"Bella wasn't thinking of your ideal of hospitality. She held her tongue because she's taken a fancy to Scheffer. But, George, how do you suppose the little pest got in? The window was shut, and Hignett declares the door was too, when she went to the room."

"Then I expect Hignett deceives herself. Anyway, what does it matter? What I am anxious about is your sister's little peculiarity. As I've told you, I don't at all like the look of her having been quite normal yesterday evening, the one evening when she was away from the house by accident. I really am feeling miserably depressed, Edith. What I'm dreading now is a repetition of the usual ghastly performance to-night."

But neither that night, nor any night after, was that performance repeated. Lady Bosworth, free now of all apprehension, renewed and redoubled the life of the little company. And the lips of Trent were obstinately sealed.

Three weeks later Trent was shown into the consulting-room of Sir Peregrine Bosworth. The famous physician was a tall, stooping man of exaggerated gauntness, narrow-jawed, and high-nosed. He was courteous of manner and smiled readily; but his face was set in unhappy lines.

"Will you sit down, Mr. Trent?" said Sir Peregrine. "You wrote that you wished to see me upon a private matter concerning myself. I am at a loss to imagine what it can be, but, knowing your name, I had no hesitation in making an appointment."

Trent inclined his head. "I am obliged to you, Sir Peregrine. The matter is really important, and also quite private—so private that no person whatever knows the material facts besides myself. I won't waste words. I have lately been staying with the Lanceys, whom you know, in Italy. Lady Bosworth was also a guest there. For some days before my arrival she had suffered each evening from a curious attack of lassitude and vacancy of mind. I don't know what it was. Perhaps you do."

Sir Peregrine, immovably listening, smiled grimly. "The description of symptoms is a little vague. I have heard nothing of this, I may say, from my wife."

"It always came on at a certain time of the day, and only then. That time was a few minutes after eight, at the beginning of dinner. The attack passed off gradually after two hours or so."

The physician laid his clenched hand on the table between them.

"You are not a medical man, Mr. Trent, I believe. What concern have you with all this?" His voice was coldly hostile now.

"Lots," answered Trent briefly. Then he added, as Sir Peregrine got to his feet with a burning eye, "I know nothing of medicine, but I cured Lady Bosworth."

The other sat down again suddenly. His open hands fell upon the table and his dark face became very pale. "You——" he began with difficulty.

"I and no other, Sir Peregrine. And in a curiously simple way. I found out what was causing the trouble, and without her knowledge I removed it. It was—oh, the devil!" Trent exclaimed in a lower tone. For Sir Peregrine Bosworth, with a brow gone suddenly white and clammy, had first attempted to rise and then sunk forward with his head on the table.

Trent, who had seen such things before, hurried to him, pulled his chair from the table, and pressed his head down to his knees. Within a minute the stricken man was leaning back in his chair. He inspired deeply from a small bottle he had taken from his pocket.

"You have been overworking, perhaps," Trent said. "Something is wrong. I think I had better not——"

Sir Peregrine had pulled himself together. "I know very well what is wrong with me, sir," he interrupted brusquely. "It is my business to know. That will not happen again. I wish to hear what you have to say, before you leave this house."

"Very well." Trent took a tone of colourless precision. "I was asked by Lady Bosworth's sister, Mrs. Lancey, to help in trying to trace the source of the disorder which attacked her every evening. I need not describe the signs of it, and I will not trouble you with an account of how I reasoned on the matter. But I found out that Lady Bosworth was, on these occasions, under the influence of a drug, which had the effect of lowering her vitality and clogging her brain, without producing stupefaction or sleep; and I was led to the conclusion that she was administering this drug to herself without knowing it."

He paused, and felt in his waistcoat pocket. "When Mrs. Lancey and I were making a search for something of the kind in her room, my attention was caught by the fine workmanship of a manicure set on the dressing-table. I took up the little round box meant to contain nail-polishing paste, admiring its shape and decoration, and on looking inside it found it half-full of paste. But I have often

watched the process of beautifying finger-nails, and it seemed to me that the stuff was of a deeper red than the usual pink confection; and I saw next that the polishing-pad of the set, though well-worn, had never been used with paste, which leaves a sort of dark incrustation on the pad. Yet it was evident that the paste in the little box had been used. It is useful sometimes, you see, to have a mind that notices trifles. So I jumped to the conclusion that the paste that was not employed as nail-polish was employed for some other purpose; and when I reached that point I simply put the box in my pocket and went away with it. I may say that Mrs. Lancey knew nothing of this, or of what I did afterwards."

"And what was that?" Sir Peregrine appeared now to be following the story with an ironic interest.

"Naturally, knowing nothing of such matters, I took it to the place that called itself 'English Pharmacy' in the town, and asked the proprietor what the stuff was. He looked at it, took a little on his finger, smelt it, and said it was undoubtedly lip-salve.

"It was then I remembered how, when I saw Lady Bosworth during one of her attacks, her lips were brilliantly red, though all the colour had departed from her face. That had struck me as very odd, because I am a painter, and naturally I could not miss an abnormality like that. Then I remembered another thing. One evening, when Lady Bosworth, her sister, and myself were prevented from returning to the house for dinner, and dined at a country inn, there had been no signs of her trouble; but I had noticed that she moistened her lips again and again with her tongue."

"You are observant," remarked Sir Peregrine dispassionately and again had recourse to his smelling-bottle.

"You are good enough to say so," Trent replied, with a wooden face. "On thinking these things over, it seemed to me probable that Lady Bosworth was in the habit of putting on a little lip-salve when she dressed for dinner in the evening; perhaps finding that her lips at that time of day tended to become dry, or perhaps not caring to use it in daylight, when its presence would be much more easily detected. For I had learned that she made some considerable parade of not using any kind of cosmetics or artificial aids to beauty; and that, of course, accounted for her carrying it in a box meant for manicure-paste, which might be represented as merely a matter of cleanliness, and at any rate was not to be classed with paint and powder. It was not pleasant to me to have

surprised this innocent little deception ; but it was as well that I did so, for I soon ascertained beyond doubt that the stuff had been tampered with.

" When I left the chemist's I went and sat in a quiet corner of the Museum grounds. There I put the least touch of the salve on my tongue, and awaited results. In five minutes I had lost all power of connected thought or will ; I no longer felt any interest in my own experiment. I was conscious. I felt no discomfort, and no loss of the power of movement. Only my intelligence seemed to be paralysed. For an hour I was looking out upon the world with the soul of an ox, placid and blank."

Trent now opened his fingers and showed a little round box of hammered silver, with a delicate ornamentation running round the lid. It was of about the bigness of a pill-box.

" It seemed best to me that this box should simply disappear, and in some quite natural, unsuspicious way. Merely to remove the salve would have drawn Lady Bosworth's attention to it and set her guessing. She did not suspect the stuff as yet, I was fully convinced ; and I thought it well that the affair of her seizures should remain a mystery. Your eyes ask why. Just because I did not want a painful scandal in Mrs. Lancey's family—we are old friends, you see. And now here I am with the box, and neither Lady Bosworth nor any other person has the smallest inkling of its crazy secret but you and I."

He stopped again and looked in Sir Peregrine's eyes. They remained fixed upon him with the gaze of a statue.

" It was plain, of course," Trent continued, " that someone had got at the stuff immediately before she went out to Italy, or immediately on her arrival. The attacks began on the first evening there, two hours after reaching the house. Therefore any tampering with the salve after her arrival was practically impossible. When I asked myself who should have tampered with it before Lady Bosworth left this house to go out to Italy, I was led to form a very unpleasant conjecture."

Sir Peregrine stirred in his chair. " You had been told the truth —or a part of the truth—about our married life, I suppose ? "

Trent inclined his head. " Three days ago I arrived in London, and showed a little of this paste to a friend of mine who is an expert analyst. He has sent me a report, which I have here." He handed an envelope across the table. " He was deeply interested in what he found, but I have not satisfied his curiosity. He found the salve

to be evenly impregnated with a very slight quantity of a rare alkaloid body called ' purvisine.' Infinitesimal doses of it produce effects on the human organism which he describes, as I can testify, with considerable accuracy. It was discovered, he notes, by Henry Purvis twenty-five years ago ; and you will remember, Sir Peregrine, what I only found out by inquiry—that you were assistant to Purvis about that time in Edinburgh, where he had the Chair of medical jurisprudence and toxicology."

He ceased to speak, and there was a short silence. Sir Peregrine gazed at the table before him. Once or twice he drew breath deeply, and at length began to speak calmly.

"I shall not waste words," he said, "in trying to explain fully my state of mind or my action in this matter. But I will tell you enough for your imagination to do the rest. My feeling for my wife was an infatuation from the beginning, and is still. I was too old for her. I don't think now that she ever cared for me greatly ; but she was too strong-minded ever to marry a wealthy fool. By the time we had been married a year I could no longer hide from myself that she had an incurable weakness for philandering. She has surrendered herself to it with less and less restraint, and without any attempt to deceive me on the subject. If I tried to tell you what torture it has been to me, you wouldn't understand. The worst was when she was away from me, staying with her friends. At length I took the step you know. It was undeniably an act of baseness, and we will leave it at that, if you please. If you should ever suffer as I do, you will modify your judgment upon me. I knew of my wife's habit, discovered by you, of using lip-salve at her evening toilette. On the night before her departure I took what was in that box and combined it with a preparation of the drug purvisine. The infinitesimal amount which would pass into the mouth after the application of the salve was calculated to produce for an hour or two the effects you have described, without otherwise doing any harm. But I knew the impression that would be produced upon normal men and women by the sight of anyone in such a state. I wanted to turn her attractiveness into repulsiveness, and I seem to have succeeded. I was mad when I did it. I have been aghast at my own action ever since. I am glad it has been frustrated. And now I should like to know what you intend to do."

Trent took up the box. "If you agree, Sir Peregrine, I shall drop this from Westminster Bridge to-night. And so long as nothing of

the sort is practised again, the whole affair shall be buried. Yours is a wretched story, and I don't suppose any of us would find our moral fibre improved by such a situation. I have no more to say."

He rose and moved to the door. Sir Peregrine rose also and stood with lowered eyes, apparently deep in thought.

"I am obliged to you, Mr. Trent," he said, formally "I may say, too, that your account of your proceedings interested me deeply. I should like to ask a question. How did you contrive that the box should disappear without its owner seeing anything remarkable in its absence?"

"Oh, easily," Trent replied, his hand on the door-knob. "After experimenting on myself, I went back to the house before tea-time, when no one happened to be in. I went upstairs to a room where a cockatoo was kept—a mischievous brute—took him off his chain, and carried him into Lady Bosworth's room. There I put him on the dressing-table, and teased him a little with the manicure things to interest him in them. Then I took away one of the pairs of scissors, so that the box shouldn't be the one thing missing, and left him shut in there to do his worst, while I went out of the house again. When I went he was ripping out the silk lining of the case, and had chewed up the silver handles of the things pretty well. After I had gone he went on to destroy various other things. In the riot that took place when he was found, the disappearance of the little box and scissors became a mere detail. Certainly Lady Bosworth suspected nothing.

"I suppose," he added, thoughtfully "that occasion would be the only time a cockatoo was of any particular use."

And Trent went out.

Eden Phillpotts

PRINCE CHARLIE'S DIRK

from THE LONDON MAGAZINE, 1926

When intellect is seated on a placid brow, honesty looks out of the eyes beneath, and humour lurks at the corners of the resolute mouth below, we are conscious that a man confronts us.

Such were the lineaments of John Ringrose, Detective-Inspector of New Scotland Yard; and to his portrait may be added dark

hair on a big, broad head, and a small, well-knit, sturdy body of the middle size.

Though travelling to a new case, the matter did not occupy his mind at this juncture. He smoked his pipe and read industriously the pages of a weekly journal devoted to the culture of fruit. Already John dreamed of a garden, where should grow pears and apples, peaches and plums ; but the time was not yet. He stood still on the threshold of his strange career and had been but recently promoted to an inspectorship.

The train pursued a leisurely way through rural scenery. It stopped near hamlets and at halts ; then a guard called " Twambley," and John Ringrose rose, folded his railway rug, gripped his large suit-case, and alighted.

An inspector of police was standing on the platform, and beside him a tall, fair young man clad in tweed knickerbockers. He had sloping shoulders and a slight stoop. His flaxen hair curled up round the rim of his cap and he gazed with an anxious expression out of blue and intelligent, though troubled, eyes. He was handsome in a conventional fashion, but revealed a temperament easily excited and lacking in balance. One had guessed him to be an artist of some sort. Ringrose approached the couple, introduced himself, and shook the policeman's hand.

" You'll be Mr. Inspector Burrows, no doubt," he said, " and I'm John Ringrose, from the Yard."

" And welcome," answered the other officer. He was a grey-bearded, tall man with dark brown eyes and a ruddy countenance.

" I'm thinking you'll eat a meal with me," said the elder, " and I'll tell what there is to tell from my point of view. This is Mr. Vincent Maydew, the nephew of the murdered lady."

John shook the hand extended to him, to find it delicate and feminine in his grasp. He was a student of hands and declared them eloquent of character.

" My respectful sympathy," he said. " A terrible shock, as such things must always be."

Vincent Maydew nodded.

" Thank you," he answered. " I wanted to see you half a minute. You'll need to be at Greystone a good bit, and it occurred to me you might find it more convenient to stop there. The village and the inn are best part of two miles from us, and should you prefer to stop at the house itself, we can make you comfortable."

The detective, who had kept his eyes on the speaker while listening to this invitation, expressed his thanks.

"Very considerate, Mr. Maydew. It may prove the best course; but on the other hand it may not. The days are short and, for some things, we might gain if I was there; for others we might lose. Probably I'll find it better to do my work from outside."

He looked at his watch.

"Half after noon," he said. "I'll have my talk with Inspector Burrows and be at Greystone at half-past two, if you please. Then we can settle the best course of action."

"Thank you," replied the youth. He nodded, bade both men "good-day," and strode off to a motor-bicycle standing outside the station.

When he was gone Mr. Burrows spoke.

"You won't want to go into the house for a day or two, if at all. It's an outside job in my opinion, though I can't give any deep reason for saying so, since there is not an outside clue of any sort or kind. But come and eat, and I'll tell you what there is to it on the surface."

A Ford car swiftly conveyed the men to Twambley, distant a mile from the station. A typical East Devon village was Twambley-in-the-Mire, picturesque, somnolent—the centre of a district where thatch still persisted and where many cottages twinkled with whitewashed or rosy-washed faces under old, moss-grown straw. Now the walls were bare of rose and jasmine, for the time was mid-January and red mud, rather than rustic beauty, triumphed over Twambley.

Leaving his Ford at the Constabulary Station, Inspector Burrows conveyed the visitor to an inn some hundred yards higher up the street, and there, at the Green Man, over a couple of very tough mutton chops, John learned what the other could tell him.

"Miss Mary Maydew," began the inspector, "was seventy-one years old—a maiden lady in good health. A common object of the countryside you might call her, for she'd lived at Greystone as long as any can remember. One brother she had still alive; but her father, Thomas Maydew—a London lawyer—had quarrelled with his son; and when Thomas died—I daresay half a century ago—he left his money and his estate to his daughter. And she's reigned at Greystone ever since. Her brother—John Maydew—paid her a visit once or twice a year—and it is

understood she kept him, giving the man an income. About family particulars Mr. Vincent Maydew will tell you, and also Mr. Fosdike, the lawyer at Exeter.

"Greystone is a big, old-fashioned country house said to date from James I. I don't know whether that's true; but it don't matter. Miss Maydew lived in the west wing, where the kitchen premises lie behind the dwelling-rooms; but a good part of the place, including the big music and dancing hall, the library and museum combined, the billiard-room and, of course, a lot of bedrooms overhead, are shut up.

"The household is very small for a place that size. There's first the dead lady's companion, a Miss Forrester. She's been there a good few years—a very pretty and popular young woman, who has proved a sort of buffer between Miss Maydew and her tenants for a long time. Then there are William and Ann Jay, the butler and his wife. There's only the cook, besides them—an elderly widow woman, the sister of one of my own men. Jane Woodhouse she's called. Outside there's two gardeners and a gardener's boy. They only keep up a bit of garden round the west wing and, of course, the kitchen garden. The second gardener is also a mechanic and tends the electric light plant. He lives at the cottage at the entrance with his wife and two children.

"The staff waits on the old lady—or did so—and on Miss Forrester. There's no lady's maid and Mrs. Jay looked after Miss Maydew of a night, if she was poorly or wanted anything. But she seldom did, being the old-fashioned, independent sort."

"And what of Mr. Vincent Maydew?" asked the listener.

"He comes and goes. He lives in London and is said to write books and go in for high art and so on. He's been at Greystone a good deal lately, off and on, and he was there when the fatal thing happened, two nights ago. All the inside details you'll get from him, Miss Forrester, and the Jays. And if you want independent information of the family and Miss Forrester, then William Jay can give it, for he's worked for the Maydews all his life and remembers Miss Maydew's father; while if there's anything you want to know about the Jays themselves, I can help you, because they're old friends of my wife and my own."

John made no attempt to hasten Inspector Burrows. He listened with close attention to his story, and abandoning a struggle with the leathery chops, turned to a large and promising wedge of orange-coloured Cheshire cheese.

