamy. We’re getting to solid ground at last.”

“We’ve a long way to go yet, though. I think we may assume that it was Bronson who inquired about the photograph from Pondersham. According to Pondersham that was two years ago. Now I have ascertained that it’s exactly two years since Bronson’s mother died. So I gather that he discovered the photograph and the letters amongst her effects, and tracked down Elthorne in much the same way as we have done.”

“That seems pretty clear,” said Allingham. “But it does nothing to help our client. Rather the opposite, in fact.”

“Indeed?” said Cardwell.

“Well, what do you think of this solution? Bronson meant to murder Elthorne to avenge his mother’s betrayal. Elthorne found out somehow or other that Bronson was after him, and fled in a hurry. Bronson broke into his room and killed this other man by mistake in the darkness.”

“That story won’t hold water for a second,” said Cardwell. “First of all, look at the extraordinary coincidence it involves. Here you have two men each connected in some way, more or less shady, with Bronson’s past. Can you believe that it was mere chance that they should have occupied in succession the same room in the town where Bronson lived?”

“No, indeed. It looks as if they were in league together. But with that much alteration my theory would still hold good.”

“There’s another objection, though,” said Cardwell. “The murderer took the greatest precautions to leave no trace of his presence behind. If it was Bronson, why did he gratuitously invite suspicion by running away?”

“I suppose he remembered that he’d left the hammer behind.”

“He couldn’t have been hanged on that evidence,” said Cardwell. “Remember, the clue that brought the police to his house was the letter found in Wilson’s pocket, which he couldn’t possibly have known about. If it hadn’t been for that, he would have had ample time to get a new hammer for his tool-box. These things are all made of a stock pattern.”

“Well,” said Allingham, “it may have been bad tactics to run away if he was guilty, but why on earth should he run away if he was innocent?”

“That is exactly what I propose to make the basis of my inquiries. But it’s no use speculating about it in vacuo. If we exercised our imaginations we might think of a hundred different reasons. You know, that’s your principal fault as a detective. You rely too much on your imagination. Give you the smallest clue, and, instead of hunting round for more, you set to work to build up a complete story out of your head, just like a novelist, which I suppose is what you will be some day. No doubt

you could imagine a dozen equally plausible explanations of this murder, but we aren't likely to hit on the true one that way. We've got to stick to the facts, and build on them; and until we've gone down to Spurn Cove and gone over the ground there, we'll have to rely on what came out at the inquest. I've been studying the newspaper reports this afternoon, and I've noticed four points which certainly ought to have struck the coroner and jury as being favorable to Bronson if the one point against him hadn't seemed so conclusive."

Allingham drew his chair closer to that of his chief, and listened with the deepest attention.

"First of all," went on Cardwell, "there was the burglary at Bronson's house a few weeks ago. Nothing was taken, but the drawers of his writing-desk were rifled, and papers thrown all over the room. Papers, mark you. Obviously the burglar was looking for something different from what the usual burglar goes for. Mrs. Dakin thought it was the papers of some invention Bronson was working at. But that's most unlikely. Rival inventors don't do that sort of thing; and anyway, unless they're complete, such papers are no use to anyone but their author. The police and the coroner, on the other hand, thought they had something to do with the San Félipe forgery, which is far more plausible. But we have an advantage over Mrs. Dakin, the police, and the jury in knowing of some papers that were of vital importance to somebody."

Allingham nodded his comprehension.

"I should think," went on Cardwell "that Bronson was using the letters and photograph to blackmail Elthorne. We know from Miss Worthing that he was born in poor circumstances, but in recent years he has been well off. Now fortunes are not usually made in scientific research, so, with the material he had in hand, the suspicion has good foundations. I don't press it, though. Bronson may have come by his money quite honestly, and used his power over Elthorne for some other purpose. Elthorne, then, or someone in his pay, must have burgled his house to get hold of the papers. Having failed, he would probably try some other plan, and there we'll leave it for the moment.

"Now we come to the second point—the evidence of the housekeeper's daughter. This little fool was accosted on the promenade by someone described as a gentleman, who, under pretense of making an amorous appointment—which, you should note, he never followed up—made himself thoroughly acquainted with the ways of Bronson's household, and in particular with the habits of the servants. As you'll remember, the crime took place on the servants' regular night off. Of course, if Bronson intended to commit a crime, that would be the night he would choose. But wasn't it rather curious that it should happen to coincide with the night of Wilson's arrival at the hotel? One more of the coincidences, you see, which make this case so remarkable. Frankly, I reject it, and conclude that Wilson's arrival was timed—either by himself or by Elthorne—for that particular night, and that it boded no good to Bronson."

"By jove!" cried Allingham excitedly. "I think I see the whole thing now. Elthorne and Wilson were plotting against Bronson. Elthorne wanted to get hold of the papers, which Bronson was using to blackmail him, and he got the help of Wilson, who had fallen out with Bronson over the San Félipe business. For some tactical reason they arranged to occupy the room in the hotel each in turn. Meanwhile

Bronson found out that his enemies were up to something, took the offensive, and murdered Wilson. There now. Pick a hole in that it you can."

Allingham lay back in his chair with a gesture of triumph, and poured himself out another whiskey.

"Let us get back to our facts," said Cardwell inexorably. "My third point is the strongest of all. According to the medical evidence, which was given in detail only in The Times, there was a single bruise on the right side of Wilson's neck, and at least three on the left side: thumb and finger marks, you see. That means that the murderer gripped his throat with the right hand, and used the hammer with the left—the very opposite to what a normal man would do. In fact, he was left-handed. Needless to say, I at once rang up our client, Miss Worthing, and ascertained that Bronson is right-handed."

Allingham threw the butt of his cigar into the fire and said: "That certainly leaves my theory rather knock-kneed—if your witness is reliable."

"She is," said Cardwell. "In any case I framed my question so that she could not possibly guess which answer would be better for Bronson."

"Still, it would always be safer to be on the normal side."

"Of course I'm bearing that in mind. But let us get on to the fourth point. After his flight Bronson wrote a letter to his housekeeper, which was produced at the inquest, telling her to lock up the house, and inclosing a check. Its wording is rather peculiar, and I'll read it to you."

Cardwell picked up the green-covered file from his desk, and, after turning over the cuttings, said: "Here we are. Now listen to this:

"Dear Mrs. Dakin,

"I have to leave home for a while on urgent business. Please lock up the house, and leave a note of your address at the post office. Take Pete—that's the canary—with you. I inclose a check for a hundred pounds—and so on.

"Now," said Cardwell, "that letter is undated. It was posted in Paris two days after the crime, but there's no indication when it was written, and internal evidence leads me to believe that it was written without any knowledge of the murder."

"How do you make that out?" asked Allingham.

Cardwell passed the cutting across.

"Try to put the murder right out of your head for a moment, and read that letter at its face value. Doesn't it look as if Bronson, having found out that his enemies were after him, had decided to clear out for a while? Expecting that they'd burgle the house again, he arranged for the safety of the canary—that is to say, of the photograph—and asks his housekeeper to leave her address at the post office, where it would be very little use to him if he was going to be a fugitive from justice."

"That might have been a blind."

"A poor one, I'm afraid. Of course by itself this interpretation of the letter proves nothing. It must be taken in conjunction with the other points, and the effect of the whole four is cumulative. In any case I hope to obtain confirmatory evidence when I go down to Spurn Cove. If, as I suspect, this letter was written before Bronson's flight, we shall probably find that it was written on whatever paper he kept in his desk."

Allingham returned the folder to his chief.

"All these points," he said, "are very suggestive. But they aren't conclusive. And, though they pick holes in the police case and mine, they don't seem to suggest any clear case themselves. I've got a sort of vague idea of some subtle villainy afoot, but no definite plot. How do you explain the hammer, for instance? Do you think that the murderer stole it from Bronson's house in order to lay the crime at his door?"

"If the rest of my theory is correct, he must have done so. And that brings us to another point. Why did he choose a hammer of all weapons? Why not a knife? A hammer would be a handy weapon enough on a lonely moor, but in a crowded hotel, where silence and speed were all important—! If he failed to stun at the first blow, a cry for help would have brought people running from all sides. Depend upon it, the murderer took that risk for a good reason. It must have been absolutely necessary for his purpose to prevent his victim being recognized. And why? Almost certainly because he was a person whom Bronson had no reason to kill, and because his identity would give a clue to the real murderer."

"So what your theory amounts to is that Elthorne murdered Wilson, and then planted the guilt on Bronson's shoulders, after first scaring him out of the country."

"I shouldn't like to put it so definitely at this stage," said Cardwell, "but it's the direction in which my thoughts are tending. It means a subtle and complicated plot, of which I see only the outline, but all the facts we've unearthed seem to fit into it."

"What about Wilson's letter to Bronson?"

"Forgery, of course."

"And how does it all work in with the San Félipe business?"

"There I'm still in the dark as much as you are, and there's no help in these papers here, for the San Félipe authorities seem to be completely at sea. It's worth noting, however, that the only evidence we have for Bronson's connection with the affair is the letter found on Wilson, which, as I have said, is probably a forgery, and the burned scrap found in the grate at Seapoint, which may very well be another, and anyway doesn't signify much. 'More of the slush' might just as well mean humbug or palaver as forged notes, if you don't jump to conclusions from the plates found in Wilson's trunk.

"And that reminds me of another point. Why on earth should Wilson have carried those plates around after they'd done their job? The gang had cleaned up a million, you remember, by the time the notes were called in. They couldn't hope to palm off any more of the stuff. Surely their obvious course was to get rid of the plates as soon as the hue and cry began. Yet this fellow took the risk of smuggling them through the customs at the bottom of his trunk! Did you ever hear of such lunacy? I don't believe it for an instant. Ten to one the notes were struck in England, and those plates were put in Wilson's trunk for the very purpose they have achieved—to associate the murder with the forgery,—in other words, to provide Bronson with a motive for killing Wilson."

"You think that Bronson had nothing to do with the San Félipe business?"

"Yes. I imagine that Elthorne was the leader in that enterprise, and Wilson his ally, or more likely his tool."

"And probably Elthorne found his continued existence an embarrassment. Do you know, I'm developing an enormous respect for that gentleman. To get one incubus hanged for murdering the other would be a stroke of genius."

"Don't let us be cocksure about it all the same," said Cardwell, "till we've collected some more facts. I propose to pay an early visit to Spurn Cove, where I shall call on Mrs. Dakin and have a look at that letter, and do some exploring at the Grand Hotel and Bronson's house. First of all, though, I'm going to see Elthorne, with whom I have an appointment tomorrow night—this time in propria persona."

"With a view to observing his hands?" suggested Allingham.

"Amongst other things."

"Won't he recognize you, though?"

"No. The person who visited him this morning was an olive-skinned gentleman from Buenos Aires, aged fifty-five, with a white mustache, spectacles, gold-filled teeth, and defective English. Tomorrow I shall be my thoroughly Nordic self. Now let's get to roost. You'll find your usual room ready for you."

Chapter IX

The Empty House.

When Doris Philpot set out for Bronson's house she was in a pleasantly cheerful mood, confident that some really interesting discovery was before her, and full of an exquisite curiosity. It was only when she entered upon the last stretch of road, still and gloomy under its canopy of beech boughs, that misgivings began to assail her. She tried to shake them off, thinking how pleased Cranley would be when she brought him back some valuable clue, and how he would solve the mystery, and be mentioned in all the papers as "the brilliant young detective," and be marked down for early promotion. Then they would get married, and she would have a nice little home of her own, instead of standing all day at a bureau at everybody's beck and call. These were pleasant reflections, but they could not keep her apprehensions altogether at bay. Thoughts of Bronson forced themselves upon her; and it was a curious phenomenon that as she drew nearer to her objective, the conception she had formed of him changed steadily for the worse. Less and less now could she picture him as the amiable young man of Mrs. Dakin's description, and more and more as the grim garrotter of the midnight hours. When she reached the gate this conception had so taken possession of her that she almost decided to abandon her quest. But just then the sun, within half an hour of setting, shone out brilliantly and gave her courage. It was silly to be frightened, she told herself. After all, even if Bronson was the murderer, he must be thousands of miles away by this time. And at that she opened the gate and walked bravely up the avenue.

Her nerve nearly failed her again when, a moment later, she found herself in the hall of the silent house. She stood still for a moment, her ears tense, and her heart

thumping uncomfortably. Nothing stirred. The wash of the sea sounded infinitely far away. A bird chirped briefly in the garden. Most certainly the place was deserted, but it cost her a real effort to walk forward and open one of the doors.

The room into which she peeped, rather timidly, was the dining-room, chill and somber in the twilight that filtered through drawn blinds. A glance around satisfied her that there was no need to waste any time there. Then she moved on to the next door, which she knew from Cranley's description to be that of the laboratory. She opened it more boldly than the other, her nerves being now better attuned to their environment; but on the threshold she paused, daunted before the dark immensity of the place, filled with strange black shapes that cast blacker shadows, and haunted by the wraith of the evil that had been planned there. Dare she make her way past the lurking terrors in those shadows to let in the light that would dispel them? Several times she drew back; but at last, bracing herself with all the courage at her command, she strode forward, and, with a gasp like a diver reaching the air, let the blind up at a run.

With the snap of the lath against the roller Doris's confidence returned; and, having raised the other blinds as well, she walked round the room, surveying with an uncomprehending eye the various apparatus with which it was stocked. The collection of flasks, retorts, pipettes, burettes, and other multifarious glassware crowded on the shelves of the great rack near the furnace particularly held her attention, setting her wondering what possible uses there could be for things shaped so queerly. Resigning the problem at last, she passed along the chemical bench, reading the unfamiliar names on the bottles, after which she took a ridiculous little lens out of her pocket and, kneeling on the floor, began a determined hunt for footmarks. Not a sign, however, could she discover. Except for the dust inevitable in a neglected room, the polished parquet was as spotless as on the day when it was laid. Of course, Doris realized, Mrs. Dakin must have swept it before shutting up the house. What a nuisance it was that Frank hadn't examined it on his first visit.

Abandoning this task, she went over to the windows. If, as Doris was assuming, the hammer had been stolen from the room, there might be signs of a burglarious entry on one of them; but no suspicious mark could she find. Was ever a criminal so exasperatingly elusive? He seemed to be able to come and go as he liked without leaving a trace behind. Reluctantly the baffled sleuth quitted what she had hoped would be the most fruitful field of investigation, and again looked rather helplessly round the room.

The oak desk at once claimed her attention. Its drawers and pigeon-holes were full of papers, which she overhauled thoroughly, only to meet with further disappointment. One and all were covered with the incomprehensible jargon of science. There were scribbled notes in pencil, long polysyllabic essays, immensely complicated formulas and equations, drawings of apparatus, graphs, and so forth; but nothing of a personal nature. In the laboratory she had drawn a blank: so she decided to try her luck in the study.

Doris was now feeling much more at ease. In the cosy little room across the hall she pursued her investigations in leisurely fashion, looking inside every receptacle and ornament, emptying every drawer, and even turning up the carpet in a vain search for—something or other. She had given up hope now of finding any tracks

of the criminal, but she had a vague idea of unearthing some old letter or diary which might suggest a reason for Bronson's disappearance. The drawers of the desk, however, yielded nothing but scientific papers. Even the inevitable secret drawer, which she opened in tense excitement, contained only letters from a girl,—letters growing in intimacy, until suddenly they became love-letters. Doris read them, very unwillingly, but feeling justified by the urgency of the case. They gave her no clue, however. It there was some secret in Bronson's life which had compelled his sudden flight, he had said no word about it to his sweetheart.

Having completed this task and replaced the bundle in its receptacle, in a kind of forlorn hope she began pulling the various odds and ends out of the pigeon-holes of the desk. Out came a ball of string, a bunch of bills and receipts, luggage labels, post cards, a box of paper-fasteners, sealing-wax, notepaper. It seemed scarcely worth while going on, but she thought she might as well finish the job while she was at it. The next compartment contained a packet of envelopes. She picked them up carelessly; then suddenly dropped them with a shudder. Across the outer one was a brownish smear, which she recognized at once as blood.

It was quite a small thing—no more than might have come from a scratched finger—but in the circumstances it seemed full of meaning. As to what exactly it signified Doris, in the first flush of discovery, did not pause to wonder. After so much fruitless seeking it was something of a triumph to have discovered anything, and blood and murder certainly seemed to go together. It was only when she had hunted round unsuccessfully for further stains that she began to realize that her discovery did not mean so much after all. A spot of blood on an envelope, what connection could it have with a murder three or four miles away? If it had any, it would seem to indicate that the murderer had come here to write a letter immediately after his crime. If that were so, it would be one more point against Bronson, for it was scarcely likely that anyone else either would or could do so. Far more likely, reasoned Doris, the stain had nothing to do with the crime at all, and thus her visit had been entirely fruitless.

So at last, weary and dispirited, Doris was faced with the decision whether to retire from the field defeated, or to extend the search to the upstairs rooms. From that task, it must be admitted, she shrank. That distant region seemed, somehow, full of mysterious terrors, like those with which a child's imagination peoples empty rooms at night. It was growing dark too, and when she went to switch on the light she found to her dismay that the current had been cut off. That decided her. Even in her present situation she now no longer felt at ease. With quick nervous movements she began to tidy up the disorder she had created, stuffing the papers back into the drawers, and cramming into the pigeon-holes the odds and ends strewn over the desk. The stained envelope she took up to put in her handbag. Frank might be able to make something of it even if she couldn't. But where was her handbag? She hunted around, looked under this and that, vainly, while the darkness thickened. Where was it?

Suddenly she remembered: the laboratory of course; and thither she went at a run. A hurried search there in the gloom, till at length she found it on the chemical bench. Then, thrusting the envelope into it, she made for the hall.

It was darker there than in the laboratory, and fear seemed to lie crouched in the still gloomier passage leading to the kitchen, ready to spring as soon as her

back was turned. Summoning all her courage, she strode forward to the door, and began fumbling with nervous fingers for the handle. It was only after much futile seeking that she realized that she was on the wrong side of the door. She darted across to the other, but at the same moment, even as she gripped the knob, from the garden outside there came a faint sound. Doris paused to listen, her heart missing a beat. It was the unmistakable sound of footsteps on gravel. Someone was coming up the avenue toward the house.

Breathless, Doris stepped to the glass panel on one side of the door, and stood looking out into the gloaming for what should appear. Presently the dim figure of a man wheeling a bicycle emerged from the cover of the shrubs, heading straight for the house. Who could it be? Was it Bronson? Or was it the midnight burglar who had ransacked the house before and was now returning for what he had failed to find? Impossible to guess, but Doris felt an instinctive fear of the man. There was something sinister about his purposeful and stealthy stride, his almost noiseless step. The nearer he came, the more certainly did fear take hold of her. She could feel her hair bristling, her heart seemed to sink within her, and a cold shudder ran up her spine. As with some new awakening sense, her soul felt the presence of evil, and for a moment every power of her body was smitten with paralysis. Still the dark figure came on. With a desperate effort the girl snapped her invisible bonds, and fled to the shelter of the laboratory. To her dismay she found that there was no key in the door. She must hide therefore. But where? Like a hunted animal she ran down the long room, anxiously peering this way and that for a refuge. Even as she did so she heard the hall door open, and instinctively she stood stock-still. What would the stranger do now? While she waited, holding her breath, he entered the study, and presently Doris gathered from the sounds he made that he was searching it as she had done.

She could now move with less danger of being heard, so she resumed her quest of a hiding-place. Immediately in front of her when she turned was the great rack with its load of apparatus. It was obviously the only object in the room large enough to conceal her, and she found that there was just space enough for her between it and the wall. Ensconced there, she had leisure to think out a plan of action. Should she stay where she was in the hope of escaping discovery, or should she try to get away by the window? It was possible that the stranger might depart after searching the study. Or perhaps he would go upstairs, in which case she could slip away fairly easily. On the other hand, the man might take it into his head to search the laboratory, and it would be too much to hope that he would not find her then. But the other course presented even graver difficulties. She might stumble in making her way across the darkened chamber. The bolt of the window might creak and betray her. Even if she got away unobserved, her difficulties would not be over. A sound on the graveled path would bring the man after her, and long and lonely was the road to the nearest house. She shuddered at the mere thought of the grim chase that would ensue; yet equally terrifying seemed the alternative of lying still and breathless in her hiding-place with that sinister stranger prowling close at hand.

