THE EYE OF OSIRIS

R. AUSTIN FREEMAN

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Fernando Pessoa

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A DETECTIVE ROMANCE

BY

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

TO MY FRIEND

A. E. B.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAPTER XIX

CHAPTER XX

CHAPTER I

THE VANISHING MAN

THE school of St. Margaret's Hospital was fortunate in its lecturer on Medical Jurisprudence, or Forensic Medicine, as it is sometimes described. At some schools the lecturer on this subject is appointed apparently for the reason that he lacks the qualifications to lecture on any other. But with us it was very different: John Thorndyke was not only an enthusiast, a man of profound learning and great reputation, but he was an exceptional teacher, lively and fascinating in style and of endless resources. Every remarkable case that had ever been recorded he appeared to have at his fingers' ends; every fact—chemical, physical, biological, or even historical—that could in any way be twisted into a medico-legal significance, was pressed into his service; and his own varied and curious experiences seemed as inexhaustible as the widow's cruse. One of his favourite devices for giving life and interest to a rather dry subject was that of analysing and commenting upon contemporary cases as reported in the papers (always, of course, with a due regard to the legal and social proprieties); and it was in this way that I first became introduced to the astonishing series of events that was destined to exercise so great an influence on my own life.

The lecture which had just been concluded had dealt with the rather unsatisfactory subject of survivorship. Most of the students had left the theatre, and the remainder had gathered round the lecturer's table to listen to the informal comments that Dr. Thorndyke

was wont to deliver on these occasions in an easy, conversational manner, leaning against the edge of the table and apparently addressing his remarks to a stick of blackboard chalk that he held in his fingers.

"The problem of survivorship," he was saying, in reply to a question put by one of the students, "ordinarily occurs in cases where the bodies of the parties are producible, or where, at any rate, the occurrence of death and its approximate time are actually known. But an analogous difficulty may arise in a case where the body of one of the parties is not forthcoming, and the fact of death may have to be assumed on collateral evidence.

"Here, of course, the vital question to be settled is, what is the latest instant at which it is certain that this person was alive? And the settlement of that question may turn on some circumstance of the most trivial and insignificant kind. There is a case in this morning's paper which illustrates this. A gentleman has disappeared rather mysteriously. He was last seen by the servant of a relative at whose house he had called. Now, if this gentleman should never reappear, dead or alive, the question as to what was the latest moment at which he was certainly alive will turn upon the further question: 'Was he or was he not wearing a particular article of jewellery when he called at that relative's house?'"

He paused with a reflective eye bent upon the stump of chalk that he still held; then, noting the expectant interest with which we were regarding him, he resumed:

"The circumstances in this case are very curious; in fact, they are highly mysterious; and if any legal issues should arise in respect of them, they are likely to yield some very remarkable complications. The gentleman who has disappeared, Mr. John Bellingham, is a man well known in archæological circles. He recently returned from Egypt, bringing with him a very fine collection of antiquities—some of which, by the

way, he has presented to the British Museum, where they are now on view—and having made this presentation, he appears to have gone to Paris on business. I may mention that the gift consisted of a very fine mummy and a complete set of tomb-furniture. The latter, however, had not arrived from Egypt at the time when the missing man left for Paris, but the mummy was inspected on the fourteenth of October at Mr. Bellingham's house by Dr. Norbury of the British Museum, in the presence of the donor and his solicitor, and the latter was authorized to hand over the complete collection to the British Museum authorities when the tomb-furniture arrived; which he has since done.

"From Paris he seems to have returned on the twenty-third of November, and to have gone direct from Charing Cross to the house of a relative, a Mr. Hurst, who is a bachelor and lives at Eltham. He appeared at the house at twenty minutes past five, and as Mr. Hurst had not yet come down from town and was not expected until a quarter to six, he explained who he was and said he would wait in the study and write some letters. The housemaid accordingly showed him into the study, furnished him with writing materials, and left him.

"At a quarter to six Mr. Hurst let himself in with his latchkey, and before the housemaid had time to speak to him he had passed through into the study and shut the door.

"At six o'clock, when the dinner bell was rung, Mr. Hurst entered the dining-room alone, and, observing that the table was laid for two, asked the reason.

"'I thought Mr. Bellingham was staying to dinner, sir,' was the housemaid's reply.

"'Mr. Bellingham!' exclaimed the astonished host. 'I didn't know he was here. Why was I not told?'

"'I thought he was in the study with you, sir,' said the housemaid.

"On this a search was made for the visitor, with the result that he was nowhere to be found. He had dis-

appeared without leaving a trace, and what made the incident more odd was that the housemaid was certain that he had not gone out by the front door. For since neither she nor the cook was acquainted with Mr. John Bellingham, she had remained the whole time either in the kitchen, which commanded a view of the front gate, or in the dining-room, which opened into the hall opposite the study door. The study itself has a French window opening on a narrow grass plot, across which is a side gate that opens into an alley ; and it appears that Mr. Bellingham must have made his exit by this rather eccentric route. At any rate—and this is the important fact—he was not in the house, and no one had seen him leave it.

" After a hasty meal Mr. Hurst returned to town and called at the office of Mr. Bellingham's solicitor and confidential agent, a Mr. Jellicoe, and mentioned the matter to him. Mr. Jellicoe knew nothing of his client's return from Paris, and the two men at once took the train down to Woodford, where the missing man's brother, Mr. Godfrey Bellingham, lives. The servant who admitted them said that Mr. Godfrey was not at home, but that his daughter was in the library, which is a detached building situated in a shrubbery beyond the garden at the back of the house. Here the two men found, not only Miss Bellingham, but also her father, who had come in by the back gate.

" Mr. Godfrey and his daughter listened to Mr. Hurst's story with the greatest surprise, and assured him that they had neither seen nor heard anything of John Bellingham.

" Presently the party left the library to walk up to the house ; but only a few feet from the library door Mr. Jellicoe noticed an object lying in the grass and pointed it out to Mr. Godfrey.

" The latter picked it up, and they all recognized it as a scarab which Mr. John Bellingham had been accustomed to wear suspended from his watch-chain. There was no mistaking it. It was a very fine scarab

of the eighteenth dynasty fashioned of lapis lazuli and engraved with the cartouche of Amenhotep III. It had been suspended by a gold ring fastened to a wire which passed through the suspension hole, and the ring, though broken, was still in position.

"This discovery, of course, only added to the mystery, which was still further increased when, on inquiry, a suit-case bearing the initials J. B. was found to be lying unclaimed in the cloak-room at Charing Cross. Reference to the counterfoil of the ticket-book showed that it had been deposited about the time of arrival of the Continental express on the twenty-third of November, so that its owner must have gone straight on to Eltham.

"That is how the affair stands at present, and, should the missing man never reappear or should his body never be found, the question, as you see, which will be required to be settled is, 'What is the exact time and place, when and where, he was last known to be alive?' As to the place, the importance of the issues involved in that question are obvious and we need not consider them. But the question of time has another kind of significance. Cases have occurred, as I pointed out in the lecture, in which proof of survivorship by less than a minute has secured succession to property. Now, the missing man was last seen alive at Mr. Hurst's house at twenty minutes past five on the twenty-third of November. But he appears to have visited his brother's house at Woodford, and, since nobody saw him at that house, it is at present uncertain whether he went there before or after calling on Mr. Hurst. If he went there first, then twenty minutes past five on the evening of the twenty-third is the latest moment at which he is known to have been alive; but if he went there after, there would have to be added to this time the shortest possible time in which he could travel from the one house to the other.

"But the question as to which house he visited first hinges on the scarab. If he was wearing the scarab

when he arrived at Mr. Hurst's house, it would be certain that he went there first; but if it was not then on his watch-chain, a probability would be established that he went first to Woodford. Thus, you see, a question which may conceivably become of the most vital moment in determining the succession of property turns on the observation or non-observation by this housemaid of an apparently trivial and insignificant fact."

"Has the servant made any statement on the subject, sir?" I ventured to inquire.

"Apparently not," replied Dr. Thorndyke; "at any rate, there is no reference to any such statement in the newspaper report, though, otherwise, the case is reported in great detail; indeed, the wealth of detail, including plans of the two houses, is quite remarkable and well worth noting as being in itself a fact of considerable interest."

"In what respect, sir, is it of interest?" one of the students asked.

"Ah!" replied Dr. Thorndyke, "I think I must leave you to consider that question yourself. This is an untried case, and we mustn't make free with the actions and motives of individuals."

"Does the paper give any description of the missing man, sir?" I asked.

"Yes; quite an exhaustive description. Indeed, it is exhaustive to the verge of impropriety, considering that the man may possibly turn up alive and well at any moment. It seems that he has an old Pott's fracture of the left ankle, a linear, longitudinal scar on each knee—origin not stated, but easily guessed at—and that he has tattooed on his chest in vermilion a very finely and distinctly executed representation of the symbolical Eye of Osiris—or Horus or Ra, as the different authorities have it. There certainly ought to be no difficulty in identifying the body. But we will hope that it won't come to that.

"And now I must really be running away, and so

must you ; but I would advise you all to get copies of the paper and file them when you have read the remarkably full details. It is a most curious case, and it is highly probable that we shall hear of it again. Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Dr. Thorndyke's advice appealed to all who heard it, for medical jurisprudence was a live subject at St. Margaret's and all of us were keenly interested in it. As a result, we sallied forth in a body to the nearest newsvendor's, and, having each provided himself with a copy of the *Daily Telegraph*, adjourned together to the Common Room to devour the report and thereafter to discuss the bearings of the case, unhampered by those considerations of delicacy that afflicted our more squeamish and scrupulous teacher.

CHAPTER II

THE EAVESDROPPER

It is one of the canons of correct conduct, scrupulously adhered to (when convenient) by all well-bred persons, that an acquaintance should be initiated by a proper introduction. To this salutary rule, which I have disregarded to the extent of an entire chapter, I now hasten to conform ; and the more so inasmuch as nearly two years have passed since my first informal appearance.

Permit me, then, to introduce Paul Berkeley, M.B., etc., recently—very recently—qualified, faultlessly attired in the professional frock-coat and tall hat, and, at the moment of introduction, navigating with anxious care a perilous strait between a row of well-filled coal-sacks and a colossal tray piled high with kidney potatoes.

The passage of this strait landed me on the terra firma of Fleur-de-Lys Court, where I halted for a moment to consult my visiting list. There was only one more patient for me to see this morning, and he lived at 49 Nevill's Court, wherever that might be. I turned for information to the presiding deity of the coal shop.

"Can you direct me, Mrs. Jablett, to Nevill's Court ?"

She could and she did, grasping me confidentially by the arm (the mark remained on my sleeve for weeks) and pointing a shaking forefinger at the dead wall ahead. "Nevill's Court," said Mrs. Jablett, "is a alley, and you goes into it through a archway. It turns out of Fetter Lane on the right 'and as you goes up, oppersight Bream's Buildings."

I thanked Mrs. Jablett and went on my way, glad that the morning round was nearly finished, and vaguely conscious of a growing appetite and of a desire to wash in hot water.

The practice which I was conducting was not my own. It belonged to poor Dick Barnard, an old St. Margaret's man of irrepressible spirits and indifferent physique, who had started only the day before for a trip down the Mediterranean on board a tramp engaged in the currant trade; and this, my second morning's round, was in some sort a voyage of geographical discovery.

I walked on briskly up Fetter Lane until a narrow, arched opening, bearing the superscription "Nevill's Court," arrested my steps, and here I turned to encounter one of those surprises that lie in wait for the wanderer in London byways. Expecting to find the grey squalor of the ordinary London court, I looked out from under the shadow of the arch past a row of decent little shops through a vista full of light and colour—a vista of ancient, warm-toned roofs and walls relieved by sunlit foliage. In the heart of London a tree is always a delightful surprise; but here were not only trees, but bushes and even flowers. The narrow footway was bordered by little gardens, which, with their wooden palings and well-kept shrubs, gave to the place an air of quaint and sober rusticity; and even as I entered a bevy of work-girls, with gaily-coloured blouses and hair aflame in the sunlight, brightened up the quiet background like the wild flowers that spangle a summer hedgerow.

In one of the gardens I noticed that the little paths were paved with what looked like circular tiles, but which, on inspection, I found to be old-fashioned stone ink-bottles, buried bottom upwards; and I was meditating upon the quaint conceit of the forgotten scrivener who had thus adorned his habitation—a law-writer perhaps, or an author, or perchance even a poet—when I perceived the number that I was seeking inscribed

on a shabby door in a high wall. There was no bell or knocker, so, lifting the latch, I pushed the door open and entered.

But if the court itself had been a surprise, this was a positive wonder, a dream. Here, within earshot of the rumble of Fleet Street, I was in an old-fashioned garden enclosed by high walls and, now that the gate was shut, cut off from all sight and knowledge of the urban world that seethed without. I stood and gazed in delighted astonishment. Sun-gilded trees and flower-beds gay with blossom; lupins, snap-dragons, nasturtiums, spiry foxgloves, and mighty hollyhocks formed the foreground; over which a pair of sulphur-tinted butterflies flitted, unmindful of a buxom and miraculously clean white cat which pursued them, dancing across the borders and clapping her snowy paws fruitlessly in mid-air. And the background was no less wonderful: a grand old house, dark-eaved and venerable, that must have looked down on this garden when ruffled dandies were borne in sedan chairs through the court, and gentle Izaak Walton, stealing forth from his shop in Fleet Street, strolled up Fetter Lane to "go a-angling" at Temple Mills.

So overpowered was I by this unexpected vision that my hand was on the bottom knob of a row of bell-pulls before I recollected myself; and it was not until a most infernal jangling from within recalled me to my business that I observed underneath it a small brass plate inscribed "Miss Oman."

The door opened with some suddenness, and a short, middle-aged woman surveyed me hungrily.

"Have I rung the wrong bell?" I asked—foolishly enough, I must admit.

"How can I tell?" she demanded. "I expect you have. It's the sort of thing a man would do—ring the wrong bell and then say he's sorry."

"I didn't go as far as that," I retorted. "It seems to have had the desired effect, and I've made your acquaintance into the bargain."

"Whom do you want to see?" she asked.

"Mr. Bellingham."

"Are you the doctor?"

"I am *a* doctor."

"Follow me upstairs," said Miss Oman, "and don't tread on the paint."

I crossed the spacious hall, and, preceded by my conductress, ascended a noble oak staircase, treading carefully on a ribbon of matting that ran up the middle. On the first-floor landing Miss Oman opened a door and, pointing to the room, said: "Go in there and wait; I'll tell her you're here."

"I said *Mr.* Bellingham——" I began; but the door slammed on me, and Miss Oman's footsteps retreated rapidly down the stairs.

It was at once obvious to me that I was in a very awkward position. The room into which I had been shown communicated with another, and though the door of communication was shut, I was unpleasantly aware of a conversation that was taking place in the adjoining room. At first, indeed, only a vague mutter, with a few disjointed phrases, came through the door, but suddenly an angry voice rang out clear and painfully distinct:

"Yes, I did! And I say it again. Bribery! Collusion! That's what it amounts to. You want to square me!"

"Nothing of the kind, Godfrey," was the reply in a lower tone; but at this point I coughed emphatically and moved a chair, and the voices subsided once more into an indistinct murmur.

To distract my attention from my unseen neighbours I glanced curiously about the room and speculated upon the personalities of its occupants. A very curious room it was, with its pathetic suggestion of decayed splendour and old-world dignity: a room full of interest and character and of contrasts and perplexing contradictions. For the most part it spoke of unmistakable though decent poverty. It was nearly bare of

furniture, and what little there was was of the cheapest —a small kitchen table and three Windsor chairs (two of them with arms); a threadbare string carpet on the floor, and a cheap cotton cloth on the table; these, with a set of bookshelves, frankly constructed of grocer's boxes, formed the entire suite. And yet, despite its poverty, the place exhaled an air of homely if rather ascetic comfort, and the taste was irreproachable. The quiet russet of the tablecloth struck a pleasant harmony with the subdued bluish green of the worn carpet; the Windsor chairs and the legs of the table had been carefully denuded of their glaring varnish and stained a sober brown; and the austerity of the whole was relieved by a ginger-jar filled with fresh-cut flowers and set in the middle of the table.

But the contrasts of which I have spoken were most singular and puzzling. There were the bookshelves, for instance, home-made and stained at the cost of a few pence, but filled with recent and costly works on archæology and ancient art. There were the objects on the mantelpiece: a facsimile in bronze—not bronzed plaster—of the beautiful head of Hypnos and a pair of fine Ushabti figures. There were the decorations of the walls, a number of etchings—signed proofs, every one of them—of Oriental subjects, and a splendid facsimile reproduction of an Egyptian papyrus. It was incongruous in the extreme, this mingling of costly refinements with the barest and shabbiest necessaries of life, of fastidious culture with manifest poverty. I could make nothing of it. What manner of man, I wondered, was this new patient of mine? Was he a miser, hiding himself and his wealth in this obscure court? An eccentric savant? A philosopher? Or—more probably—a crank? But at this point my meditations were interrupted by the voice from the adjoining room, once more raised in anger.

"But I say that you *are* making an accusation! You are implying that I made away with him."

"Not at all," was the reply; "but I repeat that it

is your business to ascertain what has become of him. The responsibility rests upon you."

"Upon me!" rejoined the first voice. "And what about you? Your position is a pretty fishy one if it comes to that."

"What!" roared the other. "Do you insinuate that I murdered my own brother?"

During this amazing colloquy I had stood gaping with sheer astonishment. Suddenly I recollected myself, and, dropping into a chair, set my elbows on my knees and clapped my hands over my ears; and thus I must have remained for a full minute when I became aware of the closing of a door behind me.

I sprang to my feet and turned in some embarrassment (for I must have looked unspeakably ridiculous) to confront the sombre figure of a rather tall and strikingly handsome girl, who, as she stood with her hand on the knob of the door, saluted me with a formal bow. In an instantaneous glance I noted how perfectly she matched her strange surroundings. Black-robed, black-haired, with black-grey eyes and a grave, sad face of ivory pallor, she stood, like one of old Terborch's portraits, a harmony in tones so low as to be but a step removed from monochrome. Obviously a lady in spite of the worn and rusty dress, and something in the poise of the head and the set of the straight brows hinted at a spirit that adversity had hardened rather than broken.

"I must ask you to forgive me for keeping you waiting," she said; and as she spoke a certain softening at the corners of the austere mouth reminded me of the absurd position in which she had found me.

I murmured that the trifling delay was of no consequence whatever; that I had, in fact, been rather glad of the rest; and I was beginning somewhat vaguely to approach the subject of the invalid when the voice from the adjoining room again broke forth with hideous distinctness.

"I tell you I'll do nothing of the kind! Why, con-

found you, it's nothing less than a conspiracy that you're proposing ! "

Miss Bellingham—as I assumed her to be—stepped quickly across the floor, flushing angrily, as well she might ; but, as she reached the door, it flew open and a small, spruce, middle-aged man burst into the room.

" Your father is mad, Ruth ! " he exclaimed ; " absolutely stark mad ! And I refuse to hold any further communication with him."

" The present interview was not of his seeking," Miss Bellingham replied coldly.

" No, it was not," was the wrathful rejoinder ; " it was my mistaken generosity. But there—what is the use of talking ? I've done my best for you and I'll do no more. Don't trouble to let me out ; I can find my way. Good morning." With a stiff bow and a quick glance at me, the speaker strode out of the room, banging the door after him.

" I must apologize for this extraordinary reception," said Miss Bellingham ; " but I believe medical men are not easily astonished. I will introduce you to your patient now." She opened the door and, as I followed her into the adjoining room, she said : " Here is another visitor for you, dear. Doctor——"

" Berkeley," said I. " I am acting for my friend Doctor Barnard."

The invalid, a fine-looking man of about fifty-five, who sat propped up in bed with a pile of pillows, held out an excessively shaky hand, which I grasped cordially, making a mental note of the tremor.

" How do you do, sir ? " said Mr. Bellingham. " I hope Doctor Barnard is not ill."

" Oh, no," I answered ; " he has gone for a trip down the Mediterranean on a currant ship. The chance occurred rather suddenly, and I bustled him off before he had time to change his mind. Hence my rather unceremonious appearance, which I hope you will forgive."

" Not at all," was the hearty response. " I'm de-

lighted to hear that you sent him off; he wanted a holiday, poor man. And I am delighted to make your acquaintance, too."

"It is very good of you," I said; whereupon he bowed as gracefully as a man may who is propped up in bed with a heap of pillows; and having thus exchanged broadsides of civility, so to speak, we—or, at least, I—proceeded to business.

"How long have you been laid up?" I asked cautiously, not wishing to make too evident the fact that my principal had given me no information respecting his case.

"A week to-day," he replied. "The *fons et origo mali* was a hansom-cab which upset me opposite the Law Courts—sent me sprawling in the middle of the road. My own fault, of course—at least, the cabby said so, and I suppose he knew. But that was no consolation to me."

"Were you much hurt?"

"No, not really; but the fall bruised my knee rather badly and gave me a deuce of a shake up. I'm too old for that sort of thing, you know."

"Most people are," said I.

"True; but you can take a cropper more gracefully at twenty than at fifty-five. However, the knee is getting on quite well—you shall see it presently—and you observe that I am giving it complete rest. But that isn't the whole of the trouble or the worst of it. It's my confounded nerves. I'm as irritable as the devil and as nervous as a cat, and I can't get a decent night's rest."

I recalled the tremulous hand that he had offered me. He did not look like a drinker, but still——

"Do you smoke much?" I inquired diplomatically.

He looked at me slyly and chuckled. "That's a very delicate way to approach the subject, Doctor," he said. "No, I don't smoke much, and I don't crook my little finger. I saw you look at my shaky hand just now—oh, it's all right; I'm not offended. It's a

doctor's business to keep his eyelids lifting. But my hand is steady enough as a rule, when I'm not upset, but the least excitement sets me shaking like a jelly. And the fact is that I have just had a deucedly unpleasant interview——"

"I think," Miss Bellingham interrupted, "Doctor Berkeley and, in fact, the neighbourhood at large, are aware of the fact."

Mr. Bellingham laughed rather shamefacedly. "I'm afraid I did lose my temper," he said; "but I am an impulsive old fellow, Doctor, and when I'm put out I'm apt to speak my mind—a little too bluntly, perhaps."

"And audibly," his daughter added. "Do you know that Doctor Berkeley was reduced to the necessity of stopping his ears?" She glanced at me, as she spoke, with something like a twinkle in her solemn grey eyes.

"Did I shout?" Mr. Bellingham asked, not very contritely, I thought, though he added: "I'm very sorry, my dear; but it won't happen again. I think we've seen the last of that good gentleman."

"I am sure I hope so," she rejoined, adding: "And now I will leave you to your talk; I shall be in the next room if you should want me."

I opened the door for her, and when she had passed out with a stiff little bow I seated myself by the bedside and resumed the consultation. It was evidently a case of nervous breakdown, to which the cab accident had, no doubt, contributed. As to the other antecedents, they were no concern of mine, though Mr. Bellingham seemed to think otherwise, for he resumed: "That cab business was the last straw, you know, and it finished me off, but I have been going down the hill for a long time. I've had a lot of trouble during the last two years. But I suppose I oughtn't to pester you with the details of my personal affairs."

"Anything that bears on your present state of health is of interest to me if you don't mind telling it," I said.

"Mind!" he exclaimed. "Did you ever meet an invalid who didn't enjoy talking about his own health? It's the listener who minds, as a rule."

"Well, the present listener doesn't," I said.

"Then," said Mr. Bellingham, "I'll treat myself to the luxury of telling you all my troubles; I don't often get the chance of a confidential grumble to a responsible man of my own class. And I really have some excuse for railing at Fortune, as you will agree when I tell you that, a couple of years ago, I went to bed one night a gentleman of independent means and excellent prospects and woke up in the morning to find myself practically a beggar. Not a cheerful experience that, you know, at my time of life, eh?"

"No," I agreed, "nor at any other."

"And that was not all," he continued; "for, at the same moment, I lost my only brother, my dearest, kindest friend. He disappeared—vanished off the face of the earth; but perhaps you have heard of the affair. The confounded papers were full of it at the time."

He paused abruptly, noticing, no doubt, a sudden change in my face. Of course, I recollected the case now. Indeed, ever since I had entered the house some chord of memory had been faintly vibrating, and now his last words had struck out the full note.

"Yes," I said, "I remember the incident, though I don't suppose I should but for the fact that our lecturer on medical jurisprudence drew my attention to it."

"Indeed," said Mr. Bellingham, rather uneasily, as I fancied. "What did he say about it?"

"He referred to it as a case that was calculated to give rise to some very pretty legal complications."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Mr. Bellingham, "that man was a prophet! Legal complications, indeed! But I'll be bound he never guessed at the sort of infernal tangle that has actually gathered round the affair. By the way, what was his name?"

"Thorndyke," I replied. "Doctor John Thorndyke."

"Thorndyke," Mr. Bellingham repeated in a musing, retrospective tone. "I seem to remember that name. Yes, of course. I have heard a legal friend of mine, a Mr. Marchmont, speak of him in reference to the case of a man whom I knew slightly years ago—a certain Jeffrey Blackmore, who also disappeared very mysteriously. I remember now that Doctor Thorndyke unravelled that case with most remarkable ingenuity."

"I daresay he would be very much interested to hear about your case," I suggested.

"I daresay he would," was the reply; "but one can't take up a professional man's time for nothing, and I couldn't afford to pay him. And that reminds me that I'm taking up your time by gossiping about my purely personal affairs."

"My morning round is finished," said I, "and, moreover, your personal affairs are highly interesting. I suppose I mustn't ask what is the nature of the legal entanglement?"

"Not unless you are prepared to stay here for the rest of the day and go home a raving lunatic. But I'll tell you this much: the trouble is about my poor brother's will. In the first place, it can't be administered because there is no sufficient evidence that my brother is dead; and in the second place, if it could, all the property would go to people who were never intended to benefit. The will itself is the most diabolically exasperating document that was ever produced by the perverted ingenuity of a wrong-headed man. That's all. Will you have a look at my knee?"

As Mr. Bellingham's explanation (delivered in a rapid *crescendo* and ending almost in a shout) had left him purple-faced and trembling, I thought it best to bring our talk to an end. Accordingly I proceeded to inspect the injured knee, which was now nearly well, and to overhaul my patient generally; and having given him detailed instructions as to his general conduct, I rose to take my leave.

"And remember," I said as I shook his hand, "no

tobacco, no coffee, no excitement of any kind. Lead a quiet, bovine life."

"That's all very well," he grumbled, "but supposing people come here and excite me?"

"Disregard them," said I, "and read *Whitaker's Almanack*." And with this parting advice I passed out into the other room.

Miss Bellingham was seated at the table with a pile of blue-covered note-books before her, two of which were open, displaying pages closely written in a small, neat handwriting. She rose as I entered and looked at me inquiringly.

"I heard you advising my father to read *Whitaker's Almanack*," she said. "Was that as a curative measure?"

"Entirely," I replied. "I recommended it for its medicinal virtues, as an antidote to mental excitement."

She smiled faintly. "It certainly is not a highly emotional book," she said, and then asked: "Have you any other instructions to give?"

"Well, I might give the conventional advice—to maintain a cheerful outlook and avoid worry; but I don't suppose you would find it very helpful."

"No," she answered bitterly; "it is a counsel of perfection. People in our position are not a very cheerful class, I am afraid; but still they don't seek out worries from sheer perverseness. The worries come unsought. But, of course, you can't enter into that."

"I can't give any practical help, I fear, though I do sincerely hope that your father's affairs will straighten themselves out soon."

She thanked me for my good wishes and accompanied me down to the street door, where, with a bow and a rather stiff handshake, she gave me my *congé*.

Very ungratefully the noise of Fetter Lane smote on my ears as I came out through the archway, and very squalid and unrestful the little street looked when contrasted with the dignity and monastic quiet of the old garden. As to the surgery, with its oilcloth floor and

walls made hideous with gaudy insurance show-cards in sham gilt frames, its aspect was so revolting that I flew to the day-book for distraction, and was still busily entering the morning's visits when the bottle-boy, Adolphus, entered stealthily to announce lunch.

CHAPTER III

JOHN THORNDYKE

THAT the character of an individual tends to be reflected in his dress is a fact familiar to the least observant. That the observation is equally applicable to aggregates of men is less familiar, but equally true. Do not the members of the fighting professions, even to this day, deck themselves in feathers, in gaudy colours and gilded ornaments, after the manner of the African war-chief or the "Redskin brave," and thereby indicate the place of war in modern civilization? Does not the Church of Rome send her priests to the altar in habiliments that were fashionable before the fall of the Roman Empire, in token of her immovable conservatism? And, lastly, does not the Law, lumbering on in the wake of progress, symbolize its subjection to precedent by head-gear reminiscent of the days of good Queen Anne?

