

The Bittermeads Mystery eBook

The Bittermeads Mystery

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THE LONE PASSENGER

That evening the down train from London deposited at the little country station of Ramsdon but a single passenger, a man of middle height, shabbily dressed, with broad shoulders and long arms and a most unusual breadth and depth of chest.

Of his face one could see little, for it was covered by a thick growth of dark curly hair, beard, moustache and whiskers, all overgrown and ill-tended, and as he came with a somewhat slow and ungainly walk along the platform, the lad stationed at the gate to collect tickets grinned amusedly and called to one of the porters near:

“Look at this, Bill; here’s the monkey-man escaped and come back along of us.”

It was a reference to a travelling circus that had lately visited the place and exhibited a young chimpanzee advertised as “the monkey-man,” and Bill guffawed appreciatively.

The stranger was quite close and heard plainly, for indeed the youth at the gate had made no special attempt to speak softly.

The boy was still laughing as he held out his hand for the ticket, and the stranger gave it to him with one hand and at the same time shot out a long arm, caught the boy—a well-grown lad of sixteen—by the middle and, with as little apparent effort as though lifting a baby, swung him into the air to the top of the gate-post, where he left him clinging with arms and legs six feet from the ground.

“Hi, what are you a-doing of?” shouted the porter, running up, as the amazed and frightened youth, clinging to his gate-post, emitted a dismal howl.

“Teaching a cheeky boy manners,” retorted the stranger with an angry look and in a very gruff and harsh voice. “Do you want to go on top of the other post to make a pair?”

The porter drew back hurriedly.

“You be off,” he ordered as he retreated. “We don’t want none of your sort about here.”

“I certainly have no intention of staying,” retorted the other as gruffly as before. “But I think you’ll remember Bobbie Dunn next time I come this way.”

“Let me down; please let me down,” wailed the boy, clinging desperately to the gate-post on whose top he had been so unceremoniously deposited, and Dunn laughed and walked away, leaving the porter to rescue his youthful colleague and to cuff his ears soundly as soon as he had done so, by way of a relief to his feelings.

“That will learn you to be a bit civil to folk, I hope,” said the porter severely. “But that there chap must have an amazing strong arm,” he added thoughtfully. “Lifting you up there all the same as you was a bunch of radishes.”

For some distance after leaving the station, Dunn walked on slowly.

He seemed to know the way well or else to be careless of the direction he took, for he walked along deep in thought with his eyes fixed on the ground and not looking in the least where he was going.

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Abruptly, a small child appeared out of the darkness and spoke to him, and he started violently and in a very nervous manner.

“What was that? What did you say, kiddy?” he asked, recovering himself instantly and speaking this time not in the gruff and harsh tones he had used before but in a singularly winning and pleasant voice, cultivated and gentle, that was in odd contrast with his rough and battered appearance. “The time, was that what you wanted to know?”

“Yes, sir; please, sir,” answered the child, who had shrunk back in alarm at the violent start Dunn had given, but now seemed reassured by his gentle and pleasant voice. “The right time,” the little one added almost instantly and with much emphasis on the “right.”

Dunn gravely gave the required information with the assurance that to the best of his belief it was “right,” and the child thanked him and scampered off.

Resuming his way, Dunn shook his head with an air of grave dissatisfaction.

“Nerves all to pieces,” he muttered. “That won’t do. Hang it all, the job’s no worse than following a wounded tiger into the jungle, and I’ve done that before now. Only then, of course, one knew what to expect, whereas now—And I was a silly ass to lose my temper with that boy at the station. You aren’t making a very brilliant start, Bobby, my boy.”

By this time he had left the little town behind him and he was walking along a very lonely and dark road.

On one side was a plantation of young trees, on the other there was the open ground, covered with furze bush, of the village common.

Where the plantation ended stood a low, two-storied house of medium size, with a veranda stretching its full length in front. It stood back from the road some distance and appeared to be surrounded by a large garden.

At the gate Dunn halted and struck a match as if to light a pipe, and by the flickering flame of this match the name “Bittermeads,” painted on the gate became visible.

“Here it is, then,” he muttered. “I wonder—”

Without completing the sentence he slipped through the gate, which was not quite closed, and entered the garden, where he crouched down in the shadow of some bushes that grew by the side of the gravel path leading to the house, and seemed to compose himself for a long vigil.

An hour passed, and another. Nothing had happened—he had seen nothing, heard nothing, save for the passing of an occasional vehicle or pedestrian on the road, and he himself had never stirred or moved, so that he seemed one with the night and one with the shadows where he crouched, and a pair of field-mice that had come from the common opposite went to and fro about their busy occupations at his feet without paying him the least attention.

Another hour passed, and at last there began to be signs of life about the house.

A light shone in one window and in another, and vanished, and soon the door opened and there appeared two people on the threshold, clearly visible in the light of a strong incandescent gas-burner just within the hall.

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The watcher in the garden moved a little to get a clearer view.

In the paroxysm of terror at this sudden coming to life of what they had believed to be a part of the bushes, the two little field-mice scampered away, and Dunn bit his lip with annoyance, for he knew well that some of those he had had traffic with in the past would have been very sure, on hearing that scurrying-off of the frightened mice, that some one was lurking near at hand.

But the two in the lighted doorway opening on the veranda heard and suspected nothing.

One was a man, one a woman, both were young, both were extraordinarily good-looking, and as they stood in the blaze of the gas they made a strikingly handsome and attractive picture on which, however, Dunn seemed to look from his hiding-place with hostility and watchful suspicion.

"How dark it is, there's not a star showing," the girl was saying. "Shall you be able to find your way, even with the lantern? You'll keep to the road, won't you?"

Her voice was low and pleasant and so clear Dunn heard every word distinctly. She seemed quite young, not more than twenty or twenty-one, and she was slim and graceful in build and tall for a woman. Her face, on which the light shone directly, was oval in shape with a broad, low forehead on which clustered the small, unruly curls of her dark brown hair, and she had clear and very bright brown eyes. The mouth and chin were perhaps a little large to be in absolute harmony with the rest of her features, and she was of a dark complexion, with a soft and delicate bloom that would by itself have given her a right to claim her possession of a full share of good looks. She was dressed quite simply in a white frock with a touch of colour at the waist and she had a very flimsy lace shawl thrown over her shoulders, presumably intended as a protection against the night air.

Her companion was a very tall and big man, well over six feet in height, with handsome, strongly-marked features that often bore an expression a little too haughty, but that showed now a very tender and gentle look, so that it was not difficult to guess the state of his feelings towards the girl at his side. His shoulders were broad, his chest deep, and his whole build powerful in the extreme, and Dunn, looking him up and down with the quick glance of one accustomed to judge men, thought that he had seldom seen one more capable of holding his own.

Answering his companion's remark, he said lightly:

"Oh, no, I shall cut across the wood, it's ever so much shorter, you know."

"But it's so dark and lonely," the girl protested. "And then, after last week—"

He interrupted her with a laugh, and he lifted his head with a certain not unpleasing swagger.

“I don’t think they’ll trouble me for all their threats,” he said. “For that matter, I rather hope they will try something of the sort on. They need a lesson.”

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“Oh, I do hope you’ll be careful,” the girl exclaimed.

He laughed again and made another lightly-confident, almost-boastful remark, to the effect that he did not think any one was likely to interfere with him.

For a minute or two longer they lingered, chatting together as they stood in the gas-light on the veranda and from his hiding-place Dunn watched them intently. It seemed that it was the girl in whom he was chiefly interested, for his eyes hardly moved from her and in them there showed a very grim and hard expression.

“Pretty enough,” he mused. “More than pretty. No wonder poor Charles raved about her, if it’s the same girl—if it is, she ought to know what’s become of him. But then, where does this big chap come in?”

The “big chap” seemed really going now, though reluctantly, and it was not difficult to see that he would have been very willing to stay longer had she given him the least encouragement.

But that he did not get, and indeed it seemed as if she were a little bored and a little anxious for him to say good night and go.

At last he did so, and she retired within the house, while he came swinging down the garden path, passing close to where Dunn lay hidden, but without any suspicion of his presence, and out into the high road.

CHAPTER II

THE FIGHT IN THE WOOD

From his hiding-place in the bushes Dunn slipped out, as the big man vanished into the darkness down the road, and for the fraction of a second he seemed to hesitate.

The lights in the house were coming and going after a fashion that suggested that the inmates were preparing for bed, and almost at once Dunn turned his back to the building and hurried very quickly and softly down the road in the direction the big man had just taken.

“After all,” he thought, “the house can’t run away, that will be still there when I come back, and I ought to find out who this big chap is and where he comes from.”

In spite of the apparent clumsiness of his build and the ungainliness of his movements it was extraordinary how swiftly and how quietly he moved, a shadow could scarcely have made less sound than this man did as he melted through the darkness and a swift runner would have difficulty in keeping pace with him.



An old labourer going home late bade the big man a friendly good night and passed on without seeing or hearing Dunn following close behind, and a solitary woman, watching at her cottage door, saw plainly the big man's tall form and heard his firm and heavy steps and would have been ready to swear no other passed that way at that time, though Dunn was not five yards behind, slipping silently and swiftly by in the shelter of the trees lining the road.

A little further beyond this cottage a path, reached by climbing a stile, led from the high road first across an open field and then through the heart of a wood that seemed to be of considerable extent.

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The man Dunn was following crossed this stile and when he had gone a yard or two along the path he halted abruptly, as though all at once grown uneasy, and looked behind.

From where he stood any one following him across the stile must have shown plainly visible against the sky line, but though he lingered for a moment or two, and even, when he walked on, still looked back very frequently, he saw nothing.

Yet Dunn, when his quarry paused and looked back like this, was only a little distance behind, and when the other moved on Dunn was still very near.

But he had not crossed the stile, for when he came to it he realised that in climbing it his form would be plainly visible in outline for some distance, and so instead, he had found and crawled through a gap in the hedge not far away.

They came, Dunn so close and so noiseless behind his quarry he might well have seemed the other's shadow, to the outskirts of the wood, and as they entered it Dunn made his first fault, his first failure in an exhibition of woodcraft that a North American Indian or an Australian "black-fellow" might have equalled, but could not have surpassed.

For he trod heavily on a dry twig that snapped with a very loud, sharp retort, clearly audible for some distance in the quiet night, and, as dry twigs only snap like that under the pressure of considerable weight, the presence of some living creature in the wood other than the small things that run to and fro beneath the trees, stood revealed to all ears that could hear.

