

the stout landlady, in no wise disconcerted, "because as a matter of fact I *should* have known. I should have heard the bell, you see. Because I didn't get to sleep after all that night, not till it was quite light I didn't. I had the toothache something chronic. I do get like that sometimes, and then it's as much as I can do to get a wink of sleep at all. I remember it was that night, because when I heard about poor Mr. Meadows the next morning, well, troubles never come singly, I thought. Not but what I know the toothache oughtn't to be mentioned in the same breath as——"

"But supposing the visitor hadn't rung the bell," Roger persisted. "Supposing he'd come round and tapped at this window and Mr. Meadows had gone to the door and let him in. You wouldn't have known anything about it then, would you?"

"Well, it's funny you should say that, sir, too, because as it happens I *should* have. I should **have** heard them talking in here, you see. My bedroom's just above this room, and you can hear the voices through the ceiling as **plain** as plain. Not what they're saying, I don't mean, but just the voices. And I know *that*," continued the landlady with an air of mild triumph, "because I heard it meself a matter of three weeks ago or more, when some one did come to see Mr. Meadows after I'd gone to bed, just like you said."

"Oh? Some one did come to see him, eh? But I thought you said he'd had no visitors?"

"Well, I did," admitted the landlady handsomely, "and that's a fact. But not having let this one in

meself, well, it slipped my memory, I suppose. Yes, the Rev. Meadows did have a visitor one night, and I know that although I'd gone to sleep, because they woke me up with their talking."

"It was pretty late, then, and they were talking loudly. Good! Have you any idea who it was?"

The landlady hesitated. "No, sir, I couldn't say that, I'm afraid."

"What could you say though?" Roger asked, with his most winning smile.

"Well, sir I'm not a one for scandal," said the landlady rapidly; "never have been, and please God never will be. But this I must and will say: if it'd been anybody else but the Rev. Meadows, I should've gone down to them then and there, in bed though I was and, goodness knows, tired enough already. My house has always been respectable and I look upon it as me duty to keep it respectable, but seeing it was the Rev. Meadows—well, what's wrong for other people would be right for him, I thought. Being a clergyman does make a difference, doesn't it, sir? So I just shut me eyes——"

"Do you mean," Roger put in gently, "that Mr. Meadows' visitor was a lady?"

"Well, I don't know about that, sir," said the landlady doubtfully. "I don't know whether you'd call her a *lady*. You see, she was talking that loud I could hardly get to sleep again, try as I might. And the Rev. Meadows, he was talking louder than a clergyman ought, if you ask me, sir. Not but what we ought to say any good of the dead, as the

saying goes, and the Rev, Meadows always being such a pleasant, soft-spoken gentleman in the ordinary way, but——”

“Were they quarrelling, then?”

“Well, I suppose if you put it like that, sir,” said the landlady with reluctance, “they were.”

Roger exchanged a significant look with Anthony. “And you haven’t the least idea who the lady was?” he asked.

“Oh, no, sir; I don’t know who she was. I never saw her, you see, and she didn’t leave nothing behind her, only a handkerchief.”

“She left a handkerchief, did she?”

“Yes, sir; I found it the next morning, when I was doing this room before Mr. Meadows was up. I meant to give it to him to give back to her, but kept putting it off somehow. I thought, perhaps, he mightn’t like me knowing anything about it, you see, him not having said a word about her being here at all; and after all, least said soonest mended, as the saying goes.”

“You haven’t,” said Roger with elaborate carelessness, “still got that handkerchief by you, have you?”

“Well, it’s funny you should say that, sir, because just as it happens, I have. I kep’ it by me, you see, meaning——”

“Would it be too much trouble to let me have a look at it for a moment?” Roger asked in honeyed tones.

“Not a bit, sir,” replied the landlady cheerfully.

"I'll go and get it now, if you wouldn't mind waiting a minute."

She bustled out of the room, and Anthony looked at his cousin with raised eyebrows.

"Mrs. Vane, of course?" he said.

"Of course," Roger nodded. "She could easily get in at that window without being seen."

"But it's natural enough, isn't it? I mean, why the excitement?"

"I'm not excited. And it's perfectly natural. She probably came here several times. But having unearthed a brand-new fact, we may as well find out all there is to be known about it. I admit that I don't see any fresh development that it can lead to, but there's no harm in following it up."

The landlady bustled back again, decidedly the worse for breath, and handed Roger a small piece of cambric entirely surrounded by lace. Roger examined it and silently pointed out to Anthony a small "E" embroidered in one corner. He turned to the landlady and significantly rattled his loose change.

"I'd like to keep this, if I may," he told her.

"And welcome," responded the landlady with alacrity. If her visitors were ready to pay good cash for such an insignificant souvenir of the tragedy, who was she to stand in their way?

"I suppose you can't say at all definitely which evening it was, can you?" Roger asked, tucking the flimsy thing away in his pocket-book.

"Yes, I can, sir," returned the landlady, not without triumph. "It was the very night before

that poor Mrs. Vane was thrown over the cliff. That fixed it in my memory, like. Wasn't that a dreadful thing, sir? Really, I don't know what's happening to Ludmouth. First Mrs. Vane and then the Rev. Meadows! Do you think that police-inspector is going to find out anything, sir? You being with him last week and all, I thought, perhaps——"

Roger discouraged her inquisitiveness with gentle firmness and began to prowl round the room. The excuse he had given for his presence, that the dead man was an old friend of his, could be easily stretched to cover any curiosity, bordering on the indecent, which he might display regarding that old friend's habits and possessions.

A rack on the wall containing three or four pipes arrested his attention, and he drew one out of its socket. "Mr. Meadows was a heavy smoker, wasn't he?" he remarked.

"Well, it's funny you should say that, sir," observed the landlady, who had been following his movements with interest, "because I shouldn't have said he was, meself, at all. Leastways, not compared with my husband, he wasn't. He'd smoke his pipe after breakfast, the Rev. Meadows would, and again after his dinner and perhaps a bit in the evening if he felt like it, but not much more than that. Now my husband, you'd hardly ever see him without he had a pipe in——"

"But Mr. Meadows had a lot of pipes for so small a smoker?"

"Well, yes, he had, sir; I'd noticed that meself. But he was very funny about his pipes, the Rev.

Meadows was. He used to smoke them one at a time, for a week ; in rotation, he called it. Very comical about it, he was too. ' Pipes are like wives, ma,' he used to say—always called me ma, he did ; said I mothered him better than his own mother ever had ; a very friendly sort of gentleman, the Rev. Meadows was. Yes, ' Pipes are like wives,' he'd say ; ' a man ought never to have more than one of 'em going at a time.' That was just one of his comicalities, you see. Always full of jokes like that, he was. ' Pipes are like wives,' indeed ! You see what he mean ; a man ought never—— ”

“ Yes, very comical indeed,” Roger agreed gravely. “ Ha, ha ! By the way, you don't know where Mr. Meadows bought his tobacco, do you ? ”

“ Well, it's funny you should say that, sir, because as it happens, I do. Next door but one the shop is, and that's the only place they sell it in the village. Barring the Three Swans and the Crown, of course ; and the Three Swans being over a mile outside the village, you could hardly expect him to go there for it, could you ? ”

“ Certainly not,” Roger agreed with an air of great seriousness. “ No, I couldn't possibly expect that. Well, I mustn't keep you any longer, I suppose. Thank you so much for letting me look round.” He held something out towards her which the landlady received with ready palm.

“ And welcome, I'm sure,” she said genially. “ Thank you kindly, sir. And if there's anything else you want to see, you've only got to ask

Wouldn't like to have a look round his bedroom, I suppose, now you're here?"

"No, I don't think we need trouble about that. Come along, Anthony. Good-morning, madam."

They were shown into the road and Roger turned to the left.

"Some day," remarked Anthony chattily, "I must match you against that woman, if I can find somebody to put up a purse. You'll enter the ring directly after breakfast and talk to each other till one of you gives up. If either of the combatants is found at the time of the contest to be suffering already from clergyman's sore throat, he or she forfeits the stake-money and all bets are null and void. Queensberry rules, no kidney-punch, towels and sponges to be provided by——"

"Cease prattling, Anthony," Roger remarked in tolerant tones, diving into a shop on their left. "We're going in here."