I should apologize for obtruding upon the reader these somewhat trite reflections; which were set going by the quaint stock-in-trade of the wigmaker's shop in the cloisters of the Inner Temple, whither I had strayed on a sultry afternoon in quest of shade and quiet. I had halted opposite the little shop window, and, with my eyes bent dreamily on the row of wigs, was pursuing the above train of thought when I was startled by a deep voice saying softly in my ear: "I'd have the full-bottomed one if I were you."

I turned swiftly and rather fiercely, and looked into the face of my old friend and fellow-student, Jervis, behind whom, regarding us with a sedate smile, stood

my former teacher, Dr. John Thorndyke. Both men greeted me with a warmth that I felt to be very flattering, for Thorndyke was quite a great personage, and even Jervis was several years my academic senior.

"You are coming in to have a cup of tea with us, I hope," said Thorndyke; and as I assented gladly, he took my arm and led me across the court in the direction of the Treasury.

"But why that hungry gaze at those forensic vanities, Berkeley?" he asked. "Are you thinking of following my example and Jervis's—deserting the bedside for the Bar?"

"What! Has Jervis gone into the law?" I exclaimed.

"Bless you, yes!" replied Jervis. "I have become parasitical on Thorndyke! 'The big fleas have little fleas,' you know. I am the additional fraction trailing after the whole number in the rear of a decimal point."

"Don't you believe him, Berkeley," interposed Thorndyke. "He is the brains of the firm. I supply the respectability and moral worth. But you haven't answered my question. What are you doing here on a summer afternoon staring into a wigmaker's window?"

"I am Barnard's locum; he is in practice in Fetter Lane."

"I know," said Thorndyke; "we meet him occasionally, and very pale and peaky he has been looking of late. Is he taking a holiday?"

"Yes. He has gone for a trip to the Isles of Greece in a currant ship."

"Then," said Jervis, "you are actually a local G.P. I thought you were looking beastly respectable."

"And, judging from your leisured manner when we encountered you," added Thorndyke, "the practice is not a strenuous one. I suppose it is entirely local?"

"Yes," I replied. "The patients mostly live in the small streets and courts within a half-mile radius of the surgery, and the abodes of some of them are pretty

squalid. Oh! and that reminds me of a very strange coincidence. It will interest you, I think."

"Life is made up of strange coincidences," said Thorndyke. "Nobody but a reviewer of novels is ever really surprised at a coincidence. But what is yours?"

"It is connected with a case that you mentioned to us at the hospital about two years ago, the case of a man who disappeared under rather mysterious circumstances. Do you remember it? The man's name was Bellingham."

"The Egyptologist? Yes, I remember the case quite well. What about it?"

"The brother is a patient of mine. He is living in Nevill's Court with his daughter, and they seem to be as poor as church mice."

"Really," said Thorndyke, "this is quite interesting. They must have come down in the world rather suddenly. If I remember rightly, the brother was living in a house of some pretensions standing in its own grounds."

"Yes, that is so. I see you recollect all about the case."

"My dear fellow," said Jervis, "Thorndyke never forgets a likely case. He is a sort of medico-legal camel. He gulps down the raw facts from the newspapers or elsewhere, and then, in his leisure moments, he calmly regurgitates them and has a quiet chew at them. It is a quaint habit. A case crops up in the papers or in one of the courts, and Thorndyke swallows it whole. Then it lapses and everyone forgets it. A year or two later it crops up in a new form, and, to your astonishment, you find that Thorndyke has got it all cut and dried. He has been ruminating on it periodically in the interval."

"You notice," said Thorndyke, "that my learned friend is pleased to indulge in mixed metaphors. But his statement is substantially true, though obscurely worded. You must tell us more about the Bellinghams when we have fortified you with a cup of tea."

Our talk had brought us to Thorndyke's chambers, which were on the first floor of No. 5A King's Bench Walk, and as we entered the fine, spacious, panelled room we found a small, elderly man, neatly dressed in black, setting out the tea-service on the table. I glanced at him with some curiosity. He hardly looked like a servant, in spite of his neat, black clothes; in fact, his appearance was rather puzzling, for while his quiet dignity and his serious, intelligent face suggested some kind of professional man, his neat, capable hands were those of a skilled mechanic.

Thorndyke surveyed the tea-tray thoughtfully and then looked at his retainer. "I see you have put three tea-cups, Polton," he said. "Now, how did you know I was bringing someone in to tea?"

The little man smiled a quaint, crinkly smile of gratification as he explained:

"I happened to look out of the laboratory window as you turned the corner, sir."

"How disappointingly simple," said Jervis. "We were hoping for something abstruse and telepathic."

"Simplicity is the soul of efficiency, sir," replied Polton as he checked the tea-service to make sure that nothing was forgotten, and with this remarkable aphorism he silently evaporated.

"To return to the Bellingham case," said Thorndyke, when he had poured out the tea. "Have you picked up any facts relating to the parties—any facts, I mean, of course, that it would be proper for you to mention?"

"I have learned one or two things that there is no harm in repeating. For instance, I gather that Godfrey Bellingham—my patient—lost all his property quite suddenly about the time of the disappearance."

"That is really odd," said Thorndyke. "The opposite condition would be quite understandable, but one doesn't see exactly how this can have happened, unless there was an allowance of some sort."

"No, that was what struck me. But there seem to be some queer features in the case, and the legal posi-

tion is evidently getting complicated. There is a will, for example, which is giving trouble."

"They will hardly be able to administer the will without either proof or presumption of death," Thorndyke remarked.

"Exactly. That's one of the difficulties. Another is that there seems to be some fatal defect in the drafting of the will itself. I don't know what it is, but I expect I shall hear sooner or later. By the way, I mentioned the interest that you had taken in the case, and I think Bellingham would have liked to consult you, but, of course, the poor devil has no money."

"That is awkward for him if the other interested parties have. There will probably be legal proceedings of some kind, and as the law takes no account of poverty, he is likely to go to the wall. He ought to have advice of some sort."

"I don't see how he is to get it," said I.

"Neither do I," Thorndyke admitted. "There are no hospitals for impecunious litigants; it is assumed that only persons of means have a right to go to law. Of course, if we knew the man and the circumstances we might be able to help him; but, for all we know to the contrary, he may be an arrant scoundrel."

I recalled the strange conversation that I had overheard, and wondered what Thorndyke would have thought of it if it had been allowable for me to repeat it. Obviously it was not, however, and I could only give my own impressions.

"He doesn't strike me as that," I said; "but, of course, one never knows. Personally, he impressed me rather favourably, which is more than the other man did."

"What other man?" asked Thorndyke.

"There was another man in the case, wasn't there? I forget his name. I saw him at the house and didn't much like the look of him. I suspect he's putting some sort of pressure on Bellingham."

"Berkeley knows more about this than he is telling

us," said Jervis. "Let us look up the report and see who this stranger is." He took down from a shelf a large volume of newspaper-cuttings and laid it on the table.

"You see," said he, as he ran his finger down the index, "Thorndyke files all the cases that are likely to come to something, and I know he had expectations respecting this one. I fancy he had some ghoulish hope that the missing gentleman's head might turn up in somebody's dust-bin. Here we are; the other man's name is Hurst. He is apparently a cousin, and it was at his house that the missing man was last seen alive."

"So you think Mr. Hurst is moving in the matter?" said Thorndyke, when he had glanced over the report.

"That is my impression," I replied, "though I really know nothing about it."

"Well," said Thorndyke, "if you should learn what is being done and should have permission to speak of it, I shall be very interested to hear how the case progresses; and if an unofficial opinion on any point would be of service, I think there would be no harm in my giving it."

"It would certainly be of great value if the other parties are taking professional advice," I said; and then, after a pause, I asked: "Have you given this case much consideration?"

Thorndyke reflected. "No," he said, "I can't say that I have. I turned it over rather carefully when the report first appeared, and I have speculated on it occasionally since. It is my habit, as Jervis was telling you, to utilize odd moments of leisure (such as a railway journey, for instance) by constructing theories to account for the facts of such obscure cases as have come to my notice. It is a useful habit, I think, for, apart from the mental exercise and experience that one gains from it, an appreciable proportion of these cases ultimately come into my hands, and then the previous consideration of them is so much time gained."

"Have you formed any theory to account for the facts in this case?" I asked.

"Yes; I have several theories, one of which I especially favour, and I am awaiting with great interest such new facts as may indicate to me which of these theories is probably the correct one."

"It's no use your trying to pump him, Berkeley," said Jervis. "He is fitted with an information-valve that opens inwards. You can pour in as much as you like, but you can't get any out."

Thorndyke chuckled. "My learned friend is, in the main, correct," he said. "You see, I may be called upon any day to advise on this case, in which event I should feel remarkably foolish if I had already expounded my views in detail. But I should like to hear what you and Jervis make of the case as reported in the newspapers."

"There now," exclaimed Jervis, "what did I tell you? He wants to suck our brains."

"As far as my brain is concerned," I said, "the process of suction isn't likely to yield much except a vacuum, so I will resign in favour of you. You are a full-blown lawyer, whereas I am only a simple G.P."

Jervis filled his pipe with deliberate care and lighted it. Then, blowing a slender stream of smoke into the air, he said:

"If you want to know what I make of the case from that report, I can tell you in one word—nothing. Every road seems to end in a cul-de-sac."

"Oh, come!" said Thorndyke, "this is mere laziness. Berkeley wants to witness a display of your forensic wisdom. A learned counsel may be in a fog—he very often is—but he doesn't state the fact baldly; he wraps it up in a decent verbal disguise. Tell us how you arrive at your conclusion. Show us that you have really weighed the facts."

"Very well," said Jervis, "I will give you a masterly analysis of the case—leading to nothing." He continued to puff at his pipe for a time with slight embarrass-

ment, as I thought—and I fully sympathized with him. Finally he blew a little cloud and commenced :

" The position appears to be this : Here is a man who is seen to enter a certain house, who is shown into a certain room and shut in. He is not seen to come out, and yet, when the room is next entered, it is found to be empty ; and that man is never seen again, alive or dead. That is a pretty tough beginning.

" Now, it is evident that one of three things must have happened. Either he must have remained in that room, or at least in that house, alive ; or he must have died, naturally or otherwise, and his body have been concealed ; or he must have left the house unobserved. Let us take the first case. This affair happened nearly two years ago. Now, he couldn't have remained alive in the house for two years. He would have been noticed. The servants, for instance, when cleaning out the rooms, would have observed him."

Here Thorndyke interposed with an indulgent smile at his junior : " My learned friend is treating the inquiry with unbecoming levity. We accept the conclusion that the man did not remain in the house alive."

" Very well. Then did he remain in it dead ? Apparently not. The report says that as soon as the man was missed, Hurst and the servants together searched the house thoroughly. But there had been no time or opportunity to dispose of the body, whence the only possible conclusion is that the body was not there. Moreover, if we admit the possibility of his having been murdered—for that is what concealment of the body would imply—there is the question : Who could have murdered him ? Not the servants, obviously, and as to Hurst—well, of course, we don't know what his relations with the missing man may have been—at least, I don't."

" Neither do I," said Thorndyke. " I know nothing beyond what is in the newspaper report and what Berkeley has told us."

" Then we know nothing. He may have had a motive

for murdering the man or he may not. The point is that he doesn't seem to have had the opportunity. Even if we suppose that he managed to conceal the body temporarily, still there was the final disposal of it. He couldn't have buried it in the garden with the servants about; neither could he have burned it. The only conceivable method by which he could have got rid of it would have been that of cutting it up into fragments and burying the dismembered parts in some secluded spots or dropping them into ponds or rivers. But no remains of the kind have been found, as some of them probably would have been by now, so that there is nothing to support this suggestion; indeed, the idea of murder, in this house at least, seems to be excluded by the search that was made the instant the man was missed.

"Then to take the third alternative: Did he leave the house unobserved? Well, it is not impossible, but it would be a queer thing to do. He may have been an impulsive or eccentric man. We can't say. We know nothing about him. But two years have elapsed and he has never turned up, so that if he left the house secretly he must have gone into hiding and be hiding still. Of course, he may have been the sort of lunatic who would behave in that manner or he may not. We have no information as to his personal character.

"Then there is the complication of the scarab that was picked up in the grounds of his brother's house at Woodford. That seems to show that he visited that house at some time. But no one admits having seen him there; and it is uncertain, therefore, whether he went first to his brother's house or to Hurst's. If he was wearing the scarab when he arrived at the Eltham house, he must have left that house unobserved and gone to Woodford; but if he was not wearing it he probably went from Woodford to Eltham and there finally disappeared. As to whether he was or was not wearing the scarab when he was last seen alive by Hurst's housemaid, there is at present no evidence.

If he went to his brother's house after his visit to Hurst, the disappearance is more understandable if we don't mind flinging accusations of murder about rather casually; for the disposal of the body would be much less difficult in that case. Apparently no one saw him enter the house, and, if he did enter, it was by a back gate which communicated with the library—a separate building some distance from the house. In that case it would have been physically possible for the Bellinghams to have made away with him. There was plenty of time to dispose of the body unobserved—temporarily, at any rate. Nobody had seen him come to the house, and nobody knew that he was there—if he *was* there; and apparently no search was made either at the time or afterwards. In fact, if it could be shown that the missing man ever left Hurst's house alive, or that he was wearing the scarab when he arrived there, things would look rather fishy for the Bellinghams—for, of course, the girl must have been in it if the father was. But there's the crux: there is no proof that the man ever did leave Hurst's house alive. And if he didn't—but there! as I said at first, whichever turning you take, you find that it ends in a blind alley."

"A lame ending to a masterly exposition," was Thorndyke's comment.

"I know," said Jervis. "But what would you have? There are quite a number of possible solutions, and one of them must be the true one. But how are we to judge which it is? I maintain that until we know something of the parties and the financial and other interests involved we have no data."

"There," said Thorndyke, "I disagree with you entirely. I maintain that we have ample data. You say that we have no means of judging which of the various possible solutions is the true one; but I think that if you will read the report carefully and thoughtfully you will find that the facts now known to us point clearly to one explanation, and one only. It may not be the true explanation, and I don't suppose

it is. But we are now dealing with the matter speculatively, academically, and I contend that our data yield a definite conclusion. What do you say, Berkeley ? "

" I say that it is time for me to be off ; the evening consultations begin at half-past six."

" Well," said Thorndyke, " don't let us keep you from your duties, with poor Barnard currant-picking in the Grecian Isles. But come in and see us again. Drop in when you like, after your work is done. You won't be in our way even if we are busy, which we very seldom are after eight o'clock."

I thanked Dr. Thorndyke most heartily for making me free of his chambers in this hospitable fashion and took my leave, setting forth homewards by way of Middle Temple Lane and the Embankment ; not a very direct route for Fetter Lane, it must be confessed ; but our talk had revived my interest in the Bellingham household and put me in a reflective vein.

From the remarkable conversation that I had overheard it was evident that the plot was thickening. Not that I supposed that these two respectable gentlemen really suspected one another of having made away with the missing man ; but still, their unguarded words, spoken in anger, made it clear that each had allowed the thought of sinister possibilities to enter his mind—a dangerous condition that might easily grow into actual suspicion. And then the circumstances really were highly mysterious, as I realized with especial vividness now after listening to my friend's analysis of the evidence.

From the problem itself my mind travelled, not for the first time during the last few days, to the handsome girl who had seemed in my eyes the high-priestess of this temple of mystery in the quaint little court. What a strange figure she made against this strange background, with her quiet, chilly, self-contained manner, her pale face, so sad and worn, her black, straight brows and solemn grey eyes, so inscrutable,

mysterious, Sibylline. A striking, even impressive, personality this, I reflected, with something in it sombre and enigmatic that attracted and yet repelled.

And here I recalled Jervis's words: "The girl must have been in it if the father was." It was a dreadful thought, even though only speculatively uttered, and my heart rejected it; rejected it with an indignation that rather surprised me. And this notwithstanding that the sombre black-robed figure that my memory conjured up was one that associated itself appropriately enough with the idea of mystery and tragedy.

CHAPTER IV

LEGAL COMPLICATIONS AND A JACKAL

My meditations brought me by a circuitous route, and ten minutes late, to the end of Fetter Lane, where, exchanging my rather abstracted air for the alert manner of a busy practitioner, I strode forward briskly and darted into the surgery with knitted brows, as though just released from an anxious case. But there was only one patient waiting, and she saluted me as I entered with a snort of defiance.

"Here you are, then?" said she.

"You are perfectly correct, Miss Oman," I replied; "in fact, you have put the case in a nutshell. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"Nothing," was the answer. "My medical adviser is a lady; but I've brought a note from Mr. Bellingham. Here it is," and she thrust the envelope into my hand.

I glanced through the note and learned that my patient had had a couple of bad nights and a very harassing day. "Could I have something to give me a night's rest?" it concluded.

I reflected for a few moments. One is not very ready to prescribe sleeping draughts for unknown patients, but still, insomnia is a very distressing condition. In the end, I temporized with a moderate dose of bromide, deciding to call and see if more energetic measures were necessary.

"He had better take a dose of this at once, Miss Oman," said I, as I handed her the bottle, "and I will look in later and see how he is."

"I expect he will be glad to see you," she answered, "for he is all alone to-night and very dumpy. Miss Bellingham is out. But I must remind you that he's a poor man and pays his way. You must excuse my mentioning it."

"I am much obliged to you for the hint, Miss Oman," I rejoined. "It isn't necessary for me to see him, but I should like just to look in and have a chat."

"Yes, it will do him good. You have your points, though punctuality doesn't seem to be one of them," and with this parting shot Miss Oman bustled away.

Half-past eight found me ascending the great, dim staircase of the house in Nevill's Court preceded by Miss Oman, by whom I was ushered into the room. Mr. Bellingham, who had just finished some sort of meal, was sitting hunched up in his chair gazing gloomily into the empty grate. He brightened up as I entered, but was evidently in very low spirits.

"I didn't mean to drag you out after your day's work was finished," he said, "though I am very glad to see you."

"You haven't dragged me out. I heard you were alone, so I just dropped in for a few minutes' gossip."

"That is really kind of you," he said heartily. "But I'm afraid you'll find me rather poor company. A man who is full of his own highly disagreeable affairs is not a desirable companion."

"You mustn't let me disturb you if you'd rather be alone," said I, with a sudden fear that I was intruding.

"Oh, you won't disturb me," he replied; adding, with a laugh: "It's more likely to be the other way about. In fact, if I were not afraid of boring you to death I would ask you to let me talk my difficulties over with you."

"You won't bore me," I said. "It is generally interesting to share another man's experiences without their inconveniences. 'The proper study of mankind is—man,' you know, especially to a doctor."

Mr. Bellingham chuckled grimly. "You make me feel

like a microbe," he said. "However, if you would care to take a peep at me through your microscope, I will crawl on to the stage for your inspection, though it is not *my* actions that furnish the materials for your psychological studies. I am only a passive agent. It is my poor brother who is the *Deus ex machina*, who, from his unknown grave, as I fear, pulls the strings of this infernal puppet-show."

He paused, and for a space gazed thoughtfully into the grate as if he had forgotten my presence. At length he looked up, and resumed :

"It is a curious story, Doctor—a very curious story. Part of it you know—the middle part. I will tell it you from the beginning, and then you will know as much as I do ; for, as to the end, that is known to no one. It is written, no doubt, in the book of destiny, but the page has yet to be turned.

"The mischief began with my father's death. He was a country clergyman of very moderate means, a widower with two children, my brother John and me. He managed to send us both to Oxford, after which John went into the Foreign Office and I was to have gone into the Church. But I suddenly discovered that my views on religion had undergone a change that made this impossible, and just about this time my father came into a quite considerable property. Now, as it was his expressed intention to leave the estate equally divided between my brother and me, there was no need for me to take up any profession for a livelihood. Archæology was already the passion of my life, and I determined to devote myself henceforth to my favourite study, in which, by the way, I was following a family tendency ; for my father was an enthusiastic student of ancient Oriental history, and John was, as you know, an ardent Egyptologist.

"Then my father died quite suddenly, and left no will. He had intended to have one drawn up, but had put it off until it was too late. And since nearly all the property was in the form of real estate, my brother

inherited practically the whole of it. However, in deference to the known wishes of my father, he made me an allowance of five hundred a year, which was about a quarter of the annual income. I urged him to assign me a lump sum, but he refused to do this. Instead, he instructed his solicitor to pay me the allowance in quarterly instalments during the rest of his life; and it was understood that, on his death, the entire estate should devolve on me, or if I died first, on my daughter Ruth. Then, as you know, he disappeared suddenly, and as the circumstances suggested that he was dead, and there was no evidence that he was alive, his solicitor—a Mr. Jellicoe—found himself unable to continue the payment of the allowance. On the other hand, as there was no positive evidence that my brother was dead, it was impossible to administer the will."

"You say that the circumstances suggested that your brother was dead. What circumstances were they?"

"Principally the suddenness and completeness of the disappearance. His luggage, as you may remember, was found lying unclaimed at the railway station; and there was another circumstance even more suggestive. My brother drew a pension from the Foreign Office, for which he had to apply in person, or, if abroad, produce proof that he was alive on the date when the payment became due. Now, he was exceedingly regular in this respect; in fact, he had never been known to fail, either to appear in person or to transmit the necessary documents to his agent, Mr. Jellicoe. But from the moment when he vanished so mysteriously to the present day, nothing whatever has been heard of him."

"It's a very awkward position for you," I said, "but I should think there will not be much difficulty in obtaining the permission of the Court to presume death and to proceed to prove the will."

Mr. Bellingham made a wry face. "I expect you

are right," he said, "but, unfortunately, that doesn't help me much. You see, Mr. Jellicoe, having waited a reasonable time for my brother to reappear, took a very unusual but, I think, in the special circumstances, a very proper step: he summoned me and the other interested party to his office and communicated to us the provisions of the will. And very extraordinary provisions they turned out to be. I was thunderstruck when I heard them. And the exasperating thing is that I feel sure my poor brother imagined that he had made everything perfectly safe and simple."

"They generally do," I said, rather vaguely.

"I suppose they do," said Mr. Bellingham; "but poor John has made the most infernal hash of his will, and I am certain that he has utterly defeated his own intentions. You see, we are an old London family. The house in Queen Square where my brother nominally lived, but actually kept his collection, has been occupied by us for generations, and most of the Bellinghams are buried in St. George's burial-ground close by, though some members of the family are buried in other churchyards in the neighbourhood. Now, my brother—who, by the way, was a bachelor—had a strong feeling for the family traditions, and he stipulated, not unnaturally, in his will that he should be buried in St. George's burial-ground among his ancestors, or, at least, in one of the places of burial appertaining to his native parish. But instead of simply expressing the wish and directing his executors to carry it out, he made it a condition affecting the operation of the will."

"Affecting it in what respect?" I asked.

"In a very vital respect," answered Mr. Bellingham. "The bulk of the property he bequeathed to me, or if I predeceased him, to my daughter Ruth. But the bequest was subject to the condition that I have mentioned—that he should be buried in a certain place—and if that condition was not fulfilled, the bulk of the property was to go to my cousin, George Hurst."

"But in that case," said I, "as you can't produce the body, neither of you can get the property."

"I am not so sure of that," he replied. "If my brother is dead, it is pretty certain that he is not buried in St. George's or any of the other places mentioned, and the fact can easily be proved by production of the registers. So that a permission to presume death would result in the handing over to Hurst of almost the entire estate."

"Who is the executor?" I asked.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "there is another muddle. There are two executors; Jellicoe is one, and the other is the principal beneficiary—Hurst or myself, as the case may be. But, you see, neither of us can become an executor until the Court has decided which of us is the principal beneficiary."

"But who is to apply to the Court? I thought that was the business of the executors."

"Exactly. That is Hurst's difficulty. We were discussing it when you called the other day, and a very animated discussion it was," he added, with a grim smile. "You see, Jellicoe naturally refuses to move in the matter alone. He says he must have the support of the other executor. But Hurst is not at present the other executor; neither am I. But the two of us together are the co-executor, since the duty devolves upon one or other of us, in any case."

"It's a complicated position," I said.

"It is; and the complication has elicited a very curious proposal from Hurst. He points out—quite correctly, I am afraid—that as the conditions as to burial have not been complied with, the property must come to him, and he proposes a very neat little arrangement, which is this: That I shall support him and Jellicoe in their application for permission to presume death and administer the will, and that he shall pay me four hundred a year for life; the arrangement to hold good *in all eventualities*."

"What does he mean by that?"

"He means," said Bellingham, fixing me with a ferocious scowl, "that if the body should turn up at any future time, so that the conditions as to burial should be able to be carried out, he should still retain the property and pay me the four hundred a year."

"The deuce!" said I. "He seems to know how to drive a bargain."

"His position is that he stands to lose four hundred a year for the term of my life if the body is never found, and he ought to stand to win if it is."

"And I gather that you have refused his offer?"

"Yes; very emphatically, and my daughter agrees with me; but I am not sure that I have done the right thing. A man should think twice, I suppose, before he burns his boats."

"Have you spoken to Mr. Jellicoe about the matter?"

"Yes, I have been to see him to-day. He is a cautious man, and he doesn't advise me one way or the other. But I think he disapproves of my refusal; in fact, he remarked that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, especially when the whereabouts of the bush is unknown."

"Do you think he will apply to the Court without your sanction?"

"He doesn't want to; but I suppose, if Hurst puts pressure on him, he will have to. Besides, Hurst, as an interested party, could apply on his own account, and after my refusal he probably will; at least, that is Jellicoe's opinion."

"The whole thing is a most astonishing muddle," I said, "especially when one remembers that your brother had a lawyer to advise him. Didn't Mr. Jellicoe point out to him how absurd the provisions were?"

"Yes, he did. He tells me that he implored my brother to let him draw up a will embodying the matter in a reasonable form. But John wouldn't listen to him. Poor old fellow! he could be very pig-headed when he chose."

"And is Hurst's proposal still open?"

"No, thanks to my peppery temper. I refused it very definitely, and sent him off with a flea in his ear. I hope I have not made a false step; I was quite taken by surprise when Hurst made the proposal and got rather angry. You remember, my brother was last seen alive at Hurst's house—but there, I oughtn't to talk like that, and I oughtn't to pester you with my confounded affairs when you have come in for a friendly chat, though I gave you fair warning, you remember."

"Oh, but you have been highly entertaining. You don't realize what an interest I take in your case."

Mr. Bellingham laughed somewhat grimly. "My case!" he repeated. "You speak as if I were some rare and curious sort of criminal lunatic. However, I'm glad you find me amusing. It's more than I find myself."

"I didn't say amusing; I said interesting. I view you with deep respect as the central figure of a stirring drama. And I am not the only person who regards you in that light. Do you remember my speaking to you of Doctor Thorndyke?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Well, oddly enough, I met him this afternoon and we had a long talk at his chambers. I took the liberty of mentioning that I had made your acquaintance. Did I do wrong?"

"No. Certainly not. Why shouldn't you tell him? Did he remember my infernal case, as you call it?"

"Perfectly, in all its details. He is quite an enthusiast, you know, and uncommonly keen to hear how the case develops."

"So am I, for that matter," said Mr. Bellingham.

"I wonder," said I, "if you would mind my telling him what you have told me to-night. It would interest him enormously."

Mr. Bellingham reflected awhile with his eyes fixed on the empty grate. Presently he looked up, and said slowly:

"I don't know why I should. It's no secret; and if it were, I hold no monopoly in it. No; tell him, if you think he'd care to hear about it."

"You needn't be afraid of his talking," I said. "He is as close as an oyster; and the facts may mean more to him than to us. He may be able to give a useful hint or two."

"Oh, I'm not going to pick his brains," Mr. Bellingham said quickly and with some wrath. "I'm not the sort of man who goes round cadging for free professional advice. Understand that clearly, Doctor."

"I do," I answered hastily. "That wasn't what I meant at all. Is that Miss Bellingham coming in? I heard the front door shut."

"Yes, that will be my girl, I expect; but don't run away. You're not afraid of her, are you?" he added as I hurriedly picked up my hat.

"I'm not sure that I'm not," I answered. "She is a rather majestic young lady."

Mr. Bellingham chuckled and smothered a yawn, and at that moment his daughter entered the room; and, in spite of her shabby black dress and a shabbier handbag that she carried, I thought her appearance and manner fully justified my description.

