

# THE EYE IN ATTENDANCE

Who killed Basil Stanismore?

VALENTINE  
WILLIAMS

is also the  
author of *The Run of Clubs*

*The Red Mask*

*The Unknown*

*The Key Man*

*Island Gold*

*The Man with the Chisel*

*Chisel in the Chamber, etc.*



THE STORY of a  
MYSTERIOUS MURDER, of TANGLED  
CLUES, and of their CUNNING UNRAVELING by  
INSPECTOR MANDERTON of SCOTLAND YARD

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

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## THE EYE IN ATTENDANCE

By Sebastian Williams

---

Whom better than Sebastian?  
Whom better than this a dog-  
eared work on the shelf?

Time was the anxiety that  
condemned (perhaps) Standeron  
of *London Yard*. The beautiful  
Alice Harrison gave a high, low  
lamented husband. Mrs. Harrison  
was, I was perhaps aware, Ma-  
the's daughter. I was among the  
guests at *Noble Court* and further  
enlarged the picture.

For those who like a thrilling  
word of adventure, Sebastian  
Williams has written one of his  
best, a story even more telling  
than *The Man with the Clock-  
face*, and even more telling than  
*The Best Men* — *The New  
Man*.

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# THE EYE IN ATTENDANCE

BY

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

*Author of 'The Man with the Club Foot,' 'The Red Mass'  
'Mr. Ramosi,' etc.*



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**TO  
WALTER HARTE JOHNSON  
OF THE ROYAL THAMES YACHT CLUB  
IN FRIENDSHIP**



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## **THE EYE IN ATTENDANCE**



# THE EYE IN ATTENDANCE

## CHAPTER I

### MAJOR BARLESTON'S HONOUR

**THERE** are some proposals so vile that even the vilest wince at their enunciation. Frankie Barleston, his brain dulled by whisky, did not at once fully grasp Basil Stanismore's meaning. But he still possessed the perceptions, as he retained the outward semblance, of good breeding; and the hardening of that face of brass as it truculently glared at him across the desk, and the deepening of its brick-red hue, made him vaguely aware that the suggestion just put to him was one of which even Basil Stanismore, M.P., was ashamed.

Major Barleston's sinewy, freckled hand trembled at his mouth.

'I don't quite know what you mean, Stanismore,' he said hoarsely. 'Jacks, the turf accountants I'm with just now, give me five hundred a year, and what with commission and a winner or two I make perhaps thirty quid a month in addition, if I'm lucky. But beyond this I haven't a bob. I've nothing on which I *can* realise.'

'There's Mrs. Barleston ——' Stanismore repeated.

'I can't touch Alix's money,' the other answered doggedly.

'It's not for want of trying, I know that,' rejoined Stanismore deliberately. 'It's tied up so that you can't get at it, or she and the boy'd be in the gutter by now. But I wasn't alluding to your wife's money. I mean Mrs. Barleston herself.'

At last the other reacted. He seemed to stiffen as he sat up, adjusted his monocle, and mustered the large, complacent man who eyed him. Through a deep mire of whisky and dissipation the old instincts came struggling to the surface. But the thinning red hair, the swimmy blue eye, the mottled complexion, and the paunchy figure, had effaced almost all trace of Frankie Barleston in the pill-box cap and gold-laced hussar jacket running through his money to the tune of ten thousand a year. Stanismore saw him as the world would have seen him, that thing of ridicule, a broken-down gentleman on his dignity.

'Would you — ah — mind explaining yourself?' Barleston spoke with the deliberate drawl which he still found useful for disconcerting troublesome tradesmen.

'No need of explanations as between you and me,' said Stanismore briskly. 'You're busted, and you know it. Bills and notes of hand of yours are out to the tune of about seven thousand pounds. Instead of presenting your paper for payment, I've asked you here for a little friendly chat to find out how you propose to meet your obligations, and you can suggest nothing. I'm a rich man, but seven thousand pounds is a tidy sum, a tidy sum, Barleston. Don't you think you'd better come down off your high horse and talk business?'

Stanismore spoke in the rich, throaty voice of the man of generous body who loves the good things of life and



has the means and health to enjoy them. His fullish lips pressed firmly and luxuriantly upon the cigar, whose admirable aroma blended with the pleasant leather smell of the study, with its rows of gleaming bookshelves, big armchairs, and huge, orderly desk. His shining, smooth-shaven face, his well-brushed dark hair, his pinkly gleaming finger-nails, were evidence of a careful toilet. He exuded a faint scent of bath-salts, shaving-soap, and lavender-water. His large frame, filling almost too closely the blue reefer jacket, radiated health and energy. There were blueish veins in his cheeks, however, and the beginnings of bags beneath the eyes which regular massage could not entirely dispel. Barleston, hunched up in the leather chair on the other side of the desk, noticed each and every one of these things, and hated Stanismore for them one and all.

‘Granted you have no realisable assets,’ the purring voice went on. ‘But you have a charming wife, Barleston — no, let me have my say — whom you don’t appreciate in the least, and who would be heartily relieved to be rid of you. Your wife is one of the most attractive women I have ever met. She has beauty and brains, and something else which I’m sure you’ve never perceived, a gift of enormous sympathy. I’ve known her now for more than a year, and I’m tremendously attracted by her. I believe she likes me, too. Nothing goes with a woman like success, Barleston.’

He paused and thoughtfully sliced the long white ash from his cigar on the rim of the ash-tray. Barleston, his glass in his eye, sat and watched him with a face of wood.

‘Now, I’ve reached a point in my career,’ Stanismore

resumed, 'where I feel the need of feminine influence to guide me. At forty-five I've made my pile out of my insurance business, and I've started to carve out a position for myself in politics. At your own age, Barleston, I'm a better man than you are. But politics ain't business. Before I was thirty I'd put it across 'em all in Brummagem, where I was born and bred, and I did it alone. But this political game's a bit different. Thrust and drive'll take you a long way, but not all the way. You want intuition, a — a sense of values. There a woman like your wife can help me — '

Barleston spoke.

'But, damn it, you're married yourself. Where does Mrs. Stanismore come in all this?'

The other smiled deprecatingly.

'Poor Gina! The wife is the tragedy of the self-made man. They clutch our coat-tails as we clamber up the ladder and try to drag us down. Gina's all right — now. She's got her own Rolls, and her maid, and one of these days she'll have a title. Gina won't make any fuss.' He grinned and showed an array of big, yellow teeth. 'She's used to me by this.'

Barleston was silent. Perhaps he was awed by the drama which those last words disclosed. Then he said:

'But will your wife agree to a divorce?'

'Divorce?' cried the other; 'there's no question of divorce.'

Barleston looked fixedly at the broad, self-satisfied countenance of his *vis-à-vis*.

'By God, Stanismore!' he muttered, 'you've got a nerve!'

Stanismore laughed easily.

'Come, come, Barleston, isn't it pure affectation on your part to pretend to take this thing seriously?'

The other, who had been nervously plucking at his trim, reddish moustache, dropped his hand upon his thigh.

'Damn it all! I suppose you realise that you're asking me to sell you my wife?' he exclaimed.

Stanismore shrugged his shoulders.

'Surely it's better to buy than to steal?'

Barleston laughed shortly.

'You poor fool, if you think it's going to be as easy as all that with Alix!'

His companion's face hardened.

'That's as may be. I'm not asking *you* to suggest anything to your wife. All I want is a free hand. In return, as long as you keep quiet we'll say no more about your paper, and I'll secure you a job abroad where you'll see nothing and hear nothing. With my influence I can undertake to get you something somewhere, sufficiently distant from London to suit us both.'

Barleston turned away with a hopeless gesture and gazed out of the window. The June sunshine was striking high lights out of the brass bonnets of the taxis as they scudded along Grosvenor Crescent.

'There you are,' said Stanismore, and began to fill his cigar-case from a box on the table, 'you can take it or leave it. I don't want to press you, but it's noon past, and if I'm to appear at this garden party at Portsmouth this afternoon I'll have to catch the twelve-fifty from Waterloo.'

'It's all very well for you to talk so airily about taking it or leaving it,' Barleston burst out shrilly, 'but I've got to consider my position a little. My honour ——'

Stanismore shook with silent laughter. The cigar gripped in his teeth spilled some ash on his coat.

'My dear Barleston, really! How *can* anybody who plays cards as — as successfully as you do talk about his honour?' And he carefully flicked the ash from his lapel.

His companion's face darkened.

'That's a damned offensive remark, Stanismore.'

The big man shrugged his shoulders and went on with his task.

'Anyway,' the other resumed, 'what's the use of riding off at a tangent? What are people going to say about me when they know that — that ——' His voice trailed away.

Stanismore playfully shook a thick finger at him.

'What did folks say about young Creagh's suicide, my friend? You lived that down all right, I think. And what about the running of Morning Maid at Kempton Park? You didn't talk about your honour when the bookies paid up, did you?'

Barleston leaned forward suddenly as though about to spring. His mottled face was flushed.

'Curse you! that's enough of that, d'you hear? I've had about all I'm going to stand from you. Present my bills and be damned! If I go through the courts you won't get a bean!'

Sharply Stanismore looked up from the desk. Very deliberately he laid his cigar-case down. His teeth gritted hard on his cigar.

'Don't you dare raise your voice against me!' he said in a low voice full of menace. 'Walk out of that door, and I'll put you where you belong, you drunken sot, and that's the gutter. You'd go through the courts, would

you? And what happens to bankrupts in your good clubs, my friend? They run 'em out quick, and well you know it. Frankie Barleston in a third-floor back at West Kensington and barred from his clubs would be a fat lot of use to Jacks, the bookie. Don't you try and bluff me, my lad! If I turn nasty there'll be no more cutting a dash at the races and Romano's for Frankie Barleston. You'd go on the dole, I shouldn't wonder. It was made for won't-works like you. But the dole won't keep you in whisky, my friend. Ah, ha! that gets under your skin, does it? Go through the courts my foot! Why, you poor sponge, do you realise that any day this twelvemonth past I could have smashed you? Ay, and I'd have done it, too, if it hadn't been for your wife.'

Barleston leant back in his chair, pallid.

'A twelvemonth!' he gasped in a dazed voice. 'A twelvemonth! You've had my paper for a twelvemonth! Then it's you that's been hounding me down all this time? What are Melchisedech and Company to you, Stanismore? I don't understand ——'

Stanismore smiled rather grimly and picked up his cigar-case.

'My dear fellow, there are more ways of laying out one's savings than buying Consols.'

The monocle dropped from Barleston's eye.

'By God, you're a nailer!' he ejaculated.

Once more Stanismore smiled.

'When you know me better, my friend, you will realise that when I want a thing I go after it.'

'A proper nailer!' Barleston repeated.

The other glanced at his wrist.

'Time presses,' he said, 'and I've my train to think

of, or I should be delighted to sit here and discuss my character with such an eminent judge as yourself. Come, I want your answer.'

Barleston picked up his grey top-hat from the desk and rose to his feet.

'Look here, Stanismore,' he remarked with an effort, 'you've said hard things to me this morning, but I'll admit that some of them were justified. I was never brought up to work and I can't live without money, and just at present — well, I'm properly up against it. Every damned thing I've touched since the war has gone wrong — I don't know why. You've got the whip hand of me. But don't make things too hard. You know that Alix and I go pretty much our own ways, and she'd be glad enough to be shot of me I dare say. But after all she's my wife, and — and you have to consider my position a little. You admit that your wife means nothing to you. Then why not let her divorce you?'

Stanismore's strong voice spoke decisively.

'No. I'll have no divorce. I can't afford to have any scandal ruining my career. I'm just starting, and I'm going to lead the party before I'm through —'

Barleston raised his eyebrows.

'Easy over the sticks!' said he. 'Why, old Chesterham's good for another twenty years yet!'

'Don't you make any mistake! These attacks in *The Daily Radical* have played old Harry with Chesterham's position as leader. They won't put up with it much longer. Discipline is all to pot. There are no secrets left in the inner circle. Everything gets into this damned rag.'

Barleston shook his head.

'You'll never dig *that* old fox out.'

'The party's fed up, I tell you. They won't stand it. Within a month, you mark my words, he'll have either to go to the Lords or retire altogether. To-day it's merely a question of who's to tell him to go. It's a damned shame after his splendid record of service. But there you are: the fat's in the fire. They want me to bell the cat. But I can't do that. Chesterham has befriended me ever since I first entered politics, and in common decency ——'

Barleston laughed.

'That ain't of much account in politics nowadays, Stanismore.'

'I've told them I'll have no hand in turning old Ches. out,' replied the other firmly, 'and I mean it. But if he goes there are three or four of us in the running for the leadership, and I'm going to have it. And so I tell you, Barleston — no scandals.'

The other's weak face looked spiteful.

'All the same, I'm her husband. She seems to think that I'm of no account already. But she'd better look out. If she's good enough to be kept in luxury until the end of her days, then, by God! so am I.'

Stanismore tapped his hand impatiently on the desk.

'Is that your final answer?'

Barleston put on his hat.

'I'm not going to decide,' he said in a sulky voice. 'You'd better hear what she thinks about it.'

Stanismore sighed happily.

'I guessed you'd say that. Are you going down to Node this week-end?'

Barleston, who was staring moodily out of the window, stiffened suddenly into an attitude of watchfulness. As his head was turned away from the desk, Stanismore,

busy sorting papers into a portfolio, did not remark the furtive look that crept into his eyes. Aided by the tawny hair and pointed nose, it impressed the face with a sort of vulpine stamp.

'I might. What do you want to know for?' was the sullen answer.

'Because,' Stanismore retorted, without looking up, 'if I'm to handle this, I don't want you butting in. Who's staying at Node now, anyway?'

'Ronnie Dene, old Vroque, a young American called Leese, a friend of Ned Fussy's, and, of course, Freckles ——'

'Quite a house-party, eh? Well, anyway, Alix won't miss you, that's one thing.' He chuckled.

'When are you going to see her?' Barleston asked. The casual air in which he put the question was overdone; at any rate, Stanismore looked up, suspicious at once.

'Look here, Barleston,' he said brutally, 'you're to leave your wife and me to settle this. You can give Node House a miss for the present, d'you understand?'

'Oh, all right,' Barleston retorted sulkily, and walked to the door.

'You stay away, d'you hear me?' Stanismore called after him.

'I hear,' Barleston flung back over his shoulder as he went out into the hall.

Stanismore heard the front door slam, saw him pass the window, very natty in his smart morning-coat, swinging a malacca cane.

'Bah!' muttered Stanismore to himself, 'I've got *his* number.'



Then he rang, and the butler brought his hat. A minute later he was in his Rolls on his way to Waterloo Station.

## CHAPTER II

### NODE TOWER

ALIX BARLESTON's feet, clad in thin evening shoes, were noiseless on the moss-grown walk. Not more noiseless than her going was the velvety June night which here, in the inky blackness of Node House Wilderness, draped itself about her. The flaunting rhododendrons, rich with bloom, through which she softly made her way, stirred restlessly in the still air; and sometimes a blossom, damp with the dew of night, brushed against her bare arm. There were odd rustlings in the man-high thickets. Now the eerie cry of a night bird struck stridently across the silence; now the beating of unseen wings quietly threshed the air.

Presently the round mass of Node Tower reared itself before her. At the side the ivy which drooped from its battlemented roof softened its barren outline; but its solitary window, looking out over the sea, projected sharp and black against the starry sky.

Without hesitation she turned off the path to take another narrower one which led to a flight of steps mounting to the entrance to the tower. Halfway along the path she paused and, as if struck by a sudden thought, returned and followed the path she had left. It brought her to a door in the wall. The night was dark and moonless; and here, under the solemn firs, the blackness was opaque. But her hand went out unfalteringly and found

at once the milled knob of the Yale lock. She swung back the door, and the beacon on the lightship on the sable bosom of the sea peeped in on her, glanced at its reflection in the gleaming beach below, and died. The tide was far, far out, and purplish shadows rested on the wide-flung desolation of the shore.

Her black satin slipper moved a brick that lay over against the door, and set it in position to keep the door from closing. Then she turned and, lightly as before, retraced her footsteps to the tower.

In the shadow of the tower she halted. A flight of stone steps, with a carved balustrade, coiled itself about the lichen-grey masonry to a flat porch set some fifteen feet up in the side away from the sea. She picked up her frock, as from force of habit women of thirty still will do even in this age of short skirts, and mounted. At the top of the stairs she depressed a latch and slowly pushed open the door.

As the hinges groaned, for the first time she faltered. The warm and musty odour of a room long shut up or little used drifted out to her. The habitation of man is livened by certain homely smells, which breathe a welcome whether they be of yellow soap or tobacco smoke, furniture polish or cooking. They are cheerful, active odours, speaking of life, of energy, of enjoyment. But the black and silent cavity framed by the half-open door was redolent only of inertia and abandonment.

She gave a little defiant shake of her cropped brown head. She pushed the door wide and entered boldly. The darkness lightened at the end of the room where its one large window looked down upon the sea. Different articles of furniture were dimly seen there: an armchair; a centre

table covered with a cloth; a pompous high mantelpiece with a clock flanked by a pair of candlesticks. Alix Barleston drew a box of matches from the brocade bag she carried, struck a match, and lit one of the candles.

She set the light down upon the table. The yellow flame shed its feeble radiance about a circular room flattened at the farther end by a tall but shallow window in the Tudor manner. It was a sombre place. The tower itself was one of those architectural fantasies which the vogue of macabre romance a century or more ago, in the heyday of Matthew Gregory Lewis and 'The Monk,' reared in so many English parks; but the furnishings of its single room were of much later date. The ugly davenport, the heavy curtains of red rep, the yellowing photographs in faded plush frames, belonged to the fulness of the Victorian Age. The chamber was inert, lifeless. The water-colours in frames on the walls, disingenuous triumphs of the drawing-class; the shelf of ragged school-books; the screen which, pasted with coloured figures clipped from the Christmas annuals, was drawn across one of the dark corners — each told its tale of stagnation as plainly as a broken punt half-sunken in the sedge of a pond.

The memory of a dead girl hovered over all. Alix Barleston knew it, and to her it was as though the faintly sickly odour of the place were distilled from dried tears and withered hopes. For this had been Marian's room, poor Marian Fubsy, only daughter of the host and hostess of Node House, laid to rest these twenty years in the cemetery at Davos Platz. They had kept her room as she left it on that last sad journey in search of health; and by Lady Fubsy's express order — inscrutable is the reasoning of grief — no one was suffered to climb the

stone stair save the maid whose appointed duty it was to keep the tower room aired and dusted. That this task was but perfunctorily performed was apparent in the stuffy atmosphere and the blur of dust which overlay everything.

Alix Barleston took a tortoiseshell case from her bag, extracted a cigarette, and sought a light from the candle. Cigarette in mouth, she crossed to the window and threw open the double casement; then, as though by an after-thought, drew the curtains together. The murmur of the tide arose from the beach below, and the stiff red hangings shivered uneasily in the night breeze from the shore. In the thickets at the back of the tower a nightingale was running over the few uncertain notes which are the overture to its burst of song.

A step sounded on the stone stair. The woman swung round. Basil Stanismore stood at the door. He was in conventional yachting dress, blue jacket, white flannel trousers, white shoes. On seeing her he took off his white-topped yachting cap and glanced at his wrist.

‘Eleven o’clock precisely. I was anxious to be on time ——’

‘I have never known you late for an appointment,’ she said with a smile.

He came briskly into the room. His presence was like the draught that, between door and window, was chasing away that ineffable odour of dead years. Alix Barleston felt his virile vigour swelling like a cloud into the sombre chamber, spreading out and filling it. He cast his cap down upon the table.

‘I wondered if you would remember,’ he said. ‘Then I saw the door open, and I knew that you were waiting.’

He took her two hands in his. 'Well, and how are we? It seems an age since I saw you ——'

'Why, it's not a week!'

'Bah! A meeting in a restaurant! One can talk more quietly at Charing Cross Station, I dare say, than at the Carlton. Why on earth do you bury yourself like this in the country?'

'The place suits me. And we have no home of our own. Besides, Sir Harry and Lady Fussy are such dears.' She gently extricated her hands.

'Are you surprised to see me?'

She shook her head, her grey eyes grave.

'Not after what you told me at the Carlton on Monday. And what I've found out since.'

'Has your husband been down here lately?'

'He was here for the day on Tuesday.'

'He's not here now?'

'Oh, no!'

Seeing Stanismore's bold gaze upon her face, she picked up her cigarette-case rather nervously.

'Will you smoke? They're only Gold Flake, I'm afraid.'

'Thanks.' He lifted his hand. 'I have a cigar. But I'll take a light.'

She stopped him as he bent to the candle.

'I forgot. Nobody is supposed to use this room. And cigar smoke hangs. I really shouldn't have lit a cigarette. Do you mind?'

She crushed her cigarette on the sole of her slipper and tossed the end into the empty grate.

'Right-o!' said Stanismore. He went to the door and pitched his cigar out into the night. When he turned back

into the room he found her installed in one of the two horsehair armchairs.

‘Do sit down.’

‘Thanks, but I can talk better if I walk about.’ He glanced around him. ‘What a romantic spot for a mid-night meeting!’

‘You must never tell anybody that you’ve been in this room,’ she said. ‘Lady Fussy won’t allow it to be used. It was her dead daughter’s play-room. Everything’s been left exactly as it was. I allowed you to come here only because you said you would be late and that you must see me alone. It’s impossible up at the house in the evening with the place full of people. Where did you leave the yacht? Off here?’

He shook his head.

‘Not much. She’s at Chine Bay. I came along the sands ——’

‘Since you’re here to-night,’ she broke in earnestly, ‘it means that things are bad?’

He moved his head in a gesture of assent.

‘They’ve reached a crisis,’ he answered.

She bowed her head wearily. Crisis! She had learnt to know the sound of the word since the war. It was often on Frankie’s lips. It meant insistent creditors, cadging, subterfuges, lies . . .

‘Your husband is in the hands of the money-lenders. I see he’s told you. But do you know how much he owes?’

He stopped in front of her, big and masterful.

‘More than he can ever pay, at any rate for the moment.’

‘Yes, but *how much?*’

'Nearly a thousand pounds, Frankie said.'

'The liar! If he'd said nearly seven thousand ——'  
She gasped.

'It's not possible ——'

'It's true,' retorted Stanismore bluntly.

'Then this is the end,' she declared with the calm of stark despair. 'I don't mind so much for myself; nothing could be worse than the sort of life we've led for the last few years. But it's tragic for Sandy. He's down for Eton, and I had hoped he would have gone there the year after next. I'm not a snob, but Frankie and all his people were at Eton, and I did so want Sandy to carry on the tradition. How am I going to bring him up with this burden of debt strangling us?'

Stanismore had expected her to cry out, to protest, maybe to burst into hysterical tears. Her self-control disconcerted but did not disarm him.

'I haven't told you all ——' he began tentatively, and watched her face. She looked up apprehensively.

'Your husband has other debts besides these.'

'It doesn't surprise me.'

'Racing debts.'

'That's nothing new.'

'One of his creditors is going to make trouble.'

'Frankie will plead the gaming law.'

'This isn't a county court affair. It's police.'

She gave a little shiver and drew her lace wrap about her shoulders.

'Tell me!' she bade in a toneless voice.

'Your husband was entrusted by a certain man with a sum of money to put on a horse. The horse won. Barleston hasn't paid up.'



‘How much is it?’

‘A matter of eight hundred pounds.’

He saw the distress in her eyes, heard her catch her breath sharply.

‘The police can’t make Frankie pay,’ she argued stubbornly.

‘You don’t understand. This man knows something——’

‘Blackmail?’ she prompted contemptuously.

Stanismore laughed shortly.

‘I wish it were as easy. Keene Kavanagh’s no black-mailer. He says he’s been swindled, and he’s out for blood. He’s found out the facts about a game of cards in which your husband won heavily from a young man named Creagh. Creagh couldn’t pay and shot himself.’

Her fingers were white where they desperately clutched the arms of her chair. She did not speak. Her face was blank, a mask of ivory satin. She stared in front of her, seeing nothing, neither Stanismore’s testing glances nor the sort of growing elation that was spreading across his broad features.

‘Kavanagh’s vindictive. He calls your husband a card-sharper, who ought to be shown up. He’s got the evidence. And he threatens to lay it before the police.’

That Keene Kavanagh had the evidence was literally true, inasmuch as he had sat in with his friend Frankie Barleston at the plucking of young Creagh. That anybody with his reputation should risk himself within the doors of Vine Street was, to say the least, unlikely, as Stanismore fully realised. But this was Basil Stanismore’s last card and he played it boldly, inwardly commending the

characteristic perseverance which had brought him into touch with this Jermyn Street loafer and his vinous tale of complaint against Frankie Barleston over some complicated turf transaction.

‘How do you know all this?’ she asked.

‘I promised to look into your husband’s affairs. I made inquiries. This is what I found out. Kavanagh’s a decent fellow, and only wants his money. But he’s Irish, hot-headed and stubborn, and if your husband doesn’t settle with him on Monday ——’

Stanismore made a deliberate pause. He had spoken with rapid assurance to cover up the evasiveness of his reply. But his anxiety was groundless. Could she have freed herself from the black thoughts crowding in upon her to raise her eyes and look at him, her woman’s intuition might have rent his veil of compassionate chivalry and discerned the lewd eagerness trembling behind it.

But the last shot had told. Suddenly she flung herself face downwards upon her folded arms and fell into a passion of weeping.

Throughout their interview he had held aloof. Always master of himself, he had clung grimly to his rôle of kindly platonic friend, biding his time, as he had bided it during the long months he had coveted her, until he deemed the fruit ripe for plucking. In politics as in business his power had ever been, not only the ability to discern the psychological moment for acting, but also the strength of mind to wait for it. Now he crossed to her side, sat himself down on the arm of her chair. But, watchful still, he did not touch her.

‘Don’t do that,’ he said caressingly. ‘Come, dry your eyes and let’s see what can be done. You know I’ve got

more money than I want. You'll have to allow me to help you.'

'No money can help us,' she sobbed. 'You might as well throw it in the sea. It's all so — so squalid. When I think of that boy shooting himself ——'

The tears choked her utterance.

Stanismore laid his arm about her shoulders.

'Listen,' he said, 'if you leave this to me I think I can fix it. I'll undertake to settle with Kavanagh and pacify the moneylenders as well. But Frankie's a hopeless proposition, as you say, and if I'm to help you you'll have to let him go. If things come to a smash his job's gone and he'll only sponge on you. And I know that, with his way of living, your four or five hundred a year isn't enough to keep you and him and give the boy a decent education. You've got to get rid of Frankie altogether.'

She shook her head helplessly.

'Why should you come to our aid? It's — it's tremendously generous of you, but I couldn't accept it, even if Frankie would allow himself to be got rid of. For the boy's sake I am not anxious to divorce him.'

'Then why divorce him?' said Stanismore jauntily. For the first time his waxing exultation got the better of him. 'You leave Master Frankie to me, little woman, and I'll fix him so that he won't trouble *you* any more.'

His changed tone struck her at once. His air of triumphant assurance puzzled her, and she raised her head and looked him in the face. Her wet eyes, her trembling mouth, her sorrowful pallor, whetted all the protective instincts in this masterful man.

'Why are you so sure?' she said, suspicion in her voice. 'Have you spoken to Frankie about this?'

But Stanismore, throwing caution to the winds, seized her hands.

‘What’s the use of our acting a part?’ he cried. ‘Surely you must have seen, in all these months that we’ve been meeting, that I’m simply crazy about you. From the very first moment that I clapped eyes on you I wanted you, you sweet’ — he stammered, and the words came thickly — ‘you sweet white creature. I’ve never met a woman who attracted me as you have done. All along I’ve felt that you were destined to — to influence my life, and now I want you to share it, to let me give you what you’ve never had from your drunken soak of a husband, love, comfort, security.’

She stood up and shook his arm from her.

‘You don’t know what you’re saying!’ she exclaimed.

‘Ay, but I do right well,’ he retorted. ‘See here, lass’ — in the ardour of his passion the burr of his early days was coming back to his speech — ‘we like plain talk in the Midlands, where I come from, and I’m going to put things plainly. You say that your man won’t set you free. Well, I’m in the same boat. Why worry then? I’ll do the right thing by you. I’ll make a settlement. You shall live where you like and as you like, have your own car, your own maid — damn it, I’ll show you how a little beauty like you ought to be fixed. And you shan’t ever be ashamed of your old Basil, I’ll warrant you that. I’ve gone far in my life. But I’m going farther yet. I’ll be in Downing Street before I’m ready for the undertakers to fetch me away. But I want you, Alix. You’ve fair bewitched me, my girl. I can’t get my sleep for thinking of you. I’ll treat you right, and with your love — and sympathy — and ——’

His purring, gross voice stumbled. Her curt, cold question checked him.

‘And my husband?’

He chuckled.

‘I’ll attend to him. I’ll get him a nice comfy job, South America or New Zealand, somewhere far enough away not to bother the love-birds.’

‘Does my husband consent to this — to this arrangement?’

She turned aside, scrutinising her nails, toying with her wedding ring.

Stanismore’s eyes narrowed suddenly.

‘As a matter of fact,’ he rejoined, ‘he suggested it.’

She swung about. Self-assured as he was, the anger that blazed in her eyes daunted him.

‘That at least is a lie,’ she said in a trembling voice. ‘Whatever else he is, my husband is a gentleman. You have reminded me that he is a drunkard; but he learnt to drink at the Front, when he was fighting for you and other people like yourself who were too busy to be spared to defend their country. I’ve heard your proposal. Now let me give you my reply. I’d rather that my husband were twenty times a bankrupt, that he should spend the rest of his life in prison, that Sandy and I should beg our bread in the streets, than that I should be beholden to you for anything, either for money or for love. Because my husband is in trouble, because he’s away in London, you think you can insult me with impunity. But let me tell you this, that if my husband were here *he would kill you* for what you have dared to say to me to-night.’

‘Now, see here, little woman ——’ Stanismore began.

But she burst into tears and fled out by the door, leav-

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ing him standing in the centre of the room flushed and bewildered.

In the wilderness beyond the tower the liquid notes of the nightingale went throbbing through the trees.

## CHAPTER III

### A KNOCKING IN THE NIGHT

ON that selfsame Friday evening, from the window of his bedroom at Node House, a young man watched the Nab Light flashing across the sea. From horizon to horizon light winked to light over the unseen waste of water, and the absolute monotony of the nocturne gave the watcher no relief from his thoughts. In truth, in his present mood Nature had nothing in her gift with which to solace him. For Captain Ronald Dene was in love, and his lady was unkind.

As soon as with decency he could, he had exchanged the boredom of the bridge-table for the ennui of his own company. How deadly dinner had been — and after, he reflected as he gazed out to sea! Freckles, who was Alix Barleston's young sister, had had one of her periodical tiffs with Lady Fubsy concerning Gerry Leese's proposal that he should take the girl with him in his motor-boat to Southampton next day to see his people off to America. Lady Fubsy disapproved, and, conscious of impending defeat, was very much on her dignity. Freckles was subdued, with the result that the rest of the company had to forego the diversion which that young person's high spirits usually furnished. Old Sir Harry Fubsy had seized the opportunity to release a perfect flood of anecdote about diplomats for the most part long since cold in their graves. The young American, Gerrard

Leese, clearly unused to English ways, had scarcely opened his lips, except to eat and drink, throughout the meal. He was obviously much intrigued by the table eccentricities of his *vis-à-vis*, Curtiss Vroque, who, his tie cocked under one ear and his shirt gaping to reveal a red flannel undervest, ate his soup as though he were gargling at the dentist's, and capped every story of their host's from the varied stock of his well-stored mind.

As for Alix, she had sat like a graven image, thoughtful and abstracted as she had been ever since Dene's arrival at Node. His heart melted at the thought of her. The long years he had known her, ever since his Sandhurst days in that *annus mirabilis* 1914! The long years they had been close friends, all through the war and after, the glimpses of her on leave, the memories of her that followed him to trenches and billets, and, later, to the East, and then to the garrison town at home where his battalion was now stationed! The long years, ah, me! that he had loved her!

After dinner they had captured him for bridge. To his horror Lady Fubsy, who knew rather less about the game than a Tibetan monk, had proclaimed her intention of playing. He had partnered her against their host and the American, while Vroque had drifted off to the library, and Alix, the faithless, the false, had announced her intention of going to bed.

The young man felt a stirring of indignation within him. With infinite difficulty he had procured a month's leave from his regiment. He had angled for and secured an invitation from Sir Harry and Lady Fubsy in order to spend a week of his furlough with Alix. And he hadn't had five minutes alone with her since his arrival, three



days before. She had wanted him to come, and for months he had looked forward to their meeting. Alix was seldom in London now, and he hadn't seen her since before Christmas.

Why did she avoid him? Her manner to him was as kind as ever, only she contrived that they should never be alone together. If the whole of his week's stay were to pass in this way he felt he could never face three weeks of the London season with, at the end of it, the prospect of a return to garrison life in the North.

The Armistice had found him in command of his battalion, and the descent to the dreary and monotonous business of mothering a company of the callow youths of whom the post-war army is composed was galling. But Alix had discouraged his idea of leaving the army. She was anxious for him to pass into the Staff College; she wanted him to make the army his career.

She was fond of him, he knew. Then why did she evade those long, confidential talks they were always wont to have when they met? Something was worrying, grieving her. That blackguard husband of hers, presumably. But for ten years now Frankie Barleston had been a persistent problem.

Impatiently Dene hauled himself out of the armchair and stepped on the balcony, tall and slim in his dark silk dressing-gown. The night was fine and tranquil. The balmy island air was as soft on the cheek as a lover's caress. The house was sunk in slumber. The trees rustled gently, and from the distance the muted murmur of the ocean sounded.

Node House backed on the sea, the drive and main entrance being on the land side. By reason of the sea

view, therefore, the best bedrooms were in rear. Dene's was on the first floor, at the extreme end, next door to his host and hostess. From his balcony, accordingly, looking to the left, he could command the whole row of windows on the back.

All were in darkness save at the far end, where there was a glimmer of light. It shone from the windows of the big double room at the other extremity of the corridor which, with a large bath dressing-room, was the Barlestons' quarters. Since the war Alix Barleston had made her home at Node. Lady Fubsy was Frankie Barleston's aunt, and Frankie came down from time to time for the week-end.

Frankie Barleston's dressing-room, which was the last window in the line, opened out of the bedroom, and, by a farther door, communicated with a little lobby at the head of a flight of steps which gave direct access to the grounds. These steps were known as the 'garden stairs.'

Dene glanced along the dark façade. The Fubsys had long since extinguished their light; then came, as Dene knew, a window giving on the well of the main double staircase which led up from the hall; and, after that, the windows of Ned Fubsy's room, his host's only son, who was absent in Brazil, Secretary of Embassy at Rio. That very afternoon Sir Harry had taken Dene and Leese, who had been Ned's friend at Washington, into 'my boy's room' to see Ned's sporting prints. It was the next window to Ned's, the last but one, flanking Frankie Barleston's dressing-room at the end of the passage, where the light still showed. Yes, the light was in Alix's room; perhaps she was yet awake.

The young man paused, irresolute. The end of his

cigarette glowed red in the darkness. Suddenly with an impulsive gesture, he flung the cigarette over the balcony and stepped back into his bedroom. There he crossed to the door, a switch clicked, and the room was in darkness. He stood for an instant, listening. Then he opened the door cautiously and looked out.

Away to the right the corridor ran its obscure length to the end save in the middle, where a sparse grey light from the staircase window fended the gloom. The house was profoundly still. Dene came out into the passage and softly closed the door behind him. Then, almost noiseless in his slippered feet, he began to make his way along the corridor.

A house full of human beings asleep seems to sleep with them. So hushed was the gallery that to Dene, as he tip-toed along, it appeared as though the very pictures on the walls, Sir Harry's grinning devil dancers' masks on the stairs even, slumbered, too. The closed doors of the bedrooms, their white paint pallid in the dimness, reminded Dene of so many shut eyes, and he found himself listening for the sound of heavy breathing.

But all remained quiet. No light showed beneath the door of the room opposite, where Vrogue slept. Dene wondered whimsically what Vrogue looked like in bed. He probably wore a red flannel night-shirt or some similarly fantastic garb. With his long flaxen hair tumbling about his eyes, his great beak of a nose and his wide mouth, he must be a sight. . . . Dene smiled to himself and went on.

The double stairway wound itself, right and left, aloft to the second story, where other guest chambers lay. Freckles' room was there, and Leese's, the young Ameri-

can's. A faint stirring sound abruptly brought the wanderer to a halt. He stopped and listened. Then a board on the stairs gave a little sighing creak as though stretching itself, like a dog asleep. Dene resumed his cautious progress along the corridor.

A knife-edge of light lay along under the door of Alix's room. Resolutely Dene tapped. Three little soft taps. Instantly a low voice answered, startled: 'What is it? Who's there?' Ronald Dene hesitated, then took his courage in both hands. The door was not locked. He walked in.

The room, chastely hushed, was lit by a pair of rose-shaded lamps set on either side of the three-part mirror at the dressing-table. Their soft radiance dimmed the effulgence of the stars, scattered over the square of blue-black night framed in the French windows flung back on the balcony, and the flashing lights to seaward. One of the two beds was turned back, ready for the night. The room was large, and airy, and dainty, perfumed, too, by a great bowl of June roses standing on a table.

Alix Barleston was watching the door in the mirror. She was sitting at the dressing-table in a white kimono, her back to him; but he saw her face in the glass, her pale, rather delicate face and starry eyes framed in the wavy crop of thick brown hair. As their glances met she sprang up, swung round, and faced him.

'Ronnie!' she cried in a voice scarcely above a whisper. 'What do you want at this time of night? What are you doing here?'

She was frightened. He saw her hand rise and fall as it lay on her breast. He did not answer, but advanced into her room. His silence seemed to reassure her. Her

tone was more matter of fact when she spoke again.

'You startled me. I thought something awful had happened. What is it? What's the matter?'

Very deliberately the young man plumped himself down on her bed. The other bed, Frankie Barleston's empty and shrouded couch, was between them.

'I couldn't sleep, and I saw that your light was still on. So I came along for a chat,' he said.

She laughed.

'My dear Ronnie, are you quite sure you're sober? Would you mind getting off my bed and going back to your room?'

He fixed his blue eyes, long-lashed under their straight black brows, on her face and shook his head.

'I'm not drunk, Alix. But I'm desperate. Why do you always avoid me? What have I ——'

She turned away swiftly, casting down her eyes. Hungrily he contemplated the admirable line of her white neck, whiter than the ivory softness of her wrapper.

'You're mad,' she said, and looked at him oddly. 'Supposing anyone should come.'

'They won't,' he told her. 'They are all asleep.'

'You've no business to compromise me like this,' she broke in angrily. 'If you don't leave me at once, Ronnie, I'll never speak to you again.'

'I'm not going until you've told me what's the matter with you,' he retorted stubbornly. 'I've come down here especially to see you, and you flee from me as though I had the plague. Have I done anything to offend you?'

She wrung her hands in desperation.

'Go, I tell you, go!'

Again he shook his head.

'Then I shall sleep in the dressing-room. At least you can't follow me there,' she said, and crossed the room to where, adjacent to the window, a door stood open.

Dene rose up without haste.

'I don't want to drive you away. But now that we *are* alone,' he pleaded, 'why don't you tell me what's grieving you? Maybe I can help. It breaks my heart to see you as you were at dinner to-night. You know I'd give my very soul to serve you.'

His voice was passionate. She averted her face from his. But she halted on her way to the dressing-room door.

'Alix,' he entreated, 'Alix, have you never realised how much you mean to me? Your unkindness is killing me.'

She raised her head and regarded him. The loveliness of her pierced him through like a sword. The yearning in his heart rose up, engulfing like a wave, as though it would choke him. In all the years that he had known her he had never told her of his love. Throughout their strange, haphazard friendship, which rare meetings, cables, letters had kept warm against the chill of his long absences — the war, India, his service in the North — he had locked his secret away, abashed always, when he would have spoken, by the candid innocence of her regard.

But now he was desperate. He had dared to break down the barriers between them and to burst into that intimate life of hers which her marriage with Frankie Barleston had always kept hidden from him. And the man who stood between them was he who had lost, because he knew not how to keep, this jewel beyond price. In her shining white robe, the short, wide sleeves reveal-

ing the smooth sheen of her arms, she was like bride awaiting bridegroom. In that still, dim room her radiance seemed to him more dazzling than the great Nab Light wheeling on the horizon.

Dene faced her defiant, hands clenched in the pockets of his dressing-gown. He dared to delight in the vision he had made bold to steal a glimpse of. The heart within him was glad as his eyes drank in the beauty of her, the fineness of the features under the delicately-arched eyebrows, the firm white curve of her neck, the lissom line of her body beneath the clinging folds of the kimono.

‘Oh, Ronnie!’

Her mournful voice, her sorrowing regard, recalled him to his senses. As a friend he had gained access to her, as a friend he must play his rôle to the end. He shrugged his shoulders.

‘It’s Frankie again, I suppose?’ he said. ‘What is it this time? Women or money? Oh, my dear, why don’t you let the fellow go? Have you never realised that I’m waiting for you?’

Sadly she shook her head.

‘There’s Sandy ——’

‘I’d make him a better father than Frankie has ever been.’

She smiled wanly.

‘Sandy thinks the world of you, Ronnie.’

‘Then why not let me make you happy?’

She shook her head again.

‘You’re not in love with Frankie still, are you?’

‘I’m terribly sorry for him.’

‘You don’t — you don’t live with him, Alix?’

‘God forbid!’ she whispered.

‘Then why hesitate?’

‘I’m afraid,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Frankie’s spiteful. He doesn’t like you, Ronnie. And I think he suspects.’

Dene laughed ruefully.

‘I wish to heaven he had cause.’

‘I have to think of Freckles, too,’ she went on. ‘I believe she’s going to be a beauty in her way, and I want her to have a chance. And, of course, there’s Sandy. People don’t think as they did about divorce, I know, but everything to do with Frankie is so — so sordid. And I’m afraid, Ronnie, I’m afraid.’

He patted her hand comfortingly. ‘What’s Frankie been up to now? Won’t you tell me?’

‘It’s money troubles again,’ she replied.

‘Can’t I help?’ he said; and reddened in his English way.

She shook her head.

‘You’re a dear! But I know you’ve got only a very little more than your pay. It’s a matter of thousands this time. He’s in the hands of money-lenders.’

‘Then let him go bankrupt.’

She sighed.

‘It’s not so easy as that. There are — other things besides. Certain people are threatening him with exposure.’

Dene puckered his brow.

‘Criminal proceedings?’

She nodded.

‘Why not tell me all about it?’ he proposed. ‘You want a man to help you, Alix.’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘What’s the use? There’s nothing you could do.’



He frowned.

'Oh, all right. Only you weren't always so reserved.'

A clock on the mantelpiece whirred and beat twelve rapid strokes.

'Well, I expect you'll be wanting to go to sleep,' the young man added.

She caught his hand as he turned to go.

'Oh, Ronnie,' she begged, 'don't be hurt with me. I know I've been a beast to you ever since you came down, but I've been almost out of my mind with worry. You've always been such a dear to me. Don't spoil it all by misunderstanding me at the very time that I most want your sympathy. When you knocked just now I was sitting at my mirror thinking of you and wondering what I could do to show you I haven't really changed.'

He drew her other hand to his.

'Then you do care for me — a little?' he said, rather hoarsely.

She bowed her head. He felt her body yield. The silence of the night wrapped them close about. Beyond the open windows the wheeling lights kept their ceaseless vigil, and the fragrance of flowers was borne in on the still, warm air. His arms went round her and she clung to him, limp in his embrace. The tears stood in her eyes as his lips found hers.

'My love, my love!' she murmured, and smiled through a mist of tears. 'Tell me once that you love me, Ronnie!'

'I love you, Alix!' he whispered, and bent to the upturned face. 'Do you realise what this moment means to me. The first time in all these years?' He sought her lips again.

But she, gazing up in his face, leaned back in his arms.

'Whatever happens,' she said earnestly, 'whatever they may say of me, promise me that you'll always think of me like this. Promise me you'll always remember that you loved me!'

Her mouth quivered and her lashes were wet.

'Dearest, I shall love you to the end as I've always loved you!' he declared. He drew her to him. Her head drooped back, and her hands were clasped against his breast as she yielded to his kiss.

And then she sought to free herself.

'Now go,' she pleaded. 'Go, please go!'

But he held her fast in his arms and showered kisses on her shining hair.

'Ronnie, darling,' she entreated in a dying voice, 'don't make it too hard for me! Please, please ——'

Even as she spoke, through the open door of the dressing-room, came the muffled sound of gentle, hurried knocking.

'Alix! Alix!' a man's voice called softly.

'Frankie!'

Her whisper was shrill with wonder — and with fear.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WHISPER

DENE felt her body stiffen in his arms, saw the terror shadow her shining eyes. For a second there was absolute stillness in the rosily dim room so that these two, against the restless bourdon of the distant ocean, could hear the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. Again came that urgent, muted tapping.

She sprang away and flashed to the dressing-table. Her hand found the light switch, and, as the room sank into darkness, the stars, powdering the purple curtain of the night beyond the balcony, brightened, and the glowing eyes to seaward flamed a deeper orange. Wraith-like in her white robe, she glided across the patch of half-light framed by the window — a panel of grey set in a wall of black — and paused tensely on the threshold of the dressing-room.

‘Is that you, Frankie?’

Her voice was hushed, rather breathless. At the same time she signed to Dene, pointing to the door by which he had entered.

‘Quietly!’ she bade him, so softly that the warning fell upon his ear no louder than a sigh.

‘Yes. Let me in!’

The whispered answer to her question drifted hoarsely, imploringly, across the silent room.

‘Wait!’ she said. ‘I’ll undo the door!’ She glanced over her shoulder. Dene, who was behind, found her

eyes glittering with a sort of feverish calm. That look was his dismissal. No further word was spoken between them. He touched her hand and crept to the door. She watched him turn the knob and slide out into the solemn hush of the corridor. His going was soundless.

Swiftly she went into the dressing-room, switching up, as she passed, the hand-lamp which stood upon the chest of drawers in the window. The light, dimmed by its silken shade, gleamed sparsely on white tiling and white-enamelled furniture. She pushed back the bolt and opened the door.

Her husband blundered past her into the room, thrust the door to behind him and felt with his hand for the bolt. He was panting, and his small eyes sparkled redly out of his ghastly face. His hat was pushed back off his brow; and as, one hand clutching at her breast, she fell back before him, she saw the perspiration pearl and run on his sloping forehead.

For an instant he stood and gazed at her sombrely. His pallor was extraordinary and horrible to see, and his hand, fumbling for the bolt, was shaking so violently that his signet ring rattled against the brasswork of the lock. With a quick and nervous gesture he pointed at the wardrobe built into the wall.

‘Get me a drink!’ he muttered. ‘You know where I keep it; in the kit-bag at the bottom of the cupboard there.’

She made no move to obey him. Out of an impassive face her eyes regarded him coldly.

‘What do you want here?’ she demanded.

He held up his two hands as though to appease her, and then stole a nervous glance over his shoulder.