"Not a soul in the house was disturbed on the fatal night," continued the inspector; "but when Mrs. Jay took in Miss Maydew's early cup of tea, at half-past seven, she found the lady dead. She'd been stabbed under the left breast—just one deep, wicked wound, that went to the heart and must have killed her instantly, so Doctor Forbes says. The bedclothes had been dragged off her and the knife driven home. There was no struggle and not a thing out of its place. Her bedroom window was open two inches at the top, but that it always would be, winter and summer, and the blind was up as usual, because the last thing the old lady did at night, before she got into bed, was to pull up the blind.

"There was no disorder and nothing unusual anywhere, and not a trace in the room, or passage, or house next morning, to show an intruder. Nor was there a sign of a weapon.

"The doctor judged the old woman had been dead since midnight, or not much later, for she was stone cold when he got to her; but it was a cold night and she being a thin creature, and lying bare like that no doubt the heat soon left her body after the life left it.

"Outside the window there was nothing to show—not a scratch on the window-ledge or bare wall round about, and not a touch upon the flower-bed that runs along the ground beneath. I, myself, conducted that examination and can testify from long experience that none of the little marks, inevitable if there had been entry or exit from the window, were there. Neither inside nor outside did we find a shadow of a clue."

"And yet you said, when we met, that this is certainly an outside job?"

"I do say so—for the reason that it can't have been an inside one. Everybody in that house is beyond suspicion. You can take each and turn him, or her, inside out and you'll find no excuse why they should have killed the old woman. At least, no cause that's known to me, or anybody here. There may be plenty of information waiting for you at Greystone, but, on the face of it, one can see no motives in any case. Miss Maydew was very rich, and all in that house lived by her. Her companion loses her job now; and, unless Vincent Maydew keeps on the old staff, Jay and his wife and Mrs. Woodhouse will be out of very good employment."

"Vincent Maydew's the heir, then?"

"So I'm given to understand. There's only him and his uncle interested, and William Jay knows for a fact—or did, when he mentioned the family to me six weeks ago in conversation—that the young man was the heir and not John Maydew, the dead lady's brother. However, that may be all different now. You'll find out in due course."

"And the household all happy and pulling together comfortably?"

"So far as I know. I wouldn't say Jay liked Miss Forrester. What their difference was I never heard, but he gave me the impression that he was a bit jealous of her power over the old woman. An old servant might feel like that if he'd been used to first place and she'd taken the lead and been trusted and consulted more than him."

"So he might."

"Don't imagine there was any quarrel, however, because I'm in a position to say there was not. William didn't, perhaps, like Miss Forrester's power over the mistress; but he never said a word against the young woman herself. In fact, she's exceedingly popular at Twambley—a parish worker and an understanding, kindly young creature. Also a beauty—out of the common handsome."

"And you found nothing, inspector?"

"Not a solitary thing, Ringrose. Not a spot; not a shirt-button. Somebody went into that room and killed the old woman with a blow; then he left that sleeping house. Nothing was found open next morning—bolts and bars all in their places. The murderer got clean away with it and not a trace of him remained behind."

"And you honestly believe the people in the house had nothing to do with it?"

"Emphatically. It's purely a matter of motive. If it's true, as Jay thinks, that Mr. Vincent Maydew is the heir, then you may say he might be glad for his aunt to die; but no sane man can imagine he would hasten the death of one who willed him so well. Besides, look at him; listen to him. He's not that sort. And everybody else in the house and on the staff is a loser by Miss Maydew's death."

John Ringrose said little; but he perceived that the local man was speaking and arguing on what might be very insufficient knowledge. The situation had yet to be revealed, and he suspected

that his course of action would lie along no conventional path and depend upon no material clues. Already, with a strange added sense for which he was famous, the young detective's intuition told him that Mr. Burrows was not within sight of the needful preliminary line of thought.

An hour later John drove out to Greystone and beheld a large, undistinguished house, a portion of which was in occupation. He proceeded on routine lines, studied the face of the murdered woman in her coffin, and beheld an austere, bleak countenance that even death had been powerless to soften.

The inquest was fixed for the following day, and Ringrose proceeded with preliminaries, leaving his first examination of the living until daylight failed. The theatre of the crime offered no complications. From the large main hall of Greystone, a flight of shallow stairs ascended to the first storey, and at the extreme west end of this corridor Miss Maydew had her private apartments. They consisted of a bedroom and boudoir leading out of it. Other bedrooms extended along the broad passageway of the first floor and faced south, while a service staircase opened not far from the corner occupied by the dead woman and descended to the kitchen premises on the ground floor. Immediately beneath Miss Maydew's bedroom was the dining-room—a comparatively small chamber used for that purpose. The deceased lady had entertained but little and the larger public apartments were all closed.

Two others had slept on the upper floor upon the night of the murder. Miss Juanita Forrester occupied a bedroom distant but three doors from her employer's chamber ; while Vincent Maydew always chose the same apartment when visiting his aunt—an eastern-facing room at the other end of the main corridor. Eight empty rooms separated his apartment from Miss Forrester's. The servants slept in the rear of the house, Jay and his wife occupying one north-facing room, while the bedroom of Mrs. Woodhouse was not far distant.

The whole radius of occupation, as compared with the total bulk of the house, was absurdly restricted. Half a dozen persons only inhabited a mansion that might have furnished accommodation for half a hundred.

Ringrose, having inspected the chamber of the crime and the adjacent boudoir, made a tour of the house and met Miss Forrester and the domestic servants. Juanita Forrester, to whom

Mr. Maydew introduced him over a cup of tea, offered a challenge during the first five minutes of their meeting. She was dark and, so she told him, very much like her Spanish mother. "A poor copy," she said. Her parents were no more, and her father's death leaving the young woman penniless, she was forced to earn her own living. An advertisement had attracted her, and on visiting Miss Maydew, then in search of a new companion, she satisfied the stern old lady and obtained the post.

The girl's remarkable frankness, contrasted with Vincent Maydew's obvious distress, impressed Ringrose at this brief preliminary interview. Juanita was a pretty woman, typically Spanish. She displayed a small and perfect figure, with a pale, oval face and immense wealth of black hair piled over her white forehead and supported by a black tortoiseshell comb. Her eyes were marvellous, and John had never seen such a pair ; while her full-lipped but firm mouth and perfect little nose completed a countenance of unusual beauty.

Her expression was placid, yet not devoid of pride, and her gaze direct and steadfast. She revealed no particular sorrow at the disaster and was self-contained but deeply interested.

"I never liked Miss Maydew," she said, speaking in level and unemotional tones. "She was a bitter, unkind old woman, with no milk of human kindness in her. A tyrant, and used her power unjustly. But for circumstances which Mr. Maydew will give you I should long since have left her. No companion ever stayed here as long as I. But it served my purpose to remain, for personal reasons concerning which there need be no secrecy. These you will hear."

"In your relations with the lady you can form no conclusions as to the reason for her death, nor think of anything to help me?" asked Ringrose, but she shook her head.

"I understand what you mean. I answered many of her letters, but was not in her secrets—if she had any. I don't think she had. She was direct and open in all her dealings—cruelly so sometimes. She loved power. I did what I could, in my very small way, for tenants, and often helped them with her. I'm afraid many humble people rather hated her, for she was hard and grasping ; but it is impossible for me to point to anybody who hated her enough to kill her. Twambley people are all easy-going and law-abiding in my experience."

"You can form no theory of this murder?"

"None, Mr. Ringrose. Vincent and I have tried hard to do so. So has Mr. Burrows; so has Mr. Mainprice, the bailiff; so has William, the butler. Perhaps William and his wife, Ann, knew her better than anybody."

"Apart from the possibility," continued Vincent Maydew, "there are the facts. Inspector Burrows thinks it was somebody from outside, since nobody from inside can be suspected. But how did they get in, and, still more difficult to understand, how did they get out again and leave no window or door open to show it?"

They explained the geography of the house, while Ringrose listened with interest. Juanita was sagacious and logical. No personal sorrow confused her clarity. She appeared profoundly interested but utterly unmoved, while her companion, the fair young man, made no attempt to hide his mingled emotions. It was not, however, the death of his aunt which caused his obvious anxiety and concern. He spoke of her with pity, but without regret. The secrets of his uneasiness remained to be learned. Their first interview extended only over a cup of tea, but it decided Ringrose in a main particular. He determined to come to Greystone and operate from within. His decision was not, however, imparted to Maydew until he had seen the indoor servants.

Mr. Jay proved a commonplace little man, with a dull, putty-coloured face, white whiskers, a dry, old-maidish manner, a sharp, long nose, and a high forehead. People said he had framed himself upon his mistress. But while servile to his betters, he was suspected of tyranny behind the scenes. He proved voluble, and John discovered that in the kitchen, as above stairs, interest in the crime was great, though sorrow for the sufferer little. Only Mrs. Jay appeared to feel the catastrophe, but in her case self-pity had loosened tears. She it was who had found her dead mistress and suffered from the shock of that horrible experience. She was a thin, grey-haired woman, nervous and irresponsible.

William, in measured phrases and with a sort of dry unction, told his tale; but when asked if his knowledge of Miss Maydew and her affairs sufficed to inspire a theory, or prompt to suggestions, he could only shake his head.

"To me it's a bigger puzzle than it might be to most," said Mr. Jay, "because of my inner knowledge. It happens that me and Inspector Burrows are old friends, and so he went into it

with me pretty deep. We don't agree and, while my heart is with him, if you understand, my head is not."

"You're in a dilemma about it?"

"That's the word. This thing was done either from inside or from outside, Mr. Detective. So far so good. But there's everything to show it couldn't have been done from inside, and yet again there's everything to show it couldn't have been done from outside."

"Suppose we assume it was done from outside—with help from inside?"

"A clever thought, and it would do away with one difficulty, but not the other. If it was done with help from outside, that argues that somebody in the house would deliberately have lent a hand to murder Miss Maydew, and from that to doing the deed wouldn't be far. The will would be there. There's five people might have let a murderer in and showed him where she was, and let him out after he'd killed her without waking the rest. Strictly speaking, there's four, because husband and wife are one, and it would have been as difficult for me to leave my partner without waking her as it would have been for her to leave me, sleeping as we do in a four-post bed.

"Take 'em one by one. Mr. Vincent Maydew will tell you about the family complications, because that's no business of mine, and what I might hear, or not hear, when waiting on the family, is beside the question. But as to him, you could swear on your oath he wouldn't kill a fly, let alone his aunt, whatever she'd done to vex him. He's not even a sportsman—all for poetry and art and so on—a bit of a namby, to say it kindly. He'd think twice before he'd kill a wasp, let alone an old woman. Then there's Miss Juanita Forrester, been here four years. She's foreign on her mother's side, no doubt—Spanish—but no fellow-creature ever won the affection of a place like what she has done at Greystone and all round about. A heart of gold, you may say, and never did any man, woman, or child quarrel with the gentle creature."

"You couldn't," declared Mrs. Jay. "Wonderful human she is for such a young thing. Many a time she's showed pity for me and Jane, the cook, when Miss Maydew sent out hard, beastly, bullying messages. She's brought 'em, as in duty bound, but she's taken the edge off 'em. And everybody—Mr. Mainprice, the bailiff, included—will tell you she's everlasting on the side of

kindness and gentleness. She's only stopped with such an employer for her wages and a comfortable home, I reckon."

"That's the point," added William. "That lets her out, just as it lets me and my wife and Jane out. We all suffered Miss Maydew because we had our living to earn and weren't likely to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs. So you may take it in reason that none of us would have done it, nor yet help to do it, even if we was built to be criminals. But where are we, then? Up against the fact it weren't done from inside, or with help from inside. And yet, when Burrows says it was done from outside, I'm in a position to swear that not a bolt, or bar, or window-catch was out of place. Master himself went round with me when my wife brought the fatal news."

"You regard Mr. Maydew as your master now, then?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir; Mr. Vincent is the master, so far as we yet know."

Ringrose did not press him further.

"I'm coming to stop here for the present," he said, and the butler and his wife expressed satisfaction at the fact. He then spoke with Mrs. Woodhouse, the cook, and found her chatty, civil, and indifferent. Jane was a big, amiable woman of handsome presence and well-mannered. She had no opinions on the subject, but appeared chiefly interested concerning her late mistress' fate in the world to come.

"I'm a religious creature," she explained, "and I'm fearing that a hard case like Miss Maydew, cut off so sudden, may wake up to a very sharp reminder in the next world. However, thank Heaven, there's pardon for all there. But you'd say she'll take a lot of forgiving when the Books be opened."

Ringrose announced his determination to stay at Greystone presently, and Vincent Maydew accepted it without demur. Of all beneath that roof, the present master of it seemed most downcast and perturbed. Now the day was done and John Ringrose returned to Twambley beside Inspector Burrows, who had arrived with his car.

John declared himself as at present without light and, leaving the inspector after a second cup of tea, carried his suit-case up to Greystone and found a room prepared for him.

He dined with Maydew and Miss Forrester, and after the lady had left them, the young man took Ringrose to a small study, gave him a good cigar, and prepared to tell his part of the story.

Vincent Maydew spoke clearly, yet with a measure of nervousness and even dread. His mind was fretted and his concern appeared to rise from private thoughts, rather than out of the narrative he unfolded for the detective's ear.

"The situation is simple now," he said, "thanks to an extraordinary coincidence. My uncle, John Maydew, died three days ago—a natural death. I only heard the fact by this morning's post. But I will come to what that means in a moment. The situation a week ago was this. There were then three of my family living. Now I alone remain. I enjoyed my aunt's confidence and respect, for though she did not much value my literary work, she knew me to be a serious man and a steady one. I was her heir, while her brother received from her an allowance of one thousand a year and no more. This she intended to continue for his life. They were quite friendly, and Uncle John visited his sister twice a year; but he was a bachelor and she held her allowance enough for him, because she knew that he did nothing, and she hated an idle man, even if he were old. That Uncle John was intemperate and unwise she did not know, for he was very careful to conceal the fact when he came to see her.

"So things stood, and then came the complication.

"I fell in love with Juanita—Miss Forrester—and could not see why on earth I should not win her, when I found my love returned. Juanita, however, believed—rightly as time proved—that my aunt would object to such an engagement. However, I was not prepared to wait for ever, and after a secret betrothal extending over more than a year, I told my future wife that there was no rational ground for further delay. We loved each other with absolute devotion, and, while only a companion to Miss Maydew, she was my life to me.

"A week ago I informed Aunt Mary that I proposed to wed Juanita as soon as she could find another companion to suit her. The result was appalling. I need not go over the fearful row, but I was accused of every sort of crime, and Miss Maydew absolutely declined to sanction the engagement. Juanita pleaded in vain. The old woman blamed her bitterly enough; but me she attacked with that ferocious and venomous temper common to her when the least incident threatened her convenience, or crossed her will. She told me plainly that she should disinherit me if I took Juanita from her, and at last a succession of violent scenes culminated with Juanita finally on my side.

"What man could do less? My aunt was sound as a bell and good at least for another ten years. I expressed my sorrow, but was firm. Then she sent for her lawyer, Mr. Fosdike, from Exeter, and made a new will, leaving all her property to her brother.

"On the morning which found her dead, I was leaving Greystone for good, and Juanita, at my wish, was remaining until it pleased my aunt to dismiss her. Of course, I stopped when we heard the terrible news. And now Fate has willed this extraordinary sequel. My uncle never lived to know what Miss Maydew had done. He was actually dead a few hours before she did it. There was no bequest of the residue of Miss Maydew's fortune. She had made an absolute bequest of everything to John Maydew; but that, of course, becomes inoperative, because he predeceased her. As her next-of-kin, therefore, everything passes to me."

The young man stopped and sighed.

"That's all there is to tell, I think; and whether it will help you I know not."

"It is very possible that it may," answered Ringrose. "At any rate, after the inquest and a search round to-morrow, I'll see Miss Maydew's lawyer and the new will. You never know where you may get a ray of light. At any rate, the legal position is clear. Owing to the death of John Maydew before his sister signed, the bequest to him lapses and falls into the residue. But you say there is none, so, as next-of-kin, you stand exactly where you did, and her purpose to cut you out was defeated. Thank you for this lucid summary. And now tell me what's biting you, as the Americans say. This shocking affair naturally saddens you, especially as relations were so badly strained at the finish; but there's more to your distress than that."

Maydew stared and flushed; then he recovered himself.

"You are mistaken. I'm all right. Nothing but natural concern and sorrow for this awful mystery troubles me. I can't let a passing estrangement come between me and the long memory of the past. She was hard and difficult, but I had little cause to hate her, and at the worst I never actually hated her. I was only deeply distressed that I had to run counter to her wishes."

Ringrose did not pursue the subject.

"So much the better; I'm glad I was wrong," he said. "I only thought you might be hiding something you held not pertinent to the case; but don't do that, Mr. Maydew. The most

unexpected and apparently trivial facts often contain the kernel of the nut."

"I can understand they might," answered the other. "Be very sure, if anything occurs to me as remotely useful, you shall be the first to know it."

"You are, of course, in complete understanding with Miss Forrester?"

"Complete and absolute," replied Vincent. "We are one, heart and soul."