They went in.

"By the way," Roger opened the conversation, having paved the way by buying an ounce of tobacco that he didn't want. "By the way, this is the same brand as poor Mr. Meadows used to smoke, isn't it? You remember; the clergyman who died next door but one last week."

"Oh, yes, sir," said the village grocer. "We all knew him here. But he didn't smoke that, sir. Crown and Anchor Coarse Cut was what he always bought."

"Is that so? I thought he told me once that he

smoked this. But of course he never did smoke very much."

"That's right, sir. About an ounce a week, that's all."

"Used to come in here for his ounce every week, did he?"

"Oh, no; he didn't do that. He used to buy it a quarter of a pound at a time; but that works at an ounce a week, you see."

"So it does," observed Roger with an air of mild surprise, and took his departure.

"So now, Anthony," he confided to that young man outside, "we know what Samuel smoked, how he treated his pipes, how much tobacco he bought at a time and everything else; in fact, about the only thing we appear not to know in this connection is the name of Samuel's tobacconist's cousin's great-aunt's cat."

"And what the deuce," wondered Anthony, "do you imagine you're going to get out of it all?"

"That Heaven alone knows!" replied Roger, with pious agnosticism.

They went back to the inn for lunch.

CHAPTER XXIII

COLIN UPSETS THE APPLE-CART

INSPECTOR MORESBY was evidently having a busy day. He did not put in an appearance at lunch, and when Roger and Anthony strolled down to the sea-level to smoke their post-prandial pipes there was still no sign of him. Anthony surmised vaguely that his investigations must be covering a larger field than their own.

Anthony had plenty of time for his surmises, for ever since their return to the inn Roger had lapsed into a highly unaccustomed state of taciturnity. To his cousin's efforts to make conversation or discuss their discoveries of the morning he replied with only a brief word or grunt. Anthony, who was not always so tactless as he appeared, realised that his mind was busy with some knotty problem connected with the case, and was content to leave him to his meditations. They scrambled out to their usual rock and composed themselves to smoke in silence.

It was nearly three-quarters of an hour before Roger volunteered any clue as to what was puzzling him. "I'm sure," he said abruptly, "that this information of the landlady's ought to give us a pointer to the truth, if we could only interpret it correctly."

"You mean, about Mrs. Vane's visit and their quarrel?" Anthony inquired.

"No, no," Roger said, with unusual testiness. "That doesn't give us anything fresh. It's natural enough for her to have visited him, and we'd gathered already that they were on bad terms. No, about those pipes."

"Oh! But I don't see how they come in."

"Well, after all," observed Roger sarcastically, "a pipe does play rather a leading part in the affair, doesn't it?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Anthony blankly.

Roger stared at him for a moment and then laughed. "Oh, sorry! I was forgetting that you don't know anything about that. And you mustn't ask me either, because I'm under the most fearful oaths of secrecy. Anyhow, a pipe *does* play a leading part—but don't tell Moresby I told you."

"Mum's the word," agreed Anthony cheerfully. "All right, carry on, then. You'll get to the bottom of it, Roger, if you work your grey matter hard enough."

"Thank you, Anthony," Roger murmured. "I do need a little encouragement, it's true." He relapsed into his brown study.

Anthony sat on the rock till it became too hard to sit on any longer, then he removed his shoes and socks, tucked up his trousers and began to wander farther afield. Anthony was growing up.

High overhead an aeroplane made its appearance,

sweeping a vast circle in the blue sky. The drone of its engine reached their ears as a muffled hum.

"Wonder if that's Woodthorpe's bus," Anthony called out, seeing his cousin's eyes following the tiny speck across space.

"Woodthorpe's?" said Roger absently. "Didn't know he'd got one."

"So Margaret told me. He was in the Air Force during the War, and now he keeps a bus of his own. They're rolling in money, of course."

"Lucky devils," remarked Roger mechanically.

Anthony found a small crab under a flat stone and the conversation lapsed.

It was another half-hour before Roger again broke the silence. He rose from his cramped position and made his way over to Anthony, jumping agilely from rock to rock and refilling his pipe as he went.

"Look here, Anthony," he said, "is there absolutely no way of getting hold of Margaret this afternoon? There's something I particularly want to ask her."

"I don't think there is," Anthony replied doubtfully. "I wanted to take her out in the car, as a matter of fact, but she said she couldn't possibly manage it; far too busy."

"She's gone into Sandsea, you said?"

"Yes."

Roger frowned. "What an infernal nuisance! It's a point I badly want to clear up."

"What is it?"

"I wanted to ask her whether by any remote

chance Mrs. Vane had expressed any intention before her death of going away in the near future."

"Well, it's funny you should say that, sir," replied Anthony humorously, "because, as a matter of fact, I *do* know. She had. What's the great idea?"

"She had, had she?" Roger demanded eagerly. "Did Margaret tell you?"

"She mentioned it once, I remember; just casually. Mrs. Vane hadn't been away this summer, and she was going to stay with some friends for the twelfth."

"The twelfth, eh?" Roger made a rapid calculation. "Then she'd have gone about a fortnight ago. Excellent! Anthony, I do believe I'm on the track of something."

"I say, are you really?" Anthony's enthusiasm was all that the most exacting detective could have required. "Mean you've solved the whole thing?"

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that," Roger said modestly. "But I do think I'm beginning to see daylight. I've got a rather stupendous idea, at any rate, and things seem to be fitting into it rather neatly."

"What is it?"

"Oh, you mustn't ask me that yet. I shall have to chew it over a lot more before I can make a connected and logical story of it. Besides, the best detectives always hold up their brilliant solutions for the most effective moment—surely you know that—and I refuse to think that an audience of

Anthony Walton, two green crabs and a limpet would be in the least effective."

"Well, hurry up and think it out properly," said Anthony, ignoring this pleasantry. "You know we all want to see this damned business cleared up once and for all."

"Then let's go back and have our tea. And after that, if you'll leave me to myself for a couple of hours, I'll see what can be done."

Inspector Moresby had still not returned to the inn when they got there, as the landlord informed them on Roger's inquiry. Roger wondered uneasily what exactly he might be up to; feeling as he did that he himself was on the verge of the truth, he had no wish that anybody should forestall him in crossing it.

Throughout tea he chattered incessantly about nothing at all, explaining on Anthony's remonstrance that he wished to clear his brain of all stale notions in order to approach the problem afterwards with an entirely fresh mind.

As soon as they had finished he took his pipe down once more to the rocks, and sternly forbade Anthony to come within half a mile of him.

More than the stipulated two hours had passed before he climbed once more up to the little path along the face of the cliff and thence to the top of the headland where Anthony, bored beyond tears with his own company but far too eager to risk missing his cousin's return, was anxiously waiting.

"Well?" demanded the latter at once, hurrying forward. "Any luck?"

"Not so much luck, Anthony, as brilliance," Roger replied with pardonable pride. "Yes, I think I've solved this little problem, as Holmes would have said if he'd been here instead of me."

"Who's the murderer, then?"

"Can you possess your soul in patience a little longer? I don't want to spoil a good story, but it's such a long and complicated one that I don't want to have to tell it twice over. If you can wait till Moresby arrives I can kill two birds with one stone."

"But he may be ages," Anthony grumbled.

"Well, give me till half-way through supper," said Roger, "and if he isn't back by then I'll promise to give you an outline of it in advance." And with that Anthony had to be content.

"By Jove," Roger resumed, as they walked back to the inn. "By Jove, I do hope Moresby hasn't been working along this line himself. He's such a reticent devil, I never know what's in his mind; he'll spill a fact or two occasionally, but never a theory—that is, not without some ulterior motive. Yes, if this idea hasn't occurred to him already, I fancy I've got a little shock in store for Inspector Moresby."

"Is the solution quite—quite unexpected, then?"

