

MYSTERY HOUSE

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BY

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"THE BLACK GHOST,"
"THE WHISPERER" ETC.



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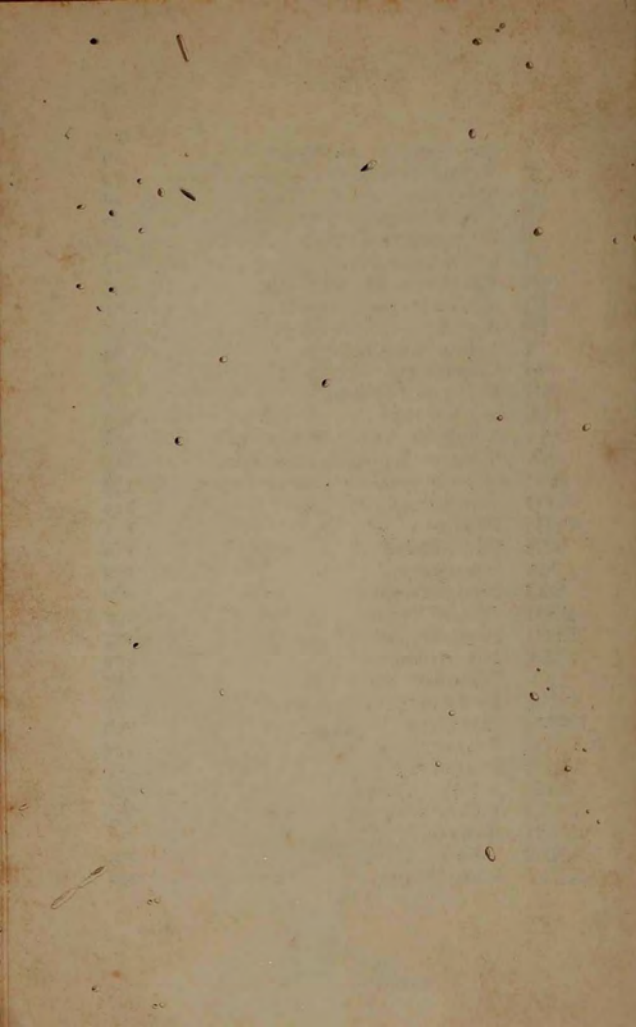
TO MY WIFE

Without whose help and encouragement
this book would never have been written



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CHAPTER I

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

As the car topped the last rise and began the long, easy descent into the hollow that lay ahead Adderley breathed a sigh of relief. A premature expression it was to prove, though this he could not be expected to know. Unless the directions given him were at fault he was within measureable distance of his journey's end, and already his thoughts were beginning to play with the warm, fire-lit room and the other comforts he knew awaited him at his aunt's house. The picture he conjured up contrasted vividly with the bleakness of the night about him.

Throughout most of the journey he had had to contend with a thin mist. It was not enough to obscure vision, it merely made it a trifle difficult at odd and inconvenient moments. Now, as he dropped down into the hollow it began to thicken perceptibly, without, however, in any way losing its original character of a drifting grey veil. Even then it would not have mattered so much had his big headlights not been out of action. As it was he had only the dimmer side lamps to show him the road. To that in part must be assigned the blame for what occurred.

The thing itself, looking unreal and unsubstantial in the drifting veil of mist, showed up ahead as he

rounded an angle of the road. The chances were that it was no more than a local thickening of the mist, a shadow that by some trick of vision looked like the smudge of an inky finger on a grey blanket.

Adderley was taking no chances. He twisted his wheel hard over. The big car responded on the instant. Yet between the realisation of what was needed and the actual performance of the action there elapsed a tiny fraction of time impossible to measure by any accepted standard.

The car swerved out, almost, but not quite, cleared the object, whatever it was. There came an odd grinding sound, then a crash.

Adderley pulled up, got down and went back to investigate. A glance showed him what had happened. A small car of the three-wheeler type lay on its side. The wheels of his own machine had merely brushed it in passing, yet seemingly this had been enough to overturn it.

In the light of his pocket electric torch Adderley gave it a closer inspection. One look satisfied him that there had been nobody in the car at the moment of collision. Apparently it had been abandoned by the roadside, though the reason for this was not evident on the surface.

Up to that point the situation was clear enough. The car had been standing on a slight declivity, balancing on the back wheel and one of the front wheels. With such a light machine a mere push, in the circumstances, was sufficient to send it reeling.

But there was no sign of its owner, and nothing to explain why it had been left standing in the road with its lights out. Adderley snapped out the light of his torch and glanced about him. The road either way looked deserted. The sole sign of life was a light in a house that stood some distance back from the road. A

light in one of the windows that shone with an odd sort of fluctuating intensity. In a way it reminded him of a lantern viewed mistily through an ever thickening and thinning wall of fog. Which, he decided, was probably what it was.

Yet somehow the sight of that light held him fascinated. He could not say just why. He only knew that as he stared at it a queer suggestion of evil crept over him, much as though a cold and ghostly hand had reached out and touched him.

The light went out with an abruptness that was almost startling. He watched, foolishly enough, for it to reappear. Then the practical side of his nature came to his aid and he turned to go back to his car. At that precise instant the silence of the night was shattered by the sound of a woman's scream.

He stopped in mid-stride. The cry had come from the direction of the house and there was an intensity of fear and horror in it that momentarily chilled him. Only one brought face to face with the vital facts of life and death could have screamed like that.

In an instinctive movement his hand dropped, then he smiled wryly as he remembered that he no longer carried weapons habitually about him. That he had left behind, as he had left many other things in his past. He did the only thing possible in the circumstances, turned and hurried towards the house.

Again the cry rang out, nearer this time it seemed. Either his imagination was tricking him or someone had called "Murder!" He broke into a run, flicking the light of his torch this way and that to make sure of his path. Someone else was running too, towards him, to judge from the patter of the footsteps.

An angle in the path between the trees brought him abruptly face to face with a woman. She was running blindly, her face white and distorted, twisted with

fear and terror. She ran plump into his arms before he could pull up, and she screamed again as she felt his hands on her.

"It's all right," Adderley said, speaking as gently as he could in that moment of excitement. "I heard you scream and came to your help."

She gave a little whimper and drew away from him as though not quite convinced of his good intentions. It was only then, as the light from his torch fell full on her that he saw that her ungloved hands were dappled with blood.

CHAPTER II

MYSTIFICATION

HE saw something more in that moment's vision, and oddly enough it seemed to add yet another horror to the fast accumulating horrors of the night.

The girl was young; she could hardly have been more than twenty-two or three, and she was pretty with a prettiness that not even the twisted terror in her face could altogether erase.

"Who . . . who are you?" she gasped hysterically.

"My name's Adderley," he said quickly, "though I don't suppose that will convey much to you. At least I can assure you that I'm a tolerably respectable citizen. But what's been happening back there?" He jerked his head towards the house. "I had an idea I heard someone cry 'Murder.'"

She shivered at the word, then, with an effort, she said, "You must have heard me."

"Murder," he repeated. "Are you sure of that?"

"As sure as . . . as sure as I can ever be of anything. Look"—she held up her hands—"isn't that enough? I didn't do it, only stumbled on it. I can't tell you more about it now. You must wait till I get calmer. But when one comes on an empty house, and finds a dying man . . ."

"A dying man?" Adderley broke in. "Why didn't you say that before? He may not be dead . . . yet. He may need attention, almost certainly will. Come on, we're wasting time."

He made an abrupt movement forward and she clutched at his arm.

"You're not going up to the house?" she queried with a note of panic in her voice.

Adderley nodded. "You needn't come, though. My car's back there. You can wait in it."

"No! No! Let me come with you. It's the lesser of two evils. I daren't wait here . . . by myself."

"All right," he agreed. "Come on then."

He could read the fear in her mind. She dreaded being left alone, perhaps believed that the murderer was still in the vicinity, and likely, if the chance presented itself, to add another defenceless victim to his quota. She felt safer in the house with Adderley, a man she did not know, than outside it and alone. The thought of a protector was comforting, and the matter of how he would shape in an emergency must be left until the need arose.

Adderley asked her no questions as they hurried towards the house. In this he was wise, for she needed the interval to order her thoughts and recover her equilibrium. By the time they reached the open door and halted outside the black cavern of the lightless entrance she had regained her self-control and was fighting fiercely with herself to retain it.

"In here," she said in a low, strained voice, pointing to the hall. "A room on the left. There should be a light on, there was when I came."

Adderley searched with his torch. There was a switch just inside the door, and he pressed it down. There came a slight click, but no light.

"I'll swear it was on. It was when I left," she said uneasily, striving to pierce the darkness of the passage ahead as though she felt that something malefic was lurking there ready to pounce on them.

Adderley did not answer. He was searching along

the wall with his light, and presently he found what he was looking for. Some distance down the passage was the main, and the position of the master switch showed him that his guess was correct. He pulled it down and instantly the passage was flooded with light. Not only that, but lights shone from several points down the passage, obviously from rooms whose doors had been left open.

Accepting the girl's story as correct then, the murderer had been in quite as great a hurry to get away as she had. He had preferred to take the simpler method of turning the lights out at the main switch rather than waste time by going to each room in turn. Probably they had all been on when Adderley had noticed the light in the window, but the intervening trees had no doubt masked the other rooms.

"That's that," he said, conversationally. "Now, which is the room?"

The girl indicated it.

The door was ajar. Adderley pushed it open and peered inside. The room was bare of furniture. He noted that in the very moment his eyes fell on the still figure on the floor. If the other rooms were in the same condition the girl had been quite right in her assertion that the house was empty.

The man on the floor could not have been much more than thirty, even allowing for the fact that the pallor of death had smoothed the traces of the years from his face. It did not look like the face of a man who had died a violent death, though that indeed was nothing to go on. His clothes were obviously English in cut, yet there was an indefinable suggestion of something foreign about him. Adderley could not isolate the suggestion at the moment; it was so extraordinarily elusive that he shelved consideration of it for the time being.

From what the girl had told him he had expected to find the place, if not the man, covered in blood, but there was no sign of anything of the sort, no sign even of any wound. Certainly there must be one otherwise how explain the man's death, but wherever it was there was no visible indication of it.

The fellow lay so extraordinarily still that Adderley was quite certain he was already dead, nevertheless, mindful of what the girl had said about 'a dying man,' he thought it best to satisfy himself beyond all reasonable doubt that no faint spark of life still lingered. He bent down to feel the man's heart and as he did so he touched the still pale face. It was an accidental gesture, yet its effect on him was remarkable. He started back with a muttered exclamation, then touched the face again. He rose to his feet at length with a queer, puzzled expression in his eyes, and turned to the girl.

She was standing just outside the door in such a position that while perfectly visible to Adderley when he turned round she herself could not see the body in its entirety. From the quick, uneasy glances she kept giving up and down the passage it looked as though her mind was more on the possibility of an unwelcome visitor appearing there than on what lay in the room.

"I say"—the biting, incisive note in Adderley's voice brought her round instantly—"didn't you say it was a dying man you saw?"

"Yes. Why?" It was obvious that she was startled by the suggestion in the words.

"Well, you've made a mistake, that's all," Adderley said grimly. "I don't see how you could have made it, but I can tell you this, that not only are there no traces of blood about, but this man has been dead for hours. To put it quite plainly, he's stone cold."

She made a little movement that was more the

shifting of her weight from one foot to the other than anything else, and she swallowed once or twice.

"Well?" said Adderley challengingly. He felt that there was something here that called insistently for explanation. A doubt of the girl's bona-fides began to hammer at the back of his mind.

"What I told you was the truth," she said a little resentfully as though she sensed the suspicion behind the sharp monosyllable. "I saw the man. I touched him. I . . ." She broke off, glancing down at her hands as the memory overwhelmed her.

"You saw the man?" Adderley repeated. "Well, then, tell me this . . ."

He broke off abruptly at the sight of her face. He had moved to one side while he was speaking so that now his body no longer formed a barrier between her and the dead man. For the first time since they had entered the house together she was able to see the stranger's face. Her eyes dilated, her lips moved soundlessly, as she stared at the still, silent figure on the floor.

Adderley, aware that something was wrong, caught her by the arm, and at the touch she seemed to recover some of her poise.

"That," she said vibrantly, "is not the man I saw!"

"Not the man you saw?" Adderley echoed incredulously, though her expression had prepared him for something of the sort. "Are you positive of that?"

She nodded. "I'm quite sure of it. This isn't anyone I know."

CHAPTER III

SUSPICION

ADDERLEY stared in his turn. He read a significance into her last sentence that for a moment left him breathless. Then:—

“So you knew the other man?” He flung the question at her.

She gave him a surprised glance, and her brows knitted. Then the precise implication behind his question seemed to hit her like a blow. Her lips tightened and a little pulse began to throb in her throat. She made just the least movement of uneasiness.

“I think you misunderstood me,” she said. “Or perhaps I didn’t make my meaning clear enough.” Her voice shook as she went on, for the suspicion in his eyes was plain to read. “What I meant was that I didn’t recognise this man as the one I’d seen some minutes previously.”

She stopped, flushing, waited for him to speak.

“I see,” he said gravely. Her explanation was satisfactory enough on the face of it—the expression was just the ‘loose sort of one most people would use without thinking—yet Adderley was not quite convinced. The possibility of two deaths in the one house, one ante-dating the other by some hours, seemed fairly remote, yet the evidence of the blood on the girl’s hands could not be dismissed lightly.

Adderley looked from her back to the man on the floor. The fellow was puzzle enough in himself, for there was nothing to show how he had met his end. It

was quite possible that he had died naturally, though the surrounding circumstances appeared to hint otherwise. However, the exact manner of his taking off would have to be left to those whose business it was to discover such things. Adderley, he considered himself, would have done all he was called upon to do once he had notified the local police.

He turned back to the girl. "I wonder if there's a telephone in the house," he said. "We'd better find that out. Do you know if there is one?"

She shook her head. She seemed past showing any resentment at the implication in his words that her knowledge of the house was more than superficial.

"I can't say," she answered. "Hardly, I should say, seeing that the house is apparently untenanted."

He had his own ideas about that; the electric light, for one thing, seemed to point to the house being in occupation; but he preferred not to voice them as yet.

"We can look," he suggested. "If there is a telephone it is almost certain to be on the ground floor."

He shouldered her gently from the room, extinguished the light, and shut the door behind them. His instinct warned him that the proper thing to do was to lock the room, but in the absence of a key the task presented difficulties. He hit on a compromise, not quite so effective, yet one that had its good points. He recollected that earlier in the evening he had bought a dozen stamps, and that the strip of stamp paper was still adhering to them.

He tore off the strip, wetted and stuck it across from the edge of the door to the frame at the side. To make sure that there should be no substitution he took out a pencil and scrawled his initials in minute characters at several points on the strip.

The girl watched him with a kindling interest that

seemed likely to swamp the antagonism that had sprung up between them.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"A crude way of sealing the room," he told her, "but it will probably serve its purpose."

She looked at him with a touch of speculation in her eyes, but she made no audible comment. Adderley shepherded her down the hall, examining each room as they proceeded. The room they had just left appeared to be the only one bare of furniture, though in the others the furniture stood shrouded in dust cloths, a fact that definitely crystallised an idea that had been shaping in Adderley's brain for some time. It seemed fairly certain on the face of it that neither the dead man nor the one the girl claimed to have seen was the rightful occupant of the house. If that were actually so here to hand were the beginnings of a mystery that seemed likely to produce more than ordinarily intriguing features.

Fortune favoured them up to a point in their search for a telephone. They found one at last in a room that was apparently a study or an office of some sort. It was the usual kind of desk telephone and Adderley picked it up without more ado, lifted the receiver and waited. Nothing happened. The line seemed dead. Though he flicked the hook for quite five minutes on end he got no reply.

As he put the telephone back on the table, his eye automatically ran down the length of insulated cord that led from the base of the telephone to the wall. Something about the hang of the slack caught his attention and made him give it a closer examination. He caught the cord in his hand and drew it towards him. The end attached to the wall still dropped as slackly as ever, but the section pulled towards him came up freely, displaying two frayed ends with a glint

of bright wire showing in the core of the insulation. The cords had been cut through by some sharp instrument, putting the telephone temporarily out of action.

The situation dawned on the girl at much the same moment.

"The line's been cut," she said, and looked at him with perplexity in her eyes. Truth to tell she was attempting to forecast his next move before he made it and wondering if it was one that would be altogether to her liking. She made a little movement of impatience as though she were anxious now to get away from the house and be off about her own affairs.

"I don't see what else we can do now," she ventured. "We've done all that's humanly possible."

"Not quite," said Adderley, nipping in the bud whatever hope she had formed of being quit of the matter. "It seems to me that the simplest and quickest course to take now is for us to call at the nearest police station and tell them all we know."

"We?" she echoed with a note of dismay in her voice.

He nodded. "I don't see very well how you can get out of it, you know," he reminded her. "You made the first discovery and your evidence is bound to be of more importance even than my own."

She said nothing to that, but fell to wrestling with her own particular problem. Her face implied that it was not an inviting one.

Adderley turned to her with his hand on the light switch.

"We'd better go," he reminded her. "Are you ready?"

She walked past him out in to the hall, still a prey to conflicting emotions.

"Do you know where the nearest police station is?"

he asked her as they turned out into the raw, grey night.

She came out of her reverie with a start. "The nearest police station?" she repeated. "Why—er—no." She gave him the feeling that she had been about to say something else, but had changed her mind at the last moment. "I don't know this neighbourhood very well," she went on to explain. "I'm practically a stranger here."

"It doesn't matter much anyway," he assured her. "We'll probably find someone to direct us. There are bound to be people about. It's early yet." He glanced at the illuminated dial of his wrist watch. "Only a little after ten."

"Is it as late as that?" she said with consternation in her voice. "I must . . . I should be . . ." Then with a sort of determined exasperation in her voice, "is it really necessary for me to come to the police station?" she asked.

"I wouldn't be so insistent on it," Adderley told her, "if I wasn't sure of that."

In the semi-darkness she eyed him askance. "Why are you so sure of everything?" she said irritably.

He chuckled. "Because I'm more or less in a position to know," he returned, telling her actually nothing. Beyond his name he had given her to date no information about himself, and at this juncture he did not feel inclined to remedy the omission. Nevertheless it did not prevent him from admitting a very human curiosity about the girl herself. She had been quite as reticent, though it was not so certain that this had been intentional on her part. He decided to put it to the test.

"You know," he hinted gently, "you haven't told me anything much about the beginnings of this affair. As we'll both have to face the police pretty

soon, the more I know of your side of it the more likely I am to be able to help you."

It did occur to her to wonder in what he could help her, but she refrained from asking him, principally because she had an idea that his answer might open up a considerable vista of uncomfortable possibilities.

They were walking down through the trees to where he had left his car, and because of the shadows he could not see the odd expression that crossed her face. It was part perplexity and part something else that did not readily admit of a label. But the surprising part of it was that the element of fear was almost entirely absent now.

"Granted then that I do have to face the police with my story," she said in level tones that contrasted strangely with her attitude up till then, "I don't see that the position you occupy in the matter gives you any right to feel suspicious of me. For all I know to the contrary you may be the murderer yourself."

Adderley chuckled again. It was the sort of riposte he appreciated. "I might be, of course," he agreed, "but you don't believe I am. You wouldn't be talking to me like this if you did."

"It sounds ungracious, doesn't it? But, you see, it goes pretty close to possibilities."

"And why not?" he retorted. "I know no more of you than you do of me. Suspicion is the order of the day, or of the night, I should say."

"And seeing the circumstances in which we met you naturally regard the consensus of evidence as being against me. I agree. But I fancy I can make the most of it plain in a few words. My name, for a start, is Mildred Orde, and I was driving past here when I found I'd run out of petrol. Carelessness

on my part or somebody else's, I suppose I'm not going into details of that now, however.

"Well, I saw a light in this house and I thought I might be able to get help. It looked the sort of place that might run a car. I knocked and rang and could not make anyone hear me. Then I noticed the door was ajar. I pushed it. Having got that far and still finding no one stirring I thought I'd step inside. There was a light showing from the open door of that room we've just left, so naturally I went there. I nearly fell over the man on the floor.

"He was not dead, but I suppose he could not be far from it. He made some sort of an effort when he saw me as though he were trying to speak. Not quite thinking of what I was doing I knelt down and attempted to lift him up. He mumbled something—words—though I could make nothing of it.

"Just then I heard a stealthy step, someone moving on tip-toe out in the hall. There's something, I think, in the sound of a footstep that tells you whether its owner's intentions are good or otherwise. At least in a case like this. It was then I realised that, save for this dying man, I was alone in the house with this other, most likely his murderer. I'll admit I lost my head.

"I sprang to my feet and looked out. Someone was moving in the shadows further down the hall, a furtive figure whose face I couldn't see. He saw me and called, 'Come here. What do you want?' He spoke in a hoarse, throaty voice that was not the least of the horrors of the place. I didn't come and I didn't answer. I turned and ran out of the house. I heard his feet come pattering behind me and I screamed. I kept on screaming, I think, and the next I knew was when you caught hold of me. For the moment I thought it was him, but perhaps my screaming frightened him away."

She stopped, a little breathless, and flung him a half-defiant look as much as to say, "That's the truth. Believe it or not, just as you like." Unfortunately the full effect of it was lost in the shadows of the trees.

"Mr.," said Adderley at the end. "It's circumstantial enough. You couldn't identify the man, of course?"

"The one who called to me or the one who was dying?"

"The former," said Adderley. "I take it you'd have no difficulty in recalling the latter."

"I didn't see enough of the man who called me to form any impression of him," she said. "Fortunately," she added.

They came to the edge of the road, and she stopped and looked doubtfully about her.

"This is where my car should be," she said, "yet somehow it isn't. I wonder if I'm mistaken."

"I don't think you are," he said. "There's your car, pushed in under the shadow of the trees. That's why you didn't see it sooner."

He pointed and the girl started forward with an exclamation. Adderley stopped and glanced up and down the road, then whistled softly to himself. He came across to the girl who was bending down examining her car as well as she could in the dim light.

"My car seems to have been spirited away," he said. "I'm sorry, but if we can manage to raise some petrol your machine will have to carry us both."

She straightened up and turned a grave face towards him.

"I'm afraid that's quite out of the question," she said steadily. "Someone seems to have been amusing himself during my absence by slitting open all three tyres."

CHAPTER IV

THE ATTACK

ADDERLEY bent down and swept the light of his torch along the roadway, and the corners of his mouth twitched into a smile. But it had gone by the time he straightened up and faced the girl.

"At least," he said, "our friend, the murderer, has had the grace to take my car the way I was going. It's inconvenient, of course, but it would have been worse if I had to retrace my steps."

He turned the light of his torch on the other car and the girl ruefully surveyed the wreck of the tyres.

"But why do this?" she said with a gesture towards her car.

"To delay us, I should imagine," Adderley answered. "The longer it takes us to get in touch with the police the greater chance the man has of getting away. He takes my car and disables yours, and there we are."

"He seems to have been a pretty thorough sort of worker in the limited time at his disposal," she remarked with grudging admiration in her voice.

"What do you think we should do now?"

"There's only the one thing to do," said Adderley drily. "It's even more necessary for us now to get in touch with civilization and incidentally, the police. I suggest we take the road he's taken. (At the worst it leads the way we both were going."

"How do you know it's the way I want to go?" she demanded.

"It's the way your car is facing," Adderley told her, "and from the tracks it's obvious you haven't turned it about."

Her lip curled, but there was an odd light of laughter in her eyes could he have but seen it.

"A bit of a detective, aren't you?" she said with a provocative note in her voice.

Adderley chuckled. "A bit of one," he agreed. "How about making a move?" he suggested in the next breath.

"It's quite a good idea," she said. She stared thoughtfully at the derelict car. "We'll have to leave it, I suppose," she said regretfully.

"We can't take it with us in its present state."

She nodded, and came over to him. "It can't come to much harm anyway," she remarked as she fell into step beside him. "The garage people will get it before morning if I let them know."

"Then you do know something about the neighbourhood," he said softly.

Her answer came pat without a trace of hesitancy. "I'm guessing," she said. "There's very few villages nowadays without garages. Of course, I'm taking it for granted that we will reach some sort of a village shortly. Where are you going, by the way, if it's not an impertinent question?"

"It's not. I'm going to Trimpleton first and then to a place not far from it."

"Trimpleton?" she said. "That's the village, isn't it? I wonder . . ."

She stopped abruptly and her eyes swept his face.

"You wonder what?" He took her up quickly.

"If it's far," she said a shade too promptly.

"That's what I'd like to know," Adderley returned. "You see, I've never been here before."

"It's a straight enough road anyway," she commented, and just in time added, "I believe."

It was all part and parcel of that irritating evasiveness that had been coming and going like a wave most of the night. Altogether pretty vague and unsatisfactory, was Adderley's unspoken comment, though he consoled himself with the knowledge that she must divulge more about herself and her destination when presently they faced the necessary police inquisition.

They set out along the road, the girl walking with an effortless stride that showed she was by no means unfamiliar with the requirements of a long tramp. Indeed she seemed if anything the better walker of the two, as Adderley soon found to his chagrin. The road was deserted, and once past the neighbourhood of the sinister house it ran for some distance past what in the darkness looked like a hedge-bordered common. The mist was settling down now and thickening considerably; the chances were that before morning it would turn into a fog.

In the next ten minutes they passed no one, either afoot or driving. Doubts began to assail Adderley.

"I'm wondering," he said tentatively, "if we're on the right road after all. We should be pretty close to Trimpleton now. I've only general directions to go on, but so far they've proved to be accurate."

Again she answered non-committally. "I don't think we'll go far wrong if we keep on as we are," she said helpfully.

They came to a place where the road narrowed between hedge-rows and a turning that might have been a lane or a by-pass road opened off. Adderley glanced about him. As far as he could see there was

no sign-post visible and nothing to indicate that the turning had any importance. Left to himself he would have continued with no more than that one casual glance. But the girl caught convulsively at his arm and stayed him.

"Isn't that something moving?" she said in an urgent whisper. "A car?"

She pointed into the drifting veil of mist athwart the turning. Adderley strained his eyes in an effort to make out what she claimed to have seen. Something certainly was moving there, unless the fog was tricking him. A black bulk of indeterminate size and shape. A vehicle of some sort it might well be, though it showed no lights.

While they stood irresolutely that came which resolved all doubts, the soft purr of an engine quickening instantly to a full throated roar. A car leaped headlong at them out of the mist, its big headlamps flashing on at the same moment.

Half-blinded the man and the girl sprang apart, and the car passed between them. It missed Adderley by inches, but as it thudded by him something hard and heavy crashed down sickeningly on his head. He went spinning back on the road and the darkness swallowed him up.

Adderley opened his eyes to find the light of a lamp shining on him. He blinked, then his eyes travelled beyond the lamp to a bicycle and the dark, helmeted form standing beside it. A gruff voice with a certain note of authority in it addressed him.

"What's all this?" it enquired. "You can't lie here all night, you know, sir."

"I'm not doing it for amusement, officer," Adderley

said throatily. It hurt him to speak as much as it hurt when he tried to move his head, but his sense of humour had not altogether deserted him. "The fact is I got knocked down by a car." He thought it better to put it in that form for the present. Later he could enter into details.

"Is that so?" said the policeman with a new note of respect in his voice. Something in Adderley's tone had convinced him that he was not dealing with any village drunk. "Did you get the number?"

"I can tell you that offhand," said Adderley, struggling to his feet with the help of the other's assisting hand. "You see, it happened to be my own car."

The policeman turned the light again on Adderley's face and regarded him with more interest and curiosity than he had yet displayed. The scrutiny cleared away the last of his doubts; Adderley was at least sober.

"Feel all right now, sir?" he asked. "You do? That's good. Well, then perhaps you can tell me all about it."

"It's rather an involved story," Adderley began. His head had not yet settled back to normal, it betrayed a distressing tendency to swim at totally inopportune moments. "By the way," he went off at a tangent, "you didn't happen to see a young lady about here when you arrived?"

"Nobody but yourself," said the policeman. "I nearly ran over you." Then, suspiciously, "Was she driving the car?"

Adderley shook his head. "I'll tell you about that later," he said. "It's part of the story." The absence of the girl was a problem that would have to wait for the present; somehow he felt certain, why he could not say, that she had not been taken off in the car.

A movement of the policeman reminded him that it was no time for reverie.

"I'd better start by telling you who and what I am," Adderley said. "My name is Adderley and I am, or was, on my way to Langshand Hall. You may know the place?"

"Langshand Hall?" said the other, quickly. "Lady Kettering's place?"

"My aunt," said Adderley. "You can check my bona-fides through her, if you wish. I fancy you'll want to when you've heard all I have to tell you."

With that he went on to relate the adventures of the night, sparing nothing, suppressing nothing. The policeman—Sergeant Aldin—listened attentively and with a greater display of intelligence than Adderley had expected. If at times he found the tale a trifle incredible he did not show it, though he made a number of notes by the light of the bicycle lamp.

"I know the house you mean," Aldin said at the end. "Denning House it's called. I don't have much to do with it, but I believe the owner's away at present. I've an idea though that he left someone in charge." He coughed a trifle embarrassedly before he went on. "This Miss Orde you spoke about, Mr. Adderley, seems to have vanished. It's rather queer that she should have gone, leaving you in the road."

"Unless she went in the car," Adderley suggested. It seemed to him the most likely thing to have happened, though he felt more or less certain she had not gone of her own free will.

"That's easily settled," said the sergeant, and he turned the light of his lamp on the ground. The surface of the road was hard and though tyre tracks showed plainly enough on it it would not retain the print of a boot. But the tarred surface did not run right up to the level of the hedge; there was a sort of

footway of beaten earth between, soft enough to take impressions.

The two men studied them together. They were the prints of woman's shoes, three sets of them it seemed, two leading towards the shelter of hedge, and one away from it.

"It looks," said the sergeant sagely, "as if she went towards the hedge, then came back to the road and finally crossed the path again."

He stared intently at the dark wall of the hedge as though he fancied the girl might be lurking behind it at this very moment. To Adderley's relief, however, he made no suggestion, but after a moment turned back to the road. Actually he was trying to make up his mind what to do. Obviously sooner or later he must investigate the supposed murder at Denning House, but he shrank, for a variety of reasons, from doing this by himself. On the other hand he did not like the idea of dragging Adderley back on foot all that distance.

"I think," he said as the easiest way out of the difficulty "that we'd better have a look first up the lane and see what that car was doing there."

It seemed a good suggestion, though Adderley could not see that they would learn more than they knew already. Actually all they discovered from the tracks in the unpaved lane, which, by the way, came to a dead end a few hundred feet past the road, was that the car had turned in there and apparently been manœuvred round so that it could get out again on to the main road without having to reverse. Adderley decided on the evidence that the attack on him had been deliberately planned, and that the driver of the car, with an uncanny prescience of the route they would take, had pulled in there to wait for them. All of which, despite the evidence of the footprints,

made him feel uncomfortable doubts of the girl's fate.

Aldin's thoughts must have been running on her too, to judge from his next words.

"I think," he said reflectively, "that I'd like a word or two with your Miss Orde, Mr. Adderley, supposing that is her name. It looks to me as if she isn't quite as innocent a lady as she seemed."

"I don't know," Adderley said. "Her own explanation of what happened struck me as being quite plausible."

Aldin nodded agreeably. "It's merely an obvious conclusion I've drawn, Mr. Adderley," he said mildly, "and I've been long enough at the game to have found out that the obvious is nearly always what has happened. Going off and leaving you like she did, whether she went on foot or in the car, doesn't seem at all like the act of an innocent person."

"Look here," said Adderley, giving the conversation a desperate twist away from what threatened to become an unprofitable subject for discussion, "how far is it back to Trimpton?"

The sergeant considered. "Between half and three quarters of a mile," he said.

"Easy walking distance," Adderley commented, and went on to speak of the idea in his mind. His suggestion was that they should go back to the village together—he rightly conjectured that the sergeant would not let him out of his sight for some time to come—; he would get a car at his own expense from the local garage, then take Aldin, plus another policeman, if possible, back to Denning House to make what investigations were necessary there. The call at the police-station would have the added advantage that Aldin could 'phone Langshand from there and establish, as well as could be done over the wire, the

fact of Adderley's bona-fides. Adderley pointed out in support of his suggestion about the car that a lot of time had already been wasted, actually through the fault of no one in particular.

The sergeant agreed with him *in toto*.

"It'll give me a chance of broadcasting a description of your car right away," he remarked, "though we can't say much about the man that's driving it. Still the chances are that if we get one we'll get the other."

CHAPTER V

INVESTIGATION

HALF an hour later the rickety village car with four men in it, including the driver, came clanking along the road to Denning House. As they progressed the air seemed to become unduly tinged with the smell of scorched rubber and petrol, and more than once Adderley sniffed anxiously. He had a feeling that the ancient car in which he sat might burst into flame any minute, but in this he was more pessimistic than the occasion warranted. But Sergeant Aldin, to whom the eccentricities of the car were an open book, had other ideas. He kept peering ahead in an endeavour to pierce the wavering uncertainty of the mist ahead of them, and more than once he sniffed like an old war-horse smelling the powder from afar.

Presently a tiny gleam of light, fitful and wan, lifted up through the fog, shone for a moment and died, only to shine out again and die once more. The smell of scorched rubber and petrol became a little stronger.

"What do you think that is?" Adderley asked with a queer suspicion at the back of his mind.

The sergeant was not committing himself to anything in advance.

"Better wait and see, Mr. Adderley," he said.

They had not long to wait. The car clanked presently to a standstill a few feet away from the fitful glimmer, and the two policemen and Adderley

sprang to the ground. Before they reached it however Adderley knew that his guess was right.

In place of the girl's car there now was only a heap of burnt and twisted metal with an aroma of scorched rubber and hot petrol round it like a halo. The rubbish was almost unrecognisable, but Adderley had no doubt of its identity. And presently the policeman, raking amongst the hot embers with a spanner borrowed from the hired car, brought to light a hot and twisted number plate. The figures were indecipherable, but by some freak of chance the index letters had been left almost untouched.

It was fairly plain what must have happened. The murderer, speeding by in Adderley's stolen car, had halted the minute or so necessary to complete the work of destruction. Whether he had fired the girl's car purely from malice or because he thought it might give him some fancied tactical advantage it was impossible to say. Aldin, however, seemed to be convinced that it was for the former reason and the idea swung him round once more in the girl's favour.

There was nothing to be gained now by lingering round the pyre once the identity of the derelict car had been established, and, leaving the chauffeur in charge of his vehicle, the other three men went on to the house. It showed up bleak and desolate through the trees, the darkened windows looking like the blank and sightless eye sockets of an empty skull.

As they progressed Aldin asked a question or two of Adderley. The latter had already told him that he had not searched the dead man's pockets, neither had he made any attempt to go over the upper rooms of the house. His feeling all along had been that such investigations were best left to the local police, particularly in view of the anomalous position he occupied. He stressed this again now, and Aldin

smiled in the darkness. A certain punctiliousness in Adderley's conduct of the affair tickled him.

"You didn't lift the body up at all then?" he asked, and Adderley shook his head.

"I thought it better to leave the body alone as soon as I'd satisfied myself the man was dead," he said. "There was no wound visible, you see, and for all I could say to the contrary the man might have died a perfectly natural death. It wasn't my business to make investigations further than that. From the start, too, though I had a bias in Miss Orde's favour her story didn't fit in with what I saw."

"So in the circumstances," Aldin said dryly, "you decided that if anyone was going to stir up trouble for themselves it had better be us. I suppose that's why you didn't search the house for the murderer."

"I didn't even know for certain that there was one," Adderley retorted. "The only evidence to support Miss Orde's story was the blood on her hands and that didn't necessarily get there in the way she suggested. My own feeling was that if I delivered her into your hands you could do the rest."

"And now she's vanished we're back where we started."

"Not exactly. I should say we've advanced a step or so. The events of the last hour or so certainly have a significance."

Aldin nodded sagely. The point was obvious enough not to require explanation.

"Here we are, Mr. Adderley," he remarked as they came up to the front door. "The place seems just as silent and deserted as you say it was when you left it."

He tried the door and it yielded to a push. The sergeant stepped inside and with the light of his lamp sought for and found the switch that lit the hall.

"Now show me the room," he said.

Adderley pointed it out to him. Again it was the sergeant who led the way and turned on the light. Things seemed very much as they had been when Adderley had left them. The dead man still lay on the floor with his white face and fixed, lifeless eyes staring glassily up at the ceiling.

Aldin looked down on him without recognition. "He's a stranger," he said. "I know many of the people about here, but I don't think I've ever seen him before. A foreigner of some sort."

"That's how it struck me," Adderley returned, "but I can't exactly place him. What would you think his nationality was?"

"Couldn't say," the other returned. He dropped on his knees beside the body, unbuttoned the coat and felt in the pockets. He brought to light a wallet and a small pocket book. There was no name on either. The wallet itself seemed crammed with English and American currency notes. The sergeant put them on one side and went on with his search of the man's pockets, but brought nothing further of moment to light.

"Better leave him like this until the doctor arrives," he remarked. "He's the man to determine the cause of death. He shouldn't be long now. I sent word from the station for him to hurry."

He turned his attention back to the wallet and pocket-book. The latter was blank except for the first couple of pages, which contained a mixture of figures and names of towns. Thus:—

London	1.	10.	29—	200	5s.
Paris	3.	10.	29—	1000	ms.
Cher.	5.	10.	29—	1000	ds.
Vigo.			—	500	ps (2nd inst. post 5. 10. 29).

After a glance through the notebook the sergeant put it down with the remark, "Well, there doesn't seem to be much we can learn from that." Adderley, however, who had been reading it over Aldin's shoulder, took up the book and began studying the first page intently.

Aldin took up the wallet and went systematically through it. Beyond the currency notes already referred to he found nothing of interest. He gave a little exclamation of disgust and was about to thrust it into his pocket as the safest place for the time being when Adderley spoke.

"Can I have a look at that wallet, sergeant?" he said. "I've an idea there's something interesting in it."

"Well, you can take it from me that there isn't," Aldin returned, nevertheless he passed the wallet over.

Adderley took the notes out in his hand, glanced through them and whistled softly. Sergeant Aldin watched him with interest and with a little apprehension. It looked as though Adderley had lighted on something in the nature of a discovery, yet the sergeant could not see that he had missed anything. Adderley settled the question for him in the next breath. He selected half-a-dozen of the English notes—all fivers—and held them up much as though they had been a hand of cards.

"Notice anything odd about these?" he asked with the flicker of a smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

Sergeant Aldin was no fool. Once he was given a broad hint he could pick up the clue as quickly as the next man. He leaned forward and scrutinised the notes carefully, then with a little click of the tongue straightened up and looked Adderley in the eye.

"All the same number," he said. "What a fool I was not to have noticed it before."

"I didn't notice it the first time either, if that's any consolation," Adderley told him. "I deduced it after looking at that notebook."

"You're getting a bit beyond me," said the sergeant good-humouredly. "What has the notebook to do with these forgeries? There's no doubt they are forgeries?" he asked with a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"I shouldn't think so, though they can be tested later. Still when you find half-a-dozen notes all of the same number the conclusion seems obvious. Oh, the notebook? That's quite simple. London 200 5s., that's five pound notes, of course."

"I see," said the sergeant, nodding. "Good guess-work, Mr. Adderley. Paris 1,000 ms, that's '*milles*,' Vigo ps, pesetas. Cher is Cherbourg, but what are the ds after it. If it wasn't Cherbourg I'd say dollars, but——"

"There isn't any 'but,' sergeant. You're quite right. Most of the big American liners run to Cherbourg. American money circulates there pretty freely. Rather neater to start the forged dollar bills off there than to put them into circulation in the presumptive land of their birth."

"Much neater," the sergeant agreed. Then a qualm seized him. "Aren't we taking rather a lot for granted?" he asked. "The only thing certain is that those notes here are forged."

"Perhaps we are in one way," Adderley admitted, "but we've seen enough to feel our man here"—he nodded towards the corpse—"was in some way connected with a gang of forgers."

"Then," said Aldin with conviction, "if it's forgery, international at that, it brings you in, and takes the

case out of our hands. The Chief Constable will probably want the Yard to take over, so I might as well let him know you're here."

"And spoil the only holiday I've managed to snatch for the last two years," said Adderley. "I shouldn't have told you just what I was, Sergeant."

"I'd have found it out soon enough, Mr. Adderley."

"Not from my aunt. They seem to think I've rather disgraced the family by becoming a detective. Hallo, there's somebody at the front door. Your doctor?"

Aldin nodded as the brisk rat-tat sounded again through the house. He turned to the waiting policeman. "If it's the doctor bring him right in," he said.

"And if it's anyone else?" asked the cautious policeman.

"Bring them too, and mind they don't have a chance of getting away."

The policeman returned with the doctor, the typical country G.P., not at all disturbed at being called away from his comfortable fire-side at such a time of night. He took it all as part of his day's work. On this occasion his interest was quickened by the suggestion that this was a case a good deal out of the ordinary.

"'night, sergeant," he said briskly, and nodded to Adderley, though his eyes asked a question.

"Mr. Adderley, Scotland Yard. Lady Kettering's nephew," said the sergeant in hurried explanation. "There's your man, doctor." He pointed to the body.

Without a trace of hurry the doctor set to work and made a methodical examination. It was a little too methodical for the policemen and Adderley; they preferred not to watch what was going on. At last the doctor rose to his feet and faced them.

"The man's been dead hours," he said, "though I suppose you know that already."

"Can you fix a time?" Adderley asked him, and the doctor smiled.

"I can approximately," he said, "and I wouldn't be surprised to be told ten minutes later that I was wrong. I'd admit that I probably was. It's only in books that a doctor can tell the exact hour a man died. Though, by the way"—he fixed Aldin with a questioning eye—"I was told over the 'phone that it was a case of murder."

"Isn't it?" said the sergeant.

"It may be, but I can't say anything definite. The man's evidently been a drug addict; I'm going by his general appearance as much by a number of old punctures I found on his arm; and it looks as though he gave himself an overdose of the drug. What the particular drug is I can't say without an analysis, though I'm inclined to believe it is one of the alkaloids of the opium family. He might have administered it himself; just as easily someone else might have given it to him. So there you are."

"When did he die?" Adderley asked abruptly.

"I've told you already I can say only approximately. He's probably been dead five or six hours at the very least."

"That's much what I thought myself," Adderley took him up quickly, for he had a queer idea that the doctor would not require much pressing to launch into a technical dissertation on the incidence of *rigor mortis*. "Though," he added, "if he gave himself the overdose it's a wonder no hypodermic was found. It couldn't have vanished from the room unless it was taken away, and if it was it strengthens the suspicion that the man was murdered."

The doctor eyed him curiously a moment, then a light seemed to dawn on him.

"You've been working on the supposition that he

died or was killed in this room," he said. "Well, he wasn't."

"I don't quite follow that," Adderley said in puzzled tones. "What do you mean?"

"Only that the chances are that he was dead and lying on moist earth for some time before he was brought here."

He bent down and turned the body over on its face. For the first time the others noticed that the backs of the heels of the dead man's shoes were covered with a thin film of slime and mud. In addition the dark hair covering the occiput was matted and earth-stained as though it had rested for some time on a pad of damp, clay-like soil. On the other hand the clothes themselves showed no traces of earth or mud of any sort.

"He was probably lying on a rug that was a trifle short," the doctor said, "and his head and feet lapped over."

"That seems to be pretty certain," Adderley agreed. "And one other thing about which there is no doubt is that no matter how he came into this house he did not walk. In fact I don't think he did any walking at all since he donned those shoes."

He pointed to the under side of the dead man's shoes. They were bone-dry and as clean as though they had just been put on.

CHAPTER VI

LANGSHAND HALL

ADDERLEY did not appear until close on to lunch time.

It had been somewhere in the small hours of the morning before he at length reached Langshand Hall, and then he had been too tired to do anything save murmur a few sleepy words and crawl into the bed in the room to which Butt had directed him. His aunt, already made aware of the state of affairs by the telephone message from the police station, had wisely followed his advice and not waited up for him.

Some time after ten tea and toast were brought to him. He had declared his attention to Butt on his arrival of giving breakfast a miss, nevertheless he experienced a change of heart when the soft knock came to the door and in response to his invitation to come in his man entered with the tray.

"So you got down ahead of me all right, Butt," Adderley said. "I was too sleepy to talk to you last night, but you shouldn't have waited up for me."

Butt blinked. "Her ladyship was of the opinion that someone should wait up to let you in," he said, "and I preferred not to give any of the servants here the trouble."

"I see," Adderley nodded. Then going off at a tangent, "Anyone else in the house, Butt?"

