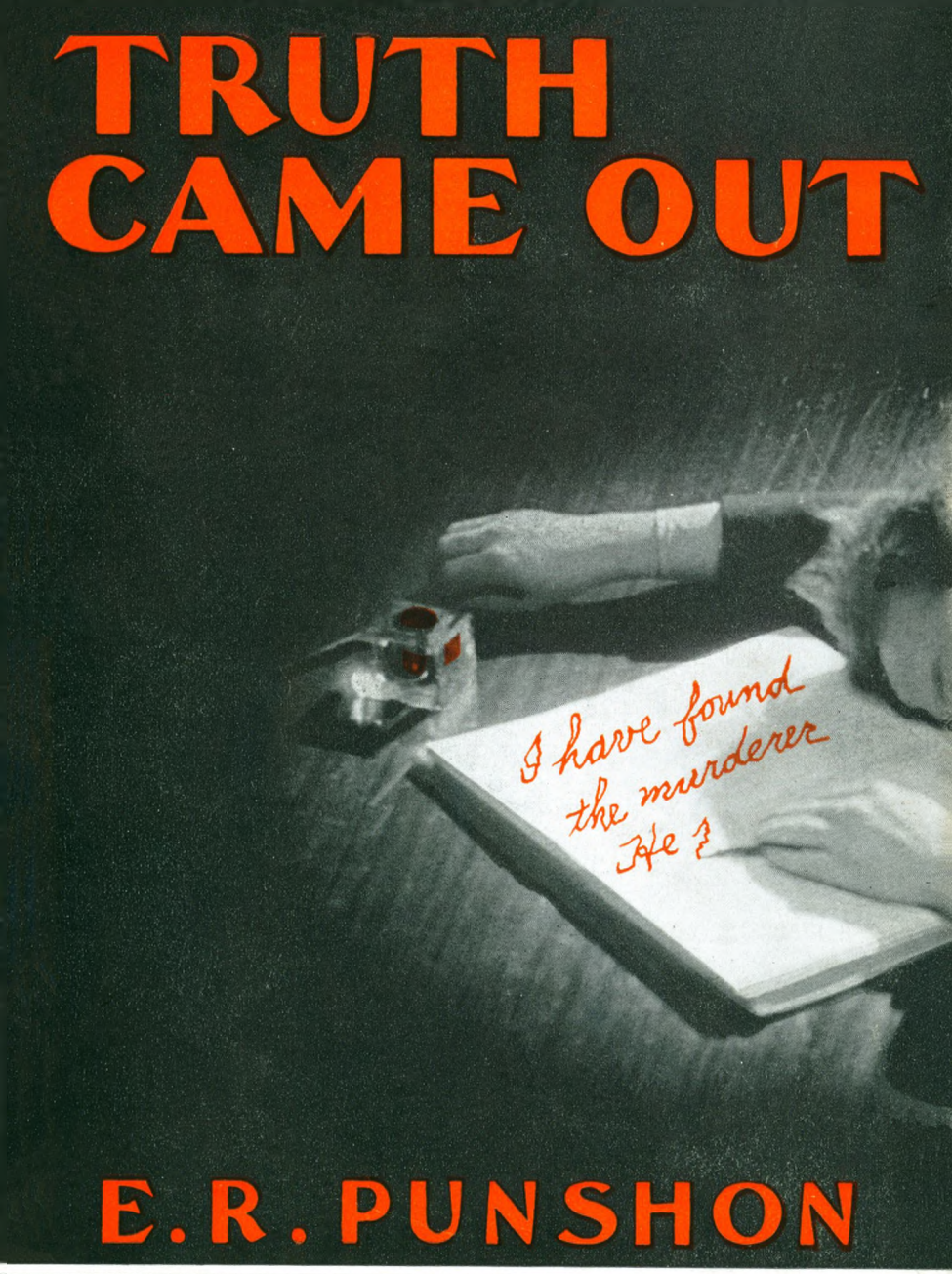
TRUTH CAME OUT



E. R. PUNSHON

A Scotland Yard MYSTERY

$2.00

TRUTH CAME OUT

By E. R. Punshon

PRUSSIC acid — enough to kill a score of men — stolen from the office of a famous London physician. Murder the next night, but with a knife, on Lord Ellerslie's country estate. And a pistol near the scene of the crime.

Sergeant Bell of Scotland Yard, modest, unobtrusive, a trifle bashful, was as puzzled as his more pretentious superiors. But he managed, in his spare moments, to do a little 'poking around' on his own. Bell had a knack of somehow blundering on the truth. He blundered into a secret chamber known for centuries only to the master of the house. He blundered on some queer, suggestive initials cut in an ancient table, on a book which suggested the uses of a hollow oak. In fact, he strayed so close to the truth that he barely escaped the fate of his chief, Inspector Carter himself.

TRUTH CAME OUT

BOOKS BY E. R. PUNSHON

THE COTTAGE MURDER

GENIUS IN MURDER

INFORMATION RECEIVED

TRUTH CAME OUT

BY

E. R. PUNSHON

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
1934

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

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TRUTH CAME OUT

CHAPTER I

DR. MACKENZIE'S STORY

INSPECTOR CARTER listened with profound attention to the story Dr. Mackenzie had to tell. Profound attention was the least that was due to any story told by a gentleman so well known, so successful, so prosperous and well-to-do as this Harley Street practitioner, even when the story itself did not sound very interesting. No doubt Sergeant Bell, whose frequent duty it was to interview callers at Scotland Yard, of whom perhaps one in a thousand has something interesting to say, and then to pass that one in a thousand on to Higher Authority, had shown himself a good deal impressed by the doctor's statement, but then Inspector Carter had not a very high opinion of his subordinate's judgment. It was true he had a knack of blundering somehow on the truth, of running, so to say, his somewhat thick head against the stone wall of fact, and thus discovering where it was, but that, in Inspector Carter's opinion was due more to good luck than good management.

"A good man in his way but no—well, no tact, no flair, if you know what I mean," the Inspector would remark at times. "No idea in his head but just plodding along—and that I will say for Bell," the Inspector would add generously: "He is a real plodder and plodders have their uses."

Which put Sergeant Bell just where he belonged, all

neatly tied up and labelled, besides sounding very nice and generous and implying furthermore that Inspector Carter, too, could have been a plodder, had he not been called to higher things.

But of course Bell had been perfectly right to bring Dr. Mackenzie to see him. Carter knew that Dr. Mackenzie was altogether likely to be Sir James Mackenzie soon, and he knew this, not only because for a Scotch doctor, practising in London, Harley Street and a knighthood are practically inevitable, but also because he knew that recently Dr. Mackenzie had been one of those signing a bulletin that had brought relief to the nation by announcing that a certain eminent person's condition would probably soon improve unless it took a turn for the worse.

It consequently followed as the night the day, or a fit of yawning on a broadcast educational talk, that Dr. Mackenzie was entitled not only to the full and respectful attention of a Chief Inspector, but also to one of the cigars that Chief Inspector provided at his own expense—serving as he did a niggardly and careful country—for offering to the really great and important. So expensive were they indeed that Inspector Carter hardly ever treated himself to them, though he intended to do so more frequently when there should fall to him that long desired superintendency now so close with the imminent retirement of Mr. Phillips. And Dr. Mackenzie mechanically accepted the proffered gift, forgot, for he was really worried, to light it, put it presently mechanically in his pocket, and later on asked himself in bewilderment where on earth he had got hold of this apparent mixture of sawdust and dried cabbage. However his chauffeur pronounced it not so bad, and Carter, ignorant of all this the future still hid, understood quite well that his cigar was being saved for a special treat later on. That, he felt, was flattering in a

way, even if not quite '*comme il faut*' as he said to himself, for he had studied French and loved to quote it on occasion, and more than ever he felt it probable that the missing article was neither stolen nor lost but merely temporarily mislaid.

"You say it contained prussic acid?" he asked.

"Prussic acid," repeated Mackenzie, wondering by what harsh decree of fate it was always necessary to say a thing three times over before the average intelligence could grasp it.

"You are quite convinced, doctor," Carter continued, "that it couldn't possibly have been mislaid anywhere?"

"One doesn't mislay prussic acid," retorted the doctor grimly.

"I suppose it's stuff that kills quick," Carter mused.

"Like a bullet," snapped the doctor, while Sergeant Bell, unobtrusive near the window, reflected sadly that while he hated and detested all murder cases, poison cases were especially loathsome and he did hope this wasn't going to turn out like that.

"A large sized bottle I understand you say?" Carter continued.

"Not large, but it probably held enough to kill every one in this building," answered Mackenzie, looking, for he was tired of answering questions that seemed to him largely going over old ground and in any case to be quite aimless, very much as if he wished it could have been used for that purpose.

But Inspector Carter was still strongly, though privately, of opinion that the missing bottle would turn up somewhere or another before long—very likely in some corner where it had been put for special safety, like the bottle of pre-war whisky his wife and he had been so sure the charwoman had stolen till it turned up inside his own old top

hat on the bottom shelf of the wardrobe, where it had been put to be safe.

"I understand," Carter continued, "that the missing bottle was kept locked up in a cupboard to which no one has access but yourself?"

Sergeant Bell interposed from his place by the window. An uncalled-for interruption, Carter thought, but then Bell never had had any tact, and Dr. Mackenzie, who no doubt cultivated all the other virtues but had somewhat neglected those of patience and meekness, was only just checked, on the very edge of an explosion, by that quiet voice from the window.

"I'll just read over again what I jotted down, if I may," Bell was saying. "The bottle containing the prussic acid solution was kept in a small cupboard which was always locked. The doctor is able to say for certain that the bottle was in its usual place at half-past eleven this morning, because he had occasion then to go to the cupboard and the bottle was there as usual. At 11.45 a.m. Dr. Mackenzie had an appointment with a patient, a Mr. Ralph Willerton. Mr. Willerton is a friend of Dr. Mackenzie."

"Knew his father," Mackenzie explained, "brought young Ralph into the world."

"Mr. Willerton wished to be medically examined. At 11.50 a.m., before the examination had actually begun," continued Bell, "there was an interruption owing to an accident, Dr. Mackenzie's cook, a woman named Ackers, scalding her foot rather badly in the kitchen by upsetting some boiling fat over it. There was a good deal of excitement and confusion, and Dr. Mackenzie went at once to see what was the matter and to attend to the injury, leaving Mr. Willerton in the consulting room. He thinks that in his hurry—the first story told him by a maid who had

lost her head was that the cook was dead—he left his keys, including the key of the cupboard containing the missing bottle in a drawer of his desk he had just opened. Mr. Willerton, partly from curiosity, partly thinking he might be useful, followed the doctor down to the kitchen. The consulting room was therefore left empty for perhaps ten minutes or even a little longer. All the other patients who had called that morning had been attended to and had gone, but Lady Ellerslie, the wife of Lord Ellerslie, of Ellerslie Court, was still in the waiting room. Dr. Mackenzie knows her both socially and as a patient, but on this occasion she had only accompanied Mr. Willerton and was waiting for him to drive her down to Ellerslie Court where Mr. Willerton is staying. Except for the ordinary members of the household the only other person known to have been there at the time was a traveller for a book company."

"Tried to sell me *The Medical Man's Vade Mecum* on the instalment plan," growled Mackenzie. "Wrote most of it myself forty years ago. I got rid of him at once."

A momentary vision hovered in the air of that unfortunate would-be seller of the forty year old *Vade Mecum* being got rid of, much as a flash of lightning might get rid of an inopportune sparrow.

"At 12.45 p.m.," Bell continued, "Dr. Mackenzie, before going to lunch, was locking up as usual, and noticed that the solution of prussic acid was missing. He then remembered that on coming upstairs, after attending to the cook's foot, he found Lady Ellerslie standing in the hall, at the door of his consulting room, and apparently in a very agitated and nervous state. At the time that seemed merely due to what had happened, perhaps to the story that the cook was dead which she might have heard, and Dr. Mackenzie quite naturally did not think much about it. He only remembered the incident when he found

that the prussic acid solution was missing. It would also have been possible for Mr. Willerton to take the bottle before following the doctor downstairs if he had wanted to."

"Or any of the servants?" suggested Carter.

"They were all in the kitchen, having mass hysterics," growled the doctor. "I can swear to that."

"The members of your family?"

"My wife was in the kitchen before me. The two girls and a friend who is staying with us were out shopping together. Neither of my two boys is at home at present."

"You realize of course, Dr. Mackenzie, that it is necessary to ask these questions?" Carter inquired apologetically.

The doctor emitted a kind of grunt which seemed to imply assent, protest, resignation, and impatience, all together, in a highly explosive mixture with a very low flash point.

"There was also the book agent," observed Bell thoughtfully.

"I don't think he left the waiting room," Mackenzie answered. "Besides, he would not have known where to look."

"I think," agreed Carter, smiling a little, "we may safely neglect the book agent for the time. It certainly seems to lie between this young Mr. Willerton and Lady Ellerslie. We might try for finger prints perhaps?"

"Lady Ellerslie was in her outdoor things and wearing gloves," explained Mackenzie. "Willerton would only have to take the keys out of the drawer if I left them there, use them to open the cupboard and put the bottle in his pocket. Not much chance of finger prints there, especially as since then I have used the keys and been to the cupboard once or twice. Any of his finger prints we found in the room would be meaningless, as of course he was there."

"I see," said Carter. "I take it they would both know where you kept your drugs?"

"I don't say that," answered Mackenzie cautiously, "but they have both been in my consulting room more than once and though of course I don't make up my own prescriptions, any patient could have noticed the medicine cupboard."

"I suppose the bottle was labelled?" Carter asked, and again before Mackenzie could answer, which he might have done rudely, Bell interposed.

"Hydrocyanic acid," he read from his note book and added the strength of the solution. "That was specially strong I think you said, doctor?"

"Much stronger than usual," Mackenzie agreed. "I happened to need extra strength for certain purposes. But no one could have known that." He added slowly: "I seem to remember now that last time Lady Ellerslie consulted me I wondered why she had come when there was nothing wrong apparently and I seem to remember also that she asked me a good many questions about where I kept what she called my 'things' and so on."

"Now that's important," said Carter, "that's very important," and Dr. Mackenzie looked more worried than ever.

Bell said:

"Isn't Lady Ellerslie a lady who was well known as a cinema actress at one time?"

"She was very popular and successful indeed," Mackenzie answered. "Not quite in the very front rank perhaps but not far off it. Her stage name was Janet Queen. Naturally she retired when Ellerslie married her."

"Naturally," agreed Carter. "Naturally. You mentioned a Mr. Willerton. He is a patient of yours?"

"Not exactly, he only came to be examined. He is a

mining engineer and there is some idea of his joining an expedition that is going out to New Guinea—probably the interior is rich in metals. He had to provide a certificate that he was in good health and so he came to me."

"Was the examination satisfactory? It didn't disclose anything serious?" asked Carter quickly, with a sudden idea in his mind that possibly the young man had been given an unfavourable verdict, and, having thereupon decided to commit suicide, had taken possession of the missing poison for that purpose.

But this nascent theory the doctor's reply disposed of at once.

"As healthy a young fellow as I ever sounded," he said. "Strong as an ox, handsome boy, too, very good looking. If he went on the stage he would have every girl in London in love with him in no time."

"Has he any idea of doing that?" asked Carter, remembering that Lady Ellerslie had been an actress.

"Lady Ellerslie told him he ought to but he says he can't act and never could," answered Mackenzie. "Though I don't see what that has to do with it," he added thoughtfully, "most of 'em can't and never could."

But Inspector Carter thought he was beginning to see light. A former film star, a strikingly handsome young man she was trying to turn into an actor, a possibly dull and elderly husband, a missing bottle of poison—these seemed ingredients of a case that had at any rate possibilities of attracting public attention.

"I believe Lord Ellerslie is much older than his wife, isn't he?" he asked, rather at a venture.

Dr. Mackenzie looked at him with disfavour.

"I believe so," he admitted. "The marriage has been a most happy one," he added.

"Ah, yes," said Carter, looking as though he didn't

much believe it, since to his essentially simple mind a marriage between a former film star and a wealthy and elderly peer was little likely to be so. That seemed to him obvious, and the obvious always attracted him, to which fact indeed his success in life was largely due, since not even success succeeds as does the obvious. So he said 'Ah' again, and Dr. Mackenzie got angrily to his feet.

"I've done my duty," he said. "I've reported the loss or theft of poison enough to kill fifty people. Now the responsibility is yours."

And though he was Scotch and clever and a doctor and highly successful and competent, he was yet human enough to feel the relief we all feel when we can push off the responsibility on to someone else.

CHAPTER II

INSPECTOR CARTER IS EXCITED

DR. MACKENZIE departed, worried and uncertain, very little impressed, one is sorry to say, by Chief Inspector Carter, almost unaware of the very existence of Sergeant Bell, more than half afraid that in acting as he had done he had given way to unnecessary panic.

"Only, hang it all," he muttered, half aloud, and using a very much more recondite word than 'hang', "the stuff's gone and someone must have taken it and if it wasn't her, who was it?"

He perceived gloomily that he was running considerable risk of becoming involved in a scandal; and to a doctor scandal is much what bankruptcy is to a business man, a general election to a politician, or the dumb silence of the critics to an author—the one thing dreadful. He understood that he had been a little premature in thinking that by confiding in Scotland Yard he had got rid of his responsibility, and he reflected that if those 'two thick headed policemen', for so he unjustly thought of Chief Inspector Carter and Sergeant Bell, proceeded to interview Lady Ellerslie and it turned out that she had not got the missing bottle—or for that matter even if she had and yet bluffed the matter out then she might easily hold him, Dr. Mackenzie, responsible for such inquiries and make some very unpleasant and disconcerting reprisals. Lady Ellerslie had a position in the world, and if she chose to tell her grievance, and it got about that patients visiting Dr. Mackenzie were liable to find themselves accused of

stealing the drugs that he himself, as the story would go, had probably mislaid, then his practise and reputation were likely to suffer very considerably.

That was Scylla and then there was Charybdis, for suppose he had said nothing, and suppose there were those developments he dreaded, since after all people do not wish to possess themselves of strong solutions of hydrocyanic acid either for cash or credit but for motives of a different sort, then if at the subsequent inquiries the stuff were traced to him, his position would have been more than awkward had he never reported its loss.

Why, he might even have found himself called an accessory before the fact or something like that, supposing that indeed any 'fact' were contemplated, and if not, why had the prussic acid vanished?

"Bottled death loose in the hands of Lord knows who," he reflected, and obtained some relief by cursing heartily the scurvy trick fate had played him in placing him in such a predicament.

Then, too, if the matter did develop, comments would certainly be passed upon the fact that he had left in a drawer of his writing desk the keys that opened the cupboard where he kept such things. Even though he had the excuse of the uproar that the unfortunate cook was quite naturally making, for somehow a lusty scream does relieve a scalded foot, and even though the scared housemaid's declaration that those same screams announced the cook's sudden and instant death, certainly required investigation, still the fact that a cupboard containing poison had been left exposed to any intruder, was one that might perhaps be described by cold blooded officials as carelessness or even as a criminal blunder, and Dr. Mackenzie had long ceased to associate himself with such words. To imagine his making a blunder was to him almost like imagining

England being forced off the gold standard, a thing quite inconceivable and that simply didn't happen—unless of course it did.

So Dr. Mackenzie's mood was gloomier than is often that of a prosperous successful practitioner, whose path through life has followed a steadily upward rising path. But on the other hand Chief Inspector Carter was feeling particularly pleased, for it almost seemed to him that this case had been as it were—sent. He almost felt as if he could discern in it the finger of Providence, beckoning him on to the superintendency shortly to be vacant when Mr. Phillips retired. It was indeed just such a case as he had wanted, simple enough, without too many complications, not threatening too much of that 'plodding' for which his own temperament was hardly suitable, and yet sufficiently interesting to command the attention of his superiors, sufficiently important to earn their approval when brought to a successful conclusion. Moreover, handled tactfully, and kept out of the papers if possible—Inspector Carter believed in making use of the papers and knew how to do it, but had no intention of letting them make use of him—the gratitude of those important people might be earned who would presumably be interested in keeping unknown this escapade of Lady Ellerslie, whatever motive might lie behind it.

He had gone at once to report to Mr. Phillips, and Phillips, genial and friendly to his almost inevitable successor, had consulted the Assistant Commissioner, who had agreed that Lady Ellerslie and young Mr. Willerton must be interviewed at once, that Inspector Carter was the man for the job, and that he had better take Sergeant Bell with him.

"Tact," observed Carter modestly to the Sergeant in communicating this decision to him, "tact is what a case

like this needs, tact, and so they both thought of me at once."

Bell said nothing. It was one of his most annoying habits, one that would long ago have made Carter choose another associate, but for the Sergeant's aforementioned curious knack of, so to say, running his rather thick head against the truth.

"Handled properly," Carter mused, "I don't suppose her ladyship will give us much trouble. I shouldn't be surprised," he said smiling and confident, "if I hadn't it all out of her in two minutes, most likely she has got cold feet already."

"That is, if she's got the bottle, too," observed Bell, "but suppose she hasn't, suppose it's someone else?"

"Who?" asked Carter almost pityingly. "Someone's got it and who else could it be? That young fellow—what was his name?"

"Willerton—Ralph Willerton," answered Bell, consulting his notes.

"That's right, but poison always suggests a woman more than a man. Men don't think of it so much, but it comes naturally to women somehow—along of their trying to poison us, most of 'em, seven days a week when they're cooking the dinner."

Having made this not very original joke, Carter stopped to laugh at it very heartily, and even Sergeant Bell paid it the tribute of a wan smile, though less from amusement, for indeed, like a certain eminent lady, he was not amused, than from surprise, since Inspector Carter seldom made jokes, even bad ones.

Rather oddly excited, the Inspector seemed, Bell told himself, and guessed it was probably over the chance this case offered to him to recommend himself to the notice of authority just at the very moment when the filling of

the soon to be vacant superintendency must be under consideration. He remarked:

"There was that book agent, too."

Carter snorted.

"What could he have to do with it?" he demanded. "Of course, we'll check up on him, we can get in touch with him through whatever firm is trying to push the *Vade Mecum* among doctors. That won't be difficult. But he's nothing to do with it, that's sure."

"Then," continued Bell, "there's Dr. Mackenzie himself."

Carter was really startled.

"Why on earth should he steal his own poisons and then come here and tell us about it?" he demanded, and the idea seemed to him so absurd that he began to laugh again and Bell thought he had never seen him so excited—the thought of that vacant superintendency and his approaching promotion must be going to his head.

"Come down to brass tacks," said Carter. "The first thing to do is to get all the information available about Lady Ellerslie. Always start at the beginning of things, Bell, that's something for you to remember. Off with you, see to that and come back in half an hour and let me know what you've found out."

Bell produced his inevitable pocket book.

"I saw to that while you were with Mr. Phillips," he explained, and Carter frowned a little.

A really tactful man, he thought, would have said 'Yes, sir', and gone away, and come back presently with the required information, instead of making it plain that the Inspector's instructions were merely elementary, and had been foreseen and carried out long ago. Yes, it was 'tact' that Bell lacked, and on account of the lack of it poor Bell was never likely to write himself Inspector.

But Bell, unaware of this condemnation so passed upon his methods, was beginning to read from his pocket book the information he had gathered partly from *Who's Who* and other books of reference, and partly from one or two brief telephone conversations.

It did not really amount to much more than what Dr. Mackenzie had already told them. Lord Ellerslie was an elderly peer, who, a widower with one daughter, had met and fallen in love with his present wife when she was a successful and well known actress engaged by a prominent film company. The marriage was said to be a happy one, at any rate nothing was known to the contrary. Lord Ellerslie was a comparatively poor man, for he possessed nothing in the world but a good many thousand acres of rich agricultural land, from which naturally his returns, when all outgoings were paid, were very small indeed. His poverty was the more pronounced, owing to his total neglect of all opportunities offered him to place his name and title at a good price in the city of London, and from his almost fanatical determination to farm a few hundred acres himself, a pursuit which of course still further diminished his already small income. As he devoted most of his time to this occupation and the general management of his estate, he and his wife lived very quietly on their property and were not much known in London society. Lord Ellerslie himself indeed hated town, and seldom visited it, except when his sense of public duty and national interest brought him up to vote against any bill proposed by any government not satisfactorily Tory. His daughter, Margaret Eayland—Eayland was the family name—was said to be a very pretty girl, tall and golden haired, who had made a mild sensation when presented at court, had played with the idea of becoming an actress till she discovered that persistent stage fright was an obstacle to

success in the theatre, and now had a small flat and a studio in Chelsea, where her painting had been well thought of till the acceptance of some water colours by the Royal Academy had thrown a blight upon her reputation. Still, a water colour now occasionally sold, which was always a consolation when her downfall into the ranks of the Academy was thrown up against her by a contemptuous colleague. It was even said that now-a-days she could afford not to draw more than two thirds of the allowance her father made her, though many blamed her for this, since the money she thus saved him only went on pigs and patent cattle foods and so on. Her week ends she generally spent at Ellerslie Court and it was understood that she and her step mother were on quite good terms—at any rate they kissed in public and never talked about each other in private. Rumours of her engagement to one man or another had been circulated but always without authority, and the stories had always been quickly contradicted.

Carter had listened to all this with interest and a slowly nodded head at different items.

"Elderly peer, hard up, lives in country, country tastes, marries popular film actress," he said. "Asking for trouble, I call it. Then there's the pretty daughter. Might have been mistress of Ellerslie Court, and running her pa's place but for his marriage, and now she lives in a Chelsea flat and works for a living. Of course she may like it—there's some as say some do—and she and her step-ma kiss when they meet, but, Lor', Bell, women often kiss when they'd sooner bite."

He paused when he had said this, for it had come out unexpectedly, and now he was not sure that it wasn't what some call an epigram. Leaving this point for further consideration, he continued:

"Anyhow, it's what you may call a situation, and when you remember Lady Ellerslie went to Dr. Mackenzie's in the company of a young man the doctor called one of the handsomest lads he had ever seen, and when you add to the situation a missing bottle of prussic acid—well, it's, it's, it's . . . a . . . a . . ."

Rather helplessly Carter looked at Bell, hoping to be helped out, and Bell, trying to do his best, said:

"A situation."

"That's right," said Carter, pleased this time. "Have to check up on Mr. Willerton, too. Meanwhile we had best be getting along."

"Car?" asked Bell hopefully, but Carter shook his head in sudden gloom.

"What do you think?" he asked bitterly, "not with this economy stunt raging the way it is. There's the car, eating its head off, but can we use it? No. The train for us, because reports have got to be sent in, showing reduced mileage and reduced use of petrol and reduced everything else, and if our train fares cost more than the petrol would have done, what's that matter? Car's a luxury service, train's a necessity, and who cares if the necessity costs the most?"

He went on grumbling, for he liked motoring and liked to whisk through the country in a car the country paid for. But there was no help for it, since the edict had gone forth, and Carter's only consolation was that economy edicts do not apply to people like Superintendents and so on, so that very soon they would not apply to him.

"You know," he remarked suddenly to Bell as the train was steaming out of Paddington, "I should hate to be leaving London for good. Phillips says he's going to settle down somewhere right in the country. But I should hate to feel I was never coming back to London."

"Yes, sir," said Bell, a little surprised, "but then you will be soon."

"Why, yes, of course," Inspector Carter said and laughed. "Of course I shall, I know that," he said and then he laughed again, and again Bell felt a little surprised and even vaguely worried. The Inspector did not seem quite himself, Bell thought, probably an attack of influenza coming on, or something like that, and probably that would mean that Bell himself would catch it. Depressed at the prospect, which now seemed certain, of spending the next three weeks in bed, Bell sighed heavily, and Inspector Carter observed:

"My last case, most likely, this one."

Bell stared at him, quite startled.

"Aren't you feeling well, sir?" he ventured to inquire.

Carter began to laugh.

"You great galoot," he said, "I mean my last case as Inspector. I've had a pretty broad hint I'm down for the vacancy when Phillips retires."

"Oh, yes, sir, of course, I know that, sir," agreed Sergeant Bell simply, and hoped that having been the new Superintendent's 'pal' would be a help and advantageous to himself, but somehow on the whole was rather inclined to entertain on that point melancholy doubts.

CHAPTER III

A FACE, A PISTOL, A CRY

BROADHIRST was the station at which one alighted for Ellerslie Court, and Inspector Carter, still brooding over the refusal of that official car, 'eating its head off in the garage,' as he expressed it, made up his mind defiantly that he would hire a cab in which to complete the journey. Surely, even with 'economy' raging through every government department like a 'débutante' through the programme of her first dance, a Chief Inspector could still manage to wangle a cab fare through an expense account, or else the service was indeed going to the dogs, and anyhow if the worst came to the worst, Bell would be there to go halves.

Unfortunately, when they inquired, there was no cab to be had. Broadhirst was a busy enough little place, rather more than a village, rather less than a town, but it boasted no cabs, and the one or two cars generally available for hiring were all engaged. So there was nothing for it but to walk, and Carter looked little pleased when he learned that the distance was a good three miles, which he calculated swiftly meant six there and back. The distance could however be reduced considerably by taking a path across some fields and then through a private door into the park surrounding Ellerslie Court.

"Interesting old place, I suppose," Carter remarked to the barmaid at the hotel where they had paused for the private purpose of refreshment and the professional one of gathering any information or gossip that might be picked up.

The barmaid agreed that it was. They often had visitors, especially Americans, coming on purpose to see it, and of course it was a very nice old place, though not, in the barmaid's opinion, a patch on the new cinemas they were putting up. Why, there was one the barmaid had seen on her last half day trip to London that had a ceiling just like the sky, moon and stars and all, painted wonderful, and of all this the barmaid grew almost lyrical in admiration, though on the moon, the stars, the drifting clouds of even the loveliest, clearest night she had never bestowed two consecutive glances.

Inspector Carter, who knew well what a fount of information both town and country barmaids often are, and who also knew well how to blend in his manner the fatherly and the flattering, allowed his surprise that the smartest and prettiest girls are often to be found outside London to become apparent, supposed however that country air is good for complexions and bright eyes, and, favourable atmosphere thus created, directed the conversation to Lady Ellerslie. The barmaid observed that she was a very nice lady, but criticized with some asperity her taste in hats, nor had she any doubt but that Lady Ellerslie would be back on the films before long. Any one would, the barmaid supposed, though of course it might be as well to leave them for a time to scoop in a title. But the subject of Lady Ellerslie was evidently one that failed to interest to any marked degree, and the barmaid was drifting away to other customers when Carter dropped into the conversation the name of Ralph Willerton. The barmaid said he was a very nice young gentleman, but the 'very nice' she applied to him was as different from the 'very nice' applied to Lady Ellerslie as a live electric wire is from itself with the current switched off.

The barmaid did not hide her opinion that in the matter

of good looks Ralph Willerton could give Ronald Colman a start and a beating, nor indeed was there a fellow on the films could hold a candle to him, not one. He was a distant connexion, hardly a relative, it seemed, of the Ellerslie family. As a boy he had been Lord Ellerslie's ward, and had spent his holidays at Ellerslie Court, and as the only other living male representative of the family of Ellerslie, was said, according to ancient tradition, to have been entrusted with the secret of the famous Ellerslie secret chamber all the Americans were so potty about.

Carter asked what this secret chamber was, and the barmaid said she didn't know, no one knew, no one ever had known except the reigning peer and the chosen kinsman to whom the secret was entrusted, and whose duty it was to reveal it to the new peer on his accession or on his coming of age. It was understood that it was a very dreadful secret, dark and fatal, with a hidden curse attached all complete and the barmaid, looking more than a little uncomfortable, and remembering that she had other duties to perform, went to see to them, while Inspector Carter, a good deal more than a little uninterested, since secret chambers and hidden curses are not much thought of at Scotland Yard, suggested to Sergeant Bell that they had better be pushing along.

So they finished their lemonade or whatever liquid refreshment it was they were enjoying, and started, taking however a wrong turning and going nearly half a mile out of their way before a passer-by put them right.

"Give me London and a handy 'bus," said Carter as they plodded along the quiet and lonely road on which darkness was quickly falling now. "Why, if I'm in the country I can't even sleep properly what with sometimes its being so quiet you can't help listening, and then when the birds and the rest of it gets started its being worse than

living on top of a garage. Is this the field path that girl talked about do you think?"

Bell thought it must be, and as they began to cross a damp field by a muddy path he said:

"Bit of a rum tale about the Ellerslie secret chamber. I think I remember reading about it in one of the Sunday papers, and how there's a curse on it that makes it death for any one but Lord Ellerslie himself or his heir to enter it."

"Good place to keep out of then," observed Carter, still without much interest.

He had stopped grumbling about the country and contrasting the warm, well lighted streets of London with these dark lonely country paths that seemed to fade away with an obscure threat into the darkness of the coming night. For now the nearer he got to Ellerslie Court the more difficult his errand appeared to grow. In town it had seemed simple enough, he had accepted it light heartedly, he had felt confident of his power to handle the situation satisfactorily. A few questions, tactful yet with just a hint of stern authority behind, and Lady Ellerslie would collapse he had supposed. But somehow this collapse appeared now less certain and inevitable. Suppose she simply denied all knowledge of the missing poison! Suppose indeed she hadn't got it at all!! Suppose it had been young Ralph Willerton who had taken it, or one of the doctor's own household, or possibly some one who had just slipped in and out during the confusion caused by the cook's scalded foot without having even been noticed. Or, finally, there was Bell's disconcerting suggestion that the poison had not really been lost, but merely concealed by Mackenzie for some unknown reason of his own. Less and less confident in that famous tact of his which before had seemed so adequate, did Inspector Carter feel with every step forward that they took.

"Not much to go on, have we?" he remarked suddenly to Bell. "I don't see the business is going to be as easy as it looked at first."

Bell, who had been of that opinion for some time, since the theft of a bottle of prussic acid did not strike him as a banal crime, said nothing, but managed somehow to make that silence extremely eloquent.

"Anyway," Carter comforted himself, "even if we don't manage to get the stuff back, who ever took it won't dare use it, once it's known we are making inquiries."

"No," agreed Bell. "No, unless that's happened already. There's the house, I suppose," he added.

For they had left the field now and had come to the road by the edge of the park where a high wall ran, and from the point where they stood they had a good view of the old and grey and sombre pile that looked more grey and sombre still in the fading evening light.

"Looks the sort of place where you would expect curses and dead men and such like," observed Bell, brightening up a little as if the prospect pleased him.

"Oh, shut it," growled Carter, less pleased apparently, for if before his spirits had seemed exceptionally good, now they appeared correspondingly depressed. "What's that?" he added.

"I thought—" began Bell and paused.

Neither of them was quite sure and yet it had seemed to them both that for a moment they had glimpsed a face that had flashed for a moment above the top of the high wall near which they stood, and then vanished again as swiftly as it had come.

"Looked like a girl," Carter said.

"A pretty girl," confirmed Bell. "Red hair I thought. Eight feet high that wall," he said.

"Eight foot at least," agreed Carter. "Give me a

hand," he said. A moment later he was on the top of the wall, and, another moment after that, Bell was beside him. Beneath them was a tangle of undergrowth, from which there rose one or two young trees whereby any young and active person could easily enough have gained the top of the wall. But of any living person there was no trace, and then, just visible, some way away, a dim form in the growing dusk, they saw the figure of a man running as those run who have desperate need of speed. Only for a moment did they see him, for in a moment he was out of sight, hidden by a fold in the ground.

"See that?" said Carter.

They watched a little longer but nothing more happened. Carter called: "Any one there?" but got no answer. He slid down to the ground again and Bell joined him.

"Don't suppose it's anything," Carter remarked. "Nothing to do with us, anyhow, no call on us to take action, nothing to show it's a police matter."

Bell was of the same opinion and neither of them spoke again. Yet there still remained in both their minds an odd impression of that distant figure running with such an air of frantic haste through the closing shades of the night. The idea had come to them both that perhaps this face they had seen peering at them over the park wall was that of Lady Ellerslie, and yet to both of them the notion seemed absurd. They wondered if there were any connexion between what they had seen or thought they saw and the distant running figure they had had that passing glimpse of.

In silence they walked on and came two or three hundred yards further on to a small door in the park wall, marked: 'Ellerslie Court. Private.'

It was unlocked, as the barmaid at Broadhirst had told them it was nearly sure to be, since it was much used as

a short cut by visitors, tradespeople and others going to and from the house, and by Lord Ellerslie himself when on his way to the neighbouring golf links on which he often played.

The path was well marked and led them through the quiet glades, and by the tall and spreading trees, and over the soft immemorial turf of the typical English park that has been cared for all through the passage of the long, slow centuries. Here and there one could see the twinkling white tail of a rabbit skurrying away to shelter, and a couple of deer stood and stared at them in mild protest at their intrusion. Ellerslie Court itself was hidden from their sight now, and over the whole brooded the calm stillness of the evening, the pause that comes when the day is dying, the night about to be born.

They came into the shade of a great oak, and a chill wind from which hitherto they had been sheltered crept round it and met them and made them both shiver.

"Give me good old London," growled Carter. "Gives me the creeps this place."

They had come in sight of Ellerslie Court again now, looking more vast, more grey, more desolate than ever. It had the air of a deserted place where no one lived and Carter said suddenly:

"Do you know I've an idea all this is going to turn out badly."

Bell looked at his Inspector with a certain concern. He had for him the sort of odd, twisted regard that comes from long companionship as well as the respect for a superior officer that is taught by discipline. After all, Carter had done well, very well, much better than he, Bell, had done, and this was a proof of superiority, and now it was odd indeed to hear the confident, brisk Carter speak like this.

"I don't see why, sir," he protested mildly, and Carter said:

"Look there, do you see that?"

For there, on the path before them, lay a small automatic pistol, none the less deadly and dangerous looking because it lay so still and quiet by the side of that quiet, deserted path.

The two men stood and looked at it, and then all around, but there was nothing they could see to account for its appearance. Cautiously they approached, watching where they put their feet that they might destroy no other marks. The ground was soft and damp just here where the pistol was lying, and there was no trace of any footsteps near, nor indeed anything to show that any one lately had passed that way. Carefully Bell picked up the weapon and saw that it was loaded but had not been discharged. He removed the cartridge clip and Carter said:

"Rum go."

Bell said nothing as was so much his habit. But he thought of that flying figure they had seen in the dusky distance, and of the missing poison, and of the half seen face that had glanced at them over the top of the park wall and then vanished and he wondered what it all meant.

"Very rum go," repeated Carter. After a long pause he said: "Ought to see whoever claims it, has a license."

Bell agreed.

"That is if any one does claim it," he added doubtfully, for it seemed to him possible this weapon had been got rid of by some one who might have little wish to claim it again.

"Small calibre," Carter observed. "Sort of thing a woman might have," he added, and Bell knew that the Inspector, too, had been thinking of Lady Ellerslie.

It seemed unusual things were happening . . . or had happened . . . or were about to happen . . . here in this quiet park where it was as though peace itself might have come to seek a habitation, and all at once there burst suddenly upon their ears, splitting terribly the quiet and brooding silence of the evening, a cry, a sudden loud and dreadful cry, a cry of which the two who heard it understood well the significance, for they had both heard its like before, the cry that tells that suddenly and with violence a human soul has been wrenched from its fleshy habitation.

CHAPTER IV

THE INVESTIGATION BEGUN

BOTH men began to run in the direction whence that dreadful cry had seemed to come. Here the trees were thicker, the undergrowth denser, the park less well tended than elsewhere, and here, too, the silence lay once more unbroken by any sound save that of their own running feet and their heavy breathing.

"It was over here it came from, didn't it?" Carter said, pausing, hesitating, looking around, no longer certain which direction to take.

Bell said nothing. He looked, he listened, with a kind of strained intensity. He even, practising a trick he had heard of, knelt down and put his ear to the ground, but either the earth tremors brought him no sound or none that he had skill to interpret. He got to his feet again and Carter, turning another way, said:

"Or was it over there it came from?"

Bell still said nothing. That cry still sounded dreadfully in his ears, and yet it was hard to associate with this soft, gentle scene where all seemed so quiet, so tranquil, so untroubled.

The spot where they stood was a lovely glade, lying in a fold of the ground which, rising slightly on both sides, seemed as it were to enclose them on either hand. At a little distance a tall oak grew, towering above its lesser neighbours, and in one direction the glade ended in a scattered grove of beech trees through which was to be seen a glint of water where a shallow stream ran between

low, reedy banks. The mild evening lay all around, the upper branches of the trees moved gently in a breeze that was too gentle to reach the two men where they stood, the peace of that quiet spot was like that of silent prayer, and yet they were very sure that somewhere near at hand some dreadful tragedy had just been enacted. Lifting his voice Carter shouted aloud but got no reply and then he said abruptly to Bell:

"You go this way, I'll go that. There must be—something."

Bell nodded and obeyed and Carter went towards the oak. He had a vague idea that he would climb it in order to get a more extended view, but then he reflected that the growing darkness and the surrounding trees would restrict his field of vision and he gave up the idea.

For a few minutes he and Bell ranged to and fro. To them the place was heavy with tragedy, that cry they had heard they both heard still, it seemed to them that every tree, every bush might well hide what they sought, and yet they found nothing. They even began to doubt whether they had not deceived themselves, or been deceived by the suddenness and unexpectedness of what they had heard, into lending it a significance it had not itself possessed.

"Only there's this," Bell said, and produced the little automatic pistol they had found. "That's proof something's been happening here."

"It's getting dark," Carter grumbled. "Shan't be able to see a thing soon, we had better get help, and lanterns, too." Then he said: "One thing, whoever it was, it wasn't prussic acid made them cry out like that."

"No," agreed Bell, "no, and it wasn't gun play, for we should have heard the report."

"Means," said Carter, "it can't have been her then . . . unless it was her. I mean," he explained hastily, seeing

that Bell looked puzzled, "I mean it can't have been Lady Ellerslie making use of the poison she took, but it may have been whoever she meant the stuff for getting in first."

"It's an idea," agreed Bell, but without much enthusiasm, for though the idea seemed possible it did not strike him as probable. Nor for that matter was it proved as yet that it was Lady Ellerslie who was responsible for the disappearance of the poison. Bell always liked to keep his mind open to alternatives and he remembered that there had been a Mr. Ralph Willerton who might also have stolen the poison—not to mention the unknown book agent or other possibilities.

"No good our going on like this by ourselves," Carter repeated. "We must get help. Perhaps it was nothing after all. Nice fools we shall look then."

"So we shall," agreed Bell with melancholy resignation, "but then you often do—at least I mean," he corrected himself hastily, seeing the look his superior gave him, "I mean I often do. Only not this time," he added with abrupt conviction, for there came back to him a clear memory of the cry they had heard and of that quality in it which neither then nor now could they have mistaken.

He gave another quick glance round that lovely glade with its murmuring, bending trees, still holding in the falling night its secret with something of that soft obstinacy a woman shows when she has determined not to speak. Was there any connexion, he wondered, between what had happened here, and the reported disappearance of Dr. Mackenzie's poison? Had the one thing led to the other? Was it really that the victim for whom the poison had been intended had watched and known and—struck first?

"There was that girl we saw," Carter was saying. "Wonder if she had anything to do with it. Would you know her again?"

"I only had a glimpse," Bell said. "I have an idea she was pretty and had red hair and that's all. She was down again like a shot."

"Like she was scared, like the sight of us scared her pretty badly," agreed Carter. "Why should it? Then there was that fellow we saw running . . . and who was it threw away that pistol we picked up?"

These were questions to which Bell had no answer. They gave one swift, last look round the glade, behind the nearer trees, amidst the denser bushes, at the foot of a bank that sloped down into a thick growth of bracken, and still they found nothing, no trace of that sudden death which they were both convinced had recently passed by this beautiful, quiet spot. Then they set off towards Ellerslie Court, going at a fast trot, for no time was to be lost if the search were to have any chance of succeeding before darkness set in.

It was evident as they drew nearer, still going at a quick trot, that their approach had been noticed and had aroused attention, for one or two persons could be seen coming out and watching them. Leaving the path, which hitherto they had followed, they struck across to where a low fence guarded what was apparently the more private portion of the grounds, that surrounding the house. Some one shouted to them from a distance and waved, evidently directing them to keep to the path that led round to the back. They took no notice, but, scrambling over the fence, hurried on through a flower garden, and past a tennis court, to the long, low terrace that ran in front of the house and on to which, through a window opening to the ground, there had just emerged a thick set, powerful looking man of middle age and a somewhat uncouth appearance that was perhaps chiefly a result of the tangled looking black beard he wore. He was roughly and untidily

dressed and had apparently been writing letters, for he had a fountain pen in one hand and some notepaper in the other. The pockets of his coat were bulging with papers and journals, and he had managed to scatter a certain amount of the ink he had presumably been using for his letters over his hands and even over his clothing. His eyes were light blue and were very keen and sharp looking, and as the two Scotland Yard men drew nearer, he called out:

"What's the matter? Fire . . . hay-stacks, ricks? . . . what is it?"

"I am an officer of police, Inspector Carter, Scotland Yard," Carter answered, a little breathless, for he was not now-a-days in such good training as in former days he had been used to keep himself in, but all the same still dignified and still able to observe that this announcement produced its effect on the black bearded one. "I have reason to believe some act of violence has been committed not far from here, in the park. I want to use your 'phone to inform the county authorities and I want the help of every man available to make a search at once. Are you Lord Ellerslie?"