'I'll — I'll tell you,' he answered tremulously. 'But I must have a drink first. Get me a drink, there's a good girl. Stop!' He hissed out the word. 'Is the bedroom door locked?'

She paid no heed to him but remained immobile, her hands holding her kimono together across her bosom. He stumbled past her into the bedroom and shot the bolt on the door. He came back, plunging along in nervous haste, and went to the cupboard. He produced a bottle of whisky and splashed a measure into a tumbler which he took from a tray on the chest of drawers. He swallowed the spirit neat and filled himself a second dram. This he drained like the first, then set the tumbler down. The spirit seemed to revive him. A little colour warmed his mottled cheeks, and, as he looked up and met her hostile gaze, she discerned once more in his face the half-crafty, half-brazen look with which he usually confronted her.

'I didn't mean to frighten you, old girl,' he said with a rather uncertain smile. 'The fact is ——'

Sharp as the crack of a whip her voice cut across his stammered protestations.

'Did you send that man to me to-night?'

'No, no,' he answered quickly. 'I swear I didn't, Alix.'

'Don't lie to me. I can see by your face that you did.'

'It's not true.'

'Listen to me, Frankiel' She spoke without heat, indeed, without any emotion at all. 'I want you to realise that this is the end. I've tried to be a loyal wife. I've always stood up for you, and it's me you have to thank if Uncle Harry and Aunt Ethel haven't discovered how you live

and shut their doors on you as all other decent people have done. I've endeavoured to make allowances, and during all these years I've clung to the hope that, if only I stuck to you, you would make an effort, sooner or later, and pull yourself together. But I didn't realise how vile you were. What has happened to-night shows me that you've sunk lower than even I had imagined. But it's all over between us now. We're going to separate for good and all, and you've got to set me free.'

A great fear suddenly looked out of his shifty eyes.

'Don't — don't talk like that, old thing. You wouldn't desert me now that I'm in trouble. My dear, you don't know what's happened —'

She laughed bitterly and her foot began to tap the ground.

'Oh, yes, I do. Mr. Stanismore was most explicit. He appears to be an excellent man of business. You've lost so much money, he tells me, that your only realisable asset is your wife. Perhaps I should compliment you on your good taste in leaving me to the last —'

He extended two shaking hands to her.

'You don't understand, I tell you. Let me explain——'

She shook her head sombrely.

'There's nothing to explain. If you'd been candid with me the other day about your difficulties, I dare say I'd have tried to help you as I did the last time, and the time before, and the time before that. But you lied to me, as you've always lied, and ——' — a warmer tone coloured her voice — 'in order to save your wretched skin you sent this vulgar creature to me with his bribe to try and tempt me to buy my redemption from the misery in which you've plunged us, Sandy and me.' A hard sob

choked her utterance. 'Oh, God!' she exclaimed in passionate despair, 'you make me feel ashamed at the very thought that I married you.'

He cast a frightened look about him.

'For God's sake, Alix, don't raise your voice!' He drew closer. 'Listen, I'm in awful trouble. I want your help. Stanismore ——'

She shook her head. '

'No. You'll get no more help from me. You've had ten years of my life. Now I'm going my own way.'

His face darkened.

'I never sent Stanismore to you,' he retorted with a sort of angry shrillness. 'It was entirely his own idea. He lied when he told you the suggestion came from me.'

She turned on him swiftly.

'How do you know that he said this?'

He relapsed into a sullen silence.

'You overheard our conversation to-night?'

He remained obstinately mute.

'You were listening? You followed him down here?' With hands tight clenched she faced him. 'Answer me, I say!'

He nodded.

'Why?' she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders, his eyes on her face. A wave of crimson swept over her cheeks and neck.

'Did you hear my answer, too?' she asked. Her bosom rose and fell quickly as, with parted lips, she waited for him to reply. He nodded again and looked towards the door. His eyes were watchful, as though he were listening for any sound beyond the walls of that quiet, dim room.

'Oh!' she burst out passionately, 'you're utterly des-

picable. When this man said that you had sent him to me with this infamous proposal I tried to believe that it wasn't true; but deep down in my heart, I had a feeling that it must be. We poor fools of women love to deceive ourselves, and the last thing we let go is our belief in men we have loved. To bolster up my belief in you, to save our self-respect, I told this vulgar wretch that if you had been there you'd have killed him for what he dared to say to me. And you would have killed him, if you were to-day the man I think you were when first we met. If you'd struck a single blow in my defence, it would have wiped out all the past, I'd have taken you back and stopped at nothing — at nothing, do you hear? — to see you through your troubles. But you held back. You let the moment pass. Do you expect me to believe, then, that you had nothing to do with this offer when you admit that you stood tamely by and let this loathsome creature insult me? When you told me that you had followed him to Node I thought for a moment that perhaps, after all, you came after him to defend me. But I was wrong, as I've always been wrong, when I've tried to credit you with any decent instincts. And you have the face to stand there and tell me that you didn't send this man to me.' Her voice quivered and she buried her face in her hands. 'The shame of it,' she murmured brokenly, 'the vile, black shame!'

Presently she raised her head.

'Now go!' she told him. 'I never want to see you again!'

'I can't!' he muttered, slanting sidelong glances from his reddish eyes like a hunted animal.

'I won't have you here!' she cried furiously.



'I must stop, I tell you!' He looked around him desperately. 'I can't go now!'

Brusquely she turned her back on him, making for the bedroom. He stayed her on the threshold, catching the wide sleeve of her wrapper and twisting her round.

'What are you going to do?' he demanded in a panic.

Her sleeve ripped up as she tore herself from his grasp.

'If you don't go, then I shall!' she cried.

'Alix,' he implored hoarsely, with ashen face and trembling hands. 'Alix, I've got to stay. And I've got to sleep here, in your room.'

'You can sleep where you please,' she retorted hotly, backing away from him. 'I'm going down to the hotel.' And she made to close the bedroom door in his face. But he thrust out his foot and stopped her. 'If you don't leave me alone to dress in peace,' she exclaimed furiously, 'I'll ring the bell and alarm the house. And this time Uncle Harry shall hear the truth!'

She let the door swing back and moved swiftly towards the bell-push beside the fireplace. He sprang after her.

'Stop!' he entreated. 'For God's sake, Alix, hear me before you touch that bell!'

Such terror rang out of his voice that she paused and turned round, staring blankly at him, a slender white figure against the black background of the darkened bedroom. She began to regard him curiously as he confronted her, his mouth twitching, his face dank with sweat. His emotion was so intense that a cold chill stole over her.

'What on earth is the matter?' she asked uneasily.

He advanced slowly towards her with a stumbling gait, his shoulders humped, his hands hanging down.

'You've got to let me spend the night here with you in this room,' he muttered thickly.

'You're mad,' she flared back at him. 'As if I should dream of allowing anything of the kind.'

He bent forward and whispered in her ear. The angry words died away in her throat, the ire faded from her eyes and on the instant her face, which, a moment back, had been rosy and warmly animated, was frozen into an expression of stark horror. She sat down suddenly upon the bed, very erect, her hands in her lap.

Frankie Barleston sank to his knees at the bedside, and, with his head pillowed on his arm flung out across the silken coverlet, began to sob convulsively.

## CHAPTER V

### AT THE SEA DOOR

'FRECKLES,' remarked Mr. Gerrard Leese, as he wiped the sea water out of his eyes, 'we can take it easy and get merry hell from Sister, or we can keep pushing along and make Node before dark. After all, one can't get wetter than wet. Ouch, here's another!'

A foam-edged tongue of green sea leaped over the bows of the motor-boat and poured, hissing and rattling, into the steering-well.

'It doesn't matter to me,' retorted the girl at the wheel, absently blowing a disorderly curl out of her eye. 'It's you I'm thinking about. I wish you'd remember you're an invalid, Gerry boy. If you get ill again, Lady Fubsy'll make you go back to Ventnor!'

Gerry Leese made a wry face. Ventnor was a sore topic. He had left the United States, a month before, for the first time in his life, to take up his post as Third Secretary at the American Embassy in London. But immediately on landing he had fallen a victim to the English spring and had absorbed his first impressions of English life, in consequence, at Ventnor, whither he had been exiled to recuperate from his bout of influenza.

'Ventnor!' he groaned. 'Gee, it's like a New England village in slow motion. I surely owe Ned Fubsy a good turn for giving me that letter of introduction to his

people at Node. Lady Fubsy would never have the heart to send me back to Ventnor after pulling me out of that Sleepy Hollow. Say, Freckles, you certainly are *wet!*'

She laughed and glanced down at herself.

'Aren't I in an unholy mess? This dashed oilskin is miles too short, and my stockings are simply wringing. I wish I'd thought of bringing my sea-boots.'

Her cheeks, tinted through wind and sun the shade of a russet apple, gleamed with moisture. The water trickled in a steady stream off the edge of her glistening oilskin, and a wet curl, blown out from under the brim of her sou'wester, lay flat on her face.

'It didn't look too bad when we started out,' the youth put in.

'It's this darn westerly breeze against the tide that makes the sea so choppy,' she answered, giving the wheel a turn. 'Better slow her down, Gerry.'

He stooped to the engine and the boat's speed slackened. He turned to the girl.

'Let Snook take the wheel,' he suggested. 'You come into the deckhouse and get dry. Snook!' he called forward. A figure in sea-boots and black oilskins emerged from the dark depths of the hull and clambered up beside the girl. Her small hands relinquished the white canvas-covered wheel to the grasp of his big, brown fingers.

They were returning from Southampton, from their trip to see Gerry's father and mother off to New York. Mr. and Mrs. Leese had accompanied their son to Europe and had finished off their European vacation in Paris, where Mr. Leese had business to transact, but had promised to take the Aquitania at Southampton, on their return

home, to enable Gerry to come over from Node and say good-bye.

The Sprite, the big white motor-boat which Gerry had bought to while away the tedium of his convalescence, was nosing her way through the leaping green seas of Southampton Water. A great curving V of frothing water rode galloping in the Sprite's wake, as, throbbing to the steady engine beat, she sped through the waves. The June evening was falling angrily. The sky was a smother of swollen rain-clouds, which lay so low that they seemed like a billowing canvas roof-cloth pressing down upon the wide seascape. Only behind Calshot Spit a remnant of reluctant sunshine flared like a polished metal plate against the black mass, and a long strip of sulphur-coloured sky rested on the horizon like the background of an old-fashioned battle piece.

Behind them Southampton now was no more than a vision of funnel and mast, with the lofty black and red smokestack of a giant Cunarder perched, broadside on, high on the distant sky line. Beyond the strip of yellow beach, and against the dark foliage beyond, a copse of masts marked the mouth of the Hamble, haven that uncertain evening from the Solent squalls for many a week-end yachtsman. They saw the gabled front of the Crab and Lobster peeping out between the trees of Warsash, and, across the water, the round-backed sheds, circular tower and black-piled pier of Calshot, where, two hours since, the last of the hovering seaplanes had dropped, plashing, to rest. Ahead, beyond the ugly silhouettes of a brace of rusty dredgers, the leafy outline of the Isle of Wight creamed blue on the horizon.

It was the lurid evening of a day of wind and rain and

fitful sunshine. The eerie light hardened every silhouette and enhanced the gaunt and forlorn air of the battered timber posts — ‘dolphins,’ Snook called them — and dripping, lonely buoys which rushed past with the green seas streaming by the cruiser. Scarcely a mark or buoy but had its watchman in the shape of a solitary cormorant, with its long, scraggy neck and drooping feathers the picture of elderly dejection; while the gulls rode the billows in complacent pairs or wheeled in clouds inshore, sending their raucous chatter and harsh staccato cries drifting sadly across the water.

A great barge, from Weymouth or Poole, under a spread of madder-brown canvas, went sailing slowly up the Solent, and a naval pinnace fussed its way in and out of the rare shipping. Except for these it was as though every living thing shunned the grim, green ocean under the livid sky.

Gerry and Freckles went into the deckhouse together. With a shammy he swabbed down a corner of the shining leather cushion and the girl sat down. He doffed his yachting cap, releasing a tousle of brown hair, and shook the water from brim and crown. Then he glanced at his wrist-watch, and from the dial over the boat's side.

‘Eight o'clock!’ he observed. ‘Well, we're late for dinner, anyhow. If it's any rougher than this off the Brambles, Freckles, my child, we'll be lucky if we're home by ten!’

The girl, who had her feet propped up on the bench opposite, sighed heavily as she contemplated her long, slim legs. The ‘sunburn’ silk stockings were stained, and the buckskin shoes soggy, with sea water.

‘Oh, my,’ she remarked philosophically, ‘I shan't half

catch it from Alix. She's always most frightfully ratty when Frankie's about, I notice. He is an inconsiderate devil, bursting in on her the way he does. I had no idea he was coming down last night, and I bet Alix hadn't, either. She'll be mad with me, Gerry boy. I promised her solemnly we'd be back for dinner.'

Gerry wrinkled his brow.

'We couldn't tell the Aquitania would be delayed. And it wasn't our fault that when we did get away, this darned old hooker should go and break down. I've never had any trouble with the jet before. But Sister won't worry about you, honey. She knows you're all right with me.'

Freckles laughed ruefully.

'It's not me she'll worry about. It's Aunt Ethel. Gerry, I believe that woman's got a clock inside her, like those weird electric cooking ranges. She simply loathes people to be unpunctual at meals, even the teeniest, weeniest bit unpunctual, just an olive or two late for lunch, if you know what I mean. I've been coming down here to stay for ages now — ever since Alix has been married, and that must be nearly ten years — and, would you believe it? I don't think I've ever been in time for a single meal! You've only been at Node for a week so you mayn't have noticed. But I'm always the last. I expect it's con — congenital. It seems to me the most rotten bad luck that two congenital weaknesses like Aunt Ethel's and mine should have to try and hit it off in the same house!'

Gerry leant back and laughed softly. When he laughed, what with the funny way he screwed up his bright blue eyes and the even line of milkwhite teeth he displayed,

he looked so young that you forgot he was twenty-four, and, as he was fond of reminding his friends, a Diplomatist.

'To employ the vernacular, Freckles,' he remarked, and purposely drawled his speech, 'you've sure said a mouthfull!'

The girl laughed merrily.

'Oh, Gerry, you're a perfect scream with your slang. I think I'll store that up and let it out on Aunt Ethel. As it is, I never can say anything; she's so very indirect. It's "Here's *dear* Isobel at last!" or "I *do* hope there's some hot soup left for *dear* Isobel!" It's not as if the meals were *worth* being in time for!'

Gerry laughed again.

'You certainly are quaint; the things you say!'

'It sounds rotten, I know,' Freckles began slowly. Then she burst out: 'But, Gerry, honestly, I don't get enough to *eat* at Node. Alix pecks like a bird at her food anyway, and Ronnie Dene's so gone on her that he's just as bad. Mr. Vrogue talks so much that I don't believe he knows what he's eating half the time. Because dear old Sir Harry lives on milk and soda, and Aunt Ethel's got her rabbit food diet, they don't seem to realise that other people may be *hungry*. And, oh, Gerry, I get *ravenous*! A spoonful of porridge and a boiled egg for breakfast, a sardine and a rissole for lunch, and for dinner a thimbleful of soup, an inch of turbot and a wing of chicken *aren't* enough to support a growing young woman who is used to taking a lot of hard exercise. Did you notice the way I tucked in at tea at Southampton this afternoon? Of course you did; and I bet you thought me jolly greedy. But I'm not really greedy,



Gerry; just hungry, that's all. Why, only last night ——'

She checked, and glanced at him whimsically.

'Can you keep a secret?' she demanded.

'As a trained diplomat of the old school,' he responded gravely, 'I am the natural recipient of confidences. The family solicitor has nothing on me. Compared to this baby, William the Silent was a chatterbox, and Mr. Coolidge as a pea in a drum. Advice given gratis on all subjects. Girlish peccadilloes a specialty.'

'If you don't stop talking rot,' she threatened, 'I won't tell you at all.'

'Spill it, lady,' he enjoined her. 'I am all ears!'

'Well,' she said confidentially, 'last night I woke up absolutely ravenous, as though a wolf were gnawing at my insides. I was so outrageously hungry that I got out of bed, sneaked downstairs to the dining-room, and pinched three scones out of the sideboard.'

Gerry threw up his eyes piously.

'My *dear* Isobel,' he said in mock reproof, 'such conduct is positive gluttony!'

Freckles screamed with laughter.

'Gerry, you're too killing!' she cried. 'I see that Aunt Ethel's told you about Sandy. Wasn't it awful? He gets hungry here just the same as I do, and when he went back to school after the Christmas holidays he left a pot of plum and apple jam by mistake in the bathroom! Aunt Ethel went on about it for weeks. That's what she called it — "positive gluttony!" I don't know *what* she'd say if she knew what I'd done!'

'Well, my Freckles,' Gerry remarked, 'one confidence deserves another and I'm going to let you into a secret of mine. Snook!'

'Zur!' bellowed a stentorian voice from the steering-well.

'Where's that hamper they brought down from the hotel?'

'Forrard under the 'ull, zur. If yew'll take the wheel, oi'll fetch it up . . .'

'All right, I'll get it.'

Gerry vanished forward and presently reappeared dragging a wicker basket. Arrived in the deck-house he hoisted it up on to the seat.

'To-night at least, my dear Isobel,' he cried, 'you shall have no pangs of hunger to prompt you to nocturnal perambulation.' And opening the basket and whipping off a white tablecloth he revealed a roast chicken, richly brown in a *papier-maché* dish, a similar dish of salad, a loaf of bread, butter in a lettuce leaf, and beneath all the gold foil covering of a bottle of champagne.

'Oh, Gerry!' cried the girl, 'what a President of the United States you will make. How did you come to think of it?'

He gave her a comical look.

'The material drawbacks of the hospitality of our otherwise delightful hosts have not altogether escaped me,' he replied whimsically. 'It occurred to me that in delaying the departure of the Aquitania and our start for home, Heaven must have deliberately meant to give us the chance of getting a square meal for once in a way. So while Snook was busy on that jet I phoned up the hotel for a cold supper to be sent down to the boat.'

'Then you've been hungry at Node as well as I?'

'Ravenous! However, that's a State secret.'

'But you ate nothing at tea?'

'I was two cream buns up on you at the turn. But I guess you were too busy to notice. There's a lot more junk under that chicken. Dig into the hamper, will you, while I bust this wire?'

Freckles opened up the folding table and spread it while Gerry busied himself with the champagne bottle. There was a smart pop, and a flood creamed over into the two glasses. Gerry raised his tumbler.

'To the memory of that good sportsman, Count Ugolino,' he said piously.

'And who may he be?' queried Freckles, with her glass poised.

'A respectable Italian nobleman who was starved to death at Pisa,' Gerry retorted. 'Classical allusion. Happy days!'

In solemn silence they drank the toast and then fell to.

In the gathering darkness they ran through the Spit-head anchorage. With the coming of night, beacons began to flare on the bosom of the black waters. Signal lights flashed their warning of the shoals that dot this dangerous passage, from the bright white beam of the Nab far away on the horizon to the winking eyes of the chequer forts strung out between the Isle of Wight and the mainland.

The westerly wind had freshened and was striking chill. The motor-boat wallowed in the heavy swell but held steadily on her way. Their meal at an end, Gerry mounted the little platform and relieved Snook at the wheel. He bade him clear away and get his supper.

'Toide's mighty low,' said the man as he stood down. 'Yew and the young leddy'll loikely hev a bit of a walk toime we get to Node.'

'Well,' remarked Gerry cheerfully to Freckles at his side, 'it won't make much difference. Our feet are wet already. I hope to goodness you've got the key of the sea door, Freckles.'

'Rather,' replied the girl. 'It's miles to go round by the road. If the tide's full out we've got a long walk before us, Gerry. Lord, I wish we were home! How unutterably desolate everything seems! Look at that red light! Now it's gone white. Aren't these winking red lights creepy? Like splashes of blood in the dark.'

'That's No Man's Fort, isn't it?' asked Gerry.

'Yes,' she replied, 'and Horse Fort over to the left. The big white chap ahead is the Warner. But my own particular old friend is the Nab, the best and brightest of the whole family. D'you see him, back there, flashing away on top of his old hush-hush tower?'

'You certainly know them all, don't you?' the boy remarked admiringly.

'I ought to,' she rejoined. 'I've been sailing these waters ever since I was a kid.'

'They make me kind of homesick, all these lights,' said Gerry meditatively. 'They remind me of the signal towers on Fifth Avenue on a winter's evening. I—I seem to like to have them flashing and winking all around, lighting us home.' He began to sing under his breath:

    Show me the way to go home,  
    I'm tired and I wanna go to bed . . .'

He broke off and pointed ahead.

'There's Chine Bay pierhead. I can see the fixed red

light. Buck up, honey, 'most home now. Say, will you look at the beach? That tide is certainly low.'

Together they gazed out at the Wight shore to starboard, at the long, dark stretch of sand with, here and there, a crazy post, reared gaunt and stark, against the leaden sky. The girl shivered and drew her wet oilskin about her.

'I'm glad you're with me, Gerry boy,' she said softly. 'I should be terrified to have to walk up to the house alone. See, there's Node Tower! Doesn't it look ghostly in this light?'

There was a friendly glow from the houses in Chine Bay as they chugged past. For a brief spell the farther horn of the bay obscured their view of the tower; but when they had rounded the point its black and massive bulk, blurred by its leafy background, was once more visible. Snook came tumbling aft.

'If yew'll stand by to pick up 'er moorings, zur, Oi'll steer 'er,' he said.

Gerry, glad enough to relinquish the wheel in the darkness with the shallows close at hand, clambered out upon the deck with the boat-hook. Freckles heard him stamping about; the boat slowed down, reversed; there was a thud and a clanking of chains. Snook hung out the steps, drew the dinghy, which had been rocking at their moorings, alongside. In silence he rowed them ashore.

Standing on the wet sand with Freckles at his side, Gerry gave the man his orders for the morning.

'We'll be over about ten,' he said. 'Get some ragworms. We'll try for some fish.'

'Very good, zur. Good-night, zur.'

'Good-night, Snook.'

Man and girl spoke together. They heard the boat grate on the sand, watched Snook leap in, then turned away, the sound of oars in their ears.

Before them a wide expanse of sand, mirroring in a hundred pools patches of the half-light that yet so strangely persisted, ran up to the squat mass of Node Tower rising above the long high wall, which as yet they could not distinguish, of the grounds of Node House. Save for the murmur of the tide behind them the night was very still. The breeze sent shivers over the surface of the pools. Gerry helped the girl out of her oilskin, which he cast over his arm. As they went across the beach they heard the rasp of a chain from the sea behind as Snook cast off, the snort of the engine, the flurry of the propeller, and then the steady purr, diminishing in sound, as the motor-boat threshed her way out again into the night.

The wild and rambling grounds of Node House came down in a solid square to the tangle of wave-gnawed rocks, thrusting slimy fangs out of a wilderness of coarse grasses and stunted bushes, which edged the top of the strand. One side of the enclosure ran parallel to the shore, forming a buttress above the rocks, and at either end the wall bent back at a right angle to the beach. Node Tower, which, from the sea, seemed to form part of the wall, stood in reality in a corner of the grounds some little way back.

The wall was lofty and most massively built, as it needed to be, for winter tides, sweeping up over the rocks, not infrequently beat mightily upon it. For this reason the sea door, the key of which Freckles was even now producing from her handbag, was placed not in the wall

abutting on the strand, but in the westerly side, close to the corner, immediately below that face of the tower. It was a stout, rather low door, garnished as to the top and upper part of its frame with sharp iron spikes to discourage would-be trespassers, for whose especial behoof, likewise, was devised, the formidable frieze of broken glass adorning the wall's summit throughout its length.

Half a dozen steps, roughly fashioned out of the rocks, led to a rustic stair which mounted to the door. Freckles stood on the top step, the key in her hand. She turned round to Gerry, who was just below, a finger to her lips.

'Don't talk in case anyone's about,' she enjoined. 'We'll go in by the garden stairs, so that I can get to my room and change my shoes before Alix sees me. These were new shoes this morning. Quiet now.'

She thrust the flat Yale key into the lock. An owl hooted in the woods behind the tower, and they heard the rain-drops patter down as the night wind stirred the branches above their heads. Freckles twisted the key about in the lock. The door did not budge.

'The blessed thing's stuck, I believe,' she said fiercely over her shoulder.

'Let me have a shot.'

She let go the key as she felt his firm, warm grip on her hand. He strained at the lock, steadying himself on her shoulder with his other hand.

'Don't break the key,' she cautioned.

'I'll tell you what,' he said at last. 'Some idiot has dropped the catch on the other side.'

'It can't be. The catch has been rusted up for years. You'd want a hammer to snib it down.'

'Well, the bolt doesn't budge any. I guess I'll have to shin over the wall and let you in.'

'Gerry, you'll cut your hands to ribbons on that frightful glass.'

The young man had gone a step or two below her and was scanning the top of the door.

'I don't believe I can make it here. I might get over a bit farther along the wall, though, where the rocks are higher. I can put my oily over the glass.'

'We'd better go round by the road, Gerry.'

'Road nothing! Wait for me there a minute, honey, and I'll have that old door open for you in two shakes.'

He darted down the stairway.

'I'm coming, too!' she cried out after him, and ran down in his wake. 'I'd be scared to fits to stay here alone.'

She saw his figure loom grey ahead of her, heard his rubber-soles patter softly in the wet. Then he dashed in among the rocks, the bushes rustling as he went, was dimly silhouetted against the pale mass of the wall, and was lost to view.

'Gerry!' she called.

'I'm here!' his voice came back gaily. 'Stay right where you are.'

She cast a swift glance at the waste of purplish sand, stretching about her for miles; at the dim ocean beyond with its fitful beacons; and then landward, where the blackness of the trees behind Node Tower was all astir with the soughing breeze.

'Wait for me!' she cried; 'I'm coming with you, Gerry!'

She began to scramble up the rocks by the way he had



gone, the bushes wet and clammy against her ankles in their thin silk. As she topped a steep boulder she suddenly came upon Gerry, standing with head bent staring down upon the ground. Just above him rose the sheer black mass of the wall. At the sound of her approach he swung round quickly. In the dim light the look on his face frightened her.

‘Go back, Freckles!’ he shouted. ‘For God’s sake, go back!’

‘What — what is it?’ she demanded.

He had spread his arms wide as though to shield from her view what lay on the ground behind him.

‘It’s a dead man,’ he answered.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE BODY ON THE BEACH

THAT evening Cantle, butler at Node House, was playing Patience in the servants' hall when the front door-bell rang a prolonged peal.

'That'll be the young miss,' he observed to the chauffeur, who was perched on the table reading Saturday's sport in the *Portsmouth Evening News*, his uniform cap pushed back off his forehead, a cigarette in his mouth. 'Past ten o'clock, I do declare! Nice goings-on, trapesin' about to all howers of the night with that American and his motey-boat.'

The bell pealed again.

'Seem to be in a nurry, don't they?' remarked the chauffeur, leisurely turning the pages of his newspaper. 'Jack 'Obbs 'as bin an' done it again for Surrey, I see. Maids all gorn to bed?' he added, as the butler proceeded, with the utmost deliberation, to exchange his tweed jacket for his evening coat.

Cantle nodded.

'Seems to me how everybody's in a nurry nowadays,' he mumbled gloomily, 'cept me, that is.'

He was a lean and pallid man, with a thin thatch of greyish hair, and a profile suggesting an elderly sheep.

'The young generation has no idea of dignity, Mr. Jump,' he pursued, pulling down the tails of his coat. 'No poise. Give me the Latin races for poise. *Mañana*,

that's their motter — a Spanish word, Mr. Jump, signifying "to-morrow." I recollect when Sir Harry and I were at the Legation at Boonus Airs —'

Again and yet again the bell clamoured forth its impatient summons. With a weary sigh the butler laid his cherry-wood pipe upon the table and with measured tread left the room.

Hardly had he opened the front door than Gerrard Leese, his white trousers smeared with slime and sand, his shoes squeaking with water, was in the hall. He was pale and excited.

'Cantle,' he cried, 'there's a body back there on the beach!'

'Is there, sir?' replied the butler in the sort of idiotic sing-song that nurses use to children.

'Yes, a dead man! A corpse washed up by the sea!'

'Dear, dear, sir! Fancy that!'

'Yes, but what are we going to do about it?' demanded the American vigorously.

'I don't rightly know, sir. You see, it's gorn ten. The constable'll be in his bed.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Cantle!' rang out a clear young voice over Gerrard Leese's shoulder. 'Go and ask Captain Dene to come out to me here.'

Freckles stepped into the hall. Seen under the light her appearance was truly deplorable. Her short tawny hair hung in dishevelled ringlets all over her head, her white linen dress was bedraggled, while her stockings were stained and her shoes sodden to a squelchy dough.

Cantle cast down his eyes as though to shut out that dreadful spectacle from his gaze.

'Very good, Miss Isobel.'

He turned to walk stiffly across the hall and disappear through the drawing-room door, the soft rugs swallowing up the sounds of his feet. He passed on to the morning-room, where, in the summer, the evenings were usually spent, as the windows gave on the pleasant rose gardens at the side of the house. He did not hurry his wonted measured pace. He had a vague impression that the two young people were trying to hustle him. Corpse or no corpse, when one has been butler at a British Legation one does not allow oneself to be hustled.

All the party was assembled in the bright and cosy room. The light cast down from the alabaster bowl suspended from the ceiling fell upon the four men at the bridge-table and Lady Fubsy, busy with her knitting, on the Chesterfield close by. Alix Barleston, in a shining black evening frock, sat apart from the lighted circle, her pale face in shadow, an open book in her hands, a cigarette between her lips. Although from time to time she turned a page she was not conscious of what she read. She was wondering, as she had wondered all day, how long she could endure the unbearable suspense and whether her features betrayed her agony of mind.

Most of the night she had lain awake, striving to grapple with a new and bewildering situation. One thing, at any rate, she saw clearly. This ghastly development had forced Frankie back into her ken. It had made them one again. . . .

For years now, it seemed to her, she had written off her husband as one writes off a bad debt. She had acquiesced in his neglect, in his failure to support her and the child, and turned a deaf ear to stories of his life, content if only he would stop away and spare her the indignity of shar-

ing the vicissitudes of his day to day existence. The hopeless ignominy of her marriage had all but broken her powers of resistance. If she had yielded, for one brief instant, to her warm affection for Ronnie Dene, it was because, in a moment of despair, she was not sure whether she would have the strength to battle against the determination of a man like Stanismore.

She had been so certain that her husband no longer counted for anything; that the fetters which matrimony had laid upon them were as ropes of sand. But the nightmare thing which had befallen had propelled this insignificant man she thought she could forget back into the very forefront of her life.

Towards morning she must have fallen asleep. Vance, the elderly housemaid, woke her with the early morning tea. In a kind of dream she had watched the maid's prim figure moving about the room raising the blinds, setting things to rights. She sought to prolong her drowsiness as though her subconscious mind were aware of the horror that lurked, ready to pounce, outside the gates of sleep.

It was the maid's remark that 'the Major' was up and had had his breakfast that jolted her into full consciousness. She told Vance to ask Major Barleston to come upstairs. The maid's rather severe countenance was unruffled. Clearly nothing untoward had been discovered.

Frankie did not appear. When she went down to breakfast, to find life at Node House pursuing its uneventful course, she was told that her husband had gone out half an hour before. After breakfast, Lady Fubsy claimed Alix to accompany her to Vanner to purchase the week's

supplies—the usual Saturday excursion. Alix went round the little shops like one in a dream. Her thoughts were in a turmoil. By the time they returned to Node for lunch she had almost persuaded herself that Frankie's whispered confidence was but another of his lies. When he did not appear for the meal she guessed that he was keeping out of her way, and called herself a fool for letting him hoodwink her again. But at the back of her mind cowered the uneasy recollection of his abject terror on the preceding evening: never before, in her ten years' acquaintance with him, had she seen her husband weep.

At one moment during the endless afternoon she almost resolved to venture down to the tower and set her doubts at rest. But the rain streamed down; she would find it difficult to make an adequate excuse for going out in the grounds, and she was afraid of being seen. If Frankie had spoken the truth her going might arouse suspicion.

Frankie came in just before dinner, wet to the skin, his shoes covered with mud. He told Alix, who was changing in the bedroom, that he had been for a long tramp. He had an unfamiliar look about him that puzzled his wife; it occurred to her only afterwards that he was cold sober. All her fears revived. But he would not let her question him; and when she told him that they must talk things over, he slammed the dressing-room door in her face.

She descended to dinner in a mood of dull despair. She felt utterly hopeless. There was nobody to whom she could turn. This was her affair alone, hers and Frankie's. Again and again that day Ronnie Dene's eyes had sought her face, and she knew that he was look-

ing for the chance to speak to her alone. But, purposely, she avoided him. That moment of happiness, when she had found comfort in his arms, belonged to the past; it was the future, the dark and terrible future, that claimed her now. . . .

She laid down her book and cigarette when, after dinner, Cantle came into the morning-room. She performed these actions with careful deliberation to cover up the alarm with which, throughout that weary day, every interruption of the sort had filled her. She saw the butler cross the room and halt at the bridge-table.

Dene and Vrogue were partners against Sir Harry and Frankie. The cards had just been dealt, and each man was sorting out his hand in his characteristic way — Vrogue, whose big form outtopped the rest, his grotesque face screwed up into one of the grimaces peculiar to him; Frankie impassive, with the unrevealing features of the seasoned poker player; Ronnie listless and rather bored; Sir Harry, his dress shirt bulging, frowning and blinking at the wreath of smoke from his cigar creeping into his eyes.

The butler halted discreetly. Sir Harry was proclaiming:

‘During the cholera epidemic in Constantinople, in Lord Dufferin’s day, I recollect that, for six weeks on end, I washed in soda-water —’

Vrogue’s nasal tones drowned the end of this reminiscence.

‘Comparatively modern invention, soda-water,’ he said. ‘Read somewhere that the original Schwebbe was bound “prentice” to the inventor. How about it, partner?’

He laid down his cards and spread his great red hands

on the table, at the same time thrusting his chin out from his collar with an odd jerky movement. This nervous 'tic' was one of Vroque's staple oddities.

'Two diamonds,' Dene declared.

Cantle decided to make his presence known, and coughed his discreet butler's cough. Dene looked up.

'Well, Cantle?' rumbled Sir Harry, staring moodily at his cards.

'It's a message for the Captain, Sir Harry ——' The butler broke off and blinked feebly.

'What is it?' asked Dene.

'Miss Isobel says, sir, will you come out to her at once?'

Lady Fubsy looked up from her knitting.

'Are they back?' she said. 'Why don't they come in?' Cantle hesitated.

'There's a dead body on the beach,' he mumbled.

A crash resounded from the background. Alix Barleston's book had slid off her knees to the ground.

'What's that?' roared Sir Harry, leaning back in his chair and glaring at the servant. 'I hope to God there hasn't been an accident! Don't stand there blinking like a fool at me. What are you trying to say?'

'I knew something had happened when they didn't come back for dinner,' boomed Lady Fubsy from the Chesterfield. 'Why ever did you let Isobel go, Harry?'

Alix Barleston had stood up. She was looking at her husband. Frankie had flung down his cards and was staring up at the butler. Dene sprang to his feet and hurried from the room.

'Hold your tongue, Ethel!' snapped her husband. 'What's all this nonsense you're talking, Cantle?'



'It's only what they told me, Sir Harry,' quavered the butler with dignity. 'A dead man washed up by the tide, Mr. Leese says it is.'

'Then why the devil couldn't you say so at first? Frightening the life out of us like that! It's all right, my dear,' he added, catching sight of Alix's ghastly face; 'nothing's happened to Freckles.'

'How perfectly appalling!' exclaimed Lady Fubsy, standing up. 'That child must be terrified.' She turned to Alix. 'A thing like this may affect her whole complex. Cattle, bring Miss Isobel in here at once!' She addressed her husband again. 'What are you going to do about it, Harry?'

Sir Harry Fubsy threw himself back in his chair and looked at Vroque. The other's great pendulous lip had dropped, and he was regarding his host with an air of almost comic dismay.

'Inform the police, I suppose, eh, Vroque?'

The other started.

'At once,' he replied promptly. 'Essential formality. Devilish unpleasant business. There'll be an inquest, of course. Have they any special procedure on the island? You're under the Hants Assizes, ain't you? Now in the Channel Islands——'

'Mr. Vroque, you're delaying Sir Harry,' Lady Fubsy's firm tones cut in.

'My dear lady, a thousand apologies. Come on, Fubsy; let's go and have a look at him.' He pulled his huge frame out of his chair. 'You coming, too, Frankie?'

The Major, his glass in his eye, was frowning down at the cards. He stood up. 'Yes, of course,' he answered slowly. He felt a light touch. His wife stood beside him.

She had slipped her fingers under his arm. They left the room together behind the others.

At the open door in the front hall they came upon Dene talking to Gerry Leese. Freckles had collapsed forlornly into a chair.

'...in a blue coat and flannels,' the American was saying. 'Fell off a yacht, I guess. His face and hands are all mauled up by the rocks.'

'My dear Isobel!' Lady Fubsy's horrified exclamation rang through the hall. 'What a state you're in! Go to your room this instant and take off those wet clothes!'

'Yes, do run up and change, dear,' said Alix.

Lady Fubsy fussed the girl upstairs, but Alix remained behind.

The chauffeur joined the group.

'I've brought my torch, Sir Harry,' he said. 'Shall I go with you?'

'Yes, come on, Jump.'

From Node House, perched on the crest of a long, gentle slope running down to the sea wall, terraced gardens descended in flowering banks of luscious green turf to the iron railing which bordered the Wilderness. Here were planted a large variety of trees and shrubs, which old Mortimer Fubsy, Sir Harry's father and a notable botanist, had gathered together from all ends of the earth. Such formal arrangements as there had been had long since disappeared, for Sir Harry's career had kept him for long years abroad, and the place had not been kept up. Viewed by day from the windows of Node House, the long declivity, from the iron railings to the sea wall, was a waving mass of green, a seemingly impenetrable thicket of trees and bushes. In reality the Wilder-

ness, the sanctuary of innumerable birds, was intersected by narrow, mossy paths, widening, in places, into small clearings adorned with a lichen-grey stone bench, a sundial, or a piece of weather-beaten statuary.

Stumbling along in the gloom, the party descended the broad staircase cut through the centre of the banked-up gardens, and, following along the railings, passed through a swing gate into a high rhododendron shrubbery. Before them a narrow path wound its way between the flowering bushes towards the sable bulk of Node Tower breaking the sky-line and beyond it to the sea door, hidden in the trees. As they hastened along, Sir Harry with a coat thrown over his shoulders, Gerry acquainted his host with the circumstances of the discovery. After finding the body, he had sent Freckles back to the sea door, had scrambled himself over the wall, and let her in.

The sea door stood wide. With Jump at his side to light the way, Gerry took the lead. He brought the party out along the top of the rocks at the foot of the wall. A little way along something white fluttered from a glass shed on the coping.

'My handkerchief,' he exclaimed. 'I fixed it up there to mark the spot. It's just here.' And he began to scramble down, the others in his wake.

And so they came to the dead man's body.

All those men except the young American, whose age had spared him the experience, had seen the poor, limp shells of humans who had died by violence—Barleston, Dene, Vroque, and Jump in the war (Vroque had served with a Red Cross unit in the Serbian Retreat), Sir Harry in days of revolution and earthquake in South America.

Yet a silence, tinged with awe, fell upon them all as the torch's beam nakedly revealed the sordid, bedraggled thing that sprawled at their feet.

Sodden with wet, twisted into a dreadful, unnatural posture, it lay between two rocks like a straw-stuffed dummy cast up after a water carnival. The breast was on the sand, but the head was slightly turned so as to rest on the left ear. The left arm, doubled in under the trunk, was hidden from view. But the right was flung out, and the hand was torn and raw.

The man was hatless. His clothes were sopping, the blue coat green with slime about the back, the flannel trousers adhering to his thighs, disclosing the outline of massive legs. He wore buckskin shoes strapped with brown.

The body was caught between two jagged rocks at an acute angle to the wall above, feet pointing to the sea. It looked as if it had been wedged into this cramped position by the tide. A streamer of amber-coloured seaweed clung to one leg.

Sir Harry broke the silence.

'Strapping big fellow,' he commented. 'Switch your light on his face, Jump.'

The chauffeur dropped on one knee, and in the white radiance of the torch one side of the dead man's face appeared. Now they could discern the injuries of which Gerry had spoken. What they could see of the forehead was a red mass.

'Ain't bin in the water long,' observed Jump.

'Raise his right shoulder a trifle,' Sir Harry bade the chauffeur. 'Don't disturb him more than you need. Here, give me your torch.'

His voice rasped with a strange hoarseness, and, as he spoke, he glanced over his shoulder at the three men who stood, with impassive mien, erect behind him. In the reflected glimmer of the light Gerry remarked his unusual pallor.

Jump handed over the torch and, straddling the body, got his two hands under the dead man's shoulder and heaved. Crouched down, Sir Harry craned forward, and for an instant, above the right temple, the dead man's hair shone crisply black in the beam's bright glare.

'The rocks caught him all right ——' Gerry began; but he was interrupted by a shocked whisper from his host.

'Merciful Heaven!' He swung round on his haunches. There was terror in his face. 'It's Stanismore!'

A small, cold hand folded itself about Frankie Barleston's and gripped it for a second in a heartening squeeze. His eye caught the shimmer of jet in the gloom.

Slowly the chauffeur let the dead man's shoulder sink back into the ooze.

## CHAPTER VII

### ALIX FACES THE INEVITABLE

LIKE many another man of his class, Frankie Barleston was a victim of the change which the war wrought in the social system of England. At Eton he proved to be one of those unteachables capable of absorbing little other than the principles of caste which were duly flogged into him; and if, when he left, he was neither less honest nor more vicious than his fellows, he was lacking in those gifts of character which the large fortune he was to inherit, as an only child, from his father prevented him from ever acquiring.

He failed for Sandhurst, and crept into the army by the back door. His commission in the Hussars was not a year old when his father died and Frankie came into his money. Thirteen years of racing, polo, cards, and acquisitive ladies at home and in the East accounted for the whole of his capital; and it was the discovery that a man of his expensive tastes could not subsist on his pay, as his Colonel forcibly pointed out in a memorable interview, that led to his rather sudden retirement from the army.

That was in 1913. When, a twelvemonth later, war broke out, Frankie Barleston was penniless. But he was not at the end of his resources. Already he was living on his wits, as the saying goes, although he did not realise it; he called it 'looking about him.' He was excel-

lent company, a good judge of a horse, a capital shot, and a fine bridge player. Many country places were open to him. He had scores of friends anxious to include him in their shooting parties and glad to mount him in the hunting season. To pay his way, for railway fares, keepers' tips, and the like, he relied on an odd deal over a race-horse or polo pony, but mainly on his winnings at cards. If his bridge was notable, at poker he was supreme. The blend of shrewdness and daring which the game demands accorded perfectly with a streak in his nature.

On the outbreak of war he went straight back to his old regiment, as a matter of course. Everybody — that is, all the younger men in the little circle which was Frankie Barleston's universe — departed 'to have a crack at the Hun.' When 'E' battery fired Britain's first shot in the World War, he was out with the cavalry in front of Mons — and the disintegration of Frankie Barleston had begun.

It was the whisky that did it. He was thirty-four years old and rather soft from good living. The ordeal of those first battles played havoc with his nerves. He turned naturally to the only stimulant he knew.

He had always drunk a good deal. Before the war men in his army set did. They lived hard and they played hard, and their bodies, steeled by continual physical exercise, withstood the long succession of 'pegs' all day, with port at odd intervals in between and always after dinner. Whisky was their stand-by, their comforter in affliction, counsellor in doubt, companion in loneliness. So Frankie turned to whisky. By the time he was sent home from Neuve Chapelle with a lump of shrapnel in the shoulder, he was rationing himself to a bottle a day.

Alix often asked herself why she had married Frankie Barleston. She asked herself the question again as she lay in bed and watched the reluctant dawn greying in the sky. After the finding of the body they had made her go to her room. But she could not sleep. An hour before she had heard footsteps on the gravel beneath her window and voices, and knew that the superintendent of police from Vanner had arrived. Her husband and Sir Harry were with him now. She wondered how Frankie was faring. She had a fleeting vision of the broken, frightened man who had confronted her in the dressing-room on the previous night. It was not easy to identify him with the gallant, eager figure of 1915.

In 1915 she was only twenty. Frankie, discharged from hospital, was doing duty with a reserve regiment of cavalry on the East Coast. He and some of his brother officers were billeted at a country house belonging to friends of Mrs. Dagleish, Alix's widowed mother, who, with her two daughters, lived in London.

Here, in due course, on a week-end filched from her work at the censorship office, came Alix, to find herself immersed in an exhilarating atmosphere of war. There was a sentry at the lodge gates, khaki caps and great-coats trailed about the hall, spurs jingled on the staircase, and from the park, where the men lay under canvas, trumpet called to trumpet, musically.

Not a Jill in the Great War but had her Jack somewhere among the millions under arms. The enduring thrill of the *épopée* seemed to draw men and maids together. But, until she came down to Norfolk, Alix had escaped the enchantment. She had men friends at the Front, boys mostly, of her own age, like Ronnie Dene,



who wrote her cheery notes in indelible pencil about nothing at all; but she seemed to have missed all personal contact with the war itself. At least, the romance of it had passed her by; nor did she discover it among the learned pedants with whom her working days were spent.

But it was lying in wait for her amid the autumn tints of the Fosters' park, between the tents of Frankie's squadron and the house. Against such a background Frankie Barleston was seen at his best. He was always a man's man, and in those days he was hardy, high spirited, and good natured. His manners were charming, and his debonair air was laced with just such an engaging dash of high-and-mightiness as the British regular looks for in his officers. He was still slim; his breeches and boots were always beyond reproach, and, mounted on Bess, his black mare, he was the picture of carefree elegance.

A gate clanged faintly in the grounds below. They were returning from the beach. Frankie would soon be coming up now.

Why had she married him? Perhaps she had been first attracted because he stood out against the rather mixed company of his brother officers; perhaps because the merry blue eyes that used to twinkle at her had looked — fearlessly, men said — upon the carnage of Mons, the Marne, and Ypres. And then his wound was but newly healed, and in 1915 a wounded man was more of a hero than he was in the latter years.

He called on them at Kensington, where her uneventful girlhood had been spent, took her to theatres. She went out with him frequently. He never made love to her, but treated her always with a sort of bearish affection. She liked him because of his tremendous simplicity, and

because he appealed to her as might a boy who wants mothering. At that time it never struck her that he drank a good deal, Whisky appeared to produce no effect upon him. She never saw him anything but sober.

Then, suddenly, he was warned to return to France. They gave him a week's draft leave. He came straight to Alix and asked her to marry him before he sailed. As a Captain he had, with pay and allowances, about six hundred a year. Alix was now of age, and, with her private income, they would have just over a thousand a year between them. 'We'll live like fighting-cocks on that, old girl,' Frankie declared. She, too, it seemed to her on looking back, must have believed that the war would last for ever. They were married, very quietly, two days later. 'In the war we were all mad,' she used to say afterwards.