"Tell me exactly when you heard of your uncle's death, and from whom."

"This morning, by the first post. The news was somewhat delayed, as Uncle John's lawyers were not informed of his death until twenty-four hours after it had happened. They had, of course, already heard of this murder through the newspapers, and for another day didn't know whom to write to. Then Uncle John's landlady told them about me, and they wrote to me at Greystone, directing the letter to be forwarded if I were not here."

He took the letter of which he spoke from a pocket-book and handed it to his visitor.

The detective scanned the note and returned it.

They chatted for another half-hour and then John Ringrose decided that he would go to bed. Their attitude was cordial on the elder's side, restrained and somewhat inconsequent on the part of his host. But Maydew presently conducted the visitor to his apartment, expressed hopes that all was as he desired it, and asked him if he would breakfast in his own room or join Juanita and himself. Ringrose preferred the latter course.

"Let me breakfast with you," he said. "And the later the better."

"Nine too early?"

"That will do exceedingly well," answered the detective, who had made private plans for the morning.

He was up and dressed at six, and as the light increased had worked industriously through the silent house for an hour and more before any domestic appeared. Neither the upper floor nor the scene of the murder occupied him; he devoted the early hours of a grey and very cold morning to examination of the dwelling-rooms. There were no bulbs in the electric sconces, but he opened shutters and conducted a general investigation, which ended at

a huge apartment devoted to books and containing glass cases, wherein were stored a mixed collection of curiosities from all lands.

The great chamber lay deserted and deep in dust. A gallery lifted some feet above the top of the bookshelves, ran round the walls, and the place was lighted from a lantern of frosted glass in the roof.

Ringrose readily perceived that the bygone head of the family was responsible for a collection which had suffered neglect since his departure. He examined the receptacles with mild astonishment at the heterogeneous curios assembled within them; then something arrested him and he stopped and bent over a show-case situate immediately beneath the central dome. Not a curiosity, but a missing one, had challenged his attention. Care and patience marked the collection and everything was labelled, while to many objects were attached information concerning them. Thus an empty card immediately arrested the eye. Something had disappeared from its place, and the enquirer was concerned to know what. The lid of the glass showcase opened to his touch and he drew forth a card and read the few words neatly printed upon it. They proved exceedingly significant.

The empty place had held a dirk, "Once the authentic property of Prince Charlie."

John Ringrose restored the card to its place. He observed that the vanished weapon had been fastened to the card with a piece of pink tape, and that the tape had been cut to liberate it. A fragment only remained. The discovery ended his present investigation within doors. The dawn had broken, the sky was burning redly to the East, and he presently let himself through a French window in the disused great drawing-room, and strolled the terrace. A clue so simple and direct as the missing dirk created natural mistrust. John told himself that such things do not happen. He suspected an ingenious attempt to hoodwink him, but could not feel sure, since the possibility that he would examine the contents of the old and neglected collection with close care must have seemed doubtful to any interested in his actions. Moreover, an explanation might be immediately forthcoming, did he seek it from the household.

At breakfast he met his host and Juanita. The girl was pale and dressed in black, and the young man appeared if possible

more anxious than on the preceding day. Miss Forrester, however, showed no perturbation. She was frankly interested in the inquest, timed for noon, and she asked John various questions concerning the procedure of the enquiry.

He said nothing of his morning's work within the house, and studied the man and woman carefully. His unique gift, to bring a human touch into every relation with his fellow-creatures, served the detective as usual. He found the tension relax and soon established himself in friendly relations with Juanita. She interested him least, however, for her complete self-possession, and a certain directness of speech and thought were obviously natural and not assumed. The young woman made no pretence of sorrow, and John perceived that, like himself, she was secretly a little puzzled by her sweetheart. Their common affection neither attempted to conceal. They were passionately in love, but while the course of events and the sequel to the tragedy now meant certain happiness for Juanita, she indicated in some subtle fashion that she could not fathom Vincent Maydew's profound depression.

Ringrose perceived this and it interested him. That the young man should be agitated and even oppressed by the terrible event that had lifted his problems off his shoulders was not strange, but why such sustained melancholy and obvious anxiety? There was a mystery here whose significance, John already suspected, would, if explained, help him upon his way.

Of one thing the detective was now secretly assured: the crime, if not actually committed by a member of the dead woman's household, had been assisted from within. That the assassin had come from without remained a probability, but he had not worked without help, and Ringrose felt already confident that a large measure of the truth might be known to somebody with whom he had already spoken. As yet he associated none of them more than another with the commission of the deed, but began to believe that, if anybody in reality knew anything at all, it was Vincent Maydew.

After breakfast he examined the upper floor with close scrutiny, and visited not only each of the occupied chambers, but also those for many years disused. The result of these investigations John kept to himself, and, of course, he pursued them alone. But they presented him with two interesting discoveries: the splintered edge of a broken board in the floor of Juanita Forrester's bedroom cupboard, and a piece of pink tape.

The inquest, conducted in the great drawing-room, pursued its way and threw no light, unless upon the mind of the detective, who silently attended it. The coroner, a sagacious and capable man, ruled his court with tact and sympathy. Each witness gave an explicit account from his or her own point of view. But Miss Forrester's evidence proved the most interesting. With absolute frankness she revealed the inner situation of those chiefly concerned—her lover and herself—and related the family quarrel and the attitude of the dead woman to her nephew's announcement of his engagement. She told all that Ringrose had heard on the previous evening from Vincent Maydew, and John was not dead to the deep attention with which the young man listened while his sweetheart spoke. It appeared that she had been nearer to the heart of the tragedy than anybody imagined.

"After that terrible conflict between Mr. Maydew and his aunt," said Juanita, "I could not sleep and on the night of Miss Maydew's death I was faced with another sleepless night, because Mr. Vincent was leaving that day. At two o'clock in the morning I left my room, lighted a candle, and went down into the library for something to read, that I might distract my mind and get to sleep. I found a book ; and then I left the great library and went into the small one, used as a dining-room. From the sideboard I took some biscuits and poured myself out a glass of port wine from the decanter. I ate the biscuits, drank the wine, and went upstairs again with my book.

"It was then, just as I reached the corridor at the top of the great flight of stairs, that I thought I heard a sound in the passage, at the far end, near Miss Maydew's corner of the corridor. It was a sound like the quiet shutting of a door. I left my book on a console table, that stands opposite the top of the staircase, and went to Miss Maydew's door. Everything was quiet, and I then opened the swing door on the opposite side of the corridor, which gives upon the service staircase. I went to the top of the service staircase and listened, but heard nothing. I half fancied I saw the glimmer of a light below, but I was holding my own candle all the time and could not be sure the light came from another. I blew out my own candle, but the light—if light there was—had vanished. Everything was quite silent and quite dark.

"I stood for a few moments listening, then went back to bed with my book. I must have gone to sleep reading it, for when I was called, Ann—Mrs. Jay—laughed at me and said I had

forgotten to turn out the electric light. She had, of course, not been to her mistress then. She always called me first."

The coroner put various questions upon this evidence, but Juanita had nothing to add to it, and its value appeared negative, since both the sound and the light were an impression rather than a conviction in her mind.

Ringrose perceived that Maydew showed signs of relief when his sweetheart's testimony and examination concluded. The young man himself had little to say, save that on hearing the news he had risen instantly and hunted the house with William. The servants only reported what the police already knew.

Mr. Fosdike, Miss Maydew's lawyer, spoke as to the new will and, when opportunity offered, agreed to let John Ringrose see the document on the following day. The police reiterated their belief that the murder had been committed from outside, though not a trace of evidence existed to support it ; but the staff stood on friendly terms with members of the Force, and the coroner pointed out that there existed nobody within Greystone who could have gained any advantage from Mary Maydew's death save, indeed, Vincent Maydew. Vincent himself admitted how on the night of the murder, he was ignorant of his uncle's end, and still imagined that he had lost all. Ringrose observed that the young man created no suspicion in the minds of the jury, or the police by this statement.

The inquest was adjourned for a fortnight and the proceedings terminated.

It was reserved for the detective's next private interview with his host to quicken interest at last and create for John a sensation far beyond any that his business had, as yet, brought him. That, however, did not come till night.

During the afternoon he again busied himself in the house, yet, for personal reasons, kept severely aloof from the chief occupants. He was now in doubt before a curious conflict of clues and spent most of his time with the Jays, accepting the housekeeper's invitation to tea and listening to the old woman's conversation. He also visited the library and museum a second time for his own purpose and, discovering a second dirk fixed to a card, which recorded its historical interest, removed the weapon, wrapped it up in his pocket handkerchief, and presently returning to the chamber on the ground floor, where the dead woman lay, again examined the body.

He left the house after dark and called upon the local practitioner—a Dr. Forbes, who had given evidence of the death wound at the inquest.

He was back at Greystone in time for dinner, at which meal Vincent Maydew appeared more silent than on the previous night. He ate little, but drank rather heavily. It was evident that Juanita felt increased anxiety on his account, and desired private speech with Ringrose. The meal ended, he prepared to give her the opportunity she sought, but then became aware that Vincent Maydew had marked her wish. It was easy for the girl's lover to frustrate any possible private interview at this moment, and he took care to do so.

Explaining that he wanted some immediate conversation with the detective, Vincent drew John away to the small sitting-room, and when coffee and liqueurs were served and Ringrose had lighted a cigar, Maydew locked the door and plunged into a hurried narrative. He was very pale ; his drink had made him perspire and he mopped his face as he spoke.

" Mr. Ringrose," began the young man, " I can stand this no longer. I have something to say to you, and I have something to offer you. I'm not so much concerned for myself as another ; that's why I want to couple a big proposal with what I have to tell you. Do not feel annoyed—I implore you to keep an open mind. When you recognise my situation your humanity will at least prevent you from being angry with me—or anybody. I have no right to ask for the least sacrifice of principle from you, and it lies entirely in your power to ignore my suggestion ; but I know you are too generous not to understand it, and far too acute not to see that I plead for another rather than myself."

He stopped a moment, but Ringrose did not speak. Then Maydew confessed to the crime.

" I killed my aunt in a moment of stark aberration. The deed is done, and I am faced with the consequences ; but all that matters now is this : that I insist upon leaving the sequel in your hands. Do you gather my meaning, Mr. Ringrose ? "

The detective regarded him without speech for a moment. Then he spoke.

" I think so ; but you had better make it clearer."

" In a word, then, I yielded to a passing wave of irrational hate against the old woman who had treated me so damnably, and feeling assured that the world would be better without her, I

destroyed her. Some devil played with me, and I committed a cowardly and infernal crime on the spur of passion, convinced that I did evil that good might come. The irony of the situation when I heard my uncle was dead you will appreciate. I worked swiftly, yet believed that I had laid my plans so perfectly that discovery must prove impossible. Now I know otherwise. I know you will presently discover the truth, and so confess to save you any more trouble."

Ringrose summoned a picture to his mind and smiled internally. It was a vision that must have appeared very inappropriate to any beholder less subtle than himself. He saw a hen partridge pretending to be wounded and fluttering clumsily along the ground, to distract an enemy from her chickens. But a moment later this theory of the situation was clouded, for the young man made swift and complete response to the obvious challenge now offered.

"You say you killed the old lady, Mr. Maydew. Can you prove it?" asked John, and his question met instant answer, for rising, Maydew proceeded to a small desk, unlocked it, and then moved an invisible spring which revealed a secret drawer. Within this receptacle lay an object wrapped in paper, and he now handed the parcel to Ringrose.

"I killed Mary Maydew with that dirk," he said quietly. "I took it from the museum—the collection made by my grandfather. It is a dagger which is supposed to have been the property of Prince Charlie. I had meant, of course, to put it back in its place. You will see the card from which I took it if you examine the large central case in the library."

Ringrose examined the weapon. The haft was of chased silver, the head, a huge golden cairngorm that shone and sparkled. The blade was of blue steel, and blood had dried upon it.

"You would soon have proved me guilty," continued the criminal quietly. "I quickly saw that my fancied security was vain. And the revelation of what such work as this means to the sinner is so terrible that, if I had to consider myself alone, I should have either confessed within twenty-four hours of the crime, or destroyed myself. But the situation is terribly complicated for me by a fellow-creature. I could escape my own sufferings by death, and my remorse would end with my life; but if my life ends, another precious and innocent life will practically end with it. Knowledge of the truth must assuredly kill Juanita.

It is not that I should lose her ; the point seems to be this : that her life is ruined if this becomes known, and so the innocent suffers far more terribly than it is possible for the guilty to do. Life to me, you understand, is henceforth a punishment rather than a boon, I should already have ended my existence but for the thought of her agony. For her sake only I am stripping the truth naked and putting myself in your hands."

The listener showed less concern than might have been expected before a situation so tragical.

" And what follows ? " he asked.

" What follows is this, Mr. Ringrose. To me it appears an ethical question, and so I hope and pray it may appear to you. That the righteous should suffer for the guilty is a commonplace. No man can sin as I have sinned and endure the consequences alone. Many innocent persons are called to a punishment they did not deserve, and my one thought at present—my one resolve—is to save others from the consequences of my crime to the best of my power. That may be done by myself in every case save one. The servants will receive money and adequate pensions in any case. They lose nothing ; but, if the truth becomes known, then a punishment that is far worse than the sentence of death falls on Juanita. Only for her I plead. Do believe that. Life, even with her, must now be incomparably more terrible for me than swift and merciful death. But for her sake I plead to live because the truth would destroy her and cover that guiltless head with shame. Her temperament is such that knowledge of this thing would bring a measure of agony impossible to describe. Her reason might well succumb to it ; or, unable to face such an appalling situation, she might take her own life. She is made of precious stuff, Mr. Ringrose, and rather than that she should be called to drink this cup, I would live—for her sake alone."

The other listened intently. He studied every word and every gesture that accompanied it. He indicated that he felt much impressed.

" You ask me to respect your secret and condone your crime ? " he said, when the young man ceased.

" For the human reason that I have given. For my unfortunate girl alone. I should not beg for my own sake. I have no wish to live now. You know I have spoken the truth. I am only concerned to do right, and Juanita's life is a thousand times more precious to the world than mine. Rather than that she shall be destroyed, I

am prepared to live ; and seeing that justice—a justice above any law of man—cries out for Juanita, I implore you to meet me. I would press the ethical side upon you, Mr. Ringrose. Your duty lies on another plane, and no doubt you do it as a rule, sternly regardless of consequences ; but you are not a machine only ; you are a man of genius, and I have seen enough of you to know that humanity means much to you."

"Granted ; but duty often clashes with inclination," replied John, taking another cigar. "An action may have two sides and look wrong from one aspect, right from another. For the sake of argument, suppose I fail to solve this case. I am perhaps doing a humane thing—a thing which might, or might not, be justified on strictly moral grounds ; but I am none the less being false to myself and my employers. And that is not all. Failure in a case, which already began to resolve its difficulties pretty swiftly, means a great deal more than a doubtful hope that I may have done rightly by pretending to fail. It means that punishment for your crime falls on me also. I fail where I ought to succeed ; I deliberately permit a black mark to be scored against me where it matters most—at Headquarters. I celebrate my promotion to a detective-inspectorship by a very inefficient piece of work. Perhaps that situation had not occurred to you?"

"It had. I recognise it. I recognised it from the first. I have imagination to see how this must look in your professional eyes, and had you been a different sort of man I should have felt the case was hopeless. But you revealed a heart and a deep human sense of sympathy. That is what I am coming to now. You concede that for the sake of the innocent, the crime might reasonably be concealed, and you know that concealment is by no means a blessing or boon to the criminal. The rights and wrongs of concealment do not eliminate each other and leave the situation doubtful. Everything points to the fact that concealment in this case is the highest justice and brings the greatest good to the innocent. That only leaves your personal position ; and I venture to think that the wrong your reputation undoubtedly suffers—the actual injustice done to you by concealment may be regarded purely as a matter of business."

Ringrose nodded.

"It is a point of view," he said.

"One case in your career amounts to little," argued Maydew, with increasing hope. "Everybody knows that you are an

extraordinary man, and probably your next mystery will be solved with such speed and brilliance that this affair must quickly be forgotten. So confident I am of that, and so sure that failure in this affair cannot really harm anything but your natural self-esteem, that I feel it in no sense a slight or reflection upon your honour to make it a question of money. I insist again that this is no selfish bargain. My crime will never torment me less than now ; but even legal justice should be rightly concerned with the welfare of the innocent before the destruction of the guilty. I am a rich man and if, knowing that the highest, purest honour and justice are on your side, you can reduce your own loss in the matter to a financial figure, I should indeed thank Heaven."

For a full minute John Ringrose made no reply. He smoked with his eyes on the blood-stained knife lying on the table before him. Maydew rose after his appeal and wandered the room restlessly.

" Sit down and light your cigar," began the detective at length. " These are interesting and illuminating things you tell me. There is nothing like breadth of vision and, be it as it may, I respect your confidence and admit the strength of your position on strictly ethical grounds. But what is your view on my side ? What sort of solatium should you judge may fairly be offered for my obvious loss of credit ? "

" I leave it to you, Mr. Ringrose."

" They say every man has his price. One must weigh the advantage of permanent improvement to one's income, against depreciation of one's credit in business."

