THE NET AROUND JOAN INGILBY

This is the Story

MARTIN BLAIR, a young newspaper man, goes down by chance to the New Forest, and there stumbles on the inquest of a Mrs. Amcott, whose death is held to be due to misadventure. He doubts this, and writes an article in which he states his grounds for believing that she was murdered. He goes on to reason out the way in which she was killed, and winds up by practically accusing Joan Ingilby, the dead woman's governess, of having played a leading part in the crime. His efforts, and those of Joan Ingilby, to undo the effects of this article bring Inspector Pointer on the scene. The reader is given, from start to finish, every clue which is discovered by Blair and the police.

By the Same Author

THE FOOTSTEPS THAT STOPPED
*THE EAMES-ERSKINE CASE
*THE CLIFFORD AFFAIR *THE CLUNY PROBLEM
THE WEDDING-CHEST MYSTERY
DEEP CURRENTS *THE CHARTERIS MYSTERY
THE CRAIG POISONING CASE
MURDER AT THE NOOK THE MYSTERIOUS PARTNER

**Uniform with this Volume*

THE NET AROUND JOAN INGILBY

by

A. FIELDING

AUTHOR OF "THE CLUNY PROBLEM," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

So thick was the fog that sky and sea and deck were all one and the same—all mystery.

A long blast came out of the grey wall quite close beside the *Dover Queen.* "I'm heading to starboard," some ship, too small to carry wireless, was calling aloud.

Martin Blair caught the far-off, continuous ringing of a bell. The hoots that preceded it had passed him unheard. A fishing smack was telling the world that she had been surprised by the thick mist with all her nets out, and would other craft kindly keep well away?

He watched the face of his companion in the little deck retreat that he had tumbled on by accident. She seemed to be still asleep. Just as she had been when he had taken the empty seat beside her. He recognised her at once. That was why he had slipped into the chair. He had collided with her on the gangway, and as a reward for his abject apologies, had had a faint smile from eyes which he thought were the most wonderful that he had ever seen

How lovely she was as she lay in her chair, her slim length vaguely outlined under her rug. He frowned as he studied that rug. It was supposed to be a tartan, but it would have puzzled a Scot to tell the clan. Its quality, too, struck the young reporter, whose livelihood depended on his sharp observation. It was the shoddiest affair. Almost

guiltily he looked down at his own. His mother had given it him when he went to Norway one year, and it was the warmest and lightest that she could buy. The first was her choice, the latter because otherwise it would have had short shrift from Blair.

Suppose he changed the rugs? The thing she had across her knees was not fit for a church bazaar, and the winds of early September can be shrewd ones. He lifted it off her and laid his own in its place. It would keep out some of the creeping mist, for the sun was in a lazy mood to-day, shrinking back under his blankets at any excuse.

The girl opened her eyes suddenly as Blair stooped over her. They really were beautiful eyes. Her gaze fell on the rug, then on the make-believe plaid on the deck.

"You'll catch cold." He spoke almost crossly to cover the awkwardness which he felt. "That thing's no good."

"This is!" she said with a friendly smile. "Aren't we there yet?"

He was nearing the seventh heaven, but she doubtless meant Dover. Women are apt to be matter-of-fact, though she looked poetry itself—a living sonnet. He told himself that life, which had not been over-kind to him in his twenty-six years, was now more than making amends by sending this fog, by keeping the Channel boat, which should have been already in Dover or Folkestone, still floating outside harbour.

"Aren't we nearly in?" she asked again.

"The captain's afraid of entering while this fog lasts. And quite right too," Blair said firmly. The mere idea that the captain might be going to be rash enough to endanger all their lives—and his chance to

talk to this divine creature—by rushing the ship into port gave Blair a distinct tremor. "One can't be too careful in a fog," he repeated.

She smiled again. Her smile was faintly elfin.

"I shouldn't have taken you for such a careful boy." She spoke vaguely, as though the matter did not interest her much. As how could it? Blair was doing well as a journalist, thanks to brains, grit, industry, and the good luck that these three always bring; but even so, how could he ever hope to interest such as she? He studied her covertly. Her head was turned a little away, her profile coming up against the fog like a flower against a cloud. How perfect she was—the loveliest thing ever! And how perfect was everything she wore, in a soft, quiet monotone, with only one knot of gold that matched her hair to strike a gay, rejoicing note.

"What would you take me for?" he asked, greatly daring.

She looked sleepy still. Her thick white lids almost covered her eyes. Suddenly she flashed them open.

"I think you are kind." She spoke more soberly than he had expected. "Kind and energetic."

"Isn't everyone kind to you, Fairy Princess?" he asked gently, but there was no question in his voice. He knew the answer.

"Yes," the girl beside him said drowsily. "Yes, I've never known what it was not to be petted."

"Tell me," he said, "we shall never meet again, and I like fairy tales, Princess, tell me about yourself!"

"There is nothing to tell," she murmured, her eyes now quite closed. "There's my home, of course—I think you'ld like the garden. I've never

seen one quite like it. Do you like gardens ? " she asked.

" Rather ! "

" So do I. I love it more than the house, I think. Though that too . . . It's a quaint old parsonage."

Yes, he would have guessed her father to be something like a parson—a wealthy parson, king of his little realm.

" And father's too busy with his books to do much more than wander round and tell me about each flower and bird. He knows them all. And they know him. Then mother—mother's wonderful ! " She opened her eyes wide for a second with a child's look of rapture. " She's more like my sister in looks. But she's the dearest mother in all the world. The very dearest. Only she does spoil me."

" They both do," he said gruffly.

" I suppose so." She smiled contentedly. " But I spoil them. We all three love each other and our wonderful old home. We all think nobody is so dear or so wonderful as each other and it. I come up to town now and then. . . ."

" For the dentist ? " he asked gravely. " Every well conducted young person I ever heard of comes up for him."

" Not in my case," she said firmly, " but if there's anything very good on in the way of a lecture or a play, father brings us, of course. Otherwise we just live and are happy." Her voice dwelt on the words and caressed them lingeringly.

" And work ? " he asked suddenly. " Don't you ever feel like work ? "

She opened her gold-flecked eyes. What colour were they ? Hazel ? Brown ? Or clear amber ?

" You've forgotten the garden, and how much work it takes to keep it as it likes to be kept. Even

with a gardener I do a lot. Then there're the bees and the two dogs."

"Rabbits? Guinea pigs?" he asked gravely.

She dimpled, and her eyes sparkled, just as a brook will in the sun.

"I don't think I like guinea pigs, and I know I don't care for rabbits. Now hares—but you couldn't keep a hare in a garden, could you? Once, after a visit to the Zoo, I thought of an otter, but it's cruel to have only one. And two otters. . . ."

"Doves, of course?" he went on.

She shook her head.

"I can't bear the lumps, nor the noise they make. But there's a bantam cock and his two wives. They're darlings. They play on the lawn with the kitten. But now about you—doesn't all this seem very silly to you? Your life must have so many interests. I feel sure of that."

"It has! Rather! Absorbing interests, too, such as bread and butter, rent and clothes."

In a few sentences he told of his struggles, struggles that he made quite humorous, and which were beginning to be easier now. As he finished, the boat started to turn. Vague outlines of what might be docks began to show through the grey walls.

"We're in!" someone called triumphantly.

Martin Blair woke up. "In"—that meant "over." Done. Finished. Never again would he see his fairy princess, except perhaps at a function which he might be sent to report.

She began to slip off his rug.

"Not yet," he begged. "This thing of yours really isn't warm enough."

She looked at it soberly.

"It belongs to a poor girl who lent it to me." She

fingered it gently. "Don't despise it so. She bought it with such pleasure. I'm glad she can't know how bad it is. I fancy"—she raised her eyes to his—"I fancy she isn't too well-off, and if you've got to make sixpence do what a shilling will hardly reach—I suppose it must be difficult." She seemed to ponder.

"That's not a task you've ever had to tackle," he said almost grimly. Oh, spoiled fairy princess, whom he was never to see again!

She smiled once more, that faint smile of the lips, that laughter of the eyes.

"I've never known what it was to think of money," she confessed, and as she turned, the scent of damask roses reached him, vague but delicious. Even Blair knew that only the most expensive perfumes can so exactly copy nature. He could have sworn that the wind blew off a rose bush on a summer evening after rain.

He folded up her rug and picked up her bag.

"Let me see you to the train," he begged.

But she shook her head, though her young eyes said to his young eyes that she too was sorry to part.

"There'll be a car to meet me. But thank you"—she said as an under-steward picked up her luggage—"especially for lending me the rug."

"And you—especially for giving me a memory," he said softly. "Good-bye, Fairy Princess."

For a moment he stood watching her as she followed her luggage, watching her off the gangway and into a waiting car. A vague impression of size and splendour of fittings penetrated his brain, but all except the girl was a blur. Then it silently glided away, and the fairy princess was gone out of his life.

He shook himself and tramped off for the train, and town, and his daily bread. He still had her plaid rug on his arm. He had managed to hand his own to the steward. His name was on it. You never knew. . . .

For days he kept a sharp watch on society functions. For weeks he "did" smart gatherings as well as his own work, but the weeks became months, and still Blair had not seen again that lovely face.

It was now mid-December, the fifteenth to be exact, and he was in a train bound, so he had thought, for Elhurst in Sussex, where there had been a railway collision early this morning. But he found to his great annoyance that both the train he was in and the ticket he had taken would fetch him up at Elmhurst in the New Forest unless he changed at once and got back to Waterloo.

Elmhurst . . . It was a pretty name, he thought. He had never heard it before. New Forest. . . .

He was a free lance, though getting to be a very busy one. It was a glorious morning, cold and bright. He had not had an hour off for weeks, not since a return journey in September. He had a sudden longing to hear the ring of hoofs on a frosty country lane, to tread crackling leaves underfoot, to look up at bare boughs overhead. He decided to go to the place which the booking clerk had assigned to him. At least, he thought then that it was that humdrum official, but he realised later that it was one greater than any railway official who had thrust that little strip of cardboard into his hand.

He knew the New Forest slightly, which meant that he only knew it badly. He had merely motored through it, and Nature is a true socialist. Her

treasures are for the man of simple ways. You must walk a land to have it for a friend. Yet even he knew it as a world apart, this hundred square miles of ever-changing woodland. He had heard much of the commoners who live in it. Blair decided that he would spend a few days in their midst, and write an article on them for one of the reviews to which he contributed more and more frequently.

He little knew that, though he was about to spend several days amongst them, his interests would be fully occupied with something much more absorbing than feudal remainders. That, sharply though the coming hours were to be etched on his memory, not one new fact concerning the people of the soil would be included. That, as far as they were concerned, he might have been staying on the moon.

At the station he made his way to the telephone. A word was due to the paper in which he blew off a good deal of froth on six days of the week, and which was expecting him to send in an account of the railway mishap in Sussex.

His message sent, Blair picked up his bag and walked to the inn close at hand. All Elmhurst was close at hand. You could settle down for life in the place, be married, call on each of the villagers, and be buried, all within ten minutes of the station.

In the coffee room he found a long table set for a larger number of people than he expected. There was a subdued hush, and yet bustle, about the whole place. It might have been a busy Sunday. Somewhat to his surprise he was conducted to the upper end of this board.

" Is it a market day ? " Blair asked the inn's only waiter. The man looked scandalised, and then sc taken aback that he broke out in his own dialect.

" 'Tis for the 'quest as you'm come down, I doubt, sir ? "

Then on Blair's stare and " What quest ? " he went on :

" The inquest on Mrs. Amcott, as was found dead this morning. The coroner is holding it this afternoon. A bit quick like, but he's due on that find of Saxon coins over to Beaulieu to-morrow, and the next day there's the 'quest on that porter here as mistook an up for a down train. So Mrs. Amcott is to be done to-day. You see 'tis just a form like. We all know how it happened. The poor lady fell asleep in a charcoal shed, to wake in heaven. We made sure as you was come from Lunnon, because of it. Shall I set you at one of the smaller tables ?"

" No, no ! " Blair liked being in the midst of things. " Who is Mrs. Amcott ? "

Again scandalised surprise filled the elderly face bending over him.

" Why, Mr. Ralph Amcott's lady, sir, to be sure ! Wife of a brother of the squire of Elmhurst. A gentleman as be abroad in the Sudan, putting the fear of God into them as killed Gordon. This table is for the jurymen."

Blair decided to claim all the rights of the Press, and was accepted as a London reporter who had rushed down in some miraculously fast way to be present at the inquest. Which was only as it should be, thought the man. It wasn't every day that a lady went out for her usual walk at nine of an evening, was silly enough to enter one of the sheds which covered in a charcoal pit, and was found asphyxiated by the fumes in the morning.

The men agreed that only an " up-country furriner " could have done such a thing. Though,

considering that Mrs. Amcott was married to a Forester born. . . .

After lunch, a charabanc took the jurymen, and, of course, Blair, who was the guest of honour, out to see the place where Mrs. Amcott had been found. In winter the Forest is as full of activity as in summer. Beech leaves are being gathered, firewood for hauling collected, furze-tops, dear to the palate of the hardy forest ponies, are cut. Charcoal burning has no season. To an ever diminishing extent for over a thousand years this trade has been plied under the trees. The sheds were but loose structures of boards nailed together, but roofed, and with a door fastened by an ordinary padlock. The charabanc stopped beside one.

"Be ye come to see the pit?" a grey-bearded man asked them. With his bent shoulders, and reddened lids, and brown, seamed face, he looked like a forest gnome on a large scale.

"Burned charcoal in the time of the Conqueror, we did," said Mr. Gull. "I be the only charcoal burner hereabouts. Ye can't teach burning. Mr. Grimshaw, he may think this or that, but, deary me, tiddn' so. Many a tell we'm had together, but he's old for learning. Nor charcoal burning can't be taught. Father to son and son's son be the only way. It takes four days to finish a lot. Two tons to one burning. I cut un four foot long, hard woods to one pit, soft woods to another, stacked in a circle, leaning innards, covered wi' bracken and litter. I fires un from the top wi' a torch, and waters un when need be. And there lies the skill."

Mr. Gull evidently thought the jurymen wanted a dissertation on his art.

"But what about the lady?" one man asked.

"Poor soul! I found her dead." And Mr. Gull forthwith would have dismissed her from the conversation.

"But why did she come into the shed, that's the question?" the man persisted fussily.

"Now, 'tis no manner of use standing in a fairy ring a-staring at I," Mr. Gull said crossly. "I'm in a terrible rout this morning, and as only the Lord above could tell you why she done it, I hope you'm haven't interrupted me at work for that sort of a tell!" he went on, as one who puts childish things behind him. "Then when 'tis burnt out, 'tis covered wi' turf or ashes. Then I lets un cool. Three to four days maybe. . . ."

Blair touched the mound of brown turf. It was pleasantly warm to the hand on this cold day. The other men followed his example, and, giving up the attempt to get Mr. Gull to talk about the dead woman, they returned to the charabanc and home to the inn. A few drops were falling, but they assured Blair that "'Tis not a rain; 'tis only a smizzle," and they were right. It had dried by the time they reached the village.

Going and coming, Blair learnt what he could of the dead woman. It was not much, and not at all interesting. She was the wife of the second son of the late squire of Elmhurst. Her husband was in the Sudan Government. Mrs. Amcott, during her husband's absence, had come down last month for the winter, taking a suite of rooms in a wing of the manor house, her brother-in-law's house. The conversation drifted to her looks. Most of the men considered her plain. Her age they believed to be around thirty.

"Like to have a sight of the manor house?" the townsman asked Blair. "The inquest isn't for

another hour. There's her electric bath-chair as I'd like to see. I'm an electrician by trade."

The two strolled on together, followed by the major part of the jurymen, who were at a loss how to kill time.

"Her electric chair?" Blair queried.

He learnt that Mrs. Amcott had hurt her back in a recent motor smash, and though she was practically cured, she still used this bath-chair constantly. It was propelled by an electric motor beneath the seat, and only needed guiding by the occupant inside. Strictly speaking it should have gone on the road, but she was tacitly allowed to trundle it along the pavement, as it never went faster than a perambulator. There was an electric foot warmer and warmed cushions, so that even in the coldest weather whoever sat inside was comfortable.

Blair found the manor house to be a very beautiful unspoiled example of the Tudor period. The ivy that clung to the mullioned oriel windows and ran up the ornamental Tudor chimneys must have been first trimmed when Elizabeth and Mary were children. Now it was close as crinkled velvet. The butler took the visitors around to a little door in a side wall and unlocked it.

"The children used to keep their bikes here in the old days," he explained. "Here's the chair. The rooms over this are those the poor lady used. Her bedroom's just above." Everyone looked up at three long windows to which the butler pointed. Blair was bored. So were most of the jurymen. At a glance the chair seemed the usual kind, barring the fact that it was perhaps roomier than usual. It had the ordinary waterproof hood, supplemented by a roll-down flap with a mica window for bad weather.

As Blair tried to enter into the electrician's very complex explanations of how the thing worked, a man was pacing a gravel path not far off. His face, apart from his collar, would have marked him as a priest of some kind. It was of the ascetic type; for the rest, it was rather an arbitrary and passionate face, with features at once complex and self-contained. In age he looked around thirty, with a spare, wiry, athletic frame.

"That's Mr. Grimshaw," whispered one juryman to another. "Always on the lookout for flies and 'skitties' and all they things that do creep about wi' too many legs on un. Worse nor an old woman he be for wanting to know what they'm doing wi' their spare time and where they bide o' nights. Onnatural curiosity, I calls it. Though I don't deny as he'm rare clever."

"I dunno about clever," the other grumbled. "He looks at my lil' Maudie, and he says, 'Less potatoes for that child and more apples.' And we done it, and she'm lost a pound a week. Fattest child in the Forest she were afore, and now she'm like any of the other lil' deurs, iddn' she?"

"Eh, and he says to I, when I speaks to un about my game leg, 'Tis the years, Mister Fletcher,' he says, 'tis the years.'"

Another put in warmly, "Years indeed! T' other leg be the same age, iddn' it? And nothing wrong wi' un. If so be as 'twas years, how could that be?"

"The interest he takes in charcoal burning, you wouldn't believe," a third murmured. "Many a time he goes the round of those huts. He was away this morning, or he might have found the poor lady himself."

Blair, who was too far off to hear this idle talk,

chanced to look up—at the Elmhurst parson, as he rightly guessed. Handsome chap, he thought, in an autocratic, imperious way. Bit of a volcano, he judged. Not the usual " squarson " by any means. Just now the face wore an expression which Blair had seen many times on lads going into an examination room, running over in their minds some last, all but forgotten tag. He had seen it, too, on the faces of inexperienced actors standing in the wings before they went on for the first time.

At that moment the rector turned and nodded to the electrician, who stepped forward to speak to him, Blair beside him. The man introduced the two. " This gentleman is a newspaper man come down from London about Mrs. Amcott's death," he finished.

" Indeed ? Why this interest of a recording angel in our secluded hamlet ? Can't we even die in peace nowadays ? " Mr. Grimshaw asked coldly.

" Not in charcoal sheds," Blair retorted. The electrician stepped back to the chair again. Blair and Grimshaw walked on. It was nearly time for the inquest.

" It seems to have been an accident, due to carelessness," the clergyman said thoughtfully, and then spoke of the weather and the scenery until they reached the room off the police station where the coroner was already chatting with the Police Inspector. The coroner was none too pleased to have to summon a jury at all. But new-fangled red tape, as he called it, made it necessary even where, as here, he was certain, everybody was certain, that death was due to the merest misadventure.

The doctor was first called.

He briefly identified the body as that of his late patient. He and another medical man from Salis-

bury had carried out the autopsy together this morning. There was no shadow of doubt but that Mrs. Amcott had died of carbon monoxide fumes, a peculiarly deadly gas owing to its absence of smell, of premonitory symptoms. It was the dreaded "miners' damp," that used to account for so many a life underground. It was the poisoning agent in all deaths from charcoal fumes. As to the time when Mrs. Amcott's death had occurred, he pointed out that that would depend on when she was last seen, for this particular gas had a way of upsetting usual computations.

The Salisbury doctor's evidence was to the same effect, with the addition of unimportant details.

The coroner then explained to the world at large that the news of the dreadful accident had been at once wirelessed to the lady's husband, Mr. Ralph Amcott, Civil Secretary at Khartoum. A reply had come already, saying that Mr. Ralph Amcott had been taken ill only yesterday, and could not be allowed to return to England for some time. The squire of Elmhurst, Mr. Ralph's eldest brother, Sir Christopher, was, as everybody there knew—except Blair—away big game shooting. There only remained the youngest of the three brothers, Mr. Hilary Amcott, who, like his sister-in-law, had been staying at the manor. Incidentally, Blair learnt from a local confrère that Ralph Amcott, alone of the three brothers, was married.

Mr. Hilary was next called. He was a very dissipated-looking man, who appeared to be around twenty-seven or eight, with weary, red-rimmed eyes that seemed unable to look at any one thing for long without closing.

His tale, corroborated by all the servants, was that Mrs. Amcott had gone out as usual last night about

half-past nine for a stroll with the Airedale, and, seeing the dog back by ten, it had unfortunately been taken for granted that she had returned as usual, and was safely upstairs in her own rooms. It was now only too evident that Mrs. Amcott had not returned.

Hilary Amcott explained that "Laddy" had the strongest objections to those with whom he was out going inside anywhere. Nothing was more likely than that, if Mrs. Amcott had entered one of the charcoal sheds, the dog would have returned home. He was a peculiarly unintelligent animal except where guarding the house was concerned.

No explanation could be given of how Mrs. Amcott came to enter a charcoal shed, let alone sit down, with the door closed, on the warm turf inside, except that of fatigue and chill. Both were considered sufficient reasons in the case of someone who, like the dead woman, was only just recovering from a recent motor accident, and knew little about the dangers of charcoal fumes.

As to her being near the shed so late in the evening, it was explained that Mrs. Amcott never omitted a quick turn out of doors at that hour. It was the doctor's orders, she had said. Dr. Pearson, recalled for a moment, explained that the celebrated specialist, who had had charge of Mrs. Amcott after her accident, had advised a brisk stroll of about ten minutes every night when possible before going to bed, as helping to limber up the spine for the next morning. The charcoal shed where her body had been found was about fifteen minutes' walk from the gates of the manor, and last night had been unusually fine. Mrs. Amcott was without a maid for the time being. She had let her own go, and then found that the new maid would be unable to

come for a couple of days yet, owing to a death in her family. There was one person, however, who might have been able to tell more of the last evening, had she been at the manor, and that was the governess of little Doris Amcott, but she had left on Saturday with the nurse to take her charge to an expensive children's sunlight home outside London. The child had been suffering from a bad cold. The governess was not expected back until to-morrow, Thursday. A telegram and a telephone message to the hotel where Mrs. Amcott and she always put up, and where she was believed to be staying, had brought the information that Miss Ingilby—the name of the governess was Joan Ingilby—had only inquired for letters on Monday morning. She had not stayed at the establishment.

A query to the home showed that she had left the child and nurse there for a fortnight's treatment as arranged, so it was believed that Mrs. Amcott and she must have settled that on this occasion Miss Ingilby should stay at some different hotel to the one usually patronised by the dead woman.

The charcoal burner, when his turn came, was inclined to scout the idea that he could have left any of his charcoal sheds unfastened. But the jury were men of the village, and a series of questions as to this date and that soon reduced him to a confession of at least two lapses in the past.

"But only twice times, and I never 'ave agained. So don't you pert me, John Boon!" he finished, eyeing the young foreman belligerently, "or I could up wi' a few things as you'm forgotten."

The coroner smoothed him down, but it was only from between his assurances that the doors had all been padlocked last night that an account of how he had found Mrs. Amcott lying was drawn out and

pieced together. She had apparently been overcome by the fumes while resting.

Blair was sorry, of course, for the dead woman. In that unthinking way in which we are sorry for those who have died, but he stifled a yawn with ever-increasing difficulty.

He had not seen her yet. A constable in the hall of the manor house would not allow him in until the official identification was over. He must in due course take a photograph of her, for he intended to send in a word picture of a New Forest inquest, larded with local customs, and laced with their quaint expressions. He looked about him, mentally photographing the village types. Then he caught sight of the rector's face as he was asked a few questions; more from civility than from any idea that he could add to the facts already known, Blair fancied, when he learnt that Grimshaw was a great friend of the dead woman's absent husband. What a mobile subtle mouth he had, the reporter thought, and a jaw like a prize-fighter's.

Yet Blair had a sudden conviction, as their eyes met, that the man was nervous. If so, he did not make the mistake of being too talkative. When he sat down after a few unimportant queries and answers, Blair had another certainty about the rector, and that was, that he had not liked the dead woman.

The verdict was as expected—death by misadventure. A couple of riders were added, the first expressing sympathy with Mr. Ralph Amcott, the second reprimanding the charcoal burner for his negligence about the lock.

Mr. Grimshaw was just ahead of Blair as the hall cleared. He looked like the younger brother of the man who had paced the gravel path but an hour ago.

Blair noticed that a young girl passed on the outskirts of the crush of people pouring out of the room. She bowed to Grimshaw, who was very close to her. Grimshaw did not stop, did not apparently see her, and the girl's face lost some of its brightness. Her colouring made Blair think of the girl on the boat.

Where in the wide world was his fairy princess? The meeting with her seemed to have brought him luck. It was after it that he had broken through into the ranks of those writers who, in some mysterious way, seemed to count. If he found her again now . . . it might not be so absolutely impossible to think that in a few years' time . . . He pulled himself together and walked to the manor house. The constable was still there, but had changed from a helmeted, one-headed Cerberus into affability itself.

Blair entered a pretty bedroom reverently enough, but still inwardly very bored. He was not bored when he came out a few minutes later. He had had the greatest surprise of his life so far.

Mrs. Amcott lay on her bed, dressed as when she had been found just before daybreak this morning. She had a face that did not attract him, but after one cursory glance at it, his eyes became riveted on her pretty little black shoes. The feet faced him as he stood at the end of her low couch-bed. The soles were painted black too, but they were as free from any marks of forest litter, let alone charcoal, as his own had been when he had stepped out of the train this noon—not at all like his shoes now, or those of anyone who had visited the sheds. He passed his hands over them. They came away practically unsoiled. He asked a few casual questions of the policeman before that worthy hurried off. The answers told him that nothing on the dead

woman had been altered, or could have been changed or cleaned.

That being so. . . .

Blair had not obtained the position that was his because of any slowness in jumping to the right conclusion. And when he jumped, he jumped with both feet, as he would have said. There had been foul play here. Mrs. Amcott had been carried into that shed—carried some distance. He had noticed that you had to walk about five yards to get to the hut from the path, and walk across rotting leaves and charcoal débris.

CHAPTER II

BLAIR unslung his camera and took two portraits—one with the soles pointing straight at the camera, the other the usual portrait of the head and shoulders. That done, he walked carefully around Mrs. Amcott's rooms, which were cut off by a door from the central landing. Her own bedrooms and the governess's room communicated through an intervening bathroom with each other. The little suite had its own boxroom, and a staircase leading down into the garden beside the place where the bath-chair was kept.

Blair spent some time in the governess's room, and a moment or two in the boxroom. Passing slowly down the stairs at the end, he looked at each tread, then he inspected the bath-chair again very closely—the door had not been relocked yet. There were charcoal and leaf-mould stains on the carpet inside the chair and on the india-rubber tyres.

After that, Blair sauntered around to the back of the house. Here he knocked at the kitchen door, and asked whether there were any uncovered beams, or possibly even a Tudor stone fireplace in the servants' hall, which he might photograph.

He was shown a fine example of the latter in the kitchen. While using his camera, he found out that the cook was a Frenchwoman, a Niçoise, and enchanted her with his appreciation of *Pissaladiera* and *Pan Bagnata* and heaven knows what other tasty popular dishes of that gay town, for he had only

lately returned from a trek through the Cote d'Azur on a missing company promoter's heels.

After quite a long and rambling chat about Mrs. Amcott's last days, he searched inside and outside the kitchen parts of the house for any "bits" that took his fancy—searched for them in some very funny places too. Then only did he leave the manor, walking slowly down the drive, with a pause and backward glance at the windows of the house.

Blair quickly developed his films at the inn, and then made for the police station.

"Want you to initial these snapshots of Mrs. Amcott."

"What's the idea?" asked the constable on duty.

"The rule. Saves faking. Proves we've been on the job," Blair said wearily. He held out his two prints. The policeman laughed aloud at the first.

"Look here! You're never going to send that one in? Why, it's all feet. This, now, is quite good."

"I have to account for every film used," Blair murmured sadly, and, surprised at the parsimony of London papers, the man stamped films and prints with the official dated stamp. Blair next asked and obtained the address of Dr. Pearson, the local general practitioner.

He found the doctor more than willing to talk of Mrs. Amcott's death to a duly qualified listener. Blair left him quite convinced that there had been no struggle, no marks of binding or gagging, that death had been due to nothing but charcoal poisoning—carbon monoxide, as Pearson would insist on calling it. Pearson was young and clever, and had by no means neglected to think of more sinister explanations for the lady's end than carelessness.

Blair made many discreet inquiries after he left Dr. Pearson.

Back in town—he did not arrive till past midnight—he typed the article on Mrs. Amcott's death which he had written in the train coming up.

The night editor glanced it over and then looked at him.

"Sure of the ground under your feet?" he asked laconically. It was well known that the *Daily Comet* would run any risk except that of big cry and little wool.

Blair nodded. He had put all his energy into his pen. He felt drained. The sub-editor re-read a line here and there. Then he raised his eyebrows.

"Grand slam, eh? It's the last word of yours we'll ever print if you've over-called your hand." He gave the orders for the article to be rushed in. Blair had already telephoned to reserve sufficient space. The article was headed *Who Killed Mrs. Amcott?*

Beneath its daring headline it set forth soberly enough the facts that made the writer—he signed his name—hold that what the jury and the coroner considered an accidental death was in truth a cunning and carefully planned murder. Blair burnt his boats. He stated that Mrs. Amcott's shoes proved that she had been carried into the shed where she was found early this (Wednesday) morning. He maintained that, as she had not been gagged nor bound, nor seemed to have struggled in any way, she must have been already dead when carried in.