"No, my name's Morland, Mark Morland," the other answered. "I'm only staying here, I'm visiting Lord Ellerslie on business. He is out somewhere in the park himself, I think."

"What is the matter?" asked a new voice.

Through the same open french window had just come on the terrace a tall, slim woman, of striking appearance, carrying herself with the grace and ease of one who has studied how to walk and stand. She was dressed in loose flowing draperies that suited well her dark and eager beauty, and she had an intense way of watching whoever she was speaking to that was perhaps a relic of her days

of posing before the camera, but that was a little disconcerting to most people until they got used to it.

"Oh, Lady Ellerslie," Morland said, turning and addressing himself to her, "these gentlemen are from Scotland Yard," and neither Carter nor Bell missed the start, the sudden pallor, the look of absolute terror that for a moment flamed in her eyes and then was gone again, as in a moment, though with an effort that was almost visible, she regained her self control. But though she was still pale, her eyes were steady, her lips firm, as she listened in silence while Morland went on: "They seem to think something's happened in the park. They want help to make a search and they want to use your 'phone."

"To search the park," she repeated, looking at them steadily. "What for?"

"I must use your 'phone to report first, please," Carter said. "Is Lord Ellerslie in?"

"No, he is in the park somewhere," Lady Ellerslie answered, "he went to look at some trees that are to be cut. If anything has happened, he would know."

Carter and Bell exchanged quick glances. Was it Lord Ellerslie, they wondered . . . and if so, was he victim or . . . the other . . .

"I think the park must be searched at once," Carter said. "May I ask you to get every one you can—men servants, friends, any one. Is the 'phone . . . you are on the 'phone? . . ."

"Mr. Morland will show you . . . do you mind?" she asked him, and there came out of the house a very pretty girl, her head crowned by a mass of golden curls. She was tall but slight in build, with quick vivacious ways, and beautifully shaped hands her friends, or some of them, said she was a little too fond of drawing attention to by

a certain trick of gesticulating she had. At any rate she was holding them both out now as she exclaimed:

"Is anything the matter? What's the matter?"

"I don't know," Lady Ellerslie answered. "Margaret, Bubbles hasn't come back yet, has he?"

'Bubbles' was Lord Ellerslie, for so, in accordance with the new etiquette, did his wife and daughter refer to him, and though he grumbled and snorted about it at times, and when he was in a bad temper made it a great grievance, in secret there was nothing he liked better.

"I don't think so," Margaret answered. "He went out to look at those trees."

"Have you been out in the park, miss?" Carter asked.

For a perceptible moment she hesitated, but then that might only have been shyness or timidity, for Carter had spoken somewhat abruptly and Bell thought to himself: 'There, now she's warned we saw her, if it was her.'

She said, a little slowly and carefully:

"Yes. I'm doing some sketches, some studies in evening light. Why?"

"You didn't hear anything?"

"No," she answered at once. "Why?"

"Well, I must 'phone at once," Carter said.

He and Morland disappeared accordingly, and as they did so there came along the terrace as handsome a young fellow as Bell had ever seen. Although it was a little early he was in dinner dress, and Lady Ellerslie turned quickly towards him.

"Oh, Ralph," she said, "something's happened in the park, apparently, and the police have come, and they want every one to help them look."

So this was Ralph Willerton, Bell thought, and regarded him with keen interest, since apparently it was between him and Lady Ellerslie that lay the responsibility for the missing prussic acid.

CHAPTER V

"WHAT'S HAPPENED?"

THAT Dr. Mackenzie had not exaggerated in describing Ralph Willerton as one who on the stage or screen would have stood a good chance of becoming a favourite with feminine audiences was indeed very evident, and Bell thought regretfully that it was a sad waste for such finely modelled features, such bright, clear eyes, such white and even teeth to have been bestowed upon a mere man. Nor was Bell altogether unconscious of a slight, instinctive prejudice against the possessor of such gifts, as though the perversity of nature in bestowing them so wastefully must most probably be answered by some kind of equal perversity in the recipient.

Not that there was anything effeminate or dandified in the young man's manner or appearance, for his shoulders were broad, his bearing athletic, and his cheeks well tanned, while the manner in which his evening tie had been fastened showed either great haste or a superb indifference to such niceties of appearance. All the same the sudden movement Lady Ellerslie made towards him as he appeared, Bell had not failed to remark, nor to observe that it had prevented him from watching her expression and from seeing whether any glance of warning or of understanding had passed between them. Of course, this movement might have been quite natural and unintended, but when he shifted his position slightly so as to be able to watch them both as they exchanged a few low hurried words he could not catch, once again they both turned

away, with the effect, again whether intended or not, of hiding their faces from him. But when Willerton turned back to Bell, his expression was quite calm and normal, his voice quite unconcerned as he said:

"Police? Why? What's up?"

Bell, though the question was addressed to him, made no attempt to answer. He was thinking that either of these two might be responsible for the theft of the missing poison or was it perhaps not so much either as both? Had what had happened in Dr. Mackenzie's consulting room been concerted and carried out between them? As Bell did not speak it was Lady Ellerslie who answered Willerton's question.

"They say they think something's happened in the park," she explained. She added: "Bubbles is there."

"Bubbles?" repeated Willerton. "Lord Ellerslie? . . . you don't mean . . . you can't think? . . . oh, that's rot."

Neither of the two women answered him but they were both very pale. They were all looking at Bell, and it seemed clear to him that they all three knew something, or suspected something, or feared something. He had the idea that some sharp, quick question or demand might easily elicit from one or other of them a response that would make all clear, and yet what form this question or demand ought to take he could not imagine. While he still hesitated a woman appeared at the open french window. She was plainly and neatly dressed and looked like a superior servant. She had some sewing in her hands but what attracted Bell's attention was that her hair was of a rather vivid red. His glance went from her to Margaret Eayland and then back again and he told himself with a resigned sigh that it was just like the natural perversity of things to find two red-haired girls in the house, even

though this newcomer was hardly a girl. But certainly it might have been either of them who had vanished so abruptly behind the park wall on catching sight of himself and Carter; and was it possible, Bell wondered, that that sudden disappearance meant they had been recognized as 'busies', to use the slang term for detectives? For there were localities in London where a mere glimpse of either himself or of the Inspector or more especially of them both together, was enough to create all around a desolation absolute enough to remind one of that the Romans are said to have called peace.

"That will do, Louise, another time," Lady Ellerslie said.

"Yes, my lady," answered Louise, and vanished, and in her place Morland came lurching back—he had a heavy laboured walk, a little like that of a ploughman toiling behind his team, but it did not prevent him from moving rapidly enough. He said:

"I saw Peters in the hall, so I told him I thought you wanted him. He's bringing every man he can find round here."

A moment or two later Carter came back from 'phoning the county headquarters and from receiving their promise that a car with assistance would be dispatched immediately, and then there appeared a small group of men coming round the corner of the house where the terrace ended in a short flight of steps. It was headed by Peters, the butler, an elderly but still vigorous man, who knew little of wines and seemed incapable of learning, who 'corked' with the utmost regularity every bottle he decanted, who possessed a memory like a bottomless pit since nothing that went into it ever came out again, but who was also still a wonderful slow bowler and had done so much to make the Ellerslie cricket team the local

champions that his master would willingly have overlooked far more serious defects. With him were four or five others, Rogers, the chauffeur, Will Darley, the underfootman, Symonds, the gardener, a village lad who helped Symonds, and a gamekeeper who had chanced to be on the spot.

Of this little army Carter took command, told them what he wanted them to do, and at their head, accompanied by Bell, started off. They were supplied with lanterns and electric torches, for the evening was now rapidly closing into night, and with them went both Morland and Willerton. Lady Ellerslie insisted on coming, too, and with her came her step-daughter, Margaret, both ladies refusing to heed the suggestion made that they would do well to wait together in the house.

"No, I'm coming," Lady Ellerslie said briefly.

"So am I," Margaret echoed.

"Has anything happened to his lordship?" the young village lad asked aloud and some one told him angrily to shut up.

"We don't know what's happened, we don't know if anything's happened," Carter explained. "All we can say is that cries have been heard and that we saw—" He paused, perhaps influenced by a sudden uneasy movement Bell made, and then went on: "Well, that doesn't matter now, only we think something has happened and we want to find out what." Quite suddenly he produced from his pocket the small automatic pistol he and Bell had picked up. "Can any of you identify that?" he asked.

There was a silence. Carter was holding it out to them on the clean handkerchief in which he had wrapped it. They all looked at it intently, gravely, silently. Not a word did one of them speak, silent they all stood, and yet something in their very silence, in their attitudes, in the rigidity

with which they held themselves, suggested to Bell that they all knew, that they all recognized it, and yet that none of them meant to say so. Lady Ellerslie was very pale, Margaret stood like a statue, on Willerton's handsome face had come a look of utter defiance, the yawn Morland was smothering did not seem quite natural, Peters, the butler, had put on an expression more stolid than was possible, and Bell saw distinctly that he trod hard on the toe of the young footman who had just been about to say something.

"Aren't we rather wasting time?" Morland asked, achieving his yawn. "It'll be dark soon."

"That's right," agreed Carter amiably, and the little party started off at once, Carter putting the pistol back in his pocket.

Taking his opportunity Bell whispered to Carter:

"I believe they all knew it. Can they all be in it?"

"All of 'em?" repeated Carter, a little surprised. "There's one of 'em though—did you notice anything special?"

"I thought all of them . . . " repeated Bell.

"Oh, come," protested Carter, "that's a bit too much . . . there was something I noticed. I'll tell you later. I think it explains the whole thing, if I'm right, and I think I am. And I don't think we shall ever see Lord Ellerslie alive."

Bell, who had considered the same idea, did not speak, though he looked grave and doubtful. Was it possible, he wondered, that somehow warning or news of the discovery of the theft of the prussic acid had reached those guilty of it, and had that made them determine upon more speedy action? It did not seem to him likely, but at the same time some explanation was required of these disconnected and puzzling events that appeared to be happening, none of them very much taken alone and yet all

together appearing to hint, to suggest . . . and was Carter right in thinking Lord Ellerslie would never be seen alive again?

He sought Carter's side once more.

"This Miss Eayland, the daughter," he said, "Margaret they call her . . . red hair she's got and so had whoever we saw peeping at us over the park wall. But then Lord Ellerslie's her father."

Carter looked at his subordinate somewhat rebukingly.

"The Honourable Miss Eayland," he said with some emphasis and with still more respect, for titles to him were ever clothed in their own glory, "and her hair's more what you would call golden, if you ask me . . . a lady like her. But there's a maid, Lady Ellerslie's own maid, with hair as red as you like, Louise they called her and a Frenchwoman as well."

"Looked to me a bit older than the girl we saw," Bell remarked.

"Couldn't hardly tell with having only such a glimpse," Carter insisted, "and anyway, which ever one of 'em it was, I'll bet a good deal it's his lordship's been done in—pretty plain that is."

Bell had no time to muse on the strange fact that just as the captain's choleric word is flat blasphemy in the soldier, so the maid's red hair becomes golden in the mistress, nor indeed would he ever have thought of musing on a fact his essentially simple mind accepted without question, for now they could all hear plainly the sound of some one running rapidly towards them, coming with heavy footsteps crashing through the undergrowth and bracken that lay on their left hand. They paused and waited, turning in the direction whence the unseen runner seemed to be coming with a speed that told there was great need of haste, some desperate urgency that pricked

him on. A moment later, bareheaded, excited, waving both arms towards them, a tall man, stout and elderly, one who looked as if running was not much a habit of his, burst into the open.

"Bubbles, it's Bubbles," cried Lady Ellerslie.

"Why, it's his lordship," Peters exclaimed.

"Something's happened," Morland said, grasping his tangled black beard with both hands as though he wished for something solid to hold on to. "What's happened?"

"Lord Ellerslie? Is that his lordship?" asked Carter, quite bewildered, but no one answered him, for to them at least the fact was sufficiently evident.

"This way, quick," Lord Ellerslie shouted to them, "this way . . . it's murder . . . there's been a man killed . . . over here."

"Murdered? Who? Who?" shouted Morland, and began to run with his characteristic clumsy speed.

The others, uttering various exclamations, followed, and Lord Ellerslie shouted again:

"It's this way . . . over here . . . by that oak . . . he's dead . . . Julie, Margaret, you stay where you are. You can't do any good and it's not pretty. Morland, will you stay with them, do you mind? You others come with me, there's a dead man over there, there's been murder done, I think."

"Well, it's evidently not Lord Ellerslie who's been murdered," observed Bell with a resigned air, "so then, who is it?"

Carter did not answer. He was close to Lord Ellerslie now and he said to him:

"I am a police officer, Inspector Carter, of Scotland Yard."

"You are!" exclaimed Ellerslie, looking very surprised. "How the devil—well, that can be explained afterwards.

You had better come along then . . . I was just going to send for the police . . . and a doctor . . . perhaps you'll know him . . . I don't, a stranger to me . . . I know every one about here . . . I was some distance away . . . then I heard a cry . . . there are some trees that want cutting and I was looking at them and then I heard a cry . . . a cry," he repeated with a slight shudder. "So I came along . . . I couldn't see anything at first . . . then I found him . . . a knife's been put right through him . . . it was lying there, close by . . . the knife I mean . . . of course I didn't touch it . . . I just made sure he was dead and then I went to get help and saw you."

"We heard that cry too," Carter explained. "We couldn't find anything to account for it, we were coming back to search again."

"I see," said Ellerslie. He had brought them now to the very glade where Carter and Bell had before failed to find anything. He led them across it, and towards the great oak Carter had thought for a moment of climbing so as to get a more extended view. Here at the foot of the tree, partly hidden by its spreading roots but yet so placed that he could not have failed to see it had he gone only a yard or two further, lay the crumpled body of a small, rather shabbily dressed man, middle-aged, his hair and his short beard just turning grey, his small grey eyes glazed in death. His bowler hat, a worn umbrella with a crook handle, and an old dispatch case that had come open in falling and spilt its contents of papers and two large and substantial looking volumes, were all lying near. With a sudden exclamation Bell picked up the book.

"Look, do you see what it is?" he said.

It was a copy of *The Medical Man's Vade Mecum*, that work which Dr. Mackenzie had mentioned some book agent had tried to sell him just before he discovered the

loss of the bottle of prussic acid. Quite bewildered at this discovery, wondering what it could mean, asking themselves if the dead man before them could really be the book agent who had visited Dr. Mackenzie that morning, Carter and Bell bent together over the book and over the body, as if hoping to find the answer there, and young Ralph Willerton came up to them:

"Look, here's the knife that killed him," he said, holding it out, "it was lying just over there."

CHAPTER VI

A PISTOL AND AN EXPLANATION

BOTH Carter and Bell had been so startled by the unexpected suggestion of an identity existing between the victim of this crime and the book agent almost casually mentioned by Dr. Mackenzie, that for the moment they had entirely forgotten everything else and all those official details and precautions that form the accustomed routine in such cases. They had both been standing there, staring blankly at the *Vade Mecum* which seemed to hint at some connexion between the stolen prussic acid of the morning and the murder of the afternoon, till Willerton came bustling to them with the knife he had picked up. Then indeed, Carter, thus recalled to himself, and his duties, fairly exploded.

"Put that down at once," he roared, "haven't you more sense than to do a thing like that? What do you mean by it? Don't you know you've no business to touch anything at all? Sergeant Bell, attend to your duties, don't stand staring there. See that every one keeps back, look at them making footprints everywhere . . . gross negligence. As for you," he shouted at Willerton, "I've a good mind to put you under arrest for obstructing me in carrying out my duties."

It was an explosion of wrath that made every one look very taken aback indeed. Willerton stammered an apology. The others retreated a few steps and tried to look as if in doing so they were avoiding leaving any footprints. Lord Ellerslie said:

"Come, you know, Ralph, you ought to have more sense than that."

"Didn't you hear his lordship say particularly that he had been careful to touch nothing?" demanded Carter, still very angry, very red in the face. "That might have told you if your own sense didn't . . . a gentleman of your education to go and do a thing like that . . . contempt of court it ought to be . . . there's many been sent to gaol for less than that."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry, I didn't think," said Willerton, who, possibly because he knew his action was indefensible, took all this scolding with a meekness that was not generally a conspicuous feature of his character.

"Didn't think," repeated Carter with indescribable scorn.

"Some don't," agreed Bell. "Some do," he added, gazing sadly at the top of the oak tree as though he suspected the real fault lay there.

Willerton gave the Sergeant a quick and sudden glance, apparently wondering if this observation hid more than it expressed, and Carter snapped out:

"Don't talk like a fool, Bell. Get on with the job."

"Yes, sir," answered Bell mildly, and his gaze fluttered from the top of the oak to Willerton and back again. "Some do quite a lot—think I mean," he murmured, while Carter continued stormily to tell Willerton just what he thought of him.

"What chance," he demanded, "do you think there is of identifying any finger marks on that knife now you've been handling it?"

"I'm most awfully sorry," repeated Willerton as humbly as before.

"Most likely," observed Bell, "there'll be no finger prints we can make out on it now at all except your own

—and that'll make things very awkward, that will, won't it?"

"I suppose it will," agreed Willerton, looking at Bell with less meekness than his manner showed towards Carter. "I suppose it may make your job more difficult?"

"But not impossible," Bell assured him.

"I must say, Ralph," interposed Lord Ellerslie, "I think you deserve everything the Inspector has said. I never thought you were such an ass."

"Show us where it was when you picked it up," Carter ordered. "I suppose you noticed that much?"

"It was over here," said Willerton eagerly, and in his apparent eagerness to propitiate the offended Inspector went off at what was almost a run and then stopped. "No, it was over there," he corrected himself, hurrying in another direction and pausing again. "I'm awfully sorry," he said, "the fact is, I'm rattled with having been such an ass and the way you've been telling me off. It was here," he decided and indicated another spot a little distance away. "I've got blood on my shoes, I've been stepping in that poor fellow's blood," he said with sudden horror.

"Never mind that, mark where you found the knife," barked Carter, though a little placated by the other's evident repentance and the meekness with which he had suffered rebuke, for indeed it is not every day that even an Inspector of the C.I.D. has the chance to 'tell off' before witnesses a young swell in evening dress, a relative of a peer of the realm—in the actual presence of that peer, too, looking approvingly on.

It was indeed one of the great hours of Inspector Carter's life. He saw himself recounting the incident at Headquarters, and he felt he could tell it with sufficient effect for no thought of any blame for the failure to prevent such a contretemps being attached to him—or at any rate

no more than could be easily passed on to the broad shoulders of Sergeant Bell.

"Mischief's done now," he grumbled, "won't be your fault, Mr. Willerton, if the guilty party escapes."

"No, indeed it won't," agreed Bell, and again somehow his eyes and Willerton's seemed to meet, though the expression of the one was as innocent as that of the other was blank.

"One thing certain," Carter remarked, "it's murder—it can't be either suicide or accident when the knife it was done with was where Mr. Willerton—" the name he accompanied by another glare at the culprit—"picked it up. Evidently the murderer threw it down there before making his escape."

"Very nice of him, too," commented Bell abstractedly, "for some would have gone and hidden it and made us spend half our time looking for it. Now if some one had had a little automatic all ready to use——"

He was thinking of the pistol they had so oddly found not far away, and that, though undischarged, he somehow felt must be in some way connected with the tragedy. Yet how he had no idea, so that his remark was an arrow fired altogether at venture, and when he glanced swiftly at young Willerton to see if it had any effect on him, he noticed with astonishment that it was Lord Ellerslie, who happened to be close behind Willerton, who started and dropped his hand towards his pocket. Bell remembered then that the peer was the only one present who did not know of the discovery made by the side of the footpath running through the park. But none of this byplay was noticed by Carter who was saying now:

"Does any one here know the corpse? Can any one identify him? Will every one who hasn't done so already please look in turn? And remember it's important. But

first I want a doctor sent for. I take it there's one near you could ring up and get along here at once?"

The young footman, Darley, was sent off on this errand, though not till he had looked closely at the dead man and asserted strongly that he was an absolute stranger to him. Each of the others in turn made the same statement, including both Lord Ellerslie and Ralph Willerton once again.

"No one I have ever seen, I can swear to that," Ellerslie said with emphasis, and, as he turned away, nearly collided with Bell who had come up behind him and who, knocking his hand against the other's coat, looked at it ruefully, for he had barked his knuckles against something hard and heavy.

His apologies for his clumsiness, though indeed his damaged knuckles made him the chief sufferer, were not received very cordially, and his lordship even muttered in return something that sounded extremely like:

"Clumsy idiot."

So Bell looked even more abashed and humble than usual, and Carter was faintly amused to think that once again his subordinate had been getting himself into trouble and offending important people who ought always to be propitiated. Turning to Willerton the Inspector said:

"I understand you visited Dr. Mackenzie's in Harley Street this morning, in the company of Lady Ellerslie?"

Willerton looked very astonished.

"How on earth do you know that?" he asked. "It's quite true, but how do you know?"

"We do know, we often know more than people think," declared Carter impressively, though secretly disappointed that the announcement, purposely brought out abruptly in the presence of Lord Ellerslie, had produced no effect whatever on that gentleman. It seemed pretty clear he had known all about the visit and thought it of no

importance or interest whatever. Carter continued: "Was there any one else in Dr. Mackenzie's waiting room while you were there?"

"I don't think I noticed, I don't think I remember," Willerton answered. "There was a lady who went in to see Mackenzie before I did, I think. Of course, Lady Ellerslie was there, you know that. Oh, and there was a man there, too. I didn't notice him much, he was looking at one of the illustrated papers or something. Why?"

"Was that him?" asked Carter, indicating the dead man.

Willerton looked very astonished, his air of bewilderment and incredulity had certainly every appearance of being genuine.

"You don't mean that poor chap was at Mackenzie's this morning?" he asked in return. "I don't see . . . surely that's not . . . well, anyhow I don't recognize him at all, I couldn't, I hardly looked at him."

Carter asked one or two more sharp questions but got no other response. Then he turned to Lord Ellerslie and explained that it would be necessary to ask Lady Ellerslie to undergo the same ordeal.

"There is a possibility this man followed her from town," he explained, "and it is important to know if she can recognize him."

Lord Ellerslie seemed inclined to protest, declaring that his wife was not strong and must not be asked to face so trying an ordeal. But Carter thought the effort must be made, it was important, any information her ladyship could give might prove of the utmost importance, and finally Ellerslie went off and came back with his wife and daughter. Morland followed, evidently full of curiosity, and clutching at his beard with both hands as if he meant either to pluck it out by the roots or else to tear from it, by main force, an explanation of these events.

Lady Ellerslie, looking shudderingly at the dead man, declared that she had never seen him before and turned so pale and was so evidently on the verge of fainting that her husband had to support her and there had to be a short delay before she could be further questioned. But then, when the point was put to her, she admitted she remembered there had been some one of the same type and build as the dead man in the Harley Street waiting room. But she had hardly noticed him, and could not be sure of his identity, though she agreed there was a kind of general resemblance. But it seemed to her unlikely this could be the same man, for she could imagine no reason why he should have followed her, nor, supposing he had done so, why this murder should have occurred.

"It's all like a nightmare," she said shudderingly.

Margaret Eayland was questioned, too, and she also declared that she had never seen the dead man before and had no knowledge of him. She had been out in the park, sketching, studying evening light effects, until it grew too dark, and then she had returned to the house, but she had neither seen nor heard anything unusual. Nor had she, she said, when Carter put the question to her directly, been near the park wall, nor tried to climb it, nor looked over it. Why should she? she asked innocently, and then the inquiry was interrupted by the arrival of Inspector Dering, of the county police, who had been sent off at once in answer to Carter's 'phone message, and by that of the doctor for whom Carter had also sent.

There was not much however that the doctor could do beyond certifying that the man was dead and that he had died from the effects of a knife wound that had pierced his lungs and from which death must have ensued almost immediately. He added that the fatal blow must have been delivered with great force, and he gave it as his opinion

that whoever had dealt it must have got his person and clothing covered with blood.

"From a wound like that," the doctor said, "the blood must have spirted out. Your man will be covered with it, that ought to help."

He added, for he had been, as it happened, for some time in the United States, that the knife was of American manufacture, of the rather old fashioned type called a Bowie knife, and this fact Carter was able, with a certain modest triumph, to show he had already noted down in his pocket book. That the dead man had been drinking freely was another opinion the doctor vouched for, and in this respect his diagnosis was confirmed by the discovery in the victim's jacket pocket of a nearly empty flask of gin. Otherwise a search of the body revealed nothing of any great interest.

"We oughtn't to have much difficulty about identifying him if it's right he was working as a book agent," remarked Dering, who had now taken charge of the investigation. "Once we get to know who he is, we shall have something to go on."

Arrangements were made for the removal of the body, a constable Dering had brought with him was left to guard the scene of the murder, which Dering intended to have thoroughly searched when daylight came in the hope that further evidence might be discovered, and then the rest of the party returned to Ellerslie Court. On the way Bell said something to Carter who after a little hesitation went and spoke to Dering, who in his turn looked rather worried, and remarked that Lord Ellerslie was a gentleman every one respected. Carter said it was for Dering to decide. So Dering went across to Bell and asked him if he were sure and Bell said he wasn't.

"Only I saw his pocket bulged a lot," he said, "and I

saw him put his hand to it in an uneasy sort of way once or twice, and then I just happened to hit my hand against it and that made me jolly sure there was something hard there. Of course, it might be a whisky flask," he conceded with a certain air of sad envy at the thought.

Dering looked still more worried. After all a peer of the realm is a peer of the realm. But the thing had to be attended to and he went up to Ellerslie.

"Begging your pardon, my Lord," he said, "are you ever in the habit of carrying a pistol?"

Ellerslie looked rather startled and hesitated a moment before he replied. Then he said:

"What makes you ask?"

"It's just a question, my Lord, if you don't mind answering it," Dering replied evasively.

"Well, I don't as a rule," Ellerslie answered. "I have a pistol in my pocket as a matter of fact at this moment. What about it? Does that bring me under suspicion? That poor fellow was stabbed, not shot."

"Oh, my Lord," protested Dering, quite shocked. "Of course, there's no idea of that. Only——"

Ellerslie produced a formidable looking automatic pistol from his pocket.

"I ran up against a rough looking customer in the park the other day," he explained. "He went off muttering threats, he said he would do for me if he and his pals caught me there alone. I didn't say anything about it for fear of worrying Lady Ellerslie but I just slipped that pistol into my pocket by way of precaution, that's all."

Dering protested that this explanation was quite satisfactory but all the same he looked a little worried as he fell back to join the two Scotland Yard men.

CHAPTER VII

CONSULTATION

In the great library of Ellerslie Court, a majestic and imposing apartment, its walls lined with ponderous calf-bound tomes of which there was not one that was not at least a hundred years old, having an enormous and finely carved old fireplace that was said to date from Tudor times, and modern windows that reached to the ground and opened on the great terrace surrounding the house, Colonel Coates, chief constable of the county, was sitting before a pile of documents that had already attained formidable dimensions.

The first thing Inspector Dering had done had been to report by 'phone to his superior officer, who, on hearing that it was a case of murder, had come as quickly as a powerful car, the abolition of the speed limit and roads unencumbered by traffic had permitted—or even encouraged. The Colonel was a mild mannered, simple minded soldier, rather like an overgrown boy in appearance, but one whose simplicity of mind was consistent, as it often is, with a certain natural shrewdness that enabled him at times to obtain results more subtle men would never have secured, for it is not only in spiritual things that what is hidden from the wise and learned is revealed to babes and sucklings.

But at the moment, which was a little after three in the morning, Colonel Coates was looking not only sleepy, but discouraged.

"We don't seem to have made much progress so far," he was saying.

He and Dering, with the assistance of Inspector Carter and Sergeant Bell, had been busy taking statements from every one concerned. Lord and Lady Ellerslie, Margaret Eayland, Morland and Willerton, the servants, all had told their stories, and their stories had been compared, analysed, discussed, gone over again and again, without so far any result to speak of.

"Sheer waste of time," Carter had whispered to Bell, and when Bell looked surprised, since this kind of spade work is not only usual but necessary, eliminating the unessential even if doing nothing more, Carter had responded by a wink, so rich, so full of a deep significance that Bell had even yet not quite recovered.

"He's spotted something, or thinks he has," Bell told himself, "only what?" and to this question he was unable even to imagine any possible reply.

"Anyhow," Inspector Dering was saying cheerfully, though between two yawns, "once we've got the dead man identified we shall have a starting point and get an idea what he was doing down here. It's quite plain there must be some connexion."

"I think you said you were taking steps about that, didn't you, Inspector?" Colonel Coates asked, looking at Carter.

"I rang up our people," answered Carter. "First thing in the morning they'll get in touch with whatever firm is pushing the *Vade Mecum* among the doctors just now and then we shall soon have our man placed."

"Unless," Bell pointed out with an apologetic cough, "he was only using the *Vade Mecum* as a blind, an excuse for getting in touch with Lady Ellerslie or Dr. Mackenzie."

Carter regarded his subordinate unfavourably.

"What is the good," he asked irritably, with that natural three o'clock in the morning irritation, which, like the courage of the same hour, is the keenest of its kind, "what's the good of raising difficulties before we come to them? If we can identify him, we can, and if we can't, we can't."

Colonel Coates looked impressed by this reasoning and nodded approvingly, Bell subsided, and the 'phone bell rang. It was Carter who was wanted and he came back triumphant from a brief conversation.

"Practically identified already," he announced with a nod at Bell. "One of our people happened to know the private address of a man in the book trade—we had to do with him over sales to outsiders of a medical book that devoted rather too much space to sex. This man says the description of deceased answers that of one of their agents, name of Thompson. He says they'll have Thompson's private address in the office somewhere and he'll get it first thing in the morning for us. So that's all right."

"Good," said Colonel Coates approvingly.

"Smart work," agreed Dering, and they both looked reproachfully at Sergeant Bell who raised unnecessary difficulties.

Drooping under their disapproval Bell retreated to his seat near the window where he had been sitting a little apart from the others, as was fitting for a mere sergeant when his companions were two inspectors and a chief constable of one of the home counties. Besides it was a little idiosyncrasy of his always to sit as near a window as he could. Now he said with a sort of vague uneasiness:

"That's a motor-cycle, some one out late."

They all listened and coming through the silent night they could hear plainly the 'chug, chug' of an approaching motor-cycle, now at no great distance.

"Well, what about it for the lord's sake?" snapped Carter, in a still more 'three o'clock in the morning' voice. "Nothing to do with the case, I suppose, if a motor-cyclist happens to be coming home late?"

"Can't be any of our men yet, anyhow," observed the Colonel. "Too early by a long way."

Instructions had in fact been already circulated for a number of the county police to report at Ellerslie Court at dawn when an intensive search of the park and the neighbourhood was to be undertaken in the hope of discovering fresh evidence. But of course it was too early yet to expect even the first arrivals.

"He's stopped now, must be some one from hereabouts," observed Bell, who still seemed interested in the distant cyclist.

But none of the others paid him any attention. With a gesture Colonel Coates dismissed the subject and turned again to the different statements that had been taken.

"Difficult case," he declared, "absurd to suspect a man like Ellerslie of keeping anything back or being concerned in any way—highest character, position in the county, and all that. But why had he a pistol in his pocket?"

"He says—" began Carter and paused.

"He says because he had been threatened by a tramp or something," grunted Colonel Coates. "That's what's worrying me—it would have been quite natural if he had taken a horsewhip with him now but a pistol—a pistol! No. I can't see Ellerslie going armed because of some stray tramp or another. Besides, if a tramp had been insolent, why didn't he mention it? If not to his wife, to one of the gamekeepers to tell them to keep on the look out. But if he is lying, and why should he be lying, what is he lying for?"

With a very puzzled air the Colonel looked round for a

reply and got none, only Carter threw towards Bell a glance of infinite significance of which Bell could make nothing at all.

"Still," the Colonel reminded himself and them, "the poor chap wasn't shot and so it doesn't look as if the pistol came into the picture at all—but then again, why was Ellerslie carrying it? Very smart of you, Inspector, if I may say so," he added with a little bow towards Carter, "to have spotted that he had it."

Carter acknowledged the compliment with a modest smile and what was as near a blush as may be, and Bell looked reflectively and a little sadly at his barked knuckles, which were still a trifle sore.

"Then there's Lady Ellerslie," went on Colonel Coates. "Most charming lady, impossible to suspect her. Yet the dead man does seem to have been following her. Why? Again, if this Dr. Mackenzie is to be trusted, it's apparently possible she took the prussic acid he says is missing. Only if she did—why?"

Dering was busy sorting the pile of statements on the table before them.

"What she says," he remarked, looking up from his task, "is simply that she knows nothing about it. Doesn't know the murdered man, never saw him before, knows nothing about any prussic acid and so on. As for her movements, she got here from town in the car driven by Mr. Willerton, in time for lunch. In the afternoon, entertained some callers. After tea went to her room for a rest, and was there till she heard a disturbance and came downstairs to see what was the matter and was told what had happened. Next, take Miss Eayland. Denies all knowledge of anything material, but agrees she was in the park at the time the thing happened. Insists she heard nothing. But both Inspector Carter and Sergeant Bell

think it's possible it was her they saw looking over the park wall in a very agitated state shortly before the murder was committed. Assuming they are right, how is that to be fitted in to the story of what happened? Was she running away from the dead man or running to find him or looking for some one else?"

Dering stopped and appeared to be waiting for a reply which however no one seemed inclined to offer.

"A mass of apparently unconnected, and, taken alone, quite trivial incidents," complained Colonel Coates, "and of course one can't suspect people of their standing and position in the county. Only I do wish they weren't all so very emphatic about not knowing anything at all. One feels somehow as if a little less ignorance would be a little more convincing, though I'm sure it's most unfair to think so."

"It does all seem to me," murmured Bell from his place by the window, "just a trifle like a real family affair."

"Possibly Miss Eayland has got herself mixed up with something or some one not too creditable," suggested Carter. "After all, though she is an Honourable, she lives in Chelsea, has a flat there all on her own, and paints pictures as well," he added, looking grave.

Colonel Coates looked grave, too, and worried, for he liked the girl, and yet he had to admit the truth of all Carter said.

"Still, young people now-a-days . . ." he murmured, and left the sentence unfinished, though with an air of having made a thoroughly satisfactory excuse that he hoped covered Miss Eayland, her flat, and even her pictures as well.

There was a pause while Colonel Coates, still very worried, turned over the pile of statements Dering had

been so carefully sorting, and disarranged them all again, poking at them with a dissatisfied finger.

"There's young Ralph Willerton, too," he said, "nice boy, very nice boy, but like the rest of them, knows nothing and has nothing to say. I do wish they weren't quite so unanimous in ignorance," he sighed again. "Well, Willerton arrived here with Lady Ellerslie for lunch. He denies absolutely all knowledge of prussic acid or anything about it. After lunch he played a round of golf. After tea he agrees he went for a stroll in the park, but declares he heard and saw nothing, came back, and dressed for dinner."

"Very handsome young gentleman," observed Bell with a sort of sad admiration as though reflecting how transitory are good looks. "Bit of a dandy, too, I daresay."

Colonel Coates smiled a little.

"Natural enough," he agreed, "and if the boy is a bit too particular about his dress and rather fusses about every detail being just so—well, I always noticed that the subalterns who were smartest in their dress were the smartest in handling their men as well."

"Now that's interesting—I mean, that he fusses about his dress," said Bell, looking up, "that is interesting, the most yet."

But no one noticed what he said or asked why, and Dering remarked:

"Isn't Mr. Willerton a member of the family?"

"Some sort of distant connexion, I believe," Colonel Coates answered. "I think he is the only male connexion left and that is why he is supposed to have been trusted with the secret of the legendary secret chamber here."

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Dering, looking quite excited, as if all at once some new idea had come to him, "the secret chamber . . . could that have anything to do with it?

. . . I mean, could it be used for entering or leaving the house without being seen?"

This suggestion amused Carter so much, for it seemed to him a very wild one indeed, that he turned away to hide a smile, and, seeing Bell watching, bestowed on his subordinate a most prodigious wink, of which again the Sergeant could make neither head nor tail.

"He's jolly sure he's found out something and he means to keep it to himself for the present," Bell thought, "what on earth can it be?"

And he felt very puzzled indeed, and a little worried, for he had the quite unjust idea that anything that the Inspector noticed would be something fairly obvious, and yet it must also be something that he himself had entirely overlooked—and he did not like to think that he had overlooked the obvious.

"Well, you see," Colonel Coates was saying in his mild way, "the only two people who know anything about the secret chamber are Ellerslie himself and young Willerton, and anyhow we know they were both out in the park about the time of the murder."

"I don't think we need worry about the secret chamber, even if there is such a thing, which there probably isn't," smiled Carter. "I don't think we shall find we have anything to do with any secret chamber, any of us."

"Well, I don't know," Dering began and paused, but Colonel Coates agreed with Carter.

"Yes, I think we can leave out that," he said. "Then there's Mr. Morland. He has nothing to say either, played golf in the afternoon and did not go out after tea, was busy writing letters in the house. Describes himself as a business man, interested in some scheme for introducing modern mass production methods into large scale farming, and is hoping for Lord Ellerslie's help. Nothing very useful

there. Then there's Peters, the butler. He has nothing to say either, states that after tea he was in his pantry, polishing his silver."

"I had a look at the pantry, silver doesn't look as if it had been polished up very lately," remarked Bell.

"Probably he was reading the paper or something but thought polishing silver sounded better," observed Colonel Coates tolerantly. "Peters is a lazy rascal, he ought to have had the sack long ago though he can keep a wonderful length, steady as a rock, almost up to county standard."

"Good character?" asked Carter.

"Oh, yes," answered the Colonel. "I think he really is devoted to the family—he steals Ellerslie's cigars and corks the wine, and scamps his work, but he would do anything for him—except do his work properly. But I think he would risk his skin for him any day. I don't know there's anything more we can do at present. We may find more evidence in the morning perhaps and once the poor chap's identified there'll probably be more to go on. Meantime we had better get a little rest. Lady Ellerslie suggested preparing rooms for us all but I didn't think it worth while —we shan't have more than a couple of hours at the most, so I thought we could just make ourselves comfortable down here. You know, my own idea is that perhaps it was this poor fellow himself who stole the missing prussic acid and that he was killed by some one who wanted to get it from him."

To the others this seemed only a guess, and one not very consistent with such facts as so far were in their possession. Bell, who had opened one of the french windows, and been outside in the grounds for a moment or two, came back.

"There's a light in every window almost," he said, "not many asleep, I think."

"Well, you can't wonder at it," said the Colonel,

settling himself very comfortably, like the old campaigner he was, on a sofa, shutting his eyes, and going to sleep almost at once.

"Wish I could drop off like that," said Dering enviously, choosing the most comfortable looking of the armchairs.

Bell, astonished that Carter was not already in possession of this, looked at his superior officer, and found him bending over the papers on the table again.

"Aren't you going to try to get a rest, sir?" he asked.

"Plenty of time for that to-morrow," Carter answered smilingly, "I'll take a long rest to-morrow, but I must get my case ready." He added, enjoying to the full Bell's look of blank surprise: "It's as good as finished now."

"Finished?" repeated Bell, quite bewildered, "why, sir, I don't even begin to see my way to put things together."

"I dare say you don't," chuckled Carter, "but I do—and I think I can say I shall be able to put before the Commissioner as brilliant a piece of analytical reasoning as police records have got to show. I suppose this will be my last case, Bell, and I mean it to be remembered."

"Your last case?" repeated Bell.

"I mean as Chief Inspector, of course," snapped Carter, a little crossly. "You've no ideas yourself?"

"Not the least, sir, not the faintest," declared Bell, very puzzled indeed, and thinking that Carter had really done very well if he had been able to solve so soon a case so fragmentary and complicated.

Carter smiled happily, delighting in his coming triumph.

"All the same, Bell," he declared with sudden severity, "it doesn't say much for your powers of analysis and deduction, or for your observation either, if you've really not got on the right road yet. I'm a little surprised." He shook his head sternly and Bell understood with resigna-

tion that he had fallen lower still in the estimation of his future Superintendent. 'Slow, rather stupid, even if he does plod on,' Bell could see the verdict forming that the new Superintendent would pronounce on him. "Yes," said Carter, "there'll be developments to-morrow that'll make a sensation throughout the country, that'll make my name a household word."

He paused, his air was exalted almost, he seemed lifted beyond himself with the thought of his approaching triumph, and then with a sudden, abrupt, commanding gesture—the gesture of a newly promoted superintendent to a subordinate of whose abilities he had but a poor opinion—he turned again to pore over the signed statements on the table while Bell retreated meekly to the only armchair left.

"Looks as if Carter had done it this time," he thought, impressed by the confidence with which the Inspector had spoken.

He settled himself to snatch an hour's sleep, and when before closing his eyes he took a last look round, it was to see that Carter had fallen into a heavy slumber over the statements he had begun to read, his head resting on the table on his folded arms.

CHAPTER VIII

INSPECTOR CARTER'S RETICENCE

In the half a thousand years of its existence this great library of Ellerslie Court had witnessed many a strange and passionate scene—an Elizabethan adventurer babbling of far off and unknown lands where gold lay like pebbles on the Brighton beach and urging his hearers to join him in that voyage from which they never returned, a cavalier spending his last hours writing love sonnets to Cynthia's eyebrows till his Puritan captors came to take him away to hang him on the great oak still shown to the curious, two men in flowered coats and enormous wigs exchanging fierce sword thrusts for the sake of a woman's name and one of them soon sobbing out his life before the great old fireplace, a boy risking all his ancestral heritage on the turn of a card and winning and swearing then a great oath never to touch a card again, a little group of silent men and women standing in utter darkness to watch where a pencil of light passed high in the clouds above and to listen to the roaring death that it spewed down as it blew by on the viewless winds, all that this old room had seen, and much more besides, and yet nothing perhaps much stranger than this spectacle of these four hunters of men slumbering there like little children tired with their sport, yet waiting only for the approaching dawn to summon them to take up their own grim game again.

On his sofa, stretched at full length, Colonel Coates slept as soundly as fifty years before in his cradle. Dering, in the most comfortable armchair, was wrapped in a slumber so

profound he seemed hardly to breathe. In an armchair a little less deep, with a cushion or two fewer, Bell slept as peacefully. Only Carter, cramped and uncomfortable, his head on his arms on the table before him, muttered and grumbled, and half woke at times from cramp or ache and then fell asleep again before he was wide enough awake to seek a more comfortable position.

But if Colonel Coates and Sergeant Bell both slept as soundly as tired children, both slept, too, with a certain light awareness, the power old campaigners have to throw off slumber in a moment and in a moment be alert and bright again. Now it was the same murmur of sound from without that woke them both and in a moment they were both on their feet. Quickly the Colonel moved across to one of the windows and threw it open. Within the library, it was still black night, but outside a wan faint dawn was beginning to make, not so much the landscape, as itself, faintly visible. A heavy dew had been falling, a mist was struggling to assert itself between the night and the day, and beyond the terrace, on the lawn it overlooked, a few ghostly figures were moving to and fro, like a sad assembly of the dead waiting for cockcrow to disperse them.

"My lads up to time all right," said Colonel Coates, "it'll soon be light enough to start work."

A loud snore from Dering made them both look round, and Carter, still asleep, stirred uneasily in an effort to relieve the ache in his neck that even in his slumbers he was conscious of.

"Let 'em sleep a bit longer," Coates said. "Every minute of sleep is worth its weight in gold."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell, though wondering a little how gold, now discredited as a measure of value, could be used as a measure of weight.

Carter, perhaps disturbed by their voices or by the current of air entering by the open window, muttered indistinctly, swore a little more distinctly at the crick in his neck that was getting worse every second, and finally woke himself up by tumbling off his chair. He picked himself up, awake now but stiff and sore in every bone, and looked very indignantly at Dering, so comfortably slumbering in his armchair, and then at the couch which the Colonel had just vacated. It made him very angry and indignant to realize that he had spent so uncomfortable a couple of hours when he might just as well have made himself as much at his ease as Dering looked, and as the amplitude of the couch suggested the Colonel had been. Definitely he felt very ill used.

"Nice way to conduct an investigation," he grumbled scornfully. "Snoozing and sleeping and snoring," and this artful if unintentional alliteration pleased him so much that he repeated it in a different order. "Snoring and snoozing and sleeping," he said, and almost as if he did it on purpose, Dering emitted a snore that for a snore was indeed a snore, superb, triumphant, and interminable. "Listen to that, will you?" Carter demanded of Bell, as it rumbled on, "now, why haven't they been trying to think the thing out, analysing it, deducing its meanings, weighing it up, like I was, till," he said, fixing his Sergeant with a stern and challenging eye, "till I just dropped off that minute."

"Yes, sir," said Bell meekly, "I saw that myself, sir."

Carter's stern and challenging gaze turned into something very like a plain old fashioned scowl. Bell had always had a trick, a really intolerable trick, of saying things that might carry a double meaning, and in a flash of sudden decision that owed much to the pain in his back, and still

more to the crick in his neck, Carter determined once for all to be done with it.

Never again would he work with Sergeant Bell.

Never. That was finished. When a Sergeant answered his Inspector in a way that might of course mean merely that he had watched with sympathy his superior drop off for a moment into well earned slumber, but that might just as well mean—and probably did, Carter felt in every ache of his whole aching body—that he had watched with much less sympathy that superior fall off his chair and go thump on the floor, then the limit was reached.