"Beyond the family, I believe not, sir. Her ladyship has not got quite settled after moving, and from what I heard in the servants' hall there is not likely to be any entertaining until Sir Michael returns from

India. I did hear, however, that the young ladies expect some friends in the course of a day or so."

"Male or female?"

Butt allowed a faint smile to play for a moment over his features.

"I was not specifically told, sir," he returned, "and in the circumstances I did not care to inquire. I gather, however, that it may be both. What time will you want your bath, sir?"

"Give me another hour, Butt. What time's lunch?"

"One o'clock, sir."

Satisfied there was nothing more required of him, Butt took his departure, and Adderley turned over. He was not allowed, however, to have his extra hour in peace. Scarcely fifteen minutes of the allotted time had passed when there came another tap on the door. Thinking it was Butt returning for something he called, "Come in."

The door opened. "It's only me, Michael," said a woman's voice. "I hope I'm not disturbing you, but I haven't seen you yet."

"Oh, come in, aunt," he said cordially.

Only her intimates knew that Lady Kettering would never see fifty again. To the unprejudiced eye of the casual beholder she would have seemed no more than in her late thirties. She was of the type that ages slowly, if at all, and it was only on a close acquaintance that one became aware of her maturity.

"You grow and you grow, Michael," she said as she came in, "but it requires an effort of mind to remember that you're not the little boy I once used to tuck into bed. But surely an aunt can visit her nephew in these circumstances without causing the tongue of scandal to wag."

Adderley chuckled. "I don't think you ever

worried much about what other people said," he remarked, and she smiled.

"It's only the unco' guid who have reputations they're afraid of losing. Do you mind if I sit on the edge of the bed? You don't. Well, that's nice of you. Now, tell me all about the trouble you got into last night. I understood that you were coming down here for a quiet holiday to get away from your criminal friends, but it seems that what's bred in the bone comes out in the blood. Michael, why don't you leave Scotland Yard?"

"Why should I, aunt? It's true, I'm more or less independent, but work is good for one's soul, and the kind of work I'm doing is about the only sort for which I've ever shown any aptitude."

"It's time," said his aunt with a gleam in her eye, "that conditions were reversed and some one caught you for a change. When are you going to marry and settle down?"

Adderley laughed softly. "One of these days, when the right young lady comes along," he said. "But, aunt, if that's a hint that you want me to marry one of the girls, well, it's off."

"They wouldn't have you," she said tartly. "They aim somewhat higher than a thief-catcher." There was no malice in her eyes, however; the smile in them robbed her tone of any suggestion of offence. "But talking of your criminal acquaintances, Michael, just what did happen last night?"

"I don't know that I should tell you," he began, "but as you have rather a reputation for keeping things to yourself I don't see that there's any harm. Anyway it'll be public property in a day or so." With that he launched into an account of the events of the previous night. It was noticeable, however, that when he came to describe the part played by Mildred Orde he sketched

her in so lightly that she was no more than a nebulous figure. Perhaps after all the slight impression she had made on him had faded with the dawn.

"And you let her get away after that, Michael," said his aunt with a mock groan. "A crook and an associate of crooks in all probability. Beaten by a woman again."

"It's not altogether unique," he returned good-humouredly. "Such things have happened before and I daresay will happen again. But, you see I was hardly in the position to prevent her from going if she wished."

"Neither you were. Which reminds me, how is the poor head this morning then?"

"It could be better. At the same time it's not asserting itself very pronouncedly."

"Like to spend the day in bed?"

"I can hardly do that. I'll have Sergeant Aldin round after lunch with news of the latest developments and the chances are that the Chief Constable will want the Yard to lend him my services."

"Which means we'll have the house turned into a miniature Criminal Investigation Department. Not that the girls will mind. It'll be a novelty for them. But what I'm thinking is, bang goes your holiday."

"I've got used to that. Tell me, how do you like this part of the country?"

"I haven't been here long enough to decide. But why the red herring Michael? What did that man die of?"

"Of a Tuesday," Adderley returned. "To-day's Wednesday, isn't it?"

"Don't be a fool. Was it foul play, horse play or act of God? Seriously now, Michael."

"Foul play," said Michael promptly. "I don't think there's any doubt about that. The precise manner of his taking off has yet to be decided, though

it's almost certain that he was killed by something out of a hypodermic syringe. That's our pathologist's business, however."

"It must be a cheerful kind of occupation. By the way, where did you get that man of yours? He says his name is Butt and he looks it. Does he always blink at you when he's talking?"

"Nearly always. But I've got so used to it that I don't notice it half the time. He's a reformed crook. The first time I met him I caught him trying to burgle my flat, forgave him and took him on as a gentleman's gentleman on the principle that lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place."

"I don't quite know whether to believe you or not."

"It's perfectly true. I'll tell you the whole story one of these days."

"You mean you can't make up one on the spur of the moment, isn't that it? Well, I suppose I've worried you long enough and had better go. But, you see, Michael, I had to satisfy my vulgar curiosity at the earliest possible moment. Will you be down to lunch?"

"I'm getting up now, as soon as you've gone, I mean. I expect to have a busy afternoon."

"Poor Michael. Poor holiday. Poor girls."

"Girls?"

At the question Lady Kettering stopped with her hand on the door handle, and her fine grey eyes searched her nephew's face.

"I wasn't referring to Claire and Helen," she said composedly, "but to some friends of theirs who are coming down shortly. We were hoping you'd help to entertain them. They've all heard about you."

Adderley groaned. "You mean they think hunting men is a romantic business and before the glamour's

worn off you'll have me married to one of them. I guess not, aunt. 'In vain in the sight of the Bird is the net of the Fowler displayed.' There you are."

"We'll see, Michael, we'll see. Till lunch then."

She took her departure. The door had scarcely closed behind her than Adderley sprang out of bed. His aunt always had more or less of a tonic effect on him, though the frank unconventionality of her methods could at times be devastating. The years had not changed her, save to bring a riper wisdom to the deeds she no longer did by stealth. Yet underneath the banter he sensed a note of seriousness. That she was a born matchmaker he knew already, and in a way he felt pleased that the promised diversion offered by the Denning House incident was likely to take a good slice of his available leisure.

As it was things began to move briskly. He was barely presentable when Butt came with word that Clinton, the Chief Constable, was holding the line and wanted a word with him over the 'phone. Adderley had never met the man, but the fact that Clinton and Sir Michael Kettering were close friends was sufficient ordinarily to bridge the gap of acquaintanceship. He introduced himself and found as he had surmised that it was about the Denning business Clinton wished to speak. He had nothing much new to say beyond the fact that he had been in touch with Scotland Yard by 'phone that morning and asked for Adderley to work in with the local police. He ended by making an appointment to come over and meet Adderley that afternoon.

Adderley was turning away from the telephone when he came face to face with Helen, the elder of his two cousins. She was carrying a racket in her hand and making one as she came down the hall.

"Good morning, Michael, or is it good afternoon?"

she said. She was as dark as her sister was fair, obviously took after her father in looks, though her mother's sense of humour was by no means dormant in her. Indeed it was a doubtful virtue that was pretty evenly distributed throughout the family.

"You've caught me on the dividing line, Helen. There's twelve just striking." He drew her towards him and kissed her with something more than mere cousinly affection. "You're not too old for that, are you?" he remarked.

She drew away from him. "I think you're perfectly beastly, Michael. A nice boy would have kissed me without commenting on it."

"Do you know many nice boys?"

"Lots. But, I say, what's this mother's saying about you being mixed up in a murder last night?"

"It's not definitely settled whether or not it was a murder," Adderley told her. "And you can't expect me to add anything to what you already know. If your mother's told you anything, you probably know more than I do."

"I said you were perfectly beastly, Michael. I withdraw that. There's nothing perfect at all about you. Here am I, expecting to have my blood pleasantly curdled for the next half hour or so and you utterly refuse to tell me anything."

"It's a way we learn in the force, Helen. A still tongue maketh a wise head."

"I suppose that's meant to be a reproof. I'll take it as one, anyway. Come out and see Claire."

"What's she doing?"

"Reading, of course. The latest thriller. She'll probably feel disappointed that you don't measure up to the accepted heroic standard."

Helen, however, had libelled her sister to a degree. She was reading in front of the fire in the library, but

not a thriller. The book was a certain popular novel which shall be nameless, and at the sound of the door opening she flushed guiltily and tried to thrust it under the cushions of her chair. She succeeded only partially. Helen dived at it and held it up for inspection.

"Fancy the child reading that, Michael," she said in mock horror, and Michael grinned.

"You know what the milkman said to the lady who complained that the milk was watered," he laughed.

"'To the pure all things are pure.' Let's hope that applies to Claire."

He caught the laughing girl by the arms, lifted her out of the chair and kissed her resoundingly.

"That's a nicer one than you gave me," said Helen critically. "I repeat what I said before about you, Michael."

"That I'm beastly? I suppose I am. At least I never kiss and tell. Do I, Claire?"

"I don't know," she said, smiling shrewdly out of her blue eyes. "All I can say is you've never told me about anyone else you've kissed and if you've made free with my name it's never come back to me. How long are you down for?"

His face became serious. "Honestly, I don't know," he said. "I may be recalled any moment and again I may not."

He was interrupted by a knock at the door. Helen opened it. Butt was standing outside, and he addressed himself to Adderley. "You're wanted on the telephone, sir," he said. "I think it's a London call."

"Good Lord!" said Adderley. "Probably the Yard. Clinton must have put in some good work. Excuse me, girls, I'll be back as soon as I can."

He went away. His surmise was correct. It was

his immediate superior at the Yard on the line, and the sum and substance of what he had to say was that at Clinton's request Adderley had been lent to the local police for the duration. The Inspector added that if a photo, a complete description and the fingerprints of the dead man were sent up to him it might help in a quick identification.

Adderley gave him a brief resumé of his own part in the affair that supplemented the account Clinton had already telephoned. The Inspector felt inclined to scout the truth of the girl's story in so far as it touched on the presence of the dying man. His own feeling, he said, was that she had concocted that for purposes of her own, though what they were he admitted himself unable to guess, just as he agreed that there were other parts of the puzzle that did not yet fit in.

"I haven't any preconceived ideas about it at all," Adderley said in answer to a question. "The girl may be innocent or guilty; she may be telling the truth or may be an accomplished liar. At the moment she has vanished completely and until we find her again nothing much can be said either way. The only thing of which I feel certain is that a gang of international forgers is in some fashion involved in the affair, and I know that I've lost a perfectly good car."

"It's not your loss," his senior told him. "It's the insurance company's, so why worry?"

Adderley hung up at the end. He did not go back to the library immediately, but returned to his room to make some notes on the matter that had just occurred to him. While he had been on the 'phone he had been vaguely conscious of movements in the hall and of someone talking, and mixed with it had been the sound of a motor-horn.

The door of the library was shut when he returned

and from the way his cousins were talking he gathered that a visitor had arrived in the interval. He knocked.

Helen opened the door to him. "Oh, it's you," she said. "Come in. I've someone to introduce you to."

He saw as he entered that Claire was talking to a girl. But as Claire was standing up and the girl sitting down in the big arm-chair with its back to the door he could see no more than the top of her head. A girl's hat and a pair of gloves thrown carelessly on the settee showed that the stranger was one who had already made herself at home.

Helen came round to the front of the big chair. Adderley lingered.

"Mary," said Helen, "I want to introduce you to my cousin, Michael. Miss Cranford, Michael."

The girl stood up, turned round and went pale.

Adderley's heart missed a beat, for Mary Cranford was the girl of the red hands who not fourteen hours before had told him her name was Mildred Orde.

CHAPTER VII

THE LADY IN THE CASE

THE girl recovered her pose so quickly that only Adderley was aware of the gleam of recognition that had flared for the moment in her eyes. The colour came flooding back to her cheeks, and she held out her hand.

"I'm very glad to have met you, Mr. Adderley," she said steadily. "I've heard a lot about you and I'm looking forward to the chance of a talk with you. You must have some very interesting things to tell."

Her eyes met his for the moment, calmly, challengingly, though—but perhaps this was merely imagination—he fancied there was a vague appeal behind it all as though she was asking him not to condemn her unheard. But beyond that instant's flurry she showed nothing of it in her voice or bearing, and Adderley himself felt quite satisfied that the by-play had passed unnoticed by his cousins.

He took the proffered hand and held it for just the conventional moment.

"I'm just as pleased to meet you," he returned lightly, and her eyes wavered before the look in his. Almost instinctively his glance settled on her hands, and with a little gasp she drew them away as though to hide them from his sight.

Helen at least had seen the action, and she smiled.

"Don't let him fluster you, Mary," she said. "Being a policeman makes him see bad in everyone whether it is there or not. Come, sit down."

Mary Cranford dropped back into the chair she had been occupying on Adderley's entrance, and the man himself, man-like, pushed the hat and gloves to one side and seated himself on the settee. Helen came over beside him in that possessive way that with her meant little or nothing. There ensued one of those awkward little silences that sometimes occur when a conversation that has been intimately and exclusively feminine has suddenly been adjusted to fit the understanding of the mere male. The pause actually lasted no longer than a man would take to count ten, but it was long enough for Adderley to feel uneasy and for the girl to steal more than one furtive glance at him.

Helen broke it characteristically. "Everyone has suddenly gone dumb," she said. "Mary, I suppose you'd be glad of a chance of seeing your room before lunch. Claire will take you up."

The girl flashed her a grateful glance and went out with the obedient Claire.

"Well," said Helen, slipping down to a seat on the settee beside Adderley, "what do you think of her, Michael?"

Adderley answered diplomatically. "I hardly know what to think of her," he said. "I expect I shall have to wait and see."

Helen turned and looked up at him. "I wonder," she said half-musingly, "if she's anything like your girl of last night."

"So your mother told you about *her*?" he said.

"You didn't tell her much," Helen pointed out. "But tell me now, honestly, is she?"

"Like the elusive lady I met last night? Well, I suppose she is."

"Most illuminating, as usual. The likeness, of course, consists of them both having two feet, two hands, two eyes, one nose and sundry assorted features,

not to mention the astounding fact that they are both females. Michael, do you ever tell anybody anything?"

His face went suddenly grave. "Helen, my dear, I have a queer fancy that in the next half-dozen hours I am going to tell some people things that won't be pleasant hearing."

"Mysterious as ever," she said, but this time there was no banter in her voice. She had suddenly realised that he was facing a task that was to him disagreeable, though she did not understand either its extent or its implication.

"Michael," she said with an odd touch of sympathy in her voice, "your job can be rather rotten at times, can't it?"

He was moved by an impulse to confide in her, to break the habits of a lifetime and discuss the case in all its ramifications with stress on one aspect in particular. Another moment and he would have taken the step, but at that particular second came the sound of a distant gong. The spell was broken. He stood up with an abrupt movement.

"Helen," he said, "if I haven't forgotten the ways of this household, that must be the signal for lunch."

"It is," said Helen rather disappointedly. She, too, had a queer idea that she had been within an ace of hearing revelations, though not unnaturally she drew an utterly wrong conclusion as to their subject matter.

Lunch was not such an ordeal as he had expected. For one thing Mary Cranford, as it now seemed he must call her, did not appear. Claire announced that she was feeling rather tired, had a headache of sorts, and had decided to lie down. Which left only the two girls and their mother to sit down with Adderley. The gathering became in consequence quite a family party, . . .

He went back to his room after lunch, mainly because he had left his pipe and tobacco there and felt inclined for a smoke. When he opened the door he found a note on the floor addressed to him in a hand he did not recognise. The letter had apparently been pushed under the door while lunch was in progress.

He tore open the envelope and drew out a folded sheet of note paper.

"Dear Mr. Adderley," (the note ran)

I must see you as soon as I possibly can. I am walking down to the village this afternoon, leaving about two. Can you overtake me, or perhaps meet me in the vicinity of the post office? I shall wait there for half-an-hour.

Sincerely yours,
MARY CRANFORD."

He took the note and envelope, dropped them into the fireplace and put a match to them. They burned swiftly away to ash.

It could be done quite easily. Clinton was not likely to call for him until about tea-time. The hour of Sergeant Aldin's proposed visit was, however, more indefinite, but then he could get over that by dropping into the police station while in the village.

He quite understood the state of mind the girl must be in. Whether her connection with the affair last night were innocent or guilty she was certain to know no peace of mind until she had learnt definitely what his attitude towards her was. The trouble of it was that he had not yet been able to define that attitude. The situation was made the more complicated by the fact that she was a guest in his aunt's house, and apparently a close friend of Claire and Helen. That, however, was nothing to go on. Many

a man now languishing in gaol would be still at large if the reputations of his friends and acquaintances were to be the criterion of his own excellence.

He decided to suspend judgment in the interval and give the girl the benefit of the doubt until she had a chance of putting her side of the case to him.

It was now a few minutes after one-thirty. Rather than wait until the girl took her departure and run the risk of something turning up to prevent him following her he made up his mind to go off ahead of her. He rang for Butt and when the man came:

"I'm going out for a while," he said. "If anybody wants me say I'll be back about four o'clock, and if Sergeant Aldin comes, though I don't think it's likely, you can tell him that I'm on my way to see him."

He knew that Butt was not likely to make any remark about his absence unless asked a specific question by Lady Kettering or the girls, but he thought it just as well to prevent any possible speculation in that direction by suggesting that he had gone out purely on police business.

His original intention had been to go straight to the police station, see Aldin and get that part of the business over and done with. But by the time he had reached the woodland path that led to the village he had reflected and come to another conclusion. It was better, it seemed, to hear what the girl had to say first. His whole outlook might be substantially changed by her attitude.

He sat down on a grass-grown log and tried to hammer out some line of action. In one way his course was perfectly clear. Innocent or guilty the girl had vanished last night the moment she got a chance, and she had remained hidden, to all intents and purposes, until he had encountered her again

in the library at Langshand. He felt almost certain that had she known he was to be there she would not have put in an appearance at all. It was obvious that his name had conveyed nothing to her the previous night, and in view of that he could accord her a not too reluctant admiration for the rapidity with which she had pulled herself together after coming face to face with him in the library.

Footsteps sounding on the path brought him to his feet. He peered between the tree trunks and presently saw the girl herself coming toward him. He stepped out into the open, and she stopped dead at the sight of him. Apparently she had not expected to find him ahead of her, and the unexpectedness of the encounter had caught her off her guard. One hand went up to her throat, then dropped away quickly as if she realised how the gesture had betrayed her unpreparedness.

Once again he had evidence of the celerity with which she could pull herself together. By the time she reached him she was herself again, and only a faint flush betrayed the uncertainty that assailed her.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Adderley," she said in greeting. "I didn't expect to meet you here. I wasn't sure that you would come after all."

"I thought the fairest thing to do was to give you a chance of explaining," he said, and she looked at him oddly, then laughed softly.

"The only thing to do then," she said, and her voice went suddenly grave, "is to tell you what happened to me last night, and trust that you will keep it to yourself."

He stopped and faced her. "I can't do that," he told her. "You must understand that you are already deeply implicated and that anything you have to say will have to be told in turn to the police."

Her face went white, and for the moment he thought she was going to faint. But she did not. Apparently she was not the fainting kind. She drew away from him and stared bleakly down the path ahead of them.

“Oh, what a fool I’ve been,” she said bitterly.

CHAPTER VIII

MINOR DEVELOPMENTS

ADDERLEY waited. He was not sure to which particular indiscretion she might be referring, and in the absence of any guide to it he decided it was better to let her proceed on her own lines rather than ask a leading question that might well have the effect of making her suppress her confidences altogether.

He had not long to wait.

"I need not have come here at all," she said after a pause. "I could have gone back to my own place. I think if I had realised just who you were and that I would meet you again that is what I would have done."

"The result would have been the same in the end," he told her. "But am I really such a terrible person after all?"

She flung him a sidelong glance. "It's not you yourself, but what you represent. You are law and order, the power that can seize and question me."

"If you have done nothing to be afraid of," Adderley said, "you have no reason to fear anything."

"If!" she said, and again that trace of bitterness crept into her voice. "If I had followed my own instincts I would simply have kept away from here after last night. As far as you were concerned, despite what you say, I would have vanished utterly."

"Well, we won't argue about that," he said gently. "You *are* here now and that's a fact that we've both got to face."

"It's easy for you to talk . . ."

"No. Hard. But listen to me. I'm not your enemy. I'd much prefer to be your friend, and do what I can to help you."

She looked as though weighing him in the balance.

"Can you do anything at all to help me? Are you just making promises that you know you can't possibly keep?"

Adderley laughed softly. "What I can or cannot do depends to a very great extent on you," he told her. "If you're going to be frank with me I may be able to do quite a lot. But I can't work in the dark."

She turned and faced him, so that the path was blocked and he had to come to a halt whether he liked it or not.

"I think," she said slowly, "that if we are going to talk we'd better do it here. We're quite close enough to the village as it is, and we couldn't very well conduct this sort of conversation in the street with half Trimpton looking on and wondering what it was about."

"Just as you please," he conceded. "Go on."

In the drab light beneath the trees her eyes searched him. "I'm in your hands," she said with a note of surrender in her voice. "But, somehow, despite the fact of your connection with the police, I think I can trust you to be fair. What do you want to know?"

"The thing I am most anxious to know," he said, "is what became of you last night. You were with me up to the moment I was laid out; when I came to you'd vanished."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Her mood changed swiftly and her face softened. "You must have thought I was a horrible, callous creature, but . . . but . . . Well, how can I possibly explain?"

"Suppose," Adderley suggested, "you tell me just

exactly what happened. Don't try to excuse your actions in advance. You can do that afterwards—if you feel your story isn't sufficient explanation in itself."

She shot him a grateful glance. "You're making it easier than I thought," she admitted. "Well, this is more or less what happened. I sprang to one side when I saw the car, just as you sprang to the other. I didn't see you fall. You believe that? I did not honestly know until to-day when your cousins told me just what had become of you. However . . . I ran, away from the car and towards the hedge. I had some sort of an idea of hiding there, temporarily. I wasn't very clear about anything, you see. To a great extent my actions must have been quite instinctive.

"The car stopped with a grinding of brakes. Did you know that? Someone got out, a man I think. Then I heard a voice behind me call on me to stop. That completed my panic. It was the voice I had heard in the house earlier that evening. I burst my way through the hedge somehow—whether there was a gap or the hedge was very thin there I did not know at the time—and found I had tumbled into a sort of ditch. Luckily it was dry and being almost under the hedge it was in deep darkness. I think that the ditch was my salvation. You must remember, too, that there was a thick mist about, that over the fields it would seem almost a fog. It would be hard to say which way anyone had taken across the fields.

"I just had sense enough to crawl cautiously along the ditch as far away from where I had entered as possible. I don't believe the man came through the hedge, though I wasn't in a position to see. At any-rate after some time I became aware that everything seemed very still, and that the beat of the engines that I had been conscious of most of the time had

stopped. Yet I didn't get out immediately. To be quite frank I was pretty much afraid. I did not know whether or not the man had gone, and I spent some time trying to screw up my courage to make sure what had happened.

"At last I crawled out of the ditch and peeped through the hedge. I couldn't see anything, and then everything seemed quite still. I pushed my way through—there was a gap there now whatever there had been before—and got out on to the road. I was half-way across when I saw a light coming towards me. Perhaps you'll think I was foolish, but I had half an idea all along that the man might return and this seemed like my fears being realised.

"I went right about again, through the hedge along the ditch until I came to a fence. I got through it somehow and found myself on a footpath."

"Interrupting you for the moment," said Adderley dryly, "doesn't it strike you as odd that you should have got half-way across the road without seeing me?"

The girl looked sharply at him. "You don't think..." she began, then stopped as though something in his face had shown her that this was the wrong line to take. "I'm sorry," she said contritely. "Of course it is quite a natural question for you to ask. But if you put yourself in my position perhaps you'll understand. I didn't expect to find anything on the ground, so I wasn't looking there. If you were trying to keep your eyes at one and the same time on both the up and down sections of the road you'd hardly be likely to see anything almost at your feet unless you tripped over it. Then, too, you must remember that all the time I was in the grip of a wild panic. You believe me, don't you?"

The note of appeal in her voice with which she

rounded off the last sentence sounded genuine enough and Adderley nodded. "You've made it seem more feasible than it did before," he admitted. "But didn't you wonder what had happened to me?"

"At the time I was too worried and scared to wonder very much. You'd disappeared. That was all I could say. And afterwards when I became calmer and had time to think I concluded that the man in the car must have carried you off. The possibility of that worried me immensely. I felt he was certain to murder you and that your death was on my conscience."

"Weren't you relieved then to find I was alive?"

She met his eyes frankly. "Yes, and no," she said. "If I'd learnt you were alive I'd have been very pleased, but to become aware of it as I did, well—it was rather a shock."

"I see. And now what did you do after you found the path?"

"Went along it until I came to the end of it." She stopped as though she had come to the end of her story. Certainly she had not, but she seemed reluctant to say more.

"And then?" said Adderley, gently encouraging.

"And then I got away. Isn't that enough?"

"Hardly. You've stopped at the most interesting part. Miss Cranford, let me put the position squarely before you. You've told me only the portion of your story that immediately concerns myself, but the police will want to know more than that. For instance, they'll inquire into your movements right through the night and up to the moment you came again into my ken. They'll even go further and probe into your antecedents and ask you what you know about your car having been set on fire."

"My car set on fire?" the girl said quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you know?" said Adderley. He related all he knew of the incident.

The girl bit her lip and a shadow passed across her face. "I didn't know that," she said. "It makes it awkward."

"How?"

"Well, I use it a lot. I shall feel quite lost without it."

Again her explanation seemed quite feasible though he had the feeling that she was not telling the exact truth. But he did not press the point.

"Will you tell me now what you did after you reached the end of the path?" he asked.

"I suppose I'd better," she answered, speaking as though she were tired of the whole affair. "The path led to the station. It wasn't quite eleven and the last train for town was due in a few minutes. I took it. I got home to my own place about midnight. I spent the night there and came down again this morning, picking up my luggage at the station. It had come down by train yesterday as I had no room in the car for it." She eyed him a little doubtfully. "That's all," she said.

"Why did you go back to town instead of coming on to Langshand?" he asked bluntly, and the girl laughed a trifle uneasily.

"For the one reason that explains most of what I did last night," she said. "Panic. It isn't too nice a walk from the station to the Hall at that hour of night. It's lonely, I mean."

"You could have got a car."

"When you're in a fix, do you think at the time of all the things you could do. I don't believe you do. You probably act on impulse, like I did."

He chuckled at that. She had thrust home.

"I'm acting on impulse now," he told her, and for the moment she looked at him blankly, then a look of understanding came over her face.

"You mean in promising to help me?" she said, and he nodded.

"Mr. Adderley," she said with a sudden change of tone, "tell me frankly now, what my position is."

"It's rather an awkward one, for both of us," he answered. "You see, your disappearance last night has complicated matters. If you hadn't run away it might have been all plain sailing. As it is you have to do a good deal of unnecessary explaining."

"You mean . . . ?"

"That you have, from the police point of view, laid yourself open to suspicion. But I think even now if you place yourself unreservedly in my hands I can manage to straighten things out."

"It sounds like a species of blackmail," the girl said. "But what do you want me to do?"

"To keep on being frank, about yourself, about your antecedents, about anything on which you are questioned. There's nothing to be gained and a good deal to be lost by evading the issue. For instance, I'm going down to the police station to see Sergeant Aldin, and you had better come with me."

"If you think it best I will," she said meekly.

"It's part of the policy of frankness. Mind, there's an ordeal of sorts ahead of you this afternoon, but it's in your own interests to see it through."

"I'll do my best. If I feel you believe me and are doing what you can for me it will help considerably."

"I think I can promise you that much. Now, when you see Aldin leave everything to me until I ask for your story, then tell him exactly what you have told me. He'll probably want to take a state-

ment from you, and remember that he's a cut above the average village policeman. They all are except in books."

The girl laughed softly. "I'll remember. Thanks for the hint. And, Mr. Adderley, I haven't to go anywhere particularly in the village. I put that in my note merely because I didn't want you to think the sole reason I was coming down here was to meet you."

"I wouldn't have minded that," he said audaciously, but rather to his surprise she coloured and did not take him up.

"Oh, there's just one other thing," he said abruptly as they turned into the High Street, "but it's rather an important point. I mean capital can be made out of it. Last night you gave your name as Mildred Orde, and it is as that that the police will know you. How are you going to explain the change to Cranford this morning?"

The girl hesitated for the space of a heart-beat. "I gave the first name that came into my head," she said. "It was the sort of silly thing that I seem to have been doing all last evening."

But she did not meet his eyes as she spoke, and of a sudden the idea jumped into Adderley's mind that the girl must have had some very strong reason the previous evening for trying so desperately hard to keep the name of Cranford out of the affair.

CHAPTER IX

WHY?

ADDERLEY found Aldin just on the point of setting out.

"I was going to come up to see you, Mr. Adderley," he said, "but I'm just as pleased now that you've saved me the trouble. There have been one or two minor developments I want to talk over with you."

He coughed and glanced significantly at the girl. As a matter of fact he was plainly puzzled by her appearance. She was not one of the Kettering girls, that he knew, and he could only conclude that she was a visitor at the Hall who had taken Adderley's fancy. And that, he felt, was by no means as it should be. If Adderley meant to take her about with him during the course of his investigations the sergeant foresaw complications, clouded judgments and all the rest of it. His look said as much.

Adderley took him up on the instant. "This, sergeant, is one of the minor developments that you haven't heard of yet. Miss Cranford, Sergeant Aldin."

The man looked puzzled. He hadn't yet realised at what Adderley was driving. But since he had learnt the primal lesson of not admitting ignorance when in doubt he waited for Adderley to proceed.

"Miss Cranford," Adderley went on easily, "is the lady who vanished last night. You may remember she called herself Mildred Orde then, and now she's

come along to explain to you anything you're in doubt about."

Aldin's expression changed. The girl had definitely stepped from the category of a friend of Adderley's into that of a suspected person. Yet for all that Aldin was not quite sure of himself. He sensed an understanding between the girl and the Scotland Yard man that made him decide to go warily.

"Is that so, miss?" he said. "I wonder if you'd mind telling me all about it."

Adderley had taken out his cigarette case and at the moment was meditatively tapping a cigarette against the side of it.

"One moment, sergeant," he said, looking up as though the thought had just struck him, "I'd better tell you before you begin that Miss Cranford is staying with my aunt, Lady Kettering. She's an old friend of my cousins, though I hadn't made her acquaintance before."

"I see," said Sergeant Aldin composedly. He did see. The dice were in effect loaded against him. He could not put a friend of Lady Kettering, who was a friend of the Chief Constable, through anything like the sort of cross-examination he would have given a stranger. Not that Aldin in any circumstances would have been anything but fair, but he felt that he was handicapped in that he had to avoid treading on corns that might be tenderer than the average.

"Well, I'll leave her to your tender mercies," Adderley said, and turning away lit his cigarette. He moved to the door out of earshot and stood there staring down the village street. He had laid the train to his satisfaction and it remained to be seen whether the fuse would squib, or——. But he did not care to linger on that aspect of possibilities.

Behind him he could hear voices—the rumble of

the sergeant's and the softer tones of the girl—and from that he gathered that things were going along nicely. A glance over his shoulder showed him that Aldin was making rapid notes as they went along. The girl looked up, caught his eye and smiled. So far then she had not been cornered. A moment later he had occasion to revise his opinion.

Sergeant Aldin gathered up the papers on which he had been writing, and spoke to the girl.

"I've taken down your statement in shorthand, Miss," he said, "so perhaps you'd better wait until I have it typed out before you sign it."

"What system do you use?" the girl asked, and the Sergeant told her.

"I can read it," she declared, and held out her hand for the papers. After a moment's hesitation Aldin passed them across to her. She read rapidly through the script.

"That's all right," she said at the end. "That's exactly what I said. I'll sign this version for you now, and, of course, when you have it typed out you can get me to sign the copy then."

She took up the pen from the table and in a firm hand signed her name at the foot of the last sheet. She was turning away as though satisfied the inquisition was over when Aldin looked up from blotting the signature.

"By the way, Miss Cranford," he said easily, "have you ever heard of anyone called Burton Canforth?"

Adderley swung round at the question. Something in the very silky softness of Aldin's voice convinced him that everything revolved round that casual question, that compared with it nothing that had gone before had the least value.

Its effect on the girl was startling. Every particle

of colour drained from her cheeks, into her eyes came the expression of a hunted animal that finds itself cornered at last, and one hand, that nearer Adderley, made an odd spasmodic movement as though clutching desperately at some invisible support. For the moment Adderley had a queer fancy that she was going to break down utterly.

Aldin apparently had not noticed her confusion. He was still tidying up the papers on his table, and the girl seemed to take heart from the fact that his eyes were not on her.

"Canforth," she said in a low voice that held a hint of strain in it. "You did say Canforth? No, I'm sorry if it would have helped you, but I really can't say I know anyone of that name."

"I thought you might," said Sergeant Aldin with a touch of disappointment in his tone. "Well, I won't keep you any longer, Miss. I want a word or two with Mr. Adderley before he goes, however."

Adderley came forward, but surprisingly enough the girl did not move away.

"Sergeant," she said, and her voice shook a trifle, "can you tell me who is this Canforth you mentioned?"

Sergeant Aldin smiled, and his eyes met hers. "If I'd known that, Miss," he said, "I'd hardly have asked you, would I?"

It was so patently a polite refusal that the girl did not pursue the matter further. She brought her lips together, then turned away with a look of annoyance in her eyes. At the door she turned.

"Mr. Adderley," she said, "if you want my company further you'll find me waiting outside."

"I'd like you to wait," Adderley told her. "I won't keep you more than a minute or so."

Aldin did not speak until the girl had passed into

the street beyond, then he turned mysteriously to Adderley.

"We've found your car, Mr. Adderley," he said. "Or rather the Barnes police did. They discovered it early this morning abandoned on a secluded part of the common, but the word's just come through to me. You see, they communicated with the Yard first. And what do you think they found in it?"

"Miss Cranford's dying man," said Adderley, having a long shot at it.

Sergeant Aldin nodded. "Only he was dead, not dying," he said. "He was propped up over the wheel, but it's almost certain that he wasn't driving but was dead when he was put there."

"I see. And have you heard yet what killed him?"

"He'd been shot, through the chest."

"That explains the bleeding . . . and lots of other things. But where did you get the name Burton Canforth from?"

Aldin looked wise. "It's queer about that," he remarked. "The man hadn't a thing on him to identify him by. Everything seemed to have been taken out of his pockets except pipe, tobacco and matches. The odd thing about his pipe though was this. He apparently put it away in his pocket half smoked and not having a proper stopper had made one out of a scrap of paper. The murderer must have overlooked that when he ransacked his pockets—it's the sort of thing you wouldn't give a second thought to—but the Barnes police pried the wad of paper out of the pipe and unrolled it. They say it looked like part of an envelope, but all they could make out through the tobacco stains were the words 'Burton Canforth.' Something else that might have been an address, or part of one rather, had been so

charred that they could make nothing out of it. After all, you know a screw of paper that fits into a pipe can't contain much in the way of writing."

"It can't. The Barnes people were lucky to find what they did. But why did you ask Miss Cranford if she'd ever heard the name?"

"On general principles. Do you think she has?"

Adderley hesitated before answering. He felt that the question had been put with an intention other than appeared on the surface. It was not so much an expression of opinion that Aldin wanted as some indication where Adderley's sympathies lay. Believing that, he decided to play safe.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised if she has heard of the name," he said. "You may remember that what she said was that she didn't know anyone of that name."

"That's splitting hairs, of course," the sergeant retorted. "To be honest with you, Mr. Adderley, now I've seen and had a talk with the lady I don't believe she's a guilty party. She doesn't strike me that way at all. But I've formed the idea that she knows a good deal more than she intends to tell us, and all I can think of is that she is trying to shield someone. What I want to know though, is why?"

"So do I," said Adderley, and by that admission definitely ranged himself on the sergeant's side.

"I had an idea and that's why I asked her," Aldin went on. "There's a certain similarity between Cranford and Canforth, and I wondered if it went further than that. The black sheep of the family perhaps, wearing a purser's name. But if that was so, seeing she must be pretty sure in her own mind that the man is dead, you'd think she would have been moved to speak out, if only with some idea of having vengeance on his killer."

"It rather looks to me as if the further we get

into the affair the more tangled we get," Adderley commented. "However, Sergeant, the lady will be kept under observation. She's staying with my people, as I think I told you, and I'll see that she doesn't leave there without your permission. So far at anyrate we haven't enough grounds to proceed further against her."

"That's so, Mr. Adderley. And between you and me I'll go warily for my own sake. I don't want to be getting into trouble with people it mightn't pay me to offend."

"Sound idea. There's nothing further, is there? Good. I'll be getting back then, as I've a bit to do in other directions this afternoon."

With some slight qualms he rejoined the girl. The fact that she was the guest of his aunt and a close friend of his cousins put her in a category different from that of the ordinary suspected person. It placed him at a disadvantage and the realisation of this made him a little more curt than usual in his greeting.

The girl glanced sidelong at him. It looked as though she wanted to ask questions, but was doubtful of the reception that would be accorded them. He decided to take the plunge himself and tell her what he had learnt. He was not giving away official secrets, for the facts would be in the evening papers for anyone who cared to read.

"My car's been found," he said. "It was discovered on Barnes Common early this morning with a dead man slumped over the wheel."

"I'm glad your car's safe," she said. "I feel that I am in a measure responsible for it having been stolen."

"You can carry 'Causation' a little too far," he said cryptically. "I don't altogether hold with

Liebnitz. Would the man found slumped over the wheel of my car have died all the same if I hadn't come along? Would you be alive now if I hadn't run into your car? I don't know. It's easy to speculate what might have been; the trouble is the speculation is nearly always wrong."

She stared bewilderedly at him, quite unable to decide what he was driving at.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that I don't understand."

He laughed good humouredly. "I'm glad of that," he told her. "I've been afraid that you would. I've been afraid of it ever since Sergeant Aldin asked you that apparently harmless question and you reacted so strangely."

"About that queer name that seemed so like my own?" she said. "I thought you must have noticed it. You see, he caught me off my guard and for the moment I thought he said Cranford. It *was* Canforth?"

"Canforth," he agreed, "the name of the man who was found slumped over the wheel of my car, the man you found dying last night and whose blood [was on your hands when I met you."

She shivered. "I haven't quite got over it yet," she said in excuse. "So they have identified that man as Canforth?"

"Not identified him," Adderley corrected. "They've merely jumped to conclusions. Natural enough though when you find a man's pipe wadded with a scrap of envelope to conclude that the name on it is his own."

"It probably is," she said, with a note of relief in her voice.

Adderley looked at her. They had left the village now and were retracing their steps along the path. The drab day was drawing in, and in among the trees it was almost dusk. Still he could see her plainly

enough to mark that her face had taken on a look of serenity that he had not seen before in his short acquaintance with her. It seemed a pity when he came to think of it, but that insistent 'Why?' first broached by Sergeant Aldin was still hammering away at the back of his brain.

"It most probably isn't," he said calmly.

The girl started, and stared. "Why do you say that?" she asked in a low, tense voice.

"I don't know that I have any very good reasons," he replied. "It's a sort of intuition more than anything else. But I thought you were going to be frank with me."

"I . . . Haven't I been?" There was a note of indignation in the words that did not altogether deceive him.

"I'm afraid not. You never told me anything about Burton Canforth."

"Because I couldn't. Do you want me to make up things just for the sake of satisfying curiosity?"

"Hardly." He went on remorselessly. "I wonder if Sergeant Aldin has seen a connection yet. It's just occurred to me, but he may be a little slower in working it out. But it seems to me that there's a sort of link between Canforth and Cranford, perhaps the sort of mistake a man who didn't hear too well might make in mistaking one name for the other."

"I admit that there is a possibility of one name being mistaken for the other. I made the same mistake myself only a few minutes ago. But that's all it could be."

"I wonder," he went on, though it seemed as if he were speaking to himself, "if a sharp man could trace the same connection between Orde and Cranford."

She knew by the way he placed the stress on the last syllable at what he was driving and for the moment

a cold fear gripped her, a panic such as she had experienced the previous night. "She wanted to take to her heels, to fly, anywhere as long as it was away from this man at her side and the smooth deadliness of his words. Every sentence he uttered showed her the web drawing closer about her, her most innocent remarks twisted and distorted and meanings she never intended given to them.

Almost timidly she caught at his arm. "I thought," she said brokenly, "that you were going to be my friend and help me instead of torturing me."

To her surprise he caught her hand and slid it under his arm. She let it remain there, for it gave her some sort of feeling of comfort in the midst of universal chaos.

"I am trying to be your friend," he assured her, "though you may fancy I am going about it in a queer way. But I know my business and I think it won't be long before you'll understand just what I am trying to save you. But I want your help and a degree of your confidence and, yes, one promise."

"What is that?" she asked in a voice no louder than a whisper. "I can hardly make a promise without knowing what I am binding myself to do."

"It's quite a simple thing," Adderley told her. "I want you to promise that you won't leave the house without first letting me know."

"But suppose I am merely going down to the village."

"That is what I had in mind. You certainly cannot leave the neighbourhood for some time yet."

She stared at him. "But that," she said, "really means I am under open arrest."

"Probably that is what Sergeant Aldin would call it and what he thinks it is," Adderley declared, "but he would be quite wrong. Will you promise now?"

"I suppose I'll have to. There doesn't seem any alternative." A phrase of his recurred to her. "What did you mean," she asked, "by saying that Sergeant Aldin would be quite wrong?"

"He does not realise that the reason I want you not to leave the house without telling me and certainly not on any account to come this way by yourself is that I am doing my best to protect you."

"Protect me?" she exclaimed. "From what?"

In the dusk his face seemed to go grim and hard. "From the danger of a sudden and violent death," he said startingly.

CHAPTER X

"MISS MYSTERY"

ADDERLEY'S grim suggestion acted on the girl like a douche of cold water. That was the surprising thing about her; one could never be sure how she was going to react to a situation, whether she would faint or fume. There seemed a touch of steel in her composition that hardened under excessive pressure.

She turned on him like a flash. "I think you must be romancing, Mr. Adderley," she said deliberately. "You surely don't for a moment believe anything of the sort."

"I'm not and I do." He answered her categorically. "I've been putting two and two together and I've got my answer now. Let me put it this way. If you're in this as a guilty party you know far more about what's going on than I can guess. You assure me that you don't, and I believe you. Also I've satisfied myself that you're ignorant of one or two matters that you would have known if you hadn't blundered into the business. The alternative I have to face then is that, as I say, you've blundered into the affair, probably all unknowingly you've tangled up one plan and gone far towards placing a couple of necks in jeopardy. Possibly you've stumbled on more than we realise at the moment, possibly it's less than the people on the other side imagine. Either way you look at it you're a potential source of danger. The conclusion I've drawn from that seems to me to be quite a natural one."

She looked thoughtful. Put that way the force of his argument struck her.

"You've made it appear more of an unpleasant possibility," she agreed. "At the same time I'm sure there's a flaw in your reasoning, though I can't place my finger on it. But if my obedience is going to help you, it's only right to tell you that you can count on me carrying out your orders. That's what it amounts to, doesn't it?"

Adderley nodded. There was nothing to be gained by attempting to explain away an obvious fact.

"Still it's hard on me," she went on, "and if I keep my promise I shall expect you to keep yours."

"To protect you?"

"And all that that implies," she said, looking him levelly in the eyes. It was only then he realised to what extent a chance phrase had committed him.

There was a momentary pause while he turned possibilities over in his mind, then: "Have you formed any idea of what it is that I might have stumbled on?" she asked. Her voice was gentler now, a subtle friendliness had crept into it as though she had decided to admit him to a closer intimacy in her thoughts.

"I wish I could say for certain," Adderley admitted. "It would simplify matters considerably."

At the end of the path she stopped. "Mr. Adderley," she said, "would you very much mind if I asked you to let me go on ahead to the house? My only reason is that it might occasion comment if we came back together."

The reason she gave was so flimsy that he felt it was not the real one, nevertheless: "Go ahead," he said. "I'll take care to let a decent interval elapse before I put in an appearance."

He watched the trim figure swing along until the

mists of the evening swallowed it up, and bit hard on the stem of his pipe as the old method of keeping under the desperate temptation that assailed him to shadow her to the house. But presently his sense of caution and his better nature came jointly to his aid; he filled his pipe, puffed away at it, and tried to shut all purely personal considerations out of his mind. It was hard work and he did not altogether succeed, but the episode did him good in one way, for it showed him a possible source of danger.