Dunn stood instantly perfectly still, rigid as a statue, listening intently, and he noted with satisfaction and keen relief that the regular heavy tread of the man in front did not alter or change.

"Good," he thought to himself. "What luck, he hasn't heard it."

He moved on again, as silently as before, perhaps a little inclined to be contemptuous of any one who could fail to notice so plain a warning, and he supposed that the man he was following must be some townsman who knew nothing at all of the life of the country and was, like so many of the dwellers in cities, blind and deaf outside the range of the noises of the streets and the clamour of passing traffic.

This thought was still in his mind when all at once the steady sound of footsteps he had been following ceased suddenly and abruptly, cut off on the instant as you turn off water from a tap.

Dunn paused, too, supposing that for some reason the other had stopped for a moment and would soon walk on again.

But a minute passed and then another and there was still no sound of the footsteps beginning again. A little puzzled, Dunn moved cautiously forward.

He saw nothing, he found nothing, there was no sign at all of the man he had been following.

It was as though he had vanished bodily from the face of the earth, and yet how this had happened, or why, or what had become of him, Dunn could not imagine, for this spot was, it seemed, in the very heart of the wood, there was no shelter of any sort or kind anywhere near, and though there were trees all round just the ground was fairly open.

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"Well, that's jolly queer," he muttered, for indeed it had a strange and daunting effect, this sudden disappearance in the midst of the wood of the man he had followed so far, and the silence around seemed all the more intense now that those regular and heavy footsteps had ceased.

"Jolly queer, as queer a thing as ever I came across," he muttered again.

He listened and heard a faint sound from his right. He listened again and thought he heard a rustling on his left, but was not sure and all at once a great figure loomed up gigantic before him and the light of lantern gleamed in his face.

"Now, my man," a voice said, "you've been following me ever since I left Bittermeads, and I'm going to give you a lesson you won't forget in a hurry."

Dunn stood quite still. At the moment his chief feeling was one of intense discomfiture at the way in which he had been outwitted, and he experienced, too, a very keen and genuine admiration for the woodcraft the other had shown.

Evidently, all the time he had known, or at any rate, suspected, that he was being followed, and choosing this as a favourable spot he had quietly doubled on his tracks, come up behind his pursuer, and taken him unawares.

Dunn had not supposed there was a man in England who could have played such a trick on him, but his admiration was roughly disturbed before he could express it, for the grasp upon his collar tightened and upon his shoulders there alighted a tremendous, stinging blow, as with all his very considerable strength, the big man brought down his walking-stick with a resounding thwack.

The sheer surprise of it, the sudden sharp pain, jerked a quick cry from Dunn, who had not been in the least prepared for such an attack, and in the darkness had not seen the stick rise, and the other laughed grimly.

"Yes, you scoundrel," he said. "I know very well who you are and what you want, and I'm going to thrash you within an inch of your life."

Again the stick rose in the air, but did not fall, for round about his body Dunn laid such a grip as he had never felt before and as would for certain have crushed in the ribs of a weaker man. The lantern crashed to the ground, they were in darkness.

"Ha! Would you?" the man exclaimed, taken by surprise in his turn, and, giant as he was, he felt himself plucked up from the ground as you pluck a weed from a lawn and held for a moment in mid-air and then dashed down again.

Perhaps not another man alive could have kept his footing under such treatment, but, somehow, he managed to, though it needed all his great strength to resist the shock.

He flung away his walking-stick, for he realized very clearly now that this was not going to be, as he had anticipated, a mere case of the administration of a deserved punishment, but rather the starkest, fiercest fight that ever he had known.

He grappled with his enemy, trying to make the most of his superior height and weight, but the long arms twined about him, seemed to press the very breath from his body and for all the huge efforts he put forth with every ounce of his tremendous strength behind them, he could not break loose from the no less tremendous grip wherein he was taken.

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Breast to breast they fought, straining, swaying a little this way or that, but neither yielding an inch. Their muscles stood out like bars of steel, their breath came heavily, neither man was conscious any more of anything save his need to conquer and win and overthrow his enemy.

The quick passion of hot rage that had come upon Dunn when he felt the other's unexpected blow still burned and flamed intensely, so that he no longer remembered even the strange and high purpose which had brought him here.

His adversary, too, had lost all consciousness of all other things in the lust of this fierce physical battle, and when he gave presently a loud, half-strangled shout, it was not fear that he uttered or a cry for aid, but solely for joy in such wild struggle and efforts as he had never known before.

And Dunn spake no word and uttered no sound, but strove all the more with all the strength of every nerve and muscle he possessed once again to pluck the other up that he might dash him down a second time.

In quick and heavy gasps came their breaths as they still swayed and struggled together, and though each exerted to the utmost a strength few could have withstood, each found that in the other he seemed to have met his match.

In vain Dunn tried again to lift his adversary up so that he might hurl him to the ground. It was an effort, a grip that seemed as though it might have torn up an oak by the roots, but the other neither budged nor flinched beneath it.

And in vain, in his turn, did he try to bend Dunn backwards to crush him to the earth, it was an effort before which one might have thought that iron and stone must have given away, but Dunn still sustained it.

Thus dreadfully they fought, there in the darkness, there in the silence of the night.

Dreadfully they wrestled, implacable, fierce, determined, every primeval passion awake and strong again, and slowly, very slowly, that awful grip laid upon the big man's body began to tell.

His breathing grew more difficult, his efforts seemed aimed more to release himself than to overcome his adversary, he gave way an inch or two, no more, but still an inch or two of ground.

There was a sharp sound, like a thin, dry twig snapping beneath a careless foot.

It was one of his ribs breaking beneath the dreadful and intolerable pressure of Dunn's enormous grip. But neither of the combatants heard or knew, and with one last effort the big man put forth all his vast strength in a final attempt to bear his enemy down.

Dunn resisted still, resisted, though the veins stood out like cords on his brow, though a little trickle of blood crept from the corner of his mouth and though his heart swelled almost to bursting.

There was a sound of many waters in his ears, the darkness all around grew shot with little flames, he could hear some one breathing very noisily and he was not sure whether this were himself or his adversary till he realized that it was both of them. With one sudden, almost superhuman effort, he heaved his great adversary up, but had not strength enough left to do more than let him slip from his grasp to fall on the ground, and with the effort he himself dropped forward on his hands and knees, just as a lantern shone at a distance and a voice cried:

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"This way, Tom. Master John, Master John, where are you?"

CHAPTER III

A COINCIDENCE

Another voice answered from near by and Dunn scrambled hurriedly to his feet.

He had but a moment in which to decide what to do, for these new arrivals were coming at a run and would be upon him almost instantly if he stayed where he was.

That they were friends of the man he had just overthrown and whose huge bulk lay motionless in the darkness at his feet, seemed plain, and it also seemed plain to him that the moment was not an opportune one for offering explanations.

Swiftly he decided to slip away into the darkness. What had happened might be cleared up later when he knew more and was more sure of his ground; at present he must think first, he told himself, of the success of his mission.

Physically, he was greatly exhausted and his gait was not so steady nor his progress so silent and skillful as it had been before, as now he hurried away from the scene of the combat.

But the two new-comers made no attempt to pursue him and indeed did not seem to give his possible presence in the vicinity even a thought, as with many muttered exclamations of dismay and anger, they stooped over the body of his prostrate enemy.

It was evident they recognized him at once, and that he was the "Mr. John" whose name they had called, for so they spoke of him to each other as they busied themselves about him.

"I expect I've been a fool again," Dunn thought to himself ruefully, as from a little distance, well-sheltered in the darkness, he crouched upon the ground and listened and watched. "I may have ruined everything. Any one but a fool would have asked him what he meant when he hit out like that instead of flying into a rage and hitting back the way I did. Most likely it was some mistake when he said he knew who I was and what I wanted—at least if it wasn't—I hope I haven't killed him, anyhow."

Secure in the protection the dark night afforded him, he remained sufficiently near at hand to be able to assure himself soon that his overthrown adversary was certainly not killed, for now he began to express himself somewhat emphatically concerning the manner in which the two new-comers were ministering to him.

Presently he got to his feet and, with one of them supporting him on each side, began to limp away, and Dunn followed them, though cautiously and at a distance, for he was still greatly exhausted and in neither the mood nor the condition for running unnecessary risks.

The big man, Mr. John, as the others called him, seemed little inclined for speech, but the others talked a good deal, subsiding sometimes when he told them gruffly to be quiet but invariably soon beginning again their expressions of sympathy and vows of vengeance against his unknown assailant.

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"How many of them do you think there were, Mr. John, sir?" one asked presently. "I'll lay you marked a fair sight of the villains."

"There was only one man," Mr. John answered briefly.

"Only one?" the other repeated in great surprise. "For the Lord's sake, Mr. John—only one? Why, there ain't any one man between here and Lunnon town could stand up to you, sir, in a fair tussle."

"Well, he did," Mr. John answered. "He had the advantage, he took me by surprise, but I never felt such a grip in my life."

"Lor', now, think of that," said the other in tones in which surprise seemed mingled with a certain incredulity. "It don't seem possible, but for sure, then, he don't come from these here parts, that I'll stand to."

"I knew that much before," retorted Mr. John. "I said all the time they were outsiders, a London gang very likely. You'll have to get Dr. Rawson, Bates. I don't know what's up, but I've a beast of a pain in my side. I can hardly breathe."

Bates murmured respectful sympathy as they came out of the shelter of the trees, and crossing some open ground, reached a road along the further side of which ran a high brick wall.

In this, nearly opposite the spot where they emerged on the road, was a small door which one of the men opened and through which they passed and locked it behind them, leaving Dunn without.

He hesitated for a moment, half-minded to scale the wall and continue on the other side of it to follow them.

Calculating the direction in which the village of Ramsdon must lie, he turned that way and had gone only a short distance when he was overtaken by a pedestrian with whom he began conversation by asking for a light for his pipe.

The man seemed inclined to be conversational, and after a few casual remarks, Dunn made an observation on the length of the wall they were passing and to the end of which they had just come.

"Must be a goodish-sized place in there," he said. "Whose is it?"

"Oh, that there's Ramsdon Place," the other answered. "Mr. John Clive lives there now his father's dead."

Dunn stood still in the middle of the road.