While Doris hesitated, the decision was taken out of her hands. She heard the man leave the study and come down the hall toward the laboratory. The girl stood in dreadful suspense, hoping against hope that he would pass by; but in a

moment came a flash of light, and he entered the room, illuminating his way with an electric torch. Through a narrow gap between two glass troughs Doris watched his movements. He went straight to the bookshelf and, taking down a volume, looked rapidly through the leaves. Then, holding it face downward by the covers, he shook it vigorously to and fro; after which he replaced it on the shelf and took down another. As he did so, the electric beam fell for an instant on his face; and a thrill of astonishment went through Doris's frame as she recognized it. The stranger was no other than the murdered Mr. Wilson.

Chapter X

A Night of Terror.

It was incredible, impossible; yet the recognition came to Doris with absolute certitude. Even without the shell-rimmed glasses she knew the man. There was no mistaking the square-cut jaw, the straight thin-lipped mouth, closed like a steel trap, or the deeply cloven chin. She saw too that he wore kid gloves, as he had done when signing the hotel book on the fatal night. Without a doubt, unless he had a twin brother, this was the man.

In that case, whose body was it that had been found in his room? And what part had this mysterious person played in the tragedy? Was he, perhaps, the murderer? As the thought crossed her mind, Doris's blood chilled at the realization of her position. Here she was, alone in this empty house, isolated from all humanity, prying into the secrets of one whose very atmosphere was evil. She was utterly at his mercy, and a breath might betray her. Fascinated by her peril, she watched the stranger methodically taking book after book from the shelves and treating each in the same manner as the first. Once, when a sheet of paper fluttered from between the pages, he stooped quickly to retrieve it, and eagerly examined it by the light of the torch. But he was obviously disappointed by what he saw, for he soon crumpled it up, and tossing it aside, returned to his investigation of the books.

Thus a long unmeasured time went by, while night settled grimly round the lonely house. Doris in her hiding-place maintained her rigid attitude with increasing discomfort and pain. Her heels were becoming sore from long standing; her back ached; a curl of her hair tickled the tip of one ear maddeningly; she badly wanted to blow her nose: yet she dared not move hand or foot. As the sinister figure came nearer and nearer, it became dangerous even to breathe. The end of the bookshelf was barely ten feet from her shelter, so that while the man carried out his routine procedure with the last few volumes the tension became almost unbearable. Doris's head began to swim, as it had done once, a long time ago, before a faint. At all costs she must keep from fainting now. She strove gallantly to retain her consciousness, clenching her teeth on her lower lip to repress a wild impulse to scream; and meanwhile that awful man from the dead, with exasperating patience, went on with his task, going through the last volumes with

the same thoroughness as the first. At length, however, he had finished, and as he moved away toward a cabinet at the other end of the room, the girl could relax and breathe once more.

Her respite was brief. Having gone through the contents of the cabinet, the man turned back again to pry into the cupboards under the chemical bench. As he knelt there Doris felt the unmistakable premonitory sensations of an approaching sneeze. Aghast at the realization, she held her breath, put her hands over her mouth, in a desperate endeavor to suppress it. But nature was not to be denied. With a vehemence redoubled by her restraining efforts, it came.

At the sound the man started up so violently that he struck his head against the top of the cupboard. Doris was quick to see her only chance. While he was still dazed she sprang from her refuge, and with a nimble movement got to the other side of the chemical bench. Next minute the light of the torch flashed full in her face.

"If you value your life, stand still," said the man, at the same time backing to the door and closing it.

For answer Doris picked up a bottle from the bench and flung it at one of the windows, with a faint hope that the noise might attract attention from someone outside. It missed, however, and smashed in pieces against the wall. Simultaneously the man leaped toward her; but she was prepared for that, and ran round the opposite end of the bench, and down the other side, with the man in hot pursuit. She did not dare make for the door, because she knew well that if she did she would be overtaken at once. Her only chance was to keep the chemical bench between them; so round and round they went in the darkness—for her enemy had switched off the torch—round and round and round, swiftly down the sides, pulling up sharp at the corners, with fingers clinging to the edge of the bench at the turn. With a clear run the man could have caught her up fairly easily; but at these recurrent checks, owing to the lesser momentum of her lighter frame, she regained what distance she had lost on the straight. So on they went, round and round, again and again, as in a nightmare. Hardy and active as the girl was, the pace soon began to tell on her. Muscles were tiring, breath failing. The very extremity of her peril seemed to paralyze her will to escape. Yet on she went almost mechanically. Round and round, round and round. Was the chase to go on forever?

She felt that she must stop. She must draw one good satisfying breath if she had to die for it. Then, at the very breaking-point of mind and body, her pursuer changed his tactics. Instead of taking the corner he doubled back on his course so unexpectedly that Doris had much ado not to run right into his arms. It was only an accident that saved her. As she whipped round, her skirt caught in the imperfectly closed door of a cupboard and pulled it open. An instant later the man ran into it with a sickening crash. Looking back from a safe distance, Doris could just distinguish his form bent double as he nursed an aching knee.

Unfortunately for Doris this interposition took place when he was between her and the door, so that she could not escape from the room. It gave her a useful breathing space, however, and when the man resumed the chase it was with much diminished vigor. Presently he stopped dead, and Doris did the same. With the bench between them, Doris could not see him. She stood straining her ears for any

sign of movement, at the same time glancing alternately to left and right in dreadful uncertainty as to which end he might appear at. Thus an age of suspense went by in a stillness that was agony to her overwrought nerves. Eyes and ears were beginning to play tricks with her now. Black shadows formed and dissolved themselves in the gloom, with the effect of a hundred menacing figures coming at her from different sides; and a throbbing in her ears seemed like a reecho of her enemy's feet in the suspended chase. At length, however, one faint sound made itself heard above this tattoo: a barely perceptible shuffle, which told her that the man was creeping round stealthily to the left.

Doris was about to move off in the opposite direction when the tail of her eye caught sight of the oak bureau close by, and a sudden inspiration struck her. Two light steps on tiptoe took her behind it, and there she crouched while her pursuer, still creeping, passed by and went on around the chemical bench. A few seconds later she heard the spring and the rush forward that were to have taken her by surprise. Then the torch flashed, and the ray went darting this way and that about the room. Next came the sound of jingling glass at its far end, telling her that the man was looking into her previous hiding-place.

Now or never was Doris's chance. In an instant she had sprung from the desk to the door, flung it open, and darted across the hall to the room immediately opposite. There was a key in the lock. Tearing it out, she dashed inside, slammed the door, and, with the man's heavy steps thundering down the laboratory, frantically tried to thrust the key into the hole. Twice, thrice, her shaking fingers missed their aim. The man was in the hall. With her free hand she found the hole, caught the point of the key, and guided it home,—not an instant too soon, for even as she turned it her enemy's weight came crashing against the door. A vicious wrenching at the handle followed, then the deliberate impact of a muscular shoulder; but the good oak held stoutly, and Doris, leaning against the wall, trembling and exhausted, knew that she was safe for the moment.

Not a yard away, separated by only two inches of timber, stood her baffled foe, breathing as hard as she after his exertions. He did not renew the assault, but retired to the laboratory, where she could hear him rummaging about, probably in search of something to break down the door with. Looking round for material for a barricade, she perceived that the room was quite bare. Her only hope then was to escape by one of the windows. At once she ran across to the nearest, and tried to open it; but the screw holding the bar was so clogged with verdigris that it would not turn. While she struggled with it there came from the laboratory the sound of the man's returning footsteps, so she stopped her work promptly, fearful that he might hear her and come round to cut her off, or break in this way himself. She meant to resume as soon as the noise of his battering should arise to drown any she might make; but he passed the door by, and continued his way along the hall. What was he going to do now? Would he arm himself with the poker from the study? Or would he come round to the window? Doris's heart sank at the latter possibility. They were French windows, easily accessible from the ground outside, so that he had only to smash a pane of glass to gain an entry. There was the risk, of course, of raising an alarm by the noise, but the chance of its being heard was remote. What, then, could the girl do if he made the attempt? She saw at once where her chance lay. She would escape by the door and barricade herself in one

of the rooms upstairs, where there would be ample material for the purpose. With a rampart of furniture to protect her, and bedroom crockery available for use as missile weapons in case it were forced, she would be infinitely safer than in her present position; so much so that she began almost to hope for the appearance of her enemy at the other side of the glass which was to be the signal for her flight.

Instead, the man came back again along the hall. He must have found his weapon, she concluded, and prepared to resume operations on the window screw. The man, however, passed on into the laboratory, where he dropped on the floor a burden that sounded heavy, though not very hard. Noises of other things being thrown down followed; then he returned to the study, to come back again with another load, which he dropped as before. This performance was repeated several times, with an interval marked by the sounds of wood being chopped and split. Further journeys between study and laboratory followed; and Doris came to the conclusion that, while her enemy was thus absorbed in his work, he would be unlikely to notice any sounds she might make at the window. She accordingly set to work afresh at the screw, twisting, twisting at the milled edge, with a persistence that was half-mechanical, till her fingers were bruised and raw. While she labored, her enemy finished whatever he was doing and retired to the study. Utter silence then fell upon the house. What was he doing, she wondered, as she tugged and twisted at the stubborn metal. He must be waiting, listening for her next move. Many minutes went by, and still the silence continued. She rested, sucked her aching fingers, wanted to break down and cry, but heroically returned to her toil. And at last her reward came. The screw gave way so unexpectedly that for a moment she could not believe it, and made no further move. Then, with infinite caution, she opened the window an inch or two, and paused, listening.

Still there came no sound from the enemy. Outside too there was silence save for the rustle of the night wind among the black spectral trees, and the wash of the sea on the more distant shore. With reviving hope the girl peered into the gloom, surveying the way to safety. Immediately in front of the window lay a graveled path, but it was a narrow one. A single step would suffice to carry her to the grass beyond; then a swift noiseless rush, screened by the shrubs, to the low wall separating the grounds from the road. If she got so far as that unobserved, she would surely be able to get clear away.

Thus resolving, she opened the window a little wider, put her head out, and looked around. Nothing stirred but the branches of the trees. The girl hesitated a moment in fearful indecision, frantically wondering where her enemy could be. Was he waiting at the door, ready, at the first sound made by her, to dart around and intercept her or run her down before she could reach the wall? Or was he already crouched out there in the shrubbery, watching for her to run into his arms? With these dreadful alternatives before her she delayed acting, while the slow minutes went by, hoping against hope that he might yet resume the assault on the door. At last, however, with an infinity of care, she opened the window to its fullest extent, and put one leg out over the Sill. Seated astride of this, she paused again, ready to withdraw in an instant at any movement beyond. Then, reassured by the continued silence, with the same elaborate precautions she drew her other leg over, and dropped noiselessly on the path. A step took her to the grass, but she dared not run yet. Stealing on tiptoe among the shrubs, her heart beating at a rate

that positively hurt, at long last she reached the wall and sat down on it, so much overcome by relief at her escape that for the moment she had not the power to go farther.

Presently a faint click broke the silence. The hall door of the house had opened, and immediately afterward Doris could hear the footsteps of her enemy on the gravel. He was moving slowly and with caution, and, as far as she could judge, toward the window from which she had fled. In a few seconds he would have discovered her escape, and then–-

Had Doris been in her right mind she would have appreciated that she was now in no real danger, lost as she was in the darkness. But the terrors of the night had unnerved her. Panic-stricken, she jumped down from the wall, and, as she did so, dislodged a couple of stones, which came crashing to earth beside her. The drop was greater, too, than she had expected, so that she pitched forward on hands and knees in the roadway. The alarm had been given. An instant later came the sound of her enemy charging through the bushes toward her. Doris picked herself up and ran like a hare.

She had turned her face northward instead of toward home, knowing that the nearest house was in that direction. The gate was not more than a quarter of a mile away; but oh how long seemed the road that stretched ahead of her in the gloom. On one side it was bordered by a row of tall, black spruce firs, in whose remote tops the wind sighed a long note of perpetual desolation. On the other were the bleak rocks of the upper foreshore, from behind which came the alternate rush and suck of the sea waves. The rising breeze was against her, and seemed purposely to hold her back; and a few light raindrops, premonitory of a coming shower, drove against her face. Her first spurt of speed exhausted itself in a few seconds. Thereafter she struggled on mechanically, with failing breath, dry-mouthed, light-headed, a dead weight seeming to hang about her legs. That sinking of the spirit that drags down the spent quarry was upon her, when capture begins to seem less intolerable than the continuance of the struggle.

Still the dreary road stretched inexorably before her, every yard of it to be trodden in pain. Her utmost effort seemed now but a crawl. The rain came thicker. The wind held her back with increasing force. Yet on she went, staggering, her heart thumping, thumping, as if it would burst. From that bend just ahead the gate would be in sight: in sight, but how far away! It seemed impossible that her weakening limbs could carry her even to the bend, still less over the hundred yards that lay beyond. Was it worth while keeping on?

She reached the bend at last. But what was this roaring sound ahead that rose even above the throbbing confusion in her ears? Was her enemy, by some strange maneuver, now coming toward her from in front? Were those his eyes that rushed at her with inexplicable speed and blinding brightness? They were close upon her now. With one wild shriek of terror the girl collapsed swooning on the roadway.

Chapter XI

Rescue.

From out of a well of darkness she looked up into a face: the pleasant rounded face of a very young man.

"You're all right," he said. "Don't try to move yet."

"Where am I?" Doris asked.

"On the roadside. Don't worry. You'll be all right in a moment."

As her senses cleared she saw that she was lying on grass, wrapped in an overcoat. The young man was kneeling beside her. The lights of his car gleamed in the background.

"Where's the man gone?" she asked.

"What man? There's no man here but me. Don't you worry."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. And if there was"—stoutly—"he'd have me to deal with."

"Oh!" She closed her eyes with a sigh of relief and lay quiet for a moment. Opening them again, she said: "I wonder could you get me some water? I'm nearly dead with thirst."

"Certainly. There's a house close by, and I know the people. Stay where you are. I'll be back in a second."

"Oh, no, no. You mustn't leave me!" Starting up, the girl caught at the boy's arm in an agony of apprehension.

"Why, you're shaking all over," he said, patting her reassuringly on the back. "Did some brute attack you?"

"Yes. I daren't stay here alone. You mustn't leave me."

"All right, then. I'll take you with me. The people will still be up, because I've only just left them. Let me get you on board my little car, and we'll be there in a jiffy."

So saying, he helped her into the rather cramped seat of a baby Austin and, turning, drove off.

"Feeling better?" he asked presently.

"Lots," replied Doris, though her limbs were still trembling.

"Breeze will do you no end of good," said the young man. "Little car's a goer, isn't she? I call her Genevieve."

"Why?" asked Doris, smiling.

"Oh, it seems sort of suitable, don't you think?—Here we are."

They turned in at a gateway and passed up an avenue not unlike that of Seapoint. The young man's ring was answered by a nice-looking old gentleman in a smoking-jacket, who interrupted his hasty explanations with a "Bless my soul, bring her in." Doris was half-carried into a handsomely furnished drawing-room and laid on a couch. Then the gentleman said: "Now, Billy, you know where the brandy is. Get it out while I fetch Catherine."

Before long he was back again, preceded by a buxom white-haired lady, who was scarcely across the threshold when she called out: "Good heavens! What on earth is the boy doing? Do you want to kill the girl, Billy?"

The young man, who was in the act of tendering Doris a wineglass brimful of neat brandy, came to a stop, looking rather like a schoolboy caught at some mischief.

“My fault entirely, my dear,” said the lady’s husband meekly. “I told him what to do.”

“I might have guessed it,” said the lady. “Men are all the same. Their one resource is this wretched alcohol.”

“It’s Martell’s best, my dear,” replied her husband, turning a twinkling eye on Doris.

“I dare say. But a whole glass of it—and neat! I don’t know what you were thinking of. Run and get some water, Billy.”

She took the glass from the young man, who ran off obediently, returning in a moment with a jug of water. The lady had already poured the bulk of the brandy back into the decanter, and she now diluted the remainder to what seemed to her the proper weakness. Doris drank it off, and at once began to feel a little better.

“Were you attacked by a tramp, my poor girl?” the lady asked.

“A murderer. Oh, I’ve had such an awful time. I can’t bear to think of it.”

Doris fell back on the couch, exhausted by the effort of speaking. The brandy had stimulated her brain, but physically she was quite worn out. The lady dropped on her knees by the couch and began to chafe her hands. Presently she said:

“Alexander, do go upstairs and get my smelling-salts—the silver-topped ones. They’re on the dressing-table—the right-hand side. A moment, though. There’s a menthol cone in the little drawer on the same side. You might bring that too. And, Billy, bring over one of those cushions.”

The lady’s husband had taken a step toward the door at the first of these instructions, but before they were completed he halted dubiously.

“Look here, my dear,” he said with a kind of affected timidity. “What about a spot of something to eat instead of all this chemist’s stuff?”

“Take the eau-de-Cologne with you when you’re fetching the smelling-salts,” said his wife dryly.

With a glance at Billy the old man went out. The lady then bent over Doris and said in a low voice: “Would you like something to eat, my dear?”

“Oh, yes, please,” answered Doris with sudden vigor. “I’m simply starving. I’ve had nothing since four o’clock.”

“You poor thing!” The lady’s voice expressed genuine concern. “Come here, Billy. You go on chafing her hands while I get her something to eat.”

In an instant she was gone. Billy came over and rather sheepishly caught hold of some of Doris’s fingers. Doris, equally abashed, made some demur, but that only encouraged the youth.

“I’m under orders, you know,” he said, smiling. “And if you knew anything of Mrs. Rossiter you’d know that her orders must be obeyed. Priceless old bird, isn’t she?”

At this moment the door opened and a girl in a pink silk négligée entered the room.

“What’s all the excitement about?” she began in a languid tone: then stopped suddenly with a sharp “Oh!” of surprise. Billy dropped Doris’s hand and looked around rather guiltily. “Hello, Pansy,” he said.

“That you, Billy? I thought you’d gone,” said the girl coldly, with a glance of jealous suspicion at Doris. She was pretty, though her features were a shade too much on the thin side. Her hair was a miracle of the shingler’s and waver’s art;

and her complexion was all that youth and health, aided by cream and powder, could make it.

"I nearly ran over this lady at the gate," Billy explained. "She was running away from a tramp or some such johnny. Did you say it was a tramp, Miss–-?"

"A murderer," said Doris. "He chased me all the way from Seapoint–-"

"Oh, I say! Was it Bronson?"

Doris decided to keep the most sensational feature of her adventure a secret for the present. "I don't know," she said. "I went to the house this afternoon to—well, to work out a theory I have–-"

"By jove, you have a nerve," said Billy admiringly, while Pansy, in the background, frowned. "Do go on and tell us all about it."

Doris, faint and sick with hunger, was utterly incapable of telling a consecutive story, and fortunately she was prevented from making the attempt by the reappearance of Mrs. Rossiter carrying a tray with a plate of beautifully cut bread and butter, tea, and a boiled egg.

"I say, Mrs. Rossiter," Billy burst out at once, "do you know what she's been up to? Hunting for clues up at Seapoint, by jove, and getting chased by Bronson."

"What's this?" said Mr. Rossiter, who had followed his wife into the room.

Mrs. Rossiter put down the tray on a low table by the couch and turned on the men a look of reproof. "Do let the girl have something to eat," she said. "Her story can wait till afterward."

"Quite right, my dear," said her husband. "Just you get outside these vittles, young lady, and don't mind us." He looked at Doris with a kindly humorous smile. Doris liked the old gentleman instinctively, and felt sorry that he was married to so overwhelming a wife—quite unnecessarily, for they were a devoted couple. Her hostess meanwhile had poured out a cup of tea, so she promptly fell to upon the supper. The milk-fresh egg and the delicious bread and butter were soon finished, and a piece of cake as well. Then Billy offered her a cigarette.

"No, thanks," said Doris. "I don't smoke."

Billy, somewhat surprised, took one himself, and was putting the case back in his pocket when Pansy said:

"Thank you, Billy. I'll have one."