The tones of night had deepened a shade or two by the time he decided to move. Almost the first person he encountered when he entered the house was his aunt and she greeted him with that quizzical smile he had learnt to distrust hovering about the corners of her mouth. He could see she was on the verge of asking the sort of question he would rather not answer and the sight decided him to kill two birds with the one stone.

"Aunt," he said, before she had a chance of saying what was in her mind, "I'd like a word or two with you if I can. In private," he added, and Lady Kettering glanced quickly at him with an odd expression in her face.

"Come in here, Michael," she said, opening a door. "We won't be disturbed. Close the door, will you?"

As he shut it she turned and faced him. "What foolishness have you been up to now?" she demanded, and for once her face was serious.

"I haven't been up to any foolishness, aunt," he said, dropping into a chair. "That is, as far as I know."

"The moment you start qualifying your answers I begin to fear the worst," she said. "Go on smoking, Michael, if it makes it any easier for you. I suppose it's about Mary. The fact that you were both in

the village and didn't come home together isn't quite without significance.

"Oh, you noticed that then? Aunt, it's about Miss Cranford I want to speak to you."

"Mary?" Lady Kettering paused in the act of lighting a cigarette she had taken from a box on the mantelpiece and regarded her nephew quizzically over the flame of the match. "So you did meet after all," she remarked. "Don't tell me it's a case of love at first sight, for I won't believe that. Even you, Michael, wouldn't be so impetuous."

"It wasn't love, aunt," Adderley said soberly, "but it was something that can be quite as devastating."

"What's that?" Lady Kettering's eyes searched his face. For a moment there was a touch of steel in her glance, a hardness in her face as though she were bracing herself to meet a coming shock.

"Recognition," Adderley told her, and waited for the reaction.

"Recognition," she repeated, her eyes still fixed on his face. "Perhaps if you explain without any more beating about the bush it might save time and trouble, Michael. You say you recognised Mary. What precisely do you mean by that?"

"Mary Cranford is the girl I met last night," Adderley announced, "only then she called herself Mildred Orde."

"The mysterious girl with blood on her hands, you mean," said Lady Kettering with a snap in her voice. "Nonsense. You must be making some horrible mistake."

Adderley laughed softly, a laugh without mirth. "I wish it was more of a mistake and rather less of the horrible," he said. "There's no possibility of error. You see, she admitted it all herself."

Lady Kettering sat down abruptly. She was plainly bewildered, and being bewildered her devastating sense of humour was for the moment in abeyance. She felt like a man completely disarmed in the centre of aggressive foes.

"There's no doubt at all about it," Adderley went on mercilessly. "I had a talk with her, but I can't say that it clarified the situation to any extent."

He paused and his eyes asked a question.

"Go on, Michael, if you can," she said. "Tell me all about it. It won't go any further. I can promise you that. I'll say nothing even to the girls."

"I'll keep you to that then," said Adderley, and without more ado launched into an account of what had happened that afternoon. He kept nothing back, for he felt that things had reached a stage when nothing was to be gained by reticence. Lady Kettering sat silent until the end, so interested indeed was she that the cigarette burnt away unheeded between her fingers until she dropped it with a muttered exclamation.

"A tribute to your narrative powers, Michael," she said lightly, exhibiting the tiny little blister on one finger. "No, it's nothing. But"—her mood changed to seriousness again—"this is really a most extraordinary situation. There's only one thing about which you can be certain and that is that Mary's telling the truth. She's as straight as they make them."

"She didn't tell me the truth last night," Adderley pointed out. He had all the policeman's distaste for false names.

"Oh, I don't mean that sort of thing." Lady Kettering brushed the suggestion aside. "Nearly everyone gives a wrong name at one time or another in the heat of the moment. It's a common failing of

humanity. It's no more than fibbing. But she told you the truth to-day—you can depend on that. She's no more capable of lying deliberately and at length in cold blood than I am of flying."

"Perhaps not," said Adderley carefully. "Aunt, what do you know of her?"

"Oh, quite a lot. She's an old school friend of the girls. They've stopped with her in town often and she's been down here a lot."

"At a flat she has?"

"How did you know?"

"Guessed it. What about her family though?"

"Warwickshire," said Lady Kettering promptly.

Adderley smiled faintly. "How do you know?" he said. "Did Helen and Claire in their schooldays ever go there and stop with her people?"

Lady Kettering looked surprised. "No," she said at length. "Now, you mention it they did not. They always asked Mary down to stop with us. They were going to her place once, but something turned up to prevent them at the last moment. Mary's small brother got the measles or something of the sort."

"Then summed up," said Adderley bluntly, "the position is this: You know nothing of the girl save what she herself has told you. None of you have ever met any of her people; and your only point of contact with her has been her visits here."

"That's so. The girls of course have been up to her place in town, and then you see there's the fact that they were at school together. And in case you don't know it, Michael, let me tell you that girls don't go to school together over a period of years without forming a pretty shrewd idea of each other's capabilities."

"I won't argue that. I won't even talk about

undeveloped tendencies. In a word you really know next to nothing about her antecedents. What she has told you is not evidence. She may be telling you the truth—I'm looking at it all quite impersonally, you understand—but you have no means of checking it."

"You have."

"I have, naturally. Aunt, why has she a flat in town and what does she do?"

"Paints," said Lady Kettering. "She has a flat at Holland Park, if you want to know."

"Does her work keep her or do her people?"

Lady Kettering's hands moved in a helpless, fluttering sort of gesture. "Michael, I don't know. How can I tell? Only policemen ask those questions. Tell me yourself, what do you really think?"

"It's not a question of thinking, aunt. If I allowed my likes and dislikes to influence me Heaven knows where I'd end—or begin, if it comes to that."

"Which means, of course, that in your horrid cold-blooded fashion, just for the sake of a principle, you'll persecute poor Mary. . . ."

"'Protect' was the precise word I used, aunt. You may remember I told you that."

"So you did," said Lady Kettering with a gleam in her eye. "Does that imply then that you're more interested in her than you usually are in a suspected person?"

"Naturally. She's a guest of yours and a friend of the girls. I'm not blind to the possible effect anything might have on you as her host."

Lady Kettering sighed. For once she found herself unable to pierce the blank wall of her nephew's obtuseness. In the circumstances the only thing left her to do was to make a direct appeal to Adderley's loquacity.

"Aren't you," she said, "just the least bit in love with her already?"

She thought he was never going to reply, then she thought he was trying to phrase his answer as non-committally as possible, but actually he was merely turning the matter over in his mind in an attempt to face the issue as squarely and as truthfully as possible.

"No," he said at length, "no, I can't say I am. You see, I'm looking on her as a suspect all the time." He looked her levelly in the eyes. "Aunt, when the time comes and the right girl puts in an appearance I shall let you know without delay. Until then I don't intend to be stamped into anything."

Lady Kettering looked him over appraisingly. "You've got the Adderley jaw," she said cryptically, and left it at that.

"Michael," she said, after an interval and there was a faint note of anxiety in her voice, "what am I to do about this?"

"Nothing," Adderley said. "That applies to talking too."

She nodded. "I promised I'd keep everything to myself. But the fact is you've rather shaken my faith. She's no longer Mary Cranford, but Miss Mystery. You've shown me the things we've taken for granted, and you've made me wonder if we were quite wise. It's that that's worrying me, and as long as the girl's in the house and nothing's settled one way or the other I'll feel the same doubt."

"You'll just have to do your best not to show it then. You mustn't give her a polite hint to leave, if that's what was in your mind. She understands the position quite well and she realises she's under surveillance. Then, too, I wasn't being altogether melodramatic when I suggested she might have made powerful enemies. In one way I hope she has."

"Michael!"

"I mean it. It would simplify things. It would in effect prove her absolutely innocent of any complicity."

"I think you're leaning more to that view than the other. Isn't that so?"

Adderley nodded. "For quite good reasons," he explained. "The whole affair seems rather more than a mere quarrel between two members of a forger's gang. If it was simply that, I'd see no difficulties ahead. I can't quite explain just what's in my mind, mainly because it's all rather too nebulous at present, but I can give you an indication of the way it seems to me that things are tending."

He might have said more, would probably have proceeded, now his aunt had gained his confidence, to elaborate his theories and his fears, but at that moment there came an interruption.

Lady Kettering answered the door. It was one of the maids asking if anything had been seen of Mr Adderley. Sir Richard Clinton had called and was asking for him.

"Mr. Adderley will be down in a few minutes" said Lady Kettering.

She came back into the room. "Any more P's and Q's I have to mind, Michael?" she asked lightly. "We mightn't have another opportunity for confidences for some time, you know"

"There's just one thing I forgot to ask you," her nephew said. "You mentioned a brother of Miss Cranford's. Have you any idea what his name was?"

"That's something I couldn't say for certain," said Lady Kettering. "I've an odd fancy though that it was a name beginning with B. Bernard, or Burton, or something of the sort. Unless I'm mixing it up with the beer."

CHAPTER XI

IDENTITIES

As Adderley entered the library Clinton rose from the chair by the fire and came towards him. He was rather different from the mental picture Adderley had formed of him; he seemed more like a city business man than a county squire. He did not look a day over forty, though actually he was ten years older.

"No need to ask who you are," he remarked as he held out his hand. "There's a resemblance between you and your aunt."

Adderley chuckled. For some obscure reason any likening of him to Lady Kettering always amused him.

"I don't know that she'd be very flattered if you told her that," he said.

"I was complimenting you, not her," Clinton returned. "However . . . You know you're in charge of this case now? Good. I'm sorry to spoil your holiday, but if people will go and get killed we must make the best of it. Now, how far have you advanced since I was speaking to you this morning?"

"Not far, I'm afraid. You know, my car has been discovered at Barnes with a dead man in it?"

Clinton nodded. "Aldin 'phoned me up just after he'd seen you, so I'm aware of that. He mentioned, too, that you'd brought along the lady in the case. She is rather a complication, isn't she?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised if a good deal

hinged on her," Adderley said "guardedly, and Sir Richard Clinton glanced sharply at him.

"You mean . . . ?" he said tentatively.

"That she is an important witness. I don't imagine for a moment that she has had any actual connection with the affair, but she seems to have blundered into a pretty complication and is still rather bewildered by the turn things have taken. Naturally she lost her head at the time and then made matters worse by trying to blunder out in the same way she blundered in."

"I wouldn't feel inclined to blame her too much—not at this juncture anyway," Clinton said. "Most law-abiding people have an instinctive horror of coming into contact with the law; the more innocent they are the more panicky they get. It's only your seasoned criminal who can face the idea of a police interrogation with equanimity. He knows from experience what its limits are. By the way, you know that the dead man has been identified?"

"Which dead man?" Adderley asked. "There were two of them, you know?"

"The Barnes one," said Clinton. "When I say identified," he went on carefully, "I mean that the Yard say his description corresponds to that of a gentleman for whom they have been looking for some time on the advice of the American police. He has never been through the hands of your people, but they feel pretty confident that he's Mark Alsen."

"When did you hear that? I was speaking to Inspector Rother this morning and the discovery of the car hadn't been made then."

"I 'phoned them at half-past two. The information hadn't been in long then."

"I see. And what was Alsen wanted for in the States?"

"Forgery and uttering," Clinton smiled. "It seems a pretty clear case. I mean it links up with what we found at Denning's."

"That particular dead man hasn't been identified yet?"

"No. But there's been one development in connection with him. Burrige—that's the doctor you met last night—has taken things a step further and he's inclined to the opinion that the man was killed by some curare derivative. He's found a scratch on the neck from which he expects great things. Of course the trouble with Burrige is that he's imaginative, he spent a season in Brazil, and since then, has, without knowing much about them, taken an interest in some of the obscure poisons of that country, and the chances are now that he's simply riding his hobby to death."

"I'm not so sure of that," Adderley said thoughtfully. "There may be something in what he says. The nationality of the fellow puzzled me at the time, but now I've heard the suggestion that he is possibly of South American origin I feel on surer ground."

"Well, it shouldn't take long to discover something about the dead man's antecedents. We've got two points of contact to start with. One is Scotland Yard's belief that the Barnes man is Alsen and the other is the fact that they were somehow mixed up with a gang of forgers. And forgers, as you know, must by virtue of their calling have connections with all sorts of people who may be expected to betray them sooner or later for a consideration."

"That is so, if this is a straight case of quarrels amongst thieves. I feel inclined to doubt that though. Criminals have a habit of running to type, and a man who forges rarely murders, certainly not on a large

scale. He's a versatile genius if he mixes arson in with his other two crimes."

"Arson? Oh, yes. The lady's car was burned. Rather a crowded night's work in addition to the two murders."

"And one attempted murder," said Adderley softly.

Clinton looked a question.

"He tried to do me in too, you may remember," said Adderley. "Chance or my thick skull saved me from the worst. By the way, what about Denning?"

"The owner of the house? He's away at present, in Paris, I believe. The Yard is getting in touch with him through the French police, though the chances are that he'll be completely mystified when he hears what has happened in his absence?"

"What kind of a man is he, Sir Richard? Do you know him personally?"

"Only a nodding acquaintance. I'm not intimate with him. But everyone agrees that he is a nice, quiet, unassuming sort of person, rather on the studious side. He's more or less of a newcomer here."

"A newcomer? How long has he been here?"

"About six weeks, perhaps two months. What are you driving at, Adderley?"

The other chuckled. "Nothing in particular," he said. "I'm merely collecting facts. You never know when they may come in useful. Who had the place before Denning?"

"Quite a succession of people. None of them stayed long. I don't recollect much about any of them. The only one who sticks in my memory was a man called Perron. Possibly I remember hearing of him because of his queer name. Aldin, however should be able to tell you more about them all."

"I'll ask him," said Adderley. "Yes, Perrer is a queer name. Frenchman?"

Clinton shook his head. "Hardly. He was a foreigner of some sort, though who kept to himself. Sort of recluse."

"Just one other thing I'd like to ask you, Sir Richard," Adderley said. "Have you any idea why nobody stopped very long at Denning House?"

Clinton shifted a little uneasily. "Only local gossip," he said uncomfortably, "not the sort of thing I place much credence on."

"I don't know," said Adderley musingly. "Local gossip sometimes has a knack of hitting the nail on the end. What do they say about Denning House?"

"The sort of thing no sane man believes nowadays," said Clinton. "The countryfolk have an idea the place is haunted."

Adderley whistled. "That's interesting," he remarked. "Not that I place much reliance on ghosts myself, but where there's smoke there's fire. However, I can't see at this juncture that it can be linked up in any way with the matter we're investigating. How about Denning's servants? Aldin told me there were some and he seemed to have an idea they should be on the premises."

"I don't know where he got that idea from. He has some servants come in from the village, but they're only daily helps, so to speak. They're sort of on holiday at present until Denning returns. The only permanent servant he has is his man—I don't know his name—who has gone to Paris with him. And that's about the sum of my knowledge. Is it indiscreet to ask if you have formed any theory yet?"

"I don't mind admitting that I've got one, though it covers only half the ground, and it deals

principally with the part Miss Cranford plays in the affair."

"Let me hear it, if you don't mind," said Clinton. "For all you know I may be able to knock holes in it."

"All the better if you can. Here it is for what it is worth: You know of the wad of envelope paper marked 'Burton Canforth' that was found in the pipe of the Barnes man? Aldin told you that and that he guessed there was some connection between that name and Cranford, a variant of it, if you like. The girl denies that it is anything of the sort. But when I was talking to my aunt she mentioned that Miss Cranford had a brother. I enquired his Christian name. Aunt was hazy. She thought it began with a B, though it might be Bernard, or Burton, and then began to wonder if the beer had made her think of the latter. Not very satisfactory, of course, but it strengthens my theory. Burton Canforth is an alias, albeit a clumsy one, of Miss Cranford's brother. He's either the black sheep of the family or has mixed with other black sheep long enough to have gone smudgy. By the oddest piece of unlucky accident the girl stumbles on this show last night, sees enough or hears enough to realise her brother is likely to be implicated and in a panic says the first thing that comes into her head as long as it happens not to be too close to the truth.

"Now, I don't feel that this brother had any hand in the murders, and my frank opinion is that at the worst he was no more than a go-between for these forging gentlemen, but she's horribly afraid that if the truth comes out he'll be arrested along with the others, whoever they are. She told the truth, except in the one instance of denying any knowledge of Burton Canforth, but she didn't tell the whole truth.

I'm sure of that. She suppressed something; whether it was something she saw, heard or simply deduced, I can't say. Now, what do you say to that?"

"There's only one thing I can say and that is that I think you've shot very close to the truth. But I feel, as you do with Miss Cranford, that it's not the whole truth. And for a start I'd like to know more about the antecedents of the parties concerned, particularly those of the two dead men. I agree with you as to Miss Cranford's probable standing in the matter, and I think it should be a comparatively easy matter to trace this elusive brother of hers."

"It shouldn't give us much trouble," Adderley agreed. "I . . ."

He stopped abruptly as someone tapped on the library door. "I said we weren't to be disturbed," he remarked with a grimace, "so perhaps this is something important."

He opened the door. Lady Kettering was standing there with a strained expression on her face.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Michael," she apologised, "but I've just remembered something, and I thought I should let you know at once what it was."

"All right, aunt. Come in and I'll shut the door before you tell us."

Lady Kettering entered the room and took Sir Richard's proffered hand and greeted him with a certain breathlessness in her tone that was unusual with so self-possessed a lady as she was. Adderley, with his eyes on her flushed face, fancied the recollection she had mentioned must have been rather a disturbing one. He had no idea that it was one that would in vulgar parlance knock the theory on which he had just been enlarging kite-high.

"Mary's brother's name," she said, "I've been

thinking hard and I've just remembered. It didn't begin with a 'B' at all. His name was Daniel and for a reason you'll find in the Bible they called him Leo for short."

And with that she sailed from the room before either of the two men could think of anything to say. Adderley was the first to recover and he made a tentative movement as if to follow and overtake her. He thought better of it, however, and turned to Clinton.

"Have you ever struck a case like this?" he said with a touch of bitterness. "Everyone who could and should help us is trying to handicap us by telling the exact truth."

CHAPTER XII

NIGHT MANŒUVRES

THE man who came tearing along the London road in the dying light of the winter afternoon slowed his motor-cycle as the night drooped down' on him, and peered a little uncertainly into the middle distance. He seemed doubtful of his exact position, and more than once as he proceeded he turned off to look for indications of something in the nature of a by-pass road.

But luck was against him. The nearest he got to anything of the sort was a footpath, whose surface on examination proved too rough to carry a machine with any degree of comfort.

He remounted the motor-cycle with a muttered imprecation, and went rolling slowly down the road. By this time the expression of irritation on his face had given way to one of anxiety. He was even beginning to wonder if he could possibly have made some grotesque mistake and have lost his way, though on reconsideration he could not see how this could have happened.

He was within a mile of Trimpleton itself before he had his doubts resolved. A road opened off at an angle from the main road and over against the intersection there stood a gaunt and dilapidated signpost. The legend on the arms had been almost obliterated, but at length, with the aid of a flash lamp he carried, he managed to decipher enough to satisfy him. Never-

theless before going on, he checked his conclusions with his road-map.

The map showed a loop way that led off the main road, that swept round almost in a complete half-circle, and rejoined it a few miles the further side of Trimpton.

The cyclist looked at his watch and made a brief calculation. He had ample time, a little too much in fact if he wished to avoid attracting undue attention. However, that could not be helped at this juncture; moreover he had the added safeguard that the back road appeared to be quite deserted.

He left the main road behind him and dimming his lights down to the minimum point of usefulness slid gently into the darkness. It was a full two hours later when he appeared in the neighbourhood of Langshand—what he did or where he had been in the interval it is not within the scope of this history to record—and abandoning his motor-cycle in the lee of a copse began to make on foot a slow and cautious circuit of the grounds.

There were lights in many of the windows of the house, but he concentrated his attention more on those in the upper storey of one particular wing. Yet he seemed rather puzzled, as though something he had expected to find was absent. He waited for what felt like an eternity, and at last was on the point of turning away with an exclamation of disgust when the light in one of the windows went out.

He stopped, staring intently. The light reappeared after an interval, then flickered oddly and went out altogether.

The moment it went out finally he began flicking the button of his flashlight in a series of longs and shorts. They followed no recognised code; the chances were that they formed a prearranged signal.

There was no evidence that they had been seen and interpreted aright, though the man himself appeared to have no doubt on that point.

With an alertness that had not marked him hitherto he turned away and headed towards the path near the copse where he had hidden his machine.

He had not long to wait. A figure detached itself from the darkness, and moved a little uncertainly in his direction. He made no move until the figure was almost abreast of him. Then he stepped out into the middle of the path.

The newcomer started back with a stifled exclamation.

"It's all right, Mary," said the man. "It's only me."

"You frightened me," said the girl in a low voice. "I wasn't sure for the moment. . . ."

"But you saw my signal? I saw yours."

"I saw it," she admitted. "But I wasn't quite sure. It might have been . . . anyone else."

"Signalling?" he said in surprise, but the girl shook her head.

"No, waiting here."

"Of course it might," the man agreed. "That's what I thought so foolish. Why couldn't I have come up and asked for you instead of hanging about here like a fellow waiting at the back gate for a servant girl he's after?"

"Don't be crude," she said with a shiver. Then, "Don't you know?"

"It all depends what it is," he said diplomatically. "I don't know of any reason for this hidden hand business, if that's what you mean?"

She stared at him. "Haven't you heard of the murder?"

He looked at her narrowly and in the faint light she

had an idea that his face went white, but it might have been only fancy or some trick of the shadows.

"Murder?" he repeated after a barely perceptible pause. "There were two of them, weren't there? That is, if you're thinking of what I'm thinking."

"Don't let us beat about the bush any longer," she said desperately. She caught him by the arm and drew him deeper into the shadow of the copse. "It's no good us playing at cross purposes. I see you know well enough what I mean. But what I'm trying to find out is how far you are implicated."

"Don't be such a priceless ass, Mary," he said roughly. "Whatever makes you think I had anything to do with it . . . with either of them?"

"The two murders? I didn't say you had anything to do with them, only that you seemed to be implicated."

"But that's splitting hairs."

"Perhaps so, but it's the sort of hair-splitting that in the end makes all the difference between acquittal and conviction, between going free and being hanged."

The man whistled. "Is it as bad as that? Mary, how much do you know and how much do you guess?"

"I can tell you quite easily what I know," she said quickly. "I had a breakdown near Denning's house last night—I'm not going to waste time telling you just where that is, even though you don't seem to know—and I went up there for help. I knew nothing about the place at all then, and I just blundered in. The door was half open, and when no one answered I pushed in. I wish now I hadn't. In the first room I entered I stumbled over a man on the floor—Mark Alsen the police say he was—and he wasn't quite dead, but I don't think he was far off it. When he saw me he tried to talk and I lifted him up thinking it might help him. The queer thing is that I'm not

sure whether he was just wandering or whether some sort of vague resemblance tricked him. In a way you know we're not unlike.

"He said something to me. Do you want to know what it was?"

The young man shifted uneasily. "What has it to do with me?" he asked sullenly.

"Don't lose your temper," said the girl warningly. "You may need to keep tight rein on it before you're quite out of the wood. Just remember I'm trying to do all I can to help you, and I'm not finding it easy."

"All right, I'm sorry," he said, but there was no contrition in his voice. "What did Mark . . . that man say?"

"He said," the girl told him, "'what a dirty trick to play on me, Bunny.'"

"Is that all? He couldn't have meant me."

"Couldn't he? That's just what I'm afraid he did mean. They call you 'Bunny,' don't they?"

"Who?"

"The . . . the people you're mixed up with."

The young man nodded. "But I hadn't anything to do with last night's business," he said distinctly. "I wasn't near the house. I don't even know where it is. Why, I might have passed it this evening without knowing it. Is that all you brought me down here for?"

"Not all," said the girl after a tiny pause. "I'm sorry now I did but I couldn't see what was going to happen. I've had just the worst possible bit of bad luck. I thought when I went home last night and dropped you the letter that if you came down here and saw me . . . like this I could warn you. But it seems it isn't to be as easy as all that. Perhaps I'd better start at the beginning and tell you all that's happened since I arrived."

The young man listened in silence until she had finished. "It does look bad," he said at the end. "The trouble," he went on ruefully, "is that they've begun by suspecting you and from that they won't be long before they get on to me. Not that there's anything anyone can hang on me," he added virtuously, "but it's always annoying when the police start asking questions."

The girl flung him a swift glance, but made no comment. It was obvious, however, that it had been brought home to her that the man was no stranger to police attentions, however much he might protest the contrary.

"Of course you weren't anywhere near here last night?" she said in a not too hopeful tone.

"Of course I wasn't. Haven't I told you already that I'm not familiar with the country?"

"You've never been down this way before then?" As he hesitated she went on, "Now, please tell the truth."

He laughed rather hollowly. "It's no good saying I haven't. But the solid fact is that I've always been brought down here in the dark, so I've never had a chance of recognising the lay of the land."

"I see," she said gravely. "Do you mean that you've been brought down to the place they call Denning House?"

"No. Certainly not. I'd never heard of Denning or his house until I saw the evening papers—the early editions, you know, before I left town. That's one of the things that's puzzling me just as much as it must be puzzling everybody else. I can't think of any reason why they should have been there last night, breaking into another man's house."

"They?" She took him up quickly. "Who are they, who besides this Alsen who is dead and this

other man they don't seem to have identified yet? Who killed them both?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know that. I wouldn't tell if I did."

In the half-light she stared at him meditatively. "Sometimes," she said, "I wonder if you're worth troubling about. You haven't given me much comfort or peace of mind. At the worst I've always hoped that you'd be no more than a bit wild, but . . . well, what's the use?"

"Of what?" he said densely.

She made a vague gesture that might mean anything, and went on in another strain.

"When they start asking the inevitable questions what will you have to say about last night?" she said.

"I wasn't out of town, that's all."

"Can you prove it?"

"I don't see why not. Nobody's going to give me away."

"Then that means that you're going to manufacture an alibi? Were you out of town?"

"Haven't I told you that if necessary I'll be able to prove I wasn't? I don't see why you should always want to know where I've been. It should be enough as long as I can tell you I haven't been getting into trouble."

"Your ideas of what constitutes trouble don't quite coincide with mine. Now, perhaps you'd better go. I've warned you. You know now as well as I do what you're facing, and . . . and I'll do what I can to save you being drawn in, even if it means perjuring myself."

"That's nice of you," he said, without any gratitude in his voice. "But I'm not worrying . . . much. I've friends."

"You may think they're friends. But just think for a moment what would have happened had anybody but I heard what Alsen said."

"You make me sick, Mary. Always preaching. There's one or two things about yourself, you know . . ."

"Don't you dare!" she said sharply. "You'd better go before you make me say or do something I'll be sorry for."

"All right," he mumbled, drawing away from her. "Have it your own way."

He was turning towards the copse where he had hidden the motor-cycle when the girl made a quick step forward and caught him by the arm.

"Quick," she said in an urgent whisper, "in here." She pushed him into the thick shadow thrown by the copse. "Don't make a sound," she added.

"What is it?" he asked in a low voice.

"A car. Can't you hear it? Not another word until it has gone."

The distant purr of engines became audible, strengthened as the car drew nearer, and became a steady beat as the machine laboured up the road that led to the gates of Langshand. The road was a winding one and at one point it intersected the path that ran through the clump of trees. At first the man had felt inclined to question the precaution she had taken, but presently the wisdom of her move became apparent.

As the car swung round the road the big headlights, like twin swords of white flame, cut through the undergrowth. Even as it was the light passed uncomfortably close to them. Had they remained standing at the spot where they had met, the headlights would have picked them out as a spotlight picks out an actor on a darkened stage.

The car passed on and the girl gave a sigh of relief.

"Who was it?" her companion asked.

"Visitors," she said. "Who I can't say. I had better go back now, before I'm missed. It may be someone I know and who will ask for me. I'm not supposed to be out. I told you that I had given my word."

"Much it seems to be worth," the man muttered.

The girl turned on him like a tigress. "I'm doing it for you, and that's all the thanks I get," she said angrily. "For two pins I'd go back and tell Mr. Adderley . . ."

"I don't think you would, Mary," he said, but there was no certainty in his voice. "Still I'm sorry I ruffled you. I won't do it again."

"You won't get the chance. Go back to London, and stop there as quietly as you can. Pray Heaven that the police haven't already started making enquiries. If they have . . ."

He cut her short with an angry gesture. "I know as well as you do what's likely to happen," he said irritably. "Don't you think I've a wholesome regard for my own skin? I'll take good care, extra care, that I don't give anything away."

On the impulse she caught him by the hands, drew him towards her and kissed him.

"Take care of yourself," she said brokenly, and a diamond-bright tear trembled on her eyelid. She brushed it away as though ashamed of her momentary weakness.

The man seemed as though about to say something, but apparently thought better of it. He pushed past the girl, and she stood and watched him as he wheeled the motor-cycle out on to the path. The branches hung low thereabouts and more than once a twig snapped as he pushed it out of his way or rebounded and flicked against his shoulders and neck.

Some flying thing slid by the girl's cheek. She had all a woman's unreasoning fear of bats and she started violently, thinking it was something of the sort, but a second's reconsideration showed her her mistake. It had not been anything as big as a bat. An insect more probably. Though it struck her as odd that insects should be about so well on into the cold weather.

In the interval the motor-cycle had vanished into the darkness of the night. She did not hear the engine and concluded that, fearing to attract the attention of some of the occupants of the car, he was coasting slowly down the slope with his lights out. The belief that this was so carried with it a degree of comfort, for it suggested that he had taken her warning to heart.

She turned to take the path that would lead her back to the house, and as she did so a man stepped out of the shadows, and came towards her.

She started back with a little cry of dismay. At the same instant from the direction taken by the motor-cyclist came the rending crash of a collision.

CHAPTER XIII

SURRENDER

FOR a split second the double shock froze her faculties. Before she could make a move the man was beside her, his hand on her arm. The touch set her nerves jangling, and the rags of her temper flared up.

"Let me alone!" she cried fiercely. "Let me go!"

She strove to pull away from him, but his grip, though gentle, was not to be broken. The resentment in her eyes gave way to panic as she recognised Butt, Adderley's man. She had seen him for the first time that afternoon, but his was not a face one readily forgot.

"What do you mean by this?" she demanded, trying to keep her voice steady.

What was happening down the road? What had that crash meant? She must know . . . at once. With the courage of desperation she tried to tear away from the man.

"Steady on, Miss," he said calmly. "You'd better get back to the house at once. It's not safe for you here. I . . . we will do all that's wanted."

"What do you mean?" she demanded again. "Where's Mr. Adderley?"

"He's coming, Miss. Please don't waste time. Do what I tell you. We can do all and more than you can."

Perhaps there was something hypnotic about the man, or perhaps it was only that the cumulative excite-

ments of the last twenty-four hours had left her weak and unable to resist. At anyrate her momentary resistance crumpled up at the impact of a superior will, and almost without knowing how it came about she found herself being impelled back to the house by a force other than her own inclinations. If, on the way, she had leisure for any thought at all, it was to wonder if by any mischance Butt had overheard her conversation with the cyclist. Perhaps he had been spying on her, probably at the behest of his master. Something in the way he had spoken to her seemed to imply that Adderley was aware she had slipped out of the house.

She would have given a lot to have known the meaning of the crash. She had a wild fear that the motorcycle had been smashed and its rider injured. Had anything of the sort occurred, all her carefully laid plans would have gone for nothing. In retrospect the queerest part of it all to her, however, was that she should have obeyed orders that ran contrary to her own urgent desire to know the truth. But perhaps it was that beyond the impulse of a superior will she had a strong, though by no means well-defined idea that her presence could be of no help and might actually cause harm. And running like a red thread through the chaotic pattern of her thoughts and ideas was the knowledge that she must now be branded as a liar in Adderley's sight. Oddly enough that troubled her acutely.

She met no one on the way back to the house. If Butt had been speaking the truth Adderley must have gone by another way and missed her. She felt grateful for the brief respite.

She managed to slip in without attracting attention. The visitors she had seen arriving were somewhere about the house; she could hear strange voices

mingled with the more familiar ones of the household ; and using this distraction as a cover she stole to her room. Apparently no one seemed to be aware that anything out of the ordinary had been taking place beyond the confines of the grounds, and presently the idea began to grow on her that there was a reasonable chance of the whole affair being regarded as a purely private diversion.

It was obvious that a reckoning with Adderley must come sooner or later, and she had reached the state of mind where it was infinitely preferable to have it out at once.

She was not left long in suspense. Someone tapped at the door, and she opened it to find one of the maids standing there. She held out a note to the girl.

"From Mr. Adderley, Miss," she said.

Mary opened and read the note. Terse and to the point it ran :

"Can you see me in the library immediately ?

We won't be disturbed. M.A."

Mary crushed the note up in her hand. "Tell Mr. Adderley," she said to the waiting maid, "that I'll be down at once."

Ordinarily she would have kept him waiting, but on this occasion his wishes marched with her own desires. The sooner she faced him the sooner she would learn what had happened to the motor-cycle and its rider. So she delayed no longer than was necessary to repair the ravages of her complexion.

Adderley was waiting for her, standing in front of the fire with something judicial in his attitude that chilled her momentarily. His voice, however, was kindly, and she felt the worst of her fears stealing away.

"Come in, Miss Cranford," he said. "Do you mind if I shut the door? I'd rather we had this little talk in private."

She saved him the trouble by closing the door herself.

"What is it?" she asked, coming towards him.

"For a start," he said, looking down at her, "take a seat. And now I suppose you're anxious to know what happened to the motor-cyclist?"

"Yes," she said quickly, and for the life of her could not keep the quickening interest out of her voice.

His answer dashed her hopes to the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said bluntly, "that I can't tell you anything definite. All I can say is that he has completely disappeared."

"Disappeared?" she echoed. "But how?"

"I can't say. Of course I have my own suspicions, but they are not evidence. But perhaps I'd better tell you what I think must have happened. When Butt arrived on the scene a few seconds before I did, he found the motor-cycle piled up against a tree. The odd part of it was that the handle-bars were detached. Do you see what that means?"

"Not quite," she said.

"There's only one conclusion," Adderley told her, "and that is that either by accident or design they became loose, and the rider lost control of the machine. Though there were no footmarks visible, I'm inclined to think the handle-bars were deliberately loosened, and that when the rider lost control the machine ran into a tree and he was pitched off. Somebody must have been waiting for him, probably more than one person, pounced on him and carried him off. The chances are that they had a car handy."

"Do you think he was killed?" she said.

Adderley shook his head. "No," he replied. "I don't think he was even seriously hurt. He may have been dazed by the fall, probably he was, as he seems

not to have put up a fight. You see, there are no tracks about of any consequence."

"Do you really think that, Mr. Adderley, or are you saying it merely in the hope of comforting me?"

The detective smiled down at her. "I'm telling you my theory," he said. "To a great extent it's supported by certain signs we discovered. What they were it would take too long to tell you. But you can rest assured that the probabilities are that he is not even seriously injured. Does that ease your mind at all?"

She smiled gratefully at him. "Of course it does," she said. Then the smile faded and her eyes clouded.

"But if your theory is right and he has been taken away," she said, "where has he gone and who was it that took him?"

"I'm hoping that you may be able to throw some light on that," Adderley said, and looked meaningly at her. "Seeing that you went out to meet him you should be able to give some indication, however slight."

The girl took a deep breath. "I don't know what you must think of me," she said doubtfully. "I made you a promise and I broke it within a few hours. In fact—I'm trying to be candid about it—I knew when I made it that I would have to break it."

She stopped, expecting him to speak, but he did not answer immediately. He stood looking so intently at her that she found herself unable to meet his eyes. She dropped her gaze and shifted uneasily in her chair. She was perilously near tears.

"Why don't you say something?" she said in a low voice. "Anything rather than looking at me like that . . . and condemning me."

"I'm not condemning you," he said, so gently that

she stared at him in amazement. His face had softened. It was no longer the stern visage of an inquisitorial detective; his eyes held an almost wistful appeal.

"No, I'm not blaming you," he went on. "I'm beginning to understand your point of view and realise some of the difficulties you're facing. At the same time you must realise that I have my duty to do and if I am to blame you for anything at all, it will be for your lack of frankness. You see, I've made myself responsible for you in a way and I don't want to feel that my trust is misplaced. If you like you can put it that I'm appealing to your better nature."

"Do you think I have any?" she said in a half-whisper.

He made a step forward; apparently reconsidered, and resumed his position in front of the fire.

"I'm acting on the assumption that you have," he told her. "I want you to understand that I'm doing certain things on my own initiative, that probably the course I'm taking is highly irregular, and make you realise if possible that Sergeant Aldin, for instance, would not have been quite so lenient with you."

"I understand all that," she said quickly, "and I am grateful for it. I hope you understand that whatever I have done, I mean that."

"In that case," Adderley took her up, "you must see that it is in your interests and your brother's—I presume he is your brother—for you to make a clean breast of everything."

She raised her head and met his eyes levelly. "Mr. Adderley," she said, "there's just one thing I'd like to ask you first, and that is, was Butt listening to us all the time?" Delicately as she phrased the question he guessed what was behind it. She sus-

pected Butt of spying, and more than half suspected Adderley of having sent him out with that very purpose.

"The fact of the matter," said Adderley slowly and deliberately, "is that Butt was not listening to you any of the time. Had he been close enough to overhear your conversation the . . . the accident to the motor-cycle would almost certainly not have happened."

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"I should think it was obvious that the motor-cycle could only have been tampered with while you and your brother were talking. Butt, as a matter of fact, only arrived on the scene just as your brother was getting on his motor-cycle. Does that satisfy you?"

She searched his face with her eyes before she answered. What she saw there seemed to satisfy her. She nodded.

"Up to a point it does," she qualified her answer. "But there's one thing I would like to know and that is what brought Butt along at that juncture."

"You," he told her. "He saw you slipping out and came and reported it to me. You see, you promised me that you wouldn't leave the house under any circumstances without letting me know."

"Then," she asserted, "he was spying."

"I wonder," said Adderley deliberately, "if you remember the reason I advanced when I asked you not to leave the house."

"You said it was for my own protection and you mentioned the possible danger of a sudden and violent death."

"Exactly."

"But it seems you were mistaken. No harm came to me to-night. I wasn't, even for a moment, in the slightest danger."

Adderley did not answer immediately. Instead he turned to the mantelpiece and took up something that was wrapped carefully in paper.

"Do you think so?" he said mildly, and began peeling the paper away from the object it concealed. "I'm inclined to differ. Do you see this?"

'This' was a squat object, half the length of a darning needle, about twice as thick. One end tapered to a sharp point that was slightly discoloured now, and the other end had a rather thick base with a tiny tuft of some soft downy material glued to it. In appearance the whole object looked not unlike an overgrown and distorted air-gun dart, and so she suggested to Adderley.

"That's just what it is," he told her. "We found this sticking into a tree almost in a line with where you had been standing. No, don't touch it. I'm doubtful about that point. It's probably poisoned."

"Poisoned?" she gasped.

"I can't say for certain, of course, but the chances are that it is. I don't suppose you saw or heard anything."

"Saw or heard anything?" she repeated, then the puzzled expression on her face cleared away. *It was too small for a bat and the weather was too cold for it to be an insect!* Then it could only have been that deadly little steel dart whizzing past her cheek. At the thought of it a shiver ran through her.

"I did hear something," she said. "'Felt the wind of its passing.' Isn't that the phrase? I had better tell you what it was . . ." She detailed the incident.

"Do you think it was meant for me?" she asked at the end.

"Obviously. It wasn't meant for your brother. You see, his motor-cycle was tampered with; that was their way of dealing with him. You wouldn't

be here now if the man with the air-gun—I'm presuming that—wasn't a bad shot."

"But why," she said, "why single me out?"

It was only gradually that the full horror of what she had escaped was dawning on her, only gradually that she was beginning to realise that Adderley had made no idle prophecy.

Adderley looked at her contemplatively. "Suppose you tell me all about to-night's incident, what led up to it, what happened then, and what you imagine will be the outcome of it," he suggested. "Perhaps in that way we may arrive at some basis of understanding." Then as the girl still hesitated he added, "If you want to keep your brother out of as much trouble as possible, this seems to me to be the only way."

"I'm beginning to think that myself," she admitted. "If I'd only known then what I know now, I would have been franker with you. I can't see though that I can add very much of importance to what I've told you already."

"If I'm any judge," said Adderley shrewdly, "the important details seem to be those you left out. If you begin by filling in the gaps in the story of your adventures last night it may help."

Before her eyes there rose a vision of the dying man on the floor; in her ears she heard the husky voice, barely audible, whispering the words that might yet place her brother's neck in jeopardy. She gave Adderley a look of mute appeal; their eyes met. Somehow she felt her strength slipping away. She strove desperately to fight against the feeling, ended by burying her head in her hands.

"I can't . . . I can't tell you," she cried.

It was accident that started Adderley on the chain of reasoning that brought him to the inevitable conclusion. Given time he would have reached it

sooner or later anyway, perhaps a little too late, however, to be of any practical use. As it was he stood looking down at her, uncertain what to do. There were quite a number of things he could do, to which his instinct urged him, against which his reason warned him. Therefore he did none of them.

Her shoulders shook with her sobbing, through the fingers clasped before her eyes tears trickled. Adderley fixed his gaze on her hands, white hands, slenderly fashioned. White hands? The first time he saw them they were red with the blood of the dying man, the man whose head—as she said—she had raised because she thought he was trying to speak. Yet she had stated that the dying Mark Alsen had said nothing. She had been emphatic about that. Too emphatic?

It was worth a long shot.

“Miss Cranford”—Adderley’s voice was dangerously, silkily soft—“what was it Mark Alsen told you last night?”

She dropped her hands as though thunderstruck. The pain in her eyes changed to resentment.

“Then,” she said chokily, “Butt—or you—overheard me. You told me you didn’t.”

“And I told you the truth,” he said suavely. “I had no reason for lying. But I guessed—put two and two together, if you like—and now I know I’m right.”

She sighed wearily. “It doesn’t seem much use fighting,” she said in a low voice, “but if you’ve guessed so much, perhaps”—there was a flash of fire in this—“you can guess the rest.”

“I suppose I can. Alsen blamed your brother. Do you want me to act on that assumption?”

For the moment she faced him with a look of blank horror in her face.

“You . . . you wouldn’t dare” she said brokenly.

"Not if I knew the truth" he insisted.

He came forward and catching her hands lifted her unresistingly from the chair and stood her on her feet.

"There is one reason and one only," he said soberly, "why you must tell me everything and why, when I know it, I shall do all I can—more than you may think possible—to save you and yours from the threat hanging over you."

She turned eager eyes towards him. "What is that?" she asked in a voice no louder than a whisper.

His answer was not given in words. He caught her to him and kissed her on the lips.

CHAPTER XIV

A LITTLE ABOUT RELATIVES

“ . . . and he said,” she concluded, “ ‘ What a dirty trick to play on me, Bunny.’ He was so husky and he spoke in such a low voice that for the moment I could not quite believe my ears. But it was the name that clinched it, that made me sure that I wasn’t dreaming. And Burton—that’s Bunny—assures me that he was not out of town last night and that he can prove it. But it was because I was afraid of what might happen that I got back to town as soon as I could, and then dropped him a note to come down here and see me to-night.”

She stopped and looked up at Adderley, searching his face for a sign of his reaction to her story.

“ You do believe me now, don’t you ? ” she asked a little breathlessly, and Adderley nodded.

“ I do believe you now, Mary,” he said. “ There’s just one or two points I’d like to get a little clearer. I can’t quite understand why you didn’t get in touch with your brother personally, if not by telephone. Then again why, once having gone back to town, did you come down here this morning? I’m not doubting you, but I’m picking out the items that are almost certain to make people feel suspicious.”

“ I see,” she said gravely. “ Yes, you’re quite right. You should know. I did ring my brother. He was out and they couldn’t tell me where he was or what time he was likely to be home. There is a girl, you see. I don’t know anything about her, who she

is, where she lives or anything beyond the fact of her existence. Probably she is his alibi.

"I felt I had to come back here. I'd arranged that, you see; my luggage was on its way, and if I did not turn up I would have to answer all sorts of awkward questions, with the probability that the very things I was trying to hide would be the first to come out. I decided on that course of action last night, or rather early this morning, when I found I couldn't raise my brother on the telephone. It was then I wrote and posted the letter. I didn't want him to come to the house asking for me; I didn't even want him to be seen in the district, so that's why I got him to signal me. Oh, I know I've done things that look silly. Everybody does in a case like that. Often and often when I've read the report of a trial and seen the comment that no innocent man would have taken such a course I've agreed. But I know now that what one does in a moment of emergency is never what one would do given a chance to sit down calmly, reason out a course of action and weigh the chances for and against. You mightn't understand; you see only what you think you'd do in a crisis; you never see what you'd do if you suddenly found yourself in an emergency with scarcely time to think. There's a world of difference, you see, between being a spectator and actor."