" A transitory depreciation ; but don't speak of having your price, Mr. Ringrose ; I couldn't buy you and I well know it. The sole question is, can Juanita's life tempt you ? Her very existence is involved. I offer a perfectly reasonable deal that reflects in no way at all on your character—or, I would argue, on mine either."

Mr. Maydew rose, returned to his private desk and produced a cheque-book, while unseen the detective suffered his features to relax into a genial grin. The smile relieved him ; but his face was again composed when his host returned to the lamplight.

" I have arranged with Mr. Fosdike," he said, " to have access to capital as it may be required ; but I imagine a transaction of this magnitude must be carried out with considerable caution."

" I think so. There is no hurry. There are ways of doing these things. I only need your cheque as evidence of good faith.

I shall not, of course, cash it. You may pay me the sum at issue in another way later—with foreign bonds to bearer, or securities you can privately make over. For the moment your cheque will merely be a guarantee of indebtedness."

Mr. Maydew took up his pen.

"Name the figure, then."

"Shall we say ten thousand?"

A wave of thankfulness which he was quite powerless to hide, brought fleeting colour to the young man's face. It seemed that the weight of his sufferings already began to lighten, despite his recent assurance that they never would.

"No," he said, "we will not say ten thousand; we will say twenty thousand, Mr. Ringrose."

"You are generous."

"I am only just. May I never write a cheque with more deep a sense of obligation than I write this one."

He drew the cheque and pushed it across the table.

"I am in your hands," he said, "and the welfare of one who is far more to me than my life lies also in your hands."

"I perfectly understand. You need feel no more anxiety, either on her behalf or your own. The future should prove absolutely clear for you both, Mr. Maydew; but we have none the less got to consider the present from my point of view. There are a few little considerations. We must cover our tracks, for the benefit of those who might not appreciate the high ethical standpoint that has determined our course of action. Your task is quite simple. I shall be busy here—no doubt fruitlessly—poking about and following up clues and so forth; but the clue you so naturally regard as of supreme significance and which you have made me a present of, must return to its accustomed place, and be a clue no more. That is all I require from you. Cleanse it carefully and to-night, when everybody has retired, return it to the central cabinet from which you say you took it."

He picked up the cheque, ran his eye over it, then doubled it up and put it in his pocket.

"And now good-night, Mr. Maydew, and may you sleep in peace."

"I shall sleep as I have not slept for many days," replied the other, shaking the hand extended with warm pressure; and then, as though conscious that his relief was exaggerated, he relapsed and strove to conceal it.

"My own sufferings remain," he declared, "but they must be lessened by the assurance that my future wife will not be called to suffer."

"Time is a great healer," answered Ringrose drily. Concealing the dirk, Vincent Maydew rang for spirits, and having spent another half-hour together, the men separated for the night. But Maydew's work was not yet done. Alone in his own room he cleansed the knife with soap and water and, at two o'clock in the morning, restored it to its place. He was strangely careless of details, however, and fastened it back upon the card with a piece of brown twine.

Though not a religious man, the young fellow spent full twenty minutes on his knees before finally sinking to sleep; but his prophecy of a good night was not fulfilled, and dawn had broken before an exhausted mind permitted him to slumber.

On the following day Ringrose spent some hours in Exeter and proceeded as though his private meeting with young Maydew had not taken place. He was apparently anxious to learn more than either Vincent Maydew or his betrothed could tell him, and the old family lawyer found himself invited to give all particulars concerning the making of the new will.

"She was an obdurate client," said Mr. Fosdike, a bald, big man with clean-shaven and pendulous cheeks, "and though I understood her, I was usually powerless to influence her. Fiery people, as a rule, between their conflagrations, are reasonable, and will undo in sane moments what they did when 'outside themselves,' as we say. Miss Maydew, however, was both short-tempered and obstinate. She would do unjust things in a rage and stick to them afterwards for pride. A sort of insensate vanity —common in men, but rather rare in women—always made her cleave to a decision, however mistaken. One could not shake her. It was a foolish boast of hers that she had never found the need to apologise in her life! So the new will would most certainly have stood had she lived. I prepared it at her wish. She might have made another will later and appointed someone else her legatee instead of John Maydew, her brother; but she would never have forgiven Vincent Maydew or restored him to his position as residuary legatee. He had crossed her; and those who crossed my client were never pardoned."

"You prepared this new will and went down yourself with it?" asked Ringrose, considering the document.

"That is so. One had to watch things with the lady. Any failure on my part to comply with her demands would have meant speedy loss of a valuable estate. She was quite capable of taking Greystone out of my hands at a moment's warning; and had she done that, nothing on earth would ever have induced her to restore the conduct of her affairs to me."

"There was no secret about this will?"

"None whatever. She told her nephew that he must choose between her and her companion, and gave him exactly twelve hours in which to do so. She could keep in a passion longer than anybody I have ever known. It is an exhausting ordeal for most people; but Miss Maydew seemed to burn with an incandescent rage which failed to consume her dreadful energy. The will, as you see, was exceedingly brief. Before she signed it, I reminded her of various bequests and certain obligations—directions from her late father—which were handed down in the existing will; but all she said was that they could wait and be restored by codicils, if she so wished.

"'Life is uncertain,' she declared in her icy voice—a voice that always made you feel as though the window were open and an east wind blowing. 'Life is uncertain, and I cannot sleep until this matter is determined and my nephew, Vincent Maydew, aware of his situation.' At a later date she intended to reconsider a few minor points from her former will, which she had not opened for some years; but for the moment all she was concerned with was the blow to Vincent. That struck, and her brother installed as legatee, she grew calmer. By the irony of chance, as you know, her brother predeceased her, and was actually dead before the will came to be signed. Thus the thing she felt chiefly concerned to do was not done, and Maydew, I am glad to say, is not disinherited. Indeed, he is a gainer."

"Who is Alfred Warner?" asked John Ringrose, with his eyes on the will.

"My clerk. He went down with the document when all was done, and he and William Jay attested Miss Maydew's signature."

"Was the former will destroyed?"

"She had specially directed me to preserve it, that she might read it on a future occasion. It embraced certain injunctions handed down by her late father and had to do with the development of the property and other points which it was only right the future heir respected, whomsoever he might be."

"Exactly," said John. "And now, of course, this will goes before Vincent Maydew, and he will respect its provisions. I will ask you to let me see it."

"Most certainly. It can hardly bear on the crime, however."

"On the contrary, I have reason to think it might."

The lawyer fetched it and his visitor spent half an hour in careful study of the document. He made no comment whatever.

His scrutiny completed, John turned to a decanter of sherry and two glasses which had stood at his elbow since the beginning of their conversation. He broke a biscuit and the lawyer poured out two glasses of wine.

"We shall meet again," said the visitor; "and it is my earnest hope that, before we do so, I may have proceeded and found definite clues to this crime. I thank you. You may have assisted me more than you guess."

"Nothing would give me greater satisfaction," declared the other; "but I confess I see no ray of light. You will probably find the criminal outside Greystone, if Providence wills that he should be discovered."

"A crime is not a conjuring trick, Mr. Fosdike. It often appears to defy natural laws and argue supernatural interference with reality. But the police never permit any supernatural theory either to challenge or defeat them. We argue that the seemingly impossible means only that the clue, or pass key, to the mystery is withheld, and we seek steadfastly and untiringly for that. When we fail to find it the unknown conjurer escapes us—perhaps to play his trick again. Sometimes we only catch him the second or third time. I am, however, far from feeling that I shall fail to find both the trick and the trickster in this case."

"Do you anticipate a long inquiry?"

"I do not. I am disposed to believe I may be successful inside a week or ten days. But if I fail within that time I shall probably fail altogether."

The detective took his leave and presently lunched alone. A chance spectator would have marked upon his face neither perturbation nor anxiety. Amusement at private thoughts and a hearty appetite were the natural indications of a mind at peace. Presently he visited the cathedral and listened to the anthem.

Vincent Maydew was gone to London that he might see after the funeral arrangements of his uncle, while two days later the burial of Mary Maydew would take place. But Ringrose found

plenty to occupy him on returning that night to Greystone. Indeed, the case forced itself upon his attention, for he found Juanita Forrester anxious to have some conversation while her sweetheart was absent, and William Jay had also something remarkable to communicate.

At tea-time the girl invited John to take his meal with her and when they were alone she explained her care.

"I saw Vincent off this morning," she told him. "After you had gone to Exeter he started on his motor-bicycle to ride up by road the way he best likes over Salisbury Plain. But I am a good deal bothered, Mr. Ringrose. He is taking this dreadful affair in a manner I cannot at all understand. One knows that he must be harrowed and shaken—such a sensitive being as he is—but, as I tried to point out to him, he had no power to prevent the tragedy, and he certainly did not precipitate it in any way. After all, for him, dear fellow, there are very obvious compensations. I daren't tell him so, of course ; he'd think it a flippant, cruel, and heartless attitude. Perhaps it is. But when you consider how bitterly Miss Maydew attacked him and how actively she tried to prevent him from enjoying what should have been lawfully his in the future—then I, for one, cannot feel very overwhelmed with grief before his wonderful escape. It would be humbug if I pretended that it was. Yet Vincent is overwhelmed. The crime has had a most extraordinary effect upon him, and I was more conscious of it than ever this morning."

"How so, Miss Forrester ? "

"There's something happened to him. It's almost as if his character was changed. He's aloof, abstracted. He stares through you rather than at you. He's not cold exactly—not really changed to me, but changed in himself ; and the change does involve a different attitude, even to me. And a change of that sort can only have been produced by some tremendous shock. I know him so well and feel sure of it."

"He said nothing definite ? "

"No, he hasn't mentioned his aunt's death to me since the inquest. But the situation now existing, which might have been expected to challenge all his powers of concentration and energy, leaves him apparently indifferent. He wants to get away. He actually spoke as though he might not return to his aunt's funeral ! There was something almost reckless in his talk. He said that perhaps he should break his neck on Salisbury Plain and snuff

out the last of the family. I was rather shocked, but he spoke as though it might be the best thing that could happen for everybody. Have you known a tragedy like this actually unseat a man's reason?"

"Never, Miss Forrester. There must be something here you don't understand."

"Have you observed anything strange?"

"Since you ask me, I can honestly say that I have. There are undoubtedly reasons for Mr. Maydew's profound preoccupation. He has confided in me up to a point, and be sure I shall respect his confidence. I have, I believe, already set his mind at rest in sundry particulars."

"If you discover the murderer it might go far to calm him," she answered. "I know one thing: that he is tremendously concerned to get to the bottom of poor Miss Maydew's death."

"We must not give up hope yet. Be sure I shall spare no pains to solve the problem, though it certainly looks difficult still."

She changed the subject suddenly.

"I noticed a curious thing in my bedroom cupboard to-day," she said. "I was turning out some dresses to find one I'm going to dye black, and I noticed on the floor of the cupboard a streak of white wood. A splinter, some inches long, must have been torn from the floor of the cupboard. Now I felt positive that was something new, because it impressed my mind as strange. So I examined it, and I found a floorboard of the cupboard quite loose. It had been loosened, so that it was easily lifted. I lifted it and found a hole underneath—an empty hole. It seems to mean nothing, but it must have been done by somebody, for some purpose, and I thought I'd mention it. Did you do it yourself, perhaps, when you were examining my bedroom?"

"No," he answered, "I did not do it; but I have already found what you describe. A receptacle was made there by pulling up a short board, and in the operation a splinter broke from the old deal and left a conspicuous streak of new wood. Beneath, as you say, is a receptacle."

"Made on purpose?"

"No. The hole beneath was natural."

"Did you find anything in it, Mr. Ringrose?"

"Nothing that appears to be very interesting. Only a few inches of pink tape."

"How extraordinary! Might I see them?"

John complied at once, and, taking his pocket-book from his breast, soon placed the tape in Juanita's hands.

She could make nothing of it, however.

"It's old and grubby," she said. "It might have been there a hundred years, I should think."

"Yes, it well might. Yet somehow I associate it with the case."

"How extraordinary, Mr. Ringrose. In what way?"

"Indirectly; but the fact is too isolated as yet to be of immediate value. A case, Miss Forrester, is often like an American Cross Word Puzzle. Thick darkness hangs over one light, and, cudgel your brains as you will, you cannot trace any correspondence between the given definition and the wanted word. But presently, as other words are guessed and fitted into their places—behold! without any effort on your part, the wanted word suddenly appears. You have written it without guessing it at all. And so, perhaps, with this shabby fragment of pink tape. It may mean nothing and lie outside the problem altogether, but it may mean something quite important. Obviously an attempt has been made to create a hiding-place in your dress cupboard. But for the splinter we should not have perceived it. The splinter is very curious. I would give a great deal to find that splinter."

"I never thought to look for it," she said.

"You wouldn't, but I did—without success. To return to Mr. Maydew. If I may advise, do not let any strangeness that he may reveal alter your attitude to him. Treat him as usual. He is, as you say, an amazingly sensitive man, an artist, and his nerves are abnormally developed probably. You can best help him by ignoring any oddity of manner or wildness of speech. Time will restore his balance. Meanwhile, don't mention this subject—the cupboard—to him, or anybody. Be sure to remember that."

Juanita thanked the detective, and, true to herself, strove to show him that she sympathised with his own difficulties and had imagination to realise the painful nature of his work in life. She was gracious and kindly, and in a man himself gracious and kindly her attitude found ready appreciation and response. Already he shared the accepted opinion of Miss Forrester, and when he had left her he might have been expected to balance her sweet nature against the dark secret overhanging the soul of the man she loved, and mourn for both. But no gravity darkened John Ringrose, as he sat presently in

the kitchen with Mrs. Jay and the cook, smoked a pipe and listened to their theories of the crime. Jane Woodhouse was indifferent, but the elder woman suffered from reaction.

"You miss her, though she was hard and a driver," confessed Ann. "I told Mr. Maydew so this morning, and he understood, same as he understands everything. 'Yes,' he said, 'you'll miss her, Ann, same as the old convicts they kept in chains missed the irons when they were struck off.'"

"A very good simile, ma'am, no doubt," answered John.

Then he heard that William desired to speak with him, and when he had smoked his pipe he joined the butler, who was cleaning plate in his pantry.

John found Mr. Jay full of a curious little discovery. "It may be nought," he said, "or it may mean a lot. We people are not in a position to tell what's useful and what's useless; you are. It's like this. Have you cast your eyes round the library, Mr. Ringrose?"

"Yes, William. I've had a pretty good look round everything in there."

"You would. And you noticed a pretty knife or two in the show-cases, I expect?"

"I took special note of them. There are two Scottish dirks, and there are other daggers from the East. They interested me above a bit, and you'll understand why. I've satisfied myself, with the doctor's assurance, that pretty well any one of those knives might have done the deed."

"Ah! Trust you! And its about one of the knives—a Scottish dirk, sir—that I wanted to speak. No doubt you see things about 'em that's hid from me; but I see one thing about one of them that's hid from you."

"Good, William! What is it?"

"Just this. I don't say I'm very well up in the collection, or anything like that. Miss Maydew cared not a button for books or curiosities; but she cared for cleanliness, and it was my job once a month to run over that room, dust the backs of the books, and polish the glass of the show-cases. So I got to know roughly what was in them—the cases, not the books. And I happened to be familiar with the middle case, because the cream of my late master's collection was in it. That Scot's dirk—and I'll take my oath of it—was fastened to its card with a piece of pink tap 'The Prince Charlie' dirk, Mr. Ringrose. There's no manner of

doubt about that. I wouldn't say anybody in this house can substantiate the statement, but I'm prepared to swear to it."

"What of it, William?"

"This: that since the murder, the dirk is fastened to its card with a bit of common book twine, uncoloured. That dirk has been out of the case unknown to me, and now it's back; but the pink tape's gone, and a piece of ordinary string has taken its place."

Ringrose showed deep interest.

"That most certainly means something," he said. "Show me the dirk. Can you describe the former pink tape exactly?"

"You can see the like in the case," answered the old man. "There's a lot of curios tied to their cards with similar stuff."

Mr. Jay lighted a lamp and groaned while doing so.

"I've hurt my arm," he explained, "and got a boil forming on it that gives me pain."

"How did you do that?" asked John, for it was his curious custom to let no statement of any sort or kind go unquestioned, when it came from an interesting person.

"Couldn't tell you more than the dead. I felt pain there a fortnight ago—woke with it, but saw nought but a flea-bite as it seemed. Then it got worse, and my wife's poulticing it."

"Don't let it get worse. A bite's often poisonous. Let your doctor see it."

"I reckon I will," answered Mr. Jay; then Ringrose took the lamp from him and they repaired to the library. The case was soon open and the dirk in the detective's hand. He took it by the blade, then studied the pink tape on other specimens.

"You can form no idea where this string came from?" he asked, but William was unable to say.

"There's nothing distinct to my eye about it," he replied.

"If I remove it, will it be missed?" inquired John.

"Not a chance. Nobody ever looks in these cases."

"There may be finger-prints," exclaimed Ringrose. "That's why I avoid the handle. Thank you, William. Now we'd better separate. I'll look after this knife for the present. Don't mention the subject to anybody."