"Very good, Sergeant," he said ominously, "very good indeed."

"That's that, and that's torn it all right," Bell thought ruefully, "all from not keeping my tongue still, even if he did look so lovely when he went sprawling the way he did."

Colonel Coates put his head in at the window.

"Now then, Dering, show a leg," he called cheerfully. "Coffee and cocoa going out here. You two coming with us?" he asked Carter.

"Any assistance we can give . . ." Carter replied with dignity.

Outside on the lawn, Peters, the butler, and the young footman, Will Darley, were distributing cups of hot coffee and cocoa. There was plenty of bread and cheese, too, and over this hasty and improvised breakfast, Colonel Coates explained briefly to Dering, another Inspector who had just arrived, and to Carter, how he wanted the search conducted, drawing as he did so on the gravel path a rough plan of the park and surrounding country.

Bell, standing a little apart from this conference, in which his rank and standing did not entitle him to participate, accepted gratefully the steaming cup of coffee Peters offered him and made some amiable remark to that

functionary about how thoughtful and kind it was of Lady Ellerslie to have had the idea of providing such welcome refreshment. But Peters was busy and not responsive. He grumbled something about its being easy to be kind and thoughtful when some one else had to do the work and went off. So Bell handed his coffee to a shy young constable who had been too backward to ask for any, and went to find Darley who was giving out the cocoa—Bell detested cocoa which always disagreed with him and had a weakness for coffee, but duty he reflected, was duty. So he asked for cocoa and said how nice it was, and he was afraid Darley hadn't had much sleep with having to prepare it, and how thoughtful it was of Lady Ellerslie to provide such welcome refreshment.

Darley said he didn't suppose he would have slept much anyhow, he didn't think any one had, he had heard people moving about all night and he didn't wonder at it, and Lady Ellerslie was a lady as was a lady, and if all ladies were like her, then some ladies would be different ladies from what they were; and Bell said that was so, and very well put, too, and he quite agreed it wasn't likely any one had had much sleep. He had noticed lights going in every room all night long nearly, perhaps that had been Darley's own light he had noticed in the window just above where they were standing now? Darley was very much amused and thought detectives ought to be a bit sharper than that and ought to know the staff didn't occupy first floor bedrooms. That room, he explained, was Mr. Morland's. The other window at the corner belonged to the room where Mr. Willerton slept—very nice gentlemen both, especially Mr. Morland who was always jolly and pleasant and knew a thing or two about horses, too, and not a bit stand-offish. Other windows were those of the room occupied by Lord and Lady Ellerslie. Miss Margaret's

window wasn't visible from where they stood. No, he hadn't actually seen any one moving about during the night, couldn't have, because he had stayed in his own room on the top floor. But he had heard footsteps and doors opening and shutting. Of course, in the ordinary way he would have thought it his duty to go and see if anything was wanted but on such a night as last night it had seemed natural enough that people should be stirring all through the small hours. He added, in a further reply to a casual observation Bell made, that as the London road was close by, skirting one side of the park, they often heard motor traffic passing at all hours.

Colonel Coates had his search parties organized by now and soon the search was in full progress. As it happened it was the party to which Carter and Bell were attached that made the first discovery—that of a motor-cycle lying on the turf in a secluded spot not very far from where the dead body had been found. The discovery, reported to Colonel Coates, brought him striding along immediately.

"Looks as if this is how the murdered man got here," he said.

Carter, who was standing by, remarked:

"Very interesting—and there's something else that's very interesting, if you notice."

Nobody quite knew what he meant, and it was with a quiet air of almost negligent triumph that he observed:

"There's been a heavy dew—so heavy that that cycle is as wet on the side that's been turned to the ground as on the side that's been uppermost."

This simple fact no one else had observed and when they had verified it they all looked at Carter with great respect. Bell told himself with genuine admiration that it was a bit of really smart observation and a credit to the man who made it. For this seemed to prove that the cycle had been

used after the crime had been committed, though, if so, by whom and for what purpose remained to be proved. So far indeed only another puzzling feature seemed introduced into the case, but that did not lessen the merit of the man who had made the discovery. Basking in the general approval, feeling that his superintendency was now as safe as houses, Carter added carelessly:

"And I'm willing to bet any man half a crown the petrol reservoir will be about empty."

No one accepted the bet but investigation showed that the suggestion was correct. The reservoir was almost dry, the cycle could hardly have covered another mile.

"I happen to know that make and how much the reservoir holds," Carter explained. "Makes it all pretty plain, I think."

They were all silent, waiting further revelations. These did not come.

"Plain in what way?" asked Colonel Coates, a little sharply, since for a man to hold back any knowledge he had was against all his ideas of loyal team work.

"Well, sir, if you'll excuse me, I think I had better not say yet," Carter answered with a kind of smooth and smiling triumph that annoyed all the rest of them immensely. "You see, I haven't quite got my proof yet, and until my case is complete I think I must hold my tongue in case I'm all wrong—and besides after all," he added carelessly, "you've all seen just as much as I have and know just as much as I do."

No more was to be got out of him and so the search was resumed, Colonel Coates looking rather black at what he considered Carter's unnecessary and unsporting reticence, and Bell, extraordinarily puzzled, and wondering very much at the acuteness Carter had shown in apparently discovering so soon a clue in what he himself was inclined

to regard as puzzling and contradictory an affair as he had ever had to do with.

"He's scoring this time all right," Bell told himself with honest admiration. "This'll boost him into the vacancy when Phillips goes all right enough—and he'll deserve it, too."

CHAPTER IX

INSPECTOR CARTER DISAPPEARS

THE search continued but without any further result, and concerning the significance of the discovered motor-cycle there were many different opinions. For some held strongly the theory that it had been used by the dead man, had been left by him where it was found, and had not been touched since; and as the observed fact that the side of the cycle next the ground was also wet with dew discredited this theory, that fact was ignored as observed facts always are when they have the ill taste to disagree with theory. Others believed that it must have been used to bring to the spot whoever had committed the murder, and these pointed to the empty petrol reservoir, suggesting that the murderer had been obliged to abandon the cycle because he had run short of petrol and had not dared to risk attracting attention by purchasing more. A third section suggested that probably the cycle had nothing to do with the murder, and Inspector Carter smiled mysteriously, letting it be understood that he had his own ideas but meant for the present to keep them to himself.

"Keeping something up his sleeve, eh?" Dering said to Bell, with a glance at Carter, still wearing his mysterious smile at a little distance.

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Bell, who in fact felt extremely puzzled. "Anyhow," he said, "it's pretty smart of him if he's seen something all the rest of us have overlooked."

Dering looked as if he didn't accept either statement, either that Sergeant Bell didn't know or that Inspector Carter was very smart. The sniff he gave was somehow subtly eloquent of both disbeliefs but all he said was:

"The old man don't like it."

The park itself had been well searched by now, and the searchers, as already arranged, split into little parties of one and two, and set out to cover the surrounding district with instructions to inquire at every farm and cottage if any strangers had been noticed, especially any stranger on a motor-cycle, and more especially, if any one answering the description of the dead man had been seen in the company of any other person.

Colonel Coates marked his displeasure at what he considered the unsporting and highly unprofessional reticence of Inspector Carter, by now entirely ignoring the two Scotland Yard men. This affected Carter the less in that he had silently departed and when Bell looked round for him, there was no trace of him to be found. It seemed however that some one had seen him walking back towards Ellerslie Court, apparently in rather a hurry. It was hinted to Bell that Carter, knowing that Colonel Coates had shown himself a trifle vexed at the air of mystery the other had put on, had taken offence in his turn, and had simply walked off.

Bell said he supposed in that case he had better follow, and Inspector Dering said he would walk along with him as he, too, had to return to the house, which was naturally the headquarters for the time being of these investigations, if only by virtue of the fact that it possessed a telephone, and that the telephone is fast becoming the most important accessory of all detective work, as of all modern life indeed. Nor was it long before Bell discovered that Dering was delicately endeavouring to pump him.

"It's no good," he assured Dering with one of his most melancholy smiles. "I haven't an idea what it is the Inspector thinks he's spotted. He told me it was clear enough to him, and so it may be, but it's clear as mud to me," sighed Bell.

"Smart man, Mr. Carter, fine reputation," declared Dering with enthusiasm, evidently not believing a word Bell said. "One of the London papers the other day called him the first detective of the age."

"Two of 'em," corrected Bell sadly, "the two a Mr. Simpson writes for, very pleasant young gentleman, Mr. Simpson, too, and would print his dying mother's most sacred secret to get a scoop for his paper. I expect you'll see him down here pretty soon."

"He won't get much change out of the old man," declared Dering. "Colonel Coates don't like the papers, except *The Times*, and of course *The Times* isn't hardly the papers, is it?"

"Of course not," agreed Bell warmly, "but Mr. Carter always says it's a great mistake not to like the papers because if you don't like the papers, then they don't like you, because they're so sensitive to public opinion, and if they don't like you, they don't put you in, and if you aren't in the papers, then you aren't anywhere, and if you aren't anywhere, well, where are you? That's what Mr. Carter always says."

"I daresay there's a lot in that," agreed Dering in his turn, much impressed by the subtle intricacies of this argument. "Very deep thinking man, Mr. Carter, I should say."

"Every one thinks a lot of him," Bell confirmed this estimate. "He has a sort of way of getting just where he wants to be if you know what I mean," explained Bell, sadly aware that his own gift was rather the reverse.

"Dead sure of his superintendency, too. Dead sure of it," he said again.

"Dead sure," repeated Dering a little absently, "dead sure." After a pause he said: "Well, it looks pretty dark to me, and where does this prussic acid business of yours come in?"

Bell had no idea and said so.

"One could have understood it better," complained Dering, "if the fellow had been poisoned, but what has missing prussic acid to do with a knife being run into a chap? Then there's the girl you saw. Why was she looking over the wall the way you told us about, and if she was Miss Margaret Eayland, why don't she say so? And if it was the maid, Louise, why don't she say so? And why was Lord Ellerslie carrying a pistol? And I must own up," added Dering generously, "that was a bit of smart work, your Inspector spotting that."

"Wasn't it?" agreed Bell, ruefully feeling knuckles that were however perfectly all right again now and not in the least sore, so that he had no reason for feeling them so ruefully.

"Might be some clue to do with that Mr. Carter spotted?" suggested Dering, still hopefully and gently pumping.

"Might be," agreed Bell, on his side still sadly aware that his professions of ignorance won no credence at all. "Only the dead man was no more shot than poisoned—he was stabbed."

Dering admitted the fact, though looking as if he thought this persistence in having been stabbed was hardly in good taste when to have been either shot or poisoned would have fitted so much more conveniently into the facts. And he looked still more like it when Bell reminded him of the other pistol—the small undis-

charged automatic the two Scotland Yard men had found near the path that traversed the park.

"Must fit in somewhere, I suppose," Bell said, "but where?"

"May have nothing to do with it," suggested Dering and coming to the point at last, he said: "My idea is it's something to do with that fellow you said you saw running about the same time—my idea is that Mr. Carter recognized him and that that's what he knows?"

But Bell shook his head.

"I've thought of that," he said, "but no one could have recognized any one at that distance and then we had only just a moment's glimpse of him—he was running fast and he was wearing plus fours and that's about all any one could say. I suppose what it is, is that the Inspector has been sharp enough to spot something the rest of us have overlooked and it's one up to him."

Dering said no more, convinced that either Bell knew nothing or else meant to say nothing. Nearer the house they saw at a little distance Morland and Willerton together, Morland wearing a suit of plus fours, that suited and fitted him very badly, and Willerton in a lounge suit. Bell commented on the fact and Dering said:

"I suppose more or less that clears Mr. Morland. If the man you saw was the murderer, and if he was wearing plus fours, he must have got them covered with blood, and they would hardly be fit to wear to-day."

"Means, I suppose," observed Bell, "we had better find out if Mr. Willerton ever wears plus fours and if so what's become of them?"

A little further on they encountered the gardener, who in answer to the question Bell put to him told them he had seen Carter go by a little time before and re-enter the house. Then a constable, seeing Dering, came up to ask

for instructions on some trifling matter or another, and Dering stopped to talk to him, Bell went on to the house and in the hall met Darley, the young footman, who said that Inspector Carter was in the library. The gentleman, said Darley, had returned a little time before, had gone to the 'phone, on which he had been inquired for from Scotland Yard, and after a conversation over it, had asked if he might use the library as he had some writing to do and might he have a cup of tea. Tea, toast and an egg—Lady Ellerslie having ordered that every one engaged in the investigations was to be given every help possible, including refreshments when required—had therefore a short time previously been taken to him, and having supplied this information Darley disappeared into the rear regions of the house with the remark that the family was at breakfast and he wanted some himself before it all went.

For a moment Bell hesitated. He knew that just down the corridor leading out of the hall was the library, and that the Inspector, his superior officer, was there, possibly waiting for him with instructions to be carried out, and certainly, from Darley's story, himself with recent instructions just received from Headquarters. But the opportunity seemed to Bell too good to be lost, since, as he knew, Morland and Willerton were out of doors somewhere, the family were at breakfast, and the household staff occupied with the breakfast of which young Darley had feared to lose his share. Very quickly he ran up the stairs. He had well fixed in his mind the location of the room of which the window had been pointed out to him as that belonging to Willerton. He found it without difficulty. The door was open and he went in quickly. A glance at an envelope on the mantelpiece addressed to Willerton showed him he was in the right room. He crossed to the wardrobe and

opened it, looked in a drawer or two; within a minute or two of having entered the room he was out of it again and was running down the stairs, having assured himself that Willerton possessed a suit of plus fours, and that it was there in his room, put tidily away in the usual manner, and that it showed no sign or trace of any blood stains whatever.

So far as that went, therefore, and provided the statement made by the doctor that whoever had been concerned in the affair must have got himself and his clothing stained with blood, was to be trusted, Ralph Willerton appeared more or less to be cleared.

"Drawn blank again," Bell muttered to himself, "and apparently it wasn't Morland either, unless either one of them had a spare plus fours suit with him, which isn't likely. Could Lord Ellerslie have had a change of clothing all ready, or had he had time to get back to the house and change and then get back again to give the alarm? Possible, but not likely. Or Peters? But would a butler be wearing plus fours? Hardly. Or who?"

Shaking his head at the problem, as though rebuking it for being so hard of solution, Bell made his way to the library. To his surprise it was empty. On the table—one of the tables, rather, for the library showed three, a large central one, a small one in the big window, and another at the end of the room furthest from the door—stood a tray with an egg half eaten, half a piece of buttered toast, a cup of tea half empty. Near by were some blank sheets of paper and a fountain pen Bell thought he was fairly sure was Carter's and that was certainly one of the make that Carter used. But of the Inspector himself there was no sign.

However, probably he would be back again in a few moments. One of the windows opening on the terrace like

a door was wide open, and thinking Carter might have gone out that way Bell crossed to it and looked out. There was nothing to be seen, however, and he went back into the room and then thought of the 'phone. From what Darley had said, Carter had been rung up once already from the Yard, and what more likely than that that should have happened again? Feeling a little relieved, though what occasion there was to feel relieved he did not know, Bell went back into the hall, to the telephone in the little cloak room adjoining. But there was no sign of Carter and when Peters came by and Bell spoke to him, the butler answered ill temperedly that he hadn't seen the Inspector or if he had he hadn't noticed him amidst the swarm of policemen who were all over everywhere as if they thought the house was theirs, and anyhow he had his work to do and no time to keep tab on the lot of them and he wondered his lordship stood it. As for the 'phone, the 'phone had never stopped ringing the whole morning, and if any one had served Inspector Carter in the library, then in the library Inspector Carter was likely to be, and anyhow, he, Peters, would like to get on with his work, if Bell didn't very much mind.

With that he went off, still grumbling, and Bell went back into the library. But there was still no sign of Carter and after another wait Bell went back once more to the hall where this time he met Lord Ellerslie.

But Lord Ellerslie, pale and drawn from what had evidently been a sleepless night, had not seen the Inspector that morning. The last person to have seen him was, apparently, Darley, when he took the tray to him in the library. Since then it seemed as if he had become invisible.

Bell, not knowing what else to do, went back resignedly into the library, and reflected sadly that probably he was going to get into serious trouble for having failed to realize

at once where his Inspector was and what he was doing. When that was known, it would no doubt be perfectly obvious, as every answer to every question is perfectly obvious once it is known.

"Nice sort of detective I am," reflected Bell disconsolately, "when I can't even find my own Inspector—and what they'll say at the Yard!!"

But that even his natural gift for picturing the worst was not able to imagine, and still Carter did not return.

What to do Bell had no idea, so he sat down—but not on one of the armchairs, he felt this was no time for armchairs, the situation would be worse than ever if Carter returned unexpectedly and found his subordinate taking his ease in an armchair. So Bell sat straight upright, facing the wall by the huge old fireplace, and tried to look uncomfortable, and found that easy enough, for uncomfortable he really was, in mind if not in body. Then the door opened and Lady Ellerslie came in. For a moment she stood in the doorway, fixing him with a gaze so tragic and intense that almost involuntarily he got to his feet. In point of fact she was hardly aware of his presence, it was merely that he happened to be within the range of her intense and searching gaze, for indeed it was something quite other that she saw. For a moment or two they remained thus, he standing silently, she in equal silence with her intent and tragic gaze fixed upon him—or, rather not on him but on something else, for her gaze seemed to go through him, as though he were not there, and to rest upon the shelves of books behind, where stood dusty tomes of the sermons of forgotten divines, Blair, Thomson, Taylor, a score of others who edified their day but not ours, and whose works had evidently been all placed together. But that these books were still sometimes read, or at least taken from their shelves, seemed to be shown

by the fact Bell noticed now, as he followed the direction of Lady Ellerslie's intent gaze, that a few of them were upside down, as if someone had been glancing at their contents and then replacing them carelessly.

Not that this trivial fact appeared to Bell to be of any interest or importance, and it was more by habit and routine than consciously, that his brain registered the fact as one among the many of apparently equal unimportance it was yet just as well to remember. For indeed it never entered his mind that on this detail of a few books replaced upside down upon their shelves, the whole solution of the mystery, the whole course of future events, was to hang.

Yet though of this he had as yet no inkling, nor the least premonition, it seemed to him that he saw quite plainly behind her rigid attitude, her pallid features, her intent and staring eyes, that ultimate despair which is the most terrible sensation the human mind can know, the knowledge that all is lost, including even hope, that for body and soul together nothing more remains. And it seemed to him also that this last and terrible despair had fallen upon her as she entered this room, and yet what there was in it that could so affect her, he could not conceive. There was no one present but himself, there was nothing in it unusual that he could see—except indeed those misplaced books, and not even the most exigent housekeeper could be so much disturbed by that small untidiness.

The idea came to him, came to him with ultimate authority as though some inner voice proclaimed it, that if he spoke now, and if he chose the right words, she would almost automatically tell him all, because there was no more strength of resistance left in her, because she was no more than a shell that emotion and terrible experience had for the moment emptied. But something like awe held him silent, he could no more have spoken to use that

dread emotion for his own ends than he could have broken upon the peace of a dying friend.

He waited, he became aware that she was growing conscious of his presence, that she was making a supreme effort to regain her self control, it hung almost visibly in the balance whether she would succeed or break down utterly—perhaps for ever, for it seemed to him that even her sanity was involved in that appalling effort. Flinging out one hand with a gesture that was none the less daunting and significant because she had learnt it on the stage, she asked:

"What are you doing here? Why were you sitting there? What were you looking at?"

Bell might have replied that he had been looking at what appeared as dry a collection of ancient theological works as all the world could show. Instead he answered mildly:

"I was only waiting for Inspector Carter."

She took no notice of that, but twice walked the length of the room without paying him any further attention, almost as if she had forgotten him, till she said abruptly:

"Have you finished your breakfast?"

Evidently she had noticed the tray standing on the table there with its half eaten meal, and supposed that it had been brought for Bell. He tried to explain that he thought it had been put there for Inspector Carter, for whom he was waiting, and whose return he expected every minute, but she either did not listen or did not quite understand.

"If you have finished, it had better be taken away," she said, "I will send one of the servants." She moved towards the door and then turned back. "I'll take it myself," she said, "every one is so busy and so upset this morning. I am, too, I don't think I quite know what I'm

doing with this dreadful thing happening. I don't think I quite know what I'm doing," she repeated as she picked up the tray and carried it out of the room with her.

When she had gone Bell drew a long breath, he had the idea that he had just passed through a strange and even terrifying experience, and that he ought to have understood its meaning instead of being simply lost in sheer bewilderment as he was.

"She knows something, she's afraid of something," he told himself. "Only what's she afraid of? Of something she knows or something she doesn't know. Can it be she who killed him?"

It was a possibility and he turned his mind to consider it. He was still deep in thought when one of the local police appeared to say that Inspector Carter was wanted on the 'phone, and did Sergeant Bell know where he was?

Sergeant Bell replied with some asperity that he did not, and the local constable opined that Scotland Yard had better be told as much by Sergeant Bell himself, a bit impatient Scotland Yard seemed, or even out of temper, if he, the local constable, might say so, and judging solely from the language used.

So Bell went to the 'phone and was there informed first of all of the strong conviction held at Scotland Yard that a sergeant who did not know where his inspector was was no sort of sergeant at all, and indeed was very likely soon to cease to be a sergeant. These pleasant passing preliminaries achieved, Bell was further instructed that his immediate duty was to go away and find his Inspector at once, like that, without any further footling delay, and his protests that he had already tried and failed met with no cordial reception. However, he also gathered that earlier on Carter had been informed that on the address being received of the man, Thompson, employed as a can-

vasser by the book distributing agency with one of whose directors Scotland Yard had been in touch, a visit had been paid to it at once. It proved to be a bed-sitting-room in Islington, and there was reason to believe that it had been visited during the past night and thoroughly ransacked. Robbery was apparently not the motive, for one or two articles of trifling value, and some small change had not been touched, but a locked desk had been forced open, a trunk showed contents much disarranged, and there were other signs in the room of a thorough search having been made. What had been taken away, if anything, there was nothing to show, but there was not a scrap of paper of any sort or kind to be found in the room, no letter or any other document, and that some one had been there during the night was proved by the evidence of the landlady who had heard, as she supposed, Mr. Thompson, moving about in the small hours, but had not thought much of it, merely supposing that he was up later than usual. She explained that the front door was always on the latch, as lodgers came in and out at all hours, and there was also evidence that another lodger had heard some one come in very late, but had neither noticed the actual time nor thought anything of it, since it was by no means unusual. Bell suggested meekly that efforts should be made to discover if any one had seen or heard a motor-cycle in connexion with this late arrival, and, if so, if the number had been noticed. It was agreed with some reluctance that this would be done, though it was hinted that a sergeant who lost his inspector had no right to make any suggestions at all and would certainly in no case receive any credit for them. Bell was also informed that what Headquarters specially wanted to know was, first, if Inspector Carter had, as instructed, reported these facts to Colonel Coates, and if so what Colonel Coates

thought of them and if he wished Scotland Yard to take any further steps; and, secondly, why Inspector Carter had not already rung up to supply this information. Would Sergeant Bell please explain that, and Sergeant Bell's timid answer that he couldn't, as he couldn't find Carter to ask him, was even more unfavourably received than had been his earlier explanations. It was a wonder the telephone wire didn't fuse right away, and it is certainly to be hoped that none of the telephone young ladies were listening.

CHAPTER X

INSPECTOR CARTER STILL MISSING

By this time Bell had fairly well convinced himself that Carter could not be either in the house itself or yet in the surrounding grounds. It seemed to follow, therefore, that he must be somewhere else, and Bell decided that he had probably considered the message given him for Colonel Coates to be so important that he had thought it his duty to go at once to find the Colonel to deliver it to him—though this theory did not quite explain why first he had retired to the library and asked for a cup of tea to be given him there, and then had left it half drunk and his fountain pen lying on the table by the side of sheets of paper unwritten on.

For these last two facts seemed to suggest a departure that had been sudden, swift, and till then unintended.

Bell decided that the best thing he could do—it would at least occupy his time—was to find the Colonel and make sure whether or no Carter had delivered the Yard message to him.

Colonel Coates was still out in the park, directing the search, and it took Bell some time to find him. It appeared that he had not seen Carter and had certainly received no message from him. Nor did it appear that the whereabouts of Inspector Carter interested him to any great degree.

"Probably gone off on his own somewhere," pronounced Colonel Coates with the fine scorn of a cricketer or a footballer for the man who plays for himself and not for his

side. "Most likely he has hit on some clue he wants to follow up all by himself."

In the contents of the message itself, however, as now repeated to him by Bell, the Colonel showed himself much more interested, even a little worried by it, indeed.

"Looks as if that motor-cycle was used to take some one to town to burgle the dead man's room, and then to get back here again," he said, wrinkling his forehead in perplexity. "Means somebody was pretty keen on getting hold of something there, eh? Evidence of identity perhaps or . . . or something else, eh?"

"Or something else," agreed Bell gravely.

"I am glad you see it that way, too," said the Colonel, so warmly and simply that Bell felt more than a little ashamed of the touch of irony he had not been able to help hiding in his assent. "Or something else," repeated the Colonel, shaking his head doubtfully; "something pretty important, too, or why should such a risk be run? Of course, if the murder was committed for the sake of something in the victim's possession that it turned out he hadn't on his person, then one can understand a visit to his room and the burglary there. Or there may have been compromising papers to be got hold of, valuable documents of some sort. Only who was it made that long journey in the night and then back here again?"

They were both silent, picturing in their minds that swift and desperate journey to London and back again that had apparently been made the night before. But by whom? Bell said suddenly:

"If you remember, sir, we heard a motor-cycle last night. . . ."

"I've not forgotten," answered Colonel Coates gravely. "Funny to think that was probably the murderer . . . if only we had known . . . a nerve, too, for if he had been

seen either going or coming back . . . even if he had been missed, if his absence had been discovered by any chance . . . he must have ridden back here like that not knowing if he wasn't riding right into discovery and arrest."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell. "A cool nerve he must have . . . or she . . ."

He had laid the slightest emphasis on this last word but Colonel Coates noticed it and started perceptibly.

"You don't mean . . .?" he began and paused. "Well, now then," he said, obviously disturbed.

"A woman could use a motor-cycle just as well as a man," Bell observed, "nothing to show it was one rather than another."

"Quite so, quite so, quite so," agreed the Colonel. He added abruptly: "The doctor said the blow that killed the poor fellow must have been delivered with great force."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell. "When a woman's all worked up . . ."

"I know," agreed the Colonel once more, "if women get excited or hysterical they can show a sheer muscular strength that's astonishing . . . it does rather look as if it were some one from Ellerslie Court . . . might be some one from the village or some cottage or farm about perhaps . . . nothing much to go on yet . . . anyhow, the first thing to do is to get this man Thompson's landlady and his employer down here and see if they can identify him, and if they do I'll get your people in London to see what they can find out about him. An inquiry ought to show some reason for his presence here and that will give us a clue to follow up. Then, too, we must try to see if any motor-cyclist was noticed near here last night. It would be a great help if we could get a description—and be sure whether whoever it was was man or woman," he added, though somewhat slowly and reluctantly.

They returned together to Ellerslie Court and the Colonel went at once to ring up Scotland Yard with whom he became engaged in a long conversation. Left to himself, Bell wandered aimlessly about, asking every one he met if anything had been seen or heard of Inspector Carter. But it seemed that in the disappearance of the Inspector no one was much interested. It seemed taken for granted that he had gone quietly off on some line of inquiry or another that he had preferred to keep to himself. It was equally made plain that such action was considered most unsporting and even unprofessional, and that only smart Londoners, who thought themselves too clever to work with other people, would be guilty of such conduct; further, that this being so, Inspector Carter could stay missing from now to next Christmas without any one turning a hair, and that, finally, he himself, Sergeant Bell, shared to the fullest degree in the unpopularity the conduct of his colleague had so justly earned. Besides, every one was much too busy to bother about smart Alecks from London.

Crushed under this weight of general disapproval, Bell returned disconsolately to the library, where, when he entered it, he found Ralph and Margaret deep in conversation. They left the moment they saw him come in, as if, he thought in melancholy mood, they also did not much like his company. Soon afterwards, Lord Ellerslie came in. He was wearing now, Bell noticed, a plus fours suit, though earlier in the day he had had on an ordinary lounge suit, and he wanted to know if Bell had seen Lady Ellerslie or knew where she was. Bell had to answer 'no' to both questions, and Lord Ellerslie went out again, nor had he been gone more than a moment or two when Bell saw Lady Ellerslie passing quickly down one of the garden paths, one that led to the rosery, Bell thought. Almost

immediately she was followed by Morland, moving with his usual apparent clumsiness and actual speed. Bell could not help wondering if this were coincidence, a rendezvous, or what—a shadowing of the lady by her guest, perhaps? It might be important to know, and Bell slipped out, and, following a side path, made his way to the rosery, which however he found empty and deserted, without any trace of either of the two he had noticed. He went back again to the house, therefore, and on the way he met Margaret who was now alone and who went by quickly, taking no notice of him. He could see that she looked pale and worn, but then that was natural enough at such a time. A mysterious murder in the close vicinity of your home, and that home filled by busy police, are enough to upset any one.

In the library there was still no sign of Carter, whose fountain pen, if it was his, still lay untouched by those sheets of paper on which there was nothing written. Having nothing else to do, Bell sat down and lighted a cigarette, but the great empty room began to feel heavy and oppressive to him, he had the idea that in its corners laughter was lurking at his failure to find his superior officer, it began to seem to him that this was a room in which dreadful things might well come to pass, so he got again to his feet and began to look about him uneasily, as if expecting to find visible traces of all the sins and follies and tragedies of which this room had been the witness through the long passage of the years. Even those rows of old, long forgotten sermons seemed to regard him with a sinister and mocking air, as if hiding some terrible and ancient secret, and he asked himself with a sort of wonder what had come over him.

"Going dotty," he decided.

All the same the oppression he felt in this great, empty,

silent room increased rather than diminished. He told himself it must come from his feeling that there was something secret here, something that was known but had not been told. Why had Lord Ellerslie been carrying a pistol? It was not in his habits and his explanation had not been convincing. Whose was the small automatic they had picked up in the park and why had no one been willing to identify it? Why had Margaret Eayland behaved as she had done that evening, and why had she denied that it was her they had seen peering at them over the park wall? Why had a bottle of poison vanished at a moment when Lady Ellerslie was at least in a position to have taken it? Why had she looked so strangely when he had seen her earlier in the day, before she had taken away the tray with Carter's unfinished breakfast on it? Above all, why had Carter, a man of routine and discipline, taken himself off in this mysterious manner?

Unable to supply an answer to any of these questions Bell drifted out into the hall, glad at any rate to escape from the huge emptiness of the library that seemed to mock him with its air of knowing all and telling nothing.

Watching his opportunity, and for it he had to wait, for the instrument was in almost continual use, he managed to get a chance to telephone again to Scotland Yard and to report that he had still not been able to get in touch with Carter.

This time his report was received with less asperity. Perhaps something of the uneasiness he felt but did not express managed to get itself communicated along the wire. First he was put through to Phillips, then direct to the Assistant Commissioner himself.

"No doubt," said this august one finally, "Inspector Carter is acting as he is doing for excellent reasons and will report soon," and Bell thought he detected in these

words a certain accent suggesting that unless those reasons were very excellent indeed, the fountains of official wrath were likely to be very copiously unsealed.

Bell only hoped those unsealed fountains would not sweep him away as well, but he told himself dispiritedly they were pretty sure to. Officialdom, he knew well, has neither time nor taste for nice discriminations, and never had his sergeant's chevrons felt more unsecure on his arm.

"Only what the dickens can Carter be playing at?" Bell asked himself with bewilderment once again, and once again he had no answer to give himself.

He had no wish to return to the library, he had no idea where else to go, he began to walk up and down the terrace, and each time he passed the open window of the library he gave a quick, half nervous glance within, half expecting to see Carter there, sitting at the table, hard at work writing his report, half inexplicably dreading seeing anything of the kind. It was this slightly absurd, evidently causeless feeling of dread he experienced, and could not control, that made him, when he had twice strolled by the library window and seen that the room was empty, give so startled an exclamation, almost a cry of terror indeed, when at the third time of passing he saw there was in fact some one sitting at the table there. But it was not Carter, it was Mr. Morland, and he rose and came over to the window, mightily amused at Bell's astonished and even startled air.

"I'm afraid I gave you a scare," he said, laughing through the tangles of his thick black beard till his laughter seemed to go slipping from him to join that other laughter Bell had imagined to himself lurking in the corners of the great room, "I didn't know policemen had nerves."

Bell felt, and felt he looked, the complete idiot.

"Very sorry, sir," he said, "the truth is you did give me

a start. I'm waiting for Inspector Carter and when I saw you at that table I thought for a moment it was him and I hadn't seen him come.'

Morland put back his head and laughed again. There was something in the idea that he had been taken for Inspector Carter that appeared to tickle his fancy most tremendously.

"No one before ever thought I was a policeman," he said, "and I don't suppose any one ever will again. But your Inspector Carter struck me as a smart man, I expect he'll find out all about it before any of the rest of you."

"I daresay, sir," agreed Bell, reflecting that once again Inspector Carter had shown he possessed the very useful gift of impressing others with a sense of his ability.

Morland turned back into the room, Bell was resuming his stroll, when the door opened and the young footman, Darley, came in briskly, looking very pleased with himself.

"I've found your half sovereign, sir," he said beamingly.

"Bravo," exclaimed Morland, and Bell, who had heard both Darley's announcement and Morland's 'Bravo' wondered if it was only his own overwrought imagination that made him detect an accent a little strange, an accent of annoyance, alarm, of terror even, in Morland's voice. But the impression was strong enough to make him turn and look round and he saw then that Morland had done the same thing—that is, he, too, had turned, and was looking towards Bell, apparently to see if he had heard, and this time Bell was almost sure that in the other's expression there showed something that was akin to terror, to panic almost. But in a moment Morland was his usual self again.

"Bravo," he said once more, and this time very heartily, "then I owe you the ten shilling note I promised you—

stupid, perhaps, but I would rather lose a fiver than that half sovereign, it's my mascot."

"Yes, sir," said Darley, beamingly accepting the proffered note. "It was another gentleman found it," he explained, "one of the police, Inspector Dering he is. It had rolled right under one of the chairs and I could have taken my dying oath I looked at that very spot this morning and never saw it, but Mr. Dering picked it up and so I said I knew whose it was and he gave it me to give you, sir."

"Well, you'll have to share the ten shillings with Mr. Dering if he wants it, which I don't suppose he will," answered Morland pleasantly. "Anyhow, I'm jolly glad to get it back."

"Yes, sir," said Darley again and went off, about his work, and Bell was certain Morland was watching him to make sure he had heard all this, and what it meant Bell could form no idea, or whether it meant anything at all.

However the incident seemed one that could bear no significance, and he knew he would never have given it a second thought but for that odd impression he still preserved that for the moment Morland had been sheerly terrified.

CHAPTER XI

RALPH WILLERTON'S DESPAIR

WITH the intention of observing Morland more closely, perhaps of getting into conversation with him and so obtaining some hint as to the significance that he was sure lay hid behind this incident of the half sovereign lost and found, Bell entered the library. But Morland either had no taste for an interview with the detective or else had finished the writing he had apparently been busy with at the table, for he was already gathering up his papers and preparing to depart.

"By the way," he said pleasantly, "there's a fountain pen on the table here. Do you know whose it is?"

"I think it's Inspector Carter's, sir," said Bell. He crossed to the table and stood looking at the pen. "I'm wondering where he is," he said.

"Oh, I don't suppose he's far," said Morland cheerfully. "You may depend upon it he's not far—or else he wouldn't have left his pen here, would he?" He took it up and, fitting the cap over the nib: "Ink dries on it," he said, "if the nib's left exposed. Oh, you may be sure the Inspector's not far," he repeated, and with his characteristic swift if clumsy-looking way of moving he was at the door and out of the room before Bell could speak again.

Bell looked round rather helplessly and was thinking of resuming his walk up and down the terrace outside, for still he had no idea what to do, and still the enormous emptiness of this great room affected him unpleasantly, when once more the door opened and this time it was

Willerton who came in, young Ralph Willerton, but changed, shaken, altered in appearance, his eyes staring and sunken, his pinched cheeks of that curious leaden pallor which comes only with the instant sight of death—or worse. On his forehead, too, the sweat stood plainly, and when he saw him Bell jumped to his feet with a low exclamation, so startled was he by the young man's appearance.

For a moment they stood thus, staring at each other, and then, as by a supreme effort, Willerton moved stiffly, jerkily, towards him.

"I know," he managed to get out, in a voice as stiff and jerky as his movements had been, "I know . . . a maid told me . . . well . . .?"

Bell did not reply. He had no idea what to say. Nor had he the least idea what could be causing the young man's extreme agitation. Could it be a result of the surreptitious visit he had paid some little time before to Willerton's room? But he had found nothing there.

"Well . . . why don't you say something?" Willerton asked.

"Did you wish to make a statement?" Bell asked, not quite sure, however, whether this invitation, if anything came of it, would not be considered in court as bringing unfair pressure to bear on a suspected person. However he thought he would risk it and he said again: "You wish to make a statement?"

For a moment Willerton seemed to hesitate. For just one moment Bell thought the whole story was going to come tumbling out. But suddenly the young man's expression changed. He made a gesture of extreme violence.

"No, not that," he cried as if with horror, "you know

enough, let it stop there," and with extreme rapidity he turned and ran out of the room.

For the first moment Bell could only stand and stare blankly and his first thought was:

"He's gone dotty, so was Lady Ellerslie, she was dotty, they're all dotty, that's what's the matter with this case, they're all dotty."

He hurried after Willerton, though he hardly knew why, down the library corridor into the great hall. Margaret was there. She was looking bewilderedly up the stairs.

"Ralph . . . he wouldn't stop," she said. She repeated: "He wouldn't stop."

Bell hurried by her. He was just in time to see Willerton pause at the head of the stairs and make from there a gesture as of farewell, so full of a tragic meaning, of the most terrible significance that there was no possibility of not understanding. From behind Margaret gave a little inarticulate cry and the thought flashed into Bell's mind:

"Good God! He's going to do himself in."

With the utmost speed of which he was capable he dashed across the hall and up the stairs, knowing that life and death hung on the passage of the instants. Another low cry from Margaret followed him. He outsped it but in his haste he blundered and mistook the room and by the time he found the right one, the door of it was closed and locked, and there had been time for that to happen Bell was certain the young man had intended.

He shook the door with violence and he shouted. But it was old, solid, firm, dating from days when work was of a more substantial nature than it always is to-day. At the door of the room of the ordinary suburban villa Bell would have flung himself with all his weight, his shoulder down, and been confident of smashing his way in. But this door was not of that nature, it looked capable of

standing up to a dozen charges, and behind its heavy immobility who knew what even then was not coming to pass?

"Mr. Willerton," Bell called. He tapped at the door softly, knowing that even that might well precipitate the tragedy he feared. "Mr. Willerton!"

There was no answer. Whatever secret it was that the door hid, it hid it well.

"Mr. Willerton," Bell called again.

There was still no answer. Persuaded that his fears were only too well founded, Bell turned away. He must give the alarm. The room was on the first floor and not high above the ground. A ladder would give easy access. Beginning to run, he had gone a yard or two down the passage, when he heard the door open. Turning quickly again he saw Willerton himself standing on the threshold, looking at him.

The young man went back at once into the room without saying anything and Bell hurried after him. Willerton was sitting on the edge of the bed, and Bell, so strong was the idea dominating his mind, looked at the young man anxiously, more than half expecting to see that he was bleeding from some dreadful, self-inflicted wound or else that perhaps he would suddenly fall dead from poison he had swallowed, for indeed the thought of the missing prussic acid that might quite well be in Willerton's possession had been strong in the detective's mind all this time.

But Willerton, though extraordinarily, terribly pale, though he was quite unable to control, in spite of the evident efforts he was making, the fits of trembling that seized him from time to time, so as to shake the whole bed he was sitting on, appeared to be perfectly all right.

Bell experienced a complete confusion and bewilder-

ment of mind, a little like that sometimes accompanying a bad nightmare.

"Mr. Willerton," he began and stopped.

He had no idea what to say, and then as his glance wandered about the room, it fell on a pocket knife that lay on the dressing table. It had a fairly long blade, and when Bell picked it up he saw that it was both sharp and strong. It was a tool by which the gate of death might very easily have been forced and Bell regarded it thoughtfully and then turned to Willerton:

"What is this?" he asked.

Willerton looked at it rather a long time before he answered slowly:

"A bare bodkin."

"That's Shakespeare," Bell remarked, "that is." Then he said: "What were you going to do it for, Mr. Willerton, sir?"

Willerton made no answer but he got up and going over to the washstand he drank a little water and moistened his forehead and the palms of his hands with a towel he damped. He was evidently slowly regaining control of himself and yet that he had passed through some crisis of terror and despair seemed to Bell more certain than ever. Looking about the room Bell saw that it was in some disorder. The wardrobe was open, two or three of the drawers showed contents all upset and disturbed, the jacket of a plus fours suit lay on the floor. Bell wondered if the young man had been intending to change his attire, but then why should he? Bell stooped and picked the jacket up from the floor and put it tidily on a chair, and then he saw that Willerton was looking at him with the oddest expression possible. What he had done unusual, he could not imagine, but evidently some action of his had appeared to Willerton under the strangest possible light, invested with some sig-

nificance of which he himself was quite unaware. But apparently whatever that significance was, it was over now, for Willerton went to the window and opened it and leaned out, drawing in long breaths of the pure outer air.

He took no more notice of Bell. He seemed almost to have forgotten his presence, at any rate to be quite indifferent to it. More and more puzzled and bewildered did Bell feel, and more and more troubled, for he had the strongest feeling that the solution to the whole mystery was there, or had been there, before his eyes, so to speak, or actually under his hand, but that it had slipped away again and was as far off as ever.

It seemed quite certain that Willerton had intended to commit suicide, and that his reason for that determination had been the sudden shock of the information, given apparently by one of the maids who must have seen Bell at work, that his room had been searched. It seemed also beyond doubt that it was with this purpose in his mind that he had rushed back to his room, that on the way he had paused to make that tragic gesture of farewell to Margaret, that he had locked himself in. But this once accomplished, the door once locked, and he himself alone with his purpose and the knife to effect it already bare in his hand, then what had happened to change his purpose?

What possible reason could there be, first for such despair, and then for such a sudden recovery from it?

And why had that recovery taken place at the last moment, in a locked room in which he and his purpose were alone together?

"I know what it is," Bell decided with a kind of melancholy resignation, "it's not them that's dotty, it's me."

He got up and began to move about the room, hoping vaguely that he would see something that would furnish

him with some sort of explanation. Willerton turned away from the window and went towards the door.

"Leave everything as tidy as you can, won't you?" he said as he was going out.

"Beg pardon, sir?" said Bell.

"I suppose you want to search my things again, don't you?" Willerton asked amiably. "I suppose that's what you were doing here before, weren't you? I'm only asking you not to mess them about more than you can help."

With that he walked quietly out of the room and Bell, after another bewildered look round, followed him. He did not think it worth while to make the search suggested, the very suggestion was proof enough there was nothing to find, anything incriminating there might be was, Bell felt well assured, now on Willerton's person, that Bell had no authority to search.

"I'm jiggered," he said to himself as he slowly descended the stairs, "jiggered I am, and what on earth's become of Carter?"

CHAPTER XII

SUPERINTENDENT PHILLIPS ARRIVES

By this time it was nearly half-past one and except that Colonel Coates had just returned to the house for the luncheon he had been invited to share with the house party, every other officer engaged on the case had departed on one errand or another. Bell alone was left, wandering disconsolately to and fro, ignored by Colonel Coates, forgotten apparently by his own superiors, scowled at by the butler, Peters, who made no attempt to hide his conviction that Bell was merely a dangerous and troublesome nuisance, and for his own part not having the least idea what to do or even how to occupy his time except by walking up and down on the terrace with his hands in his pockets.

"Funny sort of way of getting on with the job," he mused, stifling a yawn, for though every detective has to know long periods of complete inactivity, in this case Bell had no idea even of what he was waiting for or why.

"Mooching about, that's how he spends his time," said Peters loudly, making sure that Bell could hear him. "Nosing round, that's his job, pah."

Then a light rain began to fall, and Peters came, and, a little ostentatiously, closed and fastened the library windows, leaving Bell on the outside in the rain.

However he managed to find shelter in a summer-house where he was still further depressed, first by the discovery that he had no cigarettes left, and then by the fumes of the luncheon to which, unlike Colonel Coates, he

had not been invited and that floated out of the dining-room window to reach his nostrils with an almost incredible poignancy.

He even found himself able to distinguish each particular dish.

"Fish," he told himself, "that was the fish, that was. Now it's steak, a little underdone most likely, with lots of gravy, and the fat just nicely browned. Baked potatoes, probably."

He grew lost in the vision thus conjured up till, though it was still raining a little, he ventured out, and wandering towards the house met Peters again. In a casual way he remarked that he had had no supper the night before, not much breakfast that morning, and no lunch as yet, and was there any place near where any sort of meal could be obtained. Peters answered indifferently that he believed there was an inn about a mile away, near the high road, where no doubt they would be glad to serve him. With that Peters went off and Bell felt more than ever convinced that he was not really popular with the butler.