Early in the New Year they wedded. As her mind went back to that morning, grey even as the sombre sky upon which she now looked out from her bed, she could see again the blanket of fog clinging to the rafters of the church and the little knot of figures waiting at the altar rail — Frankie and his best man in khaki, with great cavalry swords, buttons, and belts resplendent; Frankie's servant, destined to be killed a month later at his master's side, with his face wreathed in smiles; the old pew-opener with her rheumy eyes and rusty black bonnet. The Fubsys lent them Node for the honeymoon. Frankie was very sweet to her, and she cried bitterly when the week was up and he departed for Havre. She returned to her mother's house and her work.

Seven months later, while she was at Node with Lady Fussy, out of range of the air-raids, waiting for her baby

to be born, Frankie unexpectedly came back. The Battle of the Somme was raging. He told them he had been sent home with shell-shock. He had not been forty-eight hours in the house before she realised that she was married to a drunkard.

The murmur of voices mounted from the garden. She could make out Frankie's clipped accents and the superintendent's soft Wight burr. She propped herself up on her elbow and looked at her bedside clock. It was three o'clock. There was a lemon light in the sky. Sunrise was at hand.

Her mind revolted from the memory of those early years of marriage. Her husband never went back to the Front. A home appointment with the Remounts kept his pay going until a year after the Armistice. They took a furnished flat in the Cromwell Road. Even now the very name of the street made her redden with shame. The ignominy of her life there with this sodden shadow of a man, the quarrels, the drunken scenes, the plausible lies, always lies, the broken promises! . . .

His gratuity lasted for a few months while, once more, he was 'looking about' him. But the blue eyes, rather swimmy now, which in the old days never flinched at a fence, looked out on a world unlike anything that Frankie Barleston remembered. Most of his friends were dead, and of the country houses where he had spent so many joyous and profitable week-ends, those which had not been sold seemed to be shut up. There were new faces in the clubs. Life was shockingly expensive, and people were less hospitable than of yore. He did not know how to get work, and he did not try. Instinctively he turned to the things he understood, horses and cards. When what

had been his pastime became his profession, men began to cold-shoulder him in the clubs. But drink, which had blunted his moral sense, had also thickened his hide. He became less careful of his associates, and he drank more than ever. . . .

The distant whinny of a self-starter, followed by the purr of a motor engine, drifted in out of the mysterious morning greyness. Alix sat up in bed and listened. There were footsteps in the corridor without. Then the bedroom door opened quietly and her husband came in. She noticed his soft movements: Frankie was always thoughtful in little things; it was in the big issues of life that he failed her. When he saw that she was awake he crossed the room and stood at the foot of the bed, staring at her moodily. His face wore a weary, rather perplexed expression.

'Well?' she asked eagerly. 'What's happened? What do the police say? Answer me, Frankie. Can't you see that I'm in a fever of anxiety?'

He passed his hand across his brow.

'I'm dead beat,' he murmured. 'I'm going to turn in now. We'll talk about it in the morning.'

'No,' she cried; 'we'll talk about it now. If I'm to help you, Frankie, you've got to tell me everything. How did you come to kill this man?'

He shook his head irritably from side to side.

'I admit nothing. Nothing, do you hear? Why do you pester me with questions when I'm dropping with sleep? You're — you're worse than the police.'

She wrung her hands.

'I'm not asking out of curiosity. But I've got to know —'

'That's just what you haven't. Listen to me, Alix. You may be questioned and cross-examined and God knows what; do you realise that? The less you know, the better for us both ——'

'I'm not afraid of Superintendent Nolling,' she broke in.

His face grew suddenly haggard.

'I'm not either. But Stanismore's an important man.' He clasped his thin hands together. 'They may call in Scotland Yard.'

The note of foreboding in his voice sent a chill through her.

'What's going to happen to us, Frankie?' she asked dully.

He seemed to brace himself up. His features hardened.

'Nothing, if you say what I told you to say, and stick to it.'

'But that's a lie. I hate lies. Is there no other way?'

'There is no other way.'

'I don't like it, Frankie. Wouldn't it be better to tell the truth?'

'You're mad!' he exclaimed roughly. 'D'you want to send me to the scaffold?'

At that word she shrank back in horror.

'That's what it would mean for me,' he went on. 'Stanismore controls these Jews who hold my paper.'

She covered her face with her hands.

'Merciful God!' she groaned.

'You can see, then,' he went on, 'that I need a solid alibi. I've got it, if only you'll support me.' His voice grew eager. 'And you're going to support me, aren't you, old girl?'

She looked up miserably.

'Frankie,' she said in a low voice, 'this is madness. Don't you realise that your connection with Stanismore is bound to come out when they wind up his affairs?'

'We've got to chance that,' he answered. 'Stanismore was devilish deep. If I know anything of him, his relations with these thieving bloodsuckers were well covered up. Anyway, I'm going to stand by my alibi. If I was here with you I couldn't be out there.' He jerked his head in the direction of the open window, all flushed with the rays of the sunrise.

She sighed.

'And this money you owe, how do you propose to pay it?' she demanded.

He laughed. She saw that his wonted confidence was coming back to him.

'Now that Stanismore's out of the way,' he said, 'I fancy that Melchisedech's will let me renew. A little of the ready will do it.' He eyed her sidelong. 'A very few hundreds will do the trick, old girl.'

'And this man Kavanagh?'

He laughed again.

'That was Stanismore's long suit. Pure bluff. Kavanagh go to the police? I'd like to see him. Besides, Creagh had no kick against me. The game was fair enough. How was I to know that the young fool lost more than he could pay?'

With a gesture of despair she pressed her fingers to her temples.

'Oh, stop!' she entreated.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Oh, all right,' he said. He looked keenly at her.

'I can count on you, Alix?'

'I don't know what I shall do,' she answered doggedly. 'Why should they question me, anyway?'

He paused.

'I hope they won't. But if they do, Nolling will expect your evidence to tally with mine.'

She started up, staring wildly at him. She was destined to recall every detail of that scene, the prelude to so many anxious hours — the quiet, dainty bedroom, flooded with a pinkish glow, and Frankie planted there at the foot of her bed, his hands in his pockets, his eyes reckless, an uneasy smile on his pallid, weary face.

'Do you mean to say you've told the police this lie?'

He nodded.

'I knew I could rely on you, old thing. Anyway, they're not likely to bother you.'

'But you had no right to do it without my consent,' she declared piteously. 'Frankie, I don't like it. I'm afraid.'

'Well,' he answered impatiently, 'the thing's settled now. There's no going back on it.'

She sank down among her pillows, her head drooping on her breast.

'No,' she said sombrely, 'there's no going back.'

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE MAN IN THE TWEED CAP

GERRY LEESE was dreaming that he was again racing up past the Island shore. But now the sides of the Sprite towered up into space, and, as he cowered in the well, an immense hand, the knuckles skinned and raw, was thrust up from the sea to grasp him, while a great wailing cry rang in his ears. He awoke with a start, his heart pounding violently. A long drawn-out, melancholy hooting drifted in through his bedroom window.

He sprang out of bed and looked out. It was broad daylight, a grey morning, such as mariners say foretells fine weather, and out of the sea mist resounded the doleful bleat of the foghorn of the Warner lightship. With a rush the recollection of the events of the previous evening came back to him. The first excitement of the finding of the body subsided, he had gone to his room, at Lady Fubsy's urgent entreaty, to get rid of his wet clothes. Before going up he had seen Jump despatched in the Daimler to the adjacent village of Dexter with instructions to rouse up and bring back the local constable with all speed; and from the dining-room, where, on the direction of his hostess, Cantle had served him with hot whisky and lemon, had heard Sir Harry at the telephone in the back hall objurgating against someone, either very stupid or very sleepy, at the police station at Vanner, the nearest town.



He had left Sir Harry and Frankie Barleston waiting up for Jump's return and had gone to bed. He was dog-tired, but sleep did not immediately come to him. And when he did drop off, his slumber was haunted by the horrifying memory of that limp object on the shore, and broken, again and again, by some query, unspoken, unformed, even, that seemed to hammer against his brain....

Now, as he stood at his bedroom window and filled his lungs with the clean morning air, it began once more its dull pricking. The sea door — that was it. Why had it been locked against them? For locked it had been. On reaching the door from the inside he had found, as he had predicted to Freckles would be the case, that the catch was down. Yet, as Freckles had assured him, it was not the custom of the house to use the catch at all. Had it been rusted as she declared it was? He couldn't remember. It didn't matter, anyway; the important fact was that they had been locked out. Why? And had this fact any bearing on the tragedy? Sir Harry and the others apparently believed that Stanismore had been drowned by falling off his yacht on his way to visit them at Node, as he had visited them before. But on Friday night the sea was dead calm. How, in the name of goodness, had the man managed to drown himself in smooth water?

Gerry opened his bedroom door and looked out. Nobody was stirring yet. Why shouldn't he do a little investigation on his own account? He fished out of the wardrobe some clothes, a tennis shirt, a pair of flannel trousers, a Shetland pull-over, and began to dress. The case was going to make a huge sensation, that was clear.

This Stanismore seemed to have been the whale of a fellow. 'A pitiably sad finish to a most brilliant career,' had been old Sir Harry's epitaph; and Vrogue, his gargoyle face distorted in the most fantastic of grimaces, had declared roundly that 'poor old Stan. would have been Prime Minister one day if he'd lived.' As he pulled on his clothes, Gerry shivered at the recollection of that sorry, shapeless thing between the rocks that might have survived to guide the destinies of a nation.

He did not stop to bathe or shave, but, as soon as he was dressed, stepped softly out into the corridor, ran down to the floor below, and descended to the grounds by the garden stairs. The dew gleamed on the huge crimson and purple blooms of the rhododendrons as he scampered through the shrubbery. The morning air was delicious. He wished he had thought of bringing his swimming suit.

The sea door stood open, as they had left it on the previous night. Gerry first turned his attention to the lock. Freckles was perfectly right: the snib was red with rust. It moved, but stiffly, when Gerry pushed it down, wedging the bolt against any attempt to turn it with the door-knob, or, consequently, with the key from the outside. Then Gerry observed a little reddish dust adhering to the catch and powdering the black enamel of the lock surrounding it.

He moistened his finger and picked up a few grains of the deposit. It was not rust. For that it was too gritty. Looking about him, the young man caught sight of a battered half-brick lying on the path. He remembered it perfectly. They used it to prop the door open when they went down to bathe.

He picked up the brick, turned it over in his hands. His fingers easily detached a few porous flakes of the same colour and consistency as that reddish powder on the lock. At one end of the brick was a nick. It was obviously freshly made, for it was lighter in shade than the dull red about it. It certainly looked as though whoever had locked them out had used the brick for battering down the snib.

A brisk 'Good-morning' made him start guiltily. A healthy-looking, red-faced man in a grey flannel suit and tweed cap stood in the doorway. He was smoking a large pipe. Gerry's first instinct was to drop his brick. But he thought better of it, and laid his trophy carefully down behind the whitened stones bordering the path before acknowledging the stranger's greeting.

'You seem interested in that door,' observed the man jauntily.

Gerry reddened. The stranger had a hard, watchful gaze which somehow disconcerted him.

'I was just having a look round,' he replied rather lamely.

'Staying here?' the stranger asked.

The young man's self-assurance was returning. The other's bland impertinence rather jarred on him.

'Are you?' he countered. But he had been brought up in a school which has taken to heart the Virginian's famous admonition in Owen Wister's masterpiece: '*When you say that, smile.*' And Gerry Leese's smile would have disarmed the Grand Inquisitor himself.

The man in the tweed cap laughed.

'I'm at Chine Bay,' he answered. 'I heard there was a dead body on the beach here, so I thought I'd stroll

over and have a look. You've heard about it, I s'pose?'

'Sure,' said Gerry. His heart swelled within him as he added importantly: 'I found him.'

'Is that so?' observed the stranger casually. 'Well, he's out there yet. They moved him up out of reach of the sea. The tide's going out again now.'

Gerry stepped out upon the little platform at the head of the steps leading down to the beach. Thirty yards below the waves were lapping the rocks. On a dry patch of sand at the foot of the sea wall some distance away he saw a dark form stretched out.

'I guess I'll take a look at him, now that I'm here,' said Gerry.

'There's no harm in your doing that if you don't touch,' rejoined the man in the tweed cap.

Gerry stopped and scanned him carefully.

'Say, are you the village constable?' he demanded.

'Well, no, not exactly,' the other replied gravely. 'I'm his deputy, as you might say. I know Jim Belper, see, and he asked me to take charge while he slipped off home to get a bit of breakfast. He's been out all night, Jem has, and he's pretty peckish. But you'll oblige me by not mentioning that. Jem's a good chap, and I don't want to get him into trouble.'

Gerry looked puzzled.

'But hasn't the district attorney been yet?'

'We don't have him in this country,' said the stranger, and smiled. 'But the superintendent and the police surgeon from Vanner have been and gone. The superintendent will be back with the photographer as soon as it's light enough to take pictures. They're going to move the dead man back to where he was found when the tide's

back enough. They'll want you to help them there, I shouldn't wonder.'

He paused and, taking his pipe from his mouth, thoughtfully contemplated the bowl. Then he said inquiringly:

'His head and trunk would have been higher than his legs, I suppose, when you came across him?'

'Yes. His feet were pointing down the beach.'

'Face downwards, eh?'

'Not his face,' Gerry corrected. 'His face was turned to one side. But his chest was resting on the ground.'

The man in the tweed cap sucked his pipe reflectively.

'Can I go along and look at him now?' Gerry asked.

'If you like. He's not a pretty sight.'

They scrambled over the rocks together. A merciful hand had flung a tarpaulin over the body; but it had been rolled down to the waist, and the face was uncovered. Despite the terrible injuries to the features the dead man looked more human now as he lay with his sightless gaze turned upward to the grey sky of morning and his hands decently arranged along his sides.

'Say,' murmured Gerry in an awed voice, 'did the rocks do *that* to him? How did he manage to get into the water, anyway? What do the police say?'

The man in the tweed cap looked hard at him.

'Have you ever seen a drowned man before?' he demanded.

'Never,' rejoined Gerry.

'I thought not. Just put your hand on his coat. Here, on the lapel. He won't bite you.'

Gerry obeyed.

'Just damp, isn't it? That's sea moisture. The front

of the jacket's not sopping with sea water like his trousers, is it? Don't you know what that means? The upper part of his body was never in the sea. High water only reached his legs. If they'd left him where he lay till the tide was full, they'd have seen that for themselves.'

'But the back of his coat was soaked.'

'Rain. It poured from noon until teatime yesterday afternoon, didn't it? The rain didn't start till long after breakfast. And Friday night was fine, wasn't it?'

'It was when I went to bed,' said Gerry eagerly. This blunt-spoken, self-confident individual was beginning to interest him.

'There wasn't a drop all night, Jem Belper tells me,' declared the other with emphasis. 'What follows? That when that body came to ground on that patch of sand between those two rocks down there *the weather was fine*. The proof is that the front of the coat and the waistcoat beneath it, which rested on the sand and were shielded by the trunk, are dry by comparison with the back. That gives us the time approximately, don't it?'

He paused and cocked his head aggressively at his hearer.

'You mean that the body must have been there *before* the rain started after breakfast on Saturday?' said Gerry.

'I certainly do. Although it looked mighty threatening all yesterday evening, the last rain we had stopped at five o'clock in the afternoon. What time exactly was it when you found the body?'

'About ten o'clock, or a little after,' Gerry replied.

The man in the tweed cap nodded.

'It all fits in. The police surgeon, who was here an hour or two back, said that the man had then been dead for more than twenty-four hours. That would give the time of his death somewhere late on Friday night or early on Saturday morning. Belper tells me that Stanismore was alive and well in London on Friday morning, and spoke of coming down to Portsmouth in the afternoon. Humph.'

He grunted, staring down moodily at the sand.

'But how did he die if he wasn't drowned?' demanded Gerry.

The stranger stirred himself from his reverie.

'*Drowned?*' he repeated in a loud voice. 'When you've seen as many drowned men as I have, my lad, you'll know—well, I needn't describe it to you. *Drowned?* The police don't bring photographers out for drowned men in this country. *Drowned*, is it? The wave that drowned *him* had a damned big stick in its hand, that's all I can say. Look at the forehead above the left eye. Why, the front of his head is knocked in, pretty near.'

In blank astonishment Gerry whistled. During the greater part of their conversation the incredible suspicion had been building up in his brain. But now the bald fact stood forth, unchallengeable.

'You mean — you mean he was murdered?'

'I do,' was the firm reply, 'and the police surgeon says so, too, by what I hear from Belper.'

The memory of the sea door locked against them, of that rusty catch battered down, flashed into Gerry Leese's mind. For a moment he debated whether he should confide the result of his investigations to his very cocksure acquaintance. He checked the impulse, however, and asked instead:

‘Are you from the district attorney’s office, or whatever you call it in this country?’

The stranger’s eyes twinkled.

‘Something like that,’ he said. He laid a finger knowingly along his nose. ‘But I’m here unofficially, strictly unofficially, you understand.’

The sound of footsteps made them both look up. A large blue policeman was carefully picking his way down to the beach.

‘Well,’ said the stranger, ‘here’s Jem back again, so I think I’ll be moving along. Good-morning to you.’

He nodded to Gerry and waved his hand to the constable. Then he set off along the shore, his tweed cap pulled down to his red ears, his pipe in his teeth, his solid black boots planted firmly down on the glistening sand.



## CHAPTER IX

### SUPERINTENDENT NOLLING'S LITTLE HOUR

WHEN Alix Barleston told her husband that she was not afraid of Superintendent Nolling, it was no vain boast. The police officer was a familiar personage to the household at Node. His squareish, shortish figure in the smart black uniform and silver-laced cap was to be seen on all public occasions in the neighborhood; and he always attended the church bazaars and other charity fêtes which, during the summer months, were held in the grounds of Node House. He was quite a crony of Mrs. Barleston's, and when she met him on her drives into Vanner, she generally made a point of stopping to speak to him. He was a man of pleasant features, with a large grey moustache, easy-going and courteous, as is the Wight way, and extremely deferential towards the landed gentry. Alix found it hard to imagine Mr. Nolling making himself unpleasant to anybody at Node.

Like many other things in this quiet, green corner of the British Isles which was to furnish him with his first impressions of England, Superintendent Nolling at first bewildered and then considerably diverted Mr. Gerrard Leese. The Superintendent took command of the situation at Node with an apologetic air which amazed the young American, accustomed to the brusquer vigour of police methods at home. Frankie Barleston had informed the Superintendent of Stanismore's intention, announced

at their meeting in London on Friday morning, of visiting Portsmouth on the Friday afternoon; and when Gerry came up from the beach to breakfast, he discovered the police officer in the hall laboriously transcribing the deposition, from the Major's dictation, in a fat notebook. Sir Harry was looking on.

Mr. Nolling was an extremely deliberate person. In speech as in action, Gerry thought that he was slower than he had imagined any human being could possibly be without falling into a coma. His phlegm was remarkable, enduing him with an outward calm which appeared as smooth and impenetrable as the stonework of the Spithead forts. The fact of the murder did not seem to astonish him as much as the circumstance that it should have occurred on the Island; and when he spoke of the victim, it was with a slightly grudging air, as though he felt that the deceased might have chosen some spot in which to be killed, other than at the very doors of one of the most respected inhabitants of the Wight.

'Ah, there you are, Leese,' said Sir Harry as Gerry appeared. 'This is the gentleman who found the body,' he explained to the Superintendent by way of introduction.

'One thing at a time, if you please, sir,' rejoined the officer. 'I'll finish first with the Major, if you don't mind.' He turned again to Barleston.

'They've located the *Anthea*, Stanismore's yacht,' Sir Harry informed Gerry in an aside. 'She's moored off Chine Bay pier. Stanismore arrived in her on Friday evening. He went on shore about half-past ten or eleven. He keeps a single hand on board, a man called Newcome, and this fellow's missing. Nolling thinks it is significant.'

‘What’s that, Uncle Harry?’

Alix Barleston stood beside them. She had descended the stairs unnoticed. She was wearing a white crêpe frock, and she had thrust a crimson rose in her belt. The Superintendent looked up from his notebook with a deferential smile.

‘Good-morning to you, Mrs. Barleston,’ he said brightly.

‘Good-morning, Superintendent,’ she returned to his greeting. ‘What’s this Sir Harry is saying about Mr. Stanismore’s yacht hand being missing?’

Mr. Nolling assumed an important air.

‘Well, ma’am, we’re following the matter up. It ‘pears as how, about nine-thirty on Friday night, this chap Newcome — I know him, and a rare rough customer he is — came ashore in the Anthea’s dinghy with his kit-bag under his arm. A boatman on the slipway — chap by name of Simpson — spoke to him, but got no answer. Thinks Newcome was in liquor. I dare say he was. He’s been in trouble before over his drinking ways. He went off into the town, and he’s not been seen since.’

Alix Barleston, her lips slightly parted, had been listening eagerly.

‘But surely you don’t think that this man ——’ she began. Her gaze strayed towards her husband. But Frankie, who was twirling his eyeglass at the end of its string, avoided her eye.

‘What I think or what I don’t think ain’t evidence, ma’am,’ Nolling observed placidly, with his strong Wight burr. ‘I may have my suspicions and then again I mayn’t. But I do know that on Friday night this Newcome chap lands with his ditty bag at half-past nine and

never comes back; and that an hour later, being alone on the yacht, this here Mr. Stanismore hails Simpson and has himself put ashore. He gives Simpson a bob and walks off in the direction of Node. He never told Simpson nothing about going calling at Node. Did he tell Newcome? Eleven o'clock, which would be about the hour Stanismore would have reached the spot where he was found if he went by the sands, strikes me as a funny sort o' time to go a-calling. But was he going a-calling? I don't know, and, from what Sir Harry has kindly told me, none of you ladies and gentlemen know, either. And therefore, until we've laid hands on this here Newcome, I reserve my judgment.'

He folded his hands across his chest and looked with a challenging air round the hall.

'The thing's a mystery to us all,' averred Sir Harry. 'To think of that poor fellow being done to death at our very doors! The body must have lain hidden among the rocks all Saturday. I don't know when it would have been discovered if Leese hadn't stumbled upon it when he went round to climb over the wall. By the way, that reminds me ——'

He glanced round the circle of his guests. Vroque and Freckles had come in from breakfast, and at this moment Dene appeared from the direction of the dining-room. His eyes at once sought out Alix, who stood by the table, twisting her handkerchief through her fingers. She would not meet his gaze.

'That reminds me,' Sir Harry was saying, 'did anybody fasten the catch on the inside of the sea door on Saturday?'

Each looked at the other with the sort of inquiring

glance which people in a group exchange when a general question is put to them. There was a murmur of 'Nos' in different keys. Now the Superintendent intervened.

'I attach no importance to the point, sir. It's Friday night, not Saturday, we're concerned with. There was nought amiss with the lock Friday night, for the Major let hisself in with the key ——' He broke off and fluttered the leaves of his notebook. 'What time was it again, Major?'

'Just before ten,' said Barleston. 'When I arrived back from town.'

Alix, who was watching Ronnie Dene, saw a perplexed furrow suddenly appear between his eyes. She stole a glance at Frankie. His face was impassive.

The Superintendent turned to Gerry Leese.

'I'll get your statement about the discovery of the body down in black and white, sir, if you don't mind,' he remarked. 'How was the name again?'

While Nolling wrote down Gerry's deposition, word for word, in longhand, Alix made a sign to her husband and went out and stood under the porch.

'Frankie,' she exclaimed desperately when he had joined her, 'I can't go on with it!'

'For God's sake, hush!' he implored. 'Someone will hear you.'

'We can't stand by and let them arrest this wretched man. That was no part of our bargain, Frankie.'

'They haven't found him yet. And if they do they can prove nothing. Listen to me, Alix: you've got to take a grip on yourself. You're losing your nerve ——'

He broke off abruptly. Freckles stepped into the porch.

'Isn't old Nolling a scream?' she said. 'Gerry's getting most frightfully ratty. The old idiot makes him say everything at least four times over. I say, Frankie' — she lowered her voice — 'have the police found out how the murder was done? I mean, what weapon the murderer used?'

Frankie screwed his glass into his eye and mustered his sister-in-law.

'The surgeon said something about a blunt instrument,' he answered, after a pause. 'But that's what they always say. What do you want to know for?'

'Because I'm thrilled by it all. Have they found the weapon?'

'Not that I know of,' retorted Frankie, turning away.

'Freckles, don't be so morbid,' said Alix.

Then Vroque called them back into the hall.

'I was asking Sir Harry whether anything unusual was seen or heard on Friday night,' Nolling remarked as they reappeared.

'I've explained to the Superintendent that on Friday night we broke up early,' said Sir Harry. 'My wife and I, with Leese here and you, Freckles, went upstairs together at half-past ten. You, Vroque, were in the library —'

'As a matter of fact, I went to my room before you did,' Vroque put in. 'Don't you remember I said good-night to you across the corridor when you came up?'

'Why, yes, of course. Well, then, that accounts for you. You were in your room, too, Frankie, as you came back at ten. At that time Alix was already upstairs, and you, Dene, you went off early as well. About ten o'clock, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' Dene agreed shortly.

'Then you were all in your rooms before Mr. Stanismore could have reached Node beach?' suggested Nolling.

'Undoubtedly,' replied Sir Harry, making himself the spokesman of his guests.

'And no cry or anything of the kind was heard?'

The momentary silence appeared to imply a negative answer to the question.

'Did everybody go straight to bed?' asked the police officer.

'I did for one,' replied Sir Harry. 'And so did my wife. We keep early hours at Node, Nolling. Not much excitement here in the evenings. What about you, Leese?'

'I did, too,' said Gerry. 'Freckles and I had to make an early start next morning.'

'I turned in early as well,' Frankie put in. 'The very instant I got back. And found that Alix had beaten me by a short head.'

'I expect Vrogue was the last, as usual, to put out his light,' remarked Sir Harry.

'Nothing of the sort,' Vrogue retorted. 'He' — he pointed at Dene — 'was later than I.'

'What time did you get into bed, sir?' Nolling said to Dene.

'I don't quite know. Lateish, in any case. When I got upstairs I changed into pyjamas and sat for a bit smoking and looking at the sea.'

'At what hour did you put out your light?'

For the fraction of a second the young man hesitated. He did not look at Alix, but he felt her eyes on his face.

'I'm not absolutely sure,' he answered evenly. 'Soon after midnight, I should say.'

'You were the last up, then. You sleep on the sea side of the house, I think Sir Harry said? You heard no sound from the beach?'

'Nothing. But the beach is a long way from the house, you know.'

Nolling was making a lengthy entry in his book. 'That's so,' he agreed, busy with his writing. When at last he had finished he closed his book with a snap. He turned to Gerry.

'I'm going to ask you to have the kindness,' he said, 'to come down with me to the beach. The photographer's outside, and I want your help in arranging the body as it was found.'

Gerry made a face at Freckles behind Mr. Nolling's back. But, rather to the boy's surprise, she did not smile. She was gazing at Ronnie Dene with her smooth young forehead wrinkled in a perplexed and anxious frown.

'Don't you have any detectives in this country?' Gerry said to Cattle.

It was noon. For three hours the Superintendent had kept the young man on the beach. But now the rather gruesome work was at an end, and the dead man had been borne away on a gurney to the ambulance waiting in the drive of Node House. The post-mortem was to take place at the Cottage Hospital at Dexter that afternoon, and the inquest in the village hall the following day. But Nolling lingered on the shore, taking abundant notes, under the awed gaze of a growing crowd.



The Node House butler had pattered down, in the slack interval before lunch, to watch the proceedings.

'Detectives?' he said, in reply to Gerry's rather sarcastic inquiry. 'Oh yes, sir. That young man' — he pointed to a red-eared youth poking about among the rocks — 'is the detective from Vanner. The Sooperintendent brought him over with him.'

'But isn't anyone coming from Scotland Yard?'

'Oh, no, sir. The Island's got its own police. There's no call for London to interfere. I think,' he added smugly — 'I think as how we may trust the Sooperintendent, sir, an Islander born and bred, a most reliable officer.'

'He certainly is a humdinger,' said Gerry, 'the world's lightning sleuth.'

The butler cackled feebly.

'You will have your joke, Mr. Leese. But that's our English way. Plodding. Slow but sure.'

'He's plodding all right,' remarked Gerry. 'That baby would run hot at a tortoise's funeral, Cante.'

The butler drew down the corners of his mouth primly.

'I dessay the Sooperintendent's working on a method of his own did we but know, sir. Should he require assistance in a day or two ——'

'Don't rush him, Cante. Better make it a week or two.'

'...he might ask for a plain-clothes officer to be sent from Winchester,' the butler concluded.

'That ought to do it,' solemnly declared Gerry.

'But I think that Mr. Nolling will manage alone,' Cante added ecstatically.

The news of the murder had spread over the Island. It had flashed across the water to the mainland and burst,

like a shell, upon the calm of a dull Fleet Street Sunday. The local reporters were, of course, the first on the scene, and were disposed of without much difficulty by Mr. Nolling on the feudal principles on which the newspaper affairs of the Isle of Wight are conducted. But, in the early afternoon, a deluge of pertinacious investigators descended upon Node. These were the newspaper men from London, polite but persistent individuals with post-office telegraph forms protruding from their breast-pockets. Their assaults on the front door infuriated Cante, who, like so many newspaper readers, strongly objected to the publicity that dealt with his own instead of other people's affairs.

'A lot o' dratted, prying busybodies,' he would mutter as he stalked, with all becoming deliberation, through the hall, 'poking their noses in where they're not wanted.' He would open the door and blink idiotically at the keen, determined faces of the news seekers outside. 'No,' he would snap importantly, handing back a card, 'we don't know anything about it. The perlice at Vanner is in possession of the particklers. The Sooperintendent left here this hower gone. No, Sir Harry is out. I can't say w'en he'll return.' And he would close the door with just enough emphasis to proclaim the outrage to his feelings.

He was particularly incensed against a certain Mr. Bryan Blake, who gained access to the house by what the butler designated as 'a low trick.' A black-haired, merry-eyed young man, extremely well dressed, he arrived alone in a two-seater. He asked for Mr. Vroque, and the card he presented bore the name of a club of such impeccable respectability that Cante admitted the visitor.

But Vroque, who was in the library, flatly refused to

receive the caller. He terrified Cantle by flying into a most violent passion.

'What's it got to do with me?' he roared, his mouth awry. 'Send him packing, d'you hear? I won't see him, or anybody else from the Press. Tell him to go to ——'

Cantle closed the library door precipitately. The young man accepted his dismissal with calm. 'Won't see me, eh?' was his only remark. And he walked out jauntily to his car.

The confusion in the house filled Alix's mind with fresh dread. The stream of callers, the perpetual pealing of the telephone, the clatter of the cars hired by the reporters, churning up the dust of the drive—all these clamorous seekers after the truth which she had undertaken to obscure appalled her. Nolling's dark hints about the missing yacht had drove her nearly frantic with anxiety. This was a possibility she had never contemplated. What had become of the man? And why did he remain away? It certainly made things look black for him. Then doubt would surge up in her mind once more. Had Frankie, after all, deceived her? What if he had assumed responsibility for this crime merely to gain access to her room and frustrate her resolve to divorce him?

At five o'clock Nolling, who had gone away for lunch, returned. The house party was at tea in the drawing-room. The Superintendent was brought in. Alix saw at once by his manner that he had some news.

'A gentleman whose ketch is moored handy to the Anthea,' he announced importantly, 'has been to me with a statement. 'Pears as how Stanismore and this man of his, Newcome, had words Friday night. Witness heard

Stanismore accuse the man of being drunk and bid him collect his traps and clear out.'

Dene nudged Barleston.

'D'you think Alix ought to hear all this?' he said in an undertone. 'She's looking awfully white. Hadn't you better take her away?'

But Alix, who had caught the purport of the suggestion, shook her head.

'Late on Friday night,' Nolling continued, 'the prisoner —'

'The prisoner?' echoed Alix blankly. 'Has this man been arrested then?'

'Detained for inquiries, ma'am. The police found him in a house in Beach Street this afternoon. He was heard to use threats against the deceased in the Anchor Friday night.' He paused and looked fixedly at Gerry, who realised that Cattle had betrayed him. 'We don't lose much time in the Island, sir.'

He puffed out his cheeks, and, under the smart black braiding of his jacket, his chest seemed to swell. . . .

But, alas! Superintendent Nolling's crowded hour of glorious life was almost run. At the inquest next day, after Mr. Cuthbert Stoale, Stanismore's private secretary, had given evidence of identification, the men of the Node House party were surprised to see a large, red-faced man rise up in the body of the court. He passed over a telegram to the coroner.

'I see by this,' said the coroner, looking over the top of his glasses, 'that the Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard has entrusted you with the investigation. You're Inspector Manderton, I suppose?'

‘ Yes, sir. I am not prepared to offer any evidence now, and I ask for an eight days’ adjournment.’

Gerry Leese gasped. From where he sat, between Sir Harry and Vroque, he could not see the speaker’s face. But he recognised the loud, confident voice, the burly back.

It was the man in the tweed cap.

## CHAPTER X

### FOOTPRINTS — AND WHAT THEY LED TO

‘THE first glimmer of brains I’ve caught sight of in the investigation of this case up to now,’ remarked Inspector Manderton approvingly to Gerry Leese, ‘and I’ve been all through old Nolling’s reports.’

Once more they stood together at the sea door where they had first met. At eleven o’clock the inquest had been adjourned for a week, and, an hour later, Mr. Manderton, flanked by two plain-clothes satellites who had arrived by the morning boat, appeared at Node House demanding Mr. Leese. The Inspector rejected Sir Harry’s offer to accompany him, saying he wished to disturb nobody. He only wanted Mr. Leese to show him on the actual spot how he had discovered the body.

Instead of proceeding directly to the beach, however, Mr. Manderton halted Gerry at the sea door, and sought from him a full account of the incident of the catch. Now he stood weighing in his hand the half-brick, where-with, as Gerry had just pointed out to him, the snib had obviously been battered down.

‘Locked out, eh?’ the Inspector observed musingly. ‘Deliberate, too. Must have been someone in the house who did it. They all knew that you and the young lady were out, I take it?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Gerry answered. ‘We discussed our trip at breakfast. Lady Fubsy didn’t want Miss Dalglish’ — this was Freckles — ‘to go.’

‘H’m,’ Mr. Manderton grunted. ‘Why didn’t you tell me about the door yesterday?’

‘I didn’t know then who you were,’ was Gerry’s truthful reply.

The Inspector nodded.

‘Caution’s a good thing in the right place,’ he said. ‘But now that you *do* know me, Mr. Leese, there’s no need to go on being cautious, d’you understand? I’m here to get at the truth, see, to peer and worry and ferret and scratch till I’ve dug it up, even if it were rooted as deep as those old elms back there.’ He jerked his thumb backward over his shoulder in the direction of the Wilderness.

‘But,’ Gerry objected timidly, ‘surely you’ve got the man that did it?’

Mr. Manderton sniffed rather contemptuously.

‘He’s put in an alibi, a good ‘un too, if it stands up. Admits he was drunk Friday evening, but he says that, after he left the Anthea, he spent the rest of the evening boozing with another yacht hand named Kenyon, first at the Anchor and afterwards at Kenyon’s lodgings with Kenyon and some men he didn’t know. Says Kenyon saw him home lateish, about two o’clock, he thinks. The lodging-house keeper confirms that part of his statement. Kenyon went off to join a yacht at Monte Carlo on Saturday morning. Until we can get hold of him we can’t know whether Newcome’s alibi is sound. And in *this* country you can’t hold a man for more than twenty-four hours without charging him. So that’s that. In the meantime’ — the detective’s jaw squared — ‘in the meantime, I follow my own line. Mallow!’ he called sharply.

'Sir?' wheezed a voice from the other side of the wall. A somewhat battered straw hat, surmounting a hard, weather-beaten face, was poked round the door.

'Ah, there you are. Smith there?'

'Yes, sir.' A solidly-built young man with a button nose and large red hands showed up in the doorway.

'Now then, Mr. Leese!' Followed by his two myrmidons, Mr. Manderton led the way down the wooden stair to the beach.

'Down with you, Smith!' he ordered when they had arrived at the spot where, under the shadow of the wall, the body had lain. The plain-clothes man dropped prone on the sand between the two rocks while Straw Hat arranged the limbs according to Gerry's indications. The Inspector stood on one side, checking the operation by a sheaf of photographs which he drew from the bag he carried in his hand.

'Everything of any use washed off by the rain,' he grumbled as he glanced idly over the ground where Straw Hat was stretched out, 'and any footprints of value trampled out by these damned staring yokels. More than forty-eight hours wasted, and they expect me to make a job of it. Mr. Leese,' he called sharply, 'did you notice any *fresh* blood on the rocks or the sand when you found him?'

'I can't say I did,' said Gerry. 'I guess it was too dark.'

'I swear there was none when I examined the ground in the morning,' murmured Mr. Manderton, as though speaking to himself. 'All right, Smith; you can get up,' he told his assistant. Straw Hat bent down and said something in the Inspector's ear



'I know that,' Mr. Manderton rejoined testily. 'It sticks out a foot.'

'That bloke 'Arris, 'im as was done in on Rainham Flats,' Straw Hat pursued in his croaking voice, 'e got a slosh over the front of the dial, same as this chap 'ere, an' we found 'im on 'is back, if you recolleck, sir.'

But the Inspector was not listening. He had produced his big black pipe, and was stuffing it with tobacco from his pouch, his back to the sea, his eyes raised towards the sea door. He had a sort of spry air about him which made Gerry think of a rooster surveying the barnyard.

'Here a moment, Smith!' commanded Mr. Manderton suddenly. 'Limp now!'

The plain-clothes man was strongly built, but the Inspector raised him up in his arms without apparent effort. He hesitated an instant with his plump young aide reclining ridiculously in his powerful arms. Then, bracing himself, he canted Smith up on his shoulder, head foremost, feet downwards, and with a brisk jerk pitched the man forward on the soft sand.

'Don't budge!' the Inspector's voice rang out commandingly. He drew himself erect, breathing hard, and stared moodily at his assistant, who sprawled in a twisted, unnatural posture face downward on the beach.

'All right, Smith,' he said presently. He lit his pipe with an absent air. Then he turned to Gerry.

'Come,' he said, 'I'd like to have a look round the grounds, sir, if it's agreeable to you. You two men wait for me here.' A straggling procession was visible approaching over the beach. Mr. Manderton sighed. 'The gentlemen of the Press, I fancy. Should they say anything to you, Mallow, you can tell them that if they want to see

me I'll be at Vanner police station this evening at seven o'clock.'

'Good fellows, the newspaper men, if you treat 'em right,' Mr. Manderton remarked to Gerry as they mounted the steps from the beach. 'But I'm not ready for 'em yet, Lord, not by a jugful. Now, if you wouldn't mind closing that door, sir.'

The sea door swung to with a click, and they were alone in the Node Wilderness. It was a mild, dull day, and the woods gave forth a pleasant, leafy smell. The Inspector, puffing at his pipe, ran a slow eye along the high and massive wall.

'Wonder you didn't cut yourself getting over all that broken glass,' he observed to Gerry.

'I folded my oilskin and laid it across the coping,' the American rejoined. 'It isn't very dangerous really.'

'No, it wouldn't be,' Mr. Manderton agreed absently.

He was now contemplating the mossy walk leading up from the sea door.

'There are plenty of tracks here,' he commented, pointing to the ground. 'Easy to see that it hasn't rained since Saturday. Looks as if a battalion had marched down to the beach.'

The path, indeed, mossgrown over a white quartz surface, was badly cut up.

'It gets mighty soft after rain,' said Gerry. 'And ever since Sunday morning people have been trampling up and down here. It's not much used as a rule. Only when we go in swimming or coming back, when we've been out in the motor-boat.'

'Why only coming back?' Manderton demanded casually.

‘Because I keep the boat at Chine Bay. It’s more sheltered in the harbour there. And my man puts up in the town. So we usually pick the boat up at Chine Bay and my man drops us off Node when we come in.’

‘Did you take the boat to Chine Bay on Saturday when you and Miss What’s-her-name went to Southampton?’ asked Mr. Manderton swiftly.

‘Sure.’

‘Did you go out by the sea door?’

‘No. We went to Chine Bay by road, in the car.’

‘I see.’ A pause. ‘Did anybody go bathing from Node on Saturday?’

The question rang sharp as a pistol-shot.

Gerry looked up in surprise.

‘I don’t think so. I know that we four, Miss Dalgleish and her sister, Captain Dene and I, didn’t go in before breakfast as we often do because the morning was so unpromising. And Mr. Vroque never bathes unless it’s sunny. I don’t believe that Captain Dene and Mrs. Barleston went swimming later, either, because Mrs. Barleston hates bathing in the rain.’

‘Ah! Then it’s possible that the sea door was not used at all on Saturday?’

‘It’s quite likely,’ Gerry answered frankly. ‘Nobody ever goes on the beach when it’s wet.’

Manderton grunted. It was impossible to divine the meaning of this characteristic ejaculation of his. He was an unsatisfactory conversationalist, Gerry decided, for he would ask a question and then, by the time one had answered him, would appear to be thinking of something else. While they stood talking at the foot of the path, the detective kept darting swift glances about him. Now his

gaze rested upon the round mass of Node Tower which the path, curving round its base, separated, across an intervening tangle of bushes and trees, from the sea wall.

'Rum old shack,' the detective remarked. 'What's it for, anyway?'

'No one ever goes there,' said Gerry. 'It was Marian Fubsy's room. She was Sir Harry Fubsy's only daughter, who died young. They say the room is kept just as she left it. Sir Harry and Lady Fubsy won't have it used.'

'How do you get up to it?'

'There's a path off this one to the right. I'll show you.'

Where the broad sweep of the path about the foot of Node Tower ended, a narrow foot-track, bending backwards, branched away to the right. Gerry stopped.

'It's here,' he said, and showed his companion the stone staircase leading up to the door of the tower. 'The tower contains only one room, and ——'

He broke off and stared down upon the path. Mr. Manderton nudged him.

'You said that the tower was never used, didn't you?' he questioned.

'Yes, but ——'

'Does this track lead to anywhere except to that stairway yonder?'

'No.'

'Someone's been here,' Manderton announced curtly. 'Look at the footprints.'

Gerry was gazing at them already, the spoor, clearly defined in the soft surface, of feet going to, but not returning from, the tower stair.

'Those marks are plumb fresh,' the Inspector declared.

‘Not later than yesterday or, maybe, to-day, that I’ll swear. In any case, they could not have been made earlier than the day before yesterday evening, for Saturday’s rain would have sluiced them away else. They’re not old Nolling’s hoofprints, by any chance, I suppose?’ He drew a tape-measure from his pocket and dropped on one knee. ‘It’s a woman,’ he announced. He leaned forward and picked something up from the edge of the path. ‘And she smokes cigars,’ he added, with a sardonic chuckle. The sodden butt of a half-smoked cigar lay in his open palm.

‘Keep clear of the path,’ he counselled Gerry. ‘Walk on the grass.’

They had reached the stone stairs.

‘You’re not going up?’ said Gerry.

‘I am,’ Manderton retorted imperturbably. ‘I’m getting interested in this lady who smokes cigars and goes where she hadn’t ought. Where do they keep the key of this place, d’you know?’

‘I guess Sir Harry has it,’ Gerry replied. ‘Don’t you think you’d better get his permission before you go in?’

But Mr. Manderton had already mounted the flight. His massive red hand gripped the latch, and, as the tower door swung back, he turned and winked comically at the young man who watched him from the foot of the stairs. Then the Inspector’s hand went to his tweed cap.

‘Good-morning, ma’am,’ he said civilly.

Unable to restrain his curiosity, Gerry darted up the steps and peered over the detective’s shoulder.

Alix Barleston was dusting the tower room.

## CHAPTER XI

### ALIX FINDS SOMETHING TO DO

A BLUE linen overall hid her frock, and a bright batik scarf, bound gypsy fashion about her head, protected her hair. A duster dangled from her girdle, and she brandished a feather broom. Various ornaments, with the brass lantern clock and two brass candlesticks from the mantelpiece, cluttered up the table. The casement windows, overlooking the sea, were open.

She made a charming picture in that gloomy room, the piquant beauty and the bright colours of her dress contrasting with the sombre hues of the faded green carpet, the ugly red curtains. She had been dusting the mantelshelf, and, at the opening of the door, had swung round to face it. If she felt any surprise at the appearance of the stranger, she managed to conceal it. She returned his greeting composedly, while her hand strayed to her scarf to tuck a wisp of hair into place.

‘Why, hello,’ spoke Gerry’s amazed voice from the threshold, ‘what are *you* doing here?’

‘Hullo, Gerry!’ She smiled back at him, but rather wistfully. ‘You were all over at the inquest, and the house was so depressing I felt I must do something. So I persuaded Aunt Ethel to let me come and give this place a good turn-out. Heaven knows, it needs it!’ And she cast a comical glance about the forlorn-looking chamber.

Mr. Manderton turned to Gerry Leese.

'You said the room was never opened,' he remarked severely.

'I'm afraid I told Gerry that,' Alix Barleston struck in apologetically. 'You see, my aunt, Lady Fubsy, doesn't like anybody to come here, and Gerry — Mr. Leese — was worrying my sister to let him have a peep in. But, as a matter of fact, one of the maids is supposed to turn-out the room every Monday. You wouldn't imagine it was ever touched by the look of it, would you?'

'You must be Mrs. Barleston, I think,' said the Inspector.

'Oh, pardon me!' exclaimed Gerry, with American punctiliousness, and he introduced the Inspector.

She inclined her small head graciously. Mr. Mander-ton's expression relaxed. He dropped his eyes to the ground, and fell to studying the toes of his heavy black boots.

'I can understand this affair coming as a great shock to you, ma'am,' he observed. 'You knew the deceased gentleman well, didn't you?'

When his eyes had left her face, she had snatched the opportunity to examine the features of her visitor. Never before had she met a detective at close quarters, but she had a feeling that this rather ponderous man with the deferential air must represent a specific type. The studied air of reserve, she fancied, was characteristic. She caught herself wondering, however, whether he turned the self-same probing, rather troubling gaze upon everyone whom he encountered in the course of his work.

The face was reddish — one might call it coarse; heavily jowled, too, and the thick toothbrush moustache did

nothing to lighten the almost brutal resolution of the mouth. Rather a common face, she would have said, but for the eyes. They were luminous and intelligent, with that steady, unyielding gaze which goes with determination out of the ordinary and courage to the pitch of utter fearlessness.

She flinched, if ever so slightly. The eyes were again upon her, following up the detective's question.

She nodded.

'We were quite good friends. I find it impossible to realise that I shall never see him again. If he had lived he would have gone far. Mr. Vroque says he would have been Prime Minister.'

'How long had you known Mr. Stanismore, madame?'

The tone was non-committal. But she knew that the interruption was intended to hold her to the subject.

'For about a year, I think.'

'Where did you meet him first?'

'At Ciro's. Someone — I forget who — introduced him. I remember he told me he had met my husband. My husband knows so many people. He went out a great deal in the old days, before we were married.'

'Did you see much of Mr. Stanismore after that?'