"Oh, sorry," said Billy, turning round to her with the case. Then he lit his own cigarette, and only remembered Pansy's after he had blown the match out. "Sorry," he said again as he remedied the omission, while Pansy puffed hard so as to raise a smoke screen to conceal the flush of mortification that rose to her cheeks. She might have saved herself the trouble, however, for Billy's entire attention was already monopolized by Doris.

"Now do tell us all about it," he said, looking at her with infatuated eyes.

"If you really feel equal to it," Mrs. Rossiter added kindly.

"I say, though," interposed Mr. Rossiter, "what about your people? Won't they be anxious about you? We can ring them up, you know."

"I don't live with my people," said Doris. "I work at the hotel. That's why I'm so interested in this murder." Thereupon she launched into her story, which she told as briefly as possible, omitting all mention of her pursuer's identity.

"It must have been Bronson," said Billy. "What a dud lot the police must be not to have caught him."

Doris said she had not had time to look at the man properly.

"I should like to know what that theory of yours is, young lady," said Mr. Rossiter. "You know, I shouldn't be a bit surprised to find that the police are all wrong."

"I dare say," said Mrs. Rossiter. "Trust you never to think the same as other people."

"Well," said Mr. Rossiter, "I must say Bronson didn't look like the sort of fellow who'd commit a murder. I've often chatted with him across the wall, you know, and found him a very pleasant young chap. Clever too. Why, I remember one time when the lights went wrong here and we couldn't get a man out—it was Sunday, I suppose—he just popped in and put them right in no time."

"Oh, I dare say he was clever," Mrs. Rossiter admitted. "But that doesn't prove anything. I never spoke to him, but I didn't like his looks at all. He always had such a cantankerous expression on his face–-"

"Absent-minded, my dear," said Mr. Rossiter.

"Well, I didn't like him anyway," replied his spouse implacably, "and why anyone should think him innocent with such a clear case against him, I can't imagine. I hope they'll catch him soon and hang him well. It makes me positively shudder to think that we've had such a criminal living next door to us. We might all have been murdered in our beds. And I really think, Alexander, that, after Miss Philpot's experience, you ought to drop that ridiculous idea of yours."

"That's all very well, my dear," said Mr. Rossiter, who had opened his mouth to speak at the end of nearly every sentence of this harangue, and closed it again good-humoredly as it flowed on regardless of him. "That's all very well, but we're still in doubt whether it was really Bronson that Miss Philpot saw."

"Who else could it have been?" said the lady.

"What was he like, Miss Philpot?" asked Mr. Rossiter.

"All I could see," answered Doris, "was that he was dark and just over middle height."

"That's Bronson," interjected Pansy.

"What about his complexion?"

"Rather sallow, I should say, and he had a biggish nose."

"Well, that settles it," said Mr. Rossiter. "Bronson was dark all right, but his complexion was ruddy, and his nose was almost a snub. I wonder who the fellow could have been."

"Some confederate, I suppose," said Mrs. Rossiter. "You'd better look to the doors and windows tonight, Alexander. I don't feel easy with people like that prowling about."

"Whoever he is," said Pansy, "I don't think any theory's going to upset the case against Bronson. It's as clear as daylight."

Doris showed no disposition to argue the matter.

"That's just it," said Billy. "In detective stories the case against the wrong person always is as clear as daylight. I bet Miss Philpot's got some jolly interesting idea up her sleeve."

Pansy blew off some cigarette smoke to show that she was unimpressed.

"Now, Billy," said Mrs. Rossiter, "it's time for you to be getting home, or your mother will think you've had an accident."

Billy jumped up at once, saying: “Very well, Mrs. Rossiter. But hadn’t I better drive Miss Philpot back to the hotel?”

“I think Miss Philpot had better stay with us for tonight,” said Mrs. Rossiter. “Wouldn’t you prefer that?” she inquired of the girl. “We can telephone to the hotel.”

“It’s very kind of you–-” began Doris.

“There, that’s settled then. Now, Billy, off with you.”

“I wonder if the rain’s stopped,” said Billy, going to the window and drawing aside the curtain. Then “Oh, I say!” he exclaimed. “Seapoint is on fire.”

With various sounds of astonishment the others all rushed to his side, Doris included. For a moment they could see nothing but a thin flame streaming skyward among the distant trees. Then a gust of wind made it swirl, and a gable and chimney were momentarily illuminated by the glow. The little group of spectators stood silent for a while, held by that feeling of excited anticipation which a fire always arouses. But before long the spell was broken by the calm voice of Mrs. Rossiter.

“Alexander, hadn’t you better telephone for the fire brigade?”

Chapter XII

Theory Number Four.

It was an amazed and horrified Cranley who listened to Doris’s tale at the police station next morning. Duty had called him at an early hour to survey the charred and drenched wreckage of Seapoint; and he had found her waiting for him on his return. His face grew pale as he learned of the dangers which his little girl had been through, and his imagination sickened at the thought of what might have been the end of the adventure. Most of the story she told sitting on his knee, with his arm held tightly round her—the expression of a protective impulse which, however retrospective in action, was somehow comforting to both of them. The end of it was smothered with kisses and expressions of endearment, and of relief at the beloved one’s escape, on which we forbear to intrude.

“And to think that I was here, sleeping like a log, while my little girl was going through all those horrors.” Cranley seemed to find a gloomy satisfaction in laying this culpability on his honest shoulders. Then he proceeded to scold Doris with the vexatious concern of a lover, putting her down from his knee the better to impress her. “To go off like that to the house of a murderer without saying a word to anybody! It was madness. You should have told me about it first.”

“If I had, you’d only have laughed at me,” said Doris.

“Oh, darling–-“

“Yes, you would. Have you forgotten how scornful you were yesterday when I told you about my theory, and how cocksure you were about your own?”

“Well, wasn’t I right?” said Cranley.

“No, my dear. You were just about as wrong as you could be. I was right.”

Cranley looked at her questioningly. In telling her story so far Doris had kept back one important detail—the identity of the midnight marauder, whom Cranley had naturally assumed to be Bronson. When she now revealed the truth he was staggered, and at first incredulous. He questioned her searchingly, reminding her how difficult it must have been to observe the man properly on both the occasions on which she had seen him; but she held her ground firmly, until at last Cranley had to own himself convinced.

"It looks," he said after some thought, "as if Wilson had staged this murder in order to make a fade-out for himself. That's why he took care to destroy the other man's face. But in that case who is the murdered man? How did he get into Wilson's room? And what has Bronson got to do with it all? The case is just a string of questions, and I can't find an answer to one of them."

"I think I can," said Doris.

"Oh, indeed. Let's hear it."

"Don't be so sarcastic," said Doris. "Here's my theory. This man Wilson was the originator of the San Félipe forgeries. He was a clever swindler, but he couldn't manage the technical business of making the plates; so, by some plausible trick or other, he got Bronson and another man, whom we'll call Blank, to make them for him. When the swindle came out, Bronson and Blank were afraid to give any evidence for fear their own innocence mightn't be accepted. Then, later on, Wilson came over to England to get them to make plates for another forgery. When they refused, he threatened to betray them to the police, probably by sending in some letters they had written to him. Blank then, being the bolder man, decided to burgle Wilson's room and get the papers back. Borrowing some tools from Bronson, he made his way in, and was then attacked and killed by Wilson.

"Now, what would Wilson do? He might have pretended that the dead man was a burglar, but he was probably afraid that his identity would come out at the inquest, and his own career along with it. He therefore decided to stage a fade-out. He dressed the dead man up in his pajamas, put his ring on his finger, left his glasses by the bedside, and battered his face with the hammer. Then he thought it would be a good plan to fix the murder on somebody, and who more appropriate than Bronson? He therefore wrote the letter you found in Blank's pocket, and, when all was ready, climbed down the verandah and got away."

Doris paused and added: "There's my theory now. If you have any holes to pick in it, fire away."

"It doesn't explain why Bronson bolted," said Cranley promptly.

"Oh, yes, it does. When Blank failed to return, he must have guessed that something had gone wrong, and ran away so as to be on the safe side. He probably believes that Blank killed Wilson, and so he's remaining in hiding for fear of being arrested as an accessory if Blank is caught."

"That's likely enough," said Cranley. "But what about Blank? Who is he? And why has he not been missed?"

"Well, he may have been an American, or some other foreigner, and his people have no idea yet that anything has happened to him."

"And what about Bronson's footprints, which I found on the balcony?"

“Oh, there’s nothing in that. Why shouldn’t Blank wear rubber-soled number sevens too? It’s a common enough size. Or, if his own shoes had no rubber soles, he might have borrowed Bronson’s when he went burgling.”

“You have an answer for everything. Now, what do you think Wilson was looking for in Bronson’s house last night? And how did he get hold of the latch-key? It’s a Yale lock, you know.”

“He must have got the key from Blank’s pocket,” said Doris. “Since Blank and Bronson were in league together, Bronson might have lent him a latch-key for convenience’ sake. He may have visited him at night perhaps, and they didn’t want the servants to know.”

“Well, what was Wilson up to last night?”

“I suppose he wanted to get back some blackmailing letters he had written to Bronson.”

“Hardly,” said Cranley. “People don’t keep blackmailing letters as a rule. They burn them. Now your man would never have made so exhaustive a search—or taken the risk of going to the place at all, for that matter—if he hadn’t been tolerably sure that what he wanted was in the house. From your description I take it that he was looking for a paper of some sort,—something so dangerous to him that when he failed to find it he burned the house down to make sure of destroying it. However, we may get it yet.”

“Oh?” said Doris in surprise. “Was the house saved?”

“Most of it,” replied Cranley. “He made a sort of bonfire on the floor of the laboratory, and another in the study. The first spread to the kitchen and some of the back rooms, but the other didn’t light properly, so the front rooms are practically undamaged.”

“If there was any paper in that house,” said Doris, “either Wilson or I would have found it last night. Probably Bronson destroyed it himself.”

“Took it away with him, more likely,” said Cranley.

“But what do you think of my theory, you bad boy? Don’t you think your little girl has a good-sized head on her after all?”

“I think so much of your theory,” said Cranley, kissing her, “that I’m going to act on it. I’ll start two lines of investigation at once. First we’ll get on the trail of Wilson, if you can give us a good description of him.”

“I can,” said Doris.

“Then I’ll try to think out a way of letting Bronson know that if he cares to give us information it will be to his advantage.”

“So I have been a help to you, haven’t I?”

“I should just think you have. But oh, you obstinate little darling”—Cranley’s tone suddenly became passionately earnest—“don’t ever take any steps in this case again without first consulting me. Promise you won’t?”

“No need to promise,” said Doris. “I wouldn’t go near that awful house again for a million pounds.”

“Promise all the same.”

Doris yielded to his importunity.

“It’s not only the house I’m thinking of,” said Cranley. “You must keep out of the thing altogether. Altogether, do you hear?”

Doris promised again, and received another kiss. Then, quite suddenly, she remembered something. When, on her first betrayal of herself to Wilson, she had leaped from her hiding-place in the laboratory, she had dropped her handbag on the floor behind her. In the bag was the bloodstained envelope which she had found in Bronson's desk, and which she had entirely forgotten in the subsequent rush of events. She told all this now to Cranley, who lit a cigarette and smoked it to the end before making any comment.

"I must go up to Seapoint and have a look for it," he said at last, "though I don't suppose it'll have survived the fire. Are you quite sure there were no other stains—on the desk or the other papers?"

"Certain," said Doris.

"I can make sure of that when I go up there," said Cranley. "On the whole, though, I don't think this will help us much. It probably has no connection with the crime at all; and if it has any, I don't see how it fits in with either of our theories."

"It'll be curious," said Doris, "if it knocks them both to pieces."

Chapter XIII

Mr. Elthorne at Home.

Mr. Robert Cardwell must not be pictured as a sharp-faced sleuth, with the faculties and the instincts of the born investigator of crime. He was anything but sharp-faced, and his tastes were for books and pleasant company rather than for facts and hard work. He liked to exercise his wits on criminal problems in the abstract; he took a keen intellectual pleasure in piecing fragments of evidence together and deducing events from them; but the business of arduously hunting for clues and practically tracing the criminal himself was not much to his mind. To the concrete cases which came his way he brought no more specialized faculties than a wide experience of men and books, and a habit of lucid and logical thinking; which latter, of course, is rare enough. And while he was always ready to exercise his brain to the fullest extent, he was apt, for the reasons aforesaid, to take short cuts in action. Hence his possibly unwise decision to get early to grips with Mr. Elthorne.

Punctually at the appointed hour of nine o'clock, he rang the bell of that gentleman's house at Lancaster Gate, and was ushered into a luxuriously furnished smoking-room where the magnate awaited him. Elthorne was a tall grizzled man, with keen dark eyes, and a harsh face with prominent nose and cheek-bones. His general expression, underlying the curiosity of the moment as to his visitor's purpose, seemed to be one of discontent: not the discontent of one who has failed in his purpose, but the deeper emotion of one who has obtained his heart's desire and found it unsatisfying. It was some time before Cardwell arrived at this interpretation. At the moment he saw only the keen eyes and masterful pose of the successful man of business. Elthorne was smoking an enormous cigar,

but at the entrance of his visitor he took it from his mouth, displaying in the action a powerful hand which, though carefully tended, had obviously done hard work at some time. He motioned Cranley to a chair and offered him his choice of many smokes, maintaining a flow of polite commonplaces while a footman served coffee and brandy.

As soon as they were alone his voice took a brisk and business-like tone. “Well, sir, I understand that you want to question me about this murder at Spurn Cove. I may say at once that I know nothing about it, and the police have not thought it necessary to ask for my assistance. However, if there is any point which I can help you to clear up, I shall be happy to do so.”

“Thank you,” said Cardwell. “As I told you in my letter, I am an independent investigator, and I recognize that I have no official standing, and shall owe it entirely to your courtesy if you choose to answer any questions I may put to you.”

Gracious acknowledgment of these sentiments on the part of Mr. Elthorne.

“This case,” Cardwell continued, “is by no means so simple as appears on the surface, and I have been retained by certain persons indirectly concerned to make inquiries into it. The question which I wish to put to you may appear unimportant, but in reality it is a vital one. As I mentioned in my letter, I have learned from the manager of the Grand Hotel that you were the last person to occupy the room where the murder took place. Now this whole case turns on a question of time. A few minutes one way or the other may make all the difference. If the crime is to be brought home to the murderer, it is absolutely necessary for us to know the exact moment at which the room became vacant.”

“One moment,” said Mr. Elthorne. “I understood that the coroner’s jury brought in a verdict of murder against that fellow Bronson. Is there any doubt of his guilt?”

“I don’t say there is,” replied Cardwell. “But a coroner’s jury is one thing, and a jury trying a man for his life is another. And remember, Bronson’s defense hasn’t been heard yet. Now will you be so good as to try and recall the time of your leaving the hotel.”

“I remember quite well,” said Elthorne. “I had been compelled to shorten my holiday for business reasons, and had given notice of departure a couple of days before. I meant to leave immediately after dinner, but got inveigled into a game of bridge, and eventually had to make a rush to catch the last train, which left at–- One moment. I have a Bradshaw here.”

He went over to a desk and, having consulted the guide, said: “It left at nine fifty-five. As I said, we only just managed to catch it, but that was really the fault of the taxi, which didn’t turn up till the last minute. We must have done the journey to the station in seven or eight minutes. That means we must have started about quarter to ten; but I’m sure I was waiting in the hall for at least ten minutes before that. Yes. You can take it that I left my bedroom between half-past nine and twenty-five to ten.”

“I see,” said Cardwell. “By the way, how long had you been staying at the hotel?”

“Since the beginning of the month. About three weeks.”

“And when had you intended to leave?”

“I had no fixed plans, but I should probably have stayed till September.”

Cardwell meditated a moment, and then said:

“Tell me, Mr. Elthorne. Did you notice any suspicious circumstances during the time you occupied the room?”

Elthorne looked puzzled. “What do you mean exactly?” he asked.

“Well—any occurrence out of the ordinary.”

Elthorne shook his head.

“Were you conscious, for instance, of being spied upon?”

“Not at all,” said Elthorne decidedly.

“Are you sure?” asked Cardwell.

“Quite sure.”

Cardwell looked at him narrowly. “I want you to search your memory thoroughly, Mr. Elthorne,” he said. “And if you can recall anything out of the ordinary run of events that might be expected at a seaside hotel—anything, however trivial it may have seemed—please tell me about it.”

“I don’t remember anything,” said Elthorne.

“That’s strange,” said Cardwell, “because,” sinking his voice impressively, “I have reason to believe that Bronson’s real intention was to murder you.”

Mr. Elthorne looked surprised, though not alarmed.

“Impossible!” he exclaimed. “I had no connection whatever with the man. Never heard of him in fact.”

“Are you sure?” said Cardwell.

“Quite.”

The investigator languidly reversed his crossed legs and lighted another cigarette.

“I must ask you to examine your memory more thoroughly, Mr. Elthorne,” he said. “I know that Bronson had designs against you, and it is difficult to understand how that could be unless he had crossed your path at some time or other. The occasion may have been too insignificant to leave any deep impression on your mind. As a man of some consequence in the world you may—unwittingly, no doubt—have done some injury at some remote time to someone far outside your own social sphere, whom you would be unable to recall without some effort. I merely put that as a suggestion, but perhaps–-“

The dark man laughed with well-simulated easiness, but Cardwell’s acute senses could detect the slight shade of falseness in the note.

“This is all pure fancy on your part, Mr. Cardwell,” he said. “Theorizing: that’s the trade word for it, isn’t it? I’ve never made an enemy in my life, and as for this man Bronson, I’ve seen his photograph in the newspapers, and I can assure you his face is quite strange to me.”

“You have no recollection of it at all?”

“None whatever.”

“That’s curious,” said Cardwell quietly, “seeing that you were married to his mother.”

Elthorne’s self-control in the face of that thrust was remarkable. Indeed he would have been better served if it had been less, for the accusation was startling even if it had been false. Under the constraint of an iron will, not a muscle of his face twitched, and his eyes looked with perfect steadiness into his questioner’s. But though he could repress the signs of emotion, he was deficient in those qualities of imagination requisite for positively acting a part, and his attempt to do

so was a failure. With the best assumption of offended dignity that he could muster he said: “Do you know what you’re saying, sir? This is not a joking matter.”

“I am not joking, Mr. Reddington,” said Cardwell.

The ironmaster stood up angrily.

“What the dickens do you mean, sir?” he snapped. “My name is Elthorne.”

“So one would gather from Who’s Who,” replied Cardwell suavely. “Unfortunately the casualty lists of the Essex Regiment, the marriage certificate of Miss Mary Hill, and the Boer War memorial at Chattering tell a different story.”

Elthorne stood staring at his accuser, a picture of guilt unmasked. For a moment he could not speak. Then he blustered incoherently: “What’s all this about? I don’t know what you’re driving at. If you’ve nothing better to do than talk nonsense, you’d better get out.”

“It’s no use, Mr. Reddington,” said Cardwell, putting a hand to his breast pocket. “Look at that now,” and whipping out the photograph he flourished it before the horrified gaze of its subject.

The latter was at the end of his resources. Dropping back into his chair, he sat there in haggard suspense, waiting for Cardwell to speak. The investigator promptly changed his tactics, and assumed his most conciliatory manner.

“Please don’t be alarmed, Mr. Elthorne,” he said, stressing the name ever so slightly. “Believe me, I have no desire to rake up an old scandal. Mrs. Bronson is dead, and I cannot see that any useful purpose would now be served by undeceiving the lady who believes herself to be your wife. I am concerned only with the murder–-“

“I had nothing to do with it,” said Elthorne. “I can call any number of witnesses to prove that I was in London at the time it happened.”

“My dear sir, I am well aware of that,” protested Cardwell with the utmost sincerity of manner. “No suspicion rests on you at all—at any rate, not in any responsible quarter, for of course the usual anonymous busybodies have been at work sending in the wildest suggestions. Here, for instance, is a letter I received only this morning.”

He sent a white envelope sliding across the polished table. Elthorne picked it up and observed: “It’s still sealed.”

“Yes. I gummed it up again after reading it—just for safety. Open it please.”

Elthorne produced a gold-handled penknife from his waistcoat pocket and, holding it in his right hand, slit the flap of the envelope. There was genuine surprise on his face when he read the letter, wherein Cardwell had typed the following brief message:

If you want information about the Spurn Cove murder, try John Elthorne.