"You come in, Miss Bellingham," I said as she shook my hand with cool civility, "to find your father yawning and me taking my departure. So I have my uses, you see. My conversation is the infallible cure for insomnia."

Miss Bellingham smiled. "I believe I am driving you away," she said.

"Not at all," I replied hastily. "My mission was accomplished, that was all."

"Sit down for a few minutes, Doctor," urged Mr. Bellingham, "and let Ruth sample the remedy. She will be affronted if you run away as soon as she comes in."

"Well, you mustn't let me keep you up," I said.

"Oh, I'll let you know when I fall asleep," he re-

plied, with a chuckle; and with this understanding I sat down again—not at all unwillingly.

At this moment Miss Oman entered with a small tray and a smile of which I should not have supposed her to be capable.

"You'll take your toast and cocoa while they're hot, dear, won't you?" she said coaxingly.

"Yes, I will, Phyllis, thank you," Miss Bellingham answered. "I am only just going to take off my hat," and she left the room, followed by the astonishingly transfigured spinster.

She returned almost immediately as Mr. Bellingham was in the midst of a profound yawn, and sat down to her frugal meal, when her father mystified me considerably by remarking:

"You're late to-night, chick. Have the Shepherd Kings been giving trouble?"

"No," she replied; "but I thought I might as well get them done. So I dropped in at the Ormond Street library on my way home and finished them."

"Then they are ready for stuffing now?"

"Yes." As she answered she caught my astonished eye (for a stuffed Shepherd King is undoubtedly a somewhat surprising phenomenon) and laughed softly.

"We mustn't talk in riddles like this," she said, "before Doctor Berkeley, or he will turn us both into pillars of salt. My father is referring to my work," she explained to me.

"Are you a taxidermist, then?" I asked.

She hastily set down the cup that she was raising to her lips and broke into a ripple of quiet laughter.

"I am afraid my father has misled you with his irreverent expressions. He will have to atone by explaining."

"You see, Doctor," said Mr. Bellingham, "Ruth is a literary searcher——"

"Oh, don't call me a 'searcher'!" Miss Bellingham protested. "It suggests the female searcher at a police-station. Say investigator."

" Very well, investigator or investigatrix, if you like. She hunts up references and bibliographies at the Museum for people who are writing books. She looks up everything that has been written on a given subject, and then, when she has crammed herself to bursting-point with facts, she goes to her client and disgorges and crams him or her, and he or she finally disgorges into the Press."

"What a disgusting way to put it!" said his daughter. " However, that is what it amounts to. I am a literary jackal, a collector of provender for the literary lions. Is that quite clear?"

" Perfectly. But I don't think that, even now, I quite understand about the stuffed Shepherd Kings."

" Oh, it was not the Shepherd Kings who were to be stuffed. It was the author! That was mere obscurity of speech on the part of my father. The position is this: A venerable archdeacon wrote an article on the patriarch Joseph——"

" And didn't know anything about him," interrupted Mr. Bellingham, " and got tripped up by a specialist who did, and then got shirty——"

" Nothing of the kind," said Miss Bellingham. " He knew as much as venerable archdeacons ought to know; but the expert knew more. So the archdeacon commissioned me to collect the literature on the state of Egypt at the end of the seventeenth dynasty, which I have done; and to-morrow I shall go and stuff him, as my father expresses it, and then——"

" And then," Mr. Bellingham interrupted, " the archdeacon will rush forth and pelt that expert with Shepherd Kings and Seqenen-Ra and the whole tag-rag and bobtail of the seventeenth dynasty. Oh, there'll be wigs on the green, I can tell you."

" Yes, I expect there will be quite a lively little skirmish," said Miss Bellingham. And thus dismissing the subject, she made an energetic attack on the toast while her father refreshed himself with a colossal yawn.

I watched her with furtive admiration and deep and

growing interest. In spite of her pallor, her weary eyes, and her drawn and almost haggard face, she was an exceedingly handsome girl; and there was in her aspect a suggestion of purpose, of strength and character that marked her off from the rank and file of womanhood. I noted this as I stole an occasional glance at her or turned to answer some remark addressed to me; and I noted, too, that her speech, despite a general undertone of depression, was yet not without a certain caustic, ironical humour. She was certainly a rather enigmatical young person, but very decidedly interesting.

When she had finished her repast she put aside the tray and, opening the shabby handbag, asked:

"Do you take any interest in Egyptian history? We are as mad as hatters on the subject. It seems to be a family complaint."

"I don't know much about it," I answered. "Medical studies are rather engrossing and don't leave much time for general reading."

"Naturally," she said. "You can't specialize in everything. But if you would care to see how the business of a literary jackal is conducted, I will show you my notes."

I accepted the offer eagerly (not, I fear, from pure enthusiasm for the subject), and she brought forth from the bag four blue-covered, quarto note-books, each dealing with one of the four dynasties from the fourteenth to the seventeenth. As I glanced through the neat and orderly extracts with which they were filled we discussed the intricacies of the peculiarly difficult and confused period that they covered, gradually lowering our voices as Mr. Bellingham's eyes closed and his head fell against the back of his chair. We had just reached the critical reign of Apepa II when a resounding snore broke in upon the studious quiet of the room and sent us both into a fit of silent laughter.

"Your conversation has done its work," she whispered as I stealthily picked up my hat, and together

we stole on tiptoe to the door, which she opened without a sound. Once outside, she suddenly dropped her bantering manner and said quite earnestly :

" How kind it was of you to come and see him tonight ! You have done him a world of good, and I am most grateful. Good night ! "

She shook hands with me really cordially, and I took my way down the creaking stairs in a whirl of happiness that I was quite at a loss to account for.

CHAPTER V

THE WATERCRESS-BED

BARNARD'S practice, like most others, was subject to those fluctuations that fill the struggling practitioner alternately with hope and despair. The work came in paroxysms with intervals of almost complete stagnation. One of these intermissions occurred on the day after my visit to Nevill's Court, with the result that by half-past eleven I found myself wondering what I should do with the remainder of the day. The better to consider this weighty problem, I strolled down to the Embankment, and, leaning on the parapet, contemplated the view across the river; the grey stone bridge with its perspective of arches, the picturesque pile of the shot-towers, and beyond, the shadowy shapes of the Abbey and St. Stephen's.

It was a pleasant scene, restful and quiet, with a touch of life and a hint of sober romance, when a barge swept down through the middle arch of the bridge with a lugsail hoisted to a jury mast and a white-aproned woman at the tiller. Dreamily I watched the craft creep by upon the moving tide, noted the low freeboard, almost awash, the careful helmswoman, and the dog on the forecastle yapping at the distant shore—and thought of Ruth Bellingham.

What was there about this strange girl that had made so deep an impression on me? That was the question that I propounded to myself, and not for the first time. Of the fact itself there was no doubt. But what was the explanation? Was it her unusual surroundings? Her occupation and rather recondite learning? Her

striking personality and exceptional good looks? Or her connection with the dramatic mystery of her lost uncle?

I concluded that it was all of these. Everything connected with her was unusual and arresting; but over and above these circumstances there was a certain sympathy and personal affinity of which I was strongly conscious and of which I dimly hoped that she, perhaps, was a little conscious, too. At any rate, I was deeply interested in her; of that there was no doubt whatever. Short as our acquaintance had been, she held a place in my thoughts that had never been held by any other woman.

From Ruth Bellingham my reflections passed by a natural transition to the curious story that her father had told me. It was a queer affair, that ill-drawn will, with the baffled lawyer protesting in the background. It almost seemed as if there must be something behind it all, especially when I remembered Mr. Hurst's very singular proposal. But it was out of *my* depth; it was a case for a lawyer, and to a lawyer it should go. This very night, I resolved, I would go to Thorndyke and give him the whole story as it had been told to me.

And then there happened one of those coincidences at which we all wonder when they occur, but which are so frequent as to have become enshrined in a proverb. For, even as I formed the resolution, I observed two men approaching from the direction of Blackfriars, and recognized in them my quondam teacher and his junior.

"I was just thinking about you," I said as they came up.

"Very flattering," replied Jervis; "but I thought you had to talk of the devil."

"Perhaps," suggested Thorndyke, "he was talking to himself. But why were you thinking of us, and what was the nature of your thoughts?"

"My thoughts had reference to the Bellingham case. I spent the whole of last evening at Nevill's Court."

"Ha! And are there any fresh developments?"

"Yes, by Jove! there are. Bellingham gave me a full and detailed description of the will; and a pretty document it seems to be."

"Did he give you permission to repeat the details to me?"

"Yes. I asked specifically if I might and he had no objection whatever."

"Good. We are lunching at Soho to-day as Polton has his hands full. Come with us and share our table and tell us your story as we go. Will that suit you?"

It suited me admirably in the present state of the practice, and I accepted the invitation with undissembled glee.

"Very well," said Thorndyke; "then let us walk slowly and finish with matters confidential before we plunge into the madding crowd."

We set forth at a leisurely pace along the broad pavement and I commenced my narration. As well as I could remember, I related the circumstances that had led up to the present disposition of the property and then proceeded to the actual provisions of the will; to all of which my two friends listened with rapt interest, Thorndyke occasionally stopping me to jot down a memorandum in his pocket-book.

"Why, the fellow must have been a stark lunatic!" Jervis exclaimed, when I had finished. "He seems to have laid himself out with the most devilish ingenuity to defeat his own ends."

"That is not an uncommon peculiarity with testators," Thorndyke remarked. "A direct and perfectly intelligible will is rather the exception. But we can hardly judge until we have seen the actual document. I suppose Bellingham hasn't a copy?"

"I don't know," said I; "but I will ask him."

"If he has one, I should like to look through it," said Thorndyke. "The provisions are very peculiar, and, as Jervis says, admirably calculated to defeat the testator's wishes if they have been correctly reported

And, apart from that, they have a remarkable bearing on the circumstances of the disappearance. I daresay you noticed that."

"I noticed that it is very much to Hurst's advantage that the body has not been found."

"Yes, of course. But there are some other points that are very significant. However, it would be premature to discuss the terms of the will until we have seen the actual document or a certified copy."

"If there is a copy extant," I said, "I will try to get hold of it. But Bellingham is terribly afraid of being suspected of a desire to get professional advice gratis."

"That," said Thorndyke, "is natural enough, and not discreditable. But you must overcome his scruples somehow. I expect you will be able to. You are a plausible young gentleman, as I remember of old, and you seem to have established yourself as quite the friend of the family."

"They are rather interesting people," I explained; "very cultivated and with a strong leaning towards archæology. It seems to be in the blood."

"Yes," said Thorndyke; "a family tendency, probably due to contact and common surroundings rather than heredity. So you like Godfrey Bellingham?"

"Yes. He is a trifle peppery and impulsive, but quite an agreeable, genial old buffer."

"And the daughter," said Jervis, "what is she like?"

"Oh, she is a learned lady; works up bibliographies and references at the Museum."

"Ah!" Jervis exclaimed, with deep disfavour, "I know the breed. Inky fingers; no chest to speak of; all side and spectacles."

I rose artlessly at the gross and palpable bait.

"You're quite wrong," I exclaimed indignantly, contrasting Jervis's hideous presentment with the comely original. "She is an exceedingly good-looking girl, and her manners all that a lady's should be. A little stiff, perhaps, but then I am only an acquaintance—almost a stranger."

"But," Jervis persisted, "what is she like, in appearance I mean. Short? fat? sandy? Give us intelligible details."

I made a rapid mental inventory, assisted by my recent cogitations.

"She is about five feet seven, slim but rather plump, very erect in carriage and graceful in movements; black hair, loosely parted in the middle and falling very prettily away from the forehead; pale, clear complexion, dark grey eyes, straight eyebrows, straight, well-shaped nose, short mouth, rather full; round chin —what the deuce are you grinning at, Jervis?" For my friend had suddenly unmasked his batteries and now threatened, like the Cheshire Cat, to dissolve into a mere abstraction of amusement.

"If there is a copy of that will, Thorndyke," he said, "we shall get it. I think you agree with me, reverend senior?"

"I have already said," was the reply, "that I put my trust in Berkeley. And now let us dismiss professional topics. This is our hostelry."

He pushed open an unpretentious glazed door and we followed him into the restaurant, whereof the atmosphere was pervaded by an appetizing meatiness mingled with less agreeable suggestions of the destructive distillation of fat.

It was some two hours later when I wished my friends adieu under the golden-leaved plane trees of King's Bench Walk.

"I won't ask you to come in now," said Thorndyke, "as we have some consultations this afternoon. But come in and see us soon; don't wait for that copy of the will."

"No," said Jervis. "Drop in in the evening when your work is done; unless, of course, there is more attractive society elsewhere—Oh, you needn't turn that colour, my dear child; we have all been young once; there is even a tradition that Thorndyke was young some time back in the pre-dynastic period."

"Don't take any notice of him, Berkeley," said Thorndyke. "The egg-shell is sticking to his head still. He'll know better when he is my age."

"Methuselah!" exclaimed Jervis; "I hope I shan't have to wait as long as that!"

Thorndyke smiled benevolently at his irrepressible junior, and, shaking my hand cordially, turned into the entry.

From the Temple I wended northward to the adjacent College of Surgeons, where I spent a couple of profitable hours examining the "pickles," and refreshing my memory on the subjects of pathology and anatomy; marvelling afresh (as every practical anatomist must marvel) at the incredibly perfect technique of the dissections, and inwardly paying a respectful tribute to the founder of the collection. At length, the warning of the clock, combined with an increasing craving for tea, drove me forth and bore me towards the scene of my, not very strenuous, labours. My mind was still occupied with the contents of the cases and the great glass jars, so that I found myself at the corner of Fetter Lane without a very clear idea of how I had got there. But at that point I was aroused from my reflections rather abruptly by a raucous voice in my ear.

"'Orrible discovery at Sidcup!"

I turned wrathfully—for a London street-boy's yell, let off at point-blank range, is, in effect, like the smack of an open hand—but the inscription on the staring yellow poster that was held up for my inspection changed my anger into curiosity.

"Horrible discovery in a watercress-bed!"

Now, let prigs deny it if they will, but there is something very attractive in a "horrible discovery." It hints at tragedy, at mystery, at romance. It promises to bring into our grey and commonplace life that element of the dramatic which is the salt that our existence is savoured withal. "In a watercress-bed," too! The rusticity of the background seemed to emphasize the horror of the discovery, whatever it might be.

I bought a copy of the paper, and, tucking it under my arm, hurried on to the surgery, promising myself a mental feast of watercress; but as I opened the door I found myself confronted by a corpulent woman of piebald and pimply aspect who saluted me with a deep groan. It was the lady from the coal shop in Fleur-de-Lys Court.

"Good evening, Mrs. Jablett," I said briskly; "not come about yourself, I hope."

"Yes, I have," she answered, rising and following me gloomily into the consulting-room; and then, when I had seated her in the patient's chair and myself at the writing-table, she continued: "It's my inside, you know, Doctor."

The statement lacked anatomical precision and merely excluded the domain of the skin specialist. I accordingly waited for enlightenment and speculated on the watercress-beds, while Mrs. Jablett regarded me expectantly with a dim and watery eye.

"Ah!" I said, at length; "it's your—your inside, is it, Mrs. Jablett?"

"Yus. *And* my 'ead," she added, with a voluminous sigh that filled the apartment with odorous reminiscences of "unsweetened."

"Your head aches, does it?"

"Somethink chronic!" said Mrs. Jablett. "Feels as if it was a-opening and a-shutting, a-opening and a-shutting, and when I sit down I feel as if I should *bust*."

This picturesque description of her sensations—not wholly inconsistent with her figure—gave the clue to Mrs. Jablett's sufferings. Resisting a frivolous impulse to reassure her as to the elasticity of the human integument, I considered her case in exhaustive detail, coasting delicately round the subject of "unsweetened," and finally sent her away, revived in spirits and grasping a bottle of Mist. Sodæ cum Bismutho from Barnard's big stock-jar. Then I went back to investigate the Horrible Discovery; but before I could open the paper,

another patient arrived (*Impetigo contagiosa*, this time, affecting the "wide and archéd-front sublime" of a juvenile Fetter Laner), and then yet another, and so on through the evening until, at last, I forgot the watercress-beds altogether. It was only when I had purified myself from the evening consultations with hot water and a nail-brush and was about to sit down to a frugal supper, that I remembered the newspaper and fetched it from the drawer of the consulting-room table, where it had been hastily thrust out of sight. I folded it into a convenient form, and, standing it upright against the water-jug, read the report at my ease as I supped.

There was plenty of it. Evidently the reporter had regarded it as a "scoop," and the editor had backed him up with ample space and hair-raising head-lines.

"HORRIBLE DISCOVERY IN A WATERCRESS-BED AT SIDCUP!"

"A startling discovery was made yesterday afternoon in the course of clearing out a watercress-bed near the erstwhile rural village of Sidcup in Kent; a discovery that will occasion many a disagreeable qualm to those persons who have been in the habit of regaling themselves with this refreshing esculent. But before proceeding to a description of the circumstances of the actual discovery or of the objects found—which, however, it may be stated at once, are nothing more or less than the fragments of a dismembered human body—it will be interesting to trace the remarkable chain of coincidences by virtue of which the discovery was made.

"The beds in question have been laid out in a small artificial lake fed by a tiny streamlet which forms one of the numerous tributaries of the River Cray. Its depth is greater than is usual in watercress-beds, otherwise the gruesome relics could never have been concealed beneath its surface, and the flow of water through it, though continuous, is slow. The tributary streamlet meanders through a succession of pasture meadows, in one of which the beds themselves are situated, and

here throughout most of the year the fleecy victims of the human carnivore carry on the industry of converting grass into mutton. Now it happened some years ago that the sheep frequenting these pastures became affected with the disease known as 'liver-rot'; and here we must make a short digression into the domain of pathology.

"'Liver-rot' is a disease of quite romantic antecedents. Its cause is a small, flat worm—the liver-fluke—which infests the liver and bile-ducts of the affected sheep.

"Now how does the worm get into the sheep's liver? That is where the romance comes in. Let us see.

"The cycle of transformations begins with the deposit of the eggs of the fluke in some shallow stream or ditch running through pasture lands. Now each egg has a sort of lid, which presently opens and lets out a minute, hairy creature who swims away in search of a particular kind of water-snail—the kind called by naturalists *Limnæa truncatula*. If he finds a snail, he bores his way into its flesh and soon begins to grow and wax fat. Then he brings forth a family—of tiny worms quite unlike himself, little creatures called *rediæ*, which soon give birth to families of young *rediæ*. So they may go on for several generations, but at last there comes a generation of *rediæ* which, instead of giving birth to fresh *rediæ*, produce families of totally different offspring; big-headed, long-tailed creatures like miniature tadpoles, called by the learned *cercariæ*. The *cercariæ* soon wriggle their way out of the body of the snail, and then complications arise: for it is the habit of this particular snail to leave the water occasionally and take a stroll in the fields. Thus the *cercariæ*, escaping from the snail, find themselves on the grass, whereupon they promptly drop their tails and stick themselves to the grass-blades. Then comes the unsuspecting sheep to take his frugal meal, and, cropping the grass, swallows it, *cercariæ* and all. But the latter, when they find themselves in the sheep's stomach, make their way

straight to the bile-ducts, up which they travel to the liver. Here, in a few weeks, they grow up into full-blown flukes and begin the important business of producing eggs.

"Such is the pathological romance of 'liver-rot'; and now what is its connection with this mysterious discovery? It is this. After the outbreak of 'liver-rot' above referred to, the ground landlord, a Mr. John Bellingham, instructed his solicitor to insert a clause in the lease of the beds directing that the latter should be periodically cleared and examined by an expert to make sure that they were free from the noxious water-snails. The last lease expired about two years ago, and since then the beds have been out of cultivation; but, for the safety of the adjacent pastures, it was considered necessary to make the customary periodical inspection, and it was in the course of cleaning the beds for this purpose that the present discovery was made.

"The operation began two days ago. A gang of three men proceeded systematically to grub up the plants and collect the multitudes of water-snails that they might be examined by the expert to see if any of the obnoxious species were present. They had cleared nearly half of the beds when, yesterday afternoon, one of the men working in the deepest part came upon some bones, the appearance of which excited his suspicion. Thereupon he called his mates, and they carefully picked away the plants piecemeal, a process that soon laid bare an unmistakable human hand lying on the mud amongst the roots. Fortunately they had the wisdom not to disturb the remains, but at once sent off a message to the police. Very soon, an inspector and a sergeant, accompanied by the divisional surgeon, arrived on the scene, and were able to view the remains lying as they had been found. And now another very strange fact came to light; for it was seen that the hand—a left one—lying on the mud was minus its third finger. This is regarded by the police as a very important fact as bearing on the question of identification,

seeing that the number of persons having the third finger of the left hand missing must be quite small. After a thorough examination on the spot, the bones were carefully collected and conveyed to the mortuary, where they now lie awaiting further inquiries.

"The divisional surgeon, Dr. Brandon, in an interview with our representative, made the following statements:

"'The bones found are those of the left arm of a middle-aged or elderly man about five feet eight inches in height. All the bones of the arm are present, including the scapula, or shoulder-blade, and the clavicle, or collar-bone, but the three bones of the third finger are missing.'

"'Is this a deformity or has the finger been cut off?' our correspondent asked.

"'The finger has been amputated,' was the reply. 'If it had been absent from birth, the corresponding hand bone, or metacarpal, would have been wanting or deformed, whereas it is present and quite normal.'

"'How long have the bones been in the water?' was the next question.

"'More than a year, I should say. They are quite clean; there is not a vestige of the soft structures left.'

"'Have you any theory as to how the arm came to be deposited where it was found?'

"'I should rather not answer that question,' was the guarded response.

"'One more question,' our correspondent urged. 'The ground landlord, Mr. John Bellingham; is not he the gentleman who disappeared so mysteriously some time ago?'

"'So I understand,' Dr. Brandon replied.

"'Can you tell me if Mr. Bellingham had lost the third finger of his left hand?'

"'I cannot say,' said Dr. Brandon; and he added with a smile, 'you had better ask the police.'

"That is how the matter stands at present. But we

understand that the police are making active inquiries for any missing man who has lost the third finger of his left hand, and if any of our readers know of such a person, they are earnestly requested to communicate at once, either with us or with the authorities.

"Also we believe that a systematic search is to be made for further remains."

I laid the newspaper down and fell into a train of reflection. It was certainly a most mysterious affair. The thought that had evidently come to the reporter's mind stole naturally into mine. Could these remains be those of John Bellingham? It was obviously possible, though I could not but see that the fact of the bones having been found on his land, while it undoubtedly furnished the suggestion, did not in any way add to its probability. The connection was accidental and in no wise relevant.

Then, too, there was the missing finger. No reference to any such injury or deformity had been made in the original report of the disappearance, though it could hardly have been overlooked. But it was useless to speculate without facts. I should be seeing Thorndyke in the course of the next few days, and, undoubtedly, if the discovery had any bearing upon the disappearance of John Bellingham, I should hear of it. With which reflection I rose from the table, and, adopting the advice contained in the spurious Johnsonian quotation, proceeded to "take a walk in Fleet Street" before settling down for the evening.

CHAPTER VI

SIDELIGHTS

THE association of coal with potatoes is one upon which I have frequently speculated, without arriving at any more satisfactory explanation than that both products are of the earth, earthy. Of the connection itself Barnard's practice furnished several instances besides Mrs. Jablett's establishment in Fleur-de-Lys Court, one of which was a dark and mysterious cavern a foot below the level of the street, that burrowed under an ancient house on the west side of Fetter Lane —a crinkly, timber house of the three-decker type that leaned back drunkenly from the road as if about to sit down in its own back yard.

Passing this repository of the associated products about ten o'clock in the morning, I perceived in the shadow of the cavern no less a person than Miss Oman. She saw me at the same moment, and beckoned peremptorily with a hand that held a large Spanish onion. I approached with a deferential smile.

"What a magnificent onion, Miss Oman! and how generous of you to offer it to me——"

"I wasn't offering it to you. But there! Isn't it just like a man——"

"Isn't what just like a man?" I interrupted. "If you mean the onion——"

"I don't!" she snapped; "and I wish you wouldn't talk such a parcel of nonsense. A grown man and a member of a serious profession, too! You ought to know better."

"I suppose I ought," I said reflectively. And she continued:

"I called in at the surgery just now."

"To see me?"

"What else should I come for? Do you suppose that I called to consult the bottle-boy?"

"Certainly not, Miss Oman. So you find the lady doctor no use, after all?"

Miss Oman gnashed her teeth at me (and very fine teeth they were, too).

"I called," she said majestically, "on behalf of Miss Bellingham."

My facetiousness evaporated instantly. "I hope Miss Bellingham is not ill," I said with a sudden anxiety that elicited a sardonic smile from Miss Oman.

"No," was the reply, "she is not ill, but she has cut her hand rather badly. It's her right hand, too, and she can't afford to lose the use of it, not being a great, hulking, lazy, lolloping man. So you had better go and put some stuff on it."

With this advice, Miss Oman whisked to the right-about and vanished into the depths of the cavern like the Witch of Wokey, while I hurried on to the surgery to provide myself with the necessary instruments and materials, and thence proceeded to Nevill's Court.

Miss Oman's juvenile maid-servant, who opened the door to me, stated the existing conditions with epigrammatic conciseness:

"Mr. Bellingham is hout, sir; but Miss Bellingham is hin."

Having thus delivered herself she retreated towards the kitchen and I ascended the stairs, at the head of which I found Miss Bellingham awaiting me with her right hand encased in what looked like a white boxing-glove.

"I am glad you have come," she said. "Phyllis—Miss Oman, you know—has kindly bound up my hand, but I should like you to see that it is all right."

We went into the sitting-room, where I laid out my

paraphernalia on the table while I inquired into the particulars of the accident.

"It is most unfortunate that it should have happened just now," she said, as I wrestled with one of those remarkable feminine knots that, while they seem to defy the utmost efforts of human ingenuity to untie, yet have a singular habit of untying themselves at inopportune moments.

"Why just now, in particular?" I asked.

"Because I have some specially important work to do. A very learned lady who is writing a historical book has commissioned me to collect all the literature relating to the Tell el Amarna letters—the cuneiform tablets, you know, of Amenhotep the Fourth."

"Well," I said soothingly, "I expect your hand will soon be well."

"Yes, but that won't do. The work has to be done immediately. I have to send in the completed notes not later than this day week, and it will be quite impossible. I am dreadfully disappointed."

By this time I had unwound the voluminous wrappings and exposed the injury—a deep gash in the palm that must have narrowly missed a good-sized artery. Obviously the hand would be useless for fully a week.

"I suppose," she said, "you couldn't patch it up so that I could write with it?"

I shook my head.

"No, Miss Bellingham. I shall have to put it on a splint. We can't run any risks with a deep wound like this."

"Then I shall have to give up the commission, and I don't know how my client will get the work done in the time. You see, I am pretty well up in the literature of Ancient Egypt; in fact, I was to receive special payment on that account. And it would have been such an interesting task, too. However, it can't be helped."

I proceeded methodically with the application of the

dressings, and meanwhile reflected. It was evident that she was deeply disappointed. Loss of work meant loss of money, and it needed but a glance at her rusty black dress to see that there was little margin for that. Possibly, too, there was some special need to be met. Her manner seemed almost to imply that there was. And at this point I had a brilliant idea.

"I'm not sure that it can't be helped," said I.

She looked at me inquiringly, and I continued: "I am going to make a proposition, and I shall ask you to consider it with an open mind."

"That sounds rather portentous," said she; "but I promise. What is it?"

"It is this: When I was a student I acquired the useful art of writing shorthand. I am not a lightning reporter, you understand, but I can take matter down from dictation at quite respectable speed."

"Yes."

"Well, I have several hours free every day—usually the whole of the afternoon up to six or half-past—and it occurs to me that if you were to go to the Museum in the mornings you could get out your books, look up passages (you could do that without using your right hand), and put in book-marks. Then I could come along in the afternoon and you could read out the selected passages to me, and I could take them down in shorthand. We should get through as much in a couple of hours as you could in a day using longhand."

"Oh, but how kind of you, Doctor Berkeley!" she exclaimed. "How very kind! Of course, I couldn't think of taking up all your leisure in that way; but I do appreciate your kindness very much."

I was rather chapfallen at this very definite refusal, but persisted feebly:

"I wish you would. It may seem rather cheek for a comparative stranger like me to make such a proposal to a lady; but if you'd been a man—in these special circumstances—I should have made it all the same, and you would have accepted as a matter of course."