"I see," said Adderley gravely. "You did a number of very foolish things, no doubt, but as you say, it's very easy to be wise after the event. But what about Burton, or Bunny, as you say some of his associates call him? Or rather, what about those associates? Can you tell me anything of them?"

"Bunny's always been a worry," she said, "and since Dad and Mum died most of the worry's fallen

on me. I was going to say that he's the black sheep of the family, but then that's not strictly true. He isn't bad, really, not black, only grey at the worst. But he mixes with queer people—this Mark Alsen was one—and . . . and . . . well, as I say, he isn't bad, only weak and wilful. I don't think, for instance, that he'd go into anything crooked, unless it was within the law, with his eyes open."

It was pathetic in a way to see how she was pleading the cause of her brother, striving to gloss over the things against him and bring out tellingly the few points in his favour. It would have had its ridiculous side had not Adderley known from his own experience of the world that she was telling the exact truth. There were young men like that; they hovered continually about the borderline that divides the legal from the illegal, and sooner or later, if only momentarily, they crossed it to the wrong side. They were the ones who, when things went wrong, most often got caught.

"You have another brother, haven't you?" he asked, not because he was interested, but simply to get her away from a subject that threatened to become unprofitable. "Daniel, whom some call Leo."

She looked surprised. "Yes, how do you know that? Oh, I see—your aunt. Yes, there's Daniel. He's really not my brother. Only a half-brother. Dad was married before. Daniel's mother died soon after he was born. Daniel's always kept to himself, as aloof from everyone as the other Daniel was in the lions' den. With a name like that you couldn't help sooner or later having someone trace the analogy. And from that they started calling him Leo. But Daniel's quite ten years older than I am."

"Where is he?" Adderley asked.

The girl looked blank. "Where . . . I couldn't

tell you that, Michael, I don't know. I haven't seen him for years. He and Dad didn't get on together. They both had tempers. Then there came a quarrel—that was before the war when we both were youngsters—and he left home. That was the last we ever heard of him. Dad cut him right out of his will. Yes, we'd money even in post-war days, when Dad had lost a lot of it. I've got my own little income still, but Bunny . . . well, I'm afraid Bunny hasn't too much left."

"The chances," said Adderley grimly, "are that he hasn't a bean."

The girl shot him a glance of understanding. She knew quite well what he was thinking, and in her own heart she was desperately afraid that such was the case.

"Michael," she said, "what are you going to do about him?"

"I don't know," he said helplessly. "I can only hope that his alibi is a water-tight, cast-iron one. But we've first got to find out what has happened to him."

"I'm worried about that. Of course, you can't do anything until the morning, though."

"I've done what I could already. I haven't much to go on, but I've warned all the police-stations in the neighbourhood to keep an eye out for a car that might have an unwilling passenger on board. But, frankly, that hope is a slender one. You see, you can't very well give a recognisable description of a hypothetical motor car."

"You mean," she said with a touch of consternation in her voice, "that we haven't much hope of finding what has become of him?"

"Not immediately. It'll take time, no doubt, but if you're worrying over his possible fate, you can take comfort in the belief that he's probably a good deal safer now than he would be in his old haunts."

"You think that?"

"I'm pretty certain of it," Adderley told her. He had quite excellent reasons for his particular faith, but since they were not the sort that would add in the least to her peace of mind he judged it better to leave them unsaid. It was like him, too, that now he had actually acquired a right to help and protect the girl he should say even less about that particular phase of the situation than the little he had said so far.

Oddly enough the girl herself did not for a moment vision the thing that was disturbing him—the possibility that lover's inclinations and policeman's duty might yet run counter to each other.

At dinner that night he made the acquaintance of the two newcomers who had arrived by car. The young man, Standish by name, did something in the city, but the precise position he occupied in the world of commerce did not appear. For some reason not explained, he maintained a rather remarkable reticence as to his office-hour activities. He seemed on terms of intimate friendship with Claire and Helen, though whether he had any more serious intentions, and, if so, at which of the sisters they were aimed did not transpire. Adderley found him presentable enough and likeable in a mild fashion.

The girl was of a more exotic type, with a good deal more apparent driving force than her brother possessed. They were both dark, but the girl's carmined lips and the skilful touch of colour in her cheeks undoubtedly emphasised her attractions. At times there was a well-defined suggestion of Oriental languour and witchery about her. Everybody addressed her as 'Lil' and it was as such she was introduced to Adderley. It was more by a process of exhaustion than anything else that he satisfied himself that the superficial resem-

blance between man and girl was founded on actual relationship.

To both Adderley and Mary Cranford the advent of the Standishes came as a welcome distraction that helped to hide the fact of their own preoccupation. Despite Adderley's assurances and the altered relation in which they now stood to each other she felt decidedly worried over her brother's possible fate, and Adderley himself was not without secret misgivings. But he realised that the only thing to do was to await developments. If Butt had met with any success they might well be expected before daylight.

As soon as an opportunity presented itself Adderley slipped away and went in search of Butt. He found that the man had been in some time, but as he had nothing of any great moment to report, he had not troubled to disturb his master. A thorough search of the neighbourhood had failed to reveal any trace of the car in which young Cranford—to give him his real name—had been spirited away.

Butt seemingly had gone systematically over the ground, leaving nothing to chance. He had discovered some footmarks close to the copse where the motor-cycle had been hidden, but they were far too faint to be of any value. He had tried to trace them back to some definite point of origination, but the man had evidently moved with great caution and left as little trace of his presence as possible.

The ground roundabout the spot where the motor-cycle had been found crumpled up also bore some faint indications of footprints, but here again they were too indistinct to be of any use.

Butt had rounded off the evening by reporting the result of his investigations to Sergeant Aldin. He had learnt there two items of news that seemed to be of only minor importance. One was that Burrige

had definitely satisfied himself that the man found in Denning's house had died from some variety of curare poisoning, and the other concerned Denning himself. The man had telephoned Aldin from London that he would be home in the morning. News of the double tragedy had reached him in Paris, and thinking his presence might be required he had at once crossed to Croydon by air-liner.

"He needn't have cut his holiday short," Adderley said unthinkingly. "I don't see what help he can possibly be to us."

CHAPTER XV

NOTHING LEADING NOWHERE

LATER that night Lady Kettering drew Adderley to one side, and lowered her voice to a confidential whisper.

"I hope, Michael," she said, "that having the Standishes here won't interfere with anything you want to do. We would have put them off, but——" She ended with a gesture that would have been eloquent if one knew just what it was meant to express.

Adderley chuckled. He was more or less certain that it was not merely to talk about the newcomers that his aunt had cornered him.

"Why should I object?" he countered. "They've really nothing to do with me. If it comes to that they're just as much your guests as I am. And, of course, if I do find I can't conduct the case properly from here I can always find accommodation at the village inn."

"You know I didn't mean that, Michael," she said quickly. "I was thinking solely of your side of the affair. And, by the way, how is it going?"

"It's hardly had time to get going," he countered.

"No? I had a fancy there might have been some later development. It seemed curious that you and Mary and that man of yours should have been absent before dinner all about the one time. Then, too, I got an idea that you were putting Mary through some sort of inquisition in the library."

Adderley looked at Lady Kettering admiringly. "There isn't much you miss, aunt," he said. "But, as somebody or other said once upon a time two successive phenomena are not necessarily cause and effect."

Lady Kettering flashed one of her quick glances at him, a look that showed he had by no means underrated her grasp of possibilities.

"From that, Michael," she said provocatively, "I take it that something has happened, but that it isn't my business. Or if it is you've no intention of telling me. Am I right?"

"You're partly right and partly wrong."

Lady Kettering nodded gravely. She had wit enough not to pursue the subject further at that juncture. She executed a swift *volte-face*.

"What do you think of the Standishes?" That was her invariable formula with people who had but recently met for the first time. Quite probably within the next ten minutes she would put a somewhat similar question about somebody else to the Standishes themselves.

"He's rather on the reserved side, isn't he?" Adderley remarked. "And the girl—we-ell, she's picturesque."

"You don't mean picaresque by any chance?" said his aunt shrewdly. "What does she remind you of? Chorus girl?"

"God forbid," said Adderley piously. "I've known quite a few chorus girls—I fancy it's a family failing—or virtue—and off stage they've been a pretty jolly lot. Now if you'd said cabaret and hinted that it wasn't an English one, I might have felt inclined to agree with you."

"Oriental and seductive," said Lady Kettering, nodding. "Whenever I start picturing the Moslem

Paradise I imagine it as being peopled with ladies like Lil Standish. But she isn't."

"Isn't what?"

"What you've been thinking," said his aunt. "As a matter of fact she's an art student. That's how Claire came to meet her. They're much about the one age, though you mightn't think it. Lil looks as if she's lived life. She hasn't though—not in that sense—it's only the way she looks. Incurrible flirt, of course, with reason. Have you noticed that yet, Michael?"

"I noticed it, aunt. She's easy to look at, as they say across the Atlantic."

"Yet I didn't notice you looking at her—much. You were paying quite a good deal of attention to someone else. Were you afraid that if you took your eyes off Mary she would escape from—well, call it custody?"

"More or less. You've got the right idea, but I must say you've drawn the wrong conclusions—in part."

Lady Kettering's eyebrows lifted just a shade. Her very attitude was so patently a question that Adderley had not the heart to keep her curiosity any longer at bay.

"As a matter of fact," he said slowly and distinctly, "I have made a prisoner of her."

For the moment Lady Kettering looked startled, then her expression changed to one of incredulity.

"Michael," she gasped, "you don't really mean you have put her under arrest!"

"Not in the way you mean, aunt. You shouldn't be so quick at jumping to conclusions. It makes you put rather weird constructions on my utterances. But I can tell you something interesting, though you must understand that it isn't for publication, even

amongst the family. I don't want any complications creeping in just at present."

"Go on. For one of these strong, silent, simple, direct men you take a long time getting to the point."

"I've got there. Mary and I are engaged. That's the culmination of what you termed the inquisition in the library."

Lady Kettering sat down limply. "You haven't known her twenty-four hours," she declared. "This is the swiftest thing I've ever heard of. Well, you know, Michael, what they say about marrying in haste. . . ."

"Which I'm not proposing to do," Adderley pointed out. "Anyway the proverb says nothing at all about whirlwind courtships."

"No more it does. One usually follows from the other, though. However, Michael, I suppose I am to conclude from that that you're quite convinced of Mary's innocence. I was all along, though I'll admit that for the moment you shook my faith."

"I hadn't any to start with. I accumulated it as I went along. But I think you're right. If you're not, the facts of the matter must be that I'm developing a fondness for the criminal classes. By the way, I take it that all your servants are local people."

"All of them. But what's the idea now, Michael? Do you want to interview the female portion of the household?"

Adderley shook his head. "I don't. I'll delegate that part of it to Butt. I'm merely developing an antiquarian interest in the local legends."

"Folk-lore?"

"Ghosts and so forth."

"Is that a private hobby of yours? I've never heard of it before. Well, I think some of them should be able to satisfy your curiosity. There's bound

to be at least one haunted house in the neighbourhood."

"Clinton said there was a belief current here that Denning's place is haunted."

"The man's a fool then," said Lady Kettering with conviction. "That's about the one house in the neighbourhood that I'd say wasn't. And if anything's grown up round it over last night's work it's about the quickest thing of that nature I've ever heard of. Ghosts, like wine, have to mature before they're acceptable to the average palate."

"I agree with you there. But this ghost—if that's what it is—seems to be quite an institution. At any-rate, previous to Denning himself no one appears to have stopped very long at the place. At least that's Clinton's version."

"I can't tell you anything about Mr. Denning himself, Michael. I haven't met him yet, in fact I've met few people about here so far. Sir Richard Clinton is the only one with whom we're on anything like intimate terms. So you see, if you want to pump me for village gossip, you're likely to be foredoomed to failure. Now, Michael, since it seems I can't get anything more out of you you'd better return to the others. That little girl of yours has had rather a trying time, and no doubt she'd like a word of comfort from you before retiring for the night."

She shot a sidelong glance at him, but Adderley merely grinned cheerfully. He was not the type that holds its heart out for inspection. Probably for that reason he felt all the more deeply.

"She shall have it or its equivalent," he said easily.

Lady Kettering watched him until he joined Mary Cranford with a fixed smile on her face. Then she sighed and a look of pain came into her eyes, as her mind travelled back over what little Michael had told

her. It might have been interesting, probably helpful, certainly illuminating to Adderley had he been in a position to know just what was passing through her mind at the moment.

Just a little before midnight Sergeant Aldin rang up to say that there was still no news of the car in which young Cranford had been spirited away, and he was not at all hopeful that there would be any. To his mind there was no mystery at all about its disappearance. It had vanished into space simply because it had secured a good start. The chances even were that it had passed more than one police patrol without exciting attention, for as he said, "You don't suspect a car, Mr. Adderley, unless there's something suspicious about it. And when there isn't, and you haven't any description of it at all, you're worse than helpless. You see, it's rather a big job to go on holding up every car on the roads to-night, even if we were sure it hadn't already got past us on its way to London."

Adderley wondered if anything had occurred to the Sergeant to make him think that the car was bound to head Londonwards, but the point did not occur to him until after he had hung up. He decided that it was of minor importance, anyway, and could well wait until the morning, the more so as he himself held quite a different view.

His own feeling was that the car had vanished in the way an intelligent hunted animal will vanish, that it had merely gone to earth quite close to the scene of the trouble and allowed the pursuit to flow by. But towards which of the thirty-two points of the compass it had headed in the brief space of time necessary to reach its hiding-place he found it impossible to decide.

Though he was reluctant to admit it, even to him-

self, he felt that this was a problem that was not likely to be solved until young Cranford's body, dead or alive, cast up once more in the world of men. Oddly enough he felt—and feared—that it would be an exceedingly live young man with whom he would have to deal.

CHAPTER XVI

SIGNIFICANCE OF A WAX VESTA

ADDERLEY had not been over to Denning's place since the night of his first meeting with Mary Cranford and the subsequent discovery of the body. The imminent arrival of Denning himself offered both an excuse and an opportunity for a further examination of the premises. True, the local police had been in possession since the moment Adderley had called them in and they had searched the house from floor to ceiling. No new facts had been brought to light, but, Adderley reasoned, that was no reason why with the help of the present owner he should not uncover something that had hitherto proved elusive.

He waited at the police station until close on to eleven in the hope that Denning would turn up, but as the man did not put in an appearance he decided to go over to the house. On the way he picked up Sir Richard Clinton and took him along. The Chief Constable was interested enough in the case, though he was by no means averse from an opportunity of shifting the responsibility on to the broader shoulders of Scotland Yard.

He had seen Burrige in the interval and was convinced of the correctness of the doctor's diagnosis. Apparently over-night his feeling that the man was merely riding a hobby to death had vanished before the array of cold, hard facts Burrige had marshalled to support his contention. Adderley, who had kept an open mind regarding the matter all along, pointed out that Burrige's analysis had yet to be confirmed

by the Home Office expert, though he agreed that the incident of the steel dart which had so narrowly missed Mary the night before was practically proof positive of the correctness of Burridge's conclusion.

"I've been making additional enquiries about the place since I saw you," Sir Richard Clinton ran on. "My own feeling is that the seed of this affair was planted during some previous occupation, and I've directed my attention particularly to the man called Perrerr. Oddly enough no one seems to know very much about him. He held the house for only a few months; he had a limited staff of servants—how many no one seems to know for certain—all of whom he brought with him; and his wants were probably supplied from London. At anyrate none of the local tradesmen, with the exception of the milkman, seem to have come in contact with him or any of the staff. The milkman, who is by no means a reliable witness, says that the servants who were men 'were all sort of foreign-looking chaps.' That isn't very helpful; to the villager hereabouts a man from twenty miles away is a foreigner."

"How many servants did Perrerr have?" Adderley queried.

"The milkman thinks three, but he admits that he only saw one face to face with any regularity. We can't rely on that evidence to any great extent, you see."

"It looks to me," said Adderley, "as if the case narrows down to a number of queries the answers to which we have to find." He ticked them off on his fingers. "(1) Why were Mark Alsen and this unknown man murdered? (2) Who did it? (3) What was the interest of murderer and murdered in Denning's house; was their presence there fortuitous up to a point or was it all of a set purpose? (4) How does it

come about that young Cranford managed to get entangled? If you can answer those questions the puzzle is practically solved."

"I can't answer one of them, I can't even make a guess at an answer," Clinton confessed. Then, "I take it from what you said that you believe Cranford was an innocent party to anything that occurred."

Adderley nodded. "That's so," he agreed. "The man's whole behaviour, like that of his sister has been incredibly foolish, but that's the first of two things that would have convinced me that he knew nothing of the major aspects of this affair."

"And the other?"

"His abduction last night."

Clinton smiled. "Of course it could have been staged."

"It could have. There's one objection to that however. Whoever loosened the handle-bars of the motor-cycle took a great risk of killing the man first. Of course I'm open to conviction, and my deductions might be utterly wrong."

Clinton flung him a shrewd look. "Would you be altogether pleased if they were?" he asked.

Adderley faced him with a smile. "I wonder what you mean by that?" he said.

Clinton's face relaxed. "I had an idea from the way you were speaking—I may be wrong—that you had certain prejudices and were trying to make your hypothesis accord with them."

"That's an error that the best of us fall into occasionally," Adderley retorted, and left Clinton wondering to which particular error he was referring. The Chief Constable did not pursue the subject further however, much as he would have liked to. The car pulled up at that moment quite close to the house, and the two men got out.

Seen by daylight the place differed but little from other country houses of its type. It had been built for a family residence as was evident from its very compactness, and it was doubtful if it was more than fifty years old. Later Adderley was to learn, however, that it possessed one or two features that were not readily apparent.

The police guard had nothing to report. They had not been troubled by callers, other than an odd newspaper man down from London, and no suspicious characters had been seen in the neighbourhood. Indeed the road past the house had been practically deserted during the twenty-four hours or so that had elapsed. Since the disappearance of Cranford a sharp look-out had been kept on all motor-traffic, but none had passed either way during the night, and since daylight only a couple of provision vans and one contractor's lorry had gone by. One of the vans belonging to a London firm had broken down temporarily on the road with an overheated radiator. The driver, a Cockney by his speech, had come up to the house for a bucket of water. He had manifested surprise at the sight of the police, and had asked a few questions natural enough in the circumstances, but once they were answered, had shown little curiosity. He got his bucket of water, then drove off Londonwards. That was about an hour or so ago.

The incident was of interest only as throwing a sidelight on the painstaking, reportorial qualities of the local police.

The house consisted of half-a-dozen living rooms, the kitchen, pantry and such other adjuncts, all on the ground floor; the only other floor was made up of rooms that either were or could be readily converted into bedrooms. The one fact that appeared was that the room where the body had been found was the only

one that was entirely bare. There seemed no particular reason why it should have been left unfurnished, but as it did not appear to have any immediate bearing on the matter Adderley did not speculate about it. Denning would probably be able to give the real explanation of it when he arrived. His non-arrival, as a matter of fact, was beginning to make Adderley feel a trifle uneasy. He felt that where there was so much mystery and so little enlightenment there was just an odd possibility that Denning himself might have fallen a victim to the people who had made such free use of his house.

Clinton's interest centred more round the telephone and the room where it was than anything else. He had a mechanical turn of mind, and somehow the sight of the severed ends of the cord intrigued him. Adderley would have left this particular room until later, and he was on the point of telling the Chief Constable as politely as he could that he considered there were more important aspects of the case to be examined when the latter gave an exclamation.

He was standing with the severed pieces of the telephone cord in his hands, and to Adderley's way of thinking had been making some attempt to join them together. Not a very successful attempt, the detective imagined.

"Come here, Adderley," he said. "Did you notice this?"

Adderley had noticed nothing. The cord had been cut through by some sharp instrument, a keen bladed penknife, perhaps, but beyond that there was nothing to catch his eye.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Only this," said Clinton. "Whoever cut the cord didn't mean that he should be altogether cut off from telephonic communication if the need arose."

In a few words he indicated the signs that supported this belief. The cord had not simply been severed and left at that. The thick insulation had been peeled back so that a section of the wires was laid bare, and a nimble-fingered man with a knowledge of the workings of telephone wires could have twisted them together again in a minute or so. It would have given a passable connection, sufficient at anyrate for temporary needs.

Adderley whistled. It threw a new though not very penetrating light on that particular phase of the business. Whoever had cut the wires had visualised the possibility that he might want to telephone in a hurry. At the same time he had been sure, if one's reasoning was correct, that a certain other person, probably the dead man, would not find it possible to establish connection. Either then the latter lacked the necessary nimbleness of fingers, mechanical ability or whatever one cared to call it, or else the time factor entered into consideration. There was another aspect also that Adderley promptly proceeded to enlarge on.

"This gives us another slight indication as to the man we are looking for," he said. "According to Miss Cranford, he spoke in a hoarse, throaty voice, that she says she would recognise whenever she heard it again. She's hazy, of course, as to precisely what type of man he is, since he was down in the gloom of the hall and she could see only a shadowy figure. We know he has a macabre sense of humour, witness the burning of her car and the way in which he abandoned mine, and now we seem justified in adding to his other peculiarities that he has a working knowledge of the mechanics of a telephone."

"There's one other thing, too," said Clinton, looking up from the wires with a smile on his face.

"Between the time this line was cut and the time probably when you came to this room that night a call was sent out from here. I'm willing to swear that these wires have been twisted together and then straightened out again. If you look closely you can see a bit of a kink in each piece. Not much, it's true—most people would miss it—but enough to make me feel we're on the right track."

"Trimpton's not a big exchange," said Adderley, "so we should have no difficulty in tracing the call. I'd better get in touch with Sergeant Aldin as soon as I can."

"I don't think you need trouble," said Sir Richard Clinton dryly. "Aldin wasn't born yesterday. It's true he's pigheaded in some ways and he doesn't think of everything at once. Yesterday he suggested to me that there might be something in trying to trace the telephone calls to or from here, and at the moment I scouted the idea. I was thinking of the severed wires, you see, and I as much as told him that seeing the line had been cut he was wasting his time. He didn't agree with me, but he didn't argue."

"As I say he's pigheaded. I know I didn't convince him that he was wrong, so the chances are that he'll investigate off his own bat. If he strikes nothing he'll say nothing, but if there have been any calls put through during the vital hours he'll turn up chuckling and saying, 'I told you so.'"

"I, for one, won't feel any rancour over it if he does," Adderley remarked with one wary eye on his chief.

"Meaning that you think I might," said Sir Richard Clinton. "Well, I won't, so that's that. Police work after all is team work. It's the system and the co-ordination of reports from an amazing number of different sources that bring results, not the brilliant lone-handed work of some gifted individual. Even

Sherlock Holmes couldn't get on without the assistance of the every day police machinery. He needed that when it came to laying his man by the heels."

"Well, so far you and Sergeant Aldin have both scored heavily," Adderley admitted. "I'd suggest we move on a bit now and give me a chance to even up things."

Sir Richard Clinton chuckled. He did not think the house contained the possibilities of any discoveries more startling than the one he had made. He was wrong in this. The house and its surroundings had not had their possibilities altogether exhausted, and before the morning was over at least two other items of more or less potential importance were to emerge into the light of day.

It became evident as the thorough search went on that the other rooms had not been used during the owner's absence. If anything was needed to emphasise this, it was to be found in the dust that had gathered on the furniture.

So they came at last to the bare front room where the body of the man as yet unidentified had been found. Adderley and the police had gone over it thoroughly on the first occasion, and the detective was satisfied that nothing could possibly have escaped their eyes. Yet Clinton's suggestion in the study had shaken his self-confidence a little, and he paid more than ordinary attention to the interior of the room from the moment the two of them entered.

As has already been recorded the room was bare of all furniture. The walls were bare of pictures, though odd discoloured squares showed where once they had hung. The floor was of stained wood, a sea of polish surrounding a rather large island of carpet that occupied the centre of the room. Nothing to be seen there.

Stay, wasn't there?

Adderley darted forward. He had caught sight of something that he was certain had not been there on the occasion of his last visit. The remains of a wax vesta lay on the carpet. He bent down to pick it up and found that it had stuck. Also, it had been trodden flat. Apparently then it had been thrown down while still alight, a heavy foot had crushed out the flame, and the warm wax in hardening had adhered to the pile of the carpet.

"Someone has been smoking in here, I suppose," Clinton remarked as Adderley straightened up with the unburnt portion of the vesta in his hand.

The senior constable who had been left in charge of the guard on the building stepped forward.

"May I see it Mr. Adderley?" he asked.

The detective handed the vesta to him. He examined it carefully, though what he expected to learn from it was not obvious. At length:

"This room's been locked from the time Sergeant Aldin left here yesterday until you got the key from me just now, sir," he said. "In the interval the key hasn't left my possession. When I went off duty yesterday evening I took it with me. I suppose I should have left it with my relief, but I never thought of it. He remarked about it this morning and said that if he had wanted to get in he wouldn't have been able."

"Who was your relief?" Adderley asked.

The constable told him, leaving Adderley as wise as before. Clinton, however, knew the man and put in a word for him.

"He's a conscientious officer, Adderley," he said, "I know him and his family, and if you're thinking that he managed to get a duplicate key and get in here you may dismiss the idea altogether. Particularly

if he's stated emphatically that he couldn't get into the room."

He turned enquiringly to the constable. "Isn't that so?"

"Yes, Sir Richard," said the man. "As a matter of fact, I asked him point blank if he hadn't found some means of getting in, and he assured me he hadn't. Of course it's only his word, but the others corroborated it, so you can take it that it's the truth."

"Oh, well," said Clinton, with an air of dismissing the subject, "I don't suppose it's of much importance anyway."

Adderley did not answer him. Instead he turned to the constable.

"Can you be quite sure that this wasn't here last evening when you locked up after Sergeant Aldin?" he asked.

"Perfectly, sir," the other answered promptly. "I noticed it the moment you did, and I said to myself, 'That wasn't here last night. I wonder how it got there.'"

"Smoke?"

"Yes, sir. But I don't use wax vestas, only the safety matches. And of the two men with me one's a non-smoker and the other uses a petrol lighter. I remember twitting him about it."

"And the two men with your relief?"

"Curiously enough they're both non-smokers. My relief ran out of tobacco himself during the night—that was one of his complaints this morning—and, of course, couldn't borrow any. He said that he hoped he never had another job with non-smokers on watch with him."

"It seems pretty conclusive then," Adderley said thoughtfully, "that this vesta was dropped here some time during the night when the room was locked, and

that it wasn't dropped by any of the police on duty."

"But it couldn't have been," the constable protested. "I had the only key to the door."

"Somebody got in," Adderley persisted. "As he didn't enter through the door, I suspect a secret entrance. That carpet in a bare room looks suspicious. Help me roll it back, constable."

Between them they moved the carpet only to reveal an unbroken area of unstained board. There was not the slightest sign of any trapdoor there; only a person of vivid and possibly perverted imagination would have looked for one.

"And," said Adderley nonplussed, "there's not much likelihood of a secret entrance in the walls. None of them is thick enough for that. It was one of the first things I thought of looking for."

Nevertheless, since there was nothing like making absolutely certain the three men systematically tapped every inch of the walls. So painstaking were they that it took them the better part of an hour before they were satisfied.

"Nothing there," Clinton said at the end, and looked enquiringly at Adderley.

"Nothing there," Adderley agreed. "Yet this match is evidence that some one has been in here. There's no secret entrance that we can discover, and it seems certain that our visitor didn't come in through the door. Still, he must have come in some way."

"Well, you know," said the constable helpfully, "he couldn't have come in through the keyhole."

CHAPTER XVII

THE SUMMER-HOUSE

"I'm not so sure of that," said Adderley, and the constable stared at him.

Clinton, however, suspected the ellipsis, though it was a fraction of a second before the full implication of it dawned on him. "You mean," he said, "that he may have had a key and that he must have entered this room through the door, from the hall?"

Adderley nodded. "That seems to be the only alternative," he pointed out. "We can't find any secret entrance, so there remains the obvious entrance."

"But Mr. Adderley," the constable protested, he couldn't have done that without being seen. There was a guard at the front door and one at the other end of the passage near the stairs. He would have had to pass one or the other, and he would have been seen by both, not to mention the senior in charge."

"Exactly," said Adderley calmly. "I see your point."

Again the constable stared at him, this time as though he fancied the detective had taken leave of his senses, but whatever Adderley might have meant he had no intention of explaining then. Sir Richard Clinton, too, looked rather puzzled, though in a vague way he guessed at what Adderley was driving. But he was not sure, and it was the uncertainty that annoyed him.

"Well," said Adderley briskly, "there's nothing more to be gained by poking round here, not at present at anyrate. Constable, better keep this room locked and under observation. Here's the key. I may arrange later about sealing it. I'll talk the matter over with Sir Richard first."

He handed the constable the key and went out of the room. Clinton followed him into the hall.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked. He sensed something purposeful in Adderley's attitude. If he expected a startling or even interesting revelation, founded on something he had overlooked, he was doomed to disappointment.

"Nothing much," Adderley told him. "I think I'll have a look round the grounds, that's all. Care to come?"

Clinton's answer was to fall into step beside him. He did not speak again until they were out of the house, and away from the possibility of being overheard by the police. In the meantime he had been turning the situation over in his mind and had reached a very plausible solution.

"Look here, Adderley," he said, "I'm beginning to see in a vague way what you were driving at when you said you weren't so sure that the man mightn't have made his entrance through the keyhole after all.

Adderley smiled. "Yes?" he said encouragingly. "Go on. I'd like to hear your solution."

"It's quite a simple one," said Clinton with an air of pride in his work. "What the constable said is quite true. Nobody could have got in or out that door without being seen. He tells us in general terms that nobody did. Well, it seems to me that when you're in a situation like that, when something has happened and the evidence of witnesses is to the

effect that it could not possibly have happened, there's only one solution."

"Good. And what is it?"

"That somebody's lying."

"Better still. And who is lying in this case?"

Clinton looked thoughtful for a moment, then his face cleared.

"It's not the man we've just left," he said. "It would have been too great a risk. He'd know we had merely to ask the men on guard last night to find that out. Then he'd be a marked man. Alternative, last night's guard."

"I follow your reasoning. It's sound, up to a point. But there's one possibility you've overlooked."

"What's that? I'd like to hear it. Mind you, Adderley, I'm only advancing a theory. I'm not altogether wedded to it."

"Only this, Sir Richard. When three men set out to lie about a particular matter the possibilities of discovery are trebled. Either they stick to the same machine-made story, the three versions of which don't vary an iota, which in itself is suspicious. No two men see a thing in exactly the same way, and no two will report all the details alike. Or else, if they're artists and realise the fallibility of the human element, each will try to differ from the other in minor details. That's all right in real life, so to speak, but when you're dealing with manufactured incident, that's fatal. They're bound to differ too much. You see minor points, on which no one ever thought of comparing notes, have a habit, at one stage or other of the game, of assuming an importance no one would ever have suspected at the start. You can't prepare beforehand for every possible contingency! So whether they tell exactly the same story or try to give it local colour, if you can call it that, by differing

in supposedly inessential details we're bound to trip them up. But if it comes to that there are two other points you seem to have overlooked."

"I'm hanged if I know what they are," Clinton said with chagrin. "I thought my argument was fool-proof."

"No argument ever is. My first point, however, is that we haven't interviewed last night's guard yet, so we're not competent to pass an opinion on their veracity. You see, we're reasoning round something that hasn't happened yet as though it were an established fact."

Clinton nodded. It was quite clear now it was explained to him; in fact it gave added point to Adderley's argument that no matter how careful one is one can't prepare in advance for every possibility that might arise.

"What's your other point?" he asked. "Is it quite as big a knock-out as this?"

"Quite. We've overlooked our own fallibility. We haven't made any surprising discovery, but that doesn't say there isn't one to be made. It's odds on that we've overlooked something."

"According to your reasoning," said Clinton gloomily, "one can never be sure of anything."

"One can't," Adderley agreed. "In the absence of direct proof one can only lean to the view that is more strongly supported by circumstantial detail."

"And in this case," said Clinton shrewdly, "what is it?"

"The view most strongly supported by circumstantial detail?" Adderley said. "Well, I should think it is the one that we've made some trifling miscalculation with far-reaching consequences or else overlooked something right under our eyes."

While the men had been talking they had come

down through the trees to the right of the path. The area between the path and the drive beyond it had already been pretty thoroughly explored, probably because the traffic to and from the house went by one or other of the two routes. On the other hand the plantation of trees which stretched apparently unbroken from the right hand edge of the path to the extreme edge of Denning's demesne had that quality of virginity that appealed to the explorer in Adderley, and that at the same time reawakened in him a certain detective instinct that was not altogether concerned with the hunting of man.

At first glance it looked as though the trees interposed a fairly effectual barrier, probably due to the fact that they had been allowed to grow wild, and all sorts of unwelcome undergrowth filled in the spaces between the boles. But presently it became obvious that there was a faintly-marked, obviously little-used track through the miniature jungle. Whether it was a well-defined path that through the years had by a process of neglect become almost grown over, or a track that ran some distance through the trees merely to serve some casual purpose, was not apparent. The latter view seemed the more likely, and it was the one that Clinton took when a minute or so later they came to a barrier of bush that grew across the path like a fence.

"No use going further," he said, and stopped on the word.

Adderley stopped too, but it was plain he had no intention of turning back, at least not yet. The mere fact that there was something to hinder him was sufficient reason why he should press forward. The bush looked as impenetrable as a hedge, but it was not. With some little difficulty Adderley managed to make a gap, stepped through and invited Clinton to follow him.

Clinton, after a barely perceptible hesitation, accepted the invitation, then looked about him. There was considerably less light about here, but he could see without difficulty that the path began again some few yards ahead. The lure of it was too strong for even the sedentary, civilization-softened baronet to ignore.

Each man had his own expectation of what might lie at the further end, yet queerly neither had any inclination to put his ideas into words. Perhaps this was due almost entirely to the feeling that the reality was bound to be quite different from the anticipation.

The track twisted and turned on itself, and in that place of gloom was very hard to follow. More than once the two men strayed from it, but the light from Adderley's flash lamp brought them back on to it the next instant.

Then abruptly it came to an end. Before them they saw a low, squat, neglected-looking building whose precise function it was hard to define at a glance. It might have been a hut or a tool-shed or almost anything of an allied nature. Adderley declared that it was a summer-house.

"Well, the best way to settle that," said Clinton, "is for us to go and see. At anyrate, I don't mind wagering the present owner hasn't the faintest idea of its existence."

Adderley thought of the difficult track they had followed and the secluded position of the building, masked as it was on all sides by trees and bushes, and admitted to himself that Clinton was probably right.

The door of the erection stood ajar. Or more correctly it was jammed into a half-open position. This did not matter much, however, for the two men were able to enter without any difficulty, albeit they had to proceed in single file.

The interior of the summer-house smelt earthy and musty, and in the meagre light of the flash-lamp looked anything but inviting. Nevertheless it was not as empty as the sight of the exterior might have led one to believe. The floor was damp and earth-stained and rusty, and long-disused gardening tools were scattered about carelessly. A heap of wet and rotting bags, of the type wheat is sometimes stored in, stood in one corner. Some of the topmost bags had seemingly, by some freak of chance, slithered from the pile to the floor. Adderley glanced from them back to the stack, then kicked one. It moved soddenly along the floor, a few inches at the most.

"What have you found there?" Clinton asked interestedly.

Adderley laughed. "Old bags," he said. "They're not much use, I should imagine, seeing they've been left here to rot."

He directed the light of his flash-lamp round the floor, sweeping every nook and cranny with the beam. He gave an exclamation, and bent down.

"What have you got now?" Clinton asked as he straightened up.

The detective held out his hand. "Only another of those wax vestas," he said. "It's quite clean and white, which means that it hasn't been here long. Probably it was dropped some time last night, earlier or later than the one we found in the house."

"Um," said Sir Richard thoughtfully, but the full significance of the discovery did not immediately strike him. He would probably have made some comment, however, had not Adderley caught him by the arm.

"Smell tobacco?" said the detective in a half whisper. "There's someone smoking close handy."

Both men turned instinctively towards the door of the summer-house. At the same instant the meagre daylight was blocked almost entirely by the dark figure of a man. Behind him Adderley could just distinguish the vague silhouette of another man.

CHAPTER XVIII

DENNING

"MR. ADDERLEY here?" said the first of the newcomers, entering the summer-house. "My name's Denning. I'm sorry I'm late. They told me you waited for me some while at the police-station. I was delayed in town, however."

"Come in, Mr. Denning," Adderley said. He did not offer to shake hands. Clinton wondered why.

"You know our Chief Constable, don't you?" the detective ran on, but Denning shook his head.

"I haven't had the pleasure, professionally or otherwise," he returned, and in the light of the flash lamp his white teeth gleamed in a smile. "Indeed this is my first encounter with the police in any shape or form, if you except our friend, Sergeant Aldin here. We've been up at the house looking for you. They told us you'd gone down the grounds somewhere and by process of elimination we managed to find you here."

"Then you know of this place?" said Adderley quickly.

"Of course," Denning answered. "Why not?" He glanced round him with a slight expression of distaste. "Not that I use it," he remarked. "Not that I can even see a use to which it can be put. Actually I've left it much as my predecessor did. I've only been here once or twice. Probably you've already learnt something of the sort."

"I gathered from the look of things that the path

from here to the house hadn't been used much of late," Adderley admitted. "That seemed rather a good reason why I should make some investigations here."

"Have you found anything?" Denning asked with a mild suggestion of eagerness in his voice.

Adderley wondered if up at the house they had said anything about the one discovery he had made in the locked room. He decided that it was very unlikely that anything at all had been said. Probably then it would be just as well not to refer to the second vesta he was at that moment holding in his hand. His hesitation was only momentary, and he felt satisfied that it had passed unnoticed. Not that it would have mattered much if it had not.

"No," he said deliberately, "I can't say I have."

Denning looked disappointed. Possibly he had expected his intellectual palate to be pleasantly tickled by some new sensation; on the other hand he may merely have wanted to draw Adderley in the hope of getting some taste of his quality.

"Mr. Denning," Adderley went on, "before we leave here and go up to the house, where we can talk in comfort, I wonder if you can give me any idea of what this place was used for."

"I'm afraid I can't," Denning answered. "I thought I'd made that plain."

"As regards yourself, yes. But I'm thinking more of your immediate predecessor."

"I couldn't tell you anything about that. When I took over the place it was in the same state that it's in now, actually I haven't touched a thing."

"Then I am to take it that everything belongs to the former owner?"

Denning smiled. "Not now. It's all mine, you see. At least I should imagine so. I bought the place lock, stock and barrel. I presume this summer-house

and its contents were included. There was never any suggestion to the contrary. You seem rather interested in the place, Mr. Adderley. Is it of any importance, or has it any bearing on the case?"

"I don't know," the detective told. "I wish I did. The odd part of this case is that there are so many things in it that seem of real importance until one investigates them. Then they fade into insignificance. It's all rather discouraging."

"Well, you've only been on it a few days," Denning said consolingly. "Two nights ago it happened, didn't it?"

"One murder took place as near as we can determine about nine o'clock that evening," Adderley pointed out. "The other man was killed five or six hours before that. He was placed on one of those sacks"—he pointed to those on the floor—"and left here for perhaps five or six hours."

Clinton swung round on him at the words, started to say something, met Adderley's cold eye and decided not to take the risk. Sergeant Aldin moved up a little from the position he had been occupying in the background. The action suggested that he was afraid of being left out of any important development. Nevertheless he said nothing. It was not his place to speak or to volunteer a statement until he was spoken to. Denning gave a quick gasp, stared first at Adderley, then at the sacks on the floor as though he fancied that he might find in them tangible evidence of the statement Adderley had just made so casually.

"Surely you don't mean that?" he said in some surprise. "Are you certain that that's what happened?"

"No, I'm not," Adderley admitted, it seemed with some reluctance. "I'm guessing, that's about all you can call it. But somehow I've an idea my guess

is right. You see, I can't imagine any other place quite as handy where the dead man could have lain undisturbed for so long, or where he could have got so cold and his clothes so damp without the body having been in contact with the ground."

Denning gave a quick jerk of his head that was obviously a gesture of agreement. "It seems quite feasible," he remarked. "Indeed the more I think of it, the more I'm inclined to feel you're right. What do you think, Sir Richard?"

Clinton, who on his own statement had only a nodding acquaintance with the man, seemed rather surprised that his identity was known. He gave a slight start as though he had just come out of a reverie, and:

"Yes, I agree with you, Mr. Denning," he said. "It does seem a very feasible solution. Very obvious, in fact."

"So obvious," Denning chuckled, "that it occurred only to the trained observer. Well, I hope Mr. Adderley has a few more observations of a similar kind to make. The sooner the matter is over and done with the better I'll be pleased."

He turned to Adderley. "You made some suggestion a moment ago about going up to the house," he said. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to carry that out, if you've finished your work here."

"I haven't finished," Adderley told him, "but I can suspend operations for the time being. There's another matter of more immediate importance that I think I should deal with."

Denning glanced at him sharply, but Adderley's expression was not one that invited questions. Denning, with a mental comment on the reticence—unnecessary at that, no doubt—of the professional detective, decided not to ask any.

After a final glance round the summer-house he led the way out. The others followed him in single file, and it was not until they had passed the barrier of undergrowth that the party was able to walk abreast. Adderley proceeded leisurely to fill his pipe as they went along.

"It was good of you to come flying back from Paris post-haste," he remarked to Denning as they progressed. "I don't know that you can help us very much—I'm being frank, you see—all the same I may have to make free with your premises, and the fact that you're here to approve or disapprove takes the weight of responsibility from my shoulders."

"It's nice of you to put it that way," Denning said with a faintly ironical chuckle. "Is there anything I should know about the matter? I fancy Sergeant Aldin put me *'au fait'* with what has transpired, that is if he knows all that's been going on."

"You can depend that he does," Adderley answered, ramming the last of the tobacco into his pipe bowl. "No one could fairly accuse Aldin of having a C3 intelligence." He raised his voice. "Anyone got a match? I can't find my box."

Three boxes were proffered him almost simultaneously. Aldin and Denning offered him wooden boxes of safety matches; Clinton thrust towards him a small, silver box, the sort that is meant to be, but usually is not, attached to a watch-chain.

Adderley hesitated a split second, then his hand closed on Clinton's box.

"Thanks," he said, and pressed the spring. The lid flew back. He selected a vesta, struck it, lit his pipe, then blew out the flame carefully and stared at the white wax stick. The box he handed back to Clinton.

Clinton started, and stared at the vesta in Adderley's

hand. With an effort he wrenched his eyes away from it and met Adderley's glance. An odd smile, scarcely confident, hovered about his lips.

"Odd coincidence, isn't it?" Adderley remarked, letting the wax vesta drop to the ground.

"Not so odd," said Clinton. There was a note of suppressed excitement in his voice; it shook a trifle.

"What's that?" said Denning. He may have imagined the conversation was directed at him, or perhaps he was merely curious.

Adderley turned towards him. "We were talking about a particular coincidence," he said steadily. "I took Sir Richard's matches, wax vestas they were—you may have noticed—and the coincidence appears to have struck us almost together. You see, we found a wax vesta in the summer-house just now."

Clinton frowned to himself. He knew perfectly well that Adderley had intended to suppress, for the time being at anyrate, all mention of the two vestas, and he could not understand why he should have decided to dilate on the discovery of one while keeping the other, so to speak, still in the dark. It was not the sort of thing he would have done himself. Then the thought came to him with a curious quiet persistence that Adderley's original remark about coincidences was not altogether without significance. In fact he could read either a hint or a threat into it. The thought had a disturbing quality that kept him out of the conversation for some time to come.

Sergeant Aldin, too, was troubled, though for an entirely different reason. Mention of the second dead man had brought something into the forefront of his mind. He was too well-disciplined, however, to break into the conversation uninvited, though he cleared his throat and endeavoured to catch Adderley's

eye. Adderley recognised his efforts, but instead of giving him encouragement, deliberately winked. The eyelid that flickered was visible only to the Sergeant, and the latter, though puzzled, read into it an intimation to let things take their own course.

"I see," said Denning. "You're taking it for granted, of course, that the murderer dropped the vesta." He stopped and looked across at Clinton before he went on. "Is the onus on Sir Richard to prove that he isn't the guilty party?" he asked.

"It shouldn't be at all difficult, if it comes to that," said Clinton lightly.