They parted and the visitor retired to his room, not again appearing until, at Miss Forrester's wish, he dined with her. William waited upon them, but the conversation was turned to the future and devoted to general subjects. Juanita showed concern

for the butler's hurt, of which she knew, and repeated John's advice. Indeed, she urged him to delay no longer, and when the meal was ended, Mr. Jay presently donned a thick coat and left the house.

On the following morning he reported that Dr. Forbes had lanced his arm, and that he felt much better in consequence.

In the course of that day Vincent Maydew returned home and, during the evening, he and the detective very vitally advanced their private understanding. But the course of the conversation was little to have been expected.

At dinner, John announced his intention of soon leaving Greystone, and when the meal was ended, the two men departed to the little study as before. Juanita went with them. She remained but half an hour, then retired, and as she kissed her sweetheart and bade him "good-night," the watcher observed a shadow deepen on the man's face and understood it. Miss Forrester was also conscious of the darkness that still held Vincent Maydew; indeed, she voiced it as she shook John's hand.

"Cheer him up if you can, Mr. Ringrose, for I am powerless to do so," she said, and the elder smiled upon her, while Vincent stared.

"I will make a great effort," promised John, and then, the girl gone, he shut the door he had opened for her and returned to his armchair.

"Mend the fire," he said; "you're in for a pretty long sitting, my friend."

He lighted his cigar and then regarded the melancholy youth before him with an expression in which amusement and deep sympathy were blended.

Maydew spoke first and blurted a piece of information. "That knife's gone out of the museum," he said. "For some infernal reason I was prompted to look at it again to-night before dinner. I went for a book to the library—or said I did—and turning to look at the darned thing, discovered that it had been taken off the card."

Ringrose nodded.

"I took it," he answered.

"Why?"

"I want it. I want to keep it, that I may add it to an interesting little private collection. You'll say you've given me enough, no doubt."

He tapped his breast.

"Twenty thousand pounds sounds good, Mr. Maydew. But I want Prince Charlie's dirk, too, and I guess you'll have no further use for it."

The other flinched before humour he felt intolerable.

"Keep it," he answered, "and leave us as soon as you reasonably can."

"Thank you. That's my intention. But there are vital points to clear to-night."

"You mean the money? Well, in a few months, or possibly less, I will hand you bearer bonds for the full amount."

"Excellent! But there's another interesting little complication I've got to break to you. I think I know who really murdered Miss Maydew."

Agony convulsed John's hearer. Vincent glared and for a moment could not speak; but the other was quick to spare him all needless torture. He rose, poured a stiff whisky, added but a splash of soda from a siphon, and took command.

"Drink and listen. It was not Miss Forrester. She is as innocent as yourself, my friend."

The sufferer stiffened and grew deadly pale; his eyes rolled up and he was about to faint; but relief took another turn. He had already drunk at the other's command. Now he relaxed; his heart leapt and he burst into tears. John, knowing that all was well, patted his shoulder, spoke comforting words, then left Maydew to recover. Indeed, he was moved himself, and though his eyes twinkled, they were dim. Silence fell on them; as Maydew regained self-control and looked longingly at the door, his visitor spoke.

"Yes, I know what you want to do, young fellow. You want to bolt to her and throw yourself on your knees at her feet, and ask her forgiveness, and tell her you're the most unworthy dog that ever loved a rare girl who was too good for him. But that's a scene you must play in your own heart and nowhere on this earth. Now listen to me. Sit still, light a cigarette, or something, and believe that you're out of the wood. You've got to heed me, and then I've got to heed you; and then you may be allowed to go to bed. As for Miss Forrester, she has had a good deal to endure lately and has stood under a pretty dark shadow, though, thank Heaven, her blessed innocence never allowed her to feel the cloud. Anybody else might have wondered at your misery, and for that

matter she did ; but she little guessed the reason and she never must—remember that. However, we'll come to her. Now I start."

John put down his cigar and perceived his listener was collected and in a condition to follow the argument with a mind at rest.

"When you told me that you had killed Miss Maydew," he began, "you told me a great deal more than the fact. Utterly ignorant as you probably are of criminal psychology—like most of the other writing chaps who invent murder stories—you overlooked certain very obvious indications of your own character which you had already presented to me. I'd studied you very carefully long before your confession. You will never commit a murder, Mr. Maydew. You can take it from me your talents will never rise to that. William was perfectly right when he told me you would find it hard to kill a wasp, let alone an old woman. Moreover, you are highly intelligent—an intellectual man—the last who would be likely to let any futile passion for revenge obscure your outlook, or run you into a capital crime. A Sclav, or Latin 'intellectual' might ; not an Anglo-Saxon. Our 'high-brows' are a meek and mild crew, except with the pen.

"Beyond that you are naturally honest. You lied badly, obviously, absurdly. Had you been already under my suspicion as the probable murderer of Miss Maydew, I should have let you out after your confession. But, of course, a great deal more than evidence of your own innocence accompanied your statement. I knew in two minutes that you never killed your aunt ; but somebody had certainly done so, and what did you do ? You made it exceedingly clear that you knew, or thought you knew, the culprit!

"What followed ? Your terror was laid bare under my eyes and your suspicion appeared. There only existed one person in the world for you who would create such confusion. For none else on God's earth would you have been prepared to take on your shoulders a crime of this magnitude, or confess it to me. Love blinds in more ways than one. It actually blinded you in the vital particular of your sweetheart's innocence ; and that, of course, proved that evidence of the most terrific character confronted you. Only such evidence could have forced you to your conviction against years of devotion and experience and love. You'll tell me about that presently. A secret between us for ever, remember ; but a secret that it will be essential I should know for the satisfaction of the law.

"The evidence that convinced your reason against your heart

must have been prodigious, for it conquered reality, as doubtless it was meant to do. You know Juanita Forrester better than anybody else in the world. You shared the common knowledge of her extraordinary distinction—her rare warm heart—her generosity—her sympathy with all who were unhappy or downtrodden. I've heard it echoed on every side, from the bailiff to the bootboy. And beyond that, you knew her inner soul and had won her confidence and worship. From you nothing was hidden ; yet where the rest of the world scorned the possibility of evil breathed in connection with her name, you found yourself convinced that she was a murderess ! That's interesting and shows how, as I said just now, love blinds in more ways than one. It's because love, like conscience, makes us cowards, Mr. Maydew."

He paused for a moment, but lifted his hand for silence when the other was about to speak.

"Listen a little longer. We've nearly done with the first act," continued John. "Well, I knew, while you told your story, that you were innocent, but believed your sweetheart guilty. I felt tempted then and there to undeceive you, so far as your attempt to delude me was concerned ; but business is business and I saw, of course, that the truth might be as your secret terror prompted you to fear. I could not yet feel positive that you were mistaken ; and so I fell in with your transparent little plot, named my price, and took your money. It was understood that I should pretend to work and presently throw up the sponge and retire beaten. The interesting and original thing is that I might actually have retired beaten had it not been for your efforts to choke me off ! They were, of course, full of invaluable information.

"I obeyed you, save in one particular. Instead of pretending to work, I did work, and my work swiftly convinced me that your fears were folly. I longed to tell you, boy. The hardest thing in the case was to keep my mouth shut to you and let you go on thinking that the girl you loved was a murderess even for one hour. But I'll be frank. I couldn't trust you. It was better you wilted a little longer and left her wondering. Because, you see, your Juanita was safe enough. She puzzled and she troubled, but nothing to hurt ; while somebody else, who mattered a great deal more than either of you, had to receive my respectful consideration ; and that was the doer of the deed. One didn't want to create any uneasiness in that quarter."

"Good heavens ! You knew ? "

"No; I guessed; but I didn't know. But after I'd seen Mr. Fosdike, the lawyer, I began to feel tolerably sure. Now hear what you can do to help me."

"How should I help? I wish I could."

"Tell me exactly what made you so terribly sure that your sweetheart, and nobody else, had killed Miss Maydew. I attach the very greatest importance to this information, so take your time and give me every detail."

Vincent Maydew collected his thoughts and then spoke. "I come out of this darned badly," he began.

"Not so badly as you tried to, however."

"The facts are these. After my Aunt Mary declared her intentions against me, Juanita and I sat tight for a day or two and hoped that she would change her mind, grow calmer and allow reason to work with her. However, she never changed her mind, and reason was not her strong suit at any time. She sent for Fosdike and told us, on the night of her death, that she had made a new will and left everything to her brother. When she had gone to bed and before I went upstairs to pack before an early start on the following day, Juanita, for once in her life was really angry. She cut loose and cried out that the old woman was a monster and dead to every decent human feeling. Her abstract sense of justice prompted her, rather than her indignation for me, or her own personal disappointment. She railed against Miss Maydew and declared that she would leave her instantly and never see her again. She had actually planned to leave the house on the following morning with me, and she thought me rather mean for pleading against such a natural action. We differed, but we didn't quarrel. I looked ahead and still hoped that a thing done in anger might be cancelled presently, if neither of us took any hasty step to make a change of front impossible. Juanita at last allowed me to persuade her. She consented to stop, at least for a time, and await events. Then she went to bed."

"One moment. When you speak of a 'personal disappointment' for Miss Forrester, you mean that, under the old will, she enjoyed a considerable bequest, while the new will contained no mention of her?"

"Yes; at dinner, when she told us what she had done, my aunt specially mentioned to Juanita that she had withdrawn her promised legacy. The amount I do not know, neither did Juanita, but she had reason to believe it handsome."

"It was ten thousand pounds," said Mr. Ringrose.

"Was it? Well, I'm probably wrong when I speak of 'personal disappointment,' for my girl certainly did not think of herself that night. She only thought of justice and the wicked wrong to me after long years of steadfast support to my aunt, and my patience and consideration and so on. I had really tried to win the old woman, and had studied her pleasure in a thousand ways. They say every artist has a good slice of feminine make-up in him, and, at any rate, I thought I understood Aunt Mary and could sympathise with her difficulties of character and see the best side of her. When the smash came, Juanita remembered these things and they made her furious on my account. She went to bed angry—honestly angry—and my mind was left acutely conscious of such an extraordinary fact. Her Spanish blood, no doubt, and her intense love for justice.

"The next thing is this. She went to bed and so did I; but I couldn't sleep. I was terribly upset by the disaster of the day, and tossed and turned and troubled hour after hour and cudgelled my wits in vain to find some rational and intelligent way of saving the situation. Somewhere about two o'clock I thought I heard a noise in the passage, rose and looked out—just in time to see Juanita enter her room, carrying a candle in one hand and something else in the other I could not make out. I guessed that, like myself, she was sleepless, and I felt half inclined to go and see her. I wish that I had done so. It might have saved me many appalling hours. But I did not, and I had forgotten the incident entirely before the shock of the morning's tragedy until she mentioned it to me many hours later.

"Then she told me exactly what she told the coroner at the inquest—how she had gone to get a book and something to eat and drink; and how she thought a sound came from the corridor near Miss Maydew's door. She had been strange during the hours after the discovery—or so it seemed to me. A calmness and indifference that appeared foreign to her as I understood her followed the evil news. She showed no great sorrow and hardly any surprise. But there was something. I felt almost as though she found herself under the weight of a dread akin to my own—as though, perhaps, the horrible thought crossed her mind that I might be responsible! At any rate, she avoided me—doubtless in reality from a delicate feeling that I might prefer to be alone at such a time—but I was unbalanced and full of vague fears.

"Thus when opportunity came something inspired me to go

into Juanita's room, when she was out of the house, and make such an examination as would doubtless presently be made by the law. I did so and found nothing to cause uneasiness until I came to the cupboard. There I found evidence of something—a splinter broken off old wood—a sort of thing to catch the eye, Ringrose. Closer search showed that a board had been displaced, and I found no difficulty in lifting it—an old, solid plank not more than three feet long. Underneath it was some white, thin material huddled up in a ball. I pulled this out, and as I did so Prince Charlie's dirk fell out of it. The thing was obviously one of Juanita's nightgowns, and the right wrist was soaked in blood.

"At that moment my mind moved queerly. It seemed that the truth was a thing of the past—that I had known for an eternity how my aunt died. I was only concerned with Juanita, and I sat on the ground and stared at the blood-stained knife and night-gown and explained to myself that my sweetheart had suffered an awful fit of temporary insanity, had done this thing and hidden the evidence, then probably forgotten all about it. I wove a theory and my mind moved as quickly as our minds move in dreams. I passed through vast arguments all tending in one direction, and after what seemed a lapse of hours I woke, as it were, wondering that nobody had come to find me. As a matter of fact, no more than five minutes had passed since I made the discovery. I restored the board to its place and took the evidence of the tragedy to my own room. And that night, when alone in this study after the household had retired, I burned the nightdress, destroying every fragment of it, and I locked up the dirk in my private desk.

"By now I had proved conclusively to myself that the deed must have been prompted by some strange freak of atavism in Juanita—an impulse awakened by my wrongs—not her own. I suspected that, in a sort of waking trance, she had done a deed which her maternal ancestors might have condoned, or themselves committed readily enough. She had remembered the museum and obtained the knife. I guessed that I had seen her returning with it, and that at a later hour she had unconsciously committed the crime, concealed the evidence, slept and awakened to suppose she had dreamed the deed—if, indeed, it remained in her memory at all. You can see how my devotion quickened my mind to explain what seemed so terribly certain.

"So it stood next day, and contact with Juanita convinced me that she knew nothing of the horrible event. To tell her what I

knew was unthinkable, for she would have insisted on making the facts public. I resolved to be dumb, therefore ; but I delayed too long in a very vital particular. My first action should have been to cleanse the knife and return it to the place from which I knew it had come. This I intended to do, but two things happened on the following morning. The post brought the news that Uncle John was dead, and I guessed at once this fact destroyed the new will ; then, early after breakfast, Inspector Burrows arrived and asked me if I would meet your train and invite you to stop at Greystone. He held that desirable and, though a detective in the house was the very last thing I desired, I dared not say so without rousing suspicions in the policeman's mind.

"No opportunity to visit the library secretly occurred until the time had come to go to the station. I went on my motor-bicycle, met you, and invited you to Greystone. I didn't think you were coming. I meant, however, to get the knife back, and that night determined to secure the card from the museum so that nothing should appear to be missing. I had meant to go after everybody was asleep in the small hours, and judged that to move the card would be as safe as to return the knife. But on going to bed I slept like the dead and didn't wake up till the first glimmer of dawn. I started at once for the card, but it was too late. You were actually in the museum, and unseen by you, from the gallery, I observed you at the centre case and saw you read the empty card. Then I cleared out, leaving you unaware that I'd seen your action."

Ringrose nodded.

"I can pretty well guess the rest," he said.

"Nobody will ever guess what the next twenty-four hours meant to me," replied the young man. "I suffered the torments of hell, for I knew, as surely as I was alive, that you would get to the bottom of it with such a clue. You somehow inspired me with an infernal certainty that Juanita was doomed sooner or later. Not reason, but terror, for you had no real clue. But my nerve was gone, and at last I determined upon taking the blame and cutting the ground from under your feet by confessing to the murder myself. It seemed a safe way out for her, and I didn't appreciate how mad it was likely to look from your point of view. You didn't give me a chance to appreciate it, for that matter. You deceived me into thinking that I had deceived you."

"What we call a double-cross, Mr. Maydew."

"Nothing matters now," replied the younger; "but I thought I'd got you, and that the money had done the trick. I ought to apologise, I suppose, but by Heaven! you've earned the money all right in your own way."

The elder smiled.

"Now it's my turn," he said. "I haven't much imagination maybe, yet quite enough to see how this looked to you and what a cleft stick you found yourself in. You argued very well, and being a literary man with a poetic turn of mind, you did pretty much what one might have expected. But you're no actor, Mr. Maydew, and as I've told you, your own yarn stultified itself. I knew what you were after, and that reduced the problem. You thought your sweetheart had done the deed—that was clear. The next thing for me to do was to find out if you were right. I found out you were wrong. That's where intuition came in. A dangerous thing intuition—if you use it to fight against reason, as so many clever people often do—but a mighty useful gift in its place.

"The problem was to find out whether any motive existed for the murder of Miss Maydew in her companion's mind. Did Miss Forrester gain by it? If you and she had heard of John Maydew's death before the murder, then one saw at once that a good deal was gained. But neither of you had heard. Therefore, to kill her mistress was to lose any future chance of changing the situation for the better. Such an act could only be performed by a certain type of character. It argued a tempest of uncontrolled passion and a lust for immediate revenge at any cost. Nothing more unlikely to overtake Miss Forrester seemed possible. Her attitude to the affair was quite in keeping with the situation. She pretended nothing she did not feel. She continued to be herself. Her only cause for distraction, apart from the natural horror of such an event, was your behaviour. She knew you so well, and she could not understand the way you took it, especially after you learned the will was inoperative owing to your uncle having died before it was made. That puzzled her very much and she told me so. Then she discovered the loose board in her dress cupboard and showed it to me. I, of course, had seen it for myself long before, and showed her the piece of tape I had taken from it—the tape from the card in the museum as it turned out. That you had overlooked with the other more terrible clues in your hand.

"I was quite sure that she knew nothing whatever. She's the sort of girl whose native quality looks out of her wonderful eyes.