He had warned her again. His features were inscrutable. Nor was he even looking at her. He was twisting his foot about so as to catch the light on the cap of his bright boot.

'He's been here once or twice. And I've usually seen him when I've been up in London. We've lunched together, or I've been to tea with him on the terrace at the House.'

'When was he here last?'



Although the searching eyes were on her face, this time she did not falter. She paused. Automatically, the detective's trained mind analysed the break. Was it to refresh her memory or to gain time? Her serene expression, her calm grey eyes, left the query unanswered.

'About a month ago. He was going to address a meeting at Portsmouth in the afternoon, and my husband brought him to lunch.'

'Was that the last time you saw him?'

'Oh, no. I have seen him twice since then. He took me for a drive one Sunday when I was up in Town, and last week-end — last Monday, it was — when I was in London again, I lunched with him at the Carlton before coming down here by the afternoon train.'

'You didn't expect him on Friday evening?'

'Oh, no,' she said.

Mr. Manderton was silent, seemingly lost in contemplation of his feet. Then he asked suddenly:

'Do you know anything of Mr. Stanismore's private life?'

At once her attitude stiffened.

'I'm afraid I don't. He was married and lived in Grosvenor Crescent. I never met his wife, though I believe my husband has. He never spoke to me about his private affairs.' She broke off to add, with less hauteur: 'Mr. Stanismore and I were really scarcely more than acquaintances. I don't want you to be under any illusion as to that. I thought him very intelligent and very pleasant to meet. And he seemed to like me, too. But I didn't actually know him very well.'

The Inspector offered no comment. There fell a silence. It was Alix who broke it.

'I *must* get this room finished before lunch,' she said. 'Gerry, you can make yourself useful by putting all these ornaments back, if you like.'

'Pray allow me.' Mr. Manderton stepped forward to the table. He picked up the candlesticks, one in each hand. 'One of the candles is missing, I see,' he remarked casually. In effect, only one candlestick contained a candle. Its virgin wick showed that it had never been lighted.

'Yes,' said Alix. 'Everything in this room has been left as it was when poor Marian Fubsy died.'

'So Mr. Leese was saying,' observed the Inspector. 'Funny idea.' He set the candlesticks down, one on either side of the clock. 'How long ago would that be, now?'

'Twenty years in October,' Alix replied, vigorously shaking the curtains. But she was watching the detective. Now he had stepped back, surveying the mantelpiece.

'I think they're straight,' said he. 'Given them a bit of a rub-up, haven't you?'

He cast one of his lightning glances about him. His eye fell on an open tin of metal-polish and a cloth lying on the table.

'They were so soiled,' Alix, busy with the curtains, explained. 'I felt sure Lady Fubsy wouldn't mind.'

The detective was fingering the polishing-cloth absently. He dropped it and glanced at his hands. He turned to the fireplace once more. Swiftly he stooped. Alix broke off to watch him. There was a sudden silence in the room.

Now the Inspector had left the fireplace, and stood, with his back to the empty hearth, gazing at the ceiling.

‘How many rooms are there in this tower?’ he asked.

‘Only this one,’ Alix replied. ‘The place is a sham, really.’

‘Waste of space, seems to me,’ commented Manderton, staring about him.

‘Isn’t it?’ she agreed. She was fastening back the curtains, and Gerry Leese was restoring the last of the ornaments, a red glass lustre with tinkling prisms, to the place Alix had indicated upon a chiffonnière.

‘Well!’ she exclaimed, and took up a broom which rested against the table, ‘I have only to sweep out the corners and I’m finished. I really must get Aunt Ethel to speak seriously to Vance. This room is in a disgraceful condition.’ She laughed and brandished her brush. ‘I shall make the dust fly, Inspector, I warn you. If you have any respect for your clothes, you’d better not stop.’

Manderton stepped forward and took the broom out of her hands. His action was so unexpected and performed with such compelling firmness that she unhesitatingly relinquished the broom.

‘Can’t stand by and see a lady go grubbing herself up like that, ma’am,’ he said pleasantly. ‘I’ve a couple of men with me. I’ll get one of them to put the place straight for you.’

‘Oh, but it won’t take me a minute,’ she protested. ‘And I’m filthy already.’

But he put the broom away in a corner.

‘That’s all right, Mrs. Barleston; my men will finish off the job.’

‘I don’t think Lady Fubsy will like it ——’ she began.

‘I’ll make it all right with her ladyship,’ he promised.

On that she fell silent, and set about collecting her

belongings. The Inspector held the door, and she and Gerry passed out. At the door she paused and said:

‘About this man Newcome, Inspector. They haven’t — any — any real evidence against him, have they?’

She spoke nervously and with haste. But Manderton was peering about the stone slab which formed the threshold of the room and paid no attention to her. She repeated her question more decidedly.

‘Newcome?’ he said absently. ‘Oh, ay, Newcome.’ He looked up. ‘At present the evidence against him is purely circumstantial. He’s produced an alibi, too. If it stands up it clears him.’

‘Oh,’ she exclaimed, ‘I hope it will!’

The Inspector smiled at her enthusiasm.

‘I expect he does, too, ma’am.’

‘And if he is proved to be innocent,’ she demanded rather breathlessly, ‘what will you do? Have you any other clue?’

Mr. Manderton’s face hardened.

‘That, madam, is a question I never answer.’

She reddened and closed the door. ‘I’m sorry,’ she murmured. ‘I’m afraid I was indiscreet.’

The Inspector laughed.

‘It’s all right, Mrs. Barleston. You’d be surprised to know how often I get asked that question in my job. I always give the same reply. I’m thinking of having it printed on a card to save trouble. Aren’t you going to lock the door?’

‘It’s never locked,’ she said. The smile faded from the Inspector’s face.

‘Do you mean to tell me that this room is always open?’

'Yes. It's a whim of Lady Fubsy's.'

Mr. Manderton said nothing, and they went down the steps together.

'Don't walk on the path, please,' he enjoined when they reached the bottom. Alix Barleston glanced swiftly at the stern face. Obediently, she led off along the long grass bordering the track.

They parted on the mossy path. Alix and Gerry went off in the direction of the house, while the Inspector strolled down to the sea door.

Presently he stopped. A hand dived into the side-pocket of his jacket and produced something which he rolled over and over in his open hand.

It was the flattened stub of a half-smoked cigarette, the tobacco dry and flaky. The detective peered down at the partially charred lettering and made a grimace. 'Gold Flake,' he murmured. 'Pretty helpful, I *don't* think.' Then from his other side-pocket he drew forth the sodden cigar butt he had picked up on the track leading to the tower. He held these twain trophies, one in either palm, glancing from one to the other. Then he dropped them carefully in a clean envelope which he took from his bulging letter-case and stowed the envelope away in an inside pocket.

With a perfectly inscrutable face he resumed his walk towards the sea door, where his men awaited him.

## CHAPTER XII

### INSPECTOR MANDERTON'S JEST

BUT for the fact that, on the morrow of the Great War, Miss Elsie Manderton, Inspector Manderton's niece, had bestowed her hand in matrimony on Sergeant-Major Twig, newly pensioned from the Coldstream Guards, this story might never have come to be written. Dan Twig and his little wife had recently taken over the Bay Hotel, one of the less important of Chine Bay's licensed premises, though time was when Chine Bay was yet a tiny fishing hamlet that the Bay tavern had been its only inn. It was a comfortable, if unpretentious, Georgian house with a snug tap, half a dozen bedrooms, and a shady garden in rear where, in the season, trippers were provided with shilling teas. Elsie and Dan had prevailed upon Mr. Manderton to take his summer holiday early in order to be their guest during the slack period.

On arriving, the Inspector had not failed to express the doubt that he would be left to enjoy his holiday in peace. It was his wont thus to grumble that he was always at the beck and call of the 'Yard.' In reality, leisure sat heavily upon him. A bachelor, his whole life was wrapped up in his work, and he was never really happy, the first few days of his vacation past, until he reported back for duty. A man whose personal courage was legendary in the criminal world, the only fear that

haunted him was the prospect of retirement. That day was yet far distant, he would tell himself, as he stretched his great arms before the mirror of a morning, flexing his massive biceps and expanding his mighty chest. He was forty-four — 'only forty-four,' the Inspector called it — and sound in wind and limb, even though his girth was a thought more ample than it was when, as a young detective, recently promoted from the uniformed ranks, he played full back for the Metropolitan Police.

When Dan Twig awakened him on Sunday morning with the news of the finding of the body of Basil Stanismore, M.P. — no bush telegraph operates more rapidly than word-of-mouth transmission among the islanders of the Wight — Mr. Manderton affected indifference. 'I don't have to worry, thank the Lord,' he said, and turned over in his comfortable bed.

But ten minutes later he was observed sneaking out by the back door, fully dressed. Elsie Twig, dusting in the taproom, winked at her husband. She knew her Uncle George. It was she, indeed, who had sent Dan to his bedside with the news. He returned to breakfast, absorbed and grumpy, and for forty-eight hours was as restless as a soul in torment. He would not talk about the mystery with which the newspapers were ringing, or even express an opinion about Superintendent Nolling's conduct of the case. 'I'm on holiday,' he would say obstinately, 'and very glad I am to let other chaps do a job o' work.'

But doubt gnawed at his heart. Like a drill on a safe, it seemed to pierce him through. Would the Yard be called in? And would they give the case to him? He was on the spot; but in London there were others, his seniors, men of longer service, greater experience. . . .

Steeled by years of police discipline, he was content to wait on laggard promotion, be deferential to superiors, hold himself back. But modest in speaking of his own exploits, he knew the full measure of his ability just as he had always been aware of his defects and striven to efface them.

As he sat at sundown that evening on the sea wall before the Bay Hotel and smoked the pipe of dejection, he felt stirring within him, like the tree its sap, the will to conquer which already had borne him from uncouth constable, with the clay of his father's Somersetshire homestead yet red on his boots, to inspector, with careful speech, a good knowledge of French, and a wide range of general information to which he was at pains constantly to add. Here was a worthy field for his dexterity, he told himself bitterly; yet he must fain stand aloof and watch the ungainly flounderings of a Nolling!

He did not know that, on that very Sunday evening, the Right Honourable Mr. William Chesterham, M.P., was in conference with the Premier at Chequers; that, in deference to the very reasonable wish of a respected political opponent, the First Minister rang up the Home Secretary on the telephone; that the Home Secretary put through a special, urgent call to the Commissioner of Police at his week-end bungalow; that the Commissioner telephoned to the officer-in-charge at Scotland Yard; that Scotland Yard got the head of the Criminal Investigation Department on the line. . . .

'I told you when I came exactly how it would be,' grumbled Mr. Manderton on the arrival of the telegram at breakfast next day. 'In my job one never has a moment's peace.'



'It's a shame!' declared his niece. 'On your holiday, too!'

But she winked at Dan Twig across the tea-things.  
*She* knew her Uncle George.

Mr. Manderton found Sir Harry Fubsy awaiting him in the library. The ex-diplomat looked anxious and ill at ease.

'Have you found out anything to shed a light on this horrible affair?' was his greeting. 'Has that scoundrel Newcome confessed?'

'He has not, sir,' the Inspector replied, 'and between you and me, I doubt if we shall be able to charge him. We're looking into his alibi, but in the meantime I want, if possible, to establish Mr. Stanismore's movements immediately before his death. As far as we know, Simpson, who put him ashore at half-past ten or thereabouts, was the last man to see him alive. Superintendent Nolling's report makes it clear that nobody here saw anything of the deceased on Friday night. Nor was any cry for help or anything of the kind heard from the beach.'

'That is so,' the other agreed. 'But the beach is a considerable distance from the house.'

Mr. Manderton nodded assent.

'It's quite a step. I just walked up from the sea door myself. That beach is a pretty lonely spot, I reckon, Sir Harry?'

'Yes. Later in the summer, when the season has started, visitors come out there from Chine Bay, and after dark young couples sit on the rocks. But at this time of the year it's rare to see anybody, unless it's one of us, on the shore in the daytime, and at night it's abso-

lutely unfrequented. You see, there's no road leading anywhere.'

'I follow. Another question, Sir Harry. The sea door, is it ever left open at night?'

'Certainly not. If anyone wants to use it to come in by he has to borrow the key that hangs in the hall.'

'Are there any other keys?'

'Two. I have one' — he fumbled in his pocket and displayed a Yale key hanging on a bunch — 'and my nephew the other. Major Barleston sometimes comes down late from Town. He can take the motor-bus, which meets the Portsmouth steamer, to Chine Bay, and walk from there along the sands and enter Node by the sea door. It's shorter than by the road, and, as Major Barleston keeps clothes down here and therefore need not bring any luggage, it saves him a taxi.'

'He came in that way on Friday night. I remember he told Mr. Nolling. Another question, Sir Harry. It's not the custom to drop the catch of the sea door at night, is it?'

'You're alluding to Mr. Leese's experience, I presume. No. What would be the use? Nobody can get in without the key. Unless Mr. Leese was mistaken, the lock must have gone wrong. Anyhow, as this happened on Saturday, almost twenty-four hours after Mr. Stanismore's disappearance, I cannot see that it has any bearing on the case.'

'It might have if the sea door were not used on the Saturday.'

Sir Harry looked up with interest.

'I didn't think of that. As a matter of fact, I don't believe that door was opened at all on Saturday until

Leese and Miss Dalgleish returned from Southampton. Do you infer from this that the door was bolted on Friday night and remained bolted all through Saturday?’

‘It’s not an unnatural inference, Sir Harry. You see, you have, handy to the sea door, a convenient hiding-place for anyone waiting to perpetrate a crime. I mean Node Tower.’

‘God bless my soul;’ exclaimed the old gentleman. ‘You’re not suggesting, I hope ——’

‘I’m suggesting nothing, sir. I’m gleaning information. And I want to know about the tower. It’s not locked, I understand, but it’s never used. Is that correct?’

‘Certainly. The place has been shut up since my daughter died.’

‘Pardon me, Sir Harry. I believe that one of the maids has access to the tower.’

‘That is so. Vance, the upper housemaid, is supposed to dust the room and so forth once a week.’

‘I found Mrs. Barleston cleaning the place out this morning.’

The old gentleman cleared his throat irritably.

‘I should have told you that, from time to time, Mrs. Barleston, who makes her home with us, visits the tower to see that all is in order. Lady Fubsy used to do this herself. But I found that it depressed her, and I discouraged the practice.’

‘Then there are two persons who have regular access to the room?’

Sir Harry clicked impatiently.

‘Nothing of the kind, sir. My niece doesn’t go there once in a blue moon. Why, before to-day I don’t suppose she’s crossed the threshold this year.’

'She might go without telling you,' the detective suggested.

'No, Inspector. She would never visit the tower without our permission. Our wishes on the subject are well known. I don't know what you're driving at, but you can take it from me that, with the exception of Vance and, at rare intervals, Mrs. Barleston, nobody ever goes into Node Tower.'

'I can understand that your guests would respect your feelings, Sir Harry,' Manderton put in suavely. 'But what about the servants?'

The old gentleman repudiated the suggestion with a brusque movement of the hand.

'You can leave the servants out of it, Inspector. All of them — we have six — have been with us for years. None would dream of disobeying me in this matter.'

Mr. Manderton was silent. Sir Harry looked at him inquiringly, as though to indicate that the interview was ended. But the detective was still wrestling with his line of thought, like a dog gnawing a bone.

'This maid — Vance, I think you said her name was — does she smoke?'

'Smoke?' repeated Sir Harry. 'Good heavens, no! Vance is an elderly woman, who has been with us for upward of twelve years.'

The Inspector was quite unabashed.

'You never can tell nowadays,' he remarked, with a cheerful grin. He stood up briskly. 'You have the key of that room, Sir Harry?' he said.

'It's in the desk there,' was the rather reluctant answer.

'I must ask you to let me have it, sir, if you please.'

Sir Harry hesitated.

'You mean to lock the door, I suppose?' he queried.

'I do, sir.'

'May I ask why?'

'I'm not giving any reasons just yet.'

Sir Harry made a helpless gesture.

'I fear my wife will take this greatly to heart. She sets such store on that room being always open. Women who have had a grievous loss get strange fancies, Inspector.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'I will get you the key.'

He brought it from the desk, a big, rusty key.

'This is the only one,' he said as he handed it over.

There was a tap at the library door. Ronald Dene put his head in.

'Come in, come in, my boy!' cried Sir Harry. 'We've finished, eh, Inspector?'

'I only wanted to say, sir, that there's a man outside, asking for Inspector Manderton,' said Dene, coming into the room.

'One of my men,' the detective explained. 'I'd like to see him for a minute, Sir Harry, if you don't mind.' He stepped to the door and came face to face with Frankie Barleston. He was wearing his hat. Behind him was his wife, with Vrogue.

'Hullo, hullo!' was Frankie's rather noisy greeting.

'Funny our meeting again like this.'

'You never told us that you knew Inspector Manderton, Frankie,' his uncle put in.

'I didn't know it myself until this instant,' retorted his nephew gaily. 'I heard, when we came in just now, that the Inspector was here, so I thought I'd look in and introduce myself.'

'I remember now,' remarked Mr. Manderton, who was staring at Barleston. 'You were in the tap at the Bay Hotel the other night, sir. You were good enough to offer me a drink ——'

'Which you refused,' retorted Barleston. He chuckled. 'Anyway,' he added playfully, 'you know where I was on Friday evening.'

A slow smile spread over Mr. Manderton's face.

'To be sure,' he observed, 'it was Friday evening, wasn't it? You'd just come down from London, I take it, sir?'

'That's right,' Frankie agreed. 'I caught the four-fifty in the afternoon from Waterloo, crossed from Portsmouth by the eight-twenty boat, and came on the bus to Chine Bay. I popped in at the Bay Hotel, as I often do, to have a nightcap on my way to Node.'

'The sea door wasn't open by any chance when you came in, was it?' asked the detective casually, his eyes on the ground.

'No.'

'And you closed it behind you?'

'Certainly.'

'And that was at ten o'clock, I think you informed Mr. Nolling?'

Frankie Barleston turned round to his wife.

'That's right, ain't it? I was with you in the bar, Inspector, at what? A quarter-past nine. I left at, say, half-past. Twenty minutes to walk along the beach. I didn't take particular note of the time, for I was dead-tired and thinking only of my bed. I didn't even stop to say how-do to Sir Harry here or any of 'em, but nipped in by the garden stairs and was between the

sheets before you could say "knife." What time should you say it was when I got into bed, Alix?

He fixed his eye on her face and waited.

'Oh, somewhere about ten o'clock,' she answered, after an almost imperceptible pause.

'Well,' said Mr. Manderton, with a grin, 'I suppose you'll come to me if you want an alibi, Major?'

Frankie roared with laughter. Vrogue's dry chuckle resounded from the threshold, and even Sir Harry smiled. The Inspector looked round cheerfully. His eyes rested for an instant on the dark young man who had broken in upon his interview with Sir Harry. Mr. Manderton's mind ran swiftly over the list of the Node party. Yes, he recognised the army type. This must be Captain Dene.

But why did he not enjoy the little joke like the rest?

Why did he look so sullen?

And what, in particular, made him stare like that at Mrs. Barleston?

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE SISTERS

**ALIX BARLESTON** came swiftly into her bedroom and closed the door. On one of the twin beds her clothes were laid out for the evening: a plain black frock, change of underwear, flesh-coloured stockings. Although the first dinner-gong had sounded she did not begin to dress. Instead she dropped into the chair before the dressing-table and buried her face in her hands.

‘Oh, God!’ she murmured, and yet again: ‘Oh, God!’

There was a light tap at the door. The bowed figure at the table made no sign. Freckles’ brown head peered into the room. On espying her sister’s attitude, she flew to her side.

‘Alix, darling!’ she cried. Her sister raised her head wearily.

‘I didn’t hear you come in, Freckles,’ she said, trying to smile back at her. ‘Isn’t it time you were getting ready for dinner?’

‘I’ve only got to change my shoes. You look worried to death, Alix. What’s up?’

‘Oh, nothing. I’m tired and a bit nervy, I suppose.’

Freckles laid her face affectionately against her sister’s smooth cheek.

‘You poor thing! This horrible business has been awfully hard on you. But worrying won’t bring Basil Stanismore back to life, you know. Why do you take it



so dreadfully to heart? Once or twice I thought you were going to faint when the Inspector was questioning us all downstairs after tea.'

Alix shuddered.

'That awful man! He's finished with us now, I hope?'

Freckles furrowed her young brow.

'When he was going away just now he asked Sir Harry not to allow anybody to leave Node for the present ——'

Alix gasped.

'He said *that*?'

'...and he said, too, that he would probably want to see some of us again to-morrow.'

Alix picked up the comb, and with swift, nervous sweeps began to run it through her short brown hair.

'Did he — did he say he wanted to see *me* again?' she asked, in a tone which she tried to make appear indifferent.

'No. He just said he might have another question or two to put to some of us. And, Alix, he's locked the tower.'

The comb clattered as it dropped on the porcelain pin-tray.

'*Locked the tower!*'

As gently as a sigh she breathed the words. With a deeply troubled face, her hands resting inert on the edge of the plate-glass table slab, she sat, staring with unseeing eyes at her pale reflection in the mirror. With an effort she mastered herself and took up the comb again.

'Freckles, why has he done that?'

The young girl shook her brown curls dubiously.

'I haven't an idea. *I* thought myself that he was strangely interested in the tower by the way he kept on

at you and Aunt Ethel about it. Hasn't he got a funny manner? His face never seems to *register* anything, as they say on the movies. I was watching him when he asked you when you last visited the tower before to-day. Do you know, when you told him you hadn't been near the place since January, he didn't appear interested, or satisfied, or surprised, or anything. His features were just a blank. It must be frightfully disconcerting for criminals.'

'He — he terrifies me,' said Alix. Her voice deepened to a passionate note. 'I wish to Heaven he'd do it quickly, whatever he's going to do, and go away from here!' she exclaimed. She stood up suddenly. 'My nerves are wretched to-day,' she declared. 'Get up, Freckles; you're sitting on my frock.'

Freckles had plumped herself down on the bed nearest the window and crossed her bare legs, burned, like her neck and arms, to a rich shade of golden-brown. At Node it was her habit to discard her stockings, reserving them for such ceremonial outings as her recent lunch on board the Aquitania.

'No, I'm not,' she retorted. 'Your things are on the other bed. I say, Alix ——' She lowered her voice confidentially.

'What?'

'I wonder what this detective man is after.'

'I haven't the least idea,' returned her sister, unfastening her frock. 'You'd better run away now, Freckles. I want to get dressed.'

'Did you notice his manner with Ronnie Dene?'

Freckles persisted, disregarding the invitation.

'Not particularly. Why?'

'He seems to me to be *watching* Ronnie.'

Alix laughed.

'What odd fancies you get into that head of yours, Freckles!'

Her sister nodded mysteriously.

'I believe I'm right,' she declared. 'What's the matter with Ronnie, anyway? Ever since he arrived at Node he's been going round like a bear with a sore head. What have you been doing to him, Alix? Have you two had a row, or what?' She was looking closely at her sister.

'How absurd you are! Ronnie and I are perfectly good friends.'

'Then I believe that Frankie's making trouble. I thought it rather strange his coming down here suddenly in the middle of the racing season. I say, Alix, is Frankie getting jealous?'

Her bright eyes sparkled with mischief. Her sister, who was pulling her evening frock over her head, did not reply.

'I swear he is!' cried the younger girl. 'You know Frankie's reforming, Alix. I was saying to Ronnie only this afternoon that I thought Frankie had changed. He seems to have become more attentive to you.'

'You've no business to discuss my affairs with Ronnie Dene,' her sister put in angrily.

'Oh, all right. But you needn't think that I don't know why Frankie's making up to you.'

Her sister rounded on her.

'Look here, Freckles, I won't have you say such things. And now you can run off. You're in my way.'

But Freckles did not budge.

'I'm not a kid,' she said obstinately. 'I know that

Ronnie has been in love with you for ages. What's the use of pretending —— '

'I'm not going to discuss it with you. Go away. You're going to make me late for dinner.'

'...and you're in love with him yourself,' Freckles added bluntly.

Alix whirled round on her.

'You're not to say that! Do you hear me? You're not to say it!'

'It's true. I can read it in your face. And Frankie's found out, and he's trying to separate you.'

'How dare you say such things!'

But Freckles was not to be stopped.

'I don't blame you. It's not *your* fault that you're married to a rotter. And Ronnie's worth ten of Frankie any day. Why shouldn't you have a lover —— '

Alix stamped her foot furiously. Her face was hot and angry and her hands were clenched.

'It's not true.'

Freckles broke off abruptly and looked fixedly at her sister. Her round young face was very grave, but a flame of the other's high spirit smouldered in her eyes.

'You needn't lie to me about it,' she said contemptuously.

Alix caught her by the shoulder and shook her.

'Tell me what you mean by that! Tell me, do you hear?'

'Let me go! You're hurting me!'

The young girl wrenched herself free and scrambled to her feet. They faced one another furiously.

'You're not going out of this room until you've told me what you mean!' said Alix tensely.

'You know jolly well what I mean,' her sister flared back at her. 'I've always looked up to you and admired you for the way you stuck to that rotter for Sandy's sake. But I know how unhappy you've been in your marriage, and if you'd owned up to me that you were having an affair with Ronnie Dene it wouldn't have made a scrap of difference, not a scrap of difference, do you hear? But you're a hypocrite. When I want to sympathise, when I ask for your confidence, you tell me lies. You're always very careful about *me*. You're always holding *me* back. You have to think about *my* reputation. Oh yes! And all the time you have your lover coming to your room at night.'

She flung the last words savagely in her sister's face.

Alix stood aghast. Slowly the colour drained away from her cheeks, and an expression of such utter agony looked out of her eyes that Freckles was shocked. The anger faded from the younger sister's face and her lips began to tremble. But Alix said nothing. She spoke no word of denial, no word of reproof. She stood motionless, her face a mask of blank dismay, staring at her sister. In that tense moment neither heard a slight creaking noise as the dressing-room door opened a few inches and remained stationary.

'I wasn't spying on you,' said Freckles in a voice warmly contrite. 'It was on Friday night. I woke up starving. You know, we don't get a great deal to eat for dinner in this house. Well, I was ravenous. So I went down to the dining-room to forage. I found some scones and some jam and ate those. On my way upstairs I had reached the second flight when I heard a door close on the floor below. I crept down a few steps and looked

along the first-floor corridor. Ronnie Dene was standing just outside your door. He was in his dressing-gown. I didn't wait but ran back upstairs to bed.' She paused. 'I — I didn't mean to upset you so, Alix. I'm — I'm sorry for what I said just now.'

Her sister caught her in her arms. Freckles was sobbing now. Alix held her silently, her face a mask of suffering, her eyes melting with anguish. Presently she spoke soothingly to the young girl.

'It's all right, my dear,' she said. 'Don't cry. Stand up. I want to show you something. Turn round to the bed behind you. Now lift the top pillow.'

Freckles looked at her sister in surprise. Then she pulled down the coverlet of the bed on which she had been sitting and raised the pillow. The gaudy hues of a folded pair of flowered silk pyjamas came to view.

'*Alix!*' There was utter amazement in her voice. 'Is Frankie sleeping in *here*?'

A little flush warmed her sister's pallor. She bowed her head in affirmation.

'But,' Freckles persisted, 'I don't understand. I thought he always slept in the dressing-room. You've had separate rooms for ages.'

Alix put her arms about her sister.

'My dear,' she said, 'there are some things I can't discuss with you. But I wanted you to — to realise that Ronnie Dene cannot have been in my room.'

'Of course,' exclaimed Freckles blankly, 'that was the night that Frankie came back unexpectedly from London! I remember now he went to bed early, didn't he? You mean that he was sleeping in here? So, of course, Ronnie couldn't have ——' She flushed scarlet. 'Oh,

Alix, what a perfect beast I've been to you! Darling, I'm so frightfully sorry. How can you ever forgive me?"

'Never mind about that, Freckles,' said Alix, and patted her shoulder. Her face was weary and anxious. 'I only hope you've said nothing about this to Ronnie.'

'No,' the girl rejoined absently. Her forehead was corrugated with a puzzled frown. 'Alix,' she said presently, 'if Ronnie was not with you, what was he doing wandering about the corridor at that time of night? I distinctly heard a door close. What door can it have been?'

Alix bit her lip. Her hands were clasped tightly across her bosom.

'The door of the garden stairs, most likely,' she answered with an effort. 'Perhaps Ronnie had been for a turn in the garden before going to bed.' Her eyes fluttered a frightened glance at her sister's puzzled face.

'In that case,' demanded Freckles, 'Why did he deceive old Nolling?'

The haunted look stole back into Alix Barleston's starry eyes.

'Deceive Nolling?' she faltered.

'Yes,' Freckles affirmed roundly. 'You heard him yourself. Nolling was asking each of us about what we did on Friday evening. Ronnie distinctly told him that he went to his room about ten. He never mentioned a word about having gone out again. He said he sat smoking by the window until about twelve and then put out the light. Don't you remember?'

One clenched fist beat a nervous tattoo in the palm of Alix Barleston's hand.

'I—I didn't follow everything that was said,' she

replied wearily. 'What does it matter, anyway, whether Ronnie says he went out or not?'

But Freckles was a determined young person. She was not easily to be put off.

'Why, Alix,' she cried, "it matters a great deal. I imagined that Ronnie was lying because I thought he naturally *couldn't* tell Nolling where he had been. But now it appears that he didn't go to your room that night. Where did he go, then?'

Alix sprang to her feet, and in sheer exasperation shook her clenched hands before her face.

'This ghastly business is driving me out of my mind,' she cried passionately. 'Why do you come here to torment me. If Ronnie didn't tell Nolling that he left his room it simply means that he didn't think it of any importance to say that he had gone to get a breath of air in the garden before going to sleep.'

'Well,' observed her sister, 'I call it jolly funny. Why, Ronnie must have been outside just about the very time that Stanismore was killed.'

'I can't stand any more.' Alix's voice rose to a plaintive note. 'That man, always prying about the house, peering about the tower, cross-examining everybody; Aunt Ethel pumping me about Basil Stanismore; and now you with your questions. I can't stand it, I say! For God's sake, leave me alone!'

She collapsed in the chair before the mirror, weeping hysterically.

The solemn notes of the dinner gong boomed through the house.



## CHAPTER XIV

### MR. VROGUE'S PARABLE

AFTER dinner that night Alix Barleston sat at the Bechstein at the end of the long drawing-room and softly played to herself. She was almost in darkness, her black frock merged in the ebony of the piano and the dusky shadows of the corner which the waning light of the June evening failed to illumine. The drone of voices reached her through the half-open door of the morning-room.

She was strumming idly, wandering from one theme to another. Now she was trying to recapture the memory of an old French song she had heard somewhere. Under her breath, in a little husky voice, she sang a snatch of the words: '*Chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie!*'

A note jarred as she broke off abruptly. She looked up, her slim white fingers on the keys.

'Ronnie! How you startled me! Where's Frankie?'

'He went out after dinner,' Dene replied.

'I thought you were going to play bridge.'

'Nobody was very keen, so Sir Harry carried Vrogue off to the library for a game of chess.'

She stood up and closed the piano.

'Take me out on the terrace. I want to talk to you.'

Through the French windows they passed out into the cool dusk. In silence they descended the broad steps. It was the first time since that memorable night that they had been alone together. A strange uneasiness lay

between them; the warm *camaraderie* of their old relations was gone. As he walked at her side he felt the familiar thrill that her presence always gave him, but he was conscious that some unseen thing was holding them apart.

For three days now he had sought this meeting, but hitherto without avail. For three days his brain had been caught up among broken waves of thought, a leaping tumult of cross-currents and whirls and eddies, like the tide race, as he had seen it at the flood, pouring through the narrows into the Solent in the teeth of the wind. His mind swarmed with unnamable doubts, inavowable suspicions.

A garden seat stood on one of the lower levels of the terraced banks. They descended towards it. Side by side they stood and gazed down upon the rustling mass of the Wilderness and the slaty surface of the sea spread out beneath the cool, dim stars.

‘Ronnie,’ said Alix, breaking the silence. ‘I want you to go away from here.’

He was super-sensitive that evening, and, with a little stab of mortification, he noticed that she did not look at him.

‘You know I can’t do that,’ he answered, ‘even if I would. You heard what Sir Harry said at dinner — that Manderton wishes all of us to remain on here for the present.’

‘I know,’ she put in quickly. ‘But he can’t detain you. You must be called away on military duty. Your Colonel can easily arrange that. You must fix it somehow. You mustn’t stop.’

He shook his head decisively.

'I can't do that.'

'Not if I ask you to go?' She turned and faced him. Now it was he who averted his gaze. 'To please me, Ronnie.'

'Not even then.' His voice was stern. He looked at her. She flinched under his searching glance.

'There are reasons,' she said in a low and hurried voice. 'Reasons I can't explain to you, Ronnie. Frankie' —she stopped, and her eyes flashed to his face—'Frankie objects to your being here.'

Steadily he met her regard.

'You mean, he knows — about our meeting the other night?'

She shook her head.

'Not that,' she said.

'Then I don't see how I'm in Frankie's way,' he retorted, rather bitterly.

She turned away and gazed across the darkling tree-tops to seaward.

'You must forget what I told you that night,' she began.

He laughed disdainfully.

'As if I could!'

'I didn't know what I was saying. It would be better if we didn't see anything of each other any more — for a time, at least. Frankie and I are friends again. We're going to make a fresh start. You'll only spoil things if you're here. That's why I want you to go away.'

He spoke no word, but his eyes never left her face. She laid a hand pleadingly on his arm.

'You'll go, won't you?'

He shook his head.

'Why are you so stubborn?' she cried plaintively.

'Because Frankie's put you up to this.'

'He hasn't, I swear! He knows nothing about it.'

'Then why should you want to get rid of me?' His voice grew hard. 'Are you afraid I'll let you down?'

'Oh, Ronnie!' she exclaimed with a little sob. 'You know I don't think that.'

But he did not relent.

'What else do you leave me to think?' he demanded. She looked at him so wistfully that his voice softened.

'Look here, Alix, why don't you tell me the truth?'

She recoiled in horror.

'Don't ask me that,' she whispered, her hands to her face. 'Don't ask me that.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't want to force your confidence,' he said coldly, 'but I confess I'm curious to know why Frankie should have gone to the trouble of producing this bogus alibi.'

She extended her hands imploringly towards him.

'Ronnie, for God's sake, stop! You don't know what you're saying.'

'I do, only too well. What I don't understand is how he was able to prevail upon you to bolster it up with a lie. You know as well as I do that Frankie didn't get to his room until midnight. Why did he tell the police that he went to bed at ten? And why, in Heaven's name, did you support him?'

Desperately she looked about her in a very frenzy of fear.

'Ronnie,' she entreated again, 'I beg of you, stop!'

He glanced around. The gardens lay still and deserted about them.

'I can understand Frankie wanting to get rid of me,' he went on inexorably, 'if he knows that I was in your room the other night, as, after you, I'm the only person who can upset this amazing alibi of his. But you say he doesn't know. What am I to think? That it's you who are sending me away? That you are equally anxious to hoodwink the police?'

She wrung her hands in anguish. 'Think what you like. Only go away from this house.'

He leaned towards her.

'Can't you see that this suspense is burning me up?' he said in a low, fierce voice. 'Do you think I'm blind? Do you imagine that I don't know that this man Manderton, ever since he arrived here, has devoted his whole attention to this house and its inmates? What is he looking for, Alix?'

'I don't know,' she wailed. 'I don't know.'

'That night in your room,' he went on passionately, 'as you lay in my arms you whispered: "Whatever they may say of me, promise you'll always remember that you loved me." Why did you say that? Did you know then that Basil Stanismore was lying dead down there on the beach?'

'No, no!' she cried, aghast. 'You mustn't think that of me, Ronnie.'

'Then what am I to think?' he flared back at her hotly. 'You and Frankie put up this story that he returned from London at ten o'clock on the night of the murder. Why this lie? Why is it essential to fix his arrival two hours earlier than the real time? And what do these two hours conceal?'

'I can't answer you,' she said.

'You say that as though I had not the right to ask,' he retorted. 'But I have this right. I'm implicated in this affair as well. I've had to let first Nolling and then Manderton believe that I never left my room once I had gone up to bed on Friday night.'

'Don't you understand,' she cried, 'that this is why you must go? Why should you be dragged down with us? Can you be sure that this man won't discover that you've deceived him? I'm haunted by the fear that he may somehow find out that you left your room.'

'Don't worry,' he said dourly. 'He can't possibly do that. And if he does, Mr. Manderton will get very little change out of me, I promise you.'

'You'd deny it, I know. But what good would that do? It would only make him the more suspicious.' She lowered her voice. 'Don't you realise that he suspects you already?'

'The less reason for my going away.'

She caught his arm.

'Ronnie,' she implored solemnly, 'for God's sake, do what I ask! This thing that's been laid upon me, I can go through with it alone; but as long as you're here I feel that you're being drawn steadily deeper into this morass. You've got your career to think of. I want you to go far. And the thought that, through your friendship for me, ruin might come upon you is driving me out of my senses.'

The urgent appeal in her voice touched him, but he would not let it appear. Her lack of confidence had wounded him, and he answered rather roughly:

'I'm not afraid for myself. You needn't imagine that. It's you I'm thinking of. You don't really believe that

you and Frankie can throw dust in the eyes of a man like Manderton and get away with it, do you? Look here, Alix, you're in a mess, and I'm going to help you out. But you must tell me the whole story.'

She shook her head helplessly.

'If you care for me at all,' she said dully, 'you'll do what I ask.'

'I'm not going away, if that's what you mean,' he replied stubbornly.

She raised her ashen face to his.

'You force me to say it,' she murmured. 'Oh, Ronnie, will you never understand? Don't you realise that I want to see you safe because — because' — she faltered, and the red glowed in her pale cheeks — 'I love you,' she whispered softly.

He looked away, stern and hard and silent.

'Promise me, dear,' she entreated, timidly touching his sleeve — 'promise me that you'll have yourself recalled to-morrow.'

He shook his head.

She sprang back.

'You think only of yourself!' she cried hotly.

He gave a hard laugh.

'What sort of love is it that knows no trust?' he answered bitterly. 'God knows what it is that connects you with this foul crime, but you make it very hard for me to believe the best of you.'

She stared at him thunderstruck.

'Ronnie!' she gasped.

'What do you leave me to think?' he burst out wretchedly. 'This man, lured here and slaughtered like an ox, and you, who know the truth, talk of love to me while

all the time your only idea is to get me out of the way lest I should —— ’

‘ You’ve said enough,’ she broke in, and gulped down a sob. ‘ You must please yourself. I’m only sorry that I was ever foolish enough to have imagined, to have —— ’ Her voice broke, and she brusquely turned to go. And he, hurt and angry even as she, torn between his love for her and the horrible suspicion that cast a shadow athwart his thoughts as black as the night which, while they talked, had dropped about them, let her depart unhindered, following her with his eyes.

Suddenly he saw her stop and grow rigid. She turned back to him, pointing down at the dim silhouette of the railings, ranged like the bare skeleton of some prehistoric monster at the foot of the terrace.

‘ That man,’ she said in a low voice, ‘ do you see him? Down there by the gate?’

Following her downward glance, he had caught a glimpse of the squat, black shape which had glided noiselessly behind a clump of rhododendrons.

‘ It’s one of Manderton’s people, I fancy,’ he said. ‘ Cantle told me he had seen someone hanging about the shrubbery before dinner.’

She shivered.

‘ This atmosphere of suspicion is stifling me,’ she murmured, as though to herself. ‘ What does this detective hope to find here, in the grounds? and whom does he suspect?’

A step crunched the gravel on the path behind them. A mocking voice declaimed:

“ Much is suspected of me.  
Nothing proved can be.” ’



A cigar glowed out of the dark. A tall form loomed up beside them. It was Vrogue.

'A woman wrote those lines,' he remarked genially. 'A clever woman, too. Queen Elizabeth, no less. Scratched 'em with a diamond on a window at Woodstock Manor, where her fond sister, Bloody Mary, had put her out of harm's way.' He grinned at them, his grotesque face for an instant visible behind the glimmer of his cigar. 'Whom does our Manderton suspect? you were askin'. Whom *don't* he suspect, you should have said, my dear. Suspicion is his job.'

'Look!' Alix said to Dene, 'there's that man again.'

Vrogue peered over their shoulders.

'Surveillance, eh?' he said.

'Looks like it,' Dene remarked.

'It's — it's abominable!' exclaimed Alix.

Vrogue sat down on the bench.

'I find it incredibly picturesque,' said he. 'It's like a page from the story of old Japan.'

'Japan?' repeated Dene. 'I don't see what Japan has got to do with it.'

Vrogue settled himself back in his seat.

'The air is warm,' he remarked, 'and this cigar is truly admirable. I have it in mind to finish my parable. Listen, then. Many years ago, when Japan first stirred from the sleep of centuries, the rare Europeans who succeeded in makin' their way to the Court of the Tycoon, or Temporal Emperor — the Japs ran to two Emperors in those days — found that amongst the highest officers of the Government was a group of functionaries — there were sixteen of 'em, to be exact — who were treated with the most exaggerated respect. They bore the title of

"Dai Ometski." They had no apparent duties, but some of 'em were invariably present at every official function. Members of their suites were attached to the persons of all distinguished foreigners. Travellers have left us pictures of these fellers, charmin' and all that, true Samurai. One or other of 'em accompanied the foreigners in all their comin's and goin's, lived with 'em in the funny little bamboo and paper houses placed at their disposal, superintended the servin' of their meals. But the system had its drawbacks. If ever the fancy took one of the white men to go for a stroll alone, no sooner had he slipped out of the house than there, round the first corner, was the Ometski, as these fellers were called, bowin' and hissin' and scrapin', and no end glad to go with him.

'So, next time they went to Court, the foreigners asked what exactly were the duties of the Dai Ometski, the solemn awe-inspirin' Sixteen, before whom, with their black wigs, flowin' robes, twitterin' fans, and twin swords stickin' up like a tail behind, all lesser officials prostrated themselves. The title of Dai Ometski, the Europeans were told, meant "Great Eye in Attendance" or "Great Looker Through." The Sixteen and their clouds of parasites were the eyes of the Tycoon. When the Emperor was not present they kept watch for him, the all-seein' ubiquitous Eye in Attendance.' Vroque waved his cigar airily in the direction of the Wilderness, all stirring in the night breeze. The shadow had flitted out of sight. 'We've got our Ometski,' he chuckled. 'Node House has its Eye in Attendance.'

Alix shivered.

'How horrible!' she murmured. 'How unutterably horrible!'

But Vroque laughed stridently.

## CHAPTER XV

### MR. MANDERTON MAKES A DISCOVERY

ELSIE TWIG was ironing in the little parlour behind the tap when she heard her uncle's heavy tread in the passage outside. She put down her iron on its stand and listened.

'Humph!' she said to herself. 'Sounds discouraged, like.' She opened the door. 'My!' she exclaimed. 'I didn't expect you so soon. Dan's not back yet. I'd best see about getting supper.'

Mr. Manderton came slowly into the parlour and sat down by the table.

'I can't stop now,' he told her. 'Is Nolling here?'

'I haven't seen him,' she declared.

'He'll be here any minute,' rejoined the Inspector. 'Half-past seven, I told him. We're going out to the Anthea together.'

His wonted air of tranquil good humour had vanished. His eyes were hard, and his mouth, under the strong, bristling moustache, was an uncompromising straight line. Elsie Twig recognised the symptoms. It has been remarked that she knew her Uncle George. He was always like this in the early stages of a case when things were not going well. It was as though his mind were congealed and reluctant to get going, like Dan's Ford on a frosty morning.

Without comment she went out into the bar and drew

a tankard of ale. She set it down silently before the Inspector, and then fetched Dan's tobacco-jar from the mantelpiece. Mr. Manderton watched her trim figure in the neat pink print flitting about the room, and his eye softened. When she stood over him with extended hand, he passed over his old black pipe in quite a lamb-like manner. She filled it, and held a match for him while he lit up.

'Well, and how are things going?' she demanded, perching herself on the table at his side.

Her uncle set down the pewter and wiped his moustache on his large red handkerchief.

'Rotten!' was the blunt answer. 'The first day of an investigation is always the worst.'

'They've had to release Newcome, I hear?' observed his niece.

Mr. Manderton grunted.

'This case is out of Newcome's class,' he said. 'I was never in much doubt about that. The Consul at Monte Carlo has got in touch with Kenyon, the bloke that Newcome claims to have spent Friday night with, and Kenyon fully supports Newcome's alibi. Humph!' He grunted again.

'And what next?' queried Elsie, glancing at the Inspector under her long lashes while she affected to contemplate a very slim ankle.

By way of reply Mr. Manderton slammed his hand down upon the ironing-board.

'Stanismore was killed in the grounds of Node, or I'm a Dutchman,' he affirmed emphatically. 'Look here, I was early on the scene, wasn't I? — earlier than I had any call to be, as you might say, and I saw no blood or

any signs of a struggle on the sand. The rain may have accounted for that, I'll grant you. But what about the position of the body? No man dropped by a crack over the front of the head ever fell in the cramped-up position in which Stanismore was lying. Do you know what I think, Elsie, my girl?'

Elsie smiled a little triumphant smile to herself. She had never known her treatment to fail. When things were going badly, what her Uncle George required was an audience. It seemed to cheer him up to think aloud.

'Tell me,' she prompted eagerly.

'From the very start it looked to me as though he'd been killed somewhere else and the body brought down afterwards and pitched on the beach in the belief that the tide, when it came up, would fetch it away. Only half the body was below high-water mark, remember. What did that suggest? Firstly, that whoever put him down there was in an all-fired hurry to be rid of him, else they'd have taken him lower down the shore and dumped him straight into the sea. The fact that he was flung down anyhow, as you might say, at the top of the beach gave me my second idea — namely, that the job was done when the tide was low; that's to say, at night, when, therefore, it was too dark, or the party concerned too flurried, to see just where the high-water line ran. This means that the body was fetched down very soon after he was killed.'

'Why?'

'See how the times fit. Stanismore disappeared at half-past ten on Friday night. He must have been murdered, therefore, between that time and the hour when it was still too dark and the tide still too far out for the party in

question to have the time, or, perhaps, the strength, to carry the body all that long way down to the sea. On Friday night low water was at 10.10. High tide would be, therefore, about 4 a.m. on Saturday. But at this time of the year sunrise is shortly before four o'clock, and at three o'clock it's already getting light. I've been talking to the fishermen round here, and from what they tell me I'm satisfied that on Friday night the hour when the state of the tide and the light would fit in with my theory is somewhere between eleven and one. D'you follow me?'

'You make it all wonderfully clear, I think,' his niece declared.

Mr. Manderton puffed at his pipe for an instant.

'Where was he brought from?' he demanded, addressing the room. 'The incident of the locked door gave me my answer.' He briefly described Gerry Leese's experience. 'What does a locked door say? "Keep out," don't it? Keep out from where? From the grounds of Node House, you'll reply. And you'd be dead right, my dear.'

'But who should have bolted the door?' demanded Elsie. 'And why?'