“Who? What?” he stammered. “Who—who did you say?”

“Mr. John Clive,” the other repeated. “Why—what’s wrong about that?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Dunn answered, but his voice shook a little with what seemed almost fear, and behind the darkness of the friendly night his face had become very pale.

“Clive—John Clive, you say? Oh, that’s impossible.”

“Needn’t believe it if you don’t want to,” grumbled the other. “Only what do you want asking questions for if you thinks folks tells lies when they answers them?”

“I didn’t mean that, of course not,” exclaimed Dunn hurriedly, by no means anxious to offend the other. “I’m very sorry, I only meant it was impossible it should be the same Mr. John Clive I knew once, though I think he came from about here somewhere. A little, middle-aged man, I mean, quite bald and wears glasses?”

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"Oh, that ain't this 'un," answered the other, his good humour quite restored. "This is a young man and tremendous big. I ain't so small myself, but he tops me by a head and shoulders and so he does most hereabouts. Strong, too, with it, there ain't so many would care to stand up against him, I can tell you. Why, they do say he caught two poachers in the wood there last month and brought 'em out one under each arm like a pair of squealing babes."

"Did he, though?" said Dunn. "Take some doing, that, and I daresay the rest of the gang will try to get even with him for it."

"Well, they do say as there's been threats," the other agreed. "But what I says is as Mr. John can look after hisself all right. There was a tale as a man had been dodging after him at night, but all he said when they told him, was as if he caught any one after him he would thrash them within an inch of their lives."

"Serve them right, too," exclaimed Dunn warmly.

Evidently this explained, in part at least, what had recently happened. Mr. Clive, finding himself being followed, had supposed it was one of his poaching enemies and had at once attempted to carry out his threat he had made.

Dunn told himself, at any rate, the error would have the result of turning all suspicion away from him, and yet he still seemed very disturbed and ill at ease.

"Has Mr. Clive been here long?" he asked.

"It must be four or five years since his father bought the place," answered his new acquaintance. "Then, when the old man was killed a year ago, Mr. John inherited everything."

"Old Mr. Clive was killed, was he?" asked Dunn, and his voice sounded very strange in the darkness. "How was that?"

"Accident to his motor-car," the other replied. "I don't hold with them things myself—give me a good horse, I say. People didn't like the old man much, and some say Mr. John's too fond of taking the high hand. But don't cross him and he won't cross you, that's his motto and there's worse."

Dunn agreed and asked one or two more questions about the details of the accident to old Mr. Clive, in which he seemed very interested.

But he did not get much more information about that concerning which his new friend evidently knew very little. However, he gave Dunn a few more facts concerning Mr. John Clive, as that he was unmarried, was said to be very wealthy, and had the reputation of being something of a ladies' man.

A little further on they parted, and Dunn took a side road which he calculated should lead him back to Bittermeads.

“It may be pure coincidence,” he mused as he walked slowly in a very troubled and doubtful mood. “But if so, it’s a very queer one, and if it isn’t, it seems to me Mr. John Clive might as well put his head in a lion’s jaws as pay visits at Bittermeads. But of course he can’t have the least suspicion of the truth—if it is the truth. If I hadn’t lost my temper like a fool when he whacked out at me like that I might have been able to warn him, or find out something useful perhaps. And his father killed recently in an accident—is that a coincidence, too, I wonder?”

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He passed his hand across his forehead on which a light sweat stood, though he was not a man easily affected, for he had seen and endured many things.

His mind was very full of strange and troubled thoughts as at last he came back to Bittermeads, where, leaning with his elbows on the garden gate, he stood for a long time, watching the dark and silent house and thinking of that scene of which he had been a spectator when John Clive and the girl had stood together on the veranda in the light of the gas from the hall and had bidden each other good night.

"It seems," he mused, "as though the last that was seen of poor Charley must have been just like that. It was just such a dark night as this when Simpson saw him. He was standing on that veranda when Simpson recognized him by the light of the gas behind, and a girl was bidding him good night—a very pretty girl, too, Simpson said."

Silent and immobile he stood there a long time, not so much now as one who watched, but rather as if deep in thought, for his head was bent and supported on his hands and his eyes were fixed on the ground.

"As for this John Clive," he muttered presently, rousing himself. "I suppose that must be a coincidence, but it's queer, and queer the father should have died—like that."

He broke off, shuddering slightly, as though at thoughts too awful to be endured, and pushing open the gate, he walked slowly up the gravel path towards the house, round which he began to walk, going very slowly and cautiously and often pausing as if he wished to make as close examination of the place as the darkness would permit.

More by habit than because he thought there was any need of it, he moved always with that extreme and wonderful dexterity of quietness he could assume at will, and as he turned the corner of the building and came behind it, his quick ear, trained by many an emergency to pick out the least unusual sound, caught a faint, continued scratching noise, so faint and low it might well have passed unnoticed.

All at once he understood and realized that some one quite close at hand was stealthily cutting out the glass from one of the panes of a ground-floor window.

CHAPTER IV

A WOMAN WEEPS

Cautiously he glided nearer, moving as noiselessly as any shadow, seeming indeed but one shadow the more in the heavy surrounding darkness.

The persistent scratching noise continued, and Dunn was now so close he could have put out his hand and touched the shoulder of the man who was causing it and who still, intent and busy, had not the least idea of the other's proximity.

A faint smile touched Dunn's lips. The situation seemed not to be without a grim humour, for if one-half of what he suspected were true, one might as sensibly and safely attempt to break into the condemned cell at Pentonville Gaol as into this quiet house.

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But then, was it perhaps possible that this fellow, working away so unconcernedly, within arm's-length of him, was in reality one of them, seeking to obtain admittance in this way for some reason of his own, some private treachery, it might be, or some dispute? To Dunn that did not seem likely. More probably the fellow was merely an ordinary burglar—some local practitioner of the housebreaking art, perhaps—whose ill-fortune it was to have hit upon this house to rob without his having the least idea of the nature of the place he was trying to enter.

“He might prove a useful recruit for them, though,” Dunn thought, and a sudden idea flashed into his mind, vivid and startling.

For one moment he thought intently, weighing in his mind this idea that had come to him so suddenly. He was not blind to the risks it involved, but his eager temperament always inclined him to the most direct and often to the most dangerous course. His mind was made up, his plan of action decided.

The scratching of the burglar's tool upon the glass ceased. Already he had smeared treacle over the square of glass he intended to remove and had covered it with paper so as to be able to take it out easily and in one piece without the risk of falling fragments betraying him.

Through the gap thus made he thrust his arm and made sure there were no alarms fitted and no obstacles in the way of his easy entrance.

Cautiously he unfastened the window and cautiously and silently lifted the sash, and when he had done so he paused and listened for a space to make sure no one was stirring and that no alarm had been caused within the house.

Still very cautiously and with the utmost precaution to avoid making even the least noise, he put one knee upon the window-sill, preparatory to climbing in, and as he did so Dunn touched him lightly on the shoulder.

“Well, my man, what are you up to?” he said softly. And without a word, without giving the least warning, the burglar, a man evidently of determination and resource, swung round and aimed at Dunn's head a tremendous blow with the heavy iron jemmy he held in his right hand.

But Dunn was not unprepared for an attack and those bright, keen eyes of his seemed able to see as well in the dark as in the light. He threw up his left hand and caught the other's wrist before that deadly blow he aimed could descend and at the same instant he dashed his own clenched fist full into the burglar's face.

As it happened, more by good luck than intended aim, the blow took him on the point of the chin. He dropped instantly, collapsing in on himself as falls a pole-axed bullock, and lay, unconscious, in a crumpled heap on the ground.

For a little Dunn waited, crouching above him and listening for the least sound to show that their brief scuffle had been heard.

But it had all passed nearly as silently as quickly. Within the house everything remained silent, there was no sound audible, no gleam of light to show that any of the inmates had been disturbed.

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Taking from his pocket a small electric flash-lamp Dunn turned its light on his victim.

He seemed a man of middle age with a brutal, heavy-jawed face and a low, receding forehead. His lips, a little apart, showed yellow, irregular teeth, of which two at the front of the lower jaw had been broken, and the scar of an old wound, running from the corner of his left eye down to the centre of his cheek, added to the sinister and forbidding aspect he bore.

His build was heavy and powerful and near by, where he had dropped it when he fell, lay the jemmy with which he had struck at Dunn. It was a heavy, ugly-looking thing, about two feet in length and with one end nearly as sharp as that of a chisel.

Dunn picked it up and felt it thoughtfully.

“Just as well I got my blow in first,” he mused. “If he had landed that fairly on my skull I don’t think anything else in this world would ever have interested me any more.”

Stooping over the unconscious man, he felt in his pockets and found an ugly-looking revolver, fully loaded, a handful of cartridges, a coil of thin rope, an electric torch, a tiny dark lantern no bigger than a match-box, and so arranged that the single drop of light it permitted to escape fell on one spot only, a bunch of curiously-shaped wires Dunn rightly guessed to be skeleton keys used for opening locks quietly, together with some tobacco, a pipe, a little money, and a few other personal belongings of no special interest or significance.

These Dunn replaced where he had found them, but the revolver, the rope, the torch, the dark lantern, and the bunch of wires he took possession of.

He noticed also that the man was wearing rubber-soled boots and rubber gloves, and these last he also kept. Stooping, he lifted the unconscious man on to his shoulder and carried him with perfect ease and at a quick pace out of the garden and across the road to the common opposite, where, in a convenient spot, behind some furze bushes, he laid him down.

“When he comes round,” Dunn muttered. “He won’t know where he is or what’s happened, and probably his one idea will be to clear off as quickly as possible. I don’t suppose he’ll interfere with me at all.”

Then a new idea seemed to strike him, and he hurriedly removed his own coat and trousers and boots and exchanged them for those the burglar was wearing.

They were not a good fit, but he could get them on and the idea in his mind was that if the police of the district began searching, as very likely they would, for Mr. John Clive’s assailant, and if they had discovered any clues in the shape of footprints or torn bits of clothing or buttons—and Dunn knew his attire had suffered considerably during the

struggle—then it would be as well that such clues should lead not to him, but to this other man, who, if he were innocent on that score, had at any rate been guilty of attempting to carry out a much worse offence.