"I hope for your sake it isn't," Adderley said. He did not look at Clinton as he spoke. He was staring ahead of him towards the front of the house. A car had just pulled up, and a man and a woman were descending.

"Visitors," he said in an annoyed tone. "Sight-seers, morbidly inclined. I wonder who they are."

Even as he spoke he fancied there was something familiar about the pair, and the next moment when the woman turned, he knew certainty. It was the Standishes, brother and sister.

The woman stood staring at them a second or so, then she came down the steps towards them. Adderley had a queer feeling that she was going to presume on a few hours acquaintance with him to be allowed to see over the house, and the possibility rankled. True, she was a guest of his aunt, but guest or no guest she should know better than that. She probably was of the type that did not.

But it was not on him she seized, much to his surprise. She gave him a nod of greeting and her carmined lips parted in a smile, but it was on Denning that she turned the full battery of her charms.

Under his breath Denning said, "Damn." He

said it just loud enough for Adderley to hear, note and marvel. The woman could not have heard it, that was certain.

She thrust out her hand. "I suppose you didn't expect to see me here," she said. "But I simply had to come. It's perfectly thrilling to think you've had a murder all to yourself."

"Two, Lil," said Denning gravely, but there was an odd sparkle in his eyes, as though the girl's witchery had already got to work on him. "Don't forget it was two."

"Two? So it was. I heard that last evening. It's doubly thrilling then."

She seemed to become aware that there were others present besides Adderley and the man to whom she was speaking. Her glance swept the uniformed Sergeant Aldin and dismissed him as of no consequence; Clinton on the other hand was plainly somebody of moment. Her expression asked for an introduction.

Denning gave it to her. He was on the point of directing her attention to Adderley when she anticipated him.

"I know Mr. Adderley," she smiled. "I met him last night. We're at the same place, Lady Kettering's."

"Lady Kettering's?" Denning repeated. Adderley had an old feeling that the man had given a mental whistle, if one could call it that, of surprise.

"My aunt," said Adderley. "I'm the black sheep of the family, if you can call being a detective being a black sheep."

Denning looked at him with a new respect in his eyes. Adderley interpreted it aright. It was not due to social position of his relatives; it was due more to his own ability to keep influence and merit in two separate water-tight compartments, and make

headway against the protests and resistance of his family.

"What brought you here?" Denning had turned back to the girl, and there was a note of urgency, no less than condemnation, in his tone.

The girl resisted making the obvious answer, though she did fling a glance at the car in which they had come.

"Curiosity," she said. "Just morbid curiosity. Also the knowledge that you were home."

Denning slipped his arm through hers with a curiously proprietorial air, and piloted her away out of earshot. If he made any comment on her answer it was not until they had passed beyond earshot.

"We'd better get along to the house," Adderley suggested to the others. "Denning seems to be engaged for the moment."

"Mr. Adderley, before we go any further"—it was Sergeant Aldin speaking—"there's something I want to tell you and Sir Richard. I've been checking over telephone calls, and I've found. . . ." He stopped to turn over the leaves of the notebook he had drawn from his pocket.

Over his bowed head Adderley and Clinton exchanged glances. Clinton's expression said as plainly as print, "I told you so."

Sergeant Aldin found his place. "Between eight and ten o'clock on the night of the murder," he began, "there was only one telephone call sent out from here. I've got the number, but it will be better, I think, if I tell you who it was to. It was made just about nine-twenty, and it was put through to a house in Holland Park."

He stopped and looked at Adderley as if doubtful how he should proceed.

"Go on," said Adderley huskily. He guessed what was coming.

"It was a personal call," said Sergeant Aldin uneasily, "and it was put through to Miss Cranford."

"That's all right then," Adderley said with a breath of relief. "Miss Cranford was here with me just about that time."

"I know," said Sergeant Aldin thoughtfully. "That's just what makes it seem so queer. You see, Mr. Adderley, that call went through all right. It was answered, and it was a woman who spoke from Miss Cranford's flat to here."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SECOND DEAD MAN

"THAT'S absurd, of course," Clinton broke in. "If Miss Cranford was here with you, Adderley, she couldn't possibly have been speaking from her flat in town."

"Perhaps it isn't quite as absurd as it sounds," Adderley returned. "However, that's a point we can come back to later. Anything more, Sergeant?"

Aldin shook his head. "Nothing of any moment, Mr. Adderley. I felt it would go a long way if I could get a record of the conversation, but I couldn't. The operator here's the conscientious sort." His smile implied that it was rare to find one, particularly in a village of the size of Trimpton, who didn't listen in. "All I could learn was that it was a man who spoke at this end."

"I don't know that that helps us forward much or simplifies things in any-way. That all, then, Sergeant? Good. Don't go away. I'll want you again in a few minutes."

He turned to Clinton. "You've raised a question, or rather two, in my mind," he said. "It seems to me that as far as that call to Holland Park is concerned, one of two things could have happened. Either the answer to that call was accidental or it wasn't. Just a moment now and I'll try to make myself clear.

"The first thing to get fixed in our minds is that we're dealing with someone who was masquerading as Miss Cranford. That's quite clear. It couldn't

have been Miss Cranford herself, as you've already pointed out. She was here with me, so the argument against her being in two places at once is consequently overwhelming. Now, who was that person in the flat? We're safe in assuming that it was a woman, I think. But was she there with Miss Cranford's permission or did she break in?"

"I'd be inclined to assume that she broke in," said Clinton.

"Why? I'd like to hear your reasons. I don't say that you're right or that you're wrong. But I want your viewpoint."

"I don't know that I have any very valid reasons," Clinton said, a trifle hesitantly. "It's more a general feeling than anything else. If she was there with Miss Cranford's permission, there'd be a suspicion that she—Miss Cranford, I mean—had an inkling of what was going on here. But we've already satisfied ourselves that she blundered on the murder."

"I agree with you there," Adderley said, nodding. "Then there remains the alternative, that the woman made an entry to Miss Cranford's flat, burglariously, if you like. Which brings us face to face with two more alternatives. Suppose, for argument's sake, that while she was in the flat the telephone bell rang and she answered, perhaps because she feared that if it was allowed to go on ringing someone else might hear it, and come to answer it, in which case she would be discovered. What's your argument for or against that?"

"I've one against it," Clinton announced. "I think it's a pretty solid one. The man at this end would have known he was talking to a stranger, and would have cut the conversation short."

"And Aldin has told us that the conversation took up practically the allotted time. That disposes of

that contention then. The remaining one is that the woman wasn't a stranger to the man here, that the call was pre-arranged and that for perhaps several reasons Miss Cranford's place was selected. The chances are that she knew Miss Cranford would be out of the way for the night, and that she could enter the flat without any trouble."

"How would she know?" Clinton objected.

"In anyone of a dozen ways. She may have been a friend of Miss Cranford's, the chances are that she was. For my part though, I'm inclined to suspect that elusive brother. He has an alibi as far as this end of that night's work was concerned; it's certain, I gather, that that alibi involves a lady, and the suggestion is that it's this lady about whom we're theorising now. Take it all a step further and ask yourself why the boy was abducted."

"Probably because he knew something he shouldn't have known," Clinton hazarded.

"You've shot tolerably close to possibilities. My reading of it though is because they—whoever they are—fancied he would tell the police what he knew if sufficient pressure was applied. The case is narrowing in a way. Once we find the boy and find the lady, we'll have the bulk of the threads in our hands."

"There's something else you're forgetting," said Clinton. "You haven't mentioned it before, so I'm taking it for granted that you've overlooked it."

"If you mean the fact that the dead man we got from here hasn't been identified yet, you're wrong. I've got that tucked away in the back of my mind, and when we leave here we'll deal with that. Here's Denning coming this way, so we'll try our luck."

The man himself came sauntering back at that moment with the girl by his side. Whatever the

subject of their conversation had been it seemed satisfactory, judging by their faces.

"Mr. Denning tells me we can't look through the house," the girl said to Adderley. "He says you police are in possession and that he's no longer master in his own house. Is that true?"

Adderley chuckled. "It's not strictly true," he said, watching her face. "There are only two rooms sightseers aren't allowed in. There isn't any objection to your going into any of the others. Your brother has probably found that out already." He pointed to the door through which young Standish had disappeared some minutes previously.

The girl's face fell. "And those are the only two rooms I want to see," she said with chagrin. She looked up pleadingly at Adderley. "Couldn't you make an exception for me?" she begged.

"I couldn't, not even for Mr. Denning," Adderley retorted. It was not strictly true, but Adderley had a feeling that the man would back him up. He did.

"Mr. Adderley's quite right," said Denning. "You're getting too morbid, Lil. And if that's what your young brother is after he'll find the police won't let him in."

The girl shrugged. "You can call me morbid, if you like," she said, "or just simply curious. It's all one to me." She looked across defiantly at Adderley. "I suppose you're thinking the worst of me too?" she said.

"I don't think I was," Adderley said steadily. "As a matter of fact I can quite understand your desire to see all that there is to be seen. Indeed, if you feel that way, I don't see why I shouldn't gratify your wishes."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, looking at him intently.

"Well, there's one interesting piece of business Sir Richard Clinton and I have yet to transact this afternoon, and if you and Mr. Denning would like to come along with us. . . ." He left the sentence unfinished as he saw the girl's face light up.

"Of course I would," she said with enthusiasm, and Adderley breathed freely again. One difficult fence had been surmounted.

Denning flashed him an amused glance. "Is that an invitation or an order?" he asked. "I know you police, you see."

"An invitation," Adderley informed him. "I said I thought you could help us and I'm putting it up to you now. And if you don't mind, just for the sake of piquing Miss Standish's curiosity"—he winked blatantly at Denning—"I'd rather keep our destination and its object a secret for the moment."

Denning laughed softly. "Go ahead," he said agreeably. "I'm willing."

Miss Standish shuddered deliciously. "It sounds Grand Guignolish," she said. "I'm getting goose-flesh already. I wonder where Reg is. We could be getting along if he was here."

"I fancy that's him coming out now," Adderley said, with an inclination of his head towards the hall door. "Who's that with him, though?"

"My man Marlin," Denning said promptly. "He's my one permanent servant. The others I recruit locally."

"Come here, Reg," the girl called. "We're in a hurry." She beckoned her brother. He approached them, followed at a respectful distance by Marlin. Since the latter was the newest arrival, Adderley gave him a close scrutiny.

He was not the type one usually pictures for such a position. He was a little under average height,

tubbily built almost, with round, chubby features and small bright eyes. A face that radiated joviality, a face that you would imagine would compose itself to respectful inferiority with the utmost difficulty. Somehow the very sight of the little man made Adderley want to smile himself.

Denning caught his eye and laughed. "Queer-looking customer, isn't he?" he said in a low voice. "He's not only a good servant, he's a tonic as well."

"He flew back with you from Paris, didn't he?" Adderley remarked, apropos of nothing in particular.

"Oh, yes. Why, Mr. Adderley?"

"Association of ideas, I suppose," Adderley told him. "I was wondering if such a look would survive a Channel crossing, or air-sickness, if it came to that."

"I've never seen him affected by either air or sea-sickness," Denning returned. "I'm afraid I couldn't imagine the result of any such calamity."

He did not pursue the matter further, and Adderley seemed willing to let it drop, yet oddly enough each had the idea that the last word had not been said on the subject.

Denning was on the point of climbing into the Standish car when Adderley spoke to him.

"I wonder if you'd mind coming with me in the car that brought us," he said. "I'd like the chance of a talk with you on the way."

Denning hesitated. "All right," he said.

"Thanks," Adderley said. "If you don't mind I'll pack Sir Richard in with Miss Standish and her brother. He can show them the way."

He turned to Clinton and spoke a whispered sentence that Denning did not catch. The latter, however, saw Clinton's eyebrows lift in momentary surprise, then his eyes sparkled.

"I don't know whether you know exactly what

happened here the other night," Adderley began as the car started off. "I fancy Sergeant Aldin has told you a good deal, but not all."

Denning stared at the broad back of the Sergeant who was riding in front beside the driver.

"I don't suppose he did tell me all," he said. "He's a discreet man you know. What is it I haven't heard?"

"If I start at the beginning and tell you all that happened you'll learn sooner than any other way," said Adderley, and with that preliminary he began the history. He suppressed nothing save the fact of his own relations with Mary Cranford. It was only when he came to the events of that day that he started to select. Even then it was hard to see why he discriminated as he did. For instance, though he again mentioned the discovery of the vesta in the summer-house as an indication that someone had been there within the past twenty-four hours, he said nothing about the precisely similar discovery he had made in the locked room. There may have been method in this, however, for he could not be altogether sure that Denning had not become aware of the discovery at the moment of his arrival.

Denning listened in patience until the end. "The girl seems to have been unlucky," he remarked, "but I wouldn't be so sure about the boy's innocence, though what you've told me about the possibility of his being abducted seems to tell in his favour. The vesta you found in the summer-house too appears to have a certain significance, though I can't quite see how you are going to link it up with what's gone before."

"I don't see for the moment either," Adderley confessed. "But what I'd like to ask you, Mr. Denning, now you're here is, have you any idea why this sort of

thing should have been staged in your house in your absence ? ”

Denning pondered that as though it were a question he did not care to answer without due consideration. At length :

“Not as far as my own knowledge goes,” he answered. “On the other hand, I can offer you a suggestion. The previous occupants may have left some legacy of which I’m ignorant.”

“You can’t suggest its nature ? ”

Denning shook his head. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “Can you ? ”

Adderley smiled. “I have a number of theories,” he said, “but as I haven’t enough evidence one way or another I’d rather not tell you yet. You might not think it to look at me, and you probably wouldn’t believe it of any Yard man, but the fact is I’m sensitive. I never like to drift into a position where someone can come to me afterwards and say, ‘Well, you see you were wrong after all.’ ”

Denning nodded. “We all have our little vanities,” he said, “and I can quite sympathise with yours.”

“Talking about being sensitive,” Adderley ran on. “You seem to be taking this unjustifiable invasion of your house rather calmly. If I was in your shoes I’d at least be indignant with anyone who’d staged a murder on my premises.”

The other laughed softly. “Would you ? ” he chuckled. “Well, you’d be right. I was . . . highly indignant. But then I’ve had a day or so to get over the worst, and I’m trying to be philosophical now in the face of affliction. Which reminds me, just how much longer am I likely to have the police on my premises ? ”

“I think I can promise you that they will be withdrawn to-night,” Adderley told him. “If things turn

out as I hope there will be no further need for their presence."

The car slowed down, and presently drew up. The Standish car slid to a standstill behind them.

"We're here," Adderley said.

Denning stared about him. "Just where precisely are we?" he asked. "I'm afraid I don't know the building."

"It's the thrill I promised Miss Standish," Adderley replied. "This is the best imitation of a mortuary Trimpton boasts. But you need say nothing to the lady."

Denning glanced at him sideways from under narrowed eyelids. "You seem to have a pretty taste in the macabre, Mr. Adderley," he remarked. "Or is it only a sense of the dramatic? Whichever it is, I'm beginning to understand now what you're driving at."

"Well, don't spoil Miss Standish's innocent pleasure by telling her beforehand," Adderley begged him. "Here she is now, coming this way with her brother and Clinton."

The girl caught Adderley by the arm, an intimate gesture that brought a smile to his lips.

"Mr. Adderley," she said, "what is this surprise you have in store for us? I'm sure Sir Richard knows, but he wouldn't tell me, though I tried hard to persuade him."

"Good man," said Adderley, avoiding a direct answer. "I hoped he wouldn't succumb to your blandishments. Sergeant, have you the keys there?"

Aldin's reply was to open the door. The building, which had been transformed into a temporary mortuary, was in reality an old and at present unused storehouse at the rear of the police-station. Its very bleakness and air of general abandonment seemed aptly to fit it for its present purpose.

There was something on a trestle table in one corner of the room the very sight of which made Miss Standish halt abruptly and clutch at Adderley's arm again. But this time it was something more than an empty gesture. The sight of that sheet-covered thing had shaken her and made her feel a very definite need for masculine support. She instinctively turned to the one man of the party whom she felt was likely to meet her on common ground.

The movement did not pass unnoticed. Her taciturn brother saw the action, saw her go white and evidently guessed the reason.

"Don't be a fool, Lil," he growled in her ear, yet loud enough for Adderley to hear. "You would have it, and now you'll have to see it through."

She turned on him hotly and for one frantic instant it seemed as though she were going to lash him with her tongue. Then her eyes met his. The fire died out of her eyes and her lips quivered. It looked as though she had seen something she feared more than the motionless figure under the white sheet.

She moved a little away from Adderley and her brother caught her arm. Denning flung them a curious glance, but said nothing. Without hesitation he walked over with Aldin to the table, and at a sign from Adderley the sergeant pulled back the sheet.

Adderley, trying hard to keep his eyes on several people all at the same time, was interested intensely by their various reactions. Young Standish faced the sight stolidly, the only sign of its effect on him being that almost invisible quiver of the muscles back of the neck that speak of nerves being held in restraint. The girl went, if anything, whiter than she was already, and her eyes dilated. Horror in the abstract might intrigue her, but the moment she met it face to face

in the flesh came the inevitable physical reaction. There are many people so constituted.

Denning stood there for the space of a heart-beat without sound or movement, his eyes searching the wax-like face of the dead man. At last he turned to Adderley and said in ordinary conversational tones, "This, I presume, is your second dead man."

"The one who was found dead in your house," Adderley said, and looked a question.

"I know him," Denning declared. "He is the man from whom I bought the house."

"Perrer?" said Adderley and Clinton together.

"That's what they called him here," said Denning, "possibly because the villagers couldn't get their tongues round his real name. Actually he was not Perrer, but Pereira. I bought the house from him, I paid him, and he went. And there, I'm afraid, my knowledge of him begins and ends."

CHAPTER XX

INFORMATION DESIRED

"PEREIRA," Adderley repeated thoughtfully. "So that was his name then. I was thinking he might have been French. Perron has a Gallic sound somehow. But now we know his real name, the chances are that he was either Spanish or Portuguese, probably the latter."

Denning smilingly shook his head. "His ancestors might have been," he said, "but the man himself was Brazilian. I know that much," he added quickly, "for on the one occasion when I had anything approaching a conversation with him he mentioned, quite casually, the possibility that he might be returning to Minas Geraes. That, I understand, is a town or a district somewhere in Brazil."

"A district, I believe," Adderley said. "I know it's in Brazil, anyway." He pulled up quickly, for in a flash an idea had come to him that looked as though it might have an important bearing on the double crime. Of course the chances were quite as great that there might be nothing in it, that on examination it might prove to be worthless, but there seemed to be enough of probability in it to make him wish to keep it to himself until he was able definitely to decide one way or the other.

"Then that explains it," said Sir Richard Clinton's quiet voice, breaking in on his thoughts.

Adderley started. "Explains what?" he asked, unpleasantly aware that Clinton might be about to drop a bomb.

"The curare," said Clinton, and Adderley breathed a sigh of relief. "Curare and Brazil are almost inevitably associated, you see."

Out of the corner of his eye Adderley saw the girl start at the mention of the word 'curare,' and shoot a glance at her brother. He met her gaze with a flash of annoyance, and an almost imperceptible shake of the head.

"Now, what the devil does that mean?" Adderley asked himself. All along he had felt a vague distrust of the girl and a vague dislike for her brother. At the time he told himself that this was probably based on an instinct, which might or might not be at fault. In the girl's case it was no doubt due to the fact that she was only too well aware of the nature of her charms and too willing to try their effect—purely experimentally—on every strange male with whom she came in contact. But so far as her brother was concerned, there had up till now been no concrete reason.

But now, for the first time since he had met them, Adderley found himself speculating whether by any stretch of chance the pair held one of the threads of the puzzle in their hands. It was not altogether impossible, all one could say was that the probabilities were against it. Still, that start of the girl's, the question she had asked with her eyes, and her brother's prompt negative shake of the head, all seemed to point in one direction. For the moment Adderley felt the complacent theory he had built up beginning to tremble in its foundations. For relief he turned to Clinton.

"I see your point about the curare," he said quietly, "but I don't agree with it altogether, that is, unless the murderer was also a Brazilian or a man who had lived some considerable time in that country."

"There is, so to speak, a third alternative," Clinton returned. "The murderer, quite probably, is neither a Brazilian nor a man who has lived there. Has it ever struck you that a toxicologist could have a decent knowledge of curare and its derivatives without having ever been near Brazil?"

Adderley whistled under his breath. The point was a good one. A toxicologist would fill the bill in every but the one particular. Even that objection might yet vanish under scrutiny.

"Well, we won't do any good by speculating," he said. "Not here, at anyrate. We've seen all we can, so I think we'd better go."

He had an idea that the unofficial members of the party were feeling restive now that their morbid curiosity had been satisfied. As far as he was concerned the object of his visit had been accomplished. He had nothing much to show for his work beyond the identification of the dead man, though two separate trains of thought had been set in motion that seemed likely to lead to something pretty definite, if all went well.

Outside the building the party showed signs of breaking up. Denning said something about wanting to get back and set his house in order, that Adderley interpreted as a hint that he would be glad to be relieved of the presence of the police as soon as possible.

"You won't be troubled after to-night," the detective said. "Sergeant Aldin will get his men away as soon as he can send word to them."

Denning stared at him with the trace of a smile flickering about his lips.

"Then," he said deliberately, "the thing you have been counting on has happened?"

Adderley nodded. "That's about the size of it," he agreed.

Denning hesitated a moment. "May I ask," he said, "what that something is?"

Adderley met his eyes frankly. "If I'd cared to be impolite, Mr. Denning," he said with a smile, "I would answer that you might."

The big man chuckled. "That means, of course," he said, "that you haven't the slightest intention of telling me. Well, I can't blame you. Premature disclosures in your line can do quite a lot of harm, I know. I'll simply have to possess my soul in patience. No, you mustn't trouble to drive me back. Mr. Standish will do that."

"I'll drive you back," said young Standish with no good grace, "but I can't promise to stop. Lil and I have another matter we're anxious to attend to as soon as we can. Come on now, and let us get away."

Denning held out his hand to Adderley. "I must be going now," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "But I hope to see you again soon." It looked as though he would have said more, but at that moment young Standish sounded his horn impatiently, and with a meaning shrug of his shoulders he turned away.

The girl leaned from the car towards Adderley. "I'll see you to-night," she said in a quick whisper. The next instant the car slid away, leaving Adderley to wonder if after all her choice of the singular pronoun and the slight stress she had put on it had been due merely to chance. Somehow he did not think so.

He signed to Clinton and the two of them got into the other car together.

"I can drop you on my way," Adderley said. "I'm going straight back to my aunt's after that. No more sleuthing for me to-day."

Clinton eyed him curiously. "Has it been a successful day?" he said bluntly, and Adderley nodded.

"Very successful," he returned. "More so than I hoped at the beginning. It's queer how a chance word, or a phrase, or an odd expression gives one a new angle on things. By the way," he went off at a tangent, "What do you think of that girl and her brother?"

"The Standishes? I can't say I've thought much of them. The young fellow seems to keep as much in the background as the girl thrusts herself forward. She's the type, I'd think, who wouldn't be in the least interested in another woman as long as there was a man present."

Adderley chuckled. "You're rather hard on the lady," he said, "but at the risk of making an ungallant pair I'd feel like agreeing with you."

"What surprises me most," Clinton ran on, "is that your cousins should have taken up with her. She's not their class."

"It was Claire's doing," Adderley informed him. "Miss Standish is arty, and Claire's arty, young and foolish."

"Arty?" said Clinton abruptly. "You're sure of that? You are. The reason I asked is that art-loving folk seem to play a big part in this case. Miss Standish, your cousin Claire, and lastly Miss Cranford."

Adderley considered that a moment before he commented on it. By then he had his answer ready, not quite such a good one as it might have been, though to his way of thinking it adequately set out the salient features of the difference between the three girls.

"In a sense you're right," he said, "and again you're not. Claire's arty and artless, so to speak; Miss Standish's art, one feels, would smack more of *Giaconda*, while Miss Cranford merely paints."

"In a word, the middle, the high-brow, and the

commercial artist," Clinton commented. "Yes, I grant, you there's a world of difference between the three. And it's the sort of difference that might explain quite a lot we've been fogging over. Why, by the way, before I forget to ask you, did you try to fasten on to me responsibility for that wax vesta?"

Adderley looked at him innocently. "I didn't," he said. "But you were the only man of us all who had them. The coincidence was too marked to be dismissed lightly."

"I can understand you talking round the matter, but what I can't understand is your attaching great significance to the vesta we found in the summer-house, while suppressing the discovery of the other one altogether."

"No? There's such a thing as coppering the other person's ace when he—or she—feels absolutely sure of holding the winning cards. If you chew over that you may see light."

Sir Richard Clinton whistled softly. "I see a gleam," he admitted. "He or she? You did say she? That suggests that you're uncertain of the criminal's sex."

"How do you know that there isn't more than one criminal and that the sexes aren't pretty equally represented?" Adderley said provokingly. "For example, who was the woman who answered the telephone in Miss Cranford's flat?"

"Why should it not have been Miss Cranford?" said Clinton devastatingly.

"She could not have been in two places at once," Adderley declared. He wondered if Clinton were going quite off the rails; at the same time he could not altogether shelve the possibility that by the exercise of pure logic the Chief Constable had hit on another possible solution.

"Quite so," Clinton went on with a flicker of amusement in his eyes. "She certainly could not have been in two places at once, but Adderley, ask yourself this: *Which of the two places was she actually in at the crucial moments?*"

"She was with me, of course."

"Why, of course?"

"Because of the evidence of my eyes and ears."

Clinton flashed a glance at him out of the corner of his eye. "Let me make it clear," he said. "What is the evidence of your eyes and ears worth? You meet Miss Cranford in the dark; you don't get a proper view of her; she is obviously distraught, not her actual self in a good many ways, I mean; she probably talks in a strained and agitated voice. Then you meet her again in the broad daylight next day, and you recognise or think you recognise her? On what do you base your recognition? Resemblance of voice, features and figure? The very word resemblance itself underlines and emphasises the possibility of mistake."

"There's her own admission, her acceptance of my recognition of the resemblance," Adderley countered, though oddly enough a strange doubt had sprung up in his mind. Clinton, he knew, could not possibly be right, yet the man's suggestion had shaken his faith. He was not quite so certain as he had been. "How do you get over that?" he added.

"Easily enough," Clinton went on. "Her own explanation of everything she is supposed to have said or done, that she was shielding someone else. Suppose that in addition to shielding her brother, she is shielding someone who the previous evening you took to be the lady herself. I'm advancing that as an argument, not as a statement of fact."

"I'm afraid it won't wash. For one thing the

resemblance would have to be perfect, and for another, there's just two little points you've overlooked. I saw the lady that night in the next best thing to broad daylight, electric light."

"I didn't know that. That looks like shattering my theory. But what's the second of the two little points? So far you've only enumerated one. The second may be even more devastating."

"It's a point that isn't susceptible of proof in a court of law," Adderley told him. "It turns on a purely personal view of the matter, and for that reason I'd like to keep it to myself, for the present at least."

Sir Richard Clinton nodded sagely. "I'm sorry," he said contritely, "if I've unearthed a mare's nest. I'm afraid I've sown the seeds of doubt in your mind, however."

"Not exactly," Adderley told him. "You've set me thinking, and incidentally given me a new idea. That hint of yours as to the worthlessness of relying on the evidence of one's eyes and ears might prove pretty helpful yet."

Clinton looked at him oddly. "I hope so," he said. "I won't press you to tell me how, curious as I am. I presume you want time to let the idea develop. Well, here's where I get out. I'll see you soon again. Is there anything I can do for you in the meantime?"

"I don't think so," Adderley said thoughtfully. That telephone call he intended putting through to Croydon air-port could be handled quite adequately by Scotland Yard.

"Yes, there is," he said abruptly the next instant. "You're fairly friendly with Burrige, aren't you?"

"Our doctor friend? Yes, why?"

"Only that I'd like you to ask him a question. I can't ask him myself, not without setting him think-

ing, which I don't want to do at this juncture. He was in Brazil for some years, wasn't he?"

"Of course. Don't you remember I told you that's where he got his knowledge of curare from?" said Sir Richard. He looked at Adderley as if he were not quite sure what had come over the man.

"I remember that well enough. But this hasn't anything to do with curare. You might ask him, if you can lead the conversation round to it casually, if he's ever heard of a place in Brazil called Diamantina. You may even find that he's been there. If he hasn't it doesn't matter much as long as he knows something about it. He's bound to, he couldn't have been long in the country without. He may even be able to tell you if Brazil has its counterpart of the South African I.D.B."

"The sting seems to be in the tail," Clinton said amusedly. "What you actually want to know, I suppose, is if there's such a thing in Brazil as illicit diamond buying?"

Adderley nodded. "That's exactly what I do want to know," he said, "only I don't want Burrige to guess that the information's coming back to me or that the query comes from me in the first place."

"Good. You needn't labour the point. I'll extract the information as tactfully as I can. But what have you up your sleeve now?" He stopped and stared at Adderley, then an expression of enlightenment crossed his face.

"Good Lord," he said, "you're not fitting my suggestion about a toxicologist on to Burrige? I never thought of him when I made it."

"And you needn't think of it now," Adderley smiled. "For your own information, not to be passed on on any account, I can tell you that Burrige is

about the one man I'm not likely to suspect. But that's about all I can tell you at present."

"I won't press you. I'll 'phone you that information as soon as I can get it."

Adderley took the hired car back to the police-station, where he dismissed it. He had sent Butt up that morning for his own car. If the Barnes police offered no objection—and he did not see why they should—it would be back that evening, and he would have the use of his own machine for the rest of the term.

Sergeant Aldin, he learnt, had already gone back to withdraw the men from Denning's house, and at the news Adderley chuckled. Things were marching well, and he had a feeling that amounted almost to an intuition that the climax could not now be long delayed.

In this he was right, though the end came in a way he little expected.

CHAPTER XXI

INFORMATION RECEIVED

WHATEVER gifts—or faults—of silence young Standish may have possessed were more than balanced by his sister's talkativeness, as Adderley found on his return to Langshand Hall. Brother and sister had arrived some time before him, and the girl had utilised the interval in giving the Ketterings a highly coloured and circumstantial account of the afternoon's events. She made it appear that she and her brother had been induced, rather against their own inclinations, to view the dead man, though to do her justice this was an impression that she made haste to correct the moment she saw it had gained ground. The fact remains, however, that no correction ever receives the same amount of credence or publicity that is attained by the original distortion.

The reason that promoted the suggestion in the first place seems a little obscure. It may be that she liked notoriety for its own sake, even such a small amount as could be got in the limited circle of her auditors, and wished to appear as the victim of an extremely mild form of what was more officiousness than police persecution. But what seems more likely is that by some perversity of her nature she was led to believe that anything that showed Adderley in an unfavourable light would inevitably have its reaction on Mary Cranford. She had already fathomed the relations between the two, and the fact that she was a man-stealer herself may possibly explain her actions.

The library contained amongst other volumes a reasonably up-to-date handbook of South America. Adderley had already noticed it on the shelves, and as soon as possible after his return, he went in search of it. Unfortunately it did not contain the exact information he wanted, and he was searching the shelves in the hope of locating another book that might be more useful, when the door opened and someone entered.

He turned at the sound of Mary Cranford's voice, then came towards her and kissed her. As his eyes met hers he fancied he noticed a touch of anxiety in them.

"You haven't heard anything?" she said, and he shook his head.

"About your brother?" he said. "No, I haven't, Mary. I'm very much afraid it's a matter of waiting now till the morning. I expect Butt back from Barnes to-night with my car, and to-morrow we'll have an unofficial hunt for him."

"Butt's back," she said. "He arrived about an hour ago. I thought you might want the car, so as soon as I knew I sent him off to pick you up. I told him you were at Denning's place. Did I do right?"

"Of course you did. I wonder how I came to miss him. Perhaps he passed when we were in the mortuary, and has stopped to exchange confidences with Marlin, Denning's man."

The girl brushed that aside as a matter of little importance. She had news of her own that she was anxious to discuss, and she had only waited to make sure that Adderley was not already aware of it.

"My dear," she said, looking up into his face, "I've had some news of Burton. It's not entirely good news, rather the reverse, if my interpretation is correct. You'd better read this first, though."

She handed him a sheet of folded notepaper, and Adderley opened and read the message it contained.

'Dear Mary (it ran),

Don't worry about me. I'm quite all right, some good friends of mine are looking after me. After what you told me last night we think it's just as well for me to lie quiet until things have a chance of blowing over.

I haven't put any address on this, so there'll be nothing to give away if it does fall into the wrong hands. I'll let you know again as soon as I can how things are going with me.

Yours,

Bunny.'

Adderley folded the note up and handed it back to the girl.

"It seems all right on the face of it," he remarked. "Though he doesn't say so in so many words he evidently doesn't want you to try and find him at present. In that I think he is wise, if, as he says, he is in good hands."

"Do you really think he is?" Mary asked bluntly.

Adderley gave the least perceptible shrug of his shoulders. "In the absence of anything definite to the contrary, Mary, we have to take his word," he said.

The girl caught him by the arm. "If it was his word I wouldn't mind so much," she said. "It's just because I don't think it is that I'm worried."

"Whew," said Adderley between his teeth. "Is that the way of it then? Mary, tell me, is that your brother's writing?"

"It's his signature," she said. "I haven't any doubt of that. And I'd swear, too, that the body of the letter was written by him if it wasn't for one thing. Bunny's never written 'all right' in his life.

He's always dropped one 'l' and made the two words into one—'a-l-r-i-g-h-t.' One of two things has happened. Either that letter has been forged by someone who could imitate his writing beautifully, and then he's been forced to sign it himself, or else, which is more likely, the letter's been drafted out for him, and he's had to make a word for word copy of it. At anyrate it's certain that he never composed it all by himself."

"From what you've said that seems fairly obvious. But, my dear, there isn't actually any cause to worry. We know what you doubted last night, that he's alive and well."

The girl blinked in an effort to stem the tears that rose unbidden to her eyes.

"I know that," she said with an odd choking note in her voice, "but how long is that likely to be the case? Michael, can't you do something, find out where he is?" Her voice rose a note or so, she clutched desperately at his arm, and looked up entreatingly into his face.

He wreathed his arm about her and drew her closer to him.

"My dear," he said, "I'm doing all that is humanly possible, and I fancy this note is going to help me to do more. Admitting that what you think is right, and that the letter was written at someone else's instigation, there must be a reason for it. The only one that seems to fit the case is that your brother's captors—we'll call them that, whatever they are—want to induce us to stop hunting for him. Most certainly they're afraid that if we go on looking for him we'll find him—and other things, too, that they don't want brought into the light of day. If I felt inclined to go further and draw an inference from all this I'd say, to put it quite brutally, that for a reason I can't

quite fathom they daren't put your brother out of the way."

He could have gone further and said, "For the present, at anyrate," but he felt that the girl was worried enough without him giving her cause for further and; perhaps, groundless anxiety. Instead he went off at a tangent.

"By the way," he said, "have you got the envelope with you?"

The girl produced it. She had been holding it in her hand all the time, and it was now considerably crumpled. Adderley took it from her and straightened it out. It was addressed to her at Langshand Hall, and the handwriting was obviously the same as that of the letter. But the one outstanding fact about it, and the one that instantly caught Adderley's attention, was that it had not been through the post. There was neither stamp nor postmark on the envelope.

"How did this come, Mary?" Adderley asked. "Who gave it to you?"

The girl hesitated a moment. "I'm sure I don't know, Michael," she said doubtfully. "No one gave it to me." At his look of surprise she went on quickly, "I'd better explain how I got it. I was in my room, and hearing the sound of a car I looked out the window. I thought it might be you returning. You know I can see part of the road from the window. But it wasn't you. It was Butt. I went down and said I thought you might want the car and told him where you'd gone. He agreed with me and went off to find you. I was coming back to the house when I heard another car. Again I thought it might be you, and again I was mistaken. It was the Standishes this time.

"Miss Standish called to me, so I waited for her. We came up to the house together. She said she had

met you, and that you probably wouldn't be long. I started to ask her something about you, and she said, 'Excuse me, there's something I wanted to tell my brother about the car before he puts it away. I'll be back in a moment.' She ran back and I went inside. I found Lady Kettering, and Claire and Helen in the hall. They'd heard the two cars, coming up with a short interval between, and were curious to know what it was all about. I told them, and just as I finished Miss Standish came running back.

"She was bursting with her news, and took us into the nearest room, which happened to be one of the sitting-rooms, to tell us all about it. She had quite a lot to say about you having taken her and her brother along to see the dead man, and somehow I got an idea that you had done something that wasn't quite nice. She had got so far when her brother came in and heard her. He told her not to be a fool, that you had only done what she had been asking for. She said then that she was sorry if she'd given the impression that you'd exercised any persuasion; she had only meant you'd sprung a surprise on her without telling her beforehand exactly what its nature was. Then her brother said that if it cured her of her Grand Guignolish leanings, it would have done some good at any rate. I fancied there was the makings of a mild family tiff in that, so I came away, leaving your aunt and the girls with them. I came straight back to my room, opened the door and found the letter on the floor. It had evidently been pushed under the door in my absence."

"By someone in the house," was Adderley's conclusion. "How long ago was this, Mary?"

"Since I got the letter? Not more than twenty minutes, I should say. I sat thinking round it for some time, then I began to wonder if you'd come in yet.

I came downstairs, looking in all the likely places until I found you here. Michael, what do you think of it? The way I got the letter, I mean."

"There's only one thing to think about it," said Adderley. "Someone in the house slipped it under your door."

"One of the servants?"

"I don't see who else it could be. It looks as though you can eliminate everyone else."

"Then the chances are that the servant, whoever it is, is in league with the people who are holding Bunny?"

Adderley shook his head. "Not altogether," he said. "The particular servant might have done it quite innocently. There's such a thing as asking a man—or a woman—to pass on a letter, and, for a consideration, to say nothing. The mere fact of doing anything of the sort doesn't presuppose guilty knowledge. However, I'll see about getting to the bottom of that particular mystery later on. In the meanwhile, there's another mystery concerning you that I want to talk about."

With that he detailed Sergeant Aldin's account of the telephone call that had been sent out from Denning's house on the night of the tragedy. She listened with the lines of puzzlement deepening on her forehead as he proceeded, and at the end she faced him with an expression of utter bewilderment in her eyes.

"But, Michael," she said, when he had finished, "I can't understand who it could have been. I don't know any girl who could have got into my flat; certainly it's no one of my acquaintance. And as far as I am concerned I have a perfect alibi. I was with you at the time."

"Not quite," Adderley pointed out. "To be exact,

you didn't run into me until some minutes later. As near as I can work out that telephone call must have gone through just about the time you discovered the dying man. The chances are that the man who called to you and then gave chase had just finished telephoning and came back into the hall when he saw you."

"I suppose that's what must have happened," she admitted. "Still, it amounts to the same thing as far as I'm concerned. I have all the alibi that's necessary. Still, I'm puzzled as to whom the woman in my flat could be, and I'm rather worried to think that anyone could have had access to the place in my absence."

"You went back there yourself that night," Adderley reminded her. "I don't suppose you'd noticed whether anyone had been there."

"There was nothing to show," she said. "Nothing had been taken as far as I can see, and there was nothing out of place. Even the maid hadn't been in to clean up the place, perhaps because she knew I was going away and didn't mean to over work herself. I knew that because you see the ash-tray hadn't been emptied. I had seen my brother that morning before I'd gone away—he had come to the flat, and the butts of his cigarettes and the wax vestas he'd used to light them were still in the ash-tray."

"Wax vestas?" Adderley said quickly. "Didn't he ever use safety matches?"

She did not answer that immediately, but appeared to be searching in the recesses of her memory. At length: "He may have," she said, "but I can't say for certain. I don't recall any particular occasion, if that's what you mean. Most times he was with me he seemed to have wax vestas. He had rather an appalling habit of striking on them on anything

handy, the furniture, for instance. That's why it has impressed itself on my mind, I suppose." She stopped and stared at him, struck by the expression of his face.

"Michael," she said uneasily, "has this any bearing on . . . on the murders? It doesn't mean that Bunny's getting more deeply involved, does it?"

There came a fateful pause during which, to the girl's fevered imagination, the world seemed to stand still. Then slowly Adderley shook his head. "On the contrary," he said deliberately, "it will go a long way towards clearing him, if I am not mistaken."

CHAPTER XXII

' OLLA PODRIDA '

THE girl fixed her eyes on him as though to search his soul. "Do you really believe that," she said, "or are you just trying to calm my fears? Michael, I'd prefer you to tell me the truth, you know that. It will come all the harder in the end if you've been trying to buoy me up with false hopes."

"I'm not trying to do anything of the sort, my dear," Adderley assured her. "I'm telling you what I honestly believe. I hinted I might be mistaken, but that was purely because no man is infallible and there is always a chance that I might have miscalculated. You understand that?"

She nodded. "Yet," she went on, "I don't quite see what wax vestas have to do with it. You haven't made any new discovery, have you?"

"I don't see why you shouldn't know," he said, lowering his voice. "It won't go any further, I know that." He gave her a sketchy account of the incidents of the day.

"But don't you see," she said desperately as soon as he had finished, "that what you've told me makes things seem blacker against Bunny, instead of clearing him? Don't you realise that if he was able to strike matches in the summer-house and in that room he was a free agent?"

Adderley chuckled. "You're implying that if those vestas were your brother's he must have struck them himself," he pointed out. "I've told you how I lit

my pipe with one of Clinton's vestas, and I'm afraid I laboured what was no more than an unimportant incident merely to point a moral. The vestas were Clinton's, but I used them. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

"Oh!" she said, and gave a little gasp. Then her face fell again. "Still, even if Bunny lent the vestas to someone else the position hasn't altered in the least. Bunny must still have been a free agent to do that."

"Not necessarily," Adderley disagreed. "Don't you think that the first thing they would have done when they took him prisoner would have been to search him? They'd certainly take away any weapon he possessed, and in the hands of a desperate man matches can be quite as dangerous as anything else."

Her eyes filled with tears. "You've made out a good case," she admitted rather reluctantly. "I know you're trying hard to present the most favourable side to me, but somehow I don't feel altogether convinced."

"You're letting your fears run away with you, that's why," he said, with some idea of consoling her. He would have said more, perhaps to no purpose, had not the door been flung open, and Lady Kettering entered. She stopped short as she saw the couple.

"I'm sorry," she said composedly. "I'd no idea you were here, Michael, or you either, Mary."

"Come in, aunt," said her nephew. "You're not intruding."

She flung a shrewd glance from one to the other. "I'm not at all sure of that," she said tartly. "Your connection with criminals, Michael, seems to have warped your moral sense. At anyrate you haven't the strict regard for the truth you had once. Which reminds me that your ex-convict man, Butt, has come

back and is wondering where you could have got to. You'd better look him up and end his anxiety."

"Good Lord, I'd forgotten about him!" Adderley exclaimed. "I want to see him, too, about the car. I may have to go to town to-morrow."

"To buy a ring?" said Lady Kettering devastatingly.

Adderley fled in confusion.

Butt had already put the car away, but he reported that it was none the worse for its adventures. Mark Alsen's murderer had treated it gently, far better than Adderley had expected when he recollected what had happened to Mary Cranford's car.

Butt had gone on to Denning's house, he said. He had found the place still in charge of the police, though Marlin was hovering round, filled with a mild resentment at what he termed the officiousness of the uniformed men. He had hailed Butt's arrival as a sort of antidote and had metaphorically fallen on his neck.

"I suppose," Adderley said critically, "that the first thing you did after sampling Mr. Denning's beer was to compare opinions of your respective employers."

Butt shifted uneasily. "Marlin did say a lot about Mr. Denning," he admitted, skilfully dodging the matter of the beer. "He is a very talkative person and not the type one would expect to be a gentleman's gentleman."

"In other words," Adderley suggested, "you think he is no gentleman himself."

"I'd hardly go so far as to say that," Butt said unctuously. "He seems to me to be lacking in proper respect to his superiors, however. He used expressions about his master that I should consider undignified, but perhaps that is due to the fact that he has lived a good deal in the Americas, where, I

understand, social conditions are different from here."

"America?" Adderley repeated. "North or South?"

Butt considered. "He did not particularise," he said at length, "beyond remarking on the quality of the beer we were drinking as compared with some he had once sampled at Buenos Aires."

"I see. He asked nothing about me?"

Again Butt shifted his feet uneasily. "He asked a number of questions that I endeavoured to avoid answering," he admitted. "He wanted to know what it was like having a detective for one's employer, and whether I ever learnt anything of value from you that could be passed on to a friend for a consideration. He seemed to have an idea that some policemen acquired a competence by-er-illegal means."