"I wonder why," he mused, "might be interesting to know why—whether it's just my face I can't help or whether it's something else."

Leaving this point for further consideration, Bell reflected that if this inn were about a mile away, it would take him, say, half an hour to walk there and back, and allowing a quarter of an hour for a hasty meal and a quarter of an hour for accidents or delays, he would be able to get back well within the hour.

"A hungry detective is a spoilt detective," he reflected, quoting what he had always thought ought to be the first maxim in the police manual even though it wasn't, and he decided to risk an unexpected return of the missing Carter.

The rain was stopping now so he went to the house and

when he knocked at the side door, it was once again Peters who appeared.

"Now what do you want?" demanded Peters. "All the rest of your lot's cleared off long ago—I don't know what you're hanging about for the way you are. The way everything's at sixes and sevens there's enough to do without having to run after you every two minutes."

Bell thought this last observation slightly exaggerated, even though he had to admit he himself did not know what he was hanging about for the way he was. But all he said was to explain meekly that he was going to get something to eat at the inn Mr. Peters had mentioned if Mr. Peters would be so good as to give him more explicit directions, and if further Mr. Peters would very kindly promise to inform Inspector Carter, should Inspector Carter return, where he, Sergeant Bell, was, and that he would be back within the hour.

"Coming back again, are you?" asked Peters, plainly regretting the fact. "Suppose you'll want me to be getting you a bed here next?"

Bell tried to look as if he thought this an excellent joke and retired, followed by the sound of a door being closed with an emphasis whose meaning there was no mistaking.

Either because he had misunderstood the butler's directions or because, as Bell strongly suspected, these had been purposely misleading, it took him not a quarter of an hour, but twice that time, to reach his destination. And then his request to be served with a meal caused something like general consternation. Beer they knew well, and whisky they were acquainted with, and ginger ale was familiar enough, and tea they themselves drank by the quart, though they never thought of trying to provide it for customers, but a meal, food, something to eat—it was a novel idea and one they had some difficulty in grasping.

Finally, after a good deal of hesitation and consultation, the idea of bacon and eggs got itself evolved. Bell accepted the suggestion with a gratitude that was somewhat modified when the bacon and eggs finally appeared and he found they had been fried with a steady perseverance, worthy of quite other causes, reducing both the eggs and the bacon to a condition of mutual and indistinguishable toughness—a toughness only to be described as the archetype of all toughness this world has ever known since frying pans were first invented, probably by the Enemy of Mankind himself in one of his more vicious moments. And all this, as Bell noted with interest, within a hundred yards of a high road along which flowed all day a fairly constant stream of motor traffic.

His delay in reaching the inn, the further delay in obtaining his eggs and bacon, and after that the time required for the intensive effort necessary to masticate them, all together made it nearer two hours than one before Bell got back to Ellerslie Court.

"Going to be trouble," he reflected, a trifle uneasily, when he noticed how long he had been away, "if Carter's turned up . . . as I expect most likely he has," he added, for he knew that it is always best to avoid disappointment by anticipating the worst.

But in this case, as in his experience so often happened, his expectation of the worst fell far short of the reality, for as he got near he saw drawn up before the front entrance to the house a car he recognized at once.

"Oh, lord," he groaned, "here's Phillips or some one turned up from Headquarters and me not there."

He knew the chauffeur, a constable named Dawson, who was regarding him with that diluted sympathy felt by the subordinate for his immediate superior on his way to a probably unpleasant interview with higher authority still.

"Mr. Phillips been asking for you, Sergeant," he said. "Been asking for you quite a lot he has—said if I saw you I was to tell you he was . . . waiting."

"Been here long?" asked Bell anxiously, only too well aware of the ominous stress Dawson had laid on that last word.

"Oh, not so long as we might have been," answered Dawson, evidently trying hard to be cheerful. "I daresay it isn't an hour yet."

So Phillips had been waiting for him nearly an hour—a superintendent kept waiting nearly an hour by a sergeant!! Instinctively Bell cast an eye towards the heavens, and was slightly relieved to see that they still held their position, apparently as yet unaffected. But he felt it was a scurvy trick Fate had thus played him once again, for who could have expected that Phillips would turn up like this, without warning or apparent cause?

Possibly Carter had made some discovery so important that he had reported it at once to Headquarters by 'phone, and Phillips had come along to deal with it. In that case most likely Carter had said that Bell would be found waiting and ready at Ellerslie Court, and instead Bell had been away, guzzling toughened eggs and leathery bacon that lay as heavily on his stomach as the thought of this coming interview with Phillips lay upon his apprehensions.

It was Peters who admitted him to the house, bestowing on him by way of greeting his customary scowl.

"So you're back, are you?" he asked, having evidently hoped against hope that that would never be.

"I think Superintendent Phillips is here, isn't he?" asked Bell, no longer caring twopence whether Peters either loved or hated him or why.

"How should I know?" snarled Peters, "do you suppose I know every policeman in the country? There's

some one here who seems to think he wants you from the way he keeps asking."

"Did you give him my message?" asked Bell anxiously.

"What message?" demanded Peters, "you told me to tell your Inspector Carter something or another but I haven't seen him. You'll find the fellow who wants you waiting in the library and why his lordship lets you lot turn his house into a police station, I don't know."

"Well, you know, there's been a murder—" Bell began and then perceived he was talking to the air, for Peters had walked off and Bell proceeded to the library, little cheered by the knowledge that the message he had left to explain his temporary absence had not been delivered.

In the library he found Phillips sitting at one of the tables and making entries in his note book.

"Oh, there you are at last," he greeted Bell with the kind of restraint that bodes trouble to come. "Haven't hurried at all, have you?"

"Well, you see, sir," explained Bell unhappily. "I hadn't had anything much to eat since yesterday and——"

"When an officer's on duty," interposed Phillips severely, serene in the recent and still vivid memory of roast beef and baked potatoes with treacle pudding to follow and after that a quite successful rear guard action with a piece of real Cheshire cheese, "an officer's got to expect to miss a meal sometimes, and a man who puts his stomach first isn't going to get very far in the promotion list. You remember that, Bell, and now what's all this nonsense about Carter?"

And Bell was suddenly aware that Phillips's blustering hid an unease akin to that he felt himself but had not yet acknowledged.

"I haven't an idea in the world," he said slowly, "what can have become of him."

"Absurd," said Phillips.

"Yes, sir," said Bell.

"Hang it all," said Phillips angrily, "he must be somewhere."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell.

"Well, where?" demanded Phillips.

Bell said nothing at all.

"When did you see him last?" snapped Phillips.

Bell explained.

"He came back here then?" Phillips asked, "that's certain?"

"Yes, sir," answered Bell. "One of the men servants gave him in this room a cup of tea he had asked for and something to eat and then he was sitting just where you are now, sir. After that no one seems to have seen him, at least I can't find any one who did and there were a number of people about. If he went out by the door he must have been seen in the hall, if he went out by one of the windows—there's a terrace they open on—you would think he must have been seen, too, for there were people going to and fro all the time."

"In other words," commented Phillips sarcastically, "he must be here still . . . can't say I see him."

"No, sir," agreed Bell, looking rather helplessly round the room, a little as if in his perplexity he hoped to see the missing Inspector there in some corner, where previously he had been overlooked.

"I never heard of such a thing," declared Phillips very angrily indeed, "an inspector vanishes in the middle of an investigation and his sergeant has no idea where he is . . . it's . . . it's . . . it's irregular," declared Phillips, bringing out the strongest condemnation his official mind could formulate.

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell once more, and his glance, still

ranging up and down the room, rested for a moment on the shelves of old volumes of sermons opposite, on which he noticed that the two or three volumes that had before been upside down had now been put right again.

"That's curious," he thought to himself, "yes, that's a bit curious."

CHAPTER XIII

INSPECTOR CARTER STILL MISSING

"If you're not too interested in those books, Sergeant Bell," the upraised voice of Superintendent Phillips boomed rather dreadfully across his meditations, "I'll trouble you to listen to what I'm saying."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir," exclaimed Bell, swinging round as he realized with horror that in his moment of absorption over the problem of the books replaced right side up, something that Phillips had apparently been saying had escaped his attention. "I beg your pardon, sir," he repeated, abjectly conscious of his fault, since for a sergeant not to attend when a superintendent is speaking is—well, not a situation for mere words.

Redder in the face and more red still, did Phillips grow, so that Bell, though watching with apprehension, could not help being reminded of a lobster undergoing the process of being boiled. Phillips had already been kept waiting an hour, his temper had not been good even on his arrival, for he was both worried and annoyed over the inexplicable disappearance of Inspector Carter, which, the Assistant Commissioner had made perfectly plain to him, was not the sort of thing that happened under really competent superintendents, and now this inattention of Sergeant Bell's was just the pretext he wanted to let himself go. In another moment the floodgates would have been opened, the avalanche let loose, the hounds of havoc and of war unleashed, and Bell probably packed straight off back to London and disgrace, when the library door

opened, and Colonel Coates came in, radiating that content and good will to all the world that comes from an excellent luncheon accompanied by an old and sound wine.

"Only just heard you were here, Mr. Phillips," he said genially as he came across to shake hands, "been smoking a cigar with Ellerslie and the fool of a butler here said he did not want to disturb us—I don't think the fellow has any love for us policemen, we upset his domestic arrangements, I suppose. Got any news for me about the dead man's identity?"

"He's Thompson all right," said Phillips, with a baleful look at Bell that told him this was merely postponement due to the presence of strangers and that when they were once more alone together their conversation would be carried on from the point at which it had been broken off. "I brought down his landlady and Mr. Meek—the head of the book canvassing firm that employed him—and both of them identified him at once. But they neither of them seem to know much about him. The landlady says he has lodged with her several months, was always quiet and well behaved, and if he took a drop too much sometimes it wasn't so as you would notice it. He came in late occasionally, but apparently not so as you would notice that either. He paid his rent regularly enough, and I expect that so long as he did so, there wasn't anything else much that she would notice. Meek hasn't much more to say. Thompson had a fair record as a salesman. At his office they don't know much about their men, if a canvasser turns in a sufficient number of orders and keeps his cash straight, that's about all they ask or care about. Some of Meek's men, he says, he wouldn't know if he met them in the street. Thompson, however, he has had more to do with, but has never spoken to him except on matters of business, and he can't make any suggestion as to what

he was doing down here. He ought to have been chasing doctors in his district, he could have had no business down here, and no orders from him from this part would have been accepted. It's some other agent's territory. It's rather odd that that applies also to Dr. Mackenzie. No order from Dr. Mackenzie would have been taken through him, so he can hardly have been calling there to obtain one. It's another agent's territory again. The only piece of information Meek had to give us was that once or twice Thompson made references to America and the way things are done there—Chicago, Los Angeles, Hollywood, other places as well. He knew South America too, and talked sometimes about Brazil."

"Where the nuts come from," murmured Bell, abstractedly, "just as films come from Hollywood."

Colonel Coates put up his eyeglass to look at Bell, evidently wondering what imbecile had escaped from what asylum to make his appearance here. Phillips very nearly exploded but controlled himself by an immense effort. For nothing on earth beneath, or in heaven above, would he have admitted before the member of any other police force that any one of his men was less than perfection personified in flesh and blood. But the moment Colonel Coates went—Phillips gloated in anticipation of the moment that would follow then, and he found himself wondering if Carter and Bell had both been drinking and if that was the secret of Carter's disappearance and of Bell's behaviour, and of this last perfectly idiotic remark.

"Well, very interesting, all that, of course," the Colonel observed, "but it doesn't seem very helpful at present. Didn't this man, Meek, take up any references when he engaged Thompson? Couldn't we get any information that way?"

"I don't think Meek's firm bother much about refer-

ences," Phillips answered. "At any rate they don't seem to have had any with Thompson. Apparently they'll try any man out, if he looks promising, and so long as he gets orders, they keep him, and if he don't, they sack him, and that's all there's to it. Of course, we've put men on to do what they can, to question the other lodgers and Meek's other salesmen and so on, and to make a round of the public houses in the district. Sometimes a man will keep mum everywhere else, in business and so on, and let himself go in the pub he uses. The usual routine, you know, Colonel."

"Looks as if he had been following either Willerton or Lady Ellerslie," remarked Colonel Coates frowningly, "Must be some reason for that. Odd business altogether. Your Inspector got back yet?"

"Not yet," answered Phillips, trying to look as if he knew all about it, but unable to help adding, with another baleful glance at Bell: "And when I got here, I thought my Sergeant had vanished, too."

Bell looked unhappy and shrank to about half his normal size and weight, or felt as if he had.

"Your Inspector," continued Coates, "seemed to think he had discovered something important. What exactly that was, Mr. Carter appeared to wish to keep to himself," and the Colonel's voice, as he uttered these last words, showed plainly enough what his opinion was of such unsporting, unprofessional conduct.

"You think he knew something, had discovered something, and kept it to himself," repeated Phillips, astonished, for indeed the idea of a police officer being in possession of information that he kept to himself, struck him as quite incredible. "Bell," he said sternly, only too evidently ready to discharge upon Bell the full force of indignation such conduct merited and that the Sergeant would have

to endure since he was there and the Inspector wasn't. "Bell, what do you know of this?"

"Well, sir," Bell admitted, "the Inspector certainly did say something . . . I don't think he was quite sure . . . he did seem to think he might be able to clear up the whole affair very soon."

"And then," said Phillips bitterly, "he goes off and no one knows where he is . . . a nice state of things." For a moment or two Phillips brooded over it, one could see him telling himself he didn't know what the force was coming to, that in his young days . . . "Which affair did Carter mean?" he asked suddenly. "The stolen prussic acid or the murder of this man, Thompson?"

"I suppose he meant both, but he didn't say," answered Bell. "I suppose it must all be one affair, somehow."

"How can it be?" grumbled Coates, "what can the theft of poison from a doctor in town have to do with a man being stabbed to death here in Ellerslie Park?"

"Carter gave you no idea of what he meant?" Phillips asked.

"No, sir," replied Bell.

"You didn't ask him?"

"I said I hadn't seen anything myself, and he said he had used his eyes and he said I ought to have used mine. He said the thing was plain enough for any one who had eyes to see with, but I've no idea what he meant."

"I suppose he must have gone off to follow up this information, whatever it is," observed Phillips, looking very worried. "But it's irregular," he repeated, falling back in his despair on the very strongest word in his vocabulary. "Highly irregular," he said, going from the strongest to the stronger still. "Who was the last person who saw him?"

Bell explained that it was the young footman, Darley,

who had served Carter in this very room with some breakfast. Darley was accordingly summoned, but had nothing more to say than that the gentleman had been sitting there at the table, he had had his pen in his hand and paper before him and was apparently in the act of beginning to write, he had thanked Darley for the tea, toast, and boiled egg, he was cracking the top of the egg as Darley was leaving the room, and that was all Darley had to say, and after that no one apparently had seen any sign of Carter.

Once more Bell repeated how he had inquired of every one he could find to question, without the least result.

"You say the egg and toast had been commenced but not finished?" Phillips asked Bell musingly.

"Yes, sir, the cup was half full of tea still," Bell answered. "Whatever it was made the Inspector leave, it must have been something sudden and unexpected. I'm as sure as can be that's his fountain pen lying there, so he left that, too, and that's not like him, either."

"What happened to the tray the food was on? Do you know?" Phillips asked.

"Lady Ellerslie came in while I was waiting for the Inspector," explained Bell. "She saw the tray and said she would send some one to clear it away and then she said the servants were busy and she would take it away herself."

"Her ladyship gave it to me," confirmed Darley, who had been listening to all this with great interest. "I took it into the back kitchen for the things to be washed up there."

Further pursuit of information on this detail seemed unnecessary, and after Darley had been questioned on one or two minor points and had proved unable to give any information of value, he was thanked and dismissed. As he was going Bell took an opportunity to ask him:

"Has this room been done up at all to-day, do you know? Tidied or dusted or anything like that, I mean?"

"The way things have been to-day," retorted Darley with some slight indignation, as if he felt his three interlocutors were more or less responsible for such breach of order and routine, "nothing's been done the way it ought, and no one's been in here this morning nor would, even if it had been the day to turn it out, which it ain't."

"I saw Mr. Peters in here just before that shower came on," observed Bell.

Darley looked discreetly amused.

"Mr. Peters wouldn't hardly be tidying up the room would he?" he asked, rather as one might ask if the President of the Royal Academy were likely to be found painting his own front door.

"Even if he saw something out of place?" Bell asked.

"Then," said Darley with decision, "he would tell off whoever hadn't seen to it, but he wouldn't ever touch a thing himself."

"Ah," said Bell.

"Have you quite finished inquiring into the household arrangements here?" asked Phillips irritably, "or do you think knowing whose job it is to dust the rooms is going to help us get in touch with Carter?"

Colonel Coates smiled at this devastating irony and then felt a little sorry for Bell because he looked so depressed. Darley beat a retreat and Bell said meekly: "Yes, sir; no, sir," from which observations those who heard them might extract what meaning they could.

CHAPTER XIV

WHERE IS SERGEANT BELL?

PHILLIPS, however, more worried than he cared to admit by the inexplicable disappearance of Inspector Carter, for never before had he known an officer to vanish in this way in the middle of an investigation, continued to glare at Bell with undiminished sternness. He could not help feeling that Bell was in some way to blame, especially when he said silly things like that about nuts coming from Brazil and films from Hollywood, and wanting to know when the rooms here were dusted and tidied. But for the presence of Colonel Coates . . . he dreamed happily for a moment of all the things he could say if only Colonel Coates were not present, and Colonel Coates offered him a cigar and said:

"There's one thing ought to help us, the doctor seems positive the murderer couldn't have escaped getting blood on his clothing, on his person, too, most likely. Of course we're following that up, but though we've got word of one or two strangers having been seen about here, there's no hint of anything unusual about them and certainly no suggestion of blood stains being noticed. One can hardly suppose the murderer came provided with a change of clothing and that seems to suggest he had a car in waiting and escaped in it—he could easily have a coat or wrap of some sort in the car to cover himself with. Assuming that the man in plus fours your two officers report having seen in the park was the murderer, the line to follow, I think, is to look for a motorist driving away from here and rather

heavily wrapped up. I'm having inquiries made to see if anybody like that was noticed anywhere along the road."

"Something useful may come of that," agreed Phillips though looking a little as if he thought it a 'line' too thin and faint to lead anywhere in particular. "Then there's this young Willerton I've been thinking about. He was at Dr. Mackenzie's and he's here, too. It would be as well to make sure none of his clothes show any sign of blood, but perhaps that's been done."

"Oh, Willerton," repeated Coates, rather taken aback, "nice boy . . . very nice boy . . . just been lunching with him . . . young nephew of mine at St. Olave's with him," and evidently the idea that an 'old boy', an old St. Olavian, St. Olave's being one of the oldest and most famous of the smaller public schools, could be guilty of murder, was not one Colonel Coates found himself able seriously to entertain, especially when he had just been lunching with him. But he knew his duty and was no respecter of persons and he said sternly: "I'll have that seen to at once."

Bell gave a timid, deprecating cough.

"I went through Mr. Willerton's room a little while ago," he said. "Mr. Willerton is wearing a lounge suit. He has a spare pair of trousers, a plus fours suit, and a dress suit. It doesn't seem likely he would have more clothes than that with him for a short visit and certainly not two 'plus fours'. All his things were quite clean and in good order."

Phillips gave Bell rather a puzzled look. He had noticed before that when facts were wanted, Bell often proved to be already in possession of them, but how this came about he was not quite sure. He supposed it was, as Carter used to say, that Bell, though deficient in powers of analysis and deduction, had a curious way of somehow

running his rather thick head against facts that, later on, turned out, somehow or another, to be precisely those wanted.

Colonel Coates was also looking at Bell with some surprise.

"Whose instructions did you act on?" he asked.

Bell had no answer to this and looked very unhappy. He felt that once again he had got himself into trouble by acting on his own initiative instead of waiting for orders as a well regulated subordinate should always do.

"I just slipped upstairs when I thought no one was looking and poked about the young gentleman's room," he explained, hoping against hope that this would be considered satisfactory.

"But . . . " began the Colonel. "I mean . . . well, Lord Ellerslie . . ." He paused. Evidently he considered that an unwarrantable liberty had been taken in 'poking' about the room of a guest of Lord Ellerslie's, especially when that guest was an old St. Olavian, but then he knew also that duty comes first, even before the privileges of the old St. Olavian. "Does Lord Ellerslie know?" he asked.

"I did not myself inform his lordship," answered Bell meekly.

"Um," said the Colonel. "Um . . . well, no harm done, I suppose."

"I found no trace of the missing prussic acid either," added Bell, "of course a small bottle is easily concealed."

"Um," said the Colonel again, and he rubbed his head and looked very worried. "Nasty case," he said, "very complicated . . . nothing to show even if there's any connexion between the murder and the stolen poison. If there is, why should any one steal poison and then use a knife? What I feel is we shan't get much further till we

get a starting point somehow. So long as we don't know where to start from, how can we tell where we want to get to?"

Neither Phillips nor Bell had any answer to give to this conundrum.

"And the point to get a start from," continued the Colonel, "is Thompson. If we could get to know who he really was, then we should be able to form some idea of what brought him down here and once we've found that out, we shall be able to go ahead. You agree?"

Phillips nodded, and Bell, leaning against the bookshelves near the huge old fireplace, said slowly:

"Well, sir, I think myself the investigation ought to begin just here—in this house. For there's something the people here know that they're not telling."

"What do you mean?" demanded Coates.

"I don't know," Bell replied. "All I know is facts, but what they mean, or whether they mean anything, whether they are parts of one whole, and that whole the truth we are looking for, or not, I can't say. Only they are facts, and they seem to me to show that every one in this house knows something and no one's saying anything."

"That's a pretty serious thing to say," remarked Colonel Coates.

"Murder is serious, sir," answered Bell.

"Tell us what facts you mean," interposed Phillips.

"First fact," Bell said, "is that there's a bottle of prussic acid reported missing, and that Lady Ellerslie, Willerton, and Thompson were all there on the spot when it is said to have vanished—I don't forget the possibility that Dr. Mackenzie is either mistaken or lying and that the prussic acid isn't missing at all. Still, that doesn't seem too likely, and the fact of the report of its disappearance is there in any case, and so is the fact that

those three people were mentioned in connexion with the report, and that afterwards one of them is found murdered in the grounds of the house where the other two are residing, one permanently and one as a visitor."

"Yes, but," began the Colonel and then was silent.

"Go on, go on, Bell," said Phillips, more amiably than as yet he had this day addressed his subordinate.

"There's Lord Ellerslie next," Bell went on accordingly, "the facts about him are, first, that he found the dead body; second, that when he did he had a pistol in his pocket; third, that it's not his custom to go about armed; fourth, that he gave a lame explanation to account for his possession of the pistol; fifth, that there was no sign of blood on his person or clothing. It would have been just possible for him to get back to the house, change, get back to the scene of the murder and give the alarm, but it's hardly credible, and still more incredible that no one should have seen him, if that's what he did."

"Well, I certainly don't think there's any reason to suspect Lord Ellerslie of murder," declared Colonel Coates. "I never had any suspicion of him."

"No, sir," agreed Bell, "only he was carrying a pistol and he hasn't said why—I think that means there's something he knows he hasn't told, or else why was he going armed that evening? Then there's Lady Ellerslie."

"Yes, but . . . " began the Colonel. "Oh, all right," he said. "All right. Go on."

"It seems clear she was in the house at the time of the murder," Bell continued. "At any rate, it's difficult to believe she got out unseen, committed the murder, and got back again to the house, still unnoticed. It would take very strong evidence to make a jury believe that. But there's something she knows that's terrifying her. A little earlier to-day she came in this room while I was here, and

any one could see she was stiff with terror—just sheer unmixed terror. There was something she knew she hardly dared even think of."

"Nonsense, nonsense," protested Colonel Coates. "She's just upset, worried—any one would be with a thing like this happening."

"It was more than that," Bell answered gravely, "and what is more, I thought it was something in this room was terrifying her, though what that could be when it was empty, except for me, I can't even imagine. There might have been a ghost standing where I'm standing now, from the way she kept looking at these rows of old books. Then there's Miss Eayland."

"Oh, come," cried the Colonel, fairly bounding in his seat, "come . . . a young girl like her . . . oh, come now."

"Miss Eayland," Bell continued, "was out in the park at the time of the murder. Inspector Carter and I saw some one with red hair look at us over the park wall and then vanish. Miss Eayland and Lady Ellerslie's maid, Louise, both have red hair. But I think the person we saw was younger than Louise, and besides she can account for herself, she was in the house busy with some sewing for her ladyship. But if it wasn't her, who was it? and if it was Miss Eayland, what reason has she got for denying it? Does it mean there's something she knows she won't tell? Take Mr. Willerton next. He clearly had time to commit the murder and get back to the house. He had changed his clothes, and in a hurry, for his dress bow was crooked and badly tied, though I'm told he is generally fussy about things like that. On the other hand, his clothing seems all accounted for and none of it shows any signs of blood-stains. When we got to the scene of the murder, the first thing he did was to pick up the knife and handle it. That

may have been only stupidity, or carelessness, but it may have been to explain finger prints he knew were there, or perhaps to confuse or overlay some one else's finger prints. In the same way he moved about very freely when most of the others were standing quite still. It's possible that was the same idea—to confuse or overlay footmarks he was afraid might be detected and that he hoped to account for like that. There's something more curious still. One of the maids saw me in his room and seems to have told him. He was scared, badly scared, more than scared. He rushed up to his room and locked his door. I thought he was going to kill himself. I knocked but he didn't answer. I was going to get help, when he opened the door again. He was still extraordinarily agitated but not quite in the same way, I mean he wasn't any longer like a man just sentenced to death, as he had been before. My belief is there was something in his room of such a nature that if I had seen it, he meant to have killed himself. Then he found either that it wasn't there or that I had overlooked it or not understood it, and he felt safe again. Anyhow, I think it's sure there's something he knows and doesn't mean to tell. Then there is Mr. Morland . . ."

"Ah, yes, Morland," agreed the Colonel with a certain relief, for Morland was neither a peer, nor a charming lady, nor a young girl, nor even an old St. Olavian, and therefore the question of his guilt could be faced with greater equanimity.

"It seems pretty clear he was in the house at the time of the murder," Bell went on. "At any rate what applies to Lady Ellerslie applies to him, though of course not so strongly—that it's difficult to imagine his slipping out to commit the murder and getting back without being seen. There's evidence he was writing letters, though the times

are a bit vague and contradictory—they almost always are. There's this, though—" and Bell briefly described the incident of the half sovereign dropped in the hall, at first undiscoverable, later on picked up and returned to Morland by the young footman, Darley, in Bell's presence.

Colonel Coates, listening intently, looked frankly bewildered.

' I don't see anything in that," he protested, "I don't see what that's got to do with us—nothing in a man dropping half a sovereign in the hall and picking it up again."

"No, sir," agreed Bell, "even though it's a little curious it was found later on and not at the time, though apparently it was looked for carefully. But what is more curious is that Mr. Morland was afraid, and badly afraid, when it was returned to him before me. There was something about it that made him afraid, though I can't even begin to guess what."

"Don't see how that can be," declared Colonel Coates. "Nothing to be afraid of, nothing in dropping half a sovereign—unless perhaps it was a bad one and he didn't want you to know that."

"I don't think it was that, sir," Bell replied gravely. "I think there's something he knows and was afraid I might know, too."

"I hope you're not being too fanciful, Bell," interposed Phillips.

"If you had seen yourself how they looked," Bell answered, "you wouldn't think so, sir. Lady Ellerslie was stiff with terror, and Mr. Willerton looked as I saw a man look once in the war when he released the safety catch of a bomb and then let it drop under his feet, and Mr. Morland—well, you know yourself, sir, how a man looks sometimes when you put your hand on his shoulder and

tell him you want him. Then there are Peters and Darley. When Mr. Carter asked them if they knew anything about the little .28 automatic we picked up, they both said they didn't. But I distinctly saw Peters tread on Darley's foot just as Darley was going to say something. That means, I think, there's something they know, too, they don't mean to tell."

"But all that's quite incredible," protested Coates.

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell, "but I think it's so, sir. There's something they all know in this house they're keeping from us. I suppose it doesn't follow," he added musingly, "that it's always the same thing."

"Well," grunted Phillips, "I must say it seems as if you had been trying to keep your eyes open, Bell."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," said Bell, at once blinking both the eyes thus referred to, and quite taken aback by such an outburst of enthusiastic approval.

"Where is this little automatic you picked up?" Colonel Coates asked.

"I think Mr. Carter has it still," Bell answered. "It seemed to have nothing to do with the case and no one claimed it, so he kept it."

"Well, where is Carter?" grumbled Phillips, for about the tenth time.

There was a knock at the door. Colonel Coates was wanted on the 'phone.

The Colonel said he would come at once, and added in a low voice to Phillips that perhaps after all Sergeant Bell wasn't so slow and simple as he seemed at first and if Phillips would come along with him, perhaps it might be as well to ask a question or two of Lord Ellerslie.

"Not of course that I dream for one moment . . ." said the Colonel as he and Phillips walked towards the door, "but I thought if you would come with me . . ."

Phillips nodded and at the door, when he and Colonel Coates reached it, he turned:

"Oh, Bell," he began and then: "Good God Almighty, where is he?" he cried.

For the room was absolutely empty and of Bell, who before had been standing there by the fireplace, now no trace or sign was visible.

CHAPTER XV

INSPECTOR CARTER RETURNS

FOR one long moment such blank, incredulous amazement held still and frozen both Colonel Coates and Superintendent Phillips as few of mortal men can have ever known. Almost it seemed to them a miracle had taken place before their eyes or else they must mistrust the message those eyes conveyed to them, for indeed they knew most certainly that the moment before Bell had been there, and now the long, wide, book-lined room showed no sign nor trace of his presence.

It was Phillips' keen glance that first saw what had happened while Colonel Coates still stared and gasped and stared bewilderedly.

"Those shelves . . . the bookshelves," Phillips stammered, seizing the Colonel by the arm, "near the fireplace . . . look . . . they've moved."

Indeed a whole section of the shelves, those next the great fireplace, where Bell had till now been standing, were no longer in alignment with those next to them. A gap was perceptible that now widened as the book-laden shelves swung still further forward, revealing behind them a narrow space or cavity that seemed to extend behind the fireplace. From it Bell apologetically emerged.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "it's what they call the Ellerslie secret chamber, I suppose."

"Good Lord," said the Colonel feebly.

"How on earth . . ." began Phillips.

They came back across the room from the door to where

Bell stood. A whole section of the shelves, from the floor six feet up, revolved on hidden hinges, and revealed behind them this hidden space, about six feet wide and hardly more than three deep, more like a cupboard indeed than a room, that had been fabricated in the stone work about the huge old fireplace. It was absolutely bare of all contents, and there seemed to be no means of giving it light or air, so that any one occupying it would have had to exist in utter darkness, in constant peril of suffocation, with not much more space than was necessary to lie down and get up again.

"Extraordinarily interesting," said Colonel Coates, "I've heard of the Ellerslie secret chamber since I was a child almost, mentioned in all the books, but I never expected to see it, never . . . I don't know what Lord Ellerslie will say, though . . . I don't know that we've any right . . . what do you think?"

Phillips apparently was not thinking about that at all. He said to Bell:

"Well, now you've found it, there's nothing there."

"No, sir," agreed Bell, "so there isn't, is there?" and he looked even more depressed than usual.

"How on earth," asked Coates, "how on earth did you find . . . I mean how did you know? . . . why, I've been in this room scores of times and I never dreamed . . ."

There came a knock at the door again and Bell swung back the movable shelves into position.

"Better not let any one know yet," he said.

"No, no," agreed Coates, "no . . . certainly not . . . no business of ours anyhow . . . I'm afraid Lord Ellerslie won't like it."

The knock at the door meant another message to say that Colonel Coates was being asked for on the 'phone

very pressingly indeed, and the Colonel said all right, he would come at once.

"I'll be back immediately," he added to Phillips. "Then we can make up our minds whether we need say anything . . . no business of ours . . . Ellerslie may not like it . . . ancestral secret and all that, you know . . . nothing to do with us, your lost Inspector isn't hidden there, you see."

He chuckled at this little joke and hurried off, and Phillips said:

"How was it you spotted it, Bell?"

"Well, sir," answered Bell, "I suppose it was because some of the books were upside down at first and then afterwards they weren't."

"What do you mean?" growled Phillips, "what's that got to do with it?"

"Oh, beg pardon, sir," exclaimed Bell, waking from the puzzled thoughts in which he had been absorbed, for neither of the other two had been more surprised at his discovery than he had been himself, and neither of them found it so difficult to understand. "You see, sir, I had heard about the Ellerslie secret chamber—they write about it in the papers sometimes—and when Mr. Carter couldn't be found anywhere, I couldn't help remembering there was such a place here, though I couldn't see how there could be any connexion. Only it wasn't difficult to see Lady Ellerslie was badly frightened about something . . . and so was young Mr. Willerton, and I wondered if it could be the same thing, and then I wondered if what he thought I might have found in his room was really somewhere else where she had put it for him, if you see what I mean, sir."

"A bit hard to follow," said Phillips, "but go on."

"Well, sir," Bell continued, "it wasn't me she was

frightened of, because she hardly seemed to see me, she stared right past me in a way of speaking, as if there was something behind me, but nothing that I could see, except I noticed in a row of books of old sermons that one or two were upside down. That didn't seem much, or enough to make Lady Ellerslie look the way she did, and so I supposed there must be something else, and it was her own thoughts made her stare straight ahead of her the way she did, and not anything she actually saw. Anyhow, I felt pretty sure it had nothing to do with our not knowing where Mr. Carter was, because when I mentioned him, she seemed quite different . . . the tension relaxed at once, if you see what I mean. But then afterwards I noticed the books that had before been upside down had been put straight again, and if you remember, sir, that young footman I asked said no one had been in here to tidy the room or put things straight at all."

"That's what you were after, was it?" grunted Phillips. "I see now."

"So then I thought," Bell continued, "I would poke about a bit behind those books, and when I did, I felt there were some knobs in the wood, there didn't seem any use for. So I started to press them, one after the other, and one of them seemed to give, and I thought I heard a slight click. I guessed that meant a bolt or catch of some sort had been released, and when I gave the shelves a pull, they moved out."

Colonel Coates came back from the 'phone, where the affair he had been wanted for had proved of slight importance, and Bell had to tell his story all over again.

"Most remarkable, most interesting," said the Colonel and then took the precaution of locking the library door that they might not be interrupted. "Don't want every one to know we've tumbled across the family secret," he

explained, and once again made Bell demonstrate how pressure on the knob of wood behind the books released a secret spring, so that then it was possible by the exercise of only slight exertion to move the laden shelves outward, like a door.

"Very interesting," he repeated yet again, as he examined the narrow, cupboard-like cavity thus revealed in the stone work of the great chimney. "But I think we must keep our little discovery—or rather, your little discovery, Sergeant—to ourselves. What Lord Ellerslie would say if he knew we had ferreted out his traditional family secret, I don't know, and after all, it's no business of ours, nothing to do with the murder, I suppose. All the same a very smart piece of work on your part, Sergeant, and I shall make a point of writing to London and saying so."

Bell murmured something incoherent, turned very red, and had the air of no longer knowing whether he was standing on his head or his heels. He was so used to having his discoveries or suggestions either ignored altogether, or put down to luck, or to seeing the credit of them appropriated by some one else, that he did not quite know what to make of the Colonel's approbation. But he stole a glance at Phillips, almost expecting to receive a frowning rebuke, and was more and more bewildered to find that dignitary looking as much as if he agreed with the Colonel, as a superintendent can be expected to, when it's a question of a sergeant's merits. Bell decided that this unexpected atmosphere of approval had better put him on his guard against the worse trouble he felt sure it must portend.

By this time Colonel Coates, still very excited and interested, was inside the stone cavity—one could hardly call it a room.

"No light, no air," he said, "just the bare stone, nothing else. Awful place to be shut up in for long, no one could stand it for more than an hour or two, after that they'd die of suffocation. The stories about priests and fugitive cavaliers being hidden in here for weeks together must be all rubbish, couldn't be done."

He emerged, a little relieved to find himself outside again, and Phillips took his place and by the aid of an electric torch examined with the greatest care and attention every inch of the stone work.

"I must say I don't quite see," he remarked, looking at Bell, "any reason why Lady Ellerslie or any one else should be terrified at the idea of this place being discovered, or care twopence one way or the other for that matter."

"No, sir," agreed Bell, looking extremely worried himself, "that's what I'm thinking, too."

"Oh, it's the old family tradition," explained Colonel Coates. "That's all—I should hate Lord Ellerslie to know it had been found—prying about in what doesn't concern us, he would say."

"Yes," agreed Phillips, "so he might, but we have to remember that some very funny work has been going on about here . . . and what's become of Carter, I can't imagine."

"Well, he's not there, is he?" the Colonel pointed out with a gesture towards the secret place they had discovered, and with an accent a little impatient, for he was tired of hearing about this London man's disappearance and took no interest in it, being certain that he was merely off to play a lone and selfish hand somewhere or another.

But Phillips had turned the light of his electric torch on a corner of the stone work that protruded slightly, and that, to his keen and intent gaze, seemed to show itself

slightly worn, as if by occasional use that the rest of the stone work had not experienced.

"Bell, see that?" Phillips said to him, indicating it.

"It's what I was looking at, sir," Bell answered.

Phillips put all his weight on it. Nothing happened. He tried, patiently, pressure in other directions. Still nothing happened. He put his hand quite lightly on one small spot of the stone work, in the actual corner itself, and the whole of one portion of the wall before him swung slowly back upon itself, revealing the foot of a narrow stairway that rose winding upward in the dark thickness of the outer wall of the house.

"Good God," said the Colonel.

"I think we've got to see where these steps lead to," said Phillips.

"Lord Ellerslie . . ." began the Colonel uneasily.

But he made no attempt to formulate more precisely any objection he felt, and when Phillips began to ascend the stairs, he followed close behind. Bell came last, and in this order the three men ascended the narrow winding stairs, both Phillips and Bell examining closely by the light of their electric torches, the stone stairs and walls, but finding nothing of interest. A faint draught up and down the stairs kept the air sufficiently fresh, and when presently they reached the top they emerged through a narrow doorway into a small oblong chamber, about twelve feet by five, furnished with an ancient chair and table in heavy oak, and having at one end a small oaken chest or coffer. Air and a modicum of light came from a series of small openings made under the stone gutter that ran round the top of the house outside, for this inner secret chamber they had now found was close under the roof, cunningly concealed beneath the great stone chimney stacks. From below, these narrow openings were quite

invisible, and they were made to slope downwards, so that not only was any light within less likely to be seen but also any person looking through them from inside had a fair view of the surrounding country.

Yet these were details that none of the three newcomers took in at the moment, so absorbed at once was all their attention by the still, human form that lay on the further side of the old oak table, between it and the wall, the still and silent form of Chief Inspector Carter, huddled in a cramped, unnatural attitude of which they all understood the dread significance at once.

"Dead," Phillips said, his voice shaken and unsteady as he knelt down by that quiet, prostrate figure. "Dead," he repeated. He stooped a little lower still. "Murdered," he said. He bent still lower and sniffed at the cold, stiff lips. "Prussic acid," he said.

CHAPTER XVI

CROCKERY WASHED UP

"DEAD? Dead? Prussic acid?" Bell repeated. "Murdered?" he said, "but . . . but . . . but . . ." His voice trailed off into silence and then with a vague, bewildered gesture: "Oh, it can't be," he muttered, still staring at the dead man before him, his comrade of so many years, as if he could not even yet believe that what he saw was so.

Indeed, to the other two as well, the thing seemed to pass the bounds of credibility, so that neither of them would have been much surprised to wake suddenly in his own familiar bed to the realization that all this was merely some specially wild, fantastic dream.

Indeed Phillips even put out his hand slowly and timidly and touched that of the dead man, and swiftly drew it back again, as though only by actual touch, and by that chill contact, could he assure himself of the stark reality.

It was as though this movement broke the spell which had held them all so still and quiet, sheer figures of horror and amazement. Colonel Coates jumped to his feet and began to gesticulate, almost to wave his arms about, a thing probably he had never done before in all his life.

"It's not possible, not reasonable," he babbled, "it can't be . . . how could he get here? . . . this room . . . its secret . . . no one could . . . why . . . how . . . I mean . . . you see what I mean?" he asked, almost pleadingly. "It's not reasonable." He paused as if he wanted confirmation, he grew still and motionless again,

with an exasperated air he stared at the dead body as though he wished to deny its existence. "Well, if he's dead, it's murder," he pronounced, as though this idea were something quite new.

"It's murder right enough," Phillips repeated, almost as bewilderedly, "only how . . . only why. . . ." He paused, apparently incapable of speech for the moment, and then: "My God," he said simply.

"Toast . . . tea," Bell stammered, and when the others looked at him with fresh bewilderment, supposing apparently that the shock had deprived him of his senses that he should talk of toast and tea, he added swiftly: "He had some breakfast here when he came back . . . toast, tea, I'll see if they've washed up."

As he spoke, with a rapidity of movement almost terrifying by contrast with the immobility of that still figure on the ground, with the almost equal stillness of the two men standing by, Bell hurled himself from this little secret room beneath the roof and down the narrow, winding stairs into the library. It was empty and deserted still as when they had left it. He dashed across the room, unlocked the door and flew out into the passage beyond, where the first person he saw was Morland lumbering along with his usual clumsy swiftness, his pockets, as usual, full of agricultural papers and pamphlets, his hands full, as usual, of the letters he was writing to interest various people in his pet mass farming scheme.

"We've found Inspector Carter," Bell said.

"When I've got my company going," Morland said, "I'll send you and him prospectuses, shall I?"

Bell did not answer. If he had hoped to surprise any sign of guilt or previous knowledge in the black bearded agriculturalist, he had failed. He turned back swiftly to the library door, and locked it this time from the outside,

making prisoners thus of his two superior officers to whom at the moment he gave no thought.

"What's that for?" protested Morland, "there are some letters I've got to write. . . ."

Again Bell made no answer. Holding the key of the door in his hand, he ran into the hall. Lady Ellerslie was coming down the stairs. It was growing late now and she had just changed into a loose, flowing tea gown, preparatory to lying down for a little to rest, for indeed she was exhausted to the point of actual collapse. But first she had remembered some domestic matter that needed her attention, and throwing over her shoulders a voluminous old Indian shawl she possessed, she was in the act of coming downstairs again to see to this household detail when Bell burst so wildly into the hall. He saw her, their eyes met, at once he changed his course and sprang up the stairs to meet her.

"We've found Inspector Carter," he said.

His face was so pale, his usual calm official look so changed and altered, his dash up the stairs towards her and the abrupt words he threw at her, all were so startling it is no wonder she shrank back in alarm.

"What do you mean? . . . where was he? . . . why . . . ?" she stammered.

"We've found Inspector Carter," Bell repeated, staring at her intently, as if by sheer intensity of gaze he would force from her anything she knew.

"I don't understand," she repeated, and once again if Bell had hoped to discover any sign or proof of guilty knowledge he had failed entirely.

Although his voice had not been loud, the very intensity with which he had spoken had seemed to lend it a strange carrying power. Now in the hall below appeared Lord Ellerslie and young Ralph Willerton together, and, behind

them, Margaret Eayland, coming out of one of the other rooms.

"What's all this?" Lord Ellerslie called loudly, "what's the matter now?"

Bell turned and raced down the stairs again. He said to Lord Ellerslie:

"We've found Inspector Carter."

"Oh," answered Ellerslie, blankly. "Well, what about it?"

Bell made a step towards Willerton.

"We've found Inspector Carter," he repeated once more.

Willerton offered no comment. He seemed, or at least he had the air of being, only puzzled. But from behind Margaret called, rather as if she realized or guessed or knew the truth already—who could tell which?

"Found? Why do you say that? Found?"

"Yes, what do you mean?" Lord Ellerslie repeated.

Bell swung round and without saying anything more rushed away and through the green baize doors whereby he had noticed that the servants came and went. As he dashed through them he heard Ellerslie say:

"He's drunk, that's what it is, drunk. He's drunk."

And then he heard Morland, who had just lumbered heavily into the hall from the library corridor, saying loudly:

"I think there's something up, I think something's happened."

Beyond the green baize doors was a long stone passage from which opened various domestic offices. Down this passage Darley, the young footman, was approaching, and Bell called to him:

"I want the cup Inspector Carter used this morning, the plate, everything, where are they?"

"Eh?" said Darley, quite bewildered by the eagerness

of Bell's demand, and it was a moment or two before Bell could get into the astonished young man's head what was really wanted.

"The cup and plate that Inspector of yours used this morning?" Darley repeated at last. "What do you want them for? How do you think I can tell which they were? They've been washed up and put away long ago."

Bell had thought there was just one chance in a thousand that that had not happened yet. But it had and he said with scarcely less eagerness:

"What became of the water they were washed up in?"

This time Darley looked really alarmed.

"Thrown down the sink, I suppose," he answered, beginning to back away from a man whose sanity seemed slightly uncertain. "Why?"

"We've found Inspector Carter," Bell said abruptly.