'I can't tell you — yet. But what I can say is this. If Stanismore walked through that door to meet his death, his corpse was never carried out through it.'

'How do you reckon that?'

'Simply because twenty-four hours later the catch was still down. You'd bolt a door to kill a man without interruption or to get rid of the body undisturbed. There'd be no sense in bolting the door after the corpse had been removed, would there? Therefore the body must have been taken out of the grounds otherwise.'

Elsie Twig looked rather scared.

‘How?’ she questioned in a small voice.

Her uncle drew on his pipe reflectively. The fragrance of his tobacco was strong in the little room.

‘That very question sent me back to the mortuary to-night. I found the answer there. Stanismore’s right hand was raw and torn when they found him. I made the police surgeon re-examine the body in my presence. Particularly the right hand. There was glass in the wound, my dear.’

‘Glass?’ repeated Elsie, much mystified.

‘Ay, glass. And there’s broken glass set all along the coping of the wall at the bottom of the grounds of Node.’ He paused.

‘But, uncle, it’s horrible!’ she cried. ‘Do you mean that the body was dragged over the wall?’

‘Not quite that. The murderer never left the grounds. The fact that twenty-four hours later the door was still bolted shows that. The body was heaved very carefully to the top of the wall and let down, probably by the legs, until it fell on the other side in the position in which it was found. Stanismore was already dead; the right hand proves this. It is lacerated, but it has not bled. The clothing is not torn; a coat or something of the kind must have been laid across the top of the wall, but I found a little splinter of glass adhering to one of his cuffs. And now I’m beginning to appreciate the significance of that locked door.’ He stood up abruptly and started to pace up and down the parlour. ‘What does it matter to an outsider,’ he demanded, stopping and frowning at his niece, ‘whether the body of this man is found in Node grounds or on the beach? He might fasten up the door against a possible surprise while he was at work,

but the job over and done with, he'd open the door and leg it for all he was worth, wouldn't he? Who alone could have an interest in trying to prevent this crime from being traced to Node House?'

Elsie stared wide-eyed at the detective.

'You don't mean ——' she began. But he interrupted harshly.

'Why was that body not taken through the door?' he resumed in a tone of growing exaltation. 'Why did the murderer go to the trouble of manhandling this corpse over a high and difficult wall?' He dropped his voice and tapped the table impressively with his hand. 'Because he knew that one of the three keys of the sea door was in Major Barleston's possession. Because he was acquainted with the Major's habit of arriving unexpectedly at all hours and was afraid of being disturbed. Because he was not aware — nobody at Node knew it except Mrs. Barleston — that the Major had returned to Node two hours or so before and was already in bed and asleep.'

'My gracious goodness!' she ejaculated. 'You make my blood run cold. Do you mean to tell me that you suspect someone at Node House of this awful murder — Sir Harry or one of that lot?'

'I can't do otherwise, it seems to me,' he rejoined sombrely, 'though, the Lord knows, I'm stuck for a motive.'

She suppressed the question that her natural curiosity forced to her lips. She had been trained in the police tradition of discretion, and she knew, from long experience of Uncle George's confidences, where his reticence began.

'I shouldn't have thought it possible,' was the remark she substituted.

'Why not?' he retorted. 'Robbery was not the motive



of this crime. This man was killed in anger. His wound shows that. He was struck down from the front, a lightning blow. He had no chance to defend himself, I'd say.'

'You mean — it was a fight?'

He gave a short, hard laugh.

'The sort of fight in which the chap that hits first is the only survivor.'

'Have you discovered where he was killed?'

He shook his head.

'There's a deal to clear up yet,' he answered. 'We've still to find the weapon of the crime; and Stanismore's hat is missing, too. We know that he was wearing a yachting cap when he landed from the *Anthea*, but it hasn't turned up yet. It wasn't with the body —' He broke off and softly pounded his open palm with his fist. 'It's a rare cat's cradle,' he muttered, 'and the deeper I get into it, the more I have the feeling that somebody has stepped in before me and deliberately tangled up all the threads —'

A knock at the door interrupted him. It was Superintendent Nolling, half an hour late, and rather out of humour.

'If you've anything better to do, Inspector,' he remarked, 'you're wasting your time on this trip. Me and my men visited the *Anthea*, and she's in apple-pie order. You'll pick up no clues there, sir. Stanismore weren't on her but a few hours. He came on board at Portsmouth at three, changed into yachting clothes, and went off to his garden party. Newcome picked him up again at the railway pier at seven-fifteen and took him aboard, and he had a bit of supper the whiles they went, under the auxiliary engine, across to Chine Bay. You'll find nowt

on the *Anthea* but his trousers as he left them when he changed and his felt hat.'

'Since you've been good enough to call for me,' said Manderton suavely, 'I think we'll go along.'

A boatman sculled them across the placid bay in the warm June dusk to where the abandoned yacht rocked quietly at her moorings. A blue-jerseyed hand, whom Nolling had installed as caretaker, led the way down the steep companion to the two cabins situated fore and aft of the hatchway, the one for meals, the other for sleeping. The Superintendent remained on deck, seating himself in the cockpit with a resigned air.

One glance below almost satisfied Manderton that he might as well have taken his colleague's advice. The electric light with which the little *Anthea* was fitted shone down upon such a scene of compact neatness as the amateur yachtsman delights in. The saloon was in perfect order: nothing was out of place. To spare himself his confrère's gibes, Manderton purposely protracted his visit, peering into lockers and lifting the cushions.

He peered into the sleeping-cabin. Stanismore had clearly changed his clothes here, for his hat and gloves were on a locker, and a pair of blue serge trousers hung from the hook, and his brown walking shoes stood on the floor. Mr. Manderton patted the trousers. The pockets were empty.

He was about to turn away when he noticed that, under the dead man's hat, a book was lying. Now, Mr. Manderton had come on board the *Anthea* for the express purpose of seeking information about Stanismore. He said to himself, when he saw the book put down with the dead man's hat and gloves, that this was, in all proba-

bility, the book which Stanismore had been reading in the train on his way down from London, and was, therefore, to that extent associated with the last hours of his life. And because he was accustomed to neglect no detail, however small, in his work, he lifted the volume to see its title just as, a moment before, he had taken one of Stanismore's shirts from the locker to note the maker's name. As he moved the book he observed that a strip of paper protruded from between the leaves, as though it had been slipped in to mark the place.

Manderton drew forth the marker. It was a long and narrow fragment apparently torn off a typewritten letter, for there was a scrap of typewriting on the upper half, and the paper, greyish in hue and of good quality, was obviously notepaper. This is what he saw:



For a full minute he remained lost in thought, staring down at the grey slip in his hand. Then he heard the companion creak. Mr. Nolling's impressive rear view obscured the hatchway.

'Found something, have you?' remarked Nolling, as his eye fell upon his colleague. Silently Manderton held out the book marker.

‘What d’you make of that?’ he demanded.

His colleague glanced at the slip, turned it over in his pudgy fingers, held it up to the light.

‘It’s Node House paper all right,’ he pronounced.

‘Ah,’ commented the other, ‘I was wondering if it was.’

‘Not a doubt of it,’ said Nolling. ‘I’ve seen it dozens of times. Sir Harry’s had the same notepaper as long as I can remember.’

‘Who uses the typewriter at Node, d’you know?’

‘Sir Harry does. You’ll see the machine standing in his study. This here’s a queer go, Inspector! That “No” stands for Node, I’d say, and that’s “last chance,” these two words here. It’s an invitation, ain’t it?’

‘Or perhaps a threat,’ the other suggested. ‘Anyway, invitation or threat,’ he added, as he put the slip away in his letter-case, ‘it’s what brought our friend to Node, I’m thinking. We’d best be getting ashore, Nolling.’

Niece Elsie was waiting at the tavern door.

‘Oh, uncle,’ she cried, ‘how late you are! You must be famished. I waited supper for you. Dan’s had his. You come straight in.’

‘Right you are, my lass,’ said Mr. Manderton heartily. ‘Has there been anything for me?’

‘There’s a gentleman waiting to see you. But have your supper first.’

The Inspector stopped.

‘Who is it?’

‘Only Major Barleston, from Node. He’s been here this hour or more. He can wait a bit longer. You come and eat.’

'Where's the Major, Elsie?' her uncle demanded.

She sighed.

'In the tap, along of Dan.'

Elsie supped alone. Mr. Manderton was closeted, for greater privacy, in his modest bedroom with Major Barleston, who was very mysterious, very long-winded, and slightly inebriated.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE BROKEN TILE

THE saying of the doctors that women have greater powers of resistance than men recurred more than once to the mind of Ronnie Dene in the days following the murder. He marvelled at the resolute calm with which Alix faced their little world. Their meeting in the garden had told him of the fears that distracted her; yet only once, when she learned that the man Newcome had been detained, had he seen her falter in public, and then she so swiftly recovered herself that her momentary weakness was set down to the shock of the news of Stanismore's death.

Even her husband, who knew something of her strength of character, was astonished at her reserve of natural force. He was happy enough to relinquish the management of things into her firm hands. At first she had almost collapsed under the stunning blow of his revelation, and the accusation against Newcome had tried her composure hard. But she quickly rallied, and he was amazed to find this woman whom, in his muddled way, he had long regarded as something unattainable, something remote from his daily life, taking charge of things, plotting and planning to help him. 'This affair is mine as well as yours, Frankie,' she told him, 'and I'm going to show you,' she promised, 'that I meant what I said.'

It was she who proposed, at their talk in the dawn of

that Sunday morning, that she should go down to the tower and efface the traces of Stanismore's visit. Though her husband still refused all information about his movements on the night of the murder, she realised that he must have contrived, in some way, to be present at her interview with Stanismore; and she very soon elicited the fact that the tower room remained as she had left it, with the window open and the candle standing on the table.

Frankie wanted to go down that very night and put things straight. But to this she, more far-seeing than he, objected. 'We can't afford to run the risk,' she said in her practical way, 'with the police about the beach. But to-morrow's the day for turning out the tower, and in the morning everybody will be away at the inquest. Aunt Ethel likes me to visit the tower from time to time; she'll be very glad to let me take Vance's place.'

Her husband protested that he didn't like the delay. Suppose Nolling took it into his head to visit the room? Besides, her choice of a day so soon after the murder might arouse suspicion.

But she possessed to the full not only the courage, but also the gambling instinct of her sex. 'If it does,' she retorted, 'I've a perfectly good answer. Everybody at Node knows that I go there now and then to see that Vance does her work properly. The — this thing didn't happen in the grounds. Why, then, should Nolling or anybody else want to go to the tower? No, Frankie; we must wait until to-morrow.'

Because she was the stronger, reluctant though he was to acquiesce in her plan, she had her way.

The intervention of Scotland Yard terrified her husband; and he could scarcely contain himself when, in

the seclusion of their bedroom, Alix told him how Inspector Manderton had surprised her at her task. She put a bold face on it. 'He was only looking round,' she assured Frankie. 'I'm sure he suspects nothing. He can suspect nothing if we always remember that I had an absolutely valid reason for being there.'

But secretly her heart misgave her. And when she learned that the Inspector had locked up the tower she had a sense of foreboding.

Her misgivings would have redoubled had she been in the grounds of Node very early on the following morning. Although midnight had struck before Mr. Manderton got into bed, the sun in rising had forestalled him by little more than an hour when, soon after five o'clock, he unlocked the sea door. The new day shone like a shilling fresh from the mint. The sea, still as a mere, was a deep Mediterranean azure, the crisp air was wantonly stimulating, and from the Wilderness the matins of the birds ascended in a joyous choral.

The Inspector had said nothing to his niece about his visit to Node Tower. This was not because he attached no importance to the superficial observations he had made there. It was rather that he had not yet made up his mind as to the place which the tower was to fill in the general scheme of his investigation; and he was secretive on principle about features of a case whose importance he was as yet unable to determine. . . .

He closed the sea door and looked about him.

'Smith!' he called cautiously. He advanced a little way and called again. There was no reply. Mr. Manderton pursed up his lips severely and followed the walk along to where the path to the tower turned off.



A number of planks had been laid to protect the foot-way. The detective put down the bag which he carried and began to remove them. Then, walking on the grassy border, he started to move very slowly forward, scrutinising the path with the utmost care. On reaching the stone steps, he continued the process, examining each stair with the same scrupulous diligence. Arrived at the top, he drew himself erect and shook his head dubiously. 'That damned rain!' he muttered. 'Like playing against loaded dice, that's what it is.'

He went back to fetch his bag, and mounted with it to the stone platform before the tower door. He opened the bag and took from it a reading-glass.

A shallow canopy of wood, affixed on iron brackets to the wall, sheltered threshold and door of the tower. The door, sunk within the tower's face, stood raised from the platform by a stone stair. It was upon this stair, a flat slab, mottled like a lizard with lichen and greenish slime, that Mr. Manderton, lens in hand, now bent his especial attention.

The centre of the slab was smudged, as the detective, mindful of the traffic of the previous morning, expected to find it. Indeed, hereabouts he picked out and held under his glass the rounded print of a woman's high-heeled shoe. On this he wasted no time. He moved the lens to the left along the face of the slab with a sureness that suggested he was looking for something already seen. So fast did the glass sweep that he all but missed the edge of a singular pattern which for one brief second flashed into its circular field.

At once the lens swung back and steadied. Punched clearly in the slime a series of rounded dots, like the sur-

face of a golf ball, came into view. The pattern was a rough pyramid in shape, the summit pointing to the door.

Manderton's eyes brightened. Very deliberately he moved the glass still farther to the left until, once more, an indentation in the greasy coating of the step appeared in the lens. Here, too, was the series of rounded dots, arranged in a cone, only this time the apex of the cone lay towards the stairs, away from the door.

With an impassive face he stretched his arm behind him and groped in the bag. When his hand reappeared it clasped a stained buckskin shoe strapped with leather. It was long, with a rather pointed toe, and had a rubber sole. The Inspector turned the shoe over in his hands.

The sole was corrugated with a mass of closely set rounded protuberances.

Laying the shoe aside, the detective picked up his glass again and resumed his study of the stair. Once more he paused lengthily over a mark half-effaced in the muddy layer. Under the lens it showed up as the bold curve of a plain flat heel.

When, half an hour later, Smith, rather red in the face, panted up the tower stairs, he found the door ajar. His chief was on his knees in a corner of the room. It was a dark and dusty nook in the angle between fireplace and window, where the circular sweep of the wall began to flatten out. A shabby screen, once gay with bright pictures, stood folded up against the centre table.

'Didn't 'ear you come in, sir,' the plain-clothes man began to explain volubly. 'I was up the path a piece, towards the house. There's something there I think you ought to see.'

The Inspector sat back on his heels and looked up at his assistant.

'Ah, there you are, Smith!' he remarked absently.

'If it isn't troubling you, sir,' his aide broke in hastily, 'I'd like you to come out in the grounds with me for a minute. It ain't fur — just a little way along and then a piece down to the left. I relieved Mallow at midnight, like what you said for me to do, and, as soon as it was light, nothing 'aving transpired in the night, I sez to myself, I sez: "No 'arm in 'avin' a look round," I sez, and ——'

But it was evident that, however closely Mr. Manderton might appear to be studying his assistant's somewhat rubicund features, his thoughts were far away. Smith broke off in some embarrassment. Said the Inspector, as though he had not heard him:

'A dam rum go, I call it.'

Discipline came to Smith's aid.

'Yessir,' he agreed briskly.

Mr. Manderton jerked his head in the direction of the mirky corner which he had been scrutinising.

'Take a look at that, will you, and tell me what you make of it!'

At that curt command, roughly spoken, the plain-clothes man pulled himself together. He knew that tone of old: the guv'nor was on the job, and things were not going well. . . .

The Inspector was pointing to the greyish blur of dust, extending to the wall behind, which marked the angle cut off by the screen. Smith peeped over his chief's shoulder. Here and there the thick layer of dust had been superficially disturbed. But in one or two places . . .

'Footprints, ain't they, sir?' spoke Smith. 'Two — no, three of 'em.'

With a sour look Mr. Manderton rose from his knees.

'That's right,' he said. 'And to think,' he added irascibly, as he brushed his trousers with his hand, 'that there's pretty near a yard of surround between the carpet and the wall which must have been fair thick with dust before that damned woman came butting in and cleaned the whole place up. Why, the housemaid who's supposed to turn the room out every week as good as admitted to me last night, when I had a word with her alone, that she never swept it. That Mrs. Barleston would have had that corner brushed out if she'd noticed it. By the Lord Harry, if I could have been in here at this time yesterday! I bet the place was fair stiff with tracks for anybody with eyes to see them.'

'These wouldn't be the lady's prints, would they, sir?' asked Smith, who had been peering into the dusty corner.

'Too large. Besides, the heel-marks are to the wall.' He swung round fiercely on his side. 'What the hell do you think she was doing behind that screen?' he demanded. 'Playing Puss in the Corner? Damn it! look at the size of the prints. Can't you see it's a man? Here' — he pointed to the screen — 'open it out!' Smith obeyed. 'It covers you all right. What height are you? Five foot nine?'

'Five foot seven and a half in me socks, sir.'

Manderton moved forward to the screen and drew it about him.

'I can see the top of your 'ead, sir,' said Smith.

'Six foot, I am,' the Inspector remarked. 'Still, that

don't prove anything. He might have crouched down. There's plenty room enough behind there.'

Smith jerked his head backwards in the direction of the corner.

'That's the chap we're after, I s'pose, sir?' he suggested.

'I reckon he is,' Mr. Manderton retorted, 'though he's left us little enough to go on. What with the crowd trampling all over the beach, and the rain sluicing away anything *they* missed, and this blasted woman with her mop, I'd like to know how the chief expects me to make a job of it. Not that there aren't one or two traces left about the place just the same.' He glared gloomily at his assistant. 'Somebody was in this room Friday night,' he said. 'Stanismore for one. Leastwise, I've picked up the track of his rubber soles on the step outside. I spotted a print there yesterday. Pointing away from the tower it was. Just now I located a second print, turned towards the door this time, and I've identified 'em both by the shoes that Stanismore was wearing. And if I'm not mistaken, I've got in my pocket the butt of the cigar he threw away on the path below. Our friend behind the screen was here, too, if those footprints behind the screen mean anything. And *he* left a heel-mark on the doorstep which I'll take a small shade of odds is identical with those prints in the corner. He was smoking, too—at least, yesterday I picked up out of the grate a fag which hasn't been lying around here since the poor young lady died, I'll warrant.'

'Ah!' Smith remarked. 'And who would it be, sir?'

'Ah!' retorted Mr. Manderton. 'Who?'

His myrmidon scratched his head. Then, with a significant expression, he fixed his eye on the Inspector.

'Well,' he observed evenly, 'it worn't done in 'ere.'

'No, nor yet on the beach,' Mr. Manderton retorted sharply. 'I don't care anything about where it wasn't done, my man. What we've got to find out is where it *was* done.'

'That's right,' agreed his assistant cheerfully. 'And if you'll kindly step out with me, sir, I think I can show you something as will interest you.'

'What's that?' demanded Mr. Manderton slowly. Then he snatched up his bag. 'Lead on!' he ordered.

As he hurried out after Smith, one of his legs caught the table cover. Stopping to adjust the cloth which was slipping to the ground, he noticed a yellowish smear on its faded red pile. It was a ragged patch of candle-grease, rounded on the inside as though it had dripped from a guttering candle and coagulated on the cloth about the base of the candlestick. The cover being somewhat too large for the table, the side marked with the grease had apparently worked its way down out of sight.

The detective's eye flashed to the candlesticks in their place on the high mantelpiece and from them back to the yellow stain. Suddenly his face became scarlet. His mouth closed with a snap, and his lower lip pouted like a sulky child's. He picked up his bag once more and fairly stormed out of the tower, slamming and locking the door behind him.

Smith was waiting for him at the end of the path, and, on his appearance, forthwith started up the mossy walk leading in the direction of Node House. Before the rhododendron shrubbery was reached a turning branched off to the left. And here the plain-clothes man came to a halt.

Before them the Wilderness, gleaming with the morn-

ing dew, spread its tangle of tree and shrub and bramble. Straight as an arrow the side-path ran away from them through the heart of the thicket. Its white quartz surface was mossgrown but free from grass and weeds, neatly bordered, too, with curving red tiles. Some twenty paces from where the two men stood it was broken by a little clearing with a low stone bench set back in a semi-circular space.

'It's along 'ere,' said Smith. 'I was up this walk, takin' a bit of a nose round w'en you arrived, sir. That's how I didn't 'ear you come in. Them tiles there, them's what I wanted to show you.'

They had walked down the turning together. On the left of the path, a bare yard from the stone sea, three of the tiles were snapped off short. Two lay on the ground beside the path, apparently just as they had been broken off. The third was some distance away, the concave side outwards, as though it had turned over on itself.

Mr. Manderton flung away his bag and dropped on one knee.

'You haven't touched anything, have you, Smith?'

'Not me, sir! But you can see with the naked eye that the break in them sherds is fresh as fresh.'

'The glass!' The Inspector's fingers snapped impatiently.

Smith opened the bag and handed him the lens. Manderton stooped over the tiles. Then he uttered a sharp exclamation.

'We've beaten the rain this time,' he said. 'Look at that, will you?'

He held out to his aide the third tile, the one that had lain farthest away.

On its convex side — that is to say, the side which, when the tile was in position, had been turned to the path, sheltered from the wet — was a sticky, brown stain.



## CHAPTER XVII

### MR. VROGUE DISCOURSES OF ALIBIS

NODE HOUSE was steeped in the peace of the warm morning. The iron railings of the Wilderness, and the fringe of deep green beyond, swam in the heat, which rose quivering from the gaudy flower-beds of the terraced gardens. The bees were busy among the roses, and from the other side of the house, where the gardener was nailing up the crimson ramblers, the sharp staccato tap of a hammer rang out across the still air.

Gerry Leese's feet were noiseless in his bathing sandals as he stepped up from the rose-garden on to the verandah of the morning-room. The blinds had been drawn against the glare. He parted them and poked his head inquiringly into the room. Out of the green and white dimness two small brown hands and the back page of newspaper confronted him.

He whistled. The newspaper did not move.

'Who's for a bathe?' he demanded.

The newspaper rustled.

'Go away!' said a bored voice. 'I'm busy.'

'The busy man has always time for one thing more,' he told her gravely. 'Come in and swim, honey. The water's fine.'

'I think the sun's too hot,' was the answer. 'Besides, I haven't finished the serial yet. Listen to this: "She sensed the passion that boiled behind the icy iron of his

regard." You never boiled for *me*, Gerry Leese! "All the clean white soul of her yearned out of her sweetly searching gaze. 'My man! My mate!' she crooned. And love's trumpets clanged triumphant through the halls of paradise. . . ."

'Some stepper, I'll say,' was Mr. Leese's ribald comment.

The voice read on glowingly:

"He breathed her name, then paused that love might be his spokesman. 'Vashti!' His raging kiss crushed her mouth. . . ." Vashti, you know. What extremely odd names these people have, Gerry!

His bath towel smote the newspaper aside and revealed Freckles, in a becoming blue linen frock, reclining in a large armchair.

'Oh, can that slush!' he cried. 'How's the hunger cure?'

She laughed.

'I ate about a pound of Petit Beurre biscuits in bed last night,' she told him, 'but it didn't seem to do much good. Soon I shall start dreaming, like explorers lost at the Pole, about porterhouse steaks and silversides of beef and veal and ham pies. Do you know, I believe Cantle realises how frightfully hungry I always am down here. He whisks my plate away at meals before I get a chance to have any more. Of course, he looks starved himself, and I'm convinced he takes a malicious pleasure in seeing that we get next to nothing to eat as well. Sometimes I feel sure he's licking his chops behind my chair when he's changing my plate, like the Grand Inquisitor chortling over heretics frying in the flames.'

Gerry grinned expansively.

'You're wasting your time here. With your imagination you ought to be at Hollywood writing scenarios. And talking about imagination,' he added, with a whimsical glance at her pretty eager face, 'what would you say if I thought up a little picnic after our swim?'

'Oh, Gerry!' she exclaimed, 'you're the world's wonder! Bathing always starts up my what-d'you-call-'em juices; you know, the ones that Uncle Harry talks about. What's it this time?'

He patted the bulging pocket of his black and orange bath robe.

'A digestive and sustaining relish calculated to whet the most jaded appetite or bridge the aching voids between meals.'

'But what is it?'

'Caviare.'

'Caviare? Gerry, *where* did you get it?'

'Supplies smuggled in to the starving garrison by Snook, the renowned blockade-runner. Come on!' He stopped. 'Lord! you're not dressed yet!'

Delicately she rose up from her chair, her hands at her waist. With a quick movement she whisked her frock up over her head. There was a horrified cry from the door.

'My dear Isobel!'

Lady Fubsy stood there.

Freckles stuck a rather towsled head through the opening of her frock.

'It's quite all right,' she said rather breathlessly, as she struggled with the garment.

'What are you thinking of, undressing in front of Mr. Leese?'

'I'm not undressing,' Freckles protested indignantly. At last she had freed herself from her frock. She stepped out in a black silk swimming suit.

Lady Fubsy sniffed.

'I care little how you term the operation,' she remarked severely. 'In any circumstances, it is excessively indelicate.'

'But I didn't show anything,' Freckles expostulated. 'I was quite decent underneath.'

Her hostess coughed.

'I don't know what Mr. Leese can have thought.'

Freckles giggled.

'I think he was frightfully disappointed.' She gave the young man a mischievous look. 'I bet you imagined you were in for one of those orgies in an English country house you've read about, now didn't you, Gerry?'

The unfortunate youth blushed up to the roots of his brown hair.

'Don't be suggestive, Isobel,' said Lady Fubsy. She picked up a vivid green wrap that lay across the chair and put it about the girl's shoulders. 'Go and have your dip. Don't stay in too long, and please remember that luncheon is at one.'

They scampered out into the sunshine together.

'My word!' Freckles remarked, as they descended the terraces, 'I was terrified she'd spot the caviare.'

He laughed gaily as he held the gate in the railings for her to pass through. They ran down between the high rhododendron thickets, gorgeous with blossom, chatting merrily, and plunged into the fragrant twilight of the Wilderness. Suddenly, round a turn in the mossy path, they came upon Alix. She was standing quite still in a

listening attitude. They charged down upon her waving their towels.

‘Come along and bathe, Alix,’ Freckles panted. ‘You haven’t been in for days.’

‘Keep quiet for a minute,’ she told them, raising her hand.

Her tense air drove the laughter from their faces. They stood and listened with her.

Out of the dusky depths of the wood heavy footsteps went crashing through the undergrowth. A peremptory voice called ‘Mallow!’ several times, and was ultimately answered by a hoarse and distant hail. The rustling came nearer, and presently, where the trees were thinner, they caught sight of a straw hat bobbing in and out of the foliage. The sounds gradually died away as the unseen pedestrian descended the slope towards the sea wall. Silence descended on the Wilderness once more. Between the branches of the towering pine that grew at the foot of the sea wall below they saw, framed in an oval of sparkling blue, the silver-grey mass of a battleship serenely steaming past the Spithead forts. It was the only moving thing in sight — as noiseless as the drowsy hush of the woods all about them.

‘They’re like a pack of hounds,’ said Alix in an awed voice. ‘They’ve been beating the Wilderness all the morning. What can they be looking for?’

‘You can search me,’ Gerry remarked. ‘I guess this Manderton guy knows a lot more than he’s telling — at least, that’s how it strikes me.’

Freckles shivered.

‘I think he’s a most unpleasant man,’ she observed. ‘There’s something — something sort of inevitable about

him, like the hangman coming to fetch you at eight o'clock in the morning.'

Alix had turned away and was listening again

'Hark!' she said.

The trampling of feet had begun again. A voice shouted: 'Keep up on your left, sir!' And then, as they watched, Inspector Manderton passed. Fifty paces away they saw his grey cap twinkle against the leaves. He went forward at a sort of ambling trot, stooping and moving his head sharply to right and left. Then the Wilderness swallowed him up again and they saw him no more. A rasping voice made them all jump.

'Like a bloodhound, ain't he?'

It was Mr. Vroque, his big body loosely clad in a Palm Beach suit, a book and pile of papers in one hand, a stick in the other. He wore no hat, and his flaxen hair stood up on his head in a tuft like the crest of a cockatoo.

'I've been waitin' to hear him bay,' he went on. 'The well-known bell-like cry—you know, what one reads about in books.'

'Ugh!' exclaimed Freckles. 'Well, he's not going to do me out of my bathe. Come on, Gerry!' She linked her arm in his.

'D'you want us to wait for you, Mrs. Barleston?' asked the young American, turning back.

She started up out of a reverie.

'No, Gerry; don't wait. I think I'll not bathe this morning.'

'I'll race you to the sea door, Gerry!' cried Freckles. They dashed away.

'Our Eye in Attendance ain't altogether an unmixed blessing, my dear,' Vroque remarked to Alix when the

young people had gone. 'I've got a mass of proofs to correct, and I find that all my favourite retreats in the Wilderness are invaded.'

'But what are they doing?' she demanded nervously.

He shrugged his shoulders and freed his neck from his collar in one of his characteristic contortions.

'Persistent chap, Manderton. He means to find out who killed this man. And where he was killed.'

He fixed his large round eyes, green as gooseberries and as round, upon her face.

'But he was killed on the beach.'

'Ah, but does Manderton think so? He don't seem to me to be a chap that wastes much time.'

'But why are they searching the Wilderness?'

'You'd better ask Manderton,' he retorted.

'I have some letters to write,' she said uncertainly. 'I think I'll go back to the house.'

Silently he watched her disappear round the bend of the path. Then he looked down towards the sea door and up the walk again towards the house. Hitching up his book and papers under his arm, he took a pace into the wood and, with a grunt, seated himself on the ground with his back to a tree. He took out a fountain-pen from his pocket, opened his book, and spread out his proofs upon the carpet of leaves about him. There was a quick rustling in the bushes. Mr. Manderton stepped out upon the path.

Vrogue glanced up. The detective's large red face was glistening with perspiration, and there were burrs on the sleeve of his coat.

'Huh!' Vrogue grunted. 'Old proverb, eh? Well, you didn't catch us that time, Inspector. Or p'r'aps you

weren't there long enough to overhear the nice things I was sayin' about you, eh, what?' He fixed his eyes upon Manderton, his forehead corrugated, his thick, blubbery lips pursed up, in an impish and froward stare.

Gazing down at him as he sat propped against the tree, his knees drawn up to his pointed and dropping chin, his splay feet encased in rough shoes of prodigious size, the detective thought he had never seen a more extraordinary looking individual. Everything about the man was exaggerated in a gigantic way — his height, which was well above the ordinary; his head, fantastically elongated, with heavy, bony face and prominent nose, jutting, high-bridged, above a fleshy gash of a mouth; long, narrow-chested torso and mighty thighs; enormous knuckly hands. He was built to scale, but so uncouth was the effect of the ogre-like traits of the face, heightened by the wry and irritable expression habitual to it, that he produced upon the detective the impression of an image reflected by a distorted mirror.

'If you mean I was eavesdropping,' Manderton rejoined, 'you're mistaken, sir. I lost my way in the woods, and suddenly came out upon this walk here.' He began to fan himself with his cap. 'I'm glad to know you were giving me a good character at least.'

'You're lucky,' Vroque muttered, turning to his work once more. 'Anatole France has said that, in his experience, if ever he opened a door without knocking he invariably stumbled upon an ignominy.'

A puff of wind blew one of the proofs away and landed it at Manderton's feet. The Inspector picked it up, glancing at it as he handed it back.

'Greek, eh?' he remarked.



'My new edition of the plays of Sophocles. That's the Antigone. Know it?'

'Can't say I do, sir.'

'Pity,' commented Vrogue in his jerky fashion. 'You'd agree with old Sophocles, Inspector. No crime without its punishment — that's his theme. Humph!'

'I see that you're a scholar, sir,' observed Manderton, sitting down beside him.

'A humble seeker after truth.' He indicated the papers spread out at his feet. 'This is hack work, correctin' proofs. Nobody else to do it for me. Got to do it myself. Not unlike your work, in a way.'

'How's that?'

'I'm trackin' down errors in the text. This ' — with a wide gesture he enveloped the green and silent expanse of the Wilderness — 'is your script. You're huntin' for errors, too, ain't you?'

'Errors?' echoed Manderton.

'Errors. The mistakes that every criminal makes, they say, tryin' to cover up his traces.'

The detective laughed.

'I guess that's about right,' he said. 'I wish my manuscript ' — he glanced disconsolately from the tidy galley-proof on Vrogue's knee to the green tangle surrounding them — 'were as neat as yours. Maybe I'd see my way a bit clearer if it were.' There was a moment's silence. Then: 'Did you know Stanismore, Mr. Vrogue?' he asked.

Fountain-pen in hand, Vrogue was bending over his proofs.

'Met him once or twice,' he grunted. 'Heard a good deal about him, too, one way and another. Why do you ask?'

'Well,' said Manderton, 'I know all about his career and that, and I've had a talk with his private secretary. I was wondering what he was like as a man.'

'Eminent number one,' Vroque observed. 'Steam-roller type. Flattened out everything in his path. Common enough figure in public life to-day. Don't appeal to me, though.'

'That's the character of most successful men,' the detective commented. 'And Stanismore was very successful.'

'You're right,' the other agreed. 'He'd have forged his way to the very top if he'd lived. There was only old Chesterham between him and the party leadership, and these attacks of *The Daily Radical* would have shunted him out in time.'

'Did Stanismore have any enemies, do you know?' Manderton asked.

Vroque growled.

'Does that type have any friends? Real friends, I mean. If Stanismore did business with a man, I've heard say, he'd pinch him so hard he'd leave him sore and angry. And his own party were terrified of him. Look at the bouquets they're chuckin' him in the party newspapers. They can afford to.' His huge face writhed. 'They know he's dead.' With a little flourish of his pen he made an entry in the margin of his proof.

'Did you ever hear anything about his private life?' said Manderton.

'Never troubled to inquire,' Vroque mumbled.

'I've heard there were stories about him — and women,' the detective remarked tentatively.

'If a man of Stanismore's type wants a thing he goes

and gets it,' the other rejoined. 'Political job, or pretty face, it's all the same.'

'I'm inquiring into the matter in London,' said Manderton.

Vrogue growled again.

'Why go so far afield?' he retorted. The detective glanced quickly at the speaker, but Vrogue's face was bowed to his work. 'You've got brains,' the harsh voice spoke again suddenly. 'Why don't you use 'em?'

The Inspector seemed taken aback.

'We do our best. But all's not plain sailing in a case like this, especially when the other fellow's been made a present of forty-eight hours' clear start.'

'Humph!' said Vrogue. 'That's the fortune of war. I ain't criticisin' the Operations branch. It's your Intelligence that's at fault.' He raised his green eyes to the detective's startled face, rolling them about in his head and mouthing with lolling tongue. 'Ever read Poe?'

Mr. Manderton looked rather bewildered.

'Yes.'

'Remember the story called "The Purloined Letter"?'

'I think so.'

'What was its theme?'

The Inspector scratched his chin.

'Well, it's a long time since I opened Poe's tales, but as far as I remember the yarn's about a man who successfully concealed a document by putting it up, as conspicuous as possible, on his desk.'

'Quite so, the moral being that the most obvious things are the hardest to see.' Vrogue smoothed out the proof on his knee and inserted a missing accent in the margin. 'Apply that to alibis.'

'Alibis?' said Manderton. 'That's the whole trouble about this case. There aren't any except the Major's.'

Vroque did not raise his eyes from his task.

'And how many people, once they've gone to bed at night, can bring proof that they haven't left their rooms till morning?' he asked gruffly. 'There aren't many married couples, husband or wife, especially if they're heavy sleepers, who'd go into court, did a man's life depend on it, and swear that the other didn't budge all night. Failing evidence to the contrary, the assumption is always that, when a man goes to bed, he stays there till morning, ain't it? Failing evidence to the contrary, I said. In the normal way, once folk have retired for the night, there can be no alibis. In the circumstances, an alibi ain't normal. And in such cases, precisely because it would be abnormal, an alibi'— he looked up for an instant, his face writhing — 'would interest me.'

He fell to work upon his papers once more. The Inspector gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment, then, turning on his heel, walked away slowly in the direction of the sea door.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE ALERT

LUNCH was over, and the party at Node House had dispersed their different ways. Alix, who knew that Sir Harry and Vroque had retired to their rooms to rest and that the library was unoccupied, went there to finish off a long letter to Sandy.

Her nerves cried out for repose. Passionately she craved a respite from her never-ending ordeal. She felt that the waters were rising about her; that but a little more and she would be submerged. Her sister's questions, Ronnie's aloof and doubting air — these things she could suffer; what was wearing her down was her forced inaction while this solemn, silent man she so greatly feared was sapping and mining the very ground beneath their feet — this and the constant necessity of turning towards him a face calm and undismayed.

'The Eye in Attendance' Vroque called him. How well the nickname fitted! As she sat at the desk in the farther of the two windows overlooking the old elms of the avenue, she found her thoughts coming back to the detective's slowly mustering, enigmatic regard.

In this tranquil spot, however, she felt secure, somehow, from that probing eye. The quiet of the long, low room with its smug busts and tall book-shelves soothed her like a sedative. She read over again Sandy's last letter, the naïve recital of his doings at his little school,

scrawled in a childish hand, surrendering herself eagerly to the anodyne of her weekly talk with her boy. With him she could, at least, be herself and forget this fearsome thing which threatened to shape afresh the whole course of her life. As she wrote she had the sensation that Sandy was at her side, gazing up at her with his round, blue eyes, as he used to do in the holidays when he came in to say good-night.

So absorbed was she in her letter that she did not hear the door open or notice the entrance of Ronnie until he stood at the desk. They had not exchanged a word since their talk on the terrace on the previous evening. When she saw that it was he, she composed her features and, with an impassive face, waited for him to speak. But she had been smiling to herself over her letter, and the ghost of happy laughter yet haunted her eyes as, after the sinking of the sun, a solitary ray of light will sometimes linger in the darkening sky.

‘Alix,’ said Ronnie hurriedly — she did not fail to notice the little furrow of anxiety between his dark eyebrows — ‘I must speak to you a moment.’

‘Well?’ Her voice was cold and distant. The sight of him had fanned into life again the flame of her resentment against him.

‘It’s about Manderton. He’s discovered something. In the Wilderness.’

‘Probably,’ she returned carelessly. ‘They have been tramping about the grounds the whole morning.’

‘I know. But now they’ve narrowed down the search.’

She dipped her pen in the inkstand as though to indicate that she wished to resume her writing.

‘Why do you come here to tell me this?’

‘Because,’ he replied gravely, his eyes on her face, ‘the time has come for you to decide definitely what you intend to do.’

‘Why?’ she queried in the same toneless voice.

‘Because I believe that Manderton has discovered where Stanismore was actually killed.’

On that she was, of a sudden, as still as death. There was a moment’s tense silence. At last, with an effort, she said:

‘But surely it — it happened — on the beach?’

He shook his head.

‘It was in the grounds. Manderton suspected it from the first, I believe. Now he knows.’

‘What makes you think that?’ Her voice shook, despite her efforts to speak calmly.

‘I was on the beach after lunch. These two plain-clothes men of Manderton’s were outside at the foot of the sea wall. I was down among the rocks, and they didn’t see me. I heard what they were saying. One was showing the other how Stanismore was killed. He said that Stanismore staggered over backwards and smashed three tiles as he fell. The tiles were stained with his blood.’

‘Tiles?’ she repeated in a puzzled voice. ‘There are no tiles on the beach.’

‘Wait. They meant the tiles bordering the path that leads off the main walk — you know, where that stone bench stands in a little clearing. I know this because, when I came up to the house just now, Manderton was taking the plaster casts of footprints just in front of the bench, and on the bench itself the fragments of the tiles

were set out. Belper, the village policeman, has been posted at the entrance to the path to prevent anyone from approaching the place.'

She had propped her chin on her hand, her elbow resting on the blotter, while she gazed thoughtfully out upon the avenue and the rooks flapping about the bending crests of the elms.

'What do you want me to do?'

He drew nearer.

'Go to Manderton and make a clean breast of everything,' he proposed eagerly. 'It's the only possible course now. If you let matters slide there's unending trouble in store for you and Frankie.'

She remained silent, stabbing the blotter reflectively with her pen.

'Don't you perceive the danger?' he urged, leaning towards her across the desk. 'If Manderton has located the actual place where Stanismore was killed, don't you realise that he's practically certain to pick up a clue that will lead him straight to the murderer?'

She paused as though considering the matter, tapping her lips, pursed up in thought, with her penholder. In reality she was trying to make up her mind to accept Ronnie's implied offer of assistance. But the memory of his suspicions of the previous evening was too strong for her. She shrugged her shoulders with an affectation of indifference, and said:

'My dear Ronnie, why should you suppose that I have anything to confess?'

'Oh, what's the use of talking like that to me,' he burst out. 'Don't you suppose I know why Frankie was so anxious to prevent anybody from ascertaining what



he did during those two hours between ten and twelve on Friday night?’

She laughed coolly.

‘You’re welcome to any theories you choose to entertain,’ she said lightly, ‘provided you don’t expect me to adopt them.’

‘You’ve got to take this thing seriously,’ he urged. ‘We haven’t a moment to lose. When Manderton acts he’ll act swiftly.’

‘Obviously I can’t control Mr. Manderton’s actions,’ she retorted carelessly. ‘But I don’t wish anything that I may decide to influence you in any way, Ronnie. If you have anything to confess, why not take your own advice and — make a clean breast of it?’

He flushed up and looked at her reproachfully. She almost relented when she saw the pain that started into his dark eyes.

‘You’re angry now,’ he said humbly, ‘and you have reason. I said more than I meant to last night. I should have held my tongue.’

The allusion to a memory that yet rankled in her mind stung her to lash him on the raw again.

‘But why not?’ she exclaimed. ‘Between old friends frankness is always best. This is a free country, I believe. Everybody is entitled to think what he likes’ — she paused deliberately and added sweetly — ‘and suspect whom he chooses.’

‘You have no pity on me,’ he answered miserably. ‘And yet I’m not going to defend myself, for we haven’t the time to quarrel. Alix, I tell you again this has got to stop. You must speak the truth. Nothing can be worse than the complications that will ensue if this detective

can bring home this crime to your husband and, in doing so, convict him and you of lying. If Frankie won't go to Manderton and own up, then you must.'

'Well, I'll be damned!'

With a brusque movement of the arm, which swept Dene aside, Frankie Barleston stepped suddenly between them.

'You're devilish free with my name, it seems to me,' he said, bending his tawny eyebrows at the younger man — 'almost as free with my name as you are with my wife.'

'Frankie ——' Alix began.

'You stop out of this!' exclaimed her husband, turning on her fiercely. 'I'm going to deal with him.' He faced Dene once more. 'So I'm to go to Mr. Manderton and own up, am I? That would suit your book devilish well, wouldn't it?'

The young man's face was pale and set.

'Don't be a damned fool, Frankie,' he said. 'You know as well as I do that Manderton means to get to the bottom of this business. I was advising Alix for the best.'

'Now you listen to me, Dene,' the Major broke in violently. 'In the first place, you can leave my Christian name out of it. In the second place, you keep your hands off my wife ——'

'Frankie, how dare you say such things!' cried Alix.

'...And, in the third place, let me tell *you* that Manderton *has* got to the bottom of this business,' her husband went on, ignoring her, 'and he's going to nab the right man.'

Dene shrugged his shoulders.

'So much the worse for you,' he retorted.

'Is it?' rejoined the other, falling back a pace, his hands on his hips. 'I'm not so sure about that.' He signed with his thumb over his shoulder. 'Manderton's back there in the study with Sir Harry. He's asked for you. They sent me to find you.'

Alix looked blankly from one man to the other.

'What are you saying, Frankie?' she murmured.

'What does he want with Ronnie?'

Her husband chuckled.

'You'd better ask him,' he retorted, pointing at Dene.

Alix turned to the young man.

'Ronnie, what does it mean?'

He made a contemptuous movement of the shoulders.

'Nothing. Frankie's drunk again, that's all.'

There came a soft tap at the door. The three of them turned round. Cantle was there.

'Sir Harry wishes Captain Dene to go to him in the study,' the butler announced. 'It is urgent, the master said.'

Frankie swung round triumphant on Dene as Cantle withdrew.

'Not so drunk as you think,' he cried. 'Now we'll see who's going to own up. Are you coming with me? Or d'you want me to fetch Manderton out to you?'

'Ronnie, what is it?' asked Alix in a low voice.

Dene dropped his hands to his sides.

'I don't know,' he answered. 'Shall we go?' he said to Frankie. They went out of the library together.

Alix followed them into the hall. She saw her husband open the study door and usher Dene in. As Frankie was about to enter, he caught sight of his wife.

'You stay out of this, Alix,' he told her brutally. 'You're not wanted in here.' With that he disappeared into the study, and the heavy door swung to with a click behind him.

For a full minute she remained outside in the hall, her fingers plucking at her little cambric handkerchief with short nervous tugs. Then she turned away and, with listless feet, mounted the staircase to her room.

## CHAPTER XIX

### FRECKLES AT BAY

SIR HARRY FUBSY was not best pleased by Mr. Manderton's visit. It was the old gentleman's custom, when he had rested after lunch, to shut himself up in his study, where he devoted the rest of the afternoon to the preparation of his memoirs, a work upon which he had been engaged at intervals over a period of about a dozen years. He resented the intrusion of this slow-moving and taciturn man with his brusque demand to speak to Captain Dene immediately. Sir Harry had sent Frankie Barleston to find their guest. Now the ex-Minister sat at his desk, bestrewn with letters and documents and open books, and fidgeted. The Inspector always gave him an uneasy feeling; and this afternoon it struck his intuitive sense, sharpened by long training, that a sort of latent menace underlaid Mr. Manderton's manner. It occurred to him that the detective's air was perceptibly graver than it had been at their interview on the previous day.

The Inspector was in no wise abashed by the coolness of his reception. While Dene was being fetched the detective's eye absorbed, in a swift and sweeping glance, the detail of the study, square in shape except at one corner, behind the desk, where a bow window bulged out with its lacquer furniture and cabinets of Chinese curios, souvenirs of Sir Harry's service in the Far East, and those signed photographs of royalty which diplomatists accu-

mulate. At length his gaze came back to the man at the desk, to Sir Harry fiddling with his fountain-pen, and to a large black japanned case standing on a small table at his elbow.

‘Is that the only typewriter in the house?’ demanded Mr. Manderton suddenly, pointing at the black case.

Sir Harry swung round in his swivel chair.

‘Why, yes. Certainly.’

‘Does anybody use it besides yourself?’

‘God bless my soul, man! I can’t type,’ replied the other testily. ‘Mrs. Barleston does all my work for me, my letters and so on.’ He raised a sheaf of typescript from the desk. ‘She typed out all these chapters of the book I’m writing. My reminiscences, you know.’

‘I see. And has Mrs. Barleston used the machine lately, do you know?’

‘Not during the past few days certainly,’ Sir Harry rejoined. ‘I’ve had other things than letter-writing to think of, Inspector, as you may imagine. She worked here most mornings last week. I haven’t had any manuscript ready for her since.’