“It looks as if someone else has discovered my past,” said Elthorne gloomily.

“I hardly think so,” said Cardwell with great confidence of tone. “Even I, with all the resources at my disposal, only discovered it with the greatest difficulty. More probably the writer of this note had heard of your presence at the hotel and of your leaving so very shortly before the crime, and suspected that there might be some connection between them.”

Elthorne remained silent a while, pensively smoking.

"For my own part," said Cardwell, "knowing what I do about your connection with Bronson, I find it difficult to believe that it was mere chance that took you to Spurn Cove."

Elthorne did not answer for a moment. Then he rose to his feet with the air of one coming to a momentous decision, and, walking up and down the room, he said:

"I see that honesty in this case is the best policy, so I'll make a clean breast of everything. After what you've found out, Mr. Cardwell, you won't be surprised to hear that Bronson was blackmailing me. It's true that I was once married to his mother. It wasn't a success. Whose fault it was doesn't matter. I dare say there were faults on both sides. Anyhow, we made a mess of things, and frankly I joined the army on purpose to get away from her. I took advantage of a mistake in the casualty lists to disappear, and began a new life out in South Africa. I got on, came home, and married again. Years went by, and I thought the whole past was buried beyond recall, when one day my first wife walked into my office. She had recognized my photograph in one of the illustrated papers. She told me at once that she did not wish to claim me as her husband, since she had herself married again. But she had a clever son whom she could not afford to start properly in life, and she was willing to keep silence if I would take him into my employment and give him an opportunity to develop his scientific tastes. I, of course, had no choice but to agree; and I must say that young Bronson proved to be a very capable and industrious fellow. For a few years things went on smoothly, and then Mrs. Bronson died. On her death-bed she must have confided the secret to her son, for, not long afterwards, he came and told me that he knew all, and that he had a photograph and letters which were a certain proof of my identity. These put me completely in his power, and from that day to this he has lived on the blackmail he has wrung from me.

"That's the whole of my unfortunate story," the man concluded. "It is in your power, Mr. Cardwell, to have me put in prison, to bring shame on my wife, and to brand my children with illegitimacy. But I've told you everything frankly, relying on the assurance you gave me just now."

"Quite so," said Cardwell. "As a matter of fact you have told me very little that I didn't know already, so you may rest easy on that score. Now let us get back to events at Spurn Cove. You say that Bronson was blackmailing you. Am I to infer that your visit to the town had some connection with that?"

"Certainly. I went there for the purpose of seeing Bronson. I had been paying him a substantial income to hold his tongue, but he wanted to change that arrangement. He was going to get married, and apparently he was afraid the girl might find out that he lived by blackmail. So he proposed that I should pay him fifty thousand pounds down in return for the evidence he held—that photograph and a few letters—and so be quit of him for good. Now I couldn't do that. I hadn't so much ready cash available; and in the present depressed condition of the steel industry I couldn't realize any of my holdings without an enormous loss. And besides, there was the difficulty of putting through such a deal without attracting notice. So I went down to Spurn Cove to talk things over with Bronson. It was no use. He wouldn't abate a jot of his demands, and at last I told him point-blank that I was going to keep to the old arrangement, and, if he didn't like it, let him

blow the gaff and have done with it. That was about a week before the murder. I did not see him again, and on the night of the crime I left the hotel as I told you."

After a brief pause Cardwell said: "You told me just now that several persons could vouch for your presence in London that night. Who are they?"

Elthorne looked at him narrowly. "So I'm not quite free from suspicion after all?" he said.

"In a detective's view nobody is," replied Cardwell. "You mustn't take offense at that. It's my duty to check up all relevant facts, and you offered the information yourself, you know. Now will you be so good as to give me the names?" and he took out a notebook and pencil.

"Well, first of all there's Sir John Trotfield, who joined the train at Chelmsford, and chatted with me all the way to London. Then there's my chauffeur, Barry, who met me at King's Cross, and whichever of the servants admitted me to the house. And, of course, there's my wife, and my son, Philip, who happened to be here when I arrived, and any servants who may have been up at the time."

Cardwell was about to put another question, when there was a knock at the door, and a footman announced a telephone call for his master.

"You'll excuse me, won't you?" said Elthorne, and went out.

Cardwell utilized the interval to rearrange his ideas. Elthorne's story, he felt, rang true, and it was in accord with all the facts of which he had cognizance. He would test the alibi, of course, by calling on Sir John Trotfield, but he felt sure that it was sound. Moreover, Elthorne was clearly right-handed, as he had shown in half a dozen ways besides that of opening the envelope he had given him. These two reasons seemed sufficient to acquit him of the murder. And yet—and yet–-

"I'll swear still that there's more than coincidence in his giving up that room to Wilson," said the investigator to himself. "And I'll swear that Wilson never carried those plates over from San Félipe. There's deep water over all that business, and it'll take good diving to get to the bottom of it."

Pondering, he helped himself to a cigarette.

"If Elthorne's the murderer," he reflected, "he works by deputy. That's it," he realized suddenly. "And it was his deputy that burned Seapoint."

Cardwell knew no more about this episode than he had been able to gather from the evening papers; and Doris, at Cranley's request, had kept her interviewers in ignorance of the identity of the incendiary. Cardwell's first hasty surmise had been that Elthorne had fired the place in order to destroy the photograph and any other compromising papers that Bronson might have left behind. Then he had noticed that Miss Philpot had described her assailant as young, and for a while he had dallied with the idea that Bronson himself might have returned to cover up some remembered evidence, and he had even begun to revise his conviction of the fugitive's innocence in consequence. Now the solution to both difficulties came like a flash. Elthorne was the brain at the back of a vast complicated plot—which included both the murder and the forgery—and the actual carrying out of his plans was left to others. "A Professor Moriarty in real life," said Cardwell to himself as the subject of his reflections reentered the room.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said Elthorne. "What about a spot of whiskey?"

"No, thanks."

“Oh, come! We must wind up this unpleasant business on a cheerful note. Scotch or Irish?” he queried, fingering the decanters.

Cardwell allowed himself to be persuaded to take a small Irish, and his host helped himself to the same.

“You’ll like that,” he said with a rather forced geniality. “It’s twelve years old.”

“Very good indeed,” Cardwell agreed, tasting it. “But, before leaving this unpleasant business altogether, I have one more question to ask you.”

“Fire away,” said Elthorne.

“It’s only this. Why did you leave Spurn Cove the day you did?”

“Well, there was no reason to stay. My mission had failed, and I wasn’t exactly in holiday mood.”

“It was a curious coincidence,” observed Cardwell, “that Wilson should have arrived that same night.”

He had taken out his cigarette-case as he spoke, and offered it to Elthorne, whose cigar had gone out during the recital of his history. Elthorne struck a light for both.

“Yes. It was certainly curious,” he said. “But, you know, coincidences do occur. Extraordinary coincidences. And in a way this wasn’t so very remarkable. Both of us wanted to see Bronson about the same time, that was all. There was only one decent hotel in the town, and, as it was full, mine was the only vacant room.”

“Yes, yes,” Cardwell admitted. “That’s true.”

“And that reminds me,” said Elthorne. “I don’t mind telling you now that the theory you mentioned a few minutes ago is probably correct. I believe that Wilson was murdered in mistake for me.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. Bronson didn’t know I had gone away, and he couldn’t have known that Wilson had arrived either. Remember, Wilson wrote to tell him, and hadn’t posted the letter.”

“Quite so. But he might have written before to tell him he was coming.”

“Possibly. But Bronson couldn’t have known what room he would occupy.”

“Exactly,” said Cardwell. “And it was for that very reason that I concluded he had killed him in mistake for you. But what was his motive?”

“The best of motives,” said Elthorne. “It was part of our original arrangement that I should leave Bronson ten thousand pounds in my will, so that in the event of my death he would be provided for. As I had refused to continue his subsidy, he was probably afraid I would cancel the will too.”

“That clears up the mystery completely,” said Cardwell, rising to his feet. “And now, Mr. Elthorne, I must thank you very much indeed for the full and frank way you have answered my questions, and can assure you that your confidence will be respected. I must be off now on some further inquiries, so I’ll say good-by.”

“Very happy indeed to be able to help you,” murmured Elthorne.

“By the way,” said Cardwell, “you’d be wise to look to your doors and windows at night and take any other precautions that may occur to you. Bronson has come back to England, and he’s probably in desperate mood. You know that his house was burned down last night?”

“Yes. I saw it in the evening paper.”

"It must have been Bronson himself that did it,—probably to destroy some incriminating evidence there."

"I should think that the police have more than enough to hang him already."

"Yes. But juries take a lot of convincing when there's a life at stake. However, it's time for me to be going. Good night once more."

Elthorne shook the investigator's hand with the utmost cordiality. "Good night, Mr. Cardwell. And allow me to express my appreciation of the—er—tact and discretion which you have shown in this unhappy business."

"That's all right," said Cardwell. "Don't worry about it any longer."

As he descended the steps to his car his mind was full of the conversation that had passed.

"Not a doubt of it that he's right-handed," he reflected, "and his story fits together like a piece of machinery. But he's evidently not afraid of Bronson, and I'm hanged if I'll believe in that coincidence."

He touched the starter and drove away, rather doubtful whether he had not played his high cards a little extravagantly for tricks of problematical value.

Chapter XIV

A Second Problem.

Next morning every newspaper in London had the striking headline:

NOTED DETECTIVE MURDERED

Underneath this it was told how the body of Mr. Robert Cardwell, the well-known private investigator, had been found by a policeman at midnight, lying in Ivy Walk, one of those steep narrow by-ways characteristic of Hampstead. His car stood close at hand, undamaged. Mr. Cardwell had been shot through the head, and his pockets had been rifled. Robbery had evidently been the motive of the deed, and most of the papers had leading articles deploring the extraordinary increase of crimes of this character in recent years, and the apparent helplessness of the police against them. There was also some declamation about the necessity of inflicting more stringent penalties as a deterrent against robbery with violence, with suggestions of greater latitude in the use of the cat, which, the writers were confident, would put down the armed robber as effectively as it had once put down the garrotter.

Meanwhile, at the offices of Investigations, Ltd., Allingham had been discussing the tragedy with Cardwell's second assistant, a sallow ferret-faced man called Agnew. It was to him that the criminal business of the bureau was usually entrusted, the chief and Allingham devoting their energies to its more agreeable and academic activities. He possessed detective qualities of a remarkable but limited kind. Keen-eyed and observant as a kite, he would draw only the most meager conclusions from what he observed; and while he had never formulated a

theory in his life, once started on a trail he would follow it with sleuth-like ingenuity and pertinacity to the very end. He had wished to join the police force, but had not the necessary physique.

The two men felt the loss of their chief as a personal sorrow, for Cardwell was a pleasant companion to work with and popular with all his staff; but the necessity for action left no time for laments.

"We have our work cut out for us," said Allingham, after having given his colleague a recapitulation of the events leading up to the tragedy. "We've got to hold this agency together somehow, without a chief, and we've got to track down the cleverest and most daring criminal in England."

Agnew looked up interrogatively.

"Elthorne, of course," said Allingham. "The chief more than suspected him of the Spurn Cove murder, and it's quite clear what motive he had for this one."

Agnew said nothing. He had not yet formed any idea on the subject, and it was not his habit to utter the conventional ejaculations with which the passive half of a conversation is usually conducted.

"I should think he was also responsible for the burning of Bronson's house," went on Allingham. "Don't you?"

"I couldn't say," was Agnew's reply.

"Oh, come. Isn't it obvious? Did you read the interview with the girl in the papers?"

"Yes."

"Well, this whole mystery centers round the photograph. Isn't that just the sort of thing that might be hidden in a book? And who on this earth but Elthorne had a vital reason for finding it? Having failed to find it, what else could he do but burn down the house in the hope of destroying it? Then, the very next day, in walks poor Cardwell with the thing in his pocket. His neck depended on a bold stroke at once, so what could he do but follow him up and kill him?"

"You may possibly be right," said Agnew.

"Good," said Allingham ironically. "It's difficult to imagine how he worked it, though. He must have followed him in a car, and quickly too, or he wouldn't have caught him. But a man can hardly rush out of his house on the heels of a guest, get out a car, and fly after him without attracting some attention. Then consider the murder itself. According to the papers, Cardwell's car is undamaged, which it certainly wouldn't be if he had been shot while it was running. Why did he stop? If there were thieves lying in wait they might have put up an obstacle to stop him, and that's what the papers are assuming. But I'm hanged if I'll believe it until the thieves are in the dock. What do you think?"

"I had better go and examine the ground," said Agnew, his invariable suggestion on such occasions.

"Both grounds," added Allingham. "Hampstead first, then Lancaster Gate. Meanwhile I shall pay a visit to the Hampstead police and see if they've got any information. For the present, by the way, we'll keep the Elthorne business to ourselves. If the police got on that trail they might scare the birds too soon."

For answer Agnew took a folded cap from his pocket and silently disappeared. Allingham, a little later, drove over to the Hampstead police station and introduced

himself to the superintendent, who led him out to a yard in which Cardwell's blue saloon car was standing.

"That's exactly as we found it," the superintendent explained. "The doors were shut, and there was only this slit of window open. There isn't a scratch on the varnish anywhere, as you see. He must have got out for some reason and been shot on the pathway."

Allingham examined the car thoroughly, both inside and out, and found no trace of violence anywhere. The superintendent then took him to a public-house close at hand where the body lay.

"The post-mortem is to be held at three," he said, "but there's nothing to discover. He was shot through the head. No other marks whatever. His pockets were completely emptied."

"Everything taken?" Allingham queried.

"Every single thing," replied the superintendent. He added that the assassin must have used an automatic pistol fitted with a silencer; for, though the body was discovered while still warm, and with the wound still bleeding, the constable on the beat had heard nothing.

"There was nobody in sight when he arrived, I suppose?"

"Not a soul."

Allingham looked for a moment at the placid face of his dead chief, then thanked the superintendent, and returned to the office to wait for Agnew. The latter did not appear until after dark, Allingham having slipped out for a hurried meal at a restaurant in the meanwhile. He was tired and dusty, and his manner conveyed no hint as to whether his explorations had had any result.

His day had been a full one. First he had gone to Ivy Walk and examined the ground, but there was nothing to be learned there: the hard dry road surface told no tales. Agnew wasted no time, but hurried into town, and, reaching Lancaster Gate, strolled casually down the mews at the back of a certain row of houses. At one of the garages a chauffeur in shirt-sleeves was sitting on the step of a Daimler car, immersed in a copy of the Irish Weekly Independent.

"Is this Prince's Mews?" Agnew asked.

"No," said the other, looking up. "Prince's Mews is on the other side of the street. First on your left."

"A fellow-countryman, I see," said Agnew, putting on an Irish accent—one of his many unobtrusive accomplishments. "Anything in the old rag?"

"Not much. You can have it if you like. I'm done with it."

"Thanks," said Agnew, taking it. "Cigarette?"

The chauffeur helped himself from the proffered packet. "Looking for a job?" he asked.

Agnew saw that the man was ready, like most of his race, for a bit of gossip, and had no difficulty in leading him on. Soon he had learned all about the manners and customs of the Elthorne family, and was admitted to the garage to look over their cars.

"There were four of them," he told Allingham when making his report. "Besides the Daimler, there was a Rolls Royce touring car, a neat little Singer coupe, and a runabout. None of them was out of the garage last night."

“I don’t suppose Elthorne would have used his own car anyway,” mused Allingham, but his expression was one of gloomy disappointment.

Agnew resumed his report without comment.

“I next hunted up Elthorne’s sons. He has two: George and Philip. They live in flats in the same neighborhood. Both have cars; and they both had them out last night.”

Allingham looked hopeful again.

“I got into conversation with George’s chauffeur,” went on Agnew. “He is a mutinous fellow of Communist views and Puritan outlook. He was very much aggrieved because he had spent last night, from nine o’clock till three in the morning, sitting in the car outside a night club while George and a gay party disported themselves inside.”

“And what was Philip doing?”

“He spent the night at his club. His chauffeur drove him there at ten and fetched him home again at one.”

“It doesn’t follow that he stayed there during the interim.”

“Quite so,” said Agnew, “but I think he did all the same, because the car in which the murderer drove has been found.”

“Good heavens, man,” cried Allingham, “why didn’t you tell me that at the beginning instead of keeping me on tenterhooks with your meanderings after false scents?”

“As I was chatting with Philip’s chauffeur,” went on Agnew imperturbably, “a friend of his came up and told us that a car had been stolen from a house at Lancaster Gate last night; so I went there to make inquiries. I found that the house was on the same side of the street as Elthorne’s, and the car—an Armstrong sedan—was taken from before the front door between quarter-and half-past ten.”

“We’re getting warmer,” said Allingham.

“I at once went to Scotland Yard,” continued Agnew in his even tone, “and inquired if any such car had been found. It had. A description had just come in of an Armstrong car which had been found early this morning abandoned in a lane at Golder’s Green.”

“Agnew,” said Allingham, “you’re a genius. It’s a perfect case. But by jove, it must have been touch and go for the fellow. I can’t imagine yet how he worked it. How far is it from Elthorne’s house to the place where the car was standing?”

“One hundred and eighty-three yards,” replied Agnew.

Allingham’s jaw dropped momentarily.

“That certainly makes it difficult for Elthorne to have done it,” he admitted.

“Very,” said Agnew: the first opinion he had yet expressed.

“Whoever did it must have been his agent,” said Allingham. “And that’s the same thing. Qui facit per alium facit per se, you know. Elthorne must have had an accomplice hiding behind the arras–-“

“Is there an arras at Elthorne’s house?” asked Agnew.

“What a literal-minded beggar you are. He probably had him listening outside the door. Then, when Cardwell produced the photograph, the fellow would have slipped out and hung about until he left. Then he’d have nipped into the first handy car and gone after him. While I’ve been waiting for you I’ve worked out how the actual killing could have been done. It’s really quite simple. The fellow could

have overtaken Cardwell and then stopped—shamming a breakdown, perhaps. Cardwell would have had to stop to avoid a collision, and you can imagine the rest."

Agnew concurred after his fashion.

"It'll do as a working hypothesis, anyway," said Allingham impatiently. "We must fix up our program for tomorrow. You'll have to do some more sleuth work. I'm going to call on Elthorne at eleven to set a little trap for him, and I want you to hang about and see if I'm followed when I come out. If I am, follow the follower. I'll be able to give him the slip all right, but you must hang on to him till you know who he is. When you've done that, get to King's Cross Station, where we'll catch the first train after three o'clock for Spurn Cove."

Agnew drew his cap out of his pocket again.

"And by the way," said Allingham, taking his hat from its peg, "if you get down to the office early enough you'll be able to see Elthorne arrive. Try and see if he does anything left-handed."

Chapter XV

Mr. Elthorne at Work.

At the hour he had mentioned Allingham walked into Elthorne's office in the City and sent in his card. After a brief wait he was shown into a room in which there were two men. One—Elthorne presumably—sat at a desk; the other, a much younger man with an obviously filial resemblance, stood with his back to the fire, his hands in his trousers pockets.

Elthorne received Allingham as one smitten by a common misfortune.

"You've come about poor Mr. Cardwell, of course. What a dreadful affair! To think that he went straight from my presence to his death. It has been a great shock to me, as you can imagine. Dreadful! Dreadful!"

He had risen to shake hands with the visitor. Now he turned and introduced the young man by the fire: "My son and partner, Mr. George Elthorne," at the same time warning Allingham by a look that nothing indiscreet must be said for the moment.

"It's that scoundrel Bronson, I'm sure," went on Elthorne, pacing up and down the room with quick nervous steps. "You know, George, Mr. Cardwell had come to ask me if I knew anything about the Spurn Cove crime, as I had been the last occupant of the room where it took place. But of course"—he turned again to Allingham—"I could tell him nothing, because I had left the hotel before the murdered man arrived. As for this present awful affair, all I know is that Mr. Cardwell left my house last night, safe and sound, soon after ten o'clock. Though I was of no assistance to him, he was confident of running Bronson to earth pretty soon, and now it seems that Bronson has got him instead."

"I have no doubt that's what has happened," said Allingham. "If it had been thieves, they'd have taken his car as well as his money."