"Found him?" Darley repeated and then with equal abruptness: "You don't mean he's been done in, too?"

Bell looked at him gloomily. He was the first to guess the truth. Morland had been preoccupied. Lady Ellerslie frightened. Lord Ellerslie angry. Willerton had been indifferent. Margaret Eayland faintly uneasy. Only this boy seemed to guess the truth and Bell said:

"Why do you ask that?"

"The way you look," Darley answered.

Peters, the butler, came up.

"What's all this?" he demanded and to Bell he said: "We've got our work to do, you know, and plenty of it, too, with everything so upset."

"They've found Inspector Carter," Darley told him.

"Bad pennies always turn up, trust 'em for that," retorted Peters. "Didn't come to tell us that, did you?" he asked Bell.

Bell repeated his demand for the crockery Carter had

used but Peters only confirmed Darley's statement that it had long ago been washed and put away in the china cupboard. One or two more questions Bell asked and then hurried back to the library, where, outside the door he found gathered a little group composed of Lord Ellerslie and young Willerton, Morland and Margaret. Willerton, trying vainly to open the door, was saying that it must be locked. Morland was explaining confusedly, no one paying him any attention, that he had seen Bell lock it, and that he, Morland, had important letters to write. Lord Ellerslie was expressing himself with vehement indignation: "My own house," he was saying, "my own house." In the background hovered Margaret, pale and frightened-looking, and seeing Bell coming back, Ellerslie shouted to him:

"Here, you, what's this mean? Is this door locked? Why is this door locked . . . my own house."

Without saying anything Bell put the key he still carried into the lock and opened the door and went in. The others followed, and at once they saw the gap in the bookshelves that disclosed the entrance to the secret chamber. Lord Ellerslie gave a sort of muffled cry at the sight, and stuttered incoherently with astonishment and rage. He had become very pale and he gesticulated angrily. Willerton looked startled and interested but that was all, and Morland said:

"Why, that must be the famous secret chamber. When it's open, it means there's a death in the house, doesn't it?"

"Is that the story?" Bell asked slowly. "It's strange if that's the story."

Lord Ellerslie, collecting himself and speaking in a carefully controlled tone, said:

"You understand I resent this strongly. . . . I shall

make representations in the proper quarter . . . you understand this will not rest here."

"I understand that," agreed Bell, "I understand that very well."

There was something in his sombre tone that made them all turn to look at him, that penetrated even the cold fury by which Lord Ellerslie had become possessed at the thought of his ancestral secret thus violated. His voice was still angry enough but had now a touch of hesitation in it as he said:

"There is no possible excuse . . . I shall accept no explanation."

"Did any one but yourself know of that place?" Bell asked. "Did any one but you know how to get to it?"

"Every one knew there was a secret chamber, of course every one knew that," Ellerslie answered, impatiently, "it's in every twopenny guide book in the country. No one knew where it was or how to get to it except myself and Ralph here."

"Ah, Mr. Willerton," mused Bell, and a little cry from behind made him look round and see, standing in the doorway, Lady Ellerslie, a frozen statue of horror and despair, her dreadful gaze going from Willerton to the open bookshelves and then back again.

"What . . . what . . . what . . . " she was stammering, though indeed her bloodless lips seemed scarcely able to articulate the words, "what . . . you've found . . . what . . .?"

"They've had the insolence," Lord Ellerslie said, "to pry . . . to force their way . . . an outrage . . . Julia, what's the matter?" he added abruptly, for even he perceived now that his wife's agitation was too extreme to be accounted for by the unveiling even of such an age long secret.

Bell pushed forward towards her.

"What was there to find?" he asked sharply, "what is it we found?"

But Lady Ellerslie did not answer. It seemed she hardly heard him. Her gaze was fixed now and still dreadful, and it was on Ralph Willerton that it rested with such an intensity of fear and questioning as none could imagine who had not seen the like. But Ralph, on his side, had only the air of being very bewildered and puzzled. Bell was about to speak again, for the thought was humming in his mind that she at least had known of the strange, dread secret that hidden chamber held, when their attention was all caught by an odd sound coming to them through the gap in the bookshelves, a sound they did not recognize at once as that of footsteps, shuffling footsteps descending slowly and with difficulty, the cramped and winding steps beyond. None of them spoke or moved. The shuffling sounds came nearer. There became visible in the gap in the shelves the broad back of Phillips as he came slowly backwards out into the room, and the souls of the little group of lookers-on became frozen in horror as they perceived that from beneath his arms, whereby he supported them, there sagged the feet and legs of a man. Slowly he backed out into the room, and as he did so there grew visible, first the dead man's body, and then the figure of Colonel Coates, breathing a little heavily with his exertions. Between them they laid down the body of the murdered man on a couch, and Lord Ellerslie said in a whisper:

"He is dead . . . is he dead?"

"Murdered," Colonel Coates answered.

Drawn by a dreadful fascination they all came nearer, all, except Lady Ellerslie, who still stood in her place by the doorway, on whose features her earlier look of extreme terror and dismay had now changed to one of almost

equally extreme bewilderment. It was almost a gesture of relief she made as she watched while they laid the dead man's body down, and Bell found himself thinking that whatever it was she had dreaded, whatever it was had so roused her terrors, whatever it was she had so feared being found up there in the secret chamber, it had not been this. His thoughts were broken into by Phillips's voice.

"Bell," Phillips was saying, "it's important the cup and plate used should be found—see to that at once."

"I have, sir," Bell answered. "They've been washed up and put away, there is no way of identifying them now;" and there came into his mind so odd, twisted and keen a regret that never more would Carter, in his bland smiling way, take to himself the credit for any such piece of initiative or energy some subordinate had shown, that for the moment his eyes were dim.

CHAPTER XVII

AN EMPTY CHEST AND A MONOGRAM

"We must send for a doctor," Phillips was saying and then again: "A doctor's no good."

"Yes, yes, a doctor, we must send for a doctor," Colonel Coates repeated.

But neither of them moved or made any effort to put their words into effect. They continued to stand there, both of them, looking helplessly at each other and at the dead man, and it was plain that what had happened had for the time so shaken and bewildered them, so thrown them out of their accustomed routine of thought and action that at the moment they were incapable of action, but could only stare and wonder, and Bell thought to himself:

"They've lost their heads . . . what made them bring the body down here? They ought to have left it where it was till there had been time for a proper examination."

In order to do the best he could to repair what seemed to him a blunder that might mean important clues had been lost, he went across to Phillips and said to him in a low voice:

"Beg pardon, sir. Shall I go and make a sketch and take some measurements up there while I remember just where—where he was lying?"

"Eh?" said Phillips, "what's that . . . hasn't that been done? It ought to have been done at once."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell.

Phillips put his hand to his head with a rather pathetic lost gesture.

"Bell," he said, "this beats me . . . I've known him ever since he joined the force . . . how many years? . . . and now this. Good God," he burst out, "I never heard of such a thing . . . I don't think I quite know what I'm doing."

"No, sir," agreed Bell with sympathy. He added moodily: "We've got to see who did this, pays for it. It'll be difficult," he added.

Phillips made an obvious effort to pull himself together.

"Go and make your sketch," he said, "take the best measurements you can . . . that ought to have been done before. I don't think we knew what we were doing," he repeated. "Well, get on with it, I'll join you as soon as I can."

Bell turned away towards the entrance to the secret chamber and as he did so he noticed that Margaret was now standing in the library doorway, looking on with a very startled and frightened air, though it was the open way to the secret chamber, rather than the body of the murdered man, which seemed to have caught her attention, for indeed the group clustering round the couch rather hid from her the significance of the still form that lay on it. But her air of terror was very marked, and then Bell noticed that Lady Ellerslie was no longer visible. He said to Ralph who was standing next to him:

"Where is her ladyship?"

"She was here just now," the young man answered, glancing round for a moment, but apparently not much interested.

Bell went across to Margaret.

"Where is her ladyship?" he asked.

"Was she here?" Margaret asked in her turn. "She has gone to her room perhaps." She pointed to the gap in the

bookshelves. "Is that the secret room?" she asked. "What has happened?"

Bell did not answer. A new sound caught his attention and made him turn abruptly. Once again slow, hesitating steps were descending the hidden stair that led to that fatal chamber beneath the roof. They paused and were no longer heard and then began again, hesitant and shuffling. No one else apparently had noticed them. Bell moved away from Margaret towards the secret entrance. The steps began again, louder this time and nearer and more distinct and firmer. Phillips heard them and turned round quickly.

"What's that?" he almost shouted, "who's that? Oh, Lady Ellerslie," he repeated with an air of relief as Colonel Coates nudged him and whispered the name.

For it was she who came now slowly through the gap in the bookshelves into the library, and what it was that Phillips had expected, or feared, to see, none knew, but he had become very pale, and his hand trembled a little as he began to wipe his face and forehead with his handkerchief.

Lady Ellerslie, too, was horribly pale, and her eyes had a strange, wild look in them, and seemed somehow to have sunk deeply into their sockets. Her aspect and air was that of one who with terror in her soul, penetrating to the very depths of her soul, had still gone on . . . was going on . . . afraid with fear most deadly and yet resolute still. There was something, too, in the general appearance of her tall, graceful figure, which, when she had been a film actress, had been almost her greatest asset, that caught Bell's attention, and yet for the life of him he could not tell what it was. She looked neither to right nor left, she held with one hand her lovely old Indian shawl draped loosely about her body, the train of her long, flowing tea gown rustled behind her as she moved on, and Bell stopped her with a gesture.

"My lady," he said, "where have you been?"

"Up there . . . up in the secret room," she answered, and though her voice was steady enough, her eyes were feverish and uncertain, and he noticed, for it was his business to notice things, how the toes of her foot, visible beyond the hem of her long, loose tea gown, moved spasmodically within her high heeled patent leather shoes.

"My lady," he said again, "why did you go there?"

"To look," she answered, "to see. . . ."

But this time Lord Ellerslie heard and he swung round in an explosion of anger.

"Can't we move about in our own house now?" he asked violently.

"It's all right, Bell," Phillips said. "It's Lady Ellerslie."

He seemed to think Bell might not be aware of the fact, of which indeed he himself, for he had not seen her before, had only just now been made acquainted by the whisper from Colonel Coates. Without another word Lady Ellerslie walked on past Bell. Margaret, in the doorway, stepped aside, and her step mother passed through and went quietly down the corridor towards the hall. Bell followed to the library door, where he stood watching her disappearing figure, and he was conscious of an odd idea he could not account for that with her, vanished the best chance they had had of solving the mystery confronting them. But one thing he did notice and it puzzled him exceedingly, even though it was apparently entirely without any significance. Phillips called him and he went across to where the Superintendent stood.

"Very square shoulders for a woman, Lady Ellerslie has," he remarked.

But neither Phillips nor Colonel Coates paid this remark any attention.

"Sergeant," Phillips was saying, "I must go straight back to report, they'll want to know everything I can tell them, upset they'll be to hear what's happened to poor Carter. You will stay here to give Colonel Coates what help you can. He is taking charge of the case, of course, but he is good enough to say he will value any assistance you can give him. First of all he wants you to make as careful a sketch and as good measurements as you can of the room up there, showing just where poor Carter's body was when we found it. Understand?"

Bell said he did and Colonel Coates began to explain to Lord Ellerslie that it was necessary to close the library for the present until the preliminary investigation had been completed. He was sending for a doctor, and for his most experienced assistants, at once, and he was quite sure, he said, that anything any one could do to help in the discovery of the perpetrators of so abominable a crime would be done willingly. He did not add that it seemed that the murderer must be one of the inmates of the house, but he had little need, for that was plain to them all, was weighing heavily upon the minds of them all. Lord Ellerslie indeed said:

"You mean the murder was committed here . . . well, then, some one must have got in by the windows."

"They are fastened on the inside," Bell said. "Your butler fastened them when it began to rain just before lunch. I don't think they have been opened since."

Lord Ellerslie did not answer and Colonel Coates said to him:

"Who else knew of the existence of the secret room and how to get to it?"

"No one," Ellerslie answered with a certain defiance, "no one but myself and Ralph here—and neither of us is a murderer."

"No man, my lord," said Bell slowly, "can answer in this affair for any one but himself."

Lord Ellerslie looked at him angrily and seemed about to say something violent and then changed his mind. It was as if he detected and resented some hidden significance in Bell's remark and yet dared not show his anger. Ralph said with a somewhat obvious affectation of light-heartedness:

"Well, anyhow, I can answer for myself, can't I?"

"For ourselves we all can," Bell agreed. "Only how and in what manner?"

"Oh, well, well," said Ralph, disconcerted.

Colonel Coates intervened. He seemed to think this exchange of question and answer had gone far enough. He began to give the necessary orders for the setting in hand of the investigation. Phillips departed for London to make his report there. One of the county constables was put on duty at the library door to make sure no one entered, and Bell once more ascended the stone stairway to the little chamber under the roof.

Very carefully, with the most minute attention, he examined every inch of floor and walls, of the table, chair, and old oak chest that formed its sole furniture.

But he discovered nothing to which he could attach the least importance. Possibly when the finger print expert came, finger prints might be found, but he doubted it. Carefully he opened the oak chest. It was empty, but for a long time he stood looking at it, for though it was certainly empty now, the idea occurred to him that perhaps it had not long been so.

"Never thought of looking in here, we didn't," he mused, "we just lost our heads like so many old women. Suppose there was something there that Lady Ellerslie knew about and that she came up to get and walked away

with right before us? Only if that was it, what was it? The prussic acid Dr. Mackenzie lost?"

He shook his head reproachfully. It had been, he felt, inexcusable not to institute immediately a close search of the room. True, it had looked bare enough, as if its bare stone walls and old oak chair and table offered no place for any search, and as for the old oak chest they had all quite overlooked it in the dread and horror and astonishment of their discovery. Perhaps, Bell thought dismally, the idea of examining the oak chest would have come to him, had he not been struck by that other idea of the necessity of attempting to recover the cup and plate Carter had used, before they were washed and put away. But then, if he had stopped to think, he might have known there was small chance in a house like this of dirty crockery being allowed to lie about all day. Still, at the moment the chance had seemed worth taking, and in his haste to seize it, small as it had been, he had overlooked the other and greater chance that a closer examination of the secret chamber might bring valuable results. And then Phillips and Coates had committed the even greater blunder of carrying the body down to the library below, thus giving Lady Ellerslie the chance to slip up into the secret room unseen.

But then once more, perhaps, there had never been anything in the chest. Perhaps it had been empty all the time just as it was now, though surely then it would not have blinked its emptiness at him with the sort of sneering triumph its gaping emptiness seemed now somehow to display. But then very likely Lady Ellerslie had come up here merely out of a not unnatural curiosity, the sort of interest that always attracts sightseers to the spot where any crime has been committed.

Only somehow Bell could not get it out of his mind that

Lady Ellerslie had not slipped up here into this small hidden room so secretly, so swiftly, so silently, without some stronger motive? Only what? And if her object had really been to recover something hidden in the old oak chest, what could that something have been?

If it were the missing phial of prussic acid, that had been hidden there, then surely the natural deduction would be that she had administered it to Carter, and was therefore the murderer?

But a woman of her by no means robust physique could hardly have carried the body up those steep and difficult stairs. Again, had the poison been administered and death taken place here, on the spot, somehow it seemed quite fantastic to imagine the murderer carefully putting away the means by which he had committed the crime in the old oak chest close by.

Again Bell shook his head, feeling that the solution of the mystery was not there.

"May have been something else altogether she had hidden here—or knew some one else had hidden. Only who? Her husband? Young Willerton? Morland, perhaps?" he wondered. "Cross currents everywhere and no one telling what they know," he sighed.

Then once again he set himself to search those bare stone walls and plain oak bits of furniture, though indeed it seemed one might as well search a granite rock for footprints. But long experience had taught him that to be thorough means to investigate even the seemingly absurd and the palpably impossible, and when at last he went so far as to turn the old oak table upside down—a feat of some difficulty—he had some slight reward, for there, upon the under side of the table he found roughly cut, cut in schoolboy fashion indeed, a capital 'V' and a capital 'J' enclosed in what seemed meant for a heart.

The carving was so fresh it had certainly been done within the last few days, and at it Bell stood and looked with an ever increasing wonder, an ever growing bewilderment.

CHAPTER XVIII

THEORIES

It grew late, evening set in, and still Bell stood there, leaning against the wall, staring towards the overturned table he could no longer see, for here in this secret room the darkness was complete that without was still only twilight, and trying in vain to discover or imagine some connecting link that would thread all these disconnected points together in a line to lead him truthwards.

"This and that," he mused, "put 'em together, and they'd make sense, but only gibberish as they are."

Then there came an irruption into the room of Inspector Dering of the County Police and two or three of his colleagues. Colonel Coates' imperative message had brought every available man in haste to the spot, and they did not hide their amazement when they found Bell standing there in the dark, leaning against the wall, opposite the overturned table their electric torches showed them.

"The old man's asking for you," Dering observed, "said you were making a sketch or taking measurements or something. He told us to take photos." He added, looking at the overturned table: "Was that like that?"

"No, no," Bell answered. "I did that."

"Found anything?" Dering asked.

"An empty box and this," Bell answered, showing the roughly carved monogram in its encircling heart—or what looked like a heart.

Dering examined it with a somewhat puzzled air.

"Done recent," he pronounced, "but not to-day—some two or three days ago I should think."

"Looks like it," agreed Bell, "not to-day, certainly."

"Well, then, can't have anything to do with the murder, can it?" Dering said.

"I was wondering," Bell said.

"Not if it was done beforehand," Dering repeated firmly, and Bell dropped the subject—for indeed he could not have explained why he felt that in some way or another some connexion existed if only he could find it out.

The table was replaced in position, the spot where the unfortunate Inspector's body had been found, Bell indicated as precisely as he could to the newcomers, and then leaving them to their task of taking photographs and re-examining the already so much examined room, Bell went down to the library where he found Colonel Coates, looking very busy and very worried.

"It'll be all over England, all over the world to-morrow, this affair," the Colonel said. "We've simply got to get to the bottom of it."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell. "I've known Inspector Carter a long time," he said slowly and there came into his mind the oddest idea of how the poor Inspector would have relished being concerned in so sensational a case. "Headlines there'll be that high," he said, and when the Colonel stared at him, he said: "Very interested in the Press Inspector Carter was, the Press gentlemen thought a lot of him—and as God Almighty hears me, I'll never rest till whoever did it has been brought to justice."

"We all feel that," Colonel Coates said, though a little taken aback by the slow and sombre force with which Bell had spoken. "We all feel that."

Bell went on to show the sketches he had made and the

note of the measurements he had taken, and the Colonel thanked him and thought them very complete.

"Always necessary," he remarked, "to have something of the sort to show a jury, they always expect it. I don't know why."

"Sometimes," observed Bell, sadly, "I don't think a jury would believe anything had happened at all unless they were shown a plan with an x in red ink on it to mark where the body was found."

"No," agreed the Colonel absently. "Difficult case . . . I suppose the motive is plain?"

"The Inspector seemed to think there was something he knew," Bell remarked, "something he had noticed or knew about somehow. He hadn't said what."

"Which means, I take it," the Colonel observed, "that who ever his knowledge pointed to, has silenced him first."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell once more. "Yes, sir," he repeated.

The Colonel coughed. His air of trouble and unease increased.

"Horrible case," he said. "Brutal murder . . . officer in the execution of his duty . . . I feel it almost as if it were one of my own men."

"When you've worked with a man as long as I have with Inspector Carter," Bell said, "when you see him, snuffed out like that . . ."

"Exactly," said the Colonel when Bell paused. "Exactly . . . I understand . . . we all understand . . . there isn't one of my men wouldn't give his last penny." Then he too paused and was silent till suddenly and abruptly he began again. "Charming woman, Lady Ellerslie," he said. "Very clever actress, too."

"I imagine," Bell remarked thoughtfully, "our people will be doing all they can to look up her record."

"Quite so," agreed the Colonel, looking slightly relieved that this task had been undertaken by others. "I remember seeing her in her last film, 'Lost Sir Massingberd.' The film people put it on with a tremendous flourish of trumpets just at the time she married Ellerslie. I remember they were both rather upset about it. Of course there was nothing they could do, but I heard they refused a fee of a thousand guineas to appear in person the first night."

"A lot of money to turn down," mused Bell.

"Very fine film, too," Colonel Coates went on. "One of the best I ever saw. Ever read the book?"

"I don't think so, sir," answered Bell. "I don't think I know it."

"I suppose nobody does now-a-days," said the Colonel, "but it was a great success at the time. By James Payn. Ever hear of him?"

"No, sir, I don't think so," Bell replied, running over in his mind all the names he could remember of the authors of those outstanding works of genius the advertising columns of our two Sunday papers introduce to us by the dozen each succeeding week.

"Great man in his day," Coates went on, "quite forgotten now, I suppose. My father knew him slightly, that's why I remember him better than most, I suppose. Excellent story *Lost Sir Massingberd.* Read it if you ever get the chance."

"I will, sir," Bell promised politely, but not very much interested.

"Lady Ellerslie's great success on the films," the Colonel went on, "funny it should come just as she retired but then that's the way things happen. There was something very graceful, very . . . alluring, if you know what I mean, something very womanly about her. I remember one of the critics had quite a long article about her move-

ments and her figure as typical of what he called the 'eternal feminine'."

"The eternal feminine," repeated Bell, as if for some reason the somewhat banal phrase impressed him oddly. "The eternal feminine . . . I suppose one could get a photograph of her in the part?" he asked.

Colonel Coates looked mildly amused.

"Don't go and fall in love with her," he warned Bell. "Everybody did, I believe, at the time." He added abruptly, as if at last coming to the point because he could no longer help doing so: "The murder was committed by poisoning with prussic acid and prussic acid was missing from Dr. Mackenzie's immediately after Lady Ellerslie was there."

"Yes, sir," said Bell.

"There is no proof," Coates continued, "that Lady Ellerslie had access to the breakfast tray before it was brought to Carter. My inquiries show no one saw her in or near the kitchen while it was being got ready. Miss Eayland was in the kitchen apparently about then but not Lady Ellerslie."

"No, sir," said Bell.

"But there is nothing to show she didn't come in here afterwards while Carter was here. It is conceivable she did so and had an opportunity to slip the poison into his tea. But that is only a negative supposition, and she would have needed help to get the body upstairs. We may dismiss all that as guess work perhaps but it is the fact that it was she who had the breakfast dishes removed and sent them to be washed up!"

"Took them away herself," said Bell. "That's my evidence."

The Colonel drummed unhappily on the table with his fingers.

"I don't believe it for a moment," he declared, "but I don't know that I oughtn't to proceed to arrest . . . arrests have been made on slighter grounds than that."

"Very difficult case," Bell said. "A clever counsel would make hay of all there is against her ladyship," and the Colonel looked at him gratefully. "There's nothing to show Mr. Carter had her in his mind when he hinted he knew something. There's no more proof she took the poison from Dr. Mackenzie's than that young Mr. Willerton took it, or Thompson himself. They were all on the spot at the time. There's no proof even, except Dr. Mackenzie's word, that the poison was actually taken yesterday morning. Other people had access to the breakfast tray."

"Miss Eayland you mean? Surely, you don't think . . .?"

"I haven't got as far as thinking, sir," sighed Bell, "but it wasn't her I meant. The footman, Darley, brought the tray in here."

"I thought of him, I thought of Peters, the butler, too," the Colonel said. "Nothing to go on, no known motive in either case."

"There's Mr. Morland," Bell added and reminded his listener of the dropped half sovereign. "Darley's story," Bell concluded, "is that he put down the tray to help Mr. Morland look for the coin and obviously that would give Morland every chance to drop poison in the tea if he wanted to."

Colonel Coates looked quite bright. It was plain the suggestion was welcome to him. Morland was not an attractive and gracious lady whose hospitality he had often enjoyed. Morland was not even, like young Ralph Willerton, an old St. Olavian. If the guilt had to be

brought home to one of the Ellerslie Court household, the Colonel felt he would much prefer that that person should be Morland.

"Only how could he have got hold of the prussic acid?" he asked. "He wasn't at Mackenzie's?"

"He might have got it from Thompson," suggested Bell, "if Thompson took it. Or from Lady Ellerslie as a possible alternative."

Colonel Coates' face fell.

"Nothing to indicate that," he said.

"No, sir," agreed Bell, "except that if it was the prussic acid taken from Dr. Mackenzie's that was used to kill poor Mr. Carter, then one of the three, Lady Ellerslie, Mr. Willerton, Thompson, must be implicated somehow. And as Thompson was murdered before Mr. Carter, he can't have been actively concerned. As a theory to keep in mind, there was some connexion between Thompson and Morland——"

"Must check up on Morland—must certainly check up on Morland," interposed the Colonel.

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell with sad patience. "Thompson and Morland quarrelled for some reason. Morland disposed of Thompson and took the poison Thompson had stolen from Dr. Mackenzie."

"Why?" interposed the Colonel hopefully.

"The theory is only a sketch, quite incomplete," Bell reminded him gently. "Mr. Carter saw or somehow discovered some fact that made him suspect the truth and Morland killed him in turn to suppress it."

"Worth bearing in mind," the Colonel decided, "but too sketchy at present to be more than a line of inquiry to follow. Also there's a difficulty in the way. It seems fairly certain Morland was in the house at the moment when the Thompson murder was committed in the park and quite

certain he couldn't have got out and back again without being seen."

"I'm afraid I had forgotten that," confessed Bell, looking somewhat brighter as if the contemplation of such an oversight cheered him up a little. "And I suppose access to the breakfast tray was easy for any one who happened to stroll in by the open library windows. Perfectly easy for any one with the poison ready, to distract Mr. Carter's attention a moment and then drop it in the tea—taking it for granted the poison was given that way."

"I think we may be sure of that," Colonel Coates decided. "I wish there was anything else in this case we could be one-tenth part as sure of."

CHAPTER XIX

MIDNIGHT IN ELLERSLIE PARK

It was not however from Colonel Coates, who still preserved in his inmost heart a certain lingering prejudice against 'brainy' London detectives—Colonel Coates had never forgotten, as a true public school boy, an old St. Olavian, the healthy contempt for brains he had learnt in his youth—but some time later on, from Inspector Dering, that Bell learnt what he thought the important and interesting fact that the exact locality of the Ellerslie secret chamber had been more or less what the French call a secret of Polichinelle.

That much had come out clearly in the examination to which the Colonel had subjected the different members of the Ellerslie household, while Bell had been working and dreaming—if that is not tautology—in the secret room. In theory only Lord Ellerslie himself, as head of the family, and Ralph Willerton, as the nearest though remote male relative, knew of its existence, except, of course, as what the local guide books called 'an ancient and picturesque tradition.' But apparently every single member of the household had known quite well both that there was such a room and that the entrance to it was somewhere in the library, even though they had not known exactly where or how to effect that entrance. That Lady Ellerslie, for instance, was perfectly well acquainted with the secret seemed quite certain, not only on the general grounds that no husband stands any chance of keeping from his wife any secret she knows of and desires to share,

but also because she had been overheard sometimes teasing him about it. Whether the daughter, Margaret Eayland, knew, was more doubtful, since daughters do not yet wield quite the wifely rod of authority. But that Peters had boasted of such knowledge was certain, and though he now declared that he had only done so by way of a joke, it was certain many of the other servants believed that he had even made a surreptitious visit to the secret room.

"Much as my place is worth," he had declared, however, in denying this to the Colonel, "to go rooting about like that—his lordship would never have stood it, even from me, what's been with him, man and boy, the best part of thirty years."

In the same way Lady Ellerslie had refused to admit any real knowledge, though she had shown a certain skill in evading too close questioning, and had admitted having what she called a 'kind of idea' of where the secret room lay and how to enter it. But she protested vehemently that what she had been heard to say to Lord Ellerslie had been purely and entirely to tease him.

"Only there you are," Dering commented, when he had finished telling Bell all this, "if Peters knew, as he anyhow said he did, and if Lady Ellerslie knew, as is quite possible, either of them may have let it out to any one, and once a thing like that gets about, well, there you are, aren't you?"

Bell agreed that you were.

"Looks to me," declared Dering, "as if any one in the house may have known all about the place—except Mr. Morland, I suppose, being only a visitor."

"Doesn't look as if he could have known," agreed Bell, "only you can never tell, and it's plain some one has been there recently because of that 'V' and 'J' carved under the table. That's recent."

"The old man," remarked Dering, referring thus irreverently to Colonel Coates who held himself to be young and brisk at forty-nine, "took Lord Ellerslie up to see that —couldn't make head or tail of it, his lordship couldn't. Quite flabbergasted he was, and tried to make out one of our chaps might have done it, just to pass the time. Luckily it don't look quite fresh enough for that."

"What I should like to know most of all," mused Bell, "is why it was cut underneath the table the way it was, why not on top or at the side?"

"So as not to be seen too soon, if you ask me," retorted Dering.

"It would seem like that on the face of it," agreed Bell, "but then in this case nothing seems to be what it looks like on the face of it."

"Oh, I don't know," said Dering doubtfully. "Anyhow, the old man is quite a lot interested. Told me to find out if I could hear of any one with 'V' for an initial, especially a 'V' keeping company with a 'J'. That heart looks like it was lovers, you know."

"That's right," agreed Bell slowly.

"The old man thinks that may turn out a clue," Dering continued, "but there's several 'Js' in the house—the cook's named Jane, and Lady Ellerslie herself is Julia, and there's a Jenny as well and so on. But there's no 'V' we can get to know of, neither in the family or staff, as a first name or a nickname or a surname. Nothing beginning with 'V' at all, that we can hear of."

"I didn't suppose it would be as easy as that," sighed Bell. "'V' is not a very common beginning letter for a name either—there's Vivian and Valentine, of course."

"Victor and Vincent," added Dering, "still 'Vs' aren't so common, and anyhow I don't see it can have had anything to do with either murder, seeing it was certainly

there before they happened. Only what I say is this, if any one in this house did Thompson in, it must have been either his lordship himself or Mr. Willerton, because it was only them was near the spot. And if it wasn't some one in this house, what was your Inspector done in for?"

"Miss Eayland was in the park about the same time," Bell reminded the other.

"No woman's work," Dering retorted, "not the way that knife was driven home. And then it was after you saw her, if it was her, by the park wall, that you heard the cry you did, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but it's not far from the spot by the wall where we saw—her or some one else, to the spot where Thompson's body was found. She can't be ruled out for that, and as for it's being no woman's work—any woman is always capable of anything. What about the butler and that young footman boy?"

"Nothing against them so far as I can see," said Dering.

"Peters says he was in his pantry at the time, cleaning his silver," remarked Bell. "He may have been in his pantry but he wasn't cleaning silver, because I've looked at it, and cleaning is just what it wants, all of it, and hasn't had for long enough. And it would be much easier for him to slip in and out the back way without being seen or noticed. No evidence he did, but it's possible. Darley was in the garden in the company of one of the maids. She confirms. But of course she would lie, any woman would, to protect her boy. No reason to suppose she is lying and no reason to suspect him. But both he and Peters would have had ample opportunity to put the poison in poor Carter's cup of tea, if they had wanted to."

"I suppose," said Dering, looking thoughtful, "we had better make a few inquiries about them."

"Darley comes of very respectable parents in Broad-

hirst. Excellent character. Peters has been with Lord Ellerslie since he was a boy. Excellent character, but inclined to be lazy. Lady Ellerslie has tried to smarten him up a bit, she likes her silver well polished apparently. But she has had no luck with him, the silver stays the way it always was. He says he's been here a deal longer than she has."

"Bad feeling between them?" Dering suggested.

"Armed neutrality, rather. Her ladyship won't complain because she knows Peters has been here so long. Peters presumes a lot on his long service—and his spin bowling—but he knows if her ladyship lifted an eyebrow, meaning it, he would go so quick he wouldn't be able to tell the difference between what struck him and a double distilled flash of lightning."

Dering looked at Bell with some surprise.

"You seem to have managed to get together a good deal of information," he remarked.

"Oh, I've just been poking about," explained Bell apologetically. "I don't think Peters likes us," he added, "but that's natural enough. Nobody loves a policeman except when it's to get across the road," he concluded, more sadly even than usual.

"A dog's life," agreed Dering, but much more cheerfully. "Now take Mr. Carter's murder—must have been some one who knew about the secret room and how to get to it and who had access to the prussic acid taken from Dr. Mackenzie's. As regards the first, his lordship and Mr. Willerton again, you notice?"

"That's right," agreed Bell, "but do you know what strikes me as the biggest puzzle in the whole business?"

"Who it was used the motor-cycle to go to London to ransack Thompson's room and what was there he wanted so much?" Dering responded promptly.

"I wasn't thinking of that so much," Bell answered. "It was Thompson's murderer used the cycle and he had to get into Thompson's room to destroy all trace of connexion between him and his victim. That's clear, clear the way mud's clear. What's still worrying me is who cut those initials on the oak table in the secret room and why they were cut underneath the table the way they were."

Dering again admitted it was puzzling, but pointed out again that that was something which, however troublesome to explain, had happened before the murder. He added that what worried him most was why Lord Ellerslie had been carrying a pistol, and who had flung away the smaller pistol Bell and Carter had found, and that presumably was now in the possession of Carter's murderer, since it was fairly certain Carter had had it in his pocket and it had now vanished.

"Do you think Carter was murdered to get possession of it?" Dering asked, struck suddenly by a new idea.

Bell supposed it was possible, but then, he said, in this affair anything was possible though nothing seemed probable. Dering agreed with him and went off, and Bell went to find the quarters he had secured in a cottage just outside the park gates, for by now it was nearly nine o'clock.

Bell's position in the case was a little anomalous. The affair was really in the hands of Colonel Coates and though Bell was tolerated as a kind of liaison officer and though his special interest in the affair, as the friend and colleague of the second victim, was fully recognized, yet he had no actual part allotted to him in the investigation and was responsible for no special activity. Still, this unusual kind of freedom he found himself thus possessed of, did not displease him. The idea came to him, though

he refused to entertain it, for he was not sure it was compatible with discipline, that liberated from too close official supervision, he had a chance to show his real capacity.

Supper was waiting for him at the lodgings he had secured and after it he wrote out his report for the Yard, and then was ready for bed,but found himself wakeful and restless. His body was tired enough, but his mind was active, and he had been too profoundly moved by the death of the man with whom he had worked so long, for whom, in spite of all, he had come to entertain a kind of queer, twisted regard, to feel any desire for sleep. He asked his landlady to leave the cottage door open for him as he might be back late and then he went out once more.

He had no very clear idea in his mind of what he meant to do, but when he found the high iron gates of the park firmly closed and locked—as they were every night—he clambered over the wall, no very difficult task, and approaching the house made a slow circuit of it in the dark night, while all the time his thoughts fluttered to and fro in his mind as ceaselessly and as aimlessly as a bird newly taken in a cage. One by one the remaining lights in the house went out, where probably most of the inmates were sufficiently glad after so trying a day and such sensational events to seek repose.

At last the whole pile was in darkness and Bell, still wakeful as ever, sat down under one of the wide spreading ancient oaks which were a feature of the park, which indeed had mostly been there before either park or mansion had been thought of. There he sat, while still, like restless birds prisoned in a cage but remembering their native freedom of sky and air, his thoughts went fluttering to and fro, finding nowhere any place whereon to rest and be content.

It was after midnight, he was thinking of returning to his lodging and his bed, when he became aware of a faint and distant sound, that when he listened to it intently, he was certain was of cautiously approaching footsteps.

CHAPTER XX

THE PRUSSIC ACID FOUND

On the instant, Bell, all fatigue forgotten, jumped to his feet, and stood intently listening, straining every faculty of hearing that he possessed. Who else could be abroad here, he wondered, at this hour and for what purpose? And then the damping thought came into his mind that perhaps it was one of the county police detective force, keeping, like himself, watch and vigil in the hope of making some discovery.

Or was this wanderer in the night, he asked himself excitedly, the same who before had made that swift and sudden journey by motor-cycle to London and back?

At any rate the question was one to which he felt he must endeavour to obtain an answer, and with infinite caution, for he knew how far sounds travel in the night, Bell began to make his way in a direction that would, he hoped, cut across the line the approaching footsteps seemed to be following.

But Bell, though country born, though this was not the first night hunt he had been engaged in, had lived many years in town. His eyes were not used to the intense darkness of the countryside at night, his feet had more the habit of the smooth town pavement than of the inequalities with which old Mother Earth cumbers her surfaces. Almost at once he stepped on a dry branch that snapped with a sound like a shout in that silence. Then, as nearly as possible, he went crashing headlong down the side of a steep and sudden hollow he came to, and only saved him-

self by catching at a bush that responded with a crackling protest to be heard, or so his overwrought nerves told him, all through the length and breadth of the park.

By the time he had recovered his balance and got to level ground again, the sound of footsteps he had heard before was no longer audible, nor, habituated as he was to depend on streets and trams, had he any longer much idea of the direction whence they had seemed to come, nor even, the outline of Ellerslie Court being no longer visible, any very clear notion of how he himself was oriented.

"Take me all my time to find my way back where I was," he mused. "Probably have to stay here all night; worse than a London fog this darkness. Another wash out," he sighed resignedly, "but I would give a lot to know who it was I heard and what they were after."

It might of course have been some colleague, prowling and zealous, like himself, but he did not think so. The official footstep has a quality of calmness, of authority, of routine and decision, that can generally be recognized, while the footsteps Bell had heard seemed in his memory to have been quick and furtive and afraid.

But he saw no hope of being able to discover now the line that they had followed or the person who had made them, for they appeared to have faded quite away. Full as was the night of all those tiny noises by which its majestic silence is composed, no sound of any footstep could be distinguished, either far or near. There was nothing even to tell him whether this was because they had reached their destination or had passed beyond his hearing.

Feeling more depressed than ever at the prospect, for bed had just lately been beginning to assume an attractiveness his worried mind had before refused to recognize, he

decided that his only course was to wait and watch all night long, on the very small and slender chance that the unknown might presently return. But the good detective is the detective who knows how patiently to take chance after chance, when the odds are a thousand to one each time against success, who knows how to make continued disappointment the raw stuff of achievement. None the less the prospect was singularly unattractive, for night vigils are most singularly boring, when all at once, not more than a couple of hundred yards away, there flashed a light for a brief moment and then went out again, and the next moment showed once more. Three times it flashed like this, three times in and out again, and to himself Bell said:

"Electric torch signal, some one fixed up a meeting."

Almost at once, confirming this idea, he heard the footsteps again, now more plainly audible and evidently approaching swiftly the spot where the light had been shown. Very cautiously, very carefully, Bell began to move in the same direction. Fortunately the ground he had now to traverse was comparatively level sward, and he trusted, too, that those who were keeping this strange midnight tryst, would be too busy with their own affairs to notice the small sounds he could not help making, no matter how carefully he went.

"Wonder who it can be," he thought, and his mind ran rapidly over the list of those who so far had seemed concerned in the affair. "Maybe some one we've known nothing of before," he reflected with growing excitement.

The light shone out again, quite close now, but, by good luck, with its ray directed away from him. He heard a low whistle. He crept a little nearer, very cautiously, never putting all his weight on his foremost foot till he was assured it had found a resting place both secure and quiet.

Rather uncomfortably he was aware that he might be about to interrupt a meeting between those who had just been responsible for two cold-blooded murders, one of them as audacious a business, too, as could well be imagined, wherein his own colleague had been the victim. Nor was he armed, and for once in his life he regretted that he had no pistol. So more than a little scared, very conscious that death might be brooding there among these all enveloping shadows, remembering clearly at the back of his mind his wife and little child and his own quiet peaceful home in Ealing, grasping very tightly the stout ash plant he used for a walking stick, he crept nearer still, as noiselessly, as swiftly, as cautiously as he could.

He heard a low whistle that came from a little grove of trees near to which he had now approached, so near that he could distinguish their separate shadows against the greater shadow of the surrounding night. The light flashed out once more, the whistle was repeated, and he heard a voice that was low and soft but that he could not recognize say:

"Where are you? Are you there?"

"Yes, here . . . mind . . . that's right," another voice answered, and then quite distinctly, quite unmistakably, there came the sound of a kiss.

Bell nearly dropped flat where he stood with surprise, disappointment, annoyance—and perhaps a shade of relief as well.

Was all he had discovered a lovers' rendezvous? Was all this just one of the Ellerslie Court maids slipping out when she should have been sound asleep in bed to meet her sweetheart from the village? Bell had a good mind in his vexation to show himself at once, give them both a good talking to, and pack them both off home again without further delay.

The sound of that soft kiss was repeated and Bell's annoyance and gloom increased. A nice position for a respectable hard working C.I.D. man to find himself in, he thought bitterly, and then he heard a voice say:

"Ralph, don't."

Ralph, however, did. The sound of a third kiss made that much sufficiently clear. But Bell was more interested now. The name suggested that one of the partners to this midnight tryst was young Willerton. But then who was it had come to meet him? Some one from Ellerslie Court? Some village girl? Was it nothing but just a foolish, vulgar, discreditable intrigue with one of the Court servants? Or was it worse, with worse behind, and had Lady Ellerslie herself come out to meet a guilty lover? Or was it the girl, Margaret Eayland? But then, if so, why should they trouble to meet like this at such a time and place when surely it would have been easy enough for them to arrange to meet by day? But by now Bell had decided it was at least his duty to make sure of the identity of both parties, and, hoping they were too interested in each other to hear any slight sounds he might make, he crept forward into the shadow of a great oak close to the spot whence their voices seemed to come. As he got into position he heard the girl's voice say:

"I've got it, I brought it with me."

"You have . . . then . . . ?" Ralph's voice began, and paused, but the girl seemed to understand.

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

"I say," Ralph's voice answered and he whistled softly.

What this could mean, Bell could form no idea, but he began once again to grow excited. This was no lovers' rendezvous, he felt, or rather it was that perhaps, but also something much more, and of a meaning more significant,

if he read aright the gravity he seemed to detect now in their voices.

"Have you been here long?" Margaret asked.

"Ever since . . ." answered Ralph and paused, apparently taking it for granted she would know since when. "You see," he added, as if in explanation, "I couldn't be sure . . . I could hardly believe it . . . I can hardly believe it now."

"You must now," she said and her voice was low and uncertain, so much so Bell hardly caught the words.

"I must now," he agreed, his voice almost as low as hers. "Give it me, dear."

"What will you do with it?" she asked.

"Get rid of it, destroy it," he answered, "we must . . . it's dangerous . . . it's death." He paused again, as though remembering that twice of late death had passed by there, death sudden and unlawful and abhorrent. "If it was known we had it . . ." he said and again left his sentence unfinished.

A cautious step nearer, and yet another, Bell came at that. Now he could almost have touched them, but when he crouched a bush hid him, and they still had no knowledge they were not alone. Only what was it, he wondered, that she had brought and that he asked for, and that was 'Death' he said, and that must be got rid of because it was dangerous? Those were questions to which Bell felt he must obtain an answer before they left. But he felt also he must act with caution and not too hastily or else, alone and in this darkness, he might fail. Whatever the 'it' might be—and already he suspected—that Margaret had brought and that Ralph asked for, somehow he must obtain possession of it. He wished they would name it instead of speaking in allusions that were no doubt clear to them but impossible for him to understand. But the

next thing he heard disconcerted him more than a little, for it was the sound of a sob.

"Oh, I say, don't," exclaimed Ralph, evidently disconcerted, too, or indeed more than that.

"I . . . I can't help," she answered, "it's all been so awful . . . it's all been like some awful nightmare . . . I didn't know such things could be . . . oh, Ralph, for you, too . . ."

"As for my share in it . . ." he answered steadily.

"Oh, I know," she answered fervently, "but all the same sometimes I've thought I should go quite mad."

"It's been pretty bad," he agreed.

"Yes, but," she exclaimed, and there was no mistaking the horror and the deep terror in her voice, "oh, Ralph, if all this came out, what would it mean?"

"Why, hanging, I suppose," he answered grimly, "but you must keep a grip on yourself, old girl. Everything depends on that. If we let ourselves go, it's all up. Give it me, and I'll attend to it all right, you can bet on that."

"Oh, you're such a comfort," she murmured, "I should never have dared do anything but for you, I should never have known what to do without you."

She began to cry again, and again Ralph comforted her, while near by and silent Bell waited, impassive and still in the darkness. In the ordinary way he would have felt uncomfortable and awkward enough at listening to all this, but now he was so utterly intent on discovering what it was they talked of, that was 'dangerous', that was 'death', that might mean, apparently, 'hanging,' if it were found, that he had no other thought. Yet he believed he knew the answer—the answer in two words to all these questions. He heard her say suddenly:

"There it is, what will you do with it?"

"Oh, I'll get rid of it," he assured her, "quick, too. I'll

pour the stuff away and smash the bottle into bits. We aren't safe till that's done."

"No," she agreed.

"Prussic acid's no stuff to play with," Ralph said, and Bell's heart leaped and then was almost still again as he heard pronounced the words that unutterably he had expected, unutterably dreaded, to hear.

CHAPTER XXI

UNTOUCHED

It was then that Bell stepped forward, looming suddenly out of the darkness and stepping between those two so astonished, so bewildered at his appearance they could do nothing but stand there, paralysed and still.

"You must give me that," he said, and took from Margaret's outheld hand the little phial she was offering to Ralph.