"I doubt that. At any rate, I am not a man. I sometimes wish I were."

"Oh, I am sure you are much better as you are!" I exclaimed, with such earnestness that we both laughed. And at this moment Mr. Bellingham entered the room carrying several large and evidently brand-new books in a strap.

"Well, I'm sure!" he exclaimed genially; "here are pretty goings on. Doctor and patient giggling like a pair of schoolgirls! What's the joke?"

He thumped his parcel of books down on the table and listened smilingly while my unconscious witticism was expounded.

"The Doctor's quite right," he said. "You'll do as you are, chick; but the Lord knows what sort of man you would make. You take his advice and let well alone."

Finding him in this genial frame of mind, I ventured to explain my proposition to him and to enlist his support. He considered it with attentive approval, and when I had finished turned to his daughter.

"What is your objection, chick?" he asked.

"It would give Doctor Berkeley such a fearful lot of work," she answered.

"It would give him a fearful lot of pleasure," I said. "It would, really."

"Then why not?" said Mr. Bellingham. "We don't mind being under an obligation to the Doctor, do we?"

"Oh, it wasn't that!" she exclaimed hastily.

"Then take him at his word. He means it. It is a kind action and he'll like doing it, I'm sure. That's all right, Doctor; she accepts, don't you, chick?"

"Yes, if you say so, I do; and most thankfully."

She accompanied the acceptance with a gracious smile that was in itself a large repayment on account, and when we had made the necessary arrangements, I hurried away in a state of the most perfect satisfaction to finish my morning's work and order an early lunch.

When I called for her a couple of hours later I found her waiting in the garden with the shabby handbag, of which I relieved her, and we set forth together, watched jealously by Miss Oman, who had accompanied her to the gate.

As I walked up the court with this wonderful maid by my side I could hardly believe in my good fortune. By her presence and my own resulting happiness the mean surroundings became glorified and the commonest objects transfigured into things of beauty. What a delightful thoroughfare, for instance, was Fetter Lane, with its quaint charm and mediæval grace! I snuffed the cabbage-laden atmosphere and seemed to breathe the scent of the asphodel. Holborn was even as the Elysian Fields; the omnibus that bore us westward was a chariot of glory; and the people who swarmed verminously on the pavements bore the semblance of the children of light.

Love is a foolish thing judged by workaday standards, and the thoughts and actions of lovers foolish beyond measure. But the workaday standard is the wrong one, after all; for the utilitarian mind does but busy itself with the trivial and transitory interests of life, behind which looms the great and everlasting reality of the love of man and woman. There is more significance in a nightingale's song in the hush of a summer night than in all the wisdom of Solomon (who, by the way, was not without his little experiences of the tender passion).

The janitor in the little glass box by the entrance to the library inspected us and passed us on, with a silent benediction, to the lobby, whence (when I had handed my stick to a bald-headed demigod and received a talismanic disc in exchange) we entered the enormous rotunda of the reading-room.

I have often thought that, if some lethal vapour of highly preservative properties—such as formaldehyde, for instance—could be shed into the atmosphere of this apartment, the entire and complete collection of

books and bookworms would be well worth preserving, for the enlightenment of posterity, as a sort of anthropological appendix to the main collection of the Museum. For, surely, nowhere else in the world are so many strange and abnormal human beings gathered together in one place. And a curious question that must have occurred to many observers is: Whence do these singular creatures come, and whither do they go when the very distinct-faced clock (adjusted to literary eyesight) proclaims closing time? The tragic-faced gentleman, for instance, with the corkscrew ringlets that bob up and down like spiral springs as he walks? Or the short, elderly gentleman in the black cassock and bowler hat, who shatters your nerves by turning suddenly and revealing himself as a middle-aged woman? Whither do they go? One never sees them elsewhere. Do they steal away at closing time into the depths of the Museum and hide themselves until morning in sarcophagi or mummy cases? Or do they creep through spaces in the book-shelves and spend the night behind the volumes in a congenial atmosphere of leather and antique paper? Who can say? What I do know is that when Ruth Bellingham entered the reading-room she appeared in comparison with these like a creature of another order; even as the head of Antinous, which formerly stood (it has since been moved) amidst the portrait-busts of the Roman Emperors, seemed like the head of a god set in a portrait gallery of illustrious baboons.

"What have we got to do?" I asked when we had found a vacant seat. "Do you want to look up the catalogue?"

"No, I have the tickets in my bag. The books are waiting in the 'kept books' department."

I placed my hat on the leather-covered shelf, dropped her gloves into it—how delightfully intimate and companionable it seemed!—altered the numbers on the tickets, and then we proceeded together to the "kept books" desk to collect the volumes that contained the material for our day's work.

It was a blissful afternoon. Two and a half hours of happiness unalloyed did I spend at that shiny, leather-clad desk, guiding my nimble pen across the pages of the note-book. It introduced me to a new world—a world in which love and learning, sweet intimacy and crusted archæology, were mingled into the oddest, most whimsical, and most delicious confection that the mind of man can conceive. Hitherto, these recondite histories had been far beyond my ken. Of the wonderful heretic, Amenhotep the Fourth, I had barely heard—at the most he had been a mere name; the Hittites a mythical race of undetermined habitat; while cuneiform tablets had presented themselves to my mind merely as an uncouth kind of fossil biscuit suited to the digestion of a prehistoric ostrich.

Now all this was changed. As we sat with our chairs creaking together and she whispered the story of those stirring times into my receptive ear—talking is strictly forbidden in the reading-room—the disjointed fragments arranged themselves into a romance of supreme fascination. Egyptian, Babylonian, Aramæan, Hittite, Memphis, Babylon, Hamath, Megiddo—I swallowed them all thankfully, wrote them down and asked for more. Only once did I disgrace myself. An elderly clergyman of ascetic and acidulous aspect had passed us with a glance of evident disapproval, clearly setting us down as intruding philanderers; and when I contrasted the parson's probable conception of the whispered communications that were being poured into my ear so tenderly and confidentially with the dry reality, I chuckled aloud. But my fair task-mistress only paused, with her finger on the page, smilingly to rebuke me, and then went on with the dictation. She was certainly a Tartar for work.

It was a proud moment for me when, in response to my interrogative "Yes?" my companion said "That is all" and closed the book. We had extracted the pith and marrow of six considerable volumes in two hours and a half.

"You have been better than your word," she said. "It would have taken me two full days of really hard work to make the notes that you have written down since we commenced. I don't know how to thank you."

"There's no need to. I've enjoyed myself and polished up my shorthand. What is the next thing? We shall want some books for to-morrow, shan't we?"

"Yes. I have made out a list, so if you will come with me to the catalogue desk I will look out the numbers and ask you to write the tickets."

The selection of a fresh batch of authorities occupied us for another quarter of an hour, and then, having handed in the volumes that we had squeezed dry, we took our way out of the reading-room.

"Which way shall we go?" she asked as we passed out of the gate, where stood a massive policeman, like the guardian angel at the gate of Paradise (only, thank Heaven! he bore no flaming sword forbidding re-entry).

"We are going," I replied, "to Museum Street, where is a milkshop in which one can get an excellent cup of tea."

She looked as if she would have demurred, but eventually followed obediently, and we were soon seated side by side at a little marble-topped table, retracing the ground that we had covered in the afternoon's work and discussing various points of interest over a joint teapot.

"Have you been doing this sort of work long?" I asked as she handed me my second cup of tea.

"Professionally," she answered, "only about two years; since we broke up our home, in fact. But long before that I used to come to the Museum with my Uncle John—the one who disappeared, you know, in that dreadfully mysterious way—and help him to look up references. We were quite good friends, he and I."

"I suppose he was a very learned man?" I suggested.

"Yes, in a certain way; in the way of the better-class collector he was very learned indeed. He knew the contents of every museum in the world, in so far as they were connected with Egyptian antiquities, and had studied them specimen by specimen. Consequently, as Egyptology is largely a museum science, he was a learned Egyptologist. But his real interest was in things rather than events. Of course, he knew a great deal—a very great deal—about Egyptian history, but still he was, before all, a collector."

"And what will happen to his collection if he is really dead?"

"The greater part of it goes to the British Museum by his will, and the remainder he has left to his solicitor, Mr. Jellicoe."

"To Mr. Jellicoe! Why, what will Mr. Jellicoe do with Egyptian antiquities?"

"Oh, he is an Egyptologist, too, and quite an enthusiast. He has a really fine collection of scarabs and other small objects such as it is possible to keep in a private house. I have always thought that it was his enthusiasm for everything Egyptian that brought him and my uncle together on terms of such intimacy; though I believe he is an excellent lawyer, and he is certainly a very discreet, cautious man."

"Is he? I shouldn't have thought so, judging by your uncle's will."

"Oh, but that was not Mr. Jellicoe's fault. He assures us that he entreated my uncle to let him draw up a fresh document with more reasonable provisions. But he says Uncle John was immovable; and he really *was* a rather obstinate man. Mr. Jellicoe repudiates any responsibility in the matter. He washes his hands of the whole affair, and says that it is the will of a lunatic. And so it is. I was glancing through it only a night or two ago, and really I cannot conceive how a sane man could have written such nonsense."

"You have a copy, then?" I asked eagerly, remembering Thorndyke's parting instructions.

"Yes. Would you like to see it? I know my father has told you about it, and it is worth reading as a curiosity of perverseness."

"I should very much like to show it to my friend, Doctor Thorndyke," I replied. "He said that he would be interested to read it and learn the exact provisions; and it might be well to let him, and hear what he has to say about it."

"I see no objection," she rejoined; "but you know what my father is: his horror, I mean, of what he calls 'cadging for advice gratis.'"

"Oh, but he need have no scruples on that score. Doctor Thorndyke wants to see the will because the case interests him. He is an enthusiast, you know, and he put the request as a personal favour to himself."

"That is very nice and delicate of him, and I will explain the position to my father. If he is willing for Doctor Thorndyke to see the copy, I will send or bring it over this evening. Have we finished?"

I regretfully admitted that we had, and, when I had paid the modest reckoning, we sallied forth, turning back with one accord into Great Russell Street to avoid the noise and bustle of the larger thoroughfares.

"What sort of man was your uncle?" I asked presently, as we walked along the quiet, dignified street. And then I added hastily: "I hope you don't think me inquisitive, but, to my mind, he presents himself as a kind of mysterious abstraction; the unknown quantity of a legal problem."

"My Uncle John," she answered reflectively, "was a very peculiar man, rather obstinate, very self-willed, what people call 'masterful,' and decidedly wrong-headed and unreasonable."

"That is certainly the impression that the terms of his will convey," I said.

"Yes; and not the will only. There was the absurd allowance that he made my father. That was a ridicu-

lous arrangement, and very unfair, too. He ought to have divided up the property as my grandfather intended. And yet he was by no means ungenerous, only he would have his own way, and his own way was very commonly the wrong way.

"I remember," she continued, after a short pause, "a very odd instance of his wrong-headedness and obstinacy. It was a small matter, but very typical of him. He had in his collection a beautiful little ring of the eighteenth dynasty. It was said to have belonged to Queen Ti, the mother of our friend Amenhotep the Fourth; but I don't think that could have been so, because the device on it was the Eye of Osiris, and Ti, as you know, was an Aten-worshipper. However, it was a very charming ring, and Uncle John, who had a queer sort of devotion to the mystical Eye of Osiris, commissioned a very clever goldsmith to make two exact copies of it, one for himself and one for me. The goldsmith naturally wanted to take the measurements of our fingers, but this Uncle John would not hear of; the rings were to be exact copies, and an exact copy must be the same size as the original. You can imagine the result; my ring was so loose that I couldn't keep it on my finger, and Uncle John's was so tight that, though he did manage to get it on, he was never able to get it off again. And it was only the circumstance that his left hand was decidedly smaller than his right that made it possible for him to wear it at all."

"So you never wore your copy?"

"No. I wanted to have it altered to make it fit, but he objected strongly; so I put it away, and have it in a box still."

"He must have been an extraordinarily pig-headed old fellow," I remarked.

"Yes; he was very tenacious. He annoyed my father a good deal, too, by making unnecessary alterations in the house in Queen Square when he fitted up his museum. We have a certain sentiment with regard

to that house. Our people have lived in it ever since it was built, when the square was first laid out in the reign of Queen Anne, after whom the square was named. It is a dear old house. Would you like to see it ? We are quite near it now."

I assented eagerly. If it had been a coal-shed or a fried-fish shop I would still have visited it with pleasure, for the sake of prolonging our walk ; but I was also really interested in this old house as a part of the background of the mystery of the vanished John Bellingham.

We crossed into Cosmo Place, with its quaint row of the, now rare, cannon-shaped iron posts, and passing through stood for a few moments looking into the peaceful, stately old square. A party of boys disported themselves noisily on the range of stone posts that form a bodyguard round the ancient, lamp-surmounted pump, but otherwise the place was wrapped in dignified repose suited to its age and station. And very pleasant it looked on this summer afternoon, with the sunlight gilding the foliage of its wide-spreading plane trees and lighting up the warm-toned brick of the house-fronts. We walked slowly down the shady west side, near the middle of which my companion halted.

" This is the house," she said. " It looks gloomy and forsaken now ; but it must have been a delightful house in the days when my ancestors could look out of the windows through the open end of the square across the fields and meadows to the heights of Hampstead and Highgate."

She stood at the edge of the pavement looking up with a curious wistfulness at the old house ; a very pathetic figure, I thought, with her handsome face and proud carriage, her threadbare dress and shabby gloves, standing at the threshold of the home that had been her family's for generations, that should now have been hers, and that was shortly to pass away into the hands of strangers.

I, too, looked up at it with a strange interest, impressed by something gloomy and forbidding in its aspect. The windows were shuttered from basement to attic, and no sign of life was visible. Silent, neglected, desolate, it breathed an air of tragedy. It seemed to mourn in sackcloth and ashes for its lost master. The massive door within the splendid carven portico was crusted with grime, and seemed to have passed out of use as completely as the ancient lamp-irons or the rusted extinguishers wherein the footmen were wont to quench their torches when some Bellingham dame was borne up the steps in her gilded chair, in the days of good Queen Anne.

It was in a somewhat sobered frame of mind that we presently turned away and started homeward by way of Great Ormond Street. My companion was deeply thoughtful, relapsing for a while into that sombreness of manner that had so impressed me when I first met her. Nor was I without a certain sympathetic pensiveness; as if, from the great, silent house, the spirit of the vanished man had issued forth to bear us company.

But still it was a delightful walk, and I was sorry when at last we arrived at the entrance to Nevill's Court, and Miss Bellingham halted and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said; "and many, many thanks for your invaluable help. Shall I take the bag?"

"If you want it. But I must take out the note-books."

"Why must you take them?" she asked.

"Why, haven't I got to copy the notes out into long-hand?"

An expression of utter consternation spread over her face; in fact, she was so completely taken aback that she forgot to release my hand.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed. "How idiotic of me! But it is impossible, Doctor Berkeley! It will take you hours!"

"It is perfectly possible, and it is going to be done; otherwise the notes would be useless. Do you want the bag?"

"No, of course not. But I am positively appalled. Hadn't you better give up the idea?"

"And is this the end of our collaboration?" I exclaimed tragically, giving her hand a final squeeze (whereby she became suddenly aware of its position, and withdrew it rather hastily). "Would you throw away a whole afternoon's work? I won't, certainly; so, good-bye until to-morrow. I shall turn up in the reading-room as early as I can. You had better take the tickets. Oh, and you won't forget about the copy of the will for Doctor Thorndyke, will you?"

"No; if my father agrees, you shall have it this evening."

She took the tickets from me, and, thanking me yet again, retired into the court.

CHAPTER VII

JOHN BELLINGHAM'S WILL

THE task upon which I had embarked so lightheartedly, when considered in cold blood, did certainly appear, as Miss Bellingham had said, rather appalling. The result of two and a half hours' pretty steady work at an average speed of nearly a hundred words a minute, would take some time to transcribe into longhand; and if the notes were to be delivered punctually on the morrow, the sooner I got to work the better.

Recognizing this truth, I lost no time, but, within five minutes of my arrival at the surgery, was seated at the writing-table with my copy before me busily converting the sprawling, inexpressive characters into good, legible round-hand.

The occupation was by no means unpleasant, apart from the fact that it was a labour of love; for the sentences, as I picked them up, were fragrant with reminiscences of the gracious whisper in which they had first come to me. And then the matter itself was full of interest. I was gaining a fresh outlook on life, was crossing the threshold of a new world (which was *her* world); and so the occasional interruptions from patients, while they gave me intervals of enforced rest, were far from welcome.

The evening wore on without any sign from Nevill's Court, and I began to fear that Mr. Bellingham's scruples had proved insurmountable. Not, I am afraid, that I was so much concerned for the copy of the will as for the possibility of a visit, no matter howsoever brief, from my fair employer; and when, on the stroke

of half-past seven, the surgery door flew open with startling abruptness, my fears were allayed and my hopes shattered simultaneously. For it was Miss Oman who stalked in, holding out a blue foolscap envelope with a warlike air as if it were an ultimatum.

"I've brought you this from Mr. Bellingham," she said. "There's a note inside."

"May I read the note, Miss Oman?" I asked.

"Bless the man!" she exclaimed. "What else would you do with it? Isn't that what I brought it for?"

I supposed it was; and, thanking her for her gracious permission, I glanced through the note—a few lines authorizing me to show the copy of the will to Dr. Thorndyke. When I looked up from the paper I found her eyes fixed on me with an expression critical and rather disapproving.

"You seem to be making yourself mighty agreeable in a certain quarter," she remarked.

"I make myself universally agreeable. It is my nature to."

"Ha!" she snorted.

"Don't you find me rather agreeable?" I asked.

"Oily," said Miss Oman. And then, with a sour smile at the open note-books, she remarked:

"You've got some work to do now; quite a change for you."

"A delightful change, Miss Oman. 'For Satan findeth'—but no doubt you are acquainted with the philosophical works of Dr. Watts?"

"If you are referring to 'idle hands,'" she replied, "I'll give you a bit of advice, Don't you keep that hand idle any longer than is really necessary. I have my suspicions about that splint—oh, you know what I mean," and before I had time to reply, she had taken advantage of the entrance of a couple of patients to whisk out of the surgery with the abruptness that had distinguished her arrival.

The evening consultations were considered to be

over by half-past eight; at which time Adolphus was wont, with exemplary punctuality, to close the outer door of the surgery. To-night he was not less prompt than usual; and having performed this, his last daily office, and turned down the surgery gas, he reported the fact and took his departure.

As his retreating footsteps died away and the slamming of the outer door announced his final disappearance, I sat up and stretched myself. The envelope containing the copy of the will lay on the table, and I considered it thoughtfully. It ought to be conveyed to Thorndyke with as little delay as possible, and, as it certainly could not be trusted out of my hands, it ought to be conveyed by me.

I looked at the note-books. Nearly two hours' work had made a considerable impression on the matter that I had to transcribe, but still, a great deal of the task yet remained to be done. However, I reflected, I could put in a couple of hours more before going to bed and there would be an hour or two to spare in the morning. Finally I locked the note-books, open as they were, in the writing-table drawer, and slipping the envelope into my pocket, set out for the Temple.

The soft chime of the Treasury clock was telling out, in confidential tones, the third quarter as I wrapped with my stick on the forbidding "oak" of my friends' chambers. There was no response, nor had I perceived any gleam of light from the windows as I approached, and I was considering the advisability of trying the laboratory on the next floor, when footsteps on the stone stairs and familiar voices gladdened my ear.

"Hallo, Berkeley!" said Thorndyke, "do we find you waiting like a Peri at the gates of Paradise? Polton is upstairs, you know, tinkering at one of his inventions. If you ever find the nest empty, you had better go up and bang at the laboratory door. He's always there in the evenings."

"I haven't been waiting long," said I, "and I was just thinking of rousing him up when you came."

"That was right," said Thorndyke, turning up the gas. "And what news do you bring? Do I see a blue envelope sticking out of your pocket?"

"You do."

"Is it a copy of the will?" he asked.

I answered "yes," and added that I had full permission to show it to him.

"What did I tell you?" exclaimed Jervis. "Didn't I say that he would get the copy for us if it existed?"

"We admit the excellence of your prognosis," said Thorndyke, "but there is no need to be boastful. Have you read through the document, Berkeley?"

"No, I haven't taken it out of the envelope."

"Then it will be equally new to us all, and we shall see if it tallies with your description."

He placed three easy chairs at a convenient distance from the light, and Jervis, watching him with a smile, remarked:

"Now Thorndyke is going to enjoy himself. To him, a perfectly unintelligible will is a thing of beauty and a joy for ever; especially if associated with some kind of recondite knavery."

"I don't know," said I, "that this will is particularly unintelligible. The mischief seems to be that it is rather too intelligible. However, here it is," and I handed the envelope to Thorndyke.

"I suppose that we can depend on this copy," said the latter, as he drew out the document and glanced at it. "Oh, yes," he added, "I see it is copied by Godfrey Bellingham, compared with the original and certified correct. In that case I will get you to read it out slowly, Jervis, and I will make a rough copy to keep for reference. Let us make ourselves comfortable and light our pipes before we begin."

He provided himself with a writing-pad, and, when we had seated ourselves and got our pipes well alight, Jervis opened the document, and with a premonitory "hem!" commenced the reading.

"In the name of God Amen. This is the last will and

testament of me John Bellingham of number 141 Queen Square in the parish of St. George Bloomsbury London in the county of Middlesex Gentleman made this twenty first day of September in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ninety-two.

"1. I give and bequeath unto Arthur Jellicoe of number 184 New Square Lincoln's Inn London in the county of Middlesex Attorney-at-law the whole of my collection of seals and scarabs and those my cabinets marked B, C, and D together with the contents thereof and the sum of two thousand pounds sterling free of legacy duty.

"Unto the Trustees of the British Museum the residue of my collection of antiquities.

"Unto my cousin George Hurst of The Poplars Eltham in the county of Kent the sum of five thousand pounds free of legacy duty and unto my brother Godfrey Bellingham or if he should die before the occurrence of my death unto his daughter Ruth Bellingham the residue of my estate and effects real and personal subject to the conditions set forth hereinafter namely:

"2. That my body shall be deposited with those of my ancestors in the churchyard appertaining to the church and parish of St. George the Martyr or if that shall not be possible, in some other churchyard, cemetery, burial ground, church, chapel or other authorized place for the reception of the bodies of the dead situate within or appertaining to the parishes of St. Andrew above the Bars and St. George the Martyr or St. George Bloomsbury and St. Giles in the Fields But if the conditions in this clause be not carried out then

"3. I give and devise the said residue of my estate and effects unto my cousin George Hurst aforesaid and I hereby revoke all wills and codicils made by me at any time heretofore and I appoint Arthur Jellicoe aforesaid to be the executor of this my will jointly with the principal beneficiary and residuary legatee that is to say with the aforesaid Godfrey Bellingham if the conditions set forth hereinbefore in clause 2 shall be

duly carried out but with the aforesaid George Hurst if the said conditions in the said clause 2 be not carried out.

"JOHN BELLINGHAM.

"Signed by the said testator John Bellingham in the presence of us present at the same time who at his request and in his presence and in the presence of each other have subscribed our names as witnesses.

"Frederick Wilton, 16 Medford Road, London, N., clerk.

"James Barker, 32 Wadbury Crescent, London, S.W., clerk."

"Well," said Jervis, laying down the document as Thorndyke detached the last sheet from his writing-pad, "I have met with a good many idiotic wills, but this one can give them all points. I don't see how it is ever going to be administered. One of the two executors is a mere abstraction—a sort of algebraical problem with no answer."

"I think that difficulty could be overcome," said Thorndyke.

"I don't see how," retorted Jervis. "If the body is deposited in a certain place, A is the executor; if it is somewhere else, B is the executor. But, as you cannot produce the body, and no one has the least idea where it is, it is impossible to prove either that it is or that it is not in any specified place."

"You are magnifying the difficulty, Jervis," said Thorndyke. "The body may, of course, be anywhere in the entire world, but the place where it is lying is either inside or outside the general boundary of these two parishes. If it has been deposited within the boundary of those two parishes, the fact must be ascertainable by examining the burial certificates issued since the date when the missing man was last seen alive and by consulting the registers of those specified places of burial. I think that if no record can be found of any such interment within the boundary of those two

parishes, that fact will be taken by the Court as proof that no such interment has taken place, and that therefore the body must have been deposited elsewhere. Such a decision would constitute George Hurst the co-executor and residuary legatee."

"That is cheerful for your friends, Berkeley," Jervis remarked, "for we may take it as pretty certain that the body has not been deposited in any of the places named."

"Yes," I agreed gloomily, "I'm afraid there is very little doubt of that. But what an ass the fellow must have been to make such a to-do about his beastly carcass! What the deuce could it have mattered to him where it was dumped, when he had done with it?"

Thorndyke chuckled softly. "Thus the irreverent youth of to-day," said he. "But yours is hardly a fair comment, Berkeley. Our training makes us materialists, and puts us a little out of sympathy with those in whom primitive beliefs and emotions survive. A worthy priest who came to look at our dissecting-room expressed surprise to me that students, thus constantly in the presence of relics of mortality, should be able to think of anything but the resurrection and the life hereafter. He was a bad psychologist. There is nothing so dead as a dissecting-room 'subject'; and the contemplation of the human body in the process of being quietly taken to pieces—being resolved into its structural units like a worn-out clock or an old engine in the scrapper's yard—is certainly not conducive to a vivid realization of the doctrine of the resurrection."

"No; but this absurd anxiety to be buried in some particular place has nothing to do with religious belief; it is mere silly sentiment."

"It is sentiment, I admit," said Thorndyke, "but I wouldn't call it silly. The feeling is so widespread in time and space that we must look on it with respect as something inherent in human nature. Think—as doubtless John Bellingham did—of the ancient Egyp-

tians, whose chief aspiration was that of everlasting repose for the dead. See the trouble they took to achieve it. Think of the Great Pyramid, or that of Amenemhat the Fourth with its labyrinth of false passages and its sealed and hidden sepulchral chamber. Think of Jacob, borne after death all those hundreds of weary miles in order that he might sleep with his fathers, and then remember Shakespeare and his solemn adjuration to posterity to let him rest undisturbed in his grave. No, Berkeley, it is not a silly sentiment. I am as indifferent as you as to what becomes of my body 'when I have done with it,' to use your irreverent phrase; but I recognize the solicitude that some other men display on the subject as a natural feeling that has to be taken seriously."

"But even so," I said, "if this man had a hankering for a freehold residence in some particular bone-yard, he might have gone about the business in a more reasonable way."

"There I am entirely with you," Thorndyke replied. "It is the absurd way in which this provision is worded that not only creates all the trouble but also makes the whole document so curiously significant in view of the testator's disappearance."

"How significant?" Jervis demanded eagerly.

"Let us consider the provisions of the will point by point," said Thorndyke; "and first note that the testator commanded the services of a very capable lawyer."

"But Mr. Jellicoe disapproved of the will," said I; "in fact, he protested strongly against the form of it."

"We will bear that in mind, too," Thorndyke replied. "And now with reference to what we may call the contentious clauses: the first thing that strikes us is their preposterous injustice. Godfrey's inheritance is made conditional on a particular disposal of the testator's body. But this is a matter not necessarily under Godfrey's control. The testator might

have been lost at sea, or killed in a fire or explosion, or have died abroad and been buried where his grave could not be identified. There are numerous probable contingencies besides the improbable one that has happened, that might prevent the body from being recovered.

"But even if the body had been recovered, there is another difficulty. The places of burial in the parishes named have all been closed for many years. It would be impossible to reopen any of them without a special faculty, and I doubt whether such a faculty would be granted. Possibly cremation might meet the difficulty, but even that is doubtful; and, in any case, the matter would not be in the control of Godfrey Bellingham. Yet, if the required interment should prove impossible, he is to be deprived of his legacy."

"It is a monstrous and absurd injustice," I exclaimed.

"It is," Thorndyke agreed; "but this is nothing to the absurdity that comes to light when we consider clauses two and three in detail. Observe that the testator presumably wished to be buried in a certain place; also he wished that his brother should benefit under the will. Let us take the first point and see how he has set about securing the accomplishment of what he desired. Now, if we read clauses two and three carefully, we shall see that he has rendered it virtually impossible that his wishes can be carried out. He desires to be buried in a certain place and makes Godfrey responsible for his being so buried. But he gives Godfrey no power or authority to carry out the provision, and places insuperable obstacles in his way. For until Godfrey is an executor, he has no power or authority to carry out the provisions: and until the provisions are carried out, he does not become an executor."