To kill an old woman for revenge was absolutely beyond her power, even if she'd been born a Borgia. What followed? Why, that somebody unknown had been at amazing pains to plant the crime on Miss Juanita. I guessed at once where you had probably found the knife. But what had led you to search for it, or imagine she was involved, I did not know until you told me.

"The knife, then, was put there—to be found—not by you, but by those who would presently search Greystone; and the splinter was deliberately torn off the board to challenge attention. Without that accident, the floor of the cupboard would not have arrested any eye.

"So I found the fun really beginning, from my point of view. And there, if you please, I'll stop to-night. The first act's ended. To-morrow will see the second act played, and you have told me important things that should help in certain rather vital particulars. I must fit your information into its place and see whether it supports my present theory, or if at any point it upsets it. I hope not, and I think not. Meantime, be at rest and feel neither shame for your falsehoods nor fear for the future. I may be right, or I may be entirely mistaken; but after the funeral to-morrow it is quite possible, with a pinch of luck, that the second and third acts can both be played."

Ringrose shook the lover's hand, and with many expressions of gratitude and thanksgiving, Vincent Maydew bade him good-night.

The following day brought the funeral of Miss Maydew, and large numbers, attracted by curiosity rather than esteem, crowded the little country churchyard. For human beings will go far and take no little pains to look at the outside of a coffin wherein lies a murdered man or woman.

Vincent and Juanita attended the ceremony, while the whole of the Greystone staff were also present. Inspector Burrows and his constables found enough to do to regulate the traffic and preserve decency; while Ringrose availed himself of a house practically empty to pursue certain investigations inspired by young Maydew's last statement and his own deductions upon it.

For more than an hour Greystone was deserted, save for a caretaker in the kitchen and John himself. He had purposely offered to remain and promised Maydew to watch the front of the premises while they should be empty. His purpose, however, demanded absolute secrecy, and, to ensure it, he entered the

kitchen five minutes after the last coach had left the front door, and bade the under-gardener, left in charge, to convey a telegram for him to the post-office. The young man raised no demur, since it was understood that Ringrose now ruled. Glad enough to leave the deserted mansion, the youth set out, and was gone three parts of an hour.

And on the return of the little funeral party, Ringrose left the house for Twambley and enjoyed a long interview with Inspector Burrows.

He returned in the afternoon and sought the society of Vincent and Juanita, after chatting with the servants and hearing from them all particulars of the funeral and the sightseers.

All the staff appeared cheerful. Indeed, the very house seemed to have gained a new and more exhilarating atmosphere with the departure of its defunct mistress. Again the trio took their dinner together, and the meal, despite the melancholy business of that day, showed Vincent Maydew in a happier mood.

He alluded to the affairs of his uncle, not mentioned until then. John Maydew had died somewhat suddenly of physical mischief resulting from intemperance. His death had not surprised his physician, and his affairs presented no complication save a body of debt, which his nephew had made immediate arrangements to cancel. Two days later would see his funeral, and young Maydew proposed to attend it.

Later in the evening John and his host took their way to the little study, and the detective, after half an hour in the united company of the lovers, begged Juanita to retire.

"I don't like to separate you," he said, "but I'm off to-morrow morning, and I must have a serious talk with Mr. Maydew to-night. You go to bed, Miss Forrester, and go to sleep."

Juanita kissed Vincent, and he opened the door for her. Then he returned and expressed regret that his guest was about to depart so soon.

"Your theory has broken down, I suppose," he said. "I hated the sight of you till yesterday, Ringrose, but now I love the sight of you, and I want you to promise to be my friend."

"A promise I'll make and keep," replied the other heartily enough. "But I've not gone yet, and my theory has not broken down, and several rather startling things are going to happen before I'm off to-morrow. You're in for another bad night. However, there's no escape from that."

He looked at his watch.

"Dr. Forbes will be here in ten minutes or so ; but we'll get on from where we left off yesterday. A lot has happened to me since then."

"Dr. Forbes ? Why have you sent for him ? " asked the other.

"Because, unless I miss my guess, somebody's going to want him badly before very long."

"Not Juanita ? "

"No, no ! I hope Miss Forrester will sleep soundly and not wake up till to-morrow morning. And I think she will. You've taken a tidy lot off her mind by coming back to your old cheerful self. Now follow me as closely as you can. Last night we had only finished with you and your sweetheart, but there were three persons open to suspicion in the house besides yourself and Miss Forrester. And all three, by the way, had spoken to me with the warmest affection and regard for her. Well, what about these three old servants associated with Greystone for a great many years ? I put it to myself this way. There had been a big thing happen in the house, and William, waiting at table and enjoying the confidence of all concerned, knew all about the row and the consequence. Through him, his wife, and Jane, the cook, would also know about it. He'd heard of the quarrel and knew it was a grim reality, for he'd been one of the witnesses to the new will.

"I had a chat with him on that subject and found him, though full of talk about every other matter, reticent as to that. He'd known what was in the will, because his mistress had told him ; but he'd not, of course, read the will when he attested Miss Maydew's signature. Asked by me whether Miss Forrester was interested in the new will, he replied that he had no idea. All he could say was that Miss Maydew had disinherited you.

"I'd already intended to see Mr. Fosdike and study both the old will and the new, and I did so two days ago and found out an exceedingly interesting fact. You had told me that Miss Forrester was remembered in the earlier will, and I informed you of the amount last night. She was to have had ten thousand pounds, and there were other legacies under the first will. Among them——"

Ringrose was interrupted, for Williams opened the door and announced Dr. Forbes. The physician entered, beat some snow off his overcoat and demanded to know the purpose of the message that brought him ; but he was not immediately answered.

Maydew bade William fetch spirits and syphons, and when he had done so and withdrawn, both men turned to the detective.

"It's like this, doctor," explained John. "A weak heart is a weak heart, and there's a weak heart beating in the breast of somebody in this house to-night. That same heart is going to get a very ugly shock at exactly ten-thirty. That's within half an hour from the present time. The shock will be severe and I'm a merciful sort of man, so I judged you would be better on the spot, and left the note for you accordingly. Now let me finish what I was saying to Mr. Maydew, please. You brought your bag, I see."

"I did, Ringrose," replied Forbes.

"Thank you. I was telling Mr. Maydew about his aunt's former will. She'd remembered one or two old people in it at the direction of her late father; and some of these had already received their bequests and were eliminated by codicil. But four legatees remained, including Miss Forrester, while in the new will all four had been omitted. The point of interest was, first, the size of the legacies, secondly, the fact that the legatees must know their money had gone. William and his wife, Ann, were down for five thousand pounds jointly; Mrs. Woodhouse, the cook, got one thousand."

"How do you know that they knew they were out?" asked Maydew.

"For the best of reasons. William was brought in to witness the testator's signature. He knew that he and his wife were in the old will for five thousand, for he told Miss Forrester so long ago; but now he knew that since he witnessed her will, he could be no longer in it. Moreover it was so exceedingly short that he might have read it if it wasn't actually covered when he signed. And Fosdike says it was not, and I doubt not he read every word.

"Now what might a facer like that have done for William? He was a self-controlled man before his betters, but I found that, behind the scenes, he had a devil of a temper and ruled with a rod of iron. His heart's groggy and it was understood as a sort of unwritten law by his wife and Jane that he must never be crossed. Even with me he had some ado, when I bothered him, to be civil. There is temper in his eyes. I began to see light. Things happened —and, as I looked at the growing theory, it developed.

"In a case of this sort the detective, if he's wise, will attempt to get into the skin of the suspected person and consider the

situation from his point of view. Here was William quietly going on with his life ; but, assuming he'd had a hand in this affair, how was he thinking and feeling ? Well, obviously he must have been the most puzzled man on God's earth. For how did things look to him ? He'd been devilish careful to say nothing but what was true touching Miss Forrester. He'd absolved her and his new master ; he'd also whitewashed his wife and the cook, and, of course, himself, in a logical and reasonable fashion. But assuming, for argument's sake, that, in a sudden fury to be revenged on her, he'd killed the old woman, who'd robbed him of his legacy at a stroke, then what had he done afterwards ?

" What he had apparently done was to plant the weapon and other evidence in Miss Forrester's bedroom at the first opportunity following the crime. That argued careful preparation. He had to make that cubby hole in the cupboard, and he had to be free to do it. Nothing was easier. He could have spent an hour in her bedroom any day, when she was out and his wife and Jane down below. That William did ; but whether he got a nightdress actually prepared before the murder or after, we don't know yet. I think after. At any rate, the point is that, in that disordered house on the morning after the murder, he had fifty opportunities to slip into Miss Forrester's room and plant the clues. And here's a side question for you, doctor. What's wrong with Mr. Jay at this moment ? "

" He's got a large tumour on his left forearm."

" Could you say what produced it ? "

" Impossible now—poison of some sort."

" A good, deep cut might have done it ? "

" Yes, if the wound had suppurated."

" Then I'll go on.

" Now I'm William," continued Ringrose. " I've killed Miss Maydew and worked off the incriminating evidence where it can't well be missed by the police, though it will look as if it had been carefully hidden, of course. And what next ? I—as William—find first that my manufactured evidence has been apparently overlooked by the professional detective altogether ; and then I find it's gone ! I am now in a quandary. But light is presently thrown on my darkness. I find the dirk back in the museum. That proves to my mind that John Ringrose did not discover it, but somebody else did. That must leave William horribly mystified ; but, of course, he's powerless and daren't pretend he knows anything.

He was quite clever about it, however, and called my attention to Prince Charlie's dirk and the new piece of string ; but that was all he could do. Since then, no doubt, he's been living in hope that I was on a wrong tack. And he's very glad I've failed and am leaving to-morrow."

Vincent Maydew stared.

"Jay!" he cried.

"Yes. An ingenious man, but a ferocious temper was always simmering under that restrained exterior, and Fate unfortunately liberated it. He probably killed the old woman for revenge—perhaps told her so before he struck ; but the plot to involve Miss Forrester, shows far more than mere passion and hate under a cruel disappointment. He's a bad old devil under his skin. I'll forgive anybody who forfeits his life for the luxury of a murder ; but it's hard to forgive one who played the game as William played it and then wanted to have his cake and eat it, too, at an innocent woman's expense.

"The nightdress solved the problem, Mr. Maydew. You see what it told me ? Perhaps not ; but it was this. William had got the hiding-place in Miss Forrester's bedroom ready before he wanted it, no doubt. But what was going into it ? The dirk, of course, and the bit of tape. But with the actual murder came another inspiration. The nightdress. And why ? In my mind's eye I saw Mr. Jay commit the crime. It was a short business. He'd slip out of his bed, do the deed and be back under five minutes. But what happened ? The blood. He found his pyjama jacket sleeve red. That gave him the inspiration. So, when you told me of the nightdress and the red, right sleeve, I thought of William's pyjamas. They might have gone the way of the nightdress and be burned, or they might not. I happened to remember they were not. When you were at the funeral and the house was empty, I looked for them—where ? Not in William's bedroom, but in his wife's work-basket. I'd seen her mending a pyjama jacket, you see. William had met with an accident and burned the right sleeve—so she explained and so no doubt he told her. But, after the nightdress story, I knew that he'd cut away the right sleeve and burned the edge of the cut. It fitted in. He's wearing the pyjama jacket again—with the right sleeve mended.

"And one more sweet touch. I found the splinter ! I found it in William's morning jacket. But not in the pocket. He'd put it in the breast pocket when he broke the board, and been much

surprised, no doubt, to find it gone later when he came to destroy it. And why did he find it gone? Because it had dropped through a hole in the lining and was at the bottom edge of the coat safe and sound. He'd put on his best for the funeral, and his coat was hanging on a peg behind his bedroom door. Feeling the lower pocket, I touched something hard in the lining and in half a minute the splinter was in my hand. Things will slip down from a worn pocket like that. I've known it happen to myself.

"So there you are. He killed her for revenge, because she'd forgotten the legacy and ruled him out; though Mr. Fosdike thinks she quite meant to put him and his wife and Jane back afterwards; and he plotted to land Miss Forrester when the deed was done. It's a clever murder enough in its little way, and he had some good touches. The most masterly thing he did was to praise Miss Forrester so heartily. The temptation to drop a word of doubt in my ear must have been considerable, but he withstood it. And now Burrows and the constable ought to be at the back door."

As Vincent explained these things for the benefit of a bewildered doctor, there came a muffled scream in the passage and the men rose. A moment later Jane Woodhouse rushed into the room.

"The police!" she cried. "Mr. Burrows and my brother-in-law have just come in and arrested William for the murder, and he's fallen lumpus in a faint, and Ann's going mad!"

"Your bag, doctor," suggested John, and a moment later all hastened to the kitchen.

They found the police striving to restore William Jay, only to hear from Dr. Forbes that the little man had passed beyond reach of law, or physic.

At his wholly unexpected arrest he had leapt from his chair and in half a minute succumbed. Dr. Forbes quickly found that the widow needed all his care.

To John Ringrose's satisfaction, Ann Jay, an hour later, was able to add a measure of testimony to the circumstantial evidence responsible for her husband's death. She had been fully conscious that his mind was clouded and, by many bitter and blasphemous speeches, he had indirectly led her to fear that he was involved in the crime. He had lived to appreciate its futility and to know that his legacy was safe with Vincent Maydew. Asked concerning her husband's wound, she explained it.

"He told me a knife fell from a shelf and stabbed him," she

said ; but Ringrose perceived the bearing of this incident and knew the wound self-inflicted.

" He wanted blood for the nightdress which he'd taken from Miss Forrester's chest of drawers," he explained to Inspector Burrows, the doctor, and Maydew, when they were alone ; " and there was no tap to turn on but his own. He cut himself, therefore, and he cut pretty deep. Then the wound gave trouble and didn't heal."

. . . . . .

John Ringrose left Twambley on the following morning and spoke a last few words to Vincent Maydew before he did so. " I shall be down again for the inquest when it finishes," he said, " and then all's cleared up. Meantime, one thing. On your life never breathe a word of what you've been through to Miss Forrester. The facts she has got to know, of course ; but the inference, that has given you such a hell of a time, must be hidden from her for evermore. That's easy. Your gloom was caused by the horrible discovery that somebody was plotting against her—no more than that."

" Trust me there. I'd rather die than that she should hear what I feared. And—you—how can I thank you, Ringrose ? "

" Why should you ? I'll take one of those cigars, please, for the journey. And I'll say one thing more. Believe me, I was never better pleased to cut a knot than this. Here, by the way, is your cheque."

He handed it to Vincent, who pressed it back upon him.

" At least keep that. I'd thankfully double it. You've saved two lives."

Mr. Ringrose laughed, folded the cheque into a spill, walked to the fire, and thrust it in. Then he lighted his cigar with it.

" I can burn money as well as the best, you see ! " he said. " There's Mr. Burrows and the Ford coming up the drive. My respects to your lady. And bear up—bear up ! Good-bye, my lad, and Heaven bless you both."

Robert Barr

THE ABSENT-MINDED COTERIE

Episode from EUGÈNE VALMONT

Hurst & Blackett, 1906

Some years ago I enjoyed the unique experience of pursuing a man for one crime, and getting evidence against him of another. He was innocent of the misdemeanour, the proof of which I sought, but was guilty of another most serious offence, yet he and his confederates escaped scot free in circumstances which I now purpose to relate.

You may remember that in Rudyard Kipling's story, *Bedalia Herodsfoot*, the unfortunate woman's husband ran the risk of being arrested as a simple drunkard, at a moment when the blood of murder was upon his boots. The case of Ralph Summertrees was rather the reverse of this. The English authorities were trying to fasten upon him a crime almost as important as murder, while I was collecting evidence which proved him guilty of an action much more momentous than that of drunkenness.

The English authorities have always been good enough, when they recognise my existence at all, to look down upon me with amused condescension. If to-day you ask Spenser Hale, of Scotland Yard, what he thinks of Eugène Valmont, that complacent man will put on the superior smile which so well becomes him, and if you are a very intimate friend of his, he may draw down the lip of his right eye, as he replies :

"Oh, yes, a very decent fellow, Valmont, but he's a Frenchman," as if, that said, there was no need of further inquiry.

Myself, I like the English detective very much, and if I were to be in a *mêlée* to-morrow, there is no man I would rather find beside me than Spenser Hale. In any situation where a fist that can fell an ox is desirable, my friend Hale is a useful companion, but for intellectuality, mental acumen, finesse—ah, well ! I am the most modest of men, and will say nothing.

It would amuse you to see this giant come into my room during an evening, on the bluff pretence that he wishes to smoke a pipe with me. There is the same difference between this good-natured giant and myself as exists between that strong black pipe of his and

my delicate cigarette, which I smoke feverishly when he is present, to protect myself from the fumes of his terrible tobacco. I look with delight upon the huge man, who, with an air of the utmost good humour, and a twinkle in his eye as he thinks he is twisting me about his finger, vainly endeavours to obtain a hint regarding whatever case is perplexing him at that moment. I baffle him with the ease that an active greyhound eludes the pursuit of a heavy mastiff, then at last I say to him with a laugh :

" Come, *mon ami* Hale, tell me all about it, and I will help you if I can."