‘Does anybody else in the house use the machine?’

‘Certainly not. If anything goes wrong with it, it can’t be repaired nearer than Portsmouth, and that entails serious interference with my correspondence. Since Vroque smashed the spacing last time he was down here I have made it an absolute rule to allow nobody but Mrs. Barleston to use my typewriter.’

‘Then Mr. Vroque typewrites, too?’

‘He knows nothing about it,’ retorted the old gentleman crossly. ‘Last time he was staying with me — at Easter, it was — he was writing a preface to his edition

of Æschylus, and he asked leave to use my machine because, he said, the printers would make a hash of the names of the authorities he quoted unless they were typewritten. You never saw such a spectacle. He has absolutely no notion of his own strength, and his idea of typewriting is to hammer the machine with forefinger and thumb with much the same force as a smith employs in beating out a horseshoe on an anvil. I had to tell him that if he wanted to typewrite at Node he'd have to bring his own machine.'

Manderton laughed shortly. Then he looked at his watch. 'I wonder if Captain Dene will be long,' he remarked. A bronze figurine was on the desk, a dancing dryad prancing above a bell push on a stand. With an exasperated gesture Sir Harry pressed the button and summoned Cattle. With more brusqueness than he was wont to display he bade the butler to tell Captain Dene that he was wanted in the study urgently.

An awkward pause ensued. Manderton retreated into the bow window and stood staring out at the lilac bushes planted along the wall of the house while Sir Harry drummed with his fingers on the blotter.

So Dene discovered them when, presently, he came into the study with Frankie Barleston. Tall and lithe and sunburnt, six foot of rippling muscle in a suit of country tweeds, he advanced to the desk while his companion lingered in the background.

'You asked for me, Sir Harry?'

Dene looked from his host to the detective. It was Manderton who answered his question.

'I wanted to see you, Captain Dene.' The Inspector's sonorous voice resounded from the window embrasure.

'You informed me that on Friday evening, the night of the murder, you went to your room soon after ten o'clock. Is that right?'

'Yes.' The young man's rejoinder rang hoarse and he cleared his throat.

Manderton had drawn a notebook from his pocket. He fluttered the leaves in his fingers until he had found the entry he wanted.

'I am quoting from your deposition to Superintendent Nolling,' he said. 'You confirmed that to me. This is what you stated: "I changed into pyjamas and sat for a while smoking and looking at the sea. I put out my light soon after twelve o'clock."' The detective closed the notebook and put it behind his back. 'Is that correct?'

Dene moistened his lips.

'Yes,' he answered.

Mr. Manderton glanced out at the laurel bushes, a tangle of blossoms, mauve and white, beyond the window.

'There's nothing you wish to add to that statement?' he asked, turning back towards the room, while he stared down at his boots.

Sir Harry, peering up at Dene through his *pince-nez*, wondered why the young man paused.

Dene coughed and cleared his throat again. His voice was still husky as he rejoined, on a note of inquiry: 'No.'

'Nothing, eh?' said Manderton.

Dene's eyes sought out the grey and kindly face of his host. Sir Harry, who had studied human faces all his life, detected almost a look of appeal in that glance. The



dark eyes were wary, but behind their wariness trembled the shadow of some stronger emotion.

‘I don’t think so,’ Dene replied.

The detective stooped to Sir Harry. His hand pointed to the dryad on the desk. His features might have been cast in the bronze of which the little leaping figure was moulded.

‘Will you ring, sir, please?’ he said. ‘I want to see Miss Dagleish.’

‘She’s on the croquet lawn,’ Frankie’s voice put in. ‘I’ll fetch her.’ He darted from the room.

Sir Harry turned a worried face to the Inspector.

‘Hadn’t you better let me question her?’ he suggested to the detective. ‘She’s only a young girl after all. What do you want me to ask her?’

‘You can safely leave this to me, sir,’ the Inspector answered. His tone was extremely mild. ‘I shan’t frighten the young lady.’

Dene was gazing from one man to the other with a puzzled expression on his handsome features. As the detective was speaking the study door opened, and Frankie ushered in Freckles. The abrupt silence which greeted her entrance must have told her that she had been the subject of their talk, and on catching sight of the grave faces turned expectantly towards her from the end of the room, she stopped short in consternation, her clear young eyes bright with apprehension. With reluctant step she approached the writing-table. Dene jumped up and gave her his chair.

‘It’s all right, my dear,’ Sir Harry encouraged her paternally. ‘Sit down a moment. Inspector Manderton wishes to ask you something.’

Silently she did his bidding. Slowly she seated herself in the chair, lissom in her simple blue frock. There was something of the unshackled grace of a young hind about her movements — the timorousness as well.

In mute expectation she raised her eyes to the detective. Her fingers entwined themselves nervously in the long string of blue mummy beads hanging from her neck. Mr. Manderton gave her the briefest of glances. Then his eyes strayed out of the window.

‘Do you remember last Friday night, Miss Dalglish?’ he said.

‘I think so,’ she answered rather dubiously.

‘The night of the murder it was.’

‘Yes.’

‘Sometime about midnight you woke up feeling hungry, I understand —’

At these words her face flamed scarlet beneath its golden tan. She stared open-mouthed at the speaker.

‘...and you went downstairs to find something to eat.’ Mr. Manderton’s voice was gently ingratiating. ‘Now will you please tell me what you saw on your way back to your room?’

Her host looked up sharply. Dene, who was standing with his hands in his pockets, staring on the ground, raised his head.

Freckles sat thunderstruck, as though utter amazement had deprived her of the power of speech or motion. Her eyes, wide with stark dismay, were riveted on the detective’s face.

‘Answer the Inspector, my dear,’ Sir Harry urged her gently.

The bright eyes glistened and the sweetly curving lip began to tremble. Still she did not speak.

'Come,' said Mr. Manderton suavely, 'I'll prompt you. You saw the Captain here.'

The words were addressed to the girl, but he might have been speaking to Dene, so narrowly did he watch the young man's face. Nor did Dene's quick and anxious frown escape the stern, bold eye.

'Oh!' Freckles gasped, then turned and looked at Dene.

'You may as well tell me the truth,' the Inspector urged, with a vestige of impatience in his utterance. 'You saw Captain Dene here coming along the first-floor corridor from the direction of the garden stairs. Didn't you?'

'Dene, my dear fellow, is this true?' Sir Harry began in a dubious voice; but a quick cry from the girl interrupted him.

'Ronnie,' she exclaimed, 'I didn't tell him! Oh, I swear I didn't! You do believe me, don't you?'

At that instant the study door burst open unceremoniously. Alix Barleston entered quickly. She went straight to her sister's side.

'Really, Uncle Harry,' she declared indignantly, 'you might have let me know that the Inspector had sent for Freckles. Either Aunt Ethel or I should certainly have been present. Freckles, dear ——'

But the young girl sprang to her feet and shook her roughly off.

'Don't touch me!' she flung at her sister. 'I wonder you aren't ashamed to speak to me after the way you've betrayed my confidence.'

Alix gazed helplessly round the circle of anxious faces.

'Will somebody please tell me what has happened here?' she demanded.

'Oh, you needn't pretend!' Freckles stormed on. 'You're nothing but a mischief-maker and — and a sneak!' She turned to Dene. 'Ronnie, I'd have told you myself, only she said I wasn't to. Why don't you speak? I know you can explain everything. I told nobody but Alix, and she — and she' — her voice was caught by a hard sob — 'she's given me away!'

'For God's sake, Freckles, hold your tongue!' Dene groaned miserably.

'But, Freckles, I promise you ——' Alix began.

'Leave me alone, Alix,' her sister flamed back at her. 'After this I'll never speak to you again!'

With that she rushed from the room. Alix was about to follow after, but a curt summons from the detective halted her.

'One moment, ma'am, if you please,' he barked. His voice was cold and hard.

Alix stopped, and at that moment her eyes fell upon her husband. Frankie was lolling against the mantel-piece on the far side of the desk. His face wore an impish, defiant grin, and he was watching the scene with every manifestation of malevolent enjoyment.

Manderton had thrown back his head, and was glaring at Dene like an angry lion.

'Well, sir,' he rapped out sharply, 'and what have you to say? Do you stand by your original statement?'

'Look here, Inspector,' declared the young man, with a fine show of impulsiveness, 'this is all my fault. I'm afraid that quite unintentionally, I deceived you. Miss

Dalglish is perfectly correct. I remember now that I did go out in the gardens on Friday night to get a breath of air before I went to sleep. I often do. It — it must have slipped my memory.'

Alix, glancing from Dene to her husband, saw the grin fade from Frankie's face. A sort of wolfish expression crept into his eyes as he leaned forward tensely.

Mr. Manderton pursed up his lips and mustered Dene from under his heavy eyelids.

'Is that so?' he remarked very drily. 'And I suppose it still escaped your memory when I tried to jog it for you just now, eh?'

Dene said nothing.

'At what time was this?' demanded the Inspector.

'Somewhere about midnight,' Dene replied.

'Where did you go?'

'I ran down only to the bottom of the garden stairs and stood there for a minute or two, then came in and went to bed.'

The detective grunted, and slowly shifted his baleful gaze across the room until it rested upon Alix. She met it with composure. She was standing a few paces away from the desk, one hand resting against her breast, the other lightly poised on the beading of a cabinet at her back.

'And what has Mrs. Barleston to say?' said the Inspector.

Alix laughed easily.

'As you've seen for yourself, Inspector,' she answered readily, 'my sister is very impressionable. She came to me full of this story of having seen Captain Dene in the middle of the night walking along the passage near his room. As she's always reading detective novels and talks

of nothing but this horrible murder, I was afraid she'd go and plague Captain Dene about it. I knew, of course, that there was some perfectly simple explanation such as the one we've all heard. So I forbade her to mention it. She must have repeated it to somebody else for it to have come to your ears. I'd have told you myself if I'd attached any importance to the incident.' She paused and thoughtfully polished her nails on the palm of her hand. 'Girls are so romantic at her age, aren't they?' she added.

She appeared to be unconscious of the detective's bleak and ponderous stare. Mr. Manderton dropped his eyes at last, and turning his back on them all, stared long and persistently out of the window. He seemed to be revolving something in his mind. Eventually he faced the room again and addressed Sir Harry.

'I'd like to have a word in private with Mrs. Barleston,' he said.

Sir Harry Fubsy gave his niece an inquiring glance. He found her cool and serene. The old gentleman stood up.

'We'll leave you, then,' he said hesitatingly.

'And I'll have tea in here,' Alix broke in brightly. 'The Inspector will join me, I'm sure. I know he's dying for a cup. Frankie, will you tell Cante?'

From his position in the window Mr. Manderton watched them all file out while Alix remained behind. He stood very erect, hands behind his back, legs planted apart, as it were defying any attempt to lure him from his attitude of stern aloofness. As though he felt it might disarm him, he paid no heed to Mrs. Barleston's smiling invitation. The study door fell to behind Sir Harry and the rest, and still the detective made no move.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE WARNING

A PHRASE read in some book flickered across his brain: 'Success in life rests upon one small gift — the secret of entry into another man's mind to discover what is passing there.' Memories of old duels, the clash of wits against wits, came back to him; and pictures of men and women, whom in the past he had thus confronted to wrest their secrets from them, stared from the crowded pages of the rogues' gallery, which is the detective's mind. There were many faces there, brutal, crafty, gallant, heart-broken; rarely one that stimulated him as did the woman who now so serenely awaited his opening passes.

Here, he told himself, was an adversary meet to cross swords with. This was the play that made the game worth while. Not that the man in him, masterful and compelling, was unconscious of their appeal as he silently appraised her charms — charms of high-bred, eager face; charm of russet hair, cropped to cling like a cap of old gold about her small and well-shaped head; charm of body slimly ripe in the frock of silken tricot. Grimly her beauty thrilled him, even as the matador is thrilled when, in the hushed arena, under the rapt gaze of the soaring tiers, a-tiptoe, with sword poised, he gazes upon the noble majesty of the steer that awaits his thrust. The beauty of this woman stirred him, but he passed it by.

Here it would play no part. She was too skilled to arm herself with her sex. Rather would she face him with his

own weapons, meeting him parry for parry, cut for cut, using as a blade her masterly 'self-command, polished like steel, and, even as steel, pliant yet adamant. No matter that there were mettle and temperament behind the level friendliness of her eyes; no matter that the fine chiselling of nostril and mouth pronounced her high-strung as a blood mare. Watch her as he might, never yet had he seen her nerve betray her, never seen to slip her self-control.

She had dropped into the chair which her sister had vacated, and now sat with one white elbow propped upon the desk, waiting quietly for him to speak. With admiration he noted that she did not, like other women he had encountered in similar circumstances, break into a nervous babble of small talk. Her silence told him that, since he wished to question her, it was for him to make the first move.

He made it, and she found the opening suave. The careful politeness of this man alarmed her. She would have better liked a thunderous attack.

'Mrs. Barleston,' said Manderton, 'I wanted to speak to you about Mr. Stanismore. You say you had no idea that he was coming down to Node on Friday evening?'

'None whatever,' she replied.

'Yet he was coming to see you?'

She smiled.

'Well, I suppose he was.'

'Why do you suppose that?'

'When he came down here before, it was to see me,' she rejoined, with engaging candour.

'When the Major returned on Friday evening, did he ask you if Mr. Stanismore had called?'



‘My husband didn’t know that Mr. Stanismore was coming.’

‘He knew he’d be at Portsmouth, and that a month ago, the last time Mr. Stanismore went down to the yacht, he came across to see you. I should have thought it quite natural for the Major to have put the question. You hadn’t seen your husband for the best part of a week: I suppose you had a bit of a chat, when he came in, about what he’d been doing up in Town, whom he’d seen, and that. Are you sure he didn’t mention it?’

She laughed.

‘He may have. In any case, I was much too sleepy to remember anything about it.’

‘Not too sleepy to remember the time, Mrs. Barleston?’ he put in swiftly.

She flicked a stealthy glance at him.

‘I was drowsy. But I remember I looked at my watch.’

‘You do remember that, then?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she answered evenly.

Manderton walked slowly over to Sir Harry’s chair and sat down heavily, facing her across the desk.

‘Did Mr. Stanismore ever try and make love to you?’ he asked abruptly. He watched her face, but he could detect no deepening of the faint flush beneath the creamy skin.

‘Yes and no,’ she answered whimsically. ‘That’s to say, he would have — if I’d let him.’

‘Did your husband object to Mr. Stanismore’s attentions?’

‘My husband? Good gracious, no! Anyway,’ she added, as an afterthought, ‘he had no reason.’

‘Then what brought the Major back to Node so sud-

denly? He was the only person who knew that Mr. Stanismore was coming down to these parts.'

'My husband is a man of unaccountable impulses,' she observed easily. 'He's always turning up here unexpectedly.'

'Then in your opinion his arrival was a pure coincidence?'

'Absolutely,' she answered promptly.

The detective paused. Not once had he penetrated beneath her guard. Every pass she had parried; no feint had caught her unprepared.

'Perhaps your husband came down to keep an eye on Captain Dene?' he hazarded at length.

That assault pressed her hard, but she was equal to it. Manderton saw how, in a flash, she rallied all her wits to grapple with the danger. As for Alix, the detective's question told her who had betrayed her sister's secret, for none, except his wife, knew of Frankie's smouldering resentment against Ronnie Dene. Now she remembered how, on the previous evening, after she had sent Freckles away, her husband had stolen noiselessly from the dressing-room to find his wife sobbing hysterically before the mirror. And she recalled the malicious grin on Frankie's face during the scene in the study but a little while ago.

She did not hesitate.

'He is rather jealous,' she admitted with a smile. 'You mustn't take my husband too seriously, Inspector,' she went on, with the air of one imparting a confidence. 'Although I see so little of him he seems to think that I should have no men friends. I've known Captain Dene for years. We're almost like brother and sister.'

'Yet your husband didn't object to your friendship with Mr. Stanismore?' the detective riposted swiftly.

'That was different,' she parried. 'As I've told you already, Mr. Stanismore and I were scarcely more than acquaintances.'

He had failed again. No need to see the calm, untroubled gaze she levelled at him across the silver inkstand to realise that. He drew forth his notebook.

'You do Sir Harry's typing, I believe, Mrs. Barles-ton?' he said.

'Yes.' Her tone was dubious.

'Would it be troubling you too much if I asked you to type out something for me?' he went on. 'Nothing very much, only a sentence or two.'

She looked at him curiously.

'Of course not. Shall I do it now?'

'If you don't mind.'

She moved round the desk to the typewriting table at the Inspector's elbow and lifted the cover from the machine. On the desk in front of the detective was a large mahogany paperstand, stacked with greyish notepaper, with 'Node House, near Vanner, I. O. W.' stamped at the top in black Gothic lettering. Manderton took out a sheet of this notepaper and handed it to his companion.

'You want me to write a letter for you?' she queried.

'Part of a letter, let's say,' he rejoined, his eyes on her face. She gave no sign, but silently slipped the page under the roller of the machine and turned it into place.

'I'll dictate,' he told her with a glance at the open notebook in his hand. 'Ready?' And he began.

"I am at Node..." He was watching her over her

shoulder, and paused for the last word to appear. 'Now put a line of "x's,"' he bade her.

She looked round.

'A line of "x's"?'

'Please.'

She obeyed, and the little bell on the machine rang.

"Better come . . ." Manderton dictated and halted again. 'Now some more "x's," please. "See me . . .,"' he resumed in due course. '"x's" again as before,' he added. 'And now,' he resumed as the bell tinkled, 'two more words.' He paused. '"Last chance . . ."' he dictated. The keys rattled. She stopped. 'That's all,' Manderton announced. She pulled the sheet out of the machine and glanced through it. This is how the sheet appeared:

Node House /  
near Vanner  
I.O.W.

I am at Node xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
better come xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
see me xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
last chance xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx,

She handed the sheet to the detective. For the first time during their interview, he noticed, her eyes were uneasy.

'Like a cross-word puzzle, isn't it?' he remarked. 'Suppose we try and fill in these rows of "x's," Mrs. Barleston.'

She shrank away.

'I don't know what it's supposed to be,' she murmured.

'It's an invitation, that's what it is,' he told her. 'An invitation from Node. Have a shot at it. It's not hard. Shall I try then?' He pointed to the first line with his forefinger. 'See how it begins. "I am at Node..." How does it go on? What about this?' His piercing glance swooped to her face as she sat, half-turned round in her chair in front of the typewriter, staring at the sheet in his hand. '"I am at Node,"' he read out glibly, '"and cannot get away. You had better come down here on Friday evening and see me. I will wait for you in the tower. This is your last chance."' He laid the sheet of paper on the desk and spread out his large red hand upon it, the fingers extended. 'What about it, Mrs. Barleston? How do you like my reading?'

He held her with his eye, forcing her at last to raise her head and look at him. He was not prepared for what her face revealed. Extreme surprise he saw there, but of fear no trace. Anger reddened his cheeks as he realised that not yet had he shaken her self-control.

'I must ask you to explain,' she said evenly. 'Who is supposed to have written this letter?'

'Ah,' he rejoined darkly, 'there are only two persons who can answer that question, Mrs. Barleston, and one

of them is dead. But supposing that Mr. Stanismore was the one to receive it. That would account for his coming to Node, wouldn't it?'

'I suppose it would,' she agreed. With mounting colour she added: 'Since you appear to wish to fasten this letter upon me, Inspector, I may as well tell you at once that I did not write it and know nothing whatever about it.'

There was a tap at the door. Cantle was there with a tea-waggon. He wheeled it over to Alix.

'You'll let me give you some tea?' she queried from behind the little barrow.

He bowed formally.

'You're very kind, ma'am.'

Eagerly she seized upon the welcome interruption.

'I expect you like a large cup,' she said. 'Cantle's brought you one, I see. These are tomato sandwiches, and those are scones. The Node scones are rather good.'

They drank their tea in silence. Manderton was not trained to the boudoir and little used to being waited upon by pretty ladies with slim, white hands. She left him to his own devices, and, realising that she wilfully ignored his awkwardness, his reluctant liking for her grew.

'Smoke, if you wish to,' she said when he had finished. 'A pipe, if you prefer it. Or will you have a cigarette?' She opened her tortoise-shell case. 'Do you care for Gold Flake?'

She wondered why his eyes narrowed suddenly as he helped himself from her case. She chose a cigarette herself and lit it from the match he held. He brushed a flake of tobacco from his moustache, and said:

'If Mr. Stanismore had received a letter such as this' — he tapped the typewritten sheet — 'one might look for traces of his presence in the tower. I want to ask you this. When you were cleaning up the other day, did you find everything in its usual place?'

With a slow gesture she rested her hand upon the desk and as slowly shook the ash from her cigarette into a jade bowl that stood there. The action was futile, for her cigarette was barely lit. He noted the device to gain time, and waited for her reply.

'I think so,' she answered.

'The candlesticks as well?'

She hesitated. Her mind was snatching at a fleeting memory — that morning in the tower, with the dust motes dancing in a shaft of golden sunlight from the window, and this burly, inscrutable man standing by the table and gazing from the open tin of metal polish to the grimy duster in his hands.... Now she saw the elation flame up in his eyes, and, lest her hesitation should betray her, answered at random:

'I believe so.'

'Strange,' remarked the detective quietly, 'if this man were in the tower room on Friday night, that you should have gone there so soon after to turn the place out.'

'It was the purest chance,' she put in swiftly. 'There were half a dozen other things I might have done that morning. But being Monday, I thought of the tower.'

'I see,' he commented. 'Just a coincidence, eh?'

She had got over her momentary alarm, and decided to challenge him.

'You don't believe in coincidences, Inspector?' she said, and boldly smiled.

Her smile found no reflection in his face. He gave her a brooding look.

'Not until they're proved to be such, ma'am,' he answered gravely. 'And not always then.' He glanced down, and seemed to be studying the toes of his boots. 'Mrs. Barleston,' he said, after an instant's silence, 'will you allow me to offer you a piece of advice?'

His tone sent a cold shiver chasing down her spine, but she spoke up brightly.

'Well, Inspector,' she asked, 'and what is that?'

He lifted his keen, unfathomable eyes to her face.

'Tell me the truth before it is too late. It's not too late now, but it will be very soon.'

She leaned back in her chair, her handkerchief to her lips.

'Why, Inspector,' she cried, laughing, 'you don't think I'd lie to you?'

Her laughter fell echoless upon the tense atmosphere which, of a sudden, was between them. Composedly, her lips just parted in a still hovering smile, she met his stern and menacing stare.

'Have it your way, then,' was all he said. She made a slight movement of the hands in a gesture of finality. He stood up, making of the action a slow and ominous manifestation. She crushed her cigarette out against the sides of the jade bowl and left it there.

'I'd like to see Sir Harry again before I go,' he told her curtly.

'I'll let him know.' She went away.

As the door closed behind her, the detective bent down to the jade bowl and delicately picked out the flattened stub of her discarded cigarette. He held it close before



his eyes, scrutinising it gravely, then dropped it in his open palm and, from an envelope which he took from his pocket, shook out into his hand the crushed and charred remnant of another cigarette. These two objects, as they rested in his palm, he compared with a manner that was triumphant and almost gay. At length he canted up his hand and slowly slid the two cigarette butts into the envelope, which he restored to his pocket. On entering the study a few moments later, Sir Harry found his visitor, with his usual reserved mien, casually inspecting a cabinet of Chinese ivories.

## CHAPTER XXI

### WHAT THE THRUSHES SAW

As soon as she was out of the study and the detective's presence, Alix Barleston's composure slid from her like a cloak. Trembling all over, she paused in the quiet hall and fought down her growing feeling of despair. The mellow glory of the afternoon, pouring in through the hall door flung wide, seemed to mock at her great unhappiness. For a moment her presence of mind forsook her. Content only to be shielded from the perpetual questioning, remorseless and unspoken, of the stern eye in the room at her back, she leaned against the door, her clenched hands pressed against her mouth, with bowed head and eyes closed in agony, never heeding the danger that the door might open and discover her.

But no movement from within disturbed her, and gradually she regained the mastery over herself. She passed through the hall and halted at the mirror to dab a little powder on her cheeks and touch her lips with red. Then she entered the drawing-room. Cantle was there alone, clearing away the tea-things. She sent him to find Sir Harry, and went on into the morning-room. It was empty, but from the croquet ground, sunk within its trim box hedge on the far side of the rose garden, she heard the click of balls and, as she stepped out on the verandah, she caught a glimpse of Frankie's grey flannel suit on the shaven lawn below.

The sight of him heartened her. At that moment,

vibrating yet beneath the tension of her long ordeal, she felt the urgent need to lean on someone. This man, weak and unreliable as he was, was her husband. The secret they shared in common bound them once more together in fetters stronger than the marriage tie. In her endless distress she found herself quite naturally turning again to him for comfort. Her conscience pricked her as she drew near the croquet lawn, her feet noiseless on the soft grass path beneath the pergola, and saw him with his mallet poised for a shot.

How worn and old he looked! The thought came to her like a stab as she noted the grey and anxious face, the thinning hair. To avenge her he had killed; yet to him also, in this maze of deceit into which she had been drawn, she must lie, and go on lying. Though she knew that love was dead between them, it shamed her to remember that, almost at the very time that her husband had ventured everything in her defence, she had all but given herself to the man she loved. Honest as she was, not only with the world but also with herself, she would have told her husband the truth about Ronnie Dene but that she feared the consequences to Ronnie. That she had done right to hold her tongue Frankie's action in taking Freckles' story to the detective abundantly proved. It was her husband's jealousy, she knew, that had driven him to try to make trouble for Ronnie. She made allowances for Frankie, but, she told herself, she would have to make him see that Ronnie must not be incriminated.

He looked up sharply as her shadow fell athwart the turf.

'Well,' he demanded, 'what did that fellow want with you?'

She shook her head sadly.

'I don't know,' she replied. 'But, Frankie, he's found out something — about the tower.'

He dropped his mallet on the grass.

'About the tower?' he repeated blankly.

'He suspects that I went there to put things straight. He wanted to know whether I found everything in its place. Oh, he didn't make any definite charge, but he kept hinting that I was deceiving him, and, oh, Frankie! I'm horribly frightened.'

'You didn't admit anything, I hope?' he put in anxiously.

She laughed bitterly.

'I denied everything, of course. Lies seem to come easily to me now. And then there was something about a letter.'

His red eyes narrowed.

'A letter? You haven't been writing to Stanismore, I hope?'

'No, but I think Manderton believes I have. He made me type out a phrase or two — it seemed to be part of a letter — on Node House paper, something about being at Node and wanting someone to come down because it was his last chance.'

Her husband glanced cautiously over the hedge.

'Did he show you this letter?' he asked.

'No. He dictated from his notebook. And then he suggested that I should help him fill in the blanks. He improvised a long rigmarole which made it look as though somebody here had invited Mr. Stanismore to come to the tower one evening.' She paused, and asked rather nervously: 'You didn't write this letter, I suppose, Frankie?'

'I certainly did not,' he retorted promptly, 'and what's more, I don't know who can have written it. It was typed, you say? Manderton wanted to get a specimen of your typing, that's clear. Does anybody use Uncle Harry's machine except you, Alix?'

'Mr. Vroque did until Uncle Harry stopped him.'

'Old Vroque don't count. He barely knew Stanismore, if he knew him at all. What about Dene?'

'He's never met Mr. Stanismore in his life. In any case, he's never used the machine, and I don't believe he can even type.'

Her husband was looking at her thoughtfully.

'Nearly everybody can type after a fashion,' he said.

'I can type a bit myself.'

She put her hand on his sleeve.

'Look here, Frankie,' she pleaded, 'I want you to keep Ronnie's name out of this.'

He laughed rather rudely.

'I know you do. And I bet he does, too.'

'I'm doing all I can to help you,' she rejoined. 'I don't want you to be petty about this. It was mean of you to take this stupid tale of Freckles' to the detective.'

'Stupid or not,' he retorted, 'your friend Dene didn't appear to relish it much.'

Her fingers strayed to the lapel of his coat.

'Listen to me,' she said, and shyly smoothed out the cloth. 'Ronnie is nothing to me now. If he ever meant anything in my life, that's all over and done with. You have no cause for jealousy, my dear. It's one thing to make a scene such as you did in the library this afternoon. It's a very different matter when you deliberately

set out to plant unfounded suspicions in this man's mind. Why did you do it, Frankie?'

'Because the story's true,' he answered doggedly. 'Dene admits being out of his room on Friday night. What was he up to? That's what I'd like to know.'

'You heard his explanation, Frankie.' She flashed an anxious glance at his face.

'I heard it all right. And I likewise heard him say that he went out by the garden stairs. Perhaps you'd kindly tell me what he meant by that.'

'Nothing more than he said. Why shouldn't he have gone out by the garden stairs?'

He swept a slow and troubled glance round the lawn. At his back an arbour stood, sheltering a rustic seat and set against a garden of blue flowers, larkspur and gentian, Canterbury bells, and cineraria, which clothed the nakedness of a corner rockery with a many-shaded azure mantle. Frankie gestured with his head towards the arbour.

'Let's sit down, shall we?' he proposed. They moved across the smooth green turf. 'We can't be overheard here,' he said, when they were seated. 'Now I'll tell you why Dene never went out by those stairs. Because if he had' — he leaned forward and thrust his face into hers — 'I should have seen him.' Impressively he tapped himself on the chest. 'From half-past eleven until midnight I was at the foot of the garden stairs.' He laughed shortly. 'Your friend Dene must think up something better than that.'

He was triumphant. With eyes dismayed she stared at him.

'Obviously, it was later than he said,' she faltered. 'He must have made a mistake about the time.'

'He made no mistake,' her husband snapped viciously. 'He was lying. He lied when he said that he had not left his room, and he lied when he invented this tale about going out by the garden stairs.'

'Why do we waste time in discussing it?' she broke in nervously. 'What does it matter, anyway? It's got no bearing on the case.'

Frankie gave her a shrewd and searching glance.

'I'm not so sure about that,' he answered meaningly.

She looked about her like one distracted.

'Frankie,' she said most earnestly, 'you'll make things no better by trying to throw this man off on a false scent. Why can't you leave Ronnie alone?'

He laughed spitefully.

'I thought you said just now that Dene was nothing to you?'

'It's true. He isn't.'

'Then why interfere? You've done your part. You leave the rest to me.'

'And let you incriminate an innocent man?'

'Innocent be damned!' he retorted. 'He's as guilty as hell!'

She stared at him blankly, then began to laugh.

'That from you, Frankie, is distinctly amusing.'

An ugly look spread over his face.

'All right,' he told her darkly, 'you can laugh now. But wait and see. You won't laugh long.'

His tones filled her with foreboding. The laughter died in her.

'What do you mean by that?' she asked in a hushed voice.

He turned on her angrily.

'I mean this,' he hissed. 'Manderton's made up his mind that Dene is the murderer. And I think that Manderton's right.'

'Your prejudice against Ronnie is turning your brain, I believe,' she said coldly. 'Why do you say things you know to be untrue?'

'You can take it from me,' was the curt retort, 'that Manderton's out after Dene. And he's going to get him, if he can.'

She had been striving to restrain her growing agitation, but now it carried her away. She sprang to her feet and faced him.

'If this is true,' she said, 'then it's your doing. Oh,' — she stamped her foot — 'I might have known how it would be. You've always let me down. Just when I thought you were a man I could respect — you must do this craven thing. But you'd better take care,' she added passionately. 'I've put up with a good deal for your sake, Frankie. Don't drive me too far. I don't mind what it costs me, but I warn you, if they arrest Ronnie, I shall speak the truth.'

He was looking at her fixedly, leaning back against the seat. His silence was so prolonged, his gaze so strangely meditative, that presently her anger left her and a cold fear descended.

At last he spoke.

'And what if you don't know the truth?' he asked sombrely.

'I know what you told me,' she riposted quickly.

'You think it was I who killed Stanismore?'

'You told me so, didn't you?'

He shook his head gravely from side to side.



‘You made me say that, and I let you believe it. I told you only that Stanismore was dead.’

She turned her back on him, clasping her hands tightly together before her breast. Ire smouldered in her eyes. His glance, anxious and inquiring now, dogged her every movement.

‘I see,’ she said icily. ‘And now that you think you’ve found a convenient scapegoat, it suits you to tell a different story. Well, my dear Frankie, it’s not good enough. You must invent something more convincing.’

He gripped her arm and shook her.

‘It’s the truth, I say. I never killed Stanismore. He was dead when I reached him.’

She wrested herself free, holding her face averted as though in horror of him.

‘The truth!’ she repeated. Her voice was almost a moan. ‘The truth!’ Then she threw back her head and began to laugh. Her laughter pealed out across the silence of the sunken lawn. The thrushes, hopping about on the shining grass, cocked their bright eyes at her, then flew up, affrighted, as the man at her side angrily flung away and strode across the ground to disappear up the steps into the rose-garden. ‘The truth!’ she cried. ‘Oh, my God!’ Her voice was choked by a paroxysm of weeping. She clenched her fists against her brow, drooping her head, and sank upon the seat with the tears streaming down her face.

So the thrushes saw her when, presently, they fluttered back to the lawn where, in the evening sunshine, the croquet hoops cast tall shadows on the shaven turf.

## CHAPTER XXII

### MR. MANDERTON AND THE ENDOCRINES

ONCE more Mr. Manderton smoked the pipe of dejection on the low and curving sea wall which marked the little horseshoe sweep of Chine Bay. Darkness had fallen, and over his shoulder, as he sat with his body half-turned from the roadway, his eye caught the ruby gleam at the pier-head and the shimmering reflections of the riding lights in the anchorage striating the black and glassy water. The roadway was deserted, for it was late, and Chine Bay kept early hours. A warm, red glow, however, yet marked the curtained windows of the Bay Hotel a hundred yards away, where the road turned up to the town.

Mr. Manderton was dejected because he was inactive — inactivity was ever a torture to his restless spirit — and he was inactive because he could not make up his mind. Since his return, hours before, from Node House, after his interview with Mrs. Barleston in the study, he had had a perfect burst of energy. He had telephoned to several different numbers in London; he had gone through a batch of official letters which the evening post had brought; he had written up his notes. All the time that he was doing these things he was conscious that he was simply creating occupation for his mind, because he shirked the decision he knew stood before him. He wanted to act, but he greatly feared the risk of error.

A car rattling round a curve awoke the echoes of the

road. As its headlights enveloped in their glare the big, black silhouette massed on the wall, there was the jarr of gears, the car slowed down, and stopped. 'It's Inspector Manderton, isn't it?' spoke a voice from the driving-seat. The detective stood up and came forward, shielding his eyes.

It was Dr. Pontifex, the police surgeon, driving himself home from a late call. At their first meeting Mr. Manderton had found this quiet, thoughtful man with the grey beard so much superior to his class that he had at once surmised that the Doctor acted for the police only in a secondary capacity. In fact, the comparative crimelessness of the Island in general and of the Vanner district in particular left Dr. Pontifex plenty of leisure to devote to a small private practice. Mr. Manderton's first impressions were confirmed when he had called at the Doctor's early Victorian villa on the outskirts of Vanner and seen in the little surgery literature such as is seldom found in the house of the country practitioner — the file of the *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift*, bound volumes of 'Brain,' the works of the Mayo Brothers, pamphlets by Alexis Carrel. Not choice, Dr. Pontifex had then confided in him, but a delicate chest had led him to bury himself in the rusticity of the Isle of Wight, and he did what he could to keep himself abreast of the progress of modern medicine.

'I had your telephone message, Inspector,' said Pontifex, loosening the heavy muffler about his throat, 'and I got in touch with the hospital authorities immediately. Stanismore's private secretary in London is making all the funeral arrangements. I just stopped to let you know that the matter's in hand.'

They chatted about the funeral for a few moments while the engine's throbbing resounded over the quiet of the night. Then Pontifex said:

'And how are things going?'

'Too slowly for my liking,' was the glum rejoinder.

'Do you still hold to your theory that he was killed in the grounds?'

'You'll not mention it,' replied the detective, lowering his voice, 'but I've located the very spot.'

The Doctor whistled.

'You have, eh? Well, that sounds like progress to me.' He bent forward and switched off the engine.

'I get no farther,' said Manderton fretfully in the sudden hush that followed. 'What I'm up against is absence of motive. You tell me the "why," Doctor, and I'll undertake to show you the "who."'

Pontifex laughed.

'You've applied to the wrong man for that, Inspector. I don't know any of these folk up at Node; I never set foot inside the place until the other day. You're in the same boat, I take it?'

'I am and that's a fact,' Manderton retorted with emphasis.

'You're asked to diagnose a case without knowing the patient's medical history, so to speak. Well, Inspector, that's a problem which is always cropping up for us doctors. In such cases we have to work along the plane of pure reasoning.' He smiled thoughtfully. 'I must say it would amuse me to diagnose for murder. I wonder how I should set about it in your case. I think I know whom I should study first if I were plunged into this thing haphazard.'

'And who would that be, Doctor?'

'Mr. Vroque,' said Pontifex.

'Vroque?' echoed Manderton. 'Why, what's he got to do with it? You can't call him a criminal type.'

Pontifex held up his hands in horror.

'My dear fellow, Lombroso's theories are utterly exploded to-day. Do you mean to tell me they still fill your heads with that nonsense at the Yard? I shouldn't dream of suggesting that our esteemed Mr. Vroque is a criminal type, whatever that may mean. He's not a criminal type. But he's not normal, either. He's a hyperpituitary.'

'A hyper-which?' demanded the detective blankly.

'A hyperpituitary. And a magnificent specimen at that. I should dearly love to examine him. When I saw him on the beach the other morning I could hardly take my eyes off him.'

'But what is a hyper — whatever you called it?' Manderton broke in.

Resignedly the Doctor let his hands drop upon the bars of the steering-wheel.

'It has always been a mystery to me,' he observed, 'why Governments should not insist on all authorities concerned with the public welfare being instructed in the elements of human mechanics. Inspector, have you ever heard of the ductless glands?'

'I can't say I have,' was the puzzled reply.

'And yet, day by day, you deal in human nature, human nature which, as many of us to-day are coming to believe, is the slave of the ductless glands. Do we wish to eat, to drink, to love, to hate, to kill, it is at the bidding of these organs which pour forth their secretions into the blood-stream and regulate and control the most vital

functions of the mind and body. Each has its specific duty to perform, and none may be tampered with without bringing about the most profound and amazing effect upon the organism, upon the nervous system and all that it directs, upon the very outward characteristics of our bodies. No human being, they say, is normal. But modern science is coming to recognise that the degree of abnormality varies only according to the overaction or underaction of the endocrine or ductless glands.'

Mr. Manderton had listened to this scientific discourse with some impatience.

'What's all this to do with Vrogue?' he broke in at last.

'Vrogue's a hyperpituitary,' said Pontifex. 'That is to say, that he suffers from excessive secretion of the pituitary gland, one of the most important, as it is in its influence almost the strangest, of the eight known endocrines ——'

'But excuse me, Doctor,' Manderton interrupted, 'how do you know all this if you haven't examined him?'

'Damn it, man, by looking at him,' thundered Pontifex. 'I clapped eyes on the fellow only for a minute, but I diagnosed him as surely as though his medical history were written up in my casebook at home. He's a classic example of acromegaly, the disease that makes giants. It's the abnormal functioning of the pituitary gland, let me tell you, that gives us giants and dwarfs just as a faulty thyroid produces imbeciles. Vrogue's getting on for a giant, isn't he? What's his height? Six foot five or six, I'll swear. He's the perfect type of hyperpituitary. Look at that huge face, dropping jaw, and bulbous lips. Look at the spade-like hands, those pillars of thighs.

I've not seen into his mouth, but I'll warrant you'll find there the characteristic separation of the teeth — ay, and a whopping big tongue into the bargain. I'll analyse his character for you if you like. I know nothing of this man, remember; I've never spoken to him and I've seen him only once, but I believe I can give you a pointer or two. Here goes then. He's good natured and a bit lethargic, inclined to melancholy, extremely sensitive, rather aggressive in argument, and given to sudden gusts of violent passion. He's eccentric, as we've seen for ourselves, and there are probably other sides of his nature unknown to me, for, in a case as markedly abnormal as this, the overaction of the pituitary is most likely accompanied by the under-function of the other glands. You note what I say, keep an eye on the fellow, and let me know if I'm right.'

Mr. Manderton had not interrupted again. He was listening to the Doctor with marked interest.

'You ought to read up on endocrinology, Inspector,' Pontifex added. 'That's the science of the ductless glands,' he explained. 'In your job it would repay you.' As Manderton did not speak the Doctor turned his head, and found the detective looking at him with a grave and absorbed air. 'I say, you're not taking all this scientific gas of mine seriously, are you?' said Pontifex in sudden alarm. 'I mean, you're not going off to arrest this chap on the strength of my theories? He's probably a most respectable person really.'

Mr. Manderton started out of his brown study and, laughing, shook his head.

'I don't think you need worry, Doctor,' he told him. Pontifex grinned.

'It would ruin my practice if my dear old ladies thought I were going round spotting murderers,' he remarked. 'Well, I mustn't stop here gossiping all night.' He touched the switch. The self-starter whirred and the engine hummed and roared. 'Good-night to you, Inspector.'

'So long, Doctor.' The car glided away into the night.

Mr. Manderton resumed his seat on the wall. His briar had gone out, but he did not relight it. He sat immobile, sucking his cold pipe, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his shoulders hunched up. So completely sunk was he in his thoughts that he did not hear, presently, the sharp ring of feet on the road or see the cigarette which, a moment later, glowed out of the darkness in front of him.

'Hullo there!' said a cheerful voice. Looking up, the detective saw Gerry Leese before him. The young American wore a straw hat and a dinner coat. 'They told me at the hotel that I should probably find you on the wall,' Gerry explained. 'You wanted to see me, I think?'

Mr. Manderton knocked out his pipe on the heel of his boot and stood up.

'That's right,' he said. 'I wanted to ask you a favour, Mr. Leese. I shall probably have to go to London in a hurry to-morrow, and I'd like to save time by running straight across to Portsmouth in your boat if it can be arranged.'

'Sure,' Gerry answered. 'What time do you want to start?'

'I can't tell you yet. I'll let you know in the morning. In the meantime' — he paused and gave the young man an inquiring look — 'you'd oblige me by not men-



tioning it at Node. I didn't wish to speak about the matter on the telephone. That's why I asked you to come over here after dinner.'

Gerry wrinkled his brow.

'See here,' he said stiffly, 'I'm Sir Harry Fubsy's guest. If he wants to know where I'm going, I don't propose to tell him any lies.'

'There will be no need to — if I go. I don't want you to mention the matter until it's settled, that's all.'

'That's different,' Gerry answered. 'All right; you can count on me. You'd better let me know to-morrow where we start from. I keep the boat here, at Chine Bay.'

'I'll tell you that in the morning,' the detective promised. The sound of footsteps made them both turn their heads. A man was passing along the road. When he saw Inspector Manderton and his companion he stopped.

'You're out late, Inspector?' he remarked jauntily.

'Just having a pipe before I turn in,' said Manderton. He turned to Gerry. 'Do you know Mr. Blake, of *The Daily Radical*?'

It was, in fact, that selfsame Mr. Bryan Blake whose prowess in forcing Cantle's blockade against the Press had so incensed the butler.

Gerry burst out laughing.

'We've met before to-day,' he remarked.

Blake looked rather uncomfortable.

'You mustn't mind my laughing,' Gerry explained, still gurgling, 'but I had only just been telling Miss Dalglish that I couldn't imagine any Englishman ever getting worked up. And then this happened. Gee, I thought he was going to kill you!'

The reporter grinned.

'He was in a wax, wasn't he?' he said.

'Whom are you talking about?' demanded the detective.

'Vrogue,' replied Blake, rather hastily. 'I had to take him a message from my editor, and he didn't like it.'

'Didn't like it!' repeated Gerry. 'Gosh, I've never seen a man in such a towering passion! I don't know what he wasn't going to do to you. No wonder you beat it while the going was good. I'd have done the same myself every time. Long after you'd gone he stood there in the shrubbery, gnashing his teeth and rolling his eyes like an ogre in a fairy tale, repeating to himself over and over again "I'll smash him! I'll crush him!" Gosh, it was funny!'

Mr. Manderton bent a frowning gaze upon the reporter.

'Where did this happen?' he demanded frigidly.

'At Node — this morning,' replied Blake, rather abashed.

'I'll wring that Mallow's neck,' declared the detective grimly. 'He had my strict orders not to admit any of you Press gentlemen to the grounds.'

'He didn't admit me,' Blake said hastily. 'The sea door was open, and as I wanted to see Mr. Vrogue, I thought there would be no harm in my slipping in for a minute.'

'What did you want with Mr. Vrogue?' asked Manderton.

'My editor gave me a card to him, and I wanted to present it.'

'You spoke of a message.'

'That was merely to say that Mr. Willis — that's my editor — hoped that Mr. Vroque would give me all assistance in his power on the story.'

'And Vroque, what did he do?'

'He told me to clear out, that's all.'

'Here,' said Manderton suddenly, turning to Gerry, 'you tell me about this.'

Gerry grinned.

'There's not much to tell really,' he replied. 'It was this way. Miss Dalgleish and I were sitting on the mound in the Wilderness — I don't know whether you noticed it; it's a look-out point over the sea — having a sandwich after bathing, when we heard a sort of furious shouting at our backs. We turned round, and say, there was this guy on the walk leading up from the sea door, absolutely dancing with rage, and screaming at your friend here, "Get out, or I'll maim you for life!" or something like that. Mr. Blake didn't wait, and, oh, boy! I don't blame him. He just passed out with old Vroque bawling after him, "You set foot in these grounds again and I'll break every bone in your body!" I thought I'd try and pacify the old nut, so I clambered down off the mound and ran through the trees. He was standing there on the path, with his proofs blowing all over the place, waving his arms above his head and talking to himself. He didn't take any notice of me for a bit, and then he said that all reporters were a pest and that newspapers were the crying abuse of the century. He said that Mussolini was quite right to stop their mouths.' Gerry began to laugh again. 'Gee, he was wild! I'll say that bird's not courting any publicity, Inspector.' He chuckled and looked at his watch. 'I guess I'd better be getting back.'

Mr. Manderton put his hand on the reporter's sleeve as the latter prepared to accompany Gerry.

'Don't go for a minute, please, Mr. Blake.' He drew Gerry aside and said: 'About that other matter, Mr. Leese, I'll let you know in good time.'

'Right,' declared the American. 'I'll stop by at Snook's lodgings on my way back and warn him to have the boat ready. Good-night.' He nodded to Blake and started off along the road.

When he had gone Manderton turned round to the newspaper man.

'Is this story true? Was Mr. Vroque in such a passion as this Yankee says?'

Blake nodded.

'As a matter of fact, he was. It's not anything to make a song and dance about, though. It's all in the day's work. I warned my editor that Vroque wouldn't see me.'

'Had you tried him before?'

'On Sunday afternoon. Vroque sent my card back. I heard him roaring at the butler through the door.'

'Why should your editor expect Vroque to see you?'

'Because Mr. Willis — that's my chief — and Vroque are intimate friends. They're members of the same club; they see one another frequently.'

The detective made a meditative pause.

'Was Stanismore a friend of your editor's as well?'