"I hope you gave him to understand that because of the way I could manipulate things I was rich beyond the dreams of avarice," Adderley said hopefully.

Butt looked uncomfortable. "I tried to intimate to him," he said unhappily, "that I was in a difficult position, since, because of my past, you expected me to keep you apprised of the delinquencies of my former friends. The precise expression I used was 'to snout.' I expressed my intention, because of this, of finding a new situation as soon as a more congenial one offered. Marlin was so good as to suggest he might be of help to me in this regard." He stopped and eyed Adderley a trifle doubtfully. "I hope I did right," he said.

Adderley chuckled. "You've done a good day's work, I fancy," he returned. "And now about this car. I want to take it to town to-morrow."

He went on to give instructions that are no concern of ours.

He had had some idea of going back to the library

and completing the search for information that had been temporarily suspended when Mary Cranford entered, but when he looked in the room was occupied by Claire, Helen and the girl Standish. He beat a hasty retreat, followed by the half-joking congratulations they hurled at him. Evidently the news of his engagement to Mary Cranford was public property by this, for which he had no doubt he had to thank his aunt. Not that it mattered much.

He was turning down the hall when he heard the patter of swift, light footsteps behind him, and he looked back over his shoulder. It was the girl Lil Standish. She beckoned, and he stopped.

"Can you spare me a few minutes?" she said in a quick half-whisper as she reached him. "I must have a word with you."

The glance she flung about her, quick, cautious, searching as though she were afraid of being overheard, convinced him that this was no mere essay at idle flirtation, unless, indeed, the girl were a more finished actress than he gave her the credit of being.

Even though some faint doubts still lingered, the sight of her expression softened his own.

"Certainly," he said, "what is it?"

"I don't quite know how to put it," she said uneasily. "I want your help, and I'm afraid . . ."

"What of?" he asked encouragingly as she hesitated.

She must have guessed the idea forming in his mind, for she went on quickly. "I'm not afraid of anyone or anything as far as I'm concerned myself," she said. She looked up at him as if measuring the extent of his capacity.

"You know Bunny Canforth, you've heard of him?" she said surprisingly.

"Cranford, you mean," Adderley corrected, and she nodded.

"Yes, that's his real name, and that's his sister here. No, I'd never met her . . . not until we came here yesterday, though I'd heard enough of her. I don't think she knows anything about me. At any rate my name doesn't seem to have stirred any recollection unless, for reasons of her own, she prefers to keep it to herself. I think she would have told you anyway."

She glanced at him shrewdly, and seemed to be waiting for him to speak.

"Just where precisely is all this leading to?" he asked, as the best way of avoiding a direct answer to the question she was asking with her eyes.

"To this, Mr. Adderley. I'm going to be frank with you. Bunny's suspected—or half-suspected—of being concerned in . . . in the trouble the other night. That's so, isn't it? Well, Bunny hadn't anything to do with . . . with killing either of those men." She ended breathlessly, and faced him squarely.

"How do you know that?" Adderley asked.

"About what's happened? We-ell, it's more or less common property now, isn't it?"

Was it imagination or was there a touch of defiance in her attitude now?

"About young Cranford, I mean. You seem rather well informed as to his position in the matter."

She made a tiny gesture with her hands that might mean anything or nothing.

"It would be queer if I wasn't," she told him. "You see, I'm his alibi." Again her eyes met his squarely. "I think I can guess what you're thinking, but I'm past caring . . . in some ways. If it's a case of saving Bunny from trouble, what does a reputation or so matter anyway?"

"So that's it," he said softly. "I wonder why I didn't guess it." Then before she could reply he went off at a tangent. "You say you'd never met Mary Cranford before yesterday. Just precisely what did you mean by that, that you'd never been formally introduced?"

"You can put it that way," she conceded. "She didn't know who I was or what my name was, at anyrate. I've seen her scores of times, Bunny's pointed her out to me, you see, but as far as talking to her, or being introduced to her goes, we-ell . . ."

"In other words you had a complete advantage of her, and when you met her yesterday you already knew all there was to be known about her, while you were a complete stranger to her. Isn't that the position?"

"Yes. But what has that to do with it?" She looked at him with a slightly puzzled expression, though a hint of uneasiness showed in the depths of her eyes.

"Lots," he returned. Then, "Of course, you were the woman who got into her flat the night of the murders and answered that telephone call," he said deliberately.

She gasped, and the colour went out of her face. "I don't understand," she said dully. "What do you mean? I wasn't near her flat."

"Perhaps I'm mistaken. But you seem to fit all the conditions. You're about the one person I can think of who could have got in with a key. Bunny was probably the one person able to get you a key, or a cast of one. But why did you go there? Who was it sent the telephone message and why?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said defiantly. "I wasn't near the flat that night. I can prove it if necessary. Bunny . . ."

"Where is Bunny now?" he cut in, and she started.

"I wish I knew!" she cried. "I wish to God I could say! I came to you because I thought you could help, tell me something about him."

"What makes you think I can?" he countered.

"You must know," she said. "At least," she hastily corrected herself, "you must guess."

"And what if I do?" he said coolly.

"If you do—I believe you do—why can't you get him back? Can't you do that much for his sister, if you won't for me?"

"Where do you imagine he is?" he asked her.

She flung him a quick glance that was eloquent of her surprise. "Don't you know then?" she demanded. "Have you been fooling me?"

"Listen," he said calmly, "you and I seem to be talking at cross-purposes. Suppose you put your cards on the table; we'll get along better then. Where do you imagine young Cranford is?"

"You've just asked me that," she said a trifle breathlessly, her eyes fixed on her face. "Why do you keep on asking me?"

"Why do you keep on evading the answer?" he thrust back at her.

"I'm not evading any answer. I don't want you to think I am. I'm as interested in finding out where he is as you are. But I don't know, I can't say with any certainty."

"You mean you have an idea then?"

She nodded. "An idea of sorts. He can't be far from here, everything points to that."

"How 'everything'?" What do you mean by the term?"

"We—ell, all that has happened. I can't express it any clearer, not without going over everything in

detail. There's no need for that, you see. You know ever so much more than I do."

Her eyes were appealing now. Her breath came and went quickly with the excess of her emotion.

"Miss Standish," Adderley said abruptly, "just how much is it worth to you to get young Cranford back unharmed?"

"Unharmed?" she cried. "You don't think . . . surely you don't imagine that . . . that any harm can come to him?"

"Once again," he said steadily, "may I remind you that you're not answering the only part of my question that really matters?"

"I'm sorry," she said contritely, and gave a little shiver. "But the way you spoke . . . You upset me . . . There was a suggestion in your words . . . How much is it worth to me? Does that mean you want to bargain with me? What have I to offer?"

"Help probably, information certainly."

"I'll do what I can then within the limits of my ability."

He nodded. "I thought you would come to that," he said pleasantly, and she stared at him in surprise, though she did not ask him what he meant. Probably she had her own good reasons for the omission.

"I have a theory," he went on, "and it is based on what I might call the law of contraries. Relying on that theory I would say that young Cranford is in London. Let me explain. Everything seems to point to him being in this neighbourhood, evidence, I might almost say, is being manufactured to support that view."

He paused impressively, but she would brook no delay. She caught frantically at his arm. "You don't believe that," she cried. "You say it is only a theory. You must be mad."

"I'm not mad," Adderley smiled. "I'm singularly sane. And if I were you I wouldn't raise my voice so much. Someone might come out of one of the rooms any minute, and, I take it, you want this to be as private a talk as possible."

His words acted on her like a douche of cold water. "You *are* cool," she said with grudging admiration. "Don't you ever lose grip of yourself?"

"Sometimes, but not often. Now, about what I was saying . . ."

"I'm sorry. Please, go on. You think Bunny is not in this neighbourhood?"

"That is what I was saying. There would have been ample time for him to have got away before the police cordon drew in, a hundred and one ways in which his captors could have evaded it and taken him on to London. It's only slowly that it has begun to dawn on me. I saw it clearly only a few minutes ago."

"Why? What happened to convince you?"

"I didn't say I was convinced," Adderley reminded her. "It didn't convince me, to be quite accurate, merely served to put the coping stone on this theory of mine. It was a letter Miss Cranford received from him, at least it purported to be from him. She found it in her room. It had been pushed under the door. Don't see what that means?"

"That someone in the house knows where he is?" she exclaimed.

"That's one way of looking at it. The point I was going to make, however, is this. The letter was delivered by hand, so to speak; at anyrate it didn't come by post; and I reason from that that it was sent in that fashion with the express object of strengthening our belief that young Cranford is being kept a prisoner somewhere close at hand."

"But if he is why should anyone—his captors, say—try to strengthen that belief?"

"That's what I'm asking you now. I can give you one answer, and it is that he isn't in the neighbourhood. His captors are trying hard to put us off the scent and make us concentrate our attention here when we should be trying to ferret something out in London. As a matter of fact," he went on, speaking slowly and uttering each word with deliberation, "I am returning to London to-morrow."

"For good?" she said quickly.

"Until the case is finished," he told her. "Then no doubt I'll come back and finish my interrupted holiday."

"And you're hopeful of finding Bunny in London?" she asked a trifle wistfully.

"I'm hopeful that by returning to London I shall not only be able to locate him, but bring the whole affair to a successful conclusion," he said.

She eyed him rather doubtfully. "That's not quite the same, is it?" she said. "Your idea of a successful conclusion might not tally with mine."

"At least it should comfort you to know that I will be doing the best I can to get that young man out of the hands of the people who are holding him," he pointed out. "By the way, I wonder if you can suggest anyone who would have been likely to have put that letter under Miss Cranford's door?"

She faced him for the moment without speaking, her fine eyes fixed on his. She had dropped all pose now and was her natural and by no means unattractive self.

"You don't mean that," she said coolly, "so I am going to answer not the question you asked, but the one that is in your mind. I did not do it, and I can think of no one else who could have done it. Does that satisfy you?"

He laughed joyously. "It not only satisfies me," he informed her; "it is the most valuable piece of information I've received this evening."

And abruptly he turned on his heel and left her. She made an impulsive movement as though to follow and overtake him, then apparently thought better of it. Instead she went slowly up the stairs to her room, her mind a riot of stormy emotions and her heart in a chill grip, for it had come to her suddenly and blindingly that this odd man from Scotland Yard had been playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse.

CHAPTER XXIII

CROSS-ROADS

IF Lil Standish had counted on being left alone to wrestle with the situation that confronted her, she was doomed to disappointment. She had been in her room only ten minutes or so—time enough, however, to twist one lace handkerchief to rags in the excess of her agitation—when someone knocked on the door.

She hesitated, wondering whether she should answer it, then she realised that she had put the light on and the gleam of it would certainly be visible beneath the door. With a sudden decision she rose from her chair, unlocked the door and turned the handle. Her brother was standing in the passage and his not unhandsome face was puckered in a frown.

"How long have you been here?" he demanded.

"I've been searching the house for you."

"Come in," she said. "I've just been wondering," she added a trifle inaccurately, "whether I should go looking for you."

He closed the door carefully behind him, then turned and searched her face. She met his gaze frankly, though the evidences of her anxiety were still plainly visible. The man noticed the drawn look of her face and the tiredness of her eyes, and his heart leaped oddly.

"What has happened?" he asked with a faint husky note in his voice.

She smiled, rather wanly *it* is true, but it was still a smile.

"It isn't so much what has happened as what might," she said cryptically, and the frown on his face deepened.

"Don't talk in riddles, Lil," he said roughly. "Out with it."

"I've been talking to Adderley, Lady Kettering's detective nephew," she told him, "and if you want to know I think our cake's dough. I followed him down the hall just now. I wanted to ask him about Bunny."

"Why the devil did you want to do that?" he asked, startled.

"Because I've been worrying over Bunny, wondering what has happened to him, and where he could have got to."

He selected a cigarette from his case, and lit it before he spoke again.

"I think," he said slowly in between puffs, "that you'd better begin at the beginning and tell me all you said and all he said to you."

She told him, and at the end he smiled. "I don't see anything to laugh at," she said uneasily. "I think the position's quite serious enough. That man seems to know—or guess—too much."

"Some of it's guesswork," he told her, "and the rest of it's pure bluff. He can't prove that you were in Mary Cranford's flat that night, and the one thing that will keep him busy thinking is who it could have been who was making so free with Denning's place when the man himself was in Paris. Do you see that?"

She nodded. "That's our main hope. But I have a fancy he suspects."

"Suspicion is not proof. Our position here is one of our best safeguards."

"You mean as friends and guests of his cousins. I wonder how far that will influence him."

The man smiled enigmatically. "As I've already remarked," he said, "position is everything. Adderley, for instance, knows Burrige has a unique knowledge of curare; he knows he's spent time in Brazil, and he knows Pereira was a Brazilian, but I'll bet anything you like he hasn't yet started to put Burrige on a list of suspects. Burrige is police surgeon here; his position places him above suspicion. I wonder why," he went on musingly, "a detective like Adderley never seems to stop and think that because a man happens to have money and be respectable that he wasn't always that way. It's quite true, apparently, that if you've money enough you can live down anything."

"Can you?" the girl said. "I don't believe that . . . not altogether. Reg."—she went off at a tangent—"Adderley seems quite convinced that Bunny is somewhere in London. He's so sure that he'll pick up the threads there that he's leaving here in the morning."

"Despite the letter you told me about?" said her brother, and she smiled shrewdly at him.

"Because of that," she returned. "I told you what he said. I'd like to know, however, how that letter got under Mary Cranford's door. Do you think she got it by post, and then told Adderley that tale, so he wouldn't go asking too many of the wrong kind of questions? Afraid perhaps that if he saw the postmark and did get on the track of . . . of the others it might hurt instead of help Bunny?"

"It's quite possible," he admitted, "though I don't think it at all likely. No, the chances are that she's telling the truth, and that someone in the house slipped the letter under the door."

"But who was it? He suspected me, but then I didn't do it."

Standish turned and threw the butt of his cigarette

into the fireplace, then answered her without turning round. He seemed to see something in the grate that interested him.

"How about Adderley's man, Butt?" he suggested. "You know he's a reformed crook?"

"I did not know that," the girl said. "I can't believe anyway that he's reformed. Once a crook, always a crook."

"That's how it seems to me," he agreed. He was still looking at the grate. "Been burning anything here lately?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Why?"

"Someone has," he said with conviction. "There's ashes, here, paper, I think."

He picked some up in his fingers, and they crumpled to dust. He seemed to lose interest at that. "Doesn't matter anyway, if you haven't," he remarked. Nevertheless he looked at her suspiciously. The girl met his eyes levelly.

"Well, what are we going to do?" she asked after a moment's pause.

"I don't know that we can do anything except wait," he answered. "I can't see any need to run away. If we left now we'd only make people suspicious, and you know the trouble you had trying to scrape acquaintance with Claire and then trying to wangle an invitation down here. It's lucky you had that art kink."

"You leave my work alone," she said ominously. "It's more than work to me, and if you can't see its good points there's no call for you to run it down."

"I didn't mean to tread on your corns. You shouldn't be so thin-skinned anyway. However . . . No, I think the best thing we can do is hang on here. We've gone to a lot of trouble to get a base, and amongst quite the best people, too."

"There was always Clinton," she pointed out.

"The Chief Constable, eh?" He gave a little chuckle. "I rather fancy he would have been a different proposition. He's still difficult. I'm a trifle afraid of him; he has a knack of taking things in a rush for all his quiet ways. If Denning would only go away again. Hang the newspapers. It was their reports brought him back post-haste, I'm certain. He practically said as much."

"Why are you so anxious to get him away?" she asked softly, and her brother stared at her.

"Because the stuff's still there," he said. "Don't you know that? That's what all the trouble's been about. Somebody else knows of it too. The somebody else who killed Pereira."

"Mark Alsen?" she suggested.

"Couldn't have been. Mark couldn't have done the job, done all the rest of it, too, and got as far as Barnes before he died with a wound like that. Maybe I know, maybe I don't. All I can say is that if I drew a circle with this room as centre and a radius of two miles you'd find the person I mean somewhere inside it."

"Clinton and Burridge both live within a two mile radius of here; I could name lots of others too," she said provocatively.

Her brother did not answer that. "I wish we could get Denning out of the road a while," he said thoughtfully. "I'd take a chance and search the place again. Can't you do anything? You're pretty thick with him."

The girl looked dubious. "I would once," she admitted. "He has money, or he seems to have, and money talks. But . . ."

"There's always a 'but,'" he said irritably. "It won't be long before he begins to wonder why you've

cooled off so suddenly after leading him on the way you've done. You haven't pumped him dry by any means yet. What's the reason?"

"I thought you knew that," she said in mock surprise, her eyebrows raised. "But if you want to know, it's Buany."

"That little rat!"

"No more a rat than you," she said indignantly. "Not as much perhaps. Anyway, if you can't speak decently about him, don't mention him at all."

"You needn't get so shirty about it," he said vulgarly. "If it hurts your feelings, I won't say what I think about him again. But even you must admit that he's gummed things up a bit. Anyway, we've got to get moving pretty quickly. We can't stay here indefinitely—something's bound to blow up; but, as I said, we can't clear off now without making everyone suspicious. We're between the devil and the big drink."

He broke off suddenly, and lowered his voice. "I say," he said in a half whisper, "did you hear anything?"

The girl shook her head. "No, did you?" she said in the same tone, and he nodded.

With a swift noiseless movement he threw the door open and stared out into the shadowed passage. There was nobody there, and though he waited several minutes no one came. He shut the door and came back to his sister.

"I could have sworn," he said, and his face was grave, "that I heard someone move outside the door, a sort of shuffle more than anything. But there was no one there."

"You must have imagined it," she said.

"Perhaps I did," he agreed reluctantly. Nevertheless the rest of their conversation was conducted in

whispers, to the immense chagrin of the man, who, a moment or so after Standish had closed the door, stole out from the room next door to listen.

After a time he gave it up, and shuffled softly away down the passage. Perhaps it was just as well for him that he did so, for at the head of the stairs he encountered Adderley.

"Will you want me again to-night, Mr. Adderley?" he asked, and the detective considered.

"No, I don't think I shall," Adderley told him. "Do you want to go anywhere?"

"I understand there is a very good cinema in the village," Butt answered. "I am rather partial to the pictures, and if you do not want me again to-night

"Go off then," Adderley interrupted him. "As long as the car is ready in time to take us to London in the morning, I don't much care what you do in the interval. Taking one of the maids with you, I suppose?"

Butt looked pained, but he made no attempt to correct what might have been a misapprehension. Adderley chuckled. "Don't let me delay you," he said.

Butt went his way. His course took him down the path to the village, where he made straight for the cinema palace. He did not go in, however, but contented himself with studying the posters of the current week's releases which were hung outside. He made several careful notes in his pocket-book, then led off briskly up the village High Street. He came to a point where two roads branched, looked up and down both forks, seemingly in a state of indecision. At length he made up his mind, and set off along what was actually the London Road. This time, however, he did not move as briskly. His progress was extremely

cautious; he kept to the side of the road and took all possible advantage of every scrap of shadow.

He had been about ten minutes on the road when the faint sound of engines and the flash of a light ahead of him warned him a car was coming his way. He shrunk back into the shadow of the hedge. With his hat down over his eyes and his coat collar turned up about his ears he was invisible to anyone a few feet away.

The car came on. It was moving at a leisurely pace as though the driver had no pressing need for haste. The interior was lighted well enough for Butt to see the faces of the driver and the man who sat beside him. Butt recognised them both at once.

The man at the wheel was Denning, and the other who sat beside him, and seemed to be conversing animatedly, was Sir Richard Clinton.

Puzzled to know what the two could be doing together at this hour of the evening Butt turned and watched the car as long as it was visible. At first he fancied they were making for Trimpleton village, but as they came to the junction the car turned off, and took the road, which as far as Butt could say led nowhere in particular. Then, since he was in most things a methodical man, he took his note-book from his pocket, glanced at his wrist-watch and made a note of the incident and the time at which it had occurred. It might mean anything or nothing, quite probably it wasn't his business at all, but should anything ever come of it he had it recorded in black and white without the possibility of error.

It was at that exact moment he chanced to look up and for the first time became aware of the running man.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RUNNING MAN

THE first thought that came to Butt's mind was that the man was a fugitive, and involuntarily he glanced back in the direction from which the fellow had come. But there was no sign of a pursuer.

The man was running with his head down, and his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him. All his energies were apparently concentrated on getting over the ground in the shortest possible time. Yet he was not running like a man in training. There was a certain laboured quality evident in his actions, noticeable even in the darkness of the night, that suggested he was exercising under compulsion.

As the man came swinging down the road Butt's curiosity overcame his desire for obscurity. He stepped out of his hiding place, reasoning quite soundly that, since the newcomer's gaze was fixed so intently on the ground he was covering, his own action would seem perfectly natural. He had no wish to appear as suddenly as though he had that moment shot up out of the ground. As a matter of fact, with one exception, everything turned out more or less as he had hoped.

The man became aware of him when he was just too close to avert a collision. Butt flung his arms out to break the force of the impact, and succeeded.

"I'm sorry," he said in the breathless voice of a man who has abruptly realised that the fault is mainly his own. "I should have been looking where I was going."

The other, brought to a sudden halt by the collision, stared intently at Butt, then laughed. "I'm quite as much to blame," he said, and his face wrinkled into a puzzled frown. It seemed that he was trying to place Butt, perhaps wondering where he had seen him before. Butt, for his part, tried to steal a glance at the other's face. The features were vaguely familiar, he fancied, but in the half-light he could not swear to this with any degree of certainty. The only thing sure was that under the suavity of the running man's apology ran a note of impatience.

"Sorry," the latter said again, "I must be off."

Butt stepped aside. He could think of no excuse by which he could detain the man any longer. Anyway it was not his affair what the fellow was doing pounding down the road at that hour of the night.

The moment he stepped aside the other ran on. To Butt, standing in the middle of the road and staring after him, it seemed that he was putting on extra speed as though to make up for the delay. Butt could see as far as the cross-roads and a trifle beyond from where he was standing, and because he felt curious as to which direction the man would take he remained looking back. The man came to the cross-roads, stopped in a hesitant fashion, then moved across the intersection rather like a hound casting about for the scent. He must have found some indication of what he sought, for presently he turned off, and taking the road that branched off from that leading to the village, disappeared from sight.

It struck Butt as odd that he should have done this. The branch road was rarely used, for it led to nowhere in particular. It was all the stranger since the car had gone that way only a few minutes previously. Both parties apparently had some reason for avoiding the village road. Obviously then there

was some connection between Denning and Clinton, the men in the car, and the running man on the road. On the face of it it looked as though the stranger was engaged in the seemingly hopeless and extremely foolish task of attempting to overtake the car.

It was at that moment that another point, whose precise significance was not apparent to him then, occurred to Butt. Undoubtedly the car had come from Denning's place further up the road. There was nowhere else Denning was likely to have started from. Obviously then the pursuit had begun from somewhere near the same spot. Yet at the rates they were travelling the man could not have started in pursuit of the car. The machine would have outdistanced him more than it had done. It followed, therefore, that the car must have started after the man. It had, apparently, overtaken him, then passed him by, leaving him to lumber along in its wake. The obvious conclusion was that the occupants of the car were not pursuing the man, yet if he were attempting to pursue them he had taken on something altogether beyond his powers. The whole thing seemed incomprehensible from start to finish; Butt would have felt inclined to treat the two encounters as mere coincidence had it not been for the way the running man had behaved at the cross-roads.

It was the feeling that for all the apparent insanity of the proceedings there was a reasonable explanation lurking behind it all that sent Butt at a smart walk back up the road towards Denning House. He had not originally intended going so far—what had moved him in the first instance to visit the village under pretence of going to the cinema was, a matter that he seemed inclined, for the time being, to keep exclusively to himself—but his curiosity had been excited to an amazing extent. Also, some of his

ancient instincts had managed to survive the stresses of the period of his reformation.

After the first abortive attempt to fix the identity of the stranger he had dismissed the matter from his mind, to return to it at a more favourable season. And, as often happens when a matter is side-tracked in this fashion, the solution worked itself out. From the hinterland of the subconscious it swam into the forefront of his mind, and he had already accepted it before he really became aware of what it was that had happened. Then when he did become aware he gave his thigh a resounding slap, a gesture to which he was prone in times of mental excitement, and exclaimed, "Of course, that's it."

The man, whose features vaguely recalled had seemed dimly familiar, was almost certainly young Cranford, whose disappearance had already become a source of minor perplexity to the police. Butt admitted that the identity had by no means been definitely established; there was always a possibility that he had been tricked by a chance likeness, and for that reason he felt pleased that the solution had not occurred to him at a moment when he might have been called on to justify its existence. Even as it was a further problem confronted him. Should he get in touch with Adderley immediately and advise him of the turn affairs had taken, or should he pursue the course he had already mapped out, and make in due course such report of the night's events as he considered necessary?

A moment's reflection showed him to his own satisfaction that little advantage could be gained from taking the former course, while if he took the latter, there was a reasonable possibility of making even more significant discoveries.

He continued on his way. It led him past the path-

way that turned in through the trees to Denning's house and brought him to the spot where the wall on the London side of the grounds met the main road at an angle. So far, he had been moving as though he were working to a definite plan, but now he showed evidences of hesitation. He began by making a preliminary reconnaissance. The enclosing wall was spiked with broken bottle glass set in cement. He found that out the moment he set his hand on the top of the wall, which he could just reach without stretching unduly.

He gave an odd grimace, took off his heavy overcoat, and with a sigh folded it in two. He sighed because it was rather a good coat and he had visions of it being gashed by the spikes of broken glass. It made a good pad, sufficiently thick to protect him while he was scaling the wall. He did not mount immediately, however, but proceeded to satisfy himself to the best of his ability that there was no one else in the vicinity.

That done, he sprang, scrambled to the top of the pad-covered wall, hung there a moment, and dropped lightly to the other side. With an extremity of care he drew the overcoat down after him. By some miracle it had escaped damage, and he gave a sigh of relief at the realisation of this.

Then, because the night was cold, he donned the coat, buttoned it up about him, and shadow-like slunk through the gloom. The fact that there was the semblance of a path underfoot determined the direction he took.

Presently he came to a halt. A low one-storied building of indeterminate size and shape showed dimly out of the darkness. It was not the sight of the building, however, that had brought him to a stop, so much as the glimpse he had caught of a pin-point

of light showing through what he took to be a half-open door. Had he known of its existence he would have recognised the structure as the summer-house Adderley and Clinton had stumbled on that morning. As it was he had to acquire his knowledge gradually as he made one discovery after another.

The first one he made of any importance was that the light he had seen came from a flash-lamp, held probably by someone not familiar with the place. He guessed this from the muffled concussions, followed by suppressed curses that came to him as the hidden searcher moved about, seemingly barging into obstacles that had escaped the revealing beam of the lamp.

Butt crept nearer, moving so soundlessly that he might have been a shadow. As he drew closer to the summer-house he began to reconstruct the ideas he had formed only a moment or so before. For one thing there were two people in the building he discovered. He could hear their voices, but the words were indistinguishable. There was no familiar ring about their tones—though this might have been due to a variety of causes—so he decided that they were not people with whom he was acquainted.

The mere fact of that was enough to make him anxious to discover their identity, and he moved forward with increasing caution. Of a sudden there came a muffled sound as though a door somewhere had banged, and the light, which hitherto had been visible, with a sort of flickering uncertainty, went out abruptly. He could not be altogether sure, but he had an odd fancy that the closing of the door and the disappearance of the light had happened simultaneously.

He waited for some seconds, not quite sure what had occurred. There was always the faint possibility that his espionage had been discovered, though this he did not think likely. He had moved with an utter

absence of noise, and he felt satisfied that he had not been seen. As the seconds whipped by he became convinced that he was not the cause of the sudden cessation of all signs of life and movement.

Rather to his surprise he discovered that the door of the summer-house, so far from being shut, was still ajar. He made a cautious circuit of the building, only to learn what he had already surmised, that there was no other door. Therefore the solution of the sound he had heard must be sought for inside the summer-house.

Any doubts he may have had of the wisdom of the proceeding vanished completely the instant he entered the summer-house and flashed on the electric torch with which he had provided himself. Not only was there no one visible inside the building, but there was nowhere anyone could hide. The two people whose voices he had heard and whose light he had seen through the door and the cracks in the wall had vanished as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed them. Which, as a matter of fact, was about the only thing that could possibly have happened to them.

CHAPTER XXV

CHECKING UP

SUCH a hurried investigation as Butt was able to make with the aid of the feeble light of his torch revealed nothing of any consequence. Though he had his own explanation as to what had happened, he could discover no sign that would substantiate it and turn a theory into an accredited fact. This was not to be wondered at. Only a few hours before Clinton and Adderley, with daylight to help them, had failed to locate the things Butt sought.

The summer-house was bare, if one excepted the empty sacks that were strewn about the one room of the building. Though one's first impression was that they had been thrown about anyhow, there seemed on second thoughts some sort of order or method in the way they had been packed. They were stacked in bales, if one could call them that, some against the wall and others about the floor, and slowly it dawned on Butt that there was just one odd feature about the way in which they were stacked. This was a conclusion that he arrived at only after some thought, and even then it came to him more as a revelation than as a logical outcome of any particular sequence of ideas. Not one of the bales was too large to be moved by anyone of average strength!

The moment Butt reached this conclusion, that moment he decided that the muffled concussions he had heard were caused not by someone blundering over unfamiliar ground, but by someone shifting the bales

from one spot and dropping them down carelessly in another. Butt chuckled, for the realisation of this confirmed him in his surmise.

Yet the one thing he sought eluded him. It would continue to elude him until time and circumstances gave him the opportunity of making a thorough and undisturbed search of the building. Even then it might be necessary to pull the building to pieces to satisfy himself. Though he did not know it, he had stumbled across exactly the same difficulty that had confronted Adderley and Sir Richard Clinton in the locked room of Denning's house many hours earlier. As if to add further point to the similarity between the two cases, he presently made another discovery.

He had overlooked it before, but now as he again swept the beam of his torch over the floor he saw a clean, new, half-burnt match on the ground. He stooped and picked it up. It was a wooden safety match. This point did not strike him as being odd—it must be remembered that he was not yet aware of what had transpired during the day; had he known of the discovery of the two wax vestas the knowledge might have confirmed him in his theory. On the other hand it is just as likely that it might have made the situation only more puzzling than ever.

Since there was nothing further to be gained by probing the recesses of the summer-house he decided to retire, temporarily at least. He had a feeling that the two people who had vanished would not be long in returning, and he was anxious, if possible, to catch a glimpse of them, and satisfy himself either that he did not know them or that his inability to recognise their voices had been due to circumstances over which he had no control.

He stole back into the shadows, taking up a position that enabled him to command the doorway. He had

not long to wait. The couple returned even sooner than he had anticipated, and with an abruptness that convinced him he had narrowly escaped being trapped. One instant all was silent, the next he heard the murmur of voices and saw a light gleam through the cracks in the woodwork. The voices were still too low for him to identify their owners, though there was a note of irritation in them that led him to believe that the expedition, whatever its nature and object might have been, had turned out a rank failure.

There came the sound of shuffling movements from the summer-house: again he heard the muffled concussions of the bales being shifted and thrown down in another place, and then a voice that struck an odd chord in his memory said, "Well, that's over and done with, but a lot of good it's done after all."

It was the girl who came first through the door of the summer-house, and her brother who followed. They passed so close to where Butt was hiding that even in the dim light he could see their faces and identify them now beyond all possibility of error. At any rate their presence here fitted in with what he had overheard earlier in the evening, and though he did not yet hold the key to the whole puzzle, portions of it were plainer than they had been before. When he had a chance of adding his information to that already possessed by Adderley, it was almost certain that there would be little left to unravel.

It did occur to Butt to wonder how they had managed to reach the place ahead of him, seeing that they were still deep in conversation when he left Langshand Hall, but he decided that they could have motored over and back a dozen times in the time it took him to reach the house on foot. The fact that he had not stumbled on their car proved nothing. Almost certainly it would be hidden securely away from the

prying eyes of any chance observer. In what he had seen, too, there seemed the germ of an explanation of Denning's departure in the car. He could not at the moment, however, connect young Cranford up with the rest of it. Clinton did not matter. His presence was susceptible of a hundred and one explanations.

The ultimate object of this secretive night visit was not plain. That they had been searching for something seemed fairly obvious, but what that something could be was more than Butt could say from the limited knowledge he possessed. The search appeared to have been unsuccessful, however. The girl's remark, the disappointment in her face and her brother's glum look showed that. The 'stuff' that Butt had overheard them mention at Langshand earlier that evening must, whatever it was, have been extremely valuable, if one could judge anything from the lengths to which everyone seemed willing to go to obtain possession of it.

Butt allowed the Standishes a good start before he moved off. Presently from somewhere outside the grounds came the purr of a high-powered car, probably the pair departing. The man felt so certain of that that without more ado he took his departure, too. Beyond the fact that it came on to rain and he reached Langshand Hall in a thoroughly drenched condition, he met with no adventure that need be chronicled.

On the way up to town in the morning he detailed all that happened to Adderley, and the detective listened with interest.

"I guessed when you made up your mind so suddenly to go to the cinema that there was something in the wind," Adderley remarked. "Why didn't you tell me the real reason, though?"

"I didn't think it altogether wise," Butt told him. Now that they were alone together without any possibility of being overheard he dropped into an easier style of diction than he usually affected. "I had a feeling that other people might be listening to me just as I had been listening to them, so I took a course that would involve no explanations until later. Even if I had suggested some other part of the house where I could have talked to you, the mischief would have been done."

Again Adderley nodded. "Are you still keeping up that fiction of your shady past?" he asked, and for the first time Butt smiled.

"It's good business, sir," he said. "I've taken in more than one person with it. I gather you told your lady aunt that I was an ex-convict."

"I mentioned something of the sort to her," Adderley admitted. "I'm afraid I gave you rather a bad character all round. Still, if this goes through all right, there should be promotion for you at the end of it, Sergeant."

Sergeant Butt grinned affably. "Between you and me, sir, I won't be altogether sorry to give up this pose of gentleman's gentleman. You and I have worked together all right for quite a long time, but all the same it's a trifle wearing, not to mention the tales I have to tell the wife about it. I can't very well tell her the truth, you know. And women do get suspicious if they feel there's anything you're keeping from them. You not being a married man, sir, don't rightly understand what it can mean sometimes."

"Well, if it works out as I hope, it will all be over in a day or so," Adderley said consolingly. "We've got to the point now where it's mostly checking up that we have to do. Then you can go back to your wife and tell her everything she wants to know."

Adderley's first port of call was at Scotland Yard. Leaving the car in Butt's charge, he went in to see his chief and report the result of his investigations to date.

"By the way," Adderley ended, "I wonder where I can get hold of a complete file of some of the principal Brazilian papers. I want to see issues that may go back some years. Does the British Museum file foreign papers?"

"I can't say offhand," the chief answered. "What do you want to know?"

Adderley told him, and the other smiled up quizzically at him. "You've got a criminal mind," he said. "Why not get in touch with the Brazilian representatives here? They may be able to supplement any information you get from the files. Quite probably they'll have fuller details. I'll get through on the telephone to the right people and see the way is made smooth for you before you go round to the Legation. Anything else?"

"Oh, yes. How about that report from Croydon? Has it come along yet?"

"About Denning? Yes, it has. He left for Paris by air-liner a week before the murders were committed; he arrived back the night before last. The times he gave you are quite correct. On each occasion his man Marlin was with him. In the light of that you can be quite certain that they were both out of England the night the murders were committed. That rather knocks your ideas about, doesn't it?"

"Not in the least," Adderley declared. "It's very much what I expected."

The other looked blank. "You seem rather pleased about it," he commented. "Yet I can't see how it supports your theory."

Adderley smiled, one of his rare tantalising smiles.

"My theory," he said, "is that the murders were committed at a time when it was known that Denning was out of England."

"That's fact, not theory," said the astounded chief.

"It can't be both?" Aldin said challengingly.

"It could be neither," the other countered.

"Exactly," said Adderley. "And if you want to know just what I mean by that, you'll have to be patient for about thirty-six hours longer. You'll get your answer then. Now, how about 'phoning the Brazilian Legation?"

It was full dark by the time the last of Adderley's business had been transacted and he was ready for home. The car ran sweetly through outer London, and picked up speed as they reached the deserted country roads.

They were within an hour of their journey's end when the car faltered in its stride, and presently it jarred almost to a stop.

"What's gone wrong now?" Adderley asked, though already a faint idea was forming in his mind.

For answer Butt switched on the light on the *facia* board, and pointed to the petrol gauge.

"Empty," he said laconically.

Adderley turned to him. "Haven't we a spare can?" he asked, and Butt shook his head.

"I didn't think it was necessary," he answered.

"I filled up just before I came round for you."

"If that's so, the tank can't possibly be empty," Adderley said, "unless . . ." He did not finish the sentence. Instead, "We'd better get down and make sure," he suggested.

The two men got out of the car and went round to the petrol tank on the back. Butt swept the surface of the tank with a beam of light from his torch,

then turned the light on the surface of road behind them. A thin glistening trail of oil showed on the smooth surface of the road.

"There's a leakage somewhere," Butt remarked.

"Obviously," Adderley said. "But how did the leak get there? There was no sign of one when you filled up, was there?"

Butt shook his head. "Not as far as I could see," he said, "but, of course, that doesn't say there wasn't one. Still if there was one, I feel pretty sure it would have been discovered as soon as the tank was filled at the petrol station. Someone almost certainly would have noticed the trail of oil."

"I see. Well, the best way to settle it all is for us to try and locate the escape. Much good it will do us now, though."

A close search of the tank presently brought to light a tiny bead of petrol on the under side of the tank. Adderley wiped the bead away with his finger, and directed the light of the torch at the spot. The beam revealed a tiny hole. As Adderley watched another bead of petrol formed.

Carefully he ran the tip of a sensitive finger round the edge of the hole, then called to Butt.

"Feel that," he said.

Butt straightened up from the examination and the two men's eyes met.

"Well?" said Adderley.

"The tank's been punctured by some sharp instrument," Butt suggested. "Seems to me it's been done deliberately."

"That's what I think, too. It must have been done between the time you left the garage and when you picked me up at the Yard."

Butt shook his head. "I don't agree with you there, sir," he said. "It couldn't very well have been

done while the car was in motion, and you remember I didn't stop any length of time there. You had come out and were waiting for me. What I think is that it was done while you were in the Legation. You said you might be some time and for me to park the car if I had anywhere to go to. As I wanted some cigarettes I did as you said. It was only a matter of crossing the street to the shop, but that was time enough. I wouldn't take more than one quick jab to do the job. As it is it's my fault."

"You're not to blame. We couldn't have foreseen this."

He stopped, listening. Butt looked up at him enquiringly.

"I was listening for that car," Adderley said. "You remember there was one behind us some miles back, but I can't hear it now. It must have turned off somewhere. Rather hard luck. If it had been coming this way we might have got some help from them."

"I remember the car," Butt said. "At least I remember hearing the sound of it in the distance. There's a cross-roads about half a mile back. It must have turned off there."

"Can't be helped now," Adderley rejoined. "What I'd like to know now though is what exactly was the reason why the tank was punctured."

The answer came at that exact moment and in a way he had not anticipated. Several dark figures seemed to rise directly from the ground behind them. A faint sound caught Adderley's ear and he whirled round. The blow meant for his head fell on his left shoulder, practically paralysing it. He hit out with his right fist at the face of his assailant. He felt the jar of the impact, and that was the last he knew. Something came crashingly down on his head and he slid into darkness and unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXVI

APOTHEOSIS OF BUNNY

How long the little rain of pebbles had been continuing on her window before they finally woke her up Mary Cranford could not say. Even when at length they roused her she did not fully realise what they meant. It was only when she thought of raising the window and, staring out, saw the figure crouching in against the wall that she guessed.

"That you, Mary?" came in a faint whisper from below.

With a start she recognised the voice. "Bunny," she whispered back, "whatever are you doing there?"

"I can't tell you. I don't want to be caught here. Is there any way I can get in? I must talk to you."

She considered. To go down at this hour of night, open the door and let him in would be to court discovery. There was only one thing to be done. His tone was urgent. Somehow she guessed he had news of import.

"I'll fix it," she whispered down to him, surprised how clearly their words carried in the still night.

She whipped the sheets from her bed, knotted them together firmly, tested them to make sure they would stand a strain, then tied one end of the improvised rope to the bed and lowered the other out of the window. It was not quite long enough, but her brother was an active man. He leaped and caught at it; she saw the sheets take on the strain, then his face appeared

over the window sill and she helped him in. He drew the sheet in after him and closed the window before he spoke.

"No chance of being overheard here, is there?" he asked.

The girl shook her head. The room on one side was empty. Claire and Helen occupied that on the other. Both were heavy sleepers. Even if they heard they were not likely to interfere.

"What has happened?" she queried. "Where have you been all this time?"

"Let me tell it my own way," he said. "There's no immediate hurry, not till daylight at anyrate. We can't do anything before then. They've got Adderley, isn't that his name?"

"How got him?" she demanded quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Captured him, like they did me. But let me begin at the beginning. They took me the night I saw you down there."

"I knew that. I got your note. At least it purported to come from you."

"I didn't send you one, Mary. It must have been a forgery. They're quite capable of doing it. Well, they kept me in a sort of cellar they had—the trouble was that they thought I knew too much and would betray them to save my own skin. You see, when enquiries started they began to get alarmed. They thought you'd guessed more than you'd do too. They tried to settle you—I heard them talking about it—but they failed, and after that they got rather more alarmed than ever. Yet for some reason they were holding on to me, instead of getting rid of me, as they might have done."

He shuddered at the thought of what might have been.

"Go on," said the girl breathlessly.

"I'm going on. One evening while they thought I was asleep one of them came into the cellar. The panel he entered by closed behind him. He had to open it from the inside, you see, so I lay there very still, watching from between almost closed eyes, thinking I might learn something. I did. I found how the panel worked. That evening when I guessed they would be at their evening meal I took a chance. It came off. The panel led to an upstairs room, on the ground floor. My luck held good. There was no one about. I just simply slipped out the door and ran for my life.

"I got out on to the road. I heard a car behind me. Someone was coming after me, I thought. I squeezed in against the hedge and the car flew by. There were two men in it, one of them I recognised as Denning, the other I didn't know.

"As soon as it passed I started to run on again. I ran slap-bang into a man. He tried to stop me, but I made some excuse to get away, and he didn't really try to hold me. I made a blunder then, when I came to the cross-roads. I thought the car had gone on to Trimpleton, so as I didn't want to meet it, I took the other road. I nearly ran into it, but I saw it in time and dodged in among the trees by the side of the road. It was Denning coming back and he was alone this time. I spent the day wandering round, keeping out of sight amongst the trees and meaning to work round this way somewhere about nightfall. But I'm not familiar, very, with the district and I must have worked round in some sort of a circle. When I came out again on the main road, about an hour or so after dark, to my horror I found I was close to Denning's house again and on the road near the wall. There was a car coming along, and I hid from it. It stopped

and some men got down. There was a girl driving the car."

"That must have been that girl Standish," Mary Cranford said abruptly. "They left here this morning, after a telephone call came for her. Go on, Bunny."

"Well, they carried a man out of the car, and then another man. One of the men carrying the first fellow slipped and nearly let go. The other said, 'Be careful, Matt. We've got something better in store for them than dropping them in the mud, especially for Adderley.'"

The girl caught his arm convulsively. "You mean . . . you're sure?" she gasped.

He cut her short. "Don't lose your head, Mary. It won't make things any the better. Yes, I'm pretty sure it was Adderley. I caught a glimpse of his face, and though it was dark I recognised him. You see," he added with a slight bitterness in his tones, "I had him pointed out to me once."

She looked up at him with dry eyes, but her heart was bursting.

"What can we do?" she said. "We can tell the police, but . . ."

She dare not put into words the thought that was in her mind, that the police might take time coming and before that the worst might have happened.

"I came here as quick as I could," he told her. "I had to take my time because I didn't want to be caught again. I hadn't anything to signal you with, and I didn't know if you'd be watching any way. I waited until everything was quiet and the lights all went out."

"Yes, yes, I know all that," she said quickly, "but what can we do?"

He looked at her oddly. "There's one thing we can do," he said, "that's if you're game."

"I am, if it's anything that will help Michael."

"It's a risk," he said slowly, "but if you care to come with me to the house, we may be able to get in, and if we do we can get them out the way I got out."

"You'd do that?" she said. "You'd risk it?"

He nodded. "It might help me, it won't ~~harm~~ me," he said enigmatically.

"Well, if you go out, out the window, I mean, and wait for me below, I'll dress and come down to you. It's not raining?"