Once or twice at the beginning he shook his massive head, and replied the secret was not his. The last time he did this I assured him that what he said was quite correct, and then I related full particulars of the situation in which he found himself, excepting the names, for these he had not mentioned. I had pieced together his perplexity from scraps of conversation in his half-hour's fishing for my advice, which, of course, he could have had for the plain asking. Since that time he has not come to me except with cases he feels at liberty to reveal, and one or two complications I have happily been enabled to unravel for him.

But, staunch as Spenser Hale holds the belief that no detective service on earth can excel that centring in Scotland Yard, there is one department of activity in which even he confesses that Frenchmen are his masters, although he somewhat grudgingly qualifies his admission by adding that we in France are constantly allowed to do what is prohibited in England. I refer to the minute search of a house during the owner's absence. If you read that excellent story, entitled *The Purloined Letter*, by Edgar Allan Poe, you will find a record of the kind of thing I mean, which is better than any description I, who have so often taken part in such a search, can set down.

Now, these people among whom I live are proud of their phrase, " The Englishman's house is his castle," and into that castle even a policeman cannot penetrate without a legal warrant. This may be all very well in theory, but if you are compelled to march up to a man's house, blowing a trumpet, and rattling a snare drum, you need not be disappointed if you fail to find what you are in search of when all the legal restrictions are complied with. Of course, the English are a very excellent people, a fact to which I am always proud to bear testimony, but it must be admitted that for cold common sense the French are very much their superiors. In Paris, if

I wish to obtain an incriminating document, I do not send the possessor a *carte postale* to inform him of my desire, and in this procedure the French people sanely acquiesce. I have known men who, when they go out to spend an evening on the boulevards, toss their bunch of keys to the concierge, saying :

"If you hear the police rummaging about while I'm away, pray assist them, with an expression of my distinguished consideration."

I remember while I was a chief detective in the service of the French Government being requested to call at a certain hour at the private hotel of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. It was during the time that Bismarck meditated a second attack upon my country, and I am happy to say that I was then instrumental in supplying the Secret Bureau with documents which mollified that iron man's purpose, a fact which I think entitled me to my country's gratitude, not that I ever even hinted such a claim when a succeeding ministry forgot my services. The memory of a republic, as has been said by a greater man than I, is short. However, all that has nothing to do with the incident I am about to relate. I merely mention the crisis to excuse a momentary forgetfulness on my part which in any other country might have been followed by serious results to myself. But in France—ah, we understand those things, and nothing happened.

I am the last person in the world to give myself away, as they say in the great West. I am usually the calm, collected Eugène Valmont whom nothing can perturb, but this was a time of great tension, and I had become absorbed, I was alone with the minister in his private house, and one of the papers he desired was in his bureau at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs ; at least, he thought so, and said :

"Ah, it is in my desk at the bureau. How annoying ! I must send for it !"

"No, Excellency," I cried, springing up in a self-oblivion the most complete, "it is here." Touching the spring of a secret drawer, I opened it, and taking out the document he wished, handed it to him.

It was not until I met his searching look, and saw the faint smile on his lips, that I realised what I had done.

"Valmont," he said quietly, "on whose behalf did you search my house ?"

"Excellency," I replied in tones no less agreeable than his own,

" to-night at your orders I pay a domiciliary visit to the mansion of Baron Dumoulaine, who stands high in the estimation of the President of the French Republic. If either of those distinguished gentlemen should learn of my informal call and should ask me in whose interests I made the domiciliary visit, what is it you wish that I should reply ? "

" You should reply, Valmont, that you did it in the interests of the Secret Service."

" I shall not fail to do so, Excellency, and in answer to your question just now, I had the honour of searching this mansion in the interests of the Secret Service of France."

The Minister for Foreign Affairs laughed ; a hearty laugh that expressed no resentment.

" I merely wished to compliment you, Valmont, on the efficiency of your search, and the excellence of your memory. This is indeed the document which I thought was left in my office."

I wonder what Lord Lansdowne would say if Spenser Hale showed an equal familiarity with his private papers ! But now that we have returned to our good friend Hale, we must not keep him waiting any longer.

. . . . . .

I well remember the November day when I first heard of the Summertrees case, because there hung over London a fog so thick that two or three times I lost my way, and no cab was to be had at any price. The few cabmen then in the streets were leading their animals slowly along, making for their stables. It was one of those depressing London days which filled me with ennui and a yearning for my own clear city of Paris, where, if we are ever visited by a slight mist, it is at least clean, white vapour, and not this horrible London mixture saturated with suffocating carbon. The fog was too thick for any passer to read the contents bills of the newspapers plastered on the pavement, and as there were probably no races that day the newsboys were shouting what they considered the next most important event—the election of an American President. I bought a paper and thrust it into my pocket. It was late when I reached my flat, and, after dining there, which was an unusual thing for me to do, I put on my slippers, took an easy-chair before the fire, and began to read my evening journal. I was distressed to learn that the eloquent Mr. Bryan had been defeated. I knew little about the silver question, but the man's oratorical powers had appealed to me, and my sympathy was

aroused because he owned many silver mines, and yet the price of the metal was so low that apparently he could not make a living through the operation of them. But of course, the cry that he was a plutocrat, and a reputed millionaire over and over again, was bound to defeat him in a democracy where the average voter is exceedingly poor and not comfortably well-to-do as is the case with our peasants in France. I always took great interest in the affairs of the huge republic to the west, having been at some pains to inform myself accurately regarding its politics, and although, as my readers know, I seldom quote anything complimentary that is said of me, nevertheless, an American client of mine once admitted that he never knew the true inwardness—I think that was the phrase he used—of American politics until he heard me discourse upon them. But then, he added, he had been a very busy man all his life.

I had allowed my paper to slip to the floor, for in very truth the fog was penetrating even into my flat, and it was becoming difficult to read, notwithstanding the electric light. My man came in, and announced that Mr. Spenser Hale wished to see me, and, indeed, any night, but especially when there is rain or fog outside, I am more pleased to talk with a friend than to read a newspaper.

"*Mon Dieu*, my dear Monsieur Hale, it is a brave man you are to venture out in such a fog as is abroad to-night."

"Ah, Monsieur Valmont," said Hale with pride, "you cannot raise a fog like this in Paris!"

"No. There you are supreme," I admitted, rising and saluting my visitor, then offering him a chair.

"I see you are reading the latest news," he said, indicating my newspaper. "I am very glad that man Bryan is defeated. Now we shall have better times."

I waved my hand as I took my chair again. I will discuss many things with Spenser Hale, but not American politics; he does not understand them. It is a common defect of the English to suffer complete ignorance regarding the internal affairs of other countries.

"It is surely an important thing that brought you out on such a night as this. The fog must be very thick in Scotland Yard."

This delicate shaft of fancy completely missed him, and he answered stolidly:

"It's thick all over London, and, indeed, throughout most of England."

"Yes, it is," I agreed, but he did not see that either.

Still a moment later he made a remark which, if it had come from some people I know, might have indicated a glimmer of comprehension.

"You are a very, very clever man, Monsieur Valmont, so all I need say is that the question which brought me here is the same as that on which the American election was fought. Now, to a countryman, I should be compelled to give further explanation, but to you, monsieur, that will not be necessary."

There are times when I dislike the crafty smile and partial closing of the eyes which always distinguishes Spenser Hale when he places on the table a problem which he expects will baffle me. If I said he never did baffle me, I would be wrong, of course, for sometimes the utter simplicity of the puzzles which trouble him leads me into an intricate involution entirely unnecessary in the circumstances.

I pressed my finger tips together, and gazed for a few moments at the ceiling. Hale had lit his black pipe, and my silent servant placed at his elbow the whisky and soda, then tip-toed out of the room. As the door closed my eyes came from the ceiling to the level of Hale's expansive countenance.

"Have they eluded you?" I asked quietly.

"Who?"

"The coiners."

Hale's pipe dropped from his jaw, but he managed to catch it before it reached the floor. Then he took a gulp from the tumbler.

"That was just a lucky shot," he said.

"*Parfaitement*," I replied carelessly.

"Now, own up, Valmont, wasn't it?"

I shrugged my shoulders. A man cannot contradict a guest in his own house.

"Oh, stow that!" cried Hale impolitely. He is a trifle prone to strong and even slangy expressions when puzzled. "Tell me how you guessed it."

"It is very simple, *mon ami*. The question on which the American election was fought is the price of silver, which is so low that it has ruined Mr. Bryan, and threatens to ruin all the farmers of the west who possess silver mines on their farms. Silver troubled America, ergo silver troubles Scotland Yard."

"Very well, the natural inference is that some one has stolen bars of silver. But such a theft happened three months ago, when

the metal was being unloaded from a German steamer at Southampton, and my dear friend Spenser Hale ran down the thieves very cleverly as they were trying to dissolve the marks off the bars with acid. Now crimes do not run in series, like the numbers in roulette at Monte Carlo. The thieves are men of brains. They say to themselves, "What chance is there successfully to steal bars of silver while Mr. Hale is at Scotland Yard? Eh, my good friend?"

"Really, Valmont," said Hale, taking another sip, "sometimes you almost persuade me that you have reasoning powers."

"Thanks, comrade. Then it is not a *theft* of silver we have now to deal with. But the American election was fought on the *price* of silver. If silver had been high in cost, there would have been no silver question. So the crime that is bothering you arises through the low price of silver, and this suggests that it must be a case of illicit coinage, for there the low price of the metal comes in. You have, perhaps, found a more subtle illegitimate act going forward than heretofore. Some one is making your shillings and your half-crowns from real silver, instead of from baser metal, and yet there is a large profit which has not hitherto been possible through the high price of silver. With the old conditions you were familiar, but this new element sets at nought all your previous formulæ. That is how I reasoned the matter out."

"Well, Valmont, you have hit it. I'll say that for you; you have hit it. There is a gang of expert coiners who are putting out real silver money, and making a clear shilling on the half-crown. We can find no trace of the coiners, but we know the man who is shoving the stuff."

"That ought to be sufficient," I suggested.

"Yes, it should, but it hasn't proved so up to date. Now I came to-night to see if you would do one of your French tricks for us, right on the quiet."

"What French trick, Monsieur Spenser Hale?" I inquired with some asperity, forgetting for the moment that the man invariably became impolite when he grew excited.

"No offence intended," said this blundering officer, who really is a good-natured fellow, but always puts his foot in it, and then apologises. "I want some one to go through a man's house without a search warrant, spot the evidence, let me know, and then we'll rush the place before he has time to hide his tracks."

"Who is this man, and where does he live?"

"His name is Ralph Summertrees, and he lives in a very natty

little bijou residence, as the advertisements call it, situated in no less a fashionable street than Park Lane."

"I see. What has aroused your suspicions against him?"

"Well, you know, that's an expensive district to live in; it takes a bit of money to do the trick. This Summertrees has no ostensible business, yet every Friday he goes to the United Capital Bank in Piccadilly, and deposits a bag of swag, usually all silver coin."

"Yes, and this money?"

"This money, so far as we can learn, contains a good many of these new pieces which never saw the British Mint."

"It's not all the new coinage, then?"

"Oh, no, he's a bit too artful for that. You see, a man can go round London, his pockets filled with new coinage five-shilling pieces, buy this, that, and the other, and come home with his change in legitimate coins of the realm—half-crowns, florins, shillings, sixpences, and all that."

"I see. Then why don't you nab him one day when his pockets are stuffed with illegitimate five-shilling pieces?"

"That could be done, of course, and I've thought of it, but, you see, we want to land the whole gang. Once we arrested him, without knowing where the money came from, the real coiners would take flight."

"How do you know he is not the real coiner himself?"

Now poor Hale is as easy to read as a book. He hesitated before answering this question, and looked confused as a culprit caught in some dishonest act.

"You need not be afraid to tell me," I said soothingly after a pause. "You have had one of your men in Mr. Summertrees's house, and so learned that he is not the coiner. But your man has not succeeded in getting you evidence to incriminate other people."

"You've about hit it again, Monsieur Valmont. One of my men has been Summertrees's butler for two weeks, but, as you say, he has found no evidence."

"Is he still butler?"

"Yes."

"Now tell me how far you have got. You know that Summertrees deposits a bag of coin every Friday in the Piccadilly bank, and I suppose the bank has allowed you to examine one or two of the bags."

"Yes, sir, they have, but, you see, banks are very difficult to treat with. They don't like detectives bothering round, and whilst they do not stand out against the law, still they never answer any more questions than they're asked, and Mr. Summertrees has been a good customer at the United Capital for many years."

"Haven't you found out where the money comes from?"

"Yes, we have; it is brought there night after night by a man who looks like a respectable city clerk, and he puts it into a large safe, of which he holds the key, this safe being on the ground floor, in the dining-room."

"Haven't you followed the clerk?"

"Yes. He sleeps in the Park Lane house every night, and goes up in the morning to an old curiosity shop in Tottenham Court Road, where he stays all day, returning with his bag of money in the evening."

"Why don't you arrest and question him?"

"Well, Monsieur Valmont, there is just the same objection to his arrest as to that of Summertrees himself. We could easily arrest both, but we have not the slightest evidence against either of them, and then, although we put the go-betweens in clink, the worst criminals of the lot would escape."

"Nothing suspicious about the old curiosity shop?"

"No. It appears to be perfectly regular."

This game has been going on under your noses for how long?"

"For about six weeks."

"Is Summertrees a married man?"

"No."

"Are there any women servants in the house?"

"No, except that three charwomen come in every morning to do up the rooms."

"Of what is his household comprised?"

"There is the butler, then the valet, and last, the French cook."

"Ah," cried I, "the French cook! This case interests me. So Summertrees has succeeded in completely disconcerting your man? Has he prevented him going from top to bottom of the house?"

"Oh, no, he has rather assisted him than otherwise. On one occasion he went to the safe, took out the money, had Podgers—that's my chap's name—help him to count it, and then actually sent Podgers to the bank with the bag of coin."

"And Podgers has been all over the place?"

"Yes."

"Saw no signs of a coining establishment?"

"No. It is absolutely impossible that any coining can be done there. Besides, as I tell you, that respectable clerk brings him the money."

"I suppose you want me to take Podgers's position?"

"Well, Monsieur Valmont, to tell you the truth, I would rather you didn't. Podgers has done everything a man can do, but I thought if you got into the house, Podgers assisting, you might go through it night after night at your leisure."

"I see. That's just a little dangerous in England. I think I should prefer to assure myself the legitimate standing of being the amiable Podgers's successor. You say that Summertrees has no business?"

"Well, sir, not what you might call a business. He is by way of being an author, but I don't count that any business."

"Oh, an author, is he? When does he do his writing?"

"He locks himself up most of the day in his study."

"Does he come out for lunch?"

"No; he lights a little spirit lamp inside, Podgers tells me, and makes himself a cup of coffee, which he takes with a sandwich or two."

"That's rather frugal fare for Park Lane."

"Yes, Monsieur Valmont, it is, but he makes it up in the evening, when he has a long dinner with all them foreign kickshaws you people like, done by his French cook."

"Sensible man! Well, Hale, I see I shall look forward with pleasure to making the acquaintance of Mr. Summertrees. Is there any restriction on the going and coming of your man Podgers?"

"None in the least. He can get away either night or day."

"Very good, friend Hale, bring him here to-morrow, as soon as our author locks himself up in his study, or rather, I should say, as soon as the respectable clerk leaves for Tottenham Court Road, which I should guess, as you put it, is about half an hour after his master turns the key of the room in which he writes."

"You are quite right in that guess, Valmont. How did you hit it?"

"Merely a surmise, Hale. There is a good deal of oddity about that Park Lane house, so it doesn't surprise me in the least that the

master gets to work earlier in the morning than the man. I have also a suspicion that Ralph Summertrees knows perfectly well what the estimable Podgers is there for."

"What makes you think that?"

"I can give no reason except that my opinion of the acuteness of Summertrees has been gradually rising all the while you were speaking, and at the same time my estimate of Podgers's craft has been as steadily declining. However, bring the man here to-morrow, that I may ask him a few questions."

. . . . . .

Next day, about eleven o'clock, the ponderous Podgers, hat in hand, followed his chief into my room. His broad, impassive, immobile smooth face gave him rather more the air of a genuine butler than I had expected, and this appearance, of course, was enhanced by his livery. His replies to my questions were those of a well-trained servant who will not say too much unless it is made worth his while. All in all, Podgers exceeded my expectations, and really my friend Hale had some justification for regarding him, as he evidently did, a triumph in his line.

"Sit down, Mr. Hale, and you, Podgers."

The man disregarded my invitation, standing like a statue until his chief made a motion; then he dropped into a chair. The English are great on discipline.

"Now, Mr. Hale, I must first congratulate you on the make-up of Podgers. It is excellent. You depend less on artificial assistance than we do in France, and in that I think you are right."

"Oh, we know a bit over here, Monsieur Valmont," said Hale, with pardonable pride.

"Now then, Podgers, I want to ask you about this clerk. What time does he arrive in the evening?"

"At prompt six, sir."

"Does he ring, or let himself in with a latchkey?"

"With a latchkey, sir."

"How does he carry the money?"

"In a little locked leather satchel, sir, flung over his shoulder."

"Does he go direct to the dining-room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen him unlock the safe and put in the money?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does the safe unlock with a word or a key?"

"With a key, sir. It's one of the old-fashioned kind."