"Entirely, so far as I know—or at any rate, by me. Then I suddenly caught a glimpse of things from a fresh angle, and all the facts proceeded to arrange themselves in the neatest way possible."

"You'll be able to convince the Inspector, I suppose? He's a bit of a sceptical devil."

"He is that," Roger agreed with feeling. "But I don't see how I can fail to convince even him. The facts ought to do that for themselves. Of course the solution isn't capable of cast-iron proof, that's the only trouble; but if it comes to that, what solution that depends only on circumstantial evidence ever can be? And proof hasn't necessarily got to be cast-iron, it only needs to be reasonably convincing; and that mine certainly is."

"Good egg!" quoth Anthony with satisfaction.

In the hall of the inn the landlord intercepted them.

"There's a gentleman come to see Inspector Moresby," he said. "I told him he was out, but he wanted to wait, so I said he could wait in your sitting-room, thinking you wouldn't mind, gents."

"Of course not," Roger concurred. "Did he leave his name?"

"Well, there wasn't no need for him to do that," replied the landlord quite seriously. "I know who 'e is, you see. It's young Mr. Woodthorpe."

Roger and Anthony exchanged glances. "Oh, yes?" said the former. "Well, no doubt the Inspector will be in soon. Thank you, landlord. And what the devil," he observed to Anthony, as they made their way up the stairs, "does young Mr. Woodthorpe want? We'd better go in and see."

Young Mr. Woodthorpe was standing by the window, his usually ruddy face decidedly pale and set in grim lines. He wheeled round abruptly as they entered the room.

"Hullo! You wanted to see Inspector Moresby?" Roger greeted him pleasantly.

Woodthorpe nodded. "Yes," he said curtly. "Will he be long?"

"I can't say, I'm afraid. We haven't seen him since breakfast. Is it anything important?"

"It is rather."

"Well, have a drink while you're waiting. I can recommend the beer here."

"Thanks."

"Anthony, shout down for three tankards," Roger said hospitably, quite unperturbed by his guest's noticeable failure to return his own cordiality; indeed, the young man's manner was so abrupt and cold as to be not far short of downright rude.

Anthony's stentorian shout echoed down the dark stairs.

"Couldn't I give the Inspector a message, if he's longer than you care to wait?" Roger asked, turning back to Woodthorpe.

"I'm afraid not," said the young man stiffly. "My business with him is rather private." He swallowed slightly and swept a nervous glance towards the door, through which Anthony was just returning. "Oh, well," he burst out with sudden defiance, "you'll know soon enough in any case, so I may as well tell you now. I've come to give myself up. I killed Mrs. Vane and—and Meadows."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Rogers blankly.

CHAPTER XXIV

INSPECTOR MORESBY IS HUMOROUS

It is not an easy exercise in hospitality to entertain a guest who has just announced that he is a double murderer. Small-talk about the weather and the latest books seem something of an anticlimax, while to display a polite interest in his hobby and question him as to details might be misconstrued as mere indecent curiosity. On the whole, it is difficult to see how the situation—should it ever occur to the reader—could be better handled than it was by Roger.

"Did you really?" observed that gentleman politely, pulling himself together with an effort as the three tankards preceded the landlord into the room. "Well, well!—er—cheerio!"

"Cheerio!" echoed the self-confessed murderer gloomily, and extracted what comfort he could from his tankard.

"Won't you sit down?" mumbled Roger, still mechanically polite.

"Thanks."

The trio seated themselves and looked at one another in silence.

"The—the Inspector ought to be here soon, I should think," volunteered Roger helpfully.

"Will he?"

"Yes, I should think so."

"I see."

There was another pause. Roger frowned at Anthony. Anthony continued to preserve unbroken silence; the situation was evidently beyond him.

It was rather beyond Roger too, but he flung himself valiantly into the breach once more. "Have you been waiting long?" he inquired desperately.

"Not very."

"Oh! Well—he ought to be in any minute now."

"I see."

There was another pause.

"Look here," said Roger, still more desperately, "what *are* we to talk about?"

Woodthorpe smiled faintly. "I suppose it is a bit awkward for you fellows," he remarked.

"Infernally awkward," Roger agreed warmly. "I don't know what the etiquette is on these occasions at all. Besides, they'll be coming in to lay the supper in a minute. Shall I tell them to lay a place for you, by the way?"

"I don't know. That rather depends on the Inspector, doesn't it?"

"Well, I should think he'll allow you to have some food at any rate, whatever he does with you afterwards. I'll tell the girl when she comes up. In the meantime, if you don't care for talking here's the morning paper."

Colin Woodthorpe smiled again. "Thanks," he said, and began to read it diligently, upside down.

"Well, I suppose I'd better go along and wash," Roger observed very airily. "Coming, Anthony?"

They escaped from the room.

"Was this your solution, Roger?" Anthony asked, when they had gained the privacy of one of their four bedrooms.

"Don't rub it in," Roger groaned. "And I'd got it all worked out so beautifully. Dash it, I *can't* believe I was wrong! I wonder if the chap can be making a mistake?"

"Fellow ought to know whether he's murdered somebody or not, surely," Anthony stated judicially.

"Yes, I suppose he ought. It would be a difficult thing to overlook, wouldn't it? Well, all I can say is, dash the chap! This is the second time I've solved this mystery wrong. Anthony, I don't want to go back to that room a bit. Let's sit down and smoke and talk about Ibsen."

"I'll go down and tell them about that extra place first," said Anthony, and extricated himself with neatness and despatch.

Twenty minutes later the maid knocked on the door and informed them that supper was ready. With reluctance they returned to the sitting-room.

Their guest was by this time a little more composed, and a scrappy conversation upon various subjects of no interest at all was determinedly maintained. Nevertheless it was with considerable relief that Roger hailed the arrival of Inspector Moresby ten minutes later. He did not wish to see young Woodthorpe, to whom he had taken a

liking, being bundled off to prison, but the situation really was a very difficult one.

Woodthorpe jumped to his feet immediately the door opened. "Inspector," he said, with a return to his former abrupt manner, "I've been waiting to see you. I want to give myself up for the murder of Mrs. Vane and Meadows."

The Inspector gazed at him coolly for a moment. Then he closed the door behind him. "Oh, you do, do you?" he said without emotion. "So it was you who did it after all, was it, Mr. Woodthorpe?"

"Yes."

"Well, well," said the Inspector tolerantly, "boys will be boys, I suppose. What's for supper, eh, Mr. Sheringham?"

"C-cold veal and salad," stammered Roger, somewhat taken aback. He had never seen an experienced policeman arresting a murderer before, but this certainly did not coincide with his ideas of how it should be done.

"Well, let's hope the salad's better than it was last night," observed the Inspector with some severity, and took his seat at the table.

Roger was not the only person to whom things did not seem to be going right. "Well, aren't you going to arrest me, Inspector?" asked Woodthorpe in bewilderment.

"All in good time, sir, all in good time," replied the Inspector, busying himself with the veal. "Business first and pleasure afterwards, perhaps, but food before either of them."

"And drink before that," murmured Roger,

who was beginning to recover himself. Roger thought he saw a gleam of light in the darkness.

Woodthorpe dropped back into his seat. "I—I don't understand," he muttered.

"You've got no salad, sir," said the Inspector in tones of some concern. "Help yourself and then pass the bowl across to me. Well, well! So it's you who's been giving us all this trouble, is it?"

"If you like to put it that way," replied Woodthorpe stiffly. Certainly it must be galling to any conscientious murderer, who has just brought off a neat right and left, to hear his exploit described merely as "troublesome." There is nobody like an inspector of police for showing things up as they prosaically are.

"And why did you suddenly make up your mind to come and tell me all about it, sir?" pursued the Inspector, with the air of one making polite conversation.

"I don't see that I'm called upon to give you my reasons."

"Of course not," the Inspector agreed with the utmost heartiness. "Worst thing in the world you could do. Never give reasons, that's my advice. Have some more veal? Mr. Walton, you've finished; cut Mr. Woodthorpe some more veal."

Anthony, who had been watching this exchange with open mouth, started violently and began to cut the bread.