"No, I'm not likely to get wet, if that's what you're thinking of. And, Mary, I wonder . . . do you think you could get anything for me to eat? I'm starving. I haven't had anything since yesterday evening."

"You poor boy. Yes, I'll get you something even if I have to raid the larder. Where will you meet me? Down where we met last time? Yes, that will do. But give me a little time. I must write a note, a couple of notes."

"What for?" he demanded.

"Just in case," she said evasively.

He was about to lift the window, when he turned and spoke over his shoulder. "You haven't a key of any sort?" he asked. "I was nearly forgetting that, and it's important."

"A key? What sort?"

"A door key."

She took the one out of her room door and handed it to him. "That will do, will it?" she said.

He took it and examined it critically. "Yes, this will do, those centre wards will come out in one piece, and then it will make a decent skeleton key. Have you a nail file? The older and rougher the better. I may want to smooth it off."

She handed him one she took from her bag. "It's not much chop," he said, "but it'll have to do."

A moment later he had dropped from the window, disdaining the sheets in his descent. There was a flower-bed just underneath and the soft earth broke his fall.

Mary dressed rapidly. Then she sat down and penned two letters. Word for word they were identical. One she addressed to Lady Kettering and the other jointly to Helen and Claire. She marked the envelopes "Extremely Urgent. To be opened without delay," and underlined the words. She left them on the table in the hall where they would be certain to catch the eye of the earliest riser amongst the servants. She nearly forgot her promise to Bunny in the excitement, and at the last minute she had to trip back to the larder and forage there. She made a selection and took it with her.

She found him at the appointed spot, working away and whistling softly to himself.

He looked up as she approached, "Here's your nail file," he said coolly. "I've got something better. There's a tool-house down the garden. It wasn't locked, so I went and found a rasp of sorts that just suited my purpose. Ready?"

He slipped the key into his pocket and dropped the rasp carelessly on the ground. He was finished with it, for all he cared it could lie there and rust. He took the provisions from Mary and munched contentedly on the road.

"It wouldn't be so bad," he said at the end, "if I had a cigarette now to finish off with."

"You can have plenty when this is over," she assured him, but in this she was wrong.

Presently, "I've a better idea," he said. "It came

to me as I was walking along. They carried Adderley in through the summer-house this evening. There's another entrance there, I believe, connected with the cellar by an underground passage. I don't know much about it, but it should be quite simple getting in. We'll try it first, anyway. Getting into the house may present difficulties."

"Just as you say," she agreed. She wished it was not so far. Her spirit fretted at the delay, and though they were moving at a brisk pace somehow to her mind they did not seem to be making much progress. But even the longest journey comes to an end some time. At length Bunny caught her arm.

"Here we are now," he said. "We'll have to go cannily from this on."

She shivered a little at that. Now that she was face to face with the great adventure, she felt her courage ebbing, and she wondered if it would see her through. Of course she would go through with it, but it would be very hard if one felt a coward at heart. She was rather surprised at Bunny. Hitherto he had always taken the easiest course, and in a way it amazed her to find him going to so much trouble and taking so much risk. It was an apotheosis she failed to understand.

Again he touched her on the arm. They were by this time within the shelter of trees in a neglected part of the grounds, to which he had apparently led her by a circuitous route. It must have been hours since she had been aroused by that soft rain of gravel against her window pane. There was a chill in the air that told her morning was not far away, unless the chill was in her own heart.

"Stay here," he said urgently, "and don't move until I come back. Even then don't speak to me until I speak to you."

"Why?" she said with a queer feeling of constriction about her throat.

"Never mind why. It's for your own good, anyway. You'll do that now. Promise."

"All right," she said. "I'll promise."

He must have been gone quite half-an-hour, and she ~~was~~ beginning to fear the worst had happened when he returned. He came slinking back through the trees, an almost invisible figure, and it was then she remembered his prohibition and saw the reason for it. He was quite close to her before she saw even his outlines, and had she not recollected in time she would have called out. It struck her how easily it might have been someone else, one of the men they were most intent on avoiding.

"I've been scouting," he said. "It's just as well, too. If we'd gone straight into the summer-house we would have blundered into someone. They've been working in there during the night, there's a pile of stones and earth just outside that looks as if it came from the tunnel. Perhaps that's where the diamonds have been hidden."

"What diamonds?" she asked.

"Didn't you know?" he said. "I'll have to tell you later, when I tell you everything. It'd take too long now. But come on, I think the way's clear, and what's even better the trapdoor's open. It looks as though they've gone in for breakfast. If that's so we can get everything over before they come out."

He led her in to the summer-house. At first she would not believe the trapdoor was open, but he showed her a crack where he could just insert his finger and lever it back. A dark cavern yawned below them.

She went first. The young man followed, stopping only to push the trapdoor gently back into the position

in which he had found it. He took extreme care that it should not slide to and block their exit.

At the ground he caught hold of the girl's hand. "Not a word now," he said softly, "and walk as softly as you can."

Nearly two minutes later the girl turned the key in the lock of the cellar door and pushed it open. At the same instant Bunny struck a match that leaped to flame for an instant and then flickered into extinction.

CHAPTER XXVII

CAPTIVITY

THE man who had laid out Adderley took a quick step back as a hand fell on his shoulder, and a voice said, "Killed him?"

"I hope not," the man growled in answer. "Don't do that again, Matt," he added. "I get nervous when anyone touches me on the shoulder."

The man called Matt chuckled. "My sore point is my neck," he admitted. "I wonder if there is anything in that."

"Unconscious prophecy," said his companion, a trifle inaccurately. "We'd better get out of here as quick as we can, otherwise the prophecy may have a good chance of coming true. We've wasted time as it is. Who'd have thought that tank would have taken so long leaking out. You should have made a bigger hole while you were about it."

"And have had them held up somewhere in the suburbs," Matt retorted. "I'd like that. Where's that car?"

He gave a shrill yet penetrating whistle, which was answered by the horn of a motor-car. A second or so later the machine itself drew up alongside, and the slim figure at the wheel looked out.

"The road's clear back my way as far as I could see," said the chauffeur. "All the same you'd better hurry."

The others took the advice on the instant. The

unconscious detectives were bundled into the back of the car, arms and legs securely tied and gags thrust into their mouths. Their captors were taking no chance of them recovering and raising an alarm.

At the moment of departure the man Matt raised a question.

"What about their car?" he queried. "~~Will~~ we set it alight? That'd destroy the evidence."

"More likely bring half the countryside about our ears," his companion objected. "Sight carries further than sound in these parts. Better leave it here. It will be found sooner or later, but it can't do us any harm then. We'll be far enough away by the time the discovery's made, and there will be nothing to connect us with it."

"But why," Matt persisted, "have we gone to all this trouble to capture them?"

"If we didn't get them they would have got us," his companion pointed out. "Any way we're not going to harm them; we'll merely keep them out of the road until the danger's over."

The car started with a jerk, and for the time being conversation was suspended. The car drove ahead along the dark country road, the chauffeur seemingly picking the way by instinct. He passed turning after turning without so much as a glance or pause, and at last switched off up a lane that would have been invisible to anyone not thoroughly conversant with the road.

He took the turning so sharply that the two captives were flung against the side of the car. Butt, from behind his gag, gave a low, almost inaudible groan. Adderley, on the other hand, came back to consciousness with a jerk. For some seconds he did not understand where he was. Then the intensity of the pain in his head brought realisation, and all that had

happened before his consciousness snapped out came swimming back into his mind.

He lay very still, turning over the situation in his mind. There was nothing much in the way of hope on which to seize. His non-arrival at Langshand would not occasion comment until the morning; even then it was not likely to give rise to alarm, and a day at least must elapse before anyone would begin to worry as to what had happened to him.

There was such a thing as being too clever, he thought as the car sped on. For purposes of his own he had actually kept the fact of his return a secret from all but Mary Cranford, on whom he had impressed the need for discretion. The others in the house had been given to understand that he might be remaining in London some days at least. Only Mary Cranford, therefore, knew the full facts of the case, and it was round her centred his one faint hope of discovery before matters had advanced too far.

Yet another aspect struck him, the possibility that, despite all the precautions of secrecy he had taken, there had been a leakage somewhere, and his plans had become known. But further reflection decided him that this was a possibility that could be largely discounted. More probably what had happened was that he had been trailed all day, the filling of the petrol tank noted, and the reasonable deduction of a fairly long journey made from the amount of petrol taken on. If his captors' deductions had been wrong the car might have broken down in a city street, as it was they had been right, hence the present uncomfortable situation. It was not made any the more pleasant by reason of the fact that a bandage across his eyes prevented him from seeing where they were going.

Oddly enough out of that fact a germ of hope

presently began to rise. His captors certainly would not have gone to the trouble of blindfolding him unless they feared that at some future date he would be able to identify the route along which he was being taken. The reasonable conclusion was that they had no immediate intention of giving him his quietus.

He had no means of knowing how long the car was on the road. Probably it was about an hour and a half. At length when he had just come to the conclusion that they were going on until dawn, the car pulled up with a jerk, and someone got out. There followed a conversation in hushed whispers, the purport of which Adderley could not catch. After that hands fumbled at the bonds about his ankles. Abruptly he felt his feet free. Someone caught him by the arm.

"Come on, get out of this," a harsh voice said.

He was dragged rather than helped out of the car to the ground, the same strong hand still supporting him. Something cold and hard was pressed in against his ribs, and the same voice spoke again in an urgent whisper.

"Now, do as you're told," it said, "and do it on the jump. If you give the slightest bit of trouble I'll blow a hole through you. If you behave you won't be hurt."

Obedient to the impulse of the propelling hand he moved forward, walking with the stumbling uncertainty of the sightless. He tried to form some idea of the nature of the terrain, but as he had no data on which to work the effort was hopeless. Once a twig cracked underfoot, from which he concluded that they were passing through trees, though he admitted to himself that the evidence was insufficient.

The gun dug a little deeper into his ribs and the pressure on his arm increased. The same menacing

voice hissed into his ear again, "Stand quietly a moment."

Some faint confused sounds whose meaning he could not fathom came to his ears, then even through the material that hid his eyes he caught the flash of an electric torch. A breath of stale air irritated his nostrils.

He was again propelled forward, then a rope was passed under his arms, and he found himself swinging out into free space. He span giddily as he felt himself sinking, the ground seemed to rise up and hit him and he collapsed in a heap. He heard the quick patter of footsteps on wood—someone coming down steps, he decided—next the rope was loosed and removed from under his arms and he was unceremoniously hauled some distance along an earthen floor. A moment later he heard a thud close at hand, followed by a muffled groan. It was Butt being treated in the same fashion.

He was given no breathing space, however. Someone whom he guessed to be his original attendant jerked him to his feet and taking his arm propelled him forward. They did not seem to go far this time, however. Someone opened a door—he heard the scrape of a key in the lock—and then he felt hard floor under his feet.

Before he quite realised what was happening deft hands had bound his ankles again; he was unceremoniously jerked off his feet, the bandage whipped from his eyes. His first thought was that he had lost his sight, temporarily at least. He stared from his position on the floor, trying to pierce the veil of darkness, and abruptly came realisation.

He had not lost his sight. He was in profound darkness, that was all. Piecing one thing to another he decided that the room where he lay must be some

sort of a cellar that was entered by means of a subterranean passage from the point where he had been dropped at the end of the rope. That much was plain; what was not so susceptible of proof was the exact location of this particular cellar. Nevertheless he was not altogether devoid of ideas on the matter and he smiled wryly as it occurred to him to wonder what his captors would say if he were to show them that despite the precautions they had taken with him he was already aware of much that they were apparently trying to keep hidden from him.

A pencil of light jetted out of the darkness and fixed itself on his face like a cold, cruel hand. He blinked momentarily, then as his eyes adjusted themselves he managed to make out the dim form of the man who held the flash-lamp. Not that this was any advantage. All he could see was a faint, shadow-wrapped outline whose semblance to humanity was more a matter of faith than vision.

The light presently passed from him, flickered round the room, revealing yet concealing as it went, until finally it came to rest on Butt's face. With a feeling of relief Adderley saw that his companion was all right; the blaze of suppressed anger in Butt's eyes was warrant enough of his bodily soundness. Probably at the worst he was suffering from a few bruises and a bad head.

The light came back to Adderley, and the man who directed it spoke.

"Mr. Adderley," he said in a hissing whisper, meant to disguise his real tones, "I'm sorry to have to treat you in this fashion. I haven't any real grudge against you. You and your man are only doing what you conceive to be your duty. I have to think of my own skin and the skins of my colleagues, however, and I feel pretty sure that if we had left

you at large for a couple of days longer you would have stumbled on something that would have placed our lives in jeopardy. As it is we've caught you in time.

"I'm sorry I've had to bind and gag you, but believe me it's the only thing I could have done. I can't afford to have you raise an outcry and I'm very much afraid that if you had your hands free you might give us considerable trouble."

He paused, and seemed to be considering what he should say next. Adderley would have given a good deal for the chance to answer back, but as it was he could only bottle his wrath.

"I hope," the man ran on, "that you don't imagine I am indulging in a monologue merely for the sake of hearing the sound of my own voice. I can assure you I'm not. But you can see for yourself that in the circumstances this conversation must necessarily be one-sided. I have to do the talking and you the listening. And as it is extremely one-sided I'll cut what I have to say as short as possible.

"My colleagues and I are about to leave this country. In the course of the last few hours we have made an interesting discovery that does away with the necessity of remaining here any longer. What that discovery is you'll probably find out for yourself in the next few days. Until we take our departure you will be fed at regular intervals. After that I'm afraid you'll have to take your chance, though I feel certain you will be located before you are too far gone. If you are not it will be regrettable. As I have already said we bear you no grudge, but our own safety is a matter of paramount concern.

"I can see that you are asking me with your eyes just where I intend going, and how in the course of such a short space of time, particularly in these days

of wireless, I hope to be able to put myself beyond the reach of Scotland Yard. I can only answer that it can be done. The best proof of that is the fact that it will be done. You detectives have not the monopoly of brains; there are ways of avoiding extradition, and there are places where a wanted man can seek sanctuary that are much handier to London than Argentina or any of the lands favoured by the absconders of a previous generation."

His voice ceased; the light went out, and silence fell on the room. There came the sound of a door being carefully closed, then the click of a key in the lock, and the man was gone.

His explanation, such as it was, had made things a little clearer in one way, in another it had merely clouded them more. But Adderley was not concerned so much with what the fellow might be able to do in the way of avoiding justice as with what he himself might be able to do in the way of escaping. Looked at anyway one pleased the position seemed pretty hopeless. Even though he and Butt were lying on the floor within a few feet of each other there was no way by which they could communicate. It did occur to Adderley that they might establish some sort of contact by means of tapping out in Morse on the floor. It looked a brilliant idea, but the moment he attempted to put it into practice he came up against an insurmountable obstacle. His hands were so tied that he could do nothing with them, and the same applied to his feet. He could make a faint noise with his heels on the floor, but it was impossible to achieve the rhythm and regularity necessary if one were to tap out even one sentence.

As an alternative he tried to think out some way of getting rid of his gag. It was composed of cloth of some sort and he believed that by gnawing at it he

might at length get it out of the way. But the difficulty was to get any sort of regular purchase on it with his teeth; tiny threads of it got into his throat and almost choked him, though they seemed to make no difference to the quantity of material still to be demolished. Nevertheless he felt that given ~~time~~ and patience he might at length succeed in ridding himself of the gag.

How long he lay awake cudgelling his brain in search of a short cut to freedom it was impossible to say. He seemed to drop off to sleep in the middle of a thought-sentence, as it were. One cannot blame him. He had had a tiring day, and probably the excessive mental effort on top of it had completed the exhaustion.

It must have been many hours later when he awoke. He had no means of knowing the time, but a dull hunger within him seemed to indicate that it was in the neighbourhood of his normal breakfast hour. His head still ached, in fact it seemed, if anything, a trifle worse, though this no doubt was due to the confined atmosphere of the room.

He tried to stretch his cramped limbs as well as his bonds would allow and a yawn seemed to slip sideways out from under his gag.

At that exact moment he heard a faint noise whose meaning he could not quite fathom. Then came the sound of metal against metal, there was a sharp click and a breath of air touched his cheek as the door was pushed open.

He stared at the place where he guessed the doorway was, and for a moment could see nothing. Then there came the scrape of a match and the yellow flame leaped up and flickered for an instant before it went out. But in that short space of time he had seen enough to set his heart beating oddly.

Two people had come into the room. The face

of the man who had held the lighted match, by some trick of the shadows, he could not see with any distinctness, but the features of his companion had shown for a second with startling distinctness before the match had flickered and gone out.

Whoever the man might be, there was ~~no~~ possible shadow of a doubt that his companion was Mary Cranford.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TRAPPED

ANOTHER match scraped to life, and this time the flame held. The girl stared forward, peering intently at Adderley, and she gave a little cry.

The match quickly burned down to the man's fingers, and he dropped it to the ground with a muttered exclamation.

"Never mind the light," the girl said in a quick whisper. "Give me the knife."

There followed some confused sounds, a soft hand the touch of which thrilled him, fumbled at Adderley's bonds, and a voice whispered, "It's all right, my dear. I'll have you free of this in a moment."

Because of the darkness she had to saw rather than slash, but at last the bonds parted, and Adderley tried to rise to his feet. But his cramped limbs refused to obey him and he crumpled up.

The girl felt him slither to the ground, and she gasped with a frightened note in her voice.

"A match here, quick," she called to the man. "He's fainted, I think."

But Adderley had done nothing of the sort, as the light of the match revealed. It was merely that his legs had given way under him. Once circulation was restored he would be more or less fit again. But the match showed the girl more plainly now the gag that had prevented him speaking. With a quick slash she removed that and bending down caught him in her arms.

"Don't mind me," Adderley breathed in her ear.

"Butt's here too. Free him, if you can."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said with quick contrition in her voice. "I never thought. I was thinking only of you. I'll set him free at once."

She moved away. There came ~~more~~ faint sounds in the darkness, whispers, the scrapings of sundry matches, a moment of silence, then Mary Cranford was back again beside Adderley.

"It's all right now," she said. "Butt's free. My dear, how are you?"

"I'm all right," he said, "or rather I will be as soon as I get back the use of my legs. How's Butt, though? I think the poor fellow must have got rather a knocking about."

He called softly, "Butt, how are you feeling?"

"A bit shaky, sir, that's all, and my head's still a trifle sore. Beyond that I'm all right."

"Good. Come over here. Mary, who's that with you? I couldn't see his face. Not Clinton, is it?"

"Clinton? No. It's Bunny. My brother, the missing one, you know. It's him you have to thank. I can't tell it all to you now, though. It's too long a story. My dear, we must get out of this, quick."

"But where are we?"

"Don't you know?" There was an echo of surprise in her voice. "We're under Denning's house somewhere."

"I guessed that. Of course there's a passage leading from that summer-house, but I couldn't find the way into it the day I was here. Or rather I could have if I'd had the time, but Denning came along and I didn't want to show off all my knowledge at once. Mary, how much do you know?"

She took a deep breath before she answered.

"Perhaps more than you think. Enough to explain

most of it, anyway. Bunny's told me a lot. Michael, what will happen to him?"

Adderley smiled wryly in the darkness. "I can't see anything happening," he said. "Not the sort of thing you're afraid of, anyway. You see, if he gets us out of this . . ."

"If!" she said. "There is no 'if.' But we must hurry."

"Which way?" said Adderley.

"The way we came in. There is another way out, through the house . . . an entrance from this room we're in now—but it's too risky, and neither Bunny nor I am sure of it. Come on."

She caught him by the arm, almost pulled him to the door. In silence they went out into the subterranean passage beyond. The girl closed the door behind them, and Adderley, hearing the click of the lock, was prompted to ask a question.

"Skeleton key?" he asked.

"Yes. Bunny got it for me. How did you know?"

"Guessed it. I didn't expect you'd have the real key. Is this a straight road? No obstructions, I mean."

"None at all," the girl told him. "You just keep straight on. Bunny's ahead of us with Butt, anyway, and he knows the road. Now, don't say any more dear, please. I'm not sure just how this passage runs; there may be a sort of listening post in it, and we don't want to be caught napping."

They continued on in silence for some time, then came a low hiss from the brother.

"We're there," he said softly, "at the foot of the steps leading up to the summer-house entrance. I'll go first."

He mounted, the only sound being the soft shuffle

of his feet on the boards of the steps. They waited, expecting every next instant to see a crack appear in the roof, when the trap-door, or whatever it was, was pushed aside. But nothing of the sort appeared, only there came a strangled cry of dismay from the young man above. He pattered down the steps to them.

"We can't get out," he told them. "Something's happened. They've found out or guessed, and the trap-door's fastened."

The girl gasped . . .

"Isn't there any way out?" Adderley demanded. "Can't we break it open?"

"We could," the young man said slowly, "if we had dynamite. Nothing short of explosive will shift it, though. The only thing to do is go back and hunt for the other exit. But I don't like the idea. It's too risky."

"It might be worth trying," Adderley said. "Anything's better than stopping here. At the worst we can go back to the room. Someone's bound to come in sooner or later with some food for Butt and me. Then we could overpower him."

"Someone might have been in already," the young man said, as a thought struck him.

Adderley shook his head, forgetting that the gesture was not visible in the darkness. "That's hardly likely," he said. "They'd have been after us before this, and so far there hasn't been any sound or light in the passage behind us."

It seemed that the young man was not altogether convinced, but he gave in before the impetus of a stronger personality. The party turned back and retraced their steps.

Adderley whispered to Butt, "Are you armed?"

"No, sir," his colleague told him. "My gun's gone and my torch with it."

Adderley groaned. "So have mine," he said. "That's rotter. If it comes to trouble now, we can't make even a show of resistance. Fists aren't much use against armed men. They must have taken our weapons away while we were unconscious, or asleep last night."

They came to the door. Adderley, as nearest, tried the handle, forgetting the door was locked.

"The key, Mary?" he said the next instant.

The girl passed it to him. He put it in the keyhole, turned it, and the wards clicked, but the door refused to open. Something had happened, some hidden bolt on the other side had been shot perhaps.

Hopelessly he turned to the others. "We can't get in," he said. "The door's barred against us. We're trapped."

From somewhere overhead, so it seemed, came a gurgling laugh and someone spoke in a soft husky voice that Adderley failed to recognise. It certainly was not the voice of the man who had spoken to him the previous night.

"Yes, you're trapped," it said, "and you'll stay trapped just so long as it suits our convenience."

The girl clutched convulsively at Adderley's arm. "That's the voice," she said in a frightened whisper, "of the man who scared me the night of the murders!"

Adderley had anticipated something of the sort, but what he had not anticipated was the discovery that the voice was one he was willing to swear he had never heard before in his life.

CHAPTER XXIX

CONTRETEMPS

THEY waited, tensely expectant, alert for further sound or movement on the part of the owner of the voice, but none came. The resultant feeling was more eerie and unsettling than if he had gone on to twit them with knowledge of their ultimate fate. A thing known is robbed of half its terrors, uncertainty in itself can stretch nerves to breaking point.

As the minutes went by and nothing came to break the stillness, first one and then the other of the little party began to move uneasily. Mary's grip on Adderley's arm slackened a little, though she did not let go of him altogether.

"Do you think he's gone?" she asked.

"It seems like it," Adderley agreed. "Butt, Cranford, I think we'll move from here."

"Where to?" Butt asked, speaking for the first time.

"Further along the tunnel. I've something to say, but I don't want to talk about it here, for obvious reasons."

He moved off down the dark bore of the passage, and the others followed him. After a time he halted, and peered into the darkness as if it were possible, by straining his eyes, to make out the dim forms of his companions.

"You there, Butt?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," came in the Sergeant's voice.

"And you, Cranford?"

"Yes, I'm here," said the young man with an odd note of curiosity in his voice. "What is it?"

"Come a little closer, then, both of you. I've something to say, and I don't want to be overheard. We seem to be about the middle of the tunnel here, and the risk is probably negligible, but we can't be sure, so it's up to us to take all the care we can."

"What is it?" Butt asked. "A chance of getting out of here?"

"It may be, but frankly it's a very poor chance. It depends on you to a great extent."

"On me?" said Butt in surprise. "What is it?"

"You remember the other evening when you tracked the two Standishes here. They went into the summer-house and disappeared. You went in after them and could not find the trap-door. Well, the point is this: They shut the door after them, therefore when they were coming back they must have had some means of opening it from this side. I don't think they used a key; there's no sign of a keyhole in any of the flooring of the summer-house."

"Then you think . . . ?" said Mary quickly, hardly daring to put her thoughts into words.

"That what they did we can do. That's what you mean, isn't it? I hope so. If they used a key after all, we're done for, but if it's what I'm hoping, well, we may have a chance yet. Cranford, you have matches?"

"Yes, I have."

"Many?"

"The better part of a box. I've struck only two or three. They're wooden ones."

"All the better. Come on then. I'll take charge when we reach the steps."

With the lift of hope in their hearts, for what reason three of them could not say with any certainty, the little party moved on. Adderley alone, though he

showed nothing of it in his voice, tasted the bitterness of failure in advance. His idea, after all, was no more than an unsatisfactory piece of guesswork; he had little or nothing in the way of data on which to go, and it was quite on the cards that the whole hopeful structure he had built up would collapse the moment he essayed to put it to the test.

They came to the steps, and Adderley taking the matches from Cranford, climbed up until he could touch the under surface of the trap-door. A close search in the light of one flickering match after another failed to reveal anything in the nature of the conventional keyhole. But presently he found something else, a little hole no bigger than a match stalk.

He came down the ladder again.

"It's a case now of turning out our pockets," he said. "I've discovered something, but it isn't much use to me as it is. Butt, what have you got in your pockets?"

Wonderingly the man replied, "Nothing much. They've taken away everything in the nature of a weapon. They've left me my money, my pipe and tobacco, but no matches."

"I'm in the same boat. What sort of a pipe have you? One of those self-cleaning ones with a sort of metal projection extending from the vulcanite mouth-piece into the bore of the stem?"

"Yes," said Butt. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. I was having a long shot. Well, we'll try it if we can't find anything better. Mary, my dear, I'm sorry the day of hatpins is past. A hatpin is just what we want at the moment. You'll see why in a moment. Cranford, perhaps you can help us out. You're different from the two of us. You haven't been in the enemies' hands."

"That's just where you're wrong," said the other

grimly. "I have, and they searched me most thoroughly. They took everything from me, even my wax matches. That's why I have wooden ones, borrowed them from Mary, and I've been smoking her cigarettes too. But that story will have to wait. What did you want anyway?"

"A knife, preferably one of those queer penknives with corkscrews and things for taking stones out of horses' hoofs. They still make them nowadays. The one Mary cut our bonds with won't do, it's only an old table-knife with no point."

"Sorry I can't help. They didn't leave me a thing."

"It's up to Mary then," Adderley said. "She's almost our last hope. My dear, turn out your bag. No, you needn't turn everything out, only things with steel in them."

He struck a match and watched her. "Nail file," he commented. "No good that. Matches, cigarettes. We'll have a smoke later. What are those wooden things?"

"Orange sticks," said the girl.

He examined them critically and struck another match to do so.

"They might do at a pinch," he said after a pause, "but I doubt if they're strong enough. Ye gods, Mary, what are those steel things?"

"Crochet hooks. A secret vice of mine. I bought them in Trimpleton yesterday, put them in my bag and forgot about them. Are they of any use?"

"I should think so. Just the very thing I want. Butt can put his pipe back in his pocket. We won't need to ruin that now. Give me the hooks, Mary, and all of you stand from under. I don't know how the machinery may work, but I'm hoping for the best. I don't want anyone to be hurt though."

"Be careful of yourself then," Mary said anxiously.

"I will, but going by what didn't happen to the others the operator seems safe enough. What am I going to do exactly? Well, since there was no sign of a keyhole and no ring or handle to move the trapdoor with I got the idea that it operated on the Italian pick-lock principle. That was a mediæval dodge. The keyhole was just large enough to take a sort of steel bodkin, and pressure did the rest. There's a hole of sorts up there that seems to answer the purpose. Now, don't let your spirits soar up because after all, I might be wrong."

Nevertheless it was surprising how the prospect of escape, however remote it might be, reacted on them. The hopelessness of the last few minutes disappeared in an instant. Though there was nothing more to be seen than the dim figure and the glimmer of a match high up on the wooden steps three necks craned upward and three pairs of eyes strove to pierce the gloom. No one had eyes for the darkness of the tunnel behind them, no one gave a thought to the possibilities that might lurk in their rear.

Abruptly there came a faint click audible to the waiting three. It was followed by a low cry of triumph from Adderley. In some fashion, not readily grasped by the others, the trapdoor above had shifted, and a thin thread of faint light drooped in a sickly fashion down on them.

"It's all right," Adderley called. "Come on up, the three of you. Butt, you'd better come first."

The police sergeant began to climb the steps.

"You next, Mary," said young Cranford.

"No, you," said his sister. "I can look after myself. Michael may want the three of you up there to help him."

"What do you mean?" Cranford demanded.

"I don't mean anything . . . Only, you have to get out of the grounds yet, you know. Suppose they try to head you off. Three pairs of fists are better than two. If I go first I may be holding back one fighting man who may be of more use on top."

"Don't be a silly."

"I'm not. It's you. There, don't argue. You're wasting time." She gave him a gentle push, and under the impulse of the stronger will he did as he was bade.

The girl had acted as she did under the influence of an indefinable sense of danger. But the intuition, if such it was, was not strong enough to give a definite direction to her fears. Her own feeling was that any danger that might arise would almost assuredly be met with at that moment when they would cross the borderline to safety. There was nothing to warn her that danger was already materialising closer at hand.

She gave her brother sufficient start to allow her to climb after him without in any way being likely to hinder his movements. The moment she judged he had gone far enough she placed her foot on the lowest step. At that exact instant she heard a panting breath behind her, the breath of someone who must have pelted rapidly yet silently along the passage.

She made an abrupt movement—the instinct to learn who or what it was that had startled her—but the movement was never completed.* Neither was the scream that rose in her throat. It was strangled at birth, so that it was no more than a soundless gurgle, by the warm moist hand that came out of the darkness and clamped itself over her mouth. Then another hand plucked her bodily back into the shadows.

Cranford's head appeared above the level of the

trapdoor, and two pairs of willing hands reached out to help him to land. He never reached the level above.

There came a sharp whip-like crack; Cranford seemed to hang a moment in mid-air with a startled dismayed expression on his face, then without a word he toppled back down the ladder, dead. The thud of his body striking the steps in his passage came sickeningly to the other two.

Foolishly Adderley bent forward to peer down into the pit. A pencil of flame followed by a whip-like crack shot out from the depths, something whistled viciously by him, and splinters sprang from the roof above him.

He jumped quickly to one side, pulling Butt back with him out of danger.

The trapdoor slid into place with a hollow clang!

CHAPTER XXX

A DOOR OPENS

For a split second the sheer horror and unexpectedness of what had happened froze Adderley to the spot; then his native initiative came to his aid, and he darted forward to the trapdoor. He still held in his hand the steel needle with which he had opened it in the first instance, but the actual hole took some finding. It was if anything nearer to the centre of the trapdoor—that on the under side had been quite close to the edge—and at first glance it looked like a fault in the construction of the trap.

Adderley thrust the needle in the hole and manipulated it in the way that had been successful before. Nothing happened, though he worked at it frantically. Either the lock from above was operated by separate machinery and in a different fashion, or else there was some way of throwing it out of gear when the necessity arose. Most probably it was the latter that had occurred.

Adderley turned away from the trapdoor with despair in his face.

"They've got her," he said despondently. "There's only one thing to do now, and even that's rather a forlorn hope."

"Don't say that," Butt said. "If we get in touch right away with Sergeant Aldin there shouldn't be much trouble. They"—he nodded meaningly towards the cellar—"wouldn't dare harm her. They know well enough what it would mean; they couldn't get out of the country with all the ports closed against them."

"Our friend of last night seemed to have already provided for that possibility," Adderley pointed out. "You heard what he said. Come on now, let us go."

He caught at Butt's arm and turned towards the door of the summer-house. Then he started back with a muttered imprecation. Two men whose faces were hidden in the shadows, were standing there. Each man carried a revolver and held it in a position that was eloquent of what would happen if the need arose.

"You've left going rather long, I fancy," said one of the newcomers, suavely. "Do you mind putting up your hands, gentlemen? You are less likely to sign your own death warrants that way."

Adderley went white. It was the whiteness of suppressed anger, not of fear. The abrupt turning of the tables had infuriated him beyond belief. He saw his last hope of rescuing Mary slipping away before his eyes, and the knowledge made him see red. With an angry roar he launched himself at the speaker. He moved so quickly that he took the fellow by surprise. Automatically he side-stepped, and for the fraction of a second his revolver wavered. True, it went off the next instant, but his aim had been shaken and the bullet that should have stopped Adderley went ploughing through the walls of the summer-house.

Adderley himself hurtled through the door into the open. His one thought now was of flight. Only by running for his life could he hope to rope in the gang and rescue the girl. Butt, in the meanwhile, would have to take care of himself.

Butt, however, was doing that to the best of his by no means poor ability. The moment Adderley made his leap Butt sprang also. His own opponent's attention was momentarily distracted by Adderley's

actions, and that was the actual cause of his undoing. The impetus of Butt's rush sent him spinning to one side with a surprised exclamation, and the next instant the sergeant was through the door and speeding after his leader.

The man who had first spoken darted out after them. With less impetuosity the second man followed. Two figures were running and leaping ahead through the plantation, not very easy marks, but the first man took a chance and fired. As two shots cracked out on each other's heels, Butt shied sideways. It was impossible to say whether or not he had been hit.

Adderley, however, stumbled, tried to recover himself, sprawled headlong and lay still. . . .

Unutterable terror, the sort of thing that had shaken her to the very fibres of her being the night of the murders, seized on Mary as the moist warm hand came out of the darkness and stifled her warning cry. She gave a little shiver, the world seemed to go black before her eyes, and she went limp in her captor's arms. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction, then shifting the girl's weight to his left arm, whipped out his revolver.

Cranford at that moment was just reaching out towards the helping hands of his colleagues. . . . As his body came crashing back Mary's captor stepped quickly to one side out of his way. Glancing up he saw Adderley's head framed against the pale light above, and more for the sake of effect than any other reason he fired at it. He knew by the way the detective jerked back that the shot had not registered.

Moving to one side, he fumbled for a moment at the wall just back of the steps, found the lever he sought and jerked it down. The trapdoor slid securely into place; until the lever was reversed no power short of dynamite could shift it.

The man avoided with considerable care the corpse on the floor. His interest in a man ceased the moment the man was dead; after that he knew only distaste for the tenantless clay. He slung Mary over his shoulder as though she were an empty sack, and with his lips pursed up into a soundless whistle threaded his way along the dark passage as quickly as though every inch of the way were illuminated,

He arrived at the door opening into the cellar room. He had left it unlocked behind him. It stood open now and light enough to see by drifted down from some opening that was not at first apparent. It seemed to come from the ceiling somewhere.

The man placed the girl on the floor, dropping her with no more ceremony than if she had been a rather awkward bundle he was glad to be rid of. Without a second's hesitation he crossed to one of the walls, raised his hand above his head, then swept them slowly out across the surface of the wall in a widening circle. His left hand touched a small inequality in the surface, and he kept it there until the other hand touched a similar spot on the right. He pressed both buttons simultaneously. A section of the wall large enough to admit a man slid softly to one side, revealing a flight of steps similar to those at the other end of the tunnel.

The man caught up Mary, slung her over his shoulder and stepped through the opening. The door slid to behind him. It was closed by a counter-weight that came into operation the moment anyone trod on the lowest step. Up and up he climbed until he reached the top, then bent nearly double with his burden he crawled into the room where Adderley had first discovered Pereira's body. It was no wonder, however, that the detectives had been unable to find any sign of a secret passage in the walls. There was

none. Instead, in this instance, the fire-grate and hearth-stone pivoted out, revealing the head of the flight of steps.

The man touched one of those little iron bosses that ornament the tops of most fire-places, in this case part of a floral design, and the whole contraption swung back on the pivot, sealing the entrance.

Mary stirred in the man's arms, and her eyes fluttered open. He let her slide to the ground and she stood there her face gone white, her bosom heaving and one hand over her heart. It seemed as though she could not believe her eyes. Perhaps it was that she found it hard to reconcile possibilities of evil with that tubby figure, the round chubby face and the small, bright eyes.

"Well?" said the man. "What have you to say, Mary?" He spoke in that assumed husky voice that she would remember to the day of her death.

Her eyes dilated. "You, Danny!" she gasped. "You a murderer!"

He nodded, complacently. "I've outgrown the conventional ideas of the value of human life," he said in his natural tones, "other people's lives, that is. I had my baptism of blood one day in the neighbourhood of Diamantina. You probably have never heard of the place, but it is in Brazil, and but for what happened there neither of us would be where we are to-day. But it is a long story, and I can't tell it now. You may hear all about it later, again you may not."

He stared at her from under drooping lids, and though he did not vary from the ordinary conversational tone, a chill of horror ran through her at the suggestion in his words. Even though he was her step-brother, she was quite convinced that he would kill her in cold blood then and there, if by so doing he would further his own interests one iota.

A thought came to her on the heels of that. "Where are the others?" she demanded. Her voice sounded hoarse and shaky, despite her desperate efforts to keep up her courage. "Did they . . . did they get away?"

He smiled, and slowly shook his head. "Of course not," he said brutally. "They were cornered in the summer-house. I had arranged that. I prepare for all contingencies."

"All except one, I think," she managed to say.

He glanced at her sharply. "What is that?" he asked with interest.

"The possibility of being hanged."

"That will never happen," he said with profound assurance. "I expect to learn any moment that your detective lover has been killed, and once that is certain there will be no need for me to linger here any longer."

"Once he is killed," she breathed, her eyes dilating with horror.

The man nodded. "Dead men tell no tales," he said sententiously. "He will go the way Bunny has gone."

"Bunny? What do you mean?" Her voice was torn with anguish, her face had gone deathly white; she was trembling in every limb.

"Of course you didn't see it," he said, as though he had just recollected. "You went off into a fit or a faint or something of the sort when I caught you. But Bunny was the last up the stairs, so I evened up things by having a pot-shot at him." He smiled evilly. "I pride myself on my marksmanship," he added meaningly.

She swayed and would have fallen had he not caught her. His touch, singularly loathsome it seemed now, made her shudder, but it helped her, too, to regain control of herself in some measure. Even though this

man was her step-brother and had some of her blood in him, she could not look on him with anything but aversion. It was more her intense loathing of him than anything else that made her keep her grip on her consciousness. She could not afford to faint again.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked. It was not that she was vastly interested now in her own fate—she had reached the stage when nothing seemed to matter any more—but she felt she had to keep talking or go mad.

He looked at her contemplatively. "You are rather a problem," he said slowly. "I don't quite know what to do with you. The only thing certain is that we can't take you with us. If we had time to linger here I imagine Denning might find a use for you. I tried to give you your quietus a few nights back, but then that was when I thought you knew too much. I find since that I was in error, but then, of course, it is always better to err on the safe side. If your friends had behaved, they would have been left here with the possibility of being discovered before it was too late. But then, you see, you rather made a mess of my plans. If you hadn't come blundering in . . . But you did, and I found out only just in time. . . Perhaps if I tie you up in the cellar."

He stopped as someone knocked on the door.

"That will be Denning and Standish," he said with a smirk, "bringing back word that your friends have been dealt with, and that the time for departure is drawing near."

The girl took a deep breath just as though she was a diver about to plunge into a pool, and sought to brace herself to face the ordeal of those words that would definitely snuff out all hopes of life and happiness.

The man took a key from his pocket, unlocked the

door, and stepped back with something dramatic in his attitude. Perhaps he too realised with what possibilities the next few seconds were fraught. What he could not have guessed what was actually to happen.

"Come in," he said invitingly.

The handle of the unlocked door turned, the door was flung open, and the man who called himself Marlin, though that was not his name, staggered back with his face gone ashen. Instead of the familiar faces of Denning and Co. he had counted on seeing he found himself staring into the business-like bore of a threatening-looking revolver. He looked to the left to be met by the same sight, to the right to see yet a third.

His eyes lifted to the faces above weapons, and he recognised Clinton, Sergeant Aldin and Adderley. Behind them he could see other figures, policemen . . .

He was faced with a situation that was as unexpected as it was disturbing; a hair's breath miscalculation had ruined his plans at the very instant success seemed within his grasp; a factor on which he had not counted, of whose existence he had not even known, had been the subtle means of smashing his house of dreams to fragments. It was no wonder he went white and that the chubby face went loose and flabby, no wonder that for one long fateful moment his tongue clove to the dry roof of his mouth and his limbs refused their office.

Yet there was something in him that could make fine gestures, that had it been directed along right lines would have made him capable of great things. He knew how to take defeat; he could accept the inevitable with an easy insouciance that with him was as much a vice as virtue. But even then, such a queer contrast was he, the guttersnipe in him must out.

"It's a fair cop," he said vulgarly, and held out his hands for the handcuffs Sergeant Aldin clicked about his wrists.

Adderley stepped past him into the room and caught Mary in the arms he had feared would never clasp her again. She nestled there with a tired sigh of satisfaction and relief.

"It's you we have to thank for it all, after all," Adderley told her. "When you disappeared and the trapdoor slammed in our faces we just managed to break past Denning and young Standish. They had come in the door of the summer-house and tried to hold us. But as we broke past them they started shooting, and they caught poor Butt in the shoulder. I tripped and it was lucky I did, for a bullet just whistled past me. Maybe they thought they were safe enough firing at us there, but from our point of view it was about the best thing they could have done. It brought Clinton and Aldin and a car-load of police down on them like a ton of bricks.

"I haven't had much time to talk to Clinton, but I gather that my aunt rang him up at an ungodly hour of the morning, said that I had been captured by brigands and was being held prisoner in Denning's house, and that you had disappeared after leaving a queer letter marked 'Extremely Urgent' on the envelope. She said you'd written that you'd gone off to rescue me, and that she was to ring Sergeant Aldin and Sir Richard Clinton without delay the instant she got the letter."

Mary sighed. "I didn't think she'd get it quite so soon," she said, "but I'm glad she did."

"Somebody at our house must be an early riser," said Adderley. "Whoever it is, I feel like pensioning her off for life."

CHAPTER XXXI

A FOOTNOTE TO HISTORY

MARLIN—if one can still call him by the name under which he went for so long—when he found there was to be no escape from his fate, made a complete confession. He could not tell everything, for there were some matters of which he had little or no first hand knowledge, but what gaps there were, were filled in by Adderley's investigations. One thing at least must be placed to his credit at the last. He insisted from the moment of his arrest that his name was Marlin, and that he had no other name. He had no wish, he said, that Mary should bear the stigma of public association with him. Only a select few knew who he really was, and as far as the general public was concerned he was tried and died under the name that was not his own.

When he was searched at the police-station he was found to have in his possession a surprising collection of diamonds, many of them Brazilian blues; experts who valued them later agreed that they were worth something in the neighbourhood of the staggering figure of a quarter of a million.

The story of how they came into his possession is the story of more than one crime; it was to gain them that men fought and bled, lied, suffered and died . . .

To understand it all one must go back some years from the date of this story and journey to South America, to Diamantina, that aptly-named town in the state of Minas Geraes, the centre of the diamond-mining industry in Brazil. Thither, some time in

those chaotic years after the war, came Dan Cranford or Marlin, whichever you prefer to call him. He reached the place by devious ways, and there is a supposition that he came there from Argentina. One version states that he made even that fairly easy-going land too hot to hold him, but belief is not evidence, and actually there is no proof forthcoming.

The chances are that he came to Diamantina with a definite purpose in view, that the tales of the wealth of the fields had already reached him and drew him like a magnet. If that was so, he was at the outset faced with disappointment. He found it was not as easy as he had imagined to lay hands on the diamonds. At almost every stage they were closely guarded, and it was hopeless to try anything at Diamantina itself. Only during the periodical transfer of the gems to headquarters was there the slightest relaxation of the guard over them.

A close study of conditions convinced Marlin that that journey offered the most likely prospect for attack; given a favourable opportunity he felt he could make the surprise really complete.

Favourable conditions, which took some finding, finally crystallised in the persons of Mark Alsen and Pereira. Alsen had been most things in his time; he counted forgery amongst his other abilities, but it was not that that drew Marlin to him at the time. At one period of his chequered career in his native land, Alsen had been a train robber; he knew all that was to be known about that particular operation, and it was on him in the end that Marlin depended to put those finishing touches that meant all the difference between success and failure. Pereira was acquired in another fashion. He held an official position on the mining fields—there is no need to particularise what it was—and he doped. Because of this latter failing

there was a prospect of him being dismissed the service.

It is not certain how exactly Marlin managed to get in touch with him originally—on that particular point he was discreetly silent—but one suspects that the dope habit had something to do with it. Marlin was not above dope-peddling, whether to earn a needed penny or simply to serve his own ends. It is probable he used Pereira's particular weakness to get the man in his power, and mould him to his desires.

The upshot of it, however, was that Pereira not only fell in with their proposals, but supplied an addition to their plans. He pointed out that holding-up the train at the revolver's point was more risky than it seemed, and he suggested a way out of it. He had spent some time with the Indians of the interior—there was a suspicion that he had more than a drop of their blood in his vein—and he had acquired a working knowledge of curare and its properties. It was Alsen with his mechanical ability who turned out the little steel needles and steel tubes to take the place of the crude wood darts and bamboo blow-pipes of the natives.

Everything went according to plan. Pereira discovered exactly where the package of diamonds was to be located, found the day on which they were to be forwarded, suggested the exact spot at which the attack was to take place, arranged leave for himself, and finally decided to travel with the guard by the train in question. The guard was a small one, consisting only of two police officers, for the powers that be were not normally afraid of the diamonds being tampered with on the journey.

At a certain spot on the line, not far from Curralinho, a gradient necessitated the train slowing to a crawl. It was here it was planned that the actual

hold-up should take place. What happened was this :

At the time and place appointed the train slowed almost to a standstill. Because of the heat of the day the doors of the van in which the guard were travelling had been left open—Pereira would have seen to that anyway—and as the engine began to grind up the gradient, Pereira looked out and made a gesture with his handkerchief that would have seemed quite natural to anyone not acquainted with what lay behind it.

At the signal two men broke from the bushes that flanked the track and came running along after the train. As has already been noted, the train was moving no faster than a walking pace. The guards had been reclining on the floor of the van, smoking their home rolled cigarettes, but as Alsen caught hold of one of the stanchions and tried to haul himself into the van, one of them started to his feet, seizing his weapons. Pereira placed to his lips the tiny little steel blow-pipe he had carried concealed in his hand, and the steel needle caught the guard in the cheek. A look of intense surprise crossed his face; he suddenly seemed to crumple up and drop to the floor. Marlin, from the other door, shot his companion before he could make a move. Only the guard was left, cowering in the corner.

At the sight of him, Marlin hesitated a second, then deliberately raised his blowpipe and shot the man. He defended his action later by saying that it was just as well to leave no evidence, and that too was probably the reason that actuated him when he collected the darts from the dead men and took them away with him.

The diamonds were in a steel box, wrapped in canvas and sealed at each end and on the knots of the cords that bound it with big splashes of blue wax; the

package itself was locked in the van safe. The keys of this, however, were in the guard's pocket, and it was the work of a few moments to open the safe.

Marlin drew out the canvas wrapped box with its imposing seals, not a very heavy article considering the wealth it contained, and held it up for inspection.

"Is this the box?" he asked, and when Pereira nodded, "Are you sure of that?" he demanded.

The man pointed to the big seals with the familiar device of the company on them. It was too well-known to Marlin and Alsen for them to accept it at its face value.

"I saw it placed in the safe myself," Pereira added, as a further earnest of its genuineness.

"Good, well, we'd better not waste time now," Marlin said, giving a quick glance round. "The sooner we're out of here and in the jungle the better for our own safety."

He tucked the box under his arm, and dropped out on to the track. Alsen followed. Pereira came last. He had stopped to catch up a dark leather handbag from a rack in the van. They had made their departure none too soon. The train was already at the brow of the gradient and was beginning to put on speed. It slid away ahead of them, leaving the track empty.

As they plunged into the forest that bordered the track Marlin turned and spoke to Pereira.

"What have you got in that bag?" he asked.

The Brazilian waved his disengaged hand airily. "My luggage," he said with a smile and a flash of white teeth. "I am going on a short holiday and it would have looked odd had I not taken some little luggage with me. Also, I have in it some things I want."

The explanation, such as it was, seemed to satisfy

Marlin, for he did not refer to the matter again, though it struck him, from the way Pereira was carrying the bag, that it must be rather weighty for its size. Afterwards he was to learn the reason of this in a singularly unpleasant fashion.

A crime such as theirs has its immediate penalties unconnected with any the law may see fit to exact later. In a few hours, possibly a good deal sooner, the crime would be discovered, and then would commence the hue and cry. To venture near civilization for some time to come was, as Alsen phrased it, "simply asking for it." Pereira, however, as one who knew the country, had arranged matters. An Indian village lay not far away. There they could remain hidden for a day or so, until the first furore had time to die away. Afterwards it would pay them to try and get away through Bolivia to Chile or Peru, and eventually to Europe or the States.

It was in its essentials a perfectly good plan. It failed for the reason most plans fail, because of the human element. However, to make a long story short, things worked out at the start much as had been anticipated. They spent that night at the Indian village; indeed they remained there quite securely hidden for three days. At the end of that time the headman began to get uneasy; enquiries were being made in the neighbourhood, and at any moment the authorities might descend. Though the hiding place of the three was not likely to be discovered, even in an exhaustive search, the fact remained that their arrival had been a matter of common knowledge, and even Indian villagers can be made to talk if sufficient pressure be applied in the right fashion.

The three whites took the hint and their departure. They plunged deeper into the jungle, Pereira guiding them. The man proved invaluable at this juncture.

He knew the forest tracks, most of them invisible to the others until they were pointed out, and he seemed to have a talisman that secured him a good reception and a helping hand from all the natives with whom they came in contact. Thus for a period of several weeks they passed on, plunging deeper into the jungle, heading vaguely in the general direction of the Bolivian frontier. It might be months before they reached it, though at the time they took no count of that. All this time Pereira clung pathetically to his battered handbag. He had dragged it through the jungle, across swamps and over rivers, refusing to be parted from it for an instant. He slept with it under his head as a pillow at night, and only grinned when Marlin chaffed him about it. Once, however, he retorted that Marlin treated the box containing the diamonds with quite as much care.

One night they reached a village where Pereira seemed particularly welcome. The headman made quite a fuss over him, and gave the travellers of his best in the way of food. Alsen and Marlin slept well that night, exceedingly so. They could not remember when they had felt so tired. They were still tired when they awoke in the morning; so heavy were their lids that it was some time before they realised that Pereira was not in his accustomed place, though his battered old bag was still in evidence. They waited, and he did not come, and they began to get uneasy. Then they thought of questioning the headman.

His knowledge of English was limited. For long he seemed not to understand the drift of their questions, then finally he grasped what was wanted.

"Pereira he gone," he said astoundingly. "He say, he very sorry. 'Poor feller. Give them these.'" He thrust at them something that had been wrapped up tightly in plantain leaves and tied with fibre.

Marlin tore the packet open. Inside lay two diamonds, rather on the small side at that. At the same moment the same dreadful thought struck both men. They rushed back to their hut, though they were only a few paces away from it. Marlin thrust his hand under the makeshift pillow and drew out the canvas-wrapped steel box with the big seals on it.

"That seems all right," he said with a breath of relief. "I wonder what the big idea is though. Why should he desert us, make us a present of a couple of small diamonds, lose his share of the loot, and leave his bag behind, I'd like to know?"

"The answer to that may be in the bag," said Alsen dryly. "I'd like to have a look at its interior. He stuck so close to it."

He opened the battered old thing and peered in. Then he thrust in his arm, and drew out a strip of canvas spotted with broken blue seals and a burst steel box.

"What does this mean?" he asked, though he had already guessed.

Marlin almost tore the canvas from his hand, snatched up his own packet and compared the seals.

"Sold, I guess," he said disgustedly. "One's a clumsy imitation of the other, and the rotten part of it is that the genuine seals seem to be on those bits of canvas."

Feverishly, for after all there was still a possibility of error, he stripped the wrappings from his packet. They covered a cheap-looking metal box of the same size and shape as the steel one they had taken from Pereira's bag. It was locked, but a blow from a stone smashed it open. It was full . . . of bits of rock and quartz!

The two men stared at each other, their faces gone white and drawn. All was explained now, Pereira's

close attachment to his bag, his secret flitting, even their own sleepiness that morning. No doubt their food or drink, perhaps both, had been drugged, and under cover of their stupor he had substituted one packet for the other, broken open the genuine box and departed with its contents. Probably it had all been planned out carefully from the very beginning; only the hour of substitution had been left to chance to decide, and the duplicate box prepared in case he did not have time at the last to rifle the real one. It must have been the Latin blood in him plus a certain understandable pride at his own sharpness that made him leave enough behind to show how the stunt had been worked. Even that packet left with the headman was an example of the way he dramatised a situation.

It is not within the scope of this record to deal with the subsequent adventures of Alsen and Marlin. They travelled far and underwent many privations; they were many things in their turn; at times they came within an ace of starvation, and again they knew reasonable plenty. Always they headed towards Bolivia and the coast, since they felt that was the way Pereira would go. From time to time they came across traces of him. At the coast he seemed to have vanished incontinently into thin air.

But there was one hope left to them. Pereira had no money; he could only exist by selling the diamonds, and he would have to sell them gradually, almost one by one, so as not to flood the market. Moreover, many of the stones, they judged, were almost certainly in a rough state; they would have to be cut and polished before they were marketable. There is just one place in the world where they do that sort of work ever so much better than anywhere else, and thither they felt that in the natural course of things Pereira must sooner or later come.

CHAPTER XXXII

NEMESIS

THERE are many places on the Continent where a man with a certain mechanical genius can find full play for his faculties, and it was to one of such that Alsen and Marlin eventually drifted. Men must live somehow, and the pair fell back on their old trades. Alsen's fingers had not lost their nimbleness, and presently from his little workroom in a certain Dutch city came the plates from which Bank of Engraving notes were printed. American bills, English Bank notes, French francs were all alike to him, save that the paper of the English bank notes from time to time presented difficulty. There is a reason for this, for the English note is printed on paper impossible to duplicate, extremely hard to imitate even passably.

But this is not a record of the nefarious practices that kept the pair alive, that presently began to bring them a certain measure of prosperity. I mention the matter merely because it has a slight bearing on certain incidents earlier in this narrative. Marlin made more than one trip across the Channel, and gradually, as his circle of underworld acquaintances widened, he came to know Denning, a calm, self-possessed confidence man, and later through him got into touch with the Standishes. Some day a fuller history of their criminal activities may be given to the world; it is not lacking in interest, though there is no place for it in these pages. It was Lil Standish, however, who was instrumental in bringing young

Cranford into the gang. It was not long before Marlin placed his step-brother, but from first to last there was no suspicion of his identity in the mind of the younger man. Had there been, there is a chance that many things that happened would not have occurred.

Presently word trickled through to Marlin from the unofficial bureau of information of Crookdom that a man answering to Pereira's description came to Amsterdam from time to time to sell diamonds. Judicious bribery at last secured the man's address. Marlin promptly crossed the channel to investigate.

The result of this was that he located Pereira at Trimpton and positively identified him as the man he sought; he convinced himself too that enough of the diamonds still remained unsold to make it worth while organising a grand coup for their recovery if necessary. But before he set about that, he made further investigations. One night he ransacked the house in the faint hope that he might locate the diamonds and save having to split the proceeds with his colleagues. Naturally he found nothing, though he acquired a good deal of knowledge that proved very useful later on. The diamonds, he decided, were probably in safe keeping, either in a bank or in a safe deposit vault. In which case Pereira must be made to disclose where they were and hand them over.

Of late Marlin had been feeling the call of his own land—it comes to even the worst of us at some time or other—and foreign countries for a variety of reasons were beginning to pall on him. Once acquire sufficient capital, he could settle down in England and live a life of ease, secure in the knowledge that his past would never be brought up against him. The house Pereira occupied possessed certain natural advantages that appealed to Marlin, and along with his plan of recovering the diamonds began to form another plan

of acquiring the house, say, at a nominal price. After all, he reasoned, Pereira had bought it with money that was not rightly his.

He returned to the Continent and took Alsen into his confidence. It was Alsen's suggestion that Denning should be put forward to negotiate the sale of the house, as they euphemistically styled the species of blackmail they decided to level. Denning need not know the exact facts of the matter; they simply gave him to understand that Pereira had been involved in illicit transactions concerning diamonds, and that he would pay very handsomely to have the matter hushed up. To make the situation even more secure from their point of view Denning was to tell no more than the exact truth, that he was acting as agent for another party in whose hands the material details were being retained. What Denning actually thought did not then transpire. At anyrate he agreed to do as was asked of him. Then and there the plan of campaign was mapped out.

That meeting between Pereira and Denning must have been one full of dramatic possibilities. One can imagine the Brazilian suddenly seeing the ground open under his feet, so to speak, the picture of ease and security he had built up vanishing in smoke before the words of the big man. He must have become panic-stricken, yet with all the intensity of a drowning man he seized at the sole straw of hope left him. Not a word was said from first to last, mark you, of the gang's ultimate intention of acquiring the diamonds by hook or by crook. That would come later. Pereira probably concluded that it was worth sacrificing the house if he could escape with the diamonds and his freedom. He could not place Denning, but he almost certainly guessed the true facts of the case, and was shrewd enough not to show what he thought.

By degrees the transfer of the house was concluded, a nominal sum exchanged hands, both parties keeping up the pretence that it was an actual sale, and Pereira began to breathe freely again. It was at the exact moment when he fancied that he had escaped again that the blow fell. He had dismissed his servants; he himself was to leave that night, indeed most of his luggage had already gone, and the new owner was to take over possession at once. Though he did not know it he had been shadowed closely for many days, and his shadowers had convinced themselves that wherever the diamonds were they were not in the bank or a safe deposit. Obviously then they must be somewhere in the house. It was not feasible to pull the place to pieces; the more satisfactory course was to let Pereira discover them himself.

Pereira was packing the last of his hand luggage when Alsen and Marlin appeared. He was alone in the house; in another hour he would have been gone. They caught him completely by surprise. He stoutly denied all knowledge of the balance of the diamonds, under pressure he said they had been turned into cash long ago, and the cash spent. There were various psychological reasons why the precious pair did not believe him. The principal ones can be set forth briefly. At no time had his bank account contained any very large sum; judicious shadowing and something tantamount to burglary had convinced them of this; so many diamonds could not have been marketed in such a short space of time without the fact being known; and Pereira, by the nature of his preparations, had shown that he was quite ready to take up a life of independence in some other land. On the face of it, it was practically certain that gems had not been converted, and that they were either actually in Pereira's possession or close at hand. A search of

him and his belongings failed to reveal any sign of them.

The two promptly clapped him into the cellar to think things over. It may be mentioned here that partly through Denning and partly owing to Marlin's investigation the secret of the underground passage was already known to the conspirators. Originally it had been constructed for some purpose unknown by a former owner of the house, and Pereira had added such improvements as appealed to him. He had the type of mind that revelled in things of that nature.

Well, as far as the rest of the little world of Trimpton was concerned Pereira took his departure and the new owner moved in. There were no enquiries; everything was in order, and the vanished man had no friends. He had transacted all business himself, and he had no lawyer or agent to worry as to what had become of him. At this juncture one slight hitch became apparent, however. Denning had already become fairly well known in the neighbourhood as the new owner, several local people had got in touch with him in that capacity, and it would occasion suspicion if presently Marlin appeared as the actual owner of the house. It was decided, therefore, that Marlin's presence and a good deal of what he might do would not require explanation if he posed as Denning's man.

It was not all plain sailing. Pereira proved surprisingly obdurate. But the very fact of his obstinacy convinced all concerned that the diamonds were still in existence. It was here that a fresh complication arose. Denning was no fool; it was impossible to keep from him all knowledge of what was or rather was not happening, and gradually he began to realise that by virtue of his peculiar position he held the whip-hand. Also he had very useful allies in the

Standishes and young Cranford. He met them by arrangement in town and told them a good deal of what was in his mind. After that he came back and, seizing the opportunity of a day when Alsen was absent, launched the attack. He took Marlin almost completely by surprise, but to give the latter credit he saw when he was beaten. He also had the wisdom to accept a plan that was better than his own. The main difference was that he had to share now with Denning instead of with Alsen. That would mean trouble with Alsen, no doubt, but then Alsen could be dealt with later. He was at present on the Continent, which served to simplify matters.

What Denning proposed was this. The house should be locked up for a period and Pereira left in the cellar to think things over while Marlin and Denning went off to Paris ostensibly for a holiday. The secret passages were unknown to any outside the three concerned, and there was not much chance of anyone stumbling on them by accident. Moreover, owing to certain alterations that had been made recently, there was no possibility of Pereira himself escaping. Left alone for a few days to think things over, deprived of food and drink and with a reasonable prospect of starving to death if he proved obdurate in the end, he was bound to be brought to a more malleable frame of mind. Then the conspirators could return and deal with the man as circumstances warranted. Though neither as much as hinted it, there was the unspoken thought in the minds of both that Pereira must be disposed of, preferably by some kind of lucky accident, if one could be arranged. Denning was the kind of man who liked to prepare his alibis in advance. They went over to Paris by plane.

The following night a telephone call from Lil Standish in London came through to Denning. He had left his

address with the Standishes before his departure, a reasonable precaution of his in the circumstances.

The girl had little to say, but it seemed fairly important. "Alsen is in London," she said. "He came over to-day, and he said he was going down to see you in a day or so. I didn't tell him you were in Paris. Was I right?"

"You were. I think I know why he's gone across too. Can you hold him for a day?"

There was a silence before she answered. "I don't know," she said at length. "I can try. Till to-morrow night, you mean? I'll do my best. Why, though?"

"I'll get a letter off express to-night. You'll have it in time, and it will tell you everything. Put a match to it when you've finished reading it, though."

He hung up and went in search of Marlin. "Alsen's in London," he announced. "Lil saw him, and she thinks he may be planning a double-cross. I've just been speaking to her on the telephone. He's talking of coming down to see us in a day or so."

"The devil!" said Marlin. "If he goes down there and finds no one at home . . . He knows the passages."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Denning admitted. "There's one thing to do, though. Lil will try to hold him, so in the meantime one of us had better go across. It will mean altering our plans, but that can't be helped. Which of us is it to be?"

"I'll go," Marlin declared, and he looked oddly at Denning. "I'd like to hurry, but I don't think it wise to go by plane. It might be necessary later on to prove I wasn't out of France. Can it be done?"

Denning met his eyes. He knew what the man was thinking, and from long association could tell what he was capable of doing.

"I hope it won't be necessary," he said meaningly,

"but it's just as well to be prepared in case it is. You've got that fake passport of yours? A touch here and there to your face and you can make up, so you won't be recognised as yourself. You'll have to cross to get over by to-morrow night. Lil will hold Alsen till then. If she can't she'll wire, and then you'll have to take the risk and go over by plane."

Marlin nodded. "I don't think there's any great hurry," he said slowly. "If we couldn't get anything out of the man, Alsen's not likely to. The only danger is that Pereira might come to some sort of arrangement with him that will leave us out in the cold, something on a fifty-fifty basis, perhaps. That will take time, however."

Denning looked at him thoughtfully. "Of course," he said at length, "there's blood on those stones already, isn't there?"

"What makes you say that?" Marlin asked him.

"Oh, nothing," Denning returned airily. "Only that, perhaps, a little more might not be so very noticeable after all."

CHAPTER XXXIII

DOUBLE CROSS

LIL Standish got Denning's letter a matter of hours before Marlin arrived, and the instructions it contained were clear and concise. She met Marlin at the train, for she was taking no chances. It was remarkable when it came to a possibility of sharing out the loot how little any of these people trusted the others.

The news she gave him was rather disturbing. "Alsen's gone off somewhere without leaving word," she said. "I tried to hold him, but he slipped away. Do you think he smelt a rat and got suspicious?"

Marlin nodded. That was much about what he thought. "I'd better get down as quick as I can," he said. "I don't want to attract too much attention." He waited for her to answer his unspoken question.

"Reg can drive you down," she said. "You'll get there in a couple of hours. He can't wait for you, though. He's wanted back here to-night."

"That will do," Marlin agreed. "He can pick me up again in the morning if necessary. How can I let you know?"

She looked at her watch, and did a brief calculation. "You had better telephone me about a quarter past nine. That will give you ample time. Here's the number. Make it a personal call, and ask for Miss Cranford."

"Miss Cranford?" he repeated, staring at her, and wondering.

She noticed the puzzled expression in his face, but

did not guess the reason. "That's the name. Bunny's sister, you know. She's going away to-day, so it will be all clear. Bunny has a key and I can get into the flat."

She did not mention, because she did not think it wise, that the girl was also going down to Trimpleton, and that she and her brother would later be putting in an appearance at the same place. It had cost her time and trouble to get the invitation, and now she had got it she had no intention of letting him see that in the event of his failure there was a chance of her and her brother having a shot at it.

"One thing I think I ought to tell you," she went on, "and that is that if I don't hear anything from you to-night I shall fancy that something serious has happened to you. And because I would not like you to be harmed I would in that case feel justified in asking the police to make sure of your safety. In fact," she added artlessly, "I'll worry about you until I see you back here to-morrow and know that you have not met with any accident."

He smiled up at her. "I seem to see Denning's hand in this," he said without rancour. "How we trust one another, to be sure!"

Thereafter things went more or less according to schedule. He arrived at the house just on dark, and scouted carefully about before deciding on entering the place. He had intended going in in the usual way, through the door, but an idea came to him and he turned towards the summer-house. Somebody had been there quite recently, as was evident from the scent of cigarette smoke that still hung about in the still air. It could only have been Mark Alsen.

This supposition was strengthened when he tried the trap-door, and found that the mechanism which locked the trap was not working. The concealed lever

in the house, the mate of that beneath the steps, must have been reversed. The trap opened in the ordinary way with the needle key.

He got down the steps, closing the trap-door behind him, and since he did not believe in being taken by surprise he took from his pocket the little blowpipe he had used that memorable day in Brazil. It was quite as effective as a revolver bullet; it made no noise, and once the dart had been removed from the slight wound it made the cause of death was not at all obvious. Someone had knocked down one of the bags from the summer-house; it lay on the floor of the passage at the foot of the steps and he all but tripped over it. With a muttered curse he picked it up and threw it behind the angle of the steps. Then he went off down the passage towards the cellar, treading as noiselessly as he could, and wondering in just what condition he would find Pereira. He would not have been at all surprised to come on Alsen with him and learn that they had arrived at some sort of an agreement. He smiled wryly at the thought of their astonishment when he appeared.

His meditation was broken by the sound of footsteps coming towards him. He stopped instantly and crouched against the wall. Alsen at last. Some sixth sense must have warned the approaching man of his presence, for as he came abreast of Marlin he suddenly stopped doubtfully, then turned about and started to run back the way he had come. Marlin, dropping all concealment, pelted after him. He could not see in the dark, but he could tell by the sound that he was gaining. The man's breathing became audible. On the impulse of the moment Marlin's hand flew up to his mouth. With a faint whirr the little steel splinter shot forward from the blow pipe, there came a faint gasp from the man ahead, then the sound of a thud.

Marlin stopped, waiting, but no further sound came.

He switched on the light of his torch and holding it at arm's length cautiously approached. The incredible had happened. His blind shot in the dark had struck home. The man lay spread-eagled on his face, the tiny little dart sticking out of the back of his neck. Marlin removed it and turned him over. Then he cursed under his breath. It was not Alsen but Pereira his chance shot had killed.

It was quite a minute before the full implication of this drove home to him. Then he realised that if Pereira was free Alsen must have released him, which presupposed that they had come to some sort of agreement. In that case Alsen must have double-crossed him.

The chances then were that Alsen was somewhere about. Pereira did not smoke cigarettes, he remembered, thinking of the scent in the summer-house. If Alsen returned he was almost certain to come back the way Marlin had entered. In which case it would never do to leave the body in the passage. Alsen would stumble over it and become alarmed. That was the last thing Marlin wanted to happen. He was extremely anxious to meet Alsen and have a little conversation with him. What would follow the talk was a matter that was on the knees of the gods.

Marlin took up the body and carried it along the passage towards the cellar. As he had surmised the door was open. He entered the cellar and swept his light around. The darkest corner and the one where the body would be almost invisible from the door was slightly damp and against the wall some slimy mud had formed, probably due to seepage through the walls. The dead man's bedclothes were still in the cellar, and struck by an idea Marlin put down the body, spread

a blanket on the floor and placed the body on this. The heels of the shoes rested in the slimy pool, but this was of no moment. He gathered the rest of the bedclothes and heaped them over the still form until it was hidden. Even if Alsen should chance to shoot his light over there—which was not at all likely—he would probably conclude, unless he made a very close investigation, that the bedclothes had simply been flung there out of the way. The risk that he might be tempted to look more closely was one that Marlin felt justified in taking. He did not realise that he had brought some of the muddy soil from the garden in on his shoes and that at the moment the back of Pereira's head was resting on a little dab of clay which had worked loose. Probably he would not have worried about it even had he known.

He went through the panel that led to the room above. Everything was much as he had left it a few days before. But urged on by something he did not quite understand he began a systematic exploration of the house. At last he came to the room where the telephone was, and mindful of Lil Standish's warning he picked up the receiver. As he did so something slapped against his leg. He turned the light of his torch on to it. The telephone cord had been cut.

That puzzled him at first. Then as he began to see light he grew alarmed. Gradually a possible explanation came to him. It was not unlikely that the girl had spoken in the full knowledge that he would not be able to telephone her at the appointed time, suppose for instance, that she and Alsen were working in collusion. They could not have foreseen the murder of Pereira; nevertheless by that act he had played right into their hands.

He decided then and there to repair the damage as far as he could. Afterwards he might not have the

time. By cutting down the insulation and baring the wires he could make a temporary connection that would serve his purpose. He had just finished when he heard the front door open. He had very nearly been caught unawares.

He came out into the hall and the man at the door turned abruptly, and snapped on the hall light. It was Mark Alsen, and at the sight of Marlin he gave a little whistle.

"I didn't expect to see you here," he said, and Marlin could not say whether his surprise was genuine or assumed. Neither of them noticed in the heat of the moment that the door had swung to, but had not shut.

"I didn't expect to see you, either," Marlin said steadily. Then, "Mark, have you been after the diamonds?"

Alsen nodded. "Did you think I came down here for any other purpose?" he said. Judging by his tone he must have felt secure enough. He could know nothing of the dead man down in the cellar.

"And have you got them?" Marlin pursued.

Alsen shook his head. "No," he said, "but I know where they are. By the way, have you seen Pereira?"

"He's safe down in the cellar," Marlin told him.

Alsen looked at him oddly. Something in Marlin's eyes must have told him the truth, for his own eyes narrowed. "So you killed him?" he said. "In cold blood?"

"I thought he was you," Marlin said simply, and a revolver seemed to flash into his hand.

"Ah." The cry came forced from Alsen.

"You see, Mark," Marlin went on purringly, "I've the whiphand again, and there's only one thing that will stop you from joining Pereira. Hand over those

diamonds, or rather since you haven't them on you, tell me where they are."

"Put that gun down and I'll talk," Alsen said. "Good. I'll promise I won't do anything rash. Well, Pereira had divided the loot into two parts. Under pressure he told me where one lot was and made a bargain with me. I was to go hunt for the first lot, and if I found them all right I was to come back, release him and he would tell me where the other lot were. I went. I found them, buried in the grounds at the exact spot he had indicated. He'd kept his part of the bargain, so I kept mine. I let him go. I saw him off the premises, so to speak, then I cached my lot in a place where they were not likely to be found and went after the second lot. But either his directions were at fault the second time, or . . ."

"Or he diddled you," said Marlin calmly. "That's the more likely seeing that he came back after you had gone. He probably came to retrieve the other lot of diamonds. I found him in the passage heading towards the steps leading to the summer-house, and he hadn't any on him, I'll swear."

"In the passage leading to the steps," said Alsen quickly. "I wonder. That's where . . ." He stopped abruptly and his eyes narrowed.

"That's where . . .?" said Marlin encouragingly.

"Nothing."

The one thought leaped into the two minds at one and the same time. The second lot of diamonds must be secreted somewhere in the passage. On top of that a second idea came to Marlin. Alsen's diamonds were secreted there, too.

Perhaps Alsen saw the thing in Marlin's eyes, saw the idea forming in a rush and realised his danger. His hand went quickly down to his pocket, but he was not quick enough. Marlin's hand flashed up and even

though Alsen leaped sideways as the shot rang out. he did not escape. The bullet that might have reached his heart and killed him outright skidded slightly to one side. He dropped in his tracks like a stone and the blood ebbed slowly out on to his clothes. From somewhere in the house an eight day clock chimed. Marlin looked at his watch. It was close on to a quarter past nine. That telephone call must be put through. It would be worse than ever for him now if he did not 'phone up.

He decided to take what after all was only an infinitesimal risk, leave the body and 'phone through. No one was likely to come; the night itself was against that; and in addition the road past the house was an unfrequented one. He overlooked the fact that the door was ajar, neither could he be expected to foresee the unique combination of circumstances that would presently make the neighbourhood comparatively populous.

He was put through without delay, for at that time of night the line was clear of traffic.

The girl's first question to him was characteristic.

"Have you got the diamonds?" she asked.

"I haven't," he said. "But I hope to before the night is out. But now listen carefully." He lowered his voice a full octave. "There has been an accident here . . . to Pereira. The worst has happened. You're all in it, so you'll have to keep quiet about it."

There was an instant's silence while the girl absorbed this. Then: "And Mark? What about him?" she asked.

"Was he to come down here?" he asked with surprise in his voice. "You know that for certain?"

"I was only guessing, but . . ." She did not finish that sentence. "When will I see you again?" she asked.

"In the morning, I hope. As soon as I possibly can at anyrate. Good night." He hung up and went back to the room where Mark lay dead.

An examination of Alsen's pockets failed to reveal anything of interest to him. All he brought to light was a pocket book bearing on the dead man's activities as a forger, and a wallet containing a selection of notes of different nationalities and denominations. No doubt Mark had come over to England to deliver them to his various distributing agencies.

In a sudden fit of anger Marlin threw them into a corner of the room. What he had hoped to find he could not say; he may have had some idea that the dead man may have noted down the exact place where he had hidden his share of the loot.

Some slight sound came to his ears; it sounded so like the faint tinkle of a distant telephone bell that he started. As a matter of fact he was mistaken, but the error brought back to his mind the fact that the telephone was still connected. If anyone rang through and got no answer the seeds of an awkward situation might be sown; it would be better to disconnect the broken wires and let it be thought that some mechanical defect had put the instrument out of order.

He tip-toed back to the study. At the exact moment that he entered the room Mary Cranford must have tapped timidly on the front door, then as it swung open beneath the touch of her fingers, she walked in and on to the very room where Mark Alsen lay dead. But actually he was not quite dead. There was still life in him. Prompt attention and skilful surgery might have saved him even then.

His work done, Marlin came out again into the passage and stopped dead as he saw that the front door was wide open. Then to his ears came the thin whisper of a voice. The words were indistinguish-

able; even to Mary, holding up the dying man's head, there was a certain haziness about them that led to her making a fundamental error.

A vague idea of the real state of affairs came to Marlin. He began to tip-toe silently up the passage in the hope of stealing in on the visitor. Some strange sixth sense warned the girl; she sprang to her feet, and peered out into the passage. Her face was in the light and Marlin was in the shadows; he recognised her instantly; he felt justified in believing that she had not recognised him.

"Come here," he hissed.

She did the very last thing he had expected, turned and fled, screaming and panic-stricken, out into the night.

It was that that stung him to action. There was no sense in following the girl further—that way he might lose valuable time. The probabilities were that she would not reach help until she got to the village and told her story, but there was always the odd chance that she might encounter some stray motorist along the road, and bring him back to investigate.

It was the possibility of that that decided Marlin on the course he was to take. He had been mistaken in thinking Alsen was dead. The man was alive, still breathing, and he might revive sufficiently to talk to some purpose before he died. Therefore Mark could not be left behind in the room. On the other hand Pereira presented a problem too. If he was left down in the cellar he would be discovered sooner or later with perhaps dire consequences to his murderer. If, however, the body was found here in this room with little or no indication as to how he had died nobody was likely to get into very much trouble over it. Pereira had been known in the neighbourhood as rather a mysterious character, and the local police

would no doubt build up a quite specious but probably convincing theory as to how he met his death. Not only that, the substitution of bodies would tend to confuse the issue, and cast doubts upon the girl's reliability as a witness. All this raced through Marlin's mind, even while he was fumbling for the stud that opened the passage through the fireplace.

He caught up Alsen, carried him down the steps, and placed him on the ground. The man was almost unconscious now, but then one never knew. Wasting no time over him Marlin went back up the steps with Pereira's body. He gave a last look round before again descending into the passage, and then it was he spied the pocket-book and wallet he had thrown down in anger. Another idea came to him, one that might help further in confusing the issue. He thrust them into Pereira's pocket. As he did so he realised that the body was already cold. This, no doubt, was due to a variety of causes; probably the low temperature of the damp cellar had a good deal to do with it. It was all to his advantage, however, as it would almost certainly lead to Pereira's death being antedated by some hours.

He had just entered the cellar by the time Mary Cranford returned with Adderley. This he did not know, though it was to become a factor in his escape. He carried Alsen's body as far as the summer-house, and left it there, doubtful what course to pursue next. Now, as always in such cases the disposal of the body was to present a pressing problem. He had little fear of anyone coming across it in this remote corner of the grounds, however; it would be safe there till daylight—at anyrate.

He looked out of the summer-house and back towards the house. The lights he had turned off had gone on again. So the girl had got help. Faintly to his ears

came the panting of the engines of a car. From the fact that the sound neither increased nor lessened in volume he decided that it was stationary, most probably empty, almost certainly the car of the person who had come back with the girl.

To make doubly sure he went out to investigate. It was as he had surmised. What he had not guessed though was the presence of another car, the overturned three-wheeler. It was obvious it was disabled, but to make assurance doubly sure he slashed the tyres open with his knife. Then he climbed into the other car. At almost the same instant he heard the murmur of voices coming through the trees—by some trick of acoustics sound carried far that night—and saw an occasional flash that he took to be the beam of an electric torch. No time was to be lost. He simply slipped in the clutch and gave the car its head. It was just the luck of the game that it should be heading towards Trimpleton instead of London.

He took the first turning he came to in the hope that it would get him off the main road. In the confusion and in the fog he did not realise it was a cul-de-sac until too late. He manoeuvred the car round in some sort of fashion, for he was a skilful enough driver in some ways, and was about to turn back when it occurred to him that the girl and the man would almost certainly set out to walk to Trimpleton, the nearest place to the hall, and that if he waited until they passed he could turn back the way he had come and get on to London. He turned out his lights and with the engine just barely running sat waiting.

As he waited an idea came to him. The girl and the man were dangerous; they might already have learnt more than was desirable, and though he had been particularly careful, there was always the chance

that he had overlooked something damaging. The road was a lonely one; it was certain to be practically deserted; why not have a motor accident? The idea seemed quite the best that had come to him that night. Even if he only disabled the pair he could finish them off with a spanner; there was quite a sizeable one in the tool pocket at his side. He waited until he heard their voices and footsteps, then shot suddenly out of the lane at them, at the same time turning on the lights. He saw them spring apart and swerved towards the man as the more dangerous. He just managed to strike a blow with the spanner as he rushed past, but he saw his man spin and drop to the ground.

He stopped the car and got out. The girl had disappeared. Most probably she had squeezed through the hedge between the field and the road, but though he looked over he could see no sign of her. It was manifestly impossible to search the field. Once again mischance had made a mess of his plans, and his resentment against the girl began to mount steadily in intensity. She had escaped after all; she would bring the police back to the house, they would search and find not only Pereira's body, but Mark Alsen also.

Then it came to him in a flash that there was no reason why they should find Mark Alsen's body anywhere near the house, that if they found it many miles away on the outskirts of London, say, there would be nothing, nothing at all, to connect one crime with the other, nothing indeed to connect him with either. It was so good an idea, and he was so eager to carry it out before anything happened to interrupt him, that he left Adderley sprawling on the road where he lay. He headed off into the night, stopped at the foot of the wall at the point nearest

the summer-house, brought Mark's body out and got it into the car. His setting alight the girl's car en route was partly due to malice, partly to policy. It is a good working rule that when people's attention is attracted to something quite obviously interesting in one direction they are not so likely to have eyes for anything happening elsewhere.

Two hours later he abandoned the car on Barnes Common. A telephone message to Reg. Standish from a wayside callbox that he reached after a good deal of walking brought the young man out with a car. They reached the coast long before daylight. A few swift touches on the way altered him almost beyond recognition, and with the help of his duplicate passport he landed on the other side of the channel without having to face any awkward enquiries. Later he reached Paris and joined up with Denning. The alibi was complete when they returned by plane to England. That alibi might never have been shattered had it not occurred to Adderley that there was no absolute proof that neither man had left Paris between plane journeys, whereas there was a good deal that could only be explained by the supposition that one, if not both, had crossed and returned in the interval.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BACK-CHAT

"I'M not saying it was simple," Adderley told Mary Cranford and an interested audience of his relatives some days after the final capture of the gang. "All I'm saying is that given the same amount of luck any man that could put two and two together would have unravelled it eventually. You and your brother Bunny, Mary, had me all tied in a knot for a start, and it wasn't until I persuaded you to tell me all the truth that I began to see light.

"For a start, the moment I heard that you had a brother Daniel as well as a brother Burton, I began to think. Burton was Bunny and Daniel can be contracted to Danny. Alsen was pretty far gone when he tried to speak to you. He said what you took to be, 'What a dirty trick to play, Bunny.' With what you told about your other brother in my mind I wondered wasn't there a possibility that it was 'Danny,' not 'Bunny' that he'd said. It was a nice idea to play with, but it wasn't one to build a whole superstructure up on.

"But oddly enough everything began to crystallise and fall into place, so to speak, the day I first met Denning. For a start the wax vestas convinced me that Bunny had been somewhere in the house the night before. The fact that they were his matches didn't mean that he had struck them himself. They weren't a material point in themselves, but they had the effect of cumulative evidence, so to speak.

"I had suspected Denning and Co. from a purely academic point of view, if you can call it that, from the very first. I more than suspected him when he turned up so late that morning. You see, he had telephoned from London the previous night, ostensibly just after his arrival from Croydon, where the plane had brought him from Paris. Now if that was so, why hadn't he come down that night? There was ample time for him to catch a train. Why had he spent a night in London, missed a couple of trains the next morning and not got down here until about mid-day? The answer seemed to be that he didn't want to appear here too soon. There was a 'why' tacked on to that, and I guessed that the kidnapping of Bunny was the answer. Bunny had to be kidnapped before Denning arrived, otherwise Denning might be suspected.

"The limelight of alibis all the time was focussed on Denning, probably with the direct intention of taking our attention away from somebody else. I found that somebody the moment I set eyes on Marlin, as I'll call him, and learnt he was Denning's man. Everyone notices Denning, no one pays much attention to what Marlin is doing.

"Alibis always make me suspicious. I checked up Denning's. He had left for Paris by plane on the day and at the hour he had told us; he told us the truth about the time when he returned and the manner in which he came. But there were some hours unaccounted for. What had happened between the time Denning actually arrived in London and the late hour at which he 'phoned Sergeant Aldin? Bunny had been kidnapped. That was what had happened. But again I came up against Denning's alibi in which by implication was included an alibi for Marlin. But the only actual proof of that alibi

was Denning's word. On the other hand it would have been quite simple for Marlin to have got down here, do all that was necessary, and have got back again. The secret passage from the summer-house gave him a chance of entering despite the police cordon, and really in the circumstances it was quite the safest hiding place he could have used. It was only for the matter of a few hours anyway, and he probably took good care that Bunny wasn't able to raise the alarm. Of course this is mostly supposition, for poor Bunny can't check it for us now.

"I think they must have felt reasonably safe now that their first panic had a chance of subsiding. The police had been in possession of the house a couple of days and had not found the secret entrances. The chances therefore were that they never would. I might have found them in time myself, but then that was because I had begun by suspecting their existence. It seemed to me the only way to explain a good number of things that would be completely insoluble otherwise.

"I staged the identification of Pereira deliberately. I thought something might come of it, and something did, though I'll admit I was rather surprised at what Denning said. I didn't expect him to say so much, but after all, when you come to think of it, he told me no more than he knew I could have found out for myself. It wasn't so much what he told me, though, as the train of thought it set going in my mind that mattered. Always I came up against Brazil. The curare, Pereira, the fact that Marlin had been in South America, one or two other things. Then there was Denning's mention of Minas Geraes. That must have been a slip of the tongue, but as he himself knew little about South America he couldn't possibly see what it would lead to. I had a hazy idea myself that it

had something to do with diamonds, and later I checked up on that.

"The next day the Brazilian Legation gave me some information when I called there, about a particular diamond robbery that had occurred in the mining district a couple of years before. Oddly enough at about the same time an official named Pereira had disappeared, more curious still the guards had been killed by curare-poisoned darts. Weak links, perhaps, but to my mind they all held together.

"The most difficult thing was to knock out that Paris alibi. The only way I could do it was by comparing it with the kidnapping business. One seemed on all fours with the other. In each case the man in the limelight was completely covered by alibis, and in each case Marlin's alibi depended on Denning's word. The minute I began to see that between the date of their arrival in France by plane and their return to Croydon by the same means there was ample time for a man to have crossed the Channel and got back again to France, I began to see the end in sight. Denning's alibi didn't matter a hoot; it was only necessary so that the man in his turn could give an alibi to Marlin. The point I'm trying to make is that the moment you doubt the reliability of a man's word lots of things that puzzled you before sort of solve themselves automatically.

"In a few hours from a feeling of security they must have begun to develop a vast uneasiness. My activities worried them. The swift identification of the two dead men worried them. Then the night of the day Denning arrived home Clinton dropped in on him for a little chat, quite a friendly call, one local nabob calling on the other, without the slightest hint that Clinton had called in his official capacity. Denning as a matter of fact was so anxious to get

rid of him that he said he had to go out, and offered Clinton a lift home in the car. They nearly ran poor Bunny down and incidentally led to Butt making some unsound deductions. I'd had a telephone conversation with Clinton that evening; he'd been to see Burrige and had asked him one or two questions that Burrige was able to answer in a rather helpful way. Clinton, on my advice, mentioned to Denning some salient points of his conversation with Burrige, just enough to set the man by the ears. The reactions were what we had expected. They made a decisive move. The fact is, however, that I did not anticipate that that decisive move would be made against me as the man most dangerous to them at that juncture. They must have shadowed me practically all day in town, and found as the day advanced that their worst fears were being realised. My call at the Brazilian Legation must have been the last straw. I don't know why I didn't keep in mind the possibility that I would be shadowed, but frankly I didn't think they would do anything of the sort. Their very daring, however, only shows how desperate they were becoming."

"There's just one thing I think you haven't made clear to me," Mary Cranford said, "and that is about that letter that purported to come from Bunny. I know it was put under my door, but who was the culprit?"

"Young Standish," Adderley told her. "Clearly he was the only person who had an opportunity of doing it. During the crucial moments when you were all gathered together while his sister was telling you about the visit to the mortuary, and incidentally abusing me, he slipped upstairs and did the deed. Obviously it was handed to him by Marlin when the pair were in the house together that day."

"Michael,"—it was Claire who spoke—"did you know that Butt was going off on that expedition to Denning's house that night?"

Adderley nodded. "I'd arranged it beforehand with him, but for a good many reasons I wanted it to appear as if I knew nothing about it. The Standishes had been talking in the girl's room; Butt had taken the opportunity of hearing a little improving conversation, and he had an idea he had narrowly escaped being caught. When I met him in the passage he tipped me the wink and asked me quite solemnly if he could go to the cinema. I played up to him. He told me afterwards that he believed they would reason that a man who had overheard their conversation, apparently by accident, and the moment he ran into his master asked for the evening off to see the pictures, was not the sort who was likely to be of trouble to them. Maybe he was right, maybe he wasn't. Butt's thought-processes are queer things, but somehow they get him there in the end."

"Well, I'm glad it's all over," said Lady Kettering seriously. "I think, Michael, I'm getting too old to relish adventure now. I wonder you don't get your fill of it, too, particularly when it's spoiled your holiday."

"I wouldn't say spoiled it," Adderley retorted. "It had its compensations, you see. Anyway, Mary and I are going to have an exceptionally nice holiday very shortly."

"Honeymoon," said Helen scathingly. "That's not a holiday, it's a holocaust. What do you say, Claire?"

Claire was made of sterner stuff than her sister. She preferred actions to words.

"The man's getting mushy," she said. "Let's throw cushions at him. It will be practice for the confetti anyway."