"It is a preposterous muddle," exclaimed Jervis.

"Yes, but that is not the worst of it," Thorndyke continued. "The moment John Bellingham dies, his

dead body has come into existence; and it is 'deposited' for the time being, wherever he happens to have died. But unless he should happen to have died in one of the places of burial mentioned—which is in the highest degree unlikely—his body will be, for the time being, 'deposited' in some place other than those specified. In that case clause two is—for the time being—not complied with, and consequently George Hurst becomes, automatically, the co-executor.

"But will George Hurst carry out the provisions of clause two? Probably not. Why should he? The will contains no instructions to that effect. It throws the whole duty on Godfrey. On the other hand, if he should carry out clause two, what happens? He ceases to be an executor and he loses a legacy of some seventy thousand pounds. We may be pretty certain that he will do nothing of the kind. So that, on considering the two clauses, we see that the wishes of the testator could only be carried out in the unlikely event of his dying in one of the burial-places mentioned, or his body being conveyed immediately after death to a public mortuary in one of the said parishes. In any other event, it is virtually certain that he will be buried in some place other than that which he desired, and that his brother will be left absolutely without provision or recognition."

"John Bellingham could never have intended that," I said.

"Clearly not," agreed Thorndyke; "the provisions of the will furnish internal evidence that he did not. You note that he bequeathed five thousand pounds to George Hurst, in the event of clause two being carried out; but he has made no bequest to his brother in the event of its not being carried out. Obviously, he had not entertained the possibility of this contingency at all. He assumed, as a matter of course, that the conditions of clause two would be fulfilled, and regarded the conditions themselves as a mere formality."

"But," Jervis objected, "Jellicoe must have seen

the danger of a miscarriage and pointed it out to his client."

"Exactly," said Thorndyke. "There is the mystery. We understand that he objected strenuously, and that John Bellingham was obdurate. Now it is perfectly understandable that a man should adhere obstinately to the most stupid and perverse disposition of his property; but that a man should persist in retaining a particular form of words after it has been proved to him that the use of such form will almost certainly result in the defeat of his own wishes; that, I say, is a mystery that calls for very careful consideration."

"If Jellicoe had been an interested party," said Jervis, "one would have suspected him of lying low. But the form of clause two doesn't affect him at all."

"No," said Thorndyke; "the person who stands to profit by the muddle is George Hurst. But we understand that he was unacquainted with the terms of the will, and there is certainly nothing to suggest that he is in any way responsible for it."

"The practical question is," said I, "what is going to happen? and what can be done for the Bellinghams?"

"The probability is," Thorndyke replied, "that the next move will be made by Hurst. He is the party immediately interested. He will probably apply to the Court for permission to presume death and administer the will."

"And what will the Court do?"

Thorndyke smiled dryly. "Now you are asking a very pretty conundrum. The decisions of Courts depend on idiosyncrasies of temperament that no one can foresee. But one may say that a Court does not lightly grant permission to presume death. There will be a rigorous inquiry—and a decidedly unpleasant one, I suspect—and the evidence will be reviewed by the judge with a strong predisposition to regard the tes-

tator as being still alive. On the other hand, the known facts point very distinctly to the probability that he is dead; and, if the will were less complicated and all the interested parties were unanimous in supporting the application, I don't see why it might not be granted. But it will clearly be to the interest of Godfrey to oppose the application, unless he can show that the conditions of clause two have been complied with—which it is virtually certain that he can not; and he may be able to bring forward reasons for believing John to be still alive. But even if he is unable to do this, inasmuch as it is pretty clear that he was intended to be the chief beneficiary, his opposition is likely to have considerable weight with the Court."

"Oh, is it?" I exclaimed eagerly. "Then that accounts for a very peculiar proceeding on the part of Hurst. I have stupidly forgotten to tell you about it. He has been trying to come to a private agreement with Godfrey Bellingham."

"Indeed!" said Thorndyke. "What sort of agreement?"

"His proposal was this: that Godfrey should support him and Jellicoe in an application to the Court for permission to presume death and to administer the will, and that, if it was successful, Hurst should pay him four hundred pounds a year for life: the arrangement to hold good in all eventualities."

"By which he means?"

"That if the body should be discovered at any future time, so that the conditions of clause two could be carried out, Hurst should still retain the property and continue to pay Godfrey the four hundred a year for life."

"Hey ho!" exclaimed Thorndyke; "that is a queer proposal; a very queer proposal indeed."

"Not to say fishy," added Jervis. "I don't fancy the Court would look with approval on that little arrangement."

"The law does not look with much favour on any

little arrangements that aim at getting behind the provisions of a will," Thorndyke replied; "though there would be nothing to complain of in this proposal if it were not for the reference to 'all eventualities.' If a will is hopelessly impracticable, it is not unreasonable or improper for the various beneficiaries to make such private arrangements among themselves as may seem necessary to avoid useless litigation and delay in administering the will. If, for instance, Hurst had proposed to pay four hundred a year to Godfrey so long as the body remained undiscovered on condition that, in the event of its discovery, Godfrey should pay him a like sum for life, there would have been nothing to comment upon. It would have been an ordinary sporting chance. But the reference to 'all eventualities' is an entirely different matter. Of course, it may be mere greediness, but all the same, it suggests some very curious reflections."

"Yes, it does," said Jervis. "I wonder if he has any reason to expect that the body will be found? Of course it doesn't follow that he has. He may be merely taking the opportunity offered by the other man's poverty to make sure of the bulk of the property whatever happens. But it is uncommonly sharp practice, to say the least."

"Do I understand that Godfrey declined the proposal?" Thorndyke asked.

"Yes, he did, very emphatically; and I fancy that the two gentlemen proceeded to exchange opinions on the circumstances of the disappearance with more frankness than delicacy."

"Ah," said Thorndyke, "that is a pity. If the case comes into Court, there is bound to be a good deal of unpleasant discussion and still more unpleasant comment in the newspapers. But if the parties themselves begin to express suspicions of one another there is no telling where the matter will end."

"No, by Jove!" said Jervis. "If they begin flinging accusations of murder about, the fat will be in

the fire with a vengeance. That way lies the Old Bailey."

"We must try to prevent them from making an unnecessary scandal," said Thorndyke. "It may be that an exposure will be unavoidable, and that must be ascertained in advance. But to return to your question, Berkeley, as to what is to be done. Hurst will probably make some move pretty soon. Do you know if Jellicoe will act with him?"

"No, he won't. He declines to take any steps without Godfrey's assent—at least, that is what he says at present. His attitude is one of correct neutrality."

"That is satisfactory, so far," said Thorndyke, "though he may alter his tone when the case comes into Court. From what you said just now I gathered that Jellicoe would prefer to have the will administered and be quit of the whole business; which is natural enough, especially as he benefits under the will to the extent of two thousand pounds and a valuable collection. Consequently, we may fairly assume that, even if he maintains an apparent neutrality, his influence will be exerted in favour of Hurst rather than of Bellingham; from which it follows that Bellingham ought certainly to be properly advised, and, when the case goes into Court, properly represented."

"He can't afford either the one or the other," said I. "He's as poor as an insolvent church mouse and as proud as the devil. He wouldn't accept professional aid that he couldn't pay for."

"H'm," grunted Thorndyke, "that's awkward. But we can't allow the case to go 'by default,' so to speak—to fail for the mere lack of technical assistance. Besides, it is one of the most interesting cases that I have ever met with, and I am not going to see it bungled. He couldn't object to a little general advice in a friendly, informal way—*amicus curiæ*, as old Brodribb is so fond of saying; and there is nothing to prevent us from pushing forward the preliminary inquiries."

"Of what nature would they be?"

"Well, to begin with, we have to satisfy ourselves that the conditions of clause two have not been complied with: that John Bellingham has not been buried within the parish boundaries mentioned. Of course he has not, but we must not take anything for granted. Then we have to satisfy ourselves that he is not still alive and accessible. It is perfectly possible that he is, after all, and it is our business to trace him, if he is still in the land of the living. Jervis and I can carry out these investigations without saying anything to Bellingham; my learned brother will look through the register of burials—not forgetting the cremations—in the metropolitan area, and I will take the other matter in hand."

"You really think that John Bellingham may still be alive?" said I.

"Since his body has not been found, it is obviously a possibility. I think it in the highest degree improbable, but the improbable has to be investigated before it can be excluded."

"It sounds like a rather hopeless quest," I remarked. "How do you propose to begin?"

"I think of beginning at the British Museum. The people there may be able to throw some light on his movements. I know that there are some important excavations in progress at Heliopolis—in fact, the Director of the Egyptian Department is out there at the present moment; and Doctor Norbury, who is taking his place temporarily, is an old friend of John Bellingham's. I shall call on him and try to discover if there is anything that might have induced Bellingham suddenly to go abroad—to Heliopolis, for instance. Also, he may be able to tell me what it was that took the missing man to Paris on that last, rather mysterious journey. That might turn out to be an important clue. And meanwhile, Berkeley, you must endeavour tactfully to reconcile your friend to the idea of letting us give an eye to the case. Make it clear to him that

I am doing this entirely for the enlargement of my own knowledge."

"But won't you have to be instructed by a solicitor?" I asked.

"Yes, of course, nominally; but only as a matter of etiquette. We shall do all the actual work. Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking of the solicitor's costs, and I was going to mention that I have a little money of my own——"

"Then keep it, my dear fellow. You'll want it when you go into practice. There will be no difficulty about the solicitor; I shall ask one of my friends to act nominally as a personal favour to me—Marchmont would take the case for us, Jervis, I am sure."

"Yes," said Jervis. "Or old Brodribb, if we put it to him *amicus curiæ*."

"It is excessively kind of both of you to take this benevolent interest in the case of my friends," I said; "and it is to be hoped that they won't be foolishly proud and stiff-necked about it. It's rather the way with poor gentlefolk."

"I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Jervis. "I have a most brilliant idea. You shall give us a little supper at your rooms and invite the Bellinghams to meet us. Then you and I will attack the old gentleman, and Thorndyke shall exercise his persuasive powers on the lady. These chronic and incurable old bachelors, you know, are quite irresistible."

"You observe that my respected junior condemns me to lifelong celibacy," Thorndyke remarked. "But," he added, "his suggestion is quite a good one. Of course, we mustn't put any sort of pressure on Bellingham to employ us—for that is what it amounts to, even if we accept no payment—but a friendly talk over the supper-table would enable us to put the matter delicately and yet convincingly."

"Yes," said I, "I see that, and I like the idea immensely. But it won't be possible for several days,

because I've got a job that takes up all my spare time —and that I ought to be at work on now," I added, with a sudden qualm at the way in which I had forgotten the passage of time in the interest of Thorndyke's analysis.

My two friends looked at me inquiringly, and I felt it necessary to explain about the injured hand and the Tell el Amarna tablets; which I accordingly did, rather shyly and with a nervous eye upon Jervis. The slow grin, however, for which I was watching, never came; on the contrary, he not only heard me through quite gravely, but when I had finished said with some warmth, and using my old hospital pet name:

"I'll say one thing for you, Polly; you're a good chum, and you always were. I hope your Nevill's Court friends appreciate the fact."

"They are far more appreciative than the occasion warrants," I answered. "But to return to this supper question: how will this day week suit you?"

"It will suit me," Thorndyke answered, with a glance at his junior.

"And me too," said the latter; "so, if it will do for the Bellinghams, we will consider it settled; but if they can't come you must fix another night."

"Very well," I said, rising and knocking out my pipe, "I will issue the invitation to-morrow. And now I must be off to have another slog at those notes."

As I walked homewards I speculated cheerfully on the prospect of entertaining my friends under my own (or rather Barnard's) roof, if they could be lured out of their eremitical retirement. The idea had, in fact, occurred to me already, but I had been deterred by the peculiarities of Barnard's housekeeper. For Mrs. Gummer was one of those housewives who make up for an archaic simplicity of production by preparations on the most portentous and alarming scale. But this time I would not be deterred. If only the guests could be enticed into my humble lair, it would be easy to

furnish the raw materials of the feast from outside; and the consideration of ways and means occupied me pleasantly until I found myself once more at my writing-table, confronted by my voluminous notes on the incidents of the North Syrian War.

CHAPTER VIII

A MUSEUM IDYLL

WHETHER it was that practice revived a forgotten skill on my part, or that Miss Bellingham had overestimated the amount of work to be done, I am unable to say. But whichever may have been the explanation, the fact is that the fourth afternoon saw our task so nearly completed that I was fain to plead that a small remainder might be left over to form an excuse for yet one more visit to the reading-room.

Short, however, as had been the period of our collaboration, it had been long enough to produce a great change in our relations to one another. For there is no friendship so intimate and satisfying as that engendered by community of work, and none—between man and woman, at any rate—so frank and wholesome.

Every day I had arrived to find a pile of books with the places duly marked and the blue-covered quarto note-books in readiness. Every day we had worked steadily at the allotted task, had then handed in the books and gone forth together to enjoy a most companionable tea in the milk-shop; thereafter to walk home by way of Queen Square, talking over the day's work and discussing the state of the world in the far-off days when Ahkhenaten was king and the Tell el Amarna tablets were a-writing.

It had been a pleasant time, so pleasant, that as I handed in the books for the last time, I sighed to think that it was over; that not only was the task finished, but that the recovery of my fair patient's hand, from

which I had that morning removed the splint, had put an end to the need of my help.

"What shall we do?" I asked, as we came out into the central hall; "it is too early for tea. Shall we go and look at some of the galleries?"

"Why not?" she answered. "We might look over some of the things connected with what we have been doing. For instance, there is a relief of Ahkhenaten upstairs in the Third Egyptian Room; we might go and look at that."

I fell in eagerly with the suggestion, placing myself under her experienced guidance, and we started by way of the Roman Gallery, past the long row of extremely commonplace and modern-looking Roman Emperors.

"I don't know," she said, pausing for a moment opposite a bust labelled "Trajan" (but obviously a portrait of Phil May), "how I am ever even to thank you for all that you have done, to say nothing of repayment."

"There is no need to do either," I replied. "I have enjoyed working with you, so I have had my reward. But still," I added, "if you want to do me a great kindness, you have it in your power."

"How?"

"In connection with my friend Doctor Thorndyke. I told you he was an enthusiast. Now he is, for some reason, most keenly interested in everything relating to your uncle, and I happen to know that, if any legal proceedings should take place, he would very much like to keep a friendly eye on the case."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"I want you, if an opportunity should occur for him to give your father advice or help of any kind, to use your influence with your father in favour of, rather than in opposition to, his accepting it—always assuming that you have no real feeling against his doing so."

Miss Bellingham looked at me thoughtfully for a few moments, and then laughed softly.

"So the great kindness that I am to do you is to let you do me a further kindness through your friend!"

"No," I protested; "that is where you are quite mistaken. It isn't benevolence on Doctor Thorndyke's part; it is professional enthusiasm."

She smiled sceptically.

"You don't believe in it," I said; "but consider other cases. Why does a surgeon get out of bed on a winter's night to do an emergency operation at a hospital? He doesn't get paid for it. Do you think it is altruism?"

"Yes, of course. Isn't it?"

"Certainly not. He does it because it is his job, because it is his business to fight with disease—and win."

"I don't see much difference," she said. "It is work done for love instead of for payment. However, I will do what you ask if the opportunity arises; but I shan't suppose that I am repaying your kindness to me."

"I don't mind, so long as you do it," I said, and we walked on for some time in silence.

"Isn't it odd," she said presently, "how our talk always seems to come back to my uncle? Oh, and that reminds me that the things he gave to the Museum are in the same room as the Ahkhenaten relief. Would you like to see them?"

"Of course I should."

"Then we will go and look at them first." She paused, and then, rather shyly and with a rising colour, she continued: "And I think I should like to introduce you to a very dear friend of mine—with your permission, of course."

This last addition she made hastily, seeing, I suppose, that I looked rather glum at the suggestion. Inwardly I consigned her friend to the devil, especially if of the masculine gender; outwardly I expressed my felicity at making the acquaintance of any person whom she should honour with her friendship. Whereat, to my

discomfiture, she laughed enigmatically; a very soft laugh, low-pitched and musical, like the cooing of a glorified pigeon.

I strolled on by her side, speculating a little anxiously on the coming introduction. Was I being conducted to the lair of one of the savants attached to the establishment? and would he add a superfluous third to our little party of two, so complete and companionable, *solus cum sola*, in this populated wilderness? Above all, would he turn out to be a comely young man, and bring my aerial castles tumbling about my ears? The shy look and the blush with which she had suggested the introduction were ominous indications, upon which I mused gloomily as we ascended the stairs and passed through the wide doorway. I glanced apprehensively at my companion, and met a quiet, inscrutable smile; and at that moment she halted opposite a wall-case and faced me.

"This is my friend," she said. "Let me present you to Artemidorus, late of the Fayyum. Oh, don't smile!" she pleaded. "I am quite serious. Have you never heard of pious Catholics who cherish a devotion to some long-departed saint? That is my feeling towards Artemidorus, and if you only knew what comfort he has shed into the heart of a lonely woman; what a quiet, unobtrusive friend he has been to me in my solitary, friendless days, always ready with a kindly greeting on his gentle, thoughtful face, you would like him for that alone. And I want you to like him and to share our silent friendship. Am I very silly, very sentimental?"

A wave of relief had swept over me, and the mercury of my emotional thermometer, which had shrunk almost into the bulb, leaped up to summer heat. How charming it was of her and how sweetly intimate, to wish to share this mystical friendship with me! And what a pretty conceit it was, too, and how like this strange, inscrutable maiden, to come here and hold silent converse with this long-departed Greek.

And the pathos of it all touched me deeply amidst the joy of this new-born intimacy.

"Are you scornful?" she asked, with a shade of disappointment, as I made no reply.

"No, indeed I am not," I answered earnestly. "I want to make you aware of my sympathy and my appreciation without offending you by seeming to exaggerate, and I don't know how to express it."

"Oh, never mind about the expression, so long as you feel it. I thought you would understand," and she gave me a smile that made me tingle to my finger-tips.

We stood awhile gazing in silence at the mummy—for such, indeed, was her friend Artemidorus. But not an ordinary mummy. Egyptian in form, it was entirely Greek in feeling; and brightly coloured as it was, in accordance with the racial love of colour, the tasteful refinement with which the decoration of the case was treated made those around look garish and barbaric. But the most striking feature was a charming panel portrait which occupied the place of the usual mask. This painting was a revelation to me. Except that it was executed in tempera instead of oil, it differed in no respect from modern work. There was nothing archaic or even ancient about it. With its freedom of handling and its correct rendering of light and shade, it might have been painted yesterday; indeed, enclosed in an ordinary gilt frame, it might have passed without remark in an exhibition of modern portraits

Miss Bellingham observed my admiration and smiled approvingly.

"It is a charming little portrait, isn't it?" she said; "and such a sweet face, too; so thoughtful and human, with just a shade of melancholy. But the whole thing is full of charm. I fell in love with it the first time I saw it. And it is so Greek!"

"Yes, it is, in spite of the Egyptian gods and symbols."

"Rather because of them, I think," said she. "There we have the typical Greek attitude, the genial, cultivated eclecticism that appreciated the fitness of even the most alien forms of art. There is Anubis standing beside the bier; there are Isis and Nephthys, and there below, Horus and Tahuti. But we can't suppose that Artemidorus worshipped or believed in those gods. They are there because they are splendid decoration and perfectly appropriate in character. The real feeling of those who loved the dead man breaks out in the inscription." She pointed to a band below the pectoral, where, in gilt capital letters, was written the two words, "ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΩΡΕ ΕΥΨΥΧΙ."

"Yes," I said, "it is very dignified and very human."

"And so sincere and full of real emotion," she added. "I find it unspeakably touching. 'O Artemidorus, farewell!' There is the real note of human grief, the sorrow of eternal parting. How much finer it is than the vulgar boastfulness of the Semitic epitaphs, or our own miserable, insincere make-believe of the 'Not lost but gone before' type. He was gone from them for ever; they would look on his face and hear his voice no more; they realized that this was their last farewell. Oh, there is a world of love and sorrow in those two simple words!"

For some time neither of us spoke. The glamour of this touching memorial of a long-buried grief had stolen over me, and I was content to stand silent by my beloved companion and revive, with a certain pensive pleasure, the ghosts of human emotions over which so many centuries had rolled. Presently she turned to me with a frank smile. "You have been weighed in the balance of friendship," she said, "and not found wanting. You have the gift of sympathy, even with a woman's sentimental fancies."

I suspected that a good many men would have developed this precious quality under the circumstances, but I refrained from saying so. There is no use in

crying down one's own wares. I was glad enough to have earned her good opinion so easily, and when she at length turned away from the case and passed through into the adjoining room, it was a very complacent young man who bore her company.

"Here is Ahkhenaten—or Khu-en-aten, as the authorities here render the hieroglyphics." She indicated a fragment of a coloured relief labelled: "Portion of a painted stone tablet with a portrait figure of Amen-hetep IV," and we stopped to look at the frail, effeminate figure of the great king, with his large cranium, his queer, pointed chin and the Aten rays stretching out their weird hands as if caressing him.

"We mustn't stay here if you want to see my uncle's gift, because this room closes at four to-day." With this admonition she moved on to the other end of the room, where she halted before a large floor-case containing a mummy and a large number of other objects. A black label with white lettering set forth the various contents with a brief explanation as follows:

"Mummy of Sebek-hotep, a scribe of the twenty-second dynasty, together with the objects found in the tomb. These include the four Canopic jars, in which the internal organs were deposited, the Ushabti figures, tomb provisions and various articles that had belonged to the deceased; his favourite chair, his head-rest, his ink-palette, inscribed with his name and the name of the king, Osorkon I, in whose reign he lived, and other smaller articles. Presented by John Bellingham, Esq."

"They have put all the objects together in one case," Miss Bellingham explained, "to show the contents of an ordinary tomb of the better class. You see that the dead man was provided with all his ordinary comforts: provisions, furniture, the ink-palette that he had been accustomed to use in writing on papyri, and a staff of servants to wait on him."

"Where are the servants?" I asked.

"The little Ushabti figures," she answered; "they were the attendants of the dead, you know, his servants in the under-world. It was a quaint idea, wasn't it? But it was all very complete and consistent, and quite reasonable, too, if once one accepts the belief in the persistence of the individual apart from the body."

"Yes," I agreed, "and that is the only fair way to judge a religious system, by taking the main beliefs for granted. But what a business it must have been, bringing all these things from Egypt to London."

"It was worth the trouble, though, for it is a fine and instructive collection. And the work is all very good of its kind. You notice that the Ushabti figures and the heads that form the stoppers of the Canopic jars are quite finely modelled. The mummy itself, too, is rather handsome, though that coat of bitumen on the back doesn't improve it. But Sebek-hotep must have been a fine-looking man."

"The mask on the case is a portrait, I suppose?"

"Yes; in fact, it is rather more. To some extent it is the actual face of the man himself. This mummy is enclosed in what is called a cartonnage, that is a case moulded on the figure. The cartonnage was formed of a number of layers of linen or papyrus united by glue or cement, and when the case had been fitted to the mummy it was moulded to the body, so that the general form of the features and limbs was often apparent. After the cement was dry the case was covered with a thin layer of stucco and the face modelled more completely, and then the decorations and inscriptions were painted on. So that, you see, in a cartonnage, the body was sealed up like a nut in its shell, unlike the more ancient forms in which the mummy was merely rolled up and enclosed in a wooden coffin."

At this moment there smote upon our ears a politely protesting voice announcing in sing-song tones that it was closing time; and simultaneously a desire for tea suggested the hospitable milk-shop. With leisurely

dignity that ignored the official who shepherded us along the galleries, we made our way to the entrance, still immersed in conversation on matters sepulchral.

It was rather earlier than our usual hour for leaving the Museum and, moreover, it was our last day—for the present. Wherefore we lingered over our tea to an extent that caused the milk-shop lady to view us with some disfavour, and when at length we started homeward, we took so many short cuts that six o'clock found us no nearer our destination than Lincoln's Inn Fields; whither we had journeyed by a slightly indirect route that traversed (among other places) Russell Square, Red Lion Square, with the quaint passage of the same name, Bedford Row, Jockey's Fields, Hand Court, and Great Turnstile.

It was in the latter thoroughfare that our attention was attracted by a flaming poster outside a news-vendor's bearing the startling inscription :

"MORE MEMENTOES OF MURDERED MAN."

Miss Bellingham glanced at the poster and shuddered.

"Horrible! Isn't it?" she said. "Have you read about them?"

"I haven't been noticing the papers the last few days," I replied.

"No, of course you haven't. You've been slaving at those wretched notes. We don't very often see the papers, at least we don't take them in, but Miss Oman has kept us supplied during the last day or two. She is a perfect little ghoul; she delights in horrors of every kind, and the more horrible the better."

"But," I asked, "what is it that they have found?"

"Oh, they are the remains of some poor creature who seems to have been murdered and cut in pieces. It is dreadful. It made me shudder to read of it, for I couldn't help thinking of poor Uncle John, and, as for my father, he was really quite upset"

"Are these the bones that were found in a watercress-bed at Sidcup?"

"Yes. But they have found several more. The police have been most energetic. They seem to have been making a systematic search, and the result has been that they have discovered several portions of the body, scattered about in very widely separated places—Sidcup, Lee, St. Mary Cray; and yesterday it was reported that an arm had been found in one of the ponds called 'the Cuckoo Pits,' close to our old home."

"What! in Essex?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, in Epping Forest, quite near Woodford. Isn't it dreadful to think of it? They were probably hidden when we were living there. I think it was that that horrified my father so much. When he read it he was so upset that he gathered up the whole bundle of newspapers and tossed them out of the window; and they blew over the wall, and poor Miss Oman had to rush out and pursue them up the court."

"Do you think he suspects that these remains may be those of your uncle?"

"I think so, though he has said nothing to that effect, and, of course, I have not made any such suggestion to him. We always preserve the fiction between ourselves of believing that Uncle John is still alive."

"But you don't think he is, do you?"

"No, I am afraid I don't; and I feel pretty sure that my father doesn't think so either, but he doesn't like to admit it to me."

"Do you happen to remember what bones have been found?"

"No, I don't. I know that an arm was found in the Cuckoo Pits, and I think a thigh-bone was dredged up out of a pond near St. Mary Cray. But Miss Oman will be able to tell you all about it, if you are interested. She will be delighted to meet a kindred spirit," Miss Bellingham added, with a smile.

"I don't know that I want to claim spiritual kinship with a ghoul," said I; "especially such a very sharp-tempered ghoul."

"Oh, don't disparage her, Doctor Berkeley!" Miss Bellingham pleaded. "She isn't really bad-tempered; only a little prickly on the surface. I oughtn't to have called her a ghoul; she is just the sweetest, most affectionate, most unselfish little angelic human hedgehog that you could find if you travelled the wide world through. Do you know that she has been working her fingers to the bone making an old dress of mine presentable because she is so anxious that I shall look nice at your little supper-party."

"You are sure to do that, in any case," I said; "but I withdraw my remark as to her temper unreservedly. And I really didn't mean it, you know; I have always liked the little lady."

"That's right; and now won't you come in and have a few minutes' chat with my father? We are quite early, in spite of the short cuts."

I assented readily, and the more so inasmuch as I wanted a few words with Miss Oman on the subject of catering and did not want to discuss it before my friends. Accordingly I went in and gossiped with Mr. Bellingham, chiefly about the work that we had done at the Museum, until it was time for me to return to the surgery.

Having taken my leave, I walked down the stairs with reflective slowness and as much creaking of my boots as I could manage; with the result, hopefully anticipated, that as I approached the door of Miss Oman's room it opened and the lady's head protruded.

"I'd change my cobbler if I were you," she said.

I thought of the "angelic human hedgehog," and nearly sniggered in her face.

"I am sure you would, Miss Oman, instantly; though, mind you, the poor fellow can't help his looks."

"You are a very flippant young man," she said severely. Whereat I grinned, and she regarded me silently with a baleful glare. Suddenly I remembered my mission and became serious and sober.

"Miss Oman," I said, "I very much want to take

your advice on a matter of some importance—to me, at least." (That ought to fetch her, I thought. The "advice fly"—strangely neglected by Izaak Walton—is guaranteed to kill in any weather. And it did fetch her. She rose in a flash and gorged it, cock's feathers, worsted body and all.)

"What is it about?" she asked eagerly. "But don't stand out there where everybody can hear but me. Come in and sit down."