Carefully he put it away in his pocket, wrapping it in his handkerchief to protect it from injury, and a great heaviness possessed him for though he had wondered and thought so much, though he had weighed the probabilities of the guilt and innocence of all in any way connected with the affair, yet he had never really supposed that these two rather attractive young people could really be touched with the guilt of an assassination so cold-blooded and deliberate as that of his unfortunate colleague. Yet here he had found them at dead of night in possession of this phial of prussic acid, and it was prussic acid that had been used in that assassination. His long experience had indeed taught him that clear, bright eyes might sometimes be the windows of a soul corrupt beyond imagination, and a smooth and innocent face hide knowledge of the lowest depths of the Pit, just as the habitation of the saint and the sage may be in the worst of slums. Nevertheless it was so strange a heaviness weighed on him as he took possession of the poison, that for the moment he quite forgot he was, by hypothesis, in the company of two desperate and

audacious assassins, between whom and escape only his life stood.

They, on their side, had not yet uttered a word or made a movement. They could only stand and stare, as those might stand and stare who had seen a miracle performed before their eyes, and indeed to them the abrupt emergence of Bell from the depths of the night that had seemed to them so silent and so solitary, had in it something of the quality of the supernatural.

It was Bell who spoke the first.

"I shall have to ask you both to come along with me," he said. "You will have to account for the possession of this, and I think I had better remind you that anything you say may be used in evidence."

"Do you mean," asked Ralph, still bewildered, "you want to arrest us?"

"Not if you wouldn't mind coming along with me now to see Colonel Coates who is in charge of the case."

"Well, suppose we do mind?"

"In that case," confessed Bell, "I'm afraid I shall have to proceed to arrest."

Ralph considered the point and then laughed harshly.

"All right," he said, "you put it very convincingly. I'll come quietly—I believe that's the correct technical phrase, isn't it? I take it there's no objection to Miss Eayland going back home. She'll be there in the morning all right, you know."

"I'm afraid the young lady must come, too," answered Bell firmly. "She was in possession of the poison."

"But, hang it all, man," protested Ralph, "at this time of night . . ."

"That makes no difference," Bell told him. "The young lady must come with us."

Ralph turned to Margaret as if about to say something to her but again Bell interposed.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I think it would be better if you and Miss Eayland didn't talk to each other."

Ralph began to protest angrily but Margaret said:

"I think he's quite right, Ralph. I think it would be better to say nothing at all till Colonel Coates comes."

"Oh, all right," grumbled Ralph, but with reluctance, "all right." Then he turned to Bell: "How on earth did you happen to be there?" he demanded, somewhat ruefully.

"Oh, I was poking about," explained Bell, "just poking about."

"Well, it was rotten luck," Ralph said.

"Just depends on your way of looking at it, sir," answered Bell mildly. "If you wouldn't mind coming as far as the lodge—I think there's a 'phone there? I could ring up the county police and get a car along."

"All right," said Ralph again, and the odd little party set off towards the park gates, Bell walking between the two who were virtually his prisoners though he had to depend on their knowledge, for he himself had little idea of their whereabouts, to find the drive that then took them quickly to their destination, where the startled lodge-keeper was soon roused from his bed. The message that Bell sent over the 'phone brought the reply that a car would be dispatched instantly, and waiting for it the three of them sat in unbroken silence in the tiny lodge sitting-room, while, consumed with curiosity, the lodge-keeper and his wife hovered without, in passage and kitchen, in the intervals of appearing with offers of cups of tea or other refreshment or on any other excuse they could think of for entering the room where Bell and the two young people sat.

What thoughts they had during this interval of waiting Bell wondered a good deal. That they were both of them exceedingly troubled and uneasy it was not difficult to see, but then that was only natural, and no sign of either guilt or innocence.

"Impossible they can have done it," Bell told himself, "but then impossible things happen every day. Perhaps they were trying to save some one else—who? If they were, that was guilty knowledge. Besides, what motive can they have had—either of them—such youngsters?"

He gave up trying to form any opinion as to their guilt or innocence, and let his tired mind relax. Deliberately he tried, though without much success, to divert it to other subjects. Until more facts were known, until what they had to say had been heard and considered, it seemed useless to try to form any coherent theory.

But once or twice he saw them looking at each other and these looks that they thus exchanged it was not difficult to interpret.

"In love with each other," he mused. "That clears Lady Ellerslie . . . or does it? But then they had the poison . . . a muddle . . . Willerton can't have taken it to use for poisoning Carter when at the time he didn't even know Carter existed . . . why did he take it then? Or did he? How did the girl get hold of it? Lord, it's more of a puzzle than it was before, and what can it have been poor Carter thought he knew? If only he had given the least hint, one might have a chance . . . as it is, black night is the sun at noon compared with this. Then where does the murder of Thompson come in? Now, if he had been poisoned and poor Carter stabbed, one might see some sense to it."

Again he tried to drive out of his mind all these thronging and puzzling thoughts that as it were whirled round within it, seeking an issue and finding none, and again with

such ill success that it was a relief when at last the sound of an approaching car became audible.

It stopped outside and from it descended Colonel Coates himself, red eyed from lack of sleep but indefatigable still, Dering, and one or two others. They came into the lodge and very briefly Bell recounted how he had come upon Miss Eayland in the act of handing over to Willerton a bottle, containing, he believed, since it had been so described by them, prussic acid, presumably that taken from Dr. Mackenzie two days previously.

The Colonel looked at the two young people. He was evidently a good deal moved and disturbed, but he strove to speak with official correctitude.

"You understand this is a serious statement," he said. "It will be my duty to detain you both. I hope, I trust, I believe you will give a satisfactory explanation, but for the present I shall have to ask you to accompany me." He added to Bell: "You have the poison in your possession? Have you identified it as that taken from Dr. Mackenzie's?"

"It's that all right, I admit that," Ralph said. "No good denying it."

"In your own interests," said Colonel Coates slowly, "I should advise you to say nothing at present. Anything you wish to say we are prepared to listen to, of course."

Bell had taken the little bottle from his pocket, unwrapping it from the handkerchief in which it had been folded. He was looking at it now with a slightly puzzled air.

"Seems securely sealed," he remarked. "Doesn't look at all as if it had been opened."

"It hasn't been opened," said Ralph. "It hasn't been used for any murder, if that's what you've been thinking."

"Well, then," the Colonel said, taking the little deadly bottle and looking at it in a puzzled way, "well, then."

He put the bottle down and Bell picked it up.

"I don't think it's been opened," he repeated, "if it hasn't been opened, the poison that poor Mr. Carter was killed with didn't come from there."

"It will have to be examined by experts to make certain of that," Colonel Coates remarked, but beginning already to look a little relieved. He turned to Ralph. "If that's so," he said, "don't you think you had better tell us what it all means? Now Dr. Mackenzie's prussic acid has been found in your possession, don't you think you had better give us some explanation?"

Ralph had evidently been thinking deeply. He remained silent for a few moments.

"It was just a lark. I thought I would give old Mackenzie a scare so I slipped it in my pocket while he wasn't looking," he said at last.

They were all silent, looking at him. He returned their looks defiantly. In his most depressed tones, Bell observed:

"Of course, you know, sir, not one of us believes a word of that."

Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"I have nothing else to say," he answered He looked at the Colonel. "Are we under arrest or can we go?" he asked. "It's a bit late."

"There's one other point you haven't explained," observed the Colonel. "You told me this afternoon you were returning to town. I saw you and Mr. Morland leave together and I know you both took the five o'clock train to London."

"I came back again, that's all," Ralph answered. "I had to keep the appointment I had made with Miss Eayland to receive back from her the prussic acid I had given her to take care of. Of course, she had no idea of what it was."

"I think she had," Bell said, "from what I heard her say, I'm sure she had." He looked at Ralph in his depressed, melancholy way. "Two murders have been done here, Mr. Willerton. I don't know why Thompson was murdered. Inspector Carter was murdered because he was trying to do his duty. Don't you think you could see your way to help us, for I think you could if you would."

"I have nothing more to say," Ralph answered after a brief pause.

CHAPTER XXII

A GLEAM OF LIGHT

IT is not permitted now to question a suspect. If he chooses to take refuge in silence, the law makes his position impregnable. Since therefore Ralph refused to say more and availed himself of the protection the benevolence of the English law accords to those it presumes to be innocent, since as yet they have not been found guilty, there was nothing to be gained by continuing. Reluctantly Colonel Coates recognized the fact.

"Like giving the fish fair play by forbidding the angler to bait his hook," he told himself, but knew that as a loyal servant of the law he had to act within the limits assigned him.

So he first told Margaret she was free to go and sent her back to the house under the escort of Dering. As she had left open the side door by which she had made her exit, she would be able to effect her entrance without disturbing any of the inmates. Once she was out of the way, the Colonel told Ralph he would not detain him longer.

"It's late," he added, glancing at his watch, "but no doubt you will be able to find a bed somewhere in the village."

"I have my motor-bike," Ralph answered. "I came down on it and I can get back the same way."

"Motor-cycle," repeated the Colonel quickly.

"Oh, not the one that was used the night of the murder," Ralph retorted, "when some one went to town and came

back here again—and you've never found out who it was," he added, rather viciously.

"No, sir," agreed Bell, "and if we had, we should know a good deal more than we do now, but the motor-cycle that was used that night is still in our possession, so it couldn't be yours very well. Though that's no proof yours wasn't in use, too, that night."

"I suppose not," admitted Ralph. "I use a lock-up garage near my place, and I daresay it could be taken out and put back without any one knowing. It wasn't, you know, but it could have been."

"I think we have your London address," the Colonel interposed.

Ralph gave it.

"Bradbury Court," he explained. "A block of service flats. I pig in with a pal of mine, a man named Watts, Johnny Watts."

"Watts?" repeated the Colonel sharply. "The name I've got is Hemingway, Christopher Hemingway."

"Been making inquiries?" asked Ralph with a wry smile. "Watts is his real name, but he's an actor, and he uses Christopher Hemingway for stage purposes—he says no one would ever think anything of John Watts, while Christopher Hemingway sounds well, and is so long sometimes he can wangle two lines on a programme all to himself. But everyone calls him 'Skates', I don't know why."

"I think that's all, Mr. Willerton," said the Colonel, making, for he was a man of method, a note of this nickname of Ralph's room mate. "What further steps we may take, I can't say at present. But I fear I must consider both your conduct and your explanations distinctly unsatisfactory—most unsatisfactory. And from an old St. Olavian——"

The Colonel paused. It was plain that crime and wrong doing he could understand, that offences against the law were, he knew, but one aspect of the dailiness of daily life, that sin and evil he recognized for the part that they always play in human life, but that from an old St. Olavian . . . better perhaps leave the sentence unfinished as the Colonel himself left the sentence unfinished in his mind.

Ralph made him a little stiff bow and went out. A moment or two later they heard the sound of his motor-cycle as he started Londonwards. Bell said musingly:

"I suppose gentlemen connected with the stage often take professional names, nicknames, too, very likely?"

"Why, you don't think this man Watts or 'Skates' or whatever he calls himself, has anything to do with it?" demanded the Colonel sharply.

"Oh, no, sir," answered Bell, shaking his head sadly at an idea attractive but utterly improbable, "no such luck, sir. I suppose," he added musingly, "it might be as well to check up on him, just in the way of routine."

"Yes, that had better be done," agreed the Colonel. He sat down. "You know, Bell," he remarked confidentially, "I feel a bit lost in this business, don't see my way at all."

"No, sir," said Bell, with such an air of sympathetic melancholy that as it were by force of contrast the Colonel felt almost cheered.

"If we only knew why young Willerton had come back here to-night and how he got hold of this poison stuff . . ." he mused.

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell, "if we only knew that . . . in these cases," he said, "there's always such a lot that if we only knew what it meant, would make all the rest quite easy."

The Colonel nodded a profound agreement.

"I've noticed that myself," he said. "All the same, I

can't somehow get it into my head that this Willerton boy is a murderer; a fine young fellow like him, best possible type . . . besides, there's no motive."

"None that we know of," observed Bell gently.

"You don't mean you suspect him?" demanded the Colonel.

Bell considered the point.

"Well," he decided finally, "I should say myself, that if we knew of any motive, or even of any connexion between him and Thompson before they met that morning at Dr. Mackenzie's, I should say it was good enough. But then we don't and so it isn't," he concluded with a depressed shake of the head.

Colonel Coates seemed slightly cheered by this pronouncement. He had been aware of an uneasy feeling that perhaps if Ralph had not been an old St. Olavian, the evidence might have appeared stronger to him . . . it was a relief accordingly to know that Sergeant Bell, to whom the pattern of the tie Ralph wore was a matter of almost complete indifference, as a higher mystery that did not touch the lower levels whereon he moved, was also of opinion that the evidence was not enough to justify arrest. But the Colonel had an uncomfortable feeling that Bell was thinking a very great deal about young Willerton, and he was coming to have a very high respect for the thoughts of this slow voiced, sad-eyed, melancholy looking man.

"You haven't told me yet," he said abruptly, "how you managed to spot they had this poison in their possession or that Willerton had come back to get it? Had you any suspicions?"

"Oh, no, sir," protested Bell, looking almost shocked at the idea, as if suspicions were the last thing his mind ever entertained.

"Well, then," said the Colonel.

"I was just poking about," explained Bell deprecatingly, never quite able to free himself from the idea that any action not taken on explicit instructions was likely to be frowned upon. "You aren't here to think," that dearest slogan of the English, a superior had once barked at him angrily, and the lesson, having been repeated at intervals, had not been forgotten. "Just poking about," he repeated.

"Then you had better go on poking about," observed the Colonel, with less asperity than Bell had feared he might show, "though I don't know we are much further forward. We knew before some one had taken the poison and we don't know much more now. If young Willerton . . ."

"He knows something," declared Bell, "and if he didn't do it, he's sheltering some one. Only who? And why? And if it's that, if he's sheltering some one, I don't see how the murder of poor Mr. Carter works in . . . a cold-blooded business if ever there was one. On the whole I should say it was young Willerton, only for one thing. The doctor sticks to it the murderer must have been pretty well covered with blood and there's not a sign on Mr. Willerton's suit of plus fours he was wearing that evening. I made sure of that."

"How?" asked Coates.

"I poked about in his room," explained Bell. "I made sure of that the same evening."

"It's a very difficult case," repeated the Colonel in a slightly aggrieved tone, as if he felt the case were hardly playing the game in remaining so persistently obscure. "You know I questioned every one at the Court this afternoon. I got nothing of any interest. But your people at the Yard have sent two reports in that may turn out

useful. I asked them to inquire about Morland—I've suspected Morland from the first."

"So have I, sir," agreed Bell, "only it seems certain he was in the house, writing letters, at the time the murder was committed in the park, and that makes it rather difficult."

"Yes, I know, there's that," agreed the Colonel, frowning so heavily it rather seemed he meant to frown the difficulty away. "I suppose you agree with me who ever committed the first murder, murdered the Inspector, too. I take it the motive was obviously to stop his investigations, which the guilty person must have felt were beginning to hit the mark. That seems certain," the Colonel went on, taking Bell's acquiescence for granted, "and now your people report that the rooms Morland occupies are in the district assigned to Thompson for his book peddling work, and there appears some evidence that a man answering Thompson's description has called to see Morland once or twice recently. Unfortunately the description is vague and there is no positive identification. But what is a curious coincidence, if nothing more, is that an American bowie knife Morland's landlady is prepared to swear he had in his possession, vanished after one of the visits of this person who may have been Thompson. It seems Morland had complained of missing one or two little articles, a charwoman had been suspected, and so the landlady was rather on the look out and when she saw this knife had disappeared, she was particular to draw Mr. Morland's attention to it."

"What did he say?" asked Bell.

"Said it was all right, it didn't matter, he knew where it was. It may be only a coincidence, but if not, then we've traced the knife the murder was committed with to the murdered man. But then that doesn't seem to help us

much, for even if Thompson stole the knife, he can't very well have murdered himself with it. And of course it doesn't help about the Inspector at all. Still, it's another fact, or may be, and every possible fact is a help—or a hope that sooner or later they may all fit to make some pattern we can understand."

"I suppose you will think it well to ask Mr. Morland a few questions, sir?" Bell suggested. "Of course, he's already denied any knowledge of Thompson."

"Exactly," agreed the Colonel, "I shall make a point of seeing him myself. However, there is also some rather interesting information to hand about Lady Ellerslie, though I'm not sure that it's very relevant. But it seems she was a widow, a Mrs. Watson, when she married Ellerslie. Her first husband was an actor, a man named Watson. He died in France some years ago—apparently just in time, as it seems the French police were after him in connexion with some swindle or another that had been going on over the gambling at Monte Carlo and all along that coast. The proceedings were dropped after his death. Apparently one or two rather prominent people were more or less implicated, no one was anxious to make a scandal, and as this Watson was believed to be the mainspring of the affair and he was out of the way, it was thought best to let the affair stop at that."

"Is it known if Lord Ellerslie was aware the lady was a widow?" Bell asked.

"Yes, the marriage register describes her so."

"An actor?" Bell mused. "Of course, that's natural enough as she was on the stage herself. I suppose he would have a stage name, too, like Mr. Willerton's friend. You don't happen to know what it was, sir?"

"It was mentioned," the Colonel answered. "I noticed it because it was so plainly invented—oh, yes, 'Verity

Small,' was what he played as, and very appropriate, too, I should say, seeing what his character was, apparently. Verity very Small, I should say."

He chuckled with enjoyment at his little joke, and even felt a trifle vexed that Bell only looked more sad than ever, and had not paid the jest that tribute of a hearty laugh that all his own staff never neglected to offer any of his jokes. But Bell looked more like tears than laughter.

"That's right, sir," he said, "Verity very Small, I've no doubt, and the very first gleam of light I've had in all this case so far, though whether it'll turn out worth anything is another affair altogether."

The Colonel would certainly have asked Bell what he meant but just at that moment there was a knock at the door and the lodgekeeper appeared on some excuse or another. But plainly what he wanted was to get rid of his visitors and get to bed, and as now also Dering returned from his duty of escorting Margaret back up the drive to the house, the Colonel agreed that it was time they all got to bed for what remained of the night.

CHAPTER XXIII

SQUARE SHOULDERS AND SLOPING

FIRST thing the next morning Bell had to return to London to report to his superiors there, for, though the case was officially in the hands of Colonel Coates, every single member of the London force was passionately eager to know how the investigation was proceeding and to do everything possible to help it to a successful end.

Not that Bell had much that was new to tell, for the telephone wire between Colonel Coates' Headquarters and Scotland Yard had been in almost continuous use, both by day and by night, ever since the discovery of the murder. But a personal interview has always its advantages—the advantages that somehow the old ways still manage to retain in face of even the most marvellous of modern developments—and Bell's interview with the Assistant Commissioner and Superintendent Phillips was a long one. At its conclusion he was told to return to Broadhirst and place himself again at the disposal of Colonel Coates, an instruction Bell received with the distrustful melancholy he reserved for those rare incidents in his life that appeared to him as too good to be true.

"They seem to want you down there," Phillips explained with rather the air of reflecting that in this world there is room for every taste, even the most eccentric. "Seem to look on you as a kind of mascot," he said, and Bell could only hope that being a mascot would not count too heavily against him in the sober official minds of his superiors, "and then I suppose they think that as you

were poor Carter's pal, you may be able to help them a bit. You can tell them we are doing our best here. We are trailing both Morland and that young Willerton chap and we are going over their records with a microscope—and over Lady Ellerslie's all over again. I suppose those two men-servants—Peters and Darley—I suppose they aren't being forgotten?"

"Oh, no, sir," answered Bell, "though it seems hard to find any link. But I must say Colonel Coates is very thorough, very methodical. He's overlooked no one—not even Miss Eayland."

"Lord Ellerslie?" asked the Assistant Commissioner.

"Inspector Dering is taking care of him," Bell replied. "Unblemished reputation, highest character, prominent social standing."

"And a pistol in his pocket?" commented Phillips.

"If only the Thompson fellow had been shot instead of stabbed . . ." mused the Assistant Commissioner, a little as if he thought the Thompson fellow had not done all he might have to help.

"Suppose," suggested Phillips, "a meeting had been arranged between Ellerslie and Thompson and for some reason they both thought it well to be armed—Thompson providing himself with the knife he took from Morland's rooms and Lord Ellerslie having a pistol. There was a quarrel. Thompson drew his knife, Ellerslie got hold of it and used it. How about that?"

"Colonel Coates thought of that at once, sir," explained Bell mildly, so mildly that Phillips gave him a hostile glare, not quite sure whether his subordinate was not in his mind putting him on a level with Colonel Coates, who had the reputation of being a fine organizer and disciplinarian, but not exactly highly gifted in every other way.

"Besides," observed the Assistant Commissioner, in-

dulging in a faint smile that did not much improve Phillips's temper, "what reason could a man in Ellerslie's position have for a secret meeting with a man like Thompson?"

"Poor Carter," remarked Phillips, "used to be very fond of quoting some French saying or another—I think it meant there's always a woman behind everything."

"If I may say so," interposed Bell, "Thompson wasn't exactly the sort to attract women—he drank and he was poor and shabby and not too clean in his person. No, sir, I don't think it's credible there was any connexion of that sort between him and Lady Ellerslie."

"Lord Ellerslie's pistol still sticks in my throat so to say," the Assistant Commissioner remarked. "Could there be anything between his wife and either of the others, Morland or Willerton, I mean?"

"Mr. Willerton is taken up with Miss Eayland, I think, sir," Bell answered. "Morland is hardly a ladies' man. He seems more or less to have forced himself on the Ellerslies, which, of course, he couldn't have done if her ladyship had been keen on keeping him out. But there's nothing to show they take the least interest in each other. Besides, her ladyship is very well spoken of, nothing against her at all."

"She was on the stage," said Phillips simply, for he had that opinion of the theatre which is so widely held by those who know nothing about it and never go near it—preferring the local cinema.

"There's another point," Bell went on, not attempting to answer the Superintendent. "The doctor is quite clear that whoever killed Thompson must have got himself covered with blood. There was none on his lordship's person or his clothes either, and he hadn't had time to clean it off before he gave the alarm. There was none

either on Mr. Willerton's suit of plus fours he was wearing till he changed for dinner. None on Mr. Morland, who, besides it is quite clear was indoors at the time of the murder. None on any clothing belonging to either Peters or Darley."

"Then apparently either the doctor was wrong or the murderer is some one of whom we have no trace yet," declared the Assistant Commissioner.

"Yes, but then," interposed Phillips, "who killed poor Carter and why? There must be some connexion, stands to reason."

"I know, I know," answered the other irritably. "All the facts in this case contradict all the other facts—they can't, but they do."

"There's one thing I should like to ask, sir," Bell said, a little timidly. "Could an abstract be made of all the cases Inspector Carter was connected with? There was something Mr. Carter had seen he thought significant. Unfortunately he didn't say what it was. I thought it possible there might be some feature in some other case he had handled that might suggest something. Of course, it's only an off-chance," he admitted deprecatingly.

The Assistant Commissioner nodded.

"Rather a big job but I'll have it put in hand at once," he said. "It'll mean a bit of overtime but no one will mind that—not in this case."

"There's one other point, though it's only a small one," Bell went on. "Lady Ellerslie's first husband's stage name was Verity Small."

"What about it? He's been dead some years, hasn't he?"

"Yes, sir, so I understand. It's only that the first initial of the two cut in the wood under the old oak table in the Ellerslie secret room, was a 'V' and 'V' is the first

letter of the name, Verity Small—probably only a coincidence," he added with a gentle resignation that seemed to abandon all hope of its ever being anything else.

The Assistant Commissioner and Phillips were exchanging doubtful looks.

"That might prove a link," admitted the Assistant Commissioner at last; "and, Lord knows, we want one."

"Do you mean," asked Phillips, almost excitedly, "that perhaps her husband—this Verity Small—you don't mean perhaps he's turned up again—who?—young Willerton, but he's too young—Morland, then? Or the butler, Peters? What a situation if she arrived at Ellerslie Court as the mistress and found her former husband there as butler!"

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell mildly, "quite like the films, sir . . . almost too much like the films, if I may say so."

"Life does plagiarize outrageously at times, though," observed the Assistant Commissioner, "I've known things happen you could swear life had lifted clean out of the cinema."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell, "only life's never so tidy—the cinema's always a closed circle and life never is. I was thinking of Mr. Morland myself, because the more I think of him, the less I see what he was really doing at Ellerslie Court."

"But he was in the house at the time the murder was committed?"

"Yes, sir," sighed Bell, "in this business, everything is always like that."

"Have you put this notion of yours to Colonel Coates?"

"Not yet, sir. I haven't seen him since last night. I thought of writing a memo for him."

"Better get along back and see him as soon as you can," the Assistant Commissioner directed, and Bell accordingly

departed, though before actually doing so he managed to make an opportunity to examine the last reports sent in by the men told off to trail Willerton and Morland. The first report had nothing of any interest. The second, just received over the 'phone, announced that Morland had been lost between eleven and half-past, but then had been picked up again, and it looked very much, the man making the report said, as though Mr. Morland had realized he was being followed, had given his watchers the slip on purpose, and then, equally on purpose, had allowed them to find him again.

"Wonder if he was simply making sure he was being followed or if anything happened during that half-hour he doesn't want known," Bell mused, and then starting out on his return journey, fell, as a not quite defenceless lamb, amidst a horde of reporters, hungry as wolves for news, ravening for any scrap of news with which to fill the column or two their editors expected from them on the subject of this most sensational murder of a high Scotland Yard official. For all of them were certain that Bell's visit to Headquarters meant that 'important developments', in their favourite phrase, were about to occur.

More or less successfully Bell strove to remove this misapprehension from their minds, and young Simpson, of the *Daily Press*, expressed a heart-felt regret that it was not Bell who had been the victim of the murder and Carter who was there for them to interview.

"Always had something to tell you, even if it wasn't anything," Simpson said regretfully, "that was poor Carter. And this is just the case he would have loved, seems hard lines he can't handle it himself."

Bell said the same idea had occurred to him, but there it was, and then managed at last to make his escape, and,

as he made his way towards the station, that half-hour unaccounted for in Morland's morning, kept teasingly in his memory.

It was in vain he told himself that very likely Morland had had no special object in view or had perhaps just wanted to test his ability to escape the watch set on him whenever he wished to. There was still that half-hour unaccounted for, and to Bell it began to seem more and more important.

"Though I don't see what he could have done in the time," he thought, and tried hard to dismiss the subject from his mind.

There was a second-hand bookshop, kept by a man he knew, that he had to pass on his way, and when he came to it he entered. His acquaintance, the proprietor, was out, but the assistant in charge knew who Bell was, and was very willing to do anything for him. The book Bell inquired about, *Lost Sir Massingberd*, by James Payn, the assistant had no more heard of than he had ever heard of the author, but he retired into the interior recesses of the shop to do his best, and then presently returned in triumph with a copy, rescued from a heap intended for the 'this lot two a penny' box, and now marked eighteenpence, for the assistant was a good business man and destined to do well in years to come. Though indeed Bell paid the eighteenpence so willingly, the assistant would have regretted, had the Sergeant not been known to him, that he had not marked the book 'rare' and charged a guinea for it.

However in any case Bell found the book good value, for he thought it one of the most interesting stories he had come across for a long time, and he read it all the way during his return journey. Before taking the train, though, he made another call, this time at the office of a film

company, where very obligingly, in response to a request he had made, they had ready for him a number of photographs of Lady Ellerslie.

"Pity she left the screen," the man who showed him these said, "she had just the face and figure you want for it—she couldn't have taken badly if she had tried."

"No," agreed Bell absently, "very graceful figure—notice the slender body and the slope of the shoulders?"

"That's just what I mean," said the other.

"And if you could tell me," Bell added, "why sloping shoulders looked square the other day, I would go straight back to the Yard and ask for my promotion on the spot."

"I don't think I quite understand," said the other, looking in fact very bewildered. "Why should or shouldn't sloping shoulders look square?"

"That," said Bell, "is just exactly what I want to know," and then said how much obliged he was for having been shown the photographs, borrowed one of them, put it in his pocket, and went off to the station and the pleasant and restful half-hour he was going to spend in the train with his new book that he was destined to find so much more interesting than he expected at present.

CHAPTER XXIV

LORD ELLERSLIE'S SILENCE

COLONEL COATES was as eager to discover the murderer of the unfortunate Scotland Yard Inspector as he would have been had the victim been one of his own men—that is to say, as if the victim had been his own son or brother. He felt in a way that his own honour and the honour of his force was involved, since the murder had happened in a district where he was responsible for the observance of law and order. Yet at the same time he knew well, too well, that Members of Parliament are highly important people, though indeed why this should be so is a question difficult to answer and one that would probably repay careful scientific investigation.

However, whatever the explanation, the fact is so. Members of Parliament—count. Therefore Colonel Coates did not feel able to ignore the further fact that the recently elected Member for that district, a young gentleman who at the age of twenty-three, just after leaving an ancient university where he had omitted to take his degree, had been chosen by a forty thousand majority in preference to the former Member, who had represented the constituency for nearly thirty years and was an international authority on economics and monetary science, had decided to call a conference to deal in part with the precarious position in the League of the principal local football team and in part with the problem of greater traffic facilities for the Saturday afternoon crowds attending the League matches. So the Colonel had left the investigation of the Ellerslie

Court murders in the temporary charge of Inspector Dering during his own absence at this important conference—important because as the youthful M.P. remarked with youthful shrewdness: "Get people interested in football, and every one is, and they won't worry about economics and all that stuff. They'll leave all that to Us."

Consequently Bell, on his arrival at Broadhirst, was not able to report immediately to the Colonel, and as the matter was not of instant importance, and as he had been learning a little tact lately and had begun to understand that it is not always well to confide to the subordinate what the superior might like to know first, he made up his mind to wait for the Colonel's return before saying anything.

But as Dering was at Ellerslie Court, where indeed the police were in practically continuous possession, where the most tactful constable available was stationed permanently at the lodge to keep out journalists and others, and where two more constables, less in tact perhaps but greater in size and weight, perpetually patrolled the park to expel those, journalists and others, who evaded the guardian at the lodge by scaling the park wall, Bell went on there, partly to emphasize his own return, partly to hear if there was anything new, partly to ask when the Colonel was expected back.

Of these three points the first failed to interest Dering to any marked degree, the second was answered in the negative, and the third appeared to depend chiefly on how long the difficult question of the price to be paid for a certain famous centre forward was likely to be debated before the traffic question was reached.

So Bell thanked Dering for the information thus received and said he thought if there was nothing else to do, he would finish *Lost Sir Massingberd*, a book he found extremely interesting.

"It's the story Lady Ellerslie took the chief part in when it was filmed," he explained to the uninterested Dering. "Has the doctor been to see her? I heard something about her having been taken ill this morning? They were talking about it at the station."

Sort of nervous breakdown, I think," Dering answered. "No wonder either, after what's been happening here, especially if she knows Lord Ellerslie had something to do with it, which is what I think sometimes. She fainted while she was answering a 'phone call this morning."

"About what time would that be?" Bell asked.

"Eleven or half-past or thereabouts," answered Dering. "Something about the fish for dinner not coming or something, so it shows what a state her nerves are in."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it?" agreed Bell, shaking a reproachful head at this prospective shortage of fish for dinner that had apparently upset her ladyship so much. "I wonder whether it was a local firm or a London one?"

"I haven't the least idea," answered Dering impatiently. "I've a good deal too much to do to bother about her ladyships faints or her housekeeping troubles, either."

"I'm sure you have," agreed Bell sympathetically. "People think detective work is just rambling round with a microscope and then sitting in a corner and thinking hard—they ought to see the clerical work involved."

"They ought to see the reports I've got in," groaned Dering. "That high," he said, indicating a point about a foot above his head, and then vanished to attend to the latest batch, just brought up by special messenger, while Bell wandered away to find Peters who greeted him with his customary lack of cordiality.

"I thought," he said disappointedly, "you had gone back to London?"

"So I had," explained Bell, "they sent me there and

then they sent me back again, that's the way with us, like so many footballs we are."

"Wish," said Peters grimly, "wish I had the kicking."

"I'm sure it would be well and thoroughly done," said Bell thoughtfully, "and would you mind telling me where you get your fish from?"

"What business is that of yours?" snapped Peters.

"I wish I knew," sighed Bell, "but there you are, one thing leads to another, and fish that's no business of mine may lead to bread and cheese that is, so if you don't mind——"

But apparently Peters did mind, for he growled something about having no time to waste and work to do, and was moving away, when Bell called him back.

"Mr. Peters," he said gently, "you've forgotten to answer my question. Why, you know, one could almost think you had some reason for being unwilling to assist the police in the execution of their duty."

"No, I'm not," retorted Peters, somewhat hastily, "only I don't see why I should waste my time answering idiotic questions."

"Idiotic, no doubt," sighed Bell, "such being the nature of most questions—including 'What'll win the three o'clock?' that every one's always asking. But I think I must get you to answer."

Reluctantly Peters gave a tradesman's name, and, on pressure, another, admitting that sometimes the fish came from this second establishment. Finally he lost his temper altogether, and angrily produced a small pile of household books, telling Bell that he had better look through them to find what he wanted to know.

"If that'll satisfy your curiosity," he said sarcastically, and Bell said it would, and he was very much obliged, and occupied himself first by extracting from these books the

name of every tradesman with whom the household had any dealings, wondering as he did so whether Peters' ill temper was just that and nothing more, due, probably, to a not unnatural nervousness and resentment resulting from recent events and the almost continuous presence of police in the house, or whether it was due to some other and deeper cause.

Unable to answer these questions, but noting them for further consideration, Bell retired to the telephone, which fortunately was not in use, and there spent a tedious half-hour or so, making sure that none of the tradespeople on his list had rung up Ellerslie Court that morning. A further inquiry put through to Scotland Yard, brought an answer that the plain-clothes man trailing Ralph Willerton had seen him use a 'phone from a call box about a quarter-past eleven, but had, of course, no knowledge of the nature of the call.

"Willerton used a 'phone about a quarter-past eleven," Bell thought to himself. "Morland's movements between eleven and half-past are not known. So it may have been one or other of them. Or, on the other hand, it may not."

Colonel Coates not yet having returned from his conference and Bell having nothing else to do at the moment, for Dering showed no overwhelming desire to avail himself of the Scotland Yard man's services, Bell went to wait on one of the stone benches in the gardens. He had meant to finish his book, but as he had committed that reprehensible sin the self-respecting reader is never guilty of, and had been looking at the end, he knew how the book was going to wind up and found himself losing interest in it. So he put it down and set himself to consider once yet again the mass of apparently unrelated, disconnected incidents, that were the characteristic of this affair, and of which the

latest was this story of Lady Ellerslie's fainting fit at the telephone.

Only one could never be sure that any of these incidents had any real connexion with the mystery. Lady Ellerslie's recent fainting fit might be purely a result of the strain of recent events, and have nothing whatever to do with anything said over the 'phone. Only suppose it had?

"You can't be sure of anything," Bell told himself with exasperation. "Why was the prussic acid taken from Dr. Mackenzie's and yet never used? Did Lady Ellerslie take it, or young Willerton and how did it get into Miss Eayland's hands? Or did Thompson take it and what did he come down here for? Who cut those initials on the table in the secret room and why under the table and not on top? Why had Lord Ellerslie a pistol in his pocket that evening? Who threw away that other pistol we found and where is it now? Was it Miss Eayland we saw looking over the park wall, and, if it was, why did she vanish when she saw us? Who was it went to town that night to visit Thompson's room? Why did young Willerton do his dress-tie so badly that night? What was he afraid I had found in his room? What scared Lady Ellerslie so badly? Was it only my imagination made her shoulders look so square when she came down from the secret room? Was it only an accident that Morland dropped his half sovereign in the hall? When was the poison put in Carter's tea and where did it come from? Is it a mere coincidence or is it the clue to the whole mystery that 'V' is the first letter of Lady Ellerslie's late husband's first name and also the first letter of the monogram cut on the old oak table? And, above all, what was it Carter knew that made it necessary for some one —who?—to put him out of the way at once?"

It was a formidable list of questions and to none of them

did he feel he could give a clear and distinct answer, though he had the feeling that if only he could do so to even the least of them, then at once the answer to all the rest would become instantly clear.

Presently he saw Lord Ellerslie come out of the house and at once he went across to speak to him and to ask respectfully how Lady Ellerslie was and to express his hope that she was recovering from her attack.

Lord Ellerslie answered shortly that she was resting and that the doctor was coming to see her again the next day.

"This sort of thing is enough to make any one ill," he added. "I feel like going clean off my head myself at times. I suppose there are no fresh developments? I see one of the papers remarks that the dead man's body was found in a secret room to which only myself and one other person—Mr. Willerton—knew the way."

"Yes, I saw that, too," answered Bell. "Sailing a bit near the wind I thought it, only they saved themselves by putting in a 'supposed' or two and an 'according to rumour'. There is one question I should like to ask though. I understand Lady Ellerslie was married previously to a Mr. Watson. Did your Lordship ever see Mr. Watson?"

"No, he was dead before I met her."

"Do you think it would be possible to obtain a photograph of him?"

"What do you want that for? I haven't any idea. I suppose he was most likely photographed some time or another."

"It is usual in the acting profession," suggested Bell mildly.

"He was generally engaged, when he was engaged at all, as a stage-manager or assistant. I believe he was really a stage-carpenter when—when Lady Ellerslie first met him.

He occasionally took small parts. But I've no idea if there's any photograph of him in existence, or where you could find it if there is. Why?"

"Well, my Lord, in a case like this," Bell answered slowly, "we just have to ask all the questions we can think of in the hope that some answer somehow may turn out useful. Our difficulty in this case is that no one is being frank with us. Information is being with-held that might clear up everything."

Ellerslie was silent for some minutes, looking fixedly before him. Finally he said:

"I don't think that is quite the case."

"Inspector Carter was murdered in your house," Bell reminded him.

The other's face was pale and drawn and it was long before he spoke.

"I cannot even imagine anything I could tell you that would help you to the truth," he said at last.

But Bell, watching him, was certain there was something that he knew but that he intended to keep silent about, and that the reason for this silence was fear.

"There is something he's afraid of," Bell told himself and then as if to change the subject he said aloud: "Wonderful old park, this is, my Lord, wonderful old oaks."

"Yes, very old, many of them," Ellerslie agreed, but as one whose thoughts were elsewhere.

"Some of them hollow, I shouldn't wonder," Bell added.

"I daresay," agreed the peer and moved heavily away, his mind evidently engaged with other, darker thoughts than that of old and hollow oaks.

"Knows something," Bell reflected once again, watching him depart, "but nothing about hollow oaks, I think."

CHAPTER XXV

THREE IN CONCEALMENT

WHEN Colonel Coates did get back at last from the conference summoned by the local M.P., during which the discussion over the contemplated purchase of the new centre forward had lasted so long and grown so heated, that the question of the traffic arrangements had never been reached at all, he found himself with so much to consider and attend to, such a multiplicity of reports to read and digest, that he had but little time to spare for Sergeant Bell.

However he agreed that every effort must be made to secure a photograph of the late Mr. Watson and to get in touch, if that were possible, with any person who had known him, so that at any rate some description of his appearance might be obtained. He also agreed that Lady Ellerslie would have to be further questioned as soon as she was in a fit state for the ordeal—at present she was still confined to her room.

"Only," sighed Bell, "if there's anything to tell, she won't tell it, and if there isn't she can't."

"Of course, I don't believe for one moment . . ." declared the Colonel and then paused, reflecting that after all in this case he had no idea what he either believed or did not believe. "One can never tell," he decided, "but your point is that it's not very clear what Mr. Morland was doing here? I don't see much in that. We've given some attention to him and the proposal he came to put before Ellerslie seems quite genuine—some very good people are connected with it, Morland is paying all preliminary

expenses himself, and they are pretty heavy, so he has money or the control of it, no one is being asked to put up a penny cash until firm guarantees securing at least a hundred thousand capital have been secured. It's some idea for applying mass production methods to farming, and apparently Morland is one of those enthusiasts who are willing to give all their time and cash to carrying out their pet idea. The negotiations have been going on some time, Morland has been down here about them before, and Lady Ellerslie has never seemed inclined to take the least interest in him, or he in her for that matter. Lady Ellerslie's fainting fit to-day was most likely just a kind of nervous breakdown. I feel a bit like that myself," he added, and as he very plainly had no more time to spare and wanted to get on with the mass of reports waiting his attention, Bell beat a discreet retreat.

A little later on, however, Bell was called to the 'phone and was told from Headquarters that as a result of the suggestion put forward by him that a close examination should be undertaken of the cases Inspector Carter had been engaged on, a very curious discovery had been made. It seemed that some years previously, at a time when Bell himself was on sick leave, and before Carter had obtained his promotion, Ralph Willerton had been arrested on a charge of the attempted murder of a man named Rawlinson. It appeared that police called to the house had only rescued Rawlinson just in time, though Willerton protested for his part that Rawlinson had only had what he deserved, and, having had it, was about to be allowed to go. But Rawlinson declared that he would certainly have been killed had not the police saved him, and the truth had never been arrived at for Rawlinson had disappeared before the case came on. For lack of a prosecutor then, and sufficient evidence, Willerton had

been discharged 'with a caution', and whether there could be any connexion between this old and rather odd business and the present mystery, Scotland Yard did not know, but thought it curious, and anyhow Bell was to report the facts immediately to Colonel Coates.

However, as Colonel Coates was still busy, Bell had to content himself with informing Dering, who also thought it interesting, considered that it showed young Willerton was a violent and dangerous character, but did not see how there could possibly be any connexion with the present affair. But he undertook to see the report reached the Colonel, who, however, was of opinion that they had enough on their hands without bothering about ancient history, a reasonable attitude which Bell, when he was told of it, felt had to be accepted.

All the same it seemed to him curious, and he meditated ringing up Headquarters and asking them to have the affair investigated more closely, but then decided it was hardly his business to do that. He made up his mind vaguely that when he got back to town—he was expecting to be recalled at any moment for he really did not see very clearly what he was supposed to be doing here—he would 'poke about' a bit on his own, and see if he could find out anything about what the Colonel so justly called this bit of 'ancient history'.

Meanwhile there was still nothing much for him to do, since any fresh line of investigation that presented itself, the Colonel always, and naturally, assigned to one of his own men to follow up, while of course in the general direction of the affair Bell had no share. But his own superiors at Scotland Yard were evidently still desirous that he should remain on the spot, once or twice the Colonel sent for him to consult him about apparent clues that invariably turned out to be quite worthless, and when

Bell hinted that he was having quite a lot of spare time on his hands, the Colonel answered vaguely:

"Oh, you can go on poking about—that's what you called it, isn't it? Poking about. Carry on, carry on."

"Now, I wonder," Bell asked himself as he retired after this injunction. "I wonder if Coates meant anything by that, and if he knows anything."

For, in point of fact, when he had nothing else to do, which was frequently the case, Bell, having provided himself with the largest scale ordnance map produced, had made a beginning of subjecting the Ellerslie park to a detailed examination. Dividing it by the help of his map into sections, he was going over it carefully and minutely, almost inch by inch, though what he hoped to find he had small idea and though the task was evidently one he had small chance to complete unless he kept at the work till he was due to retire. But it was something to occupy his time, since otherwise he had no specified duties save to report twice a day by 'phone to Headquarters, which reports were always to the same effect, that there was nothing new, that Lady Ellerslie was reported to be making good progress but was still confined to her room, that Lord Ellerslie still showed himself, very naturally, gloomy and preoccupied, that Peters was still sulky and resentful, and Darley still cheerful and interested, and that the cohort of journalists, though diminished in number, was still as fiercely watchful as ever, and still providing day by day articles of palpitating interest and tense dramatic power that told the reader nothing he had not been told a dozen times before but that left him eagerly anticipating the new developments always hinted at.

However the journalistic cohort was sufficiently reduced for Bell to be able to go out for a walk without an eager train ever following at his heels. The two constables

patrolling the park had also been withdrawn, the necessity for expelling too eager investigators having ceased to exist. Consequently Bell's wanderings about the park he was able now to carry out without much risk of being interfered with.

"Poking about," he told himself, "that's all, and not much to it—poking about to fill up time."

He was, in fact, disappointed, though not surprised, for he had a humble mind, that Colonel Coates had not taken him more into his confidence or shown a greater disposition to avail himself of his services.

In order to minimize as much as possible any chance that his 'poking about' in the park should be noticed, he was in the habit of using neither the main entrance by the lodge gates nor yet the small door leading to the golf links, but instead, scaling the boundary wall at a point where a growth of surrounding trees made it unlikely he would be seen.

As best he could he had divided the park into sections, so as to make sure no part was overlooked, no part examined twice, and this afternoon he was contemplating with an air even more depressed than usual, a large patch of tall bracken which overflowed into a thickly wooded slope where several great oaks grew.

"If anybody hid anything in that bracken," he told himself, shaking a reproachful head at it, "no one could ever find it, except by cutting the whole lot down. Haystacks nothing to it," he sighed.

So he sat down under the wide spreading branches of one of the oaks and began again to let his mind dwell upon the case and all the possibilities and all the probabilities that it presented. A curious sense of loneliness came upon him, and his memory turned again to all those long and tedious days that he had spent with the murdered In-

spector, unravelling or striving to unravel one case after another.

"Poor old Carter," he thought, "he wasn't such a bad sort after all and he did so enjoy himself."