“Quite so,” said Elthorne. “And I must say the whole thing is a very grave reflection on Scotland Yard. To think that a murderer who is supposed to have got out of the country, and for whom the police of the whole world have been looking, should turn up in London and commit a second murder under their very noses! Why, sir, it’s preposterous.”

“They’re a damned incompetent lot,” added his son.

“Oh, by the way, George,” said Elthorne, “I have a few words to say in private to Mr. Allingham. Perhaps you’ll excuse us. We shan’t take more than a few minutes.”

“That’s all right,” said George, and, gathering up some papers from the desk, he left the room.

Elthorne waited until the sound of his feet along the passage outside had been cut off by the slam of a door. Then he said:

“I was unaware that Mr. Cardwell had a partner, Mr. Allingham. May I ask if you were fully in his confidence?”

“Fully,” replied Allingham.

“You are acquainted with all the—er—details of this particular case?”

“The Spurn Cove case? Certainly. I know all about it.”

“All is perhaps a little indefinite,” said Elthorne. “Would you—er—put it somewhat more precisely?”

“I know about your photograph and all that,” said Allingham.

“Ah! Then you will be aware of—er—certain—er—indiscretions of my youth, which were discovered by Mr. Cardwell in his pursuit of this murderer, Bronson.”

“I know that you were once married to Bronson’s mother, and have therefore committed bigamy,” said Allingham bluntly. “I’ve guessed that Bronson has been blackmailing you on that score. And I’ve more than a suspicion that it wasn’t mere coincidence that you were at the Grand Hotel in August, and left it a few minutes before the murdered man arrived.”

“Quite so. Quite so,” said Elthorne nervously. “I see that your information and your suspicions are entirely in accord with poor Mr. Cardwell’s, and I can do no better than take you completely into my confidence, as I did with him.”

“Thank you. I’m all attention.”

Mr. Elthorne retold his story, betraying more shame in the process than on the previous occasion, as was only natural in making such a confession to a much younger man. Allingham, however, showed him no consideration on this score, but cross-questioned him exhaustively until every fact was out and sorted into its place. When the ordeal was over, Elthorne said:

“You will understand, Mr. Allingham, that I am most anxious to keep my unfortunate past a secret from my family. The lady I wronged is now dead, and, as Mr. Cardwell very sensibly said, no good purpose would be served by taking a strictly legal view of my actions. I trust that you will regard the matter in the same light.”

“Make your mind easy about that, Mr. Elthorne,” said Allingham. “Our firm’s telegraphic address is ‘Discretion, London,’ and we have always lived up to it. As far as we’re concerned, you’re safe. But there’s another danger threatening you. I dare say Mr. Cardwell warned you of it. That’s Bronson. I should advise you to apply for police protection.”

"I have already done so," replied Elthorne. "As soon as I saw the dreadful news in the paper yesterday morning, I feared I should be the next victim, so I telephoned to Scotland Yard at once."

"Excellent," said Allingham. "But I mustn't waste any more of your time, Mr. Elthorne, and I have a lot of work ahead of me too. You know that Bronson's house was set on fire the other night? The papers all think it was Bronson himself who did it, but they're wrong."

"Indeed?" said Elthorne. "Mr. Cardwell seemed to be under the same impression."

"He wasn't really. He believed that it was some other victim of Bronson's who wanted to destroy whatever papers Bronson was holding over him."

"Very likely indeed," said Elthorne.

"Well, I went down to Spurn Cove yesterday to try and get information from Mrs. Dakin, Bronson's housekeeper. This old lady is quite certain Bronson is innocent, so I had to pretend I was on his side and looking for evidence to help him. You may remember that at the inquest she talked about a burglary, and said that the thief must have been after the papers of her master's invention. I reminded her of this, suggesting that if those papers could be found they'd go a long way towards proving Bronson's innocence, and at last I persuaded her to tell me where they were. It's the cutest hiding-place you could think of, and I'm going down tonight to get hold of them. I expect they'll shed a most interesting light on Bronson's career, tell us who the mysterious Wilson was, and so on."

"I presume that the hiding-place is in a part of the house that escaped the flames," said Elthorne.

"Yes. Can you oblige me with a railway guide?"

Elthorne produced one from his desk.

"Six-five, six-thirty-five, six-fifty," read out Allingham. "That ought to suit me all right. Arrives seven-forty-five. Yes. I'll take that."

"Rather late, isn't it?" suggested Elthorne.

"Can't be helped," replied Allingham. "I have some other jobs to do first, so I can't get away any earlier. Besides, I want to do this job on the quiet, without having to explain things to the police. They don't like us private investigators, you know—regard us as amateur interlopers—so I dispense with them whenever possible."

He took out a little notebook and made an entry of the hour. As he did so, the door opened and another young man came in. Elthorne introduced him as his son, Philip. He was much taller than his father and elder brother, but very slightly built, with something of a stoop about the shoulders. He had light brown hair and pale blue eyes, and his chin inclined to a pointed shape.

"There's a suspicious-looking character hanging about outside," he said to his father, "and as Phibbs is going to the bank in a few minutes, I thought perhaps we ought to ring up the police."

"I shouldn't bother," replied Elthorne. "But for safety Phibbs had better take a taxi, and you might tell one of the clerks to go with him."

"Very well," said the young man, and quietly withdrew.

Elthorne turned to Allingham with a look of consternation. "Supposing it's Bronson," he said.

“Forewarned is forearmed,” Allingham replied. “You needn’t worry about me,” and he showed Elthorne a revolver.

“Well, take care of yourself,” said Elthorne, clasping the hand which Allingham offered, and shaking it cordially.

Allingham took his departure forthwith. A few minutes later the suspicious-looking character who had excited Philip Elthorne’s distrust, and who had been loitering on the other side of the street, set out in the same direction. The ironmaster watched from the window until they were out of sight, then turned round as his son George entered the room.

“Did you see?” he asked.

“Bronson Claims a Third Victim,” said George, quoting an imaginary headline, and laughed unpleasantly.

“Seriously, though,” said Elthorne, “who do you think it could be?”

“I should say it’s the police protection you asked for. Won’t it be a joke if he arrests that bird?”

Chapter XVI

Allingham Gets Busy.

A very young man, exquisitely dressed, entered the Grand Hotel, Spurn Cove, and, advancing up the hall, swept off his hat with a debonair gesture to the girl at the bureau. Miss Philpot greeted him a little shyly with a smile. He laid a bunch of deliciously perfumed violets before her.

“Rather nice, these, eh?” he said. “Picked them up in the town as I was passing. Thought you might like them.”

“Are they for me? Oh, how lovely. Thanks awfully.”

There was a moment’s embarrassed silence.

“I—er—just dropped in as I was passing,” said the youth, “to see how you were getting on after your adventure.”

“That’s really most kind of you,” replied the girl. “I’m quite all right, thanks.”

“Good,” said the young man. “I’m delighted to hear it.” Then he hung irresolute, not knowing what more to say.

“It’s awfully good of you to call,” Doris said to help him. “And, you know, now that you’re here, I really must thank you for saving my life. I was going to write—in fact I’ve begun a letter—but it’s so hard to express oneself properly–-“

“Don’t you bother,” said the young man. “I mean to say, of course, I’d love to get a letter from you, but it was nothing, you know. I—I did nothing at all. The fellow must have sheered off as soon as he saw my headlights.”

“Still, you were very kind–-“

“Not at all. It was a pleasure, I assure you. Any other time I’ll be only too pleased.”

“Oh, I hope there won’t be another time,” said Doris, laughing. “Once was quite enough.”

“Of course I didn’t mean that, you know,” said the young man seriously. “It must have been jolly awful of course. By jove, yes. It must have been jolly awful.”

He stood for a moment with his mouth open, as if he would have liked to give vent in really expressive terms to his appreciation of the awfulness of the girl’s experience, if only his vocabulary had been equal to the task. To say “jolly awful” a third time would have been too senile a futility, so he took youth’s refuge in silence. Only for a moment, however, for it was uncomfortable.

“Jolly nice day, isn’t it?” he said presently with an engaging air of freshness.

“Isn’t it?” said Doris, and added mischievously: “But aren’t the evenings getting shorter?”

“Yes, by jove, aren’t they!” There Billy’s eloquence dried up again; but almost immediately he remembered what he had intended to say earlier if Doris had not switched his thoughts in another direction. “Oh—er—look here though. What I mean to say is—any time I can be of any service to you at all, I’ll be only too pleased, you know.”

“Thank you so much, Mr.–-” Doris paused and laughed. “I’m afraid I only know you as Billy.”

“Billy will do very well,” said the young man, delighted. “And now look here—er—dash it all, I only know you as Miss Philpot–-“

Doris made no attempt to supplement his information.

“Well,” went on Billy, somewhat dashed, “what I mean to say is I’ve a little car, you know, and if you think a run now and then would buck you up and so on, I’d be delighted to take you along. Any time you like,” he added encouragingly as she delayed answering.

“I’m afraid my afternoons are pretty well booked up just at present,” said Doris. “But—oh, perhaps some other time.”

Billy saw that look in the girl’s face which even the youngest of men knows only too well how to interpret.

“Well, I hope it’ll be as soon as possible,” he said gallantly. He paused a moment, added, “So long, then,” and Doris was left with the violets lying forlorn on the counter.

Half an hour later two other young men entered the hotel. One was cheerful and good-looking, the other sallow and of a rather furtive demeanor. The former presented a card to Miss Philpot and asked to see the manager.

Doris looked up from the card in surprise. “Is this the poor detective who has been murdered?” she asked, pointing to Cardwell’s name.

“Yes,” said Allingham, and repeated his request.

“The manager is out at the moment,” said Doris. “Is there any message I could take? Or would you prefer to wait?”

“We’re in a hurry,” said Allingham. “The fact is that the murder of our chief is connected with the murder here, and we want to ask some questions about it.”

“Perhaps I would do,” said Doris. “I’m Miss Philpot.”

“By jove!” said Allingham. “The very person I wanted to see. Have you quite recovered from your adventure the other night?”

“Quite,” said Doris. “If you want to talk about it, will you and your friend come into my office?”

Telling her assistant to take charge, she led the young men into a small room at the back of the bureau.

"The first thing I want to know," said Allingham, "is, who was the man who attacked you the other night? Or at least, what was he like? It wasn't Bronson, I know."

"You're right."

"Who was it then?"

"You won't believe me when I tell you," said Doris.

"I'm accustomed to hearing incredible things," said Allingham.

"Nothing as bad as this, though."

"Out with it, and we'll see."

"It was Wilson," said the girl.

Prepared as he was, Allingham showed that he was staggered.

"Wilson!" he said. "The murdered man?"

"Yes."

Allingham sat down, completely and hopelessly bewildered.

"This case is getting impossible," he said. "Are you sure it was he?"

"Quite. He was as close to me as you are now."

"Evidently Wilson wasn't murdered," said Agnew stolidly.

"Oh, come. Don't be so materialistic," Allingham rallied him. "Aren't you up-to-date enough to believe in ghosts?"

"No," said Agnew.

"Good. We'll assume then that Wilson is still alive. The mystery now resolves itself into two: who was the murderer? and who was the murdered? Or, more briefly, who murdered whom? I think that problem must be unique in the annals of crime."

"There's a third mystery," suggested Doris. "And that's who is Wilson."

"I fancy that will solve itself if we can solve the other two. Now let me collect my scattered senses. Wilson is alive, and before that hard fact the beautiful and ingenious theory which I have been elaborating crumples up like a bijou villa before a howitzer shell. We must start all over again at the beginning."

"Oh, but first," said Doris, "there's one more clue I'd better tell you about," and she related how she had found the bloodstained envelope in Bronson's desk.

Allingham's interest was caught at once. For some reason the clue seemed of much more significance to him than to Cranley, and he at once asked to see it.

"Unfortunately I haven't got it," said Doris. "I dropped it in the laboratory, and it was burned in the fire. But I can show you exactly what it was like."

She fetched an envelope from the bureau, and with a blob of ink marked the position and size of the smear.

"Excellent," said Allingham. "And now, Miss Philpot, with your permission I'll have a look at the room where the crime took place, while my friend goes around to examine the verandah which the murderer is supposed to have climbed."

Doris promptly summoned the hall porter and entrusted Agnew to his guidance. Then she went upstairs with Allingham. The chamber of mystery was still untenanted, but all traces of what had occurred there had been removed. Doris showed the investigator which window-pane had been cut, and as he opened the

casement and stepped out on the balcony, the top of a ladder appeared above the rail and Agnew could be heard mounting the steps.

"He's just making quite certain whether the murderer really did climb the verandah," Allingham explained to Doris. "What a glorious view that is!"

"Lovely, isn't it?" said Doris. "Do you see those red roofs among the trees, right over there across the bay?"

"Yes."

"The very end one is Bronson's house."

"What!" Allingham's face suddenly lighted up with intense interest. He looked across the bay and stood silent for a while, staring, with knitted brow, biting his nether lip. At the same moment a window of the house flashed back a ray of the setting sun.

"By jove, I almost see it," he cried. "Just let me think it out."

Flushed with excitement he stepped back into the room and again stood still, head bent, one hand playing with the coins in his trousers pockets, the other gripping his chin, utterly oblivious of all around him. Doris watched him, breathless with expectation. Outside the ladder creaked occasionally under the weight of the prying Agnew. Otherwise silence reigned for some minutes.

"I have it," said Allingham at last. "The case is solved. We must go down to the police station at once."

"Who did it?" asked Doris.

"I don't know that yet," said Allingham. "But we'll find out soon now."

Doris thought that the only point that really mattered, but said nothing. Just then Agnew's face appeared above the balcony rail.

"No traces here," he said.

"Good," said Allingham. "Let's go straight to the station now. There's no time to lose."

He wished Doris a hasty good-by, and in an instant was gone. A taxi took the two detectives to the police station, where Inspector Cranley received them, none too cordially at first. Allingham, however, had a winning way with him, and the new light which he was able to shed on the case soon won him the professional's respect, especially as he had the tact to admit that his success was due to the chance of his having been presented with a clue which had been denied to the inspector.

Mollified by this, the latter said: "I've just received a piece of information which you may have for what it's worth. The cameo ring has been traced to a second-hand jeweler in New York, but he can't describe the man he sold it to."

"That doesn't matter," said Allingham. "Did he say when he sold it?"

"Yes. It was at the beginning of June last."

"Good!" cried Allingham. "That fits in perfectly. And by the way, have you still got the plates for the San Félipe notes here?"

"No," said Cranley. "They were sent to Scotland Yard. There's an official of the San Félipe Bank coming over to identify them."

"He's wasting his time. They're not the right ones."

"What!" cried Cranley.

“Oh, come!” said Allingham. “Are they likely to be? Those forgers got away with a cool million. What on earth would be the use of keeping the plates? They couldn’t hope to pass off any more notes from them, so why risk being caught with them?”

“So I’ve often said to myself,” said Cranley. “But there the things were.”

“No,” said Allingham. “The plates that the San Félipe notes were printed from were broken up long ago. These were a new set, never intended to print anything.”

“What were they intended for, then?”

“Why, as a red herring across the trail of the Grand Hotel murder.”

Cranley sat down, dumbfounded. Allingham went on:

“We shall probably find, when the experts examine them, that, though good enough for the purpose they were designed for, they would not have printed successful forgeries. Now I have one more question to ask you. When you first examined Wilson’s bedroom, did you ascertain whether anyone had in fact climbed up that veranda?”

“Well, no,” Cranley admitted. “It was all so obvious. There was the cut window-pane, you see, and the footmarks on the balcony and the flower-bed. Besides, it was impossible for the murderer to get into the room any other way, because the door was locked and the key was on the bed-table.”

“That only means that it was impossible for him to get out by the door. The murderer could have locked it himself after getting in.”

“That’s true,” said Cranley.

“And as a matter of fact he didn’t get out by the window either, as you’d have found out for yourself if you had examined the verandah. There’s a creeper on it, and my colleague has examined every tendril of it without finding as much as a single broken sucker. There were no traces on the woodwork either, and, though a longish time has elapsed, still the weather has been good, and Agnew’s lens ought to have found a sign of some sort if anyone had climbed that way.”

“Then how did the murderer get out?” asked Cranley. “By the chimney?”

“That’s my little secret,” said Allingham.

Cranley grinned.

“Well, Mr. Allingham,” he said good-humoredly, “after all the help you’ve given me, I don’t grudge you your bit of mystification. What’s the next thing to be done?”

“If you have Wilson’s trunk here I should like to have a look at it.”

Cranley led them to another room where the big black trunk lay amongst other lumber. Allingham opened it and quickly emptied it of all the clothing it contained. Then, turning it to the light, he carefully examined the interior.

“That’s all right, Inspector,” he said presently in a satisfied tone. “Now, it you’ll be so good as to call up one of your men, we’ll go over to Seapoint. Bring revolvers, by the way.”

Cranley was now completely under the younger man’s ascendancy. In a few minutes the party were ready, and were whirling off through the twilight to Seapoint.

“That’s a heavy bit of luggage you’ve got,” observed Cranley as they drove, indicating a brown suitcase which Allingham had brought with him.

“Another of my little mysteries,” replied Allingham with a smile. “Can you go a bit faster? We’ve no time to lose.”

They drove up the avenue of Seapoint, and round the blackened eastern wall of the house to the garage in the rear, where, at Allingham's direction, they stowed the car. Then they walked back to enter the gloomy hall. Cranley produced an electric pocket lamp.

"No lights," said Allingham at once. "We must do the best we can without. Which is the dining-room?"

Cranley opened the door to their left. This room had been entirely untouched by the fire.

"See if you can find anything under the carpet," said Allingham. "I'll be back in a moment."

He went out, taking the suitcase with him, while the other three began to push the table and chairs towards one end of the room. When Allingham returned he found them surveying the bare boards.

"There's nothing here," said Cranley.

"I thought not," replied Allingham imperturbably. "Now for the study."

That apartment was still in the state of disorder in which Wilson had left it. A pile of charred books, papers and wood lay in the middle of the floor. The carpet had been ripped up and thrown into a corner, and some of the flooring had been raised, leaving gaping chasms. The drawers of the desk were all out, with their contents strewn everywhere. The packet of envelopes, however, was still in its pigeon-hole. Allingham took it out. Then from his pocket-book he produced the envelope of the letter which Miss Worthing had received, and compared it with the others. They were identical.

"Do you remember if the envelope of Bronson's letter to Mrs. Dakin was like these?" he asked of Cranley. "I mean, was it the same as these?"

"It was certainly like them," replied Cranley. "But it's a common sort enough. I couldn't say if it was the same."

"Well, it should be, a fortiori. And that settles it. Everything is quite plain now."

"I'll take your word for it," said Cranley, "though I don't see anything like daylight myself. Shall we go on and catch the murderer?"

"That will be quite unnecessary," said Allingham, glancing at his watch. "He should be here any minute now."

Chapter XVII

The Night Hunters.

Inspector Cranley gave an involuntary exclamation of surprise, and the young policeman's hand went to the butt of his revolver.

"Yes," said Allingham. "I rather fancy the eight-twenty should serve his purpose. Perhaps you'd better choose your chairs now. We shall have to sit perfectly still presently."

"But what's he coming for?" asked Cranley.

"To murder me," replied Allingham. "Now, arrange your chairs so that they aren't visible from the window. I'm the only person who must be seen."

While they obeyed these directions Allingham opened the window near the desk, and drew down the blind to within a few inches of the sill. The other blind he drew down completely. Then he took a candle from his pocket, lighted it, and after melting the end of it with the match flames, stuck it on top of the desk.

"There, that's all serene," he said, sitting down in the swivel chair. "Now at a sign from me you'll all have to sit as still as if you were in your coffins, so make yourselves as comfortable as you can."

"Who's our man?" asked Cranley.

"I don't know," said Allingham. "All I can tell you is that he's the cleverest, the most daring, the most ruthless, and the most desperate criminal of the century. You'll have to be very spry with your guns. Silence now."

He took some papers from one of the drawers on the floor, and spreading them on the desk, appeared to become absorbed in their contents. Cranley could see, however, that in reality he was straining his ears to catch some distant sound. Darkness had fallen outside, and there was no wind. The candle, near as it was to the open window, burned without guttering. Agnew and the young constable lounged in their armchairs, the latter obviously nervous and uncomfortable, the former still and patient as a cat watching a mouse-hole. Thus a long silent vigil began, during which the only movement was when Allingham from time to time turned over a sheet of paper. Cranley's mind presently flew to his little Doris. In this very room she had searched, with growing nervousness as the darkness fell, for the clue that should help him. Here, later on, the sinister Wilson had lain in wait for her, while she, poor frightened bird, had trembled in the room beyond, wondering when he would strike. Again came that sickness of imagination as he thought of what might have happened to her. The most daring, ruthless, and desperate criminal in England—that was how Allingham had described her assailant: for, though the sequence of events was still a mystery to him, Cranley had no doubt that Doris's midnight hunter was the same man who had murdered the unknown guest at the hotel, who had murdered the detective on the verge of discovering him, and who was now coming to murder Allingham. Ruthless and desperate indeed, with his systematic piling of murder on murder, his relentless determination to bury his guilty secret under a mound of corpses.

And of these Doris's might have been one. He pictured her again, this time fumbling at the hall door and freezing into stillness as the stealthy tread of the unknown first tell on her ear. What a moment that must have been! His own heart now chilled at the mere imagination of it. He saw her recoil, hesitate, fly to the shelter of the laboratory; then the figure of the midnight prowler usurped her place in his thoughts. Crunch—crunch—crunch, he had crossed the gravel, grim and purposeful, wrapped in an atmosphere of evil whose taint the innocent of soul had perceived at once. How would he come tonight? Surely velvet-footed as a panther in the jungle, feeling his way warily over the lawn, gliding from shrub to shrub, his eye ever on the light that marked his destined prey. Was he yet at hand? If so, no sound betrayed him. The warm autumnal night was hushed in a brooding quiet. The naked candle flame burned as steadily as in a lantern. Even the sea was

dumb. One false step, one breath too loud, must inevitably betray the murderer's approach. But the stillness remained unbroken.

Allingham turned another sheet, then slightly inclined his head. Was that a footstep on the grass, or only the fall of a leaf? No stir again.

Then, with the awful suddenness of one of nature's disturbances, came the clash of metal, a yell of dismay, followed by sounds of a struggle mingled with the jangling of chain. Allingham at once darted to the window, revolver in hand, shouting "Hands up!"

Bang! came a shot in answer, splintering the sash. Allingham fired immediately after; then "Damn!" he said. "He's got away. After him, boys."

He leaped from the window, followed by Agnew, while the others dashed for the door. Flying feet could be heard to the right; then the hurtling of a body through the shrubs.

"He's making for the plantation," Allingham shouted as Cranley and the constable came charging from the hall door. "Shoot if you see him."

The four rushed through the shrubbery toward the belt of trees beyond. As they crossed the bare space between, a shot flashed in the plantation. Cranley gave a cry of pain, and dropped his revolver. The others paused. "It's nothing," said Cranley, groping for his weapon with his left hand. "Come on, or he'll get away."

In the shadow of the wood the young constable fired at random. Agnew plunged in and was quickly lost to sight. The others followed more slowly, the constable advancing with heavy deliberation, Cranley stumbling a little and Allingham hesitating, as even a braver man might do, at the prospect of pursuing a desperate man through that black maze, where every tree was a possible ambush.

"What's at the end of this?" he asked of Cranley as they groped their way between the trunks.

"Straight ahead there's the wall of Mr. Rossiter's place. Off to the right there's the road. Beyond that there's the seashore."

"We'd better get back to the car and cut him off by road. We'll never catch him on foot."

Cranley's answer was to tumble to the ground in a faint.

"That settles it," said Allingham to the constable. "Call Agnew and we'll carry him back to the house."

They raised a shout, and presently Agnew reappeared, baffled, his face bleeding where a branch had struck it. Carrying Cranley between them, they regained the house, and laid him on a couch, improvised from chairs, in the study. Then the constable went to the garage for the car, while Allingham attended to the wound. The bullet had passed through the shoulder, but he had not sufficient medical knowledge to tell what damage it had done. The wound had bled profusely, but clotting was beginning, and he wisely decided not to interfere with nature's safeguard beyond securing the patient's arm in a position where it would remain steady. A drop of brandy brought Cranley to his senses, and his first words were: "Have you got him?"

"No. But we soon will," replied Allingham, as the car drew up, panting, at the door.

It was decided that the constable should stay with the injured man while the others resumed the chase; and in a few minutes they were speeding along the

same stretch of road which had been the scene of Doris's desperate flight. They kept a sharp look-out to left and right, but with so many trees and bushes about, and with no moon to help them, they realized that there was little hope of finding their quarry. When, therefore, they had gone a mile or more, Allingham stopped the car and said:

"We're simply wasting time. The proper thing to do is to turn out the whole police force and search the country thoroughly, so we'd better get back and send them out at once."

Agnew grunted, and, turning, they drove back to the house, where Cranley declared his entire agreement with the proposal. Before departing, however, Allingham invited the others to come and examine the man-trap which had so signally failed them. It lay on the flower-bed immediately under the study window. By the light of a flash-lamp they saw the grim steel jaws glinting among the disordered loosestrife and poppies. Then, with an excited "Hello!" Allingham turned the ray on a shoe, caught by the heel between the fangs, which had bitten deep into the tough leather. Disengaging it, he examined it closely.

"Clue?" said Agnew hopefully.

"Not exactly. This is just one more example of the fellow's forethought and attention to detail. The shoe is brand new, as you see. Price, one guinea. The makers have scores of shops all over London, and they probably sell hundreds of these shoes every day. Our man must have bought them specially for this expedition, meaning to destroy them at once, in case he left any traces.

"All the same," he added, "our night's work hasn't been wasted. With only one shoe, he won't be able to go very far: so let's get back and start the hunt at once."

The night was still young when they reached the police station, and the hue and cry was sent forth immediately. Agnew accompanied it; but Allingham felt justified in taking a rest. Having seen that a doctor was fetched for Cranley, he went home to his lodgings, leaving instructions with the station sergeant to call him by telephone for identification purposes if an arrest were made.

In about half an hour the summons came.

"We've got our man," said Agnew's imperturbable voice at the other end of the wire. "We ran him down, dead-beat, a couple of miles away, and closed on him before he could draw. Will you come down and see him?"

Excited beyond measure, Allingham hurried off to the police station, where he found Agnew sitting at a desk with what he called "the exhibits" spread out before him: that is to say, a pair of tan shoes and an automatic pistol.

"We found this," said Agnew, picking up one of the former, "lying on the road about fifty yards from where we caught him. He was in his stocking feet when we got him, so I went back and scouted around till I found it."

"Good man," said Allingham, taking the pistol. "This is a nice little weapon." He touched a spring, and the cartridge clip glided out into his hand. "One, two, three, four, five, six, and it holds eight," he said, pressing the cartridges out one by one with his thumb. "We must go and look for the empty shells at Seapoint tomorrow. Has the prisoner been troublesome?"

"No. Too done up. He seems to have got his face bashed in the wood, like me, and it's left him groggy. Come and see him."

It was indeed a miserable-looking figure that they found in the next room, sitting hand-cuffed between two constables. His clothes and hair were covered with dust; his face was smeared with dried blood; he had a black eye; and he had nothing on his feet but a pair of dusty socks. He had been sitting huddled up in a posture of utter weariness and dejection, but looked up hopefully on the entry of the new arrival.

"Oh, I say, look here," he cried. "Do tell these people I'm all right. They think I'm Bronson or somebody. I was just driving along the road, and some fellow knocked me down–-"

Allingham experienced a pang of disappointment. This was not the person he had expected to see. On the other hand he was very evidently the man who had shot at him that night.

"What about this?" he said, showing the pistol.

"I don't know anything about it," the prisoner protested. "The fellow must have stuck it in my pocket when I was unconscious."

"What fellow?"

"The fellow who knocked me down. I was just driving along the road when he asked me to stop. Then he jumped up and bashed me all over the place, and that's all I know."

"What about your shoes, then?" asked Allingham; but he already knew that a mistake had been made. This poor youth was so obviously bewildered and frightened.

"The fellow's gone off with them, I suppose. That one they found isn't mine, anyway. Try it on me if you like."

"Let's have your story from the beginning," suggested Allingham.

"Certainly," said the young man eagerly, and sat up with renewed vigor.

"But I must warn you," said one of the policemen in the heavy official manner, "that everything you say–-"

"Will be used in evidence against me," concluded the young man rapidly. "I know all that. Use as much of it as you like. My name is Featherstone-Culpepper—Billy Featherstone-Culpepper—and I live with my parents at Oakleigh, on the Coast Road, you know. You can ring them up—Spurn Cove one four three—and they'll identify me all right."

"We'll do that presently," said Allingham. "How did you get into this mess?"

"I was just driving along the road," said the young man, "on my way to call on some friends—the Rossiters of Fernbank, as a matter of fact, and if you ask them they'll bear me out, because they were expecting me. Well, as I was driving along, suddenly I heard some shots, and began to slow up in case of trouble. A few minutes later a man appeared in the middle of the road in front of me and gave me a hail.

"'Are you a doctor?'" said he.

"I said 'No.'

"'Well, give me a lift to the nearest one, quick,' said he. 'My father's been shot by a burglar.'

"I stopped the car and said: 'Hop up,' and with that he jumped on board, and before I knew what was happening he gave me this"—indicating his eye—"with his right, and rapped me over the head with his left. Down I went, and I remember

nothing more. When I came to I was lying behind a rock on the foreshore, close to the road, with my shoes gone, and that one they found on my foot. I got up, and was just walking home when these blighters came along and arrested me.

"You can let him go," said Allingham to the custodians. "This isn't the man; but you can ring up his home if you want to make sure."

Billy jumped up with a whoop of joy. "Come on now, you blighters. Spurn Cove, one four three, and look sharp about it."

"One moment," said Agnew, stepping forward. "An ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory."

With these words he pushed the prisoner back on the seat, and, taking hold of his dusty foot, inserted it in the murderer's shoe. The youngster's innocence, already apparent, became obvious at once, for the shoe was two sizes too large.

"By jove!" cried Allingham. "We'll get our man yet. What's the number of your car?"

"XY double seven three."

"And the name?"

"Genevieve."

"I mean the maker's name, you idiot."

"Oh! Baby Austin."

Allingham darted into the next room. "Got a map?" he asked of the station sergeant.

The latter produced one, which Allingham spread out on the desk before him and scanned eagerly.

"Look here," he said at last. "Our man will have to stick to the car, since he can't possibly walk in that boy's shoes. That means he'll have to go north along the seacoast till he strikes the main London road out there"—pointing to a cross-road. "That's twenty miles away. He's had a long start, but if we can't run down his baby in our car, we're not fit to drive a perambulator."

"You'll catch him easy enough," put in Billy, who had been freed from his chains and was peering at the map between the shoulders of Allingham and the sergeant. "There's not much gasoline in my little bus."

"How much?" asked Allingham.

"Not more than a spoonful."

"Come on quick," cried Allingham to the constables.

"Half a mo," said the sergeant. "How do you know your man will make for London?"

"He must. It's his only chance. If he doesn't sleep in his own bed tonight, and go down to his office in the morning, he gives his whole game away."

"Then you know who he is?"

"I think so. But I can't prove it unless I catch him red-handed."

"Is it George or Philip?" asked Agnew quietly.

"Probably George. But if we don't catch him I can't be sure."

"When is the next train to London, sergeant?"

"Ten-twenty. And it's the last."

Agnew gave one glance at the clock, and without another word darted into the street.

“He has his own methods,” said Allingham with a smile. “Now, sergeant, will you ring up Scotland Yard and ask them to take out warrants for the arrest of John Elthorne and his sons, George and Philip?”

“Were they all in it?”

“Yes. Now, men, let’s be off.”

In a moment the big police car was rushing along the coast northward again, past Seapoint, over the ground of the former chase, past the scene of Billy’s arrest, and then at racing speed along the lonely road beyond that. Nothing of any sort did they meet or pass on the way, till at length they sighted the lights of a gas station at the junction with the main London road.

“Slow up,” said Allingham. “Our man probably had to fill his tank here.”

A single car stood in the station by one of the pumps, but it was not the one they sought. Waiting beside it was a fussy little man in a leather coat, who rushed up to Allingham, bubbling over with excitement.

“I say!” he cried. “What do you think of this? The keeper of this bally station seems to have vanished. I’ve been waiting here for the last ten minutes, and he hasn’t shown up.”

Drawing an electric lamp from his pocket, Allingham jumped from the car, and dashed into a clump of bushes at one side of the station. For a few moments the others heard him moving about among the foliage, while his light darted this way and that. Then the ray suddenly vanished, and he emerged slowly, dragging a senseless body by the shoulders.

“He’s alive, I think,” said Allingham, feeling for the man’s heart, while the others gathered round. “He’s had a nasty knock on the head. See.”

“Why, he’s got no shoes on,” cried the astonished motorist.

“You stay and look after him,” said Allingham to one of the policemen. “We must get on.”

Followed by the other policeman, he leaped on board the car, and, wheeling to the left, they drove at a reckless pace down the broad London road. Now at last they encountered traffic in plenty, and overtook not a few baby Austins, which they scrutinized anxiously; but mile after mile went by without sight of the one they sought. Allingham meanwhile tried to put himself in the fugitive’s place, and work out what course he was likely to pursue. Obviously it was not for nothing that he had taken the risk of attacking the keeper of the gas station. It must, therefore, be vital for him to obtain a pair of shoes that would fit. That could only mean that he recognized the impossibility of reaching London undetected in the Austin, and had resolved to abandon the car and proceed on foot. In that case, how was he to get to London? Would he really make for London after all? Second thoughts made this seem less certain to Allingham. The events of the night must have upset all the murderer’s plans. He would know that a trap had been set for him, and that, therefore, suspicion against him must be strong. Would he dare, in face of that, to brave things out any longer? Would he not rather attempt to bolt before the net should close completely? In that case he must get rid of the incriminating car, and seek for a disguise and a hiding-place.

The more Allingham thought about it, the more likely did this alternative appear; and, almost unconsciously, he began to slacken speed. He drove more warily now, with an eye on the side of the road, looking for anything that might

serve the purpose he was attributing to the fugitive. He had reached his conclusion none too soon. A few minutes later he clapped on all his brakes and stopped dead.

"What is it?" asked the policeman.

"The Austin," said Allingham, and, jumping out, ran back some twenty yards along the road to where a narrow lane branched off. In the middle of this stood Billy's little car, its lights out, and the engine quite cold. Allingham's flash-lamp revealed the number to the policeman.

"Getting a habit of deserting cars, ain't he?" observed the latter.

"Let's see which way he went," said Allingham, directing the electric ray on the ground.

It was easy to follow the murderer's track in the mud of the lane. It led straight back to the main road; but there, on the graveled pathway, it could be followed no farther.

"Are we near a railway?" asked Allingham.

"Yes, sir," replied the policeman. "Abbot's Crockford Station is about quarter of a mile from here."

"By jove!" cried Allingham. "Agnew's in luck. I'll bet our friend has caught his train. Come on. We must have a talk with Scotland Yard."

Chapter XVIII

Mr. Sparker's Adventure.

When Mr. Alf Sparker boarded the last train from Spurn Cove to London, he was in the gayest of humors. He had obtained tremendous orders from the two leading drapers in the town for the goods of his firm—Silkerino Hosiery and Underwear, Limited—and on the strength of this achievement had won for his future partner in life, a certain Miss Maudie Griggs, in Mr. Sparker's eyes the personification of all female perfections, and in point of fact a very desirable young woman indeed. Settling down in a corner seat of the railway carriage, with a case of samples on the luggage rack before him, and the memory of his lady's kisses still warm on his lips, Mr. Sparker felt his bosom seething with emotions which a Keats would have transmuted into a joy forever, but which Mr. Sparker—being only Mr. Sparker—must let off in not very melodious whistling, and in smiles which an unsympathetic observer would have called inane. His one desire was to tell all the world about this unique event in its history, or at least—for he recognized the possibility that his idyll might not be regarded as of great public interest—to fall into chat with someone who might appreciate the slickness of his dealings with the two drapers. But, though he kept the door open till the last moment, nobody fell into the trap, and he was left to face the journey in solitude.

As the train sped on its way, Mr. Sparker's lyric mood sought expression in further bursts of whistling, in frequent changes of position in the carriage, and in the lighting, and throwing away, half-smoked, of numerous cigarettes. Finally he

took out his order book and surveyed with deep satisfaction the details of the transactions which had brought him so much bliss.

A few moments later the train slowed down and stopped at a station. “Abbot’s Crockford” he read. Then the door of the carriage was suddenly opened, and a man got in. Mr. Sparker looked up cordially, but the stranger’s appearance was not one to encourage casual conversation. He was tall and dark, with harsh features and unamiable eyes. He was also, Mr. Sparker felt, of a higher social order than his own. His suit, though somewhat disheveled, was obviously the creation of a West End tailor; and his shirt, collar, and tie were equally eloquent of wealth. “What the dickens is he doing in a third-class carriage?” Mr. Sparker asked himself as the stranger sank down in the tar corner.

First impressions failed to daunt the successful lover’s ebullience of spirits.

“Nice weather we’re having lately,” he observed.

The stranger stared with the astonishment of a patrician at finding himself addressed by anything so unusual as a member of the inferior orders. But he managed to effect a grunt which the listener was at liberty to take as indicating agreement.

“We could do with a bit of sunshine to make up for the summer we didn’t have,” continued Mr. Sparker.

The stranger grunted again.

“I just come from Spurn Cove,” went on Mr. Sparker. “Where the murder was, you know. They’ve had a pretty poor season down there, I’m told, what with the weather and the trade depression and one thing or another. And the murder hasn’t done the place no good either. Half-emptied the Grand Hotel, I believe.”

“Indeed,” said the stranger without the remotest symptom of interest.

“Fishy crime that, altogether,” commented Mr. Sparker. “I always think there’s something fishy about a crime when the corpse can’t be identified by its face. Can’t be sure of anything then, can you? Might be a substitution of corpses for all you can tell. What do you think?”

The stranger went so far this time as to say that he had no opinion on the matter.

“Then take the burning of the murderer’s house,” went on Mr. Sparker. “That’s another fishy business. If it was Bronson himself that did it, how was he able to hang about all this time without getting copped? And if it wasn’t Bronson, who the dickens was it?”

The stranger had no theory to put forward.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I think,” said Mr. Sparker, “for what it’s worth. It’s my belief that some big nob in San Fillip, or whatever they call the place, was mixed up in that forgery business. Somebody in the government, perhaps. So when he got murdered the San Fillipers bribed our police to mess his face up, so as he wouldn’t he recognized. And afterward the police burned down that house to get rid of clues that they didn’t want to find. What do you think of that for a solution?”

“Very plausible indeed,” admitted the stranger.

“All this sort of hanky-panky is fishy, as I say,” pursued Mr. Sparker. “Undermines public confidence in the police, and so on. Don’t you think so?”

“I suppose so,” said the stranger, with such obvious indifference that Mr. Sparker lapsed into silence for a while. He could not, however, hold his tongue for very long.

“Wonder how long this trade depression’s going to last,” he observed presently.

The stranger made no suggestion.

“Never knew trade so bad before,” declared Mr. Sparker out of his vast experience. “Not that I’ve any right to complain myself. As a matter of fact I’ve just put over the biggest deal of my life down at Spurn Cove. Of course,” he added modestly, “bad trade don’t affect my line like what it does to others. I’m in the art silk business—stockings and things, you know—and ladies must have stockings if the sky falls,—not to mention other things. But it took a bit of salesmanship all the same.”

The stranger fell back once more on the grunting policy.

“Salesmanship,” declared Mr. Sparker, “is what really matters today. The salesman is more important than the manufacturer, really. After all, there’s no good making things if you can’t sell them, is there? People say there’s too many middlemen between the producer and his market; but what I say is, if you don’t have lots of middlemen, you won’t have any market. What I mean to say is, it stands to reason that you’ve got to have salesmen to make people see that they want your goods. The salesman makes the market for you; so, if you look at it rightly, he’s as much a producer as the manufacturer himself. The manufacturer produces the goods, but the salesman produces the market. Do you see what I mean?”

The stranger’s lack of interest now showed itself to be profound. He had taken a notebook from his pocket and was studying it with knitted brows, occasionally stopping to scribble a few words in pencil. Mr. Sparker gave up his sociable efforts in disgust, and surveyed the stranger’s person with extreme disfavor. What the dickens was a nob like this doing in a third-class carriage anyway? And how had he got his clothes in such a mess? His right hand showed a recent cut, the blood from which had stained his shirt cuff, and there was a kind of wheal on one cheek as if he had received a lash from a whip. But the most extraordinary thing of all was his footgear. This fashionably dressed young man was wearing the boots of a laborer, and a very badly worn pair at that. Mr. Sparker stared at them long and hard, glanced again at the face of their owner—still absorbed in his notebook—and then once more at the boots. Those boots were inexplicable. The most stylish of nobs might get his hand cut, or his clothes ruffled. He might have met with a motor accident, or been caught kissing somebody’s wife, or had a disagreement in his cups. But for what possible reason could he have put on a pair of boots like those?—a poor man’s boots, old, muddy, one of them cracked at the toecap, the laces broken and knotted.

Mr. Sparker raised his wondering gaze once more to the face of the wearer. The latter was no longer interested in his notebook. He was watching Mr. Sparker, and his expression was not pleasant to see. Mr. Sparker felt a kind of chilly uneasiness creep over his skin. He smiled ingratiatingly and said: “It looks as if you’ve been doing a bit of hiking.”

“Oh, you think so, do you?” said the stranger with slow emphasis.

“Well, if I’ve remarked on anything I shouldn’t,” Mr. Sparker faltered, “I can only say I’m sorry. No offense meant, I’m sure.”

“H’m!” said the stranger, with a grim tightening of the lips.

For a moment he looked Mr. Sparker over with an air of detached calculation. Then he rose from his corner, and the young man saw death in his hard eye. Half-paralyzed with sudden fear, Mr. Sparker strove to stand up, raising his hands in a feeble gesture of defense. But before he could collect his scattered wits, the stranger was upon him like a charging bull. One fist caught Mr. Sparker on the point of the chin, the other on the solar plexus, and he sank back in his corner almost senseless. The stranger’s hand at once closed on his throat. Convulsion seized him. Then all went black.

The slowing down of the train warned the dark man to let go of his victim’s throat. Perhaps this inquisitive youth still lived; but above all things he must prevent anyone from entering the carriage at the station. Throwing the senseless body on the floor, he hastily pulled down the side blinds, and then stood leaning out of the open window as the train came to a standstill.

There were few passengers waiting at the station; but one of them, a meek-looking old gentleman with a large handbag, came hurrying forward and gripped the door handle.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the occupant suavely. “This carriage is engaged.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon, I’m sure,” replied the meek gentleman, and bustled off to find accommodation elsewhere.

The murderer breathed more freely; but immediately afterward another man, coming apparently from nowhere, approached the carriage.

“I’m afraid this carriage is engaged,” said the murderer with the same politely regretful tone as before.

“Nonsense,” came the answer very decidedly. “Where’s the notice?”

“It must have fallen down–-” began the murderer; but at the same moment there was a banging of doors, and the voice of the guard calling:

“Hurry up, please.”

“Nonsense,” said the intruder again, and, tearing the door open, he leaped on board just as the train began to move.

“Strictly speaking,” said the murderer, as a porter slammed the door to, “the carriage is not engaged. But my friend here is in a rather disgusting condition, and I wanted to spare strangers the unpleasantness.”

“What’s wrong with him?” inquired the other, glancing at the prostrate form on the floor.

“Drunk, I regret to say,” said the murderer.

At the same moment the unfortunate Sparker gave a desperate gasp for breath.

“Something ought to be done for him,” said the intruder, “and, as it happens, I’m a doctor. Let’s have a look at him.”

“He’s all right,” declared the other, standing immovable in the way. “Merely drunk. You can’t do anything for him.”

“I can try at any rate,” said the intruder.

“Let him alone,” said the murderer with finality.

The two men faced each other for a moment in silence. The train was now well clear of the station, but the murderer hesitated, for once, to strike. Perhaps he

recognized that this lean and wiry opponent was not the person to collapse under a single blow, and that a prolonged struggle might destroy what little hope was now left for himself. At any rate he let the opportunity go by, and said: “I’ll look after my friend myself, thank you.”

Agnew, for his part, having seen his quarry board the train at Abbot’s Crockford, had changed carriages purely in order to keep him under observation. He had not intended to do more than follow him to his home and then report to the police. But now he realized that he had interrupted another crime, and the necessity of saving a life enforced an entire change of plan. Drawing an automatic pistol, he said:

“Hands up, Mr. George Elthorne.”

Taken by surprise, the murderer’s nerve at last gave way. The sight of the pistol, and of Agnew’s scarred face, told him that this was only the continuation of the chase begun at Seapoint, and he did what he was told without a word. Agnew promptly stepped forward, and, holding his pistol to the man’s chest, went through his pockets to satisfy himself that he had no weapon. That done, he stood a while pondering, his slow mind endeavoring to work out how he could help the gasping figure on the floor and secure his prisoner at the same time. Presently he said:

“Now listen to me, and do exactly as I tell you. Any tricks, and you’re a dead man. First I want you to take your handkerchief out of your pocket and throw it on the seat there. Use your left hand.”

The murderer obeyed.

“Now turn round, and then cross your hands behind your back.”

“You’re going to tie them?”

“Certainly.”

“Then I won’t do it.”

Agnew looked significantly at his gun.

“Fire away,” replied the murderer. “I don’t mind being shot. But I won’t hang.”

He spoke the words with an emphasis that expressed fear as well as determination. Agnew was momentarily baffled, for he knew that he had no right to shoot in the circumstances, and he knew that Elthorne must know it too. As he hesitated, another gasp came from the asphyxiated Sparker.

Inspiration suddenly came to Agnew. He reached with his free hand for the communication cord.

“Stop!” cried the murderer. “If you touch that cord, I’ve give this fellow a kick on the head that’ll finish him for good.”

Agnew paused; but he kept his prisoner covered, and said quietly: “After that threat, you can trust me to shoot dead quick. So don’t stir a finger.”

Again the two men faced each other in silence, while the train rattled and swayed on its journey.

“Now look here,” said the murderer presently. “You want to save this fellow’s life, and you can’t do it while I’m here. You also want to bring me to the gallows, but you can’t do it and save this fellow’s life at the same time. Why not strike a bargain about it? What about a life for a life?”

“What do you mean?” asked Agnew.

“Let me slip along the footboard and get into the first empty carriage I can find. I’ll take my chance of escape at the next station.”

Agnew pondered this proposition. He had achieved his original purpose of identifying the murderer, and Elthorne’s chance of ultimate escape was now remote. On the other hand, there was no knowing how many lives this resolute and desperate man might take while he retained his liberty.

“Time is pressing,” said the murderer with recovered coolness. “If you don’t make up your mind quickly, I’ll give this chap his quietus at once.”

Agnew’s indecision was now pitiable, for this was a situation with which his talents were quite unfitted to cope. Elthorne watched him with growing contempt and self-confidence, a smile of insolent triumph lighting up his face. He even began to drop his hands, but that pulled Agnew together at once, and he said sharply: “Keep ‘em up, or I’ll plug you straight.”

Elthorne obeyed the command with studied languor, and said: “Now then. Which is it to be? Do I go? Or do I settle this booby’s hash at once?”

Even as he spoke there came a whistle from the engine, and the train began to slow down. With a quick movement Elthorne reached one arm out of the window and flung open the door.

“Hands up!” shouted Agnew.

The murderer made no attempt to obey. Keeping hold of the door, he replied to Agnew’s threat with a mocking smile. The pace of the train grew slower and slower.

“Hands up!” repeated Agnew.

“Fire and be damned,” said Elthorne suddenly, and leaped into the night.

Chapter XIX

Unraveling the Threads.

As soon as he had handed over the unfortunate Mr. Sparker to the care of the station-master, and telephoned for assistance to the local police, Agnew set out in further pursuit of the criminal. The latter, however, had gained too good a start, so his quest was fruitless. Elthorne, in fact, had commandeered a second motor-car by the same simple method by which he had obtained the Austin, and was miles away in an unknown direction before his pursuers had begun their search. Two days passed before the car was found, half-sunk in a cattle pond on a derelict farm in Norfolkshire. Of Elthorne himself not a trace could be discovered.

A week later the whole country was shocked by a particularly brutal crime committed in a Lincolnshire village. The post office was broken into at night, and the postmaster, an elderly man, who, according to his wife, went down to attack the burglar with a poker, was beaten to death with his own weapon. Public opinion was unanimous in attributing the crime to Elthorne, and Scotland Yard redoubled its efforts to hunt the murderer down. For five days there was no further news of him. Then a policeman was found shot dead in a Yorkshire lane,

and, though there was no evidence to prove it, all England felt instinctively that the same desperate hand was at work. Scotland Yard, having reason to know that the murderer was in the neighborhood, drew its net closer.

Three days later, Elthorne was recognized by detectives when trying to secure a berth as seaman on a Dutch vessel at Hull; but, before they could lay hands on him, he drew a pistol and blew out his brains.

Long before this—in fact, on the morning after the events at Seapoint—Mr. John Elthorne and his son Philip had been arrested. Ignorant of what had happened in the night, each had left home at his usual hour, to find the officers of the law awaiting him on the doorstep.

It is something to be said for George that, in, the midst of his own peril, he made an attempt to warn his accomplices. Immediately on receipt of a message from Inspector Cranley, Scotland Yard had taken steps to have the telephone wires tapped, and the hunted man was actually heard asking the butler at Lancaster Gate to summon his father. Some sound made by the listener must, however, have put George on his guard; for when John Elthorne came to the instrument he could obtain no reply.

On the day after the arrests, Allingham, calling at the police station at Spurn Cove to see Cranley before returning to town, found him in bed, but sitting up, and chatting with Doris, whom for a moment Allingham hardly recognized, so different did she look in her pretty hat and frock from the formally clad young woman at the hotel bureau.

"We're engaged," Cranley explained.

"I congratulate you both," said Allingham. "But on such an auspicious occasion you'll hardly want to hear what I've come to say. I was going to tell you the solution of the mystery."

"Oh, please do," said Doris. "I'm dying to hear it. We didn't become engaged just now, you know. It's been going on for ages."

"Won't you take a chair?" said Cranley.

Allingham did so.

"Well," he said, "I came down here with a theory, which poor Cardwell was working on, that Elthorne and Wilson had been collaborating in a plot against Bronson, and that Elthorne had inveigled Wilson into taking his room—supposedly as part of the plot—and murdered him there, faking matters in such a way as to throw the guilt on Bronson. How he could have worked it I didn't know, but I hoped to find out by examining the ground here. I had already come to one conclusion. The cutting of the window-pane, the footprint on the flower-bed, the locked door, and so on, were all part of an elaborate scheme to conceal the fact that the criminal had access to the room from within the hotel. Elthorne, as we know, had occupied the room for a fortnight, and it would be an easy matter to get a second key made in that time.

"This theory seemed to be confirmed by Cardwell's murder. Bronson could not possibly have been responsible for that. It was obvious that the motive was the recovery of the incriminating photograph he held, and, of course, the obliteration of any other evidence he had acquired against Elthorne. This linked it up with the burning of Bronson's house. The man whom Miss Philpot saw must have been searching for the same papers which we held. Who was he? Not Bronson; for he

would have known where they were, and he would certainly not have wanted to destroy them. Not Elthorne; for he was described as young. Probably then some agent or ally of Elthorne's.

"That made matters a little clearer in regard to the hotel crime. Elthorne had established a perfectly genuine alibi. It was this same agent who, using the key provided by Elthorne, entered Wilson's room in the night and murdered him in his bed. And it was the same agent who had listened at the door while Cardwell talked with Elthorne, followed on his heels in a stolen car, and did him to death.

"The only thing that now remained unexplained was the identity of Wilson. The murderer had taken great pains to conceal that, probably because the inquest would have elicited evidence showing that he had never had any connection with Bronson. Who was he then? I thought of a lot of possibilities, but the most likely seemed to be that he was some shady character who had reasons of his own for assuming a disguise.

"The discovery that Wilson was alive seemed at first to knock my whole theory to pieces; but at the same time I satisfied myself that I was right about the window. There was no trace on the verandah of anyone having climbed up that way. Clearly, then, the murderer had had access by the door, and probably by the means I had supposed.

"It was then, Miss Philpot, that you pointed out to me the view of Bronson's house from the window of the bedroom. You may remember that I behaved rather strangely. The fact is that at once I received that curious intimation, which I think most people have experienced now and then, that a thing one has been puzzling over or trying to remember is just within one's grasp if one could only think hard enough. One's brain seems to strain physically to grasp it, and then suddenly one sees it all quite clear, or else it eludes one altogether."

"I know what you mean," said Cranley.

"At the same time," went on Allingham, "a most extraordinary feeling came over me: a sort of shuddering of the soul, as if I was in the presence of some embodied evil–-"

"That's the word," cried Doris suddenly, springing to her feet. "That's exactly how I felt when I first noticed the same thing. Do you remember, Frank?"—turning to Cranley—"I told you about it that day on the promenade, and you only laughed at me—said it was a girl's fancy, or something."

Cranley reddened and muttered something inaudible.

"Well," went on Allingham, "I sat down promptly and did a bit of the hardest thinking in my life. I'm feeling the strain of it still. One thing was perfectly clear. The view of the house from the hotel was an integral part of the crime. It couldn't be carried out without it. Why? The flash of the sun on a window gave the answer. A signal had had to be given from the murderer in one house to his accomplice in the other. Why? Because the accomplice had some essential task to perform in a given time. What had he to do? He had to get out of the hotel in time for someone else to get in.

"That answer lit up the whole mystery with the sudden brightness of a magnesium flare. If the accomplice was in the hotel, the murderer was in Bronson's house: and it was over there, and not at the hotel that the crime had been committed.

“For a moment that seemed a far-fetched conclusion. Then I remembered the bloodstained envelope found by Miss Philpot on Bronson’s desk, and I felt sure it was the truth. I remembered next Wilson’s arrival at the hotel, so carefully synchronized with Elthorne’s departure. I was no longer yielding to my pet vice of imaginative theorizing. I was getting hold, bit by bit, of an elaborately infernal plot designed in every detail by some master intelligence. So logical and closely knit was the scheme, so perfectly co-ordinated in its parts, that once one had possession of a single factor, the whole thing revealed itself in inevitable sequence.

“The murder had taken place in Bronson’s house, and the corpse had been brought to the hotel by Wilson. How? Obviously in his luggage. His luggage included a large black trunk, very suitable for the purpose. But it was found full of clothes. These, of course, must have been left behind by Elthorne, who probably disposed them on the top of the wardrobe, where they escaped observation during the short period when the room was vacant. All Wilson had to do was to place the corpse on the bed, arrange the room as it was found, put the clothes and the plates in the trunk, and slip away unobtrusively by a side door, leaving the guilt on Bronson.”

“And what was Bronson doing all this time?” asked Cranley, as Allingham paused. “Why did he clear out?”

“He didn’t clear out,” said Allingham.

“What became of him then?”

“He was lying dead in the Grand Hotel with his face beaten into pulp.”

Allingham spoke the words with an artist’s consciousness of their dramatic effect; and, having dropped the curtain, as it were, produced and lighted a cigarette.

“I don’t quite see that,” said Cranley after a moment’s thought.

“You’re thinking of those letters he wrote?”

“Exactly. If those were forgeries, they were perfect masterpieces. At any rate one of them was. I dare say it would be easy enough to deceive the housekeeper, but not his sweetheart.”

Doris gave a confirmatory nod to this.

“And remember the two messages about the canary,” Cranley continued. “It’s the sort of touch a real clever forger would put in, I admit. But it reads to me like the genuine Bronson securing the safety of what was hidden in the cage. And it blew the gaff on the whole scheme too.”

“You’re quite right,” said Allingham. “The letters were perfectly genuine.”

Cranley and Doris looked completely at sea.

“But they were written days after you say he was dead,” protested the former. “One of them was written in France a week after.”

“No,” said Allingham. “That’s the whole point. Cardwell deduced from internal evidence that they were written before Bronson knew about the murder. And I deduce from the bloodstained packet of envelopes that they were written after Bronson had been overpowered and just before they killed him.”

“And who posted them?”

“One of the murderers. It was part of their plan.”

“Better begin at the beginning,” said Cranley, “and tell us exactly how it all happened.”

"Well, here's my reconstruction of it. Bronson was blackmailing Elthorne about that past of his, and evidently pushed him too hard. According to Elthorne, after having extracted a yearly levy for some time, he demanded fifty thousand pounds to buy the papers outright. At that point his sons came to hear of what was afoot,—or he may have decided to take them into his confidence, and get their advice and help. They had just as much interest as their father in keeping the secret dark, and the elder, George, who now becomes the principal actor in the affair, was a strong character who would stick at nothing. First he tried to get hold of the papers by burglary. When that failed he determined on murder. But he made up his mind that he was not going to be detected, and he devoted the energies of a remarkably powerful mind to evolving a plan which would leave no clues to betray him. The best way to secure such immunity is to throw the guilt on somebody else; but it is not infallible, since that person, in spite of every precaution, may succeed in clearing himself. George's solution of that difficulty proves him a genius. He would throw the guilt on someone who could never clear himself—on the very man who was to be murdered.

"This required the construction of a complete story to account for the murder, and of a personality for the murdered man. The latter was achieved fairly simply. George Elthorne went to America in June and bought a stock of clothes and the cameo ring. You may remember my saying yesterday that the date fitted in. I was thinking, of course, of its relation to the burglary, which was in May. Well, George bought the clothes, and probably wore them for a while, and in some way or other secured a false passport. Then he came home to carry out the rest of his plan.

"This was to construct a plausible story to provide a motive for the murder. The unsolved San Félipe mystery supplied one ready made, so he set to work to manufacture the necessary plates. He probably made them by a photographic process from genuine notes, but of that I can't be sure. As soon as everything was ready, he went down to Spurn Cove to survey the ground, and had that interview with Polly Dakin which told him Bronson's domestic routine. He then went off to New York, and came back again as Wilson in the Pannonia, arriving at Southampton on the twenty-fifth of August. From there he wrote to the Grand Hotel to book a room, and then went straight up to London to meet his brother.

"Meanwhile Mr. Elthorne, senior, had been taking a holiday at Spurn Cove. Just before the arrival of George's letter he announced that for business reasons he would have to return to town next day, and so his room became available for George as we know. On the following night George and Philip motored down to call on Bronson, ostensibly to discuss the new arrangements for the payment of the blackmail. They overpowered him—not without a struggle—and demanded the papers. On his refusal, they told him—here, I confess, I'm guessing—that if he did not surrender they would take him away and keep him prisoner till he did. Bronson still refused. They then told him he might write letters of a reassuring kind to his friends, which they would supervise. George's object was to create indisputable evidence that Bronson was alive; and, of course, Bronson was only too glad to be able to save his friends from anxiety, and to secure the safety of the papers on which his income depended. He must have received some slight abrasion of the hand in the struggle with his enemies, and thus left the mark on the packet of envelopes as he extracted the two that were needed.

"As soon as this was done, the Elthornes proceeded to make an end of him and get away with the body. The whole thing had now to be very carefully timed. Elthorne could not leave the hotel until he knew that the murder had been successfully accomplished; because, in case of failure, he would have to take away the clothes and the plates which were hidden in his room. When everything was ready, therefore, they gave him a signal—probably by flashing the electric light. Elthorne was then to look up the train which George must catch, and time his own departure accordingly; while George, in Bronson's car, would have to rush to Grantwich, deposit the trunk in the cloak-room at the station, drive off again, abandon the car in a side street, and get back to the station in time to catch the right train to Spurn Cove. Probably Philip remained at Seapoint to look for the papers, and afterward drove away in his own car at his leisure."

"One moment," interrupted Cranley. "Who was it that Mrs. Dakin heard coming into the house after midnight?"

"Philip, I suppose," replied Allingham. "Just before she came home he would have withdrawn temporarily to the garage—where his car was already hidden—and waited until the two women were in bed. He then let them hear him moving about the house as if he was Bronson. It was another proof that Bronson was the murderer, and there was no risk in it."