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"I'm afraid your luck's out, old chap," Dunn muttered, apostrophizing the unconscious man. "But you did your best to brain me, and that gives me a sort of right to make you useful. Besides, if the police do run you in, it won't mean anything worse than a few questions it'll be your own fault if you can't answer. Anyhow, I can't afford to run the risk of some blundering fool of a policeman trying to arrest me for assaulting the local magnate."

Much relieved in mind, for he had been greatly worried by a fear that this encounter with John Clive might lead to highly inconvenient legal proceedings, he left the unlucky burglar lying in the shelter of the furze bushes and returned to the house.

All was as he had left it, the open window gaped widely, almost inviting entrance, and he climbed silently within. The apartment in which he found himself was apparently the drawing-room and he felt his way cautiously and slowly across it, moving with infinite care so as to avoid making even the least noise.

Reaching the door, he opened it and went out into the hall. All was dark and silent. He permitted himself here to flash on his electric torch for a moment, and he saw that the hall was spacious and used as a lounge, for there were several chairs clustered in its centre, opposite the fireplace. There were two or three doors opening from it, and almost opposite where he stood were the stairs, a broad flight leading to a wide landing above.

Still with the same extreme silence and care, he began to ascend these stairs and when he was about half-way up he became aware of a faint and strange sound that came trembling through the silence and stillness of the night.

What it was he could not imagine. He listened for a time and then resumed his silent progress with even more care than previously, and only when he reached the landing did he understand that this faint and low sound he heard was caused by a woman weeping very softly in one of the rooms near by.

Silently he crossed the landing in the direction whence the sound seemed to come. Now, too, he saw a thread of light showing beneath a door at a little distance, and when he crept up to it and listened he could hear for certain that it was from within this room that there came the sound of muffled, passionate weeping.

The door was closed, but he turned the handle so carefully that he made not the least sound and very cautiously he began to push the door back, the tiniest fraction of an inch at a time, so that even one watching closely could never have said that it moved.

When, after a long time, during which the muffled weeping never ceased, he had it open an inch or two, he leaned forward and peeped within.

It was a bed-chamber, and, crouching on the floor near the fireplace, in front of a low arm-chair, her head hidden on her arms and resting on the seat of the chair, was the figure of a girl. She had made no preparations for retiring, and by the frock she wore Dunn recognized her as the girl he had seen on the veranda bidding good-bye to John Clive.

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The sound of her weeping was very pitiful, her attitude was full of an utter and poignant despair, there was something touching in the extreme in the utter abandonment to grief shown by this young and lovely creature who seemed framed only for joy and laughter.

The stern features and hard eyes of the unseen watcher softened, then all at once they grew like tempered steel again.

For on the mantelpiece, just above where the weeping girl crouched, stood a photograph—the photograph of a young and good-looking, gaily-smiling man. Across it, in a boyish and somewhat unformed hand, was written

“Devotedly yours,
Charley Wright.”

It was this photograph that had caught Dunn’s eyes. Both it and the writing and the signature he recognized, and his look was very stern, his eyes as cold as death itself, as slowly, slowly he pushed back the door of the room another inch or so.

CHAPTER V

A WOMAN AND A MAN

The girl stirred. It was as though some knowledge of the slow opening of the door had penetrated to her consciousness before as yet she actually saw or heard anything.

She rose to her feet, drying her eyes with her handkerchief, and as she was moving to a drawer near to get a clean one her glance fell on the partially-open door.

“I thought I shut it,” she said aloud in a puzzled manner.

She crossed the floor to the door and closed it with a push from her hand and in the passage outside Dunn stood still, not certain what to do next.

But for that photograph he might have gone quietly away, giving up the reckless plan that had formed itself so suddenly in his mind while he watched the burglar at work.

That photograph, however, with its suggestion that he stood indeed on the brink of the solution of the mystery, seemed a summons to him to go on. It was as though a voice from the dead called him to continue on his task to punish and to save, and slowly, very slowly, with an infinite caution, he turned again the handle of the door and still very slowly, still with the same infinite caution, he pushed back the door the merest fraction of an inch at a time so that not even one watching could have said that it moved.

When he had it once more so far open that he could see within, he bent forward to look. The girl was beginning her preparations for the night now. She had assumed a long, comfortable-looking dressing-gown and, standing in front of the mirror, she had just finished brushing her hair and was beginning to fasten it up in a long plait. He could see her face in the mirror; her deep, sad eyes, swollen with crying, her cheeks still tear-stained, her mouth yet quivering with barely-repressed emotion.

He was still watching her when, as if growing uneasy, she turned her head and glanced over her shoulder, and though he moved back so quickly that she did not catch sight of him, she saw that the door was open once more.

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"What can be the matter with the door?" she exclaimed aloud, and she crossed the room towards it with a quick and somewhat impatient movement.

But this time, instead of closing it, she pulled it open and found herself face to face with Dunn.

He did not speak or move, and she stood staring at him blankly. Slowly her mouth opened as though to utter a cry that, however, could not rise above her fluttering throat. Her face had taken on the pallor of death, her great eyes showed the awful fear she felt.

Still without speaking, Dunn stepped forward into the room and, closing the door, stood with his back to it.

She shrank away and put her hand upon a chair, but for the support of which she must certainly have fallen, for her limbs were trembling so violently they gave her little support.

"Don't hurt me," she panted.

In truth he presented a strange and terrifying appearance. The unkempt hair that covered his face and through which his keen eyes glowed like fire, gave him an unusual and formidable aspect. In one hand he held the ugly-looking jemmy he had taken from the burglar, and the new clothes he had donned, ill-fitting and soiled, served to accentuate the ungainliness of his form.

The frightened girl was not even sure that he was human, and she shrank yet further away from him till she sank down upon the bed, dizzy with fear and almost swooning.

As yet he had not spoken, for his eyes had gone to the mantelpiece on which he saw that the photograph signed with the name "Charley Wright," did not now stand upright, but had fallen forward on its face so that one could no longer see what it represented.

It must have fallen just as he entered the room and this seemed to him an omen, though whether of good or ill, he did not know.

"Who are you?" the girl stammered. "What do you want?"

He looked at her moodily and still without answering, though in his bright and keen eyes a strange light burned.

She was lovely, he thought, of that there could be no question. But her beauty made to him small appeal, for he was wondering what kind of soul lay behind those perfect features, that smooth and delicate skin, those luminous eyes. Yet his eyes were still hard and it was in his roughest, gruffest tones that he said:

"You needn't be afraid, I won't hurt you."

"I'll give you everything I have," she panted, "if only you'll go away."

"Not so fast as all that," he answered, coolly, for indeed he had not taken so mad a risk in order to go away again if he could help it. "Who is there in the house besides you?"

"Only mother," she answered, looking up at him very pleadingly as if in hopes that he must relent when he saw her in distress. "Please, won't you take what you want and go away? Please don't disturb mother, it would nearly kill her."

"I'm not going to hurt either you or your mother if you'll be sensible," he said irritably, for, unreasonably enough, the extreme fear she showed and her pleading tones annoyed him. He had a feeling that he would like to shake her, it was so absurd of her to look at him as though she expected him to gobble her up in a mouthful.

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She seemed a little reassured.

"Mother will be so dreadfully frightened," she repeated, "I'll give you everything there is in the house if only you'll go at once."

"I can take everything I want without your giving it me," he retorted. "How do I know you're telling the truth when you say there's no one else in the house? How many servants have you?"

"None," she answered. "There's a woman comes every day, but she doesn't sleep here."

"Do you live all alone here with your mother?" he asked, watching her keenly.

"There's my stepfather," she answered. "But he's not here tonight."

"Oh, is he away?" Dunn asked, his expression almost one of disappointment.

The girl, whose first extreme fear had passed and who was watching him as keenly as he watched her, noticed this manner of disappointment, and could not help wondering what sort of burglar it was who was not pleased to hear that the man of the house was away, and that he had only two women to deal with.

And it appeared to her that he seemed not only disappointed, but rather at a loss what to do next.

As in truth he was, for that the stepfather should be away, and this girl and her mother all alone, was, perhaps, the one possibility that he had never considered.

She noticed, too, that he did not pay any attention to her jewellery, which was lying close to his hand on the toilet-table, and though in point of actual fact this jewellery was not of any great value, it was exceedingly precious in her eyes, and she did not understand a burglar who showed no eagerness to seize on it.

"Did you want to see Mr. Dawson?" she asked, her voice more confident now and even with a questioning note in it.

"Mr. Dawson! Who's he?" Dunn asked, disconcerted by the question, but not wishing to seem so.

"My stepfather, Mr. Deede Dawson," she answered. "I think you knew that. If you want him, he went to London early today, but I think it's quite likely he may come back tonight."

“What should I want him for?” growled Dunn, more and more, disconcerted, as he saw that he was not playing his part too well.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I suppose you do.”

“You suppose a lot,” he retorted roughly. “Now you listen to me. I don’t want to hurt you, but I don’t mean to be interfered with. I’m going over the house to see what I can find that’s worth taking. Understand?”

“Oh, perfectly,” she said.

She was watching him closely, and she noticed that he still made no attempt to take possession of her jewellery, though it lay at his hand, and that puzzled her very much, indeed, for she supposed the very first thing a burglar did was always to seize such treasures as these of hers. But this man paid them no attention whatever, and did not even notice them.

He was feeling in his pockets now and he took out the revolver and the coil of thin rope he had secured from the burglar.

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"Now, do you know what I'm going to do?" he asked, with an air of roughness and brutality that was a little overdone. He put the revolver and the rope down on the bed, the revolver quite close to her.

"I'm going," he continued, "to tie you up to one of those chairs. I can't risk your playing any tricks or giving an alarm, perhaps, while I'm searching the house. I shall take what's worth having, and then I shall clear off, and if your stepfather's coming home tonight you won't have to wait long till he releases you, and if he don't come I can't help it."

He turned his back to her as he spoke and took hold of one of the chairs in the room, and then of another and looked at them as though carefully considering which would be the best to use for the carrying out of his threat.

He appeared to find it difficult to decide, for he kept his back turned to her for two or three minutes, during all of which time the revolver lay on the bed quite close to her hand.

He listened intently for he fully expected her to snatch it up, and he wished to be ready to turn before she could actually fire. But, indeed, nothing was further from her thoughts, for she did not know in the least how to use the weapon or even how to fire it off, and the very thought of employing it to kill any one would have terrified her far more even than had done her experiences of this night.