"Then the clerk unlocks his leather money bag?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's three keys used within as many minutes. Are they separate or in a bunch?"

"In a bunch, sir."

"Did you ever see your master with this bunch of keys?"

"No, sir."

"You saw him open the safe once, I am told?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he use a separate key, or one of a bunch?"

Podgers slowly scratched his head, then said:

"I don't just remember, sir."

"Ah, Podgers, you are neglecting the big things in that house. Sure you can't remember?"

"No, sir."

"Once the money is in and the safe locked up, what does the clerk do?"

"Goes to his room, sir."

"Where is this room?"

"On the third floor, sir."

"Where do you sleep?"

"On the fourth floor with the rest of the servants, sir."

"Where does the master sleep?"

"On the second floor, adjoining his study."

"The house consists of four stories and a basement, does it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have somehow arrived at the suspicion that it is a very narrow house. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does the clerk ever dine with your master?"

"No, sir. The clerk don't eat in the house at all, sir."

"Does he go away before breakfast?"

"No, sir."

"No one takes breakfast to his room?"

"No, sir."

"What time does he leave the house?"

"At ten o'clock, sir."

"When is breakfast served?"

"At nine o'clock, sir."

"At what hour does your master retire to his study?"

"At half-past nine, sir."

"Locks the door on the inside?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never rings for anything during the day?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"What sort of a man is he?"

Here Podgers was on familiar ground, and he rattled off a description minute in every particular.

"What I meant was, Podgers, is he silent, or talkative, or does he get angry? Does he seem furtive, suspicious, anxious, terrorised, calm, excitable, or what?"

"Well, sir, he is by way of being very quiet, never has much to say for hisself; never saw him angry, or excited."

"Now, Podgers, you've been at Park Lane for a fortnight or more. You are a sharp, alert, observant man. What happens there that strikes you as unusual?"

"Well, I can't exactly say, sir," replied Podgers, looking rather helplessly from his chief to myself, and back again.

"Your professional duties have often compelled you to enact the part of butler before, otherwise you wouldn't do it so well. Isn't that the case?"

Podgers did not reply, but glanced at his chief. This was evidently a question pertaining to the service, which a subordinate was not allowed to answer. However, Hale said at once:

"Certainly. Podgers has been in dozens of places."

"Well, Podgers, just call to mind some of the other households where you have been employed, and tell me any particulars in which Mr. Summertrees's establishment differs from them."

Podgers pondered a long time.

"Well, sir, he do stick to writing pretty close."

"Ah, that's his profession, you see, Podgers. Hard at it from half-past nine till towards seven, I imagine?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else, Podgers? No matter how trivial."

"Well, sir, he's fond of reading too; leastways, he's fond of newspapers."

"When does he read?"

"I've never seen him read 'em, sir; indeed, so far as I can tell, I never knew the papers to be opened, but he takes them all in, sir."

"What, all the morning papers?"

"Yes, sir, and all the evening papers too."

"Where are the morning papers placed?"

"On the table in his study, sir."

"And the evening papers?"

"Well, sir, when the evening papers come, the study is locked. They are put on a side table in the dining-room, and he takes them upstairs with him to his study."

"This has happened every day since you've been there?"

"Yes, sir."

"You reported that very striking fact to your chief, of course?"

"No, sir, I don't think I did," said Podgers, confused.

"You should have done so. Mr. Hale would have known how to make the most of a point so vital."

"Oh, come now, Valmont," interrupted Hale, "you're chaffing us. Plenty of people take in all the papers!"

"I think not. Even clubs and hotels subscribe to the leading journals only. You said *all*, I think, Podgers?"

"Well, *nearly* all, sir."

"But which is it? There's a vast difference."

"He takes a good many, sir."

"How many?"

"I don't just know, sir."

"That's easily found out, Valmont," cried Hale, with some impatience, "if you think it really important."

"I think it so important that I'm going back with Podgers myself. You can take me into the house, I suppose, when you return?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Coming back to these newspapers for a moment, Podgers. What is done with them?"

"They are sold to the ragman, sir, once a week."

"Who takes them from the study?"

"I do, sir."

"Do they appear to have been read very carefully?"

"Well, no, sir; leastways, some of them seem never to have been opened, or else folded up very carefully again."

"Did you notice that extracts have been clipped from any of them?"

"No, sir."

"Does Mr. Summertrees keep a scrapbook?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Oh, the case is perfectly plain," said I, leaning back in my

chair, and regarding the puzzled Hale with that cherubic expression of self-satisfaction which I know is so annoying to him.

"*What's* perfectly plain?" he demanded, more gruffly perhaps than etiquette would have sanctioned.

"Summertrees is no coiner, nor is he linked with any band of coiners."

"What is he, then?"

"Ah, that opens another avenue of inquiry. For all I know to the contrary, he may be the most honest of men. On the surface it would appear that he is a reasonably industrious tradesman in Tottenham Court Road, who is anxious that there should be no visible connection between a plebeian employment and so aristocratic a residence as that in Park Lane."

At this point Spenser Hale gave expression to one of those rare flashes of reason which are always an astonishment to his friends.

"That is nonsense, Monsieur Valmont," he said, "the man who is ashamed of the connection between his business and his house is one who is trying to get into Society, or else the women of his family are trying it, as is usually the case. Now Summertrees has no family. He himself goes nowhere, gives no entertainments, and accepts no invitations. He belongs to no club, therefore to say that he is ashamed of his connection with the Tottenham Court Road shop is absurd. He is concealing the connection for some other reason that will bear looking into."

"My dear Hale, the goddess of Wisdom herself could not have made a more sensible series of remarks. Now, *mon ami*, do you want my assistance, or have you enough to go on with?"

"Enough to go on with? We have nothing more than we had when I called on you last night."

"Last night, my dear Hale, you supposed this man was in league with coiners. To-day you know he is not.

"I know you *say* he is not."

I shrugged my shoulders, and raised my eyebrows, smiling at him.

"It is the same thing, Monsieur Hale."

"Well, of all the conceited——" and the good Hale could get no further.

"If you wish my assistance, it is yours."

"Very good. Not to put too fine a point upon it, I do."

"In that case, my dear Podgers, you will return to the residence of our friend Summertrees, and get together for me in a bundle

all of yesterday's morning and evening papers that were delivered to the house. Can you do that, or are they mixed up in a heap in the coal cellar ? "

" I can do it, sir. I have instructions to place each day's papers in a pile by itself in case they should be wanted again. There is always one week's supply in the cellar, and we sell the papers of the week before to the rag man."

" Excellent. Well, take the risk of abstracting one day's journals, and have them ready for me. I will call upon you at half-past three o'clock exactly, and then I want you to take me upstairs to the clerk's bedroom in the third story, which I suppose is not locked during the daytime ? "

" No, sir, it is not."

With this the patient Podgers took his departure. Spenser Hale rose when his assistant left.

" Anything further I can do ? " he asked.

" Yes ; give me the address of the shop in Tottenham Court Road. Do you happen to have about you one of those new five-shilling pieces which you believe to be illegally coined ? "

He opened his pocket-book, took out the bit of white metal, and handed it to me.

" I'm going to pass this off before evening," I said, putting it in my pocket, " and I hope none of your men will arrest me."

" That's all right," laughed Hale as he took his leave.

At half-past three Podgers was waiting for me, and opened the front door as I came up the steps, thus saving me the necessity of ringing. The house seemed strangely quiet. The French cook was evidently down in the basement, and we had probably all the upper part to ourselves, unless Summertrees was in his study, which I doubted. Podgers led me directly upstairs to the clerk's room on the third floor, walking on tiptoe, with an elephantine air of silence and secrecy combined, which struck me as unnecessary.

" I will make an examination of this room," I said. " Kindly wait for me down by the door of the study."

The bedroom proved to be of respectable size when one considers the smallness of the house. The bed was all nicely made up, and there were two chairs in the room, but the usual washstand and swing-mirror were not visible. However, seeing a curtain at the farther end of the room, I drew it aside, and found, as I expected, a fixed lavatory in an alcove of perhaps four feet deep by five in width.

As the room was about fifteen feet wide, this left two-thirds of the space unaccounted for. A moment later, I opened a door which exhibited a closet filled with clothes hanging on hooks. This left a space of five feet between the clothes closet and the lavatory. I thought at first that the entrance to the secret stairway must have issued from the lavatory, but examining the boards closely, although they sounded hollow to the knuckles, they were quite evidently plain matchboarding, and not a concealed door. The entrance to the stairway, therefore, must issue from the clothes closet. The right hand wall proved similar to the matchboarding of the lavatory as far as the casual eye or touch was concerned, but I saw at once it was a door. The latch turned out to be somewhat ingeniously operated by one of the hooks which held a pair of old trousers. I found that the hook, if pressed upward, allowed the door to swing outward, over the stairhead. Descending to the second floor, a similar latch let me in to a similar clothes closet in the room beneath. The two rooms were identical in size, one directly above the other, the only difference being that the lower room door gave into the study, instead of into the hall, as was the case with the upper chamber.

The study was extremely neat, either not much used, or the abode of a very methodical man. There was nothing on the table except a pile of that morning's papers. I walked to the farther end, turned the key in the lock, and came out upon the astonished Podgers.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed he.

"Quite so," I rejoined, "you've been tiptoeing past an empty room for the last two weeks. Now, if you'll come with me, Podgers, I'll show you how the trick is done."

When he entered the study, I locked the door once more, and led the assumed butler, still tiptoeing through force of habit, up the stair into the top bedroom, and so out again, leaving everything exactly as we found it. We went down the main stair to the front hall, and there Podgers had my parcel of papers all neatly wrapped up. This bundle I carried to my flat, gave one of my assistants some instructions, and left him at work on the papers.

. . . . . .

I took a cab to the foot of Tottenham Court Road, and walked up that street till I came to J. Simpson's old curiosity shop. After gazing at the well-filled windows for some time, I stepped aside,

having selected a little iron crucifix displayed behind the pane; the work of some ancient craftsman.

I knew at once from Podgers's description that I was waited upon by the veritable respectable clerk who brought the bag of money each night to Park Lane, and who I was certain was no other than Ralph Summertrees himself.

There was nothing in his manner differing from that of any other quiet salesman. The price of the crucifix proved to be seven-and-six, and I threw down a sovereign to pay for it.

"Do you mind the change being all in silver, sir?" he asked, and I answered without any eagerness, although the question aroused a suspicion that had begun to be allayed:

"Not in the least."

He gave me half-a-crown, three two-shilling pieces, and four separate shillings, all the coins being well-worn silver of the realm, the undoubted inartistic product of the reputable British Mint. This seemed to dispose of the theory that he was palming off illegitimate money. He asked me if I were interested in any particular branch of antiquity, and I replied that my curiosity was merely general, and exceedingly amateurish, whereupon he invited me to look round. This I proceeded to do, while he resumed the addressing and stamping of some wrapped-up pamphlets which I surmised to be copies of his catalogue.

He made no attempt either to watch me or to press his wares upon me. I selected at random a little inkstand, and asked its price. It was two shillings, he said, whereupon I produced my fraudulent five-shilling piece. He took it, gave me the change without comment, and the last doubt about his connection with coiners flickered from my mind.

At this moment a young man came in, who, I saw at once, was not a customer. He walked briskly to the farther end of the shop, and disappeared behind a partition which had one pane of glass in it that gave an outlook towards the front door.

"Excuse me a moment," said the shopkeeper, and he followed the young man into the private office.

As I examined the curious heterogeneous collection of things for sale, I heard the clink of coins being poured out on the lid of a desk or an uncovered table, and the murmur of voices floated out to me. I was now near the entrance of the shop, and by a sleight-of-hand trick, keeping the corner of my eye on the glass pane of the private office, I removed the key of the front door

without a sound, and took an impression of it in wax, returning the key to its place unobserved. At this moment another young man came in, and walked straight past me into the private office. I heard him say :

"Oh, I beg pardon, Mr. Simpson. How are you, Rogers ?"

"Hallo, Macpherson," saluted Rogers, who then came out, bidding good-night to Mr. Simpson, and departed whistling down the street, but not before he had repeated his phrase to another young man entering, to whom he gave the name of Tyrrel.

I noted these three names in my mind. Two others came in together, but I was compelled to content myself with memorising their features, for I did not learn their names. These men were evidently collectors, for I heard the rattle of money in every case ; yet here was a small shop, doing apparently very little business, for I had been within it for more than half an hour, and yet remained the only customer. If credit were given one collector would certainly have been sufficient, yet five had come in, and had poured their contributions into the pile Summertrees was to take home with him that night.

I determined to secure one of the pamphlets which the man had been addressing. They were piled on a shelf behind the counter, but I had no difficulty in reaching across and taking the one on top, which I slipped into my pocket. When the fifth young man went down the street Summertrees himself emerged, and this time he carried in his hand the well-filled locked leather satchel, with the straps dangling. It was now approaching half-past five, and I saw he was eager to close up and get away.

"Anything else you fancy, sir ?" he asked me.

"No, or rather yes and no. You have a very interesting collection here, but it's getting so dark I can hardly see."

"I close at half-past five, sir."

"Ah, in that case," I said, consulting my watch, "I shall be pleased to call some other time."

"Thank you, sir," replied Summertrees quietly, and with that I took my leave.

From the corner of an alley on the other side of the street I saw him put up the shutters with his own hands, then he emerged with overcoat on, and the money satchel slung across his shoulder. He locked the door, tested it with his knuckles, and walked down the street, carrying under one arm the pamphlets he had been addressing. I followed him some distance, saw him drop the pamphlets

into the box at the first post office he passed, and walk rapidly towards his house in Park Lane.

When I returned to my flat and called in my assistant, he said :

" After putting to one side the regular advertisements of pills, soap, and what not, here is the only one common to all the newspapers, morning and evening alike. The advertisements are not identical, sir, but they have two points of similarity, or perhaps I should say three. They all profess to furnish a cure for absent-mindedness ; they all ask that the applicant's chief hobby shall be stated, and they all bear the same address : Dr. Willoughby, in Tottenham Court Road."

" Thank you," said I, as he placed the scissored advertisements before me.

I read several of the announcements. They were all small, and perhaps that is why I had never noticed one of them in the newspapers, for certainly they were odd enough. Some asked for lists of absent-minded men, with the hobbies of each, and for these lists, prizes of from one shilling to six were offered. In other clippings Dr. Willoughby professed to be able to cure absent-mindedness. There were no fees, and no treatment, but a pamphlet would be sent, which, if it did not benefit the receiver, could do no harm. The doctor was unable to meet patients personally, nor could he enter into correspondence with them. The address was the same as that of the old curiosity shop in Tottenham Court Road. At this juncture I pulled the pamphlet from my pocket, and saw it was entitled *Christian Science and Absent Mindedness*, by Dr. Stamford Willoughby, and at the end of the article was the statement contained in the advertisements, that Dr. Willoughby would neither see patients nor hold any correspondence with them.

I drew a sheet of paper towards me, wrote to Dr. Willoughby alleging that I was a very absent-minded man, and would be glad of his pamphlet, adding that my special hobby was the collecting of first editions. I then signed myself, " Alport Webster, Imperial Flats, London, W."

I may here explain that it is often necessary for me to see people under some other name than the well-known appellation of Eugène Valmont. There are two doors to my flat, and on one of these is painted, " Eugène Valmont " ; on the other there is a receptacle, into which can be slipped a sliding panel bearing any *nom de guerre* I choose. The same device is arranged on the ground

floor, where the names of all the occupants of the building appear on the right-hand wall.

I sealed, addressed, and stamped my letter, then told my man to put out the name of Alport Webster, and if I did not happen to be in when any one called upon that mythical person, he was to make an appointment for me.

It was nearly six o'clock next afternoon when the card of Angus Macpherson was brought in to Mr. Alport Webster. I recognised the young man at once as the second who had entered the little shop carrying his tribute to Mr. Simpson the day before. He held three volumes under his arm, and spoke in such a pleasant, insinuating sort of way, that I knew at once he was an adept in his profession of canvasser.

"Will you be seated, Mr. Macpherson? In what can I serve you?"

He placed the three volumes, backs upward, on my table.

"Are you interested at all in first editions, Mr. Webster?"

"It is the one thing I am interested in," I replied; "but unfortunately they often run into a lot of money."

"That is true," said Macpherson sympathetically, "and I have here three books, one of which is an exemplification of what you say. This one costs a hundred pounds. The last copy that was sold by auction in London brought a hundred and twenty-three pounds. This next one is forty pounds, and the third ten pounds. At these prices I am certain you could not duplicate three such treasures in any book shop in Britain."

I examined them critically, and saw at once that what he said was true. He was still standing on the opposite side of the table.

"Please take a chair, Mr. Macpherson. Do you mean to say you go round London with a hundred and fifty pounds worth of goods under your arm in this careless way?"

The young man laughed.

"I run very little risk, Mr. Webster. I don't suppose any one I meet imagines for a moment there is more under my arm than perhaps a trio of volumes I have picked up in the fourpenny box to take home with me."

I lingered over the volume for which he asked a hundred pounds, then said, looking across at him:

"How came you to be possessed of this book, for instance?"

He turned upon me a fine, open countenance, and answered without hesitation in the frankest possible manner: