

The Murders at Madlands

or, The Mystery of Madlands

by Aidan de Brune, 1879-1946

Serialized: 1931

in »The Armidale Express & New England General Advertiser«,
New South Wales

»The Pittsworth Sentinel«, Queensland

»The Westralian Worker«, Perth

❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦ ❦

Table of Contents

Chapter I ... thru ... Chapter XXVI



Chapter I

"LO, Bobby. Got everything you want?"

Bobby Trayne looked up with a start. Although every sense had been on the alert from the moment he had entered the room, the question had caught his attention wandering. He nodded vaguely to the small table, set close beside his solitary chair.

"Smokes, drinks of all patterns—all that the soul of a journalist covets, except—"

"Well?" Gerald Preston, private secretary to Sir Rupert Haffervale, spoke almost impatiently. He glanced nervously towards the dark, grim-visaged man seated at the far end of the long dining table. "Anything I can get you?"

"No one better!" Bobby spoke very quickly. "To make the surroundings perfect I want just one thing—Why am I here?"

"You don't know?" Almost involuntarily the man glanced again at his employer.

"I don't." Very deliberately Bobby squirted from the siphon half a glass of soda water and sipped it slowly "I know I was telephoned by the office to come in this morning. When I arrived I found Alan Reeves, the respected chief of staff, of the *Daily Mirror*, already at his desk. That alone was a suspicious circumstance."

"How?" Although Preston spoke eagerly he still stared up the room to where his employer sat.

"Merely that to get Alan Reeves out of bed before mid-day is, or should be, recorded as one of the seven wonders of the world. Yet he was there, bright and worried, at nine-fifteen, Ack Emma."

"Well?" Some signal, imperceptible to the onlooker, must have passed between Sir Rupert and his secretary, for the latter turned and pulled a chair close to Bobby's side, sitting with his back half-turned to the group at the other end of the long room.

"Well?" Bobby echoed the word with exasperating slowness.

"You were telling me what took place between yourself and Mr. Reeves." Rupert Preston lifted one of the decanters and poured a liberal allowance of whisky into a glass.

"Very little took place." A wide, boyish grin came on the newspaperman's lips. "Alan Reeves instructed me to go down into the street at ten-thirty. There I should find a private car, driven by a chauffeur in Sir Rupert Haffervale's livery. I was to enter that car—and not ask questions."

"Yet you are asking them?" Preston shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"I took the prohibition to apply to the chauffeur."

For some moments there was silence. Once Preston half-turned and glanced up the room, but Bobby sat silent, and almost motionless. His keen brain was probing possibilities. He knew he was being used as a pawn in some secret game. But, what was that game? The experience was original and not altogether to his liking.

"Newspapermen are sent out by their employers on all kinds of assignments." Preston spoke slowly. "To report—or discover."

Bobby lifted a cigarette from the open box on the table and lit it.

"I am not to write a line on what I see, hear—or discover."

"Is that unusual?"

"For me." There was no conceit in the journalist's tones. "I believe any Australian newspaper is anxious to publish anything I write."

Again a long silence. Suddenly Gerald Preston raised his glass to his lips and gulped the contents at a draught.

"Sir Rupert encourages that?" Bobby drawled the words, lazily.

"What?"

"His secretary drinking raw whisky by the half-glass." The newspaper man tensed, "Come, Gerald, what's the story."

"You talk like a policeman." A slight frown puckered the light brows.

"Seems like I'm doing policeman's duty." Bobby lowered his voice, speaking rapidly. "Listen! I get in the car, quite a luxurious affair, and it drives away. We go through Bondi and out into the open country. A couple of miles and the road curves in towards Barrabarra Bay. I'm deposited, gently, on the doorstep of one of the oldest houses in the State—a house dating back to the first days of the Colony of New South Wales."

"One of Sir Rupert Haffervale's residences." Preston smiled.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're picking points." The secretary spoke angrily. "Nominally the house belongs to Sir Rupert. Of course if you want to be absolutely exact—"

"The House belongs to Sir Rupert's niece, Miss Myrtle Haffervale. I am only guessing but I believe that Miss Haffervale comes of age today."

Gerald Preston nodded, shortly. The frown on his face had deepened.

"And I am asked to witness the handing over of the young lady's fortune." Bobby's tone was bland.

"Not exactly." The secretary laughed, irritably. "You are correct in assuming that Miss Haffervale comes of age today, and gains control of the income of her fortune. But the principal—"

"Remains under the control of her trustees until—"

"Until she marries or attains the age of thirty." Preston supplied the information reluctantly. "You understand, Bobby, this is not for publication. Sir Haffervale will give the *Mirror* what it is to publish."

"While the *Mirror's* star man sits and drinks his—or Miss Haffervale's—whisky—The ethics of journalism are fully served!"

"Sir Rupert controls the *Mirror*," The secretary answered quickly.

"Sir Rupert controls—but Miss Haffervale holds!" The newspaper-man laughed gently. "If the Registrar General is correctly informed the late Matthew Haffervale owned three shares in the newspaper to Sir Rupert's one."

"Sir Rupert is managing director of the Company."

"By the grace of Matthew Haffervale—and his will." Bobby paused. "So you, see nothing strange in the *Mirror's* star reporter being called in from his just and due rest to attend the handling over to Miss Haffervale of the income from her fortune—while instructed not to write a line on the subject for publication?"

"Then let me continue my theories." The journalist was enjoying himself. "On arrival at Madlands—by the way the name of the house quite fits my story—I was welcomed by Sir Rupert and his niece. I was escorted to the grand old dining-room and given a seat opposite the long windows opening on to the balcony. My chair was placed so that, while I commanded the windows and balcony, I had one of the doors close to my hand and the other wall well within sight. I was instructed not to let anyone in at the door, and to raise an alarm if I saw anyone, or anything suspicious on the balcony. And you wonder when I say I have fallen to a John's job."

"Sir Rupert might not have cared to call the police."

"So he uses a man to whom the *Mirror* pays two thousand a year, when he could have obtained the eyes of a second-year cadet! Rather expensive, isn't that?"

"Sir Rupert may have reasons."

"To explain them, let me continue." Bobby spoke imperturbably. "I should have said Sir Rupert, himself, brought me to this seat before he left me; he placed in my hands, this:"

With a quick motion Bobby produced a small but serviceable automatic, and dropped it on the table, yet keeping his hand in close proximity to it.

"Just the handing over of a wealthy young lady's income!" the journalist jeered. "It can't be otherwise or—" he glanced significantly at the group at the end of the long table.

"You know them?"

Preston shifted his chair so that he could watch up the room towards his employer.

"Certainly. Sir Rupert is seated at the head of the table. On his right is Miss Myrtle Haffervale. Next to her is an empty seat—occupied by you, until you took pity on my loneliness and came to interest and instruct me. Next to that chair sits Adam Ibbotson, controlling, I believe, not only newspaper but tobacco interests. On Sir Rupert's left is Mark Parsons, senior partner in Parsons, Parsons, Myers and Parsons, solicitors to Sir Rupert Haffervale, the late Matthew Haffervale, Miss Myrtle Haffervale, and the Daily Mirror Newspaper Publishing Company, Limited. Next to him is Fred Frazer, Mr. Parsons' managing clerk—really he knows more about the family and the newspaper than his chief, but of course has not the standing to guide so important a gathering of notabilities. Next to Mr. Frazer is Godfrey Mackenzie, chain store controller, and nearest us is Lord Carriday. I believe his holdings form quite a kingdom in the north lands of Australia. What they are in South America no one but himself and his personal accountant has yet fathomed."

"You seem to have it all, pal."

Again Gerald flashed a quick glance up the table—as if asking for instruction or aid. "What of it? It seems you are making a mountain out of a molehill."

"Nothing! Just nothing, Gerald, dear!" Bobby rose to his feet, and stretched himself. "I see our friends have finished. So my newest and most novel assignment is drawing to a close. Never again will I accuse the new South Wales Police Department of incompetence, if much of their duty approximates this they must sleep serene lives. A word with Sir Rupert and—"

"What?" Preston jumped from his chair, involuntarily following the journalist's lead. He glanced quickly towards the group at the end of the long table.

Sir Rupert had risen to his feet and, standing with his knuckles resting on the table-top, was addressing the girl, half-humorously, half-formally. As he concluded his little speech with a bow, the girl, smilingly, pushed back her chair and made to rise.

A sudden shout from the newspaperman drew all eyes to him. With a sweep of his arm he thrust Preston from his path, throwing him onto the small table, which collapsed under the sudden burden. In a couple of bounds he was at the girl's side, kneeling beside her chair and holding her down with an iron grip.

"Look out, Sir Rupert, jump!"

The sudden cry brought the other men to their feet.

For the space in which a man could count five, Sir Rupert stood at the head of the table, a strange look of wonder on his face. Slowly he leaned forward, bowing until his forehead rested on the polished surface of the table. A shudder shook his frame and he collapsed, a mass of quivering flesh and clothes.

"Hands up, everyone."

Bobby had caught up the girl and backed into the corner beside the windows. "Hands up, I say. The man who moves, I'll shoot."

Chapter II

FOR a long minute there was silence in the room. Bobby hooked a chair towards him and pushed it into the corner. He placed the girl in the chair and turned again to face the men around the table.

Mark Parsons was on his feet, bending over Sir Rupert's motionless body. The journalist watched him sombrely. As the lawyer straightened himself the automatic swung to cover him.

"Sir Rupert—" Mark Parsons hesitated.

"Yes." Bobby paused, then continued quickly. "Only wounded! Good! Gerald, telephone for the doctor! At the same time you might ring up the police. No, not Bondi. Get on to Headquarters and ask for Inspector Williams. I know he's there this morn—Where are you going?"

"To the telephone," the secretary answered, sullenly. "There is not one in this room."

"Then I'm afraid I cannot use your services."

For the moment Bobby was puzzled. He glanced towards the solicitor who still remained on his feet.

"May I trouble you to touch the bell, Mr. Parsons. A servant can do all I require."

"What do you mean?"

Mark Parsons turned irritably on the journalist.

"Sir Rupert is—"

"Only wounded—I believe a slight wound." The newspaperman interrupted quickly. His voice dropped and became pregnant with meaning. "Nothing can be done—immediately—for him."

"Nothing." Mr. Parsons spoke after a long pause. "But—"

"Mr. Preston will help you move Sir Rupert to the couch."

Again Bobby interrupted the lawyer. "Then he will return to the seat he occupied when he entertained me. You, gentlemen—"

"What's the meaning of this?" Adam Ibbotson sprang to his feet, his ruddy face blazing with passion. "Who the hell are you and what are you giving orders for. If anything's happened to Sir Rupert then Mr. Parsons, as his solicitor—"

"Mr. Parsons abdicates in my favour." A slight grin broke the stern lines of the newspaper's man's mouth. "For the time I am in control. If you question my authority ask this." The automatic swung in an arc to cover the financier.

Ibbotson made as if to speak, then slumped angrily into his chair.

"What do you intend to do?" Godfrey Mackenzie turned a thin, ascetic face towards the corner where the journalist stood before the girl. "You say Sir Rupert is only wounded—and you are the only armed man in the room."

"So far as we know at present," Bobby nodded.

"I suggest that Miss Haffervale be allowed to go to her room," Lord Carriday interposed.

"Sorry to negative that!" The journalist spoke quickly. "Sir Rupert, for a reason of his own, brought me here this morning—a kind of super-policeman, so far as I gather. I propose to remain the policeman until the official men arrive. Ah!"

A slight, discreet knock at the door and a servant entered. He started back with low cry at the sight of Sir Rupert stretched on the couch, the solicitor and secretary bending over him.

"Thomas, Charles—whatever your name is," Bobby spoke imperatively. "Listen to me. Go to the telephone and ring up the nearest doctor. Ask him to come here with all speed; then get on to Police Headquarters, Phillip Street, City, and ask for Inspector Williams. Tell him I—Bobby Trayne—want him at Madlands, as quickly as possible. Understand? He's to put the Blue Bird at her top and get here. Now, get to it!"

"The local police station should be informed." The solicitor spoke over his shoulder.

"Inspector Williams can do that."

"Then you propose we should remain here until a policeman comes out from the city," Lord Carriday drawled, ironically.

"Just that!" There was a tang of decision in the newspaperman's voice. The Englishman, with his drawling speech irritated him greatly. "And Sir Rupert is to be unattended until the Inspector arrives."

"You're taking a lot on yourself, young man." Adam Ibbotson sneered. "I'll have a word to say to your employers."

"A doctor will be here within a few minutes."

Without releasing his grasp on his gun Bobby pulled a case from his pocket and took out a cigarette. Using only one hand he struck a match and drew the smoke into his lungs with very apparent satisfaction.

"And I suppose the doctor will not be allowed to leave the room once he enters," Ibbotson spoke with heavy sarcasm.

"Correct."

"That's the sack for one cocky youngster." The financier slumped into his chair. "What the devil Haffervale—"

"I'll tell you." Bobby hesitated and glanced back at the girl, "Sorry to keep you there, Miss Haffervale, but its a case of necessity. In that corner you're safe. Out in the room—"

"Safe? With an armed maniac standing before her." The Englishman sprang to his feet and turned to the other men around the table. "Are five strong men to be intimidated by—by—"

"They're intimidated by this." The gun lined straight against the peer. "Adam Ibbotson may talk but he knows me, Carriday. And I may not be the only man armed in this room."

"What do you mean?"

"Sir Rupert was shot. The gun that fired the bullet was covered with a silencer." Bobby spoke slowly. "And—the doors were shut and the windows closed and barred."

"You seem to know all about it." The Englishman turned from his chair and strode across the room. "Shoot if you dare. I don't intend to be held up by any servant."

"I shall shoot—and shoot to disable—if you approach this corner of the room or go near doors or windows." Bobby spoke earnestly. "You say I seem to know all about it. Perhaps I know more than when I entered this room, half an hour ago."

"You're insinuating?"

"Nothing." A light flashed in the newspaper-man's eyes. "For the time I'm guessing—on the principle of putting two and two together and—"

"Making five of it." Carriday turned angrily. "It anything has happened to Sir Rupert, Mr. Parsons is the logical—"

"Yet Sir Rupert sent for me." Again Bobby's infectious grin showed. "Why did he do that? I wonder—but I don't know. Sir Rupert expected something to happen. I didn't. I couldn't see how anything criminal could happen with eight reputable people in a closed room. Yet it has. If anything serious has happened to Sir Rupert—"

"Mr. Trayne, is Sir Rupert seriously injured?" The girl spoke from behind him; her tones anxious. "Will you not allow me to go to him?"

"Sorry, Miss Haffervale." Bobby thought a moment, then glanced at his watch. "If Lord Carriday will resume his seat at the table and the other gentleman give me their word not to move until Inspector Williams arrives, you may go to Sir Rupert. Yes? That doesn't apply to you Mr. Parsons. You and Miss Haffervale can do all that's necessary at the moment, for Sir Rupert."

He stepped before the windows, until he came to the wall immediately behind Sir Rupert's chair, at the head of the table. The girl crossed quickly to the couch and whispered to the solicitor. At his reply she dropped to her knees, covering her face with her hands.

Bobby lowered his pistol hand. For some seconds his eyes wandered from face to face of the sullen-looking men gathered round the table. Presently he stepped forward and glanced down at the polished table-top immediately before where Sir Rupert had been seated.

A gold hunter-cased watch lay on the table—the cover open. With a pencil Bobby carefully lowered the cover. On the outer face was engraved Sir Rupert's monogram. The newspaperman frowned, thoughtfully. Why had the wounded man had his opened watch on the table? He let the cover fly open again. Immediately he saw the hands he glanced down at his own watch. Sir Rupert's watch was four minutes slow.

Sir Rupert had been interested in watching the time while he sat at the table. Yet his watch was four minutes slow. Why?

Bobby half-stretched his hand out towards, the watch—then drew it back. He must not touch anything! He must preserve everything as it was at the moment the shot was fired, until the arrival of the police.

A knock came at the door and Gerald Preston started to his feet, to resume his seat at a slight motion from, the newspaperman. Bobby gave the permission to enter and the servant who had gone to the telephone opened the door.

"I have telephoned the doctor, sir," the man reported. "He says he will be here in five minutes. I also telephoned the police."

"Headquarters, as I instructed?" Bobby spoke sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"Inspector Williams answer?"

"Yes, sir. He says he will be with you as quickly as possible."

"Good. You can go. Close the door after you."

"This is insufferable." Lord Carriday was again on his feet.

"Sit down!"

"Held up by a young maniac armed with a gun," Ibbotson laughed angrily. "But I'll see he gets his!"

Bobby, did not answer. His eyes were flashing from face to face around the long table; his mind was conning over a problem. Sir Rupert had his watch open on the desk—and that watch was four minutes slow. Why? If only he could get an answer to that question.

He turned to see the solicitor lifting Myrtle to her feet.

"Sir Rupert—?" Bobby spoke questioningly to the solicitor.

"Is dead." Parsons bowed his head. "I believe he died instantaneously."

"I thought so." Bobby murmured. He raised his voice slightly.

"Mr. Parsons, will you please place a chair for Miss Haffervale behind your chair at the table."

"Miss Haffervale should—" The lawyer hesitated.

"Oh, no. Not that!" The girl spoke quickly.

"The chair is the safest place." The newspaperman insisted.

"Safest place, rot!" Ibbotson spoke. "Do you expect someone to murder her."

"Yes."

"Tell me who killed Sir Rupert."

Bobby's blue eyes flashed to the speaker.

"You suggest one of us murdered Sir Rupert," Carriday laughed, sarcastically.

"I do."

"Then why don't you arrest him?"

"I'm arresting the lot of you—until the police come. Then I shall do my best to help them to sort the murderer out."

"Unmitigated rot!" Mackenzie swung his chair from the table, leaning back, his elbows resting on the arms of the chair, his fingertips meeting. "You dare to say that one of us murdered our host."

"The doors were closed—no one opened them, I'll swear to that. No one could get into the room from the terrace for the windows were closed and locked. You can see the glass is unbroken. How then could the shot come from without the room—or how could any one enter the room to fire at Sir Rupert? The only possible solution is that the shot was fired by someone within the room. I am the only one who has shown a weapon, yet. The police will decide if anyone else carries a gun."

A knock sounded at the door. At the newspaperman's answer the door opened and a short black-bearded man strode into the room.

"Dr. Martingale, sir," the servant announced.

"All right. Mr. Parsons, will you attend Mr. Martingale?"

Bobby turned again to the servant who still stood in the doorway.

"Well, what is it?"

"There is a policeman at the door, sir."

"A policeman? Inspector Williams?"

"No Sir. A constable from the local station."

"Show him in." Lord Carriday spoke impatiently. "Thank goodness there's someone with authority come. Now we'll get rid of this bumptious newspaperman."

"Hold on there." Bobby spoke quickly as the servant turned to leave the room. "What's he want?"

"He says Sir Rupert rang up the local station early this morning and asked that a constable should be sent here at noon exactly. He says he is sorry he's a few minutes late. Shall I show him in, sir?"

Chapter III

SIR RUPERT HAFFERVALE had asked the local police station to send a constable to Madlands at noon that day!

Bobby glanced down at his watch. It was fifteen minutes past the hour. So far as he could Judge, Sir Rupert had been shot exactly on the hour. Had the expected arrival of the constable been the cause of Sir Rupert's open watch on the table. But that watch was four minutes slow! Had the newspaper magnate known that? It was improbable. The shooting of a man in a closed room while he was surrounded by people of unimpeachable standing; the slow watch, ticking on the

table; the constable awaiting admission at the door. They were all parts of a problem—a problem at the solution of which the newspaperman could not yet even guess.

"Show in the constable." Bobby spoke decidedly. He turned to the peer pacing agitatedly up and down the room. "I must ask you to resume your seat, Lord Carriday."

"And if I refuse to take orders from you?" The cattle king turned suddenly. "Remember, there's a constable at the door and most likely armed. He'll—"

"Call the bluff of this upstart journalist," Adam Ibbotson interjected. "Once I'm out of this room I'll see to him."

"Thanks," Bobby drawled, "'fraid there's quite an eye-opener coming to the Englishman. He'll be sorry he spoke."

"What do you mean?" Carriday strode up the room, to halt before the newspaperman's levelled gun.

"I'll give you a hint, Carriday." There was an ominous calmness in Bobby's voice. "I only had a glance at the wound in Sir Rupert's breast. From the direction the bullet appears to have taken, it must have been fired from somewhere near where you were seated."

"You—"

"Quite finished?" Bobby laughed. He called permission for the servant to enter.

The door swung open and a uniformed constable strode into the room. A couple of paces and he halted, staring at the men in the room, in amazement.

"One moment." The newspaperman spoke as the servant made to return and shut the door.

"You, Thomas. Wait at the hall-door until Inspector Williams arrives and bring him straight here. Understand? The Inspector is to be brought to this room directly he steps from his car. When you have shown him in you are to remain in the room until you have permission to leave."

"Constable, arrest that man!" Lord Carriday turned and pointed dramatically at Bobby. "He shot Sir Rupert Haffervale and has held us up at the point of his gun. Heaven knows what would have happened if you hadn't arrived!"

"Murder?" The constable strode over to the couch and looked down on the still form of the newspaper proprietor. He looked up, sharply, at Bobby standing behind the head of the table, the automatic dangling in his fingers. "Put that gun down!"

"Try again, Sergeant." The journalist laughed slightly. "No, only constable, I believe. You heard what I said to the servant? Stop that. Pull your revolver and I'll plug you."

The man hesitated, his hand fumbling at his hip pocket.

"Get him, constable!" Lord Carriday took a couple of steps towards the newspaperman. "If he fires I'll—"

"Duck under the table." Bobby laughed. "Listen to sense and not the ravings of a lunatic, constable. Sir Rupert sent for me this morning to guard him from some unnamed danger. He, these gentlemen, and this excitable British peer, were in this room with Miss Haffervale, discussing business. The doors and windows were closed and barred, yet someone shot Sir Rupert, I believe as he was about to make an important statement. I've held everyone up, keeping the room in the exact state

in which it was at the time of Sir Rupert's murder. I've sent for Inspector Williams. He should be here within the next five minutes. Until he comes I don't intend anything in the room to be touched—not even by you."

"Sounds, reasonable." The constable scratched his head. He turned to Lord Carriday. "What's this you say about this gentleman shooting Sir Rupert Haffervale."

"He's the only one armed in the room." Carriday turned furiously on the constable. "Are you going to do your duty and arrest him?"

"Did you see him fire the shot?"

"No. But he was sitting in a position where he could have done so without my knowledge. He—he has the dashed impertinence to accuse me of the murder."

"Let me introduce Lord Carriday," the newspaperman spoke easily. "Lord Carriday is quite an important person in his own country. I'm going to ask him to resume his seat so that he does not mess up any clues that might be about. Since the shooting he has developed quite a partiality for walking. In fact so energetic has he become that just before your arrived I had to—"

"He threatened do shoot me."

"That's serious, sir." The constable turned to Bobby, a worried look on his face. "We can't have that sort of thing. Y' know."

"Now constable, I suggest you take a chair over by that door—the one you entered by—and watch. Between the two of us we may persuade these gentlemen to be reasonably quiet until Inspector Williams arrives."

The constable moved as if to obey; then turned to face the newspaperman again.

"Who may you be," he asked suddenly. "This gentleman—you say he's Lord Carriday—accuses you of shooting Sir Rupert. Sir Rupert rang up—"

"Telephoned your police station and asked for you to be sent here," Bobby interrupted. "Quite so. He also instructed my Chief of Staff to send me here. My name is Robert Trayne—usually called 'Bobby,' even at Police Headquarters. You needn't worry about Lord Carriday's outburst. No one will support his accusation."

"I will." Adam Ibbotson sprang to his feet. "I believe he's right. You're the only one in the room who could have shot Sir Rupert."

"Believe!" Bobby laughed. "The accusation is ridiculous."

Myrtle spoke slowly. "Mr. Trayne has only acted in the interests of the police. He was not in a position to shoot Sir Rupert. If he had fired the shot I—I was on my feet between him and Sir Rupert. He would have shot me."

"Shot you?" A sudden light came in Bobby's eyes. He turned to the police officer. "Enough of this. Take a chair to the door and sit down, constable. Inspector Williams will be here in a few moments and then he can decide who is to be arrested."

He waited until the police officer had obeyed his orders, then he turned to the girl.

"Miss Haffervale, you have given me an idea. I don't want to worry you, but can you tell me what was happening during the few seconds proceeding the firing of the shot. Sir Rupert was on his feet speaking, I believe, to you."

"Yes," Myrtle spoke slowly. "Today—today is my birthday. I am twenty-one. Sir Rupert chose to make a little ceremony of my becoming my own mistress. From what he said, there are quite a number of interests involved."

"Such as your connection with Mackenzie stores?" Bobby nodded. "I know that your father was a financial genius behind that venture."

"Mr. Matthew Haffervale was wise to invest in my companies." Godfrey Mackenzie's long face was turned up for the moment. "I am happy to-day he was financially successful, through following my advice."

"He was also the moving spirit behind the Tobacco Trust—commonly attributed to Mr. Ibbotson. In fact, I believe that only since Mr. Haffervale's death, and Sir Rupert's accession to power as trustee for Miss Haffervale, has Mr. Ibbotson had any real power in that trust."

"Grossly libellous!" the big man sprang upon his feet, his face red with anger, "Mr. Haffervale—"

"I was asking Miss Haffervale what Sir Rupert was saying at the moment he was shot," interjected Bobby.

"He said—" Ibbotson continued.

"I was asking Miss Haffervale." The newspaperman was courteous but firm.

"Mr. Parson had finished explaining the various ways in which my fortune was invested," Myrtle continued. "When he finished Sir Rupert stood up and congratulated me on becoming head of the family. He said he regretted that he was not able to hand over to me the sole control of my fortune—but that from that hour—"

"That hour?" inquired Bobby.

"I was born at midday almost to the second." Myrtle smiled faintly. "Sir Rupert was timing this meeting so that I assured control of the income of my fortune exactly to the hour of my birth. It was a little idea he had had for some time—that I was to be installed at the very minute of coming of age. He was saying that when—"

"One moment, Miss Haffervale." Again Bobby stopped the girl. "Sir Rupert Haffervale was your trustee, under your late father's will. Was he the sole trustee?"

"Mr. Mark Parsons acted with him, I believe."

The newspaperman glanced at the lawyer who nodded affirmatively.

"And in the event of one of the trustees dying who was to act? Was an alternative trustee appointed under Mr. Matthew Haffervale's will, or did the remaining trustee continue alone, or—"

"My trusteeship should revert to my successor in the legal firm in which I am partner," Mark Parsons explained. "In the event of Sir Rupert's demise Mr. Adam Ibbotson would assume the post."

"Ah!"

"What are you ah-ing about?" Adam Ibbotson sprang to his feet again, glowering angrily at the newspaperman standing behind the chair Sir Rupert Haffervale had lately occupied. "Are you accusing me of Sir Rupert's murder? I was Matthew Haffervale's greatest friend."

"So!" Bobby laughed gently. "There's not the slightest reason why you should not assume the trusteeship, Mr. Ibbotson—so long as Mr. Parsons is the other trustee to curb your tendency to speculative investments."

"I'm not going to stay here to be insulted by any upstart journalist."

Adam Ibbotson levered his big bulk from the chair and moved towards the door. "You've said it, young man. I'm trustee of Miss Haffervale's estate and that means I control the Morning Mirror. I'll have a word to say to you, in those offices."

"Please sit down Mr. Ibbotson," Bobby's voice was almost humble. "We have to wait for Inspector Williams."

"The police can see me at my office."

Ibbotson continued to move towards the door.

The constable on guard rose to his feet.

"Sir Rupert was shot, Mr. Ibbotson." The journalist spoke slowly.

"And you're flourishing a pistol," Ibbotson laughed gratingly. "If this fool constable wasn't a coward, you'd be on your way to the lock-up by this time."

"And you have a gun in your hip pocket, Mr. Ibbotson," Bobby's voice was very suave.

"You—" the big man swung round furiously, "I'll—"

"Inspector Williams."

The door opened silently to admit the police officer, closely followed by a servant. The constable closed the door and set his back up against it, relief showing in every line of his face.

"What's the matter here?" Inspector Williams, quietly and with a red good-humoured face, strode into the room and looked around him.

"Hullo, Bobby. Doin' theatricals with a big gun in your hand. Jove, what's this." He turned to where Sir Rupert's body lay on the couch, a handkerchief covering the still face. "Dead!"

"Listen Jim." The newspaperman smiled his relief. "Sir Rupert was seated in this chair, some half-hour ago. He rose to his feet to make a speech. Almost immediately he was shot by someone in possession of a gun fitted with a silencer.

"On the table before him was his watch—four minutes slow. The big fact you have to consider is this. If Sir Rupert's watch had been correct he would have finished his speech and Miss Haffervale would have been standing in his place—here—preparatory of taking her seat at the head of the table. If Sir Rupert's watch had not been four minutes slow the bullet that pierced his heart would have lodged in her breast."

Chapter IV

"AND that's the story." Bobby finished the recital of the happenings at Madlands that morning, with a vague gesture.

Inspector Williams had listened to the newspaperman with rapt attention. He had asked many questions but had not elicited any further material fact.

They were alone in the long dining-room, the scene of the tragedy. Myrtle Haffervale had retired to her rooms. Lord Carriday had accompanied Adam Ibbotson and Godfrey Mackenzie back to the city. Only Mark Parsons and his managing clerk remained in the big house. They were in the library, examining Sir Rupert's papers.

"I'll hand it to you, Bobby." The burly Inspector pulled a cigar from his breast pocket and bit off the end. "I couldn't have handled the situation better myself."

"High praise!" the newspaperman turned to his companion with a smile. Then seeing him strike a match he jumped to his feet. "Here, don't do that, Williams!"

"Do what?" The inspector stared at Bobby, amazingly. "What—oh." He dropped the match burning his fingers.

"Try one of these," Bobby went to the table where he had sat and brought back a box.

"What's the matter with this?" Williams took the cigar from his mouth and eyed it suspiciously.

"Nothing—but I want to stay in this room for quite a while and your Fumeralds-Funeralosa is likely to asphyxiate an unaccustomed journalist. Good man! I can recommend that cigar. Put a couple in your pocket; they may break off a bad habit. Now, let's get to work. What about fingerprints?"

"On what?" The Inspector glanced around the room. "From what you tell me there's fingerprints everywhere—and we don't know who's who among them."

"No." Bobby spoke regretfully. "One day your Department will wake up and insist that every man and woman who has more than five thousand a year shall register fingerprints. With that income the owner is either a potential victim or criminal."

"Sweeping, what?" Williams levered himself from his chair and sauntered to the big table. He stopped before the seat Sir Rupert had occupied and looked down at the open-faced watch for a moment, pulled an old fashioned silver watch from his breast pocket, and compared the times.

"Thought you said this watch was only four minutes slow?"

"Isn't it?"

A couple of strides brought the journalist to the detective's side. A slight whistle escaped his lips. He glanced at his wristwatch.

"Seven minutes slow! Why, that watch loses."

He hesitated, plucking at his lower lip. A few seconds and he lifted Sir Rupert's watch from the table and twisted the stem a moment and handed the watch to the Inspector with a significant gesture. A couple of turns of the stem-winder and Williams replaced the watch on the table.

"So that's it. Another of your pet clues exploded. Sir Rupert forgot to wind his watch last night."

"Last night?" Bobby bit at his nails. "Last night to mid-day today is something over twelve hours. Yesterday morning today would be about twenty eight hours. The night before last to date would be thirty six hours or perhaps a couple more. Depends on what time Sir Rupert goes to bed. Yes, you're about right. He winds his watch at night-time."

"Important?"

"Maybe." The newspaperman lifted the match to his ear. "It's run down, certainly. So that's how he came to be four minutes slow at midday."

"You're theorising that Sir Rupert was planning to murder his niece?"

"Not the first uncle that's had such an idea," Bobby grinned. "For the time we can only take the points as they come to us. You can't get away from Myrtle—Miss Haffervale's evidence. Sir Rupert rose to his feet and commenced a speech at a

couple or so minutes to noon—his time. She says he was suggesting she exchanged chairs with him; that as the new head of the house she should sit at the head of the table."

"Umph!"

"Beastly, but what else is there?" The journalist paused. "We've got to accept facts, and the first is that if Miss Haffervale had followed Sir Rupert's suggestion—and I saw her push back her chair to do so—she would have been seated in Sir Rupert's chair at noon—his time—"

"What made you stop her?" The inspector gazed, curiously at his companion.

"Damned if I know!" Bobby scratched his head. "Something told me she shouldn't move. I acted on impulse."

"Sure?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have a good think." The detective dropped into the chair Sir import had occupied. "There's such a thing as a subconscious memory, Bobby."

Bobby shook his head. He had tried to puzzle out what had influenced his actions. He had tried to visualise the faces of the men at the table when Myrtle had pushed back her chair. Had a look of dark triumph passed over the baronet's features as his niece moved to respond to his invitation? Had there been a tension in the broad back of Adam Ibbotson as the hour of noon approached? What had the fixed smile meant on the lips of the old solicitor? He put the thoughts from him with an impatient gesture. They were all men of note in Sydney's business world. Who would care to charge with conspiracy to murder, on such evidence?

"We want facts—not theories, Bobby," The Inspector broke in on the newspaperman's reverie. "Even the evidence of that watch is not a fact. You're connecting that Sir Rupert planned to murder his niece; that he planned she should change chairs with him just before midday, the time when the pistol was to be fired. You suggest that Sir Rupert was killed, instead of Miss Haffervale, because his watch was four minutes slow. No good, old son."

"And the search of the party revealed nothing?"

"Not a thing—but to confirm your accusation that Adam Ibbotson was armed. But the doctor states the bullet could not have been fired from where Ibbotson sat. Again, his gun was fully loaded and had not recently been fired."

"Who fired the shot?" Bobby turned exasperatedly on the detective.

"Ibbotson accuses you."

"Rot." With a swift motion Bobby pulled his gun from his pocket and threw in on the table. "There's the gun. Myrtle Haffervale will tell you she saw Sir Rupert hand it to me in the library."

Williams picked up the automatic and snapped open the magazine. It was empty. He looked up at Bobby, questioningly.

"The cartridges." The newspaperman grinned, emptying the cartridges from his pocket on to the table. "Gee! I'm not falling for that sort of Wild-West stuff. Couldn't tell Sir Rupert where to take his gun, so emptied the cartridges out and—"

"Held up half a dozen men with an empty gun." The Inspector grinned, "Lord, boy, you took a risk with that man Ibbotson heeled and in a beast of a temper."

"Damn Ibbotson." Bobby strode over to the window and looked out over the Barrabarra Bay. "Say, Jim. Do you mind these windows being open? It's stuffy in here."

"Go as far as you like." The detective was staring up at the large crystal chandelier hanging the middle of the ceiling. "There's no clues about, so you can't haze them."

The newspaperman pushed open the window and stepped out on the stone terrace. Below him were the gardens of the house, running down to the edge of the cliffs, some quarter of a mile away. A few yards to his left were stone steps leading to the gardens. He walked towards them—to stop hurriedly just before the top step.

"Jim?"

"Well?"

"Come here."

He waited, until the detective stood at his side.

"What's that?"

On the smooth stone was outlined the sole of a boot. The toe was pointing towards the windows of the dining-room. It was not a good impression, merely the outline of the boot—the wearer having recently trampled over wet mould.

"Big man, that." The detective was on his knees. "Size of boot about 10's."

"Bout that. He came up the steps."

Bobby pointed to a row of wet marks on the seven stone steps. "Trod lightly—the toe of the mark is better-defined than the heel. Where did he go?"

He traced back along the terrace. Nearly opposite the first of the dining-room windows he stopped and pointed to the balustrade. "Got over here."

"Can't see it."

Bobby picked from the stones a cigarette butt. Walking wide from where the unknown man had paced, he went down the steps into the gardens and along a path to a spot opposite the dining room windows. There on the gravel were, the plain marks of the boots.

"Good work!" Williams approved. "Where did he go then?"

"Across the grass, I guess." Bobby pointed down the gardens. "The way he came. See, the gardeners have been watering the lawns this morning. That's where the mould on his boots came from."

"Can you track him, Bobby?" The detective grinned at the dubious look on the reporter's face. "But he doesn't matter. He couldn't have fired the shot. If he had, Sir Rupert would have been shot in the back, not the breast."

"But what was he doing here?"

A sudden light had come into the newspaperman's eyes.

"Sir Rupert told me this morning that he had given orders that no one was to be in the grounds until after mid-day."

"What was his game?" Williams scratched his chin. "He seems to have taken a lot of precautions—with no object. Say, Bobby, where are you going?"

"For a walk," the newspaperman grinned. "Comin'?"

The detective did not reply. He kept pace with Bobby as he strode across the grass. Twice Williams spoke, to be answered with grunts. They came to a path, leading between flower-beds. Bobby led on without hesitation, his eyes continually

searching the path, the beds and the surrounding air. Suddenly he jumped to one side and from under a standard rose-tree picked up a scrap of paper.

"More clues, Bobby?"

"Huh!" The journalist carefully smoothed out the screw of paper, his eyes widening! On the centre of the paper were words: "Madlands, Barrabarra Bay, nine to one."

"Good odds!" Williams grinned. "Say these cigars Sir Rupert smoked are 'it.' Have one, Bobby?"

But the journalist had not waited. Placing the paper in his pocket he was walking swiftly down the path to where a sundial stood, the centre of a small circle of gravel. Again he stopped. Close to the pillar of the sundial was the mark of a boot.

"Chappie came up here." Williams grunted. "Jove, no! This was made, with a size seven boot."

"And not an hour old." Bobby was on his knees by the mark. "See, there's the dust on the edges still. And with this wind blowing that should have disappeared under an hour."

"Two men in the gardens—where Sir Rupert had prohibited his gardeners this morning." The Inspector looked worried! "One goes to the house, up the steps to the terrace. The other—"

"Either followed, or preceded him." The newspaperman spoke from some distance ahead. "Look here, Jim. See. He took a round-about track to the house. That means he knew the other man was about and wished to avoid him."

"Which of 'em dropped that piece of paper you are treasuring so greatly, Bobby?" the detective asked.

"Neither of them!" Bobby spoke confidently. "It was dropped by a third man, who was watching the other two—and the house."

Chapter V

"THE third man?" Inspector Williams stopped short, staring at the newspaperman. "That's a new one, Bobby!"

"There was a third man in the gardens." Again the journalist led on, making for the cliffs at the end of the gardens.

"Any proofs?"

"Get them presently. At present, the two men we have tracked were not dogging each other; they were avoiding a third man."

"In that case, half Bondi may have been around the house." The detective pulled at his moustache. "Anything published about Miss Haffervale's coming of age?"

"Nothing relating to this affair at Madlands." Bobby stopped suddenly and turned to the Inspector. "You've given me an idea. Come on back to the house."

"What, for? What about this third fellow? Going to drop him?"

"He's gone," the newspaperman answered, indifferently. "So have the other two. I wonder what scattered them?"

Again he changed direction making for the steps up to the terrace where he had found the first boot marks. From there he retraced the trail more carefully, stopping and marking boot marks that would serve to identify the owner. At the sundial he paused for some time; then cast about, keeping between the footprints of the two first men. A long search and, under a low bush, he came on what he sought—a scatter of footprints where a man had crouched in hiding. On a patch of earth close by he found the imprint of a left-boot. The detective gathered some branches and twigs, carefully covering the mark.

"Where now, Bobby?" Williams smiled as the newspaperman turned towards the house.

"A talk with Mark Parsons."

Bobby lingered to allow the detective to catch up to him. "Got any ideas, Jim?"

"Not one," the Inspector answered, candidly. "If you weren't here I'd be sitting in that dining-room chewing a stogie and wondering on which of Sydney's crooks I could pin a medal!"

"Crooks?" Bobby stopped and glanced back at his companion with scorn. "I handed you six when you arrived."

"Crooks?"

"Yah! Two lawyers, three monopolists and a dud secretary."

"Held under the empty gun of a sleuth journalist," Williams laughed.

"Should have said seven, then."

The newspaperman reached the steps, and ran up on to the terrace. In the dining-room he paused and looked around him.

"Say Williams, how was Sir Rupert shot?"

"I'm listening." The inspector dropped the end of his cigar in an ashtray and drew another from his pocket.

"Item, a dozen chairs, assorted. One dining table, with a heavy crystal chandelier hung with prisms above it. One sideboard and a small table, set close to one of the two doors. A cabinet gramophone and a fireplace with an imitation Adams mantelpiece. Walls papered. Now where did that shot come from?"

"You're forgetting the mirrors. One over the sideboard, and the other opposite, over the mantelpiece you defame by stating it is imitation."

Bobby strode to the table, looking down on a long chalk mark on the polished surface.

"I got the doctor to draw that," he said, at length. "It marks as nearly as possible the course the bullet took. Now—"

"Put the arrow at the opposite end; get a jury to swear they'll convict on that evidence and there'll be one less journalist in Sydney's newspaper world."

"Looks bad." Bobby grinned. "Points right to where I was seated. All you've got to do is to be able to swear that Sir Rupert didn't twist or turn after he was shot, and—" he shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "Give me one degree of turn and that bullet passed immediately under that chandelier." With a light vault he gained the table top. A motion of his hand and the detective lifted a chair to beside him. Bobby mounted the chair and examined the prisms of the chandelier, using a pencil to deflect the crystals, when necessary.

"Got a stool there?" He looked down at the detective. "I want to get higher."

"I'll have a ladder brought." The detective moved towards the door.

"Scats! I don't want anything touched, just for the moment." The journalist pulled a powerful magnifying glass from his pocket and standing tip-toe carefully scanned the lower lines of crystals.

"Say, Jim! There's a foot-stool under that armchair by the fireplace. Phew! I wonder when they cleaned this last?"

"What are you looking for?" Williams asked curiously as he lifted the footstool to the chair. "Keep your feet still, man. Now the left, that's it. Steady?"

"All right, thanks! What am I looking for? Oh—" The young man's body stiffened. For some seconds he was silent, then slipped the glass into his pocket and looked down at the detective.

"Say, Jim, think this scaffolding will bear your fairy weight?"

"I'll take the risk, if you think it's worth while."

"Then come up here. First, mark this prism I'm touching with my pencil. Got it? Good!"

The journalist leaped lightly to the table and slid to the floor. As the detective, moving heavily, reached the chair, Bobby called to him and handed him the magnifying glass. The Inspector climbed to the stool on the chair and raised his head, close against the crystals of the chandelier.

"Further to the right Two more. There! Next that one that's badly chipped. There! Don't touch it with your hands man! Good!"

Bobby waited, impatiently, while the detective carefully examined the indicated crystal. At length Williams flipped the glass into his pocket, and reached up. Holding the prism with him handkerchief on a folded newspaper, held flat.

"Fingerprint." Williams lumbered down from his perch to the floor. "What the devil's a fingerprint doing there? A newie, too; and the chandelier hasn't been cleaned for donkey's years!"

"Got your powders and paints." The newspaperman was leading to the head of the table. He bent to the polished surface, scanning the table. "Here, Jim. This is where Sir Rupert caught the edge of the table; just before the shot was fired."

"Sir Rupert?" the detective starred.

"Go on, you chump!" Bobby's impatience burst bounds. "Get one of those fingerprints visible. I want to see what Sir Rupert's trade-mark looks like."

Williams shrugged his broad shoulders and produced his sufflator. A few moments and a row of fingerprints stood out along the edge of the table, in yellow powder. Bobby shifted the newspaper on which the prism rested, across the table to before the detective. Without a word Williams used the sufflator on the fingerprints, barely visible. For some full minute he compared the impressions. At length, he looked up, a queer expression on his face.

"Sir Rupert's?" The Inspector nodded. "I thought so. Print about twenty-four hours old, so far as I can guess. Now, tell me why Sir Rupert wanted to climb up to that chandelier within the past twenty-four hours?"

"The pistol?"

"Not on your life!" Bobby stared in mock commiseration at the detective. "And I thought you recognised that this murder had been committed by someone with brains!"

"You've been suggesting that Sir Rupert set a trap to murder his niece!" retorted the inspector.

"Far as I see, I'll suggest a hundred possibilities before we strike the track of the real murderer." Bobby moved to the door. "Got the key, Jim?"

"Where now?"

"Mark Parsons in the library?"

"So far as I know. He said he would not leave until he had seen me again. What's the big idea?"

"Just a small, one—the key of this door?"

"Damn you!" Williams laughed uncertainly. He turned the key and flung open the door. A constable stepped on one side. "Mr. Parsons in the library, Allan?"

"Yes sir. Haven't seen him since he went in."

"Guess he's there." Bobby strode across the hall and turned the handle of the library door. With a sudden jerk he flung the door open and entered quickly, followed by the inspector. Mark Parsons looked up at the sudden interruption. A frown gathered on his face at sight of the journalist.

"You! What do you want? I'm very, busy!"

"So I see." Bobby gazed around the room with an air of wonderment. The room looked as if a quick search had been made by some agitated person. "Found the will?"

"Sir Rupert's will is in my office," Mark Parsons answered shortly.

"So!" The newspaperman crossed to a low-armed chair. "Sir Rupert is a methodical man, Mr. Parsons?"

"Sir Rupert was a business man."

"Same thing I suppose. Tidy and methodical, eh?"

"A very tidy and methodical man."

Fred Frazer, Parsons's managing clerk, looked round, some suspicion showing in his eyes.

"Get a fit if he came in here, then." Bobby lit a cigarette and blew a series of rings towards the ceiling. "Often cleans his chandelier?"

"Clean his chandelier?" Mark Parsons swung round from the desk, suddenly. "What do you mean?"

"Rather a fine crystal chandelier in the dining-room," Bobby continued to stare after the smoke-rings. "Suppose Sir Rupert thought it too valuable to entrust to a servant—so cleaned it himself."

"Are you mad?" The lawyer stuttered in anger. "Sir Rupert could afford to pay servants for that work."

"Wanted to see if the servants had done what they were paid for." The newspaperman shifted to a more comfortable position. "Very tall man, Sir Rupert."

"What's the matter, Trayne?" Frazer turned from his work, laughingly. Parsons had bent to examine the documents before him, ignoring the journalist. "What's up your sleeve?"

"Dust. Been examining that chandelier, but had to get a chair and footstool to reach to it. Not so tall as Sir Rupert, unfortunately."

"No?" Frazer laughed again. "Only about four inches taller. If you want someone to tell you."

"Strange." Bobby sat upright. "Now tell me. How is it I had to use a table, a chair and a footstool to reach up to the chandelier, when Sir Rupert just reached up and left his fingerprints on one of the prisms."

"A lie!" Parson was on his feet, glowering down at the journalist. "Sir Rupert never did that."

The lawyer, swung round to face the detective. "Inspector Williams, will you please remove this person. I'm busy and want to get back to the city."

"Sir Rupert never made his desk in that litter." Bobby winked openly at the Inspector. "Nice tidy man, Sir Rupert. Say, Mr. Parsons, you'll not find that mortgage there."

"Mortgage? What mortgage." The solicitor had, suddenly become pale. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"The mortgage you have searched this room for." The newspaperman spoke courteously and plainly. "The mortgage held by Sir Rupert securing the very large sums he advanced to the Bralley Estate."

"You know where it is?"

"Yes."

"Where is it."

"Quite safe, Mr. Mark Parsons—but not in this room!" Bobby turned to the Inspector. "Say, Jim, I'll have you to help Mr. Mark Parsons in his arduous task. Of course, the police will not allow any papers to be taken from this house until they have completed their inquiry into the murder of Sir Rupert Haffervale. S' long, for a time."

"Where are you going?" Parsons asked the question, his face still white.

"To have a little chat with Myrtle—Miss Haffervale—if she's well enough to see me." He rose lazily from the chair and strolled to the door.

"I forbid you." Parsons almost choked with anger. "Inspector, throw that man out of this house. I forbid you to go near Miss Haffervale. And you needn't go back to the *Mirror* offices. You're sacked. Understand. Sacked!"

"Dear me." Bobby turned at the door. "And you've already forgotten the five years contract you prepared for my signature, a short three months ago. Bye, bye, Parsons. See you later. Jim. May have news for you then."

Chapter VI

BOBBY strolled out of the library, leaving the solicitor fuming with vexation. As he was about to close the door he looked back, and, catching the Inspector's eyes, winked. The answering nod assured him that the detective had not missed the point.

The journalist had fired a shot in the dark when he spoke of the Bralley mortgages. Peculiarly, those mortgages were one of the few matters connected with the Haffervale Trust of which he had knowledge.

Some few weeks previous he had been in Sir Rupert Haffervale's offices in the *Mirror's* building and had been asked to witness his chief's signature to some documents. Casual words between Sir Rupert and Parsons had informed him that the papers signed were mortgages over part of the Bralley Estates. Sir Rupert had kept him talking until the solicitor had left, insisting that the papers remained

with him. Then, he had asked Bobby to carry them to the clerk in charge of the *Mirror's* strong-room.

The mention of the Bralley Mortgages had upset the solicitor. The newspaperman wondered why. What did they contain to cause Parsons to lose his temper so completely? Why had he made so rapid and untidy a search among Sir Rupert's papers?

For the moment he put the question from him. He had much to think of—much to co-ordinate into a connected story if he was to trace down Sir Rupert's murderer. With a shrug of his shoulders he moved a few further paces into the hall. He did not want Parsons to come out of the library and find him near the door. The solicitor might think he had been eavesdropping.

Who had murdered Sir Rupert Haffervale? Who had fired the silent fatal shot, almost at the moment Sir Rupert had proposed to change chairs with his niece? From the moment he had entered the house, the newspaperman had found himself surrounded by an atmosphere of mystery and intrigue. He had wondered at the precautions surrounding what was, after all, a mere formality—the handing over of her income to the heiress of the Haffervale millions. Sir Rupert's actions, his very manner, had been illogical and only explainable by fear of some tragic happening.

In the dining-room, during the few minutes of the ceremony there had been an atmosphere of strain—almost fear—among the persons assembled. Sir Rupert had been uneasy; Myrtle had appeared watchful and distrait. There had been no signs of friendship between the men around the table. They feared and distrusted each other. They were antagonistic—indeed, almost to the point of open rupture.

For what reason? Bobby knew much of the commercial politics of the city of Sydney. He knew that Matthew Haffervale had been the financial genius of the century—with a finger in every large amalgamation that had taken place during his years. He knew that the old man had ruled his associates with an iron hand; that his death had occasioned relief to many of the so-called captains of industry. More, he knew that Sir Rupert had attempted to follow out the policy of autocracy and intimidation initiated by his brother—and had failed. He had held his position as head of the Haffervale trust mainly by the weight of the wealth he controlled. His associates in the various organisations had been rebellious; waiting for the moment they could combine and overthrow an autocrat whose feet, they knew, were of clay.

Seven men had sat around the table in the dining-room at Madlands and those seven men had hated each other. Had their hatred grown to a point when each man could, individually, contemplate murder? If he could answer to that question in the affirmative, Bobby realised he would have to reorganise his theories concerning the murder. The fatal shot had been fired at the knight, not at his niece, as he had supposed. But in that case, he would have to find a fresh explanation of the slow watch and the proposed change of seats at the hour of noon.

Into whatever story he constructed he had to bring three unknown men prowling about the grounds of Madlands at the time of the celebrations taking place in the dining-room. Who were these men? What interest had they in the ceremony, or the men and women participating in it? Why had they taken so

much pains to avoid each other? Why had their interests centred most obviously on the dining room windows?

Bobby shrugged his shoulders, disgustedly. Perhaps Myrtle Haffervale could resolve some of his doubts. He had not had a chance to question her. Now—

He glanced around the hall, questioningly; then sought the bell to summon a servant. He would send a message to Myrtle asking for an interview. Williams, would keep the solicitor engaged for some considerable time. As he moved forward he stiffened and halted, staring into a dark corner, behind one of the massive marble pillars supporting the glass roof. Someone was hiding there.

Someone had seated himself in the hall in a position where he could keep unobserved watch on the library door! Who had an interest in the solicitor's search of the dead man's papers?

For a moment Bobby frowned thoughtfully; then stepped quickly forward.

"Hullo, Gerald." The newspaperman dropped onto the wide lounge beside the secretary. "Got a result yet?"

"Result?" Gerald Preston turned a sullen face towards the journalist. "A result on what?"

"On the problem of the murder of your employer—he was murdered, you know."

Bobby stretched his long legs before him, looking down at his well polished tan shoes with appreciation. "Quite a mystery, isn't it?"

"Mystery?" Gerald made as if to rise. "I thought you turned it into an imitation wild-west stunt with your holding us up at the point of a gun."

"Good, wasn't it," Bobby chuckled. "I've often wondered what I should do if I chanced to be on the spot when a murder was committed. Ran true to form—though I say it."

"What's going on in there?" The secretary nodded towards the door.

"Don't know. Parson's got the willies. Blew up when I suggested he wouldn't find the papers there that he was after. Went straight up in the air and threatened me with the sack. I left it to Williams to bring him to earth again."

"What does he think?" Gerald turned to face the newspaperman. "Will he let us go?"

"Go? Where?"

"I've got to go to the city."

"Sir Rupert's business?"

The secretary hesitated. "I'm not allowed to say."

"Sorry. 'Course; Sir Rupert's business is Mark Parson's now, or, at any rate, for the moment. S'pose he's confirmed your instructions."

"He said—" Gerald jumped to his feet angrily. "Look here, Bobby Trayne! I've stood all I'm going to stand from you today. You may be the big noise down at the Mirror's offices but—"

"Going to sack me? You're the third, and Sir Rupert hasn't been dead a couple of hours! Lucky I got that contract, isn't it?"

"Damn the contract!"

"Not a bit, old son. It's too good to damn." The newspaperman paused a few seconds, carefully lighting a cigarette.

"Don't go to the city, Gerald. I'd stick tight to, this house, if I were you."

"So I'm suspect!" A surge of colour flooded the young man's face. "Of all the cheek! Why, I had my back to Sir Rupert when the shot was fired. I was—"

"Staring at him in a small, round mirror hung over my head," amended Bobby. "Say, Gerald, what was Sir Rupert like to work for?"

"All right."

"And—"

"Hard."

"Thought so. Made enemies quicker than friends."

"Sir Rupert was a successful man."

"Was he?" Bobby stretched himself, luxuriously. "Now, I've had an Idea that he was merely Matthew Haffervale's paid man."

"He had a big holding in the *Mirror*."

"Over which Matt. Haffervale and his heiress held a piece of paper, lacking a date. Press a rubber date stamp on that paper and Miss Haffervale's hold becomes considerably increased."

"Sir Rupert paid off the mortgage—Say Bobby what's your game? I'm not talking of Sir Rupert's business! If you want to get information, go to Mark Parsons. He'll—"

"Tell me to go to hell," Bobby amended. "I'd rather take that from you, Gerald. What are you going to do? Stop on as private secretary to the heiress?"

"I'm to see Mr. Ibbotson to-morrow."

"So he's to become the big noise. Think I'll see him before you, Gerald."

"What for?"

"I'm investigating the death of Sir Rupert Haffervale. There's questions to answer, and you—" The newspaperman allowed his voice to trail away.

"What do you want to know?"

"Who hated Sir Rupert?"

The secretary laughed shortly. "Most people. All successful men suffer from that."

"Except, of course, Adam Ibbotson." Bobby laughed. "He'll hate to step into the dead knight's shoes."

"Love him?" The Secretary stared at Bobby, in blank amazement. "Why, only the other day—"

"Yes?"

"Oh, I may as well tell you." Gerald made a gesture of resignation. "I'd been out—Sir Rupert sent me in to Bondi to send off some telegrams he didn't want the servants to see. As I—"

"Telephone working all right, Gerald?"

"Course. Why?"

"Sir Rupert ran a telegram deposit at the local post-office?"

"Yes—What—Oh, I see. I was sent to the post office to be out of the way."

"You didn't know Adam was to call?"

"No." The secretary abandoned his former reserve. "I didn't know he was in the house until, just as I got to the library door, he barged out. In the doorway he turned and said—"

"Careful, Gerald. I want the exact words."

"He said—" The secretary paused a moment. "He said: 'You're a damned smooth jack-in-office. Go to hell! I won't take orders from you.'"

"Go to hell!" Bobby lay back, digesting the information. "Gerry, you knew the noble knight quite well. Do you think he took his pal's advice."

"Don't think he had much opinion—after what happened in the dining-room, today." Gerald frowned. "The dumb brute! I'd have liked to—!"

"Have fired that bullet!" The newspaperman murmured the words. "But, you didn't, Gerry? Let's see! 'Course, I can get the info in the city, but it would save time if—Ibbotson's a wealthy man?"

"Haffervale money." The secretary sniffed. "Some with Mackenzie. Both of them Haffervale dummies. Old Matt had them well under his thumb."

"And Sir Rupert didn't let up?" Bobby laughed.

"Sir Rupert was his own best friend."

"And pals with no one else." There was a slight smile of satisfaction on the newspaperman's lips. "I thought so."

He turned quickly to the secretary. "You say Sir Rupert's holdings in the *Mirror* are free—now?"

"I believe Sir Rupert paid them off some little while ago." Gerald hesitated. "Yes, I'm certain I'm right, about the time he signed that contract with you. Say, Bobby, you're lucky; if you hadn't that contract you'd be hunting a job, now. The contract's water-tight?"

"Drew it up myself—with the aid of the best solicitor I knew. I did the newspaper side of the contract and Arnold saw to it that the legal part bound them tight. Oh, I'm satisfied. What of you?"

"Ibbotson says he wants a private secretary with knowledge of the Haffervale affairs."

"Let him want." A hard tone came in the newspaperman's voice. "You stick here."

"But Miss Haffervale won't want me. She has no business—"

"Not until she marries or reaches the age of thirty. I know that." Bobby grinned. "Same time, I've got a hunch she'll want a man about the place—a man who can— Say Gerry, able to handle a gun?"

"A gun?"

"Revolver, pistol, automatic—"

"I've fired one."

"And still alive—then you're safe." The journalist pulled a small squat nosed automatic from his pocket and passed it to the secretary. "Look here. It works that way. Understand? Just like this. Got it? Now, don't forget. It you've got to use it see that you're close up against the man you want to hit. From the way you handle a gun you should touch the second button on his waistcoat before you fire—and then he'll want a corporation to catch the bullet. Still, you're the best bid on the shelf. Understand, anyone coming at Myrtle Haffervale gets a pellet from you. Shoot first and ask their business afterwards is your best rule."

The young man rose to his feet and walked into the body of the hall, leaving the secretary staring at the automatic in his hand. Almost at the foot of the stairs Bobby turned and went back to where Gerald was seated.

"By the way, old man. If you want to go into the city, all serene. But, take a tip from a pal, and don't pay that debt—just yet."

Again the newspaperman turned and walked to the foot of the broad flight of stairs. As his foot reached the first step he hesitated. From above came the sounds of high heels, "tap-tapping" on the polished parquet flooring. He drew back, lounging against one of the newel-posts.

Dropping the cigarette from his lips Bobby carefully ground it to powder and drew out his cigarette case, selecting a fresh smoke. The sounds of the high-heels came near the head of the stairs, then were suddenly muffled. The newspaperman grinned, keeping his eyes fixed on the toe of his boot. The girl had come from her rooms, walking close beside the balustrade of the gallery, peeping over into the hall below. At the head of the stairs she had stepped back on the heavy carpet.

He waited a few moments, until he knew she was some distance down the long flight of stairs then looked up. He caught his breath with a little gasp. What had happened to the girl?

In one of the upstairs rooms lay all that remained of Sir Rupert Haffervale. Coming from her rooms to the head of the stairs she must have looked towards the door of the death-chamber. Yet in her eyes—in the whole contour of her face—was expressed relief, almost happiness.

Bobby Trayne had met Myrtle Haffervale on several occasions. He had pitied the girl—silent, dull, heavy; as if overweighted by the burden of gold she had inherited from her dead father.

Now she was changed—gloriously. Above the average height of women, dark, with a wonderful clarity of skin, her face relieved by a pair of sparkling brown eyes, flecked with little gold spots, her beauty struck him a physical blow. He caught his breath sharply; his hands clenched so that the nails bit deep into his palms. What a girl! From her smooth glossy hair to the perfect silk clad ankles, she was perfect—adorable!

The wonder—homage—faded from Bobby's broad, pleasant features to be replaced by a frown of perplexity as the girl advanced to where he stood awaiting her. She glanced sharply at his face and a little friendly smile dawned on her lips. She held out her hand, eagerly.

"Mr. Trayne. I was wondering where I would find you." Her voice came almost in a whisper. "I must speak to you soon—and alone. Where can we—"

"Ah, Bobby," Inspector Williams's booming voice sounded from the library door. "I want you. Mr. Parsons has just told me—Beg pardon, Miss Haffervale, didn't see you. Trust you're—er—I want to say—I hope you—"

"Quite, Inspector." The light in the girl's eyes glowed to a smile. "You want Mr. Trayne, I believe."

"When you've finished with him, please, Miss Haffervale." The detective turned in the direction of the dining-room.

"Cruel!" Bobby spoke lowly. "I did not think you would abandon me to the enemy, like that."

"I thought Inspector Williams was your friend, Mr. Trayne." Myrtle smiled, demurely. "Please, don't keep him waiting—and—Mr. Trayne, when you have finished with my hand. Thank you. I know journalists are acquisitive persons,

but—" As Bobby turned away in mock disgust the murmur came to him. "The seat behind the sundial in the gardens, in half an hour."

BOBBY TOOK a couple of steps towards the dining-room where the inspector awaited him, then turned and watched the girl out of sight. Immediately she had disappeared he strode across to the lounge where Gerald still, waited.

"Say Gerry. What private inquiry agency does Adam Ibbotson look to for protection?"

"Carruthers." The secretary looked up startled. "Why?"

"Not much, 'cept they've got their work cut out!" As he spoke the newspaperman turned to the dining-room and entered, closing the door carefully behind him.

Chapter VII

INSPECTOR WILLIAMS was standing at the far end of the room, staring out of the long windows on to the gardens. At Bobby's entry he turned and held out a piece of paper.

"Looks as if we've got the murderer, Bobby," he observed, without enthusiasm. "Lor', to think of it. A British—"

"Got to have a better reason than that, old son." The newspaperman lounged across the room. He glanced at the scrap of paper and laid it on the table. "Worst of you Headquarter 'johns' is that you fill up on such detective fiction, in your large spare time, that a title is a sure road to the gallows."

"We got a newspaperman once," Williams remarked darkly. "And—"

"Have held it against the profession ever since. So your two best bids are Lord Carriday and Bobby Trayne." He turned and pointed to the chalk mark on the table. "Allowing a small deflection from that theory either of them is a good suspect—except—"

"What?"

"That two other persons might just as well come under the clouds gathering on your brow," the journalist laughed.

"Read that paper?"

"Two lines and a signature torn from the lower half of a full sheet of newspaper. Worded:

"You're not fit to live, Rupert Haffervale! If you go on with this scheme I shall be strongly tempted to stop you by means in my power.—Carriday."

"Good enough."

"Except that Adam Ibbotson, but a few days ago, told Rupert Haffervale that he was a damned smooth jack-in-office. To go to a place unmentionable and that he refused to take orders from him."

"He did?"

"A third suspect for you. Notice anything about Miss Haffervale, just now?"

"What?"

"An air of relief—as if a big weight had been lifted from her shoulders."

"That girl." The inspector stared at the newspaperman in astonishment. "You don't suspect—"

"I'd punch the head of anyone who even hinted at such a thing." Bobby spoke with sudden heat.

"Yet you—"

"Go to—school!" The newspaperman strode down the room to where he had sat through the conference. For some minutes he stood facing the table, mentally visioning the scene just before the fatal shot was fired.

"Taken a review of the dramatic person in this crime, Williams?"

"What's yours?"

"Ideas chaotic—but—" He turned impulsively to the Inspector. "I hate to say it Jim, but in this we've got to take in all possibilities. Myrtle—Myrtle Haffervale's relieved at the death of her uncle. Sounds horrible and no doubt, poor girl, she hates herself, for her unbidden thoughts."

He turned to the chair on which he had sat and from under it picked up a copy of that day's *Mirror*.

"Seen this?" His finger indicated a paragraph in the serial column. Williams read the few lines and whistled.

"A marriage has been arranged—Lord Carriday and Myrtle Haffervale. Whew! Poor girl."

"A British earldom—and colonial wealth!" The bright tones could not hide the feeling in the journalist's voice.

"You mean lucky girl, don't you?" Remember he's not one of the vast army of impecunious peers searching the world for rich brides. He's got money—oodles of it—perhaps more than Myrtle, and—"

"And a reputation?" The Inspector spoke significantly.

"A title covers much. Add to it enormous wealth and—and the Ten Commandments are snowed under so deep that—that—"

"Well, get along with your theories!" Williams spoke after a quick glance at the newspaperman's face. "What of the others?"

"Gerald Preston had no cause to love Sir Rupert." Bobby had recovered his pose of indifference.

"Who had? That's not a cause for murder, Bobby."