Blake laughed.

'Not on your life. Why, it's *The Daily Radical* that's been running this campaign to get rid of old Chesterham as the head of the party. Stanismore strongly disapproved of our attacks, and said so repeatedly, both in public and in private. What made him and the rest of

them so piping mad was that they couldn't deny the truth of our statements. Nothing went on in the party without Willis hearing of it. They knew it, and yet they didn't seem able to do anything to stop it.'

Manderton grunted.

'He must have been on to a damned good leak, this editor of yours,' he commented. 'Nevertheless,' he went on, 'old Ches. was too much for you chaps after all. You didn't get him out, did you?'

'Don't be too sure about that,' said the reporter darkly. 'We don't print all we know, Inspector. Would you be surprised to hear that, a fortnight before this thing happened, old Ches. had decided to retire and had privately promised Stanismore to use his influence to secure him the party leadership?'

'Ah!' was Manderton's sole comment.

'That means, of course,' Blake added, 'that Stanismore would have got it.'

'Much good it will do him now,' said the detective sombrely.

In silence they walked up the road together as far as the Bay Hotel, where Blake, who lodged at the Anchor, parted from the Inspector. The detective's 'Good-night' was gruff and distracted. When the reporter left him, Manderton went to the telephone and rang up Node House. Leese had not returned, so the detective left a message, asking the American to call for him at the Bay Hotel at eight-thirty on the following morning to take him across to Portsmouth in the Sprite.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE YACHTING CAP

INSPECTOR MANDERTON had gone to London, but the atmosphere of doubt which his presence seemed to radiate hung in the wake of his passage like a noxious vapour. A miasma of suspicion rested low over Node House, a cloud of poison gas slowly seeping into the minds of them all.

A strange oppression held them in ban. They met for meals in silence, as if each were privily aware of the sombre eye which watched them from afar, shunning speech for fear of what speech might disclose. All knew that this unfathomable man suspected one of their number; whom none could with certainty affirm. No one of them had he specifically accused, but each of his questions, like a black and swollen rain-cloud, was great with the promise of the storm. The whole household divined that the cloud would burst; none could foretell when and how the storm would break.

The weather had turned to wet, and the whole Island seemed wrapped in a film of melting gauze when, next morning, after an early breakfast, Gerry Leese set out in the Daimler for Chine Bay to keep his appointment with the Inspector. He did not return until the afternoon, for, having sundry commissions to execute for Lady Fubsy in Portsmouth, he lunched there before starting on

the homeward journey. Alix ran into him in the Wilderness as he was walking up from the sea door.

She was dressed for the weather: old Burberry over a golfing suit of tweed, woolen stockings and low-heeled brogues, and a plain little sports hat. She carried a walking-stick, and there was clay on her shoes, as though she had been tramping about the country roads. The rain had ceased, but ugly brown clouds raced across the sky, and the woods were a weeping blur of dripping trees and sopping undergrowth. The damp had brought out a soft, rosy glow in her pale cheeks.

'You're back from Portsmouth then?' she greeted him, stopping on the path. 'Did the Inspector say when he would ——' She broke off abruptly, scrutinising his face. 'Why, Gerry,' she exclaimed, 'what's the matter?' She outlined a smile. 'You're not going to tell me you've been seasick?'

His answering laugh rang rather constrained.

'I'll say not,' he retorted. 'I'm — I'm all right, thank you, Mrs. Barleston.'

'You're nothing of the sort,' she declared. 'You look as if you'd seen a ghost. You're not ill, are you, Gerry?'

'Truly I'm quite all right,' he assured her. 'Just a bit tired, I guess.'

She contemplated him anxiously as he stood before her, a slim, slight figure in his gleaming oilskins. His boyish face, richly tanned and barred by an ample band of freckles, peered out from under his sou'wester with an expression both perplexed and startled. But, more than this, he wore an air of dejection which was entirely foreign to the Gerry Leese she knew. It was his bubbling zest of life, this and his delightful manners, which had

won him all hearts at Node. Now he seemed to have lost his buoyancy; it was as though a light in his face had been extinguished.

'You look ghastly,' she affirmed. 'Something's happened, Gerry.' She put her hand on his sleeve. 'Won't you tell me what it is?'

He turned his eyes from her.

'I don't believe I will,' he replied.

She had expected him to rebut her suggestion, and his acquiescence disquieted her. She glanced at him narrowly.

'It's that man,' she announced suddenly. 'Gerry, Inspector Manderton's told you something.'

His bright brown eyes searched her face dubiously. He shook his head and wistfully looked away.

'It's not that exactly,' he said.

'Why, Gerry,' she broke in, 'it's nothing you have to keep from me, I'm sure.' With a pretty air of confidence she slipped her hand under his arm and swung him round to face the sea door. 'Come,' she said, 'let's walk a little way down the path, and you shall tell me about it.'

They took a few paces in silence, then he said abruptly.

'Can I ask you an indiscreet question?'

She coloured up and looked at him.

'If you ask it, Gerry, I'm sure it won't be indiscreet.' He hesitated.

'You're fond of Ronald Dene?' he ventured.

Her face flamed. She was silent for an instant, then, very slowly, she inclined her head.

'He's a fine fellow,' said the boy. 'And I liked him from the first day we met. If you'd asked me I'd have said he was a man I'd trust anywhere.' He broke off con-



fused. 'Oh,' he went on, rather breathlessly, 'I know I've got no right to criticise. I'm a foreigner in your country, and everything here is so different from what it is back home. But I guess our — our values are about the same. What I mean is that decent English people and decent Americans think pretty much alike on all the things that matter. And I thought I'd got Dene right. Then something happened to-day, something I don't understand.'

'Something—something concerning Ronnie?' she asked in a small, tense voice.

He nodded.

'Yes. And I don't know what to do about it. If I tell him he'll think I suspect him. If I say nothing, I shall feel I'm playing him a low-down trick. It's not that I suspect him, either; it's just that I don't trust my own judgment, I guess. If he were an American I'd put my hand in the fire for him. But I feel such a stranger over here. Your outlook is so different from ours. It's so repressive, so — deliberate. It makes me want to scream sometimes. Look at this man Manderton. Does he never get worked up? Does nothing ever bust inside him? Why, out there in the boat this morning —'

He broke off, frowning in perplexity. Discerning that he was overwrought, she had let him have his say until he was brought up short by this secret thing that oppressed him. But now she interposed.

'Gerry, dear,' she said. 'I know Ronnie very well. Won't you let me advise you?'

He surveyed her gravely as her grey eyes anxiously scanned his face for his answer.

'If — if we're both mistaken in him,' he said at last, 'you won't thank me for telling you.'

'I'll take the risk,' she declared bravely.

'Well,' he began, 'it happened this morning, when we were going over to Portsmouth in the boat. She's pretty wet when the sea's choppy as it was to-day, so I thought I'd take an extra oilskin for the Inspector. One or two cross seas caught her as we turned into the fairway at No Man's Fort, and she shipped so much water that Manderton decided to put on the oily I'd brought for him. As he was wearing a rain-coat and he's a large man, anyway, it was a pretty tight fit. Well, he was struggling into the oily when he stopped and said there was something bulky in the pocket. He tugged it out. It was a yachting cap.' He paused and looked at her. 'It was Stanismore's cap!' he added.

'Go on,' she bade him.

'Directly I saw it I knew whose it was,' Gerry resumed, 'and so did Manderton. The leather peak had been split in two and the badge torn away, and there was a great smear of blood on the white cover. And when we turned it over, there inside were his initials in gold letters: "B. S."'

'What did Manderton say?' she asked breathlessly.

Gerry wagged his head.

'That bird knocks the Sphinx for a goal every time,' he remarked. 'He just grunted and stowed the cap away in that brown bag of his. Then he asked me whose oily I'd borrowed for him. I told him I didn't know; I'd just grabbed one at random — there are half a dozen hanging up in that little room off the hall, you know.'

As they talked they had unwittingly come to a full stop on the path. Absently she bored the soft soil with her cane

'Was — was that the truth?' she said softly. She did not look up.

'No. I knew that Manderton was a big man, so I chose the largest.'

The hand that grasped the walking-stick was suddenly still. In the pause that followed they could hear the rain-drops pattering down from the branches.

'Ronnie's?' She spoke the name almost under her breath.

'Yes.'

Again a silence, and once more she fell to punching out a pattern in the path.

'Why — why didn't you speak — the truth?' she asked almost shyly.

The boy seemed to reflect before replying.

'I couldn't, somehow. Ronnie's been awfully decent to me. Apart from that, I felt sure there must be some explanation, something I didn't know.'

Always she kept her eyes on the ground.

'Manderton,' she said at last, 'he's bound to find out, Gerry.'

'Maybe he will, and try and rattle Ronnie with his find. That's the police game all over. But Ronnie's got to have a square deal, hasn't he? I feel he ought to be warned so's to have his explanation ready, don't you? For he has an explanation, of course; he must have an explanation, mustn't he, Mrs. Barleston?'

Her chilly reticence was beginning to mystify him, and he flung his questions broadcast with growing anxiety in his voice.

'You do agree with me, don't you?' he asked shyly.

And then, at length, she raised her head. He was

bewildered by her pallor, by the tragedy of her eyes. Her gaze drifted away from him, resting wistfully upon the trees all shining in the wet, upon the blurred mass of Node Tower, rising, grey and forlorn, against the mournful sky, from the foot of the path.

‘Why didn’t God give us women you men’s gift of trust?’ she murmured brokenly. ‘At least, the trust you bear each other.’ She let her eyes linger probingly upon the boy’s wondering face. ‘I love you for your great big heart, Gerry dear,’ she declared impulsively. ‘Will you let *me* tell Ronnie what you say?’

‘Why,’ he replied, flushing up, ‘you know you’d do it far better than I should.’

Without warning she flung her arms about his neck and kissed him, then fled away into the gathering mists towards the house. Gerry stared gravely after her. His face was damp where her cheek had pressed his.

Straightway she sought out Ronnie. He was at his table writing when, in answer to his sharp ‘Come in,’ she stood framed in the doorway of his bedroom.

On seeing who it was, he sprang up from his chair and remained facing her silently.

‘Gerry’s back,’ she told him. ‘He says that Inspector Manderton has found ——’

On the instant his face grew cautious. Before she could finish her sentence he walked swiftly to the door and peered out into the corridor. When he came back into the room he shut the door behind him.

‘Don’t do that,’ she protested.

‘We can discuss this matter only behind closed doors,’ he rejoined firmly. ‘You needn’t be afraid that Frankie

will disturb us. Cantle and I put him to bed an hour ago.'

She furrowed her brow.

'I thought he had been drinking when he came in to lunch.'

'He was much worse afterwards. Now he's in Ned Fubsy's room with the door locked. We gave him a bromide to keep him quiet.' His manner was brisk and hard. 'What were you saying about Manderton?'

'He's found Mr. Stanismore's yachting cap in the pocket of your oilskin.'

Leaning up against the bed-post, he contemplated her gravely. Her announcement left him unmoved

'Well?' was his only comment.

'What does it mean?' she asked nervously.

'I can't tell you.'

'But you must have some explanation. Gerry told me because he thought you should be warned. The Inspector doesn't know as yet that it's your coat. And Gerry didn't give you away.'

'That was thoughtful of Gerry.'

She gave a little gasp of indignation.

'Is that all you have to say? Don't you realise your danger — when Inspector Manderton identifies the coat? What are you going to say when he confronts you with it?'

'I don't know,' he replied.

'Oh, don't fence with me,' she cried wearily, her voice trembling. 'I have my reasons for asking.'

He glanced at her warily.

'What reasons?'

'You think that Frankie killed Basil Stanismore,' she

said. 'Are you sure of that?' She was watching his face, and she saw it alter.

'Why do you ask me that?' he demanded quickly.

'Because,' she cried desperately, 'I want to give you every chance to clear yourself against the weight of evidence that is piling up against you. Do you think that I care what you say to Manderton or anyone else as long as I know the truth? Have I lied to you? You urged me to reveal a secret which was not mine to tell; I couldn't speak, but at least I never lied to you, Ronnie. But what chance do you give me? You leave me to make what I will of the little dribblets of truth that I find out piecemeal, and when I give you the opportunity of being frank with me, you fence with me and parry with me as though I were not to be trusted.'

'Don't misjudge me, Alix,' he began, in a warmly pleading voice.

She laughed bitterly.

'I wish I might. You are judged by facts, not surmise, Ronnie.'

'Facts?' he broke in sharply. 'What facts?'

'Facts like the finding of this cap in your pocket, facts that lead me back step by step to things that have happened, to which I paid no heed at the time, but which, now that you've left me to struggle in the dark, rise up and stifle me. When Gerry told me this just now my mind went back to something Cantle said this afternoon. I was going out for a walk, and I thought I'd take Uncle Harry's blackthorn, the one that you often use down here. Cantle told me it was missing, said he hadn't seen anything of it for days.'

'That's true.' Dene was staring in front of him. 'I haven't set eyes on it for a week.'

If she heard his muttered interjection, she passed it over.

'And then I thought of your coming to my room that night. Why that night of all nights, unless it were to bind me to silence?'

'Good God, Alix!' he exclaimed, 'you don't think that of me?'

'I only know,' she went on in a weary, listless voice, 'that at a quarter-past eleven that night Basil Stanismore was alive, and that at half-past eleven you came to my room. I know the time because the clock struck as you knocked. I was the only person to know that Mr. Stanismore was at Node, or, at least, you thought so. Don't you realise that you made it impossible for me, without compromising myself, to contest any account you chose to give of your movements that night?' She wrung her hands. 'Oh, why do you leave me to think such things of you?'

'Listen!' he said. 'You do wrong to doubt me. I did not kill this man.'

'Then who did, in God's name?'

'I have my suspicions, but until they are certainty I can't speak.' He looked at her very tenderly. 'Alix, won't you trust me? It won't be much longer now.'

'Open the door and see if anyone's about,' she said listlessly. 'I must go and change my dress.'

He glanced outside. The corridor was deserted. He signed to her, and with no further speech between them she went to her room, leaving him plunged in melancholy thought.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### MR. MANDERTON RETURNS

Not until next day did Inspector Manderton come back. A telephone message from Scotland Yard for Gerry at breakfast-time, asking whether the motor-boat could meet the Inspector's train at Portsmouth at eleven o'clock that morning, was the first notification of the detective's impending return. It was not stated whether Mr. Manderton would land at Chine Bay or come straight across to Node; but soon after eleven, Gerry having started out an hour before, the different members of the house-party, one by one, as if drawn by an unseen thread, began to drift in to the morning-room.

A flawless summer day had tripped in on the heels of the rain, a fiery sun blazing down out of a deep blue sky upon a sea like painted glass. In the glowing gardens, drowsy in the morning heat, the warm, damp flower-beds exhaled their subtle fragrance, and the scented air was burdened with the brisk chatter of the birds and a constant undertone of humming insect sounds.

But within the house the atmosphere was oppressive. The long drawn-out suspense was sapping the fortitude of them all. For thirty-six hours, under the ceaseless surveillance of shabby, silent men, gliding like shadows about the house, they had waited in ignorance; and now that Inspector Manderton's reappearance seemed to foretell the end of their ordeal, the nervous tension became



almost unbearable. For suspense is a two-edged sword; fear of its protraction and terror of the unknown are equally welded together in its blade.

Frankie Barleston had not appeared that morning, and Alix was the last to join the party. She found Sir Harry, that gentlest of men, pacing the carpet like a caged beast, and Lady Fubsy, like an agitated hen, fluttering about him. Freckles kept darting to and from the gardens to watch for the arrival of Gerry and the Inspector, while Ronnie stood on the verandah, his fingers beating a restless tattoo on the balustrade. Vroque had retired behind *The Times*, his huge frame almost filling the Chesterfield.

Alix did not sit down. She leaned against the end of the settee, fingering a string of white crystal beads about her neck and listening to the different sounds that broke the ominous hush — the clamour of the thrushes among the roses; the droning of a vagrant bee; the creaking of Sir Harry's shoes as he tramped the room; the rustle of Vroque's newspaper.

Her heart was racing; her hands felt cold as ice. She knew that her courage was slowly oozing away, and to give herself countenance, to hold frayed nerves in check, she began to count the beads as her fingers slipped over the keen, hard facets of the crystals.

Flying footsteps on the verandah, and a vision of Freckles, cheeks heated, short skirt flying, long bare legs.

'They're coming up the walk from the sea door!'

As from afar off Alix heard the fretful voice of Sir Harry:

'You leave me to deal with him, Ethel.'

She opened her eyes. Ronnie was standing beside her. His face seemed strangely magnified.

‘Steady.’ A voice sounded, like an echo, in her ear. She told herself it must be Ronnie; queer she had not heard him speak. Her arm was tightly gripped. Everything in the room seemed to slide back into position and remain like that. The dark eyes that gazed so solicitously into hers were now their normal size. She realised she had all but fainted, and made a gallant show of a smile in token that she was herself again. . . .

Heavy footfalls reverberated on the parquet of the adjoining drawing-room, then Cattle’s terrified face, like a sheep’s in the grasp of the slaughterer, bobbed in the doorway. The next moment the butler was shouldered aside, and Inspector Manderton loomed large on the threshold.

He had exchanged his holiday attire for a dark reefer suit, and the sober dress lent him a more formal air. He was frowning and his jaw jutted, and from under his heavy eyebrows his eyes, lit by flames of determination, seemed to flash forth a persistent, angry challenge. His two acolytes accompanied him, and at a gesture ranged themselves at his back, stiff as dummies in their clumsy suits of serge, twisting their hats in their large, red hands. One carried the Inspector’s bag, which he set down on the floor.

In an oppressive silence Mr. Manderton came forward and, with a gesture of stark defiance, slammed, with a hollow sound, his hard felt hat down upon the centre table. Then he let his gaze slowly circle the room until it rested upon Alix Barleston’s pale and agitated face.

You must picture them as they were assembled there, eyeing that menacing figure with uneasy glances — Gerry and Freckles, visibly thrilled, right and left of the door;

Lady Fubsy, in her black-and-white flowered silk, enthroned in the armchair next to Freckles; then Vrogue, with his totem face, on the Chesterfield, at his back the French windows open on the shady verandah and the gay gardens beyond; Alix, white and grave, in cool mauve linen frock, standing near by; and, next to her, Ronnie, with features sternly set. Sir Harry was on his feet in the centre of the room, nervously fingering his beard.

With slow deliberation Mr. Manderton walked up to Alix and halted in front of her. His deep voice shattered the silence.

'Mrs. Barleston,' he said ominously, 'what were you doing in Node Tower on the night of the murder?'

A thrill of excitement rustled round the circle. But this man dominated them all, and none dared interrupt. Alix gave the detective a glance of speechless alarm.

'Do you deny that you were there?' he asked, and paused for her reply.

Her lips moved, but no sound came forth from them.

'It's a dangerous game trying to bamboozle me,' he told her threateningly. 'So you thought you'd go to the tower room, did you, and tidy up all traces of your visit? You're a very clever lady, ma'am, but not quite clever enough to hoodwink me. There were one or two little things you overlooked.'

With a violent gesture he thrust out his closed hand and opened the fingers almost in her face. Two charred and crushed cigarette stubs reclined in his palm. He pointed from one to the other with his finger.

'Will you compare these cigarettes? They're both Gold Flake, the brand you smoke. One I picked up out of the grate in the tower room; the other you discarded

yesterday in Sir Harry Fubsy's study. Look at them, please. On each you will find a little smear of red. D'you know what that is? I'll tell you. It's rouge, Mrs. Barleston — lipstick, I think you call it. Only two of you have access to this room — Vance, the maid, and yourself. Are you going to tell me that this elderly servant of yours rouges her lips and smokes?' He paused and glared fiercely at her. 'Well, what have you got to say about it?'

Still she did not speak. Her face was waxen in its pallor, and the shining beads that rested on her bosom rose and fell quickly. With a menacing air he drew nearer to her, his hot eyes fixed on hers.

'The candlesticks wanted cleaning, didn't they?' he barked viciously. 'Oh, your story was very glib, ma'am. You didn't get rid of the burnt out candle-end, I suppose, and scrape off the fresh wax that had dripped down on the candlestick you had used? If you'd looked at the tablecloth a little closer you'd have seen it was stained with wax — fresh wax, Mrs. Barleston. It told me, anyway, that the room had been used recently. And used at night. Now, are you going to tell me why you went to the tower, and why you were so anxious that I should not find out about your visit?'

She stood like an alabaster statue and said never a word. He put an arm on his hip and nodded grimly.

'Then I'll tell you. You went to meet Basil Stanismore. And had your lover handy, just to see fair play.'

At that sneer, as he watched her, he perceived a change in her face at last. The colour rushed into her cheeks and her eyes grew angry. . . . She was trembling from head to foot.

'It's not true,' she cried.

Sir Harry Fubsy's voice cut in, protesting, upon the detective's rejoinder.

'Inspector,' he said sharply, 'you compel me to protect Mrs. Barleston. What right have you to speak to her in this fashion?'

Mr. Manderton turned on him savagely.

'What right?' he thundered. 'I'll let the lot of you know what right quick enough. From the outset this lady has obstructed the investigation to shield her lover. Evidence suppressed right and left, right and left I'm lied to. What right indeed? Nobody's going to make a monkey of me and get away with it, I can tell you straight. And now, sir, I'll ask you to have the goodness not to interrupt me again.' With sudden, deadly calm he turned back to Alix.

'You deny it, eh? Mr. Stanismore was not in the tower room shortly before he was murdered?' He thrust his face into hers. 'You dare to tell me this when his footprints are on the path and on the doorstep of the room; when I've got here in my pocket the cigar he threw away, identical with the cigars which were in the case in his pocket? You be careful before you deny anything I say to you.'

'I don't know — whom you mean — by my lover,' she gasped out.

He laughed shortly.

'Oh, yes, you do, Mrs. Barleston. And you know that he was present throughout your interview with Stanismore, concealed behind the screen. That was why you tried to hush up your sister's story. It was awkward to find that Captain Dene had been seen coming back from the tower ——'

‘That at least is not true,’ Ronnie broke in sternly. ‘I’ve never been in the tower room in my life.’

Mr. Manderton gave him a bleak look.

‘Then perhaps Mrs. Barleston will tell us who it was?’ he suggested icily.

But once more she had wrapped herself in her pitiful silence.

‘Silence won’t help you,’ persisted the detective. ‘The footprints are there in the dust behind the screen. If I’d lighted on you a few minutes later the other morning you’d have had them brushed away, I know that.’ He glanced towards Dene. ‘If you were not coming back from the tower, perhaps you’ll inform me what you were doing in the gardens on Friday night?’ he suggested.

‘I told you before,’ Dene rejoined hastily. ‘I just went out to get a mouthful of air.’

‘That was at midnight, I think you said — after I had refreshed your memory?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then where were you at twenty minutes to twelve?’

Manderton saw — they all saw — the prompt alarm that showed in Dene’s eyes and noted the fatal pause before his reply.

‘In my bedroom, I suppose,’ he answered at length.

The detective bent his brows at him.

‘I suggest to you,’ he said, very slowly and distinctly, ‘that you were present at the interview between Mrs. Barleston and Mr. Stanismore in the tower room, and that at the end of it you followed this man to one of the paths in the Wilderness and killed him in an altercation on the subject of Mrs. Barleston.’

There was a gasping cry from Alix. Ronnie laid a restraining hand on her arm.

'That's perfectly absurd,' he declared firmly. 'I didn't kill Stanismore, nor had I anything to do with his death. Why, I didn't even know the man.'

'Mrs. Barleston knew him,' the detective retorted significantly.

'Are you suggesting that Mrs. Barleston persuaded me to kill Stanismore?' demanded the young man hotly.

'Mrs. Barleston has only herself to blame for any interpretation I put upon her actions,' was the prompt reply. 'You deny the charge, then?'

'Of course I do; it's preposterous.'

Mr. Manderton snapped his fingers at Mallow, who had his bag in charge. The plain-clothes man stooped to it and extracted a stained and battered yachting cap, which he handed to the Inspector. The detective held it aloft.

'Have you seen this before, Captain Dene?' he asked quietly.

'Yes, I have,' was the resolute answer.

Mr. Manderton stared at the speaker, surprise, mingled with suspicion, in his whole attitude.

'Is that so?' he murmured in a puzzled voice. 'Then you can tell us what it was doing in the pocket of your oilskin?'

Dene hesitated. The Inspector, watching him keenly, followed the young man's gaze as it travelled from Alix, tragically aloof, at his side to Vroque, who leaned back against the Chesterfield, his newspaper on his knee, with his grotesque features crumpled into an expression of close attention.

'You'd better ask Mr. Vroque,' Dene replied at last. Mr. Vroque shot abruptly into an erect position.

'God bless my soul!' he cackled in his harsh voice, 'I know nothing about it. I never saw the thing before in my life.'

'Would you mind explaining that remark, Captain Dene?' the Inspector's deep tones interrupted.

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

'I have nothing more to say,' he returned.

The detective raised a hand to silence Vroque, who was fuming and throwing himself about on the settee.

'Come, come, Captain Dene,' he remarked severely, 'this sort of thing will do you no good. I think you'd better leave Mr. Vroque out of it and try to realise your own position. I may as well tell you that I know the precise hour at which the murder was committed. Stanismore's wrist watch has been picked up near the scene of the crime. The glass was smashed and the strap broken, apparently by the blow that killed him. But the hands are intact; and they point to 11.39 — twenty-one minutes to midnight. If you are innocent, why did you pretend to me that you never left your bedroom on Friday night? I don't have to remind you that you would have had sufficient time to dispose of the body and return to the house by midnight, at which hour you were seen by Miss Dalglish.'

'I tell you again,' said Dene tensely, 'I did not kill Stanismore.'

Mr. Manderton set his mouth in a firm line.

'Very good, sir. You leave me no option. I'm going to arrest you on a warrant I hold for the wilful murder of Basil Stanismore. You are free to make a statement,



but I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you at your trial.' He snapped his fingers behind him. 'All right, Mallow.'

His assistant shuffled forward, clutching his battered straw hat under one arm. With his free hand he fumbled at something that clinked in his jacket pocket. He went up to Dene and pointed, with a significant gesture, at the young man's wrists.

Then an anguished voice cried: 'Stop!'

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE SHOT

ALIX BARLESTON stepped between Dene and the plain-clothes man. Mallow hesitated, blinking at her dubiously out of his ferret face. A pair of shining handcuffs dangled from his fingers.

‘Wait!’ she said. She turned to Manderton. ‘Before you do anything you must listen to me.’

Brusquely the detective signed to his man to stand aside.

‘Well?’ he exclaimed impatiently. His tone was bluntly hostile.

Dene sprang forward.

‘Alix!’ he cried warningly.

The Inspector rounded on him as though he were going to leap at his throat.

‘That’ll do!’ he snapped. ‘If Mrs. Barleston has anything to tell us, she can say it without any prompting from you.’ With extreme deliberation he shifted his baleful glare to the woman’s ghastly face. ‘Well?’ he barked. ‘I’m waiting. What is it?’

She seemed to take a deep breath.

‘I can tell you what Captain Dene would never have told you himself,’ she said in a low voice. ‘If he deceived you, it was through loyalty to me. From half-past eleven until after midnight on Friday Captain Dene was with me in my bedroom. He was leaving my room when my sister saw him in the corridor. I — I didn’t want my sis-

ter's story to come out because I feared the consequences to Captain Dene. I knew that he wouldn't be able to say where he'd been. If I'd known that the murder took place after half-past eleven I should have spoken before. At thirty-nine minutes past eleven, the hour at which you say Mr. Stanismore was killed, Captain Dene was with me, and had been for nearly ten minutes.'

'Ah!' The detective's bass shattered the glacial hush upon which her halting confession had fallen. 'And did you and Captain Dene come back from the tower together?'

She looked up in wild alarm.

'No, no!' she cried. 'Captain Dene was never in the tower.'

'Then who was it?'

She glanced desperately about her.

'Come on, ma'am,' said Manderton impatiently. 'I know there was someone there. The marks are behind the screen to prove it. Who was it?'

'It was my husband,' she whispered.

'Ah!' Mr. Manderton's exclamation was like a sigh of satisfaction. 'And what became of the Major while you and Captain Dene were together?'

Eyes haggard, lips trembling, with hands that fluttered in supplication, she paused, while her gaze roved round the circle of awestruck faces as though she sought there succour in her distress.

'You heard my question, Mrs. Barleston? What was the Major doing all this time?' The detective's tone was peremptory.

She swallowed, and said with an effort:

'He — he was in his room.'

'In your bedroom — with you and Captain Dene?' asked the detective incredulously, with deadly emphasis on every word — asked and waited ominously.

She began to stammer.

'I don't mean that — I — he ——'

Mr. Manderton bounded forward and caught her by the wrist.

'No,' he said tensely. 'This time we'll stick to the truth, Mrs. Barlestone. If I can't get it from you, then, by God! I'll get it from your husband!'

His glance swooped round the room.

'Where's the Major?' he demanded explosively.

'He — he wasn't well last night,' Sir Harry put in timorously. 'He's not down yet.'

The Inspector made a sign to Smith.

'Find Major Barlestone,' he ordered, 'and bring him to me here immediately.'

'Wait!' said Alix suddenly. Mr. Manderton paused, expectant. Imploringly she lifted her dark eyes to the detective's angry face. 'He will tell you what I cannot,' she went on, 'if you'll let me reason with him. Only let me speak to him first, and I believe I can promise you that you shall hear the truth.'

Mr. Manderton snorted.

'D'you take me for a fool?' he demanded indignantly. 'I've had all the cooked-up stories I want, ma'am. I'm going to hear the truth all right, I can promise you that. But I'll get it out of your husband for myself. Go along, Smith.'

But now Dene intervened.

'One moment, Inspector,' he said, and drew him apart. 'Before you do anything further, let me speak to you

alone.' Mr. Manderton looked at him curiously, then turned and opened the door. 'Wait!' he told Smith, and led Dene into the empty drawing-room.

'Don't you realise,' said Dene, as soon as the door had closed behind them — 'don't you realise that Major Barleston holds the key to the mystery? What's the use of bullying Mrs. Barleston? You can't use her evidence against her husband: I needn't tell you that. If you antagonise her, she's only got to advise Major Barleston to sit tight and deny everything, and then where will you be? Let her go and talk to him, Inspector. You know as well as I do that anything she's done or said has been to cover him. If anybody can make him speak, it's she, not you.'

Mr. Manderton seemed to ponder this advice, for he was silent for a moment. Then, with a rapid gesture, he opened the door.

'Mrs. Barleston!' he called into the room. She came out to him at once, and stood expectant before him, her eyes cast down. 'I'll give you one more chance,' he said dourly. 'You can go and talk to your husband now, but it'll be best for the pair of you if you can make him understand that the jig's up. Don't be too long about it. I'll wait for you both here.'

She bowed her head, and they heard the light tap of her heels on the gleaming parquet as she vanished into the hall. Then Mr. Manderton, putting his hand behind him, gently closed the door and faced Dene. To the latter's astonishment the detective's eyes, which had so lately smouldered with wrath, now beamed amiably upon him.

'No ill-feeling, sir, I hope?' observed the Inspector,

with a smile. 'I had to frighten the pair of you, or I'd never have got at the truth.'

'Then I'm not under arrest?' said Dene, with a puzzled air.

Mr. Manderton stooped to his ear.

'Pure bluff,' he whispered. 'I've got a warrant,' he added in his natural voice, 'but not for you.' His eyes narrowed. 'Now that we're alone for a minute,' he added confidentially, 'suppose you tell me just what you meant by that remark of yours about Mr. Vrogue.'

A little silence fell between them, and they exchanged a long and significant glance. Then Dene said:

'Vrogue planted that cap on Barlestone ——'

'Ah!' remarked the detective. 'Now that's very interesting.'

'... day before yesterday, it was. I was in my room with the door open when in the mirror I had a glimpse of Vrogue, who has the room opposite mine, sidling along the corridor with something bulging under his coat. I watched him creep into Mrs. Barlestone's bedroom. I followed him to the door, and saw him at the cupboard in the dressing-room. I waited until he'd gone downstairs, and then I investigated. In the cupboard, stuffed away behind an old kit-bag, was this cap.'

'And what did you do then?'

Dene laughed.

'Nothing. I left it there. I wanted to see what would happen.'

Mr. Manderton chuckled softly.

'Very good, sir. And after that?'

'The next thing I knew was that you had discovered it in the pocket of my oilskin.'

The detective nodded sagely.

'The Major's hand, of course,' he commented. He threw Dene a questioning look. 'While we're waiting for Major Barleston,' he added, 'I think I'll have a word with Mr. Vroque about this.' As he spoke he opened the door. 'Mr. Vroque!' he called. 'Hullo!' he exclaimed, peering about the room, 'what's become of Mr. Vroque?'

Sir Harry, who was talking in undertones with Lady Fussy, looked up and glanced round.

'He was here a moment ago,' he said, coming forward. 'He may have stepped into the gardens for a minute.' He passed through the French windows, and they heard him on the verandah calling for Vroque. With beckoning finger Mr. Manderton summoned Mallow and gave him a whispered order. The plain-clothes man nodded his grizzled head understandingly and shambled off at a rapid trot. After that the telephone was heard ringing furiously in the hall, and presently Cantle came and fetched the Inspector away. Manderton was gone for a good ten minutes. He returned fuming.

'That's the Yard for you!' he exclaimed to Dene. 'Take me off the job and keep me jawing on the telephone about some tuppenny-ha'penny case a uniform constable could handle.' He grunted indignantly. 'Where's Mr. Vroque?' he asked. He poked his head in at the morning-room door. 'Isn't Mr. Vroque here yet?' he demanded irritably.

'He's not in the gardens,' replied Sir Harry, 'and I had a look in the library. He's not there, either.'

'Well, where is he?' the Inspector snapped. 'He must be somewhere around.'

'He may have gone up to his bedroom and forgotten

all about us,' Lady Fubsy put in. 'You know how frightfully absent-minded he is, Harry.'

'That's true,' her husband agreed. 'I'll go and see.'

He went away through the drawing-room. Mr. Manderton began to fidget. In a minute the old gentleman came back.

'He's not in his room,' he announced, 'or in the study or anywhere. I think he must have gone down to the Wilderness or the beach.'

'Smith!' The plain-clothes man jumped to the Inspector's sharp summons. 'Have a look in the grounds. You'll find Mallow on the sea door. Ask him if he's seen anything of the gentleman. Don't waste time. If the party's nowhere about, come back here at once. At the double. Understand?'

'Sir!' Smith touched his hat and darted away. Dene was looking curiously at the detective, who was frowning heavily at his boots.

'Inspector,' said the young man at length, 'have you found the weapon with which the murder was committed?'

Mr. Manderton gave him a sour stare.

'Not yet,' he answered morosely.

'Then,' Dene went on, 'when Mr. Vrogue comes, why don't you ask him what's become of Sir Harry's black-thorn stick?'

On the instant the detective was all attention.

'What's that?' he questioned sharply.

'It's missing,' Dene explained. 'I usually carry it when I'm down here. But last Thursday — that's to say, the day before the murder — I couldn't find it when I went to look for it in the hall stand. Later in the day I saw Mr. Vrogue with it, and it's not been seen since.'



'Tchah!' cried the detective. 'Why didn't you mention this to me before?'

'It never occurred to me to do so. I don't suppose I'd have given the matter another thought, but that yesterday Cattle informed Mrs. Barleston that the stick had disappeared. When Mrs. Barleston told me about it, I remembered the incident at once. Coming on top of the affair of the cap ——' He paused, and added thoughtfully: 'It's a regular cudgel, a murderous-looking ——'

He broke off as Smith panted in on them.

'He ain't in the grounds, sir,' he announced breathlessly, 'and Mallow ain't set eyes on him, neither.'

'Damnation!' roared Mr. Manderton, with such unexpected and explosive ferocity that his aide reeled backwards. 'What the devil is all this monkey business? He's got to be found, I tell you.' He dashed into the morning-room. 'What's the meaning of this, sir?' he shouted at Sir Harry. 'Where's Mr. Vroque got to? Smith,' he trumpeted over his shoulder, 'warn that uniform man on the drive that no one's to leave the house without my orders, and tell Mallow the same.' Suddenly his eye fell upon the enthralled, flushed, and excited face of Gerry Leese. 'Lord!' he exclaimed, smiting his brow, 'the motor-boat! I'd clean forgotten her. What's to prevent the fellow from shinning over the wall and getting down to the dinghy? You left it on the beach, didn't you? Smith!' he roared. But the plain-clothes man had rushed off on his errand.

'Don't worry,' said Gerry, with his easy drawl. 'Snook's gone off to his lunch, and won't be back till two. Without Snook that motor-boat's as much use as a fan to an eskimo to anyone in this house, barring me and

Miss Dalglish, who's one great little navigator. Vroque can't even start her, chief, let alone navigate her.'

'Humph!' grunted Manderton. 'There's something in that. But what the devil's become of the fellow, that's what I want to know?'

As if in answer to his question a loud report resounded from the gardens outside. It was followed by a woman's piercing scream.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE NAME THAT REMAINED UNSPOKEN

ALIX BARLESTON went to find her husband, with no more definite plan in her mind than to make him realise that the hand was played out. It would not be easy, she knew, to persuade him to a confession; for her admission about Ronnie, which she had no intention of concealing, would be fuel on the flame of his jealousy, and she greatly feared his stubborn malevolence. But now that she knew Ronnie to be innocent, now that that crushing burden of suspicion had been lifted from her heart, she was determined that Frankie should speak: in no other way could Ronnie be wholly exculpated; and if Frankie proved obstinate, then she was resolved to tell all she knew. After all, she told herself, as she hurried through the house, if Frankie must face his trial it would be as the avenger of his honour: that motive stood out more clearly than any question of his debts. Surely, when the true facts were known, he would find clemency from his judges. . . .

The door of Ned Fubsy's room, where Frankie had spent the night, stood wide. The room was empty. Her husband's gay pyjamas trailed on the floor; his clothes were gone. She made her way rapidly along the corridor to peep into their bedroom; it was empty, too. Thereupon she retraced her steps to the hall, and sought him in the library, the study, the dining-room. He was nowhere to be seen.

Panic, sickening like a wave of nausea, swept over her as she stampeded into the gardens. What if Frankie had fled? She had never reckoned with this eventuality. Supposing his nerve, always shaken after his drinking bouts, had failed him? Then only she, a discredited witness, remained to help Ronnie in his plight. . . .

Suddenly she remembered Frankie's favourite haunt, the croquet-ground. She would look there. The prolongation of the terrace brought her to the end of the long rose-garden, through which she gained the flight of steps leading down to the lawn. The croquet-lawn was the quietest corner of the park, sunk in the angle of the outer wall and the enclosed kitchen-garden, remote from the house and sequestered within its dark, broad hedge of box. On two sides the hedge was laid directly against these walls, while on the third side, at the foot of the ground, it was set back against the iron railings of the Wilderness.

As she descended the steep, cindered stairs from the rose-garden, Alix caught sight of Frankie on the lawn below, his head and shoulders visible above the hedge. He was standing motionless, a cigarette between his lips, turned towards the Wilderness, seemingly lost in thought, his fingers picking nervously at his moustache. As she stepped on to the green sward through the arch of box, she called him by name, but he did not appear to hear her. Nor even when she was at his side did he look up.

'I've been hunting for you everywhere,' she panted. 'Why aren't you in the morning-room with the rest of us? Listen, Frankie. Inspector Manderton has ——'

He checked her with his hand.

'I know,' he told her listlessly. 'I was outside on the verandah. I heard every word ——'

'Then you heard — what I said, too?'

He nodded sombrely, his eyes on the trim hedge in front of him, a dozen paces away, with the green disorder of the Wilderness rising beyond and above it.

'Frankie,' she declared earnestly, 'no one but you can clear Ronnie now. The Inspector will never accept my word for it unless you confess ——'

'How do I know that either you or Dene are telling the truth?' he answered morosely.

A warm flush coloured her pale cheeks.

'Would I invent such a story if it weren't true? Do you think I want to furnish you with grounds for divorce? You know I'd have left you years ago but that I didn't want to put this shame on Sandy. If it means anything to you still,' she added rather shyly, 'I want to say that Ronnie is not, has never been, my lover. It was a mad freak of his to come to my room that night to have it out with me because I'd been avoiding him. I was overwrought, upset, by what Basil Stanismore had said to me, and I let Ronnie kiss me. But it went no farther than that. I've played the game by you, Frankie, and now you've got to play the game by me.'

'Oh, what do you and I and Dene matter now?' he broke in harshly. 'The only thing that counts is that Dene is cleared.'

She looked up almost joyfully.

'Oh, Frankie!' she exclaimed, 'then you do believe me?'

There was rancour in his nod.

'I know you wouldn't let Sandy down,' he retorted with bitter emphasis.

She took his hand in hers.

'Oh, my dear,' she said warmly, 'I'll let Ronnie go. You and I will face this thing out together. Inspector Manderton's waiting for you. You'll go to him and tell him the truth, won't you?'

He extricated his hands from her clasp, staring in front of him like one bemused.

'He won't believe the truth,' he affirmed at last.

'But he must if you admit it,' she cried. 'If Ronnie is innocent, as you and I know he is, who else but you can have killed this man?'

'That,' was the grave reply, 'is what I'm wondering myself.'

She drew back in sudden consternation.

'It was true, then,' she questioned, her eyes uneasily searching his face, 'what you told me yesterday, that you did not kill Stanismore, that he was dead when you reached him?'

'Yes,' he answered, his eyes steadfastly averted.

'Then why did you deceive me?' she demanded, with a sob swelling into her voice.

'You put this admission into my mouth' — there was a sort of furious shrillness about the rejoinder. 'I wanted to tell you that night, but I hadn't the pluck. I knew I'd failed you, but your outburst scared me, and I didn't know what you'd do if I undeceived you.' He ceased speaking, while his brooding gaze wandered out over the waving fronds of the Wilderness. His face grew sullen. 'You were right, Alix,' he told her presently. 'I'm no good. I've always let you down. You may as well know the truth. I hadn't even the guts to kill the dirty tyke. I came down here intending to catch you two together. Stanismore was terrified of scandal, and I meant to

frighten him into handing back my paper. I know it was blackmail, but somehow it didn't seem to me so bad with a swine like Stanismore — not as I looked at it then. I waited about the Wilderness until you appeared. I saw you turn up to the tower, and that told me you expected Stanismore. While you were away opening the sea door I slipped into the tower and hid behind the screen. I intended to let Stanismore get going and then burst out on him; but I was interested in your talk, anxious to find out whether — well, whether you'd fall in with Stanismore's offer. I kept putting off the moment to spring my surprise, and then, when you turned that beast down so hard, I — well, I just felt I couldn't do it. The way you stood up for me sort of bowled me over. I — I didn't know you could still believe in me. God! you made me feel ashamed.' His voice trailed off into a mournful silence.

'I'm a useless creature,' he resumed after a pause — 'useless to you and the boy, useless to myself. I don't know why I let him go; couldn't make up my mind to tackle him, I suppose. Anyway, he went out of the tower soon after you; and when I came out — I seem to have stayed there behind the screen for ages, fighting with myself — he'd vanished in the dark.'

He paused, and it was as though, against the woodland background before him, he looked once more upon the horror of that night. His eyes were fixed in a distant stare, his features contracted as if with pain.

'I thought he'd taken himself off,' he continued huskily, 'and there seemed nothing left for me but to go to bed. I started to walk up to the house. Halfway along the path I stopped to light a cigarette. It was black as

be damned under the trees, and, as the match flamed, I suddenly caught sight of Stanismore's white face staring up at me out of the darkness. God! it was horrible! He was sprawling on his back just inside that path which turns off the main walk, close to the bench in the clearing, with his face smashed in.'

With trembling fingers he groped in his pocket and produced a loose cigarette, which he lit from the stump of the one he was smoking. He inhaled the smoke greedily and blew out a cloud.

'After that I don't remember what happened. I know I found myself standing at the foot of the garden stairs, wondering what I should do. I'd have gone back to Town, only they'd seen me at the Bay Hotel. I must have stood at the side door for a good quarter of an hour before I could make up my mind to go upstairs. First thing next morning I was down in the clearing. The body had disappeared. You don't realise what agonies of suspense I suffered all that Saturday until the body was found. When Newcome was arrested I thought they'd got the right man. When he was cleared I began to suspect Dene; and when Dene lied himself out of the tangle Freckles landed him into, I was convinced that he was guilty. But now ——' He shook his head sombrely, and on that doubting note his tale was done.

In a stricken silence she had heard him to the end. She knew that his story rang true. That he made no effort to palliate its bluntness she counted to his credit. Men were as God made them, she reflected, strong or weak, just or unjust. She might have remembered that. Was she not in part to blame for seeking figs from thistles, for wishing to see a paladin in this aimless,



self-indulgent man simply because he was her husband?

Once more, as of old, in all her dealings with Frankie, she took the lead. Turning half round, her back to the woods, so as to look him in the face, she said, and her voice was rather tender:

‘There’s only one thing to do now. You must tell Inspector Manderton your story just as you’ve told it to me. He’s clever and resourceful; he will clear things up.’

He raised his eyes to her face, those eyes which she remembered so bluely sparkling and fearless in that dead past when all the world was mad, when, side by side, they had put their horses over the jumps in the russet silence of their autumn idyll. Now she winced under the hopelessness of that regard. It was as though his spirit had died. He looked broken and abashed.

‘Have it your own way,’ he said in a lifeless voice. ‘I think you’re right. There’s not much left for the Inspector to clear up, is there? If Dene’s innocent, then only one other can be guilty. And that’s——’

The sentence was never finished. At that instant a deafening report crashed out from the stiff, clipped hedge at her back. So loud and close was the explosion that instinctively she whirled about. She was in time to see a blueish haze hanging above the dark, flat bushes, and to hear the stealthy rustle of receding footsteps in the undergrowth of the Wilderness.

In bewilderment she turned to her husband, the roar of the discharge still singing in her ears. She saw him swaying to and fro, his hands pressed to his waist, his mouth half-open, his eyes glazed, in an expression of terrible surprise. His cigarette, which had fallen from his

lips, was sending up a thin spiral of smoke from the grass at his feet.

‘Frankie!’ she exclaimed in a frightened voice, and more shrilly, ‘Frankie!’ Then she screamed, and screamed again. For, very slowly, like a balloon collapsing, her husband was sinking down upon his knees on the smooth, warm turf.

She flung herself down to raise him up. Already he was rocking himself from side to side in mute and awful agony. Before she could get her arms about him he had pitched forward on the grass. When she lifted him, cradling his head against her bosom, she saw, with a kind of dull horror, that he was breathing strangely and that his eyes were clouding over.

A distant clamour broke out across the profound hush of the gardens, and hearing shouts and the thunder of feet, she shrieked once more, while, under her very eyes, a greyish shade seemed to fall and linger upon the lined and weary face in her lap.

So they found her presently — Dene, Manderton, and the others — in that sheltered place among the birds and the flowers, where, beneath her tense and tearless gaze, Frankie Barleston’s storm-tossed spirit was slowly drifting into quiet waters.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE FLIGHT

AMONG that little party in the morning-room there was one who had displayed no interest and taken no part in the hasty comings and goings subsequent to Alix Barleston's withdrawal.