So the pistol lay untouched by her side, while, very pale and trembling a little, she waited what he would do, and on his side he felt as much puzzled by her failure to use the opportunity he had put in her way as she was puzzled by his neglect to seize her jewellery lying ready to his hand.

He was still hesitating, still appearing unable to decide which chair to employ in carrying out his proclaimed purpose of fastening her up when she asked a question that made him swing round upon her very quickly and with a very startled look.

"Are you a real burglar?" she said.

CHAPTER VI

A DISCOVERY

"What do you mean?" Dunn asked quickly. The matted growth of hair on his face served well to hide any change of expression, but his eyes betrayed him with their look of surprise and discomfiture, and in her own clear and steady glance appeared now a kind of puzzled mockery as if she understood well that all he did was done for some purpose, though what that purpose was still perplexed her.



"I mean," she said slowly, "well—what do I mean? I am only asking a question. Are you a burglar—or have you come here for some other reason?"

"I don't know what you're getting at," he grumbled. "Think I'm here for fun? Not me. Come and sit on this chair and put your hands behind you and don't make a noise, or scream, or anything, not if you value your life."

"I don't know that I do very much," she answered with a manner of extreme bitterness, but more as if speaking to herself than to him.

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She did as he ordered, and he proceeded to tie her wrists together and to fasten them to the back of the chair on which she had seated herself. He was careful not to draw the cords too tight, but at the same time he made the fastening secure.

"You won't disturb mother, will you?" she asked quietly when he had finished. "Her room's the one at the end of the passage."

"I don't want to disturb any one," he answered. "I only want to get off quietly. I won't gag you, but don't you try to make any noise, if you do I'll come back. Understand?"

"Oh, perfectly," she answered. "May I ask one question? Do you feel very proud of yourself just now?"

He did not answer, but went out of the room quickly, and he had an impression that she smiled as she watched him go, and that her smile was bitter and a little contemptuous.

"What a girl," he muttered. "She scored every time. I didn't find out a thing, she didn't do anything I expected or wanted her to. She seemed as if she spotted me right off—I wonder if she did? I wonder if she could be trusted?"

But then he thought of that photograph on the mantelpiece and his look grew stern and hard again. He was careful to avoid the room the girl had indicated as occupied by her mother, but of all the others on that floor he made a hasty search without discovering anything to interest him or anything of the least importance or at all unusual.

From the wide landing in the centre of the house a narrow stairway, hidden away behind an angle of the wall so that one did not notice it at first, led above to three large attics with steeply-sloping roofs and evidently designed more for storage purposes than for habitation.

The doors of two of these were open and within was merely a collection of such lumber as soon accumulates in any house.

The door of the third attic was locked, but by aid of the jemmy he still carried, he forced it open without difficulty.

Within was nothing but a square packing-case, standing in the middle of the floor. Otherwise the light of the electric torch he flashed around showed only the bare boarding of the floor and the bare plastered walls.

Near the packing-case a hammer and some nails lay on the floor and the lid was in position but was not fastened, as though some interruption had occurred before the task of nailing it down could be completed.

Dunn noted that one nail had been driven home, and he was on the point of leaving the attic, for he knew he had not much time and hoped that downstairs he would be able to make some discoveries of importance, when it occurred to him that it might be wise to see what was in this case, the nailing down the lid of which had not been completed.

He crossed the room to it, and without drawing the one nail, pushed back the lid which pivoted on it quite easily.

Within appeared a covering of coarse sacking. He pulled this away with a careless hand, and beneath the beam of his electric torch showed the pale and dreadful features of a dead man—of a man, the center of whose forehead showed the small round hole where a bullet had entered in; of a man whose still-recognizable features were those of the photograph on the mantel-piece of the room downstairs, the photograph that was signed:

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“Devotedly yours,
Charley Wright.”

For a long time Robert Dunn stood, looking down in silence at that dead face which was hardly more still, more rigid than his own.

He shivered, for he felt very cold. It was as though the coldness of the death in whose presence he stood had laid its chilly hand on him also.

At last he stirred and looked about him with a bewildered air, then carefully and with a reverent hand, he put back the sackcloth covering.

“So I’ve found you, Charley,” he whispered. “Found you at last.”

He replaced the lid, leaving everything as it had been when he entered the attic, and stood for a time, trying to collect his thoughts which the shock of this dreadful discovery had so disordered, and to decide what to do next.

“But, then, that’s simple,” he thought. “I must go straight to the police and bring them here. They said they wanted proof; they said I had nothing to go on but bare suspicion. But that’s evidence enough to hang Deede Dawson—the girl, too, perhaps.”

Then he wondered whether it could be that she knew nothing and was innocent of all part or share in this dreadful deed. But how could that be possible? How could it be that such a crime committed in the house in which she lived could remain unknown to her?

On the other hand, when he thought of her clear, candid eyes; when he remembered her gentle beauty, it did not seem conceivable that behind them could lie hidden the tigerish soul of a murderess.

“That’s only sentiment, though,” he muttered. “Nothing more. Beautiful women have been rotten bad through and through before today. There’s nothing for me to do but to go and inform the police, and get them here as soon as possible. If she’s innocent, I suppose she’ll be able to prove it.”

He hesitated a moment, as he thought of how he had left her, bound and a prisoner.

It seemed brutal to leave her like that while he was away, for he would probably be some time absent. But with a hard look, he told himself that whatever pain she suffered she must endure it.

His first and sole thought must be to bring to justice the murderers of his unfortunate friend; and to secure, too, thereby, the success almost certainly of his own mission.

To release her and leave her at liberty might endanger the attainment of both those ends, and so she must remain a prisoner.

“Only,” he muttered, “if she knew the attic almost over her head held such a secret, why, didn’t she take the chance I gave her of getting hold of my revolver? That she didn’t, looks as if she knew nothing.”

But then he thought again of the photograph in her room and remembered that agony of grief to which she had been surrendering herself when he first saw her. Now those passionate tears of hers seemed to him like remorse.

“I’ll leave her where she is,” he decided again. “I can’t help it; I mustn’t run any risks. My first duty is to get the police here and have Deede Dawson arrested.”

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He went down the stairs still deep in thought, and when he reached the landing below he would not even go to make sure that his captive was still secure.

An obscure feeling that he did not wish to see her, and still more that he did not wish her to see him, prevented him.

He descended the second flight of steps to the hall, taking fewer precautions to avoid making a noise and still very deep in thought.

For some time he had had but little hope that young Charley Wright still lived.

Nevertheless, the dreadful discovery he had made in the attic above had affected him profoundly, and left his mind in a chaos of emotions so that he was for the time much less acutely watchful than usual.

They had spent their boyhood together, and he remembered a thousand incidents of their childhood. They had been at school and college together. And how brilliantly Charley had always done at work and play, surmounting every difficulty with a laugh, as if it were merely some new and specially amusing jest!

Every one had thought well of him, every one had believed that his future career would be brilliant. Now it had ended in this obscure and dreadful fashion, as ends the life of a trapped rat.

Dunn found himself hardly able to realize that it was really so, and through all the confused medley of his thoughts there danced and flickered his memory of a young and lovely face, now tear-stained, now smiling, now pale with terror, now calmly disdainful.

"Can she have known?" he muttered. "She must have known—she can't have known—it's not possible either way."

He shuddered and as he put his foot on the lowest stair he raised his hands to cover his face as though to shut out the visions that passed before him.

Another step forward he took in the darkness, and all at once there flashed upon him the light of a strong electric torch, suddenly switched on.

"Put up your hands," said a voice sharply. "Or you're a dead man."

He looked bewilderedly, taken altogether by surprise, and saw he was faced by a fat little man with a smooth, chubby, smiling face and eyes that were cold and grey and deadly, and who held in one hand a revolver levelled at his heart.

"Put up your hands," this newcomer said again, his voice level and calm, his eyes intent and deadly. "Put up your hands or I fire."



CHAPTER VII

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Dunn obeyed promptly.

There was that about this little fat, smiling man and his unsmiling eyes which proclaimed very plainly that he was quite ready to put his threat into execution.

For a moment or two they stood thus, each regarding the other very intently. Dunn, his hands in the air, the steady barrel of the other's pistol levelled at his heart, knew that never in all his adventurous life had he been in such deadly peril as now, and the grotesque thought came into his mind to wonder if there were room for two in that packing-case in the attic.

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Or perhaps no attempt would be made to hide his death since, after all, it is always permissible to shoot an armed burglar.

The clock on the stairs began to strike the hour, and he wondered if he would still be alive when the last stroke sounded.

He did not much think so for he thought he could read a very deadly purpose in the other's cold grey eyes, nor did he suppose that a man with such a secret as that of the attic upstairs to hide was likely to stand on any scruple.

And he thought that if he still lived when the clock finished striking he would take it for an omen of good hope.

The last stroke sounded and died away into the silence of the night.

The revolver was still levelled at his heart, the grim purpose in the other's eyes had not changed, and yet Dunn drew a breath of deep relief as though the worst of the danger was past.

Through his mind, that had been a little dulled by the sudden consciousness of so extreme a peril, thought began again to race with more than normal rapidity and clearness.

It occurred to him, with a sense of the irony of the position, that when he entered this house it had been with the deliberate intention of getting himself discovered by the inmates, believing that to show himself to them in the character of a burglar might gain him their confidence.

It had seemed to him that so he might come to be accepted as one of them and perhaps learn in time the secret of their plans.

The danger that they might adopt the other course of handing him over to the police had not seemed to him very great, for he had his reasons for believing that there would be no great desire to draw the attention of the authorities to Bittermeads for any reason whatever.

But the discovery he had made in the attic changed all that. It changed his plans, for now he could go to the police immediately. And it changed also his conception of how these people were likely to act.

Before, it had not entered his mind to suppose that he ran any special risk of being shot at sight, but now he understood that the only thing standing between him and instant death was the faint doubt in his captor's mind as to how much he knew.

It seemed to him his only hope was to carry out his original plan and try to pass himself off as the sort of person who might be likely to be useful to the master of Bittermeads.

“Don’t shoot, sir,” he said, in a kind of high whine. “I ain’t done no harm, and it’s a fair cop—and me not a month out of Dartmoor Gaol. I shall get a hot ’un for this, I know.”

The little fat man did not answer; his eyes were as deadly, the muzzle of his pistol as steady as before.

Dunn wondered if it were from that pistol had issued the bullet that had drilled so neat and round a hole in his friend’s forehead. He supposed so.