"No." The newspaperman grinned. "Pass Gerald. Then comes Adam Ibbotson. There's bad blood there. Carriday might not have got all he wanted—with the promise of Myrtle's hand in marriage. That scrap of paper looks good or bad—for him. Parsons had—"

"What?" Williams was staring at the journalist in amazement. "Lor' man. Was there no one in the room free from suspicion?"

"Know anything of the Bralley Trust?"

"No!"

"A big block of land in Queensland. Said to be oil under it. Matt Haffervale invested slightly, in the speculation. Sir Rupert avoided it for a time; then, just before his death put in a wad. Mark Parsons is one of the trustees and—"

"Good God, man, speak out," Williams burst out impatiently.

"Mark Parsons commenced a rapid, disorderly search for the mortgage deeds Rupert Haffervale signed a few months ago—within a few minutes of the knight's death. You heard, and saw."

The Inspector bit at the ends of his fingers, watching Bobby keenly. When the journalist did not continue he spoke again, drumming on the glass with the tips of his fingers.

"You haven't accounted for Godfrey Mackenzie and Parson's managing clerk. What's his name—oh, Frederick Frazer."

"For the present—no." Bobby paused. "I tell you this, Jim, Within the next twenty-four hours your fingers will itch to get hold of both their collars."

"Nine persons in a closed room. One murdered, and eight suspected. The good Lord!" The inspector turned impatiently and strode up and down the room. "What a puzzle! If only there was a single definite clue."

"The gun?"

"I searched the room again while waiting for you. Not a sign of it."

"Who's been in here?"

The Inspector turned to the door, opened it and beckoned in the constable on duty.

"Who's been in here between the time I left and when I returned, Allan?"

"Mr. Parsons, Lord Carriday, Mr. Mackenzie, Mr. Ibbotson, and Mr. Preston. Mr. Parsons brought his clerk in with him, sir—"

"All together?"

"No, singly, sir. You didn't tell me to keep them out."

"You let them in and shut the door behind them."

"Yes, sir."

"All right." As the constable left the room Williams turned to the journalist and made a gesture of despair. Bobby laughed, turning to the open window. "Say, where are you going?"

"For a stroll on the grounds." Bobby looked at his watch. It was nearly time to keep his appointment with Myrtle.

"Think I'll come with you. There's nothing to do here."

"There's less for you to do where I'm going." There was a strong significance in the journalist's tones. "If I were you—"

"A lady to see you, Inspector."

"A lady to see me?" Williams swung round to see Keston, the butler, standing in the doorway. "What's her name?"

"She would not give it. She said that you did not know her, sir."

"What's she like?"

"Very heavily veiled, sir. I thought I recognised her, but I cannot give her a name."

The detective swung round to where the journalist had been standing, but Bobby had disappeared. A couple of quick steps took Williams to the window. Far across the lawns Bobby was striding towards the cliffs. For a moment the Inspector hesitated, then turned to the servant. "All right. Show her In."

He waited, pacing impatiently up and down the room. What was Bobby Trayne after? He had a great admiration for the newspaperman's abilities—his almost uncanny knack of jumping to right conclusions on the most flimsy evidence. He

knew that Bobby was hot on some trail, and this damn-fool woman prevented him joining in the chase.

"Inspector Williams." A soft voice spoke from the doorway.

"Yes. And you, madam?"

The veiled woman did not answer. Williams surveyed her curiously. He placed her age in the late twenties. Slender and small, she appeared overweighted by the transparent scarf that shrouded hat and features.

"Your name, Madam." The inspector spoke impatiently.

"They tell me Sir Rupert has been—been murdered." The light voice quivered. "Is that—it is not true, is it?" The woman advanced a step, laying her hand on the detective's arm.

"They? Who?" The detective spoke quickly. "Who told you Sir Rupert was—dead? Come now, madam! Who are you?"

A moment's hesitation and the woman threw back her veil. Williams looked at her curiously. A pure ash blonde; her face pale, the eyelids puffed by recent tears.

"You know me?" she asked hesitantly.

"Can't say that I do, Madam. What is it you want to know?"

"I have been told, that Sir Rupert Haffervale is dead. Is that true?" The woman was holding her emotions in check with obvious effort.

"Your name, madam. I can't answer questions from people I know nothing about."

"I am Mrs. Mackenzie."

"Mrs. Mackenzie? The wife of Mr. Godfrey Mackenzie."

"Yes."

"You, say someone told you Sir Rupert had been murdered?—Who was that?"

"I—we—live close by. About a mile and a half away. Mr. Mackenzie came home, just now, and told me Sir Rupert had been murdered. Oh, tell me—tell me—it is not true."

"Fraid it is." Williams spoke grimly. "Why had Godfrey Mackenzie, on leaving Madlands, gone to his home and informed his wife of Sir Rupert's violent death?"

"Dead!" The woman spoke in a hushed whisper. "Oh, my God!"

She sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands, sobbing quietly. Williams turned and paced to the windows, searching the gardens for signs of Bobby Trayne. He felt he was not qualified to deal with the situation. Mrs. Mackenzie was crying over the death of Sir Rupert Haffervale. What did that mean? He racked his brains to discover a logical reason. So far as he know there was no blood relationship between the Haffervales and the Mackenzies. Then—

"Come, come, madam. This won't do." He spoke gruffly. "Mr. Mackenzie shouldn't have frightened you—"

"Frightened me!" The woman sprang to her feet in sudden anger. "There isn't anything he would not do. The beast! The brute! Oh, how I hate him. I—"

"There! Enough of that." The detective, fearing hysteria, spoke brutally. "Looks like we'll make better progress if you sit down quietly and answer my questions. Now, what's your name—Christian names I mean."

"Alice Maude."

"Alice Maude Mackenzie. Well, what relation are you to Sir Rupert?"

"He is—was—a—a—friend."

"A friend?" The inspector's tones showed his unbelief. "So Mr. Mackenzie stopped on his journey to town to inform you that your mutual friend had been murdered?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Mackenzie was upset at the death of his friend?"

"Mr. Mackenzie was not Sir Rupert's friend."

"Only a business connection?"

"Yes."

"Then Sir Rupert and Mr. Mackenzie were business acquaintances, and you and Sir Rupert friends. Were you friendly with Miss Haffervale?"

"Not very."

"But very friendly with Sir Rupert?"

For some moments the woman sat without answering. Williams repeated the question.

"Oh you're as bad as my—my husband." Alice Mackenzie spoke in sudden anger. "He accused me and Sir Rupert—"

"Of being more than friends, eh?"

"You brute!" Sullen anger flared in the light blue eyes.

"Yes, he said that. He said—"

"And he had proof? Answer me," the Inspector continued, as the woman did not speak. "Answer me!"

"He caught—Yes, he had proof." She flung up her head proudly. "Why should I care? Yes, yes, yes—yes."

"You think that your' husband—Godfrey Mackenzie—murdered Sir Rupert Haffervale." Williams spoke in low, intense tones.

"I thought he would murder me," Alice Mackenzie answered under her breath. "He would have, but he feared—"

"Who?"

"Sir Rupert." Again rage flamed in the woman's face. "Oh, yes, he could rage and storm, but he could do nothing. He has only one God—what he calls his position. Sir Rupert could have taken that from him with a word. He could have thrown him down—stripped him of every—"

"Godfrey Mackenzie is a rich man?"

"A rich man!" The woman laughed scornfully. "Sir Rupert was the rich man. He owned them—Carriday, Ibbotson and Godfrey. They had to do what he told them. I did because—because I loved him."

"Mr. Mackenzie caught you and Sir Rupert in a compromising situation, you say. Did they quarrel? Where did this take place?"

"At the cottage?"

"The cottage. Where is the cottage?"

"About a mile from here. It used to be the gardener's cottage, but Sir Rupert built another, nearer the house, and left this one empty. He suggested—"

"That it would be a convenient and secret place for you and he to meet at?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Mackenzie." The detective spoke after some moment's silence. "You have been very frank with me. You have confessed an intimacy existed between you and Sir Rupert—when there was no occasion for such a confession. I admit I cannot

understand your reasons for that confession, but I will promise I will not use it unless it is imperative in bringing Sir Rupert's murderer to justice."

"His murderer to justice!" Although her tones were so low that Williams hardly caught the words, the malice in her voice made a cold shiver run down his spine. "Yes, his murderer to justice. I would sacrifice, my life, and more, for that."

"Jim. Jim!"

Williams swung round to face the window. A moment later and Bobby Trayne dashed into the room.

"Jim! Those foul friends have got her!"

"Who?" The detective sprang forward catching the journalist by the shoulders and shaking him roughly. "Speak man, who?"

"Myrtle!" Bobby sank into a chair, his face drawn and haggard.

"I was to meet her by the sun-dial. When I got there I waited—and waited—and—she did not come."

"Perhaps she has been detained." The Inspector suggested, hopefully.

"I thought that, at first." The newspaperman's tones were hopeless. "I moved around a bit—and in one of the by-paths I found this."

He held out a small bronze shoe between his two hands. For a moment he sat staring at it, then dropped it on the table and flinging himself in a chair, buried his face in his hands.

Chapter VIII

"TAKE a pull at yourself, man!" The inspector walked across and laid a heavy hand on the newspaperman's shoulders. "You're only guessing. How do you know that's her shoe?"

"She wore it when she came down the stairs half an hour ago." Bobby rose from his seat and shook himself, savagely. "I don't jump to conclusions, Williams, you know that. There's something damned fishy going on here and—"

He turned and stared at the woman seated on the opposite side of the room. "Good Lord! Why, you're Mrs.—"

"Mrs. Mackenzie has brought me some news," The Inspector interposed. "I'll tell you about it later."

"No need," Bobby chuckled. The Inspector's matter of fact manner had helped him recover, his poise. "I'll guess. Mrs. Mackenzie came here because her husband stopped on his way to the city to inform her of the death of Sir Rupert."

"Well?" The detective spoke quickly, exchanging a glance of anxiety with the woman.

"Sir Rupert and Godfrey Mackenzie were—er—friends." The journalist spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. "They were not so great friends as Sir Rupert and Godfrey Mackenzie's wife."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Mackenzie sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing with excitement. "Inspector Williams—"

"Rather strong, that, Bobby," the detective spoke heavily.

"Common knowledge, Inspector," Bobby drawled. "There's a weekly 'rag' in this town that makes a feature of that sort of gossip."

Without a word Mrs. Mackenzie walked out of the room, ignoring the journalist who sprang to open the door for her. As he closed the door Bobby breathed deeply.

"Thank God for a cleaner atmosphere!" He walked to the windows. "Now we can get to essentials."

"Mrs. Mackenzie's story was not essential, you think," queried the detective.

"I'd forgotten," Bobby spoke simply. "But, before the day had passed I would have remembered. I knew there was something at the back of my mind connecting Godfrey Mackenzie and Sir Rupert, as antagonists. So you think now that Mackenzie, murdered his chief because of his wife?"

"That's a reason."

"Is it? What of the proof?"

"Mackenzie knew of his wife's visit to the deserted cottage, to meet Sir Rupert."

"And because of that knowledge Mackenzie takes revenge for his sullied honour amid a roomful of people. Not good enough. Those detective mystery stories will be your downfall, Jim."

"Murderers act queerly."

"On the contrary they're the most logical of criminals—in point of fact they should not be classed as criminals at all. They suffer from a primitive reversion, piercing through a veneer of law and order, established by centuries of theorists and prohibitionists."

"That doesn't help us."

"Except reducing our stock of non-suspects to one."

"It we exclude Miss Haffervale."

"Of course." Again the journalist moved towards the window. "Time we got to work. Come along, Jim."

On the veranda he paused, suddenly. "What about the deserted cottage you spoke of."

"'Bout a half-mile from here. The lady and Sir Rupert used it for their meetings. Know it?"

"No. 'Course its furnished. Would be, if I know my late chief—in the best of style for ash-blondes. God!" He led across the lawns at a dog trot, the Inspector following more slowly. Bobby waited at the garden seat until the detective came up an then moved on, watching the ground carefully.

"Found that shoe here," he said, abruptly. "Careful, Jim. I was too anxious to get in touch with you to examine the place for marks."

"On the path."

"Just off it." The newspaperman bent and indicated a patch of earth under some standard rose-trees. "Just, here! No, there's no mark; I looked for that. It fell there, lightly—I mean. It was not thrown down."

"Then—?"

"Myrtle was sensible when she passed here." Bobby spoke positively. "She was sensible and was being carried by her abductors."

"Why didn't she call out?"

"We shouldn't have heard her at the house. So far as I can see there's no one about the grounds. Keston tells me there are three gardeners. Where they are I can't discover."

"Sir Rupert sent them off for the day."

"For the half-day," corrected the journalist. "You can't hear Sir Rupert giving more than he had to away."

"The gardens, deserted—the girl abducted. That brings us back to the three men in the garden, Bobby."

"Three men we've got to prove," Bobby grinned. He was regaining his confidence. "For all we know at present, they may be the gardeners. There's such a thing as devotion to duty, but—" He ceased speaking suddenly, staring down towards the edge of the cliffs. With a beckoning motion he moved on rapidly. At the other side of a bank of ornamental trees he came on a man digging industriously. For some moments he stood watching him, the man not aware of his presence.

"Hard soil that." The newspaperman lounged forward, his hands thrust, deeply in his trousers pockets. "You're one of the gardeners, aren't you?"

"Name, Martin, Sir." The man straightened his back and leaned on the handle of his fork. "Soil's hard, as you say—mighty hard."

"Been at it long," Bobby measured with his eyes the turned-over soil. "Bout an hour I'd say."

"Rather more 'n less." The man grinned. "You've a good eye, though, sir."

"That means you started about one o'clock."

"One o'clock it was, sir. Sir Rupert gave us the morning off. You been from the house, sir?"

"Yes, You've heard of the—the—"

"The accident, sir?" The man shoved back his tattered hat and scratched his head reflectively "Well, I heard something, just a bit of gossip which I didn't pay much attention to."

"Sir Rupert's dead—shot," Bobby spoke briefly. "This is Inspector Williams, from Headquarters. It wasn't an accident—just pure, premeditated murder. Now I want to know if you've seen any suspicious characters about the gardens this morning?"

"Did you hear anyone shouting, within the last hour, Martin?" interposed the detective.

"Sir Rupert, murdered," the man spoke dazedly. "No, sir. I've heard nothing. There's been no one about, so far as I know."

"You're the head-gardener?" Bobby asked. "Keston said the head-gardener was named Martin. The under-gardeners were named—both, I've forgotten!"

"Rufus and Thomas." The man supplied the names quickly. "They're working on the other side of the house."

"That's away towards the old abandoned cottage." interjected the newspaperman. "You used to live there, didn't you."

"Not me, sir. 'Twas Roberts, the man who was here before me had that cottage. When he went Sir Rupert built the new cottage on this side of the road from Bondi. The—"

"The other cottage is on the other side, of the road, then," Williams spoke.

"That's correct."

"What's happened to it—abandoned?"

"Well, it's shut up. I 'eard it's to let—been to let for some considerable time."

"Furnished?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I ain't never been inside. It's tight locked up."

"Suppose you went to see?"

"I was there last week." The man hesitated. "Suppose it doesn't matter to tell you; sir, but there was a rumour about that lights had been seen in it. I went round thinking that someone had found a way in—but it was tight locked up."

"You didn't report the rumour to Sir Rupert?"

"Never thought of it, or I might have—" Martin grinned. "When I found I couldn't get in, 'less I got the keys, I guessed others couldn't have."

"Look here, Martin." Bobby spoke after a lengthy silence. "Sir Rupert was murdered, in a most mysterious manner, while surrounded by his guests. That's a point that concerns Inspector Williams, not you—What I want from you is this: Who were the three men in the grounds, between here and the house, about noon, today?"

"Three men in the grounds?" The man looked amazed. "There's been no one in the grounds, so far as I know."

"Then come and see." Bobby led the way, at a smart pace, back to the sun-dial. Then he pointed out the various marks he and Williams had discovered. While Martin was examining them he managed to slide alongside the detective and caution him against mentioning Myrtle's disappearance.

"None of those marks belong to you or your men?"

"Not mine—nor Rufus or Thomas made those footprints," the man answered positively, "you can take it I'm right, sir. I'd tell the marks of any of us who stepped on a bed—aye, and swear to them."

"You say your mates are working on the other side of the house?" Bobby continued. "Between the house and the abandoned cottage?"

"Depends on which way you goes, sir." Martin grinned. "If you goes down the path from the house direct, then yes. But it you go from here, then no. You see," he led the way along the path for a few yards. "You're on the angle of the house here. The cottage is over there. You wouldn't go within a hundred yards of the house to get to it from here."

"Then you could get from' here to the cottage without coming in contact with your men?" questioned the newspaperman.

"That's so. There's plenty of shrubs and trees about. Rufus and Thomas are working along the creek, in what we call the Middle Hollow. They wouldn't see anything, or anyone, who didn't go across the bridge."

"Good enough!" Bobby slipped his hand into his pocket. "I don't think Sir Rupert will object to you stopping that digging, or Rufus, and Thomas neglecting the watercourse for an hour or two. Bring me the names or descriptions of the men who made those footprints—the men themselves, if you can—and there's a note for each of you. The size depends on how quick I get that information. Understand? The inspector and I are going to the cottage. You'll find me there or at the house. Ask for Robert Trayne. If I'm not there telephone the *Mirror* office. I'll come along to you as quick as I can."

With a short nod he led the way up a path the gardener indicated. A little over half a mile and they came to the main road to Barrabarra Bay. Turning to the left he found a small gate leading into a large plantation.

A hundred yards along the path, and a small cottage came into view, the windows shuttered. There was something about the cottage that caught the newspaperman's attention. It was apparently unoccupied but about it hung an indefinable atmosphere of being in occupation. Followed by the detective he skirted the building, examining it from all sides.

"Don't like it, Jim," he muttered, as they turned, the fourth corner, coming back to the front door. "In spite of the shutters, and the general air of neglect that place is being lived in."

"Forgotten the tale of Sir Rupert and the lady?" Williams grinned.

"Forgotten nothing!" The journalist moved towards the door. Suddenly he stopped and pointed to a patch of soft earth. "Lord, what a fool that man is. There's his trade mark again."

On the soft earth was outlined the pattern of a large boot. Bobby bent to examine, it. A short survey and he straightened himself. There could be no possible doubt. The marks patterned exactly the one he had found by the sundial.

What had the man been doing at the door of a cottage supposed to be deserted? What had he been doing in the grounds of Madlands, during the time the conference had been assembled in the dining-room? With a shrug of his shoulders the newspaper-man went to the door of the cottage and knocked.

"Expect an answer, Bobby?" The detective had been watching the journalist with a smile of amusement on his lips.

"Just politeness, Jim," The newspaperman ripped open his waistcoat and from under his shirt drew a soft leather belt.

"Crook's etiquette, if you want to know. They always knock before entering."

From the belt he drew a queer looking instrument, somewhat resembling a bent key. A few turns in the lock of the door, and the wards gave. With a shove of his shoulders Bobby sent the door open, and motioned the detective to enter.

"The complete journalist-crook," Williams spoke regretfully. "I should arrest you for having those things in your possession, Bobby. As it is, you're too useful at present and—"

"Even an Australian detective may enter the door of a deserted cottage, if he finds it open." Bobby waved ceremoniously towards the door. "Official precedence, Inspector."

But Bobby was too impatient to wait for Williams' slow deliberate movements. In the little hall he pushed past him and flung open the door to the right of the entrance. It led into a well furnished dining-room, the table laid with the remains of a meal.

"The love-nest!" Bobby spoke with disgust as he noted the various signs of female occupation. "Mrs. Mackenzie made herself at home, certainly. What beasts some of our leading citizens are."

"They're not alone in that, Bobby." Williams spoke in slow deep tones. "At headquarters I've heard tales of the proletariat that would make a blush rise to your hardened cheeks. But—Come on, Let's have a look at the other rooms. There's nothing here."

He crossed, the small hall and flung open the opposite door. As he hesitated on the threshold Bobby sprang past him with a shout of amazement. Just within the door lay the fellow to the shoe he had found by the sun-dial.

"God! Is she here?" He strode in to the room; to halt with a cry of alarm. On the ornate bed lay the form of a woman, covered with a light wrap. For a moment the journalist stared, his cheeks blanched. He rocked on his feet, and would have fallen, but for the detective's hand.

"Steady, Bobby."

Williams helped the young man to a chair and forced him into it. He turned, and after a moment's hesitation, crossed to the bed. For some time he stood looking down on the shrouded figure. Had the young brilliant girl he had spoken to in the hall at Madlands come to this? Could there be any doubt? She had been forcibly taken from the grounds, while waiting for Bobby Trayne to come to her. They had found her shoe at the door of the room.

Then—With a sudden movement he drew the wrap from the silent form. His cry brought Bobby to his side.

In silence the two men stared down on the white face of Alice Mackenzie.

Chapter IX

"ALICE MACKENZIE!" Bobby breathed the words, with almost a sigh of relief. Pushing the inspector to one side he bent over the body. A moment, and he straightened himself, pointing to a bullet wound in the chest. "Went the same way as Sir Rupert."

"And by the same hand." The detective's large hand, strangely gentle, passed over the bare shoulders. "Still warm. Of course, we saw her within the past hour."

"Came straight here from Madlands," Bobby nodded. "The murderer was lying in wait, and shot her down. Where?"

He turned to face the room. "Not here. Jim, have a look round. I want the place where she fell. Look at her dress—her attitude as she was carried here; there's no doubt of that."

"What are you going to do?" For a moment a gleam of suspicion lit the detective's eyes. "What are you looking for?"

"Telephone."

"Here?"

"Sir Rupert wasn't a piker. There's a telephone here—hidden behind one of those contraptions women love to have about."

A quick search of the room and Bobby went to the door. In the dining-room he found the telephone and called a city number.

"What's the game, Bobby?" The inspector loomed at the doorway.

"Eliminating possibilities." The journalist held up his hand for silence. "Yes. Mr. Mackenzie—Mr. Godfrey Mackenzie in his office? Yes, I would like to speak to him. Who? Robert Trayne of the Mirror. Hold the line! All right." There was a long silence. "What's that? Tell Mr. Mackenzie I want to speak to him. Engaged. Well,

tell him it's a police matter and unless I get him on the phone within the next few seconds he will find the Headquarters' Police at his office."

"Here! Steady, Bobby." Williams protested

"I will!" The newspaperman covered the receiver with his hand and turned to the detective. "Let those people delay in getting me on to Godfrey Mackenzie and I'll ring up Police Headquarters and lay an information against him, pronto. "Wait!"

"Mr. Mackenzie? Bobby Trayne speaking. I heard you went home from Madlands and informed your wife of Sir Rupert's death. What's that to do with me? I'll tell you. Mrs. Mackenzie has gone the same way as Sir Rupert. Get me? What? I'm telling you—"

"Hold hard, Trayne." The Inspector's voice was harsh and dominant. "That's brutal!"

"You know the abandoned gardener's cottage on the Madlands estate? Get in your car and go there. Quick! Yes, Inspector Williams and I are here. We're waiting for you."

In sudden anger the journalist flung the earpiece on the hook and turned to the Inspector, his face blazing with anger.

"You heard? I repeated his words so that you should understand. You accuse me of being hard. What of it? What of the woman in the next room? Is it hard on her? What of Myrtle, in the power—"

"You're not accusing Mackenzie of the abduction of the girl—"

"You accused him just now of the murder of his wife," Bobby flung round, in sudden temper. "I want to know what all this means. Why was Alice Mackenzie shot, within a few hours of her lover's death? I want to know the reason for the abduction of Myrtle."

"Are you certain the girl was abducted?" asked the detective stolidly.

"Ignoring the evidence of the two shoes?" Bobby laughed harshly. "Girls wander through gardens kicking off shoes now and then, and forgetting to retrieve them! They wander across main roads with one high-heeled shoe on and the other lying, neglected, a mile away. They—"

"What's the good of getting hot, Bobby?" Williams spoke quietly. "I'm granting something strange has happened, but we don't know what, yet."

"The body of that woman, lying on the bed in the next room," Bobby, laughed harshly. "You saw, the blood has hardly stained the linen. There's no blood on the floor, or the couch. There's no sign of a conflict in the room. Can you read the riddle?"

The detective shook his head.

"Look around this room," continued the journalist. "The table set for two. Feel this slice of bread: it is not a dozen hours old. Look at the china and glass. There's hardly a trace of dust on it. The table linen has not yet had time to lose the ridges of its folds."

For some minutes the journalist paced the room, frowning thoughtfully. His sudden temper, born of anxiety, wore itself out and, at length, he turned to the detective, holding out his hand.

"Sorry, Jim; sorry I let myself get out of hand. But the air's got me set. Let's reconstruct what happened, so far as possible. Start from last night. There's evidence that Sir Rupert and his lady love had an assignment here—and kept it."

Williams nodded.

"Now, who set that table? You've seen that lady—do you think she was capable of that? I don't—I reckon there wouldn't be much beauty about the table that Sir Rupert laid. Then there's someone in the confidence of the pair of lovers, who is that person? She can tell us a lot."

"She?"

"Accusing Keston, the butler? No. Sir Rupert wouldn't trust him in that matter. Let me proceed. Sir Rupert and Alice Mackenzie kept an assignation here last night. You noted that the bed had been used—not merely flung open to lay in the dead woman. Sir Rupert goes to Madlands, to prepare for the ceremony of his niece's coming of age. There was to be great doings at Madlands tonight you know. They're off—poor girl!"

He rose from the chair in which he had been sitting and strode up and down the room, continuing.

"Something happened last night to put the fear of God into Sir Rupert's heart. He rings up Alan Reeves, the Mirror's chief of staff at some unearthly hour this morning. I know that, for I got my instructions by telephone for this day, just after eight o'clock. From what Reeves said I gathered he had only just received his."

"That's news, Bobby."

"I know. I'd only just compared times, in my mind. We'll go on. I come to Madlands and find Sir Rupert in a deadly funk. Why? Had anything happened during the night giving him reason to fear for his life? I say, 'yes,' and I say that woman in the next room gave him the information that set in train the series of events culminating in her death."

"You're ignoring a lot," interjected the Inspector.

"More than I'm adding together!" The journalist acknowledged. "There's the watch on the table. By the way, if I am correct in suggesting that Mrs. Mackenzie gave Sir Rupert information that fluffed him, then the rundown watch is explainable. There's the gun that killed Sir Rupert. That has to be found."

"The same gun that killed Mrs. Mackenzie."

"I'll stake a year's income that it is not," Bobby retorted quickly. "We're not dealing with a fool, Jim, and until we lay hands on him there's not a hope of getting it. One of the men who entered the dining-room while we were out in the grounds retrieved it."

"Where was it hidden?"

"Ask me something easy. Jim, did you notice anything queer about my conversation with Godfrey Mackenzie. I mean his words."

"He said little—you didn't give him a chance to say much."

"It wasn't what he said—but what he forgot to say." Bobby spoke significantly. "I told him to come to the abandoned gardener's cottage. He didn't ask for directions. He didn't ask how his wife died. But we'll get on to that when he turns up here. At present, I want to know where Alice Mackenzie met her death."

He led from the room to the open air. For some moments he stood gazing down on the large footstep pointing to the door of the cottage.

"If that mark could only speak, what could it tell of the happening of the night and day?" With a shrug of his shoulders he moved on, again circling the cottage.

As he came near the back door of the cottage it opened and the detective beckoned to him.

"There's a queer litter in the kitchen, Bobby," Williams voice was low. "Looks as if your theory of the warning was right for there's been evident preparations for the abandonment of the place. Then, there's this."

He held out an envelope. Bobby almost snatched it. The enclosed paper was covered with a large scrawling writing; and containing but few words, unsigned. A glance and the newspaperman had mastered the contents.

Alice—

I won't share you with anyone. Rita has told me of this cottage—and the use you make of it. You must send him away or—"

"Or—"

The journalist looked up into the detective's face with a quizzical grin.

"Seems like the lady was free with her favours."

"Sir Rupert had evidently found out something," added Williams.

"Sir Rupert?" Bobby looked his astonishment. "That's not Sir Rupert's writing."

"Then—"

"I'll guess in one." Bobby twisted the envelope in his fingers. "Lord Carriday."

"Guess?"

"No. Certainty. One of the social writers at the *Mirror* was gossiping with a mate. I overheard. The inference was that Alice Maude had transferred her attentions from the knight to the lord. The lady appears not to have made any secret of her amours. At one time she was seen about, freely, with Sir Rupert; of late her cavalier has been Carriday."

"Engaged to be married to Myrtle Haffervale! Good Lor!"

A flash of anger illuminated the newspaperman's eyes. He glanced down so that the detective should not witness his emotion. A sudden amazement came on his face.

"Jim! Look at this." He held up the back of the envelope. In dark outline on the white paper was the imprint of a woman's shoe heel.

"Slipped under the door of the cottage." Williams reconstructed. "Mrs. Mackenzie enters the cottage and treads, accidentally, on the envelope. She tears it open and reads it, then carries it into the kitchen—and forgets it."

"Where was it?"

"On the floor. Had evidently been knocked off the table. Come in here and tell me what you make of this."

Williams stepped back into the kitchen. Bobby followed him. The place was in confusion, papers littering the ground on every side. Bobby took one glance at the litter, then stepped to the back door and looked it.

"Come out of here, man. There's work for a full day here and we haven't time now. Mackenzie will be here any minute and we'll have to give him all our attention."

As he spoke the sound of a motor horn came from the road. Williams made to go to the front door, but Bobby held him back.

"Let the blighter find his own way here," he said in a low tone. "When I 'phoned him he didn't ask for directions how to find the cottage. I want to watch him. When he comes in, show him where his wife lies and then get out of the cottage and join me. I'll watch for you."

Treading lightly, Bobby ran out of the cottage and disappeared. Williams shut the door and went to the dining-room, grinning largely. Bobby on the trail was a sheer delight.

Well grounded in criminology, the journalist had an uncanny instinct that led him to conclusions over obstacles that frequently baffled the detective. A knock came at the door of the cottage. Williams leisurely answered the door, admitting Godfrey Mackenzie. The financier showed little emotion on his face. He greeted the detective briefly and followed him to the bedroom. For some seconds the detective stood in the doorway watching the man, then closed the door and made his way to the grounds. A moment and Bobby was by his side, his face alight with excitement.

"Jim, I've fozzled it. That boot mark—the 10—was not made today. It's been there all night. Have a look at this."

Quite openly he led to where he had found the strange boot mark. Warning the detective to consider it carefully he strolled on. When Williams raised himself from his examination, Bobby beckoned him to where he stood. On a patch of fine earth lay a facsimile of the first boot-mark.

"Godfrey Mackenzie's," the journalist whispered. "They're exact. Now, look at this."

He drew from his pocket the soiled envelope and handed it to the detective. The mark of the girl's heel was now defined in pencil outline. From his pocket Bobby brought out the shoe he had found within the cottage bedroom door. The shoe fitted the marked envelope, exactly.

"Myrtle Haffervale's shoe!" The detective gasped his surprise. "What was she doing in the cottage last night—when her uncle and his mistress were there."

Chapter X

BOBBY turned and walked down the narrow path to the gate opening on to the main road. He wanted to be alone, to think; to try and co-ordinate the facts he had gathered into a connected, intelligible story.

He had watched Myrtle descend the stairs at Madlands, wearing shoes exactly similar to the one he held in his hand. He was certain he had made no mistake—that the shoe he had found in the cottage belonged to her. She had bidden him come to her in the garden by the sun-dial, in half an hour. He had kept the appointment—to find her missing. Time passed and his anxiety had increased. He had searched—to find one of her shoes in the flower-bed.

How had the shoe come there? He could find but one possible answer. The girl had been attacked and forcibly abducted; in the struggle her shoe had fallen off.

Her captors had not noticed the loss of the shoe; it had lain on the flower-bed until he had discovered it.

He had now to explain the shoe found in the cottage. He must follow out his theory. The abductions had taken the girl to the cottage. One of them had held the girl in his arms, while the other had opened the door. It was then she had trodden on the envelope. A few paces inside the cottage and she had kicked off her remaining shoe, finding it easier to walk in stockinged feet than to limp on a single high-heel.

But that theory would destroy his reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding the letter from Carriday to Alice Mackenzie. He had theorised that the letter had been slipped under the cottage door the previous evening and that the woman had found it there when she arrived to keep her assignation with Sir Rupert. That theory would postulate that Myrtle had come to the cottage immediately before the arrival of Sir Rupert and his mistress.

The idea was inconceivable! What had the girl to do with the sordid intrigue between the knight and Alice Mackenzie? More, Myrtle had been wearing those shoes that morning. His finding one of the shoes under the rose-bushes proved that.