Now, I didn't want to discuss the matter here, and, besides, there was not time. I therefore assumed an air of mystery.

"I can't, Miss Oman. I'm due at the surgery now. But if you should be passing and should have a few minutes to spare, I should be greatly obliged if you would look in. I really don't quite know how to act."

"No, I expect not. Men very seldom do. But you're better than most, for you know when you are in difficulties and have the sense to consult a woman. But what is it about? Perhaps I might be thinking it over."

"Well, you know," I began evasively, "it's a simple matter, but I can't very well—no, by Jove!" I added, looking at my watch, "I must run, or I shall keep the multitude waiting." And with this I bustled away, leaving her literally dancing with curiosity.

CHAPTER IX

THE SPHINX OF LINCOLN'S INN

At the age of twenty-six one cannot claim to have attained to the position of a person of experience. Nevertheless, the knowledge of human nature accumulated in that brief period sufficed to make me feel pretty confident that, at some time during the evening, I should receive a visit from Miss Oman. And circumstances justified my confidence; for the clock yet stood at two minutes to seven when a premonitory tap at the surgery door heralded her arrival.

"I happened to be passing," she explained, and I forbore to smile at the coincidence, "so I thought I might as well drop in and hear what you wanted to ask me about."

She seated herself in the patients' chair and, laying a bundle of newspapers on the table, glared at me expectantly.

"Thank you, Miss Oman," I said. "It is very good of you to look in on me. I am ashamed to give you all this trouble about such a trifling matter."

She rapped her knuckles impatiently on the table.

"Never mind about the trouble," she exclaimed tartly. "What—is—it—that—you—want—to—*ask*—me about?"

I stated my difficulties in respect of the supper-party, and, as I proceeded, an expression of disgust and disappointment spread over her countenance.

"I don't see why you need have been so mysterious about it," she said glumly.

"I didn't mean to be mysterious; I was only anxious

not to make a mess of the affair. It's all very fine to assume a lofty scorn of the pleasures of the table, but there is great virtue in a really good feed, especially when low-living and high-thinking have been the order of the day."

"Coarsely put," said Miss Oman, "but perfectly true."

"Very well. Now, if I leave the management to Mrs. Gummer, she will probably provide a tepid Irish stew with flakes of congealed fat on it, and a plastic suet-pudding or something of that kind, and turn the house upside-down in getting it ready. So I thought of having a cold spread and getting the things in from outside. But I don't want it to look as if I had been making enormous preparations."

"They won't think the things came down from heaven," said Miss Oman.

"No, I suppose they won't. But you know what I mean. Now, where do you advise me to go for the raw materials of conviviality?"

Miss Oman reflected. "You'd better let me do your shopping and manage the whole business," was her final verdict.

This was precisely what I had wanted, and I accepted thankfully, regardless of the feelings of Mrs. Gummer. I handed her two pounds, and, after some protests at my extravagance, she bestowed them in her purse; a process that occupied time, since that receptacle, besides being a sort of miniature Record Office of frayed and time-stained bills, already bulged with a lading of draper's samples, ends of tape, a card of linen buttons, another of hooks and eyes, a lump of beeswax, a rat-eaten stump of lead-pencil, and other trifles that I have forgotten. As she closed the purse at the imminent risk of wrenching off its fastenings she looked at me severely and pursed up her lips.

"You're a very plausible young man," she remarked.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"Philandering about museums," she continued,

" with handsome young ladies on the pretence of work. Work, indeed! Oh, I heard her telling her father about it. She thinks you were perfectly enthralled by the mummies and dried cats and chunks of stone and all the other trash. She doesn't know what humbugs men are."

" Really, Miss Oman——" I began.

" Oh, don't talk to me!" she snapped. " I can see it all. You can't impose on *me*. I can see you staring into those glass cases, egging her on to talk and listening open-mouthed and bulging-eyed and sitting at her feet—now, didn't you?"

" I don't know about sitting at her feet," I said, " though it might easily have come to that with those infernal slippery floors; but I had a very jolly time, and I mean to go again if I can. Miss Bellingham is the cleverest and most accomplished woman I have ever spoken to."

This was a poser for Miss Oman, whose admiration and loyalty, I knew, were only equalled by my own. She would have liked to contradict me, but the thing was impossible. To cover her defeat she snatched up the bundle of newspapers and began to open them out.

" What sort of stuff is ' hibernation ' ?" she demanded suddenly.

" Hibernation!" I exclaimed.

" Yes. They found a patch of it on a bone that was discovered in a pond at St. Mary Cray, and a similar patch on one that was found at some place in Essex. Now, I want to know what ' hibernation ' is."

" You must mean ' eburnation,' " I said, after a moment's reflection.

" The newspapers say ' hibernation,' and I suppose they know what they are talking about. If you don't know what it is, don't be ashamed to say so."

" Well, then, I don't."

" In that case you'd better read the papers and find out," she said, a little illogically. And then: " Are you fond of murders? I am, awfully."

"What a shocking little ghoul you must be!" I exclaimed.

She stuck out her chin at me. "I'll trouble you," she said, "to be a little more respectful in your language. Do you realize that I am old enough to be your mother?"

"Impossible!" I ejaculated.

"Fact," said Miss Oman.

"Well, anyhow," said I, "age is not the only qualification. And, besides, you are too late for the billet. The vacancy's filled."

Miss Oman slapped the papers down on the table and rose abruptly.

"You had better read the papers and see if you can learn a little sense," she said severely as she turned to go. "Oh, and don't forget the finger!" she added eagerly. "That is really thrilling."

"The finger?" I repeated.

"Yes. They found a hand with one finger missing. The police think it is a highly important clue. I don't know quite what they mean; but you read the account and tell me what you think."

With this parting injunction she bustled out through the surgery, and I followed to bid her a ceremonious adieu on the doorstep. I watched her little figure tripping with quick, bird-like steps down Fetter Lane, and was about to turn back into the surgery when my attention was attracted by the evolutions of an elderly gentleman on the opposite side of the street. He was a somewhat peculiar-looking man, tall, gaunt, and bony, and the way in which he carried his head suggested to the medical mind a pronounced degree of near sight and a pair of "deep" spectacle glasses. Suddenly he espied me and crossed the road with his chin thrust forward and a pair of keen blue eyes directed at me through the centres of his spectacles.

"I wonder if you can and will help me," said he, with a courteous salute. "I wish to call on an acquaintance, and I have forgotten his address. It is in

some court, but the name of that court has escaped me for the moment. My friend's name is Bellingham. I suppose you don't chance to know it? Doctors know a great many people, as a rule."

"Do you mean Mr. Godfrey Bellingham?"

"Ah! Then you do know him. I have not consulted the oracle in vain. He is a patient of yours, no doubt?"

"A patient and a personal friend. His address is Forty-nine Nevill's Court."

"Thank you, thank you. Oh, and as you are a friend, perhaps you can inform me as to the customs of the household. I am not expected, and I do not wish to make an untimely visit. What are Mr. Bellingham's habits as to his evening meal? Would this be a convenient time to call?"

"I generally make my evening visits a little later than this—say about half-past eight; they have finished their meal by then."

"Ah! half-past eight, then? Then I suppose I had better take a walk until that time. I don't want to disturb them."

"Would you care to come in and smoke a cigar until it is time to make your call? If you would, I could walk over with you and show you the house."

"That is very kind of you," said my new acquaintance, with an inquisitive glance at me through his spectacles. "I think I should like to sit down. It's a dull affair, mooning about the streets, and there isn't time to go back to my chambers—in Lincoln's Inn."

"I wonder," said I, as I ushered him into the room lately vacated by Miss Oman, "if you happen to be Mr. Jellicoe?"

He turned his spectacles full on me with a keen, suspicious glance. "What makes you think I am Mr. Jellicoe?" he asked.

"Oh, only that you live in Lincoln's Inn."

"Ha! I see. I live in Lincoln's Inn; Mr. Jellicoe lives in Lincoln's Inn; therefore I am Mr. Jellicoe.

Ha! ha! Bad logic, but a correct conclusion. Yes, I am Mr. Jellicoe. What do you know about me?"

"Mighty little, excepting that you were the late John Bellingham's man of business."

"The '*late* John Bellingham,' hey! How do you know he is the late John Bellingham?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't; only I rather understood that that was your own belief."

"You understood! Now, from whom did you 'understand' that? From Godfrey Bellingham? H'm! And how did he know what I believe? I never told him. It is a very unsafe thing, my dear sir, to expound another man's beliefs."

"Then you think that John Bellingham is alive?"

"Do I? Who said so? I did not, you know."

"But he must be either dead or alive."

"There," said Mr. Jellicoe, "I am entirely with you. You have stated an undeniable truth."

"It is not a very illuminating one, however," I replied, laughing.

"Undeniable truths often are not," he retorted. "They are apt to be extremely general. In fact, I would affirm that the certainty of the truth of a given proposition is directly proportional to its generality."

"I suppose that is so," said I.

"Undoubtedly. Take an instance from your own profession. Given a million normal human beings under twenty, and you can say with certainty that a majority of them will die before reaching a certain age, that they will die in certain circumstances and of certain diseases. Then take a single unit from that million, and what can you predict concerning him? Nothing. He may die to-morrow; he may live to a couple of hundred. He may die of a cold in the head or a cut finger, or from falling off the cross of St. Paul's. In a particular case you can predict nothing."

"That is perfectly true," said I. And then, realizing that I had been led away from the topic of John Bellingham, I ventured to return to it.

"That was a very mysterious affair—the disappearance of John Bellingham, I mean."

"Why mysterious?" asked Mr. Jellicoe. "Men disappear from time to time, and when they reappear, the explanations that they give (when they give any) seem to be more or less adequate."

"But the circumstances were surely rather mysterious."

"What circumstances?" asked Mr. Jellicoe.

"I mean the way in which he vanished from Mr. Hurst's house."

"In what way did he vanish from it?"

"Well, of course, I don't know."

"Precisely. Neither do I. Therefore I can't say whether that way was a mysterious one or not."

"It is not even certain that he did leave it," I remarked, rather recklessly.

"Exactly," said Mr. Jellicoe. "And if he did not, he is there still. And if he is there still, he has not disappeared—in the sense understood. And if he has not disappeared, there is no mystery."

I laughed heartily, but Mr. Jellicoe preserved a wooden solemnity and continued to examine me through his spectacles (which I, in my turn, inspected and estimated at about minus five dioptres). There was something highly diverting about this grim lawyer, with his dry contentiousness and almost farcical caution. His ostentatious reserve encouraged me to ply him with fresh questions, the more indiscreet the better.

"I suppose," said I, "that, under these circumstances, you would hardly favour Mr. Hurst's proposal to apply for permission to presume death?"

"Under what circumstances?" he inquired.

"I was referring to the doubt you have expressed as to whether John Bellingham is, after all, really dead."

"My dear sir," said he, "I fail to see your point. If it were certain that the man was alive, it would be impossible to presume that he was dead; and if it were

certain that he was dead, presumption of death would still be impossible. You do not presume a certainty. The uncertainty is of the essence of the transaction."

"But," I persisted, "if you really believe that he may be alive, I should hardly have thought that you would take the responsibility of presuming his death and dispersing his property."

"I don't," said Mr. Jellicoe. "I take no responsibility. I act in accordance with the decision of the Court and have no choice in the matter."

"But the Court may decide that he is dead and he may nevertheless be alive."

"Not at all. If the Court decides that he is presumably dead, then he is presumably dead. As a mere irrevelant, physical circumstance he may, it is true, be alive. But legally speaking, and for testamentary purposes, he is dead. You fail to perceive the distinction, no doubt?"

"I am afraid I do," I admitted.

"Yes; members of your profession usually do. That is what makes them such bad witnesses in a court of law. The scientific outlook is radically different from the legal. The man of science relies on his own knowledge and observation and judgment, and disregards testimony. A man comes to you and tells you he is blind in one eye. Do you accept his statement? Not in the least. You proceed to test his eyesight with some infernal apparatus of coloured glasses, and you find that he can see perfectly well with both eyes. Then you decide that he is not blind in one eye; that is to say, you reject his testimony in favour of facts of your own ascertaining."

"But surely that is the rational method of coming to a conclusion?"

"In science, no doubt. Not in law. A court of law must decide according to the evidence which is before it; and that evidence is of the nature of sworn testimony. If a witness is prepared to swear that black is white, and no evidence to the contrary is offered, the

evidence before the Court is that black is white, and the Court must decide accordingly. The judge and the jury may think otherwise—they may even have private knowledge to the contrary—but they have to decide according to the evidence."

"Do you mean to say that a judge would be justified in giving a decision which he knew privately to be contrary to the facts? Or that he might sentence a man whom he knew to be innocent?"

"Certainly. It has been done. There is a case of a judge who sentenced a man to death and allowed the execution to take place, notwithstanding that he—the judge—had actually seen the murder committed by another man. But that was carrying correctness of procedure to the verge of pedantry."

"It was, with a vengeance," I agreed. "But to return to the case of John Bellingham. Supposing that after the Court has decided that he is dead he should turn up alive? What then?"

"Ah! It would then be his turn to make an application, and the Court, having fresh evidence laid before it, would probably decide that he was alive."

"And meantime his property would have been dispersed?"

"Probably. But you will observe that the presumption of death would have arisen out of his own proceedings. If a man acts in such a way as to create a belief that he is dead, he must put up with the consequences."

"Yes, that is reasonable enough," said I. And then, after a pause, I asked: "Is there any immediate likelihood of proceedings of the kind being commenced?"

"I understood from what you said just now that Mr. Hurst was contemplating some action of the kind. No doubt you had your information from a reliable quarter." This answer Mr. Jellicoe delivered without moving a muscle, regarding me with the fixity of a spectacled figure-head.

I smiled feebly. The operation of pumping Mr.

Jellicoe was rather like the sport of boxing with a porcupine, being chiefly remarkable as a demonstration of the power of passive resistance. I determined, however, to make one more effort, rather, I think, for the pleasure of witnessing his defensive manœuvres than with the expectation of getting anything out of him. I accordingly "opened out" on the subject of the "remains."

"Have you been following these remarkable discoveries of human bones that have been appearing in the papers?" I asked.

He looked at me stonily for some moments, and then replied:

"Human bones are rather more within your province than mine, but, now that you mention it, I think I recall having read of some such discoveries. They were disconnected bones, I believe?"

"Yes; evidently parts of a dismembered body."

"So I should suppose. No, I have not followed the accounts. As we get on in life our interests tend to settle into grooves, and my groove is chiefly connected with conveyancing. These discoveries would be of more interest to a criminal lawyer."

"I thought that you might, perhaps, have connected them with the disappearance of your client."

"Why should I? What could be the nature of the connection?"

"Well," I said, "these are the bones of a man——"

"Yes; and my client was a man with bones. That is a connection, certainly, though not a very specific or distinctive one. But perhaps you had something more particular in your mind."

"I had," I replied. "The fact that some of the bones were actually found on land belonging to your client seemed to me rather significant."

"Did it, indeed?" said Mr. Jellicoe. He reflected for a few moments, gazing steadily at me the while, and then continued: "In that I am unable to follow you. It would have seemed to me that the finding of

human remains upon a certain piece of land might conceivably throw a *prima facie* suspicion upon the owner or occupant of that land as being the person who deposited them. But the case that you suggest is the one case in which this would be impossible. A man cannot deposit his own dismembered remains."

"No, of course not. I was not suggesting that he deposited them himself, but merely that the fact of their being deposited on his land, in a way, connected these remains with him."

"Again," said Mr. Jellicoe, "I fail to follow you, unless you are suggesting that it is customary for murderers who mutilate bodies to be punctilious in depositing the dismembered remains upon land belonging to their victims. In which case I am sceptical as to your facts. I am not aware of the existence of any such custom. Moreover, it appears that only a portion of the body was deposited on Mr. Bellingham's land, the remaining portions having been scattered broadcast over a wide area. How does that agree with your suggestion ?"

"It doesn't, of course," I admitted. "But there is another fact that I think you will admit to be more significant. The first remains that were discovered were found at Sidcup. Now, Sidcup is close to Eltham ; and Eltham is the place where Mr. Bellingham was last seen alive."

"And what is the significance of this ? Why do you connect the remains with one locality rather than the various other localities in which other portions of the body have been found ?"

"Well," I replied, rather gravelled by this very pertinent question, "the appearances seem to suggest that the person who deposited these remains started from the neighbourhood of Eltham, where the missing man was last seen."

Mr. Jellicoe shook his head. "You appear," said he, "to be confusing the order of deposition with the order of discovery. What evidence is there that the remains

found at Sidcup were deposited before those found elsewhere ? "

" I don't know that there is any," I admitted.

" Then," said he, " I don't see how you support your suggestion that the person started from the neighbourhood of Eltham."

On consideration, I had to admit that I had nothing to offer in support of my theory ; and having thus shot my last arrow in this very unequal contest, I thought it time to change the subject.

" I called in at the British Museum the other day," said I, " and had a look at Mr. Bellingham's last gift to the nation. The things are very well shown in that central case."

" Yes. I was very pleased with the position they have given to the exhibit, and so would my poor old friend have been. I wished, as I looked at the case, that he could have seen it. But perhaps he may, after all."

" I am sure I hope he will," said I, with more sincerity, perhaps, than the lawyer gave me credit for. For the return of John Bellingham would most effectually have cut the Gordian knot of my friend Godfrey's difficulties. " You are a good deal interested in Egyptology yourself, aren't you ? " I added.

" Greatly interested," replied Mr. Jellicoe, with more animation than I had thought possible in his wooden face. " It is a fascinating subject, the study of this venerable civilization, extending back to the childhood of the human race, preserved for ever for our instruction in its own unchanging monuments like a fly in a block of amber. Everything connected with Egypt is full of an impressive solemnity. A feeling of permanence, of stability, defying time and change, pervades it. The place, the people, and the monuments alike breathe of eternity."

I was mightily surprised at this rhetorical outburst on the part of this dry and taciturn lawyer. But I liked him the better for the touch of enthusiasm that

made him human, and determined to keep him astride of his hobby.

"Yet," said I, "the people must have changed in the course of centuries."

"Yes, that is so. The people who fought against Cambyses were not the race that marched into Egypt five thousand years before—the dynastic people whose portraits we see on the early monuments. In those fifty centuries the blood of Hyksos and Syrians and Ethiopians and Hittites, and who can say how many more races, must have mingled with that of the old Egyptians. But still the national life went on without a break; the old culture leavened the new peoples, and the immigrant strangers ended by becoming Egyptians. It is a wonderful phenomenon. Looking back on it from our own time, it seems more like a geological period than the life-history of a single nation. Are you at all interested in the subject?"

"Yes, decidedly, though I am completely ignorant of it. The fact is that my interest is of quite recent growth. It is only of late that I have been sensible of the glamour of things Egyptian."

"Since you made Miss Bellingham's acquaintance, perhaps?" suggested Mr. Jellicoe, himself as unchanging in aspect as an Egyptian effigy.

I suppose I must have reddened—I certainly resented the remark—for he continued in the same even tone: "I made the suggestion because I know that she takes an intelligent interest in the subject and is, in fact, quite well informed on it."

"Yes; she seems to know a great deal about the antiquities of Egypt, and I may as well admit that your surmise was correct. It was she who showed me her uncle's collection."

"So I had supposed," said Mr. Jellicoe. "And a very instructive collection it is, in a popular sense; very suitable for exhibition in a public museum, though there is nothing in it of unusual interest to the expert. The tomb furniture is excellent of its kind and the

cartonnage case of the mummy is well made and rather finely decorated."

"Yes, I thought it quite handsome. But can you explain to me why, after taking all that trouble to decorate it, they should have disfigured it with those great smears of bitumen?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Jellicoe, "that is quite an interesting question. It is not unusual to find mummy-cases smeared with bitumen; there is a mummy of a priestess in the next gallery which is completely coated with bitumen excepting the gilded face. Now, this bitumen was put on for a purpose—for the purpose of obliterating the inscriptions and thus concealing the identity of the deceased from the robbers and desecrators of tombs. And there is the oddity of this mummy of Sebek-hotep. Evidently there was an intention of obliterating the inscriptions. The whole of the back is covered thickly with bitumen, and so are the feet. Then the workers seem to have changed their minds and left the inscriptions and decoration untouched. Why they intended to cover it, and why, having commenced, they left it partially covered only, is a mystery. The mummy was found in its original tomb and quite undisturbed, so far as tomb-robbers are concerned. Poor Bellingham was greatly puzzled as to what the explanation could be."

"Speaking of bitumen," said I, "reminds me of a question that has occurred to me. You know that this substance has been used a good deal by modern painters and that it has a very dangerous peculiarity; I mean its tendency to liquefy, without any very obvious reason, long after it has dried."

"Yes, I know. Isn't there some story about a picture of Reynolds' in which bitumen had been used? A portrait of a lady, I think. The bitumen softened, and one of the lady's eyes slipped down on to her cheek; and they had to hang the portrait upside down and keep it warm until the eye slipped back into its place. But what was your question?"

"I was wondering whether the bitumen used by the

Egyptian artists has ever been known to soften after this great lapse of time."

"Yes, I think it has. I have heard of instances in which the bitumen coatings of mummy cases have softened under certain circumstances and become quite 'tacky.' But, bless my soul! here am I gossiping with you and wasting your time, and it is nearly a quarter to nine!"

My guest rose hastily, and I, with many apologies for having detained him, proceeded to fulfil my promise to guide him to his destination. As we sallied forth together the glamour of Egypt faded by degrees, and when he shook my hand stiffly at the gate of the Bellingham's house, all his vivacity and enthusiasm had vanished, leaving the taciturn lawyer, dry, uncommunicative, and not a little suspicious.

CHAPTER X

THE NEW ALLIANCE

THE "Great Lexicographer"—tutelary deity of my adopted habitat—has handed down to shuddering posterity a definition of the act of eating which might have been framed by a dyspeptic ghoul. "Eat: to devour with the mouth." It is a shocking view to take of so genial a function: cynical, indelicate, and finally unforgivable by reason of its very accuracy. For, after all, that is what eating amounts to, if one must needs express it with such crude brutality. But if "the ingestion of alimentary substances"—to ring a modern change upon the older formula—is in itself a process material even unto carnality, it is undeniable that it forms a highly agreeable accompaniment to more psychic manifestations.

And so, as the lamplight, re-enforced by accessory candles, falls on the little table in the first-floor room looking on Fetter Lane—only now the curtains are drawn—the conversation is not the less friendly and bright for a running accompaniment executed with knives and forks, for clink of goblet and jovial gurgle of wine-flask. On the contrary, to one of us, at least—to wit, Godfrey Bellingham—the occasion is one of uncommon festivity, and his boyish enjoyment of the simple feast makes pathetic suggestions of hard times, faced uncomplainingly, but keenly felt nevertheless.

The talk flitted from topic to topic, mainly concerning itself with matters artistic, and never for one moment approaching the critical subject of John Bellingham's will. From the stepped pyramid of Sakkara

with its encaustic tiles to mediæval church floors; from Elizabethan woodwork to Mycænæan pottery, and thence to the industrial arts of the Stone Age and the civilization of the Aztecs. I began to suspect that my two legal friends were so carried away by the interest of the conversation that they had forgotten the secret purpose of the meeting, for the dessert had been placed on the table (by Mrs. Gummer with the manner of a bereaved dependant dispensing funeral bakemeats), and still no reference had been made to the "case." But it seemed that Thorndyke was but playing a waiting game; was only allowing the intimacy to ripen while he watched for the opportunity. And that opportunity came, even as Mrs. Gummer vanished spectrally with a tray of plates and glasses.

"So you had a visitor last night, Doctor," said Mr. Bellingham. "I mean my friend Jellicoe. He told us he had seen you, and mighty curious he was about you. I have never known Jellicoe to be so inquisitive before. What did you think of him?"

"A quaint old cock. I found him highly amusing. We entertained one another for quite a long time with cross questions and crooked answers: I affecting eager curiosity, he replying with a defensive attitude of universal ignorance. It was a most diverting encounter."

"He needn't have been so close," Miss Bellingham remarked, "seeing that all the world will be regaled with our affairs before long."

"They are proposing to take the case into Court, then?" said Thorndyke.

"Yes," said Mr. Bellingham. "Jellicoe came to tell me that my cousin, Hurst, has instructed his solicitors to make the application and to invite me to join him. Actually he came to deliver an ultimatum from Hurst—but I mustn't disturb the harmony of this festive gathering with litigious discords."

"Now, why mustn't you?" asked Thorndyke. "Why is a subject in which we are all keenly interested

to be *tabu?* You don't mind telling us about it, do you?"

"No, of course not. But what do you think of a man who buttonholes a doctor at a dinner-party to retail a list of his ailments?"

"It depends on what his ailments are," replied Thorndyke. "If he is a chronic dyspeptic and wishes to expound the virtues of Doctor Snaffler's Purple Pills for Pimply People, he is merely a bore. But if he chances to suffer from some rare and choice disease, such as Trypanosomiasis or Acromegaly, the doctor will be delighted to listen."

"Then are we to understand," Miss Bellingham asked, "that we are rare and choice products, in a legal sense?"

"Undoubtedly," replied Thorndyke. "The case of John Bellingham is, in many respects, unique. It will be followed with the deepest interest by the profession at large, and especially by medical jurists."

"How gratifying that should be to us!" said Miss Bellingham. "We may even attain undying fame in textbooks and treatises; and yet we are not so very much puffed up with our importance."

"No," said her father; "we could do without the fame quite well, and so, I think, could Hurst. Did Berkeley tell you of the proposal that he made?"

"Yes," said Thorndyke; "and I gather from what you say that he has repeated it."

"Yes. He sent Jellicoe to give me another chance, and I was tempted to take it; but my daughter was strongly against any compromise, and probably she is right. At any rate, she is more concerned than I am."

"What view did Mr. Jellicoe take?" Thorndyke asked.

"Oh, he was very cautious and reserved, but he didn't disguise his feeling that I should be wise to take a certainty in lieu of a very problematical fortune. He would certainly like me to agree, for he naturally wishes to get the affair settled and pocket his legacy."

"And have you definitely refused?"

"Yes; quite definitely. So Hurst will apply for permission to presume death and prove the will, and Jellicoe will support him; he says he has no choice."

"And you?"

"I suppose I shall oppose the application, though I don't quite know on what grounds."

"Before you take any definite steps," said Thorndyke, "you ought to give the matter very careful consideration. I take it that you have very little doubt that your brother is dead. And if he is dead, any benefit that you may receive under the will must be conditional on the previous presumption or proof of death. But perhaps you have taken advice?"

"No, I have not. As our friend the Doctor has probably told you, my means—or rather, the lack of them—do not admit of my getting professional advice. Hence my delicacy about discussing the case with you."

"Then do you propose to conduct your case in person?"

"Yes; if it is necessary for me to appear in Court, as I suppose it will be, if I oppose the application."

Thorndyke reflected for a few moments, and then said gravely:

"You had much better not appear in person to conduct your case, Mr. Bellingham, for several reasons. To begin with, Mr. Hurst is sure to be represented by a capable counsel, and you will find yourself quite unable to meet the sudden exigencies of a contest in Court. You will be out-manœuvred. Then there is the judge to be considered."

"But surely one can rely on the judge dealing fairly with a man who is unable to afford a solicitor and counsel?"

"Undoubtedly, as a rule, a judge will give an unrepresented litigant every assistance and consideration. English judges in general are high-minded men with a deep sense of their great responsibilities. But you

cannot afford to take any chances. You must consider the exceptions. A judge has been a counsel, and he may carry to the bench some of the professional prejudices of the bar. Indeed, if you consider the absurd licence permitted to counsel in their treatment of witnesses, and the hostile attitude adopted by some judges towards medical and other scientific men who have to give their evidence, you will see that the judicial mind is not always quite as judicial as one would wish, especially when the privileges and immunities of the profession are concerned. Now, your appearance in person to conduct your case must, unavoidably, cause some inconvenience to the Court. Your ignorance of procedure and legal details must occasion some delay; and if the judge should happen to be an irritable man he might resent the inconvenience and delay. I don't say that that would affect his decision—I don't think it would—but I am sure that it would be wise to avoid giving offence to the judge. And, above all, it is most desirable to be able to detect and reply to any manœuvres on the part of the opposing counsel, which you certainly would not be able to do."

"This is excellent advice, Doctor Thorndyke," said Bellingham, with a grim smile; "but I am afraid I shall have to take my chance."