He said again

“Don’t shoot, Mr. Deede Dawson, sir; I ain’t done no harm.”

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"Oh, you know my name, do you, you scoundrel?" Deede Dawson said, a little surprised.

"Yes, sir," Dunn answered. "We always find out as much as we can about a crib before we get to work."

"I see," said Mr. Dawson. "Very praiseworthy. Attention to business and all that. Pray, what did you find out about me?"

"Only as you was to be away tonight, sir," answered Dunn. "And that there didn't seem to be any other man in the house, and, of course, how the house lay and the garden, and so. But I didn't know as you was coming home so soon."

"No, I don't suppose you did," said Deede Dawson.

"I ain't done no harm," Dunn urged, making his voice as whining and pleading as he could. "I've only just been looking round the two top floors—I ain't touched a thing. Give a cove a chance, sir."

"You've been looking round, have you?" said Deede Dawson slowly. "Did you find anything to interest you?"

"I've only been in the bedrooms and the attics," answered Dunn, changing not a muscle of his countenance and thinking boldness his safest course, for he knew well the slightest sign or hint of knowledge that he gave would mean his death. "I'd only just come downstairs when you copped me, sir; I ain't touched a thing in one of these rooms down here."

"Haven't you?" said Deede Dawson slowly, and his face was paler, his eyes more dead, the muzzle of his pistol yet more inflexibly steady than before.

More clearly still did Dunn realize that the faintest breath of suspicion stirring in the other's mind that he knew of what was hidden in the attic would mean certain death and just such another neat little hole bored through heart or brain as that he had seen showing in the forehead of his dead friend.

"Haven't you, though?" Deede Dawson repeated. "The bedrooms—the attics—that's all?"

"Yes, sir, that's all, take my oath that's all," Dunn repeated earnestly, as if he wished very much to impress on his captor that he had searched bedrooms and attics thoroughly, but not these downstairs rooms.

Deede Dawson was plainly puzzled, and for the first time a little doubt seemed to show in his hard grey eyes.

Dunn perceived that a need was on him to know for certain whether his dreadful secret had been discovered or not.

Until he had assured himself on that point Dunn felt comparatively safe, but he still knew also that to allow the faintest suspicion to dawn in Deede Dawson's mind would mean for him instant death.

He saw, too, watching very warily and ready to take advantage of any momentary slip or forgetfulness, how steady was Deede Dawson's hand, how firm and watchful his eyes.

With many men, with most men indeed, Dunn would have seized or made some opportunity to dash in and attack, taking the chance of being shot down first, since there are few indeed really skilled in the use of a revolver, the most tricky if the most deadly of weapons.

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But he realized he had small hope of taking unawares this fat little smiling man with the unsmiling eyes and steady hand, and he was well convinced that the first doubtful movement he made would bring a bullet crashing through his brain.

His only hope was in delay and in diverting suspicion, and Deede Dawson's voice was very soft and deadly as he said:

"So you've been looking in the bedrooms, have you? What did you find there?"

"Nothing, sir, not a thing," protested Dunn. "I didn't touch a thing, I only wanted to look round before coming down here to see about the silver."

"And the attics?" asked Deede Dawson. "What did you find there?"

"There wasn't no one in them," Dunn answered. "I only wanted to make sure the young lady was telling the truth about there being no servants in the house to sleep."

"Did you look in all the attics, then?" asked Deede Dawson.

"Yes," answered Dunn. "There was one as was locked, but I tooked the liberty of forcing it just to make sure. I ain't done no harm to speak of."

"You found one locked, eh?" said Deede Dawson, and his smile grew still more pleasant and more friendly. "That must have surprised you a good deal, didn't it?"

"I thought as perhaps there was some one waiting already to give the alarm," answered Dunn. "I didn't mind the old lady, but I couldn't risk there being some one hiding there, so I had to look, but I ain't done no damage to speak of, I could put it right for you myself in half-an-hour, sir, if you'll let me."

"Could you, indeed?" said Deede Dawson. "Well, and did you find any one sleeping there?"

But for that hairy disguise upon his cheeks and chin, Dunn would almost certainly have betrayed himself, so dreadful did the question seem to him, so poignant the double meaning that it bore, so clear his memory of his friend he had found there, sleeping indeed.

But there was nothing to show his inner agitation, as he said, shaking his head

"There wasn't no one there, any more than in the other attics, nothing but an old packing-case."

"And what?" said Deede Dawson, his voice so soft it was like a caress, his smile so sweet it was a veritable benediction. "What was in that packing-case?"

“Didn’t look,” answered Dunn, and then, with a sudden change of manner, as though all at once understanding what previously had puzzled him. “Lum-me,” he cried, “is that where you keep the silver? Lor’, and to think I never even troubled to look.”

“You never looked?” repeated Deede Dawson.

Dunn shook his head with an air of baffled regret. “Never thought of it,” he said. “I thought it was just lumber like in the other attics, and I might have got clear away with it if I had known, as easy as not.”

His chagrin was so apparent, his whole manner so innocent, that Deede Dawson began to believe he really did know nothing.

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"Didn't you wonder why the door was locked?" he asked.

"Lor'," answered Dunn, "if you stopped to wonder about everything you find rummy in a crib you're cracking, when would you ever get your business done?"

"So you didn't look—in that packing-case?" Deede Dawson repeated.

"If I had," answered Dunn ruefully, "I shouldn't be here, copped like this. I should have shoved with the stuff and not waited for nothing more. But I never had no luck."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Deede Dawson grimly, and as he spoke a soft voice called down from upstairs.

"Is there any one there?" it said. "Oh, please, is any one there?"

"Is that you, Ella?" Deede Dawson called back. "Come down here."

"I can't," she answered. "I'm fastened to a chair."

"I didn't hurt the young lady," Dunn interposed quickly. "I only tied her up as gentle as I could to a chair so as to stop her from interfering."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Deede Dawson, and seemed a little amused, as though the thought of his stepdaughter's plight pleased him rather than not. "Well, if she can't come down here, we'll go up there. Turn round, my man, and go up the stairs and keep your hands over your head all the time. I shan't hesitate to shoot if you don't, and I never miss."

Dunn was not inclined to value his life at a very high price as he turned and went awkwardly up the stairs, still holding his hands above his head.

But he meant to save it if he could, for many things depended on it, among them due punishment to be exacted for the crime he had discovered this night; and also, perhaps, for the humiliation he was now enduring.

CHAPTER VIII

CAPTIVITY CAPTIVE

Up the stairs, across the landing, and down the passage opposite Dunn went in silence, shepherded by the little man behind whose pistol was still levelled and still steady.

His hands held high in the air, he pushed open with his knee the door of the girl's room and entered, and she looked up as he did so with an expression of pure astonishment

at his attitude of upheld hands that changed to one of comprehension and of faint amusement as Deede Dawson followed, revolver in hand.

"Oh," she murmured. "Captivity captive, it seems."

At the fireplace Dunn turned and found her looking at him very intently, while from the doorway Deede Dawson surveyed them both, for once his eyes appearing to share in the smile that played about his lips as though he found much satisfaction in what he saw.

"Well, Ella," he said. "You've been having adventures, it seems, but you don't look too comfortable like that."

"Nor do I feel it," she retorted. "So please set me free."

"Yes, so I will," he answered, but he still hesitated, and Dunn had the idea that he was pleased to see the girl like this, and would leave her so if he could, and that he was wondering now if he could turn her predicament to his own advantage in any way.

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"Yes, I will," he said again. "Your mother—?"

"She hasn't wakened," Ella answered. "I don't think she has heard anything. I don't suppose she will, for she took two of those pills last night that Dr. Rawson gave her for when she couldn't sleep."

"It's just as well she did," said Deede Dawson.

"Yes, but please undo my hands," she asked him. "The cords are cutting my wrists dreadfully."

As she spoke she glanced at Dunn, standing by the fireplace and listening gravely to what they said, and Deede Dawson exclaimed with an air of great indignation:—

"The fellow deserves to be well thrashed for treating you like that. I've a good mind to do it, too, before handing him over to the police."

"But you haven't released me yet," she remarked.

"Oh, yes, yes," he said, starting as if this were quite a new idea. "I'll release you at once—but I must watch this scoundrel. He must have frightened you dreadfully."

"Indeed he did not," she answered quickly, again looking at Dunn. "No, he didn't," she said again with a touch of defiance in her manner and a certain slightly lifting her small, round chin. "At least not much after just at first," she added.

"I'll loose you," Deede Dawson said once more, and coming up to her, he began to fumble in a feeble, ineffectual way at the cords that secured her wrists.

"Jove, he's tied you up pretty tight, Ella!" he said.

"He believes in doing his work thoroughly, I suppose," she remarked, lifting her eyes to Dunn's with a look in them that was partly questioning and partly puzzled and wholly elusive. "I daresay he always likes to do everything thoroughly."

"Seems so," said Deede Dawson, giving up his fumbling and ineffectual efforts to release her.

He stepped back and stood behind her chair, looking from her to Dunn and back again, and once more Dunn was conscious of an impression that he wished to make use for his own purposes of the girl's position, but that he did not know how to do so.

"You are a nice scoundrel," said Deede Dawson suddenly, with an indignation that seemed to Dunn largely assumed. "Treating a girl like this. Ella, what would you like done to him? He deserves shooting. Shall I put a bullet through him for you?"

“He might have treated me worse, I suppose,” said Ella quietly. “And if you would be less indignant with him, you might be more help to me. There are scissors on the table somewhere.”

“I’ll get them,” Deede Dawson said. “I’ll get them,” he repeated, as though now at last finally making up his mind.

He took the scissors from the toilet-table where they lay before the looking-glass and cut the cords by which Ella was secured.

With a sigh of relief she straightened herself from the confined position in which she had been held and began to rub her wrists, which were slightly inflamed where the cords had bruised her soft skin.

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"Like to tie him up that way now?" asked Deede Dawson. "You shall if you like."

She turned and looked full at Dunn and he looked back at her with eyes as steady and as calm as her own.

Again she showed that faint doubt and wonder which had flickered through her level gaze before as though she felt that there was more in all this than was apparent, and did not wish to condemn him utterly without a hearing.

But it was plain also that she did not wish to say too much before her stepfather and she answered carelessly

"I don't think I could tie him tight enough, besides, he looks ridiculous enough like that with his hands up in the air."