No! Myrtle had been abducted from the grounds of Madlands that morning. She had kicked off one shoe in the first struggle; the other when forced into the cottage.

If his reasoning was incorrect, how had the imprint of her heel come on the back of the envelope? Had Alice Mackenzie received the letter the previous evening or that morning? Williams had found the letter on the kitchen floor. If was possible that Myrtle might have trodden on it while it lay there. In that case why had she wandered through the rooms of the cottage on one high heel; to discard the shoe just within the bedroom door? If the girl had been brought to the cottage under duress would her captors have allowed her to roam the place? Neither supposition fitted the facts.

One thing was incontestable. Myrtle had been captured and taken to the cottage before Alice Mackenzie had left Madlands. Both he and Williams could swear to that. The woman had gone from the house to the cottage, presumably to remove traces of her presence. She had found Myrtle and her captors at the cottage. The men shot her, placed her body on the bed and fled, taking Myrtle with them.

Who were the men? Immediately to the newspaperman's alert brain sprang the word Carriday! The meat baron knew of the cottage—the letter to Alice Mackenzie tended to show that she had used the place for her meetings with him. Carriday had abducted Myrtle, taking her to the cottage, believing it to be the most secure hiding place for the moment. Alice had come upon him and the girl; there had been a severe quarrel, resulting in the woman's death.

But why had Carriday abducted Myrtle? He had displayed no anxiety regarding the girl until after Sir Rupert's death. Yet he had been officially engaged to her. The man had a reputation for gallantry—with women more matured and sophisticated. A young girl would have few attractions for him.

Myrtle was an heiress: one of the wealthiest young women in the world. But Carriday was reputed enormously rich. Was his wealth a myth? Mackenzie and Ibbotson were reputed millionaires. Gerald Preston had laughed at their claims,

declaring them dummies for the eccentric millionaire, the late Matthew Haffervale. Did the British peer come in the same category?

A sudden sound from the direction of the cottage caused Bobby to swing round, abruptly. Godfrey Mackenzie was standing in the cottage door. Inspector Williams advancing to meet him. Bobby strode back to the cottage. He wanted to hear every word the chain-store magnate uttered.

"Who found—her?" Mackenzie spoke without emotion and with a perceptible pause before the last word.

"Inspector Williams," the newspaperman responded briefly.

"What was she doing here?"

"We don't know." Bobby flashed a warning glance at the detective. "We heard of the abandoned gardener's cottage and came to examine it. Then we found—"

"Her." The chain-store magnate nodded. "Who shot her?"

"There was no one in the place when we arrived," said the newspaperman.

"That means you're not handing out information." A wisp of a smile came on the thin lips. For a moment the man was silent. Suddenly he looked Bobby straight in the face. "You know she's been here before?"

"And that you knew of her visits, here." The newspaperman shot back. "Why did you drive home on your way to the city and inform your wife that Sir Rupert' was dead?"

"You know that?" The man did not flinch. "Well, I did. I wanted to see how she would react to the news. If you want to know, she's not been a wife to me for quite a while—just a psychological study."

"You mean—Sir Rupert?"

"Steady Bobby," Williams spoke. "The woman's dead."

"Her lovers, you mean," Mackenzie laughed shortly. "Oh, you needn't be mealy-mouthed, Inspector. I've known a lot, and for quite a time."

"You knew she came here to meet Sir Rupert Haffervale, last night." For the first time the detective took a hand in the examination.

"I followed her—to the door. She told me she was playing bridge at the club."

"You followed her here." Williams gasped. "What did you do when she entered the cottage?"

"Was Sir Rupert here when she arrived?" amended Bobby.

"She opened the door with a latchkey." Mackenzie spoke impersonally. "What did I do when the door closed on her? I went home and went to bed."

"Leaving your wife alone in a deserted cottage with another man?" The inspector gasped.

"What good would it have done me to storm the cottage and raise hell?" A wolfish snarl distorted the financier's lips. "Besides, she hasn't been my wife for quite a time. I had to—"

"Stand on one side—to save your position," Bobby completed, brutally. "If you had interfered Sir Rupert would have—"

"He would." Mackenzie interjected, almost too quickly.

"Yet you look the trouble to drive out of your way to tell her Sir Rupert had been shot," asked the inspector. "Why?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"You knew Sir Rupert was not—not the only man concerned." With sudden impulse Bobby pulled from his pocket the envelope bearing Myrtle's heel mark and took out the unsigned paper.

"Do you know that writing?"

Godfrey Mackenzie accepted, the paper with steady hand, reading the message on it, quickly. A slight smile broke the line of his compressed lips.

"Carriday! That's old." He tossed the paper back to the journalist, contemptuously.

"Before Sir Rupert's time?"

"Yes. Sir Rupert was my lady's latest caprice."

"Godfrey Mackenzie, who killed Sir Rupert Haffervale?" Bobby spoke hastily.

"If anyone—you." The man's beetling brows drew together in a harsh line.

"My pistol was not covered with a silencer. Besides the bullet was of a different calibre." Unthinkingly, Bobby, defended himself. "Can you make a better guess?"

"There were eight of us in the room." Mackenzie shrugged his shoulders. "That's the problem for Inspector Williams—not me. Can I take her away?" He nodded towards the bedroom.

"It you want to." Inspector Williams moved into the cottage. "I'll ring the ambulance."

"No." Mackenzie spoke hastily. "I'll get some men to carry her home. It's not far—a bare half mile. I don't want the ambulance around here while she's—" He hesitated, ceasing to speak, with a weak gesture.

"There are Madlands gardeners working in the gully on the opposite side of the road; but we'll want a stretcher." Bobby experienced a sudden sympathy for the financier. He turned at the sound of a motor-car coming to halt before the gate on the road. "I'll get them."

"There's a loose door to the shed behind the cottage." The inspector volunteered. Then as he caught the newspaperman's eye he added. "I'll get it free while Mr. Trayne gets the men. They can carry her on it."

The inspector stepped down on the path. Bobby advanced to meet him. A few words in a low tone and the detective disappeared around the corner of the house. The newspaperman watched a few moments, then walked down the path towards the gate. Watching over his shoulder until the chain-store magnate's attention was diverted from him, Bobby slid into the bush beside the path. Out of sight he stole silently in the direction of the cottage, finding a position from where he could hear and see everything that happened at the door.

He had only been in position a few seconds when Adam Ibbotson strode up the path to the cottage. Mackenzie watched him approach with sombre eyes. Ibbotson held out his hand, but it was some moments before Mackenzie grasped it.

"Heard of your loss, in town, old man." There was perceptible nervousness in the tobacco-man's voice. "Came out here at once to know if I could do anything for you."

"Heard of my loss in town?" Mackenzie spoke with sudden suspicion. "Who told you?"

"Just heard it." Ibbotson laughed uneasily.

"Or read it in the papers?"

"Haven't seen the afternoon papers yet. No, I heard it from some man."

"A man in my offices." Sudden anger blazed in the chain-store magnate's voice. "That's got to stop, Ibbotson. I've heard enough of it. Three times during the last twelve months I've had to dismiss men for taking information from my office to you. I tell, you, for the last time—"

"Threatening' me?" The big man laughed, harshly. "Don't forget you threatened Haffervale—and you know what happened to him. I'm not going the same road to please you. There's an Inspector of police about here. One more word from you and I'll—"

"What?" Mackenzie laughed contemptuously. "You forget. You threatened Haffervale also. He told, me that—but there, I'm not bandying words with you, and my wife lying dead in this hut. Sorry you've had all the trouble of bringing your sympathy out here, where it's not appreciated. Good day—and to the devil with you and your sympathy."

The chain-store magnate turned on his heels and entered the cottage, closing the door violently behind him. Ibbotson stood undecided for some moments, then swung round and walked back to the gate. He stood for some time leaning on the post, watching the road. Bobby was puzzled. What was the man waiting for? He drew back into the undergrowth and commenced to circle towards the road. He had proceeded less than twenty yards when some sound attracted his attention. For a moment he hesitated, then went forwards again towards the cottage, taking the precautions to make no sound. Under a low branched tree a man was stationed, watching the front of the cottage. Bobby waited a few moments, then stole forward until he was but half a dozen yards from the man. Then he straightened and walked heavily forward.

"Good evening, Mr. Carruthers!" The newspaperman spoke ironically. "Still with a strong devotion to duty?"

"Mr. Trayne!" The man gasped with surprise.

"The same." Again the newspaperman laughed. "By the way, Mr. Carruthers, you might inform me what reason you had for being in the grounds at Madlands this morning between eleven-thirty and half-past twelve—and did you leave then."

The private detective stared at Bobby amazingly. "I never saw you there."

"I was not there—I preferred the inside of the house, where, things were happening." A broad grin came on the newspaperman's features. "Won't tell me? Then I must guess. Shall I say our mutual friend, Adam Ibbotson, required protection when he visited his friend and patron, Sir Rupert Haffervale. That the same friend picked you up this evening, when he decided to visit Godfrey Mackenzie, here. Friend Ibbotson wants a lot of protection, doesn't he? Now, Carruthers, who were the other men in the grounds of Madlands, this morning? No good saying you don't know, for you spent quite a time in dodging them."

"I—I don't know." The private detective stared at Bobby in amazement for some moments; then inconsistently ran through the bush in the direction of the road.

Chapter XI

MR. TRAYNE, where are the Bralley mortgages?" Mark Parsons stared sombrely across his desk at the newspaperman. "Yesterday afternoon you remarked that I should not find them among Sir Rupert's papers, at Madlands. What was your reason for that statement?"

"I happen to be aware that Sir Rupert did not take the mortgages home with him," Bobby answered shortly.

"You know where they are?" The solicitor leaned forward, eagerly.

"I might guess. I cannot claim to have definite knowledge."

Some minutes passed before the lawyer spoke again. He leaned back in his chair biting the end of the long penholder he had held throughout the interview. Bobby fidgeted in his chair. Parsons was seated with his back to the window, his face in deep shadow. There was a nervousness in his manner that intrigued, yet irritated the newspaperman. If he would turn—if he would reveal his face in the full light for one moment—the journalist felt he would be better able to play his part.

"If my memory is correct," The solicitor spoke slowly. "You were in Sir Rupert's office at the *Mirror* when the documents were signed. I believe Sir Rupert asked you to witness his signature."

"Your memory serves you well, Mr. Parsons." Bobby smiled.

"Sir Rupert would not allow me to keep the papers. I believe you remained with Sir Rupert after I left. Did he refer to the mortgages again?"

"Sir Rupert asked me to take them to the clerk of the *Mirror's* strongroom—with other papers he handed me."

"Strange." Again the solicitor was silent. "I presume you carried out Sir Rupert's instructions?"

"Yes."

"The papers are not in the *Mirror's* strong-room." The lawyer spoke eagerly. "I had the place searched this morning. *If* you took them there—"

"*If*, Mr. Parsons!" Bobby sat upright.

"I beg you pardon." Parsons hesitated. "I accept your statement that you took the papers to the strongroom. But they are not there now. Have you any knowledge of them?"

"I have given you my information." Bobby rose to his feet with a slight sigh. "Is that all you wanted me for, Mr. Parsons?"

"Sit down." For the first time during the interview the solicitor shifted his seat and, for the moment, Bobby caught a clear sight of his face. "Do you realise that the recovery of the Bralley mortgages are of great importance to the Haffervale estate?"

"I believe the paramount duty at the moment to be the location of the missing heiress, Myrtle Haffervale," Bobby answered with warmth.

"Miss Haffervale is quite well—and happy."

The journalist noticed the slight pause before the last two words. "She is a young girl and—"

"You infer you know where Miss Haffervale is?" Bobby could not help showing his surprise. "The—"

"I have nothing to add." Again a cold tone crept into the lawyer's words. "You seem very concerned about Miss Haffervale, Mr. Trayne."

"Miss Haffervale made an appointment to meet me in the Madlands grounds. She did not keep that appointment. Certain facts discovered by Inspector Williams and myself induced the conclusion that she had been abducted."

"Does Inspector Williams share your belief that Miss Haffervale had been abducted?"

"Yes."

"He did not express himself to me in that manner this morning." The solicitor laughed shortly. "He seemed rather amused at your evident concern regarding the absence from her home of a young lady who is, I believe, a stranger to you."

Bobby flushed hotly, then cursed under his breath. What had Williams said to the lawyer? He had not seen the detective that day; but late the previous night Williams had expressed the opinion that when Myrtle Haffervale was traced down—when she told the story of her abduction—they would be far on the road to the solutions of the murders.

"You knew Mrs. McKenzie, Mr. Parsons?" Bobby said abruptly.

"Very well. She and her husband are clients of my firm. I handle most of their business, personally."

"You knew of the—er—understanding between Mrs. Mackenzie and Sir Rupert?"

"That is rather an indiscreet question, Mr. Trayne." The solicitor shrugged his shoulders.

"Would I be indiscreet if I asked if you can explain who fired the shot that killed Sir Rupert." Bobby flashed back the question.

"The conclusions drawn by the doctor who saw Sir Rupert immediately after his death appear to indicate that the shot was fired from the other end of the table. If that theory is correct, you, Mr. Robert Trayne, Mr. Rupert Preston and Lord Carriday must be under suspicion. Of the three you were the only one to carry a gun."

"Gerald, Lord Carriday and myself," Bobby laughed. He rose to his feet and crossed to one of windows, close beside the solicitor's chair. Instinctively the man swung his chair to continue to face the journalist. Now Bobby caught a fair full-light view of his features. His face was drawn and haggard, the eyes bloodshot, a dull dirty yellow colour showing under the drawn skin. "Lord Carriday was engaged to be married to Miss Haffervale. Do you think he—er—anticipated the wedding?"

"What do you mean?" Parsons sprang to his feet. "Do you accuse Lord Carriday of abducting Miss Haffervale?"

"A few seconds ago you informed me that Miss Haffervale had not been abducted." Bobby turned abruptly. "Lord Carriday is engaged to Miss Haffervale. He might have thought it wise to remove her from the troubles at Madlands. An immediate marriage, by special license, is not without the bounds of possibility."

"You forget," Parsons spoke harshly, "Miss Haffervale is a minor, subject to the rule of her trustees. Their permission to the marriage would be required."

"I am afraid love forgets trustees, settlements and permissions," Bobby hated to utter the words, but he must get the girl's track. Parsons had inferred he had knowledge of where she was. If possible, he must be made to speak.

"Lord Carriday is not engaged to Miss Haffervale." The solicitor turned towards his desk. "Sir Rupert—"

"Yes?" Bobby questioned, as the lawyer paused.

"You may all well know." Parsons passed his hand wearily, across his eyes. "Sir Rupert was a domineering man. He published the engagement of his niece to Lord Carriday without her knowledge or consent. Miss Haffervale protested—I was with Sir Rupert at the time. She said nothing on earth would induce her to marry Lord Carriday. Sir Rupert was angry—"

"For what reason." Bobby interjected. "Lord Carriday is a rich man—but, of course, wealth would not count with the Haffervales. There are stories—"

"Miss Haffervale would know nothing of them." Parsons spoke hurriedly.

"Would she not?" Bobby laughed. In a few graphic words he told of finding Myrtle's shoe at the abandoned gardener's cottage. He told his story in a manner that suggested Myrtle had been there about the time Sir Rupert and Mrs. Mackenzie met there.

"But that is impossible." The solicitor stared at the journalist in blank amazement. "Sir Rupert was with me all that evening. We had matters to discuss—affairs to arrange that kept us together far into the night. Sir Rupert slept at his club. He left me after a final drink and I watched him go upstairs to his bedroom."

"What?" The newspaperman caught Parsons by the shoulder swinging him around, peering closely into his face. "Is that true, Parsons?"

"Why should I lie?" The lawyer released his shoulder from the journalist's grip, which had tightened painfully. "I can swear Sir Rupert did not go to Madlands the night before last. In fact, I called for him at his club the next morning, after breakfast, and we drove out together."

"Sir Rupert in town that night!" Facts were ordering themselves in the journalist's brain. "Tell me, Parsons, why did Myrtle tell Sir Rupert she would not marry Lord Carriday?"

"Sir Rupert had had the engagement announced in that morning's *Mirror*."

"Yes? Get on! I showed the paragraph to Williams a bare hour after Sir Rupert was killed."

"That paragraph was the first intimation Miss Haffervale had of the arrangement between Lord Carriday and Sir Rupert. When we arrived at Madlands on the morning of her birthday she followed Sir Rupert and I into the library and asked that an immediate contradiction be published."

"How did Sir Rupert take Miss Haffervale's protest?"

"Better than I expected." The solicitor smiled slightly. "I had walked to the other end of the library so heard but scraps of the conversation. From what I heard I gathered that Sir Rupert considered he had been informed by Lord Carriday that the marriage had been arranged."

"And Myr—Miss Haffervale?"

"I heard her reply, distinctly. She said; *I would not marry Lord Carriday if he was the last man on earth; He is—* Then Sir Rupert said something that caused her to lower her voice and I did not hear the completion of the sentence."

Bobby paced the office in tense agitation. He could complete the sentence the solicitor had not heard. Now he knew what Myrtle Haffervale had wished to tell him in the grounds at Madlands. At last he had a clue that promised to lead him to the heart of the mystery.

Sir Rupert had been in town the night preceding Myrtle's birthday. Then he had not been at the cottage with Alice Mackenzie. But, the woman had been at the cottage—she had acknowledged that to Inspector Williams. Who had been her companion?

Again Bobby's thoughts reverted to the scrap of letter the Inspector had found in the cottage kitchen. He was certain it had not been written by Sir Rupert. He had thought it had come from Lord Carriday. Had he been mistaken? It so, in what manner? Alice Mackenzie had been at the cottage the night before Sir Rupert's murder. What had she gone there for? Who had her companion? It was inconceivable that she had been there alone.

Suddenly Bobby halted in his abrupt pacing of the lawyer's office. Heavy, agitated steps sounded in the passage. A hoarse, strong voice rose in muttered rumbles over the expostulatory tones of a woman. The door was flung violently open and Adam Ibbotson strode into the room.

"Good God, Mark, what does it all mean? My man tells me that Myrtle has disappeared."

"It's true." For the moment Parsons forgot the newspaperman, partially concealed by the shadows. "I saw Inspector Williams this morning and he told me that Miss Haffervale went into the ground to meet that fellow Tray—"

He hesitated, remembering Bobby was in the room. His eyes sought the shadows where the newspaperman stood. Ibbotson, who was watching the lawyer intently, looked round. He strode forward until he stood before the journalist.

"What are you doing here? Always sneaking and prying about! Is that what the *Mirror* pays you for?"

"Mr. Trayne came at my request." Parsons spoke quickly, rising from his chair and coming to where Ibbotson stood. "I wanted some information from him—"

"Which you didn't get, I'll be bound." The big man laughed gratingly. He swung round on Bobby he face alight with anger.

"Well can you get out of here, as quick as you damned well please, and you needn't go back to the *Mirror*. You're sacked—d' yer hear me? Sacked, and I'll take damned good care you don't get another job in this blasted city."

For a moment the journalist stared blankly at the angry man, then laughed. Pushing past the two men he sauntered to a seat before the desk and sat down.

"There's a matter of contract, Mr. Ibbotson," he said gently. "Mr. Parsons drew it up and Sir Rupert signed it but a few weeks before his death. It mentions a period of five years."

"Contract be damned, I'll fight it!"

Pushing the lawyer to one side Ibbotson strode across the room until he stood over the newspaperman, his first clenched.

"Fight it?" Bobby's eyebrows elevated quickly. "I think not, Mr. Parsons, your co-trustee, might object."

Chapter XII

FOR some moments there was a deep silence in the room. Bobby lounged back in his chair, outwardly negligent, but keenly watching the two men through his half shut eyes. Parsons had gone back to his seat behind the desk. Ibbotson stood glowering down on the newspaperman.

"You came here because you received information from Mr. Carruthers that Miss Haffervale had disappeared from her home, Mr. Ibbotson," Bobby spoke at length. "I can relieve your mind. A few minutes ago Mr. Parsons told me that Miss Haffervale was quite well—and happy. As her trustee he should be well informed."

"Happy?" The tobacco magnate swung round on the lawyer. "What's this? The pair of you seem to know more than me. You don't mean you're sell—"

"Mr. Ibbotson!" Parsons half rose from his seat.

"That be damned for a tale!" Ibbotson turned again to the journalist. "What do you know?"

"Just what I have repeated," Bobby smiled. "Did you see the announcement in the *Mirror* yesterday morning?"

"The announcement?"

"Of the marriage arranged between Lord Carriday and Miss Myrtle Haffervale." The newspaperman's tones were very gentle.

"Myrtle marry that—" For the moment the man could not speak for rage. Suddenly he turned to the lawyer. "What do you know of this?"

"I saw the paragraph," Parsons spoke easily. "Sir Rupert—"

"Made the match possibly as a birthday present to his niece." Bobby rose from the chair, languidly. "Am I to take it that you had other marriage arrangements for the young lady, Mr. Ibbotson?"

He did not wait for an answer, but strolled to the door. There he turned and nodded mockingly, to the men watching him. He knew he had scored another point in the strange game.

In the passage he paused a moment, Ibbotson had lied when he inferred that he had not seen the engagement notice in the *Mirror*. He had been puzzled and perplexed when he had quoted the lawyer's words. Now Bobby understood why, during the strange proceedings at Madlands the previous day, the tobacco magnate had sat silent, scowling deeply.

What reasons influenced the big man. Bobby tried to understand. Did the man desire Myrtle's fresh young beauty—or the enormous wealth she would control on her marriage. Whatever the reason, Ibbotson had betrayed himself. He desired the girl. A shudder shook the journalist's frame as he envisioned Myrtle in the grasp of that gross, sensual man.

At every turn he found the problem growing more perplexing. Five of the men who had gathered in the dining room at Madlands hated the dead man; hated him to a point where they could consider his death without flinching. The thoughts of Carriday and Mackenzie centred about the dead woman and her relations with Sir Rupert. Carriday and Ibbotson were in bitter opposition to the man who had been their master, in their desire to gain Myrtle and her millions. Perhaps he was concerned with the Bralley mortgages, seeking feverishly for traces of the papers the dead man had refused to entrust to his charge. Gerald Preston hated the man because of—No, at the present moment he could not place a definite fact against

the secretary, but he knew that Gerald had hated the dead man with that blind, unreasoning hatred that makes killers.

He laughed shortly. The more he examined the problem—the more facts he had accumulated—the greater the mystery. Nine persons had sat around that dining-room table and eight of them—No, he dared not think that. He could not accuse Myrtle of any part in the death of her uncle—yet she had not loved him. But a few hours previous to his death she had quarrelled over his unauthorised publication of her engagement to Lord Carriday.

Five men, of the seven who had sat around that table, held for the dead baronet a blind, unreasoning hatred that might have blossomed into murder. Of the remaining two—himself and Fred Frazer—

Frazer! Mark Parsons' managing clerk! What connection had he with the death of the baronet. He had come in frequent contact with the dead man. With a shrug of his shoulders, and a little laugh, Bobby turned in the direction of the managing clerk's office.

"Any objections to visitors." He stood in the half-opened door, looking at the bent, partially bald, head of the clerk. "Just came from an interview with your chief, and want cheering up—"

"Trayne!" Frazer looked up with a slight smile. "Come in, old man. The chief upset you?"

"Not possible. He only wanted information regarding the whereabouts of the Bralley mortgages."

"You know where they are?"

"I have my suspicions."

"Did you tell him."

"Speak to a lawyer of suspicions!" Bobby laughed. "You men of law want facts, not suspicions. I gave him of my knowledge freely."

"That means you kept quite a lot to yourself," Frazer laughed.

"What sort of bloke was Sir Rupert—in business, I mean?"

"A brute." The managing clerk's face darkened.

"And, in his private life?"

"A beast of the beasts!"

"So!" The newspaperman shrugged his shoulders. "Then you know something."

Frazer did not answer. He turned to his work as if seeking to close the interview. Bobby waited a moment and then strolled up behind where the man sat.

"Beast or not, Fred, his death has to be revenged." He spoke gravely. "What do you know?"

Slowly the managing clerk raised his head. Unconsciously his eyes wandered to the portrait of a young girl, standing on his desk. Bobby could not see the look that came into the man's eye, but he felt the shoulder under his hand quiver.

"Sir Rupert was murdered," Bobby's tones had become very grave. "There were eight persons in the room with him when he died. One of those eight—"

"Why one of the eight?" Frazer asked the question irritably.

"Because the doors and windows were closed. There was no possible hope of anyone shooting him from without the room."

The managing clerk did not answer. He bent again over the papers on the desk. Bobby waited. Presently the man's head raised with a jerk. Again his eyes sought the portrait on the desk. A slight sigh escaped his lips.

Bobby stole softly from the room. He held the secret of the sixth man.

Chapter XIII

IT was late in the afternoon before Bobby could set out on his return to Barrabarra Bay. From the moment he had left the lawyer's office he had met with difficulties and delays. Inspector Williams was not at Police Headquarters and nothing had been heard from him since he left for Madlands to investigate the death of Sir Rupert Haffervale.

Bobby smiled grimly to himself as he left the tram-car at Bondi and set out on the long two-mile walk to Barrabarra Bay. For the first half-mile he proceeded cautiously, believing that he was followed. But, in spite of careful watching he could not discover any tracker. It might be that Adam Ibbotson realised that he would go out to Madlands, and he had stationed his spies there. The journalist was prepared for that. He had no intention of going direct to the old house. First, he would go to the gardener's cottage and from there take up the trail of the missing heiress.

In spite of the evidence he and Williams had discovered the previous evening he was certain that Myrtle had been taken there by her abductors. Later, during the night hours, he would go to Madlands. He had made his arrangements for getting into the house.

He was puzzled at the silence of the detective. Williams had not intended to stay at Barrabarra Bay the previous night. When Bobby left him at the cottage, to follow Ibbotson back to the city, the Inspector had spoken of returning to headquarters to organise the help he would require the following day for a thorough search of the district. Something had happened to make the detective change his plans. The newspaperman puzzled his brains to guess the reason.

Half way on the journey to Barrabarra Bay Bobby struck into the bush and lay down under a tree. He was early; for he did not want to get to the cottage until after nightfall. If, as he believed, the cottage was deserted he would have many lonely hours in which to make a search. He did not anticipate getting to Madlands before the early hours of the morning.

For some time he lay in the bush watching the road. No one came along. The surrounding country was silent and apparently deserted. From where he lay, on a small rise he had a wide view. Far to the south lay the big bulk of Madlands, glowering under the rays of the setting sun.

From almost under the knoll, wound the sandy road. To the west of the big house he could see the patch of heavy bush within which lay the gardener's cottage. For as far as his sight could reach he could not see another house; yet he knew that within the hollows, and behind the low hills, were concealed several residences. Somewhere in that wide stretch of country Myrtle Haffervale, held

prisoner by one of the men he knew had desired Sir Rupert's death. But, on which of the men could he lay the abduction?

He knew that both Lord Carriday and Adam Ibbotson desired the girl. He knew that Mark Parsons and Godfrey Mackenzie were secretly planning to obtain control of the huge fortune Matthew Haffervale had left in trust for his only child.

He could dismiss Gerald Preston and Fred Frazer from his calculations. However much the two men hated the dead baronet, neither of them had the means or the ability to plan the murder and the abduction of the heiress. No, he had to decide on one of the other four—and he smiled grimly as their names passed through his mind. If he uttered his thoughts and suspicions, who, of the inhabitants of Sydney, would believe they were capable of the deed.

Six men must lie under suspicion of the murders: four of them of the abduction of Myrtle Haffervale. Could he fasten the crimes on any one man? So far as his information lay the guilt lay equally between the four—if, indeed, the crimes were not the work of one master-mind.

The sun had descended into the wide open sea before Bobby came out of his shelter and strode down the road in the direction of Madlands. Just before he reached the gates of the drive-way he turned to the opposite side of the road, and, opened the wicket-gate leading to the gardener's cottage.

The place was in darkness. Bobby, keeping well in the shade of the thick bush, cautiously approached the front door. Satisfied that no one was in the front rooms he swerved into the bush again and circled the house. Stealing, on silent feet, up to the back door, the newspaper man satisfied himself that the place was deserted, then tried the door handle.

The door was unfastened. Bobby stepped back with a low exclamation. What did the unfastened door mean? Williams would not have left the place like that. Then who had been there since the detective left?

The problem suggested another. Where was the Inspector? He had intended to return to town the previous night, and had not. Had he remained out of Madlands? That was improbable, for he would surely have communicated his plans to the newspaperman. But would he have done so? Williams was a cautious and suspicious man. He would not speak openly over the telephone.

A sudden thought crossed Bobby's mind. Did the detective suspect him of the murder of Sir Rupert? He could not suspect him of the murder of Alice Mackenzie, for he had been in the detective's company from the moment the woman had left Madlands until the discovery of her dead body in the cottage. But, of the eight persons in the dining-room at Madlands, he, of all, had had the best opportunity to shoot the baronet, and hide the gun.

Again he approached the cottage door and silently swung it open. The interior of the house was in darkness. Bobby pulled a torch from his pocket and, concealing the light under his coat, played it around the kitchen. There was no one there; the place was in the same litter in which he and Williams had found it.

He crept into the kitchen and shut the door behind him. The key was in the lock and he turned it, silently. Again he flashed his light around. Why was the key in the lock, within the door? Had the Inspector left the cottage by the back door, without taking out the key and fastening the door? That would be unlike him.

The wide kitchen occupied the whole of the rear portion of the house, with the exception of a narrow space, used as a store room. The newspaperman opened the door and peered into the small space. It was bare and swept. A door opened from the store into the small yard at the rear. That door was fastened and the key missing. From the kitchen a door opened into a narrow passage, dividing the living room from the bedroom.

There was no one in the passage nor, so far as Bobby could judge by indent listening, in either of the rooms. He stole up the passage and opened the bedroom door. Involuntarily, his eyes went to the bed on which they had found the dead woman. She was no longer there. No doubt she now rested in the Mackenzie house, some mile and a half away. On the small table by the bed stood the shoe he believed to belong to Myrtle—the shoe he had found just within the door. Why had Williams left it there? Surely it was a valuable clue and should be in his charge. Bobby crossed the room and, lifting the shoe from the table, thrust it in his pocket. He disliked to see it there, in that room where the dead man and woman had consummated their illicit passion.

Quietly and methodically he quartered the room, searching for some sign that would, put him on the track of the murderer. He could see evidence of the careful search made by Williams. The place had been examined with meticulous care. With a shrug of his shoulders he turned from the room and crossed to the door of the living room.

As his hand found the handle of the door he heard the sound of feet advancing up the path to the cottage. He looked around him, anxiously. Where could he hide? He did not want to be caught there. He opened the living-room door and stepped in. A quick glance around showed him a cupboard set in the corner. He stepped silently to it and pulled open the door. If the new-comers did not search the house the place would serve.

The steps came closer and paused at the front door. Bobby stood just within the cupboard, the door held ajar. His hand sought his hip-pocket for the automatic that was there. He withdrew the gun and slipped it into a side pocket of his jacket. The lock of the front door clicked loudly under the key. Two men stamped into the small hall, talking in low tones.

Bobby waited; tensed with excitement. Who were the men? He tried to catch some of the words—an inflection of a voice—but could not. He stood, waiting for the moment when he would have to step into the cupboard and pull the door shut.

A hand caught at the knob of the living-room door.

Bobby withdrew into his retreat, closing the door silently. The men entered the room, noisily.

"Anything to eat in this dug-out, Charlie?" One of the men inquired. A chair creaked under a heavy weight.

"Dunno. Maybe but it'll be stale. What d' yer always wanting to be eating for?"

"What's biting you? We haven't had a bite since we left Bondi, early this afternoon."

The first voice spoke aggrievedly. "Well, have a look. Got a match? I'm not going to sit in the dark until he comes."

Bobby withdrew further into the cupboard. He could not recognise either of the voices, Who was the "he" the men had come there to wait for?

"S'pose the fodder's in the kitchen." Heavy feet strode across the carpeted floor. The door opened and slapped noisily. Again a chair creaked, and the odour of tobacco scented the air. For some minutes there was silence broken only by the creaking of the chair as the remaining man moved to his seat.

Bobby tried to plan. Should he go out of the cupboard and challenge the men?

"Say Charlie. Have a look here. Someone's been in the place."

"What's the trouble, Ted?"

"Know the shoe that was on the table in the other room—the bedroom. It's gone."

"Gone?"

"Straight. He'll be wild. Didn't he go off at us because we left it behind the first time—and she wasn't any lightweight to handle."

"Who's been here?"

"That dick!"

"Talk sense. How could he get here?"

"Well, someone's been here!"

"Perhaps he's about. Never know. Active sort of chap, him!"