"I suppose it was at that time that he put the burned papers in the study grate," said Cranley.

"More likely George attended to that artistic detail himself," said Allingham.

"What happened next?" asked Doris breathlessly.

"Well, everything worked perfectly except for one hitch. It was an ironical stroke of fate that the subtlest part of George's scheme should prove to be the undoing of the whole: that for several days he should have carried about in his pocket the key to the hiding-place of the papers, and then sent it off to reveal everything and ensure his own destruction. I imagine that he expected to find the papers in the house that very night. Having failed, he had to come back later on—after waiting till interest in the case had died down—with the result that we know.

"The murder of Cardwell was, of course, an act of despair, but it was the only alternative to throwing up the sponge entirely. When he asked to see Elthorne, George guessed that he must have got hold of an important clue; but he didn't want to take the risk of killing him until he was sure. He made his plans with the same thoroughness as before. Agnew has been making inquiries in town, and he's just 'phoned me the result. Elthorne's butler told him that he had orders to summon his master to the telephone after Cardwell had been with him for half an hour. Elthorne actually went to the telephone and made a call, but of course the butler didn't hear anything he said. Agnew, however, guessed he must have rung up George at the night club where he was spending the evening, and found that, sure enough, George had been called to the telephone at about ten o'clock. His father would then have told him that Cardwell had the photograph, and what followed we can easily imagine.

"George must have slipped away unobtrusively from the night club, hurried over to Lancaster Gate, and waited about until Cardwell came out. Then he jumped into the nearest car, followed him to Hampstead, and shot him dead. After that he must have raced on to Golder's Green, left the car by the roadside, and caught the

tube back to town. The whole business probably didn't take two hours, and gay parties at night clubs don't bother counting time. If his friends missed him, he probably told them that he had been out for a stroll.

"Fortunately, the only thing that Cardwell had with him was the photograph. I still had the letters, and used them to bait a trap for the criminals. I knew that the perpetrator of the murder down here was left-handed–-"

"Yes. I meant to test Bronson for that as soon as I'd got him," put in Cranley.

"Well, my colleague, Agnew, applied his talents with the same intent, only to find that in that respect Elthorne was not so sinister. In the meantime, however, I had set my trap, and the thoroughly sinister George very soon walked into it. I think that explains everything."

"Well, I think it's perfectly marvelous," declared Doris. "However you thought it all out I don't know," and Cranley concurred that it was a pretty good bit of headwork.

"There's one thing I don't understand yet, though," said Doris. "What first interested me in this case was what Mrs. Dakin said about Bronson. She felt sure that he couldn't have committed the murder because he was so nice and kind-hearted a man. Well, it seems to me that a blackmailer is very nearly as bad as a murderer, and worse in some ways."

"Oh, I wouldn't place much reliance on an old woman's feelings," said Allingham. "A blackmailer would be just the sort of smooth-tongued rogue to get on the right side of her. Anyway, that's my case, and the final proof of it has been supplied most effectively by Mr. George Elthorne."

Chapter XX

The Villain of the Piece.

There was one person to whom the question asked by Doris and so lightly dismissed by Allingham addressed itself with stern insistence. That was Miss Hester Worthing, who, on the day after it all had been disclosed, lay on a couch in a quiet room in her father's house, her mind in a torment as faith and doubt struggled for possession, with grief brooding darkly over the combat. Now that the first sharp heartbreak for her lover's fate was past, the problem could no longer be denied a hearing. If the tale, which yesterday's papers had told the world, was true, then her Harry, Harry who had loved her, and whom she had loved with all her heart, was that meanest, crudest, and most cowardly of creatures, a blackmailer. It was impossible to believe it. He was so true, so tender a lover; so simple in many ways; so unworldly that, with all his great intellectual gifts, she had always felt herself older and wiser than he, and wanted to mother and care for him. How could he ever have carried through that long relentless persecution? How could he, the scorner of ease, whose inmost soul could be moved to such indignant eloquence by social injustices which most people accepted as part of the order of nature,—how could he be content to live in this lamprey fashion, sucking

the blood of other men? It was impossible. Yet the story which the young detective had unfolded was unerring in its logic, inevitable in its flow from the first remote beginning to the full point marked by the crack of the suicide's pistol.

One ground of hope she had. On her lap lay a letter which she picked up and read for perhaps the tenth time.

Dear Miss Worthing,

A stranger hesitates to intrude on your grief at such a time as this. But as an old friend of your late fiancé I was entrusted by him some time ago with a message for you which he requested me to deliver into your hands in such circumstances as have now arisen. I shall therefore be glad to call on you for the purpose at any time you may be pleased to name.

Believe me to be yours very truly

Alexander Rossiter.

The girl let the letter fall again into her lap. Would Harry—who had evidently anticipated his fate—have any explanation to offer which would contradict the confident assertions of the triumphant young detective? With that hope she awaited impatiently the arrival of the writer of the letter.

He came punctually at the appointed hour, a white-headed old gentleman with courteous ways, and eyes which at the proper season could beam with humor. Now, however, he was all gentle sympathy.

"I knew your young man well," he said, "and many were the pleasant chats we had over the garden wall. I never believed him guilty of the murder, and I don't believe even now that he was a blackmailer—no matter what that clever young detective may say. There must be some flaw in his reasoning somewhere, you know. Like those funny old propositions in Euclid which seem quite all right until suddenly they say 'Which is absurd' and then turn round and prove the exact opposite. Harry and I got on jolly well together. You know, he was a deuced clever young chap. He could do absolutely anything with his hands. I remember one time when our lights failed, he came in and fixed them up in a jiffy. I never could understand it, but there you are. We can't all be clever, and if we were, I suppose cleverness wouldn't count for so much. But here I am, rattling along like the old fool that I am, instead of doing what I came for."

"It's very good of you to go to such trouble," said Hester, as the old gentleman dived a hand into the breast of his overcoat. "And I love to hear anyone speaking well of poor Harry. After the things I've read in the papers, oh–-" The girl's eyes filled with tears, and her mouth trembled.

"That's all right, my dear. Don't you mind them," said the kind voice of Mr. Rossiter. "I haven't the slightest doubt that this document here will show things in a very different light." He had drawn a long envelope from his pocket, and was tapping it on his palm as he spoke. "It was just three days before the murder that he gave it to me. I remember it well. I was pottering about the plantation, seeing how the young trees were getting on—we were both interested in trees, Harry and I, and our plantations were alongside one another. While I was pottering about like that, Harry looked over the wall and called me. He told me he was conducting a rather dangerous experiment, and that if it went wrong it might blow him up. He then gave me this envelope and said I was to give it to you if any such thing happened: in fact if he met with a violent death of any kind. I don't think he really

meant that about the experiment, though I told him to be careful at the time. I think he was probably expecting what actually happened to him. Anyway, I promised to do what he asked, and now here's the letter."

He presented it to the girl with the old-fashioned grace which was characteristic of him, and said: "Having discharged that duty, I'll take myself off. If Harry says anything in that letter which clears his memory, well, as an old friend, I shall be very glad to hear it, and I hope you'll be so good as to let me know."

"I certainly will," said Hester cordially.

"On the other hand," went on the old man, "if he doesn't say anything of that sort—and of course he may say nothing but what a young man faced with danger might write to his sweetheart—well, it doesn't matter. I shan't believe ill of him anyway. I may be a bit thick-headed where books and machinery are concerned, but I know a decent man when I see him. Good-by, my dear young lady."

When he had gone, Hester broke the seal of the envelope and took out the bulky document within. It was dated five days before the murder, and began with the most intimate of the pet names her lover had bestowed on her. It continued as follows:

"If ever you read this it will be because I have been killed, probably under mysterious circumstances, in the investigation of which facts may be revealed which will throw discredit on my character, and thus give pain and sorrow to you. I therefore want to tell you the whole truth about my life, so that you may understand exactly how it took its present course. It is also possible that some innocent person may be blamed for my death. In that event, please speak out. Otherwise be silent. I have no desire for vengeance.

"I was born into very poor circumstances. That is a common phrase and a common lot; but only those who have shared it can appreciate to the full what it means. Poverty is but a word to so many people, signifying a more or less serious shortage of money. Those who are more comfortably situated picture it merely as a sort of intensification of an inconvenience they may themselves experience occasionally, as when they cannot put their hands on a thousand pounds for a new car, or twenty pounds for a dress suit. They either cannot or will not see the wretched reality—the blighting of childhood, the thwarting of youth, the wasting of manhood which are its fruits. Some people are made of a stuff which can endure it, which hardly knows how it suffers or what it is deprived of. I was not like that. I had potentialities within me of which I was fully conscious, and of which in my narrowed circumstances I could make no use whatever. Taken from school the moment I reached the legal age, and just as the wide fields of knowledge were opening out before my awakening eyes, I was thrust into a shop to earn my living by dull monotonous toil which I hated, and which hindered instead of helping my growing mind. My parents were not to blame. My father, who was a carpenter, and doing pretty well at his trade, had been incapacitated for work by an accident shortly before I was born. Some young fool on a motor-bicycle ran him down, and had no money with which to pay compensation. My mother, therefore, had to take up the burden of supporting the family. With all our civilization behind us, with all the resources of science at our command, it still seems a perfectly natural and sensible arrangement to our society that the support of a crippled man and a child should devolve on one unaided woman. Poor mother, how she toiled and contrived

to make ends meet. The only work she could get was of the hardest and worst paid kind, and she was not robust; so that by the time I was old enough to notice things she was already wearing out and looked double her age. It was absolutely necessary, therefore, that I should contribute my share to the family budget at the earliest possible moment, so I was found a post in a shop as I have said.

"You cannot imagine what a dreary existence I was now doomed to. My mother soon fell ill, worn out by years of toil, and so both my parents were dependent on my meager wage. My working hours were long, and I never had a penny to spare for the simplest recreation. The one bright spot in my life was my friendship with an old apothecary who lent me books and in various other ways encouraged my taste for science. That soon filled me with an ambition which seemed utterly unattainable. There I was, shackled to my native place as inexorably as a medieval serf; and there I should still be but for an accident.

"One day, when I was seventeen years old—my father had died in the meantime—my mother asked me if I would like to go into a chemical works. I needn't say what my answer was. She then told me that a friend had secured me a post at one of Mr. Elthorne's works near Birmingham, and that I could start there as soon as I liked.

"As I have already told you, I worked under Mr. Elthorne for a number of years. My position was now a tolerable one. I was learning things, and I was earning a living wage. On the other hand my real ambition in life was still denied to me. My interest was not in commercial chemistry, but in pure research and in mechanics. To indulge that I must have leisure and money; and I had neither; nor could I see any prospect of obtaining them for years to come. Our glorious society, which can afford to shower fortunes on turf accountants, gigolos, speculators, cinema stars, and inheritors of empty brain pans, can only spare a pittance for men of science whose only desire is to carry on their work. I read in a paper once of a man who earned thirty pounds a week by selling cigarettes on commission in one of the swagger hotels. And I was only earning five pounds. There's something radically wrong somewhere in society's costing system, if one could only put one's finger on it. I think sometimes that I'll have to abandon science and study economics.

"While the gigolos and the scented cigarettes touts flourished, there was I toiling ingloriously, with my capacities going to waste just as surely as when I was eating my heart out in the shop at Chelmsford. To make matters worse, while at my routine work I hit upon the beginnings of a discovery of quite another nature. Though it was in the realm of pure science, I soon realized that it was of enormous practical importance too. But it required time and money to work out—constant experiment, and some rather expensive materials—so I made very little progress with it. I could only work at it in my spare time, you understand. At last I took courage and wrote to my employer asking him to allow me to devote myself to this business instead of to the normal work of the department, pointing out that though it would be of no direct utility to the steel industry, it would, if it were a success, be a tremendous help to industry in general. He never so much as answered my letter; and some time later I learned that experiments were being conducted in another of his works which could only have been suggested by the outlines of my idea as given in my letter. Will you be surprised to hear that then and there I solemnly swore to myself that it ever an opportunity to get hold of

money, by fair means or foul, should come my way, I would seize it with both hands.

"Shortly after this my mother died, and the turning-point of my life came. Searching among her effects, I found some letters which told me—what I had not known before—that my father had not been her first husband. She had been married previously to a man called Reddington, who had enlisted in the Boer War, and been killed in battle. This discovery was followed by another—a photograph taken on her wedding day. You can imagine my surprise when I recognized in her first husband my present employer, John Elthorne.

"My first emotion on realizing this was naturally indignation. I felt like rushing to the man's presence and taxing him with his desertion. But that mood passed. I began to see that my discovery might serve a more useful purpose. Hester, if you are to understand and pardon the course I took now, you must read again what I have written about my early life. You must not think of me as a calculating scoundrel planning to live by preying on another man. I was a man with ambitions, with talents going to waste, a man who, given the chance, could render great services to mankind. All I needed for the purpose was money and leisure, and here was an opportunity to obtain them thrust in my way. It was the tide in my affairs. If I neglected it, I might have to spend the rest of my life in the shallows of poverty and futility.

"Remember too that Elthorne owed a debt to the law. I was not exploiting a decent man's momentary lapse. He had coldly and calculatedly committed a crime, and should be glad enough to get off with such a fine as I would impose instead of having to spend several years in prison. Even so, I decided to give him an opportunity to do what I wanted of his own free will as an act of generosity and public service, before resorting to compulsion. I therefore wrote to him again, telling him exactly how I was situated, setting forth the lines of research on which I proposed to embark, and asking him to finance me. As I had expected, I received a curt note from a secretary saying that my proposition was unacceptable; and next day I got notice to quit from the works. I at once took action; delivered my threat; and won, hands down. Since that date I have been living on an income paid me by Mr. Elthorne. I have not made unreasonable demands. The sums I have required have not been small; but the bulk of the money has been spent on scientific research from which the whole of mankind will benefit, my own wants, as you know, being quite simple.

"My conscience did not trouble me in the matter till I met you. That did make a difference. It was not that I felt that what I had done was wrong, but rather that you, with your totally different experience of life, and with your conscience trained according to a code of absolute morality, would not be able to see it according to my lights. I did not want to have any secrets between us, and sooner or later you must begin to wonder where my income came from. I resolved therefore to make an end of the business, and offered to sell Elthorne all my documents outright, and not bother him again, in return for a round sum. Unfortunately, in order to make sure that I should never be without sufficient capital to carry on my researches, and also with a view to gratifying your father's desire that I should maintain you in the state to which you are accustomed, I made that sum rather a large one, and Elthorne has boggled at it, representing that his business is

suffering from the general depression, and that he cannot find the money. We have been haggling over the amount ever since, and meanwhile I think he has been forming designs against my life. A short time ago my house was burglarized, in an attempt, I am certain, to get hold of my mother's papers. More recently the wheel came off my car when I was driving, but fortunately I was going slowly at the time and so escaped injury. I am convinced that this was not an accident. I do not think that Elthorne will take any serious risk in order to get rid of me: if he was prepared to murder me crudely, he could have done so on the occasion of the burglary: but if he can make an end of me in some tricky way without endangering his own neck, I feel sure he will do so. I have therefore decided, when the work I am now engaged on is finished, to take a trip abroad for a time, incognito. I shall then be able to apply my mind to the problem of dealing with him, as I cannot do at present, with my head full of chemical formulae. Meanwhile, in case of accidents, I am entrusting this to a friendly neighbor to keep for you."

The concluding paragraphs were of an intimate nature which we take liberty to reserve for the eyes for which they were intended.

Chapter XXI

The Loose Ends.

The detection of crime is but the preliminary to its punishment, and we therefore take it to be the duty of the mystery-monger to follow his tale to the bitter end. Let it be recorded then, for the moral gratification of all concerned, that the law duly took its course with the criminals. Nothing much could be done with George Elthorne, who had so wickedly fordone himself; but what it could do in the way of dishonoring his corpse it did, most decorously. His father was still more decorously hanged, in this wise. On the day appointed for the execution, at eight o'clock in the morning, there entered his cell a member of a profession which you, gentle reader, would not for the world think of adopting, or of apprenticing your son to, and which I cannot imagine even the most determined of feminists clamoring to have thrown open to women; a profession the very name of which is abhorred, yet which few people, gentle or fair, are willing to see abolished; to wit, the common hangman,—called common because he acts in the common name, yours and mine, taking our pay to do what we are too squeamish to do ourselves, but are determined to have done nevertheless. He was really a harmless poor fellow, with a wife and children to keep, on whose account, owing to the prevailing scarcity of money and of more congenial ways of earning it, he had hired himself out, at no very extravagant figure, to be the instrument of the law. He took his profession rather seriously, and was at pains to carry out his duties in as humane and decorous a manner as possible. On entering the cell he proceeded at once to pinion the prisoner. Round Elthorne's waist he fastened a broad leather body belt, to which were attached in suitable positions a pair of straps with steel buckles to secure his elbows, and another for his wrists. A decorous procession was then

formed: three warders abreast in front; three more in file on each side; in the center the convict, preceded by the prison chaplain, and followed by the executioner; in the rear the governor of the prison, the sheriff, and the surgeon. On the march from the cell the chaplain read the burial service, and just as the scaffold was reached, the executioner drew a white cap over Elthorne's head. The convict was then placed under the beam of the scaffold, and his legs were pinioned below the knees. The rope was adjusted so that the brass ring forming the noose was behind Elthorne's left ear, this being held to be the best position to cause instantaneous death, as it dislocates the vertebrae and ruptures the jugular vein in addition to strangulating the victim. That done, all with the greatest decorum, the executioner pulled the bolt, the trap fell, and all was supposed to be over. The body, however, was left hanging for an hour to make sure. An inquest was then held, and the jury accepted the surgeon's word for it that death had been instantaneous.

Thus perished John Elthorne as a punishment for his sins, and as a deterrent against murder,—or at any rate against getting found out.

Philip Elthorne was not hanged. He made a statement while in prison to the effect that he had been dominated and deceived by his elder brother throughout the whole affair. He had gone to Bronson's house in the belief that George's only object was to force Bronson to give up the papers. He had helped him to overcome Bronson, but had taken no part in killing him. When the deed was done, however, he had no choice but to fall in with the rest of his brother's plans. This testimony was reinforced by the obviously weak and characterless appearance of the prisoner, and the law in his case was satisfied with the infliction of fifteen years' penal servitude. What manner of man he will be at the end of that period, and how he will set about maintaining himself, are questions which concern himself alone, and in any event can be safely postponed.

The tale is now told, and those who began at the beginning and are satisfied with the solution of the mystery need read no further. But there is a pestilential sort of reader who likes to begin a book at the end, and so frustrates the best efforts of the mystery-monger to entertain him; and there is also a pleasant sort that likes a story to end happily, to the great joy of the author, who is mightily flattered that the puppets of his creation should make themselves friends with a genuine interest in their future careers. Therefore, to balk the former sort, and to indulge the latter, let us wind up with a harmless page about our minor personages.

Cranley and Doris, of course, are married, but she does not meddle in his cases any more. One such experience, she says, was quite enough for her, and in any case her time is fully occupied with the baby.

Mr. Sparker recovered from his injuries, and is now happily married to his Miss Griggs.

Billy's heart was not irretrievably broken by Doris's rejection of his advances. Indeed he was on the way to seek a rapprochement with Pansy on that memorable night of his encounter with George Elthorne. When they met again Pansy of course owed it to herself to receive him somewhat coldly, but, owing to the shortage of men and her consequent fear of becoming a surplus woman, she allowed herself presently to be won over. At the moment all is well between the couple, but they

are both under twenty, so the chances are that in a few years' time they will be married, happily or unhappily, to other people.

Investigations, Ltd., has been wound up. Allingham said that, after such a case as the Spurn Cove murder, the ordinary run of petty criminality that came its way would be a succession of anti-climaxes, and as for research work for incompetent politicians and authors, he was sick of it. He is now engaged in freelance journalism, and hopes that some day—in spite of the competition of society leaders, film stars, popular preachers, and important criminals—he may be able to make a living at it. Fortunately he is of a sanguine temperament, so this may be regarded as a tolerably happy ending too. As for Agnew, he does not seem to be concerned much with happiness. The latest news about him is that he has started out with a scientific expedition to the heart of Mongolia in search of relics of primeval man.

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