For that was the impression that somehow most clearly remained in his mind. There are some who enjoy life, or this or the other manifestation of it, but Carter remained in memory chiefly as a man who most enjoyed himself, and more and more Bell was aware of a deep anger growing in him at the ruthless manner in which the Inspector had been destroyed. Yet the prospect of bringing his assassin to justice had never seemed more remote to Bell than now as he sat there, letting his idle glance wander to and fro over the sea of bracken, which seemed to him now, as it were, to typify the tangled waste of his own thoughts.

"Poor old Carter," Bell said, half aloud, and getting to his feet he saw a long way off the approaching figure of a man.

Having no desire to be seen and questioned or his presence there reported, Bell hesitated for a moment whether to seek concealment in the leafy branches of the oak above or in the recesses of the bracken. Then he decided on the second course, for it seemed to him less trouble, and wriggling his way into that dense growth he lay there close and snug, though still able, peering through it, to watch the approaching newcomer whom presently he was able to identify as Lord Ellerslie himself.

"Now what's he after?" Bell thought, for there was something direct and hurried, even agitated, in the manner of the other's approach that did not seem to suggest he was merely enjoying a stroll.

Closer still Bell lay, though the bracken concealed him so well he had small fear of discovery. Not that it would matter much if he were seen, only it would be awkward to be asked what he was doing and what he hoped to find

out, for indeed those were points on which he was himself by no means clear. Nearer came Lord Ellerslie, and nearer still, in the same direct and rather hurried way, straight up to the bracken at a point not twenty yards from where Bell lay, and then going down upon his hands and knees he crawled and wriggled forward till he was completely hidden, till the sea of bracken had closed upon him also, till there remained visible to any observer not a sign or a hint that it now concealed within itself two hidden watchers.

"Well, I'm blowed," said Bell to himself, more completely bewildered, more utterly taken by surprise than perhaps he had ever been before in all his long and varied experience. He wondered what to do, and then he decided that his only course was to lie still and wait developments. But he wondered a little if he were watcher or watched, for it seemed to him possible that perhaps his presence in the park had been noticed and that it was himself Lord Ellerslie was lying thus in ambush for. But that did not seem to him altogether likely, and yet if not, who was it for whom Ellerslie was watching? For what reason was it that he had hidden himself thus in this concealing bracken?

A movement in the bracken not far away, a noise that he heard once or twice, and once a muttered exclamation, all told him that Ellerslie had chosen a place of concealment quite close to that where he himself was lying snug. As still as he might, controlling even his breathing for fear it might be detected, Bell lay and wondered, waiting for developments.

But there were none for long, and so still was the whole quiet scene, with the wooded slope above and the sea of bracken stretching up to it, none could have believed that there were those who lay there in hiding in that place of apparent calm and peace. Yet at long last Bell's patience was rewarded, for as he peeped through the

bracken and remembered sadly that it was tea time and small chance of getting any, he saw approaching the figure of a woman, whom soon he was able to identify as Lady Ellerslie.

"Come to meet her husband, knowing her husband is here?" Bell asked himself. "Or not? Not, I think," he decided presently, for though she was coming straight and rather quickly towards the very spot where Lord Ellerslie lay hidden, he was giving no sign of his presence.

She was quite close now, and Bell could see her plainly. She was deathly pale, but that was not to be wondered at, since this must be the first day on which she had been able to leave her room. But there was also a certain air of strain or expectation about her, a certain wildness in her manner and her bearing that was very marked. Bell felt it would give him no surprise if at any moment this sort of strain she seemed to be enduring did not break out into some unexpected action.

But she was very still and silent now, as she stood there like a pale statue between the wide spreading oak and the bracken where her husband and the detective lay so close. Whether she suspected their presence, or that at any rate of one of them, Bell could not determine, but it seemed to him that her glance strove to search and penetrate its recesses. Watching her from where he lay, his eyes intent upon her, his ears still more intent for any sound that would reveal any movement on Lord Ellerslie's part, Bell waited with every nerve and muscle tense, and it seemed to him the very air of that quiet, calm afternoon vibrated with a sense of expectation, stretched to such extreme he thought it could not endure much longer.

Yet a passer by would have seen nothing but a woman standing there, very still, as if deep in thought.

It began to grow cold there in the bracken, in the shade,

where the ground on which he lay was soft and damp, but Bell was surprised to find suddenly that he had broken out into a violent perspiration.

"Well," he thought, surprised, "what next?" and he wished very heartily that something would happen, for he was beginning to find the strain of this waiting quite intolerable, and yet he felt that what he endured was nothing to what that slight upright figure in the sunlight was enduring, nothing probably to what his neighbour in hiding in the bracken was going through, and then it seemed to him that if something did happen, it would certainly be terrible.

"This can't last long," he told himself again, "something's simply got to happen."

But still it did not. She remained in the same unchanging attitude, hardly moving, hardly stirring, a living statue as it were in that lonely spot between the bracken and the great old oak.

Then at last, with a little quivering sigh of which the sound came whispering through the bracken to Bell where he lay, she turned and began to walk slowly back towards the house, her head bent, her steps slow and drooping, like one who leaves behind her her last hope. Then when she was well out of sight Lord Ellerslie emerged from his concealment and slowly followed her.

Finally when he also was at a safe distance, Bell in his turn emerged, utterly puzzled, completely at a loss, unable even to make a guess at the meaning of this strange scene, or at its connexion, if any connexion in fact existed, between it and the double mystery of murder he was there to solve.

"Beats me," he said to himself with extreme exasperation, "what can it mean . . . does it mean anything? . . . but then it must . . . only what?"

He followed for a little at a distance to make sure that both husband and wife went back to the house, and then once more returned to the spot where this odd happening, if happening that can be called where nothing happens, had taken place, and when he did so he noticed underneath the old oak facing the bracken, where he and Lord Ellerslie had lain concealed, that now a cigarette was lying. That it had not been there before he was fairly certain, and when he went to pick it up he saw that it was quite fresh looking, so that it could not possibly have lain there long, and that it was of the rather expensive Balkan brand which he knew young Ralph Willerton was in the habit of smoking. Turning his glance upon the oak and examining its gnarled old trunk closely, he was soon able to distinguish a few slight signs and fresh looking scratches which were enough to indicate that somebody recently had climbed it.

Had there then been another spectator of that silent scene? And had that third onlooker not shown himself, simply because he was aware that the other two were hiding near? And was that some one, some one Lady Ellerslie had come to meet? And was it because he had known or suspected that this meeting was to take place, that Lord Ellerslie had been there, watching from his silent hiding place? Finally, did that cigarette, lying under the tree as if it had been dropped when some one had recently paused to light one before going away, did that indicate that the person hidden in the oak had been Ralph Willerton?

Shaking his head at the thought, Bell caught hold of an overhanging branch and drew himself up. A good place of concealment, he thought, and then, as he saw where a strong forked branch offered an almost comfortable seat, he saw also lying on this branch a small automatic pistol, one that seemed identical with the one that he and Carter had found that other day.

CHAPTER XXVI

A USELESS CLUE

VERY carefully, with infinite precaution, Bell wrapped the dainty, deadly little pistol, thus so strangely rediscovered, in his handkerchief Not that he had the faintest hope that any finger prints would be found upon it. He had far too high a respect for the intelligence of the unknown he was endeavouring to track down, to suppose for one moment that there had been neglected that elementary precaution of gloves, which is adopted to-day by every youthful hooligan breaking into a suburban villa left unoccupied for an hour or two in the afternoon. Besides, in any case, the handle of the little weapon, slightly roughened in texture to give a more secure grip, was not likely to have retained any very clear impression, for the popular idea that any one touching anything, at once automatically leaves a perfect and easily legible record of the fact is as mistaken as are most popular ideas. Finger prints are not so simple as they look, few things are, indeed.

But Bell knew also that not the tiniest precaution must be neglected, for whether or no genius is a matter of infinite pains, detective work certainly is so. So as carefully as if he knew the whole issue of the case depended on what he was doing, he wrapped the pistol up in his handkerchief, and trusted rather than hoped that as that handkerchief was the only one he had in his pocket, he would not want to blow his nose—though in fact symptoms of such a desire were already forcing themselves upon his attention. The cigarette he had found he also put away with equal

care, and then perched up there in the tree, on the branch where perhaps he whom he so ardently sought had been sitting within reach only a few minutes ago, he gave himself up to the turmoil in his mind, where one theory after another was forming itself and contradicting itself and vanishing and then re-forming once again, like the patterns in the old-fashioned kaleidoscope.

One thing at least was clear and certain. Some one had been hiding in the oak during the recent scene, some one who must have been aware of the presence in the bracken both of Lord Ellerslie and of Bell himself. And this fact humiliated him a little, for it meant that he who had wished to be the observer had been in fact the observed, that the watcher had been watched, and the tracker tracked in his turn.

"He knew about both of us," Bell reflected ruefully, "and I knew about his lordship but not about him, and his lordship knew about neither of us, and we all three knew about her ladyship and she knew about none of us —or did she?"

These reflections he turned over in what was becoming, he told himself ruefully, more and more like a chaos and less and less like a mind and then a new line of thought occurred to him.

For after all it was possible Lord Ellerslie had known there was some one hidden in the oak. Possibly he had wished that, whatever was to happen or not to happen, there should be a witness . . . but then that cigarette . . . that pistol . . . at this point Bell decided that a chaos that had ceased to bear any resemblance to any normally working mind was not worth much.

So he turned to meditate on the curious problem of why the beer in an English village inn should be so much worse than the beer in even the worst of London public houses

and the beef served with it have rather evidently just come out of cold storage after a somewhat prolonged sojourn there. He supposed that beef, like port, must improve with keeping, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, and cheered by these profound economic reflections, he rang up his London superiors and asked if it could be ascertained what Morland and Ralph Willerton had been doing that afternoon. The answer when it came was not satisfactory. Pressure of work, caused by the very brutal murder of a child in Notting Hill—Bell himself had very nearly been re-called to help in the investigation—had caused the withdrawal of the plain-clothes men put on to watch Morland and Willerton, the withdrawal being made the more willingly as the watch was producing nothing of interest and both suspects had shown themselves fully aware of its existence. But other inquiries hurriedly made showed that Willerton had been out for a long motor drive that afternoon—and when Bell heard that he almost smiled, the connexion seemed so plain—and further that Morland, who did not own a car, had hired a motor-cycle before lunch and had not returned it till quite late—and when Bell heard that he nearly, but not quite, said a bad word.

"Those two," he sighed, "you can never disentangle them."

But as he had remarked in his report over the 'phone, one thing at least was clear—the little pistol he had found in the oak was a link to prove that some connexion existed somewhere between the first murder, the murder of Carter, and now this mysterious incident in Ellerslie Park.

"Found near the scene of Thompson's murder," he mused now, "disappears after poor Carter's death, turns up again now—and was it just the accident that I was there, and that whoever was hidden in the oak must have

seen me, that prevented a third tragedy—only what? Or perhaps did my being there very nearly provide another mystery some one else would have had the job of investigating and is that why the pistol was all ready up in the oak? Easy enough to pick me off."

And when later on he suggested this idea to Colonel Coates, when he went to make his report to him, that gentleman looked grave and was inclined to think this last idea a very probable one.

"Looks as if it might have been some one who had some idea of trying to stop this poking about of yours as you call it. Do you think it could have been Peters who was hidden in the tree? I've got a report here to say he was out all afternoon, he says he went nowhere in particular, just for a walk, smoked a pipe under a hedge, came back again, didn't meet any one who could confirm his story and doesn't see why it should need any confirmation anyhow. But I'm not satisfied he doesn't know a good deal more than he has ever said. He appears to be devoted to Lord Ellerslie but one is not so sure of his feelings towards Lady Ellerslie—and now you have proof that Ellerslie is watching his wife, a thing which, but for what you tell me, I would never have believed . . . well, I don't know what to make of it. Good God, Bell, men do strange things when they think their honour has been touched."

He was plainly very greatly disturbed. Bell said nothing, he seldom did when he had nothing to say, and that was perhaps the most remarkable trait in his character. Rising from his chair, Colonel Coates paced up and down the room once or twice as was his custom when more than usually disturbed, and then he devoted his attention to the cigarette Bell had picked up.

"Doesn't tell us much," he grumbled. "Willerton smokes 'em. Lots of people smoke 'em—for one thing they

don't bore you with coupons and one does appreciate that. I remember seeing Willerton offering his case more than once to other people. Perfectly easy for any one to have taken two and kept one and dropped the second where you found it, easier still to have noticed the brand and bought a few. And of course Peters could have helped himself to Willerton's cigarettes just as easily as to Ellerslie's cigars. No," he repeated, turning over the cigarette with the end of his fountain pen, "no good at all."

"Is there any action you suggest my taking, sir?" asked Bell, but the Colonel shook his head.

"No, no," he said, "just go on poking about, as you call it—you generally seem somehow to poke something out, don't you? Not that it's been much good to us so far," he added to prevent Bell getting too exhilarated.

But it was never easy to exhilarate Bell, and it was with an air of depression as complete as ever, that he stared at the cigarette on the table that seemed to hint so much and yet that in reality meant so little.

"No, sir, we aren't much further forward, are we?" he agreed sadly, "and it's not even as if the oak had been hollow."

"What do you mean?" snapped the Colonel. "Hollow? Why should it be hollow?"

"I only meant you could hide things in hollow oaks," Bell answered, "but not in this one, because of its not being hollow."

"What things?" demanded the Colonel sharply, but Bell only looked more sadly puzzled than ever.

"I only wish I knew," he said. He was about to add that to know it, he would give his chance of promotion, when he reflected that to say so would be a little like

saying he would give a row of brass pins. So he tried to think instead of what he valued most and said finally: "I would give my annual leave to know that."

"Oh, well," answered Coates, impressed, "carry on, carry on."

So Bell went back again to 'carry on', first by way of supper and bed, and then by way of a long sleepless night, during which he sought in vain the key word that would as it were bring together into one coherent whole the disconnected totality of these happenings.

Again and again he passed in review the names of all those who had been, so far as he knew, in any way connected with the case, and in the end he decided that any one of them might as well as another have been hidden in the oak—any one of them that is except himself and Lord and Lady Ellerslie.

"And if I go on worrying my brains much longer," he told himself at last, "I shall begin to think it might have been one of us."

Or was it, he wondered, some one of whom as yet none of them had any knowledge, some figure in the background revealing itself only by its handiwork?

"If her ladyship is in love with some one, if there's some clandestine love affair at the bottom of it all," he thought, "who can it be? Who is there she can be in love with? If it is young Willerton, can he be carrying on both with her and her stepdaughter at once? Or using one as a blind to the other? Not likely. If her first husband has turned up again, who can that be? Morland? Impossible. Willerton? Absurd. Peters? If it's Peters, I'll never laugh at the cinema again. And if I'm mad and that's the secret of the whole thing, I'll apply for admission to Bedlam next week. All the same Lord Ellerslie was there, hiding in the bracken, and some one else was there, hiding

in the oak, with the pistol Carter had in his possession when he was murdered."

But as his meditations brought him no nearer knowledge, there was nothing else for him to do but 'carry on' according to instructions, and as he had been awake most of the night it has to be confessed that a large part of this process the next afternoon consisted in a comfortable and refreshing doze he indulged in on a mossy bank he found, from which doze he awakened with a start to find sitting opposite to him, staring at him from his heavy lidded eyes, the clumsy, rough, black bearded figure of the agricultural expert, Morland.

"I've come down from town on purpose to see you," Morland said. Close behind him was his motor-cycle, on which he had apparently arrived, as perhaps, Bell could not help thinking, he had done more than once before. "I want to make a clean breast of it," he said.

CHAPTER XXVII

MORLAND SPEAKS

BELL sat bolt upright, jerked as it were into consciousness, by the impact of these words. Yet still he almost doubted if he were really awake, as he stared blankly at the speaker, who in return gazed back at him with a kind of mournful resignation but did not speak again. Trying to collect his thoughts, Bell was aware that mingling with his extreme astonishment was a certain faint strain of disappointment, as if there ran in his mind a kind of regret that a mystery so strange, so tragic, so complicated, should end in so banal a manner by a commonplace confession of the guilty man.

"You mean," he said at last, as the black bearded agriculturalist remained silent, "you want to confess . . . you understand what you are saying? What the consequences will be?"

"Very unpleasant, I suppose," agreed Morland, looking very much as if he appreciated that to the full. "Of course, I know that. I suppose you are giving what you people call 'the usual warning'? But it's too late to think about all that now."

Bell got to his feet. He was fully awake now, but extraordinarily bewildered and a little doubtful, too. That Morland should prove to be the murderer did not surprise him greatly, for certainly many straws had pointed in that direction. But that the murderer who had carried out crimes so audacious and so mysterious, so deliberate and so cold-blooded, should now simply come forward, like a repentant drunkard in a sober fit, and offer to tell all

about it, seemed to him almost incredible. Yet it was apparently what was happening, and somehow he had the idea that he could face it better on his feet. Morland remained sitting, sometimes with his hands clasped round his knees, sometimes with one or both of them tugging at his beard. He mumbled, more into his beard than to Bell:

"I'll tell you all about it . . . got to now . . . that is, all I know."

"I think we had better go at once to Colonel Coates," Bell said slowly. "He is the proper person to hear what you have to say. Besides, that will give you more time for reflection and then, when you have finally made up your mind, your statement can be taken down and signed and witnessed in the usual way."

But Morland shook his head.

"I know what I've got to say," he answered, "and I think you must hear it at once, before we leave here. There's a very good reason for that. I believe conclusive evidence of the truth of what I have to say is hidden not very far from here and I believe there is very considerable risk that it may be destroyed at any moment. If it is, a vital link will be lost. I think you must hear what I have to say first, and then you can decide what you ought to do, because this evidence I think is hidden near here will show you at once whether I'm right or not. And if we go away from this spot, there's a very fair chance it will be destroyed. If I'm right, its hiding place isn't far from here."

Bell looked at him thoughtfully, still doubtful.

"I don't think I know what you mean," he said, "but if there's material evidence hidden close at hand, I think we had better make sure of it before we do anything else."

"It's safe enough while we are here, nothing can happen

to it while we're around," Morland insisted. "But the moment we turn our backs, something may happen. That's why I thought it such extraordinary luck that I happened to catch a glimpse of you just now. That thing," he directed his untidy beard as he spoke towards the motor-cycle lying to one side, "has been jibbing all the way down from town and I had to get off to try to tinker it up a bit. I had nearly finished the job, there wasn't much wrong, when I saw you coming along. That seemed a bit of luck as I had come down to see you. You didn't see me because I had been doing my tinkering by the roadside and some bushes hid me from you. I was filling my pipe ready to start off again when I saw you coming along, and I was just going to give you a hail when I saw you turn off behind some trees that are there between the road and the wall of Ellerslie Park. Of course I expected you to appear again, but you didn't, and when I went to look, you weren't there, so of course I concluded you had got over the wall into the park. Just as well, I thought. That gave me my chance. I made up my mind to follow you and say what I had to say right on the spot, and then show you the evidence I told you about just now. After that, of course, it'll be for you to say what you are going to do next."

"You mean," said Bell slowly, "you know who murdered the man Thompson? You know who murdered Inspector Carter?"

Morland was silent a moment or two, tugging at his untidy beard in a rather hesitating way.

"I think I had better tell you as simply as I can what I do know," he said at last. "Some things I don't actually know seem to me to be certain as well. But I suppose the point is what I actually know."

"Yes, but first, what is this evidence you speak of?"

Bell asked. "I think you had better show me that first, especially if there's any risk of its being destroyed."

"No risk at all while we are here," Morland assured him, "it's only if we go away that anything could happen—it would, too."

"Colonel Coates is in charge of the investigation, he is the proper person to hear what you want to say," Bell remarked again.

He was more than a little troubled in his mind, for while at first he had supposed that Morland wished to confess his own guilt, now it seemed it was some one else he wished to accuse. There was always the possibility—even the probability—that the whole thing might turn out the usual mare's nest into which most confessions and statements resolve themselves. Only Morland's manner did not quite suggest that was likely to be so with him, and yet why was he so insistent on telling his story then and there? Great care has nowadays to be exercised in accepting statements, especially confessions, or else the unlucky recipient of them is very liable to find himself denounced as having been guilty of conduct much worse than that confessed to. And besides, Bell felt very puzzled by the references to evidence that might disappear unless he and Morland remained exactly in the same spot where they then were.

"This evidence you talk about——" he began.

"We'll come to it in good time," Morland interrupted quickly. "Dear me, I had no idea it was so difficult to make a confession," he added, somewhat irritably. "I thought you tore secrets out of people with thumbscrews and things, and instead your one idea seems to keep me quiet."

"No," protested Bell, "only I'm a bit—well, after all, Colonel Coates——"

"I know all about Coates," interrupted Morland again and this time still more impatiently. "I know he's in charge. I expect that's why nothing much has been found out and why I've been obliged to come forward—very much against my will. I hoped it would all be cleared up without my coming into it at all. Too late to hope that now, I suppose. And the value of the evidence I shall be able to show you depends very largely on its turning out to be actually what I say it is beforehand. You understand I don't actually know that what I think it is, is actually where I think it is. I'm only reasoning it must be. And if it proves to be what I think, that'll prove, too, that my reasoning is right. You see what I mean?"

Bell nodded, but did not speak, and Morland continued:

"Of course that implies that if I turn out to be wrong and it isn't there, then my reasoning and my facts are all wrong. Because, I admit, the only plain, clear, simple fact I actually know is that I saw Ralph Willerton, immediately after the Thompson murder, dodge into Ellerslie Court wearing a plus fours suit that seemed to me to be smothered in blood."

Bell drew a long breath.

"You are sure of that?" he asked.

"I make the statement with every sense of responsibility," Morland answered deliberately.

"Why have you held the information back until now?"

"Because at the time I had every sympathy with Willerton, at any rate I had no intention of helping to get him hanged. I thought he probably had good reason for what he had done. But for later developments I think I should have gone on keeping quiet."

"Which later developments do you mean?"

"In part the murder of your other Scotland Yard man," Morland answered. "Who did that I don't know and I

don't know that by itself that would have made me speak. It was shocking, but I suppose policemen and detectives must expect to run risks. But I began to be afraid a third murder was contemplated. I have every reason to believe that a third murder is contemplated."

"Whose?" Bell asked in a voice not altogether steady, for already he anticipated in part what the reply was likely to be.

"Lord Ellerslie's," Morland answered, and there was silence after that for a moment or two, a silence that to Bell seemed in some way to envelope earth and heaven together, as both together shrank back appalled from the abyss of horror and of wickedness these words seemed to unveil.

"Who . . . who . . .?" Bell asked, and then, for he knew the answer the other would give, but that he seemed to hesitate to pronounce, Bell said: "You mean that his wife . . . that Lady Ellerslie . . .?"

"I think that is what she wanted the prussic acid for," Morland replied. "You know some was stolen from Dr. Mackenzie? Well, I think originally the idea was to use it for that, but I expect afterwards it was used to stop your Inspector's inquiries when they threatened to become inconvenient."

"The poison taken from Dr. Mackenzie has been recovered intact," Bell said.

"Oh, I didn't know that," exclaimed Morland quickly. "You must remember I'm only guessing half the time, I expect I'm wrong in some details, whether I'm wrong in all you can judge when I've told you what I think and shown you what I have to show you—or think I have. It may be Lady Ellerslie had some poison in her possession before but wanted more. I have an idea that if the plot failed she meant to have means at hand to make sure of

one way of escape at least for herself and for her lover."

"Who is her lover?"

"Willerton." After a pause Morland added: "He's handsome, you know, good looking as the devil, good looking enough to turn any woman's head."

"Yes," agreed Bell. "Yes. You say you sympathized with him when you thought he had murdered Thompson. Why? Why should an intrigue like that lead him to kill Thompson?"

"Because Thompson's real name was Watson. He was Lady Ellerslie's husband, she married him when she was only sixteen or seventeen, long before she ever met Ellerslie."

Morland was watching Bell rather closely as he said this and seemed to expect protests and expressions of doubt or disbelief, or at any rate of extreme surprise, from the detective. But Bell only said:

"An actor, wasn't he? Verity Small was the name he went by on the stage, wasn't it?"

"Oh, you knew that?" Morland grumbled, slightly disconcerted apparently, and grabbing again at his beard with both hands, as his trick was when he felt at all worried.

"No. I didn't know it," Bell answered slowly, "not till you told me. It was just a kind of idea I hadn't been able to put into shape. But there was the 'V' that was part of the monogram I found and that was also the first initial of 'Verity Small', and there was the fact that Thompson knew America and had talked about Hollywood where Lady Ellerslie made her big success. But I hadn't been able to see how to work it all in, though it's plain enough now."

"It always is when you've been told," Morland retorted with a slight sneer in his voice. "Anyhow, she has no more

right to call herself Lady Ellerslie than you have. She's Mrs. Watson. Her marriage with Ellerslie is bigamous. I sympathized with Willerton at first because I believed what was happening was that Thompson—Watson—was blackmailing his wife. I rather believe that not so very long ago she paid him every penny she could lay her hands on. He promised to go away and never trouble her again. Of course, he lost it all, cards and racing and so on, in double quick time, and had to take a job as book agent to keep body and soul together. Then he applied to his wife again. She refused, had to, he had sucked her dry. But he wouldn't believe that and he followed her to Dr. Mackenzie's that day to get a chance of speaking to her. She tried to refuse and he threatened to come down to Ellerslie Court after her, so she agreed to meet him in the park. And the prospect made her so desperate that when the chance offered, she took the prussic acid as a way out. Well, that's what made me sympathize with Willerton at first, because I thought he had killed Thompson, most likely during a quarrel or fight of some sort, in an attempt to help Lady Ellerslie. I was simple enough to put his interest in her down to pure chivalry, silly of me of course, but I had no idea then that they were lovers. So when I saw him coming back that night with his clothes covered with what looked like blood, I was certainly a bit startled but I made up my mind to say nothing. I thought Watson probably deserved what he had got, and anyway it was no business of mine. It was only afterwards that I began to realize I had made myself what I suppose you would call an accessory after the fact. So I decided I had better go on holding my tongue. I wasn't sure I hadn't made myself liable to a term of penal servitude or something of that sort. Then came the murder of that poor devil of an Inspector of yours. That was a shock, a very severe shock.

But I felt that I didn't dare come forward. All the same I began to think, I began to watch, easier for me than for you, perhaps, because of course no one suspected I had any interest in what was going on. And I gradually came to think Lord Ellerslie also was in danger. That was rather different. To get another man hanged doesn't seem to me an absolute duty—oh, I know all about being a good citizen, and public duty, and all that. But when it seemed to be a question of another life, of permitting another murder, I felt I had to do something. I could see I was letting myself in for a lot of trouble, possibly for a criminal prosecution, but I felt I had to face it. I'm not sure in a way I'm not even responsible for your Inspector's death."

"How do you mean?" Bell asked.

"I happened to drop a gold half sovereign I've had a long time and call my mascot, just as one of the men-servants was taking a tray in to him in the library. I asked the man to help me find my half sovereign and he put the tray down for a moment. Lady Ellerslie came into the hall just then, either by accident or because she had been following. I distinctly saw her put her hand out, over the cup of tea. I didn't think much about it at the time, only that it was a rather funny sort of gesture. Afterwards . . . I heard that she had taken the cup and saucer away to wash up herself."

He paused. He was still sitting in the same attitude, his hands clasped round his knees, his heavy lidded eyes gazing straight in front. He had a little the air of being crushed beneath the weight of what he had been saying. Bell said presently:

"You mean Lady Ellerslie murdered Inspector Carter?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

MORLAND CONTINUES HIS STORY

It was a long time before Morland replied. He seemed to be thinking deeply, it was almost as though he wished to reply with a denial and yet dared not. When at last he spoke it was to ask another question:

"What other conclusion is it possible to come to?"

"How could a rather slender woman, who doesn't look very strong, carry the body of a man like Carter up those awkward stairs to the secret room where we found it?" Bell asked.

"Possibly she had help," Morland answered. "I don't know. Perhaps she managed it alone. A desperate woman —or a man, either, really put to it—can do things quite impossible in the ordinary way. It may be Willerton helped her. I don't know. The only thing I do know is that she had used that hidden room up there in the roof for a hiding place once before."

"What for?"

"I told you I saw Willerton come in with his clothes all over blood—or at least what looked like blood. It was a plus fours suit he was wearing and it was all over blood, at least I thought so."

Bell said mistrustfully:

"I went to Mr. Willerton's room and examined his clothing almost at once. He had just changed to evening dress. His plus fours suit was there. I looked at it carefully. There wasn't a trace or sign of blood on it."

"Are you quite sure it was Willerton's own suit you

found in his room?" Morland asked quietly. "Are you sure it wasn't a suit belonging to some one else put there for your benefit?"

"What?" almost shouted Bell, startled for once quite out of his habitual calm. "What?"

"I asked if you were sure it was Willerton's own suit you found in his room and examined and found no blood stains on," repeated Morland calmly. "I'm pretty sure Lady Ellerslie realized his danger, saw it would be fatal if his room were examined and his clothes found with blood on them, and so took them away and hid them and put in their place an old suit of her husband's. She realized that as Willerton was known to possess a plus fours suit, if it wasn't found that would be as bad as if it were found with blood on it. But Ellerslie is a good bit more round the waist than Willerton, and if you had thought of making a few measurements you might have wondered why a thirty-five inch waist man should wear forty-five inch knickerbockers, or why a smart young fellow like Willerton should be wearing quite such an ancient suit or one that came from the stores Lord Ellerslie goes to, instead of from the very smart, exclusive tailors Willerton patronises."

It is probable that not often has any human creature both looked and felt so utterly and hopelessly depressed and miserable as did Bell at this moment. The blunder he had made, this unhappy oversight, seemed to him a veritable Mount Everest among blunders, an oversight reducing all others in known history to mere nothings. Why on earth had he taken it for granted that the suit in Willerton's room was necessarily Willerton's own suit? Why had not the idea of a possible substitution occurred to him? Why had he not remembered that he might well have against him a woman's ready wit and subtle mind? He told himself mournfully that the youngest recruit would never have

made such an ass of himself. Fervently, passionately he vowed to resign then and there from the detective force and to devote the rest of his life to delivering milk in one of the more remote suburbs. It was, he felt in every bone of his body, all that he was fit for.

The truth of the story he did not doubt for a moment. It coincided too well with observed facts, accounted too successfully for the conduct and behaviour both of Lady Ellerslie and of Willerton. It explained at once why Willerton had shown such extraordinary agitation when he knew that his room had been searched, his room in which he knew the bloody evidence of his guilt was still lying. No wonder he had fallen into such panic, no wonder he had been on the very point of escape by suicide, no wonder he had all at once grown calm and collected again when he realized that he was safe after all, that the incriminating garments had been removed and others substituted.

Tremendous, soul shattering indeed, must have been his experience when he realized what had happened and so passed from an apparent certainty of detection back to safety once again. Bell wondered a little that the young man had been able to stand the shock of such conflicting emotions without betraying himself, without indeed breaking down altogether. Yet all that was as nothing in his mind compared with the desolating knowledge that oppressed him that plain proof of the young man's guilt had been in his hands and he had let it go.

"If I had thought of it, Carter would probably be alive to-day," he told himself remorsefully.

His thoughts turned to Lady Ellerslie. With what courage, speed, and resolution she had acted, such courage, speed, and resolution as a woman can seldom show save in the cause of the man she loves. He could not with-hold from her the tribute of the admiration that he felt and he

no longer doubted that Morland was right when he spoke of her love for the young man.

"Is this suit Willerton was wearing when he committed the murder the evidence you say is hidden somewhere near here?" he asked.

Morland looked a little taken aback, as if he had not expected so swift a deduction.

"Not at first," he said, "I mean it wasn't hidden here at first, first of all it was hidden—you can guess where? In the secret room. I suppose it struck Lady Ellerslie as a perfectly good, safe hiding place, so then she used it again, and hid your friend's dead body there, too."

"When we found his body," Bell said, "we searched the whole place very carefully. There was no sign of any clothing there then. Had it been removed before? Why?"

"No, it had not been removed before," retorted Morland, "and if you had had the sense to have a look at once, instead of all losing your heads and clacking together like a lot of hens, and if you had so much as opened the old oak chest that was staring you right in the face, there you would have found Willerton's things, still soaked in Watson's blood."

"There was only a very short delay," Bell said, "I opened the chest and looked inside almost at once. There was nothing there."

"That short delay was long enough," Morland retorted with a contempt he did not much trouble to conceal, but that Bell had far too little spirit left in him even to resent. "Only a little delay—that's your slogan I believe, delay. Well, Lady Ellerslie had been beforehand with you, quick she had been, that's her slogan—quick. She had been up in the secret room, if you remember, while you were all busy with the dead body you had found, as though a dead body mattered any longer. And when she came down she

walked away with the evidence that would have proved her lover's guilt—walked away with it right under all your noses and none of you sharp enough to see it."

"She was carrying nothing, her hands were empty," Bell protested, but only half-heartedly, for already he had some idea of what was coming. "If she had been carrying anything I should have stopped her at once—and a plus fours suit isn't like a handkerchief or easily hidden."

"Easily hidden from some people," retorted Morland scornfully. "I daresay if she had had a bundle under her arm perhaps even you might have noticed it—though I don't suppose you would have been so rude as to want to see what was inside. But you might have had a sort of a kind of a suspicion perhaps. You might have wondered. No, she hadn't anything under her arms, she wasn't carrying anything either—not in her hands, only on her back."

"On her back?"

"On her back. She was wearing a loose kind of tea gown and she simply put the plus fours suit on underneath, and the tea gown on top, and walked away with the evidence of a murder right under your eyes."

Bell drew a long breath. That was the explanation then. He said mournfully:

"I noticed her shoulders looked very square . . . I couldn't understand it."

"He noticed her shoulders looked very square, he couldn't understand it," Morland repeated, his voice full of a scorn and a contempt intense beyond the power of words to convey.

But this scorn and this contempt was not so great as that which Bell felt for himself. He perceived that even for the job of delivering milk in one of the more remote suburbs he was no longer fit, he could not think of any job for which

he was fit, he knew for certain that his career in the police was over and done with for ever more. When he had rallied sufficiently to be once more capable of speech, he asked mournfully:

"How do you know all this?"

"By having eyes in my head and using them. By being able to put two and two together and seeing they make four," retorted Morland savagely. "That doesn't matter though. I daresay you did your—best." His pronunciation of the word 'best' would have made Bell feel still worse had that been possible, but it wasn't. He continued: "What does matter is that now I've told my story, it's up to me to show you my evidence, to let you see it just where it is and what it is, and if it corroborates what I've said. It's not far from here." He unclasped his knees, got to his feet, and stood with his hands in his pockets, regarding Bell with that same air of profound contempt and almost derision the sad detective felt he had no right to resent, because he felt he had so well earned it. Besides, all his life he had been used to being considered in much the same light, though certainly in a form a little less exaggerated. "Well," Morland said, "can you guess what there is close by here and where it is?"

"The plus fours suit Willerton was wearing when he killed Thompson," Bell answered, "and that was smuggled away under our eyes by Lady Ellerslie and then hidden by her inside a hollow oak."

The effect on Morland of this answer was almost ludicrous. Now it was he who could only stare and gasp. He looked a little like a man who, superbly conscious of superior knowledge, had been giving a lesson in elementary chemistry, only to find that his supposed pupil was a member of the Royal Society.

"Oh, yes . . . well . . . you knew that," he stammered

when he had recovered a little. "Well then . . . you knew . . . you knew . . .?"

"Not much," answered Bell frankly, "but enough to think it worth while spending my spare time looking for hollow oaks. Interesting story, *Lost Sir Massingberd.* Ever read it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," growled Morland.

"No?" said Bell. "Well, read it sometime, if you can manage to get hold of a copy. So far I have managed to find several hollow oaks but none of them of any interest. Where's this one you mean?"

"It's not far, I'll take you to it," Morland answered, his manner oddly changed from the sort of contemptuous superiority it had been gradually assuming, till now it was once more almost as subdued and hesitating as it had been at the beginning of this interview. "It's only two or three hundred yards distant . . . over there," he said, pointing with his black, untidy beard as he had a trick of doing. "Also there's something else . . . you don't know what?"

"No, what?" Bell asked.

"We'll have to see," Morland answered. "I'm not sure . . . I don't want to say . . . I'm pretty sure you'll find what I've told you about. I can't think I'm all wrong about that, even though the only thing I actually know for an absolute fact is that I saw Willerton dodging into the house with what I thought looked like blood on his clothes. There is one other thing. Perhaps you know it. You knew Lady Ellerslie had a French maid?"

"I think so, yes. She was questioned with the others. She seemed to have nothing to say and to be very anxious to say it and go on saying it. What about her?"

"Only this," Morland answered gravely, "she has been

missing for twenty-four hours. Lady Ellerslie has announced that she was called back suddenly to her friends in Paris. And I am wondering if perhaps she knew something and if perhaps we shall find more than we expect hidden in the hollow oak."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE HOLLOW OAK

THE distance was not great, and Bell's mind was full of very strange and disturbing thoughts as he and Morland paced it together side by side, in silence, till they came to where a magnificent old oak rose superbly, eighty feet or so into the air. It stood aloof and alone, as though its majesty would brook no rival near at hand, and though its summit was still green, the vast and ancient trunk showed where already the processes of decay had begun their work. Dying, yet with many branches still green as in its lusty youth, it seemed to stand there like a living parable of the pattern that life and death forever weave together, and with a gesture Morland pointed to where, hidden in the intricacies of the vast and far spreading roots, was a tin of petrol.

"What I believe," Morland said, "is that the idea is to set it on fire. Parts of it are dead and dry as tinder, it would burn like a torch. Everything's ready, a match would do the trick, and what's hidden inside, supposing I'm right, would soon be in ashes, too. You wouldn't think the trunk was hollow, would you?"

"This maid of Lady Ellerslie's you spoke about," Bell said, staring intently at the old tree that might, it seemed, hide such grim secrets. "A middle aged woman, wasn't she? With red hair?"

"Yes. I believe some of them thought it was a wig. Perhaps we shall know that for certain very soon."

Bell did not answer. He was looking now at the base

of the tree. It was evident that careful preparations had been made. There was petrol to hand. Dry wood had been put into position. Very quickly a small bonfire could be started that would inevitably involve the whole great tree.

"A match," Morland said, "that's all, and where would our evidence be then? Fire hides well. I believe it is planned for to-night. That's only guessing, though."

Bell struck heavily on the oak's trunk. The answering sound gave no echo.

"You are sure it is hollow?" he asked.

"I daresay the sides are pretty thick still but the inside is just dust," Morland answered. "You can see for yourself."

With some agility, for though he was awkwardly built he was both strong and active, Morland swung himself by a low projecting bough into the lower branches, and then higher yet, till he was some twelve or fifteen feet from the ground, standing upright where a great projecting limb gave secure footing. He called down:

"Can you follow, can you get up here do you think?"

For answer Bell swung himself up, and in a moment or two was standing by Morland's side. There Morland showed him a great cavity that yawned in the enormous trunk and seemed to reach right down to the roots of the tree.

"Have you an electric torch?" Morland asked. "If you have, shine it down and see what you can see."

Bell obeyed, and though the beam of his electric torch was of some power, yet the darkness within the vast, dead heart of the tree was so intense, he could not see very clearly. But standing where Morland, who gave place to him, had been perched before, he was able, or thought he was, to distinguish faintly what looked like a heap of clothing.

"I believe you are right, I believe Willerton's plus fours

are there all right enough," he said. "What a hiding place."

"You can guess what would be left," Morland remarked, "once the old tree had been thoroughly burnt out. Now move your light a bit to one side—can you see something that looks as though it were tresses of red hair?"

"No," answered Bell, moving his beam to and fro, "no."

"Go, look closer then," screamed Morland, for it was to a wild scream that his voice rose at that moment, and with a sudden and violent push, with a volley of blows he rained down in a frenzy, he hurled Bell forward, to fall feet foremost into the dark cavity he had been examining. Uselessly Bell strove to find a hold for his clutching hands, as vainly as desperately he struggled. Blow after blow was hammered down upon him, relentlessly, fiercely, wildly, he was beaten down and down into the dark hollow yawning to receive him. He had no foothold, his feet hung uselessly in vacancy or scraped with equal ineffectiveness against the smooth inner walls of that deep hollow place. If he tried to support himself with his hands and outstretched arms, he was helpless against the shower of blows that fell upon his unprotected head; if he tried to defend himself or to retaliate, then he slipped further and deeper into the darkness over which he dangled. With all the frenzy of terror and of guilt Morland still rained down blows upon him, he sunk beneath them, he sunk ever deeper, further and further his body was forced downwards and ever downwards. Slowly, quickly, each word means much the same at such a time, he was thrust and beaten down, all his frantic efforts to clamber back quite unavailing. His feet swung in emptiness and found no support, his body swayed, for a moment his face showed pale and dreadful, upturned in a gleam of light

that fell through the leafy screen above. It was as though he sought one last gleam of light before a final blow fell, deluging his face in a spurt of blood; in a mask of blood it disappeared and Sergeant Bell fell slipping, struggling unavailingly against the smooth inner sides of the old hollow oak till he had dropped a dozen feet or more and lay senseless, in a huddled heap, prisoned thus in the heart of that immemorial tree, his unconscious, bloody head resting on the very bundle of old clothing that had been the bait for this trap in which he had been caught.

High above Morland peered fiercely down, hurling curses and vile obscenity at his victim, as though the deed were not enough but he must vent his hate and fear in words as well.

"I'll finish you," he screamed, "I'll finish you, I'll show you, I'll finish you, I'll make sure, you—you—" and again his words flowed into a stream of oaths and bitter curses.

All this time he was searching desperately in all his pockets for the pistol he believed he had with him, and as he searched and searched in vain, he still swore and cursed in every variety of filthy language, as if somehow the deed he had just accomplished required for its accompaniment a chorus of such words.

But there was no pistol in his pocket and he paused in both his searching and his swearing, dismayed and astonished, for he had calculated on making absolutely sure of the death of Bell by emptying at him down that narrow place the whole contents of the small automatic pistol he had been used to carry with him. It would be safe enough, he had calculated when laying his plans, for the reports would be muffled if the pistol were fired inside the hollow tree. But now it seemed he had no pistol to fire, and Bell for the time was as safe from his malice

as though he were a hundred miles away, instead of lying inert and senseless at a distance of but a dozen feet or so.

In impotent rage, Morland broke off a bit of dry branch and flung it down at him. He thought of collecting stones and dropping them on the unconscious man till he was crushed beneath a great pile of them, and his thoughts were joyous at the picture they presented to him of the bleeding mass of the detective's body, quivering beneath a steady, stony hail of death.

"Most likely he's dead already," he tried to console himself. "He won't live long down there anyhow."

Reluctantly he decided that the idea of collecting stones and stoning out whatever life his victim might still retain, was impracticable. It would take too long, there were no stones at hand, the risk of being seen would be too great. Yet the idea that Bell might be still alive, terrified him. He felt that somehow or another he must make sure. True, there was not one chance in a million that his victim could escape from such a prison. Escape seemed impossible. Not even if Bell recovered enough to try to attract attention by shouting or knocking, was it likely any one would pass near enough to that lonely spot to hear him, muffled as such sound as he could make would be. It was incredible that rescue could reach him by such means, impossible he should escape by his own efforts, and yet the guilt in Morland's soul made him dread both the impossible and the incredible. He dared run no risk, for always it is true that the wicked flee when no man pursues. Once more he searched frantically in every pocket for the pistol that was not there and he tried to remember what he had done with it and when he had it last.

"I must have left it in that other oak," he decided at last, muttering darkly to himself, "so I must, when she

came and they were hiding in the bracken and I didn't dare show myself."

For now he remembered clearly that he had got the pistol out and laid it ready to his hand on a convenient branch, ready for use if his place of concealment had been detected, for indeed a man perched high up in a tree is well placed for observation but less well for flight. But everything had passed off quietly. He had seen Lady Ellerslie waiting, but he had not dared to show himself, for also he had seen first Bell and then Ellerslie hide themselves in the bracken, and that had terrified him badly enough, so that no thought had been left him but to stay hidden, since he had supposed that perhaps they were acting together as they hid together and that he, and his presence there, were suspected. Then when first Lady Ellerslie had gone away, and the other two had followed her, he had evidently forgotten the pistol in his eagerness to escape as swiftly as might be, though he had had sufficient presence of mind to leave one of Willerton's cigarettes behind as a false clue, likely to mislead.

The pistol would have been lying there some time now and might, he supposed, be damp and unusable. But he thought it would be worth getting it, worth trying to see if it would not serve him to put Bell's death beyond all shadow of doubt. He thought he could find the spot and the tree again without much difficulty but when he did so there was no trace of the pistol, and the fact that it had disappeared threw him into a fresh paroxysm of rage and terror.

A new idea came to him, one that startled him at first, and then as it grew more familiar, began to excite him, to please him, to set his imagination working with a pleasant suggestion of hellishness and safety.

"Just the striking of a match and what would be left of

our evidence?" he repeated, remembering what he had said to Bell. "Just the striking of a match and what would be left of our detective?"

At any rate he had matches, if he had no pistol. And he remembered how everything was in readiness for setting the old oak on fire. Why not? That would make him safe. Most likely the cinders and ashes of the old tree would never be examined. No one would bother. Why should they? And even if they did and human remains were discovered, there would hardly be any possibility of identifying them. The idea seemed to him superb, magnificent. The old oak well burned, and Bell with it, and he would be safe enough.