As to the death itself, the medical evidence showed that she had been killed by charcoal fumes, but Blair denied that they were those of the charcoal pit where she had been found. His idea of the instrument of death was this:

In a kitchen outhouse he had found a portable charcoal stove about the size and roughly the shape of a man's top hat, and but little heavier. It was a type that is to be found in every concierge's rooms along the Riviera. A tall bag of charcoal sticks stood beside the stove. It was impossible to tell whether any had been recently taken, just as it was impossible to say whether the stove had been lately used or not. The ashes were merely shaken out, more or less carefully—chiefly less.

Blair, after mentioning the stove, proceeded to detail the clues that he had found.

The bath-chair tyres showed marks of having been wheeled close up to the hut across charcoal and forest débris. On the treads of the staircase leading up to her room, beside the carpet runner, were some marks left by charcoal-soiled shoes. The stairs had been cleaned on Tuesday morning as usual, the wooden margins polished. One of these shoes had undoubtedly been a woman's pointed shoe. "See inset photograph," said the article.

In the bedroom of the governess was a gas stove with a little concealed gas-ring on the top. In the centre of this ring Blair had found—and left—a very fair-sized piece of charcoal, the same charcoal as that in the bag downstairs. He went on to explain the method of lighting charcoal stoves when there is gas available, which is to hold each piece with a pair of tongs over a lit gas jet until well caught, and lay it in the stove until a handful of glowing sticks is built up; then to fill up the stove, leave the damper open, and set it outside in the open air to draw well, unless a special funnel is used. On the window ledge of the governess's room was a black smear, a smear of charcoal, and charcoal that

evidently had scorched the paint of the sill where it had fallen.

Blair maintained that whoever had killed Mrs. Amcott had waited at night in the boxroom belonging to her suite for the right moment. A trunk showed marks in the dust which, even in his photograph, supported this theory. When all was quiet, this someone had come downstairs, taken the charcoal stove, set it going, and placed it noiselessly in the room of Mrs. Amcott, who sometimes took veronal. Blair had seen a little veronal bottle lying out on the table beside her bed, as though used by her for her last sleep.

Mrs. Amcott would have been dead long before morning—she slept in winter with her windows closed—supposing that the little stove had been filled to the uttermost. In the dark her body had been carried down the staircase of her suite and placed in her bath-chair in the lock-up below, which was fitted with an electric light. Mrs. Amcott kept the key hanging in the boxroom.

But since dead bodies cannot be shifted in daylight without comment, and since a bath-chair cannot be trundled at night along newly gravelled paths that loop backwards and forwards in front of quite a number of bedroom windows without causing a noise, many noises, which would have been fatal to the success of the plot, Blair held that the crime had been carried out in parts—a little at a time. So that only when daylight came, and a suitable hour, had the self-propelling bath-chair passed out of the gates as so often before, but this time to be hidden in some secluded part of the Forest until it should again be dark, and Mrs. Amcott's body be able to be finally carried into the nearest charcoal shed, and placed in a position as though she had been overcome

by the fumes while sitting down. A couple of turves had been taken off the still hot wood to account for the deadly effect of the fumes. The body from the chair would by this time be stiffened into a sitting position. It would look, as it did, perfectly natural when found by the charcoal burner.

Here Blair pointed out that his reconstruction of the crime meant that since the body had been found on Wednesday morning before daybreak, it had been hidden all Tuesday, and that therefore the actual murder must have occurred during the night before (Monday night). In other words, according to him, the figure seen throughout the Tuesday, but —as he cleverly pieced together—never spoken to, could not have been Mrs. Amcott, for Mrs. Amcott, he maintained, was by then dead.

He went on to show that this was possible. While breakfast had been laid in her sitting-room on Tuesday—Mrs. Amcott took no early cups of tea, and when, as now, without a maid, would turn on her own bath—the maid had heard music played on the piano in an adjoining room—music at which Mrs. Amcott had been working for some days. She had knocked at the door as usual under those circumstances, a discreet knock, not loud enough to interrupt, but loud enough to catch the player's ear, and had heard later on, while downstairs, Mrs. Amcott walking about the room.

She had heard the impersonator of Mrs. Amcott throughout Tuesday, Blair felt sure, heard her both at the piano and walking about, heard the woman who—before the maids had come upstairs to clear away the breakfast table or start on the rooms of her suite, which were never touched until nine—had slipped down these convenient stairs, dressed in Mrs. Amcott's clothes, and got into the roomy bath-

chair, which already held another, a very slender, silent, and cold occupant. The hood had been up, and the mica shutter down—it was a vile morning—when the chair had passed the woman at the gates. The woman had curtseyed, thinking that it was "Mrs. Ralph," and indeed it was that lady's hat.

Blair believed the impersonator to be a woman, but at the charcoal shed itself, he reasoned that a man must have helped in the final placing of the body, as in carrying it down the stairs and lifting it into the bath-chair; and a man might well have forced open a padlock while waiting for the chair with its double burden to come creeping up just before nine, probably, from its temporary hiding place in the forest.

The body disposed of in the charcoal shed, the woman had returned alone in the chair to the manor, and gone up to the murdered woman's rooms, leaving those marks on the stairs that he had found. In the evening a maid had heard the bath-chair being rolled into its lock-up about nine. This meant, she had thought, that Mrs. Amcott had returned, either from Salisbury, or from town, by one of her favourite trains, one to which a restaurant car was attached. For on Tuesday Mrs. Amcott was often away from the manor house all day long, and always all morning and evening. On that day, from five to eleven, at Salisbury, "Teapot Row"—the generic name for the wives and daughters of the army men stationed there—had a bridge drive and a friendly dinner, and cut off as she was this winter from dances and hunting, the dead woman had become a regular visitor, generally putting in the morning as well in the quaint old town, and lunching there.

She had not been to lunch or bridge this last Tuesday. Indeed, an inquiry at the railway station had

told Blair that she had not been anywhere by train since Saturday.

A little later on this last Tuesday evening, the same maid had seen, from the other end of the large outer hall, the supposedly Mrs. Amcott coming down the stairs that led to and from her rooms, her well-known fur cloak around her, a felt hat pulled low over her face, according to the fashion of the moment. A very useful fashion, Blair said.

Blair had learnt in the kitchen that "Laddy" had behaved oddly all Tuesday, appearing uneasy and restless. In the light of Wednesday's discovery of the dead woman, the servants were inclined to think that he had some sort of intuition of what was coming.

Blair did not refer to the dog's restlessness in his article, any more than he tried to explain why Mrs. Amcott had kept so much to herself. His point was only this: if, as he maintained, the dog's companion this last Tuesday evening had not been Mrs. Amcott, who was she?

It must be someone who knew all her habits thoroughly; who knew all the habits of the manor house extremely well; who was friends with the by no means effusive Airedale; who was roughly about Mrs. Amcott's height and slender build. And Blair wound up with regretting the apparent inability of everyone to get into touch with the governess, the governess who was supposed to be in town. Where was this Miss Joan Ingilby?

He asked the question ostensibly by way of gaining light on various obscure points, but he showed how this woman, in whose room the broken bit of charcoal still lay, whose window bore the smear of a glowing charcoal cinder, could have come back at any time after she had left the child at the home.

With great skill he pointed out, without seeming to do so, that she fitted all the requirements of his theory. In short, his whole conclusion was an indirect accusation against the absent woman.

It was a brilliant piece of writing. Short and temperate and deadly. But no paper except the *Comet* would have printed it.

He read it himself with approval when the sheet was brought to him at the breakfast table in his comfortable rooms near Victoria.

Half-way through it he raised his head from the page. He had unusually good ears. Or, rather, he had the faculty of instantly and accurately cataloguing what he heard. There was a scuffle going on just outside his door.

Suddenly it was jerked open and then shut in the same instant—shut as one shuts a sanctuary in the face of imminent and deadly peril.

And there, her back against the door, her eyes wild with terror, her breath coming in swift jerks, leant the girl of the boat, the girl of his dreams, his fairy princess.

He jumped to his feet.

"You!" It was a cry of rapture.

She put her finger to her lip in a gesture of fear. The sleeve of her coat was torn at the cuff.

"Look out quickly. Someone attacked me just as I was going to knock."

Instantly Blair switched out the light and peered on to the landing. He caught but the merest glimpse of a man's dark figure on the stairway below—of a grey felt hat. He jumped the stairs three at a time, but when he reached the front door no one was to be seen in the dark December morning, for it was not yet nine.

Upstairs he bounded again, his whole being in a

turmoil. What did it mean? His fairy princess and that lurking figure on the stairs!

When he entered his sitting-room she was standing out of sight until the door was shut.

"Lock the door," she whispered tensely. "He must have been outside your rooms, watching them. I know I wasn't followed."

"Followed—he—who? Why on earth——"

"I'm Joan Ingilby, Mr. Blair. Perhaps that's why."

Joan Ingilby! He stared at the pretty young creature before him, the colour moving back inch by inch from his pale but healthy face. Joan Ingilby! Mrs. Amcott's governess! Whom he had. . . .

"I only read the paper just now. The one with your article in it," she managed to articulate. "If they find me they'll hang me—because of what you wrote. But they'll never think of looking for me in your rooms—after it. You don't mind my coming?" She scanned his face with a timid glance. She was trembling—the whole lovely, slender figure of her.

"Mind!" he jerked out. He was appalled, dazed. He felt like a surgeon whose knife has slipped and cut a vital part. He had been so certain that he was right. But, thank God, in spite of her terror, the blunder he had made was not irreparable.

"You will help me?" She was not sure of even that much from the writer of that article. Though she had staked everything on it, she was not sure. "You can, without doing wrong. For *I* did not kill Mrs. Amcott, Mr. Blair." She spoke with a sort of pitiful dignity.

He could only look at her. Help her? He would die to put right what he had put wrong. She read

his ardent, horrified eyes, and her face lost some of its tension.

"I need help," she said simply, "as I don't think many people have needed it in this world." And suddenly she put her hands to her face and broke into low, smothered sobs.

Dropping on a chair, she crouched there, crying under her breath with the terrible insistence of despair. He was on his knees beside her. That soft, heart-broken weeping wrung his very heart's core.

"Had I known or dreamt that you were the governess——" Blair said hoarsely. His tone told how differently in that case he would have read the mystery of Mrs. Amcott's death. "But we'll soon put it right—about my article and you, I mean."

"How?" she asked without looking up.

"Haven't you an alibi?" he demanded, a sudden cold chill touching him.

"Not the ghost of such a thing. Nothing but my word. Not for Monday night nor Tuesday. Nor for last night." For a second she turned so white that he thought she would faint, but she forced herself to speak on.

"Mr. Blair, Mrs. Amcott wasn't killed." She spoke with certainty. "You are wrong about its being a crime. I'm sure of that." The conviction in her voice was almost catching. But Blair shook his head.

"There's no possibility of its not being a crime," he told her honestly and definitely.

"Yet you were wrong about who did it," she said timidly. "Indeed, *indeed* you are."

"You don't need to assure me on that point. God forgive me for the blunder I've made. But there's no question but that Mrs. Amcott was murdered.

None whatever. I know it—and the police know it now. But we'll soon put right any mistakes caused by that article. We'll clear you at once, fairy princess."

"You will if you can," she breathed, "but *can* anyone? Can even you really clear me?" She turned towards him. The light fell full on the pale oval of her face. Blair thought that she had the softest, most trusting eyes that he had ever seen.

"You see," she went on nervously, in the whisper of a whisper, "I have no alibi except for Monday afternoon. Usually I stop at a little hotel in Kensington, but I didn't quite care for the people there when I was by myself. They were so off-hand to me. I didn't speak of it, but I went to a much cheaper, and to me much more civil, house. I'm afraid it will prove dear economy and pride, for it's the sort of place where no one knows whether you are out or in."

"But surely someone saw you on Tuesday? You talked to some person who might remember that you were in town?" He pressed her confidently.

She almost wrung her hands.

"No. I got up late. It's a treat nowadays to get the chance to sleep long, and I didn't do anything in the afternoon but stroll through the shops. I lunched at the A.B.C. in the midst of a fearful crush. I didn't dine anywhere either on Monday or Tuesday. I wanted to save up for my winter coat. I put some of my own money to the cheque which Mrs. Amcott had given me, and to make it stretch I had some chocolate and cakes both days, again at a fearfully crowded bun-shop. Oh, I couldn't have done it better if I'd been trying not to have people know where I was! Then I changed and went to the theatre, alone."

"Still—the lack of all motive . . ." he said with determined hopefulness.

"But there *is* what some people might twist into a motive," she murmured brokenly. "Her brother-in-law, Mr. Hilary Amcott. He—he drinks," she murmured in a distressed whisper, "and I'm so sorry for him. I tried to help him, and Mrs. Amcott chose to think, and to say on Saturday, that I was trying to catch him. She gave me notice—I think that's the word. Poor, poor Mrs. Amcott!" She lifted eyes on whose lashes the tears still hung like diamonds. "In spite of our last parting, I liked her. And I loved the child—little Doris. Mr. Blair," she breathed, "if you were clever enough to write that awful article that could only apply to me, be cleverer still and see the truth, the real truth. Find out the real criminal!"

He would! he told himself. He would. But meanwhile what of his fairy princess? A noose was circling around that innocent head, and his was the hand that had flung it.

"What step to take first," he muttered. "An immediate recantation goes to the paper, of course."

"First of all I need a disguise," she said practically.

"Oh, come, it's not so bad as that," he began, and then stopped. His article rose before him—the noose that he had knotted. If there was a motive, however slender . . . if she had no alibi . . . if the police chose to act on his thinly veiled accusation of the governess . . . something cold and heavy seemed to be labouring inside his breast.

She gave him a pitiful travesty of a smile.

"If the police get hold of me, it couldn't be worse, so I must have a disguise first of all. My portrait will be in the evening papers." She flushed.

Blair felt that that stung her to the quick, and for a second her eyes showed full of indignation.

"Oh, to be dragged into this! To be considered part of a crime! To be thought a murderess! Why, I can't drown a trapped mouse! I always let them run. And now, now—if the police find me—because of what you wrote . . ." She stopped and turned to him again.

"Forgive me! *Of course*, you had to write what you thought the truth! But my picture will be out everywhere soon, I'm afraid. I acted in the Elmhurst church theatricals only last week, and everybody took snapshots of everybody."

"Yes, you're right. You must have a disguise. I'll get you one at once." He forced himself to speak in a business-like, practical tone.

"Oh, will you?" Her voice and eyes thanked him, and Blair had to bite his lip.

"I've written on this paper a list of things I shall need. Thank goodness, I'd just bought a new coat and hat. The coat was to be Mrs. Amcott's Christmas present to me." She turned her face away, and Blair saw her hand—such a little hand—go up. Then she faced him again. "Luckily I put them on this morning to go down to Elmhurst, and luckily I came to you!"

"But the risk!" His mouth was dry. With no alibi—with a motive of revenge—after—he could not deny it to himself—after his article!

"It was my one chance. My one chance for my life."

But there Blair could honestly contradict her.

"Not a bit of it! In spite of my article, in spite of no alibi, not a bit of it!" he protested stoutly. "You mustn't get the wind up like that. But now I'll hurry off with this list."

"Don't go to any theatrical agent," she put in swiftly. "The police may inquire if any wigs have been bought of them lately. Will you take my purse, please. I want a wig bought at Harrods. I saw one there only yesterday in their hairdressing rooms that would do splendidly—black and curly. But if it's been sold, get any dark, bobbed kind. Say it's for a small-sized head, to cover Eton-cropped hair. Fortunately I had them cut mine extra close. Ask the woman to pack you up the right kind of face cream or lotion to go with it to make up an Italian type of face. Liquid powder that won't rub off, tell her; and the right colour rouge, and lash pencils, and lip-stick, and, oh! a bottle of belladonna. They'll give it some ridiculous name such as Eastern Delight, probably." She all but pushed him towards the door. "Oh, hurry, and hurry back! I'm "—she gulped—"I'm frightened," and she looked at him with distended eyes.

"Lock the door after me," he told her. "When I come back I'll rub gently along a panel." And with that he was gone.

To the girl he left in his rooms every second was sixty separate intervals of terror. At first she walked the floor like a person all but demented. Could Blair save her? Could anyone save her? The article which he had written was terribly logical. Anyone reading it *must* think her guilty. Then she calmed herself and told her reeling wits that Blair would somehow undo what he had done. That nowhere was she safer than here—here in the house of the man who would be supposed to be against her, on the hunt for her. She must keep up. She must not crash now. Glancing with almost unseeing eyes down into the street from behind the lace curtains she stiffened. It was daylight outside, and

Blair had switched off the lights and pulled up the blinds. As she stared, the little colour which she had rubbed into her cheeks left them in a wave of almost green pallor. There was a man standing in the shadow of a doorway opposite. He had not moved since she had looked out. He did not move now. It was too dark still, too far off, to see his eyes, but his face was turned towards the rooms where she was. Joan clutched the back of the nearest chair, and, frozen with horror, stood looking at him. For fifteen minutes by the clock she watched him. He was still there, still facing the house which was her only refuge. So she *had* been followed! She pulled herself together by a violent effort. She felt certain that the man opposite was a police watcher. If so, that meant? Her head swam. Let her be arrested, after that damning article, and she would have no chance at all—absolutely none. Except, perhaps, that of insufficient motive. Perhaps!

A step came running up the stairs. One man's step. There came a rub. She unlocked the door without a sound.

It was Blair, and only Blair, a packet in his hand.

"Got everything," he murmured after he had closed and locked the door. He stooped and looked hard at her. There was something about that tense little figure. . . .

"What is it?" he asked hoarsely.

"There's a man across the street watching this house. I think he's from the police. I think they've found out where I've got to."

Blair peered out in his turn. It was still foggy, but he could see the burning end of a cigarette far back in the doorway.

"I'll saunter over and see what he looks like near

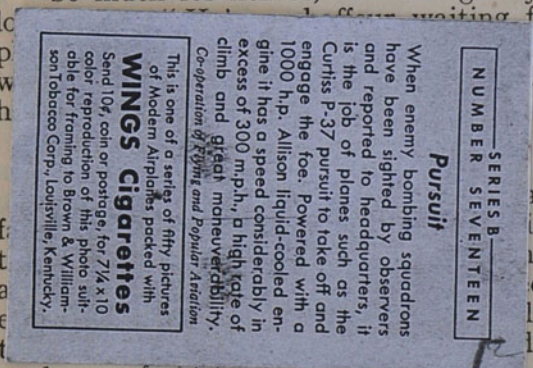
at hand," he murmured. "Don't do anything rash."

"I—I haven't the ghost of a chance if he's from the police. If they have found out that I'm here . . ." Her face quivered convulsively.

"You mustn't feel like that!" he scolded gently. "The ghost of a chance indeed! You've a fat certainty even if the police were the dunderheads they aren't. But I'll soon find out about that man."

Again she locked the door noiselessly behind him. He came back quickly and smiling.

"So much for nerves," he said gently in a very lo... ...for his em- p... ...one wrong w... ...king telling h...



...s going to ...ief, she took ...e was away ...d figures of ...ll to deny it ...l. His very soul was afraid for her. That article . . . and she without an alibi . . . and with a motive of sorts. . . .

When she entered he would not have known her. She was lovely always, but now her make-up showed a dashing quality—Joan intended it to show it. She looked a handsome, artificial girl of the day, lipsticked, rouged, with glossy black hair hanging in an Egyptian mop around her ivory face. She had a certain Eastern, Byzantine beauty that made Blair marvel at how a woman can change her appearance. Then she looked at him, and he found his fairy princess again.

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"So much for nerves," he said gently in a very low voice. "He's a chaffeur waiting for his employer to come out. Something has gone wrong with the car at the garage, and he's funking telling him."

"Sure?" she quavered.

"Absolutely."

For a moment Joan thought she was going to faint after all, then, with an immense relief, she took the parcel and ran into his bedroom. She was away a full half-hour, during which he walked figures of eight over his floor. It was all very well to deny it to her, but his heart was sick with dread. His very soul was afraid for her. That article . . . and she without an alibi . . . and with a motive of sorts. . . .

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"I can face the world now," she said more cheerfully than she had yet spoken. "It was because I couldn't, daren't even buy a disguise, and yet had to have one, that I was so panicky."

"How did you know where I lived?" he asked. So many questions were thronging within him that he took the first that cropped up.

"Your name was stitched on the rug you lent me. Do you remember? I didn't know where to send it to. But when I saw your name heading that article this morning, I telephoned to your newspaper office, and learnt where you lived. You see, as I said, I felt at once that, apart from a hiding-place and apart from the fact that I needed someone to get me a disguise and daren't turn to anyone, apart altogether from those things, you alone could save me—if it's possible to save me."

There came a pause of terrible emotion. Blair hurried in with another question out of his thronging host.

"The man outside my rooms—when did you see him? What happened?"

"I thought I felt someone pass me on the stairs before he caught hold of my arm on the landing, as though to pull me away from your door."

"Did he say anything?"

"Nothing. He only made a grab as I stepped past. I don't think he had heard me come up the stairs, and it was dark outside."

Blair had noticed that the light had gone out when he came down to his breakfast.

"You don't think you've ever seen him before? Not that that would make it less amazing."

"I couldn't see enough of him to be sure" She seemed engrossed in some more pressing thought. Suddenly she looked up.

"I'm going down to Elmhurst. Now that I'm disguised, and well disguised too."

He thought that he could not have heard aright.

"Yes; to the manor," she repeated. "I shall go as Lucy Ingilby, Joan's sister. It won't seem quite so much of a lie then. Besides, my voice. . . ."

He would have made some wild demur, but she faced him with the alert, intelligent look of one who under all her prettiness has brains. There was character in that lovely mouth, whether lip-sticked or left to its own wild rose colour.

"Of course I'm going down. I must go. Do you suppose I can rest with such a story as that out against me and not try to find out the truth?"

He felt as though she distrusted his powers to help her. She saw the hurt, and a very sweet look came into her own face.

"I want you to come down too. You're appointed my own private investigator, but I must help. I can find out lots of things no one else can—about that charcoal in the gas-ring in my room . . . lots of things . . . and minutes count. Whoever did the murder will be able to do away with all the traces if I'm not quick. And I can't get down in much under three hours!" She looked desperate.

"I want you to telephone at once to the nearest garage for a car, a good one, to get me down as fast as possible. Tell them to meet me at Victoria. Don't give any name. I'll settle with the driver before we start."

"You can't go!" he protested, with no pretence of her not being in danger. "You're playing, not with fire, but with. . . ."

He could not finish.

"With a rope." She said it for him very quietly. "I know I am. But I must go down. I must clear

up this dreadful thing. I owe it to Mrs. Amcott, and I owe it to Joan Ingilby."

"You can do it faster by train. There's one leaves Waterloo in an hour that gets down quicker than any car could. It's not a good road for hurrying along. Too many police traps."

He pulled a time-table towards him and showed her. She nodded finally.

"A whole hour to wait. I feel as though I were burning up, and yet I only hope I shall be able to stick to my resolve when an hour's gone by! I'm an awful coward!" She half whispered the words to herself. "But I mustn't be one now!"

Blair would have liked to take her hand. He would have liked to draw her into his arms. But he was very conscious that by his doing she had no refuge save with him, and that a refuge which only her daring had given her. Also, there was something about the girl herself that checked him. She seemed to him like Britomart, clad in shining armour.

"What to do when I get there—how to start," she was murmuring thoughtfully. "You say someone was in those rooms of Mrs. Amcott's, hiding . . . They're sure to've left some clues behind them if so. Clues that only I could see. For you wouldn't notice anything strange in the room as I should."

"Look here," he said urgently, "haven't you any suspicions yourself?"

"Suspicions? Of murder?" Her tone was a negative in itself.

"Yes, but now," he persisted, "now that you know a crime has been committed."

He saw her hesitate, start to speak, then check herself. "I mustn't drag other people down just because I'm drowning," she said a little wearily.

"After the experience I've had as to where circumstantial evidence and very accurate reasoning—judging by what seemed the truth—can bring a clever man, am I likely to repeat it?"

Blair flinched, but he persisted.

"What sort of a person is Mr. Hilary Amcott, for instance?"

"He's a man who has no interest in life beyond learning recipes for cocktails, and drinking them. I suppose when he's away—I believe he's been shunted to some place in Asia—I suppose he now and then does work out there, though I can't believe it. He certainly had no hand in any murder. Neither the brains nor the energy."

"And the eldest brother? The squire, as they call him at Elmhurst. The one who's big game hunting in Uganda or Rhodesia. What's he like?" he queried.

"I've hardly met Sir Christopher. I only came to Mrs. Amcott in September, just after you and I met on the boat. I didn't know it at the time"—her lip quivered—"but I was sent for because my father had died. It killed my mother. She only survived him two days. And then I found that things were quite different to what I expected. My poor father had believed some account of a gold mine that only needed money to work it. Somewhere in Peru it was, and every penny had gone into it. He was so sure it was a—well, a gold-mine." Blinking her eyes hard, she managed a smile. "But about the Amcott's, you see I don't know very much of them or the house."

"Nor of Mrs. Amcott's husband?"

"I've never seen Mr. Ralph Amcott."

She stopped, or, rather, she started, made a sign to him to unlock the door noiselessly, and herself

crept across the floor to the room beyond. A knock came. It hurt Blair intolerably to see the look in her face as she turned to him for one pallid second before she slipped into his bedroom and closed the door behind her without a sound, just as the maid opened the one from the landing.

"Gentleman to see you, sir."

In came a smart-looking, keen-faced man, who bowed politely.

"Mr. Blair? I'm Police-Inspector Armstrong from Elmhurst. I saw you yesterday down at the inquest. Well, Mr. Blair, a pity you didn't tell us your very interesting theory of Mrs. Amcott's murder last night. We'd have got Miss Ingilby then. As it is, she's escaped. Got away—for the time being. We shall get her in the end, of course. By the way, are we alone?"

"We are," Blair said promptly. He was sorry, but this was no place for George Washington. "Let's go out for a stroll, however. There's always the chance of a maid eavesdropping."

His one idea was to get the Inspector away from Joan's neighbourhood.

"We shall be quite safe if we talk low, Mr. Blair." The police officer was glad of a rest. "Now, what I've come about is this: the Chief Constable doesn't suppose that you want to leave the case where it is. We would like you to work with us, sir. We think you're too good to lose."

Blair offered him some cigars before he replied. His thoughts were with Joan, with his poor, hunted fairy princess, for he knew, what she did not, that in a few minutes the maid would start doing up some rooms on the ground floor, and then attack his own bedroom. Ellen was always punctual to the minute. Joan would very likely be seen when she

tried to slip out of the house, unless she got away at once.

"Yes," the Inspector repeated, "much too good to lose, Mr. Blair. Though I don't mind saying that we weren't the blind mice you perhaps thought us. In fact, we think, and thought, very much along your lines, though we hadn't linked up with the governess as quickly as you did. Clever idea that, and the right one. Oh, undoubtedly the right one!"

"Hold hard!" Blair said lightly. He kept his head from swimming only by an effort as he lit up. "That idea about the governess was only a newspaper scoop, you know."

"Eh?"

"Merest column filling as far as she is concerned. Newspaper stuffing," Blair said firmly.

"You're too modest, Mr. Blair. Much too modest. Even the cook bears out your idea of the governess having been the one to use that stove," the Inspector went on pleasantly. "She says Miss Ingilby was the only person for miles around except herself who knew how to light it."

Blair told himself that he must seem casual enough for the conversation to be dealing with a stranger.

"No, no!" He spoke contemptuously but lightly. "The steps in the murder are, I think, more or less rightly outlined. But as to connecting them with the governess . . ." Blair shook his head. "It was the best I could do for something sensational on the spur of the moment. But the real facts of this crime, Inspector, are much harder to solve than that; much more recondite than my little fantasia. I have a theory—its only vague as yet—but it's a very different theory from that article of mine as to what really happened."

He finished on a mysterious note.

"And that theory?" the Inspector asked quickly.

Blair shook his head, as well he might. He had no other theory than the terrible one that had brought Joan Ingilby to him, seeking a refuge in the lion's den itself.

"I must wait and see whether anything turns up to support it."

Again there came a knock at his door, a quick, firm tapping. He called "Come in!" and then jumped to his feet.

A girl stood there with a magnolia-like complexion and eyes like big black coals. Her lips marked two double wings of carmine against the creamy velvet of her skin. Two little waves of black hair showed beneath the trim hat.

The Inspector rose hastily.

"Are you Mr. Blair?" Joan Ingilby asked Martin, coming into the room with a haughty, head-up carriage.

He bowed, too overcome to speak. The grit of her! Again her only way out had lain through the lion's den.

"I'm Lucy Ingilby, a sister of Mrs. Amcott's governess," Joan said coldly, eyeing him as though he were a cockroach, "and I would like to speak to you for a moment."

CHAPTER III

BLAIR'S exclamation was a mixture of amazement and consternation. It was a genuine let-off to some of his emotions. He stared at her wildly.

"But how—how . . ." He could not think of anything to say.

"Miss Ingilby's sister?" The Inspector looked very pleased. "We've been trying to get into touch with that young lady all morning." He mentioned his name and position. "Can you give me your sister's address?"

"No." Joan spoke even more coldly than before. "She is not at her usual address. I do not know where she is. Hiding in some spot until this terrible accusation *you* have brought against her is cleared up." She turned to Blair.

"I'm most awfully sorry about it," that young man said earnestly. "I deeply apologise, Miss Ingilby, for having written that article. It was only meant for what we call a newspaper scoop, and was based on a very hasty judgment of the facts of Mrs. Amcott's death, on what I now believe to be a quite wrong assemblage of them."

"And what good does your regret do my sister, do to Joan?" she asked with a forlorn note in her voice that wrung young Blair's very soul. "That 'scoop' of yours, as you call it, will cost my sister every friend she has in the world; it will leave a life-long stain on a girl who has to work for her living; and who has always, as I know, kept her reputation untouched until you have

smirched it. It was a cruel article." Joan spoke passionately. In truth, she could hardly trust herself to think of it. "Cruel and most utterly untrue!" She could have burst into tears as she finished. "I demand a public retraction of it from you."

"You shall have it," he said promptly. "I was writing it when the Inspector arrived."

"Yet you're clever. You might help us, Joan and me," she said after a pause.

"Just what I've been suggesting, Miss Ingilby," the Inspector, who had been patting his neat moustache as though it might drop off, said quickly. "What we all want is the truth. That's what we want, isn't it? By the way, how did your sister come to go to Mrs. Amcott? No one quite knows."