"Sad he wouldn't return till dark."

"Found anything to eat?"

"Oh, you ain't above a peck then? Thought you wasn't hungry?"

"Talk sense. Found anything?"

"Some tinned stuff in the kitchen."

"Fetch it in. Any bread—and booze."

"Plenty booze. Bread in pan—a bit stale."

"Fetch it in. We'll have to get a move on. Don't want him to catch us in the middle of a feed."

"Give a hand then. Don't want me to wait on you?"

Bobby heard the two men move towards the door. He moved to one side, to try and get a look at them through the crack of the door, and rubbed hard against something soft. A cloud of dust flooded the little space. For a moment Bobby choked, stuffing the handkerchief into his mouth. The air was stifling and in the spasms he pushed slightly against the door.

"What's that?" one of the men spoke hastily.

"What's what?"

"There's someone here."

Then Bobby sneezed loudly.

Chapter XIV

"HANDS UP!" With a thrust of his shoulder Bobby forced back the cupboard door and sprang into the room. The two crooks were at the door of the room, half turned towards him; their faces expressing astonishment.

"Up with your hands, quick!" The levelled automatic in the journalist's hand menaced the two men. "Come forward and shut the door. Get a move on, or I'll fire."

The man did not move from the door. The foremost turned wholly to face Bobby, an impudent grin on his face.

"Own the cottage, bo?" A slight movement placed him before his comrade. "Why, if I'm not mistaken, Charlie, it's our little newspaper friend, doing a wild-west stunt—and we're the crooks from Mystery Range. Put up your hands, pard, or the little popgun may go off. He's a real bad-man and shoots from the hip, with both hands."

The other man guffawed loudly. In mock terror he raised his hands high in the air. For the moment Bobby felt disturbed. Had he chanced on a couple of tramps seeking shelter in the cottage for the night? But, if so why had they referred to someone who was to meet them there? In the few words of conversation he had overheard there had been constant reference to a "he," whose orders they were obeying.

"Come from that door." He allowed his gun-hand to fall to his side. "And not so much talk. There's a few questions you have to answer before I let you go."

"All right." Charlie spoke without hesitation. He moved into the room and took his seat at the table. "Get ahead with it boss. The missus doesn't like me out late. Thinks I may get into bad company."

Following the example of his friend the second man strolled back into the room and seated himself. Broad grins were on their faces as they watched the journalist. Yet, under their apparent nonchalance, Bobby could detect a careful watchfulness.

"Who's the man you referred to as 'he'?" he asked abruptly.

"He?" Charlie, who had evidently constituted himself spokesman, looked puzzled. He turned to his mate. "Were you talking about 'he,' Ted. If I know you, you'd be more likely to yarn about some bit of skirt."

"That's enough of that." Bobby advanced a pace, standing on the opposite side of the table to the two men. "You know well to whom I refer. I want the name of that man."

"Anything else, boss?"

"Where's the girl you took from here. Oh, you needn't look at your friend. I overheard quite a lot while I was in that cupboard. You'd best come clean, I'll take you into Bondi and hand you over to the police, on a charge of abduction. Where is she?"

"Girl?" Ted spoke, grinning broadly. "Why you don't mean the stiff-un we carried out of here this afternoon? 'bout a mile an' a half away. Big house among a lot of trees. The old chap said she was 'is wife and paid us well for the job. She warn't no light weight, either. We earned all we got, didn't we Charlie?"

"I say so." The other man nodded, affirmatively. "My arms ached before the job was over."

He stretched his arms before him across the table. Bobby watched him vaguely. Had he been mistaken? Had the men before him carried from that cottage the corpse of Alice Mackenzie? That was what their words inferred. And he had thought they had taken Myrtle.

"What of that shoe you spoke about?" The newspaperman turned sharply to Ted. "You said he'd be wild at you leaving it behind the first time. What did you mean by that?"

"Just what I said." The man grinned impudently. "S'pose the old bloke wanted his wife complete. She hadn't any shoes on as she lay on the bed. If you'd been 'ere you'd have seen that."

Bobby was staggered. He remembered that the dead woman had not had shoes on her feet when she lay on the bed. He had not attached any significance to that, at the moment. He had been obsessed with the theory that the shoe he had found within the door of the room belonged to Myrtle. He had believed that the shoe he had found by the sun dial in the gardens of Madlands belonged to Myrtle. With that thought in his mind he had jumped to the conclusion that the similar shoe he had found in the bedroom of the cottage was a mate to the shoe in his pocket. He had not compared them, closely.

For some moments he stood casting his memory back on the incidents. If the shoes were not a pair then they matched so closely that not only he but Inspector Williams had been deceived. Could he trust the word of the men before him? They suggested that the shoe he had found in the cottage belonged to the dead woman. Was he to suppose that the shoe he had found in the Madlands gardens also belonged to her? If so, then Alice Mackenzie wandered from the house, after her interview with Inspector Williams, down to the sundial. There she had lost her shoe—how? Had she deliberately kicked it off and then hobbled through the grounds to the gardener's cottage?

The supposition was absurd. If he had to assume that the shoe he had found by the sundial belonged to Alice Mackenzie then he must assume that the woman had been murdered in the Madlands gardens. That would explain the small amount of blood he had found in the cottage. If Alice Mackenzie had been murdered by the old sundial in the Madlands gardens, and the murderers, in taking her corpse from the spot, had lost one of her shoes then what had happened to Myrtle Haffervale? She had promised to meet him by the old sun-dial. Had she witnessed the murder of Alice Mackenzie? Had the shock affected her brain, and was she wandering somewhere in the bushlands of Barrabarra Bay, her brain disordered, afraid to go back to her home?

The theory held possibilities. Even if only partially true, it destroyed all the work he had accomplished during the past twenty-four hours. He would have to go back to the beginning—to the moment when Sir Rupert Haffervale fell dead across the dining-room table, and work forward again—and that with many of the varied links in the chain of theory destroyed.

"That all you want, guvner?" Charlie spoke, his voice full of insolence.

Bobby glanced across the table at the crook. The man's hands were resting on the edge of the table. A baneful, hopeful look shone in his small eyes. Almost as Bobby realised his danger the two crooks pushed strongly at the table, throwing him violently to the ground.

The door of the room slammed shut before he could regain his feet. He heard horrid derisive laughter in the small hall. Then, the outer door was shut and running feet passed the window. Bobby rushed to the door and wrenched it open.

Outside, on the path he hesitated. Night had fallen and he could only see a few yards from the cottage. He pulled out his torch and pressed the button. The brilliant ray of light illuminated the path to the gate. There was no one there. He swept the light along the edge of the bush on either side of the path. He could see no one; the two men had entirely disappeared.

Should he go back to the cottage and await the mysterious "he" the two men had come there to meet? That would be useless; the crooks would take care to intercept and warn the unknown of his presence. The man would not come to the cottage.

With a muttered curse, Bobby turned back to the cottage and continued his search. He found nothing of importance in the bedroom and returned to the dining-room. A decanter of wine stood on the sideboard. Seeking a fresh glass Bobby poured out the wine and raised the glass to his lips.

One sip and he placed the glass on the table. The wine had a queer taste. The bottles of whisky stood on the sideboard, unopened. By one of them lay a corkscrew. Bobby went to the table and examined the glasses lying on it—the glasses the crooks had placed there. Neither had been used. He lifted the bottles and examined the corks.

So far as he could see, the bottles had not been tampered with. Only the wine in the decanter had been drugged. When had that wine been brought to the room?

Alice Mackenzie had kept an assignment in that cottage the previous evening. With whom? Not with Sir Rupert; for Mark Parsons had declared that the dead baronet had been with him all that evening. Who had been her partner in the supper, the remains of which Williams and he had found on the table when first they entered the cottage?

Had that wine been decanted for that illicit supper-party. Had that wine been doctored before Alice and her lover had sat down to that table? Or, had someone, knowing that he would revisit the cottage, drugged the wine, in the hope that he would drink it?

Bobby locked the doors of the cottage, determined to return there in daylight and take a sample of the drugged wine for analysis. Stepping lightly, he walked down the path to the gate, and after a long and careful scrutiny of the road, passed through. A glance at the illuminated face of his watch showed that it was just past ten o'clock. It was too early to go to Madlands. The servants would be awake. He must wait until after midnight, for he had the intention of examining the big house without disturbing the inmates.

The two crooks had spoken of carrying Alice Mackenzie's corpse to her home. Had they done so? Bobby knew that the chain-store magnate had intended to get the gardeners from Madlands to carry his wife to his home. Were the two men who came to the cottage the gardeners Martin had referred to as working in the gully on the other side of the big house.

He would go to Mackenzie's house and question him. He did not expect any enthusiastic welcome, but if his questions were framed carefully he might extract some information.

Bobby smiled grimly. Why were the four men so antagonistic to him? They were placing every obstacle in his way. Yet the murder of Sir Rupert Haffervale could not be the concerted plan of the four men. The death of Alice Mackenzie might well

be placed to her husband's account. He had traced her to the cottage on one of the occasions, when she had gone there to meet her lover. He had said he had left her there! Would any sane husband do that?

Mackenzie had found absolute proof that his wife was carrying on an intrigue with a man. Would he not have faced the guilty pair and denounced them—perhaps taking immediate revenge for her soiled honour? Instead, he had turned on his heel and come away from the cottage, leaving his wife with her paramour. The suggestion was inconceivable!

Bobby strode down the road. He had a good knowledge of the locality. Some half mile along the road he would find a path through the bush that would lead him to the Mackenzie house. He passed over a culvert and halted a moment. From where he stood he commanded a good view of Madlands. Lights were still in the windows. A couple of hours and the household would retire for the night. Then would come his opportunity.

He found the path he sought through the bush, with some little difficulty. It was rough and worn. Walking carefully and slowly, Bobby pushed on. He had not yet determined what he should do when he reached Treview—the Mackenzie's home. He would wait until he had seen it. A sudden thought came into his mind. Was Mackenzie the "he" the crooks had awaited at the gardener's cottage?

A turn in the path, and Bobby halted suddenly, drawing back into the shade of a bush. A few yards before him opened a little glade.

Walking across the open space were a man and a girl. Immediately he recognised Gerald Preston. Who was his companion? Bobby stared with unbelieving eyes. He was certain the girl was Myrtle.

Chapter XV

BOBBY stepped further into the deep shadows. He was certain the girl was Myrtle. What was she doing there, within a few yards of Mackenzie's house?

Unconscious they were watched, Myrtle and Gerald strolled towards the house, talking earnestly. So far as Bobby could interpret their gestures the secretary was urging the girl to some course against which she protested. His gestures were insistent, and continually she shook her head. At the edge of the clearing, where the path again entered the bush, they halted. Gerald half-turned away, but the girl stayed him, laying her hand on his arm. For some minutes she spoke in low earnest tones, the man every now and again shaking his head.

At length, Myrtle, with a gesture of despair, turned and walked quickly up the path. Gerald stayed, looking after her for a few seconds, then retraced his steps across the glade, passing close to where Bobby crouched in shadows. For the moment, the newspaperman had the impulse to step out of his concealment and challenge Gerald. But, what could he do? He could question, but the man need not reply. He could voice his suspicions—and Gerald would only laugh.

Myrtle had left Madlands. Where had she gone to? Why had she left her home before keeping the appointment she had made with him, beside the old sundial? The assignation had been of her seeking—why had she broken it?

Bobby watched Gerald disappear into the bush. He turned along the path the girl had taken. She had passed out of sight. Crossing the glade, Bobby pressed on until he came within sight of the house. Myrtle was not before him. Where had she gone to? He was certain that unless she had greatly quickened her pace he must have overtaken her before she came within sight of Treview. Could she have turned from the path on to a side-track? Using his torch freely, Bobby retraced his path. There was no track leading off on either side. Greatly puzzled, he returned to the edge of the bush, opposite the house. A wire fence crossed the path, and beyond lay the gardens. Slipping through the wires Bobby crossed the belt of shrubbery and came to the lawns. The house was brilliantly lit. The previous afternoon Mackenzie had brought to his home, from the gardener's cottage, the dead body of his wife—She lay in that house—and Mackenzie had lit the place as if he were celebrating some time of rejoicing! The blinds were drawn at the upstairs windows. On the ground floor, every room showed a light, and some of the blinds were not drawn.

Bobby, from where he crouched, could see shadows moving within some of the rooms. There seemed to be quite a number of people within the house. If he could get across the open lawns, into the shadows of the house! If he could find the reason for the strange illumination of the place! There was—there must be—a reason for this strange action. Mackenzie was not insane, yet who but a madman could conceive the illumination of his house while its mistress lay cold beneath its roof.

A sudden clouding of the moon gave him the opportunity. Before the quiet rays again lit the gardens, Bobby had crossed and was crouching under some shrubs, close in against one of the windows. Cautiously, he raised his head until he could peer into the room. There was no one there.

Exercising the utmost caution, he crept along the wall until he came to another window. Here he could hear voices, for the window sash was raised a few inches. Almost immediately he recognised the chain-store magnate's harsh tones. There were other voices speaking, but so low that he could not recognise them. Again he reached upwards, until he could peer into the room. He had not been mistaken. Mackenzie was in the room and with him two other men. With, amazement Bobby recognised Ibbotson and Carriday. What were they doing with Mackenzie at that time of night?

The three men were speaking so low that he could not distinguish their words. He moved a few paces to one side of the soft soil and thrust his hand into his pocket. A moment later he reached up and fastened a little round instrument to the glass. Now he could hear plainly through the receiver pressed to his ear.

"I tell you, I will have nothing to do with the matter." Mackenzie was speaking! "Matthew Haffervale's will is very definite. The girl enjoys the income of the trust from her coming of age."

"And if there is no income?" Carriday spoke.

"Ridiculous!" The harsh voice protested. "How can we stop the money coming in? Why, the *Mirror* alone—"

"Parsons will do as he is told." Ibbotson spoke for the first time. "Does that help?"

"You forget that I take Rupert Haffervale's place as trustee," the tobacco magnate answered, angrily. "I'll answer for the interests I control. Parsons can wangle the Mirror funds. Carriday says he can work the outback interests. It rests with you, Mackenzie. If you come in with us we can control the Haffervale trust. A few manipulations on the stock exchange and the shares will fall—fall into a bottomless pit. When we're ready—"

"You think Parsons will stand for that?" Mackenzie asked.

"He won't know—any more than we want him to," Carriday laughed.

"He'll think we want to work some game with the Mirror. I'll fix a story for him. When the bottom tumbles out of things he may protest, but he'll be helpless. He can only stand and look on."

"He may have a story to tell." The chain-store magnate's voice showed he was half-persuaded.

"Parsons is looking for the Bralley deeds," Ibbotson interjected, "Why, I haven't found out yet, but I will. There's something queer there. 'Course, there's a quarter of a million of money locked up in that fake oil show—but there's not a cent of interest coming in—They're no good to the girl."

"Well, I take it that we act together and knock the bottom out of the Haffervale thrust."

Mackenzie spoke after a long pause. "What then?"

"The girl will be left without a cent to her name." Carriday answered quickly. "She'll be dependent on our charity—and ready to do as she is told."

"And that is?"

"She'll accept the little arrangement that Rupert Haffervale and I arranged; Then—"

"You mean the marriage?" Ibbotson spoke quickly. "Is it necessary to go as far as that?"

"What do you mean?"

"This." Bobby heard a chair pushed roughly back and the steps of the big man on the floor. "You don't want the girl. She's not your sort. You want women, like—"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Carriday interjected, brusquely. "Wasn't it the arrangement that I was to marry without settlements the girl, and get control of the Trust. Then we—"

"You didn't arrange that with Rupert." Ibbotson laughed harshly.

"Never mind what arrangement Rupert Haffervale and I had." Carriday's voice indicated anxiety. "I'm to marry the girl and—"

"She objects to marrying you," interrupted the big man. For some seconds there was silence, then: "You think she'll be willing to marry you?"

Again a long silence. Bobby peered up. The three men were on their feet. Ibbotson and Carriday glaring at each other across the table. Suddenly the big man moved, as if to spring at the Englishman, but Mackenzie interposed.

"Where is the girl?"

"At Madlands, of course, you fool!" Ibbotson spoke with sudden heat.

"She is not." The harsh tones were level. "Inspector Williams, told me yesterday afternoon that Myrtle had left the house. He said, abducted."

"Abducted!" The two men swung round to face the chain-store proprietor. "What do you mean?"

"She knew something." There was a tinge of anxiety in the harsh tones. "She made an appointment to meet that damned journalist at the old sundial. He went there and waited, but Myrtle did not keep the appointment. Then he found one of her shoes close by—and he and the detective worked it out that she had been taken prisoner and carried away."

Bobby cursed the inspector for a talkative fool. What did he mean by revealing clues they held to the man they held under suspicion of murder?

"By God, if that's true—" The big voice rang through the room.

"Carriday, what do you know of this?"

"I?" The smooth English accents turned to a higher pitch. "What have I to do with the girl? I'm prepared to marry her; if by doing so—"

"Kind!" Ibbotson sneered. "Look here, lord or not, if you injure that girl—"

Bobby had just time to wrench the dictaphone from the glass and crouch under the lee of a bush before the big bulk of the tobacco magnate darkened the glass. The window was flung violently open and the man leaned far out into the night. Waiting his opportunity the newspaperman crept along the line of wall until he was out of sight of the window. He had gained knowledge, but little that fitted into the story of Sir Rupert's murder he was trying to construct.

Now he knew that Myrtle was the centre of a conspiracy to deprive her of her fortune, even of her person. Could he believe that none of the men in the room were innocent of the abduction of the girl? But, had Myrtle been abducted. He had seen her but a bare hour ago free and unharmed, in the bush, a few yards from the house. He believed that she had turned from the path, towards some secret hiding-place.

Again he crept forward, keeping close to the wall. At every window he peered in, to find the rooms empty, though well lit. Again he came to the study window, where he had listened to the three men talking, and peered in. The room was empty, although the lower window sash was pushed fully up.

A sudden impulse came to him. He caught at the edge of the window sill and drew himself up until he could see the whole of the room. There was no one there. For a moment he slipped back to the ground, then sprang up, trying to get his knee on to the sill.

Something hit him on the back of his head. His fingers relaxed and he slipped back on the soft soil. Again something heavy and soft struck him and he pitched forward—the faint moonlight fading from before his staring eyes.

Chapter XVI

A RAY of moonlight crept through the bush and rested on the still form of the young man lying in the glade. He stirred slightly, faint moans coming from between his clenched teeth. One hand went up to his forehead—to come away red-wet.

He rolled to one side to avoid the faint light and opened his eyes. For some time he stared, uncomprehendingly, up at the dim-lit sky; then slowly around him!

He was in the glade where he had seen Myrtle and Gerald; but he was certain that he had not returned there of his own volition. For minutes he remained with his head in his hands, trying to order the incidents of the night. He recalled that he had been under the study window at Treview when he had been struck down. He remembered feeling one of the bushes breaking his fall; the branches tearing at his face. Then, someone must have carried him from the house to the glade; abandoning him to live or die.

With an effort he sat up. His eyes fell in his hands and opened wide, in horror. They were covered with blood. Suddenly something obstructed his vision; his eyes were filled with moisture. Dragging his handkerchief from his pocket he mopped his face. As he withdrew his handkerchief he saw that it was stained with blood. He heaved a sigh of relief.

He had not killed anyone; the blood on his hands had come from his own head. He put his hand to his head again and felt it gingerly. There was a big broken bruise across the crown.

Who had caught him at the window of Treview? Bobby was inclined to believe that Ibbotson had been his assailant. The man was a brute and, if he had caught him watching, would hit, vindictively. Again, the taking of his unconscious body to the glade and leaving it there—callous whether he was dead or alive—was typical of the man.

Lying on his side he managed to pull pencil and paper from his pocket and tried to set down the words he had overheard spoken in the Treview study. They were ambiguous, but the indications were clear. Myrtle was to be robbed. The Haffervale Trust was to be broken. The three men who owed their wealth to Matthew Haffervale's financial genius were to share the spoils. Myrtle was to become the prey of Carriday—if Ibbotson permitted.

Honour among thieves! Bobby grinned. Already the seeds of discord were germinating among the crooks. Let Ibbotson gain advantage in the division of the spoil; let him get a hold over the Englishman; and Myrtle would become the main point of dispute.

Already Ibbotson held Carriday at his mercy. Enough had been said in the Treview study to show the newspaperman that the Englishman feared that Mackenzie should know of his intrigue with his Wife. Ibbotson knew of it. Then why had he not spoken? Perhaps he was awaiting proof. Perhaps he thought it would pay him to delay the inevitable rupture. When their schemes were so far advanced that Carriday's defection could not wreck them; when Ibbotson had obtained absolute proof of the connection between the beef baron and the dead woman; then he would speak.

Mark Parsons was an associate of the rogues. He was to be bribed with the Bralley documents. Bobby grinned. It would be some time, if ever, before the lawyer received the price of his treachery.

Already the finger of fate pointed towards the end. Parsons and Carriday were to be sacrificed and discarded—when the work required from them been accomplished, Ibbotson and Mackenzie, the greater rogues, would divide the spoils—the girl falling to the hands of the tobacco magnate.

The pains in his head became more intense. He thrust the papers into his pocket and lay back, closing his eyes. Gradually the light dimmed; thoughts became misty and vague. Sleep overcame him, dulling the throbbing on his brain.

He dreamed. He thought that a white-clad figure flitted into the glade and stared around, bewilderedly. It moved across the clearing, as if searching for something. Suddenly it stopped, poised as if listening to some distant sound. A moment and it blended into the bush.

Two men came along the path from the house to the clearing. Bobby recognised Ibbotson and Mackenzie. They stared about, bewilderedly—if missing something.

"So, he wasn't dead." Ibbotson's deep voice rumbled through the bush-like silence. "Pity! I thought I hit hard enough."

"Thou shalt not kill!" The words sounded grotesque, coming in the harsh accents of the Scot.

"Getting religious?" Bobby now realised that he was not dreaming. "You didn't make a fuss when Haffervale went out. But, this blasted journalist! Mark my words, Mac. We're going to have trouble with that young man."

"He's gone." The chain-store magnate showed relief in his voice. "Suppose he came to his senses and crawled away. Best come home, Adam. If he's anywhere about he will be suspicious if he finds us searching for him."

A soft hand touched Bobby's face. He nearly cried out. He looked up to see a girl's face bending over him.

"Myrtle!"

"Hush, Bobby. They mustn't find you."

"I thought they had taken you prisoner." The words came drowsily. "I've been trying to find you. Sure you're safe, old girl? You'd better get away. Doesn't matter if they find me, but you Myrtle, that man's a beast. He—he wants—you—"

"I know." The girl bent lower, until her cheek almost rested beside his. "But I'm safe. I'm with friends, Bobby—Bobby, are you asleep, dear?"

Something soft, infinitely gentle, crept around his neck. His head rested peacefully against a breast that fell in regular soothing sequences. He was happy—but so sleepy. He closed his eyes wearily.

AGAIN he awoke and looked around. He was alone but his head, though sore, had ceased to throb. For long moments he stared about. Had he dreamed—or had Myrtle been with him? Had she knelt beside him, gathering his broken head into her young, strong arms; soothing, comforting him? Had he seen Ibbotson and Mackenzie searching for him; intent on completing the murder the big man had commenced outside Treview.

He gained his feet, holding on to a branch of a tree. Gradually strength returned and he staggered down to the path through the glade. There he hesitated, then turned in the direction of Treview. He would see if the household had retired for the night; but he must act cautiously.

Action started the chilled blood coursing through his veins. Before he came within sight of the house he was feeling almost fit again. A stubborn determination came over him to get even with the rogues. He knew what they were planning. A few inquiries and he would be able to play a hand against them.

Myrtle had said that she was safe with friends. But why had she deserted him in the glade? Could she not have waited until he had fully recovered? Could she not have told him what she had planned to tell him beside the old sundial and scheme with him for her ultimate safety and triumph over the men who menaced her and her fortune.

He came in sight of the house and halted. The windows were in darkness, except for a couple of the upstairs rooms. Keeping in the shelter of the bushes the newspaperman circled the house. Few lights showed. Either Mackenzie and his guests had retired for the night or they were in the bushland, searching for him.

The latter was unlikely. They had carried him to the glade and there left him; returning later to make certain whether he was alive or dead. They would not search the bush at that time of night. They could not guess which direction he had taken.

To make inquiries at any of the scattered houses in the district would be dangerous.

No. Ibbotson and Mackenzie were in the house. Bobby turned and walked down the track to the main road. He would go to Madlands and take up the second part of his planned search.

On the main road he broke into a dogtrot. A glance at his watch had shown him that it was a little past midnight. A grin came on his face. Rarely had he crowded so many adventures into so few hours.

Within sight of the entrance gates of Madlands he slowed to a moderate walk. The gates were open and the lodge cottage in darkness. Walking on the turf he went towards the house. Unless the servants had been very alert he had his entrance to the house arranged.

The bent catch of the dining-room window gave to his pen-knife. Bobby slipped into the room and fastened the window again. During the early hours of the morning he proposed to search until he found the secret of Sir Rupert's death.

He wanted the gun from which the fatal shot had been fired. He was certain that it had not been removed from the room, and that in spite of the careful search Inspector Williams and he had made. Somewhere in the room was the cartridge from which the bullet had sped. If the gun was a revolver then the cartridge was still in the chamber; if an automatic, the piece of brass he sought lay somewhere in the room.

By the light of his torch he quartered the room, searching minutely, for any sign of the cartridge. He did not expect to find it loose, for Williams had been most eager to discover it. He searched to satisfy the doubt. Had Sir Rupert been killed by a bullet from an automatic or a revolver?

He came to the head of the table, his search almost completed. He looked at his wristwatch. It wanted a minute to one o'clock. For a moment he allowed the torch-light to play on the surface of the table. The watch and papers had been removed. Even the white powder the inspector had used in searching for fingerprints had been wiped away. The smooth, glass-like surface gave no clue.

He stepped back from the table and the light fell on the carpet. Something glistened in the dazzling rays. He bent to pick it up and stumbled, catching at an edge of the table.

Instinctively he ducked. A slight grating noise had been followed by a shot. He had felt the wind of the bullet as it passed his head.

Chapter XVII

FOR some moments bobby remained kneeling at the head of the table, straining his eyes into the darkness of the room. Someone had shot at him—and he could have sworn he was the only person in the room!

The shot had come from the other end of the long dining-room table. He had felt the bullet pass his head; he had heard it impinge on the wall. It had come from the same direction as had the shot that had killed Sir Rupert. What did it mean?

The shot had been preceded by a strange noise. He had not heard that noise the previous day. But Bobby knew that he was not mistaken. It had sounded as if some machinery had been set in motion. But, there is no machinery in the room. The Inspector and he had searched thoroughly the previous day.

Bobby sprang to his feet. The shot had sounded loudly in the silence of the house. It was certain the sound had penetrated beyond the room. If it had woken the inmates they would come to investigate. He would be discovered—and explanations were tedious.

He must get from the room, but he would not leave the house until he had resolved the many doubts in his head. He turned to the window—and hesitated. Not that way! If anyone came to investigate they would believe, on not finding anyone in the room, that the intruder had escaped through the window. He must get into the body of the house.

A wrench of his fingers and the window-hasp broke. Pushing out the window he sprang across the room to the door and opened it. The hall was in darkness. Listening intently, he thought he could hear movements in upper parts of the house.

He darted into the darkness of the hall, to one of the tall columns between the hall door and the stairway. Crouching there, he waited. Now he could hear distinct sounds from upstairs. A moment and a light flashed on the upper floor. The shuffle of slippered feet sounded on polished boards. Someone was coming to the head of the stairs.

The lights on the stairway sprang to life. Bobby stifled a cry of amazement. Inspector Williams, clad in a vivid suit of pyjamas, came in sight. He ran down the stairs and turned to the dining-room.

What was the inspector doing at Madlands? Early that day Bobby had rung up police headquarters to obtain news of the detective; to be informed that he had not reported since he left to investigate the death of Sir Rupert Haffervale. Now he found him at Madlands, coming from one of the bedrooms!

Bobby rose to his feet, to follow the detective to the dining-room. Then the lights on the stairs were suddenly extinguished. The journalist drew back behind the pillar. Someone was coming stealthily down the stairs. Bobby strained his eyes through the darkness. It was evident that the newcomer was trailing the detective.

Williams had left the dining-room door half-open and had switched on the lights in the room. A few minutes and a shadow passed between Bobby and the door. With a start, the newspaperman recognised the silhouette of Gerald Preston.

Gerald was trailing the detective! For what reason? Bobby stole after the secretary. Here was another mystery added to those he had already to solve.

At the door of the dining-room Gerald stepped to one side, peering around the door-jamb into the room. From a few paces further back Bobby obtained a fair view of the room. Williams was standing by the open window, fingering the broken catch.

The situation was abnormal. Bobby was undecided how to act. If Williams had remained alone he would have gone to him and explained the shot. If Gerald had joined the detective, he would have joined them. But the strange action of the secretary warned him that some new act in a strange drama was now to be played. He decided to watch.

He had seen Gerald but a couple of hours previously in the bush, with Myrtle. She had left him and he had turned back, presumably returning to Madlands. In that case Gerald had known that the detective was in the house. Possibly he had spent some time with him that day? Did Williams know that Myrtle was free and in hiding?

The inspector was walking about the dining room searching for some signs of the intruder. At length he found the fresh bullet hole in the wainscoting, behind the head of the table. It puzzled him and he probed the hole with his pen-knife. At length, he gave an exclamation of satisfaction and picked up some article from the floor. For a few seconds he stood, examining it, then placing it in the pocket of his pyjama jacket, he came towards the door.

Bobby drew back. If Gerald did not want the detective to catch him watching him he would have to retreat. That would bring him near to Bobby, and until the secretary's inexplicable actions were solved the newspaperman did not want to reveal himself. Going back behind the pillar the journalist resigned himself to a patient watch.

The inspector lingered in the room a few moments longer, then came to the door. He turned and switched off the lights. Bobby, heard the door close, then an angry exclamation, followed by the sounds of a heavy fall. He sprung forward tugging the torch from his pocket. As he touched the trigger someone collided with his arm and the torch fell on the ground.

Bobby swore as he groped on the ground for the torch. Almost as his fingers touched it he was caught by the neck and flung to the ground. A jerk and he brought his assailant down on top of himself. For some minutes they struggled in the darkness.

The blow on the head he had received in the grounds of Treview had sapped the journalist's strength. He found himself forced back, his assailant straddling his chest. He felt himself lifted from the floor and dashed down. His head came in contact with the edge of the stairway and he became insensible.

"DAMNED good you've got a hard crust."

Bobby opened his eyes to find Inspector Williams bending over him.

"What the hell you wanted to attack me like that for, I can't understand. Were you the burglar in the dining room?"

"Attack you?" The newspaperman laughed weakly. "Wasn't it you who attacked me—as I was coming to your rescue?"

"Didn't you trip me up as I came out of the dining-room?" retorted the detective.

"Not on your life!" Bobby looked around the lit hall. "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Gerald Preston."

"Was he down here?"

"He was standing in the dining room door while you searched the room."

"What was he doing there?"

"Search me!"

"Was it he who tripped me as I came out of the room?" The detective hesitated, then continued. "Say, Trayne, you're putting up a funny tale. What are you doing here tonight? Who fired that shot in the dining-room?"

"That's what I want to discover." Bobby grinned. "I was in the dining room when someone fired at me. Luckily I had bent down to pick up something from on the carpet when the shot came."

"Who fired the shot?"

"I'm telling you, that's what I want to know." For some seconds the journalist was silent; then: "I've got suspicions."

"Whoever it was went out of the window," observed the detective, "the window was open."

"That's how I got in," the newspaperman grinned, "I'm not puzzled about that, it's what happened to Gerald Preston that's puzzling me."

"Who called me?" A voice from the stairs spoke.

The men looked up. Half-way down the stairs Gerald Preston was bending over the rail, looking down on them.

"Hullo, Bobby?" Gerald spoke lightly. "You look as if you'd been in the wars. What's the trouble, Inspector?"

"Only burglars, Mr. Preston." Williams answered shortly. "Mr. Trayne thought you'd been down here and wondered if you'd been in the mix-up."

"Down, there?" Gerald slowly descended the stairs. "No, I heard a commotion, in the hall, and, came down to see what was the matter."

"You mean, to say this is the first time you've come downstairs tonight?" Bobby tried to conceal his amazement.

"Just that!" Gerald spoke indifferently. "Why so astonished, Bobby? If you and the inspector are going to indulge in rough and tumble in the hall you must expect to wake sleepers up. I thought something serious had happened."

"You say you have just come out of your room." Bobby spoke incredulously.

"I say that Keston came to me a few minutes ago and waked me to come downstairs with him. When he opened my door I could hear that a fight was in progress and we came down together. Never expected to find that it was you and the inspector. Who won, Bobby?"

Bobby rubbed his head. Had he been dreaming, when he saw Gerald follow the inspector down the stairs? Yet there was the butler nodding confirmation or the secretary's statements.

"I've been around the district, investigating, most of the evening," The newspaperman answered slowly. "Went as far as Treview and butted my head against a young tree. Don't think Inspector Williams would have had so easy a victory if I'd been fit."

The newspaperman watched Gerald Preston's face as he spoke of Treview; but the secretary did not show any signs of agitation.

"Did you go to the cottage, Trayne?" asked Inspector Williams suddenly.

"Yes, and found a couple of interesting gentlemen in possession." Bobby laughed. "Oh, I've had plenty of excitements, believe me. Say, Keston, can you fit me with a bed? I don't feel like getting back to the city just at present."

"Better have a spot before you go up," suggested Williams. "Come into the dining-room, Trayne, I want a word with you."

A short nod from the detective dismissed the others. He caught the newspaperman's arm and led him into the drawing-room, closing the door carefully after them.

"Now, Bobby, what's the tale?" Williams spoke as he brought a stiff brandy and soda to where the journalist was sitting, "You've got quite a story to tell, if I know anything."

"And there's not a connecting link between the incidents." The strong spirits made the journalist gasp, and set the blood coursing through, his worn body. "First, let me have a look at that bullet you dug out of the wainscoting."

The inspector put his hand in his pyjama-jacket pocket—to withdraw it empty. The bullet had disappeared.

Chapter XVIII

FOR a full minute inspector Williams fumbled in the pocket of his pyjama suit, in vain; then turned and stared blankly at the journalist. Suddenly he sprang to the door and wrenched it open.

"The torch, Bobby!" He ran into the hall and switched on the light. "I've got to have that bullet. Where thee devil—I suppose it dropped out of my pocket when that door banged to me."

Bobby levered himself from his chair and carried the torch into the hall. For some time they searched, without result.

"Give it up, Williams." Bobby straightened himself with a groan. "We know now what that chap was after."

"The bullet?" The detective frowned. "What's the good of it to him?"

"Prevent you comparing it with the bullet the doctor took from Sir Rupert's breast."

"And then? You think the bullets are from the same gun?"

"Must be. What would be the use stealing the bullet you found a half-hour ago if they weren't?" Bobby grinned. "Say, he's got pluck! Wonder if he knew I was just behind him?"

"If you hadn't been—" Williams turned and led into the dining-room again. "Say, Bobby, who was it?"

"Ask me something easier!" The newspaperman wandered around the room. "What I am worrying about is, who wants to out me?"

"Perhaps you're getting to know too much." The inspector grinned broadly.

"Perhaps I'm dense." Bobby was probing the hole in the wainscoting with his finger. "Know too much! There seems to be little I don't know, but how to fit it together and what's missing I can't even guess at."

Searching his pockets the journalist pulled out a pencil and a wad of copy paper. Chewing some of the paper to pulp, he thrust the pencil in the bullet-hole and plugged it into place, taking care that the pencil was exactly central to the hole. Then he went the other end of the room and focused the pencil until he had the end showing as a disc. He backed slowly, keeping in exact line with the pencil, until he came in collision with the small table at which he had been seated at the time of Sir Rupert's death.

"Illuminating, eh?" The inspector grinned.

"Wonder you don't arrest me!" Bobby turned from the table and drew a chair to the place he had occupied just before the shot was fired. He sat down—to jump to his feet, immediately.

"Look here, Williams. That pencil's only in alignment when I'm standing."

"You didn't rise to your feet before the shot was fired?"

"No. Yes, I did! Something seemed to warn me there was danger about, I thought it was to Myrtle—Miss Haffervale, and jumped to her side, to hold her down in her chair."

"Then you weren't in the chair when the shot, was fired? Do you remember exactly where you were?"

"About here." Bobby walked up the room and drew a chair to the big table, kneeling beside it. "Yes, I remember. I was on my knees, holding her down when the shot came."

"Who was at that table?" The inspector pointed to the little table by the door.

"Gerald."

"Again!"

"What do you mean?"

"He was at the door, you say, when I went to get out, just now?"

"He came from upstairs later, followed by Keston," Bobby suggested.

"How many minutes after you and I came to grips? I forgot. You went out!" The inspector laughed. "Well, I'm telling you. I reckon it took fully ten minutes for Mr. Gerald Preston to get down to us. Give another five minutes for me to awaken on hearing the shot, get down and search the room—that's all of a quarter of an hour. Shouldn't have taken Keston all that time to arouse Gerald and escort him down here. But—"

"But sufficient time for Gerald to get that bullet from you, bolt upstairs to his room and pretend to be just awakening when Keston knocked." Bobby nodded.

Again the inspector circled the room, peering inquisitively at every article of furniture, tapping the wainscoting with the butt of his gun. He found nothing and returned, frowning, to where the journalist sat watching him.

"What next?" The journalist enquired.

"Bed, I think." The detective turned to the door. "Don't suppose there'll be more shooting to-night. Ready, Bobby?"

The newspaperman rose, wearily to his feet. He wanted to sleep. Twice that night he had been knocked out. His head ached, infernally. Yet the problems before him kept him alert. Again, he crossed the room to the small table and sat down.

"Look here, Williams," he exclaimed, "You think Gerald fired that shot. But he was sitting here when I passed him to go to Myr—Miss Haffervale."

"Certain?"

"If he was sitting he could not have fired that shot." The journalist continued his reconstruction. "You say the doctor reported that the bullet took a downward course."

"Umph!"

"Another thing." Bobby, rose to his feet. "That bullet must have passed directly over Lord Carriday's head."

"Preston was on his feet." The detective spoke emphatically.

"You're sure?"

"Stands to reason," Williams' explained. "You were watching Sir Rupert when something tugged your suggestion that a catastrophe was about to happen. You sprang from your chair to go to the girl. Now, if Preston was sitting where you have placed that chair you would have tumbled over him. As it was I noted, when I first came here, that you said that you pushed him to one side, as you rushed forward. That means that he was on his feet."

"Oh, damn!" Bobby laughed. "Still, Williams, we've reduced your suspects by one. There's only Gerald and Carri—"

Something caused the journalist to swing round and face the window. For a moment he stared blankly, at the darkened glass, then sprang forward with a shout. Blindly, Williams followed him. He caught up to Bobby on the terrace.

"What's the matter, man?"

"There was man at the window." The newspaperman was searching the grounds with keen eyes. "Man with his hat pulled over his eyes; looked as if he had a long cloak wrapped around him, buttoned up tight to his throat. One side of the cloak was thrown back, over his shoulder and he had a gun in his hand, pointed at you through the glass—a gun with a queer bulge on the muzzle."

"A gun covered with a silencer," The detective interpreted. "That's interesting, but it doesn't explain that whirling noise you heard before the shot was fired at you."

"But the shot that was fired at me wasn't fired through a silencer." Bobby pretested.

"Well, he's gone how, whoever he was."

The detective turned back to the room. "Come on, man, we'd best get to bed."

Bobby followed reluctantly, turning back at the window to again search the grounds. The man must be somewhere about; he could not have gone far. From the moment when he had seen him peering in through the window to the time when he rushed out onto the terrace was too short for the man to have got far away from the house. Where had he gone to?

With one foot in the room Bobby turned again and strode out on to the terrace, going to the stone balustrade and peering over. With keen eyes he swept the long line of terrace, now silent and deserted. A sudden thought and he walked along the wall of the house, testing each window. They were all fastened.

"Come on, Bobby," Williams called, impatiently.

Reluctantly, the newspaperman started to obey. He had only taken but a dozen steps when a hoarse, terror-stricken cry came from down the garden.

Someone was in the grounds. Bobby ran to the stone steps, following the detective down to the gardens. On the turf Williams halted, peering inquisitively around him.

"You heard it, Bobby?"

"Sure thing! Where did it come from?"

"Somewhere down towards the water." The detective took a step forward and halted. "Why the devil doesn't he cry again?"

It was useless to wander forward through the darkness, following the clue of a single cry. It might have come from anywhere in the grounds. Bobby flashed the light from his torch around. To his left ran a path—he believed it ran down to the old sundial. Instinctively he moved in that direction, the inspector following. Almost as his feet crushed the gravel the cry came again.

It was a cry of pain, almost inhuman in expression of intense agony. It rang through the still night air with terrible terseness.

"Down the path!"

Williams, his bedroom slippers flapping grotesquely on his heels passed Bobby, racing down to the old sundial. The journalist followed, waving his light from side to side.

They came to the sundial and halted. Bobby swept the light over the flower-beds, but there were no signs of anyone about. Here the path branched in three directions; the one directly before them leading down to the cliffs. To the right was the path they had followed when they went from the sundial to the gardener's cottage. The remaining path probably led to the little gully in which the assistant gardeners had been working on the day of Sir Rupert's death.

Which road should they take? Bobby waited, listening intently. It only the man would call again; but only the soft lapping of the waves at the foot of the cliffs broke the silence.

"Man over the cliffs." Williams guessed. "Come along and keep that light on the path; I don't want to follow him over in the dark."

For nearly a hundred yards they ran at breakneck pace through the night; then Bobby gave a cry of warning. The path was inclining upward abruptly; they were at the head of the cliffs.

Before them rose the outline of a small building. It showed black against the luminous soft light that overhung the rippling waters of the ocean, Williams again took the lead, making for the hut. A few yards before it he stopped, with a sharp cry.

Bobby peered forward, held in sudden terror. A wraith-like white-robed figure came from the building and glided to the edge of the cliffs. For some seconds it appeared to hang there, then bent forward—and disappeared.

Williams passed the hut, running to the edge of the cliff, followed by Bobby, now released from his sudden terror at the appearance of the wraith. He threw himself down on the turf and flashed the light down the face of the cliffs. There was nothing to be seen save the bare water-washed rocks. Reluctantly they turned to the building. The door was swinging idly in the breeze. Williams pushed it back and entered.

"What's that?" the torch-light showed an ungainly, dark bundle lying in the middle of the floor. The inspector rolled it over. A man's face came into the circle of light.

"God, man!" Bobby spoke in a whisper. "That's Carruthers; Ibbotson's pet private detective!"

Chapter XIX

"HE'S had a terrible smash on the head." Inspector Williams knelt by the unconscious man, scanning the livid bruise by the light of his torch.

"Now who whanged him?"

Bobby did not answer. He was staring through the door, out into the night over the edge of the cliff. What had been the meaning of the wraith-like shadow that had come from the building to float out over the edge of the cliff—to nowhere? Had the shape been but a figment of his imagination. No, the journalist knew that the detective had seen the figure also. Then too, there were no such things as ghosts. The shadow had been a real person.

He shook himself roughly. Why should he be thinking of ghosts when Carruthers lay insensible, perhaps dying, inside the hut? The man had been stricken down by some material weapon, not a ghostly hand. Who, then, had been in the hut with him? What had been the reason for that mortal cry of terror that had reached to the terrace of the big house?

"Give me a hand, Bobby." Williams spoke curtly. "He's coming round and we'd better get him up to the house as quickly as possible."

Without speaking the journalist stepped back into the hut to the side of the private detective and helped raise him to his feet. The man, though conscious now, could hardly stand.

Half-dragging, half-carrying him, they came at length to the house and to the room Keston had prepared for Bobby. Leaving the detective to drag off the man's clothing, the journalist went to the library and rang up the local doctor, asking him to call immediately. He returned to the bedroom to find Williams seated by the semi-conscious man, a puzzled frown on his brow.

"This case beats me, Bobby." The inspector spoke abruptly. "I thought I had a line on it this morning—but this—" He pointed to the man on the bed. "This beats me."

"Carruthers is Ibbotson's private detective," said the journalist abruptly.

"And that means?" The inspector queried.

"Does Ibbotson's dirty work and looks after his personal safety."

"You're not suggesting that Ibbotson clumped him on the head?" Williams spoke almost roughly.

"He did me, tonight

"What?" The detective swung round to face the journalist. "You say—"

"I'm telling you." In a few, terse words the newspaperman told of his adventures during the early hours of the night. Williams listened in undisguised amazement.

"Then the whole mystery centres about that girl!" he ejaculated when the newspaperman paused. "But where is she? Say, Bobby," he paused a moment. "Do you remember seeing some one—"

"Something!" corrected the journalist.

"Well, 'something,' if you like." Williams spoke impatiently.

"'Something' come out of that summer-house and disappear Over the cliff?"

"You're not suggesting anything," The detective interrupted angrily. "The affair's got me fogged. Why were you shot at tonight? Why was Carruthers struck down in the summer-house—"

"Why was he at the window a few minutes before, with a gun in his hand, pointed at you? Why was someone else so anxious that you should not keep the bullet they fired at me? Why is everyone connected with Sir Rupert Haffervale's death sitting in at some independent game?" completed the journalist. Then, after a pause, he added, "Get rid of the sidelines, Williams. Find out who was responsible for the shooting of Sir Rupert Haffervale and the rest of the story will fall into line, almost automatically."

"There's something in that," the inspector mused. "Yet, I think—"

The shrill clamour of the door-bell caused them to spring to their feet. Bobby ran down the stairs to the front door and admitted the doctor. Guiding him to the room where Carruthers lay, he went in to the corridor and paced up and down, in deep thought, until Williams joined him.

"Getting on all right," reported the detective moodily. "But he's not to talk yet. Dr. Martingale proposes to remain with him until daybreak, so we'd better get to bed."

Through the remaining hours of the night Bobby tossed restlessly from side to side.

WITH the first beams of the new day he rose and went along the corridor to the room where they had carried Carruthers the previous night. At the door he met the inspector.

"Well?"

"Conscious."

"Said anything?"

"Darned little." Williams smiled grimly: "While the doctor was out of the room for a few seconds, I asked him who had struck him down and he said he didn't know. Then I asked him why he had tried to shoot me through the dining-room window and he denied that he had been on the terrace."

"Denied it?" Bobby whistled, astonished. "But—damn it, I saw him."

"You saw someone." The inspector shook his head with a little laugh. "Now think, Bobby. Didn't you notice that Carruthers hadn't an overcoat with him in the

summer-house—that there wasn't anything like the cloak you described anywhere about?"

"He could have got rid of it between the house and the cliffs," objected the journalist.

"Maybe," Williams nodded. "Directly the gardeners show up in the grounds I'll have a search made. Take it from me, if I find a cloak or anything like it about, Mr. Interfering Carruthers will have a hell of a lot of explaining to do. I'll have him just where I want him!"

The detective turned back into the sick room, leaving the newspaper man waiting, hesitatingly, in the corridor. At length, with a shrug of his shoulders, Bobby strolled to the stairs, and descended into the great hall. Instinctively, his steps turned towards the dining-room, the scene of the complex mysteries surrounding the death of Sir Rupert Haffervale. For a few moments he stood in the doorway, surveying the now familiar scene, a puzzled frown on his brows, then turned to the windows and passed out on the terrace.

Again he halted, scanning the scene before him with keen, anxious eyes. It was barely daybreak, and over the sea to the east slowly spread the first faint flush of dawn. Shrugging his shoulders the newspaperman descended to the lawns and strolled towards the head of the cliffs.

He was certain that somewhere around the quaint stone structure on the cliffs—he had named it the summer-house for want of a better title—he would find the solution of the mystery of the previous night. Pausing for a moment to watch around and see that he was not observed, he pushed open the swinging door of the hut and entered.

The room was octagonal in shape, not more than ten feet across its widest area. On the roughly boarded floor stood three chairs and a small round table. The windows, fitted with casement frames, were on the sides; the wall opposite the door, and backing towards the old house, showed neither window nor door. Immediately behind the door hung a small cabinet, the door locked. On the wall, on the opposite side of the door, hung the telephone.

A few minutes work with his penknife and the door of the cabinet swung open to the journalist's pull; in it was crowded a mass of thin black material. Bobby pulled it out and, shook it open. It was a wide, loose cloak. From within it something dropped to the floor. Bobby picked it up, staring at it curiously. For a full minute he frowned at it, perplexed—then laughed. It was a black, silk fringed mask.

For a long time Bobby stood in the doorway of the hut, the cloak over his arm, the mask in his hand, gazing over the waters of the bay, pondering the problem. Who had placed the cloak and mask in the cabinet in the hut?

The obvious answer was Carruthers, but if so, had he done so before someone had crept up to him, to stun him with some blunt instrument. Or, had the wearer of the cloak and mask been hiding in the hut when Carruthers arrived and had struck him down to secure his escape?

With a shrug of his shoulders and a light laugh, Bobby put the problem from him. Rolling up the cloak and mask in as small a compass as possible, he thrust them into the cabinet again and wedged the broken door shut. If the inspector wanted them, he could go there to find them.

Why had Carruthers come to the hut? Had he come there to meet some person? Then, that person could only be Ibbotson, his employer. But, Bobby knew he had left the tobacco magnate at Treview the previous evening, but a couple of hours before Carruthers had been struck down in the hut on the cliff.

Whichever way he turned the problem the facts would not fit. With an impatient shrug, Bobby turned to leave the hut. His eyes fell on the telephone—and he whistled lowly.

Had Carruthers come to the house to get in touch with someone? Had he fled from the house on finding himself observed, when he peered in at the window? Had he come to the hut on the cliffs to telephone someone at Madlands? There would be a reasonable explanation of the private detective's actions—even taking into belief his direct denial to Williams that he had been on the terrace the previous night.

The telephone was of the wall-pattern, yet somewhat unlike the usual machine. It possessed the usual desk, but there was no calling handle; just above the desk was a press-button. Bobby lifted the receiver and pressed the button. He waited some time but there was no reply.

Very carefully the journals examined the telephone. Under the box desk he found a three-ways switch. At the time the connection was resting on the centre stud. He shifted the arm of the first stud and again pressed the call-button. A short wait and a voice he knew answered.

"That Keston?" Bobby asked, abruptly.

"Yes, sir. Keston speaking, from Madlands."

"Oh, you know where I am calling from then—the hut on the cliffs?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right! Will you get Inspector Williams to this telephone, at once, please?"

"Certainly, sir. Will you be so good as to hold the line for a moment, sir."

A short wait and then the inspector's deep voice came over the wire.

"That you, Bobby?"

"Yes; speaking from the hut on the cliff. Say, Williams, has Carruthers any keys with him?"

"What the—?"

"Certainly," Bobby interrupted. "I'm speaking from the hut on the cliff. New South Wales, Australia not your native country. I want information about Carruthers' keys."

"Well, well." There was a laughing drawl in the detective's voice. "You're in luck. As it happens, I got curious this morning and took the liberty of searching friend Carruthers' pockets. For your information I may say that he had nothing in the nature of a key on him."

"So!" Bobby grinned delightedly. He had expected a similar answer.

"Doesn't that strike you as funny? Perhaps he dropped them somewhere—anywhere?"

"Why?"

"A private detective without keys!" Bobby mocked. "Can you visualise a private detective without a cloak and a dark lantern—then, possibly, also keys, eh?"

"What's the game?" There was keen suspicion in the inspector's voice. "Found anything, Bobby? Where are you speaking from?"

"The hut on the cliff; I told you a minute, ago. Quite an interesting place. Tell you all about it when I get home for breakfast."

"Don't get another bash on the head, Bobby. Three in a dozen hours—"

"No chance, old dear," Bobby scoffed. "It's morning and I'm wide awake. Again, I happen to know where all the sleep-drenched official police are. So long, old man. I'm coming up to the house now. Tell Keston that I'm hungry, and if breakfast isn't ready I'll hand him over to you."

He hung up the receiver and waited. Now he would have to act quickly. If he knew Williams, the detective, would by this time be on the road to the hut on the cliff—and before he arrived there Bobby wanted to complete his inquiries and be away.

Perhaps he had acted hastily in calling Williams to the telephone, but he had been surprised—perhaps taken aback—when Keston answered the call. Now he had to discover where the other two lines of communications led, if indeed there were others than the house line leading from the telephone instrument in the hut.

With the end of the switch-arm on the first stud he was in communication with Madlands. With what places did the studs two and three connect?—or were they blanks? But, if they did not connect the instrument with other lines, why the switch on the instrument?

Again he scrutinised the switch, this time by the light of his torch. The switch was new—much newer than the telephone; he was certain it had been placed there some time after the instrument had been erected. He went out of the hut and looked up at the roof. Only one line led from the hut—in the direction of the big house.

Only one line led from the hut. Then, if there were other lines passing from the hut, they must lead away underground.

Bobby shrugged as he re-entered the hut. He had yet to discover that there were other lines leading to the switch. Again he brought his torch into play, minutely scanning the woodwork around the instrument.

The wire that led from the telephone to Madlands ran up the wainscoting and through the roof. Another wire led from the switch to the ground—evidently the earthed wire. Taking out his penknife Bobby scraped this wire, to discover if, within the insulating material, was more than one wire. He found the line contained only the earthed wire.

Again he scanned the wainscoting of the hut immediately about the telephone instrument. A few minutes and he found that certain of the boards had been recently removed and replaced. A search of the flooring and he found that one of the boards had been lifted and re-laid with meticulous care; dusted with dirt, carefully rubbed in.

So, two wires led from the telephone underground. The newspaperman felt in his pocket for some instrument with which to wrench off the wainscoting boards. He had nothing except his penknife. Then, he would have to go to the house to get some tool—and he did not want to meet the inspector until he had a full story to tell.

Yet he could not discover the secret of the telephone unless he had tools. He would have to go to the house. He shrugged and swung on his heels—to halt in surprise. The telephone bell was ringing softly.

Chapter XX

AGAIN the telephone bell rang; quickly and mildly, with a quaint hint of secretiveness in its tones. Bobby turned to face the instrument, a look of indecision in his eyes.

Who was ringing the hut on the cliffs? Possibly the call was from Williams. He might have thought of some fresh questions he wanted answered; he might have some information gathered from Carruthers.

No, the latter was not likely. The inspector would hardly have had time to get to the private detective's room and back to the telephone.

For the third time the bell rang; now with a hint of impatience in its tone. A broad grin came on Bobby's lips. He turned from the instrument with a negative shake of his head.

He had other matters of more moment than answering fool questions, asked over the telephone wire. Myrtle was living somewhere in the neighbourhood. That much he had gathered from her during the few minutes she had been with him in the glade, after Ibbotson's assaults on him at Treview. Did one of the wires he believed led from this instrument go to her hiding-place. In that case had she rang the bell?

No. Bobby could answer that question decisively. Myrtle would not ring up the hut on the cliffs. She would realise that her enemies were prowling about the grounds at Madlands. Even if she had friends about the house, she would not use that means of communication. It was far too dangerous.

But he must trace those hidden wires. Some instinct warned him that somewhere in their sinuous length he would come to the girl he sought; to the heart of the mystery surrounding the death of her uncle and his fortune.

He dared not return to the house for tools! Yet, all he had on him was his heavy-bladed pocket knife. He pulled it out and tested the big blade. It was stout and of fine steel; it should serve.

The wainscoting below the telephone proved of soft wood and the keen blade bit easily into it. A few minutes and he had prised a fair-sized hole in the wood. Now he could break out larger pieces of the wood! In five minutes he had a jagged hole, extending almost the width of the board. He shone the light from his torch into the hole.

He had guessed correctly. Down the wall of the hut, behind the wainscoting, ran two wires. They disappeared below the level of the flooring. A minute's hesitation and the journalist went out of the hut and started to dig away the earth close against the outer wall and as near as he could guess, immediately under the telephone. Almost immediately he came across a small iron tube. Digging along the line of the tube he found, some two feet from the wall of the hut that it branched, one section going towards the edge of the cliff, the other bending inland to pass the corner of the hut.

Bobby decided, after a little reflection, to follow the line leading inland. He moved a few yards in the direction he supposed the tubing to take, then dug down again. It was some moments before he again found the tube. He straightened, with a scowl. Progress with his pen-knife was too slow. He must find some tool to work with.

He went up the path to the sundial, watching keenly on every side. Just before he reached the joining paths he found a fork stuck in the soil under the ornamental tree. He seized it eagerly. Now he had a tool that would permit him to proceed with some speed.

The line of tubing led towards a small plantation of trees, bordering the boundary of the estate. Just within the plantation he missed the tubing and it was several minutes before he located it again. Now he found the telephone line coming out of the earth and climbing into the branches of a tree. It was looped from tree to tree until, at the boundary fence, it descended to one of the posts and followed the fencing wires in the direction of the roadway.

Bobby's face flamed with excitement. He was guessing to where the line would lead him. He came to the main road and looked around. A line of poles, bearing the Madlands telephone wires came up to the fence. One of the poles was on the line of fencing and here the secret wire climbed the pole. Yet, but a single wire crossed the road to the public telephone post on the other side of the highway; a single wire, but of heavy insulation.

The newspaperman crossed the road and examined the pole. As he had guessed, a wire came down from the height of the post and passed to the fence bounding the grounds around the gardener's cottage. At the foot of one or the fencing posts the wire entered the ground, in an iron tube. Bobby whistled and straightened; then made direct for the cottage. Close to the earth, under the sitting room window, he found where the wire entered the cottage.

He glanced up. From the high-road a line of poles came, bearing a single wire. Now he remembered seeing a telephone in the cottage. But with the wire he had discovered entering the cottage on the ground level, there must be two telephone instruments in the cottage; and he had only seen one.

A few minutes' search in the sitting-room and he located the secret wire. Now it was easy, to trace up to the instrument. He found it under a concealed trap-door in the kitchen. For some minutes he stood gazing down at the instrument. Now he understood why the man the two crooks had come to meet at the cottage had not kept his appointment.

He lifted the instrument from the secret cupboard—to place it on the floor with a little gasp of astonishment. It was a pedestal instrument. On the base was a call button and a two ways switch. He flashed his light on the hole. Yes, there were two wires leading out of the compartment. One led to the hut on the cliff. Where did the other lead to?

A few minutes search in the grounds surrounding the cottage and Bobby read the secret. The second wire led through the bush in the direction of Treview.

For some time Bobby paced the path from the cottage to the road, puzzling over the problem of the telephone wires. Who had laid them—and for what reason? Madlands and Treview were connected with the public telephone system; yet,

between the two houses lay a secret system, passing, by way of the hut on the cliffs, and the abandoned gardener's cottage.

Suddenly Bobby shouldered the gardener's fork he had brought to the cottage and retraced his steps to the hut on the cliffs. In his mind there was a glimmer of a solution of the problem of the secret telephone. But, before he could be confident he had the correct solution he had to discover to where the third wire from the hut on the cliff led.

A few minutes work and Bobby discovered that the third wire led to the edge of the cliffs. About ten feet from the hut it dipped steeply into the earth. Raking out the soil from around the iron tubing, the newspaperman found that the wire followed into a fissure in the rocks.

Going to the edge of the cliff, Bobby peered down the face of rock. The fissure in the rock extended down the cliff for some distance. He was certain that the wire followed the fissure, but to where? He would have to get a rope to follow it. The previous night he and the inspector had witnessed some white clothed figure pass from the hut to the edge of the cliffs and disappear. Had the wraith-like figure been human? Bobby was too materialistic to believe in ghosts, in spite of the involuntary shudder that had seized him on first seeing the figure. No, it, had been some human being; someone who had found a way down the cliffs.

Four feet down the cliffs, a point of rock jutted out. It would be easy to get on to that rock, but from where he lay the newspaperman could not see any further means of descending. Still there might be one. Wriggling around he dropped down to the rock; and crouched there, scanning his surroundings.

There was a way. A little to the right, and under a bulge of rock that concealed it from the top of the cliffs, was a small platform and from it ran a faint, rough path, descending towards the water. Scrambling and slithering on the smooth rock, Bobby followed the faint track, noting that it bore signs of having been used recently.

Just above the high water mark he came to a small cave, in which the track ended. He looked, up; yes, the trail was practical, even for a girl.

Pulling his torch out of his pocket, Bobby entered the cave. It was narrow and the roof low for some twenty yards. Then the roof heightened and the walls fell apart. Exultantly, the newspaperman strode on. A sharp angle and he found himself standing at the entrance of a large, lofty cavern.

He looked around him, by the light of his torch, inquisitively. The cavern was empty, yet showed signs of human habitation. Against the rough rock walls were the remains of substantial shelving. In a far corner was a heap of rubbish that, when he examined it, proved to be the remains of old casks. Curiously, the journalist circled the cavern, pausing at one spot to examine it with care where some of the old wood showed signs of having been recently broken.

In a far corner, he found a narrow opening, leading inland. Waving the light of his torch before him Bobby entered the opening. As he progressed, the floor rose steadily. At fifty yards, and on his right-hand, he found another opening. Entering it, the first thing the light of his torch rested on was a telephone.

The cave was small, barely twelve feet square. On one side stood a stretcher bed. On it was a mattress and bed-clothing, neatly arranged.

Close to the foot at the bed was a large packing-case and on it a mirror and some toilet articles. At the other end of the cave stood another packing case and on it an oil-stove and an array of cooking utensils.

Bobby barely restrained a shout. He had found Myrtle's hiding-place. But, where was the girl? Again he circled the cave. He was certain the girl had recently occupied it.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to think. Should he wait there until Myrtle returned? If he did, would she take hint into her confidence and let him help her? She had promised to do so, when she made the appointment to meet him at the sun-dial, immediately after Sir Rupert's death. But, as she had not kept that appointment, she had left him alone in the glade outside Treview. Had she repented of her promised confidence?

A sudden restlessness seized him. He went into the cave-passage and swept his light to and fro. The passage led on, past Myrtle's cave, still sipping upwards. To where did it lead?

Bobby tried to think back over his wanderings in the cave. He believed he was not far from Madlands. Would this passage lead him to the big house? He believed so. If it did then the secret that had baffled him for so long was almost within his grasp.

Moving forward, guided by the waning light of his torch, Bobby strode up the passage. The ground sloped steeply, until the newspaperman thought that but few feet must separate him from the surface. Suddenly he turned a corner, almost at right angles, and found himself facing a rock wall.

For some full minute he stood, failure tugging at his heart. Had he penetrated so far into the earth below Madlands to discover he had been on a fool's quest? Doggedly, he flashed his light around the passage end. A slight exclamation passed his compressed lips. In one corner dangled a rope. He sprang forward and jerked it, roughly.

Something heavy and hard struck him on the back, pitching him against the rocky wall. The torch dropped from his nerveless hand as he staggered back, now bumping into some solid wooden structure. He grasped at it, dazed and almost helpless from the shock.

Who has assaulted him. For long moments he stood, listening intently. Gradually his brain cleared. There was no one with him in the cavern.

He laughed, loudly, feeling at the wooden structure he was holding on to. It had not been there before. He was certain of that. Then, where had it come from?

He felt in his pockets and found a match. His first glance was at the wooden structure—and he gasped. It was a ladder, leading up into the shadows of the cavern roof. He glanced around for his torch; it lay almost at his feet. Picking it up he pressed the trigger. Luckily it had not broken. Guided by the feeble light he mounted the ladder, to find himself in a narrow passage. A few yards forward he came up against a door.

It was some minutes before he heard voices on the other side.

Again he hesitated, trying to listen, but the wood was too thick to convey more than the faintest sounds. Holding the door carefully, he pressed the spring, allowing the door to open but a fraction of an inch. Cautiously he peered through the opening.

He was staring into the morning room at Madlands. The table was set for an early breakfast and at its head sat a young girl, a manservant standing beside her, talking lowly and earnestly. Bobby gasped in astonishment. Myrtle Haffervale had returned to her home.

Chapter XXI

FOR some moments Bobby stood behind the partially-opened secret door in the wainscoting watching Myrtle and Keston. The butler was evidently conveying news that distressed and displeased the girl.

The newspaperman glanced down at his watch. It was barely seven o'clock, far too early for any of the usual Madlands residents to think of breakfast. Then, this was a special meal. A slight smile came on his lips. He was beginning to understand much.

Keston finished his report and asked a question. Myrtle shook her head and the butler, with a slight bow, moved towards the door. For some, seconds after the man had passed from the room the girl sat frowning thoughtfully at her plate: then pushed it from her and let her head fall suddenly into her hands.

Bobby allowed the secret door to fly back into place and stepped into the room. The slight click with which the door fastened caused the girl to glance up quickly.

"Bobby."

"Myrtle!"

In a moment he was by her side, drawing her to her feet, into the circle of his arm. He looked down into her fair, fresh face, upturned to his quizzically, questioningly. Something he saw in her eyes decided him—solved questions and doubts that had instantly sprung into his mind. Their eyes met and held as his lips came down to hers and her arms crept to the back of his neck.

"Myrtle!"

"Oh, Bobby, I've been so worried about you!"

"And I—" He shrugged, holding her tighter to him. "I've searched everywhere for you. Myrtle. Bondi. Treview, the city—to find you here, at breakfast in your own home."

The girl laughed gently.

"Here on sufferance, Bobby. Here, hiding from my enemies."

"Your enemies, dear?" He frowned, then laughed. "Course, I know there's quite a fight going on around you—for the control of your fortune, but—"

"Then you don't know?"

"Know?" The young man's face became grave. "I know there's a darned lot of scoundrels gathered around the Haffervale estate—damned vultures, and among them a cowardly murderer, but—"

"What did you think, Bobby, when I failed to meet you by the sundial?"

"I thought someone, Carriday perhaps, had abducted you."

"Yes."

"You mean—?"

"You guessed right, Bobby. I was waiting for you when—"

"The skunk! I'll—but, old girl, what really happened. Since you passed me that message in the hall I've not had a line on you."

"Until you saw me in the glade. Bobby. Oh, dear, I was so frightened when Keston told me that you were not there when I sent him to bring you here."

"Keston went to the glade for me?"

"Of course, Bobby dear." The girl looked at him with a little smile. "You are so heavy!—I couldn't move you. I thought you were seriously hurt and tried to think what was best to do. I couldn't go to Treview, for that man was there—the man—"

"Ibbotson, you mean?"

"Yes. It was him who struck you with the walking-stick."

"You know that?"

"I saw him." She shuddered slightly. "I thought he had killed you. I saw the three—Mackenzie, Carriday and Ibbotson—carry you from the house to the glade and throw you down. Then they held a consultation and after some discussion walked back to the house."

"Mr. Ibbotson looked back and—and I thought he was going to return. I waited until I was certain they were well out of sight and then I went to you. I couldn't move you—all I could do was to come here and ask Keston to take some help to the glade and bring you to Madlands."

"Then?"

"When Keston told me you were not in the glade, I thought they had found you again and that that man would kill you. Keston would not let me go with him last night. He made me go to bed. It was only just now I that he told me—"

"He told you that I had disappeared?"

"Yes. Bobby—"

"What were you doing there, Myrtle?" The young man looked at the girl, questioningly.

"With Gerald in the glade?" She laughed slightly. "Oh, yes, I know! you saw me, for I saw you hiding in the bush. Oh, Bobby dear, there's such a long story to tell."

"I wonder how much of the mysteries of Madlands your story will clear up?" Bobby laughed. "And—I'm so hungry! Wandering through the caves at Madlands."

"Hungry? And I'm sitting here finishing breakfast!" The girl sprang to her feet and touched the bell. "Bobby, you don't mind Keston knowing you're here, do you?"

"Mind Keston?" The newspaperman laughed. "Why, the old boy and I are the best of pals. He's been looking for me to rescue you from the abductors. Getting me in odd corners to ask what progress I'm making, and all that."

"While all the time he's been hiding me here." Myrtle laughed.

"Here?"

"In my room and in the caves."

"Since when?"

"Dusk of the day when—when my—Sir Rupert was—killed."

"Kamrad!" Bobby threw up his hands in mock despair. "Sure there's a story, but I can't guess it. Look here, Myrtle. I'll open out first—tell you all I know, then—Hallo, Keston! Just dropped in for early breakfast and Miss Haffervale tells me I

can have it with her. Early, I know—well, anything you can scrape up, hot or cold, will do. The caves under this house are the best aperitif I've come across."

"The caves?" The girl and man showed their surprise. "How did you know of the caves, Bobby?" Myrtle continued.

"Just come up from them." Then laughing at their air of incredulity he went to the wainscoting and after a short search found the spring working the secret door. He let the door slide shut again and returned to his seat.

"Bobby, I've been hiding down there." Myrtle gasped. "I thought I was quite safe—that no one but Keston and I knew of them now."

"Mind me sharing the secret, old dear?" Without waiting for an answer the young man swung on the butler. "Say, Keston, if you don't want to have to dispose of my corpse, feed me. Then I'll tell the story of my explorations and how I fought the swing ladder in the cave below, to a gory finish. No, I won't commence until you return. Myrt—Miss Haffervale—No, damn, it's going to be Myrtle from now on, isn't that right, dear?"

The girl's bright smile and starry eyes answered him. For some minutes they stood hand in hand looking into each other's eyes.

"There's going to be a devil of a row about this, old dear." Bobby said at length, with a low gasp of satisfaction.

"Who?" Myrtle laughed. "Guardian Ibbotson."

"Will he prefer to face a charge, and conviction for attempted murder?"

"You mean?"

"I saw him assault you." Myrtle's tones were very grave. "I heard him say he intended to kill you."

"You?"

"You saw me in the glade with Gerald, Bobby?"

"Yes." Bobby frowned.

"I saw you. When I left Gerald I turned at the edge of the bush and saw you coming into the glade. I waited and saw you go down to Treview. I watched you go round the house and go to get in at that window. I saw him—"

"Who?"

"Mr. Ibbotson. He came behind you and struck you on the head. Then Mr. Mackenzie came out with Lord Carriday and Mr. Ibbotson said they would have to kill you or you would find out everything."

"So that's that." Bobby-whistled. "And you propose to hang that over friend Ibbotson's head. But, Myrtle, think! Marrying a journalist, even the star reporter of the Mirror, is rather, well—you know, for the richest girl in Australia."

"The richest girl in Australia!" Myrtle laughed softly. "And you don't think the richest girl in Australia has a right to—become richer?"

With a little happy laugh she broke from him, returning to her seat as Keston entered, carrying a laden tray. When Bobby was served, Myrtle motioned the butler to a seat.

"No—no, Keston. Sit down, please." She said, as the man hesitated. "I'm going to tell Mr.—" she paused. "Keston, first I must tell you that I am going to marry Mr. Trayne."

"Miss Myrtle—" The man gasped in astonishment.

"Just how I felt when I first realised the good news, Keston," Bobby nodded, "I can't quite get the hang of it, yet."

"I'm sure Miss Myrtle, Mr. Trayne—"

"Taken as read." Bobby grinned. "Say, Myrtle, while I'm repairing damages you might let me know where you've been since I went to the sundial to find you."

"You went there?"

"Sure. To find only your shoe." Bobby hesitated. "Why did you ask me to meet you there?"

"You remember the notice in the *Mirror*—about my engagement to Lord Carriday. I was furious with Uncle over that. I insisted that he contradicted it, for he had it inserted. He promised that he would. Then—then that dreadful thing happened and I knew that if I did not take some other means that statement would go uncontradicted and—and so I asked you to meet me so that I could ask you to get the contradiction in the newspaper."

"I see." Bobby pondered, "But, old girl, I was there to time—and all of you that remained there was your shoe."

"I know." Myrtle frowned. "I think I went to the sundial too early. I was trying to keep out of his way—"

"Lord Carriday, you mean?"

"Yes. In the house he whispered that he wanted to speak to me—and I didn't want to speak to him. I hated him. I went into the grounds and wandered about, waiting for you. Then he came up to the sundial—to me."

"And made a damned nuisance of himself, I suppose."

"He wanted me to consent to marry him. When I said I would not he—he—"

For long minutes there was silence. Bobby had ceased to eat. He was staring down at the table. Myrtle had covered her face with her hands, sobbing quietly. The butler rose to his feet and came round the table to Bobby's side.

"Perhaps, sir, I can tell the story better than Miss Myrtle," he said, with some hesitation. "I've gathered a lot, looking after her in her rooms these last couple of days."

"Yes?" Bobby looked up, bleakly.

"Lord Carriday is a passionate man, sir." Keston spoke slowly. "I gather he found Miss Myrtle at the sundial and suggested that she carry out the arrangement made between him and Sir Rupert. Miss Myrtle refused and his lordship got nasty. Then Miss Myrtle hit him and he picked her up and carried her down to the old gardener's cottage—if you know where I mean, sir."

"I know the damned place." Bobby spoke tersely.

"Very good, sir." Keston continued, smoothly. "He told Miss Myrtle that he didn't want to be missed from the house at that time, but that he would return to her. He said that she could stay at the cottage until he was ready to deal with her—and that until he returned she could think things over. Then he tied her hands and feet and put her on the bed and left her."

"Left her bound?"

"Yes sir. He said he would be back by nightfall. Then, if she was reasonable he would take her to the city and that they could be married the next day—that was yesterday. If she didn't feel reasonable—"

"Well?"

"Lord Carriday told Miss Myrtle that there were few people who knew that the cottage was habitable and that none of them would come near it. His lordship told Miss Myrtle that, if she wasn't reasonable she—she—"

"For God's sake, speak, man!"

"Yes, sir. He said they could stay there until she decided to carry out her guardian's wishes, sir."

"Stay there with him?"

"Yes, sir."

The knife between Bobby's fingers snapped, abruptly. For a minute he looked at the pieces, dazed, then dropped them on the ground. He rose to his feet and went to where Myrtle sat, sobbing. She laid her face on his breast as he dropped on one knee beside her chair. Smoothing her hair caressingly, the newspaperman turned to the butler..

"Well?"

"Miss Myrtle managed to get her bonds untied and escape from the cottage; She came to me, sir, and I hid her in her own rooms and in the caves."

For some moments Bobby thought rapidly.

"Myrtle," he said softly, "Which way did you and Carriday enter the cottage?"

"Through the back door, Bobby. Why?"

"You had only one shoe on."

"Yes."

"That settles the heel-mark on the envelope clue. Then, when you escaped, you found you couldn't walk on one high-heel, you kicked off the other shoe and left it in the cottage. That settles the other puzzle: Say, old dear, did you see anything of Alice Mackenzie at the sundial or at the cottage?"

"No, Bobby."

"Thought not. There Williams and I made another of our blunders." For some seconds he was silent. "Will you tell me what you and Gerald were talking about in the glade, last night, Myrtle?"

"Gerald wanted me to marry him. He said that if I would, he would undertake that neither Lord Carriday nor Mr. Ibbotson bothered me any more."

"That all?"

"No. He said that if I married him he would clear up the mystery surrounding the shooting of my uncle."

"He did?"

"Now I wonder how Mr. Gerald came in a position to promise that?"

A deep, grave voice spoke from the doorway.

Bobby looked up. Framed in the open doorway was Inspector Williams, surveying the little group at the head of the table with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Welcome home, Miss Haffervale." The inspector came forward holding out his hand. "I trust you are not going to disappear again?"

"I'll take care of that," Bobby spoke emphatically.

Chapter XXII

THE inspector laughed. He sauntered around to the other side of the table and seated himself. A little grim smile of triumph came on his lips as he looked across at the newspaperman who, apparently, had no thought but for the girl at his side.

"Had breakfast, Bobby?" he asked at length.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Myrtle touched the bell. "You're rather late—I mean early, Inspector."

"Early or late?" Williams laughed.

"I've an idea a certain lady connected with Madlands has been very early for more than one morning of late, Miss Haffervale."

"And dreadfully hungry for lunch." The girl made a small moue. "Breakfast at seven, or before, and lunch in one's room at one or after, excites the appetite. Keston believes I have developed an alarming craving for biscuits."

"There's nothing exciting in being in hiding, Inspector."

"Not when there's a couple of professionals and a pack of private detectives haunting the premises?" The big man laughed heartily. "I'm going to congratulate Keston, though. He almost put it over me."

"How is the invalid?" Bobby asked hastily.

"Chippy." Again the grim smile flicked the detective's lips. "Had a talk with him an hour ago, and he quite opened up. Found it wise, perhaps; there's almost enough to land him in the Queer Place if he refuses to talk."

"You mean—" Bobby had to pause for at that moment Keston entered with the breakfast tray.

When they were alone Williams refused to talk, busying himself with the breakfast. At length, he pushed back his chair from the table and pulled out a long, wicked-looking cigar.

"Object to smoke, Miss Haffervale?" he asked, casually biting off the end of the torpedo.

"Of that, yes!" Bobby interjected, countering Myrtle's nod of assent.

"Don't let him light that, Myrtle." He went to the sideboard. "Here you are, Williams. Sir Rupert knew a good cigar."

"Thanks." The Inspector returned the defamed cigar to his waistcoat pocket and selected one from the box Bobby held out to him. "Effeminate things, these modern young men, Miss Haffervale. Don't value a strong bit of tobacco. Want something light and fancy, done up in packets with portraits of dancing girls on the outside. Think they taste better that way, maybe."

"I shan't mind what you smoke, Inspector," Myrtle spoke bravely.

"Well, I won't test you." The Inspector lit the cigar and drew luxuriantly on it. "Good smoke this, Bobby."

"Too good for the man who shirked work yesterday." The newspaperman spoke grimly.

"So you did bite? I inquired at headquarters and they told me that you had rung up; that you seemed annoyed when they said that Inspector Williams was missing." The detective laughed. "Well, well! Superintendent Manners could have told you a different tale if he'd wanted to. Had quite a talk with him at mid-day. He said you'd rang up once."

"I rang up three times."

"So he said when I spoke to him again, during the afternoon."

"You held out on me," Bobby accused.

"Haven't you held out on me, Bobby?" The Inspector sounded mildly sarcastic. "Ah, well, we'll have a heart to heart talk, later. Just for the time I'll say I've got a line on things—got it yesterday afternoon—and-decided that I was best out here, until—well, until things broke."

"You mean—"

"Want to know what Carruthers has to say?"

"Jove!" Bobby leaned forward interestedly. "You mean to say he's opened out?"

"Quite a lot," the detective grinned. "By the way, Miss Haffervale, you shouldn't bang doors behind you. Might hit someone on the head—perhaps knock him out."

"You mean—" Bobby glanced from the girl to the man. "Why, then, Myrtle you were the wraith we saw disappear over the cliffs last night."

The girl nodded.

"Guessed it at the time," Williams grinned. "Y' see, I found the way down the cliff to the cave, yesterday."

"And explored the caves?"

"No." The detective hesitated. "Thought we might try that this morning, Bobby. But I guessed Miss Haffervale was using the caves as a hiding place; and that she communicated with Keston from the hut on the cliffs."

Bobby and the girl exchanged glances, and the young man shook his head slightly. He was not prepared to lay his cards on the table. He was guessing much, but he wanted real evidence before he had a connected tale to tell.

"It's like this," continued the inspector. "Miss Haffervale has been using the caves for a hiding place. She was on her way there last night, when Carruthers caught sight of her. He followed, tracking her to the hut on the cliffs. He waited outside and heard her speak to Keston over the telephone. Then he entered the hut and tried to capture her."

"What for?" asked the newspaperman hastily;

"Because he knew his employer, Ibbotson, would appreciate having control of Miss Haffervale, especially as she had been reported missing for some time."

"The brute!"

"Well, he didn't get her. Miss Haffervale managed to wriggle out of his grasp and rushed out of the hut, slamming the door shut behind her. The catch didn't act, and the door rebounded, striking Carruthers across the face and felling him, as he went to follow her. Laid him out, fair—and good enough for him, too."

Bobby looked at Myrtle. The girl nodded.

"But what of the cloak and mask?" the journalist asked.

"Well, Miss Haffervale?" Williams inquired.

"They belong to me," the girl admitted quietly. "Last night I was in a light-coloured dress and wore the cloak over it. When I went into the hut I hid the cloak and mask in the cabinet, ready for the next time I came up the cliffs."

"I thought so," Williams nodded.

"Then Carruthers—" commented Bobby.

"Carruthers has been responsible for quite a lot that mystified us," interrupted the detective. "I've got his statement here. First, I'm going to tell you that there

were no less than four persons in the Madlands grounds during the meeting in the dining room that ended in the shooting of Sir Rupert Haffervale."

"Four people?"

"Yes. Carruthers—well, you know that he's Ibbotson's shadow and general dirty-worker. Then there was a man named Armstrong. He was working for Lord Carriday, but just what his line was I don't quite get yet. More 'n likely he was watching the others. The third man was Peters. Has a bit of a record with H.Q., but seems to have turned over a new leaf of late and now calls himself a private inquiry agent. He gets quite a lot of work from Mr. Mackenzie. From what Carruthers tells me he was keeping tabs on the meeting—and Alice Mackenzie.

"Was she there?"

Williams grinned. "I'll say she was. Dressed as a man, with number ten boots on. She made the marks on the terrace and also the boot mark by the sundial—the one that puzzled us."

"But she couldn't, man!" Bobby exclaimed, "Why, she came here to see you but a short time after the shooting. She wouldn't have had time to get to Treview, dress and return."

"Didn't want to!" The detective spoke decisively. "She changed into her man-kit at the cottage, and then came back into the Madlands grounds."

"Then, when the shooting took place she bolted back to the cottage and came to see me—in her normal rig-out."

Williams grinned. "I'll say she was! Dressed as a man, with number 10 boots on. She made the marks on the terrace and also the boot mark by the sundial—the one that puzzled us."

"But she couldn't, man." Bobby exclaimed. "Why, she came here to see you but a short time after the—the shooting. She wouldn't have had time to get to Treview, dress, and return."

"Didn't want it." The detective spoke decisively. "She changed into her man-kit at the cottage and then came into Madlands grounds. Then, when the shooting took place she bolted back to the cottage and came to see me—in her normal rig-out."

"Well, I'll be—"

"You may be, before we get to the end of this trial." Williams laughed. "Then—"

"But what was she after?" protested Bobby.

"There was a certain noble lord at Madlands and there had been quite an interesting item in the Mirror that, morning." The detective explained. "Get me, Bobby?"

The journalist nodded. He could not pursue that line of investigation before Myrtle!

"Perhaps you can explain that piece of paper? You remember. The 'Madlands, Barrabarra Bay. 9 to 1' note."

"Carruthers says that was Armstrong's instructions from Lord Carriday."

Again Bobby became silent. Facts were falling into place with startling rapidity. He glanced at the girl at the head of the table, sitting silently, intent on the detective's statement, her chin cupped in her hands.

"That's all, Williams," he said at length.

"Not by a mile." The detective spread a sheet of foolscap on the table before him. "Perhaps in place of asking questions, you will allow me to tell the man's story as he told it to me. It's this. Listen:

"For some time Carruthers has been exclusively employed by Ibbotson, partly for protection, partly to gather information for his employer regarding the actions of Lord Carriday, Sir Rupert and Mr. Mackenzie. They seem to have constituted a 'big four' in the financial world that didn't trust one another—not a bit. They were out to grab all they could get as individuals and only formed the pack when their mutual interests coincided. Carruthers got quite a lot of information for his employer—and a darned sight more for himself. Looks to me that if things hadn't bust up that he'd have gone into the blackmailing industry, with some success."

Bobby nodded.

"While Ibbotson didn't trust any of his partners, he was more friendly with Mackenzie than with the other two. He didn't like Carriday nor that man's close association with Sir Rupert. He positively hated the latter.

"What for?"

"For more than one reason." Williams glanced almost stealthily at the girl. "There was—" He hesitated. "Sorry Miss Haffervale, if I trespass, but, well—Mr. Ibbotson thought he'd like to control the Haffervale Trust and—and there was only one way to do that."

"You mean—"

"Mr. Ibbotson wanted to marry me." Myrtle spoke gravely. "He spoke to me and—and he spoke to Sir Rupert, even after I had refused to have anything to do with him. Then—"

"That was the reason for Carruthers following you last night." Bobby came to his feet with an angry frown. "Of all the—"

"Sit down, Bobby." The detective spoke imperatively: yet it was the girl's gentle band on his arm that brought Bobby to his seat again.

"That, and more." Williams troubled glances again sought the girl. "There was something between Mr. Ibbotson and—and Mrs. Mackenzie."

"Lord, man! You don't think that—"

"I don't know," Williams interjected. "All I'm going to say is that Alice Mackenzie was a lady of very—with a very firm eyes to the main chance—for herself. Mr. Ibbotson seems to have formed the opinion that Sir Rupert had interposed in a very promising friendship."

"The damned brute." Bobby thrust his hands in his pockets, slouching back in his chair.

"Then there was friction between Mr. Ibbotson and Sir Rupert over the various trust interests and the details of the various businesses of which they were co-directors." The detective's tone was very impersonal. "Carruthers told me quite a lot about those interests and I've gathered more from other sources. You see, Sir Rupert was a high-handed gentleman—and the Haffervale Trust holds a majority of shares in the companies that Ibbotson looked upon as peculiarly his own."

The detective paused and again he glanced at the girl. Bobby was silent, pondering over the revelations Williams had obtained from the private detective.

"There is something else, Inspector?" Myrtle spoke gently, yet her eyes challenged the detective.

"There is, Miss Haffervale." Williams shifted uneasily. "I said just now that I proposed to have a look at the caves this morning—"

"Was Mr. Carruthers interested in the caves?" The girl spoke quickly. "I did not think he could find them."

"Mr. Preston knew of the caves?" inquired the detective.

"Did he?" Myrtle was puzzled. "I thought the caves were somewhat of a family secret. My father—"

"Mr. Matthew Haffervale did not use the caves?" asked the detective quickly.

"Oh, no."

"Nor did Sir Rupert Haffervale?"

"I am certain he did not."

"You are quite sure?"

"Absolutely positive." The girl spoke with assurance. "The only reason for keeping the caves secret was because they formed an entrance into the house that it was difficult to guard. My father often declared he would have them bricked, up, but at the same time he was rather proud of them. You know, Inspector, they were used in the first days of the colony to smuggle rum and tobacco into the settlement. Most of the exchange in those days took the form of rum and tobacco."

"What's the joke?" Robby asked quickly, as the detective nodded.

"Simply that the caves are again in use, and for the old purpose. They've been used quite a lot of late."

"Who by?"

"'Fat' Carruthers and Gerald Preston."

Chapter XXIII

BOBBY swung round on his chair and looked at the detective, his eyes opened wide with wonder.

"'Fat' Carruthers and Gerald Preston?" he gasped. "They've used the caves below Madlands? What the devil for?"

"I've told you. Smuggling."

For a long space there was silence; then Bobby laughed.

"Say, old man," he asked with mock concern. "There's nothing troubling you? Not suffering from toothache—or any pains in the head? No dizziness nor—"

"Nor am I offering to solve the mysteries surrounding Madlands within twenty-four hours if Miss Haffervale marries me to-morrow!" He laughed at the concern showing on the young people's faces, "Didn't think I knew that, did you? No, Mr. Gerald Preston's not so simple as he tries to make out. He knows more than a little of what we're after and—But that doesn't affect his business with friend Carruthers. That's of long standing."

"And is—"

"As I said before, a matter of smuggling. Reversion to type, if you like to call it that."

"Smuggling?"

"You know that Preston is hard up?"

"Never knew him otherwise. Spends all he earns and would, if he had the salary list of all Australia. He'd be in debt if he owned the Commonwealth Bank. He's the sort of fellow who could go to market with a thousand pounds in his pockets and not bring home the value of a penny postage stamp."

"Hot, Bobby?" The detective laughed. "Yes, hot, but not far wrong. As you say, Gerald Preston has always wanted money and when he butted up against 'Fat' Carruthers he learned how to make quite a lot."

"Then that's what he was so anxious to get in town for on the day of—of the shooting." Bobby exclaimed as light suddenly dawned on him. "I see the game now. Parcel of stuff in the house and murder committed. Police on the premises and the weapon missing. Of course there'd be search. Lord! how the poor devil must have sweated! Say, where is he?"

"Wooing the sleep of the unjust!" Williams laughed. "At all events, he's not up yet. But, not a word of this for the present. Smuggling's a small matter compared with murder. When we have the gun and the man, well, then we'll turn on Mr. Gerald. Until then—"

Bobby nodded.

"So that explains the telephone lines." The newspaperman spoke meditatively, his brain jumping off at a tangent.

"Not exactly." The detective became grave and ill at ease again; his eyes wandering towards the girl, grave and attentive at the head of the table. "Gerald fitted those lines up, except the line from the house to the hut—but not entirely for smuggling."

"You mean—"

"There's a line from the hut to the cottage; another to the caves; another from, the cottage to the summer-house at Treview. That's what Carruthers tells me—but he only knows of them from what his smuggling partner has told him."

"And he did not misinform him."

Bobby grinned. "Don Juan Rupert, eh?"

"Just so." A quick glance from the detective's keen eyes shut down further inquiry.

"Then when Mr. Gerald comes to breakfast—" commenced Bobby.

"If you please, Miss." Keston spoke from the door. "Mr. Parsons is in the library and would like to speak to Inspector Williams."

"Master Gerald will have to have his breakfast alone." The detective rose with a sign of relief. "I was wondering how we were going to pass matters with the gentleman, for the time. Now—"

"I'm coming with you, Inspector," Bobby announced, sharply. Then noticing the detective's indecision, he added, "I think I have some information that may interest our good lawyer friend."

"May I join the party, Inspector?" Myrtle rose from her seat. "I think it is time I met my official guardian again and—and I believe I have some news for him."

"I'll guess your news in one," Williams laughed. "I'm wondering what Guardian Ibbotson will say to your news?"

"I may have to leave you to convince that gentleman." Myrtle spoke demurely. "I happened to be at Treview last night and witnessed his cowardly assault on my future husband. Later I overheard him urging on Mr. Mackenzie the expediency of putting him out of the way."

"Good Lord!" The detective stared at the girl with wide-open eyes. "You were there? Then, if Bobby lays a complaint—"

"I shall certainly give evidence—unless, of course, Mr. Ibbotson offers recompense."

"Valuable—exceedingly valuable recompense!" added Bobby.

Williams turned to the door, his shoulders shaking. As he stood on one side for the girl to pass he asked:

"Did Mr. Ibbotson remain at Treview last night. Miss Haffervale?"

"I believe so. You will find Lord Carriday also a guest at Mr. Mackenzie's house."

"I think I shall send them an invitation to visit Madlands this morning." Williams grinned slightly as he followed Myrtle and Bobby into the great hall. He beckoned to a man lounging by the entrance doors and whispered a few words. When he rejoined the couple by the library door his smile had considerably broadened.

"Shall I call this a wedding-present, Bobby?" he whispered.

"It'll be a better one than the plated fish-knives you usually give, Inspector."

They found Mark Parsons seated at the big desk in the centre of the room. He rose to his feet quickly at the sight of the girl.

"Myrtle. I had understood you had disappeared."

"Abducted, Mr. Parsons." The girl's tones were maliciously sweet, "In that case I should have thought my guardian would have come in search of me."

"I thought—"

"Mr. Parsons understood that you were quite safe while I was looking after you, Myrtle?" Bobby grinned at sight of the solicitor's face.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Trayne." The lawyer stiffened. "Miss Haffervale's safety can be no concern of yours."

"In spite of the fact that she has promised to marry me?"

"Absurd! Such a marriage cannot take place." Parsons flushed red.

"And I relied on Mr. Parsons to give away the bride," Bobby turned to Williams in mock dismay. "Perhaps, if I offer him some information I possess regarding the Bralley mortgages—"

"What do you know?"

"I think we will drop that, Bobby." Williams spoke coolly. "There's a lot to be explained before we arrive at marriages and giving in marriage."

He turned to the lawyer. "Mr. Parsons, I understand that Mr. Trayne can indicate the whereabouts of the Bralley mortgages, when necessary. I have asked him, however, to keep his knowledge to himself until—"

"The documents belong to the Haffervale Estate." Parsons spoke quickly. "They should be placed in my hands as trustee for the estate. If Mr. Trayne refuses to give them up I shall apply to the courts for—"

"If any action is taken regarding those papers without my sanction." interposed the detective sternly, "I shall ask Mr. Trayne to deposit the mortgages at police headquarters, pending the conclusion of the inquiries I am making. If so, they will remain in the possession of the police until the Commissioner thinks fit to release them."

"I don't think you understand, Inspector." The solicitor tried to show a bold front. "Those mortgages are extremely valuable."

"They will be safe in the hands of the police."

"I shall certainly protest at your action, Inspector."

"Mr. Parsons." Williams' voice became very stern. "At the moment I am engaged in investigating the murder of Sir Rupert Haffervale. I believe that before I have finished that investigation I shall be involved in an investigation of certain irregularities concerning the Haffervale Trust. This morning, Mr. Trayne is laying a charge of attempted murder against your co-trustee, Adam Ibbotson. I think you will find it to your best interests not to further—er—complicate matters."

For many minutes there was silence in the room. At length the solicitor turned to the detective.

"You are making very grave statements, Inspector Williams. In my position I am also an officer of the law. It is my duty to give you all the help I can. If you—"

"I shall be glad of your assistance, Mr. Parsons." The detective's voice did not relax. "I believe you possess certain information that will be extremely valuable to me. Will you answer my questions freely and frankly?"

Again came silence. Parsons walked to the big windows and stood for some time looking out over the waters of the bay. At length became to a decision and faced the detective.

"Inspector Williams, you have a very big reputation in your department. I shall back your superiors' opinion of you and answer your questions to the best of my ability."

Williams' official attitude relaxed. He motioned to the seats around the desk. "If you don't mind, Mr. Parsons, we will commence at the beginning of things."

For some minutes he sat pondering deeply; then spoke suddenly.

"You were with Sir Rupert the evening before his death?"

"Yes."

"Sir Rupert discussed with you the meeting appointed for the next day; the day on which Miss Haffervale came of age?"

"Yes."

"He told you that he had obtained the presence of Mr. Trayne at that meeting?"

The lawyer nodded.

"For what purpose?"

"Sir Rupert Haffervale had discovered his associates in the Haffervale Trust had recently conspired on a bear market to depreciate the trust's securities—to their personal benefit."

"And those associates were?"

"Mr. Ibbotson, Mr. Mackenzie, and Lord Carriday."

"Sir Rupert believed that he had obtained conclusive evidence of intent to defraud?"

"Sir Rupert's evidence seemed to me complete. I approved of his proposed actions."

"When Mr. Trayne arrived at Madlands on the morning of the meeting, Sir Rupert supplied him with an automatic pistol, requiring him to carry it to the meeting. Can you inform me for what purpose?"

"Sir Rupert had reason to believe that more than one of his associates in the Haffervale Trust were always armed. He feared Mr. Ibbotson's known irritable temper."

"Had Sir Rupert any particular reason for timing a certain stage of the proceedings of the meeting for exactly the hour of noon?"

"Only that Miss Haffervale was born exactly at noon."

"I have been informed that Sir Rupert telephoned the local police station requesting that a constable be sent to Madlands, to arrive exactly at noon. Was that action taken in view of fear of personal violence from his business associates?"

"Not exactly. Sir Rupert had recently discovered that his secretary, Gerald Preston, had embezzled a large sum of money from the Estate."

"Great Scott!" Bobby sprang to his feet. "Gerald embezzled and—"

"That's enough!" The inspector's harsh voice cut off the end of Bobby's exclamation. "Will you please sit down, Mr. Trayne."

"I'm sorry." Bobby subsided into his seat, his face flushed.

"At the commencement of the meeting," continued the inspector, "Sir Rupert placed his watch, open, on the table before him. Later I found that the watch had not been wound for some considerable time; that it was gradually running slower and slower. Has that statement any effect on you, Mr. Parsons?"

"None whatever. Sir Rupert was with me to a very late hour at his club in the city. He slept there that night. It is possible he forgot to wind his watch on retiring for the night."

"Very possible," The detective mused. "Yet he planned to install his niece at the head of the table at the noon hour, I believe."

"You are quite correct." The lawyer spoke more easily. "Sir Rupert had the idea that his niece should be seated at the head of the table at the time he exposed the underhand dealings of his financial associates. He was going to call on them to resign from all offices of trust in the estate and in the companies controlled by the estate. In fact, I brought with me, to Madlands, documents I had prepared to give effect to such actions."

"Yet Sir Rupert had caused to be published in that morning's Mirror a statement to the effect that a marriage had been arranged between his niece and Lord Carriday—one of the men you inform me he was preparing to denounce as unworthy to hold office in the Haffervale Trust."

"I believe Sir Rupert gave that statement to the social editress of the Mirror some days previously!" Parsons spoke with some hesitation. "I believe he wrote out the statement before he obtained the evidence convicting Lord Carriday of conspiring with the other two to men to rob the trust. I think he forgot the matter in the stress of the moment and did not recall what he had done until Miss Haffervale protested at the announcement. He then immediately, and in my presence, agreed to have inserted in the newspaper a denial of the engagement."

The detective nodded. He waited some moments before proceeding with his next question.

"You told me previously that you heard only part of Miss Haffervale's protest at the announcement of her engagement to Lord Carriday. You have not since remembered her concluding words?"

"Perhaps I can supply them, Inspector." Myrtle spoke quietly. "I told my uncle that I considered Lord Carriday a thoroughly evil man. That any woman connected with him would be irretrievably ruined."

"You had reason for so strong a statement, Miss Haffervale?" The inspector turned to the girl, sharply.