"Not necessarily," said Thorndyke. "I am going to make a little proposal, which I will ask you to consider without prejudice as a mutual accommodation. You see, your case is one of exceptional interest—it will become a textbook case, as Miss Bellingham has prophesied; and, since it lies within my specialty, it will be necessary for me, in any case, to follow it in the closest detail. Now, it would be much more satisfactory to me to study it from within than from without, to say nothing of the credit which would accrue to me if I should be able to conduct it to a successful issue. I am therefore going to ask you to put your case in my hands and let me see what can be done with it. I know this is an unusual course for a professional man

to take, but I think it is not improper under the circumstances."

Mr. Bellingham pondered in silence for a few moments, and then, after a glance at his daughter, began rather hesitatingly: "It is exceedingly generous of you, Doctor Thorndyke——"

"Pardon me," interrupted Thorndyke, "it is not. My motives, as I have explained, are purely egoistic."

Mr. Bellingham laughed uneasily and again glanced at his daughter, who, however, pursued her occupation of peeling a pear with calm deliberation and without lifting her eyes. Getting no help from her, he asked: "Do you think that there is any possibility whatever of a successful issue?"

"Yes, a remote possibility—very remote, I fear, as things look at present; but if I thought the case absolutely hopeless I should advise you to stand aside and let events take their course."

"Supposing the case to come to a favourable termination, would you allow me to settle your fees in the ordinary way?"

"If the choice lay with me," replied Thorndyke, "I should say 'yes' with pleasure. But it does not. The attitude of the profession is very definitely unfavourable to 'speculative' practice. You may remember the well-known firm of Dodson and Fogg, who gained thereby much profit, but little credit. But why discuss contingencies of this kind? If I bring your case to a successful issue I shall have done very well for myself. We shall have benefited one another mutually. Come now, Miss Bellingham, I appeal to you. We have eaten salt together, to say nothing of pigeon pie and other cates. Won't you back me up, and at the same time do a kindness to Doctor Berkeley?"

"Why, is Doctor Berkeley interested in our decision?"

"Certainly he is, as you will appreciate when I tell you that he actually tried to bribe me secretly out of his own pocket."

"Did you?" she asked, looking at me with an expression that rather alarmed me.

"Well, not exactly," I replied, mighty hot and uncomfortable, and wishing Thorndyke at the devil with his confidences. "I merely mentioned that the—the—solicitor's costs, you know, and that sort of thing—but you needn't jump on me, Miss Bellingham; Doctor Thorndyke did all that was necessary in that way."

She continued to look at me thoughtfully as I stammered out my excuses, and then said: "I wasn't going to. I was only thinking that poverty has its compensations. You are all so very good to us; and, for my part, I should accept Doctor Thorndyke's generous offer most gratefully, and thank him for making it so easy for us."

"Very well, my dear," said Mr. Bellingham; "we will enjoy the sweets of poverty, as you say—we have sampled the other kind of thing pretty freely—and do ourselves the pleasure of accepting a great kindness, most delicately offered."

"Thank you," said Thorndyke. "You have justified my faith in you, Miss Bellingham, and in the power of Doctor Berkeley's salt. I understand that you place your affairs in my hands?"

"Entirely and thankfully," replied Mr. Bellingham. "Whatever you think best to be done we agree to beforehand."

"Then," said I, "let us drink success to the Cause. Port, if you please, Miss Bellingham; the vintage is not recorded, but it is quite wholesome, and a suitable medium for the sodium chloride of friendship." I filled her glass, and, when the bottle had made its circuit, we stood up and solemnly pledged the new alliance.

"There is just one thing that I would say before we dismiss the subject for the present," said Thorndyke. "It is a good thing to keep one's own counsel. When you get formal notice from Mr. Hurst's solicitors that proceedings are being commenced, you may refer them to Mr. Marchmont of Gray's Inn, who will nominally

act for you. He will actually have nothing to do, but we must preserve the fiction that I am instructed by a solicitor. Meanwhile, and until the case goes into Court, I think it very necessary that neither Mr. Jellicoe nor anyone else should know that I am to be connected with it. We must keep the other side in the dark, if we can."

"We will be as secret as the grave," said Mr. Bellingham; "and, as a matter of fact, it will be quite easy, since it happens, by a curious coincidence, that I am already acquainted with Mr. Marchmont. He acted for Stephen Blackmore, you remember, in that case that you unravelled so wonderfully. I knew the Blackmores."

"Did you?" said Thorndyke. "What a small world it is! And what a remarkable affair that was! The intricacies and cross-issues made it quite absorbingly interesting; and it is noteworthy for me in another respect, for it was one of the first cases in which I was associated with Doctor Jervis."

"Yes, and a mighty useful associate I was," remarked Jervis, "though I did pick up one or two facts by accident. And, by the way, the Blackmore case had certain points in common with your case, Mr. Bellingham. There was a disappearance and a disputed will, and the man who vanished was a scholar and an antiquarian."

"Cases in our specialty are apt to have certain general resemblances," said Thorndyke; and as he spoke he directed a keen glance at his junior, the significance of which I partly understood when he abruptly changed the subject.

"The newspaper reports of your brother's disappearance, Mr. Bellingham, were remarkably full of detail. There were even plans of your house and that of Mr. Hurst. Do you know who supplied the information?"

"No, I don't," replied Mr. Bellingham. "I know that I didn't. Some newspaper men came to me for

information, but I sent them packing. So, I understand, did Hurst; and as for Jellicoe, you might as well cross-examine an oyster."

"Well," said Thorndyke, "the Press-men have queer methods of getting 'copy'; but still, someone must have given them that description of your brother and those plans. It would be interesting to know who it was. However, we don't know; and now let us dismiss these legal topics, with suitable apologies for having introduced them."

"And perhaps," said I, "we may as well adjourn to what we will call the drawing-room—it is really Barnard's den—and leave the housekeeper to wrestle with the debris."

We migrated to the cheerfully shabby little apartment, and, when Mrs. Gummer had served coffee, with gloomy resignation (as who should say: "If you will drink this sort of stuff I suppose you must, but don't blame *me* for the consequences"), I settled Mr. Bellingham in Barnard's favourite lop-sided easy chair—the depressed seat of which suggested its customary use by an elephant of sedentary habits—and opened the diminutive piano.

"I wonder if Miss Bellingham would give us a little music?" I said.

"I wonder if she could?" was the smiling response. "Do you know," she continued, "I have not touched a piano for nearly two years? It will be quite an interesting experiment—to me; but if it fails, you will be the sufferers. So you must choose."

"My verdict," said Mr. Bellingham, "is *fiat experimentum*, though I won't complete the quotation, as that would seem to disparage Doctor Barnard's piano. But before you begin, Ruth, there is one rather disagreeable matter that I want to dispose of, so that I may not disturb the harmony with it later."

He paused, and we all looked at him expectantly.

"I suppose, Doctor Thorndyke," he said, "you read the newspapers?"

"I don't," replied Thorndyke. "But I ascertain, for purely business purposes, what they contain."

"Then," said Mr. Bellingham, "you have probably met with some accounts of the finding of certain human remains, apparently portions of a mutilated body?"

"Yes, I have seen those reports and filed them for future reference."

"Exactly. Well, now, it can hardly be necessary for me to tell you that those remains—the mutilated remains of some poor murdered creature, as there can be no doubt they are—have seemed to have a very dreadful significance for me. You will understand what I mean; and I want to ask you if—if they have made a similar suggestion to you."

Thorndyke paused before replying, with his eyes bent thoughtfully on the floor, and we all looked at him anxiously.

"It is very natural," he said at length, "that you should associate these remains with the mystery of your brother's disappearance. I should like to say that you are wrong in doing so, but if I did I should be uncandid. There are certain facts that do, undoubtedly, seem to suggest a connection, and, up to the present, there are no definite facts of a contrary significance."

Mr. Bellingham sighed deeply and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"It is a horrible affair!" he said huskily; "horrible! Would you mind, Doctor Thorndyke, telling us just how the matter stands in your opinion—what the probabilities are, for and against?"

Again Thorndyke reflected awhile, and it seemed to me that he was not very willing to discuss the subject. However, the question had been asked pointedly, and eventually he answered:

"At the present stage of the investigation it is not very easy to state the balance of probabilities. The matter is still quite speculative. The bones which have been found hitherto (for we are dealing with a skeleton,

not with a body) have been exclusively those which are useless for personal identification; which is, in itself, a rather curious and striking fact. The general character and dimensions of the bones seem to suggest a middle-aged man of about your brother's height, and the date of deposition appears to be in agreement with the date of his disappearance."

"Is it known, then, when they were deposited?" Mr. Bellingham asked.

"In the case of those found at Sidcup it seems possible to deduce an approximate date. The watercress-bed was cleaned out about two years ago, so they could not have been lying there longer than that; and their condition suggests that they could not have been there much less than two years, as there is apparently not a vestige of the soft structures left. Of course, I am speaking from the newspaper reports only; I have no direct knowledge of the matter."

"Have they found any considerable part of the body yet? I haven't been reading the papers myself. My little friend, Miss Oman, brought a great bundle of 'em for me to read, but I couldn't stand it; I pitched the whole boiling of 'em out of the window."

I thought I detected a slight twinkle in Thorndyke's eye, but he answered quite gravely:

"I think I can give you the particulars from memory, though I won't guarantee the dates. The original discovery was made, apparently quite accidentally, at Sidcup on the fifteenth of July. It consisted of a complete left arm, minus the third finger and including the bones of the shoulder—the shoulder-blade and collar-bone. This discovery seems to have set the local population, especially the juvenile part of it, searching all the ponds and streams of the neighbourhood——"

"Cannibals!" interjected Mr. Bellingham.

"With the result that there was dredged up out of a pond near St. Mary Cray, in Kent, a right thigh-bone. There is a slight clue to identity in respect of this bone, since the head of it has a small patch of what is

called 'eburnation'—that is a sort of porcelain-like polish that occurs on the parts of bones that form a joint when the natural covering of cartilage is destroyed by disease. It is produced by the unprotected surface of one bone grinding against the similarly unprotected surface of another."

"And how," Mr. Bellingham asked, "would that help the identification?"

"It would indicate," replied Thorndyke, "that the deceased had probably suffered from rheumatoid arthritis—what is commonly known as rheumatic gout—and he would probably have limped slightly and complained of some pain in the right hip."

"I am afraid that doesn't help us much," said Mr. Bellingham; "for, you see, John had a pretty pronounced limp from another cause, an old injury to his left ankle; and as to complaining of pain—well, he was a hardy old fellow and not much given to making complaints of any kind. But don't let me interrupt you."

"The next discovery," continued Thorndyke, "was made near Lee, by the police this time. They seem to have developed sudden activity in the matter, and in searching the neighbourhood of West Kent they dragged out of a pond near Lee the bones of a right foot. Now, if it had been the left instead of the right we might have had a clue, as I understand that your brother had fractured his left ankle, and there might have been some traces of the injury on the foot itself."

"Yes," said Mr. Bellingham, "I suppose there might. The injury was described as a Pott's fracture."

"Exactly. Well, now, after this discovery at Lee it seems that the police set on foot a systematic search of all the ponds and small pieces of water around London, and, on the twenty-third, they found in the Cuckoo Pits in Epping Forest, not far from Woodford, the bones of a right arm (including those of the shoulder, as before), which seem to be part of the same body."

"Yes," said Mr. Bellingham, "I heard of that.

Quite close to my old house. Horrible! horrible! It gave me the shudders to think of it—to think that poor old John may have been waylaid and murdered when he was actually coming to see me. He may even have got into the grounds by the back gate, if it was left unfastened, and been followed in there and murdered. You remember that a scarab from his watch-chain was found there? But is it clear that this arm was the fellow of the arm that was found at Sidcup?"

"It seems to agree in character and dimensions," said Thorndyke, "and the agreement is strongly supported by a discovery that was made two days later."

"What is that?" Mr. Bellingham demanded.

"It is the lower half of a trunk which the police dredged out of a rather deep pond on the skirts of the forest at Loughton—Staple's Pond, it is called. The bones found were the pelvis—that is, the two hip-bones—and six vertebræ, or joints of the backbone. Having discovered these, the police dammed the stream and pumped the pond dry, but no other bones were found; which is rather odd, as there should have been a pair of ribs belonging to the upper vertebra—the twelfth dorsal vertebra. It suggests some curious questions as to the method of dismemberment; but I mustn't go into unpleasant details. The point is that the cavity of the right hip-joint showed a patch of eburnation corresponding to that on the head of the right thigh-bone that was found at St. Mary Cray. So there can be very little doubt that these bones are all part of the same body."

"I see," grunted Mr. Bellingham; and he added, after a moment's thought: "Now, the question is, Are these bones the remains of my brother John? What do you say, Doctor Thorndyke?"

"I say that the question cannot be answered on the facts at present known to us. It can only be said that they may be, and that some of the circumstances suggest that they are. But we can only wait for further discoveries. At any moment the police may light upon

some portion of the skeleton which will settle the question definitely one way or the other."

"I suppose," said Mr. Bellingham, "I can't be of any service to you in the matter of identification?"

"Indeed you can," said Thorndyke, "and I was going to ask you to assist me. What I want you to do is this: Write down a full description of your brother, including every detail known to you, together with an account of every illness or injury from which you know him to have suffered; and also the names and, if possible, the addresses of any doctors, surgeons, or dentists who may have attended him at any time. The dentists are particularly important, as their information would be invaluable if the skull belonging to these bones should be discovered."

Mr. Bellingham shuddered.

"It's a shocking idea," he said; "but, of course, you are quite right. You must have the facts if you are to form an opinion. I will write out what you want and send it to you without delay. And now, for God's sake, let us throw off this nightmare, for a little while, at least! What is there, Ruth, among Doctor Barnard's music that you can manage?"

Barnard's collection in general inclined to the severely classical, but we disinterred from the heap a few lighter works of an old-fashioned kind, including a volume of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, and with one of these Miss Bellingham made trial of her skill, playing it with excellent taste and quite adequate execution. That, at least, was her father's verdict; for, as to me, I found it the perfection of happiness merely to sit and look at her—a state of mind that would have been in no wise disturbed even by *Silvery Waves* or *The Maiden's Prayer*.

Thus with simple, homely music, and conversation always cheerful and sometimes brilliant, slipped away one of the pleasantest evenings of my life, and slipped away all too soon. St. Dunstan's clock was the fly in the ointment, for it boomed out intrusively the hour

of eleven just as my guests were beginning thoroughly to appreciate one another; and thereby carried the sun (with a minor paternal satellite) out of the firmament of my heaven. For I had, in my professional capacity, given strict injunctions that Mr. Bellingham should on no account sit up late; and now, in my social capacity, I had smilingly to hear "the doctor's orders" quoted. It was a scurvy return for all my care.

When Mr. and Miss Bellingham departed, Thorndyke and Jervis would have gone too; but noting my bereaved condition, and being withal compassionate and tender of heart, they were persuaded to stay awhile and bear me company in a consolatory pipe.

CHAPTER XI

THE EVIDENCE REVIEWED

"So the game has opened," observed Thorndyke, as he struck a match. "The play has begun with a cautious lead off by the other side. Very cautious, and not very confident."

"Why do you say 'not very confident'?" I asked.

"Well, it is evident that Hurst—and, I fancy, Jellicoe too—is anxious to buy off Bellingham's opposition, and at a pretty long price, under the circumstances. And when we consider how very little Bellingham has to offer against the presumption of his brother's death, it looks as if Hurst hadn't much to say on his side."

"No," said Jervis, "he can't hold many trumps or he wouldn't be willing to pay four hundred a year for his opponent's chance; and that is just as well, for it seems to me that our own hand is a pretty poor one."

"We must look through our hand and see what we do hold," said Thorndyke. "Our trump card at present—a rather small one, I am afraid—is the obvious intention of the testator that the bulk of the property should go to his brother."

"I suppose you will begin your inquiries now," said I.

"We began them some time ago—the day after you brought us the will, in fact. Jervis has been through the registers and has ascertained that no interment under the name of John Bellingham has taken place since the disappearance; which was just what we expected. He has also discovered that some other

person has been making similar inquiries; which, again, is what we expected."

"And your own investigations?"

"Have given negative results for the most part. I found Doctor Norbury, at the British Museum, very friendly and helpful; so friendly, in fact, that I am thinking whether I may not be able to enlist his help in certain private researches of my own, with reference to the changes effected by time in the physical properties of certain substances."

"Oh; you haven't told me about that," said Jervis.

"No: I haven't really commenced to plan my experiments yet, and they will probably lead to nothing when I do. It occurred to me that, possibly, in the course of time, certain molecular changes might take place in substances such as wood, bone, pottery, stucco, and other common materials, and that these changes might alter their power of conducting or transmitting molecular vibrations. Now, if this should turn out to be the case, it would be a fact of considerable importance, medico-legally and otherwise; for it would be possible to determine approximately the age of any object of known composition by testing its reactions to electricity, heat, light and other molecular vibrations. I thought of seeking Doctor Norbury's assistance because he can furnish me with materials for experiment of such great age that the reactions, if any, should be extremely easy to demonstrate. But to return to our case. I learned from him that John Bellingham had certain friends in Paris—collectors and museum officials—whom he was in the habit of visiting for the purpose of study and exchange of specimens. I have made inquiries of all of these, and none of them had seen him during his last visit. In fact, I have not yet discovered anyone who had seen Bellingham in Paris on this occasion. So his visit there remains a mystery for the present."

"It doesn't seem to be of much importance, since

he undoubtedly came back," I remarked; but to this Thorndyke demurred.

"It is impossible to estimate the importance of the unknown," said he.

"Well, how does the matter stand," asked Jervis, "on the evidence that we have? John Bellingham disappeared on a certain date. Is there anything to show what was the manner of his disappearance?"

"The facts in our possession," said Thorndyke, "which are mainly those set forth in the newspaper report, suggest several alternative possibilities; and in view of the coming inquiry—for they will, no doubt, have to be gone into in Court, to some extent—it may be worth while to consider them. There are five conceivable hypotheses"—here Thorndyke checked them on his fingers as he proceeded—"First, he may still be alive. Second, he may have died and been buried without identification. Third, he may have been murdered by some unknown person. Fourth, he may have been murdered by Hurst and his body concealed. Fifth, he may have been murdered by his brother. Let us examine these possibilities seriatim.

"First, he may still be alive. If he is, he must either have disappeared voluntarily, have lost his memory suddenly and not been identified, or have been imprisoned—on a false charge or otherwise. Let us take the first case—that of voluntary disappearance. Obviously, its improbability is extreme."

"Jellicoe doesn't think so," said I. "He thinks it quite on the cards that John Bellingham is alive. He says that it is not a very unusual thing for a man to disappear for a time."

"Then why is he applying for a presumption of death?"

"Just what I asked him. He says that it is the correct thing to do; that the entire responsibility rests on the Court."

"That is all nonsense," said Thorndyke. "Jellicoe is the trustee for his absent client, and, if he thinks that

client is alive, it is his duty to keep the estate intact; and he knows that perfectly well. We may take it that Jellicoe is of the same opinion as I am: that John Bellingham is dead."

"Still," I urged, "men do disappear from time to time, and turn up again after years of absence."

"Yes, but for a definite reason. Either they are irresponsible vagabonds who take this way of shuffling off their responsibilities, or they are men who have been caught in a net of distasteful circumstances. For instance, a civil servant or a solicitor or a tradesman finds himself bound for life to a locality and an occupation of intolerable monotony. Perhaps he has an ill-tempered wife, who, after the amiable fashion of a certain type of woman, thinking that her husband is pinned down without a chance of escape, gives a free rein to her temper. The man puts up with it for years, but at last it becomes unbearable. Then he suddenly disappears; and small blame to him. But this was not Bellingham's case. He was a wealthy bachelor with an engrossing interest in life, free to go whither he would and to do whatsoever he wished. Why should he disappear? The thing is incredible.

"As to his having lost his memory and remained unidentified, that, also, is incredible in the case of a man who had visiting-cards and letters in his pocket, whose linen was marked, and who was being inquired for everywhere by the police. As to his being in prison, we may dismiss that possibility, inasmuch as a prisoner, both before and after conviction, would have full opportunity of communicating with his friends.

"The second possibility, that he may have died suddenly and been buried without identification, is highly improbable; but, as it is conceivable that the body might have been robbed and the means of identification thus lost, it remains as a possibility that has to be considered, remote as it is.

"The third hypothesis, that he may have been murdered by some unknown person, is, under the

circumstances, not wildly improbable; but, as the police were on the look out and a detailed description of the missing man's person was published in the papers, it would involve the complete concealment of the body. But this would exclude the most probable form of the crime—the casual robbery with violence. It is therefore possible, but highly improbable.

"The fourth hypothesis is that Bellingham was murdered by Hurst. Now the one fact which militates against this view is that Hurst apparently had no motive for committing the murder. We are assured by Jellicoe that no one but himself knew the contents of the will, and if this is so—but, mind, we have no evidence that it is so—Hurst would have no reason to suppose that he had anything material to gain by his cousin's death. Otherwise the hypothesis presents no inherent improbabilities. The man was last seen alive at Hurst's house. He was seen to enter it and he was never seen to leave it—we are still taking the facts as stated in the newspapers, remember—and it now appears that he stands to benefit enormously by that man's death."

"But," I objected, "you are forgetting that, directly the man was missed, Hurst and the servants together searched the entire house."

"Yes. What did they search for?"

"Why, for Mr. Bellingham, of course."

"Exactly; for Mr. Bellingham. That is, for a living man. Now how do you search a house for a living man? You look in all the rooms. When you look in a room, if he is there, you see him; if you do not see him, you assume that he is not there. You don't look under the sofa or behind the piano, you don't pull out large drawers or open cupboards. You just look into the rooms. That is what these people seem to have done. And they did not see Mr. Bellingham. But Mr. Bellingham's corpse might have been stowed away out of sight in any one of the rooms that they looked into."

"That is a grim thought," said Jervis; "but it is

perfectly true. There is no evidence that the man was not lying dead in the house at the very time of the search."

"But even so," said I, "there was the body to be disposed of somehow. Now how could he possibly have got rid of the body without being observed?"

"Ah!" said Thorndyke, "now we are touching on a point of crucial importance. If anyone should ever write a treatise on the art of murder—not an exhibition of literary fireworks like De Quincey's, but a genuine working treatise—he might leave all other technical details to take care of themselves if he could describe some really practicable plan for disposing of the body. That is, and always has been, the great stumbling-block to the murderer: to get rid of the body. The human body," he continued, thoughtfully regarding his pipe, just as, in the days of my pupilage, he was wont to regard the black-board chalk, "is a very remarkable object. It presents a combination of properties that makes it singularly difficult to conceal permanently. It is bulky and of an awkward shape, it is heavy, it is completely incombustible, it is chemically unstable, and its decomposition yields great volumes of highly odorous gases, and it nevertheless contains identifiable structures of the highest degree of permanence. It is extremely difficult to preserve unchanged, and it is still more difficult completely to destroy. The essential permanence of the human body is well shown in the classical case of Eugene Aram; but a still more striking instance is that of Sekenen-Ra the Third, one of the last kings of the seventeenth Egyptian dynasty. Here, after a lapse of some four thousand years, it has been possible to determine, not only the cause of death and the manner of its occurrence, but the way in which the king fell, the nature of the weapon with which the fatal wound was inflicted, and even the position of the assailant. And the permanence of the body under other conditions is admirably shown in the case of Doctor Parkman, of Boston, U.S.A., in which identification

was actually effected by means of remains collected from the ashes of a furnace."

"Then we may take it," said Jervis, "that the world has not yet seen the last of John Bellingham."

"I think we may regard that as almost a certainty," replied Thorndyke. "The only question—and a very important one—is as to when the reappearance may take place. It may be to-morrow or it may be centuries hence, when all the issues involved have been forgotten."

"Assuming," said I, "for the sake of argument, that Hurst did murder him and that the body was concealed in the study at the time the search was made. How could it have been disposed of? If you had been in Hurst's place, how would you have gone to work?"

Thorndyke smiled at the bluntness of my question.

"You are asking me for an incriminating statement," said he, "delivered in the presence of a witness too. But, as a matter of fact, there is no use in speculating *a priori;* we should have to reconstruct a purely imaginary situation, the circumstances of which are unknown to us, and we should almost certainly reconstruct it wrong. What we may fairly assume is that no reasonable person, no matter how immoral, would find himself in the position that you suggest. Murder is usually a crime of impulse, and the murderer a person of feeble self-control. Such persons are most unlikely to make elaborate and ingenious arrangements for the disposal of the bodies of their victims. Even the cold-blooded perpetrators of the most carefully planned murders appear, as I have said, to break down at this point. The almost insuperable difficulty of getting rid of a human body is not appreciated until the murderer suddenly finds himself face to face with it.

"In the case that you are suggesting, the choice would seem to lie between burial on the premises or dismemberment and dispersal of the fragments; and either method would be pretty certain to lead to discovery."

"As illustrated by the remains of which you were speaking to Mr. Bellingham," Jervis remarked.

"Exactly," Thorndyke answered, "though we could hardly imagine a reasonably intelligent criminal adopting a watercress-bed as a hiding-place."

"No. That was certainly an error of judgment. By the way, I thought it best to say nothing while you were talking to Bellingham, but I noticed that, in discussing the possibility of those being the bones of his brother, you made no comment on the absence of the third finger of the left hand. I am sure you didn't overlook it, but isn't it a point of some importance?"

"As to identification? Under the present circumstances, I think not. If there were a man missing who had lost that finger it would, of course, be an important fact. But I have not heard of any such man. Or, again, if there were any evidence that the finger had been removed before death, it would be highly important. But there is no such evidence. It may have been cut off after death, and that is where the real significance of its absence lies."

"I don't quite see what you mean," said Jervis.

"I mean that, if there is no report of any missing man who had lost that particular finger, the probability is that the finger was removed after death. And then arises the interesting question of motive. Why should it have been removed? It could hardly have become detached accidentally. What do you suggest?"

"Well," said Jervis, "it might have been a peculiar finger; a finger, for instance, with some characteristic deformity, such as an ankylosed joint, which would be easy to identify."

"Yes; but that explanation introduces the same difficulty. No person with a deformed or ankylosed finger has been reported as missing."

Jervis puckered up his brows and looked at me.

"I'm hanged if I see any other explanation," he said. "Do you, Berkeley?"

I shook my head.

"Don't forget which finger it is that is missing," said Thorndyke. "The third finger on the left hand."

"Oh, I see!" said Jervis. "The ring-finger. You mean it may have been removed for the sake of a ring that wouldn't come off."

"Yes. It would not be the first instance of the kind. Fingers have been severed from dead hands—and even from living ones—for the sake of rings that were too tight to be drawn off. And the fact that it is the left hand supports this suggestion; for a ring that was inconveniently tight would be worn by preference on the left hand, as that is usually slightly smaller than the right. What is the matter, Berkeley?"

A sudden light had burst upon me, and I suppose my countenance betrayed the fact.

"I am a confounded fool!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, don't say that," said Jervis. "Give your friends a chance."

"I ought to have seen this long ago and told you about it. John Bellingham did wear a ring, and it was so tight that, when once he had got it on, he could never get it off again."

"Do you happen to know on which hand he wore it?" Thorndyke asked.

"Yes. It was the left hand; because Miss Bellingham, who told me about it, said that he would never have been able to get the ring on at all but for the fact that his left hand was slightly smaller than his right."

"There it is, then," said Thorndyke. "With this new fact in our possession, the absence of this finger furnishes the starting-point of some very curious speculations."

"As, for instance?" said Jervis.

"Ah, under the circumstances, I must leave you to pursue those speculations independently. I am now acting for Mr. Bellingham."

Jervis grinned and was silent for a while, refilling his pipe thoughtfully; but when he had got it alight he resumed.

"To return to the question of the disappearance; you don't consider it highly improbable that Bellingham might have been murdered by Hurst?"

"Oh, don't imagine that I am making an accusation. I am considering the various probabilities merely in the abstract. The same reasoning applies to the Bellinghams. As to whether any of them did commit the murder, that is a question of personal character. I certainly do not suspect the Bellinghams after having seen them, and with regard to Hurst, I know nothing, or at least very little, to his disadvantage."

"Do you know anything?" asked Jervis.

"Well," Thorndyke said, with some hesitation, "it seems a thought unkind to rake up the little details of a man's past, and yet it has to be done. I have, of course, made the usual routine inquiries concerning the parties to this affair, and this is what they have brought to light:

"Hurst, as you know, is a stockbroker—a man of good position and reputation; but, about ten years ago, he seems to have committed an indiscretion, to put it mildly, which nearly got him into rather serious difficulties. He appears to have speculated rather heavily and considerably beyond his means, for when a sudden spasm of the markets upset his calculations, it turned out that he had been employing his clients' capital and securities. For a time it looked as if there was going to be serious trouble; then, quite unexpectedly, he managed to raise the necessary amount in some way and settle all claims. Whence he got the money has never been discovered to this day, which is a curious circumstance, seeing that the deficiency was rather over five thousand pounds; but the important fact is that he did get it and that he paid up all that he owed. So that he was only a potential defaulter, so to speak; and, discreditable as the affair undoubtedly was, it does not seem to have any direct bearing on this present case."

"No," Jervis agreed, "though it makes one consider

his position with more attention than one would otherwise."

"Undoubtedly," said Thorndyke. "A reckless gambler is a man whose conduct cannot be relied on. He is subject to sudden vicissitudes of fortune which may force him into other kinds of wrongdoing. Many an embezzlement has been preceded by an unlucky plunge on the turf."

"Assuming the responsibility for this disappearance to lie between Hurst and—and the Bellinghams," said I, with an uncomfortable gulp as I mentioned the names of my friends, "to which side does the balance of probability incline?"

"To the side of Hurst, I should say, without doubt," replied Thorndyke. "The case stands thus—on the facts presented to us: Hurst appears to have had no motive for killing the deceased (as we will call him); but the man was seen to enter his house, was never seen to leave it, and was never again seen alive. Bellingham, on the other hand, had a motive, as he believed himself to be the principal beneficiary under the will. But the deceased was not seen at his house, and there is no evidence that he went to the house or to the neighbourhood of the house, excepting the scarab that was found there. But the evidence of the scarab is vitiated by the fact that Hurst was present when it was picked up, and that it was found on a spot over which Hurst had passed only a few minutes previously. Until Hurst is cleared, it seems to me that the presence of the scarab proves nothing against the Bellinghams."

"Then your opinions on the case," said I, "are based entirely on the facts that have been made public."

"Yes, mainly. I do not necessarily accept those facts just as they are presented, and I may have certain views of my own on the case. But if I have, I do not feel in a position to discuss them. For the present, discussion has to be limited to the facts and inferences offered by the parties concerned."

"There!" exclaimed Jervis, rising to knock out his

pipe, "that is where Thorndyke has you. He lets you think you're in the very thick of the 'know' until one fine morning you wake up and discover that you have only been a gaping outsider; and then you are mightily astonished—and so are the other side, too, for that matter. But we must really be off now, mustn't we, reverend senior?"

"I suppose we must," replied Thorndyke; and, as he drew on his gloves, he asked: "Have you heard from Barnard lately?"

"Oh, yes," I answered. "I wrote to him at Smyrna to say that the practice was flourishing and that I was quite happy and contented, and that he might stay away as long as he liked. He writes by return that he will prolong his holiday if an opportunity offers, but will let me know later."

"Gad," said Jervis, "it was a stroke of luck for Barnard that Bellingham happened to have such a magnificent daughter—there! don't mind me, old man. You go in and win—she's worth it, isn't she, Thorndyke?"

"Miss Bellingham is a very charming young lady," replied Thorndyke. "I am most favourably impressed by both the father and the daughter, and I only trust that we may be able to be of some service to them." With this sedate little speech Thorndyke shook my hand, and I watched my two friends go on their way until their fading shapes were swallowed up in the darkness of Fetter Lane.

CHAPTER XII

A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

It was some two or three mornings after my little supper-party that, as I stood in the consulting-room brushing my hat preparatory to starting on my morning round, Adolphus appeared at the door to announce two gentlemen waiting in the surgery. I told him to bring them in, and a moment later Thorndyke entered, accompanied by Jervis. I noted that they looked uncommonly large in the little apartment, especially Thorndyke, but I had no time to consider this phenomenon, for the latter, when he had shaken my hand, proceeded at once to explain the object of their visit.

"We have come to ask a favour, Berkeley," he said; "to ask you to do us a very great service in the interests of your friends, the Bellinghams."

"You know I shall be delighted," I said warmly. "What is it?"

"I will explain. You know—or perhaps you don't—that the police have collected all the bones that have been discovered and deposited them in the mortuary at Woodford, where they are to be viewed by the coroner's jury. Now, it has become imperative that I should have more definite and reliable information about them than I can get from the newspapers. The natural thing would be for me to go down and examine them myself, but there are circumstances that make it very desirable that my connection with the case should not leak out. Consequently, I can't go myself, and, for the same reason, I can't send Jervis. On the other

hand, as it is now stated pretty openly that the police consider the bones to be almost certainly those of John Bellingham, it would seem perfectly natural that you, as Godfrey Bellingham's doctor, should go down to view them on his behalf."

"I should like to go," I said. "I would give anything to go; but how is it to be managed? It would mean a whole day off and leaving the practice to take care of itself."

"I think that could be arranged," said Thorndyke; "and the matter is really important for two reasons. One is that the inquest opens to-morrow, and someone certainly ought to be there to watch the proceedings on Godfrey's behalf; and the other is that our client has received notice from Hurst's solicitors that the application will be heard in the Probate Court in a few days."

"Isn't that rather sudden?" I asked.

"It certainly suggests that there has been a good deal more activity than we were given to understand. But you see the importance of the affair. The inquest will be a sort of dress rehearsal for the Probate Court, and it is quite essential that we should have a chance of estimating the management."

"Yes, I see that. But how are we to manage about the practice?"

"We shall find you a substitute."

"Through a medical agent?"

"Yes," said Jervis. "Turcival will find us a man; in fact, he has done it. I saw him this morning; he has a man who is waiting up in town to negotiate for the purchase of a practice and who would do the job for a couple of guineas. Quite a reliable man. Only say the word, and I will run off to Adam Street and engage him definitely."

"Very well. You engage the locum tenens, and I will be prepared to start for Woodford as soon as he turns up."

"Excellent!" said Thorndyke. "That is a great

weight off my mind. And if you could manage to drop in this evening and smoke a pipe with us we could talk over the plan of campaign and let you know what items of information we are particularly in want of."

I promised to turn up at King's Bench Walk as soon after half-past eight as possible, and my two friends then took their departure, leaving me to set out in high spirits on my scanty round of visits.

It is surprising what different aspects things present from different points of view; how relative are our estimates of the conditions and circumstances of life. To the urban workman—the journeyman baker or tailor, for instance, labouring year in year out in a single building—a holiday ramble on Hampstead Heath is a veritable voyage of discovery; whereas to the sailor the shifting panorama of the whole wide world is but the commonplace of the day's work.

So I reflected as I took my place in the train at Liverpool Street on the following day. There had been a time when a trip by rail to the borders of Epping Forest would have been far from a thrilling experience; now, after vegetating in the little world of Fetter Lane, it was quite an adventure.

The enforced inactivity of a railway journey is favourable to thought, and I had much to think about. The last few weeks had witnessed momentous changes in my outlook. New interests had arisen, new friendships had grown up; and, above all, there had stolen into my life that supreme influence that, for good or for evil, according to my fortune, was to colour and pervade it even to its close. Those few days of companionable labour in the reading-room, with the homely hospitalities of the milk-shop and the pleasant walks homeward through the friendly London streets, had called into existence a new world—a world in which the gracious personality of Ruth Bellingham was the one dominating reality. And thus, as I leaned back in a corner of the railway carriage with an unlighted pipe in my hand, the events of the immediate past, together

with those more problematical ones of the impending future, occupied me rather to the exclusion of the business of the moment, which was to review the remains collected in the Woodford mortuary, until, as the train approached Stratford, the odours of the soap and bone-manure factories poured in at the open window and (by a natural association of ideas) brought me back to the object of my quest.

As to the exact purpose of this expedition, I was not very clear; but I knew that I was acting as Thorndyke's proxy and thrilled with pride at the thought. But what particular light my investigations were to throw upon the intricate Bellingham case I had no very definite idea. With a view to fixing the course of procedure in my mind, I took Thorndyke's written instructions from my pocket and read them over carefully. They were very full and explicit, making ample allowance for my lack of experience in medico-legal matters :—

"1. Do not appear to make minute investigations or in any way excite remark.

2. Ascertain if all the bones belonging to each region are present, and if not, which are missing.

3. Measure the extreme length of the principal bones and compare those of opposite sides.

4. Examine the bones with reference to the age, sex, and muscular development of the deceased.

5. Note the presence or absence of signs of constitutional disease, local disease of bone or adjacent structures, old or recent injuries, and any other departures from the normal or usual.

6. Observe the presence or absence of adipocere and its position, if present.

7. Note any remains of tendons, ligaments, or other soft structures.

8. Examine the Sidcup hand with reference to the question as to whether the finger was separated before or after death.

9. Estimate the probable period of submersion and note any changes (as, e.g., mineral or organic staining) due to the character of the water or mud.

10. Ascertain the circumstances (immediate and remote) that led to the discovery of the bones and the names of the persons concerned in those circumstances.

11. Commit all information to writing as soon as possible, and make plans and diagrams on the spot, if circumstances permit.

12. Preserve an impassive exterior; listen attentively but without eagerness; ask as few questions as possible; pursue any inquiry that your observations on the spot may suggest."

These were my instructions, and, considering that I was going merely to inspect a few dry bones, they appeared rather formidable; in fact, the more I read them over the greater became my misgivings as to my qualifications for the task.

As I approached the mortuary it became evident that some, at least, of Thorndyke's admonitions were by no means unnecessary. The place was in charge of a police-sergeant, who watched my approach suspiciously; and some half-dozen men, obviously newspaper reporters, hovered about the entrance like a pack of jackals. I presented the coroner's order which Mr. Marchmont had obtained, and which the sergeant read with his back against the wall, to prevent the newspaper men from looking over his shoulder.

My credentials being found satisfactory, the door was unlocked and I entered, accompanied by three enterprising reporters, whom, however, the sergeant summarily ejected and locked out, returning to usher me into the presence and to observe my proceedings with intelligent but highly embarrassing interest.

The bones were laid out on a large table and covered with a sheet, which the sergeant slowly turned back, watching my face intently as he did so to note the impression that the spectacle made upon me. I imagine

that he must have been somewhat disappointed by my impassive demeanour, for the remains suggested to me nothing more than a rather shabby set of "student's osteology." The whole collection had been set out (by the police-surgeon, as the sergeant informed me) in their proper anatomical order; notwithstanding which I counted them over carefully to make sure that none were missing, checking them by the list with which Thorndyke had furnished me.

"I see you have found the left thigh-bone," I remarked, observing that this did not appear in the list.

"Yes," said the sergeant; "that turned up yesterday evening in a big pond called Baldwin's Pond in the Sand-pit plain, near Little Monk Wood."

"Is that near here?" I asked.

"In the forest up Loughton way," was the reply.

I made a note of the fact (on which the sergeant looked as if he was sorry he had mentioned it), and then turned my attention to a general consideration of the bones before examining them in detail. Their appearance would have been improved and examination facilitated by a thorough scrubbing, for they were just as they had been taken from their respective resting-places, and it was difficult to decide whether their reddish-yellow colour was an actual stain or due to a deposit on the surface. In any case, as it affected them all alike, I thought it an interesting feature and made a note of it. They bore numerous traces of their sojourn in the various ponds from which they had been recovered, but these gave me little help in determining the length of time during which they had been submerged. They were, of course, encrusted with mud, and little wisps of pond-weed stuck to them in places; but these facts furnished only the vaguest measure of time.

Some of the traces were, indeed, more informing. To several of the bones, for instance, there adhered the dried egg-clusters of the common pond-snail, and in one of the hollows of the right shoulder-blade (the

" infra-spinous fossa ") was a group of the mud-built tubes of the red river-worm. These remains gave proof of a considerable period of submersion, and since they could not have been deposited on the bones until all the flesh had disappeared, they furnished evidence that some time—a month or two, at any rate—had elapsed since this had happened. Incidentally, too, their distribution showed the position in which the bones had lain, and though this appeared to be of no importance in the existing circumstances, I made careful notes of the situation of each adherent body, illustrating their position by rough sketches.

The sergeant watched my proceedings with an indulgent smile.

" You're making a regular inventory, sir," he remarked, " as if you were going to put 'em up for auction. I shouldn't think those snails' eggs would be much help in identification. And all that has been done already," he added as I produced my measuring-tape.

" No doubt," I replied ; " but my business is to make independent observations, to check the others, if necessary." And I proceeded to measure each of the principal bones separately and to compare those of the opposite sides. The agreement in dimensions and general characteristics of the pairs of bones left little doubt that all were parts of one skeleton, a conclusion that was confirmed by the eburnated patch on the head of the right thigh-bone and the corresponding patch in the socket of the right hip-bone. When I had finished my measurements I went over the entire series of bones in detail, examining each with the closest attention for any of those signs which Thorndyke had indicated, and eliciting nothing but a monotonously reiterated negative. They were distressingly and disappointingly normal.

" Well, sir, and what do you make of 'em ? " the sergeant asked cheerfully as I shut up my note-book and straightened my back. " Whose bones are they ? Are they Mr. Bellingham's, think ye ? "

"I should be very sorry to say whose bones they are," I replied. "One bone is very much like another, you know."

"I suppose it is," he agreed; "but I thought that, with all that measuring and all those notes, you might have arrived at something definite." Evidently he was disappointed in me; and I was somewhat disappointed in myself when I contrasted Thorndyke's elaborate instructions with the meagre result of my investigations. For what did my discoveries amount to? And how much was the inquiry advanced by the few entries in my notebook?

The bones were apparently those of a man of fair though not remarkable muscular development; over thirty years of age, but how much older I was unable to say. His height I judged roughly to be five feet eight inches, but my measurements would furnish data for a more exact estimate by Thorndyke. Beyond this the bones were quite uncharacteristic. There were no signs of disease either local or general, no indications of injuries either old or recent, no departures of any kind from the normal or usual; and the dismemberment had been effected with such care that there was not a single scratch on any of the separated surfaces. Of adipocere (the peculiar waxy or soapy substance that is commonly found in bodies that have slowly decayed in damp situations) there was not a trace; and the only remnant of the soft structures was a faint indication, like a spot of dried glue, of the tendon on the tip of the right elbow.

The sergeant was in the act of replacing the sheet, with the air of a showman who has just given an exhibition, when there came a sharp rapping on the mortuary door. The officer finished spreading the sheet with official precision, and having ushered me out into the lobby, turned the key and admitted three persons, holding the door open after they had entered for me to go out. But the appearance of the newcomers inclined me to linger. One of them was a local

constable, evidently in official charge; a second was a labouring man, very muddy and wet, who carried a small sack; while in the third I thought I scented a professional brother.

The sergeant continued to hold the door open.

"Nothing more I can do for you, sir?" he asked genially.

"Is that the divisional surgeon?" I inquired.

"Yes. I am the divisional surgeon," the new-comer answered. "Did you want anything of me?"

"This," said the sergeant, "is a medical gentleman who has got permission from the coroner to inspect the remains. He is acting for the family of the deceased—I mean, for the family of Mr. Bellingham," he added in answer to an inquiring glance from the surgeon.

"I see," said the latter. "Well, they have found the rest of the trunk, including, I understand, the ribs that were missing from the other part. Isn't that so, Davis?"

"Yes, sir," replied the constable. "Inspector Badger says all the ribs is here, and all the bones of the neck as well."

"The inspector seems to be an anatomist," I remarked.

The sergeant grinned. "He's a very knowing gentleman, is Mr. Badger. He came down here this morning quite early and spent a long time looking over the bones and checking them by some notes in his pocket-book. I fancy he's got something on, but he was precious close about it."

Here the sergeant shut up rather suddenly—perhaps contrasting his own conduct with that of his superior.

"Let us have these new bones out on the table," said the police-surgeon. "Take that sheet off, and don't shoot them out as if they were coals. Hand them out carefully."

The labourer fished out the wet and muddy bones one by one from the sack, and as he laid them on the table the surgeon arranged them in their proper relative positions.

"This has been a neatly executed job," he remarked; "none of your clumsy hacking with a chopper or a saw. The bones have been cleanly separated at the joints. The fellow who did this must have had some anatomical knowledge, unless he was a butcher, which, by the way, is not impossible. He has used his knife uncommonly skilfully, and you notice that each arm was taken off with the scapula attached, just as a butcher takes off a shoulder of mutton. Are there any more bones in that bag?"

"No, sir," replied the labourer, wiping his hands with an air of finality on the posterior aspect of his trousers; "that's the lot."

The surgeon looked thoughtfully at the bones as he gave a final touch to their arrangement, and remarked:

"The inspector is right. All the bones of the neck are there. Very odd. Don't you think so?"

"You mean——"

"I mean that this very eccentric murderer seems to have given himself such an extraordinary amount of trouble for no reason that one can see. There are these neck vertebræ, for instance. He must have carefully separated the skull from the atlas instead of just cutting through the neck. Then there is the way he divided the trunk; the twelfth ribs have just come in with this lot, but the twelfth dorsal vertebra to which they belong was attached to the lower half. Imagine the trouble he must have taken to do that, and without cutting or hacking the bones about, either. It is extraordinary. This is rather interesting, by the way. Handle it carefully."

He picked up the breast-bone daintily—for it was covered with wet mud—and handed it to me with the remark: "That is the most definite piece of evidence we have."

"You mean," I said, "that the union of the two parts into a single mass fixes this as the skeleton of an elderly man?"

"Yes, that is the obvious suggestion, which is confirmed by the deposit of bone in the rib-cartilages. You can tell the inspector, Davis, that I have checked this lot of bones and that they are all here."

"Would you mind writing it down, sir?" said the constable. "Inspector Badger said I was to have everything in writing."

The surgeon took out his pocket-book, and, while he was selecting a suitable piece of paper, he asked: "Did you form any opinion as to the height of the deceased?"

"Yes, I thought he would be about five feet eight" (here I caught the sergeant's eyes, fixed on me with a knowing leer).

"I made it five eight and a half," said the police-surgeon; "but we shall know better when we have seen the lower leg-bones. Where was this lot found, Davis?"

"In the pond just off the road in Lord's Bushes, sir, and the inspector has gone off now to——"

"Never mind where he's gone," interrupted the sergeant. "You just answer questions and attend to your business."

The sergeant's reproof conveyed a hint to me on which I was not slow to act. Friendly as my professional colleague was, it was clear that the police were disposed to treat me as an interloper who was to be kept out of the "know" as far as possible. Accordingly I thanked my colleague and the sergeant for their courtesy, and bidding them adieu until we should meet at the inquest, took my departure and walked away quickly until I found an inconspicuous position from which I could keep the door of the mortuary in view. A few moments later I saw Constable Davis emerge and stride away up the road.

I watched his rapidly diminishing figure until he had gone as far as I considered desirable, and then I set forth in his wake. The road led straight away from the village, and in less than half a mile entered the outskirts of the forest. Here I quickened my pace to

close up somewhat, and it was well that I did so, for suddenly he diverged from the road into a green lane, where for a while I lost sight of him. Still hurrying forward, I again caught sight of him just as he turned off into a narrow path that entered a beech wood with a thickish undergrowth of holly, along which I followed him for several minutes, gradually decreasing the distance between us, until suddenly there fell on my ear a rhythmical, metallic sound like the clank of a pump. Soon after I caught the sound of men's voices, and then the constable struck off the path into the wood.

I now advanced more cautiously, endeavouring to locate the search party by the sound of the pump, and when I had done this I made a little detour so that I might approach from the opposite direction to that from which the constable had appeared.

Still guided by the noise of the pump, I at length came out into a small opening among the trees and halted to survey the scene. The centre of the opening was occupied by a small pond, not more than a dozen yards across, by the side of which stood a builder's handcart. The little two-wheeled vehicle had evidently been used to convey the appliances which were deposited on the ground near it, and which consisted of a large tub—now filled with water—a shovel, a rake, a sieve, and a portable pump, the latter being fitted with a long delivery hose. There were three men besides the constable, one of whom was working the handle of the pump, while another was glancing at a paper that the constable had just delivered to him. He looked up sharply as I appeared, and viewed me with unconcealed disfavour.

"Hallo, sir!" said he. "You can't come here."

Now, seeing that I actually was here, this was clearly a mistake, and I ventured to point out the fallacy.

"Well, I can't allow you to stay here. Our business is of a private nature."

"I know exactly what your business is, Inspector Badger."

"Oh, do you?" said he, surveying me with a foxy smile. "And I expect I know what yours is, too. But we can't have any of you newspaper gentry spying on us just at present, so you just be off."

I thought it best to undeceive him at once, and accordingly, having explained who I was, I showed him the coroner's permit, which he read with manifest annoyance.

"This is all very well, sir," said he as he handed me back the paper, "but it doesn't authorize you to come spying on the proceedings of the police. Any remains that we discover will be deposited in the mortuary, where you can inspect them to your heart's content; but you can't stay here and watch us."

I had no defined object in keeping a watch on the inspector's proceedings; but the sergeant's indiscreet hint had aroused my curiosity, which was further excited by Mr. Badger's evident desire to get rid of me. Moreover, while we had been talking, the pump had stopped (the muddy floor of the pond being now pretty fully exposed), and the inspector's assistant was handling the shovel impatiently.

"Now, I put it to you, Inspector," said I, persuasively, "is it politic of you to allow it to be said that you refused an authorized representative of the family facilities for verifying any statements that you may make hereafter?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that if you should happen to find some bone which could be identified as part of the body of Mr. Bellingham, that fact would be of more importance to his family than to anyone else. You know that there is a very valuable estate and a rather difficult will."

"I didn't know it, and I don't see the bearing of it now" (neither did I, for that matter); "but if you make such a point of being present at the search, I can't very well refuse. Only you mustn't get in our way, that's all."

On hearing this conclusion, his assistant, who looked like a plain-clothes officer, took up his shovel and stepped into the mud that formed the bottom of the pond, stooping as he went and peering among the masses of weed that had been left stranded by the withdrawal of the water. The inspector watched him anxiously, cautioning him from time to time to "look out where he was treading"; the labourer left the pump and craned forward from the margin of the mud, and the constable and I looked on from our respective points of vantage. For some time the search was fruitless. Once the searcher stooped and picked up what turned out to be a fragment of decayed wood; then the remains of a long-deceased jay were discovered, examined, and rejected. Suddenly the man bent down by the side of a small pool that had been left in one of the deeper hollows, stared intently into the mud, and stood up.

"There's something here that looks like a bone, sir," he sang out.

"Don't grub about, then," said the inspector. "Drive your shovel right into the mud where you saw it and bring it to the sieve."

The man followed out these instructions, and as he came shorewards with a great pile of the slimy mud on his shovel we all converged on the sieve, which the inspector took up and held over the tub, directing the constable and labourer to "lend a hand," meaning thereby that they were to crowd round the tub and exclude me as completely as possible. This, in fact, they did very effectively with his assistance, for, when the shovelful of mud had been deposited on the sieve, the four men leaned over it and so nearly hid it from view that it was only by craning over, first on one side and then on the other, that I was able to catch an occasional glimpse of it and to observe it gradually melting away as the sieve, immersed in the water, was shaken to and fro.

Presently the inspector raised the sieve from the

water and stooped over it more closely to examine its contents. Apparently the examination yielded no very conclusive results, for it was accompanied by a series of rather dubious grunts.

At length the officer stood up, and turning to me with a genial but foxy smile, held out the sieve for my inspection.

"Like to see what we have found, Doctor?" said he.

I thanked him and stooped over the sieve. It contained the sort of litter of twigs, skeleton leaves, weed, pond-snails, dead shells, and fresh-water mussels that one would expect to strain out from the mud of an ancient pond; but in addition to these there were three small bones which at the first glance gave me quite a start until I saw what they were.

The inspector looked at me inquiringly. "H'm?" said he.

"Yes," I replied. "Very interesting."

"Those will be human bones, I fancy; h'm?"

"I should say so, undoubtedly," I answered.

"Now," said the inspector, "could you say, off-hand, which finger those bones belong to?"

I smothered a grin (for I had been expecting this question), and answered:

"I can say off-hand that they don't belong to any finger. They are the bones of the left great toe."

The inspector's jaw dropped. "The deuce they are!" he muttered. "H'm. I thought they looked a bit stout."

"I expect," said I, "that if you go through the mud close to where this came from you'll find the rest of the foot."

The plain-clothes man proceeded at once to act on my suggestion, taking the sieve with him to save time. And sure enough, after filling it twice with the mud from the bottom of the pool, the entire skeleton of the foot was brought to light.

"Now you're happy, I suppose," said the inspector

when I had checked the bones and found them all present.

"I should be more happy," I replied, "if I knew what you were searching for in this pond. You weren't looking for the foot, were you?"

"I was looking for anything that I might find," he answered. "I shall go on searching until we have the whole body. I shall go through all the streams and ponds around here, excepting Connaught Water. That I shall leave to the last, as it will be a case of dredging from a boat and isn't so likely as the smaller ponds. Perhaps the head will be there; it's deeper than any of the others."

It now occurred to me that as I had learned all that I was likely to learn, which was little enough, I might as well leave the inspector to pursue his researches unembarrassed by my presence. Accordingly I thanked him for his assistance and departed by the way I had come.

But as I retraced my steps along the shady path I speculated profoundly on the officer's proceedings. My examination of the mutilated hand had yielded the conclusion that the finger had been removed either after death or shortly before, but more probably after. Someone else had evidently arrived at the same conclusion, and had communicated his opinion to Inspector Badger; for it was clear that that gentleman was in full cry after the missing finger. But why was he searching for it here when the hand had been found at Sidcup? And what did he expect to learn from it when he found it? There is nothing particularly characteristic about a finger, or, at least, the bones of one; and the object of the present researches was to determine the identity of the person of whom these bones were the remains. There was something mysterious about the affair, something suggesting that Inspector Badger was in possession of private information of some kind. But what information could he have? And whence could he have obtained it? These were

questions to which I could find no answer, and I was still fruitlessly revolving them when I arrived at the modest inn where the inquest was to be held, and where I proposed to fortify myself with a correspondingly modest lunch as a preparation for my attendance at that inquiry.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CROWNER'S QUEST

THE proceedings of that fine old institution, the coroner's court, are apt to have their dignity impaired by the somewhat unjudicial surroundings amidst which they are conducted. The present inquiry was to be held in a long room attached to the inn, ordinarily devoted, as its various appurtenances testified, to gatherings of a more convivial character.

Hither I betook myself after a protracted lunch and a meditative pipe, and, being the first to arrive—the jury having already been sworn and conducted to the mortuary to view the remains—whiled away the time by considering the habits of the customary occupants of the room by the light of the objects contained in it. A wooden target with one or two darts sticking in it hung on the end wall and invited the Robin Hoods of the village to try their skill; a system of incised marks on the oaken table made sinister suggestions of shove-halfpenny; and a large open box, filled with white wigs, gaudily coloured robes and wooden spears, swords and regalia, crudely coated with gilded paper, obviously appertained to the puerile ceremonials of the Order of Druids.

I had exhausted the interest of these relics and had transferred my attentions to the picture gallery when the other spectators and the witnesses began to arrive. Hastily I seated myself in the only comfortable chair besides the one placed at the head of the table, presumably for the coroner; and I had hardly done so

when the latter entered accompanied by the jury. Immediately after them came the sergeant, Inspector Badger, one or two plain-clothes men, and finally the divisional surgeon.

The coroner took his seat at the head of the table and opened his book, and the jury seated themselves on a couple of benches on one side of the long table. I looked with some interest at the twelve "good men and true." They were a representative group of British tradesmen, quiet, attentive, and rather solemn; but my attention was particularly attracted by a small man with a very large head and a shock of upstanding hair whom I had diagnosed, after a glance at his intelligent but truculent countenance and the shiny knees of his trousers, as the village cobbler. He sat between the broad-shouldered foreman, who looked like a blacksmith, and a dogged, red-faced man whose general aspect of prosperous greasiness suggested the calling of a butcher.

"The inquiry, gentlemen," the coroner commenced, "upon which we are now entering concerns itself with two questions. The first is that of identity: Who was this person whose body we have just viewed? The second is, How, when, and by what means did he come by his death? We will take the identity first and begin with the circumstances under which the body was discovered."

Here the cobbler stood up and raised an excessively dirty hand.

"I rise, Mr. Chairman," said he, "to a point of order." The other jurymen looked at him curiously and some of them, I regret to say, grinned. "You have referred, sir," he continued, "to the body which we have just viewed. I wish to point out that we have not viewed a body: we have viewed a collection of bones."

"We will refer to them as the remains, if you prefer it," said the coroner.

"I do prefer it," was the reply, and the objector sat down.