Joan did not reply. She stood looking down at the table, her head a little on one side. Blair thought the line of her temple and cheek made the most entrancing Greek-vase curve that he had ever seen.

"I do not intend to tell you anything about my sister," she said at last, very quietly and collectedly.

"Mistake, Miss Ingilby," the Inspector said pleasantly. "A good character is worth a lot in a case of this kind."

"The last thing my sister would want is to have her past dragged along into this terrible present." Joan spoke with certainty. "Her old friends are all that she has left now, I'm afraid. No, Inspector, it's no use asking me for any information. When she is cleared, Joan herself can tell you what she likes. I shall be absolutely dumb about her, and about myself too, therefore."

She had read his next question in his eyes.

"Mistake, Miss Ingilby," the police officer repeated, not quite so pleasantly.

Joan's chin went up into the air. She shook a very determined little black head.

"The last thing I should do would be to give you any addresses," she said crisply. "Joan can at least hope that that terrible article won't reach some of our friends and relatives. Your inquiries would drag them all in."

"They would be made very guardedly," he said coaxingly. "A past such as I don't doubt your sister could show goes a long way in a case of this sort, as I said before."

"My sister's past makes any idea of a crime on her part quite silly," Joan said confidently, "but, all the same, it's *her* past, Inspector! I'm on my way to Elmhurst Manor now to see what threads I can pick up."

Blair stopped her.

"A moment. I'm working on this case too, Miss Ingilby, to repair, if I may, the harm I've done. Now, as the sister of Mrs. Amcott's governess, you must have heard a good deal about the house and its inmates. Haven't you any clue to give us?"

"You both believe it was a murder?" she asked as before, in a low, agonised tone.

"Most certainly a murder," the Inspector this time assured her, "and two people in it. One at least, if not both, must have known Mrs. Amcott closely and intimately, and known the house, and been known to the dog—more than known to him. That Airedale wouldn't have gone out with anyone but an actual member of the household. That will be our greatest help."

"Our greatest pitfall," she retorted with spirit.

"That person was probably a woman," he went on unmoved.

"A woman!" she repeated incredulously.

"Altogether, Miss Ingilby," the police officer threw in casually, "you really would be doing your sister a good turn to advise her to come forward. Your sister leaving just before the crime. . . ."

"Saturday morning! Mrs. Amcott wasn't murdered until Monday night at the earliest, according to Mr. Blair's article," Joan reminded him.

"Even so. Sticking to Mr. Blair's idea that she was killed Monday night—I think you still hold to that, Mr. Blair?" the Inspector asked.

"I see no reason to change that part," Blair agreed.

"Your sister left the Saturday before," Inspector Armstrong continued. "Now, Miss Ingilby, taking it that she had nothing to do with Mrs. Amcott's death, have you any idea who first suggested that she should go up to town? It's odd that she should have been sent away just then."

Joan reflected a moment.

"Mrs. Amcott sent her up because of little Doris going for a fortnight's violet ray treatment. As for Joan, she would have infinitely preferred to come up to town on Monday. Saturday and Sunday were so many lost days for Christmas shopping."

"You take my advice and ask her to come forward," the Inspector repeated.

"I'm not by way of seeing my sister, as I told you, Inspector," Joan said quietly.

There was rather a constrained silence.

"And now what about telling us where you think of looking first?" Blair urged. He had an idea, an impression, that Joan had some line of action mapped out in her mind. That she was going down to Elm-

hurst to see if some theory of hers would hold water, would work.

"You might think that I was trying to lead you astray," she said bravely, looking at the police officer.

"We should sift anything we hear," was the prompt reply from Armstrong.

"Well, I happen to know that Joan intended to go to Scotland Yard this morning," Joan began unexpectedly. "Of course, that newspaper article must have prevented her. But what she was going to tell them has nothing to do with Mrs. Amcott's murder."

"How do you know?" the Inspector asked immediately.

"Because the man about whom she was going to —well, ask advice I think would be the best word— was in full view of us both at a performance of *The Craven* at the Royalty, Monday night—the night when, according to you, that awful crime took place." Joan looked at Blair. "And the next night, last Tuesday, when we went to the Gaiety, there he was again. That was when my sister told me about him. She believed that he was following her about. She intended to go to the police this morning, I know."

"Why? Because the man followed her about?" asked the Inspector.

"Oh, no! But Mrs. Amcott has a wonderful emerald necklace. Joan thought it the most beautiful thing of its kind that she had ever seen— not that that means much! But she says that this man whom we saw at the theatre twice running, a Monsieur Waddy, who is staying down at the manor house, acted in what she thought a very suspicious way about it."

Monsieur Waddy . . . Blair remembered the name. The cook had said that the charcoal stove, which was her own property, was in almost daily use since the arrival of a friend of Mr. Hilary Amcott's, a Monsieur Waddy, a *gourmet* who agreed with her that in dishes prepared with olive oil charcoal should be the fuel used.

"Ah-h!" The Inspector nodded emphatically. "That is one of the things I intended to find out first of all—whether Mrs. Amcott had any valuables in her possession."

"Joan, at any rate, thought the necklace immensely valuable. So did Mrs. Amcott, I feel sure. My sister was quite worried about it and this man. She got it into her head that he is after the necklace, staying down at the manor house for that purpose only."

"She didn't say what made her think that?" Armstrong questioned.

"I don't think she could give actual facts, but I know she was so nervous about it that she had begged Mrs. Amcott to send it to the bank or to her solicitors. I understand that, acting on Joan's advice, she did finally send it out of the house. Joan fancied that it was this that set this man, this Monsieur Waddy, against her, for she told me that lately he never missed a chance of being perfectly horrid and most offensive when they were alone. I don't doubt the necklace is safe and sound, or someone would have spoken of its loss at the inquest." Joan's voice suggested that anything else was too good to be true. "But as it happens, Mrs. Amcott had Joan get it out of the bank for her only this last Saturday."

"What bank was that?" the Inspector asked quickly.

Joan thought that she had better not know its name. He could easily find out this point.

"So you think Mrs. Amcott had this necklace in her possession when she was killed?" he asked.

"That, of course, I don't know, but Joan gave it to her before they all drove to the station, and she and the child and the nurse went on up to town."

"What about the nurse? Was she in the car?"

"I asked that. Joan said she sat in front."

"You don't know if Mrs. Amcott took the necklace out and looked at it at all?"

"Joan said she undid the sealed paper and just snapped the case open and shut to see that it was all right."

"Do you know why Mrs. Amcott wanted the necklace on Saturday last?"

Joan said that she had not the faintest idea.

There was a silence of a few seconds.

"Do you think Mrs. Amcott shared your sister's distrust of this man?" the Inspector asked.

Joan had no idea.

"I know my sister told Mrs. Amcott that she thought he was too interested in the necklace."

"But for your having seen this man on Monday and on Tuesday evening . . ." Blair began thoughtfully. The Inspector shook his head imperceptibly. He did not approve of discussing theories of crimes before sisters of very-much-suspected persons. But Blair went on.

"My theory, first and last, presupposes an impersonator of Mrs. Amcott, but not necessarily that it was a woman. That idea was only—forgive me Miss Ingilby—because of the note of the unusual, the startling fact that it introduced. But a man could have worn a disguise, supposing he knew the

dead woman, and the house, and was well known to the dog, and could impersonate a woman's voice." Blair was desperately trying to upset his first theory and at the same time paddle on in a fresh one.

"Hard supposition that last, Mr. Blair," murmured the Inspector.

"But a possible one—to some men. And murderers don't like partnerships. Such a man as you tell us of could have done the whole thing off his own bat—carried the body downstairs, taken it off in the bath-chair, and laid it in the charcoal shed. But for the fact that you say you saw him at the play. . . ."

"From first to last, on both nights," Joan said with a rather despairing catch in her voice.

The Inspector gave her an unofficial look of sympathy. She had scored with him by refusing to snatch at Blair's idea, by crushing it as utterly impossible.

Joan rose. "In any case, what I have told you both is in strictest confidence, of course."

The two men assented at once.

"I take it we shall all three meet again very shortly then," and with a grave bow apiece she let Blair open the door for her.

"How did you know where to find me?" he asked. It struck him that this had better be cleared up in front of the police officer.

"I telephoned to the newspaper for the address of the Mr. Blair who wrote the article about Mrs. Amcott's death. I said I knew something about Miss Ingilby and wanted to speak to you."

"I'll see you to the front door," Blair murmured. On the stairs she stopped.

"One thing more," she said in his ear. "Be very

careful! This man Waddy is awfully clever. He doesn't look it, but he is!" And with that she was gone.

Blair re-entered his sitting-room.

"Whew-w! That was a dreadful interview!" he said frankly. It had been a nightmare to him—lest she make some slip.

"Plucky young lady," the Inspector said. He had an eye for a pretty girl. "Let's hope—but there's no use hoping the impossible. I'm always sorry for the relations of criminals. There's luck if you will. Yet some people don't believe in luck. As to what Miss Lucy has just told us about those emeralds—well, there's a possible motive for the murder! Joan Ingilby admired them tremendously, she says. As for that about Monsieur Waddy—of course, the sister probably believes it, and, of course, we'll look into it; but this Monsieur Waddy is a great friend of Mr. Hilary Amcott's. He's hardly likely to be a jewel-thief. Particular people the Amcott's. None of your hail-fellow-well-met sort."

There was a short silence.

"I've questioned all the servants, and the nurse at that children's home included, and learnt nothing, though, of course, you never know. . . . But if they're hiding anything, time will tell."

Joan sat in the train taking her to Elmhurst, and with mixed feelings watched the world fly past. She was not naturally brave, and the effort that she had just put on herself this morning, first to go to Blair's rooms, then to meet the Inspector in order to get away from the newspaper man's room without arousing suspicion, had made a heavy call on her determination. She was glad that she had seen the police officer. She knew now that he was absolutely

sceptical of Joan Ingilby's innocence—until proof of that innocence could be furnished. She had to conquer a desire to get out at the first station and run for shelter. Now that she was disguised and perfectly disguised, she could hide. She had money enough to tide over the next weeks. . . .

But that might mean permanent hiding, for, thanks to Blair's article in this morning's *Comet*, until Mrs. Amcott's murder was definitely brought home to someone, a sword dangled over her own head, and not by a hair, but by a spider's thread.

She sat alone in her compartment, every nerve tingling. Could she do it? Could it be done? Could she even pass herself off successfully as Joan Ingilby's sister among people who knew her? Her safety would, she knew, lie in the fact that, like the Inspector just now, no one would easily assume that the practically accused girl would dare, or want to, return to the scene of her alleged crime.

She thought over all the people she would have to face at the manor house. There would be Baroness de Maricourt for one—Felicity Maricourt. "'Ty Maricourt," as her family called her, a young widow, was Mrs. Amcott's cousin and next of kin. She would be sure to be there, staying until at least after the funeral. She had very keen eyes, but Joan believed that the Baroness liked her. She might, she thought, be counted as a friend.

Then came Hilary Amcott, the dead woman's brother-in-law. . . . Joan thought a great deal about him. He had tried to start a very hectic flirtation with her shortly after her arrival, then, finding that Joan ignored him, had made love to her of a more discreet, apparently more genuine kind. He might be safely considered as a friend too; at least,

as much so as one could count a drink-sodden, weak-willed man as anything. As to his constant companion, Monsieur Waddy, who had expected to stay at the manor till the New Year, he would, she knew, be an ever-present danger. How much of a one time alone would show.

Dangerous too, though for other reasons, would be the rector and the servants and the villagers. Let her make one slip and betray her real identity, and she might be arrested. Joan thought that not a possibility, but a certainty. And once arrested, she would be the victim of the ruthless logic of an article written—oh! irony of things!—by a man who, she had known on the boat, had for her one of those dream-passions which, given a chance, can lead to the most enduring love. But not all his efforts could save her if she blundered. Well, she must not blunder. But she did intend to search the manor. She would be on the lookout for any clue that had been left behind.

That charcoal . . . she must make some inquiries at once about that. Probably, or at least possibly, many people could have helped themselves to it and to the stove.

She spent many minutes trying to think of every possible explanation of the known facts that could account for a crime. Groping for any motive on the part of those at Elmhurst that could be considered adequate for a murder. She found nothing.

At last Elmhurst was reached. She saw Blair and the Inspector get out further down. She hurried out and took a fly to the manor. She was in a fever to see how her disguise worked. So far it seemed perfect. A parlourmaid opened the door. The butler was busy for the moment with the undertaker.

Joan was so deep in her own thoughts again that, to her horror, she all but smiled at the girl as one does at a familiar face. The oversight was a warning to her to be more on her guard.

Hilary Amcott was out, she learned, but was expected back any moment.

The maid, who eyed Joan excitedly when she gave her name, went over the top as far as the rules of decorum were concerned.

"Oh, miss!" Her face worked. "Oh, Miss Ingilby!" she said in a low but warm voice, "if I may make so bold, please tell your poor sister that we none of us in the hall believe that wicked stuff in the *Comet* this morning."

The approaching butler heard, but he was human after all. He pretended not to notice the interlude. As for Joan, it seemed to her a good omen. She smiled gratefully at the maid.

"If you will let me know when Mr. Hilary Amcott comes in, I would like to wait in my sister's room."

Again Joan had to catch herself up, or she would have turned into the right passage before her guide.

In the room, the familiar room, her eyes brimmed. How little she had thought when she last left it that the next time she entered it would be with an accusation of murder hanging over her head—all but in the hands of the police—doomed if she took one false step—as good as hanged if she gave herself away.

She stared at the smudge on the window-sill and the marks in the dust of the trunk in the box-room. She could have screamed. For these, and such as these, she was being pilloried, her very life put in jeopardy. It was monstrous. She

had to fight down the feelings that threatened to swamp her.

Pulling herself together, she searched the rooms inch by inch. There was nothing of any interest as far as she could see.

She went through the bathroom into Mrs. Amcott's room, where lay a silent form covered with a sheet. Blossoms stood about it. Their presence a reminder that that which lay in their midst was kin to them—was but earth and air and water in another combination; a combination that, no longer of use, would shortly be dissolved to bloom afresh in the flowers, blow again in the summer breezes, rise and fall once more in the deep blue sea.

In this room, too, Joan found nothing that could be of use to her. Also, she heard nothing. She might have done, for, watching her every movement through a crack in the old door's hinges, flattened against the wall till he gave an idea of a slug, or a centipede, or anything foul and flat, was a man, eyeing her with malignant closeness. Not a glance of hers, not a touch of those well-kept little hands but he saw it, noted it.

Suddenly he detached himself from the door, and, stepping softly, so softly that he seemed to barely touch the carpet, he slipped round a corner.

Joan, who was in Mrs. Amcott's sitting-room, only heard two women's voices—it was their owners that had alarmed the watcher—as they entered the room where she had just been. She knew them both. One was the Baroness de Maricourt. The girl with her was Octavia Dallas. The two were by way of being friends, as childhood's playmates always are, however far apart the poles of character may lie.

Joan cautiously set the door ajar. She must know if anything were taken from the room. Apparently the two intended to go over the contents of a tallboy near the window. Leaving the door ajar, she stood back and watched them. Their backs were to her. They talked of the arrangements for to-morrow's funeral.

"Hilary wants me to check off Doris's locked-up things, as she's without a maid of her own. I think I know all her belongings." The Baroness took out a jewellery box.

"Can't think why people use these things," she said impatiently as the lock refused to open. "They're no good. 'Pon my word, Otto, the thing acts as though it had been all but forced. There's a trick about how you press the key in, you know."

The box opened at that moment, and the Baroness forgot her suspicions. Standing at the table, she glanced over its contents.

"They're mine now, so Doris always said. I shan't wear them, of course. I hate wearing other people's choosings." She bent down and looked at the box closer.

"The lining's fearfully scratched up, and it's a new case too. Doris must have tried to open the top pocket with her nail scissors! Have you a top pocket in your case, Otto? I have, just like this one." She moved as she spoke a little gold embroidered, padded cushion, and, pulling, drew open a hidden pocket in the lining.

"For love letters and bills," she said lightly; "at least, that's where I keep mine. But poor Doris's is empty, I see. And look at the lining behind it, cut to ribbons. How funny!" She locked the case again. "I shouldn't say that that pocket's always been empty of late, would you?"

Octavia looked a question.

"Didn't you think Doris's soul was rather to the fore since her accident?" 'Ty asked, smiling. "Mr. Grimshaw's awfully fetching. I adore those strong, silent men myself."

This time Octavia did smile.

"My dear 'Ty! He doesn't know the difference between a Charleston and a banana glide!" she scoffed.

"He could be taught."

"I don't think he'ld take dance lessons, not even from you, 'Ty."

"Maybe, but when he looks at me as though I were somewhere in the handle of the Dipper, I feel as if I could follow him anywhere," gushed 'Ty. "That North Pole, glacial air of his is awfully fetching. Makes you want to thaw it at once, or, at least, it makes me. You never seem to be taken with such fancies. And it made poor Doris feel that way too. I wonder if she did succeed in thawing him a bit?"

Octavia's answer was pointedly to look towards the bedroom where Doris Amcott lay, colder than any air of Grimshaw's. 'Ty flushed a little.

"Poor Doris! It seems utterly impossible to think of her as having no further interest in clothes. To remember that she's dead, let alone that one silly paper is trying to make out that she was murdered. I think the man who wrote such a thing must be mad."

"I think he wrote the truth," Octavia Dallas said firmly. "I was tremendously impressed by his reasoning. I mean that she must have been killed. Oh, poor, poor Doris! Not about Joan Ingilby having had a hand in it, of course. That's monstrous."

"But Doris *wasn't* murdered! You have to have a reason to murder people!" 'Ty Maricourt said hotly.

Octavia Dallas said nothing for a moment.

"Did you read the article in the *Daily Comet*?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes. But Hilary said it was all stuff and nonsense. He went off raging about it to find Waddy. Of course it isn't true. It simply can't be true."

Again the other said nothing.

"You believe it!" 'Ty spoke as though accusing her companion of a crime. "Yet you know what it will mean to us here! How people will talk, and pry, and gossip! I know one thing. If there *was* a murder, then that article is right in its conclusion too, and Joan Ingilby had a hand in it. If there's a murder at all, she's in it. I always disliked her I always knew that there was something sly and—oh—wicked about her. I could feel it through all her put-on sweetness that took me in too at first."

Baroness de Maricourt's face flushed, then it paled. She seemed to speak with a great deal of emotion. An emotion that sounded uncommonly like hatred.

"Oh, 'Ty!" remonstrated the other, "don't say that of Joan Ingilby! It's cruel. I'm sure she's innocent. And she must be in awful danger after that article. And she's only a girl . . . a helpless girl. . . ."

She stopped. The door had opened, and the rector stepped in. He had a prayer-book in his hand, and seemed surprised to find the room occupied. Octavia Dallas left the two together.

"I—I only came to say a short prayer," he began, turning away.

"Don't go, padre," 'Ty said at once. "We shan't be a minute. We were just talking of the article in the *Comet* this morning. I don't suppose you've seen it though, as you never read anything but the leaders in the papers."

"I shall certainly read the article as soon as I get home," Grimshaw said promptly. He had a harsh voice for so young a man. "But I've heard all about it. Everyone is talking of it. I need hardly tell you, Baroness, how very sorry I am about it—about the possibility, I mean, that anything even suspicious is connected, or can be connected, with the death of Doris Amcott."

"It's too utterly mad for words," 'Ty said indignantly. "I think it's positively indecent to increase the sales of the paper in that sort of a way. Murder down here at the manor house! Murder of Doris! No, don't go, Mr. Grimshaw. This is the last drawer." She jerked it open as she was speaking. "Oh, only Doris's diary for the year. It's very nearly full, I suppose, though it's locked. How dreadful death makes personal things seem. She was sensible enough to only write about other people and what she thought of them." The Baroness laid the little book, bound in purple alligator skin, back again and turned away, running her hands over her shingled hair.

"Don't you think so too, padre? I mean that the idea of anyone having harmed Doris is quite ludicrous. Who would? Why?" She was staring out of a window.

"Why, there's the Police Inspector up here again, and a young man with him. What on earth . . ." She looked hurriedly around. Her face was rather pale.

"Do be so kind as to lock the door when you've

done. I must go down and see what it all means."

She was gone on the instant.

And then the parson did a very strange thing. Without a moment's hesitation, as though he had come into the room for that rather than for the prayer of which he spoke, he stepped to the tallboy and opened the drawer which 'Ty Maricourt said contained the dead woman's diary. In another second he had slipped the purple-bound book into the pocket of his coat. It was a flat book, though of a fair size.

Joan, who was watching intently, had taken a swift step forward, but, quite unprepared for the rapidity of the book's disappearance, was too late to save it.

"Oh!" she gasped, then remembered that she was only the governess's sister. "Oh! ought anything to be taken from these rooms? I'm Joan Ingilby's elder sister. I've come down because of that awful article in this morning's *Comet*—come down to clear her. These rooms must be left just as they are." She finished on a very resolute note.

The rector had wheeled at her sudden appearance, but otherwise he showed no perturbation.

"The rooms are left just as they were," he said stiffly. Then he went on in what seemed a very kind and genuine tone, "Of course you'll clear your sister! But I trust that she will need no clearing." Kind though the voice was, he kept trying to step past Joan and out of the room.

Joan made no effort to move.

"Come down with me into the gunroom. It's always deserted these days, more's the pity." The rector was still speaking very sympathetically.

"We'll talk it all over. I'm sure we can think of a dozen facts that will prove, what, of course, we know, that your sister could have had nothing to do with Mrs. Amcott's death. I have met Miss Joan often, and formed the very highest opinion of her character."

Joan was in a cruel dilemma. What ought she to do? The rector was a very important person in Elmhurst, naturally, and she needed every friend she could muster, yet she could not suffer anything to be whisked away from here without having at least seen it.

"But I—I saw you take something from the drawer." She said it most unhappily.

The rector had bushy eyebrows above resolute eyes. They drew together now, but he said nothing.

"I—I shall have to mention it," Joan went on desperately. "I can't let anything be taken away from these rooms. It might be something that would clear Joan from that awful, unspeakable suspicion. I mean Mrs. Amcott's diary. I was in there waiting till you should all be done in here. I didn't want to intrude."

"Miss Ingilby"—something cold and resolute was in the harsh voice now, though he spoke very low—"that book I took was my own property, a book lent by me to Mrs. Amcott, and intended only for her. If her diary has gone, which of us would be the more likely to take it? You or I? I am the rector here. Pray understand that I am not accusing you of having taken it. I know better. But if such a book should be missing, your being here alone would make it look as if you must have taken it. That would be a very unfortunate début for your efforts down here. Believe

me, I am most exceedingly sorry for your sister Please believe that." He finished on a very warm, earnest tone.

Joan moved away from the door. She could not prevent Mr. Grimshaw from leaving the room. But she did not believe him, not for a moment. He did not look the kind of man to have books bound in purple leather. Also, the gilt edges of the book itself, the tiny lock . . . no, she felt sure, though she had never seen the book herself, that the dead woman's cousin had not been mistaken when she had said that the book was a diary

" Oh, may I look at it ? " she breathed. " Surely, for my peace of mind, you would let me just glance inside it."

" It's locked," he said briefly, making no effort to produce it. " My dear Miss Ingilby, I don't think you quite realise what you are saying. Small wonder, after the terrible shock you must have had. But let me point out to you again, that if a diary of Mrs. Amcott's is missing, there is only one person who would be suspected of having taken it. Ah, I hear someone coming up the stairs," and, saying that, the rector opened the door, just as a servant knocked to say that Mr. Hilary Amcott had returned and would like to see Miss Ingilby. The rector stayed behind.

Joan, still trembling with amazement and indignation, was shown into an oak-panelled room, where Hilary Amcott hurried forward.

" Miss Ingilby ? Miss Joan Ingilby's elder sister ? " His voice sounded as flat as ever, but he was smiling broadly. Yet some people—Blair, for instance—might have thought that his smile seemed only on the surface.

" I should never have guessed the relationship,"

he went on, " though there is a likeness in a way, especially in the voice. How is your sister ? What a terrible shock to her and to all of us, that dreadful article in this morning's *Comet* ! It certainly was to me. Luckily I am able to prove it the merest rubbish. But come into the Indian room. The Police Inspector is there. We will settle this preposterous idea of a crime once and for all. It's a pity that it did not come up at the inquest yesterday. I could have proved it impossible there and then."

Joan followed with her head whirling. This was indeed unexpected, and most marvellously welcome. Was it possible that her peril was to pass almost as soon as it had come ?

The two men waiting turned at their entrance.

Blair held his breath as he saw her. The grit of her ! And the danger ! Hilary shook hands with the Inspector, a limp, clammy handshake.

" And are you a member of the police too ? " he asked, turning to Blair.

" I'm sorry to say I'm only the writer of an article in this morning's *Comet,*" Blair said hurriedly, while the Inspector murmured his name.

Staring hard at Hilary, Blair thought what a temper the chap had. For a second there had been a sort of frozen fury in his bloodshot eyes. Almost, Blair thought, they had glared like the eyes of a madman. Certainly the eyes of a fanatic. Then the red lids drooped again until they all but met as Blair hurried on.

" I'm afraid my wind-up must have been very painful to Miss Ingilby and her friends. I want to make it quite clear that I retract the concluding words as far as she is concerned. On more careful analysis of the facts of Mrs. Amcott's death I see

that any theory which includes the governess is grotesquely improbable."

"The article is grotesque from start to finish!" Hilary Amcott said, biting his pale lips, around which deep lines ran, lines of ill-health and worse living. "I've just posted a reply to your paper that will settle any idea of a murder having been committed. I talked to my sister-in-law Tuesday afternoon in Salisbury; about four or five it must have been, at a time when, according to that damned silly concoction of yours, she was already lying murdered."

"You talked to Mrs. Amcott, Tuesday afternoon?" Blair was not prepared for this. In so far as, by making his sketch of the crime impossible, it helped to clear Joan, he rejoiced exceedingly to hear it; but he had not expected his reconstruction to be blown sky-high quite so promptly and so completely.

"You saw her face?" the Inspector asked.

"I did. She talked to me for quite five minutes, about some Christmas arrangements for the village children. I wanted to see the Chief Constable early this morning and get him to drop the whole thing. I tried to get hold of you, Inspector, but you were both away."

"You actually saw Mrs. Amcott's face?" the Inspector persisted.

"Naturally, in talking to her."

The Inspector patted the centre of his moustache several times.

"I'm afraid I must look over the house just the same, sir. For Mrs. Amcott was murdered, whether murdered Monday night or Tuesday night or just before she was found yesterday morning. Mrs. Amcott didn't walk into that charcoal shed, sir. She

was carried. Her shoes prove that. And that being so, she was probably dead when so carried."

"But my dear Inspector, shoes, eh? Suppose Mrs. Amcott wiped her shoes on a bit of turf, automatically, you know?" Hilary Amcott suggested feebly.

"Then where did those charcoal stains found on the carpet of the bath-chair come from?" the Inspector countered. "Not from Mrs. Amcott's shoes, which are new, and had only been worn indoors a few times, I fancy. They couldn't have made those marks. So the question is, whose could?" He carefully refrained from looking at Joan.

"But, frankly, your whole evidence seems to be absolute rot." Hilary poked a glowing log with his foot. "At any rate, I spoke to Mrs. Amcott late on Tuesday afternoon around four or a little later."

He eyed Blair as much as to say, "So that's that!" before he turned away.

Joan rose. She felt dizzy with all that she had gone through, was still going through.

"I think I will see about a room at the inn," she said faintly.

"You are staying on in Elmhurst? It must be very painful for you." Hilary spoke sympathetically.

"Very painful indeed!" Joan agreed with a catch in her breath. "But I can't leave this village until it is known who killed Mrs. Amcott. Joan didn't kill her. She was devoted to her. She thought her all that was dear and kind." Her voice trembled.

The door opened.

"That you, Waddy?" Hilary Amcott looked around as though pleased to see the new arrival.

" This is a sister of Mrs. Amcott's governess. She's come down about that article in the paper which you thought so damned funny. Mr. Waddy—Miss Ingilby. And this is our Police Inspector, and this is the Mr. Blair who wrote the article in question."

Raoul Waddy bowed as a Latin bows, from the hips; in fact, he almost seemed to bow from his supple knees. His figure was perfection. His movements had a grace and a spring that made one think of a Greek god in the flesh. But there was nothing Greek nor godlike about his singularly small dark head, and still more singularly small dark face. Yet he was handsome in a bizarre way, except that the narrow little forehead sloped back from the uncurving slant of brows beneath which the light, opaque eyes were set so high that they had the effect of a cobra's brows. The eyes themselves were the smallest that Blair had ever seen.

As Hilary Amcott muttered Blair's name the newcomer turned and gave him what would have been a stare from another man. Blair felt as though a rattle-snake had lifted its head and was regarding him. In Hilary Amcott's glance he had read a cold rage. Here he read stark murder for one second.

Blair in his turn looked at the man openly, steadily. He was so conscious of intense animosity on his own part that, apart from the singular flash of hatred which he had caught, it could but be mutual. He could well understand that a girl like Joan Ingilby felt this man's presence as evil. She had said that Waddy was clever " though he did not look it." But Blair did not think that Waddy looked in the least stupid. The face was too peculiar for that. Those strange eyes, so small, so dull, so

much the colour of the sallow skin that you had to look very closely to see whether they were open or shut, gave an extraordinary effect of secretiveness to the face. Standing now with his back to the light, Blair was certain that they were closed. Then they moved, and he saw that they were open and staring at Joan.

CHAPTER IV

"A SISTER of Miss Joan Ingilby's?" Monsieur Waddy had a husky voice that suggested immense capacities for all the animal passions. His English was perfect, except for a faint evenness of accent which suggested a Frenchman. He turned his back on the room, as though to pull a chair forward. Blair saw that he was laughing, laughing silently, but with a hilarity that shook him for one brief second. Then he faced around again as Joan put her hand to the door; he opened it with a kind of solicitous gallantry.

"I trust I have not driven Miss Joan Ingilby's sister away. As a great friend of Miss Joan Ingilby's, permit me to accompany mademoiselle down to the hotel and to express my. . . ."

The shutting door drowned the rest of the sentence. Blair was strongly tempted to take his leave at the same time, but he decided that he could better serve Joan by staying.