"I don't want any more veal, thank you," said Woodthorpe, flushing angrily.

"Just as you like, sir, of course," murmured the Inspector, and bestowed a large wink on Roger.

Roger, to whom the gleam of light had now become a broad beam, returned the wink with interest.

Unfortunately, Woodthorpe intercepted both. He sprang wrathfully to his feet again, knocking his chair over behind him. "Look here," he burst out, "I've had about enough of this fooling. I told you what I came here for, Inspector. Are you going to arrest me or are you not?"

The Inspector looked up from his plate. "Well, sir," he said blandly, "since you ask me so candidly—no, I'm not! But I'd like to ask you a few questions, perhaps."

For a long moment the eyes of the two men held each other, while a deep flush slowly overspread the younger's face. Then Woodthorpe turned away and marched over to the door.

"Then you can jolly well come up to my house and ask me them there," he announced as he opened it. "I've had about enough of this." The door closed behind him with a bang.

"That looks like a walk for me, I'm afraid," observed the Inspector with regret.

"Yes," Roger laughed. "He got one back on you there, Inspector."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Anthony. "Good Lord!"

"What's the matter, Anthony?" Roger asked sympathetically.

"You mean—that chap never did it at all?"

"No, not exactly that, Anthony," said Roger with a grave face. "It's simply that Inspector Moresby has a conscientious objection to arresting anybody for murder under the age of thirty."

"Ass!" growled his cousin, and helped himself to stewed gooseberries. "Well, what about your story now, then? Did you know Roger had solved the mystery, Inspector?"

"No, Mr. Walton, I didn't," said the Inspector with interest. "Has he?"

"Well, he thinks he has," said Anthony nastily.

"Now, now, Anthony," Roger reproved. "Don't be vindictive. Yes," he said modestly to the Inspector. "I've solved the mystery all right. And I warn you that I'm going to telephone part of it at any rate to London to-night, though not the bit you wanted suppressed for the present, of course."

"Well, well!" said the Inspector. "These gooseberries seem to me a bit sour, didn't you think?"

"Inspector Moresby," said Roger with heat. "there are some people for whose murder it's well worth while to be hanged. You're one of them. So take this as a friendly warning and don't try me too far."

"But they are a bit sour, Mr. Sheringham," protested the Inspector. "Really!"

"So are the grapes too, I'm afraid," Roger grinned. "Never mind, Inspector; perhaps I shan't be on your next case. So the story-books

are right after all when they talk about Scotland Yard's professional jealousy of the amateur."

"True, sir," said the Inspector, shaking his head. "Terribly true."

"See in the paper this morning that Glamorgan have won their eleventh match this season, Anthony?" Roger remarked airily. "Extraordinary how they've come on, isn't it? We shall see them head of the table soon."

"Yes, it's nice to see a county that plays more than one amateur doing well for a change," Anthony responded with alacrity.

Roger kept the conversation firmly upon cricket till the Inspector had swallowed his last mouthful and the dinner things had been cleared away, and even till the Inspectorial pipe was well alight and the inspectorial countenance decidedly bored.

"By the way, sir," remarked Inspector Moresby, relaxing comfortably in the arm-chair to which he had transferred himself. "By the way, didn't I hear you say something about having solved the mystery?"

"I thought you'd come round, with time and gentle treatment," Roger laughed. "Yes, Inspector, joking apart, I really think I have solved it. Care to hear?"

"Of course I would, sir. You mustn't mind if I pull your leg now and then."

"Well, I do a bit of that myself," Roger admitted. "But look here, the trouble is Anthony. I haven't told him yet, because it's all bound up with what you confided to me the other night; but of course

he wants to hear. Can't you stretch a point and let me just give him a quick idea of what you told me?"

The Inspector hesitated. "You'll give me your word that it wouldn't go any further, then, Mr. Walton? Not to another mortal soul?"

"On my oath," Anthony agreed eagerly.

"It's highly irregular," sighed the Inspector, "but—very well, Mr. Sheringham, fire away."

Roger proceeded to give Anthony a brief outline of how Meadows had met his death and the discovery in the tobacco-jar.

"And that's why I was so interested in tobacco this morning, Anthony, you see," he concluded, and went on at once to acquaint the Inspector with the new discoveries he had then made.

The Inspector nodded sagely. "Yes, I wondered whether you'd get hold of that," he remarked.

"You knew it already?" Roger asked, somewhat dashed.

"A week ago," replied the Inspector laconically.

"But she never told me she'd told any one before."

"She didn't know she had. She doesn't know she's told you now. With that sort of person, if you don't ask 'em direct questions but just let 'em dribble their information out in their own way, they'll tell you everything they know just the same and they won't realise five minutes later that they've told you anything at all. Yes, well, what did you make of it all, Mr. Sheringham?"

Roger drew a deep breath.

CHAPTER XXV

ROGER SOLVES THE MYSTERY

"WELL, I'd better begin at the beginning," said Roger.

"Now, in the very first place, I made up my mind, as you know, Inspector, that the person whom you seemed to be suspecting—whether you really did or not, I don't know; but you certainly gave me that impression—I made up my mind that that person was not responsible for Mrs. Vane's death. The evidence was against her, of course, and badly, but there are some cases where circumstantial evidence, however apparently convincing, can lead one rather badly astray, and I was sure this was one of them. I admit that I had nothing definite to go on; my reasons were purely psychological. I felt, quite simply, that to suspect Margaret Cross of murder—and a seemingly cold-blooded, carefully planned murder at that—was nothing short of ridiculous. The girl was transparently sincere and honest.

"If it wasn't she, then, who was it?"

"Well, both of you know that my suspicions finally centred upon this fellow Meadows, *alias* all the rest of it. I thought I had a pretty good case

against him even before we knew anything about him at all ; afterwards it almost amounted to a foregone conclusion. And then Meadows apparently committed suicide. Well, that didn't affect my case ; if anything (and the circumstances being as they were) it was actually strengthened. But Meadows, it turned out, could hardly have committed suicide at all. He must have been murdered. How did that make things look ?

" Now, this is where we jumped to the wrong conclusion, Inspector. At least I did, I can't answer for you ; I've never known what was really in your mind from the very beginning. Misled, intentionally or otherwise, by you, I practically assumed that the two murders had been committed by one and the same person—or if I didn't actually assume that, I came so near it as automatically to wash out the idea that Meadows committed the first. We agreed that they must almost certainly be interdependent, and I accepted your very plausible theory that the strongest and most obvious motive for the second was that Meadows had been an actual eye-witness of the first. And that theory of course eliminated him from the list of suspects. At the same time you made out a very useful case against Vane for the double murder.

" And now I'm afraid we become a little personal.

" Thinking things over in bed last night, away from your magnetic influence, I was suddenly struck by this bright thought : *why* does Inspector Moresby go to such pains to plant in my mind the idea that both murders were committed by the same

person, and to give me the impression that this is what he himself thinks? He's a reticent sort of devil; he's never volunteered any ideas of his own worth speaking of before; he knows that in a way we're rivals here; the last person he'd want to help towards a solution is Roger Sheringham; *why?* And, of course, the answer to that came pat: because he wants to put me on the wrong track! He *doesn't* think those murders were committed by the same person. On the contrary, he's convinced they weren't. How's that, Inspector?"

The Inspector laughed heartily. "No, no, Mr. Sheringham," he said, shaking his head. "You do me an injustice, you do really. That was my honest opinion when I was talking to you last night. I had no doubt at all that Mrs. Vane and Meadows were murdered by the same person, and I don't mind admitting it."

"Humph!" observed Roger, not altogether without scepticism. "And do you still think so?"

"I'm always open to conviction, I hope," replied the Inspector carefully. "Yes, go on, sir. This is very interesting."

"Well, whether you really thought there were two murderers or whether you didn't, my base suspicions of you did me one good turn; they biased me in favour of thinking so myself. So when I set out to pay a visit to Meadows' lodgings this morning, I was already prepared to look for his murderer in somebody other than that of Mrs. Vane. Well, I made my investigations, I unearthed a few new

facts which looked interesting but of which I was blessed at the moment if I could make head or tail, and I sat down after lunch to try and think the whole thing out." Roger re-lit his pipe, which had gone out; and settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"It wasn't for some little time that a very simple question occurred to me, to which the answer began at last to put me on the right track. The question was this; what after all has happened to make it so impossible that Meadows *should* be the murderer of Mrs. Vane, as seemed so obvious before? And the answer, of course, was—nothing! Very well, then. Could I get any further with the second mystery by utilising my theory of the two agents to make Meadows the solution of the first?

"Now there were two pointers towards the murderer of Meadows, both somewhat vague—motive and aconitine. Assuming, as I think one had every right to do, that Meadows would not have shrunk from blackmail, the first of these was so wide that I shelved it for a time and concentrated on the second. This was wide too, but it could be narrowed down. If one took the working assumption that the aconitine had come from Dr. Vane's laboratory, there were, excluding servants and so on, three people who could have got hold of it: Dr. Vane himself, Miss Williamson and Miss Cross. Well, for some reason or other (psychological again) I wasn't drawn towards Dr. Vane as the murderer although, as you showed, Inspector, it

was possible to make out a pretty convincing case against him—probably because you *had* gone out of your way to make a pretty convincing case against him, perhaps. In the same way, of course, I had already discarded Miss Cross. There remained Miss Williamson.

“Well, Miss Williamson was a difficulty. Why, in the name of goodness, should she want to kill Meadows? I could see no possible reason. There would have been a reason, of course, if she had already murdered Mrs. Vane—an idea that had already occurred to me, by the way, Inspector, and for the same motive, before you put it forward once as a joke, if you remember. There would have been a motive in that case, if Meadows had seen her do it; but I was working on the theory that he had murdered Mrs. Vane himself. For the life of me I couldn't see, if that were the case, how she could possibly be his murderess.”

“Out of the question, I should have said,” interjected the Inspector.

“Yes, that's what I decided. Well, there were all my three suspects discharged without a stain on their characters; so I was driven to the conclusion that either the aconitine had not come from Dr. Vane's laboratory at all, or else Meadows had not killed Mrs. Vane. In either case I was in an *impasse* and had to go back a little way. I went back to motive.”

“Now this is where we really do begin to warm up. Do you remember last night, Inspector, you asked me who had the biggest motive for wanting

Meadows out of the way, and I replied, somewhat facetiously, that Mrs. Vane had? I began to play with that idea."

"Mrs. Vane?" repeated Anthony incredulously. "But she was dead already."

"When Meadows died, yes; but she had plenty of motive, I imagine, for wanting him out of the way before she died herself. Anyhow, you see the idea. I was asking myself, with growing excitement, was there any way in which Mrs. Vane could have brought about Meadows' death, although she herself was already dead? And the answer, of course, was obvious. Yes, there was!" Roger leaned back in his chair and beamed triumphantly at his audience.

"This is very clever, Mr. Sheringham," said the Inspector ungrudgingly. "Very clever indeed. Yes, I see now what you're driving at, but let's have it in your own words."

"Well, as you probably discovered yourself, Meadows had had no visitors during the past few weeks, so far as the landlady knew. Any theory, then, which was to cover the insertion of poison in his tobacco must presuppose the murderer's visit late at night and, probably, through the sitting-room window, with or without Meadows' own knowledge. But on the night before the murder the landlady, although awake, heard no sounds at all, whereas she had heard a visitor's voice, quite distinctly, some three weeks beforehand, that visitor being proved to be Mrs. Vane."

"Wait a minute, sir," said the Inspector.

"What's all this about? I don't know anything of a visit of Mrs. Vane's."

"Ah!" Roger grinned. "Well, I'm one up on you there at any rate. Look at this!" He drew the little handkerchief out of his pocket-book, tossed it over to the other and explained how it had come into his possession.

"Yes," agreed the Inspector with a rueful air. "Yes, you're certainly one up on me there, Mr. Sheringham."

"That's good," said Roger, with undisguised satisfaction. "Well, to continue. Apart from the information about Mrs. Vane's visit, two other facts emerged: one, that Meadows changed his pipes once a week, to which no significance appears to attach, the other, that he was a very small smoker—and that's very important indeed. I found out from the village shop, you see, that he bought a quarter of a pound at a time, but only smoked it at the rate of an ounce a week. As he evidently emptied the whole lot into that tobacco-jar in his room which you sent away to be analysed, that would mean that the bottom contents of the jar would remain in place for between three and four weeks. For anybody conversant with his habits, this knowledge might be very useful indeed."

The Inspector nodded slowly. "Very ingenious, sir; very ingenious."

"Glad you think so, Inspector," Roger smiled. "I'm quite sure that praise from you is praise worth having. Well, that's my theory. Mrs. Vane and Meadows, to cut a long story short, were both

planning to murder each other. Meadows believed in direct methods ; Mrs. Vane was more painstaking. Both their motives are obvious, I think. Meadows had been threatening her with exposure, no doubt, if she didn't satisfy his financial demands, which, as Mrs. Vane with her knowledge of the type must have realised, would gradually grow bigger and bigger. She had retaliated by threatening to inform the police of his whereabouts, knowing that he was badly wanted by them on more than one charge. The result was that both had succeeded in thoroughly frightening the other, and each decided on the other's elimination as the only escape from an intolerable situation. That's perfectly reasonable, I think ? ”

“ Perfectly,” assented the Inspector at once.

“ Damned cunning,” commented Anthony warmly.

“ Thank you, Anthony. Well, as I said, Mrs. Vane was the more painstaking of the two. She elaborated her plan with, I think, considerable ingenuity. Her knowledge of poisons, you see, was probably two-fold ; her father was with a firm of wholesale chemists, you said, and she might well have picked up a few tips from him, apart from what she could have got out of her husband's books. She knew enough at any rate to recognise aconitine as pre-eminently her requirement. And she hit upon poison in the first place, I should have said, because she had an unlimited supply of all brands ready to her hand. What did she do, then ? Simply this : having made an excuse for visiting

her real husband's rooms (necessarily in circumstances of profound secrecy) she sent him out of the room on some pretext, slipped the stuff into the *bottom* of his tobacco-jar, and went calmly away to await developments."

"Which turned out to be somewhat different from what she'd expected," supplied the Inspector.

"Very much so. But of course she thought she was on velvet. She knew the fact of her having been to Meadows' rooms that night would never leak out, because it was to his advantage to keep quiet about it—though it certainly was short-sighted of her to talk loudly enough to waken the landlady—and having placed the poison at the bottom of the jar, with two or three ounces of harmless stuff on top of it, she knew that it would be at least a fortnight before he would reach it, and by that time she would be miles away with a complete alibi established."

"Ah, but how do you know that, sir?" asked the Inspector, with the air of one who puts his finger on a weak point.

"Because Miss Cross happened to mention it casually to Anthony!" Roger returned triumphantly. "I'd got as far as that in my reasoning, you see, when it occurred to me that the only possible purpose Mrs. Vane could have in delaying the death was this one, to provide herself with an alibi. If I could find out, I felt at that stage, that Mrs. Vane actually *had* expressed her intention of going away in the very near future, then my

case was as good as clinched. And up pops Anthony with the very information I wanted ! ”

“ So I haven’t lived in vain after all, Inspector, you see,” murmured Anthony facetiously.

“ Well, hitherto I’d been working entirely on guess-work, but that seemed to give me the one bit of proof I wanted. After that it was simply a case of using one’s imagination to reconstruct what must have happened. And what did happen can be put baldly in a couple of sentences. Before Mrs. Vane’s ingenious scheme could take effect, Meadows had pushed its author over the cliff. Result, Meadows murdered Mrs. Vane and Mrs. Vane murdered Meadows, in spite of the handicap of being already dead herself. I should think that must be the first time in Scotland Yard’s history that a man has been murdered by a corpse, Inspector, isn’t it? If I wanted to make a detective story out of it and was looking for a nice lurid title, I should call it *The Dead Hand*. Well, now, comments, please. What have you got to say about it all ? ”

“ I’ll say this, sir,” replied the Inspector without hesitation. “ It’s as clever a bit of constructive reasoning as ever I’ve heard.”

“ And the idea had never occurred to you ? ” pursued Roger, pleased.

“ Never,” admitted the Inspector handsomely. “ And so after all this excitement the public is to be disappointed of an arrest, eh ? ”

“ Well, I’m afraid so.”

There was a little silence.

“ Of course it isn’t capable of what you might

call *proof*, Mr. Sheringham, is it?" remarked the Inspector thoughtfully. "Not the kind of proof to satisfy a court, I mean."

"No, it isn't; I know that. But as they're both dead, justice isn't going to be cheated."

"You're going to publish your solution in the *Courier*, after the facts have come out at the inquest next Thursday?"

"Yes, but only as an interesting theory, of course. I don't know whether there's any law about libelling the dead, but in any case I couldn't very well do more than put it forward as a workable solution, in the complete absence, as you say, of all proof."

The Inspector smoked a few more minutes in silence.

"I think, sir," he said slowly, "that you'll find the official explanation of the whole thing, for the benefit of the public, will be that Mrs. Vane's death was an accident and Meadows committed suicide."

Roger nodded. "Yes, I'd rather expected that. It's tame, of course, but it's safe. Do you mean you don't want me to attack that too fiercely in the *Courier*?"

"Well, we don't want to stir up mud which it's impossible to clarify," replied the Inspector, in somewhat deprecating tones.

"I see that. Very well, I promise not to be sarcastic. You must let me put my theory forward, just as an interesting piece of deductive reasoning, but I won't insist upon its being the truth. And after all," Roger added, "I can't defend it, except

on the grounds of probability and common sense. However convinced we ourselves may be that it's the right solution, we're always up against this unfortunate absence of decisive proof."

The Inspector nodded as if satisfied. "I think you're wise, Mr. Sheringham, sir," he said.

"Well, well," remarked Anthony robustly. "What about a drink?"

"Anthony," observed his cousin, "your ideas are sometimes nearly as good as mine."

Anthony removed himself to the lower regions and returned with the wherewithal for celebrating the occasion fittingly. In the intervals of celebration, they continued to discuss the case, the Inspector now paying ungrudging acknowledgments to his unprofessional rival's acumen and ingenuity. Roger decided that after all he really liked that hitherto somewhat maddening man very much indeed.

Half an hour or so later the recipient of Roger's new affection put down his glass with a sigh and looked at his watch. "Well," he said with deep regret, "I suppose I'll have to be getting along."

"To interview Woodthorpe?" said Roger in some surprise. "But surely there's no hurry about that?"

"When a man bothers to confess to a double murder, the least one can do is to ask him why," the Inspector pointed out. "It's merely a matter of form, I know, but I think I ought to get it done to-night. I've got a motor-bicycle outside; it won't take me a minute. By the way, Mr. Sheringham, how do you account for that, I wonder?"

"Woodthorpe's confession?" said Roger thoughtfully. "Yes, that is a little puzzling, I admit. But you do get all sorts of comic people confessing to crimes they haven't committed, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, sir; they're always doing it. Sort of muddled mentality, I suppose. But you wouldn't call Mr. Woodthorpe a comic person, would you?"

"No, I certainly shouldn't. There's only one other explanation that I can see—a super-quixotic sense of chivalry. The village gossip must have reached him, and he would naturally be acquainted with the other members of the Vane *ménage*."

"You've hit the nail on the head again," the Inspector agreed. "That must be the explanation. No doubt the report in the village is that I'm going to make an arrest at any minute."

"But super-quixotic, for all that," Roger smiled. "Now if it had been Anthony who had made the confession I should have understood it much better."

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked that gentleman in high bewilderment. "This is all Greek to me."

"Then Greek let it remain, Anthony," replied his cousin kindly. "Greek let it remain. That shows the advantage of a classical education."

The low hum of a distant engine floated in through the open window, increasing rapidly to a loud roar.

"Powerful sort of car, that," Roger commented.

"That isn't a car engine," remarked Anthony, with all the scorn of the mechanically-minded

for those not similarly gifted. "That's an aeroplane, you ass."

The Inspector jumped hastily to his feet. "An aeroplane, did you say?"

Anthony cocked an ear towards the now shattering din. "Yes," he was forced almost to shout. "Nearly overhead, and flying low. Making for the sea apparently. Young Woodthorpe celebrating his escape from arrest, I expect. You can tell it's a——"

"I must go and look into this," observed the Inspector shortly, and vanished with rapidity. A minute later the noise of a motor-cycle engine drowned that of the swiftly receding aeroplane.

"What on earth's the trouble now?" wondered Anthony.

"Heaven knows," replied Roger philosophically. "Probably friend Colin is still trying to make himself look guilty by pretending to do a bolt for the Continent. Dear me, what a handicap to a man a super-developed sense of chivalry must be! It's as bad as a disease."

The next hour passed pleasantly enough; there was plenty for the cousins to discuss, and Roger had not by any means yet got over his elation at triumphing over the Inspector. He talked at considerable length. The second hour passed more slowly. By a quarter to twelve both were frankly yawning.

At ten minutes past twelve the buzz of a distant engine heralded Inspector Moresby's return. They heard him pushing his bicycle round into the yard

at the back, and then his heavy tread on the stairs outside.

"Thought you'd gone for the night," Roger greeted him. "Well, was I right? Has Colin bolted for the Continent?"

"He has, sir," replied the Inspector, shutting the door and advancing into the room.

"Ah!" said Roger, not without satisfaction.

The Inspector was looking decidedly grim. He did not return to his chair, but stood in the middle of the room, looking down on the other two. "I'm afraid I've got bad news for you, Mr. Walton," he said slowly. "Mr. Woodthorpe hasn't gone alone."

Anthony stared at him. "What do you mean?" he asked, in a curiously high voice.

The Inspector looked still more grim. "Miss Cross has gone with him," he said shortly.

CHAPTER XXVI

CAUSTIC SODA

"Miss Cross!" exclaimed Roger.

The Inspector continued to address himself to Anthony. "You must be ready for a bit of a shock, I'm afraid. It's Miss Cross that Mr. Woodthorpe has been engaged to all the time. She's been just amusing herself with you. She's——"

"I think I shall go to bed," observed Anthony abruptly, and rose from his chair. "It's pretty late. Good-night, you two."

He went.

The Inspector watched the door close, then dropped into his seat. "It's a nasty smack for him," he said sympathetically. "But he's young. He'll get over it."

Roger found his tongue. "But—but this is almost incredible, Inspector!"

The Inspector looked at him quizzically. "Is it, sir?"

"I can't believe it of her. Are you sure you're not making a mistake?"

"Perfectly. I've known it for some time, as a matter of fact, but I couldn't very well drop a hint to your cousin."

"Of course," Roger said slowly, readjusting his

ideas in the light of this startling development, "of course this makes Woodthorpe's confession a good deal more understandable."

"Oh, yes, I knew what he was getting at."

"She must have shown him she was frightened," Roger pursued, thinking rapidly. "But the last time I saw her she seemed quite all right. Something must have happened since then. Inspector—you're looking guilty! Out with it!"

"I had a long interview with her this morning," the Inspector admitted. "Perhaps I *did* press her pretty closely. I knew she was concealing her engagement from me, you see, so she might have been concealing other things as well. Yes, I certainly did press her pretty closely."

"What you really did, I suppose, was to convey to her quite obviously that you still suspected her after all, and that if she couldn't produce a better explanation of certain matters, she'd be finding herself very shortly in distinctly hot water?"

"We have to do these things, you know, sir," confessed the Inspector almost apologetically.

"Well, thank goodness I'm not a policeman," retorted Roger, making no effort to conceal his distaste. "No wonder you frightened the poor girl out of her wits. I suppose you practically told her you were going to apply for a warrant against her. The rest was inevitable, of course. So what do you suppose is going to happen now?"

"Perhaps when she finds there isn't a warrant out against her, Mr. Woodthorpe will bring her back the same way as he took her away."

"Oh, so you're not going to apply for a warrant after all?" said Roger sarcastically.

"No, sir, I'm not."

"Very nice for the girl's reputation, I must say, to be careering about the Continent with a young man for goodness knows how long."

"She's engaged to him," the Inspector pointed out mildly. "It is possible for them to get married abroad, you know."

Roger snorted.

There was a little silence.

"You seem very put out on her behalf," the Inspector ventured, curiosity overcoming discretion. "Considering how she's been treating your cousin, I mean."

"She was a minx, I admit," Roger said with a little laugh. "I also admit that she took me in properly; I really thought she was quite fond of Anthony. But after all, I suppose she had some justification. If she was engaged to friend Colin all the time, the position must have been a very difficult one for her, both before Mrs. Vane's death and afterwards, whether she knew anything about her fiancé's intrigue with that lady or not. She couldn't admit the engagement while she was under that cloud, you see, and all her energies must have been concentrated on clearing her name. I don't say she behaved very nicely, but that must be the explanation. Having had it forcibly impressed on her that not only public opinion but the official police as well were dead against her, she deliberately set out to attach Anthony to her in order to make

sure of getting him and me on her side and enlisting our energies on her behalf. Don't you think that's the truth of the matter?"

"Not a doubt of it, sir," agreed the Inspector heartily. "That's the truth of that all right."

"And very well she succeeded," added Roger modestly. "Well, now that the whole thing's at an end, so to speak, Inspector, what about a little bed?"

The Inspector's answer was not a direct one. "So you think the whole thing's at an end, do you, Mr. Sheringham?" he said, with a return to his quizzical expression.

"I do, yes," said Roger, surprised. "Don't you?"

"I'm very much afraid it is," the Inspector agreed.

Roger looked at him. "What are you driving at, Inspector? Have you still got a card or two up your sleeve? You surely don't mean to say you don't accept my solution of the mystery?"

The Inspector puffed once or twice at his pipe. "If you'd asked me that question before, when Mr. Walton was still here," he said slowly, "I should have said that I did accept it. But as we're alone—well, no! I certainly don't accept it."

"But—but why ever not?" Roger asked in astonishment.

"Because I happen to know it isn't correct, sir," returned the Inspector placidly.

Roger stared at him through the blue haze of

tobacco-smoke. "Isn't correct? But—but—well, dash it, man, it must be correct!"

The Inspector shook his head. "Oh, no, sir, if you'll pardon me. It isn't correct at all. You see, my trouble hasn't been to find out the truth; I've known that all along. My trouble has been to prove it. To prove it, I mean, definitely enough to satisfy a court of law, and that I haven't been able to do, and I'm afraid never shall. The truth's plain enough, but there's too many gaps in the chain of legal proof. It's a great pity." The Inspector shook his head again, this time expressing gentle regret.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Roger cried. "Truth obvious all the time? What do you mean? I haven't found the truth obvious all the time."

Once more the Inspector shook his head, now conveying the disappointed reproof of the master at the too easy failure of a fairly gifted pupil. "And yet it was staring at you in the face all the time, sir," he said in tones of reproach. "The trouble was you wouldn't look at it." He drew again at his pipe for a moment or two, as if collecting in his mind what he wanted to say. Roger watched him in frank amazement.

"Yes, that was your trouble, sir," resumed the Inspector, in a slightly didactic voice. "All the time you've been refusing to look the facts in the face. This was a simple case, so far as just finding out the truth went; as simple as ever I've come across. But that wouldn't do for you. Oh, dear

no ! You must go and make a complicated business out of it. As simple a little murder as ever was, but you want to run about and raise all sorts of irrelevant issues that had nothing to do with the case at all."

"Who did murder Mrs. Vane, then ?" demanded Roger, disregarding these strictures. "If Meadows didn't, as you seem to be meaning, who the devil did ?"

"That's the trouble with you people with too much imagination," pursued the Inspector. "A simple murder's never enough for you. You can't believe a murder can be simple. You've got to waste your time ferreting out a lot of stuff to try and make it look less simple than it really is. No good detective ought to have too much imagination. He doesn't need it. When all——"

"Oh, cut the cackle for the time being !" interrupted Roger rudely. "Who *did* murder Mrs. Vane ?"

"When all the evidence points to one person, and motive and opportunity and everything else as well, the real detective doesn't waste his time saying, 'Ah, yes ! I know a thing or two worth that. When all the evidence and the rest of it points to one person, then the odds are that that person is innocent and some one else has made it look like that. That's how *I* should commit a murder, by Jove ! I'd fake all the evidence to point to somebody else. That's what must have been done in this case. So, whoever may be guilty, we know one person at any rate who isn't, and that's the one

that the foolish Inspector from Scotland Yard, who hasn't got a nice big imagination like me, is going to go and suspect. Haw, haw ! ' ' The mincing accent with which the Inspector strove to represent the speech of this superior person with imagination was offensive in the extreme.

" Who murdered Mrs. Vane, Inspector ? " asked Roger coldly.

" Why ask me, Mr. Sheringham ? " retorted the Inspector, still more offensively. " I'm only the man from Scotland Yard, without any imagination. Don't ask yourself, either, though, because the answer's staring you in the face ; so, of course, you'd never be able to see it. Go and ask any child of ten in the village. He'd know. He's known all the time, for the matter of that."

" Good God ! " Roger exclaimed, genuinely shocked. " You don't seriously mean that—— " He paused.

" Of course I do ! " returned the Inspector more genially. " Good gracious, sir, I can't think how you can have persuaded yourself she didn't. Everything was against her—every single thing ! There wasn't a loophole, so far as common sense went (I'm not talking about legal proof, mind you). Of course she did it ! " He lay back in his chair and roared with callous laughter at Roger's unmistakable discomfiture. It was the Inspector's hour, and he was evidently going to enjoy every minute of it.

" But—but I can't believe it ! " Roger stammered. " Margaret Cross ! Good Lord ! "

"Well, perhaps I ought not to laugh at you, sir," the Inspector went on, continuing nevertheless to do so with the utmost heartiness. "After all, you're not the first one to be taken in by a pretty face and a nice, innocent, appealing sort of manner, are you? Why, there's mugs in London being taken in by 'em every day."

The country mug winced slightly, but no words came to him.

"Of course I wouldn't be saying any of this if Mr. Walton were here," said the Inspector, ceasing to laugh. "It'd be a nasty shock for him, very nasty indeed; and the one he's got already is quite enough. You'll keep it all dark from him, of course."

Roger found his voice. "Who killed Meadows, then?" he asked abruptly.

"Why, the girl!" ejaculated the Inspector. "She killed 'em both, I keep telling you. Meadows saw her with Mrs. Vane, lay low for a few days, then sprang it on her and started in to blackmail her, no doubt; probably wanted most of that ten thousand pounds she was to get under the will. So she finished him off, too."

"Oh, rot!" Roger cried incredulously.

"It's true enough, sir," said the Inspector more seriously. "I saw it all the time; knew he must have been murdered when we found him there dead. It was a nasty blow for me too, I can tell you, because he was my only witness against her for the murder of Mrs. Vane. That's what I was going to arrest him for, as a matter of fact, to keep him safe in prison and make him talk—not because I thought

he'd committed the murder himself, like you ; I never did think so. In fact, I knew he hadn't. Yes, she spoilt my case against her there completely."

"But—but look here, can you prove these extraordinary assertions in any way, Inspector?"

"Well enough for common sense, sir, though not beyond all reasonable doubt, which is what the law wants. Let's take the two cases in turn. What were the clues in the first one? The coat-button and the footprints. Well, the footprints had been made by a number six shoe, fairly new, the heels not worn at the side ; Miss Cross, I found out, had been wearing shoes that afternoon which answered to that description. That wasn't conclusive, of course ; half a dozen people might have been wearing shoes like that. But the coat-button was. There was no getting round that. The maid was dead certain that button had been on Miss Cross's coat when she went out, and there it was in the dead woman's hand. That would want a lot of explaining away."