The notion seemed so attractive he broke into a run in his haste to execute it, and the match was in his hand ready to light. In another moment it would have been thrown down, the petrol would have caught, the fire would have begun, the oak and what it prisoned would have flared into one vast, dreadful bonfire, when there came into his mind another idea. Suppose he were seen making his escape? Would it not be better to wait till it was dark? It was not wise to risk being seen. The fire would soon attract attention, if he were noticed he might be questioned, suspicions might be aroused . . . when one has guilt, and such guilt upon one's soul, no precaution can be too great.

Another idea occurred to him, an idea at once so subtle and so simple, that he began to laugh in sheer enjoyment of his own cleverness.

The delay involved would not be great, only an hour or two. The result would be certain, and a further result would be that he would be put in a position not only of complete security but of complete power as well.

It would mean that he would win all along the line.

Still chuckling to himself, he blew out the match he had already lighted. He took a few further precautions to make sure that when the time came the old tree would blaze like a torch, it and all that it contained, that it would flame and smoke and smoulder to utter and complete destruction, it and its contents together. Still laughing and chuckling to himself, he hurried away, for there was much to do before this superb idea he had just conceived could be safely executed.

CHAPTER XXX

FIRE

THERE was not one of all the Ellerslie Court household to whom these recent weeks did not seem like one long horrible and unreal nightmare. Apart even from the mystery of the two violent and sudden deaths that had taken place among them, apart from the constant coming and going of the police, and from the unceasing strain of the defence that had to be maintained against the crowd of eager newspaper men and the mingled curiosity and sympathy of friends, who considered themselves entitled to be interested, there was also the perpetual anxiety that possibly even yet, so long as the two mysteries remained unsolved, there might still be more and worse to come, all combining to create an almost unbearable experience of suspense and tension.

Lord Ellerslie indeed could never have found the strength to endure it, had he not felt that it was to him that his wife looked for support and help and that he must not fail her. Lady Ellerslie herself would undoubtedly have broken down, had she not known instinctively that only in her steadfastness could her husband find power to continue. Margaret, too, would inevitably have given in, had she not been well assured that upon her youthful vigour her elders depended, that for her to collapse would be fatal for them also.

And these three beliefs were all equally true and all equally well founded.

But it was no cheerful family group that this evening

was assembled in one of the smaller rooms of Ellerslie Court—a room that Lord Ellerslie liked to call his study, though in fact all his studying he did in the open air and in the fields; that Lady Ellerslie called the sewing room; though practically all the sewing was done by Louise, the red headed French maid, in the servants' sitting-room, that Margaret called the school room, because probably she had always so persistently refused to do any lessons there until at last she had been packed off to Cheltenham to the common despair of her father and herself; and that the household staff called the breakfast room, because presumably breakfast was never served there.

At the moment Lord Ellerslie was trying to read an article in an agricultural paper. It combatted by arguments equally senseless and grotesque one of Lord Ellerslie's favourite theories on the feeding of milking cows, and he read its foolish arguments without a sign of protest, though for much less he had been known to put himself to the trouble of cancelling violently a subscription that had to be renewed almost immediately, since agricultural papers are more necessary—to some—than are food and drink—to all. Lady Ellerslie was trying to sew, and her efforts were comparatively harmless since Louise never found it much trouble to undo her stitching again before tackling the job properly. Margaret was smoking cigarettes at a rate which seemed calculated to prevent any appreciable fall in the dividends of tobacco companies in even the hardest times. Margaret was also under the impression that if the clock continued ticking in its present offensive manner, she would probably be impelled to throw it out of the window. For why, she wondered, did they make clocks of which the ticking seemed to say continually:

"Bad . . . bad . . . worse coming."

Very likely it was true, but why should the clock tick it out like that? And if it did, was not one fully justified in throwing it out of the window?

It was a relief to them all when Louise, Louise of the red hair libellously assumed to be a wig, came into the room on some errand or other—ostensibly, really in order to rescue the sewing Lady Ellerslie was engaged on before the results grew really too complicated. While she and her mistress were talking, and while the sewing was being tactfully rescued, Margaret went over to the window, calculating how far one would have to throw a clock so that its intolerable ticking should be no longer heard. When Louise had gone, Margaret said:

"I think I'll just go out and get a breath of fresh air—it's stifling in here."

"I thought I heard a motor," observed Lady Ellerslie.

"Ralph said he would come by train," Margaret answered. "He would be here by now if he had come by the seven ten."

"The seven ten's always late," grunted Lord Ellerslie, which was untrue, for it was sometimes punctual. "Anyhow he might come up from the station by car—unless he walked and came in by the short way."

"I expect he would, he generally walks if he can, it's almost as quick," Margaret said, and leaving the room went out into the hall, where she met Peters whose air was no more cheerful than was that of all the rest of them.

"Peters," she said to him fiercely, "if you go about looking like that, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"Yes, miss," said Peters sympathetically.

"Well, I will," declared Margaret, and feeling somehow that this declaration lacked force, marched away angrily, while Peters looked after her with in his eyes a curious doubt that had been growing there for some days now.

"She's never said a word about that pistol," he thought, "doesn't she know it's missing or doesn't she want to say? And if she doesn't, why doesn't she?"

Unaware—as happily we are always unaware of one another's thoughts—of what was in Peters' mind, Margaret left the house without troubling to put on hat or coat, since the evening was warm and fine. Twilight had come now, though some measure of the day would linger for a time yet, and she directed her steps along the avenue that led to the main entrance to the park. The motor she had heard might be only some passing vehicle, it might be a police car, or, even worse, that of some fresh newspaper man who would have afresh to be held at bay. But possibly it might be Ralph's. She was a little surprised, but not much interested, when she saw Morland coming towards her.

He greeted her hurriedly and excitedly and she was quick to see that his manner was not normal. At once she put herself on the defensive—it was always the defensive now that was her first thought. Yet how short a time it was since the idea of adopting a defensive attitude would ever have occurred to her, who then had never known the need.

"Lady Ellerslie," he began a little breathlessly, "I'm anxious to see . . . privately . . . for her own sake . . . it's rather important . . . can you arrange that for me? . . . for her own sake entirely."

Perhaps Margaret had grown not only mistrustful but a little cynical of late. Too many people had tried recently to secure interviews with inmates of Ellerslie Court, for motives they declared to be entirely disinterested. That 'for her own sake' put her on her guard. She said coldly:

"I'm afraid it's quite impossible. The doctor is still attending her."

"It is of extreme importance I should see her," Morland

urged. "It's her safety . . . her personal safety. I must see her," he insisted.

But Margaret still looked at him distrustfully. She did not know the black bearded agriculturist very well. She had only seen him a few times and had never paid him much attention. She knew her father regarded his ideas as attractive but quite impracticable. A little frightened by the eagerness of his manner, by something a little wild and breathless he displayed, she yet tried to show him a bold front.

"Lady Ellerslie is not in any danger," she said. "Why should she be?"

"Don't talk like that, don't try to bluff me, you know well enough," he retorted angrily. "If I went to the police and told them all I know . . ."

He paused. Margaret was really frightened now, but she continued to stand her ground bravely.

"Will you tell me plainly what you mean?" she asked, miserably aware of the tremor she could not quite keep out of her voice. "What is there to know?"

"Don't try that on with me," he retorted even more roughly than before, "don't try any of your lies and tricks with me," and the insult was one she did not dare resent.

"Tell me what you mean, what you know," she managed to get out at last.

"I know a lot," he told her, still with the same rough voice and manner. "No business of mine perhaps but I know it . . . look here, young lady, I'm not your enemy . . . I want to help you . . . selfish perhaps . . . if it all comes out, I shall lose my chance of interesting Ellerslie in my plans . . . of getting his support, and without his support I've not much chance . . . all the same that's not the only reason. I want to help you, if I can, if you will let me. Now, can I see Lady Ellerslie . . . privately?"

"I don't think it's possible," persisted Margaret, "tell me first plainly what you mean, why you want to see her? She's not fit . . . she isn't really, really she isn't. Why won't it do to tell me what you mean you know?"

"I mean I know," he answered then, "where the clothing's hidden that Ralph Willerton wore when he—when something happened, you know what."

She gave a little wail, the last thin wail of a great despair, for those words sounded in her ears like a doom from which there was no appeal. Not many could have heard that pitiful cry, the cry of a trapped animal, and remained unmoved. But Morland was only tugging at his untidy beard again and staring at her from his hot and heavy eyes.

"Now you understand I've got to see her," he said. "If the police find out she took Willerton's things away, and hid them, and put her husband's in their place, if they found out she hid them in the oak chest up there in the Ellerslie secret room . . ."

"She didn't," Margaret answered, and now the tremor had gone out of her voice and it was clear and steady again, though very low, "she did none of those things."

"You listen to me," he snarled, "if I'm to help you, don't you lie. It's no good. See?" He stopped, as suddenly a fresh idea struck him. "If she didn't, who did?" he asked.

"I did," the girl replied. "I did all that. She knew nothing about it till afterwards."

"I never thought of you," he admitted. He was staring at her, and she did not very well understand the expression in those dark, heavy lidded, burning eyes he fixed on her so strangely. He said slowly: "I never thought of you but you will do just as well."

"I don't understand," she answered, and if she were

more terrified even than before, she gave now no sign of it.

"I never thought of you," he repeated, "but you will do just as well."

She did not speak again, but waited, and after a short pause he continued:

"Anyhow, it must have been her, not you, who smuggled the things away right under their eyes without their suspecting a thing . . . there was one of the blockheads noticed her shoulders looked square but he hadn't sense enough to guess what it meant or pluck enough to ask her. She did that, anyhow?"

"Yes," Margaret agreed reluctantly. "I should never have thought of it, I should never have dared . . . not even if I had . . . she said it had to be done and so she did it . . . oh, that was magnificent," she cried.

"It saved Willerton," he agreed. "Nothing else could. It's a lucky devil's got two women fighting for him."

She made no answer. It was plain he was thinking rapidly, still tugging at his tangled beard with both hands. He said:

"You saved him between you, the two of you . . . Lord, I would rather have two women on my side than half the governments of Europe. Which one of you was it thought of the hollow oak for a hiding place?"

"You . . . you know that?" she cried, unable this time to keep the dismay from her voice.

"It wouldn't matter if I knew," he retorted, "the point is the police know."

She uttered no sound but her very silence, the absolute rigidity of her body, showed her despair. Somehow he even had the impression that at last she had been pushed almost beyond her strength.

"Now, don't go fainting or anything like that," he said

hurriedly. "There may still be a chance, if you've pluck, if you dare . . . listen . . . and if you're quick, above all, if you're quick . . . listen . . . it was that Scotland Yard fellow found the place, Bell they call him, don't they? . . . well, he found it . . . he and another . . . it doesn't matter why I was there, the fact is I've been watching him some time, poking about the way he was . . . well . . . listen . . . he was up that tree, climbed up . . . he had another fellow with him . . . I heard him call down he was almost sure it was there . . . he said something about a plus fours suit and Mr. Willerton . . . then he said they must get independent witnesses and they had better leave it where it was till they had, or else some one might say the police had planted it there, and the other fellow said would it be safe? And Bell said it would be all right for the short time they would be away, and off they went . . . so then I thought of Lady Ellerslie, of warning her . . . I didn't think of you but you will do just as well."

"Why . . .? How . . .?" she asked.

"There's only one chance," he answered, bending eagerly towards her, "just one chance . . . the tree's old and dry . . . dead wood . . . most of it . . . there are sticks there and petrol . . . that means you've had the idea already . . . set fire to it," he said intensely. "It'll burn like tinder . . . it and all that's in it."

"All that's . . . in it?"

"Yes, all that's in it," he stopped and laughed harshly, or barked rather, so little was the sound that he produced like laughter. "You little fool, can't you understand?" he burst out in a fury as she still stood and stared. "Run as you've never run in your life . . . there's not a second to lose if you're to get there first . . . just light a match and throw it down and be off again before you are seen . . .

it'll blaze like a torch, in a couple of hours there'll be nothing left . . . just ashes . . . nothing else left of the tree and everything that's in it . . . just think of what that interfering scoundrel, Bell, will feel then." Again he barked out his horrid laugh. "You understand?"

"Yes, yes, I understand," she breathed.

"I thought you would," he said. "In a couple of hours the tree and all . . . just a few ashes left . . . now run like the wind. There's no time to be lost; they may be back any moment, your only chance is to get there first. Have you any matches?"

She shook her head. He thrust a box into her hand. Without another word she left him, running her swiftest, running her hardest, the matches in her hand. She was gone from him in a moment so that he was hardly aware of it till he found he was alone, and then he turned too, and ran almost as quickly, for now his one thought was to get as far away as quickly as he might.

"I'll show myself at some garage on the way, buy some petrol and grumble about the price," he thought, "then they'll remember me and it'll be a good alibi if I'm suspected . . . why should I be?"

There seemed no reason, and his spirits were high as he found his motor-cycle where he had left it, and mounted and rode away. It was on the top of a distant hill that he paused, and looked back, and then was able to see where, in the direction of Ellerslie Park, a pillar of fire and flame was rising in the night that by now had fallen.

"I never thought of her," he said with complacence, "but she has done just as well."

CHAPTER XXXI

RALPH INTERVENES

LIGHT as a bird through the air, swift as a deer on the land, sudden as a darting fish in clear water, Margaret fled on, the box of matches Morland had given her clasped tightly in her hand.

She came to the path, the narrow path that ran to Ellerslie Court from the door in the park wall by which Carter and Bell had one day entered. She crossed it almost at the spot where they had found the small automatic pistol they had picked up, and as she did so she heard her name called. She paused, she looked round, Willerton himself was there, running and calling. He had just caught a glimpse of her as she ran on, intent upon her purpose, and when she heard and stopped and looked round, she was utterly astonished to see him, for she had forgotten that in fact she had come out first of all to meet him.

"Ralph," she stammered, "Ralph . . . they know . . . the police . . . the tree . . . they know . . . Mr. Morland's just been to tell me, he told me to set it on fire . . . you know we thought we would . . . he says we must at once now the police know . . . he gave me his matches, look."

"Oh, he did, did he?" said Ralph, and took the matches from her. "I wonder why he told you? I should have thought, if he knew such a lot, he would have told the police."

"Wasn't it wonderful of him not to?" Margaret cried, "wasn't it good of him?"

"Well, you know," answered Ralph with less enthusiasm, "Morland's a merchant I don't altogether trust, and I'm not sure that he loves me quite as much as he should, and I'm not taking him at face value. Besides, there are one or two little things I've found out about him that are just a bit surprising."

"But, Ralph," the girl protested, and tumbled out her story in a confused spate of words, all the time she was talking, pushing, pulling and urging him in the direction of the old hollow oak. "The police may get there first," she urged in terror.

"Awkward if they do," he agreed, "but I want to be sure where Morland comes in in all this. I want to be sure this Sergeant Bell isn't there already," he added, all unaware of the grim realism of his words. "Suppose the police are there watching and catch us in the act of trying to destroy evidence—that would put the final lid on what chances I might have of getting my version believed. If Morland is so keen on trying to help me, why didn't he start the fire himself? Besides, I don't think he's likely to be so awfully keen on getting me out of a hole, more likely to be keen on shoving me a bit further in."

"Oh, Ralph, why?"

"It's a bit of a long story," Ralph answered, "but Morland's been worrying me quite a bit lately. It began that very first night when I saw that poor unlucky Scotland Yard Inspector looking at me in a way that made it plain he suspected me all right, as of course I knew he must, and then I saw him looking at Morland as if all at once he had recognized him. Apparently he knew Morland. Well, then, I heard—Peters told me—that he had been saying he had spotted something that made it all quite plain to him, and next thing was the poor fellow was dead, poisoned. Well, I made up my mind I had to

try to find out something about Morland. I went to our lawyers and told them some of the story and got them to help. They ferreted it out. Some years ago a pal of mine had a sister who had got herself into a hole. She was a companion to a rich old woman, and one day she was idiot enough to go to a dance wearing a valuable diamond pendant belonging to the rich old woman, and without having got permission from her. Morland was at the dance. He didn't call himself Morland then, his name then was Rawlinson. He got hold of the pendant, refused to give it back, and began to blackmail the poor girl. If she didn't do what he told her, and it wasn't very nice, he threatened to get her run in for stealing it. Well, she had sense enough to tell her brother. He was a pal of mine and we called on Mr. Morland Rawlinson one night, and I sat on his head while he yelled police and fire and blue murder, because he thought we were the common or garden variety of burglar, and my pal hunted round for the pendant. He found it just as the police turned up, and so I told him to hop out of the window, while I kept the bobbies in dalliance. I got run in for attempted murder and burglary and assaulting the police in the execution of their duty and a few other little things, but Morland never turned up to prosecute. He couldn't stand the racket naturally. Not if he knew it. Too many nasty questions might have been asked. So the charge had to be dropped for the lack of a prosecutor. Besides, by then I had told the police what the real trouble was, and they were quite decent about it all, and didn't press the thing, and in the end I got off with a wigging and a pailful of fatherly advice from the beak. Another thing the lawyers found out was that a C.I.D. man, who came and talked to me once or twice while they were trying to find out why I had been sitting on Morland's head and why Morland himself had cleared

out instead of prosecuting, was named Carter, and was the same poor fellow they found dead here the other day. I had quite forgotten him, but apparently he knew me again—for one thing I never knew his name but I suppose perhaps he remembered mine—and if only I had spotted Morland before, only that black beard of his put me off completely, I might have been able to give the police something to work on. Anyhow, when I tell them my story now, which is really what I've come down here to do, I hope they won't worry so much about my old plus fours. I imagine they are a good deal keener on finding out who murdered their own man than what really happened to that poor devil of a Thompson. Because you see if Morland was in the blackmail game once, he may have been in it twice, and that would explain a lot, wouldn't it?"

"I don't think I understand a bit," Margaret protested, looking quite bewildered, "but I shan't feel a bit safe till those things of yours have been destroyed and I think setting the tree on fire, and them, too, is the only way to do it."

"Yes, but we won't be in a hurry," Ralph answered. "You see, we know Thompson was blackmailing your stepmother, and it's possible now that Morland was behind Thompson. We know he wanted money desperately to get his wild cat mass farming scheme going."

They had reached the spot now where grew the old hollow oak, and Ralph, declaring that at any rate the first thing was to make sure that his old suit was still there, swung himself up into its branches. When he came down again he was very pale, more pale than Margaret had ever seen any one before, pale and shaking from head to foot.

"My God," he said, "there's a man down there, my God, Margaret, suppose . . . he's unconscious, I think,

one of the Scotland Yard men. . . . Merciful God, if you had done what Morland wanted. . . ."

"I . . . I . . . I . . ." she stammered, "a man, a man there . . . in the oak . . ."

"And dry wood soaked in petrol put all ready," Ralph said. "It only needs just a match. . . ." He swore aloud a sudden oath that for this thing that he had planned, Morland should die, and Margaret shrank away from him in terror, for she hardly knew him now, so transformed was he with great anger. He said more quietly: "That's all right. . . . The first thing is to get the poor fellow down there out of it. I can't manage it by myself. You must go and get help, will you? Find Peters and send him along with some strong rope. I daren't go myself, I daren't leave here, just a match thrown down . . . my God, if you had done that . . . find Peters quick as you can, the first thing is to get this chap out of it and then we can think what to do."

Margaret hurried away at the top of her speed, and before long returned with Peters, who brought with him a coil of stout rope. Even then the task was not easy, but presently they accomplished it and as soon as Bell was in the open he began to show signs of recovering consciousness. Margaret had some knowledge of first aid and had brought back one or two simple remedies with her she knew how to apply. It was not long before Bell opened his eyes.

When he did, almost the first thing he saw was a pillar of fire and smoke, where at a distance of two or three hundred yards, for they had carried him that far away, the old oak was burning fiercely. For Ralph had yielded to Margaret's insistence, Morland's matches had been made use of, and the tree, with the bloodstained suit of plus fours that it contained, was burning fiercely.

For some time Bell lay and watched it idly. Then he said faintly:

"What's happened?"

"Goodness knows," answered Ralph, "and Mr. Morland, who, I think, is anything but goodness. We found you dumped inside that old oak over there, and so we hauled you out and now the old tree's doing a sort of fifth of November stunt all on its own."

"It's burning," Bell said, sitting up.

"It is, isn't it?" agreed Ralph. "I was lighting a cigarette, and I threw a match down, and the whole blessed thing's caught. I suppose the local fire brigade will be toddling along soon—no water near, though."

"There was a suit of old plus fours inside, there was blood upon them," Bell said.

"Ah, you've had a blow on the head," returned Ralph sympathetically. "Makes a chap imagine things . . . why should any one keep his plus fours inside a hollow oak? Most inconvenient place if you ask me. And why should there be blood on them? Anyhow, we shall never know now, for when that tree's burnt, there won't be much left, either of it or of anything that was inside it . . . as there wouldn't have been much left of you if you had been inside."

"No," agreed Bell and could not repress a shudder. "If you got me out, you saved my life," he said.

"Just as it happened," explained Ralph, "though it is a little like the hunted hare saving the greyhound's life. Not that I think I love policemen an awful lot, few do in these motoring days. But then I've no taste for roast policeman either."

"Ralph, don't talk like that," cried Margaret angrily. "I shall scream if you do, it's . . . it's awful."

"Yes, I know," Ralph answered in a slightly different

tone, "only you see where it makes you want to scream, it makes me try to be funny, that's all. Means the same thing with us both. Sex difference as every one's so fond of saying in these frank open days."

"God! how it burns," Bell said. He got to his feet and gazed like one fascinated at the old tree that after so many centuries was now ending in such a glory of flame and fire. "I might have been in there," he said, and none of them answered as they watched the leaping flames roaring up towards the heavens above.

Margaret had brought some sal volatile. She thought she was going to faint with the sheer horror of what might have been and made use of it. Bell said:

"How did you know I was there?"

"Morland told us, but I don't think he meant to," Ralph answered, and briefly recited what he knew while Bell listened in absorbed silence.

"You've saved my life," he said after a long time, "but I must do my duty—duty's before wife or child, or the man who has saved your life, or anything. Well, if I go on with my inquiries you may hang, but if you had left me there I suppose you would have been safe enough."

"Yes, I know," Ralph answered. "I suppose I thought I had to risk it."

"Duty's first," Bell said again.

"Do you mean I may hang for your Inspector's murder?" Ralph asked. "I had nothing to do with that. I think Morland had. I think I can put you in the way of proving that. Do you mean for killing Thompson?"

"You did that, I think?" Bell said.

"I suppose I was partly responsible," Ralph answered slowly, "I didn't mean it, I think it's fair to say he killed himself, he didn't mean that either. If you like, as you know so much, I'll tell you all about it."

"Morland has told me a good deal."

"Lies, probably," Ralph answered, "at any rate I will tell you my version, that is if you feel fit to hear. You've been a bit knocked about, haven't you?"

"I'm all right," Bell answered, "a bit sore and achey, of course, but nothing to bother about . . . a detective needs a thick head, his first qualification, some say, and I think I've shown I have it in both senses," poor Bell added with a heavy sigh, as he thought how sadly he had failed to unravel this mystery about which apparently he was now going to be told, as a good little child is told stories to amuse it.

CHAPTER XXXII

RALPH'S STORY

BUT it was first Bell himself who told his story to Ralph and Margaret, Peters having returned to Ellerslie Court to explain the cause of the fire of which the towering flames were already visible far around, and to ring up the Broadhirst Fire Brigade to inform them that there was no need for their services, since the tree could not now be saved and there was no risk of the fire spreading.

So while the three of them sat and watched the destruction of the ancient oak that had been there perhaps when William the Conqueror landed, and was now so superbly ending its long career, Bell repeated briefly what Morland had told him.

"I felt all the time some of it was lies," Bell concluded, deprecatingly, "and I knew I had better keep an eye on him, but when I saw it was true about a suit of plus fours being down there and then he sprang that other yarn on me about her ladyship's French maid—well, I forgot for a moment and only thought of looking to see if that was true, too, and that gave him his chance."

"I don't know why he didn't set the tree blazing himself right away," Ralph remarked. "As there are no witnesses I don't mind confessing we intended to do that, only we wanted to give it a bit more petrol to make sure." He paused and looked at Margaret, who had put her hand towards him as if in an involuntary appeal for help and for protection. With a kind of cold fury that was a little terrible, he said: "I'll see he pays for trying to get Margaret . . ."

"I think he'll pay all right, I think there's enough to make sure he'll hang," Bell answered. "Most likely he was afraid of being seen and wanted to be miles away when the fire started. His sort always think first of an alibi. Very likely he thought, too, that working it that way, he would have you all in his power—feed out of his hand all of you would have had to do, if he could have said it was Miss Eayland had done that," and when Margaret trembled afresh at the thought of what she had so narrowly escaped, Ralph slipped an arm round her and held her tight, caring nothing that Bell was there.

"I should have done it," she said in a whisper, "I meant just to strike the match and throw it down and run—only I met Ralph."

"Lucky for me you did," observed Bell meditatively. "My lucky day," he said, with an air of slight surprise as though he felt that lucky days were not generally much in his line.

"I suppose it was more blackmail he was after," agreed Ralph. "Blackmail has always been his strong suit. As for the yarn he told you it was a jolly clever mixture of lies and truth, though that part about Lady Ellerslie and myself was a bit disgusting even for him. Lady Ellerslie knows Miss Eayland and I are going to be married and she's done all she could to help us. Lord Ellerslie thought my position wasn't quite secure enough, and of course I know I haven't a bean, though I have prospects, and she always said prospects were good enough for anybody to marry on. But the part about her first husband being alive when she married again, is true enough. I'm going to tell you all I know, but it's not to be evidence, and if you try to use it as evidence, I shall deny every word. In the pass we've got to, a little perjury won't hurt me if I'm put to it, though I happen to prefer truth. But I'm not going to let

any one else down, not if I go to hell ten times over for telling lies. I think it's probably true that Lady Ellerslie was so glad to be told she was rid of the blackguard who had made her life a misery that she didn't worry too much about whether the story was true, and when Lord Ellerslie came along, and they fell in love rather on the top note, she felt she didn't dare risk losing him by ferreting about in the past. Also she was, I think, a bit overwhelmed with a sense of her responsibility to her new family and her new position as an English peeress bearing a name that for umpteen centuries has borne itself unblemished through history, chiefly because the bearers of the said name have always had enough money and influence to hush things up. But you know the sort of bunkum I mean, and the effect it would have on the mind of a rather romantic, generous American girl who found herself suddenly turned into the holder of an old British title. So when Thompson—Watson, rather, that was his real name—turned up again, she simply didn't dare confess that she had committed bigamy, and brought what she thought unending disgrace on a hitherto unspotted name and fame, though most likely, if all the skeletons in the family cupboard were turned out, a little thing like bigamy wouldn't hardly be noticeable. Still, I expect Lord Ellerslie would have been a good deal upset and anyhow she didn't dare face it, so first of all she tried giving money to Watson to keep him quiet. Of course, all that happened was that he lapped it up and asked for more. Then she decided to pass out, and pinched old Mackenzie's prussic acid. She thought that would wash the family escutcheon clean, I suppose, bless her poor romantic heart. But Miss Eayland, who has quite a lot of common sense, though she's only a girl, and girls aren't expected to have much, spotted something was up. She was rather pals with her

step mother, and she saw there was trouble about, so finally Lady Ellerslie agreed to let her meet Watson next time. But Lady Ellerslie warned her Watson was apt to be violent, especially if he had been drinking, so Miss Eayland took with her a small automatic pistol she possessed. Well, Thompson had been drinking and he was violent."

"He was awful," Margaret said, "he was furious because Julie—because Lady Ellerslie hadn't come. He used frightful language and he threatened what he would do, and he got hold of me and tried to kiss me and I got the pistol out and he didn't care a bit. He only laughed and there was an awful knife he had and I screamed my hardest and then I ran—I ran just as hard as I could. I suppose I was awfully frightened, I didn't know men could be like that. I found I still had the pistol in my hand and I remember thinking what a silly thing it was and no good at all, so I threw it away. I was so excited I hardly knew what I was doing, and you found it and I was frightened still worse, and I believe Peters, and perhaps some of the others knew quite well who it belonged to, but they never said a word, not one of them. It was good of them, but I was terrified and I knew all the time it all depended on me to keep Julie's secret. Well, after I had thrown the pistol down, I went on running. I knew quite close there was a part of the park wall I could easily climb and get into the road where I thought I should be safe. But when I got to the wall and climbed up, there were two men on the other side staring at me and so I jumped down again and got to the house the other way."

"I heard Miss Eayland scream," Ralph took up the story. "I was hanging about, because I had an idea there was something in the wind. I found Watson, and I asked him who he was, and what he wanted, and he fired off a

lot of dirty abuse—well, he said things about both Miss Eayland and Lady Ellerslie that annoyed me and I told him I was going to give him a licking he would remember to his dying day. I meant it, too. I went for him, but he whipped out his knife suddenly and went for me instead. I think he meant it, too, he was scared, scare and drink made him vicious all right. I only dodged just in time and in dodging I tripped him up and somehow or another he did a kind of somersault and came down right on the point of the knife he was flourishing. When I saw what had happened, I pulled the knife out and the blood spurted all over me. Well, I saw he was dead and I didn't know what to do. It was rather a hole. I didn't want to run the risk of being hanged and I saw if anything came out, both Lady Ellerslie and Miss Eayland would be involved—in fact, it would mean a first class scandal all round. I daresay I rather lost my head—it's rather a shock to see a man all at once dead at your feet and his blood all over you. I made up my mind to say nothing. I thought perhaps a scallywag like Watson would never be missed at all. Even then I think I had a vague notion of hiding the body in the old hollow oak Miss Eayland and I had known of since we were children, but that I thought no one else knew about. I cleared off back to the house to change and then I found all the fat was in the fire, with two Scotland Yard men on the spot and Ellerslie himself discovering Watson's body, though what Ellerslie was doing round about there, I've never understood."

"I think," interposed Margaret, "father had some idea —I think he suspected something. Perhaps he had heard a stranger had been seen, and he may have suspected it was some one from mother's old life, trying to get money out of her."

"That would explain," mused Bell, "why he had a pistol

in his pocket, just in case of trouble, why he was on the spot, and why he wouldn't say anything. He was afraid of bringing in Lady Ellerslie's name."

"But what was so awful," Margaret continued, "was that the blackmailing went on just the same. Some one rang up to tell my step mother he had the papers to prove her marriage while her first husband was alive and she must meet him at a certain place. It so upset her that she fainted and she couldn't go. And when she was better and did go, after getting another message threatening awful things if she didn't, there was no one there."

"I was there," observed Bell, "more or less by accident, but I was there. Lord Ellerslie was there, too. He must have known something!"

"I think he was still watching," Margaret said, "I think he got a glimpse of the note Lady Ellerslie had received. I suppose he decided to say nothing to her, but to try to find out who was writing to her like that, and what it meant. But there was no one. If father was there, too, it's a good thing there wasn't."

"I think in point of fact Morland was on the spot," Bell observed, "but he had taken the precaution to be in good time and to hide himself, and so when he saw Lord Ellerslie was there as well, he didn't dare to appear. I think if he had done, there might have been another tragedy and either he or Lord Ellerslie would never have left that place alive—perhaps neither of them would."

Ralph, taking up the story once again, told of the circumstances in which he had first met Morland, and Bell, having asked one or two questions, nodded in a satisfied way.

"Seems to explain," he said, "why Morland poisoned poor Carter. He saw Carter had recognized him, knew him for a blackmailer, knew his record, and that meant his

game was up. It ought to have been anyhow, we've missed chance after chance in this business. But he thought, if he silenced Carter he still had a chance, and a good chance, to get what I expect seemed to him like complete control of the Ellerslie money and estate to back up his mass farming scheme. Only how did he know how to get into the secret room?"

"I think," said Margaret hesitatingly, "I think Mr. Watson was in the house once when father came home unexpectedly and Julie was so frightened of their meeting that she showed Mr. Watson how to get into the secret room and told him to hide there. It was because Peters couldn't understand what had become of the man he knew was in the library that he began to suspect something was happening and why he let father know he thought so. I suppose Mr. Watson, when he knew the secret of the room, might tell Mr. Morland."

"Very likely," agreed Bell, "that would explain those initials I found cut in the wood under the table—perhaps out of pure mischief, or perhaps to provide proof that Lady Ellerslie had hidden him there. Not very discreet on Lady Ellerslie's part if I may say so. And I suppose he cut them on the underside of the table so that they shouldn't be noticed."

"What's going to happen now?" Ralph asked abruptly.

Bell thought for some time before he answered.

"I must see about getting Morland arrested," he said finally, "that's my clear duty and I think there's enough now to make sure he will hang. You've saved my life—at the risk of all you've tried to keep concealed. If Lady Ellerslie had gone straight to her husband in the first place, a lot would have been saved. Well, that's neither here nor there, only it's generally a lot less trouble to tell the truth from the start. On the whole I don't see that

much need be made public. What you've just told me isn't evidence, of course. No man is obliged to bear witness against himself, and anyhow any K.C. would quite enjoy himself making hay of a purely verbal statement merely reported by a policeman without supporting evidence of any sort, no notes taken at the time, and couldn't be, because somehow the policeman's note book had tumbled out of his pocket and got burnt," and Bell as he said this took his note book out and gave it to Margaret, who lost no time in acting on the hint and adding it to the huge blaze of the burning tree. "I must report to my superiors but I'm sure they'll agree there's nothing we could take into court. No evidence at all, now the plus fours have been burnt. The coroner's jury will have to bring in an open verdict, or one of death from misadventure, perhaps, if that's put to them. In half the cases the public call unsolved mysteries, we have evidence enough to satisfy us who was guilty, but not enough to put before a jury. Why, there's this child murder case in Notting Hill. I believe our people know quite well who did it, but some one has committed perjury to save him and we can't prove anything. A woman will always lie like winking to save any one she's interested in."

"Well, of course," said Margaret simply.

"But Morland will hang I think," Bell went on. "I suppose it was Morland made that journey to London the night of Thompson's death, and ransacked his rooms."

"To get the papers proving the previous marriage, I suppose," Ralph suggested.

"It was that being said over the 'phone made Julie faint," Margaret said, "that whoever was speaking had the marriage papers, I mean."

"Morland, for certain," Bell said, "and Morland will hang, that's certain, too."

CHAPTER XXXIII

CONCLUSION

THE sight of the burning oak, of the pillar of fire and smoke that it was throwing up into the evening air, was beginning to bring others to the scene and Bell went back —he was quite able to walk alone now—to the village, while Ralph and Margaret returned to Ellerslie Court. Lord Ellerslie himself had gone out to the scene of the fire, to find out what was happening there, though they had somehow missed him. Lady Ellerslie had remained in the house and to her Margaret told the story of these new events and of Morland's forthcoming arrest, for which preparations were probably already in hand.

For a long time they talked together and when Lord Ellerslie came back from the scene of the burning oak, Margaret slipped away to leave husband and wife together. But when Lady Ellerslie began hesitatingly and stammeringly to tell her story, he checked her at once.

"I think I know all you can tell me, Julie," he said gently, "and what I do not know, I can guess. I have known most of the truth all the time, except how Watson actually met his death. I suppose I hoped that if I said nothing, it would all blow over without too much trouble. But I wasn't reckoning on two things, I had no idea Morland had anything to do with it, I never dreamed it was he who was egging Watson on. I thought with Watson out of the way all that trouble would be over for good, I never supposed Morland would carry on the same game. And I didn't reckon on the murder of that unlucky Scot-

land Yard Inspector. After that I didn't dare to speak."

There was something in his voice as he said this that made her look at him quickly, as she realized all at once that the most dreadful suspicions had not been, could not have been, entirely absent from his mind.

"Oh, you didn't think . . . did you think . . .?" she panted.

"No," he answered, "no, because I never allowed myself to think. But I saw quite clearly what others might think and I determined not to say a word to any one. It's over now, I hope." He drew her closer to him as he sat down on one of the chairs, and added: "There is one thing I must make quite clear. I knew when I married you I was taking the risk that the marriage might not be legal. I saw quite well that there was no real proof of your first husband's death, nothing that is to satisfy people who didn't want to be satisfied. I thought it might be true, and I hoped it was, but the risk that it mightn't be, I took with my eyes open. I wasn't going to run the other risk of losing you. I don't know if what we did was wrong, but I do know I would have done worse. Three days before our marriage I got a hint he might be alive and I ignored it—deliberately. And I took care you didn't know. I was afraid you might refuse at the last moment to go on and I couldn't have borne that." He added after a pause: "You may be highly civilized, and a British peer, and educated, and all the rest of it, but there's not much difference between you and primitive man in the long run. The plain truth is I meant to have you one way or another, and I didn't care too much which way."

She was looking at him in a very astonished manner, for it was almost the first time she had had a glimpse of the primitive man behind the cultured aristocrat. He said again:

"When I put that pistol in my pocket that night and went out to find Watson, I'm not quite sure it wasn't killing I had in my mind. Perhaps that's one reason why I kept quiet. I wasn't sure I wasn't going to be suspected of what I had more than half intended to do."

"Oh, oh," she stammered, "then if you knew . . . all along . . . oh, if you had told me . . ."

"Yes, or if you had told me," he said with rather a sad laugh. "We were both afraid of each other, I think. We didn't trust each other as we should have done. We must do better in the future and for one thing we must get married again as soon as we can. It'll be legal this time. Ralph and Margaret want to get married quickly, too. They mean to go away somewhere and forget all this. That's what I want, too. They are thinking of taking a trip through America, Ralph says—good idea, too, every one ought to visit America; that is, if they are young enough to stand it. How would it be if we went to Kenya for the winter? Very interesting farming prospects in Kenya."

So it was agreed, though before these arrangements could be put into effect, a few bad hours had to be gone through. But they were not so bad as might have been feared, for after all there was no reason why justice, which had to be satisfied, should require the dragging into publicity of unrelated matters. Besides, Lord Ellerslie possessed a certain amount of influence and that is always a help. At the adjourned inquest on Thompson the Broadhirst jury showed itself quite content with the evidence put before it, and quite willing to return the open verdict suggested by the coroner, in agreement with his remarks that though the medical evidence showed that the fatal wound might easily have been the result of a fall and that that was quite probably the truth, there wasn't enough to

go on to justify them in returning such a verdict. The open verdict suggested would meet the case, he thought, and the jury again agreed. As for Ralph, he was in court, but it was not considered necessary to ask him any questions.

At the trial, too, of Morland, who never got over the shock of finding officers waiting to arrest him on his return from his cycle ride, and of the further shock of finding that his wild story that Sergeant Bell had been burnt to death by Margaret Eayland was treated only as a bad joke by detectives who had recently been speaking on the 'phone to both of them, all these other matters were hardly mentioned. Morland indeed collapsed so entirely that he seemed to lose all interest in his defence. Among his papers, too, was found the memo Inspector Carter had been writing at the moment when the prussic acid Morland had dropped into his cup of tea had slain him as a bullet might have done, and this memo identified Morland, not only with the vanished prosecutor in the Willerton case, but also with another case of blackmail in which under another name Morland had received a three years' sentence. The memo went on to suggest that Morland was the man wanted in yet a third case, in which the penalty would have been much more severe, but it was never thought necessary to follow this up and make certain of Morland's identity with the person for whom a warrant in that case was outstanding. It seemed certain they were the same and so was suggested another and yet more powerful reason for Morland's determination to rid himself of Carter and his knowledge and his suspicions. But in view of the sentence passed upon Morland the matter was not considered important enough to justify time and money being spent on it. The final touch of proof was provided by evidence that Morland, shortly before

Carter's murder, had been in possession of prussic acid, for which he was now unable to account. But indeed all through the trial he hardly attempted to defend himself.

"A satisfaction to think," Superintendent Phillips said to Bell when the news of the verdict reached Scotland Yard, where the Superintendent's term of service was ending that week, "a satisfaction to think poor Carter hasn't gone unavenged. It was touch and go though. A very little luck, and Morland would never have seen the dock, much less the gallows. Touch and go all through. And yet, Bell, more than once you had your finger on the thread that would have unravelled the whole tangle if only you had known it."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell sadly, "if only I had gone more thoroughly into that case when Mr. Willerton was charged with assault. I ought to have gone into it deeper, and then I should have seen there was more to it than appeared on the surface, and then I should have found out enough to guess that Morland was the prosecutor who wouldn't come forward."

"It certainly ought to have been gone into more thoroughly," agreed Phillips with some sternness and with no apparent appreciation of the fact that for that neglect others were just as much responsible as was Bell. "A very little investigation would have shown Morland and Rawlinson were identical. Then we should have been on the right lines at once."

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell, making no attempt to defend himself.

"As for the way," continued Phillips, "you let yourself be put off with Lord Ellerslie's plus fours instead of Willerton's you were looking for . . . anything to say about that?"

"Nothing," answered Bell with conviction. "I shall

never forgive myself when I think I had only to look at the waist measurement to see they couldn't possibly be Mr. Willerton's things. Had the proof in my hand, actually in my hand, and never saw it," he said with such a depth of self reproach that even Phillips was almost moved.

But all he said was, still frowning heavily:

"Then that business with the oak tree. You let Morland lead you up the garden pretty easily?"

"Yes, sir," agreed Bell. "Followed him like a lamb I did."

"Other points got overlooked as well, I think," Phillips went on remorselessly.

Bell had not a word to say for himself.

Phillips' manner grew more and more grave.

"I may as well tell you," he said, "that your name was on the promotion list and now it isn't."

With that he walked away, and Bell, returning home, was on the whole almost as gratified to think his name had once at least reached the promotion list as disappointed to know that now it had been removed again. On the whole he was inclined to suppose he was fortunate in that, after an investigation so poorly handled, in which so many points had been overlooked, he had not lost his sergeant's stripes, and he tried to hope that after a good many more years' hard work, perhaps his name would reappear on that promotion list, where, in his secret and humble soul, he was a little surprised to know that once it had already figured, however briefly.

But his wife did not take a view so calm and so resigned. She was indeed in the midst of expressing a somewhat heated opinion that if her husband knew as much about pushing himself as he did about getting on with his job, he would have been promoted long ago, when the telephone bell rang.

"Most likely the Yard," she commented as she went to pick up the receiver, "they'll want you to go along and do the work so that some one else can have the credit—and I don't see what they have to grumble about this time seeing you got the man in the end."

"Ought to have got him sooner, quicker, neater," Bell explained, shaking his head at his own work with the dissatisfaction of the artist who knows himself how far his work has fallen short. But Mrs. Bell at the 'phone seemed puzzled.

"Not here," she was saying. "Is it the wrong number? No, I don't know who you mean." She turned to her husband. "It's some one asking for Acting Inspector Bell. Who is he? I didn't know there was another Bell. I said Sergeant Bell was here and they say they want the Acting Inspector. You had better come yourself and see if you can make it out."

"Some mistake," said Bell, and took her place. "Sergeant Bell speaking," he said. "I don't know Acting Inspector Bell. Who is he? I'm a galoot? Yes, but why? What have I done this time? . . . eh? . . . oh . . . oh! . . . oh!!!"

He hung the receiver up and turned upon his wife the bewildered gaze of an astonished child.

"That was the Assistant Commissioner himself," he said. "He says it's me . . . he says the Commissioner has approved my appointment as Acting Inspector . . . that's what Phillips meant when he said my name wasn't on the promotion list any longer."

"Time they did give it you," pronounced his wife. "High time . . . are you sure?" she added cautiously.

"It was the Assistant Commissioner himself speaking," Bell repeated. "It's a funny world," he added. "I believe I've done pretty good work in some cases—that Windmill

Common case, and the Margetson affair and the one the papers called the cottage murder, and that other case where we were up against a man I've always thought a genius in murder. But in this one I've missed chance after chance and only got at the truth at last because it was told me—and they give me my promotion for it."

"That's the way the world goes," said his wife wisely.

INFORMATION RECEIVED

By E. R. Punshon

Sir Christopher Clarke lay very still beside the billiard-table, with two bullet-holes in his white shirt-front, the door of the great safe ajar, and the bonds and diamonds of the Belfort Trust missing. Sir Christopher's unsigned will might have been the leading clue, for it disinherited his own daughter, Jennie, and left a fortune to his stepdaughter, Brenda. But there was also Marsden, the solicitor, who feared that Sir Christopher would find a shortage in his accounts. Possibly Marsden's partner, Carsley, might have been involved, because he had secretly married Jennie and stood to gain a fortune if Sir Christopher died intestate. But then why was the mysterious stranger from the Regency Theatre on the scene of the crime? And who was the young man in the striped gray trousers who cut his hand escaping over the garden wall, just before the murder was discovered?

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CARTWRIGHT IS DEAD, SIR!

By HUGH BAKER

Brooding peace lay upon the Gulf as the fruit steamer Napoc pursued her course from New Orleans to Puerto de Oro. Yet on the Napoc's bridge lay the inert body of the quartermaster, mysteriously murdered as he stood at the wheel.

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By TIMOTHY KNOX

Fred Johnson, night watchman at the State House, heard Bill Ransom's agonized cry for help as the boy entered his father's office. When the police arrived a moment later Governor Ransom was past help.

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TRUTH CAME OUT

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