"Now, Mr. Hilary, was there anything in Mrs. Amcott's possession which might explain a murder? Did she have any jewels down here with her, for instance?" The Inspector had risen.

"Not to my knowledge."

"She didn't own anything uncommon in the way of stones or pearls?" the Inspector persisted.

"I think you had better ask my brother. A wire to him as soon as he is better would settle that." Hilary spoke as though bored by the police officer's insistence.

"I should like to look over the house, sir," was the Inspector's only comment. "I'll try and not inconvenience anybody more than I can help. And will you let me have another word with you when I've finished?"

"I should expect it," Hilary Amcott said with his silly grin. "Of course, I should expect to hear if you find anything that bears out your terrible idea, though to me it's still a most fantastic one."

"Maybe you'll hear and maybe you won't," the Inspector murmured to Blair as they closed the door of the now empty suite behind them, after the police officer had sent away the constable who had accompanied him to the house, and who was sitting on guard on the landing. Armstrong explained the latter move.

"No use keeping Higgins dangling around. Anyone who wanted to take anything away has had days enough in which to do it. I saw Mr. Grimshaw at the window in here as we came in. Not that he would tamper with anything," Armstrong added hurriedly.

"I don't know about days . . ." Blair said, looking around him keenly. "It's possible that the murderer or murderers thought themselves quite safe until this morning."

"Until they read that article of yours," mused Armstrong. "That's possible of course. Unholy-looking chap that Frenchman is," he went on, examining the writing-table as he talked. "Do you think he really is French?"

"From Devil's Island possibly," Blair conceded. The Inspector laughed.

"I don't wonder the governess didn't like him. The police officer worked swiftly. "But as to his

being a criminal and connected with those emeralds —I'm not so sure. A man with a face like that is bound to keep straight. It keeps him straight. He couldn't hope to get away with the dog's biscuit unsuspected. When I served with the Norfolks during the war we had a chap like that—a thorough wrong 'un. Always trying to do you, and never getting a chance. It really was pathetic. There was poor old Shirty, as we used to call him, ready and anxious to do any dirty trick he could play, and not the youngest lad out from home letting him get near him. One look at his face, and everybody felt for their money belt and counted the grub. He never had a look in. I'll wager he got through the war without a stain on his character. Yet as capable a crook, I do believe, as ever went unjugged. Hard lines that!" He rose from the writing-table. "No motive for murder here."

"Was Mrs. Amcott a wealthy woman?" Blair asked.

"Well-to-do. Her lawyer told the Chief Constable—he flew up to town this morning to have a chat with him and a glance at the will—that she had spent a good deal of her fortune. She was a gambler, like all the Norreys. Their place is quite close to us, you know. It's in their blood. Now, in spite of Mr. Hilary, the Amcotts are careful with money."

"In spite of Mr. Hilary Amcott? What's his character, then?"

"Light. They thought him no end clever as a lad, but he bitterly disappointed his brother in Egypt, they say. He was sent home in disgrace; too many pegs; too many little games like *Petits Chevaux*, I fancy, as well. Nowadays, since his return—on extended leave, as he calls it—he cares

for nothing but night clubs. He and Mrs. Amcott's cousin, a Baroness de Maricourt, and that Monsieur Waddy you've just met go off to Salisbury night after night, and to some very queer houses too—houses that we suspect of gambling as well as dancing. Suspect, but can't prove, mind you."

"How about Mrs. Amcott's will?"

"All her jewellery and personal belongings go to the Baroness, everything else to the child."

"And she was alive Tuesday afternoon, and Hilary Amcott talked to her. . . ." Blair drummed his fingers on the window-pane. "That staggering fact means an absolute reconstruction of my theory of the crime from start to finish. But, at least, it also means that Miss Joan Ingilby can come forward now."

"I only wish she would!" The Inspector spoke fervently. "I would arrest her on the spot. Do you mean to say that you believe Mr. Hilary's statement about seeing his sister-in-law the day before yesterday in Salisbury? Why didn't he mention it at the inquest? The coroner asked a lot of questions about her last day. Not a cheep from Mr. Hilary then about their supposed meeting."

"You don't think he's speaking the truth?"

"I don't, Mr. Blair. Not a bit! I think he's trying it on, hoping to quash a murder investigation. Though I must say I'm surprised. . . ."

"Inspector"—Blair came up to him—"don't let my initial mistake mislead the whole inquiry. It's quite possible that he was speaking the truth just now and *did* see and *did* talk to his sister-in-law herself late on Tuesday. It's quite possible that not only my suspicion that the governess had a hand in the murder, but also my whole idea of how it was committed, is wrong."

The Inspector shook a stubborn head

"No, Mr. Blair. I'm as certain that you've got hold of the truth as though I'd been there myself. I'm finished here, if you are. I came up at once, of course, as soon as I'd read my *Comet* and secured that piece of charcoal and the flake of paint with the scorch mark from the window-sill."

Armstrong and Blair went downstairs. The Inspector paused at the telephone. Blair opened the door of the room where he had been. He saw an extremely pretty girl with a lively skin and a pair of hot, devastating black eyes, and hair so satin-smooth in its waves around her head that it looked as though painted on wax. He guessed her rightly to be the Baroness de Maricourt. She was warming her hands at the fire, little hands like carvings of rose ivory. Blair watched them with a curious feeling.

Had those dainty fingers lit a charcoal brazier—a brazier which was to bring death to a sleeping woman? For the first time, there, in that beautiful old room, a horror of the whole affair, quite apart from Joan's danger, came to Blair. Up till now it had been academic except where she was concerned. Even though he had seen the dead woman's body, it had in reality been an affair of the mind. But now, could it have been this girl? Someone intimately connected with the household it must have been to account for the dog . . . But this lovely girl. . . .

She looked up. He introduced himself.

"The author of that frightfully clever article in the *Comet*? I heard you had come and rushed down to meet you. For you're right in that awfully brilliant guess of yours. There's no use mincing matters. If my cousin's death really *is* a murder,

who else could it have been but the governess? As your article said, it must have been someone who knew Mrs. Amcott, knew the house, and whom 'Laddy' knew. I was at the big ball at the French Embassy given in honour of the President's arrival. There isn't anyone else but Miss Ingilby whom it could have been."

Blair marvelled how he could have thought Baroness de Maricourt pretty. The girl was a ghoul, he told himself, a vampire.

"But Miss Ingilby may have a perfectly good alibi too," he said equably. "I have already absolutely retracted everything in my article which suggests that the governess was implicated in the crime."

The Inspector entered.

"I can't think why you should want to undo all your article," she said swiftly. "It loses its point without your conclusion. It's the climax of your whole argument surely."

"My opinion exactly!" the Inspector agreed.

"But Mr. Hilary Amcott spoke to his sister-in-law on Tuesday afternoon," Blair said almost triumphantly. "That knocks the bottom out of everything—down tumbles the whole theory."

"Mr. Hilary said . . ." 'Ty Maricourt seemed positively to gape.

The Inspector quoted what Mr. Amcott had said, and ended with:

"I think he may have mixed two days up. Confused Tuesday with, say, the day before, Monday."

"Mr. Hilary would try to be wrong if it would help Miss Ingilby at all," 'Ty said coldly.

"Meaning?" The Inspector bent forward.

"Miss Ingilby used to flirt with him whenever she got a chance. That was why she was leaving.

Mrs. Amcott had learnt about it. That's quite confidential, by the way. My cousin told everyone that it was because she needed a better trained governess now that the child is getting older. Whatever Mr. Hilary says, I *know* that you were right in your first idea, Mr. Blair, and that Joan Ingilby killed Mrs. Amcott. It's a terrible thing to think and to say, but, between ourselves, strictly between ourselves, of course, I *know* it was the governess."

"You know?" The Inspector was startled.

"I feel sure of it."

"Oh-h!" The Inspector's eyes lost their gleam.

"Miss Ingilby once showed that she was perfectly familiar with the use of charcoal stoves," she went on to the Inspector. "It was when little Doris was ill, and had to have a poultice in the night. The gas ring wouldn't act, and Miss Ingilby brought up the stove and lit it in exactly the way you described in your article."

"You were in the room?" Blair asked thoughtfully.

"I was." The reply was brief.

So supposing her story to be accurate, or even true, after that night she herself would know how to light that stove.

"Anyone else in the room with your ladyship?" asked the Inspector.

"Miss Dallas. There was a dance on. Mrs. Amcott was away in town, but Miss Dallas and I did what we could."

There was a short silence.

"Your ladyship thinks it is the governess," the Inspector broke in to say musingly. "It certainly remains my own belief, except for the lack of motive. That's the great obstacle to going by that theory."

'Ty Maricourt drew a deep breath.

"Mrs. Amcott had a very valuable necklace," she began in a queer, hurried voice. She paused as Monsieur Waddy and Hilary Amcott came in.

"Dismissed!" the former said with a lift of his eyebrows. "Miss Ingilby would have none of me. You were saying, Baroness?"

She did not seem in a hurry to speak.

"The Inspector is certain that Doris Amcott was murdered," she said at last in an almost propitiatory voice.

"Absolutely certain," Armstrong said curtly, watching her curiously.

"It's only that there seems no motive," the Baroness went on, still in the same odd voice. "But I've just had a most frightful shock."

She did not look it. She looked very excited and very nervous, Blair thought, but not as if she had had a shock of even a slight kind.

"Better go to bed in that case," Waddy said, turning his head slowly towards her.

"By Jove, yes!" Hilary agreed, jumping up as though to open the door for her.

"Mrs. Amcott's emeralds are missing," 'Ty Maricourt announced with a certain defiant lift of her slender neck. "I mean the Norreys necklace."

"Oh, rubbish!" Hilary said after a glance at his friend Waddy, who sat very immobile on his seat. "Absolute rot, 'Ty. You've not looked in enough places. Why, they're at the Bank."

"They're missing," she repeated angrily. "They're not at the Bank, for I found the empty case."

The police officer now joined in the conversation.

"And what is the Norreys necklace, my lady?"

"An heirloom in our branch of the family, an emerald necklace from Peru—Inca work. It was the Duke of Parma's ransom when Sir Peter Norreys took him prisoner after the Armada. It's mine now, of course, as I'm the last of our branch. I've just telephoned to the Bank, and found that it was handed last Saturday to Miss Ingilby. She had a note from Mrs. Amcott, and as they knew her, and she had often cashed Mrs. Amcott's cheques, they handed her the box after trying to get Mrs. Amcott on the 'phone and not finding her."

"By Jove!" muttered Waddy, thoughtfully. "Those stones were worth £500 merely as stones, and historically the necklace was worth—well, I've heard the rector, who's as well up as you, Hilary, in such things, say that they would fetch eight thousand any day at a London auction."

Hilary Amcott nodded. Blair thought that he looked relieved.

"Well, now they're gone. Stolen! Miss Ingilby has them!" 'Ty Maricourt finished almost shrilly. Blair's heart felt as though it were lead.

"Evidently the theft of the necklace was but the first step in the murder of poor Doris," 'Ty Maricourt went on. "Doubtless she missed them and perhaps suspected Joan Ingilby at once." She stopped with a little exclamation like a crow of satisfaction. "Why! I remember now. Mrs. Amcott"—she was speaking to the Inspector—"once caught Miss Ingilby trying the lock of her trunk in which she kept the necklace within a couple of days after her arrival."

Blair held his tongue, but with difficulty. He was prepared to put up with unpleasant facts, but unpleasant lies were a harder matter.

"When was this?" the Inspector asked 'Ty.

" Oh, months ago now. Mrs. Amcott was frightfully upset about it."

" It's a pity to confuse a clever argument," Waddy put in softly, " but Miss Joan Ingilby could not have played the rôle in Mrs. Amcott's death that you, Baroness, suspect, and which you, Mr. Blair, so cleverly sketched for her, for the very good reason that Mr. Hilary Amcott and I saw her Monday night at the Royalty. Again on the Tuesday night, at the Gaiety, who should be sitting in the front row of the dress circle but Miss Ingilby ! And there she continued to sit, as on the night before, throughout the whole performance, so certainly she could hardly have been waiting in the boxroom for a chance to kill Mrs. Amcott. Yet undoubtedly those marks show that someone was sitting here."

" Was Miss Ingilby alone at the theatre ? " asked the Inspector.

Monsieur Waddy said that he had not noticed. Hilary Amcott said that he, too, could not say.

" But," the Frenchman went on, " though I know that she was not the murderess of Mrs. Amcott, I am sure she is the thief of her necklace, and that is why she dare not come forward. I am right in assuming that she has not come forward, am I not ? " He asked the question of Blair with a leer that made the newspaper man's blood run hot and cold—hot for himself, cold for Joan.

He would dearly like to close those dots of eyes still more completely.

" Besides, who is this Miss Ingilby ? " Monsieur Waddy asked of the room at large. " No one seems to know. Her sole reference you, Baroness, think, was a lady living abroad. Oh, these ladies living abroad ! " He shrugged his shoulders. " Several times she asked me questions in the short time I am

here which struck me as over-curious about those emeralds."

Hilary Amcott was grinning as though something amused him. It was a silly grin, and yet Blair thought that it held a touch of covert malice. 'Ty Maricourt looked sullen.

"You two may have mistaken someone else for the governess," she said now. "My cousin was parting with her, and, of course, her disappearance since Mrs. Amcott's death is a very suspicious thing."

"I'm afraid that seeing my article in the paper of this morning, she can't come forward until she is cleared," Blair said heavily.

"And I'm afraid in that case she'll have to stay hidden a long time!" The Baroness spoke with an upward tilt of the chin that used to be called a toss of the head. "But I shan't prosecute. About the emeralds, I mean. I only want you, Inspector, to know the facts."

"Thank you," Inspector Armstrong said non-committally. "About the squire; is he still unreachable?"

"As I told you, Inspector," Hilary replied negligently, "Southern Rhodesia is the last address we have—if you can call that an address. The Mounted Police are trying to get into touch with him."

"So, as Mr. Ralph is ill, you're the head of the family for the time being?"

Hilary promptly refused even temporary rank.

"Count me out, Inspector. I'm on a much-needed holiday, and I don't intend to get out of my depths. I should like to help, of course, in this terrible business, but I should be no good. Amateurs had much better stay out." He shot a vindictive glance at Blair.

Armstrong rose.

"I think I'll have a last look round, for the time being, in Mrs. Amcott's rooms. Of course, I shall have to be out and in a good deal until this tragedy is cleared up, which won't be long."

"And Miss Ingilby found," 'Ty Maricourt put in sharply. How plainly she hated Joan, Blair thought. Poor Joan, who needed friends so badly, so desperately.

The Inspector made no reply, but took his leave.

"Funny thing," he muttered as they shut the door of the suite behind them again. "It's a funny thing that Miss Lucy, the sister of the girl who is as good as accused—for as far as I'm concerned she is that—and this here Monseer Waddy should both swear that Joan Ingilby was at a theatre on a night that puts your idea of how the murder was done quite out of court. Makes me wonder, that does."

"What does, Inspector?" Blair asked quietly. He could have bawled the words in passionate anger. He guessed what was coming.

"Why, that both should hurry to give her an alibi!"

"Why not? If it's true?"

"Does Mr. Waddy strike you as a gentleman to care about what's true and what isn't?" the Inspector asked drily.

"Hilary Amcott agreed that she was there too," Blair pointed out.

"Ah, Mr. Hilary, I'm afraid, will agree with everything that Mr. Waddy chooses to say. Apart from pity, or a penchant for Miss Ingilby, it looks to me as if the Frenchie had a hold over him, which is likely enough. They say in the village that more times than not this winter he comes home the worse

for drink. He used to be out with the hounds three times a week at the least, but not this year, not since that monseer has come to the manor. But this alibi of Joan Ingilby's, it doesn't make your theory of the crime impossible, Mr. Blair. I mean, the governess could have got down here afterwards and done it."

"She would have been seen at the station, or if she hired a car it could be traced. I think those two men told us about the theatre because they were seen there by someone who knew Miss Ingilby too. So knowing that any appearance of Miss Ingilby's on the night on which, according to my article, she had killed Mrs. Amcott, would in time be reported, they've spoken at once to give an appearance of honesty to any later declarations of theirs."

The Inspector listened with an unconvinced look.

"Maybe so, Mr. Blair. Quite possible, of course. But to me this alibi of Joan Ingilby's looks as if she and this Frenchie were the two criminals, and have to stick it out together, each saying they saw the other."

"You think Miss Lucy Ingilby . . ." Blair queried sarcastically.

"Is Joan Ingilby's sister, Mr. Blair! Of course she would do what she was asked to do. The more I think it over, the more certain I feel that the governess and this monseer"—the Inspector could speak very good French indeed, but his pronunciation was meant to mark his contempt for the man—"fill all the chinks. The sister may think Joan disliked the man; that would be bluff on the sister's part, of course. But. . . ." He shook his head. "And the motive for the crime, so far, looks like the emeralds."

"The emeralds?" Blair still kept to his tone of sarcasm.

"Why not?" asked the Inspector. "It looks to me as if the governess had got 'em, and Monseer Waddy had been double-crossed, which naturally would make him like to put us on to her and their track. He gives the girl an alibi for the murder because he's in it, and he throws suspicion on her where he's not in it. Simple enough, I think."

"And Miss Lucy Ingilby throws suspicion on her sister too"—Blair managed a superior smile with difficulty, for his lips were stiff—"when she first—*first*, mind you, Inspector—told us about the emeralds?"

"No, I think she's acting honestly about the necklace, and hasn't an idea that her sister took it. So far Miss Lucy strikes me as a very nice and straightforward young lady. So far." Armstrong's guarded tone told of an instant readiness to change his opinion should he see fit.

Blair wheeled on him.

"And you think that interview that we've just had down below was straightforward?"

"Ah!" The Inspector tapped his moustache. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that, not by a long chalk. Sounded to me as if the family band was playing a very odd tune, a tune they hadn't rehearsed together, a tune I mean to find out—and shall in time."

Apparently with the Inspector detection was always merely a matter of time.

"It's a simple enough one." Blair's voice was scathing now. "It's merely *The Devil take the Governess*, as sung by Baroness Maricourt, with an obbligato by Monsieur Waddy, and accompanied by Mr. Hilary Amcott."

The Inspector laughed.

"It's a pity the Squire isn't here. Straight as they make 'em, like most of the Amcott's. Got brains too, he'ld be a tower of strength in all this. For the trouble is the emeralds *do* belong to the Baroness now. Like you, I think there's something fishy about her story and her way of telling it. She knew well enough that Mr. Hilary, for one, didn't want anything brought out to confirm the idea of murder; nor apparently, by the way she looked at him, Monsieur Waddy either. Certainly she's got her knife into Miss Joan Ingilby right enough. Jealousy is what it looks like—that sort of heat. But there's one thing, whoever she's attacking, she didn't kill her cousin for the sake of a necklace. The Norreys aren't criminals. As I said, gambling is in their blood—but not criminals. Besides, in her case, she has about six thousand a year under her husband's will as long as she doesn't re-marry. She can't have needed to murder for money. But Miss Ingilby now, as that Monseer says, who are the Ingilby girls?"

"Oh, don't waste your patrician feelings on them, Inspector," Blair fumed. "They're probably not even 'County.' They're doubtless only some penniless parson's children."

Again the Inspector laughed. He was a cheery young man, and found Blair in a peppery mood very amusing.

"You know, you're like the writers of these detective stories some people read—I can't stand the drivel in 'em myself—who want you to suspect everyone near and far. The writers can't help themselves, I see that, or how could they fill their books; but it's not true to life! In a real case," the Inspector went on confidentially, "of course, you look

up everybody's time-table and keep an eye on 'em—but there are some people you're certain aren't criminals. You've known 'em for years. You can leave 'em on one side—in your own mind. And there are others—well, you know they're crooked at a glance, and you concentrate on them."

"Do you mention your feelings in your reports?" Blair asked. He had regained his good humour.

"Well, no." Armstrong shook his head. "It mightn't read well if you wrote that it was no use Blank's saying a word in his own defence, for you had taken a violent dislike to him the moment you clapped eyes on him, and therefore didn't believe a syllable. But it's what happens nine times out of ten. And nine times out of nine the chap you suspect is the one who did it. Character—like murder—will out, Mr Blair; only it takes time. I'm talking, of course, of people like us who aren't biassed by being friends with anyone in the crime circle, and yet know them. And as a policeman, I wish I could get into touch with the Ingilby's people. Her sister says Joan Ingilby's past is her own. It shouldn't be. See if you can't coax Miss Lucy to be a bit franker. Of course, we shall get at it in time, but she may help us to a short cut. You may get a chance of a talk with her, since she's putting up at the inn where you say you intend to stay."

Blair had refused an offer of a room in the Inspector's pretty house. Blair thought it as well to point out that it was highly unlikely that Miss Ingilby would condescend to be even aware of his existence, but that he would do his best.

"We know it wasn't an outsider who committed the crime, thanks to the Airedale." The Inspector was harking back to his own thoughts. "Nice dog,

'Laddy.' Though I don't deny he's a bit dull-witted. Pity of it is he used to belong to a medical man who went in a lot for dissection. I think that's why he didn't howl at Mrs. Amcott's dead body. But he's a good dog, belongs to Mr. Ralph Amcott. He came from the Elmhurst kennels; his lordship gave me a pup from the same litter. First-class watchdogs, one and all."

Lord Elmhurst was Octavia Dallas's father, and had a well-known kennel.

"I haven't seen the dog so far," Blair said indifferently.

Inspector Armstrong dropped the article which he was examining, and spun on his heel. "Why, that's true!" he said, as if to himself.

"I do sometimes speak the truth when I'm not thinking. But why this blind confidence in your fellow-man?"

Armstrong did not smile.

"'Laddy' . . . I haven't seen himself to-day. I don't doubt it's all right, but I'll ask if I can borrow him for Farmer Ryan's haystack."

But downstairs the Inspector learnt that the dog had not been seen since just before lunch.

"Hope he isn't poaching," the butler said anxiously. "He does love a rabbit hunt. And in the Christmas holidays so many young gentlemen are just learning to handle a gun that it isn't safe to let even a cat out of sight."

"I'll have a look around the grounds," the Inspector said as, followed by Blair, he turned down a path.

"This leads to his kennel. He and I are old friends. He comes to my house for a game with his brother at least once a day. Both use their kennels as larders. Ten to one 'Laddy's' still burying a

bone or a bunny." He stopped short, and seemed to listen for a moment, then with a gesture of caution he stepped lightly and cautiously to a summer-house that backed in their direction.

"I don't doubt!" Blair, joining him, heard the Baroness say with a sneer in her voice, "what gallant cavaliers you and Waddy are to be sure! Both protecting that poor lamb. I don't care what you say. If there was a murder, she did it, and the Inspector says there was a murder."

"From now we must do exactly as Waddy says," came in Hilary Amcott's silly drawl. "He has the brains of the outfit. I agree with you about Armstrong's pig-headedness. That damned newspaper article started it all," Hilary went on with a note of surprising menace in his voice. "I'ld like to wring the neck of the fool who wrote it."

"He's right about that girl in spite of all of you." 'Ty Maricourt's light, hard voice threw in.

"Why, you and she seemed no end of friends." The sneer was now in the man's voice.

"Not at all!" Baroness Maricourt spoke coolly enough. "I don't deny that she hoodwinked me too at first. But it didn't take me long to do what you've never done, Hilary, and that is to see through her."

The desire to wring necks seemed to be in the air. Blair had it very badly just then, and it was such a pretty neck that he felt like wringing.

"She tried her best to catch you when she saw you were interested in her, but it was Waddy she really hoped for. There's no reason why I shouldn't say what I think when we're alone." 'Ty Maricourt finished, with an attempt at a careless laugh.

"No reason why you shouldn't say what you

think . . ." repeated the man. "Some of your thoughts might be interesting, 'Ty. Those about the emeralds, for instance."

"Nothing to those about your talk with Doris on Tuesday afternoon!"

Blair could see Hilary's face through a crack in the wood. It was convulsed for a second. But all he said in reply to this last sally was:

"Possibly, my dear kitten. Your claws are always sharp as needles. But you'll find that mine are longer, sharper."

Hilary was speaking in a muffled but very disagreeable voice. Evidently a family row of grade A quality was on. "And now let's cut along to the house, there's a good kid. Heart-to-heart talks might be misunderstood by our peerless police."

The two left the shelter and walked up towards one of the long windows.

"Funny little scene that!" Blair murmured as he and the Inspector stepped around some laurels.

The police officer threw him an eloquent glance.

"Like a couple of crooks, eh? I told you he was pulling my leg with that speech about having seen his sister-in-law on Tuesday afternoon. But this way to the dog show." He led on for a couple of hundred yards. At the kennel he stooped down and peered inside. "He's there right enough," he said in a low, sharp whisper, "but he's dead."

Together they dragged out the stiff body. The Inspector tightened his lips.

"I wonder if this might be the reason that you hadn't seen him? Poor old chap! Poisoned, by the look of him. He was in perfect condition yesterday. Shut up when the jury came to look at the body merely because his barks didn't seem seemly just then. Poisoned. . . . That looks as if some-

thing were afoot at the house that isn't finished yet. . . ."

"The family tune," Blair murmured. "Of which we heard just now part of the quarrels over the rehearsal in the summer-house."

The Inspector only looked very grave. He was still peering into the kennel when his torch gave out.

"Mind you," he went on, straightening up, "the Elmhurst dogs won't touch food from a stranger or eat anything lying around. So if not from a stranger. . . ."

"Yes?" asked Hilary Amcott's tired voice close beside them. "If not from a stranger, Armstrong, then what?"

He and the rector had stepped from behind some bushes. Both now stood gazing down at the dog.

"Dead, eh?" Hilary said indifferently. Grimshaw said nothing. He seemed to draw a little apart from the others.

"Poisoned probably," Inspector Armstrong said shortly. He was remembering that Hilary Amcott was credited with having objected to Mrs. Amcott's bringing the dog down with her. The animal belonged to her husband. It had taken a cable from the squire to make him give way about "Laddy."

"I came down to tell you," Hilary went on, turning negligently from the dog, "that, on thinking things over, I shouldn't wonder if I had made a mistake about Tuesday afternoon. I mean my talk with Mrs. Amcott. I rather fancy you are right, and that it took place on the day before, the Monday. One day goes by so like another in this God-forsaken hamlet to which the doctor banishes me that really. . . ." Yawning, he moved off. The rector had already turned on his heel and left them.

The Inspector tapped his moustache.

"I don't like the look of this," he confided to Blair. "Do you mind staying by the carcase, Mr. Blair, while I go for the vet? I don't want to leave it alone."

In a short time a couple of men came hurrying up with a covered handcart. The dog was laid in and wheeled out of the garden. The Inspector hurried off, and Blair made for the inn and a room under the same roof with Joan.

CHAPTER V

It seemed to Blair that the gods of misfortune and bad luck laughed that morning. The death of the Airedale might have been used as a proof that other hands than Joan Ingilby's were stirring in this case. For Joan had been in the train when the dog was killed. But since the girl in the train was called Lucy, poor Joan could still be suspected by the Inspector of this new act of cruelty. Blair had a feeling that the Inspector so read the riddle of "Laddy's" poisoning.

The inn, whose outside was apparently built of thatch and ivy, had a bedroom which he could have. The landlady looked at him rather sharply.

"We've got Miss Ingilby staying here with us," she announced pugnaciously, "the sister of that poor young lady as you hinted at in this morning's *Comet*, sir. At least, I'm told as you wrote that article?"

Blair acknowledged the authorship and waited.

"We're all on Miss Ingilby's side in the village," the landlady went on in a tone that suggested that Blair might not care to stay in the place even overnight.

Once again he explained his present opinion of that article. Her face softened.

"Well, of course, newspapers have to sell, don't they?" she murmured. "I'm from London myself, and what with the police wanting promotion . . ." She seemed to think that any further explanation of covert remarks was needless.

most prejudiced cannot but recognise. It so spoke here.

" Oh, it's too monstrous to speak of ! "

Joan was seething, boiling, bubbling, yet she looked alarmed too. This was a second and a distinct accusation. If persisted in it might prejudice people against her ; people who even after the accusation of murder had remained her friends. There was, to anyone who had ever seen her, let alone talked to her, a certain grotesqueness about suspecting her of the worse crime. But those emeralds. . . .

She turned to Blair with imploring eyes.

" You're so clever, can't you see any light ? Have you no idea on which we can work ? It seems horrible to talk like this about people with whom I've lived for months, but I must ! What motive can there be which would account for a crime ? That's what staggers me. If one could only think of a motive, one could think of someone whom it would point to. But no one, *no* one gains anything by Mrs. Amcott's death."

" As far as we yet know," he corrected. " That's what Armstrong would say if he could hear you. And, after all, this is only the first day, remember ! "

" The first day ! " she repeated in a tone of horror. " The first day of my back to the wall—of wondering from second to second whether I've been discovered and am about to be arrested." She spoke with a fierce passion.

Her hand was on the arm of her chair. Stooping, Blair suddenly kissed it.

" And, of course, that dreadful man won't say that he saw me at the theatre, saw me on both evenings ! " she went on in a tense voice.

Blair found Joan sitting by the fire in the empty drawing-room. She looked a very forlorn little figure to him as he stood a moment in the doorway watching her. She was wondering about that diary —and the rector. On the whole, she decided to be silent about the extraordinary affair—for the present. She might have a chance of getting the book back again. In any case, there was probably nothing to be found within its covers that would throw any light on the murder.

Just then she glanced up, and a vainer young man than Blair might have felt his heart leap at the look that came over her face.

"I thought you were never coming! That awful Mr. Waddy walked all the way here with me. I thought I should never get rid of him. I hope he doesn't suspect that I'm not Joan's sister?" she whispered. They were not only alone in the room, which was at one end of a long wing of the building, but it was approached by a passage whose boards would have creaked even under the feet of a ghost.

"I'm sure he doesn't!" Blair reassured her. He was sure that Waddy had a certitude, not a suspicion, on that point. That silent laugh could have meant nothing else; but there was no need to tell Joan that, at least not yet awhile. He had so much else that would be a shock to her to tell her. He gave her a very frank account of the conversation after she had gone to the inn.

Joan bounded from her chair.

"He—this Monsieur Waddy accuses me of having stolen those emeralds?"

Blair wished that it had been possible for the Inspector to see her at this moment. Truth now and then speaks with an accent, a look which even the

Blair told her that both Monsieur Waddy and Hilary Amcott had owned up to this. She looked very surprised.

"Then there's a catch in it somewhere!" Still, she looked relieved.

"What about this Baroness de Maricourt, what's she like herself?" he asked after a pause.

"At first I thought her a jolly good sort. But latterly"—Joan bit her lip—"it's too utterly silly, but latterly I thought she was jealous of me, and because of that awful man!" Joan's look of scorn was eloquent.

"What's the relationship between her and Waddy?" was Blair's indiscreet question.

Joan's answer was, "Heaven knows!"

"You don't know anything about him? His antecedents? His family?"

"Nothing. I don't think I've spoken to him more than twice all told. And he dared to say that he admired Joan Ingilby!" Her finely-cut nostrils dilated with anger. "He claims to've been a friend of the late Baron de Maricourt. She says so too. Says that's how he became such a friend of the Amcotts. Certainly in town he seemed to know plenty of the right people."

"Satisfactory testimonial to his banking account, but to nothing much else, in the case of a good dancer, and a bachelor. Did Mrs. Amcott care for him? Before you spoke to her about him and his interest in the emeralds?" he asked.

"I don't think she liked him. But he tried tremendously to ingratiate himself with her—for the sake of the emeralds, I'm certain. It used to make 'Ty Maricourt, as they call her, furious."

"She was jealous?"

"I thought so, though it was only an impression.

Outwardly she and Mrs. Amcott were the closest of friends, but I used to think sometimes that secretly she hated Mrs. Amcott—as much as she apparently now hates me."

Blair thought again of those rose petal hands. Had they carried in that charcoal stove, the instrument of a slow but certain death ?

" And Mr. Grimshaw, the rector, was he a great friend of Mrs. Amcott's as well as of her husband ? "

Joan hesitated.

" He was constantly in her sitting-room, and I often met her coming away from the rectory. But I think she was in some trouble of mind. Mr. Grimshaw is wonderfully popular in the village with everyone who knows him, and I always thought he fully deserved it."

" Don't you still ? " he asked quickly.

She hesitated. Should she or should she not speak of that diary ? But she had a plan by which to get that back ; she would try that first.

The creaking of the floor outside announced the waiter, who wanted to know if he should bring the lady's black coffee into the room where they were. Blair asked for a cup for himself as well, and when they were alone again told Joan of the death of " Laddy." She gave a little cry of pity.

" I searched the kennel with my torch," he went on, " and found something that I don't suppose will be of any use. But you never know where a clue will turn up."

Hardly in a kennel, Joan thought, with some inward amusement at the idea. Blair caught her look, and agreed ruefully.

" I'm afraid so, especially as it seemed to be only a ticket of some kind—Spanish, I think."

The door opened, and the waiter brought in a tray with two cups on it.

"I must show it to the Inspector, of course," he went on, watching the man set it down near them, "though it is probably only a dud. However, I sent it on in my attaché case by a constable to the station. I'll drop in after this and see what Armstrong thinks. You might care to have a look at it too."

The door had closed, but opened immediately again. This time it was a message. Mr. Blair was wanted on the telephone.

He found it was from the sub-editor of the *Comet*. That paper utterly refused to print Blair's recantation of his theory of how Mrs. Amcott had been murdered, a recantation handed in just before Blair caught the express down to Elmhurst. Blair did his best, but it was no use.

Joan came out finally. Long telephone messages made her nervous just now, she said.

They had barely returned to the room and seated themselves again, when another telephone call came. This time it was she who was wanted.

"A kind message of sympathy from Dr. Pearson and his wife. The dears! They believe in Joan," she explained as she returned once more to her chair. "Our coffee certainly won't be too hot now. How nice of you to have waited for me."

She picked up her cup. The first taste went into her handkerchief.

"Mr. Blair, don't touch yours!" Her voice was hoarse with terror. Her face had blanched. It was twisted with fear. Her eyes had widened until the whites showed all around the big, distended pupils. Even her lips were white.

"It's been tampered with!" She stared at him

as though stupefied. "Poisoned!" She gave a rattling gasp. "Oh, have you drunk any?"

He had not.

"Ask Mrs. Black, the landlady, for an empty bottle. She's down in the coffee-room, I know." Joan was recovering her nerve. "Ask her to have it well washed, and we'll pour this into it. It must be examined. I know it's been doctored in some way."

Blair could taste nothing amiss, though he took care not to swallow any of it. He thought it merely the local idea of black coffee. However, Joan's face was too ghastly to be argued with. He returned with a bottle, into which she carefully poured both their cups, corked it, and suggested going with it at once to the Inspector.

"What had we better do with the cups?" she whispered. "Suppose they poison the water in which they are washed?"

Blair thought her nerves were getting the upper hand, and no wonder! But he promptly settled that question by dashing both cups on to the stone hearth, where they lay in pieces.

At the police station Blair found that the Inspector did not pooh-pooh Joan's terrors. For one thing, the girl was too obviously shaken by at least a conviction of a very close shave for that.

"We'd better let Dr. Pearson have a look at your bottle. Sensible of you to've brought it." Inspector Armstrong held it against the light while Blair was busy getting his attaché case out of the safe. He opened it, and hunted for the tag of paper found in the kennel. He was right that it was of no importance. It proved to be only a stall for some Spanish play got up and produced by the Anglo-Spanish Society in London some two months

before, which obviously must have lain for nearly that time in the kennel, and equally obviously could be of no use in assisting to solve the murder of Mrs. Amcott.

Joan could have told them, now she knew what it was, that Mrs. Amcott had taken the ticket intending to go, and then, on something better turning up, had thrown it away. But she must not seem omniscient.

She and Blair hurried to the doctor's house, where Blair handed in a note from the Inspector as well as the bottle. They had rather a long wait before Dr. Pearson returned, looking very grim, and gave Blair a note for the Inspector, adding that he was telephoning as well. Apparently he was unwilling to discuss the contents of the bottle.

"Let's hurry back," Joan begged. "I *must* know what was in that coffee. Whether I was right or, as you thought me, absolutely ridiculous."

Blair protested all the way to the police station that under no circumstances could such an idea ever occur to him.

The Inspector tore the letter open, though he knew its contents already.

"Was I right? Was there something in our coffee?" Joan asked, moistening her lips before she could speak.

"There was, Miss Ingilby. Same stuff as killed the dog. Arsenic. Good job you had your suspicions and didn't swallow that mouthful you took. I don't suppose it was meant for you, though I'm bound to say that the doctor says there was enough for three people. You must evidently be very careful. If it *was* meant for you, it looks as though you knew something or were in possession of s nething

that might be dangerous to, or is wanted by, the murderer." He eyed her keenly.

Joan shook her head. She had closed her eyes with horror. She was still badly frightened.

"Perhaps it's something you're not aware of yourself?" he persisted.

But Joan declared that this was impossible. The Inspector thought a moment.

"The coffee may have been poisoned when it was first brought in," he thought. "But more likely something was dropped in when you and Mr. Blair were both out of the room at the telephone. Some distance away, as I happen to know. Now, who was in the inn at the time? There are no strangers there just now, except some reporters, and they were at the coroner's, as I happen to know. They all lunched with him."

Blair thought of the rector, whom he had met, looking very grim, talking to Mrs. Black in her parlour, or rather listening, with an obviously absent mind, to Mrs. Black's cheery chatter; but he did not bring down on himself the Inspector's ridicule by mentioning that now. Instead, he offered to see Joan back to the inn, but she refused.

She wanted quiet and a walk in the open air, she said. So Blair reluctantly saw her leave. He had a feeling that some danger hovered over her, not over him, and that it might strike any moment, even in a well-lit main street, even though he knew that a constable would follow her.

"Here is the report from the vet," the Inspector said as soon as they were alone.

Blair learnt from it that the Airedale had been poisoned by arsenic inserted in, or scattered over, liver. The dog must have swallowed it about noon, and crawled into his kennel to die.

"Extraordinary thing, this attempt on your lives. Or, rather, it was probably only meant for you, and an over-dose put in. And yet—is it possible that Miss Ingilby knows something? If so, is she keeping it dark?"

Blair could only say that if Miss Ingilby knew anything that could help the case forward, obviously she would have told it.

"It's really her terror that frees her from the suspicion of having herself tried to poison you just now. But that wasn't acting; she's fairly sick with fright," the Inspector muttered.

Blair kept his seat by an effort.

"You see," the police officer went on, quite unconscious of the emotion rioting in Blair's every nerve, "if the two sisters aren't really in touch, Joan Ingilby wouldn't know that you've changed your point of view. I haven't. I still think that article of yours points straight to the truth. She might imagine that you're still of the same opinion."

Blair clenched his hands. He *must* seem academic in his manner. He *must* remain impersonal and calm.

"Damn that article of mine!" was his way of achieving these desirable ends.

The Inspector looked surprised.

"Sorry! Nerves," Blair explained, "and having it rubbed into me what a fool I made of myself in that final paragraph."

"From beginning to end," Armstrong said quietly, "I still maintain that yours is the best, most probable theory of how the murder was done that we've hit on so far. And here's another thought, though linked to the first. Miss Joan may be trying to sweep both you and Miss Lucy out of the way. Her

sister's efforts to clear her may be the last thing that she wants ; she may be embarrassing some further project of hers. And it *was* you who wrote that article, you know ! Joan Ingilby will never forgive you that, we may be sure. If she poisoned the dog, she may have tried to poison you two, singly or doubly. As long as Miss Lucy is down here, there's a risk that she may give her sister's whereabouts away. I only wish the risk were bigger than it seems to be ! "

Blair checked an hysterical laugh. Joan trying to poison Lucy !

" Joan Ingilby is not the answer to this puzzle, Inspector. It's not any governess, but a much more subtle and dangerous combination."

" Possibly," the Inspector agreed politely. " Strange case this. Frankly, I don't like its looks, unless your theory of the governess is the right one, Mr. Blair. But for it, I see nothing but bog, and bog isn't my idea of a neat job."

" What about Mr. Ralph Amcott . . . was he ever entangled with any woman before or during his marriage ? "

" I don't know about entangled. He was engaged to Mr. Grimshaw's sister before he married Miss Doris Norreys as she was then. Miss Grimshaw turned him down after a very short trial. He's got a rare bad temper, and she's none so meek herself either. She used to keep house for her brother in those days ; since then she's taken to living with her people in Yorkshire.

" So she's free to marry him now, should she change her mind about his temper," Blair said ruminatingly. " This rector of yours interests me, Armstrong."

" So he does the ladies," chuckled Armstrong.

"Oh, not his fault. He never gives any of 'em a second glance unless they come about church matters. He believes in celibacy. Some say he's half-way to Rome."

"Yes, a man at the inquest said he's always in hot water with his bishop because he's so High Church."

"Because he's so high-handed," Armstrong said at once. "Mr. Grimshaw will only follow Mr. Grimshaw's rules."

"Apart from that sort of thing, what's his personal rating in the village?"

"Nothing could be higher. You're not speculating on *his* having killed Mrs. Amcott, are you, Mr. Blair?" Armstrong spoke with all but open derision. "That's what I say about you newcomers, clever amateurs, or even Scotland Yard men. You all have to begin at the beginning as far as the characters of the people are concerned, while we can take things up where the crime commences."

"No, I'm not suggesting that the rector is a murderer," Blair said after a long pause, "but I have a feeling that he suspects someone. And, more than that—that he knows something which he doesn't want to tell."

"That's quite an idea," ruminated Armstrong. Suddenly he jumped. "By Jove, Mr. Blair, I shouldn't wonder if you're right again! Mr. Grimshaw has taken to confessions lately, and, being Christmas time, has rather made a point of them. It's amused most of the women immensely. There's nothing they like better, high or low, than a chance of 'a tell,' as they call it hereabouts, and especially when they can bring in all their neighbours' sins as well. Half the village has been to confession

this last fortnight, and I understand that what's told in the confessional is dropped into the sea. Awkward for us, that. And there's nothing Mr. Grimshaw would like better than to be hauled over the coals for it. He loves a fight with his fists or his tongue. Oh, first-class boxer is our rector! And you should see him batting!" The Inspector was in the village Eleven, and glowed with admiration.

"How about the people at the manor? Do they go to confession?"

"I'll ask Hobbs, the verger. He's as great a gossip as any of us. That's one thing in this sort of a place—you can't stop to pat a kitten but all the village knows of it."

"Yet you can commit a murder and all but get away with it."

"For the time being," conceded the Inspector; "only for the time being."

Blair made no reply as he watched the lights shine through the window.

"I suppose Ralph Amcott really *is* ill, and in Khartoum?"

"He is. Very ill. There's no doubt of that whatever."

"And his character?"

"Clever. Very high-and-mighty manner. Supposed to have the devil of a temper, as I said, and altogether not to be over-pleasant to live with."

"Oh, don't weaken on the local gentry!" begged Blair. "Surely an Amcott of Elmhurst can do no wrong."

The Inspector only looked amused.

"Well, I don't think they've done much wrong here, Mr. Blair. Not for all of Mr. Hilary Amcott's knuckling under to that French friend of his and

lying to keep his family's name out of the papers, and also the account of how he spends his time."

"Waddy is a very queer friend, Inspector. Like draws like."

"Queer he is," the Inspector agreed. "The Chief Constable has been trying to look up the facts about him. We can't get hold of anything wrong—as yet. He lives the life of an ordinary man about town of means. Seen everywhere with the Baroness. He's her dancing partner. They seem to think no end of his dancing and skating at all the places where he goes. He first came to London—as far as we can find out—two years ago as a friend of Baron de Maricourt. He was a Baron all right—fine old French house." The Inspector had unlocked a drawer while talking, and now drew out a number of long slips.

"What are you doing?" Blair asked.

"Looking up the time-tables of the different people connected with Elmhurst."

The Inspector placed the long slips in a row. Blair came and looked over his shoulder. He noted that Mr. Grimshaw had been spoken to by one of his constable parishioners on Tuesday night about midnight in a lane which led away from the manor house. He pointed it out with the stem of his pipe now.

"He had been working late at the Boy's Institute over at Welldene. He has the keys of the manor gates, given him by the squire, they say, when he appointed him to the living. He might have seen something . . . but in that case, not being a confession . . . still, Mr. Grimshaw is a law unto himself . . . anyway, I'll get it out of him in time if he knows anything."

Blair was deep in his own thoughts, too deep to

cast any doubt on the Inspector's ability to bring forth that which the rector preferred should remain hidden.

"Sure there's no gossip linking Mr. Grimshaw's name with Mrs. Amcott?" he said finally.

"None whatever as far as I know, and I hear everything sooner or later. Some do say that he was thinking of taking her along with him over to Rome. But only spiritually, Mr. Blair, only spiritually!"

The two parted on that. On the way back to the inn, Blair ran into the very man they were discussing. The rector stepped forward eagerly.

"What good luck to meet! It's about that article of yours in this morning's *Comet* that I wanted to see you. I didn't want to talk before Armstrong. Are you sure of your facts?" He flashed a knife-like look at Blair.

"The presumed facts? Possibly, though I've learnt something that shakes my belief even in them. But my theorising, my final winding-up"—Blair laughed carelessly—"utter rot! Purest rubbish!" was his verdict.

Mr. Grimshaw still eyed him.

"The reporters, who all rushed down here after it came out, are all convinced by it. So, I understand, are the police. . . ."

"A second examination of the witnesses' statements has made me absolutely certain that the governess had no hand in the murder, as I hinted in the conclusion of that article," Blair said patiently.

"A second glance at her face would have told you as much, and been quicker." Grimshaw seemed to speak with genuine heartiness. "Though I'm bound to say you made that article very convincing, statements and hints alike."

"Trick of the trade," Blair muttered contemptuously.

"Yet you still believe Mrs. Amcott was murdered?" Grimshaw seemed now to find a sudden interest in his pipe.

"There's no doubt of that, none whatever; and in somewhat the way I mentioned."

"Do the police still agree with you? About Mrs. Amcott's death, I mean?"

"Absolutely."

There was a silence.

Mr. Grimshaw's face seemed to stiffen.

"Terrible thought. She's gone, but the crime remains. What is the motive supposed to be?" The tone was casual enough, too casual, Blair thought, to go with the brightness of the eye.

"Motive is the deuce and all in this sort of a case, isn't it?" he said vaguely. "Nothing adequate has turned up so far—to my knowledge."

"It's a dreadful thought . . . I mean the possibility of any human being committing such a sin." Grimshaw spoke in a low voice, though they had the road to themselves. "A man—called to the high destiny to which men are called . . . 'Which was the son of Adam. Which was the son of God.' . . . Perhaps the murderer has repented already. . . . That would make a great deal of difference. . . . Instant repentance. . . ."

There was a pause. Blair said nothing.

"I wonder, too, what poor little Joan Ingilby is feeling. You didn't know her, of course?"

"Heaven forgive me!" Blair said fervently, if a trifle incoherently. "Fortunately her sister came at once to me about my article. She read into it what I meant clearly enough."

"Like everyone else," Grimshaw threw in.

"Naturally she was—well, more than indignant. I'm doing what I can to atone, if one can atone for such a blunder. She is staying down here until the murderer is found and her sister cleared."

"Jolly plucky of her," murmured the parson appreciatively, yet absent-mindedly. "So you think that no motive has been found yet? It's rather early to tell, isn't it?"

"I suppose so. I wondered if *you* could help us." Blair shot a swift glance at his companion under cover of suddenly relighting his pipe.

Again came that stiffening of the features. This time more clearly to be seen. There was a wary look in the parson's eyes as he turned them on Blair.

"I? In what way?"

"You were out late on Tuesday night. Did you happen to see anyone moving about in or near the manor house as you passed it?"

"Surely you do not suppose that if I had I would not have told the police as much this morning?" Mr Grimshaw looked at him with an effect of great surprise, a rebuking glance.

"You might have kept silence because of—many reasons," Blair said stubbornly. "You parsons have to keep so many things to yourself, that you might—*might*—have kept one more."

"I think the poisoning of the dog may help us all on to the right track," Grimshaw went on as though the other's question had been answered and done with. "His having been killed looks as though that outsider wanted to be sure that he would be unmolested, for, of course, 'Laddy' would go for any outsider."

"And would *not* go for any insider, which might have been equally betraying."

"You mean?"

"That he's as likely to have been killed by some friend who didn't want him following him around as by some outsider who wanted to prevent his barking," and Blair shook hands and turned back to the inn.

The rector was deep. Something lay behind that carefully careless questioning. The point was, what?

Blair knew, of course he knew, that not one of us is snatched suddenly from our complex modern lives without leaving a host of ragged ends behind us. In his own mind he placed Hilary Amcott's sinister-faced friend as the chief criminal, even though, in some cunning way he had avoided being actually in the place when the crime was committed. Could a fuse have been laid? Could Joan have mistaken some brother or disguised friend for Waddy? But why should Mr. Grimshaw want to shield Waddy?

To his surprise he met Joan coming towards him. She was now feeling better, and had been for a stroll, she said. She did not add that it had been to the rectory, where she had rung, and, finding that Mr. Grimshaw was out, had boldly asked for the 'purple-bound book that belonged to Mrs. Amcott." She had described it well, with its gilt edges and gilt lock. The maid, though quite without any suspicion of her, had first replied that she had never seen such a book, and then that she knew every one of her master's books, as they were always all over the place. "Purple leather, you say? I never saw such a book here in the rectory, never. If you're sure it wasn't some kind of a prayer-book? Mr. Grimshaw gets them given him of all colours."

Joan assured her it was not a prayer-book, thanked her, and walked away. She had failed. However, like the Inspector, she hoped that, given time enough,

she might yet get that purloined book back, with its possibly invaluable contents, and possibly damning ones, else why had the rector taken it away? But if so, what on earth was his motive? She did not turn in at the little hostelry, a fact which greatly disappointed young Blair. But Joan wanted to see Baroness Maricourt without delay and question her about the alleged missing emeralds. She found, however, that the young widow and Waddy were both out. Then could she see Mr. Hilary Amcott?

She was shown into the same room as before. It was the study of the absent lord of the manor, a room that Joan had always disliked for its darkness and bareness and the number of slaughtered deer heads and masks and brushes that "decorated" it.

Just now Hilary was standing by the huge fireplace; as he turned she wondered if it was the play of the flames that for a second gave his face something vaguely menacing, secretly malignant, even, it seemed to her, unappeasingly hostile. Another moment and she wondered how she could have imagined such nonsense, for as he stepped into the full light she saw only his usual silly grin and vacant eyes that blinked at her out of a puffy, pallid face.

He greeted her with the empty cackle that she knew so well.

"At a loose end already?" he asked in a voice that sounded very unsympathetic.

"It's about Joan," she said, taking a chair with its back to the light like his own, instead of the one he placed for her. "Of course—in strict confidence—I have ways of letting her know about things down here. Now she's frightfully distressed for fear people should get to know about the trouble she had on Saturday with Mrs. Amcott."

"Indeed!" was Amcott's only and very indifferent reply.

Joan stiffened. She stared at him. What had changed him so? He had always acted as though devoted to her. She must know where she stood with him.

"It was about you," Joan said bluntly. "Mrs. Amcott thought that Joan and you had been seeing too much of each other."

Hilary gave a rather fatuous grin. Joan longed to shake him.

"Can she be sure that nothing will be said by you about that?" she went on instead. "As far as she knows, only you know of it."

She looked at him closely. Had he talked about it? Did Monsieur Waddy know of that rift between herself and her late employer that might be twisted to her detriment? Did the Baroness know?

"Your sister's been pulling your leg," Amcott said rudely. "We all think that Mrs. Amcott let her go because she wanted a Roedean girl as governess for the child. If I were you, Miss Ingilby, I shouldn't try to suggest anything else. It might only lead to trouble, like the dog being loose down here."

"Like the dog . . ." she repeated, bewildered.

"He was evidently one too many. Somebody thought they could bear to do without him apparently," was the callous reply. Or was it something more than that, much more?

Suddenly Joan felt afraid of Hilary Amcott—a formless, and as far as she knew, baseless fear.

"Joan thought you were a friend of hers!" she said in a low voice.

"Very kind of her." Hilary gave his silly giggle. "I'm afraid I can hardly presume to that position." He glanced patently at his French novel.

"You mean you're *not* on her side?" the girl pressed. She wanted some explanation of the amazing change in the man. "You see, Mr. Amcott, that article in this morning's *Comet* practically accused my sister of the crime."

"Well, I said I saw her at the theatre," he said as though dismissing the subject—and the sister. "Jolly decent of me to volunteer that much!"

"But it was the truth! Naturally you'd tell the truth!" There was amazement and indignation in her voice.

"Anyway, it saved her. You tell her to be content with that."

"But—but—it's not a question of your doing anything for her; it's merely that she wants to know who thinks her innocent and who doesn't."

"Look here," he said, reaching for his book. (What a boor the man was, she thought.) "You tell your sister that Monsieur Waddy and I will stand by her as long as she keeps quiet—and hidden! But she's not to come down here and stir things up, or she'll find she has to settle with us." His puffy lids lifted to let him give her a cold glance from pale grey eyes all criss-crossed with red veins—a glance that sent a shiver through Joan. It was a menace.

"Us?" she asked, rising, but he seemed not to hear the low perplexed repetition.

"Anything I can do to help my friends," he said lightly. "Monsieur Waddy I mean by that, see?"

"And Joan thought you liked her! She thought she could count on you," the girl murmured.

"Let her count on Waddy and she can count on me," Hilary Amcott said succinctly. "But remember! No coming down here herself to rout things out—and stir the police up." He spoke very low, but with remarkable firmness for him.

"You mean that you wouldn't help her if she came herself and appealed to you?" she asked gently.

Hilary Amcott was at the door.

"Better not try it!" he said with a silly chuckle. Something in it drove the colour from her cheeks. She passed on through the hall without another word. The man was an enemy. Open and yet secret. "Acting on instructions received," as official papers said. Acting on Monsieur Waddy's instructions without a doubt.

As she walked away the man she so loathed and Baroness Maricourt were discussing her. They had returned while she was in Sir Christopher's study.

"You go too far in accusing the governess of Mrs. Amcott's murder," Monsieur Waddy was saying for about the tenth time, and with vigour. "You'll get yourself into trouble if you don't look out."

"What trouble?" snapped 'Ty.

He only looked at her.

"Oh," she shrugged pettishly, "you and your anxiety over Joan Ingilby! If you dislike her as much as you claim to, why do you care what I say about her?"

"Because I care about you," Waddy said, trying to take her hand, but she pulled it away, and began to set out on a table a little roulette wheel.

"The servants won't know, and as we can't go to any clubs for a few evenings we'll do as last night and play here. Heaven be on my side to-night." She spoke as though heaven were not always to be found there. "I can't afford to be unlucky again. Hilary won seventy pounds from me."

"You'll win it back from him at cards," Waddy said consolingly.

She nodded.

"Judging by his cards, he must be the luckiest man in love in the world, I should think," she said lightly as she left the room.

A minute later the door was flung open and Hilary rushed in. His eyes, like his hair, were wild.

"I've just seen Ralph! What the devil does he mean spying on me like this?"

"You've seen your brother?" Waddy's face went white, or rather pale yellow. "You're drunk!"

"I'll thank you not to be insulting," Hilary said with a weak man's splutter. "He was just slipping down the east corridor away from my room."

"And towards mine!" Monsieur Waddy was out of the room in an instant. He was away some time. When he came back he stood frowning and clenching his thin fingers and muttering to himself until Hilary hurried in again, still looking very much upset.

"I all but caught him! What the devil does he mean slinking around like that and spying on me? Did you see him?"

Waddy nodded. "I did. *Shi mahul!*" he muttered under his breath. And when Waddy broke into Arabic, or rather Cairene, he was indeed perturbed. "I thought he was ill in Khartoum." He turned his face towards Hilary, and seemed to stare hard at him.

"So did I!" echoed Hilary. "That, of course, is what he wanted me to think! But why should Ralph slink around like a burglar? Here, let's question the servants!" He strode, not over-steadily, towards the bell, but Waddy stopped him with a leap like a panther's.

"Don't be hasty. This is a serious matter. Your brother found hiding in the house where his wife was

murdered! This needs thinking over. I wonder if the rector knows . . . he's your brother's great friend, isn't he?"

Hilary's mouth opened, and stayed open, as he nodded feebly.

"Good lord!" he muttered, "you don't think . . . oh, rot! Ralph's spying on me, that's all. And as for Grimshaw . . . you think he's putting Ralph up at the rectory and letting him lie low there? It's only just across the park . . . but that's tosh. I think. . . ."

"I think your brother is the answer to the riddle that's been puzzling us," Waddy said darkly, "if he's over here and not in the Soudan."

"How can Ralph be an answer to a riddle?" Hilary tittered foolishly.

"The riddle of your sister-in-law's murder," snapped Waddy. "The point is, what should we do?" He bit his nails deep in thought.

"But Ralph . . . why should he hurt Doris . . ." Bleated Hilary, goggling.

"Jealousy, you fool!"

"Not so much fool, if you please." Hilary again attempted, with marked unsuccess, an air of dignity. "I think you forget sometimes. . . ."

"Oh, cut it out!" Waddy said shortly. "The point is your brother's secret arrival. I thought he was ill. There was a notice to that effect in *Al Mokattam* last week. They wrote of him as all but at death's door."

"I wish he were!" came unfeelingly from Hilary. "But you *did* see him, didn't you?" He asked this last a little shamefacedly. "It wasn't imagination on my part?"

"No, it was your brother," Waddy said between his teeth. "I saw his back."

"And I his face. He glared at me like a devil." Hilary touched his forehead, as though it were suddenly wet.

"Damn him!" came from Waddy, and was followed by some Arabic curses.

"I say!" Hilary bridled, "I can swear at my brother, for I've cause to. But you haven't any cause to curse him. And I don't . . .

"If he's after you, that's quite enough for me, Hilary." Waddy spoke with a heartiness that went ill with his eyes. It seemed to touch Hilary.

"You're a good chap, Waddy," he murmured gratefully.

"There's no doubt he murdered his wife," Waddy went on. "I say, there's no doubt," he repeated as Hilary opened a protesting mouth. "The point is, shall we try and get hold of him ourselves, or shall we put the police on his track?"

"I think I see myself doing either!" muttered Hilary. "You don't know Ralph! He's a devil when he's in a rage. Doesn't care what he does. And he's as strong as an ox. Staying with Grimshaw, you think. . . . Look here, I'm off! He's come home because of that bill I told you of, the bill I—eh—had to get accepted. Anyone whom Ralph has it in for is a fool to stay. We'll go to Mentone. Jack Thynne's yacht is still there, and it's only ten minutes from Monte. I'll 'phone to Cook's for tickets now. Air, I suppose?"

"I'm not going to be frightened away by your brother," Waddy said in a none too steady voice. "I'm staying on. You asked me down here till New Year and I shall stay till then. If not here, then at the inn. I've made all my plans, and I don't intend to shift them. And as for you—you can't leave, my dear fool. Not till it's been found out who did the

murder. Not till your brother's been caught, in other words."

"And have him tell them about that bill?" Hilary snapped. He was shaking in his chair. "Besides, he would kill us first before the police could get to him. I know Ralph. I—I think we must say nothing about his being here and just slip away ourselves—fade out."

"I've said that I'm not going." Waddy spoke with an effort, but doggedly. "I promised 'Ty to get her emeralds back for her, and I won't fail her."

"What a good chap you are, Waddy!" Hilary said again. "I don't know what we'ld do without you. If you stay—well, I'll stay too. But"—he looked very frightened—"I wish I knew what Ralph was up to. His face—you see I saw it—wasn't the face you like to meet in a dark passage, brother or no brother!" He broke off at Hilary's air of listening to something. "What is it? Do you hear him coming this way?" Quite patently Hilary looked around for cover.

"Who's ringing like that? Has 'Ty's bell stuck?" Waddy asked sharply, opening the door. But before he could step into the hall the ringing stopped. A moment later 'Ty Maricourt came running downstairs looking extremely indignant.

"Is this supposed to be a joke? Which of you two locked me into my bedroom just now? The servants had their hall door shut. I thought I'd never make them hear me."

"Locked you into . . ." began Hilary with round eyes.

His friend laid a hand on his arm and pinched it hard.

"I did it, 'Ty," he confessed. "Hilary and I had a bet on as to who could run down the east wing and

round by the loggia and back here first. I didn't want to collide with you and break your or my legs on the stairs."

"Winning that bet must have been easy money for you," 'Ty said with a glance at Hilary's shrunk figure, "though a couple of years ago you might have found your match. But Hilary's shockingly out of condition, from these late hours we all keep. Nearly as much as out of pocket. But now let's have a few minutes' amusement for goodness' sake." She moved towards the table, and the two others followed her.

CHAPTER VI

As a sleeper counts time, it was that same night, though in reality it was just before dawn next morning, when Blair was waked by something being pulled over his head. It was a felt bag with an elastic edge that gathered in tight around his neck, stifling his shouts and all but smothering him. He had no chance to do more than touch it with startled fingers before a noose of furniture-webbing was slipped over his body—he had sat up in bed with the first shock of surprise—down to his elbows and drawn tight. An end went round his knees. Within the minute he was neatly and completely trussed.

He tried to shout louder. Instantly another piece of felt on another stout elastic was slipped over the bag and the whole held so close against his mouth that for a second he was smothered. A pair of short quills were thrust from the outside into his nostrils. He could breathe now, but make no sound. This was not a first performance. He was in experienced hands. He listened as best he could. His room was being searched; more than that he could not tell. After what seemed to him nearly an hour he himself was searched with the utmost care by hands that seemed made of smooth steel. Then he was hoisted on to the carpeted floor and his bed evidently minutely examined.

Finally he heard the key put into the lock, turned, and then a snap of what must have been razor-edged shears cut through one strap around his legs

The next instant the door was shut, and he heard the key turned from the outside.

It took Blair at least half-an-hour to get his arms free and to fling off the gag and felt bag. Then he jumped for the switch ; it refused to connect with his lights.

He pressed the bell ; it did not ring. He shouted and pounded on the panels. No one seemed to hear. He and Joan were the only visitors in the inn as far as he knew.

Some reporters had tried to get rooms, but the landlady had declared that she had none to let. Joan had begged her not to let them stay in the house, and had accompanied the begging by a handsome " make-weight," as Mrs. Black called it. There was a door at the end of his corridor ; probably it had now been shut. Blair had chosen his room because he could see Joan's windows from it—she had been put in the corresponding wing—and also because it offered an easy descent to the ground if need be by means of a thick trunk of ivy just beside his casement.

He was half-way across to that particular window now, intending to use nature's ladder, when he saw something dark slip from Joan's window, something dark—it was a man—let itself down by the brickwork and creepers, and, as he jumped to his own window-ledge, something dark melt like a solid shadow into the garden, and be instantly swallowed up in the blackness. At that moment his foot found the key of his bedroom door. It had been tossed onto his window-ledge out of sight behind a curtain. The intruder must have had his own pass-key.

As he grabbed it, he heard the faint click of the garden gate. Instantly Blair had his door open

and was out in the corridor. He would have liked to catch the man, but first of all he must know if Joan were all right.

He hurried down the corridor that led to her room. There was no light in it, as there should have been, no light under her door either. He listened; all was silent. He tapped gently until he heard a low "Who is there?" It sounded reassuringly sleepy.

"Me—Martin Blair. Are you all right?" he whispered through the crack. She opened at once and peered out at him, rubbing her eyes as though he might be a dream. Another moment and she came out wrapped in her green dressing-gown. He whispered to her what had happened. The whole affair was too grave, in his opinion, to hide things from her. She darted back into her room with a gesture that asked him to wait. She came out again in a moment or two looking disturbed.

"Someone's been searching through all my things. Not that they're many," she whispered. "To think of that dreadful man in my room! At this hour! Turning over my dressing-case!" Blair did not wonder that she gave a little choked exclamation. He felt choked too. "Luckily I keep my wig on even at night," she murmured after looking up and down the little corridor, but all the house was asleep.

"What man? Who was it?" he asked.

"Waddy, of course. Monsieur Waddy!" she answered without a second's hesitation.

Martin was not so sure of his visitor's identity. For one thing, the monsieur did not look as if he had muscles of such steel as those wrists that had knotted the webbing around Blair; for another, just as the bag went over his head, in other words, just as he

waked, he now remembered a scent of peat-smoked Harris tweed, and a smell of an old pipe and of a very fragrant tobacco. Now there was nothing about Waddy to suggest any of these things. Harris tweed is not a French fashion, and Waddy did not look like a pipe smoker.

"And what would Monsieur Waddy be after?" he asked Joan slowly.

"The emeralds of course."

"But I thought you believed that he had stolen them?" Blair expostulated.

She nodded. "So I did. But from his words this afternoon, and now this visit to me—and to you—makes me sure that they've been stolen from him again. He thinks evidently that I have them, or have perhaps given them to you to keep. And as I'm absolutely sure that he stole them, there's no other explanation that will reconcile the two."

Joan shivered, not from the cold, for it was a warm corner where they stood by a heater. Even country inns have heaters in their halls in this year of grace.

"You're cold?" he asked solicitously. He himself could have stood talking to her in a snow storm and not felt it.

She shook her head.

"Frightened," she said, and fell silent. And that silence rammed the word home as no additional explanations would have done.

"Of him?"

She made a very helpless gesture and crept closer.

"I have an idea that he knows I'm Joan Ingilby," she whispered. "It's an idea that's been growing stronger the more I think it over. And if he hasn't denounced me to the police, it's because he's waiting

for a good chance or for something. That something can only be to get the emeralds from me." She closed her eyes and leant half against the wall, half against his arm. "It would be no use swearing to him that I haven't got them, that I don't steal." She gave a little half-sob. "It's fixed in his mind that I've got what he wants, and, in my belief, unless he learns where they are, he'll go to any lengths to make me give him what I haven't got.

"Oh, why did I ever come to this horrible manor house? Why did I ever take the post with Mrs. Amcott? I should never have met him then, never have been dragged into this awful position! I know he's planning something, and if he thinks I have the emeralds he'll stick at nothing. Oh, Martin, I'm so afraid of him. I'm bound and gagged because of. . . ." She swallowed a sob.

"Of my article!" Blair finished her sentence to himself. It was true.

"I feel as if he would sell his soul for that necklace!" she muttered.

"Sell his soul?" Blair tried to raise a smile on her pale cheeks, a pallor not entirely due to that stuff in the bottle which he had bought for her. "Chaps like that don't have souls to offer!"

"I'ld *give* mine to make him slip up on whatever it is he's planning!" she said with sudden fire, and on the instant was gone.

In the morning he asked casually about the house dog. He was told by Mrs. Black that "Hero" was reliable, but a glutton that no amount of training could teach to pass food by.

"But he evidently went the rounds all right last night," that unsuspecting woman wound up, "for he's snoring like a house a-fire this morning. Won't

even wake for breakfast, and he loves porridge and milk, does ' Hero.' Mr. Grimshaw told me I ought to leave some mustard done up in liver around to give him a lesson," Mrs. Black went on. " He found ' Hero ' dreadfully sick one day when he called in after a day with the hounds, but as I told him, what's the good ? It would take more than mustard to stop ' Hero ' from gobbling up anything he found, short of poison there's nothing would cure him," and with that she moved off.

Blair had already decided that ' Hero ' had had a free supper last night provided by someone who knew of his fondness for good things.

The funeral was at eleven. Blair went by himself ; so did Joan.

When it was over Miss Norreys touched her on the arm. Miss Henrietta Norreys was the dead woman's aunt.

" Get into my car ; I want to talk to you," was that lady's peremptory yet somewhat kindly way of opening the conversation. " With those bare legs of yours you'll freeze. It's like a being at a Highland gathering to see all you young things with your kilts above your knees. I don't know how you stand it. In December ! "

" One has to wear what one can buy," Joan murmured meekly.

" Quite so. And, of course, the less stuff they give you for your money, the more dressmakers and tailors put in their own pockets," the old lady said tartly. " I refuse to be swindled." Certainly her garments left no seamstress anything to hope for in the way of spare breadths or inches off the hem. " I won't look as though I had jumped out of bed on an alarm of fire. But now about your sister. I liked Joan. She's quite unlike you."

Joan laughed. She could not help it. Miss Norreys pricked up her ears.

"You both laugh alike."

"Our voices are alike," Joan said equably. "No one can tell us apart when we're talking."

Miss Norreys nodded absent-mindedly.

"What's she going to do?" she asked bluntly. You could be blunt on Miss Norreys's income.

"I know what *I'm* going to do," said Joan with spirit, "and that's clear her."

"Easily said, but easily done?" Miss Norreys asked a trifle grimly.

"How would you begin?" Joan asked after a pause that had something a little forlorn about it.

"By getting the best private detective down, or by insisting on the Chief Constable putting the affair into the hands of Scotland Yard," the old lady replied decidedly.

"I'm not in a position to do either," Joan said, biting her lip. "Not money enough for the first—not influence enough for the second."

"I'm ready to help you to do either. I mean it," the old woman replied to Joan's little look of inquiry. "I'm sorry for your sister. It's an awful position for the poor child."

Joan's eyes filled. She always responded to sympathy.

"You—you *are* kind!" she murmured brokenly.

"Not at all—merely just. I've had an easy life myself; I don't say it's been any the happier on that account. There's lots of fun to be got out of winning a stiff fight; but I've never had one, and, illogically enough, I'm always sorry for young women who are up against things. Now which will you choose? The finest detective in England, or the affair in the hands of Scotland Yard?"

Joan took plenty of time to think over her answer. There was something to be said both ways. But at last she made up her mind.

"I think Scotland Yard is cleverer than any private agency."

"Of course they are!" Miss Norreys agreed. "But"—she cocked a very shrewd eye, bright as a blue glass marble, at her companion—"not 'all the king's horses nor all the king's men' can stop them once they start. Have you thought of that?"

Joan sat up rigidly.

"Tut-tut!" Miss Norreys laid a plump white hand on the nearest silk knee under the fur rug. "Now, now, don't get cross! After all, you're only Joan's sister, you know, not her soul. And only the soul of Joan Ingilby knows whether she did kill my niece or not."

"*I* know she didn't!" Joan said with a conviction that brought another squeeze.

"It's natural that you should feel like that. But what I want you to think of is this: would Joan be equally sure? Mind you, frankly, I shall get the Yard into it in any case, but, at least, you wouldn't be the one to have set the hounds on your own sister's trail; they're bloodhounds, my child, after all. You and I, thank God, are apt to think of the police as protectors, helpers—I'm sure I don't know when we fat old women would get across a street but for them—but they're not protectors nor helpers to the evil-doers."

"My sister isn't an evil-doer," the girl beside her said indignantly, but in a voice that quivered, try though she would to keep it steady. The bloodhounds were to be set on her own trail, and it had seemed a very straight course to Blair's reasoning. They, too, might follow that article. But, on the

other hand, they might help her. In any case, she must chance it, for Miss Norreys had just said that she would bring in Scotland Yard in any case, and Joan felt that she would. No one could rest until the murder was cleared up, let alone a relative of the murdered woman.

"Miss Norreys, surely you don't believe that Joan had any part in a murder?" she asked piteously, cowering away a little from the word.

"Certainly not," was the reassuring and instant answer, "but one has to speak of possibilities. And now we'll never refer to that as one again. So it's to be Scotland Yard. I'll drive straight to Captain Parry's house. I hoped you would choose as you have done."

"But, Miss Norreys," Joan said slowly, "what about. . . . The Amcotts are all relatives of yours, aren't they?"

"Distant. I hardly know 'em. Yes. Well?"

"Well, doesn't what you said to me—about putting the bloodhounds on the trail of one's own people—apply to the manor too? Someone in the household killed Mrs. Amcott, so the police maintain. *I* know that Joan didn't. Then who did?"

"My dear," the old lady said in a very quiet voice, "there's no murderer at the manor house. Belonging there, I mean. Take each one. The squire? What does he gain? Nothing. He looses the weekly six guineas which Ralph and Doris Amcott paid for their wing. As to Mr. Hilary Amcott, he strikes me nowadays as quite incapable of thinking out a clever murder. Once he had brains enough for anything, but now——. Could he have juggled with that bath-chair and so on? No. I'm afraid not. I mean afraid from the point of view of brains. No, it wasn't Mr. Hilary. Then

there's my other niece, Felicity de Maricourt. She gets nothing out of Mrs. Ralph Amcott's death, except an emerald necklace the like of which she could buy—well, if not every year, then every two years. Nor is she fond of jewellery, no Norreys is; personally I always wear imitations, and not too good imitations either. I don't intend to be robbed or killed because a man mistakes cathedral glass for the real thing. But where was I?"

"Going through the people at the manor," Joan said with a glint in her eye.

"Well, that's all there are, apart from that quiet young Franchman, Mr. Hilary's friend. I talked with him before the funeral. Really, for so young a man, a foreigner and a Roman Catholic—poor fellow—his ideas on the revision of the Prayer Book are quite sound. He shared with me my feelings about the omission of the King's name. But, apart from his own character, like Mr. Hilary it seems that he was away from the manor house the night of my niece's death. No, my dear child, I think the crime is the work of a servant, perhaps of a discharged one. Someone who knew of the emerald necklace, and did not realise how impossible such things are to sell. Or else—I don't think the police have dwelt enough on the point after all, Mrs. Amcott's husband is in the Sudan. Doubtless he has antagonised some of the natives there, perhaps a priest of one of their fanatical religions, and I've understood that they never forgive, and will go to any lengths to revenge themselves. I remember when I was young how *The Moonstone*. . . . But here we are at the Chief Constable's."

Captain Parry listened quietly to Miss Norreys.

"We are quite satisfied with our present arrangements," he said finally, and, to the old lady's amaze-

ment and indignation, not all her rather peremptory requests could get a more definite reply.

"And *we* will see about a private detective at once," she said to her companion on coming out.

"I think the Chief Constable has something up his sleeve." Joan said wisely. and counselled patience because of that.

Blair had paired with the Inspector as soon as Joan had been whizzed off by Miss Norreys. The two men tramped back in silence to the station. Blair was thinking of the look of sorrow on Joan's face as the coffin was lowered. The Inspector broke the silence.

"That sort of a funeral is a reproach to us, and we feel it as that. Shouldn't have happened. Should have been prevented somehow."

"Couldn't have been," Blair said comfortingly. He liked Armstrong.

"No. But should have been, just the same." The Inspector pulled at his moustache.

"No clues turned up yet ?" Blair asked. He had already told the Inspector of the strange incident of last night.

"Clues ? There aren't any in this case, Mr. Blair. All other ideas but the one you first worked out end in smoke. The parson knows nothing. I never thought he did. I wish we could lay our hands on Miss Ingilby—the real one, the governess. This one hasn't written her a line, nor sent her a message of any kind, as far as we know. I thought at first we should soon run the other sister to earth by means of this one. To tell the truth, that's why I welcomed her coming down here, but she's too clever !"

"Or too frightened," Blair said softly.

"No need to be frightened unless you're guilty," the Inspector said cheerily. "If Miss Joan comes

forward and gives us a clear statement that we can verify of her actions from Saturday to Tuesday, she would be out of all trouble, and we should have one suspect, and in my opinion more than suspect, scratched. You get that idea into Miss Lucy's pretty head, Mr. Blair. Nice young lady, Miss Lucy. You see if you can't get her to pass what I've said on to her sister. Oh, not as a trap! If Miss Joan can't come forward, then it's because she can't think of anything to say that'll hold water."

Blair was silent.

"Unless, of course, that other theory of yours is strong enough to be let out?" The Inspector eyed him hopefully.

"That coat last night smelled exactly like one that is hanging in a cupboard outside the manor smokeroom. I got a chance this morning to lose my way a bit," Blair said after a pause.

"And?"

Blair did not continue. He must have something more to go on than a coat. But there was a suspicion growing up in his mind that might yet give him a real basis on which to work.

"There's the rector! I'll press him again as to any suspicious characters that he's seen about here. Though mark you, Mr. Blair, Miss Ingilby, the governess, is the clue we're after by rights."

"You might ask him at the same time if he poisoned the dog at the manor house and doped the one at the inn," Blair suggested casually.

The Inspector gave his hearty laugh.

"I think I see Mr. Grimshaw doing either! Miss Dallas, that's a young lady friend of Baroness Maricourt's, told me just now that she was coming in to see me at my station as soon as she can get there

on the quiet—has something to say. So you might drop in too. I'll hurry back."

Miss Dallas did not keep them waiting long. The Inspector had barely got back and reported another blank as far as the rector's observations were concerned, when she arrived, looking both determined and uncomfortable.

"I heard a rumour at the funeral that Mrs. Amcott's emerald necklace is missing," she began hurriedly. "The Norreys necklace, I mean."

"It is," Armstrong agreed.

"And that it's said that Miss Ingilby, the governess, had something to do with its disappearance?" This last was a question.

"So we were told."

"Is it—I suppose it's important?"

"It's not the principal accusation, but it seems to point very definitely to her as Mrs. Amcott's murderess," Armstrong confided. He was looking at her very keenly.

"Oh, surely not!" Octavia turned an agitated face to his calm one. "Joan Ingilby never murdered Mrs. Amcott. But isn't this the author of the article in yesterday's *Comet*, saying that she did?"

She had not noticed Blair before, and the Inspector had "forgotten" to introduce him. He repaired the omission with many apologies. Octavia looked at him with grave eyes.

"It was awfully clever, terribly clever that article of yours, but you were all wrong as to Joan Ingilby having anything to do with Mrs. Amcott's death."

"I'm sure I am," Blair said gladly. "I, too, know that now."

She looked calmer.

"I'm so glad to hear you say that. I was afraid you might be prejudiced. And I know Joan Ingilby is innocent."

Blair liked her on the instant, liked her as much as he saw that the Inspector did, who, as he rightly guessed, had known her from a child.

"You know she is innocent?" Armstrong asked. "How do you mean, Miss Dallas?"

"Because I know she wouldn't hurt a fly. But as to the emeralds—I have something to tell you about that necklace. It won't clear poor Joan, but you ought to know that I met Mrs. Amcott last Saturday in Salisbury, and we came home in the train together. She told me, among other things, that she had just that morning lent the Norreys necklace to Baroness Maricourt; had got it from the Bank in order to let her have it to wear at the French Embassy ball that night."

The Inspector asked a few questions, but she could add nothing material to her statement.

"Did you ever hear that Miss Ingilby was found tampering with the lock of the trunk in which the necklace was at one time kept?" the Inspector asked when the other matter was finished.

"I heard that she caught her scarf on it," Octavia said quickly, "and had to go down on her knees to get it free. I suppose that is the time you mean? But I never heard any suggestion as to her having . . . oh, how horrid of people to cook up such untruthful stories! Doris, Mrs. Amcott, told me herself that she had torn her stockings on it in passing more than once."

Again the Inspector went into details and dates and hours.

"Miss Dallas," Blair said, when this too was over, "I wish you could explain something that puzzles

me. To what were the strained relations due that obviously existed between Mrs. Amcott and her brother-in-law, Mr. Hilary Amcott? They seem to have been barely on speaking terms."

Octavia hesitated.

"You see," Blair went on, "I need every help that can be given me if I can put right the harm done to the absent governess by that unfortunate article of mine. And I consider this quite an important point. I do really."

"Well"—Octavia evidently was no gossip, but she obviously intended to help Blair to help Joan —"you see, neither her husband nor Mr. Hilary Amcott wanted Mrs. Amcott to come down to the manor house at all this winter. Her husband expected her to stay in town at their flat. But Mrs. Amcott found she could let that very well, and besides. . . ." She seemed to hesitate here.

The two men waited.

"I think she wanted some help or guidance from Mr. Grimshaw. He's so wonderfully certain of things, you know. He always can clear up one's doubts so well. I think that was really the reason why Mrs. Amcott cabled to Sir Christopher before he had heard from his brother about the flat in town, and asked him if she might come down for the winter. He cabled her back the reply, I know, just before he got out of touch with civilisation, saying that of course she could have the rooms and was welcome to bring the dog. For some reason or other, Mr. Hilary disliked having 'Laddy' down this time, though the dog is, or was, devoted to him—followed him about everywhere. But, of course, you see now how awkward it was for Mr. Hilary, and for Ralph Amcott too for that matter, to have Mrs. Amcott down there after he and her husband had separated

on such bad terms out in Khartoum. Mr. Hilary couldn't stand the climate out there, any more than Mrs. Amcott could. But I think that he misunderstood her being at the manor. He choose to assume, so he told her more than once, that she kept her husband acquainted with all that he did. He had as little as possible to do with her for that reason ; they saw no more of each other than if they had both been stopping at the same hotel, only Baroness Maricourt helped to smooth things over ; she was down a lot. Monsieur Waddy, who is making a long visit with Mr. Hilary, was one of her late husband's greatest friends, and is her favourite dancing partner. He does dance divinely. However much one may dislike the man, he certainly can dance ! But lately Mr. Hilary had grown so constantly and increasingly rude to Mrs. Amcott that she told me on Saturday she was leaving the manor house shortly, though not Elmhurst, I think."

That was all.

" Well, I'm off to see the Baroness." Armstrong put on his topcoat after seeing Miss Dallas to her car. " I shan't be long. By Jove ! I do begin to wonder if you're right, Mr. Blair, and that I may have taken all these people too much for granted. I always follow blood in backing a horse, you see."

" And I go by form," Blair countered, as he too left the station. " I'll wait for you here."

Inspector Armstrong was not long, but he was very red in the face when he returned to his room.

" That Baroness is a slippery handful ! She says now that the emeralds were stolen from her on the way up in the train, or in her hotel before dinner on Saturday. When I asked why she didn't report the theft—if there was one (I didn't say that, but I begin to think it)—to the hotel or station police, she

said that she was so worried over having lost the family heirloom that she hoped to get it back on the quiet, as Monsieur Waddy suggested. Oh, yes, he travelled up with her it seems. She says she didn't want her cousin, Mrs. Amcott, to learn of the loss. And she seemed to think that I had no business to know of it either. The trouble is that, as I remarked before, the emeralds *do* belong to her, and any cock-and-bull story she chooses to tell about 'em we're bound to accept. I cut the interview short," the Inspector went on with a wry smile. "Patience isn't my long suit, and patience is what we're supposed to have an unlimited supply of in the Force: they call it tact. Same thing. Where we're to get more from when it gives out the authorities don't say. Suppose we've just got to keep on producing it mysteriously like a spider's web. If I'd stayed much longer in the room with that cheeky little devil of a Baroness I'd have said something that wouldn't have come under the heading of tact. It would not!" Armstrong evidently half congratulated himself, half regretted, that he had got away in time.

"What line will you follow now?" Blair asked.

"I'll tell you when the telephone rings," the Inspector answered mysteriously.

The instrument obliged on the spot. As Armstrong listened to it his face brightened.

"Good egg!" he muttered to Blair as he hung up. "The Chief Constable asked Scotland Yard, before the funeral, to take over. They wouldn't reply at once; fussed as usual about being drawn in so late, but acknowledged, of course, that they'd been watching the case. You bet they have—with extra-powerful binoculars! But it seems they finally agreed that one of their brass hats should come along and take over; that is to say, that he'll

arrive within the hour, for he's flying down to Salisbury. I must get my notes in order. It's Chief Inspector Pointer."

Chief Inspector Pointer! Blair said good-bye with a chill running down his spine, and yet with hope in his heart. Could Joan deceive eyes that were reckoned among the keenest in England? In a desperate case like hers every new factor meant a new danger.

But at the inn he found his fairy princess herself very pleased at the news.

"The case isn't getting anywhere," she said thoughtfully. "I mean, I don't think any but trained detectives can worry out the truth."

"But—will it be safe for you to meet him, Lucy?" he asked in a low voice. She flashed him a glance of not very stern reproof for his use of her assumed first name. "You think you dare?"

"I'm absolutely safe," she said confidently. "No one of all the people who have known Joan has even guessed it. I think I was quite wrong about Mr. Waddy. And before the funeral I spoke to several people—the doctor's wife, Miss Grimshaw, and so on—who had all known me. No one suspected me. Why, even *I* don't recognise myself in the glass, nor in my heart. I seem to've changed inwardly as much as outwardly. I'd no idea I could be hard and fierce and fight for my right as I'm ready to do. You need to be in the peril I'm in to learn to know yourself. Those who know me best would be the last to think this Lucy Ingilby could be that meek little Joan. I'm not meek. I'm desperate."

She had risen impetuously, and stood facing him for one moment, then she passed a hand across her cheeks and sank again into her chair.

"But tell me, what is this Scotland Yard man like? Is he clever? I hope he is!"

"I've never met him. But he used to be a professional footballer before he joined the Force. The best forward that his home county, Devon, ever had. He played for England." Blair spoke reverently of the ex-Internationalist. "That speaks for itself. You don't get the reputation he had without having quicker brains than other people. He used to be a wonder at guessing what the man with the ball was going to do before the man himself quite knew; it isn't quick legs, but quick wits that do that."

"I want a clever man," Joan said simply. "A stupid man would never save me. . . ."

"From what a stupid dolt got you into," he finished bitterly.

The door opened. The waiter entered to say that the Inspector and a gentleman wanted to see Miss Ingilby.

Blair and Joan exchanged looks. The brass hat from Scotland Yard? It must be. Blair admired pluck; he thought Joan's quiet way of meeting what both knew to be a very terrible moment, a crucial moment perhaps, was superb.

She did not alter her position. Lightly, gracefully sunk in the deep armchair, she sat watching the flames, her chin on her hand until the Inspector's voice began:

"Miss Ingilby, this is Chief Inspector Pointer from New Scotland Yard."

Then Joan rose and came forward with something very winning in her eager face. She had the frank, friendly, utterly disarming smile of a child. She was but a child, Blair thought with a pang; a child that had been tossed overboard in a raging sea to sink or swim—and by him.

Her eyes softly shining, she shook hands with the newcomer; he looked much younger than she had expected, and more distinguished too. As his fingers closed around hers, there flowed through her a sense of his power. A man dangerous to a criminal, was her first thought; a difficult man to deceive. She had a definite impression of a fine, clear, cold intellect, a great personal dignity, and of unusual force of character—force that showed in his quiet manner, in the clean, firm lines of the lean face and figure. In a certain stillness about him that meant vast reserves of strength, physical and mental.

She tingled with excitement. Would he suspect her? Would he help her? This brown-faced man with the pleasant but very enigmatic grey eyes.

"Oh, I hope you will be able to clear up this terrible mystery," she said a little shakily. "I thought I might be able to help Joan by coming down here, but"—she shook her head wearily—"it seems like trying to catch hold of water or air."

Pointer nodded thoughtfully, then he looked at Blair.

"I understand that you have changed your mind about the closing paragraph in your article in yesterday's *Comet*?"

"Where I hinted at the governess as the criminal? Absolutely," Blair said very firmly. "More so than ever by this time. The problem is more complex than I thought at the time."

Again Pointer nodded, then once more he turned to Joan.

"I'd like you, Miss Ingilby, to come across to the manor house and help me in my first look at Mrs. Amcott's rooms. You may have heard your sister speak

of this or that which might puzzle us. Can you manage to come now?"

She went with them gladly, Blair, by tacit consent, making one of the party. Pointer looked over the rooms with apparantly but a casual interest; then he returned to the bedroom and stepped up to the mantelpiece.

CHAPTER VII

THE mantelpiece in Mrs. Amcott's room was of white marble, with a strip of black velvet stretched along it. On either end glittered a brass candlestick, and in the centre, on a carved stand, stood a small wooden figure. Pointer lifted it off and looked inquiringly at Joan.

"I see there's a Saint Anthony and several Buddhas in that cupboard over there. Who's this gentleman? I'm not up in the Roman calendar, nor in Eastern teachers, but he hardly looks a saint or a sage."

Everyone smiled, for a more vicious face than that carved on the little figure it would be difficult to find. The statuette represented a capering black man with gilt turban, loin cloth and huge earrings. There was uncommon skill in the balance and rhythm of his poise and the savagery of the face; his gloating leer alone was a triumph of craftsmanship which not even a ridiculous knot of coloured ribbon around his bulging waist could spoil.

"Do you know who or what he is?" Pointer continued. "Mrs. Amcott seems to have thought him worthy of the place of honour in her bedroom."

Joan had no idea what the statuette represented, nor why it was on the mantel. She explained that her sister had told her that Mrs. Amcott was very superstitious, and always had what she called a ju-ju on that stand. Some sort of a mascot.

"Joan told me once that she altered them con-

stantly. She said they varied from penguins to elephant hairs."

"They don't seem to've brought her much luck," Armstrong said drily.

"Perhaps that's why she changed them so frequently," Joan suggested.

"I wonder if Mr. Grimshaw or Mr. Hilary Amcott downstairs could name him," the police officer ruminated. "Both are up in everything about collections and bric-a-brac, I understand."

"I wonder if the little chap saw the murder done?" Pointer said slowly. "Very likely he was on guard here the night Mrs. Amcott went to sleep and never woke up."

Joan covered her face with her hands in a gesture of horror. Blair had not paid any attention to the statuette before, merely noting it as a bizarre ornament. He now looked at it carefully.

"Some Gold Coast or West African fetish?" he suggested, "or some Nigerian spirit?"

"The Spirit of Crime?" Pointer asked. "If so, he shouldn't be black. He should be whitey yellow, so that all races could have a share in him. But we've no time to waste." With that he asked a few questions as to this and that arrangement. Joan was very cautious and very skilful. She gave him all important information, but on non-essentials she remarked that that wasn't the sort of thing that Joan would have been likely to speak of. There was not much that she could tell, and, thanking her for her trouble in coming along, Pointer opened the door for her.

Blair followed her out. In the lounge below, in front of a blazing fire, sat Hilary Amcott and Waddy, the former looking very sleepy, the latter imperturbable as always.

"Assisting the law?" he asked, turning his head with its strange, walled-in eyes towards her as he rose. "I hope you have not misled it in any way? Or should I say her? The law is a lady, is she not?" He turned to Hilary, who only gave a silly laugh.

"Don't ask me about anything to do with laws. Ask Grimshaw. He always says he's one unto himself, whatever that means."

"I don't understand you," Joan said coldly, dislike in her voice as well as in her eye as she turned to Monsieur Waddy.

"I suggest that it is hard to be impartial," he murmured. "Sometimes, owing to circumstances beyond one's power, it is impossible. Close relationship, for instance, or being in love, or—oh, many reasons. But I hear that the case of Madame Amcott's death is now in the hands of New Scotland Yard." Waddy turned to Blair. "How interesting! And how the criminal must be trembling," he added with a show of his glittering teeth.

Joan said nothing; Blair only nodded.

"I often wonder why a criminal is a criminal," Waddy went on, leaning an arm on the mantelshelf, from above which a Tudor Amcott regarded him with a ruminating stare. "Don't you too, Miss Ingilby? Or should I say Miss Lucy Ingilby? I am not sure whether you or your so charming sister is the elder?"

"I am much older than Joan," the girl answered composedly.

"Thank you so much. I should have taken you for—eh—twins," he said smoothly. "But don't you agree with me that a criminal's life can never be really worth while? Such tremors, such agitations, for, generally speaking, very little result."

"Whoever got these emeralds, which you and Baroness de Maricourt believed were stolen, certainly got something worth while," Joan said with a flash of her eye.

"You think so?" he drawled.

"I don't think they would have been taken otherwise," she countered, turning her back on him and walking on. Outside on the drive she turned to Blair. Her composure was gone now, her lips trembled.

"He means mischief," she whispered, and Blair felt her quiver. "Sometimes I think he is only biding his time, like a great cat with a mouse. And I daren't answer him as I would like to and as I could! One word might betray me."

A servant came hurrying after them. Would Miss Ingilby step back for a moment. One of the gentlemen wanted to ask her a question.

Joan went back at once. Intensely curious, Blair followed. Pointer had a pair of dark fur-lined gloves in his hand.

"Do you know if these belong to your sister?" he asked.

She looked at them carefully. They were old, suede outside and rabbit inside.

"They seem about her size, but Joan never wears lined gloves. She detests them. Why?"

"Because of this scrap of paper I found in the very tip of the thumb. The gloves were lying on the bureau over there."

Joan had passed them by a score of times without any but a cursory examination. But Pointer now held out a little slip of paper about an inch long and half as wide. It was obviously part of a longer strip, for both ends were torn away, whereas the edges above and below the writing were cut. All

that was on the tiny scrap was '*one mad.*' in ink. It was torn so closely in front of the *o* that part of the letter was missing, though enough remained to show its identity. Behind the '*mad.*' came a full stop and a fraction of a clear space, though then came the mark of the pen showing that some other word was following. What word or what letter it was impossible to tell.

"Gone mad!" Blair breathed, and looked at the Inspector, who also muttered "Gone mad" reflectively and tapped his moustache.

All three recognised the writing as Mrs. Amcott's.

"You're sure these wouldn't be your sister's gloves?" the Inspector repeated.

Joan could not betray too great a certainty. She could not be expected to know every detail of her sister's wardrobe. She only repeated that Joan never wore lined gloves.

"Mrs. Amcott, I see, wears the same size. So if not Miss Joan's, they would probably be hers." Pointer had a pair taken from Mrs. Amcott's things in his hand. And this time Joan was definitely thanked and speeded on her way.

"Gone mad!" she repeated to Blair when they were outside. Her face was very pale now. "What can 'gone mad' mean? To think of all the times I've hunted those rooms through yesterday and today, and never saw that dot of paper!"

She and Blair talked of nothing else until they were at the inn, without fitting anything sensible to the strange little tag. Arrived at their quarters, Blair spent half-an-hour or so sitting thinking in the empty lounge. Joan was upstairs. He needed quiet to collect his fancies.

That paper in those gloves . . . Mrs. Amcott's gloves. "Gone mad," if a statement or a message,

to whom would it probably be made ? It suggested a medical expert or a friend of the family—Mr Grimshaw ? Grimshaw looked as if he would have muscles of steel. As a boxer he must be sure-footed and deft with his hands. . . . Blair was thinking of last night and the search through his room.

" Chief Inspector Pointer to see you, sir," he heard the waiter announcing. Blair looked hard at the ex-Internationalist ; he had decided already that Pointer, if he so wished, could play as bold and as skilful a game as ever.

" I wonder if you would help me tackle Mr. Grimshaw," Pointer began in a very friendly tone. " I'll start him off, but he might run on to you more freely than to me, and my being there might bring home to him the importance of the interview. Two men, labourers, have just come to the police station saying that they saw Mr. Ralph Amcott coming out of the manor house last Tuesday around midnight. The men in question—they were doubtless off for a bit of poaching—are quite positive about its having been Mr. Ralph. They say he has a walk that's unmistakeable, a twist of the shoulder every time he takes a step, and the Inspector confirms this. Now Mr. Grimshaw was seen about that hour too, and to reach his rectory from the Institute, where we know he was, in the late evening, may very well have cut across the grounds of the manor. Armstrong tells me that you have all along held that the rector was keeping something back. It's very possible you were right, and that he has been. But leave it to me to speak of Mr. Ralph Amcott."

" Ralph Amcott ! The husband ! " Blair jumped to his feet. He was off beside the other on the instant.

" The Inspector says that Mr. Grimshaw agrees

with you in thinking that Miss Ingilby had no hand in the murder," Pointer went on, lighting his pipe.

"Don't you?" Blair flashed.

"So far I don't see any motive that would explain her taking such a fearful step," was as far as Pointer would go, but even that much, coming from him, comforted Blair.

The two found the rector in his austere study.

"It's about Miss Ingilby, Mrs. Amcott's governess," Pointer began. "I wonder if you could give us any idea of where to look for her."

"I?" Mr. Grimshaw's stare was as chilly as the room.

"You went a good deal to the manor; I take it you saw something of her. Of course we would give a good deal to get our hands on her."

"Why?" the parson asked curtly.

"Why do the police ever try to capture criminals?" Pointer said coldly.

"But Miss Ingilby isn't a criminal," Grimshaw said at once.

"We've not been able to find any other person who could as easily have murdered Mrs. Amcott," Pointer said gravely. "And if we're right in assuming that Mrs. Amcott had suspicions of her governess—she had asked her to leave, you know—why, there's revenge for a motive, not to speak of some missing valuables."

There was a silence that the rector seemed prepared to let last indefinitely.

Pointer glanced at Blair.

"For God's sake," the newspaper man exploded, "if you know anything to clear up this dreadful affair I do beg you to speak out. Miss Ingilby is having the devil of a time somewhere, we may be

sure—will have it till she's cleared. All my fault, I know, for that rotten article, but she deserves every particle of help that can be given her. If you have any knowledge or any suspicion that might help to clear her, then, as I say, for God's sake, speak!"

Grimshaw put his fingers together and bent them backwards and forwards—strong fingers.

"I've always considered Miss Ingilby innocent, chiefly because I know her, and believe her incapable of a crime," he began slowly.

"But the police don't!" Blair again burst in. "I—I. . . ." He stopped and bit his lip. His emotion threatened to swamp him.

Grimshaw looked at him for a long second, then he turned away.

"I regret that I cannot be of any assistance. I deeply regret it," he said coldly.

His two visitors rose and took their leave. But Pointer, parting from Blair almost at once, made a swift loop and came back.

"Is there any strain of madness in the Amcott's?" he asked, when he was shown in once more.

Mr. Grimshaw said that he had never heard of any taint. His eyes had narrowed.

"Of course, I have no right to say anything," the rector went on, "but I feel morally certain that the criminal was that French half-caste, that Monsieur Waddy, as he spells it, though I feel sure that *Ouadhi* would be the right way, for he's mongrel Arab by every supple joint of him."

"The dog hated him," Pointer said casually. "He wouldn't go a step with him. It must have been a regular member of the household, or someone the dog liked."

"Information has just reached us at the police

station," he went on, "that Mr. Ralph Amcott was seen last Tuesday night coming out of the manor around midnight. Higgins and Richards are the two men from whom we have the story. They are quite firm and unshakeable as to having made no mistake."

Grimshaw seemed to press his elbows to his sides, as though a stiff fence were coming. Something about his pose suggested that he was jamming his hat over his eyes and was prepared to get over with something to spare. He made no reply, however.

"Now, Mr. Grimshaw, you were seen not far from the manor last Tuesday night. Did you see anyone at all moving about the house or meet any member of the household?"

"I could hardly have seen a man who is lying desperately ill away off in Khartoum, Chief Inspector."

"You met no one at all, or saw no one, last Tuesday night except the constable, Budge?"

"No one at all," Grimshaw said very firmly.

Pointer then called in at the police station for Armstrong, who was making his notes of the two labourers' separate statements.

"Suppose we drop in at the manor house. They don't do much there but drink and play, I'm told."

About that Armstrong agreed. "But what does this mean, sir—this about Mr. Ralph Amcott? The two men seem quite certain. I had another go with them after you left. They stuck to it that they saw him, though only his back. But we know that Mr. Ralph is as ill as he can be, and ill in the Soudan."

Pointer only talked of a big burglary that had been committed up in Scotland until they reached the manor. There they were told that Mr. Hilary was in.

"It's about some information that's reached us, showing that Mrs. Amcott's husband was down here last Tuesday night," Pointer began.

"Well? What of it?" Hilary Amcott gave him a surly glance out of red-rimmed, red-veined eyes.

"But surely the information at the inquest was that he was ill. Very ill in Khartoum," Armstrong pointed out. "You yourself, sir, have said as much."

"I repeated what I was told. I shouldn't be surprised if my dear, good brother, anxious at reports that I'm wasting my time, had let that idea be circulated in order to slip over here and have a look for himself. I certainly saw him myself last night; so did Monsieur Waddy. He was walking down a passage upstairs. We chased him, but he got away. Have a cocktail, either of you? I've just christened my latest the Safebreaker."

Pointer and Armstrong declined rather curtly.

"What, not even a Fair Maid or a Mother-in-law? We are indeed in good hands. Shall we have prayers instead?"

"The point is this." The Chief Inspector spoke very gravely, very slowly, so that the drink-sodden man opposite him could follow. "Mrs. Amcott's husband is reported to have been seen here—*here*—on the night after his wife was murdered! You must see for yourself what that means."

Waddy had entered; he had a way of entering when callers came. He was listening intently, his head turning now and again, first to Hilary, then to Pointer, then to Inspector Armstrong.

"Well?" Hilary asked again with a bibulous cough. "Suppose I do see? What then? If you can connect my prating sobersides of an elder brother with a crime, Chief Inspector, I'll put you up a

purse. But don't believe it easily ; it's too good to be true."

"Too good that he should have murdered his wife ? " Pointer asked.

"Too good that he should be tumbled from the high altar on which he delights to sit," Hilary Amcott said with a snarl. "He's a hypocrite and a canting, psalm-singing pussyfoot already, and if you can add worse to that list, so much the better ! "

There was a note of almost mad ferocity in the grating voice that caused Armstrong to look closely at him. This was a new Hilary Amcott indeed. Yet in some odd way he seemed like some revelation of the inner, the real man. Something about a tag of Dr. Pearson's—*in vino veritas*—floated through his startled mind.

"But the nursing home, the medical certificate ? " he asked.

He had the latter cable in his safe.

"D'you suppose they would blab if he told them to hold their tongue ? " Hilary asked, with a look of contempt at the speaker.

"Mr. Ralph Amcott was seen, actually *seen* here last Tuesday night ? " Monsieur Waddy inquired. His face was a curious mottled colour.

"Here at the manor house." Pointer turned to him as though he had not noticed his entrance. "So that, since you saw him again last night, he may have been, or in the village or near here at least, since then."

Waddy passed a long, pointed tongue over his lips, lips that writhed when he spoke.

"Is someone impersonating him ? " he asked rather unsteadily.

"Both the men who gave us the information are

prepared to swear that it could have been nobody but Mr. Ralph Amcott himself."

The two officers took their leave.

"Drink is killing Hilary Amcott," Pointer said in a tone of pity. "I give him another six months at the outset before he breaks up, if he continues this gait."

"He was half-drunk, of course, or he would never have spoken as he did. He's a sorry wreck now, but you should have seen him only five years ago—the picture of health and energy, and keen as mustard."

"Now, Armstrong, supposing it wasn't Mrs. Amcott's husband whom those two men saw, taking the two men there at the manor and the rector, which of the three could best make himself up like Ralph Amcott, especially from the back?"

Armstrong thought carefully.

"The parson could do it best. He's Ralph Amcott's height and rather his build. But, on the other hand, Mr. Hilary Amcott's not unlike his brother either. Only he slouches, and the other has a back like a drill sergeant's. All the three Amcotts resemble each other a bit. The only one who couldn't do it is that monseer. He's too weedy."

There followed a long silence as the two walked back to the station.

"You've not traced the emeralds yet?" Pointer said next.

"No, sir, not yet, though we're hard at it, of course. I can't make up my mind about that necklace. Are they gone—the stones, I mean—or aren't they? Well, time will tell. Did you notice the look on that monseer's face when you spoke of Mr. Ralph at the manor last Tuesday night? That did put the wind up him. I think. . . ." And

Armstrong proceeded to repeat to Chief Inspector Pointer those reflections of his that so infuriated Blair—Blair who just now was fast asleep, making up for the previous night. But he did not have his usual length of rest, for towards morning a bell rang on the ground floor. Years of a reporter's life had made him as quick as a doctor to hear that summons. It might be for him, from the police, he thought, as he ran down the stairs.

It was an automatic exchange. He picked up the receiver.

"Red Oak Inn. Who's speaking?" he asked.

"Martin!" His name came in a whisper of incredible gratitude, unhoped for joy, that seemed to tingle along the wire. "Oh, help! Come, London. Fourteen Kennington Park Mews. I'll be killed if the police get on——." Silence, sudden, absolute, awful. Blair's hair rose, and little prickles went up and down his spine; he did not dare hang up for fear of a click at the other end. Joan's tone as well as her words had told him that only some unforeseen stroke of luck had enabled her to get for a second to an instrument.

He leapt upstairs to her room, tried the door, opened it, and found the room empty, the bed untouched.

He flung on some clothes as though the last boat were leaving the ship, snatched up an automatic and an electric torch, and ran to the garage. He knew where the key hung. It would take too long to wake the inn's chauffeur-mechanic, sleeping in a distant attic. But he got out the inn's one car, rang up a good garage at Salisbury and ordered their fastest roadster to be waiting ready for him to drive off. He rushed to it as fast as the clogged old car would rattle. When he showed his papers, he found

that the people at Salisbury had heard of him as down here to help with the Amcott case. A moderate deposit gave him the fast Bentley, and Blair drove her splendidly, but like a man possessed. He knew his London well. He knew West Kennington Park Road ; he had an idea of where the Mews must be. It only needed one glance at the map to show him finally, after three hours at the wheel, where he should stop his car and climb down. All around him was a maze of not too well kept streets, some of them quite respectable, some with reputations far worse than their looks. The Mews was a small deserted alley. Number fourteen was a garage at the end, with what looked like backs of shops and warehouses on either side. Blair knew that appearances were particularly deceptive on this side of the river, but the place seemed uninhabited. He looked at the door of the garage ; it would have taken a stick of dynamite to force it, but the side showed a window that he opened without undue difficulty, so that he thought it had often served as an entrance. He climbed in. All was silent. He would have said that the place was as empty as the houses around, but for hearing the *gurgle-gurgle* of a running tap somewhere. His torch in one hand, he looked about him with desperate keenness. In the further room he found Joan's overcoat in a heap on the floor. Apparently it had been trampled on. And always the sound of the water as though running slowly into a bath. In the same room with the coat was a trap-door, not bolted. Opening it, his torch shone on water ; it seemed to be within an arm's length of him. And then his heart seemed to stand still, for there, floating on the surface, was Joan's white face. She was gagged. The water was not far below her chin ; her eyes met his at first dully, as might the

eyes of a person already done with life—then with a wild hope. He seized a bar lying on the cellar floor and sounded. He was Joan's only helper. Rashness might leave her with no one, and Blair could not swim. The depth was five feet. He snatched off his overcoat and shoes, took his automatic between his teeth—he might yet need it in there—jumped down, and felt a cement floor beneath his feet. In a second he was beside her. With one hand he untied the cloth with which she had been gagged, and got her to take a drink from his flask, which he had transferred a moment ago to an inner pocket.

"I am chained," she murmured, trying to move the lips which had been crushed against her teeth till they were white. There was blood on the lower one "Mr. Waddy padlocked me and threw the key out of reach. If you're careful you ought to find it."

Blair trod the surface of the cellar's floor until he stepped on the key. Another second and he had turned it, and was lifting Joan to the floor above. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Thank you, Martin. Thank you, dear."

He held her close.

"As I thought, he's after the emeralds," she told him, her teeth chattering. "Fortunately they tore off my thick coat before they carried me down there. It's here somewhere."

He put it round her. Suddenly she gripped his arm again.

"He'll be back any minute. He said he would be back just before the water reached my mouth, so that I could tell him where those emeralds are. If not, I was to drown by inches where I was chained. I told you he was mad on that point." She shrank

against him. "Oh, Martin! He was such a brute when they carried me here. Look"—she showed the scarlet mark of a hand on her white damp arm—"but for wanting those emeralds he would so have liked to kill me. He said so. Hush-h! He's coming back!"

A step sounded outside. The same window which Blair had used was opened none too noiselessly. Blair swept her behind him and picked up his automatic again. He was in a mood that was new to him—the mood of the killer. He would have Waddy's blood for this; his life for the all-but-taken life of the girl behind him. He was quite cool—quite determined. Let Waddy come in to finish his work and he would kill him, and leave him where he would have left Joan Ingilby.

But the steps coming quietly but firmly down the passage stopped outside the door.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Blair. It's me, Chief Inspector Pointer." And Chief Inspector Pointer it was. He helped Blair carry Joan into his own car, and Blair most unwillingly drove his own car, while Joan sat beside Pointer and talked to him. She was quite herself again by now. The only thing she would not do, she told them, was to stay overnight in town and go down to Elmhurst in the morning.

"I'm afraid of being left by myself," she said wanly. "Down there with you all about me I feel safer."

"Do you mind telling me what happened," Pointer asked gently, "or would you rather not talk just now."

"There's so little to tell. I found a note lying on my pillow last night when I went to bed saying that the writer—a woman—could tell me how to clear my sister if I would meet her alone at the

north end of Lovers' Lane. I was to bring the letter with me, and I was not to tell the police or bring a friend, or the writer would not come, and I would not learn something of the greatest importance to me."

"As always," murmured the man from Scotland Yard.

"At the lane I waited a few minutes, and then something was thrown over my head—I had heard nothing whatever—and I was bundled into a car. The cloth was kept over me; someone fastened it and my arms to my sides by a strap. At last I was hauled out into a house—where, I have no idea—and dumped, tied up, into a room. I heard the key turned in the lock. A corner of my rug was loose, and I could see a carpet and what looked like a sort of office desk. I could hear the murmur of three men talking, or it may have been only two. The cloth over my head kept me from being sure. But, at any rate, I heard men's low voices next door in the next room, and one of the voices was Mr. Waddy's. I heard someone say rather sharply, 'You mean fourteen Kennington Park Road, or do you mean the Mews?' And someone say, 'Sh-h! The Mews, of course.' Then I caught sight of the lower part of a telephone off in one corner. Monsieur Waddy came in and asked me where the Norreys necklace was. I said I didn't know. He threatened me for a while. Then he went out and locked the door again, and I think they talked in a further room. I could only hear the barest sound of voices this time. There was a hook on the door meant for coats, I suppose. I managed to use it to lift the blanket around my head a little. My hands were strapped to my sides, but I joggled the receiver off its hook with my shoulder and turned the disk with

my tongue. I set it to Red Oak Inn and chanced anyone hearing. I kept my ear down to the receiver on the desk top until I heard someone say 'Hello! Who's that? What's wanted?' And you can't imagine what I felt when I heard Mr. Blair's voice." Her eyes looked out of the window for a minute as though her heart were too full for speech.

"I managed to get the receiver back into place by picking it up in my teeth. The men came in very shortly after and bundled me out into the car again. When they carried me out once more, it was to put me down on the edge of that trap-door you saw when you came in just now. But the cellar below was dry then. They took me down. It was all dark. I thought I was going to be killed." Her voice faltered for a moment. "But they only chained me to a pipe running up the wall and padlocked me to it. Then they turned on two taps. I don't know who was there. I think it was three men. But it might have been two men coming and going. It was all so dark. Also—well, frankly, I was too terrified to notice things much. All I heard was Monsieur Waddy keeping up an interminable request for those emeralds; I think he must have sat with his watch on his knee and timed himself. Finally, when the water was up to my waist, he dropped the trap-door and told me he would come back just before the end and either watch me drown or take me out if I told him—what I can't tell him, Chief Inspector. What I don't know."

"You recognised Mr. Waddy?" Pointer asked.

"I know he was there," Joan said promptly and decidedly. "I dislike him far too much to be mistaken about him."

"But did you see him?" Pointer pressed her.

"Not actually see him," she agreed reluctantly.

"The rug was over my head at the first house in town, and the cellar was all dark when he chained me." Her voice broke off in a little tremor. "And when he spoke up on the floor he stood out of my sight. There was a small light up there, a gas light, I fancy. But I feel absolutely positive that it was Monsieur Waddy."

"Still, that won't help us to bring it home to him," Pointer said after a pause. "Only a face-to-face recognition, something to which you could swear, would be of any use. Besides, the puzzling thing is that you should be attacked; if you were your sister one might understand it easier."

Joan's heart missed a beat.

"I don't see that," she said instantly. "Why should they attack her?"

"Monsieur Waddy maintains that she took Mrs. Amcott's emeralds; that he wants to get them back for the Baroness. Don't misunderstand me," Pointer said carefully. "*I* don't think so, but that is what he claims."

"Pretends!" she flashed out.

"Claims," he repeated in a tone that said that if he were not an official he, too, would prefer her word. "But the question remains, why should he attack you?"

Joan hesitated. Should she or should she not tell him who she was? With him on her side she felt that she would indeed be safe.

"I'm not concerned with the answer," Pointer said quickly, so quickly that it conveyed a warning, "but if we try to bring this outrage home to him, we shan't be able to prove it; we shall only give him an opportunity of asking, and getting others to ask, *why* he should be supposed to want to attack you. And there is such a thing as forcing a step on the

police, Miss Ingilby, that they really don't want to take."

Joan gazed attentively at him. She felt fairly sure now that he suspected that she, Joan, was masquerading as Lucy, that he was giving her a friendly warning, telling her that unless forced to act he would do nothing about her presence down at Elmhurst.

"He might think her interests and mine are one," she ventured with a timid but friendly glance at him.

"Naturally they are," and for the ghost of a second their eyes met.

"I—I do so want to clear her!" she said passionstely. "Joan is innocent, Chief Inspector, and yet that dreadful *Comet* article brands her in front of all the world as a criminal. Even though Mr. Blair wants to take it back publicly, they won't let him. His article has to stand, with its dreadful concluding paragraph!"

"Those words that distress you may be proved all wrong any day," he reminded her.

"By you?" she asked with a most engaging smile. "Are *you* on her side? Oh, if you are, I'm not afraid of the issue!"

"Scotland Yard is always on the side of justice," he said reassuringly.

She drew a deep breath.

"I hope so. But isn't justice blind?" she asked, her eyes dancing a little.

"I never did care much for that as a symbol," Pointer confessed, "especially when they put a sword in the lady's hand as well. A sword nearly as long as herself."

Joan said no more all the rest of the long drive. She seemed to doze a little. When at last the two

cars pulled up at the inn and Blair ran to the door to help her out, she looked absolutely spent. It was now nearly ten o'clock in the morning.

Mrs. Black, who came running out, was told a rather incoherent tale by Blair of a fall into the river off a slippery bank that Miss Ingilby had been investigating.

Joan insisted on being able to get to her room unaided. She remembered the untouched bed. And Mrs. Black hurried off for hot bottles and a cup of hot milk with a dash of rum in it.

Blair made for the police station, where he found the two officers busy with notes and telephone inquiries.

"What about that infernal brute, Waddy? And the cellar?" Blair asked.

Pointer only looked grave, very grave.

"Shooting Monsieur Waddy wouldn't have helped to solve Mrs. Amcott's death, Mr. Blair," he said firmly. "No murder ever helped to clear up a murder. But for my coming into the room, I think you intended to kill him?"

"And who wouldn't!" Blair asked, "if they had blood in their veins and had seen that girl's face all but under water?"

"It wouldn't have helped the search for the murderer," Pointer repeated. "As to this Monsieur Waddy, I certainly would like to catch him, so would Inspector Armstrong, but he can't be caught with this night's story. There's no evidence against him; he tells us he was in his bed all night. He certainly didn't use an Elmhurst car. That cellar belongs to a brewer who is trying to sell it—never uses it now. Miss Ingilby doesn't, can't, know to what house she was first taken, nor whose was the other voice or voices that she heard."

"Except this Waddy's," Blair said hotly. "I believe he killed Mrs. Amcott."

"But the theatre, the stall at the theatre where he was seen with Mr. Hilary Amcott?" Pointer asked, with a tiny spark far back in his grey eyes, eyes that were so keen, yet could look so casual.

Blair made a gesture, rather like one Joan often used these days—a hopeless, almost a helpless gesture, and went off.

CHAPTER VIII

POINTER meanwhile took out of a shed hardly bigger than a small garage, but standing at one end of a field belonging to a friend of his, an old single-seater fighter, an S.E. 5a on which he had flown down. He replaced its wings, and was off with the little carved figure from Mrs. Amcott's mantelpiece in his bag, the statuette which Joan had not thought of connecting in any way with Mrs. Amcott's death.

To her it was but one silly mascot rather than another, but to the Chief Inspector it suggested a possible clue to something, as yet unknown, for which Mrs. Amcott had selected this particular blackamoor as a luck bringer. Else why had she troubled to place him in the post of honour?

Pointer had learnt from a housemaid that it had been put on the mantelpiece only this last Saturday. She was certain of that, for on Saturdays she "did out" Mrs. Amcott's rooms, and on that morning "a fat old man" had had the post of honour—she meant a Laughing Buddha, one of the thirteen Buddhas in Mrs. Amcott's possession. But in the afternoon of last Saturday Mrs. Amcott must have taken out this figurine, for the maid had found it on the ju-ju stand on Sunday morning, ribbon-bow and all, and there it had remained since.

Mrs. Amcott's late maid, on Pointer going over to see her, ostensibly about the glove in which the paper had been found, said that she had only once seen the statuette put out. That single occasion was a year ago. They had gone to Scotland to spend Christ-

mas. It was on December 20th that they had arrived—the date had remained in the maid's memory as it was her birthday—and Mrs. Amcott had at once placed the same little monstrosity on the same carved stand, making a place for it on her already overcrowded dressing-table. She had not seen the "little nigger" since. As to the knot of ribbon, it had not had it last year.

December 20th. . . . Pointer had eyed his shoe-tips reflectively as he stood talking with the young woman. This year it was mid-December. The same month both years. . . .

He asked Miss Turvey about the Christmas before last? But she had not then been in the employment of Mrs. Amcott, who had spent it with her husband in Spain. As to the glove, the maid could not identify it, beyond stating that Mrs. Amcott generally wore lined gloves in winter in the country.

Pointer next spoke of Mr. Ralph Amcott. She seemed to be in a considerable awe of him. But as she was both by nature and inclination a very silent woman, and very distrustful of the police, Pointer fared no better than had Armstrong in trying to wheedle out of her any gossip, any talk about the dead woman's character or life with her husband. For the moment Pointer was not concerned with that. The ugly figure set out so conspicuously on Mrs. Amcott's mantelpiece was what he was trying to "place."

Now, as he flew towards town, he was thinking over the little that he had learnt of it. It was little, but intriguing. For, though there might not be any connection between the two dates, yet the fact remained that each year the month had been the same.

On landing in the small aerodrome in Regent's

Park which belongs to New Scotland Yard, Pointer, thinking of Blair's guess that the idol—if one—came from the Gold Coast, went first of all to a curator familiar with ju-jus and tangible spells from every land. He inspected the little polychrome figure closely, then he shook his head.

" African work apparently. Probably a fetish of some kind. But the carver must have been thoroughly in touch with Europeans, though the figure itself is pure Arab. Carved from life, I should say."

In fact, in this instance, the curator could only do what Pointer could do, and that was, guess. Pointer went on to the South Kensington Museum. Here he had no better luck. The experts " inclined to the belief " that the workmanship, which they agreed was of a very high kind, was European, but if so, the sculptor knew the lower Arab type perfectly.

So far Pointer had only wasted his time. He lost still a little more of it at the British Museum. Finally he had another look at the little man himself. He was made of wood. That much was certain. Kew Gardens have experts who at a moment's notice can identify a splinter for a puzzled timber merchant. To the Botanical Gardens he hurried, and there he was told his first definite fact. The statuette was made of olive wood, of a kind that only grows in the south of Europe. In this particular instance the wood had grown in a very dry region, and had been cut and carved about four centuries ago.

South Europe. . . . Pointer first thought of southern France or Italy as the possible home of the little blackamoor. But the very word gave him another idea. Moors . . . what about Spain? Spain, with the dryest regions in South Europe, the country that most of all others had had to do with

the Arab race. . . . Instantly came the recollection of the maid having said that Mrs. Amcott had spent the winter before last in that country.

Pointer went to Lord Barlock's private secretary. Lord Barlock has the best collection in England of Spanish *objets de vertu.* Not even that at Apsley House is finer.

Pointer's hopes rose from the very way that the secretary in question picked up his little man and studied him with a faint smile. The Chief Inspector had at last, he told himself, come to The Man Who Knew.

The secretary put the little carving down with reluctance.

" If anyone wants to sell him, I should certainly urge Lord Barlock to buy him. It's a *Paso,* a miniature *Paso.*"

Mr. Wilton went on to explain that the statuette was one of the carved figures used in Spain at a *Paso* —a scene illustrating the Passion—the whole series of which are carried in procession during Holy Week in every village and town of the peninsula. As a rule the figures are life-sized, but now and again small ones were used at court or in some secluded monastery. Owing to the occupation of the land by the Moors, the Spaniards often depicted the most cruel figures in the Passion series as Moors, as had been done in this case apparently.

" Here's a family relation of his." Wilton went out of the room, and came back with a very similar statuette. " Supposed to be one of the attendants of King Herod. So is yours probably."

Pointer asked if the figures were ever used as mascots.

" The small ones are, very often, but their powers are purely local. A Cadiz *Paso* wouldn't assist any-

one living in Seville, for instance," Wilton warned with a grin. "Where did this little man come from?" He thought that he was one of several small sets made for Ferdinand and Isabella by Arrigo of Madrid, and used there. When the figures got shabby they were sold to the devout or the superstitious.

Pointer thanked Wilton and hurried back to his rooms at Scotland Yard. So the little black demoniacal-looking figure was a Madrid mascot, out of commission in other parts of the world. Yet Mrs. Amcott had placed him in the point of honour this year as she had last year—both years in December, though not on the same date.

What could there be, two years running, in Madrid in the same month, that the figure could be supposed to influence?

Suddenly Pointer altered his step, a sure sign of mental excitement. The Gordo!

The drawings of the big permanent European State lotteries are dates that every Scotland Yard man knows approximately. Spain has three every month, drawn in Madrid on the 1st, 12th, and 22nd respectively. And on December 22nd the Gordo—'the fat one'—is drawn, the great annual Christmas prize of fifteen million pesetas, or, roughly, four hundred and eighty thousand pounds. Moreover, this year, for the first time since the lotteries were started by Royal Decree in 1763, it had been drawn, not on the usual date, but on the 12th, to coincide with the State opening of the Madrid International Fair. The 12th had been last Monday. And Pointer believed with Blair that Mrs. Amcott had been killed that night. Certainly, so far, no one had come forward who had definitely, unmistakeably spoken to her face to face since that afternoon.

On Monday at noon the news of the winning numbers would have been broadcast from Madrid, and would be posted up in every Spanish newspaper shop and library of any size throughout the world.

The statuette had been placed in its position of honour last Saturday—two days before the drawing. And the year before, when the drawing had been as usual on the 22nd, it had been put out on the 20th, and taken away on Christmas Eve.

The dates fitted the idea. So did Mrs. Amcott's words about it never yet having brought her luck. So did the fact that the dead woman had spent the winter before last in Spain, where Spanish lottery tickets are hawked incessantly in every cafe, along every street. The lotteries are only too popular.

And with this idea came another about the knot of ribbon—ribbon that by its look had probably come off a box of sweets, but a dark purple ribbon for all that.

Pointer telephoned to the secretary of Ranelagh Club, a man he knew.

"What are the colours of the Spanish polo team that did so well last August? I mean the Duke of Penerada's *El Gordo*."

Pointer loved to watch polo. He loved to play it too with the mounted police down on their own big polo ground.

"Colours? Dark purple vest and ordinary regulation breeches and hat," came the reply, which he had expected.

Pointer thanked him and rang off. Dark purple . . . that fitted, supposing that the mascot was for the Gordo, the ribbon might have been twisted around it, probably in some gay moment when the Gordo team had had a particularly good day, as an additional luck-bringer.

And that scrap of paper found in the lined glove. . . . That "one mad." . . . Mrs. Amcott's writing had the peculiarity that certain of her capital letters, such as *m*'s, *n*'s and *o*'s, among others, were practically the same size as her small letters. Gone mad. . . . The cut edges of the scrap of paper found showed it had been a narrow strip, such as one might pick out for a message, a memorandum, or an order, but which would not seem to admit of the explanations those two words would need, one would think, where there was no known case of madness. What if the half words had been "telephone Mad." The last word an abbreviation of Madrid written with a capital that looked like a small *m*?

He thought that, so far, the bits fitted quite well, though, beyond the mere possibility that Mrs. Amcott was interested, like many other people, in Spanish lotteries, his inference could not and did not go.

It might be connected with her murder, but the gap between "it might be" and "it is" is as great to a detective as to a chemist.

The Chief Inspector's thoughts now turned to the *Paso* and an odd fact that he had noted about the little figure. The odd fact was, that though the figure which Mr. Wilton had brought to show him was made from the same kind of wood and smaller than Mrs Amcott's, yet it was considerably heavier. Wood varies, of course, in weight, even the same kind of wood, but not, he thought, to such an extent. He now examined the little Moor more closely. There was nothing to suggest a join, even when looked at through a magnifying glass. But his loincloth was carved in deep folds around his tubby waist. If there were a join at all, if the inside of the figure

were hollow, it could only open there. There, too, was where the ribbon had been tied.

Carefully Pointer twisted the body in opposite directions. Finally it turned, unscrewing in the middle.

In a second he had it apart, and in the hollow inside he found a rolled piece of paper. He opened it out, looked at it for a moment, and then picked up his telephone.

He telephoned to a foreign booksellers and news-agents, where he knew Spanish journals were sold. He, the speaker, gave no name, but asked what the winning number of the Gordo was this year. The answer came back at once, and Pointer heard the number called that was on the little piece of paper—about the width of an average cheque, but square, which was what he had taken from the wooden figure—for the paper was a half ticket in the Gordo. It represented, therefore, a sum of two hundred and forty thousand English pounds, if presented in Madrid within the space of one calendar year. It was, moreover, a bond to bearer. For a lottery ticket is cashed without any inquiries, even though the man who presents it has stabbed the previous holder of it on the bank steps and snatched it from his dying hand.

Investigations are for the civil authorities. The motto of the Government lottery is pay on sight. That being so, more than one lottery ticket has meant at the same time a prize and a burial certificate for its winner.

Pointer asked over the 'phone when the news had reached London. The numbers, he learnt, had been broadcast from Madrid last Monday at noon. Yes, the proprietor had, of course, placarded them in his shop.

Had anyone asked for the numbers to be telephoned to them? Pointer now gave his official position. A list of nearly fifty names and addresses was read to him, none of which interested him. But that meant nothing—even though the man whom he at once sent off to every similar shop in town should also draw a blank. If she had spent a winter in Spain, Mrs. Amcott had very likely had the ticket sent direct from there—probably under an assumed name.

Who had won the Gordo this year? Pointer asked next. One half had been won by a bank official, and, since no names had come in as having won any small parts of the remaining half, it looked as though either someone had bought that too in its entirety, or it had not been drawn.

Pointer thanked the speaker and hung up the receiver. He picked up the ticket thoughtfully. Here was one tremendous incentive to Mrs. Amcott's murder. It might not be the real one. Strange conjunctions are found in murder cases—as though sucked in by the crime. Mrs. Amcott might yet turn out to be murdered for a reason far afield from any Spanish lottery. But two hundred and forty thousand pounds, paid to whoever should present this scrap of paper, could not but rank as the probable cause until something that negatived it was known. And so far, not only did nothing do that, but he thought that the idea that she had been killed for it, and for it alone, explained much that had happened, and was still happening, down at Elmhurst.

Pointer felt quite sure that Mrs. Amcott did not know of her win, or she would not have left the ticket, unlocked, in that figure. There was no wireless at Elmhurst. No cable seemed to have reached

her from Spain. It looked as though she had gone to bed on Monday night ignorant of the large fortune that was now hers. But others might have been quite aware of the fact, and had seen to it that she should not wake on Tuesday to receive a list of the numbers, or read them in an easily obtainable paper.

While Pointer was busy in town, Blair spent the morning trying to think things out, since he could not sleep. But he found reasoning as difficult as resting. In the afternoon he learnt that all the village was talking about the visit of Mr. Ralph Amcott to the manor last Tuesday night. No information could be gathered as to how he had come or how gone. The villagers were divided in their minds. Some, headed it was said by the rector, inclined to the belief that the husband's spirit had come to warn or protect his wife in her hour of peril, but come too late. This idea was very popular. Gross materialists thought it simpler to believe that the two men who claimed to have seen the figure were either drunk at the time or lying now. But there were those, Blair amongst them, who wondered whether here might not lie the solution of the mystery concerning Mrs. Amcott's death. There was talk of Mr. Ralph having sent his wife home because of a flirtation with a fellow-official, of her having kept up a forbidden correspondence, and even—of course—of a proposed elopement, which the husband, hurrying home secretly while he himself had been announced as lying ill, had prevented in a way more common in Latin countries than with us.

It was in the early afternoon that Joan motioned Blair to come into the deserted drawing-room.

"I've been over to the manor," she said softly,

" and while I've been out someone has been through my things here in the inn—again ! I knew it as soon as I got back by the position of the suitcase—my only piece of luggage—on the side table. Inside it I keep my money. No, no ! Not gone at all. Wait ! " as Blair made a quick, involuntary motion towards his own pocket-book.

" Now I happen to keep a very close account of my money, naturally." She gave a faint smile. " It's not difficult. But I found two ten-pound notes too many. I have no ten-pound notes, but I got a cheque cashed for Mrs. Amcott on Saturday when I went to the bank for the emerald necklace, and these notes were among those handed me for her. When I was hunting among her things the day before yesterday I found a slip with the numbers jotted down, and by luck I knew where it was still. I got it, looked at it, and found I was right. Those two notes put upstairs among my money are two of Mrs. Amcott's notes."

" Where are they ? " Blair asked quickly.

" I put them in an envelope, printed Monsieur Waddy's name on it, and dropped it in the manor letter-box a little while ago, along with a note, also printed, to Mr. Hilary Amcott, which stated that two ten-pound notes which the sender believed belonged to the late Mrs. Amcott had been found and returned to Monsieur Waddy."

" Good for you ! " laughed Martin. Joan laughed too—for the first time since that meeting on the boat, like a happy child.

" Oh, Martin ! " He had been promoted for bravery on the field, she told him ; in other words, for his efforts to rescue her last night in the flooded cellar. " Oh, Martin, I've been talking to Mrs. Black. She told me that Mr. Ralph Amcott

was seen here in Elmhurst last Tuesday night, and if Tuesday, why not Monday? Mr Ralph, whom everyone thought in Khartoum."

"I doubted that much-credited item," Blair could say truthfully enough. She looked at him admiringly.

"Up at the manor all the servants are talking of it too. The maid who spoke to me about it says that she and two other servants have seen Mr. Ralph too, but thought, of course, that they were mistaken. It was only from a distance, and they thought up till now that it must have been Mr. Hilary in a dim light. But to think that at last there's a hope of the truth being found out! It really looks as though Inspector Armstrong, with his talking of time as telling everything, is going to turn out to be true after all. And it got on my nerves so!" Then suddenly her face grew very grave. "I met Monsieur Waddy as I was coming down the stairs." She shivered.

"And he?"

"He looked at me as though he would have liked to fling me down them," she said with a shiver. "'Still here?' he said in a quite indescribably mocking and yet very terrifying way. Oh, I don't pretend that he doesn't frighten me, Martin, for I feel that he's got some plan, and is only waiting for the right moment. Now more than ever, now that I seem about to be cleared."

"You ought never to have come down here really," Blair said at that.

"I felt that I had to! I hoped so much to find something out, to help clear myself, but I've found nothing. Why, I had even passed by a score of times that 'gone mad' that the Chief Inspector found at once. I wish I knew what that means. . . ."

"So do I," Blair agreed, "though one can link it up with her husband's arrival. Like 'Ralph seems to have gone mad about' so and so. Something like that. . . . But what are you thinking of doing?"

"Of getting away before Waddy springs that trap of his. After his attempt last night on my life, and just now on my liberty—for, of course, he would have seen to it that I was accused of stealing those notes—I'm more terrified of him than ever. I have a sort of feeling"—she paused—"that it's touch and go," she finished under her breath. "*You* foiled him the first time, I've avoided the second plan, but the luck may be with him next time. And in some way this news leaking out about Mr. Ralph's arrival seems to be hurrying him up. That's how I read those bank-notes planted in my case, and his face and manner on the stairs of the manor. You know, I shouldn't wonder if his belief that I have those emeralds is my salvation in a way. But for believing that I've got them, I think he would have pointed me out to the police at once."

Blair on the whole was inclined to agree with her.

"You don't think it's something else that he may think you have?" he asked. "Somehow the emeralds don't seem to me to quite explain . . ."

"But what else could it be?" she asked him, round-eyed. "What else can it be? Anyway, I want to get away until everything is cleared up. Thank heaven, that seems to be near at hand now. But for the police, of course, I'd go openly. But they still want Joan Ingilby—poor, hunted Joan Ingilby!" She spoke with sorrow, but with bitterness. "At least, the Inspector does. The man from

Scotland Yard is on my side. He's like you. He's got brains. The trouble about getting away is that I'm watched all the time. Unfortunately for myself, I gave their man the slip last night, and since then, for my own sake also, they're watching me closer than before. We shall have to be very clever and very quick. I suppose I can count on you?" She asked it with a roguish little smile that told of how certain of the answer she felt. There was a soft light in her eyes that made his heart beat fast.

"Nothing need keep me here now. The case, my case, is in good hands, and I want to escape before Waddy strikes, before his net closes around me finally."

"*My* net!" he put in remorsefully.

"I don't believe I shall escape it, or him, next time," She was speaking very soberly now. "Premonition perhaps."

"Superstition!" he corrected on the instant, but his mind was racing to help her. "We've got to escape from the police, you think, as well as from Waddy. . . ."

Both were silent for a moment; both trying out plans. She spoke first.

"The rectory might help. It's a house out of which it's easy to slip unnoticed. Part of the cellars are Plantagenet. There's one that runs ever so far under the ground and comes up in a little tool-house near a gate in the orchard. Mr. Grimshaw's sister showed it to me once some time ago. They don't often use it, but it's convenient for wet Sundays, as it cuts off a windy corner by the church. The door leading up into the shed is bolted only on the inside. I know that Mr. Grimshaw is always at the Institute later on this afternoon. If I went to his

rectory I could easily slip down into the passage. His front door is never locked. That's a rule with him. Day or night it's only latched. He has only one woman as a housekeeper and servant. If I met her I should explain that I had stepped in to write a note after ringing in vain. People do, you know. He keeps literally an open house, and the same old woman who was there in his father's time. What was that?" Joan clutched Blair's sleeve convulsively.

Blair had heard nothing, but he had been listening very intently to her.

From the point of view exclusively of the suspicions against Joan, it seemed a pity to do anything now to jeopardise herself. If discovered, if anything went wrong, she would indeed be in a parlous state. At the same time, he thought she was wise to get away, just as she had been foolish, or at least too daring, to come. There was a very real and a very terrible danger still hanging over her head, and there was Monsieur Waddy and the incalculable menace that he seemed to represent. That flooded cellar rose before Blair's mind. Had he been half-an-hour, a quarter of an hour later!

"Wasn't someone in the passage?" With a gesture she slipped to the door and flung it suddenly open. The wind seemed to howl at them, but the passage was empty, so was the landing, so seemed the stairs.

"I thought the door creaked as though someone leant against it," Joan said when they were once more beside the fire, the door shut. "It must have been the wind, I suppose. But now, to go on. I will chance getting into the passage unseen and out of the shed. So meet me by the gate"—she described exactly where it was—"and we'll slip away

on foot to Salisbury. It's a glorious afternoon for a walk, not too light, and yet light enough. I've got my things all packed. My bill is settled. I said I didn't like it to run on. If you telephoned to a discreet garage in town to send down a car to meet you at a given place on the Salisbury road, you could take me on too, and all would be well."

"Would you go far?" he asked wistfully.

"Anywhere where Waddys don't grow," she said wearily. "He's got on my nerves. If only that wretched necklace would turn up he'd cease to take an interest in me. But as it is, I thought of one of these sea trips." She pointed to an advertisement in the *Morning Post*. "'A trip to the Canaries and back for seventy-five pounds.' It seems a fearful sum, but I'm quite wealthy. I've had no expenses for three years back, and when I left Countess Gérode she gave me fifty pounds as a parting keepsake. I think a cruise would be a delightful souvenir, don't you? I should think of the dear soul every hour, and wish to heaven I'd never left her. But for the fact that the kiddies were to go to a convent, for they said I spoiled them, I should never have left her."

"I haven't had a holiday since the unforgettable day when I met you," Blair said, staring at the paper.

She touched his sleeve with one of her rare, friendly pats. "You stay here and work, Martin. Work for Joan. Clear her name for her. I can't. That much I have learnt at last. I might stay down here all my life, and spend every hour at the manor, and yet be no nearer the reason for that murder. But you're different. You're clever. I'm such a hopeless fool. I don't know where to begin"

Blair went over the plan carefully. He did not care for the underground passage part, but Joan insisted that it was the only way that she could avoid the man who always followed her, by orders of the police —ostensibly to protect her. Perhaps really for that reason, she agreed. The man would suppose she was waiting to speak to Mr. Grimshaw, or was writing a note to him.

It all went off well. The car picked them up at the spot agreed on, though Joan was a little belated.

It was getting dark when they ran into Salisbury. Blair had decided, on talking it over with her, that they would pass through that busy town to confuse the trail. They were almost in the outskirts when Joan turned to him very quietly.

"We're being followed. That's a car from Elmhurst—Mr. Hilary Amcott's Sunbeam. You can't hope to outrun her. I know that car. She easily does seventy without going all out."

Blair saw that the big car behind them, purring like a great cat, was closing up.

"There's a turning near here. Our one chance is to shoot into it and have them think we've gone on." She still spoke quietly, but her face was tense. Her eyes burnt. "It's downhill. The engine's off. You can turn her silently. . . ."

Blair did. Like a mouse his car crept around the curve. It was twilight now. They heard the big car hum past. Their own lights out, they saw Waddy at the wheel, that cruel chin poked far forward, his all but invisible eyes raking the confusing grey as he turned his head from side to side like a blind adder.

"He'll be back in a moment," Blair said softly. "Now then, out of the car!" He swung Joan out and jumped down beside her.

"There's an open gate back there," she said, "I think if we went towards him he wouldn't look for us in that direction."

"He'll give up the hunt when he finds that empty car," Blair said confidently. "It's one thing to follow a car, another to hunt out people on foot."

"He'll hunt me!" Joan said between her set teeth as she hurried towards the gate that she had seen standing open. They were in a street of what house agents call semi-detached villas, each standing back from the road in a little garden.

"Let's hide in the porch here."

Blair hurried in her wake. He thought that she was taking too serious a view of things, but he was not sure. There was a street lamp not far away that might show them up by the gate. For the trouble was that this was a danger where no personal courage or devotion on his part could be of the least use. Blair was very good with his fists; he had plenty of pluck; he would have faced long odds at any time; and for Joan he would have faced them gladly. But Joan's danger was something so all-enveloping, yet so subtle, that he could only hold his breath and watch with, and for, her.

The dazzle lamps of a big car came into sight as they swung two half-circles. The car was turning in after them. Then she stopped. After a second a figure got out, locked the car, and moved silently down the street, past them as they stood in the porch.

"It's a cul-de-sac," Blair said, peering at the lamps at the further end. "Better slip out now and into the main road before he turns back."

"There's another man back there, waiting behind that pillar-box." Joan was peering over his shoulder. Then she stiffened.

"Monsieur Waddy is turning round." She backed against the door behind them. The porch was shallow, a mere foot or two in depth.

"The door's not fastened!" Joan gave a gasp. "What luck!" She caught his arm and pulled him inside, closing the door behind them noiselessly. The hall was dark. A thin carpet was under their feet. Blair guessed that some servant left in charge had slipped out for a trifle, and had left the front door conveniently on the latch.

It was odd, standing in a strange house, in a street whose name he did not know, waiting for he knew not what. Blair thought Joan was taking the wrong course. But she left him no choice, and he dared not make a suggestion or question any suggestion of hers in a hurry.

It was surely time now to open the door and slip out to their car and be off. His hand was turning the little knob of the lock, when he stopped. It did not need Joan's touch on his wrist to tell him that someone had come up the short path and was outside in the porch. He heard no key inserted, but the door was opened with a sudden, soundless push for which he was unprepared. Also, subconsciously, he was at a disadvantage. This was undoubtedly someone who had a right to enter the house. Blair had none. There is no sensation more laming, that more makes for hesitation, than an uneasy conscience. It was all done in a second. As he gave ground, so did Joan behind him. Following her pull, he found himself in a room just by the door. Joan drew the door shut.

"The key's this side!" she gasped half hysterically, turning it without any effort to do it silently—speed being her one aim. "Now, out through the window!"

"No, no!" he said soothingly. This had gone far enough.

"That was Waddy who came in—who opened that door! It's a trap. He's caught us where he wants us. Martin, I've found something since we parted—a sealed envelope slipped behind a bureau drawer in Mrs. Amcott's room. That's what made me late. I didn't want to speak of it till I had had time to see what was inside it, for it's marked *Important* in Mrs. Amcott's writing. Mr. Waddy came in just as I slipped it into my handbag, but he came in with such a rush that I wondered if he hadn't been watching me in some way. He looked—oh, extraordinary. His eyes were like coals of fire."

"Sparks," corrected the user of the written word automatically. "You can't have coals as small as his eyes."

"Fortunately a maid was passing down the stairs to post a letter, and I let her show me out, and kept beside her for a while. There must be something tremendously important in that envelope," she went on eagerly. "I think I am justified in opening it—under the circumstances—don't you?"

Through her whispered words Blair heard something stir even now outside the door.

"Hand me over that envelope," he said in tones loud enough to be heard outside, and yet subdued enough to suggest an effort at secrecy on his part. "They'll never think of looking for it on me. It'll be much safer than with you. Trust me, dear. I have a plan," he said very firmly. He had—a plan to divert the hunt from her to himself.

"But they'll suspect at once that I've given it to you to keep," she whispered with an admonitory

frown to him to talk lower. He did not heed it. If anything, he raised his voice.

"Not they! And if they do, I shall know how to keep it safe. Let me switch on the light."

"But why?" With the look of one who is none too pleased at the incomprehensibility of suggestions showered on her, Joan handed him, on his urgent gesture, a sealed envelope. On it was the one word "Important."

"Now then, out of the window with you!" he whispered, switching off the light and glancing out into the street. "I see that the house, outside of which I left the car, has lighted up. A couple of women are having tea in the front room. I think you might make it unnoticed. I'll be here in the window covering you. And as I have the paper—you ought . . ."

"You can't do anything against that awful man." She hung back.

"Can't I!" Blair's pride was aroused.

But she wheeled. "No. Give me the envelope back. I know him; you don't. He'll trick you in some way and get hold of it. I have a feeling that it's vital in proving who murdered Mrs. Amcott. It's the only thing I've found in all these days. Let me have it back, Martin. I can run across and be in the car before they know I've gone, if you stay and call out to them."

Had it been possible for Blair to be angry with Joan, he would have been so now. The idea that she, or any woman, could hold what he could not, or that he could not keep what she could! That he could be easier duped than a girl! It would have rankled from anyone but her. Even as it was, he flushed deeply.

"Waddy or anyone else will only get this paper

over my dead body," he said curtly, if somewhat melodramatically.

"But I don't want . . ." she began with a little cry.

He stopped her. "Now let me help you out."

He watched her slip across the road and into a car opposite. After a second's pause he saw the car turn and rush off into the darkness of the road beyond the lamp-post.

CHAPTER IX

BLAIR looked around the room. His back to the window, he studied every inch of floor and wall and furniture for some good hiding-place, if need be, for the paper.

As he stood so something banged. For a moment he thought that it was the front door, and meant a hasty pursuit of Joan. Then he saw that the outside shutters to his window had closed. He threw up the window to fling them wide again, but they would not budge. Shaking them, he felt that they were fastened on the outside by some stout bar that had been shot up from below. They were of stout oak, and effectually blocked that way out.

As he wrestled with them, there came a sharp *rat-tat ! rat-tat !* on the front door. Blair heard the front door opened.

" Registered letter for Mr. Blair," said a business-like voice. " Marked ' urgent.' "

" No one here of that name," said a voice that Blair did not know, speaking as though closing the door and turning away.

" But he's in the house all the same," the postman retorted. " Saw him just as I passed. In that front room where the shutters have just been closed. I know Mr. Blair well. That's why I stopped here, seeing as the letter is marked ' urgent.' Mr. Blair ! " came his voice, raised in a hearty call. Blair had already unlocked his door. It was amazing what that familiar uniform meant. A moment before very sinister things had seemed stirring, and stirring

close by. But with his door open and that stalwart, business-like-looking man holding out a letter and a slip for him to sign, Blair felt once again back in familiar surroundings.

"Knew I wasn't mistaken!" the man said in the same cocksure way that he had spoken from the first. "Just sign here, will you please, sir? Letter for you. Registered and marked 'urgent.' So as I caught sight of you in passing, why not bring it in, I thought, and save time?"

"I'll walk on with you, postman," Blair said after signing. "I want a chat with you on your views on the abolition of Christmas boxes," and with a keen glance at the man who stood back in the shadow of the hall, a man whose face was unfamiliar to him, Blair passed out beside the postman, who swung his heavy bag over his shoulder with a practised twist of the linen, and looked at a small bundle in his hand.

"Got another letter, registered, for next door but one," he muttered as though only on duty bent as they passed out of the gate together.

"Who lives in that house—the one where you found me?" Blair asked lightly enough.

"Mr Waddy, sometimes," a familiar voice replied. "Yes, it's me, Mr. Blair—Chief Inspector Pointer. You gave my men the slip, you and Miss Ingilby, but I was following Mr. Waddy. I felt sure that I should meet Miss Ingilby again if I kept on his trail. What was going on in there?"

"Is Miss Ingilby safe?" Blair asked instead of answering.

"She is," Pointer assured him, leading the way towards a car some distance down. "One of my men was on the lookout for her. We were following Monsieur Waddy. I hung around to see what was

going to happen." Pointer motioned Blair to take the wheel, while he stepped into the closed car. A few minutes later he spoke through the tube. Blair stopped, and the Chief Inspector, his quiet, good-looking self again in tweeds and felt hat, drove on with Blair beside him.

"When I saw those shutters close I thought it was time to take a hand. What was happening?"

Blair told him. "What would have been the next move if you hadn't come along, Chief Inspector?"

"What do you think yourself, Mr. Blair?" Pointer asked in a very level voice. "They evidently think, or Mr. Waddy, let us say, has reason to think, that you hold something he wants. It was after the discovery of the tag of paper in the dog's kennel, you know, that the poison was put in the coffee you and Miss Ingilby nearly drank. I think Mr. Waddy and his friends would have searched you, and after that?" He left his sentence unfinished for a moment.

"Look here!" Blair said, "I want to understand this. Is that chap Waddy still in that house?"

"I don't think so," Pointer said, faintly smiling. "When I asked for you by name I fairly felt the cold air on my feet from the opening and shutting of the side door. I think we shall find Mr. Waddy at Elmhurst when we get back—quite astonished at the idea that he was supposed to be anywhere near this part of Salisbury this afternoon. But the fact that they let Miss Ingilby escape makes me certain that it is you, not she, who has, or whom they think has, something that interests them. One moment! That's a police car's horn." He gave a sudden toot on his own. The two cars approached, slowed

down, and drew near. Inside the one coming to meet them sat Inspector Armstrong.

"Just got a 'phone message from Miss Ingilby. She seemed in a rare taking. Thought you were in danger, Mr. Blair. Begged us to fly to you and save you from Mr. Waddy. I think she's got Mr. Waddy on the brain," and with a laugh the Inspector pulled in behind Pointer's car.

"Let's see what it is that you have on you that interests Mr. Waddy so greatly, Mr. Blair." The Chief Inspector stretched out a hand.

"There's nothing of mine that can interest Mr. Waddy," Blair said casually. He had no intention of handing over the letter given him to keep to anyone but to Joan herself.

"That's highly likely," Pointer agreed, "but what about something given you by Miss Ingilby? Something she found in Mrs. Amcott's rooms, say. Something like a paper, for instance. I should expect it to be something in an envelope."

Blair looked at him. "So you were on the look-out too?"

"No." This time Pointer laughed. "Did you ever read *Zadig*, by Voltaire, Mr. Blair? I take it it's the first detective story we have, and certainly he out-Sherlocks Holmes in it. Well, along those lines I deduced an envelope."

Pointer meant that believing him to know about the Gordo ticket, he thought it highly likely that Waddy would keep an intensely keen eye out for anything that could be, or contain a lottery ticket. But Blair, not knowing that simple clue, only drew his brows together.

He knew better than to question Pointer. There was something about the Scotland Yard man that did not encourage probing. At the same time, he

had no intention of handing over the letter that Joan had given him to keep, a letter marked "Important"—in Mrs. Amcott's writing. He put his hand into his inside waistcoat pocket and gave a sort of hoarse cry.

"Lost it?" Pointer said, turning on him instantly.

"Yes." Blair was equally brief. "Turn round and drive back to that house we've left, will you, Chief Inspector? I've had a valuable letter stolen from me, or I've dropped it while wrestling with those outside shutters. I nearly stood on my head trying to get at a catch that ran down out of sight below the window."

Pointer drove back at once.

"Come now, Mr. Blair, confess. The letter was handed you by Miss Ingilby, wasn't it?"

Blair told how it had come to be given to him.

The door was opened by the same man whom Blair had seen on leaving. He stood aside stonily when the newspaper man said that he had dropped something in the room beside the front door. Blair searched the room in vain. He could have beaten at the walls in his rage. Joan's one find gone! If he had dropped it, how long would it have taken those dark, dull eyes of the man in the hall to find it? He himself, when he heard the unexpected voice of the postman at the door, had left the room without another look around. It was natural enough under the circumstances of intense excitement, but the fact remained that the letter was gone.

Still without speaking, the man let them out again when Blair gave up the hopeless search. As he closed the door Blair saw that he was of some Levantine mixed race—like Waddy himself, so Blair believed.

In the car again, Pointer turned to the young man sitting white-faced beside him.

"I don't think there was anything of value in that envelope, Mr. Blair. Even if Monsieur Waddy now has it, it won't be of any assistance to him, any more than I think it would have helped Miss Ingilby to clear—her sister."

Was it Blair's fancy, or was there the hint of a pause before the last word? He told the Chief Inspector about the bank-notes in "Miss Lucy's" suitcase. Joan had decided that this should be done if she was not able to get away at once. Blair went on to give the conclusion that he and she had arrived at, which was that Waddy was evidently trying to discredit the elder sister as well, or at least to frighten her away from Elmhurst. He thought the latter quite possibly was the true motive.

Pointer listened attentively, but he said nothing as he stopped the car at the inn.

Joan took it with very great magnanimity when Blair had to confess what had happened. She did not even look "I told you so."

"It must have slipped out while I tugged at that bolt. I ought to have looked around the room before leaving it, of course. But I confess I was so surprised by the turn events were taking, my name asked for by the postman, as I thought him, that I stepped out into the passage too hastily," he finished unhappily.

She leant forward and laid a hand on his sleeve. Joan rarely touched people.

"I don't suppose for a moment it was of any value." She spoke with resolute cheerfulness. "If it had been, Monsieur Waddy would certainly have found it long ago. Also, after all, it was Mrs. Amcott's letter. I felt a frightful sweep at the thought of opening it. Besides"—her face showed a look of