Freckles was tenderly attached to her sister, and the tale of deception which the detective's brutal cross-examination had unfolded filled her with a sense of pity overwhelming all other feelings. She bore Alix no grudge for having deceived her about Ronnie. Her loyalty told her that it was not to save herself that Alix had lied, and, as a very modern young woman, the romance of this midnight meeting gave her an envious thrill. But she was appalled by the gulf that suddenly yawned at her sister's feet.

And so when Alix, white and sad, had departed in search of Frankie, Freckles, her young face deeply troubled, crept to a chair in a corner and gave herself up to her thoughts. So wholly was she absorbed by her sister's plight that every other aspect of the issue escaped her. Inevitably she was conscious of the Inspector's explosive curiosity as to the whereabouts of Mr. Vroque, but it made no mark on her mind. And when the shot, crashing out of the steamy silence of the park, brought her trembling to her feet, her first thought, her only thought, was of Alix.

As he sprang to the French windows, Inspector Manderton shouted to Gerry Leese to remain behind with the ladies. But either Gerry did not hear him or declined to be left out of any excitement that was going. At any rate, he simply darted out at the detective's heels. And Freckles, seeing that the men had departed by the verandah, quietly made her exit by the door. What the shot portended she did not know. She merely had the feeling that Alix was in trouble and that she must be with her.

She ran through the drawing-room and slipped into the gardens by the back way. She had no precise idea of the direction whence the shot had rung out, but as she emerged from the house, she heard a distant hail from below. Forthwith she plunged helter-skelter down the staircase connecting the terrace levels, and did not stop until she reached the railings bordering the Wilderness. There she paused and listened.

Once more silence, like a curtain, had dropped down over gardens and woods. Standing there, with the resinous fragrance of the forest warm in her nostrils, in a hush disturbed only by chirpings and flutterings in the trees, she could scarcely believe that the brooding peace of the park had ever been so abruptly shattered.

And then she saw in the Wilderness, about fifty yards away on the other side of the fence, a stooping figure shambling swiftly out of a thicket and, without looking round, vanish noiselessly behind a bush. It was Vrogue! There was no mistaking that gawky form, the creased tussore suit hanging loosely on the tremendous limbs. 'Mr. Vrogue!' she piped shrilly; but the only answer was a faint shivering among the leaves.

Thirty yards to her left was the swing gate in the railings giving on the path which led down to the sea door. In a second she was at the gate. She did not pause to open it, but vaulted lightly over and bolted down the path. As she went, from the distance behind her a whistle thrilled three insistent blasts, shocking all the echoes of the Wilderness into affrighted remonstrance. She checked her pace, but then in front of her a hoarse shout rang out, answered from the rear by a sudden clamour of voices. She wondered what was happening, but she did not stop. Vrogue was ahead of her; she could hear his heavy footfall on the path. She told herself he must be going in the right direction, and continued to follow after.

The path wound frequently. Now the ivied pile of Node Tower emerged from above the trees, and she knew that, round the next bend, she would come in sight of the sea door. Suddenly, from somewhere just ahead, came a muffled exclamation followed by a sharp crack, a thud, and the sound of snapping twigs. Here under the trees the soil was yet greasy from the previous day's rain, and she was round the bend before she could stop herself, her rubber-shod feet slithering in the mud.

Now the sea door, flung wide, stood before her. On catching sight of it she gave a gasp of horror. For within the gate, just off the path, a man sprawled at the foot of an elm, limp and still, as though he had been crumpled up and flung aside. Terror-stricken, she approached and bent down over the prostrate figure. There was blood on the face, but she recognised Manderton's assistant, Mallow. . . .

And then, before she could speak or move, from behind

her an enormous palm, soft and damp, folded itself, like a great leaf, across her nose and mouth, with hot, moist fingers that bored into her cheeks, bearing her irresistibly backwards until she felt she must stifle. A long arm, crooked about her waist, caught her up, and she felt herself lifted clear off the ground. Now hoarse shouts and the tramp of heavy feet burst clamourously from the green depths of the Wilderness behind.

But she was helpless to summon aid. Unable to cry out, fighting desperately against the suffocating pressure of that pad of warm and pudgy flesh, she was swiftly borne through the gateway, down the steps, and across the sand to the edge of the tide. There she was ruthlessly pitched forward into a boat, which at the same moment glided into the water. Half dazed, breathless, and blazing with anger, she struggled to her knees in the bows, to find herself confronting Vroque, who sat on the thwart plying the sculls with short, powerful strokes.

The furious protest that was on her lips died there when she caught sight of his face. The ogre-like features were streaked with sweat and bleeding from many scratches. The pinkish, flaccid cheeks trembled, and the eyes, round as a cat's, their sea-green depths iridescent with an eerie glitter, bulged as though they would start from their sockets. The fleshy lower lip drooped pendulous, to disclose the lolling tongue, fat and crimson like some unhealthy fungus, unbaring as it slobbered a broken line of irregular yellow stumps. The nostrils twitched, and little specks of froth bubbled at the corners of the mouth. The girl went cold with fear as she contemplated that grimacing, gibbering mask of horror.

'Where are you taking me?' she faltered piteously.

'I don't want to go with you, Mr. Vroque. I want to find Alix.'

He vouchsafed no reply. They had drawn alongside the Sprite, moored close inshore, as Gerry had left her. Vroque signed to the girl to get on board. With a scared glance at him she obeyed. He fastened the dinghy astern, and, walking forward, cast off the moorings. The buoy dropped back into the water with a splash. 'Start the engine!' he told her over his shoulder.

She hesitated. Fear seared her mind like a white flame. The mystery of Stanismore's death — the shot — Mallow lying senseless on the path: swiftly her brain strung these links together. She had a confused recollection of talk in the morning-room about Vroque; of Manderton clamouring that he must be found. . . .

Vroque uttered an incoherent screech like an angry ape, and came tumbling into the steering-well. 'Start the engine!' he snarled again, with such menace in his tone that instinctively her eyes sought the land. Through the sea door a string of figures came pouring, streaming down the steps onto the beach.

A bony hand crunched her shoulder, and the sharp spasm of pain chased away the numbing terror that had frozen her into inaction. Blindly her fingers sought the self-starter and the throttle. As the propeller began to thresh up the water she heard a great voice go booming across the shore, crying out, in lurid language, for a boat. But she knew that within a mile there was no boat other than the dinghy trailing in their wake.

The same instinct that, the Sprite once under way, led her to take the wheel made her, almost unconsciously, point the Sprite at the black-and-white diceboard of

No Man's Fort, planted, like a huge round cheese, amid the white-capped wavelets of the fairway. Such was the course they always steered from Node to make Portsmouth or to run down to the Solent. She was as much at home in these intricate waters as in the mazy paths of Node Wilderness. Her apprenticeship had been served in many long summer days afloat with Alix and Ned Fubsy in Ned's yawl, the Mercia; she knew the ebb and flow of the tides, the buoys and the lights, and at all the Island regattas the Mercia, with Miss Dalglish at the sheet, was a competitor to be reckoned with in the small yacht class.

'Oh, you're hurting me,' she gasped sobbingly, as that agonizing clutch bit into her. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Faster!' cackled Vroque in her ear, and, as she gave the throttle a turn and the propeller's beat quickened, 'Faster still!' he yelled once more. With a sort of blind despair, her eyes on the leaping bow, she opened the throttle full out, and, with a sickening lurch, the Sprite sprang forward, burying her nose in a smother of hissing foam.

Rapidly the bosky outline of Node, where little figures still gesticulated on the shore, receded, and with it the curving horseshoe of Chine Bay, the dark hillside at the back stepped with the red roofs of the village, the old grey baulks of the pier.

'Where are we going?' she asked of Vroque, who stood in the well below the little steering platform, his thin clothes flapping in the breeze.

'Past Cowes and down the Solent,' his harsh voice answered. 'After that ——' He broke off and glanced



sharply astern. Her small, firm hands gave the helm a sharp turn to port, laying the Sprite's nose dead on the centre of the fort.

With bows high out of the water, the graceful boat tore through the waves, flinging up on either side a lofty curtain of spray that hung lucent in the sunshine before rattling down like hail into the steering-well. The Sprite drove irresistibly forward, now staggering in the trough of the swell, now cleaving through the creaming crest of a breaker, forging her way ahead under, as it were, an arch of contrasted sounds, a persistent symphony of noises — engine roaring, seas slapping savagely at her sides or rearing up to thunder ponderously down upon her decks, with hissings and smackings and gurglings and frothings, and the draught moaning through the deck-house like a banshee.

Again and again a wave drenched the girl and the man as, side by side, they crouched behind the canvas 'dodger'; again and again the flying screen of spray stabbed their faces with a thousand salt-dipped needles. Freckles had run out of the house just as she was, bare-headed, stockingless, in a tennis frock of white piqué, with pleated skirt, and tennis shoes. Now her frock was a sodden rag, the pleating a mockery; her short brown hair was sopping; her brown cheeks streamed with wet. Grimly she faced wind and weather, her eyes just above the level of the canvas, clinging to the wheel, which tore madly at her grasp as the Sprite cavorted among the waves.

Once she stole a glance at her companion. Though he was standing below her, his great height brought his face flush with hers. Soaked to the skin, his yellow top-knot

blown about by the wind, he flinched at no wave or even deigned to wipe the salt water from his eyes. His features twisted into a sardonic grin, he was like a vision of some evil god of the Southern Seas, arisen from the Pacific bed to ride the waters, silent, inscrutable, pitiless.

She put the helm over to enter the Channel as they drew near the fort. A shout was wafted down to them from on high. A man hailed them from the top, his hands cupped about his mouth. His words were swallowed up in the roar of the Sprite's passage. Vroque stepped to the boat's side and stared aloft as the fort swung astern. Then, glancing over his shoulder at Freckles, he pointed significantly ahead, as though to bid her keep on.

She realised that she could do nothing but obey. As he had moved from her side to gaze up at the fort, his tussore jacket, soaked to transparency, revealed to her the outline of a pistol in a side-pocket. Here, she told herself, was the explanation of the shot, here the motive of his flight. If only she knew what that shot signified, at whom he had fired! Why, and with what result? Once more her mind flew back to her sister. Had anything happened to Alix? The question racked her brain. . . .

Automatically, her trained eye picked up the swinging dot of the Sandhead buoy, and she kept their foaming bows on that mark as they thundered down the smiling waters of Spithead. It was a glorious afternoon, with a heavy swell and a stiffish breeze — enough wind, indeed, to give the seaplanes plenty to do as, with the deadly monotony of flies dancing round a chandelier, they circled above their base at Calshot.

Ryde, with its pier thrust like a long arm into the sparkling sea, its graceful spires and mass of grey roofs,

driven like a wedge into the wooded uplands, streamed by. From the pierhead, where the semaphore was busily jerking its gaunt arms, a shout rang out behind them. Looking backward, the girl saw a launch shoot out from the harbour in a flurry of spray. But the Sprite had the heels of anything they had seen afloat that afternoon, and, in a little, the launch was lagging far astern.

Still, the incident gave the girl a dash of hope. No Man's Fort, she knew, had a telephone line to the shore. The challenge from the fort, renewed from Ryde pierhead, and the appearance of the launch, told her that Inspector Manderton was on their track. It comforted her to think of the Eye in Attendance — Vrogue's nickname had made the round of Node House — following their flight, peering down upon them like the seaplane which, battling against the breeze, even now, high above their heads, hung over their creaming wake.

The solemn pile of Quarre Abbey, the ugly towers of Osborne, were now past, and they were approaching the narrow inlet of the Medina River with the white house fronts of Cowes glinting through the trees beyond. She wondered whither they were bound. She dare not touch the throttle and slow down their speed, for Vrogue was watching her every movement; and if she ran them aground, she would find herself, helpless as she was, face to face with this armed madman. With a thrill of fear she wondered how long the petrol would last out. Eight gallons an hour, she remembered Gerry telling her, was the average consumption at normal speed; but on their mad course they must be burning a great deal more than that.

Above the insistent thump of the engine a loud droning

now rang in her ears. She glanced aloft, to discover the seaplane she had remarked before apparently swooping straight down upon them out of the sunlit sky. Involuntarily she ducked as, with a mighty roar, the machine skimmed low over the leaping, lurching Sprite and then zoomed gracefully upward above the boiling V of their wake. She had a momentary glimpse of a helmeted, be-goggled figure; of a gauntleted hand that waved. . . .

'Beaulieu,' a strident voice muttered suddenly in her ear. 'We'll run for Beaulieu River. You know it, eh?'

She nodded. The placid stream, where the dark oaks of the virgin forest grow down to the rank yellow grass of the meadows covered at the flood, was redolent for her of memories of long, drowsy afternoons. She glanced at her wrist-watch.

'The tide's still low,' she said. 'We can't make the entrance at this speed, you understand that? We should be aground before you could say knife.'

She felt his eerie green eyes on her face.

'We'll chance that,' he grunted. 'We must go fast, fast.'

She said no more. The Ryde launch had long since dropped out of sight, and no other craft had sought to oppose their passage. She wondered whether she was fated to carry this strange adventure through to its appointed end, whatever that might be, before Inspector Manderton could intervene. They had a long start of him; but somehow she felt that this taciturn, inexorable man would not be easily shaken off. . . .

The shipping grew denser as they neared Cowes Roads, and it required all her attention and all her skill, at the pace at which they were rocketing down the fairway, to avoid a collision. As they approached the East Lepe buoy,

with the thread-like entrance of Beaulieu River in the Hampshire shore beyond, she saw that the spit at the river mouth was still uncovered. A sailing-boat tacking slowly up the river seemed to be set down in the midst of green pastures.

They left the cheerful red-and-white stripes of the buoy to port, and stood over to the mainland coast. Freckles turned to Vroque.

'There's a sharp turn just after the entrance,' she protested. 'I can't follow the Channel-marks at this speed. We've got to slow down.'

'Faster, faster!' he mouthed. 'Always faster!'

Every minute now was bringing them closer to the flat coast-line. Already she could make out the confusing cluster of bean-sticks, set at intervals to mark the Channel.

'We'll ground for certain,' she exclaimed. 'You must let me slacken down.'

But he only chanted his refrain of 'Faster! Faster!'

'You're mad!' she cried, and resolutely stooped to the throttle.

'Stand off!' he screeched, and drew his pistol.

She sprang down from the steering platform and cowered against the deck-house, while, as the Sprite ran free, first one wave and then another smote the slender craft with thunderous blows and broke, in a shower of spray, over the two figures confronting one another in the well. Freckles gasped for breath as, again and again, the green seas soused her, the water swirled gurgling about her feet, and the quivering boat staggered and rolled at the mercy of the waves.

And then the disaster happened. The engine stuttered, coughed once, and stopped. The Sprite, oscillating vio-

lently, seemed to slide at once into smooth water. With a roar of rage Vroque leaped at the girl, but she, quick as thought, sprang into the deck-house and slammed the door in his face. A brass crank, the starting-handle of the engine, lay upon a seat, and she snatched it up and thrust it through the ring handle, thus securing the door.

She knew that the respite was but momentary. The deckhouse was merely a covered way connecting, through two doors, the well with the cockpit. She raced to the farther door to close it, but she had no means of fastening it. Vroque had only to crawl over the deckhouse roof to have her at his mercy. But even as she reached the door she heard a deep note in the air above her. A seaplane was majestically planing down, describing ever decreasing circles about the little patch of sea where the Sprite was floundering. Standing in the doorway the girl screamed and waved her hand. Her voice was drowned in the swelling hum of the seaplane, but as it came lower it seemed to her that her signal was returned.

But then a muffled thumping close at hand sent a chill of terror through her. Vroque was clambering over the deck-house roof; she heard the boarding creak beneath his weight, his laboured breathing. Only then did she think of the dinghy as a means of escape; but the thought came to her too late. With a crash that shook the Sprite, Vroque dropped into the cockpit. In a flash she banged the door, but he hurled himself at it, driving it in upon her. She was flung back on the seat as a sudden shadow fell athwart the deck and the seaplane swooped down low over the Sprite. The roar of its propeller was deafening; the deck-house door slammed violently to and fro as the Sprite rolled; the air seemed full of noise. . . .

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### MR. VROGUE ACTS IN THE SPIRIT OF SOPHOCLES

SHE must have fainted then, for when she opened her eyes she had the sensation of emerging from the infinite remoteness of some dark and lonely dream. The Sprite was rocking and bumping about, and the girl knew by the movement that they were aground; the deck-house door still swung, banging, from side to side. Now the chill of metal was on her lips, and she detected the smell of brandy, which she abhorred. A sort of brownish mop moved before her face, and as she pushed the flask away she saw that the mop surmounted the anxious countenance of Gerry Leese. She smiled at him wanly.

‘Oh, Gerry boy!’ she sighed, ‘I’m glad you’re there.’

‘She’s coming round,’ said Gerry to somebody at his side. Only then did she notice that a firm arm supported her. Moving her head, she found herself looking into the face of Ronnie Dene.

‘Geel!’ exclaimed Gerry excitedly, ‘we were just scared to death when we found you were missing. The Inspector raged like he was crazed or something.’

‘How do you feel now?’ Dene asked her.

‘Better, thanks awfully.’ She smiled, rather abashed. ‘I made a fool of myself, flopping off like that. But I was terribly frightened. Where — where is he?’

‘Vrogue?’ said Dene. ‘He’ll not trouble you any more,

Freckles. He's over the hills and far away by this. He rowed himself ashore in the dinghy and vanished in the woods. As soon as the other launch comes up, Manderton's going after him.'

She struggled erect.

'I'd like to go out in the air,' she told them. 'I'm all right now.'

As she stood up she saw, through the door of the deck-house, the enormous wing of a seaplane, which, looking gigantic at that close range, quite dwarfed the Sprite. The machine was tied up to the motor-boat. A young man, hooded in leather, smiled down at her from the driving-seat. On one of the floats Inspector Manderton was standing, intently gazing up the Solent through a pair of field-glasses.

The Sprite had stranded on a shoal close in shore. The tide had carried her above the river mouth, and she lay opposite a patch of mud and shingle, just past the entrance. On the beach, not thirty yards away, the dinghy was drawn up. There was no sign of Vroque. The foreshore, which ran up to a patch of grass fringed with wind-stricken pines, was deserted.

'Ronnie,' said Freckles, 'tell me quickly, is Alix all right?'

'Yes, thank God!' he answered.

'That shot, what was it?'

He looked at her gravely.

'Frankie ——' he began, then stopped.

With frightened eyes she sank down in the stern sheet.

'Suicide, do you mean?' she asked in an awed voice.

He shook his head.

'Vroque shot him.'



‘Is he — is he ——?’

‘He never spoke again. He died before we came away.’

‘Poor old Frankie!’ The tears started into her eyes, and she was silent for a moment. ‘How did Alix take it, Ronnie?’

‘Badly, I’m afraid. We left her crouching by his dead body on the croquet lawn, waiting for the ambulance that was to take him away to Vanner for the post-mortem. No tears or anything like. She answered all Manderton’s questions in a queer, impersonal way that frightened me. She seems dazed, crushed.’

‘The poor darling! Oh, Ronnie, I know she wants me. Can’t you take me to her?’

‘We must wait for the launch that’s following on behind — unless the tide floats us off before. I see Gerry’s making ready in case.’

The boy was out on one of the seaplane’s floats watching the pilot filling a petrol can from a feed pipe which he had disconnected.

‘And Mr. Vrogue,’ Freckles asked presently, ‘why did he want to kill Frankie?’

‘To stop his mouth. When he was shot Frankie was making a statement about the murder to Alix. It’s too long to tell you now, but its effect was to clear him. Vrogue knew that, as long as Frankie kept silent, suspicion would rest on the latter. When he heard Frankie tell Alix that he would make a clean breast of everything to Manderton, Vrogue determined to prevent it.’

‘Then it was Mr. Vrogue who killed Basil Stanismore?’ He nodded rather grimly.

‘Yes, it was.’

‘But why? What had Mr. Vrogue against him?’

Dene shrugged his shoulders.

‘I haven’t any idea. Manderton knows, I fancy, but I haven’t had the chance to ask him. Everything happened in such a rush after Vrogue’s escape. I think the old devil counted on finding Snook on board, and when he saw that the Sprite was deserted, he seized on you to run the boat for him. Well, he left us all gaping on shore like a pack of idiots; we could do nothing but stand there and watch him show a pair of clean heels. Then Manderton woke up. He rushed back to the house and sent out the alarm by telephone. As soon as No Man’s Fort reported that the Sprite had passed, we got on to the Ryde police. They put out in a motor-boat; but the margin of time was too narrow, and they missed you. It’s their launch we’re waiting for now. Then Manderton had this brain-wave about a seaplane. He rang up Calshot, and the officer in charge happened to be a bright fellow, who promptly wirelessly one of his seaplanes that was over the Solent training to come across to Node and pick Manderton up.’

‘I remember it passed us,’ she put in, ‘on the way to Node, I suppose, and swooped down ever so low. The pilot waved to me. I never realised, of course, that he was going to fetch help.’

‘I was worried to death about you, as you can imagine,’ Dene continued, ‘so I persuaded the Inspector to take me with him. Then Gerry refused to be left behind, so, in the end, we all went along. The machine’s only a two-seater, so it was a bit of a squash. When we caught you up we could see that the Sprite’s engine had failed; she was drifting along anyhow past the river mouth. As we skimmed down over you we could see Vrogue staring up

at us from the cockpit, but you were nowhere in sight. We came down on the water about a hundred and fifty yards away and taxied straight across. But before we hit the sea I saw Vrogue jump into the dinghy and row like blazes for the shore. He had the devil's own luck not to stick on the mud with the water as low as it is. Anyway, he reached the beach and dashed off inland. Manderton had his gun out, but he never got a shot at him.'

A deep voice from the seaplane cut across his recital.

'Here they come!' it said. 'And they've taken their time about it.'

Mr. Manderton handed the field-glasses up to the pilot and clambered over the side of the Sprite. 'Glad to see you all right, miss,' he remarked to Freckles with a smile. A small launch came swirling through the waves towards them. Gerry, with his coat off, was tinkering the Sprite's engine. As the launch drew near they recognised Mallow, with his head bound up, in the bows, and Smith, Snook, and a couple of uniformed policemen distributed amidships and aft.

'It's the launch I ordered to follow us from Chine Bay,' said the Inspector.

'The Ryde boat broke down and had to put back, sir,' explained Mallow.

'You look none the worse for your crack on the head, Mallow,' said the Inspector humorously.

'It's not the first I've had,' the plain-clothes man answered hoarsely, 'as you well know, guv'nor. But I'd dearly like to get me 'ands on that great murderin' rascal, pickin' me up and bashin' me agin a tree like I might be a doll.'

Snook was left in charge of the Sprite, and the detective, with Freckles and the two other men, were transferred to the Chine Bay launch. The Sprite was becoming unpleasantly lively, and the Inspector arranged that Freckles, Ronnie, and Gerry should land with the rest and wait for the Sprite to float off, while Manderton and his men set off in pursuit of the fugitive.

To avoid the mud the launch made for a spot on the other side of the little point round which Vroque had abandoned the dinghy, as the water was deeper there, and a strip of shingle afforded a reasonably good landing-place. The party, led by Manderton and his two assistants, the two uniformed constables bringing up the rear, clambered up the foreshore, and came in sight of the dinghy drawn up on the beach on the other side.

A very small boy in a ragged shirt and a much abbreviated pair of flannel shorts was bending over the boat, submitting it to such serious and thorough investigation as a small boy will bestow upon anything that interests him. They looked at each other in surprise. No one had seen the urchin arrive; and behind him the flat shore, with its edging of coarse grass and unfriendly pines, was as desolate as they had seen it when Vroque's gaunt figure had first been swallowed up in the bluish dusk under the trees. At the sound of feet on the stones the infant straightened up and looked round. When he caught sight of the little column of strangers bearing down upon him, his eyes widened, and with some haste he put the dinghy between himself and them.

'Seen anything of a tall gentleman around here, son?' said Manderton, gazing down benignly upon the small, rather scared face.

The urchin nodded vigorously, his saucer eyes on the detective. Then he thrust a grimy hand into the pocket of his Lilliputian breeches and produced in succession a knife, a piece of string, a much-creased cigarette card, a glutinous substance which at some earlier stage might have been a piece of chocolate, a shilling, and, at the last, a folded sheet of paper. Claspings the rest of his treasures to his bosom, he held out the paper to Manderton.

‘Gentleman told me to give yer this,’ he piped.

Manderton snatched the paper from the boy, and, before unfolding it, said sharply:

‘Where did you see the gentleman, sonny?’

The infant pointed back over his shoulder.

‘Back in the woods there. ’E was setting under a tree writing. ’E told me to go down to the point and — and I’d find a boat. If I’d wait beside the boat and — and give the paper to a man what came ’e said I should ’ave — a shillun.’ The interesting juvenile nodded mysteriously. ‘I gotta shillun, I ’ave,’ he announced solemnly.

With a brusque movement the Inspector unfolded the paper. His companions, anxiously scrutinising his face, saw a puzzled look give place to an angry frown. The detective read to the end, then handed the paper to Dene.

‘Keep it for me, will you?’ he said. He turned to the urchin. ‘Come on, son,’ he cried. ‘You show me where you left the kind gentleman, and I’ll give you another shilling.’ He beckoned to his men, and, led by their diminutive guide, the party swept up the beach.

Meanwhile Dene was perusing the paper. It was a letter, scrawled in pencil in a crabbed hand.

‘Read it aloud, Ronnie,’ Freckles urged him.

With sundry pauses, for in places the writing was almost illegible, Dene read out:

DEAR INSPECTOR MANDERTON,

It will save you further trouble if I tell you that I killed Stanismore. I was of service to him, and when he had achieved his purpose he cast me aside. I will not weary you with details of the intrigue I conducted on his behalf, except to say that not gain was my motive, but the pure joy of hoodwinking this rabble of intellectual crooks and unblushing time-servers who arrogate to themselves a sort of divine mission for the conduct of the nation's affairs. It amused me to substitute a ruthless self-seeker like Stanismore for a solemn humbug like Chesterham.

If you measure this man's value to humanity against mine, you must acquit my act of deliberation. Even to rid the world of a Stanismore the sacrifice of my life would be too great. No, to suffer the public hangman executioner to extinguish the light of an intellect such as mine that an earth-worm should be crushed under foot would be illogical. It was this consideration that sealed the fate of the unfortunate Barleston. When it became a question of him or me, I did not hesitate. Better a thousand times that a thing of no account like Barleston should die than that I, with my preëminent brain, should be delivered up into the hands of undiscerning, indiscriminate justice.

How did I come to kill Stanismore? Ah, my dear Inspector, that time passion clouded intellect. For a fortnight Stanismore had evaded me. But I would not thus be slighted. When I read in the newspapers that he was going to attend a political function at Portsmouth, I wrote summoning him to Node. That night we met face to face in the grounds. I upbraided him with his ingratitude. He insulted me; my temper got the better of me, and I struck him down. I

went away and left him there, and when I had cooled down returned to find him dead. To guard against interruption in the task that was before me, I bolted the sea door; then picked up the body and cast it forth like carrion over the wall. On my way back I found his cap, which I brought indoors with me; the stick with which I killed him I buried under leaves in the Wilderness. When your investigations became inconvenient to me, I hid the cap in Major Barles-ton's room; from the outset he had seemed to me the most worthy subject upon whom to throw suspicion. It diverted me to learn from you this morning that the Major lost no time in using the cap as a means to incriminate Captain Dene. I should like Captain Dene to understand that I had no hand in this. Intellectually speaking, the military type is so low that, in my opinion, it should be preserved if only for the reason that, in the modern State, professional soldiers are inevitably destined to become the only class foolish enough to devote itself to the useful task of exterminating the military.

You will agree that I have been frank with you. But do not imagine, my dear Inspector, that I propose to gratify your professional vanity by lending myself to a hue-and-cry, with handbills and blood-hounds and all the paraphernalia of your engaging occupation. Sophocles has written: 'Death is not the worse evil, but rather when we wish to die and cannot.' You will find the passage in the 'Elektra.'

CURTISS VROGUE.

Ronnie finished reading.

'What an extraordinary letter!' said Freckles in a hushed voice.

'He was stark, staring crazy!' exclaimed Gerry.

'Crazy with intellectual arrogance,' Ronnie put in. 'Wait a minute, there's a postscript overleaf.' He read out

slowly: "*Morte magis metuenda senectus.*" That means "Old age is more to be feared than death," doesn't it?' He paused, and his eyes clouded over reflectively. 'What a strange, bitter creature!' he murmured at last. 'Well, may God have mercy on his soul!'

A brief silence fell between them as they stood about the abandoned dinghy on that lonely beach.

'You think — you think he means to kill himself, Ronnie?' the girl asked, rather tremulously.

'His letter makes that clear, doesn't it? He shot Frankie in a fit of homicidal mania, I imagine. Frankie's death wouldn't have altered the ultimate result. If Vrogue had stopped to reason he'd have seen that, apart from everything else, this act must definitely throw suspicion upon him in respect of the other crime. When he cooled down I suppose he realised that a man of his extraordinary appearance could not long avoid arrest, and his pride revolted at the idea of standing his trial for murder. Therefore —'

'But what's all this stuff about Stanismore and an intrigue?' Gerry interrupted explosively.

'Manderton will have to tell us that,' Dene replied, 'if he knows, that's to say. If he doesn't, well, I don't think he can rely on getting it from Vrogue.' He tapped the letter. 'This is the old boy's swan song. He's said all he means to say. By the time Manderton reaches him, I fancy it will be too late.'

Even as he was speaking, from the hidden fastnesses of that barren shore, somewhere in the distance behind the wind-bent screen of trees, there fell a single, short report, muffled, hollow. Their eyes exchanged a wondering glance, and, with one accord, they turned to stare up



the beach, listening, listening. But to their ears came only the patter of sand against the branches as the wind swept through the pines, and the sad, wild cry of the sea-birds everlastingly wheeling over the azure thread of the Solent.

A hoarse call rang from the sea. Snook was hailing them. 'See,' said Ronnie, 'the Sprite's afloat.' Slowly he led the way up the shore to descend to the far side of the point where they had left the launch. All three went in silence, as though each were awed by the same picture that stood out clearly in Dene's mind — the vision of a loose and lanky figure, with face pathetically grotesque, cowering in the dusky hush of some secluded spinney, pistol in hand, waiting for the rustling footsteps, the shouts of the pursuit, that should seal his self-sent doom. . . .

## CHAPTER XXIX

### MR. MANDERTON LAYS HIS CARDS ON THE TABLE

AFTER dinner that evening, when the house was quiet and the clinging darkness of the June night rested like warm black velvet over the grounds of Node, a soft whistle resounded from the porch at the foot of the garden stairs. Gerry Leese, who was walking up and down on the grass outside, heard, and swung round sharply. He saw a white shape beckoning to him mysteriously from the doorway.

He sprang forward.

'Freckles!' he cried delightedly.

'S-sh!' A small, soft hand was clapped over his mouth. I'm supposed to be in bed. I'm sleeping in Alix's room to-night, but she's with Aunt Ethel, so I crept downstairs in my dressing-gown to find out what's going on. Such rot sending me off to bed like that when we came in! Don't talk loud, or that old sneak Cantle will hear. Is Mr. Manderton back yet?'

'No,' whispered the boy. 'Ronnie's waiting for him on the terrace.'

'There's no news of Mr. Vroque then?'

'Nothing. Why?'

'Alix was asking.'

'How is she?'

The young face clouded over.

'Gerry, she's terribly unhappy. She's taken this thing

most frightfully to heart. I suppose I oughtn't to say it, but I don't really see why she should grieve. After all, it was the best thing that could happen to Frankie. I'm sorry about him, of course, but I do feel that Alix, poor darling, can now be happy at last.'

He nodded understandingly.

'It's been a fierce time for all of you,' he said. 'How's Lady Fussy?'

'Dreadfully upset. She was always cracked about Frankie, you know. Sir Harry's quite alarmed about her. Poor Aunt Ethel! To think of all this going on at Node, where nothing ever happens!'

'You aren't looking too grand yourself, honey,' said the boy, looking at her solicitously.

'That man did frighten me,' she admitted, with a little shiver, 'but I'm all right now.'

'You don't know what I felt like,' he said, with a sudden burst of feeling, 'when I saw that murderous savage carry you off under my very eyes this afternoon. It made me realise what pals we'd been, how — how fond of you I am.'

Her little hand stole out and found his brown one. She looked down at her fingers, and a little wave of red deepened the milk and roses of her dainty face.

'How nicely you say that, Gerry dear! I think — I'm rather fond of you, too. At least, when I came out of my faint on the boat this afternoon and found myself looking at you, I felt — safe — and happy.' She paused shyly.

'It sort of broke me all up to see you lying there like that,' he told her. 'At first, for one dreadful second, I thought you were dead. Then, when you opened your

eyes, I was so happy I felt like kissing you. And I would have,' he added defiantly, 'if Ronnie hadn't been there.'

She raised soft, fond eyes to his.

'Ronnie's not here now if you — Oh, Gerry!'

She sighed out his name as his arms went about her, and she surrendered her red young lips to his kiss.

'Oh, Gerry boy!' she remarked contentedly, 'there's something very soothing about a kiss. I've been wanting you to kiss me all day.' Upon which he kissed her again.

'I've been wanting to kiss you since the first day I met you,' he admitted, 'only I didn't know the English usage in such cases.'

She gurgled delightedly:

'You know now,' she laughed. 'In this country you'll be quite safe if you never kiss a girl until you know she wants you to kiss her, and then kiss her quickly before she has time to change her mind. It's an excellent treatment,' she sighed. 'I wish to Heaven I could prescribe it for Alix.'

'You mean — Ronnie?'

She nodded.

'I suppose in the circumstances it would be highly improper. But she's miserable, Gerry. No one but Ronnie can comfort her. They're both up to their eyes in love with one another; they're bound to marry sooner or later. So why shouldn't Ronnie be nice to her now when she wants it?'

Gerry rubbed the back of his head with a nonplussed air and laughed.

'Hold your horses, honey. Give 'em time. He's got to respect her mourning. He'll gain nothing by rushing things.'

She breathed a little sigh.

'I suppose not. Life's very complicated, isn't it?'

The long drawn-out jarring of an iron gate in the distance broke in upon their talk.

'That'll be Manderton!' cried the girl. 'Run along, Gerry, and find out what his news is. I must dash back to bed.'

'You certainly are as pretty as a picture in that swans-down wrap of yours,' he told her.

Impulsively she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him on the mouth.

'You're a dear!' she said. With that she tripped away, and the gloom under the porch swallowed her up.

As Gerry reached the bench on the terrace where Ronnie sat enjoying the calm of sea and stars over a contemplative cigar, Manderton came up the steps. His gait was dragging; he looked tired and depressed. He stopped before the two men and doffed his hard felt hat to wipe his brow.

'Well?' said Dene.

'Dead when we reached him,' said the detective moodily. 'In a little copse he was, 'bout a mile inland from where we left you. He'd shot himself through the temple. Whew, what a strapping big chap! Proper job we had, getting him away, I can tell you! That's what kept me so long. By the way,' he added to Dene, 'I'll have that letter if you've got it.' Dene handed over the document. Manderton put it away in his pocket and sank down on the bench.

'Well,' he remarked, mopping his brow, 'he's simplified things, anyway. The doctors will testify that he

was unbalanced, and that'll save the washing of a heap of dirty linen.'

'You mean this intrigue that Vrogue speaks of?' said Dene, sitting down beside the detective. 'What was it, Inspector?'

Mr. Manderton began to fill his pipe.

'A dirty business. Stanismore was behind this campaign of *The Daily Radical's* to drive old Chesterham into surrendering the leadership of the party, and Vrogue was the intermediary.'

'But I thought Vrogue barely knew Stanismore?'

Mr. Manderton grunted.

'He knew him a damned sight better than anybody had any idea of. Stanismore kept the acquaintance dark, and I've not yet definitely discovered where they met. It wasn't Grosvenor Crescent, nor yet at Vrogue's rooms in Curzon Street. Latterly Stanismore had taken to visiting the British Museum, to go to the reading room, he said, and Stoale — that's his private secretary, you know — thinks he may have met Vrogue in one of the Museum galleries. No doubt Stanismore thought that the sort of people who frequent the Museum wouldn't be likely to recognise him.'

'But why did Stanismore select Vrogue of all people? Rather a strange choice, wasn't it?' Dene put in.

'Not so strange when you know that Vrogue and Willis, the editor of *The Daily Radical*, were close friends. Stanismore didn't miss much. *The Daily Radical* had been trying for a long time to push out old Ches. Stanismore decided to turn these attacks to his own advantage and to strengthen them with the finest ammunition a newspaper can obtain for a job like this, and that's accu-

rate information from the inner circle of the party. Where or how he first became acquainted with Vroque I don't know, but I haven't the least doubt he deliberately picked on him on account of the old devil's relations with Willis.'

'How do you know all this?' asked Dene.

'I made Willis tell me. He was difficult at first — you know how stuffy a good newspaper man is about disclosing his sources of information — but when I'd put him wise to a thing or two, Gad! the whole story came out. It was Vroque who brought him every scrap of information on which the campaign was based. Vroque would not say the name of his informant, and Willis did not press for it; it was good enough for him that the old ogre's stuff was red-hot and always dead accurate. Willis realised, of course, that someone in the party was leaking; it never occurred to him that it could be Stanismore, for Stanismore never lost an opportunity of denouncing the paper for its scurrilous attacks on Chesterham. Oh, he was a deep one, was Stanismore! Now, pay attention to me. About a fortnight before Stanismore was murdered, old Vroque ran dry; not another scrap of news did Willis get out of him for *The Daily Radical* campaign. After Stanismore's death Willis discovered that, a fortnight before, old Ches. had decided to retire, and had privately promised Stanismore to secure him the leadership. Willis never noticed the coincidence in dates until I pointed it out to him. Now we know why Stanismore, as the letter mentions, evaded Vroque. Stanismore had got what he wanted, and his bottle-washer could go to blazes.'

'By Jove!' exclaimed Dene admiringly, 'you've cer-

tainly made out a convincing case, Inspector. Did you know all this when you came back from London this morning?’

‘All of it except the valuable corroboration which that letter contains.’

‘Then why didn’t you arrest Vroque straight away?’

The detective laughed and wagged his head.

‘I’m going to be frank with you, Captain Dene,’ he said. ‘My first suspicions were centered on you. You weren’t open with me; you had a strong motive — namely, jealousy — for the crime; and, apart from Vroque, you were the only person at Node physically capable of dealing the fearful blow that killed Stanismore, not to speak of hoisting his heavy body over the wall. And there was evidently some secret between you and Mrs. Barleston. But I was puzzled to discover that, while the Major sought to incriminate you, Vroque went out of his way to poison my mind against the Major.’

Mr. Manderton paused to take a few reflective whiffs of his pipe.

‘On these same physical grounds,’ he resumed, ‘the Major, in my opinion, was out of it. He hadn’t the physique to have killed this man the way he was killed and got rid of the body. I should not have believed him guilty — of the actual murder, at any rate — even if I’d known about his money troubles, of which Mrs. Barleston has told me. Incidentally, if Stanismore did have any connection with these moneylenders, it has not come out in the settlement of his affairs, and I’m inclined to think that he was bluffing the Major, just as he frightened Mrs. Barleston with this lie about Kavanagh, the con. man. And that brings me to Vroque. A rather cunning attempt



of his to discredit the Major's alibi made me wonder what his game was, for at first Vrogue seemed to be right out of the picture. I was as hard put to it to link him up with Stanismore as with Mrs. Barleston, who, I felt all along, held the centre of the stage. Then a chance conversation with Dr. Pontifex, the police surgeon, revealed to me the fact, which Vrogue's London doctor fully confirmed, that Vrogue was an abnormal type, subject to accesses of violent rage. This disclosure brought Vrogue nearer to the crime but still left me stumped for a motive. I then discovered that he and Willis were intimate friends, and also that, despite their relationship, Vrogue had declined to receive *The Daily Radical* man down here, notwithstanding an introduction from Willis, and had actually threatened the reporter with violence. I thought that Willis could give me a line on Vrogue, and so I went to London, with the result you know.'

He stopped to relight his pipe, which had gone out. The stillness of the night clung close about them. Down in the woods a nightingale was striking the first uncertain notes of its song.

'In London,' the detective went on, blowing out a cloud of tobacco smoke, 'I found awaiting me the first direct clue pointing to Vrogue. I had submitted to the type-writing expert at the Yard a fragment of a letter, written on Node House paper, which I discovered in a book on Stanismore's yacht. The bulk of the letter is missing, but from the scrap which fell into my hands it appears to have been an invitation to Stanismore, in rather threatening language, to come to Node. With this fragment I sent a copy of the original, which Mrs. Barleston typed out for me on Sir Harry's machine. The expert declared

that the same machine was used in both cases, but that in the case of the original the typing had been done with excessive force by an unskilled hand — experts have their own way of telling these things, you know. This report pointed straight at Vroque, for Sir Harry had told me that Vroque's touch on the typewriter was so heavy that on one occasion he smashed the spacing.'

'I know,' said Dene. 'I've heard Sir Harry chaff Vroque about it more than once.'

'Now then,' Inspector Manderton resumed, 'I had a strong suggestion of motive and one straight clue leading to Vroque, but still no direct evidence to implicate him in the murder. I decided that I could get him only by a process of elimination. And the first stage in this process was to get at the truth from the three material witnesses, who, I felt sure, were concealing it. That's why, Captain Dene, I used you to frighten the facts out of Mrs. Barleston and Mrs. Barleston to squeeze the story out of the Major. I handled her rough, but she had only herself to blame; I gave her fair warning. I'd have had the whole truth, let me tell you, if Vroque hadn't lost his head ——' He broke off, musing. 'Well,' he concluded moodily, 'his suicide don't make much difference. It might have been a long and wearisome business, but' — his voice grew hard — 'I'd have got him in the end. Anyway, he'll get a fair trial where he's gone; no judicial errors on the other side.' He stretched himself, yawning cavernously like a wild beast, and stood up. 'I've had a long day, and I think I'll say good-night. It's probably good-bye, gentlemen, for I go up to London in the morning, and I doubt if I shall be coming back to Node.'

'There's one question I'd like to ask you before you

leave, Inspector,' said Dene. 'Why, as between me, whom you suspected, and Vroque, whom you did not, did you turn your attention to Vroque?'

A pleasant twinkle gleamed in the detective's keen eyes.

'Well, sir,' he answered slowly, 'I'll tell you. I'm not altogether without intuition, and you didn't strike me as the murdering type.'

With that he clapped his hat on his head with a little air, nodded brightly to the two young men, and strode away down the steps to the Wilderness.

It was Gerry who spoke his *envoi*.

'I was just getting used to the Eye in Attendance,' he said. 'Ronnie, I believe I'm going to miss him.'

## CHAPTER XXX

### NOCTURNE

GERRY went off to bed, but Ronnie remained sitting on the bench. He was thinking, as he had thought all day, of Alix. He had not seen her since his return, and she had not replied to the little note he had sent up to her room. His heart was heavy for her. He felt that she was unhappy, and it galled him to know that he must not seek her out. Was Frankie, who had separated them in life, to hold them, from beyond the grave, asunder? Who was it who said that the dead are always in the right? . . .

And then, without warning, she was beside him. Though he did not hear her come, he knew that she was there, even before her face looked whitely down upon him out of the darkness that mingled itself with the sombre black of her dress. He rose up and stood at her side, quietly waiting for her to speak.

She remained in silence for a spell, her face turned towards the sable blur of the Wilderness, jewelled with the gleaming gold of the fireflies, where the trees were stirred in the dark. Then she uttered a single word.

‘Vroque.’ Her voice was toneless, dead.

‘It was all over when they found him,’ he answered simply.

The murmurous voice of the distant ocean bridged the hush that fell between them. Against the blackness of her dress he saw her white fingers twine and untwine.

'Ronnie,' she said at last, in the same muted tones, 'I've been grievously at fault.'

'Oh, my dear!' he answered tenderly, 'who am I that you should say such a thing to me? You've nothing to reproach yourself with. It was I who failed you.'

She shook her head sadly.

'Love is always jealous, and jealousy breeds suspicion. There was justification for you; but, oh, Ronnie! there was none for me. I failed you and I failed him, too. If I'd been less proud, if I'd been more understanding, this last tragedy would never have been ——'

'No one can foresee the end of things,' he told her. 'The unexpected always defeats us.'

'For it is a tragedy,' she went on, as though he had not spoken, in the same lifeless voice, 'to be cut off like that, suddenly; not to be given another chance.'

'I don't want to be heartless,' he put in, 'but, Alix, you know it was the best thing that could have happened.'

'I know,' she answered wistfully. 'I don't pretend that for himself, for all of us, it is not better that he should have died. But'—her voice grew tragic with feeling—'I reproach myself, Ronnie, I reproach myself, and I feel to-night as though I should never know any peace of mind again. When I should have had all my wits about me to advise him, I was thinking of you. I knew he was weak and irresponsible, and when he leaned on me I failed him. I was blinded with pride and selfishness, wrapped up in myself, so that I saw in him not what he was but only what I wanted to see. He never pretended to be anything better than he appeared to be. It was I who was the hypocrite, I who had broken my marriage in spirit and who did not hesitate to shame him with

my virtue. Oh, Ronnie, his death has humbled me to the very dust.'

He gazed into her face, tense and tearless, and spoke boldly.

'Death wipes the slate clean,' he said, 'and I'll say no more of Frankie than this. Swiftly, terribly, he has been called to settle a long debt that you and all the others he had wronged had accumulated against him. Life is nothing but a series of compensations, my dear, and he had to pay the price. Why should you torture yourself with vain reproaches? He came down to Node with intentions even baser than those you first credited him with; and if he held his hand, if he flinched at dragging you into a horrible blackmailing scandal, it was solely because you proclaimed your faith in him to Stanismore. It was you who revived a spark of decent feeling in him, Alix, you who shamed him into silence. If these things count before the Judgment Seat, and I think they do, Frankie has you to thank, and you alone, for that entry to his credit.'

Suddenly she, who had been all tearless, was weeping convulsively, her head drooping on his shoulder, as they stood by one another in the dark.

'Oh, Ronnie,' she sobbed, 'I knew that you would comfort me!'

His eyes were hungry with the longing to fold her in his arms and wipe away her tears. But he schooled himself to wait. He made no move. His dark eyes tenderly embraced the pale face, unwrought by grief, the clinging brown hair, the white hands feverishly crumpling the little handkerchief — all the appealing loveliness of this woman he had loved so long and faithfully. Rather

huskily he said: 'Some day you must give me the right to comfort you for always.'

From the depths of the Wilderness below went up the liquid notes of the nightingale. The night air, warm and fragrant with the scent of roses, seemed to quiver with the deep-throated thrills and shakes. Then a small, broken voice, rather breathless for tears, stole across the perfumed duskiness of the terrace:

'Some day, if you still want me.'

A light footfall sounded on the gravel; Ronnie Dene was alone.

The nightingale, witness of their plighted troth, sang on. . . .

THE END