"But it *could* be explained away."

"Oh, yes, sir ; it could," agreed the Inspector cheerfully. "I showed you how myself."

"But what about those shoes I found in the sea ? You said they were Mrs. Russell's."

"So they were, sir. But what about them ? You never seriously thought those were really the shoes the murderer had worn, did you ?"

Roger choked slightly, but made no reply.

"Oh, I can't believe you thought that," continued the Inspector with relish. "Why, that was

an old pair, not new like the pair that had made those footprints. A child could have seen that. Besides, they'd only been in the water an hour or two."

"What?" Roger cried.

"Oh, didn't you know that, sir?" asked the Inspector innocently. "Oh, yes; they weren't much more than wet through. And you don't mean to say you never recognised them, sir? Well, dear me!"

"Rub it in, rub it in," Roger groaned. "Dance on my body if you like. I've no doubt I deserve it. No, I didn't recognise them. Would you mind explaining to my futile intelligence what exactly you mean by that?"

"Well, seeing that you'd had them in your hands not twenty-four hours before, I thought you might have recognised them. Didn't you get hold of a pair of Mrs. Russell's shoes, and give them to Miss Cross to give back for you?"

"Great Scott, you don't mean to say *those* were the ones?"

"Indeed they were, sir, as it wouldn't have taken you five minutes to find out, if you'd ever thought of it. The girl lost her head a bit over that. It's easy enough to see what happened. You'd been putting forward the idea that the murderer was a man, who'd made those marks with a pair of women's shoes to throw us off the track. She's getting pretty desperate by then, seeing how strongly I suspected her (I never troubled to hide that), so she makes some excuse to get away, nips back to the

house, slashes the shoes up the sides to give the impression they'd been prepared for big feet, and throws them over the top of the cliff. Then she makes another excuse to get you down on to the ledge, where they can be found. Why, bless you, sir, *you* never found those shoes. She did!"

"It's perfectly true," Roger muttered. "She did. I remember."

"Yes, it's all plain enough as far as common sense goes, but no good for a court of law, I'm afraid. A smart counsel could tear all that to shreds with his eyes shut. The same with the second case, too."

"Yes, go on to that."

"Well, there, sir, I really did my best to put you on the right track. I *told* you that Meadows was murdered by the same person who killed Mrs. Vane, and because he'd seen the first murder done. I told you that, and I told you that it must have been some one who had access to aconitine. You said just now you thought I meant Dr. Vane, but I didn't, of course; I meant the girl. And then the funny thing is you thought I was trying to pull your leg. Why, it's all been staring you in the face. I've heard you with my own ears talking with Mr. Walton about how funnily Miss Cross was behaving, wanting to go over to France one minute and stay here the next and all the rest of it; and all you thought was that it was nerves. So it was, but not the kind you meant!"

"And I'd given you another hint long before that, when I told you there was real bad blood in

that family. I told you straight out they were practically all of them criminals; and still you thought she couldn't be, just because she had an innocent face. Of course the first thing I'd done was to have the records searched for her at the Yard, *and* found her in them, too. Never actually been in prison, you understand, but mixed up before she came here with a very shady crew indeed; a house she got a job in as a parlourmaid was burgled, for instance, and another where she was supposed to be the governess; we never laid our hands on the lot that did it but there's no doubt that she was in with them, though nothing could be proved against her. Oh, and several other things too. She was a bad lot all right before she ever came here, but clever—oh, yes, clever enough."

"Go on to the second case," said Roger feebly.

The Inspector paused and marshalled his ideas. "Well, now, there, sir, you made a very bad mistake indeed," he said with some severity. "You jumped to the conclusion that Meadows was killed by aconitine in his tobacco. If you'd troubled to read up aconitine as you ought to have done, you'd have found out that it's a vegetable alkaloid, and vegetable alkaloids lose all their power if they're burnt. You can smoke as much aconitine in your tobacco as you like, and it isn't going to do you any harm."

"But that's what killed him," Roger protested.

"Oh, no, it isn't sir, if you'll pardon me. He was killed by aconitine placed in his *pipe*, not in his

tobacco. Aconitine was put in the bowl or the stem of his *pipe*, sir, where his saliva melted it, and he swallowed it before he knew what he'd done. And that not only proves that it couldn't have been put there three weeks before, as you thought, but must have been during the previous night, but also that it was put there by some one who knew a little about poisons but not very much, for otherwise there'd have been none wasted in the tobacco. She meant to make sure of the job all right, by the way; there was enough of the stuff there to kill a hundred people."

"But wait a minute!" Roger interrupted. "You're wrong there, Inspector. It *could* have been put there by Mrs. Vane. I found out that Meadows only smoked his pipes a week at a time, remember!"

The Inspector's expression was more pitying than chagrined. "Yes, but did you find out when he changed them, Mr. Sheringham, sir? I did, you see. On Sunday mornings. So it couldn't have been Mrs. Vane after all. It was somebody who came during that previous night, while he was asleep. It wasn't the doctor, because he'd never have put the stuff in the tobacco; there's no conceivable reason why it should have been Miss Williamson; it *must* have been Miss Cross. But there again there's no absolute proof."

"Well," said Roger. "I'll be damned!"

The Inspector helped himself with an absent air from the bottle of whisky which stood, flanked by a couple of siphons, on a small table at his elbow. He sipped his drink thoughtfully.

"And you're not going to apply for a warrant?" Roger asked, when all this had sunk into him. "You're going to let her get away with it?"

The Inspector allowed a little whisky to sink into him. "No help for it, I'm sorry to say. We could never get a conviction. As I said, I think you'll find that the verdict next Thursday will be suicide, and we shall let it rest at that; the verdict of accidental death on Mrs. Vane as well. It isn't the first time this has happened, you know. There's any number of people walking about to-day, free men and women, that we *know* to be murderers, but we can't prove it to the satisfaction of a court."

"Yes, I know that, of course," Roger nodded. "Legal proof is a very different thing from moral conviction. Well, I must say I'm not sorry. They were two distinctly unpleasant specimens of humanity of which she ridded the world, and I should be sorry to hear of her hanging for them. But—poor Colin!"

"Be thankful she hasn't got into your own family, Mr. Sheringham, sir," replied the Inspector philosophically. "And I dare say she won't make him a bad wife when all's said and done. It was his money she was after, of course; now she's got that, and an established position, she may settle down all right."

"Not the sort of wife I'd choose myself for all that," Roger said with a little shiver. "Yes, she must have been after his money, I suppose. As no doubt Mrs. Vane was before her."

"No, sir," said the Inspector meditatively. "I'm inclined to think Mrs. Vane wasn't; I think she was genuinely fond of the boy. Margaret knew about her affair with him, of course, and that was another reason for wanting her out of the way. That's why the engagement was kept so secret too. She knew her cousin would never give him up to her, and would certainly cut her out of her will as well. By the way, it may interest you to know that the doctor's marriage settlement is invalidated, as Mrs. Vane was never his legal wife; I had the wording looked into and a legal opinion taken. So the girl doesn't get that ten thousand after all."

"Much ado about nothing," Roger commented ironically.

"Or 'The Dead Hand,'" smiled the Inspector. "That was a good title of yours after all, sir, because it was the button in Mrs. Vane's dead hand that makes the whole thing so certain."

Roger stifled a yawn and looked at his watch. "Good Heavens, do you know it's past two, Inspector? We'd better get to bed. Though whether I shall sleep very much is another question. All this is a little upsetting, you must understand. By Jove," he added as he rose to his feet, "do you know, even now I can hardly believe that she did it!"

The Inspector smiled at him tolerantly as he also rose. "Because she looked pretty and innocent, and you thought at one time she might be going to make a match of it with your cousin, sir? Because

you saw her, in fact, as the pretty little heroine of one of your own books ? ”

“ I suppose so,” Roger admitted.

The Inspector patted him on the shoulder with a large and consoling hand. “ Do you know what’s the matter with you, sir ? ” he said kindly. “ You’ve been reading too many of those detective stories.”

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