"I had very good reasons, Inspector." Myrtle spoke proudly. "That morning, Mrs. Mackenzie had telephoned me from Treview, asking if the reported announcement of the engagement in the Mirror was true. Before I could reply she went on to state that Lord Carriday was her lover and loved her alone and—and that she loved him."

Chapter XXIV

BOBBY caught at the girl's hand, in sympathy. Myrtle smiled bravely, yet the rich colour flooded her face. For a moment the inspector's Official poise dropped and he turned to the girl, something like moisture in his eyes; then, with a slight cough, he turned again to the solicitor.

"Mr. Parsons, I am informed that Sir Rupert gave instructions that while the meeting was taking place in the Madlands dining-room no one was to be admitted to, or work in the grounds."

"That is correct."

"Sir Rupert had no knowledge that each of his business associates had brought with them to that meeting his private detective, who had orders to penetrate the Madlands grounds and try and oversee and overhear what transpired in the dining-room."

"I am certain that Sir Rupert had no such knowledge."

"I believe that Mr. Ibbotson called at Madlands during the morning of the day preceding the meeting?"

"That is correct. I was with Sir Rupert in the library when Mr. Ibbotson was announced."

"The interview took place in your presence?"

"No. I remained in the library. Sir Rupert and Mr. Ibbotson went into the dining-room."

"Did Sir Rupert inform you after Mr. Ibbotson left of the nature of that interview?"

"Sir Rupert returned to the library when Mr. Ibbotson left the house. Sir Rupert was much annoyed. He told me that Mr. Ibbotson had demanded that Miss Haffervale accept him as her husband—"

"Demanded?"

"That is how Sir Rupert phrased it.

"Sir Rupert declined the proposed honour on behalf of his niece?"

"Most emphatically."

"I believe there were hot words exchanged between the two men?"

"I was informed so. I did not overhear any. Sir Rupert complained of Mr. Ibbotson's habit of flourishing his stick."

"Flourishing his stick? Did he do any damage?"

The lawyer laughed. "I believe he knocked one of the prisms off the chandelier in the dining-room."

"He knocked down a prism from the chandelier in the dining-room?"

"Yes. Sir Rupert came into the library dairying the prism. The glass was not broken, only the thin wire that hooked it into place. Sir Rupert found a piece of wire and formed a new hook. He then called Keston and they went to the library. I went with them. Keston mounted on a chair on the table and Sir Rupert handed the prism up to him, then Keston fitted it into place."

"Good Lord!" Bobby leaned forward, interestedly. "Mr. Parsons, did you notice how Keston handled that prism?"

The solicitor looked surprised.

"I remember now," he said after a moment's pause. "Sir Rupert polished the prism on his handkerchief and Keston, when he took it from Sir Rupert, held it by the wire hook. I don't think he touched the prism."

Bobby looked at the detective, a comical grimace on his face. Williams laughed gently. One of the main puzzles of the mystery surrounding the death of the baronet had proved absurdly futile. Again the detective turned to the solicitor, but Bobby interposed.

"Mr. Parsons, when I called on you yesterday I asked if you knew where Myrtle was. You replied that she was well and happy. Had you any reasons for that statement?"

"Only that I considered your inquiry an impertinence." The solicitor spoke bitterly. "I cannot acknowledge that you can have any interest in Miss Haffervale."

"Thank you." The colour mounted to Bobby's face but he held his temper in check. "Another matter, Mr. Parsons. I happened to notice in your managing clerk's room—Mr. Frank Frazer's room—a photo of a young girl on his desk."

Parsons nodded as Bobby paused.

"When I spoke of Sir Rupert to Mr. Frazer he answered very bitterly. Is there any reason to connect Mr. Frazer's evident—dislike—of Sir Rupert with—with that photo?"

"I am afraid I must say 'yes.'" The solicitor spoke with great reluctance. "The photograph is of Mr. Frazer's daughter. She was a clerk in the *Mirror's* offices. Later, she was promoted. to the position of secretary to Sir Rupert. I believe she was—er—unfortunate."

"Sir Rupert, you mean?"

Parsons did not answer.

"I have noticed that there is an air of antagonism against Mr. Trayne amongst the members of the Haffervale Trust, Mr. Parsons." Williams spoke quietly. "I fear I notice a bias that way in your manner, Mr. Parsons. Is that manner the outcome of any definite reason?"

"I believe Mr. Trayne shot Sir Rupert." The answer came in cold, passionless tones.

"By—" Bobby sprang to his feet, his face aflame with passion. Myrtle's quiet hand stayed him and he sank back on the chair beside her.

"I will answer for Mr. Trayne." The girl spoke proudly. "Mr. Parsons, for the time you are the only trustee of the Haffervale Trust I recognise. Mr. Ibbotson has betrayed his position, and I believe the courts will remove him from office, if what you have told us this morning is correct. Therefore I now formally inform you that I propose to marry Mr. Trayne as soon as possible."

"I shall refuse my consent."

For some moments the girl sat, pondering thoughtfully. She rose from her seat and went to the panelling in a corner of the room. Touching one of the bosses a small door flew open, revealing the door of a safe. Unlocking the safe. Myrtle took out a packet of papers and returned to her seat.

"You did not examine that safe, Mr. Parsons?" The girl asked in quiet tones.

"I did not know of its existence."

"That is my private safe. Sir Rupert had it installed for me." She paused, then continued: "Mr. Parsons, I have here the Bralley mortgages. With them is a formal transfer of the mortgages from Sir Rupert to myself."

"That is impossible." The solicitor spoke quickly. "The mortgages were taken by the trust."

"Another document is a purchase of the mortgages from the trust by Sir Rupert Haffervale. It antedates my transfer by one day. Sir Rupert gave me the mortgages as a birthday present. I am the legal holder of the Bralley mortgages."

"Then—"

"I am not satisfied with the security, Mr. Parsons." Myrtle spoke coldly

"You infer—"

"When Sir Rupert gave me the mortgages he informed me that he considered the security considerably overvalued. That was the reason he purchased them from the trust, for he considered that he was responsible for the mistake. He placed the mortgages, with transfer, in this envelope. Also he enclosed a letter setting out his reasons for taking the mortgage for the trust, in the first instance."

"And those reasons?" Parsons laughed slightly sarcastic.

"I do not yet know. Sir Rupert asked me not to open the envelope until after his death. I shall do so now."

The three men sat and watched the girl while she slit the envelope and drew out the papers. Examining the mortgages she handed them and the transfer to Bobby, then slowly read the letter.

"Mr. Parsons." Raising her eyes the girl looked direct at the lawyer. "I have read Sir Rupert's letter. In it he states that having found certain members of the Haffervale Trust were looting the trust funds he thought it wise to obtain some hold over every member associated in the estate. This mortgage Sir Rupert considered was his hold over you, Mr. Parsons."

"Are you stating that Sir Rupert accused me of irregular—unprofessional conduct, Miss Haffervale?"

"You will remember that Sir Rupert insisted that a clause be inserted in the deeds that if the value of the shares in the Bralley Trust fell below a certain figure that mortgagor had a right to foreclose."

"If you foreclose that mortgage you will smash the Bralley Estates, Miss Haffervale." Beads of perspiration stood on the solicitor's brow.

"Will the bankruptcy of the Bralley Estates affect you, personally, Mr. Parsons?"

"I shall be ruined."

The eyes of the man and girl met and clashed. Then followed a long, painful silence, broken by a sharp rap at the door. With a sign of relief Williams sprang to the door and wrenched it open. He spoke a word to a man in the hall, then turned to the girl.

"Miss Haffervale, with your permission I would like an adjournment to the dining-room. Mr. Ibbotson, Mr. Mackenzie and Lord Carriday are here, and Mr. Preston is somewhere about the house. I want, if possible, to have a small reconstruction—nothing to worry you, Miss Haffervale—of the scene in the dining-room before the firing of the—er—shot."

Myrtle nodded and led from the library. In the great hall were gathered the financiers, uneasy and whispering, tensely. Almost at the library door stood Gerald Preston. As Myrtle came out of the room he moved to her side but she passed him without sign of recognition, beckoning Bobby to keep his place by her side. At the dining-room door she waited until Inspector Williams came up to her, then followed him into the room.

"Will you take your places around the table—the places you occupied when the regrettable shooting of—occurred." Williams spoke briskly. "I want you in exactly the same positions as when Sir Rupert opened the proceedings."

"What's this for?" Ibbotson stood in the doorway, leaning on his heavy stick, morose and sullen. "I've not come here to play games."

"I am asking you to take your part in a serious work, Mr. Ibbotson." The inspector spoke quietly. Then, as the big man did not move. "I believe you had some trouble at Treview last night, Mr. Mackenzie?"

"Trouble?" Ibbotson's bloodshot eyes travelled quickly to Bobby's bandaged head. "Trouble! Poof! I had to knock a silly young calf over the head last night, if that's what you mean."

"I am glad you acknowledge it." The detective's tones were icy. "I may have something to say on the matter later."

"Say?" The big man scoffed loudly. "That calf won't bleat, I'll swear."

"There was a witness—a witness to a very definite suggestion—to murder."

For the moment the big man was staggered. Then with a laugh he moved into the room, to the chair where he had sat at the meeting.

"Trying to frighten me? There was no witness, I'll swear. And if there were, who's to say that a newspaper spy, prying into other people's windows, shouldn't get a broken head?"

The inspector did not answer. He watched until the men were seated, then went to the head of the table and took the chair where Sir Rupert had sat.

"Miss Haffervale and gentlemen." The detective spoke gravely. "I am not trying to harrow your feelings. I have no intention of going into any mimicry of the sad and fatal—accident—that happened in this room but a few short hours ago. There are

few movements, however, I want checked. You will remember that I was not here until some time after the—Sir Rupert's death. I want to know your positions before—that." He paused a moment. "I take it that you are now in the positions you held when Sir Rupert opened the proceedings?"

A little murmur of assent ran round the table.

"Did anyone more—leave the table?" asked the detective, after a slight pause.

"I did." Gerald rose to his feet. "I went to the table where Bobby Trayne is sitting and spoke to him. I sat with him for some minutes."

"Then do so, now, please."

Gerald sauntered down the room and sat down at the small table opposite Bobby.

"Is that correct, Mr. Trayne?" Williams asked.

"Approximately so." Bobby agreed. "What is the difference?"

"When Gerald came down to this table he brought with him Mr. Ibbotson's stick. He kicked against it when he rose from his chair and it fell to the ground."

"That's right." The tobacco-magnate grunted. "When I went out of the room I missed my stick. Later I came back and found it under that little table. I wondered how it had got there."

Almost reluctantly Gerald returned to his first seat. He picked up the massive stick and returned to the small table.

"Any further movements, please?" asked the detective.

No one answered.

"Has anyone any suggestions to make towards a solution of the mystery surrounding the fatal shooting?" Williams asked quietly.

Again his question was received in silence.

"Two of the men present in this room, were armed at the time of Sir Rupert's death. They were Mr. Ibbotson and Mr. Trayne. Mr. Ibbotson's revolver was fully loaded and had not been fired that day, or since it was last cleaned. Mr. Trayne had on the table with him an automatic gun, handed to him by Sir Rupert a few minutes before the meeting. Mr. Trayne, however, removed the magazine from the pistol. The pistol had not been fired and the magazine was full."

Again silence followed the end of the detective's speech. An uneasy silence, for more than one man in the room was certain that the inspector was on the track of some vital information.

"Then, we assume that Mr. Ibbotson's revolver and Mr. Trayne's automatic were the only two weapons in the room," continued the detective. "Thus—"

"That is not true!" Gerald was on his feet, his face livid with passion "Bobby Trayne had one gun on the table, but he carried another. Here it is."

With a dramatic gesture the secretary flung the automatic Bobby had given him on to the table. With a queer grating sound it slipped up the polished surface to come to a rest almost under the hands of the detective.

Chapter XXV

FOR long minutes there was silence in the room. Bobby had sprung to his feet, standing beside Gerald at the foot of the table. There was a little smile on his lips, a twinkle in his eyes, that belied the pallor that had spread over his face.

He glanced at the two rows of faces bounding the long table. Next to where he stood sat Carriday, looking up with open malice in his little green eyes hidden under their almost colourless lashes. Next to him sat Ibbotson beaming triumph and snorting and grunting almost indistinguishable words.

His eyes came to rest on Myrtle. The girl was sitting back staring down the table at him. A strange little smile hovered about her lips. As her eyes met his she nodded slightly, as if to reassure him. He straightened big shoulders, flashing defiance on the men he well knew were antagonistic to him.

Almost against his will his eyes travelled past the detective, and fell on Parsons. To his surprise he saw in the thin, austere face something he could only interpret as sympathy. Yet, up to that moment the man had shown uncontrollable hostility to him. What did that shrewd, kindly expression mean? But a bare hour ago the man had definitely accused him of shooting Sir Rupert.

He drew his eyes from Parsons and looked at Williams, seated at the head of the table. The detective's face was immobile. In his eyes was an expression that could only be read as expectation—waiting.

What was the inspector waiting for? Why didn't he speak? Bobby shrugged his shoulders, impatiently. There was going to be an awkward scene. He was going to be asked to account for the possession of the automatic. It was his own property. He would have to acknowledge that. He would have to admit that he had not brought it to light when Williams first searched the room and its occupants, immediately after the murder. Why? In truth, he had forgotten it. The automatic on the table had swept his own weapon from his mind. He was not used to carrying more than one gun—and that only in cases of emergency.

It would be easy to prove that the gun belonged to him. A quick search of the records would show that he was licensed to carry it. So far so good—but he would have to explain why he had concealed, if only involuntarily, its presence on him.

"Well?" The short sharply-spoken word from the head of the table broke the silence becoming oppressive.

"That is my gun," Bobby answered evenly.

"You carried it concealed in your clothing during the meeting at which Sir Rupert was shot?"

"Yes. In fact, I had forgotten I had it on me."

"Rather an awkward pocket utensil?"

"I carry the gun in an holster strapped under my left arm-pit."

"In true Western style?"

"It is convenient to carry it that way. As you say, Inspector, it is a rather awkward pocket utensil."

"This, then, is the gun that shot Sir Rupert Haffervale."

"That will have to be proved. I cannot admit, nor deny it."

"One cartridge is missing from the magazine. The gun has been fired once."

"So you inform me."

"You admit that this is your gun."

"Yes."

"That admission is serious. On it I could place you under arrest on a charge of murder."

"You ask a question, Inspector, obtain your answer and then warn me—is that the usual procedure?"

For a second the detective was silent. A slight smile came and went on his firm-set lips.

"You handed this gun to Mr. Preston?"

"Yes. In the hall. About an hour or a little more after Sir Rupert was shot."

"To get rid of the weapon with which you committed the murder?"

"To my knowledge—or should I say, for lack of knowledge that the gun had been fired—it was then fully loaded."

"For what reason did you hand the gun to Mr. Preston?"

"I proposed to return to the City that night. I thought someone in the house should be armed. I asked Mr. Preston if he owned a weapon and he said he did not. I then lent him my gun."

"Lent it to him?"

"Yes. I am rather fond of it if you remember, Inspector, it was of rather important service to you and I one night in Surry Hills."

"So that is the weapon." Williams' official manner relaxed slightly. "You are certain that it had not been fired—that the magazine was fully charged—when you handed it to Mr. Preston?"

"I am quite certain. I cleaned and oiled the weapon and filled the magazine before coming to Madlands on the morning of the meeting."

"You had no personal animosity against Sir Rupert Haffervale?"

"Not the slightest. He had always treated me very decently. In fact, he had gone out of his way to keep in touch with myself and my work at the *Mirror*. I always understood that I had a firm friend in him—in a business sense, and reciprocated."

"Thank you." Williams' nod was dismissal and Bobby returned to his seat. Almost immediately the inspector turned to the secretary.

"Mr. Preston, this gun has not been out of your possession since Mr. Trayne handed it to you?"

"No."

"You have not fired it?"

"No."

"When Keston aroused you last night, with the information that there; were burglars in the house you brought this weapon downstairs?"

"No, I forgot it."

"You were unarmed when you came downstairs—not even aimed with the traditional British householder's poker."

"I was unarmed."

"Mr. Preston—" Williams leaned forward, almost eagerly; then sat back at a rap on the door panel.

"I have the men here, sir," reported the plain-clothes constable, who entered in response to the detective's permission.

"Bring them in, please." The detective turned to the men seated at the table. "I must apologise for having to introduce certain outside matters into this meeting."

For the present I do not propose to go further into this inquiry. No," he interjected at a movement on the part of Lord Carriday. "I want you all to remain. In fact, to speak bluntly, you will all remain in your seats *until* I give you permission to leave."

"This is absurd." Ibbotson levered himself to his feet. "I'm not going to stand for it. Put that young scoundrel under arrest and let us go about our business."

"I am conducting this inquiry, Mr. Ibbotson."

"I shall complain to your superiors."

"You will have an early opportunity. For the moment I intend to hold you, pending a charge of attempted murder."

"Of a murderer." The big man laughed heartily.

Williams did not reply. He waited a few moments and then spoke evenly.

"There are two murders being investigated. The murder of Sir Rupert Haffervale and that of Mrs. Alice Mackenzie. Last night Mr. Trayne reported to me a scene he had taken part in at the abandoned gardener's cottage. Mr. Trayne reported to me a good description of two men he found in the cottage. I ordered their immediate arrest. I am informed that this has been accomplished. I propose, therefore, to have the men brought here, to question. First, I should like to ask Mr. Mackenzie certain questions. Are you willing to answer me, fully and frankly, Mr. Mackenzie?"

Again fell the oppressive silence. Williams repeated his question. Mackenzie looked up sharply, trying to catch Ibbotson's eyes, but the big man kept his eyes down, on his fingers, playing nervously on the tabletop.

"I will answer you." The chain-store magnate spoke slowly.

"You know of a certain—friendship—existing between Sir Rupert Haffervale and your late wife?"

"Yes."

"You knew that a similar friendship had grown up between your wife and Lord Carriday—superseding the friendship between her and Sir Rupert?"

"Yes."

"I know that your wife frequently met Lord Carriday at the gardener's cottage?"

"Yes."

"You were outside the cottage the evening previous to Sir Rupert's murder and watched your wife and Lord Carriday enter?"

"I have no reason to deny that."

"You did not follow them into the cottage—create a scene?"

"No. I had promised my wife a divorce. From then I considered I had forfeited my right to interfere with her movements. In fact, I was thoroughly sick of her carryings-on."

"Mr. Mackenzie." The inspector paused as the door opened and the constable brought in two men. "Ah, Thompson, you have our friends. Stand them at the foot of the table. So! Now, Mr. Trayne, are these the men you saw in the cottage yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Do you know them, Mr. Mackenzie?"

"They are the under-gardeners at Madlands. They helped carry my wife from the cottage to her home."

"Mr. Trayne, when we discovered Mrs. Mackenzie in the cottage, dead, you volunteered to get the gardeners at Madlands to carry her to Treview. Did you do so?"

"I sent a messenger for them. At the time I was pursuing another line of investigation and was pressed for time. When I saw them yesterday at the cottage, I did not know they were Madlands gardeners."

"Thank you." The inspector turned to the men and obtained the usual particulars. Again he turned to Bobby, "These men came to the cottage yesterday to meet some one. Have you any knowledge of whom that man is?"

"No. I have suspicions."

"Which are not evidence!" For a moment the detective was silent. "Did you go to the cottage yesterday to meet these men, Mr. Mackenzie?"

"I did not go to the cottage yesterday,"

"That is an evasion." Williams' spoke sharply. He turned to the men. "Charles Rufus and Edward Thomas, I shall arrest you for the wilful murder of Alice Mackenzie. I have to warn you—"

"You arrest me?" Rufus leaned forward, questioningly. "You dud of a john! Why don't you arrest the right man?"

"I warn you—" commenced Williams, but the man interrupted.

"Here, hold hard a minute. Suppose a bloke may speak sometimes. Now, just you listen to me."

The detective sat back, a slight smile on his lips. Bobby thought he appeared pleased; that he had not intended to arrest the man; that he was playing a game of big bluff.

"Talk if you wish to." The inspector sat back, his hands clasped on the edge of the table.

"Well, me and my mate were working, the day Sir Rupert was shot, in the little gully south of the big house. It was hot there and we got thirsty. We knew that someone used the old cottage on the other side of the road and we knew that there was stuff there."

"Stuff?"

"Drinks, if you want it that way. Well, as I was saying—"

"Wait a moment." Williams leaned forward. "Let me get a connected tale. Some little while after Sir Rupert's murder Mrs. Alice Mackenzie called here to see me." The detective addressed the group around the table. "She told me that a very extensive—friendship existed between Sir Rupert and herself. She said nothing of the—er—friendship between herself and Lord Carriday."

"I have not admitted that—friendship." Carriday spoke quickly.

"I guessed it at the time that Mrs. Mackenzie was trying to lay a smokescreen," Williams smiled. "I had occasion to watch the lady go from this house and noticed that she turned up the road, in the direction of the cottage, instead of back to Treview. I also notified that she was walking and from my observation of the lady I considered that strange. Thus I was quite prepared to hear that she had come from the gardener's cottage, after spending the morning about Madlands, in disguise. Now, Rufus, you may continue your story—if you want to. Remember, I have warned you."

"Warned, be damned." Rufus laughed. "I'm going to get out of this, and put someone else in. Get me? Well, listen.

"I said we were thirsty, if you like it that way. We went to the cottage and found a couple of bottles of beer. We'd just got into the bush again when we heard someone coming up the path from the road. It was a man and he was carrying a girl. He went round, to the back door and got into the cottage that way. I was curious and persuaded Ted to wait and see."

"Presently, the man came out of the cottage and went down the path to the road. Almost at the gate he met a woman—"

"Who?" Williams questioned sharply.

"Mrs. Mackenzie—her that's dead."

"Who was the man who met her."

When the man hesitated Williams continued. "Look around this room. Is he here?"

Immediately the man pointed to Lord Carriday.

"Then Lord Carriday met Mrs. Mackenzie outside the cottage? Were they friendly?"

"They argued a bit." The man smiled. "She seemed anxious to go to the cottage and he didn't appear to want her there. Not likely considering the girl he had just carried there. Anyway, at last he got her to walk through the bush with him. We followed."

"You had Mrs. Mackenzie in view from that moment to the time of her death?"

"Yes. We found that there was another man watching her as well as us. Ted saw him first and we had quite a job dodging him. Then that man," he pointed to Carriday, "left her and the other man came up to her. They weren't far from the cottage then. Well, they just got round a clump of trees out of sight when we heard a shot."

"Well, what, then?" Williams spoke, as the man hesitated.

"We saw him coming back with her in his arms—"

"Mrs. Mackenzie?"

"Yes."

"And the man who was carrying her—the man who was with her when the shot was fired?"

"Oh, he was her husband—that man there!"

Chapter XXVI

"AM I to consider myself under arrest?" Bobby spoke as Inspector Williams passed the lounge on which he and Myrtle were seated, some half hour after the scene in the dining-room, that culminated in Godfrey Mackenzie's arrest for the murder of his wife.

"Can't you see how you'll get anything less than a lifer," retorted Williams. "From the way you behave I can't say more than you well deserve it. One thing, you won't have to serve your sentence at Long Bay or any other well-known guest

houses run by the New South Wales Government. No, you'll have to live in splendid misery."

"Kind of female prison?" Bobby mused.

"Well, I don't know." The detective scratched his chin. "There'll be a lady governor, that's a certainty," He turned to Myrtle. "First act went over strong, Miss Haffervale. Gerald Preston played up well, didn't he?"

"Gerald?" Myrtle looked puzzled. "I don't think that you had let him into the secret. Why, it was only as you seated yourself in uncle's chair that you whispered to me not to be startled at anything that might happen."

"Bobby in the role of the virtuous accused!" Williams guffawed. "I had to laugh when I saw him standing at the foot of the table, wearing the smile of injured innocence."

"But, what was it all about?" The girl questioned, greatly puzzled. "Bobby says that it was true that he had the second pistol, and—"

"But he told me of lending it to Gerald," explained the detective. "If he hadn't done that—well, there might have been quite an aura of trouble around his curly head."

Bobby nodded.

"And my telling you was just an idle thought," he stated, laughing. "Came into my mind last night, just after someone took a pot-shot at me in the dining-room."

"I heard that shot." The girl shivered. "I was afraid to come downstairs and see what had happened for, of course, I was not supposed to be at Madlands. I sat up in bed and waited for Keston to come and tell me what had happened."

"But he came to you immediately after the shot was fired," Bobby laughed.

"How do you know that?" The girl looked astonished.

"Edgar Wallace—the mind of Mr. Reeder—and all that sort of piffle. Guess, can't you, Williams? Well, don't you remember remarking on the long interval between the shot and Gerald and Keston coming downstairs to inquire what was wrong?"

"Oh, that!" The detective raised his heavy eyebrows. "By Jove, that's right. Keston going to Miss Haffervale gave Master Gerald just the time he wanted to get upstairs and tuck himself in bed again."

"That's so!" The young man wedged himself more comfortably into the angle of the lounge. "Time, and to spare. Can't you imagine our young friend lying in bed and wondering what was happening down here—and waiting for Keston to come and officially inform him of the shot in the dining-room. Why, he must have developed grey hairs, wondering if the old man had slept through it all. Almost put a kink into his plans."

"But—" Myrtle was frankly puzzled. "Bobby, you surely are not accusing Gerald of shooting at you in the dining-room last night."

"Just one shot, old dear," Bobby spoke sleepily. "Every dog's entitled to one bite. I shan't object, unless I'm the one bitten. Suppose every gun-owner's entitled to one catastrophe. Well, I won't object unless I'm the catastrophe. Say, Williams, is every murderer entitled to one victim on the same theory?"

"Don't know that," The detective laughed. "But policemen are allowed one whang at each newspaperman who talks nonsense. Still—"

"Can't get Branston off his mind, Myrtle;" Bob spoke in a false whisper. "Newspaper chap who called himself the Shadow Crook. Baffled the police no

end—and in consequence for ever more, world without end, journalists are disgraced in the Police Department eyes."

"Oh, shut up, Bobby." The girl laughed. "Don't take any notice of him, Inspector. He's beginning to believe that he alone solved the Madlands mysteries."

"There's still the shooting of Sir Rupert to explain." Williams spoke in a low tone. "At present I can't see light. There's no doubt that Gerald shot at Bobby last night, and then assaulted me outside the dining-room door to obtain possession of the bullet I'd dug out of the wainscoting. He confessed that the gun had never been out of his possession and I found the bullet in his room today. But—"

"To shoot across a dining-room full of people." Suddenly Bobby sat up right. "Inspector, I've got a hunch."

He jumped to his feet, dragging the girl with him and ran into the dining room. The detective followed more soberly. For some moments the young man wandered about the big room studying the small table from at angles. At length, he went and sat down at it, taking the seat he had occupied during the meeting.

"Take that seat, Inspector!" He spoke imperatively. "The one Gerald occupied. Now, Myrtle, will you take your seat at the big table. Good! Ready!"

For some full minutes he sat back with closed eyes. Then he commenced to speak in an undertone.

"The meeting has been on for some time. Sir Rupert has been handing out one of the long, tedious speeches financial magnates of this, the greatest city in the southern hemisphere, love to inflict on suffering humanity. He has said piles of nice things about his niece and ward, he has praised her beauty in the most extravagant—"

"Girls still wear pins, Bobby dear, although they have abandoned hat pins." Myrtle spoke sweetly.

"My best period, blue pencilled," mourned the journalist. "I see I have fallen under a permanent sub-editor with a ruthless pencil. But let us proceed. Where was I? Ah—"

"Sir Rupert has explained the truth of the Haffervale Trust. He has proudly declared his beautiful and learned niece to be the most bloated capitalist of Australia. He proposes that in token of her assuming the sceptre of finance over the capital of the southern lands and seas that she shall seat herself at the head of this table. Gracefully he turns and half-bows—Say, Williams, that was your cue to rise to your feet."

"Eh?"

"Eh? Of course! Blow out my best scene." Bobby spoke bitterly. "Mix your clues; forget your lines. Haven't we rehearsed this scene until—oh, get to your feet you—you policeman!"

With a grin at the bewildered girl, Williams rose to his feet, facing up the room. Bobby sprang from his chair, thrust the detective aside, roughly, and ran up the room; to fall on his knees beside the girl and hold her down in her chair. For a minute he held the picture, then released the girl with a little hug and pat. He turned to the astonished inspector.

"Solved, oh future Commissioner of the New South Wales Police Department!" he announced, with a flourish, "Robert Trayne, of the Mirror staff, again traces a mystery to its lair—if mysteries really possess anything so beastly."

"But—I don't understand," blurted Williams.

"Neither do I." Bobby laughed at the expression on his companion's faces. "But it is so! All we have to do now is to find the gun."

"Easy to say that." The inspector snorted. "If instead of all that play-acting you'd told me where to find that gun, you'd have done more good."

"The gun was here—you don't doubt that. Couldn't have had the shot fired without the gun. You ask, then, where is it?" For a long minute he studied the room and furniture, then turned to the detective. "Say, Williams, you're certain I didn't kill Sir Rupert?"

"Sure—unless you had a third gun on you; The one you lent Gerald wouldn't take that bullet. Now get on with your work, you newspaper-sleuth, or confess for all time that you're a dud detective."

"Where's Ibbotson?" demanded Bobby suddenly.

"In the library with Parsons and Carriday, signing papers." Williams grinned broadly. "You've put the fear of little devils into that bunch. Miss Haffervale. You and Bobby are considered too dangerous to be free and alone so they're going to chain you permanently together and load you down under tons of gold—for the welfare of all good financial crooks that choose to visit Sydney."

"Good!" In a couple of steps Bobby reached the door. "I'll be back in second."

He was back in less than a minute, carrying Ibbotson's heavy walking-stick. Again, in the dining-room, he examined it carefully, testing the silver bands in every way.

"No-good, Bobby, I've been all over that," The detective laughed. "I thought of Ibbotson's walking stick when you first spoke of Gerald bringing it down to the chair beside you. There's no gun in it. In fact, I believe the stick's solid wood, right through."

"Yes—it must—it must be." The journalist was plainly puzzled. "The handle's just right. High bands, just in the right place. It must be—it must be. And yet—it isn't—it—it is!"

He brought the stick down with a powerful blow across his knee. Just beneath the second band there appeared to be a weakness in the wood, for it gave way with a splintering sound.

A few seconds, and Bobby turned to face his companions, pointing at the detective a long, slight, pistol, the trigger of which was constructed so as to lie flat along the barrel.

"I see the scene now." The look of the dreamer had come again on Bobby's face. "When Gerald rose from his seat he knocked down Ibbotson's stick. There was nowhere to leave it up there so he brought it with him to my table. He was nervous, excited, for he knew something of the revelations Sir Rupert proposed to make that morning. He sat in that chair, playing idly with the stick. In some way he touched the spring and the handle containing the pistol came apart from the stick."

"But why did you rush from your table to me, Bobby?" asked the girl, curiously.

"Work of the sub-conscious brain, old dear. Gerald must have found the pistol and some little devil was whispering in his ear to shoot and end the trouble. Perhaps I overheard that whisper; anyway, I was told you were in danger. I jumped to you and that gave Gerald his chance. The confusion my movements caused

covered him effectively. When he had fired the shot and had seen Sir Rupert fall he jammed the pistol back into the stick and dropped it under the table."

"Well!" The inspector gasped. "I'd have sworn that stick was solid right through."

"So it was after the shot was fired," Bobby laughed. "Gerald bungled in putting that pistol into the stick again. Didn't get it in the right way or something. Anyhow he had to close it down by brute force and of course broke the spring, or put it out of action. When you examined the stick Williams, it was as solid as an iron rod. Then, you satisfied and the stick standing in the dining-room unguarded and unwanted, Ibbotson walks in and unconsciously walks away with it. Jove, what a story!"

"But—" The detective took the fragments of the stick and examined them carefully. "Sure, Bobby, you've solved the mystery. Well, well, who'd have thought of that?"

"Strange, but true!" A moment and Bobby took his arm and led the inspector gently but firmly to the door. "Williams, will you convey my apologies to Mr. Adam Ibbotson for smashing his stick in demonstrating how well how the contents were used. Tell him I'll buy him the finest walking-stick in Sydney, tomorrow, as a thanks-offering. But before I leave for the city I have one more job, a very important one, to tackle."

"And that?" Williams looked perplexed. "We're solved all the mysteries, haven't we?"

"We have solved many, this last couple of days, comrade." Bobby's hand gently urged the detective into the hall. "Now I have to solve the greatest mystery of all—alone."

"And that?"

"The exact date of my wedding-day—you blanketty-born idiot."

Then he shut the door softly—but very firmly.