It was her revenge for what he had made her suffer. He felt himself flush and he knew that she knew that her little barbed shaft had struck home.

"Well, go and look through his pockets," Deede Dawson said. "And see if he's got a revolver. Don't be frightened; if he lowers his hands he'll be a dead man before he knows it."

"He has a pistol," she said. "He showed it me, it's in his coat pocket."

"Better get it then," Deede Dawson told her. She obeyed and brought him the weapon, and he nodded with satisfaction as he put it in his own pocket.

"I think we might let you put your hands down now," he remarked, and Dunn gladly availed himself of the permission, for every muscle in his arms was aching badly.

He remained standing by the wall while Deede Dawson, seating himself on the chair to which Ella had been bound, rested his chin on his left hand and, with the pistol still ready in his right, regarded Dunn with a steady questioning gaze.

Ella was standing near the bed. She had poured a few drops of eau-de-Cologne on her wrists and was rubbing them softly, and for ever after the poignant pleasant odour of the scent has remained associated in Robert Dunn's mind with the strange events of that night so that always even the merest whiff of it conjures up before his mind a picture of that room with himself silent by the fireplace and Ella silent by the bed and Deede Dawson, pistol in hand, seated between them, as silent also as they, and very watchful.

Ella appeared fully taken up with her occupation and might almost have forgotten the presence of the two men. She did not look at either of them, but continued to rub and chafe her wrists softly.

Deede Dawson had forgotten for once to smile, his brow was slightly wrinkled, his cold grey eyes intent and watchful, and Dunn felt very sure that he was thinking out some plan or scheme.

The hope came to him that Deede Dawson was thinking he might prove of use, and that was the thought which, above all others, he wished the other to have. It was, indeed, that thought which all his recent actions had been aimed to implant in Deede Dawson's mind till his dreadful discovery in the attic had seemed to make at last direct action possible. How, in his present plight that thought, if Deede Dawson should come to entertain it, might yet prove his salvation. Now and again Deede Dawson gave him quick, searching glances, but when at last he spoke it was Ella he addressed.

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"Wrists hurt you much?" he asked.

"Not so much now," she answered. "They were beginning to hurt a great deal, though."

"Were they, though?" said Deede Dawson. "And to think you might have been like that for hours if I hadn't chanced to come home. Too bad, what a brute this fellow is."

"Men mostly are, I think," she observed indifferently.

"And women mostly like to get their own back again," he remarked with a chuckle, and then turned sharply to Dunn. "Well, my man," he asked, "what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing," Dunn answered. "It was a fair cop."

"You've had a taste of penal servitude before, I suppose?" Deede Dawson asked.

"Maybe," Dunn answered, as if not wishing to betray himself. "Maybe not."

"Well, I think I remember you said something about not being long out of Dartmoor," remarked Deede Dawson. "How do you relish the prospect of going back there?"

"I wonder," interposed Ella thoughtfully. "I wonder what it is in you that makes you so love to be cruel, father?"

"Eh what?" he exclaimed, quite surprised. "Who's being cruel?"

"You," she answered. "You enjoy keeping him wondering what you are going to do with him, just as you enjoyed seeing me tied to that chair and would have liked to leave me there."

"My dear Ella!" he protested. "My dear child!"

"Oh, I know," she said wearily. "Why don't you hand the man over to the police if you're going to, or let him go at once if you mean to do that?"

"Let him go, indeed!" exclaimed Deede Dawson. "What an idea! What should I do that for?"

"If you'll give me another chance," said Dunn quickly, "I'll do anything—I should get it pretty stiff for this lot, and that wouldn't be any use to you, sir, would it? I can do almost anything—garden, drive a motor, do what I'm told, It's only because I've never had a chance I've had to take to this line."

"If you could do what you're told you certainly might be useful," said Deede Dawson slowly. "And I don't know that it would do me any good to send you off to prison—you deserve it, of course. Still—you talk sometimes like an educated man?"

"I had a bit of education," Dunn answered.

"I see," said Deede Dawson. "Well, I won't ask you any more questions, you'd probably only lie. What's your name?"

With that sudden recklessness which was a part of his impulsive and passionate nature, Dunn answered:

"Charley Wright."

The effect was instantaneous and apparent on both his auditors.

Ella gave a little cry and started so violently that she dropped the bottle of eau-de-Cologne she had in her hands.

Deede Dawson jumped to his feet with a fearful oath. His face went livid, his fat cheeks seemed suddenly to sag, of his perpetual smile every trace vanished.

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He swung his revolver up, and Dunn saw the crooked forefinger quiver as though in the very act of pressing the trigger.

The pressure of a hair decided, indeed, whether the weapon was to fire or not, as in a high-pitched, stammering voice, Deede Dawson gasped:

“What—what do you mean? What do you mean by that?”

“I only told you my name,” Dunn answered. “What’s wrong with it?”

Doubtful and afraid, Deede Dawson stood hesitant. His forehead had become very damp, and he wiped it with a nervous gesture.

“Is that your name—your real name?” he muttered.

“Never had another that I know of,” Dunn answered.

Deede Dawson sat down again on the chair. He was still plainly very disturbed and shaken, and Ella seemed scarcely less agitated, though Dunn, watching them both very keenly, noticed that she was now looking at Deede Dawson with a somewhat strange expression and with an air as though his extreme excitement puzzled her and made her—afraid.

“Nothing wrong with the name, is there?” Dunn muttered again.

“No, no,” Deede Dawson answered. “No. It’s merely a coincidence, that’s all. A coincidence, I suppose, Ella?”

Ella did not answer. Her expression was very troubled and full of doubt as she stood looking from her stepfather to Dunn and back again.

“It’s only that your name happens to be the same as that of a friend of ours—a great friend of my daughter’s,” Deede Dawson said as though he felt obliged to offer some explanation. “That’s all—a coincidence. It startled me for the moment.” He laughed. “That’s all. Well, my man, it happens there is something I can make you useful in. If you do prove useful and do what I tell you, perhaps you may get let off. I might even keep you on in a job. I won’t say I will, but I might. You look a likely sort of fellow for work, and I daresay you aren’t any more dishonest than most people. Funny how things happen—quite a coincidence, your name. Well, come on; it’s that packing-case you saw in the attic upstairs. I want you to help me downstairs with that—Charley Wright.”

CHAPTER IX

THE ATTIC OF MYSTERY

Robert Dunn was by no means sure that he was not going to his death as he went out of Ella's room on his way to the attics above, for he had perceived a certain doubt and suspicion in Deede Dawson's manner, and he thought it very likely that a fatal intention lay behind.

But he obeyed with a brisk promptitude of manner, like one who saw a prospect of escape opening before him, and as he went he saw that Ella had relapsed into her former indifference and was once more giving all her attention to bathing her wrists with eau-de-Cologne; and he saw, too, that Deede Dawson, following close behind, kept always his revolver ready.

"Perhaps he only wants to get me out of her way before he shoots," he reflected. "Perhaps there is room in that packing-case for two. It will be strange to die. Shall I try to rush him? But he would shoot at once, and I shouldn't have a chance. One thing, if anything happens to me, no one will ever know what's become of poor Charley."

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And this seemed to him a great pity, so that he began to form confused and foolish plans for securing that his friend's fate should become known.

With a sudden start, for he had not known he was there, he found himself standing on the threshold of that attic of death. It was quite dark up here, and from behind Deede Dawson's voice told him impatiently to enter.

He obeyed, wondering if ever again he would cross that threshold alive, and Deede Dawson followed him into the dark attic so that Dunn was appalled by the man's rashness, for how could he tell that his victim would not take this opportunity to rise up from the place where he had been thrust and take his revenge?

"What an idea," he thought to himself. "I must be going dotty, it's the strain of expecting a bullet in my back all the time, I suppose. I was never like this before."

Deede Dawson struck a match and put it to a gas-jet that lighted up the whole room. Between him and Dunn lay the packing-case, and Dunn was surprised to see that it was still there and that nothing had changed or moved; and then again he said to himself that this was a foolish thought only worthy of some excitable, hysterical girl.

"It's being too much for me," he thought resignedly. "I've heard of people being driven mad by horror. I suppose that's what's happening to me."

"You look—queer," Deede Dawson's voice interrupted the confused medley of his thoughts. "Why do you look like that—Charley Wright?"

Dunn looked moodily across the case in which the body of the murdered man was hidden to where the murderer stood.

After a pause, and speaking with an effort, he said:

"You'd look queer if some one with a pistol was watching you all the time the way you watch me."

"You do what I tell you and you'll be all right," Deede Dawson answered. "You see that packing-case?"

Dunn nodded.

"It's big enough," he said.

"Would you like to know?" asked Deede Dawson slowly with his slow, perpetual smile. "Would you like to know what's in it—Charley Wright?"

And again Dunn was certain that a faint suspicion hung about those last two words, and that his life and death hung very evenly in the balance.

“Silver, you said,” he muttered. “Didn’t you?”

“Ah, yes—yes—to be sure,” answered Deede Dawson. “Yes, so I did. Silver. I want the lid nailed down. There’s a hammer and nails there. Get to work and look sharp.”

Dunn stepped forward and began to set about a task that was so terrible and strange, and that yet he had, at peril of his life—at peril of more than that, indeed—to treat as of small importance.

Standing a little distance from the lighted gas-jet, Deede Dawson watched him narrowly, and as Dunn worked he was very sure that to betray the least sign of his knowledge would be to bring instantly a bullet crashing through his brain.

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It seemed curious to him that he had so carefully replaced everything after making his discovery, and that without any forethought or special intention he had put back everything so exactly as he had found it when the slightest neglect or failure in that respect would most certainly have cost him his life.

And he felt that as yet he could not afford to die.

One by one he drove in the nails, and as he worked at his gruesome task he heard the faintest rustle on the landing without—the faintest sound of a soft breath cautiously drawn in, of a light foot very carefully set down.

Deede Dawson plainly heard nothing; indeed, no ear less acute and less well-trained than Dunn's could have caught sounds that were so slight and low, but he, listening between each stroke of his hammer, was sure that it was Ella who had followed them, and that she crouched upon the landing without, watching and listening.

Did that mean, he wondered, that she, too, knew? Or was it merely natural curiosity; hostile in part, perhaps, since evidently the relations between her and her stepfather were not too friendly—a desire to know what task there could be in the attics so late at night for which Deede Dawson had such need of his captive's help?

Or was it by any chance because she wished to know how things went with him, and what was to be his fate?

In any case, Dunn was sure that Ella had followed then, and was on the landing without.

He drove home the last nail and stood up. "That's done," he said.

"And well done," said Deede Dawson. "Well done—Charley Wright."

He spoke the name softly and lingeringly, and then all at once he began to laugh, a low and somewhat dreadful laughter that had in it no mirth at all, and that sounded horrible and strange in the chill emptiness of the attic.

Leaning one hand on the packing-case that served as the coffin of his dead friend, Dunn swore a silent oath to exact full retribution, and henceforth to put that purpose on a level with the mission on which originally he had come.

Aloud, and in a grumbling tone he said:

"What's the matter with my name? It's a name like any other. What's wrong with it?"

"What should there be?" flashed Deede Dawson in reply.

"I don't know," Dunn answered. "You keep repeating it so, that's all."

"It's a very good name," Deede Dawson said. "An excellent name. But it's not suitable. Not here." He began to laugh again and then stopped abruptly.

"Do you know, I think you had better choose another?" he said.

"It's all one to me," declared Dunn. "If Charley Wright don't suit, how will Robert Dunn do? I knew a man of that name once."

"It's a better name than Charley Wright," said Deede Dawson. "We'll call you Robert Dunn—Charley Wright. Do you know why I can't have you call yourself Charley Wight?"

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Dunn shook his head.

“Because I don’t like it,” said Deede Dawson. “Why, that’s a name that would drive me mad,” he muttered, half to himself.

Dunn did not speak, but he thought this was a strange thing for the other to say and showed that even he, cold and remorseless and without any natural feeling, as he had seemed to be, yet had about him still some touch of humanity.

And as he mused on this, which seemed to him so strange, though really it was not strange at all, his attentive ears caught the sound of a soft step without, beginning to descend the stairs.

Had that name, then, been more than she also could bear?

If so, she must know.

“I don’t see why, I don’t see what’s wrong with it,” he said aloud. “But Robert Dunn will suit me just as well.”

“All a matter of taste,” said Deede Dawson, his manner more composed and natural again.

“It’s a funny thing now—suppose my name was Charley Wright, then there would be two Charley Wrights in this attic, eh? A coincidence, that would be?”

“I suppose so,” answered Dunn. “I knew another man named Charley Wright once.”

“Did you? Where’s he?”

“Oh, he’s dead,” answered Dunn.

Deede Dawson could not repress the start he gave and for a moment Dunn thought that his suspicions were really roused. He came a little nearer, his pistol still ready in his hand.

“Dead, is he?” he said. “That’s a pity. He’s not here, then; but it would be funny wouldn’t it, if there were two Charley Wrights in one room?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Dunn answered. “I think there are lots of funnier things than that would be.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” retorted Deede Dawson, and he laughed again, shrilly and dreadfully, a laughter that had in it anything but mirth.

“Can you carry that packing-case downstairs if I help you get it on your shoulder?” he asked abruptly.

“It’s heavy, but I might,” Dunn answered.

He supposed that now it was about to be hidden somewhere and he felt that he must know where, since that knowledge would mean everything and enable him to set the authorities to work at once immediately he could communicate with them.

The weight of the thing taxed even his great strength to the utmost, but he managed it somehow, and bending beneath his burden, he descended the stairs to the hall and then, following the orders Deede Dawson gave him from behind, out into the open air.

He was nearly exhausted when at last his task-master told him he could put it down as he stood still for a minute or two to recover his breath and strength.

The night was not very dark, for a young moon was shining in a clear sky, and it appeared to Dunn, as he felt his strength returning, that now at last he might find an opportunity of making an attack upon his captor with some chance of success.

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Hitherto, in the house, in the bright glare of the gas lights, he had known that the first suspicious movement he made would have ensured his being instantly and remorselessly shot down, his mission unfulfilled.

But here in the open air, in the night that the moon illumined but faintly, it was different, and as he watched for his opportunity he felt that sooner or later it was sure to come.

But Deede Dawson was alert and wary, his pistol never left his hand, he kept so well on his guard he gave Dunn no opening to take him unawares, and Dunn did not wish to run too desperate a chance, since he was sure that sooner or later one giving fair chance of success would present itself.

"Do you want it carried any further?" he asked. "It's very heavy."

"I suppose you mean you're wondering what's in it?" said Deede Dawson sharply.

"It's nothing to me what's in it—silver or anything else," retorted Dunn. "Do you want me to carry it further, that's all I asked?"

"No," answered Deede Dawson. "No, I don't. Do you know, if you knew what was really in it, you'd be surprised?"

"Very likely," answered Dunn. "Why not?"

"Yes, you would be surprised," Deede Dawson repeated, and suddenly shouted into the darkness: "Are you ready? Are you ready there?"

Dunn was very startled, for somehow, he had supposed all along that Deede Dawson was quite alone.

There was no answer to his call, but after a minute or two there was the sound of a motor-car engine starting and then a big car came gliding forward and stopped in front of them, driven by a form so muffled in coats and coverings as to be indistinguishable in that faint light.

"Put the case inside," Deede Dawson said. "I'll help you."

With some trouble they succeeded in getting the case in and Deede Dawson covered it carefully with a big rug.

When he had done so he stepped back.

"Ready, Ella?" he said.



“Yes,” answered the girl’s soft and low voice that already Dunn could have sworn to amidst a thousand others.

CHAPTER X

THE NEW GARDENER

“Go ahead, then,” said Deede Dawson, and the great car with its terrible burden shot away into the night.

For a moment or two Deede Dawson stood looking after it, and then he turned and walked slowly towards the house, and mechanically Dunn followed, the sole thought in his mind, the one idea of which he was conscious, that of Ella driving away into the darkness with the dead body of his murdered friend in the car behind her.

Did she—know? he asked himself. Or was she ignorant of what it was she had with her?

It seemed to him that that question, hammering itself so awfully upon his mind and clamouring for an answer, must soon send him mad.

And still before him floated perpetually a picture of long, dark, lonely roads, of a rushing motor-car driven by a lovely girl, of the awful thing hidden in the car behind her.

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Dully he recognized that the opportunity for which he had watched and waited so patiently had come and gone a dozen times, for Deede Dawson had now quite relaxed his former wary care.

It was as though he supposed all danger over, as though in the reaction after an enormous strain he could think of nothing but the immediate relief. He hardly gave a single glance at Dunn, whose faintest movement before had never escaped him. He had even put his pistol back in his pocket, and at almost any moment Dunn, with his unusual strength and agility, could have seized and mastered him.

But for such an enterprise Dunn had no longer any spirit, for all his mind was taken up by that one picture so clear in his thoughts of Ella in her great car driving the dead man through the night. "She must know," he said to himself. "She must, or she would never have gone off like that at that time—she can't know, it's impossible, or she would never have dared."

And again it seemed to him that this doubt was driving him mad.

Deede Dawson entered the house and got a bottle of whisky and a syphon of soda-water and mixed himself a drink. For the first time since Ella's departure he seemed to remember Dunn's presence.

"Oh, there you are," he said.

Dunn did not answer. He stood moodily on the threshold, wondering why he did not rush upon the other, and with his knee upon his chest, his hands about his throat, force him to answer the question that was still whispering, shouting, screaming itself into his ears:

"Does she know what it is she drives with her on that big car through the black and lonely night?"

"Like a drink?" asked Deede Dawson.

Dunn shook his head, and it came to him that he did not attack Deede Dawson and force the truth from him because he dared not, because he was afraid, because he feared what the answer might be.

"There's a tool-shed at the bottom of the garden," Deede Dawson said to him. "You can sleep there, tonight. You'll find some sacks you can make a bed of."

Without a word in reply Dunn turned and stumbled away. He felt very tired—physically exhausted—and the idea of a bed, even of sacks in an outhouse, became all at once extraordinarily attractive.

He found the place without difficulty, and, making a pile of the sacks, flung himself down on them and was asleep almost at once. But almost as promptly he awoke again, for he had dreamed of Ella driving her car through the night towards some strange peril from which in his dream he was trying frantically and ineffectively to save her when he awoke.

So it was all through the night.

His utter and complete exhaustion compelled him to sleep, and every time some fresh, fantastic dream in which Ella and the huge motor-car and the dreadful burden she had with her always figured, awoke him with a fresh start.

But towards morning he fell into a heavy sleep from which presently he awoke to find it broad daylight and Deede Dawson standing on the threshold of the shed with his perpetually smiling lips and his cold, unsmiling eyes.

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"Well, my man; had a good sleep?" he said.

"I was tired," Dunn answered.

"Yes, we had a busy night," agreed Deede Dawson. "I slept well, too. I've been wondering what to do with you. Of course, I ought to hand you over to the police, and it's rather a risk taking on a man of your character, but I've decided to give you a chance. Probably you'll misuse it. But I'll give you an opportunity as gardener and chauffeur here. You can drive a car, you say?"

Dunn nodded.

"That's all right," said Deede Dawson.

"You shall have your board and lodging, and I'll get you some decent clothes instead of those rags; and if you prove satisfactory and make yourself useful you'll find I can pay well. There will be plenty of chances for you to make a little money—if you know how to take them."

"When it's money," growled Dunn, "you give me the chance, and see."

"I think," added Deede Dawson, "I think it might improve your looks if you shaved."

Dunn passed his hand over the tangle of hair that hid his features so effectually.

"What for?" he asked.

"Oh, well: please yourself," answered Deede Dawson; "I don't know that it matters, and perhaps you have reasons of your own for preferring a beard. Come on up to the house now and I'll tell Mrs. Dawson to give you some breakfast. And you might as well have a wash, too, perhaps—unless you object to that as well as to shaving."

Dunn rose without answering, made his toilet by shaking off some of the dust that clung to him, and followed his new employer out of the tool-house into the open air.

It was a fresh and lovely morning, and coming towards them down one of the garden paths was Ella, looking as fresh and lovely as the morning in a dainty cotton frock with lace at her throat and wrists.

That she could possibly have spent the night tearing across country in a powerful car conveying a dead man to an unknown destination, appeared to Dunn a clean impossibility, and for a moment he almost supposed he had been mistaken in thinking he recognized her voice.

But he knew he had not, that he had made no mistake, that it had indeed been Ella he had seen dash away into the darkness on her strange and terrible errand.

“Oh, my daughter,” said Deede Dawson carelessly, noticing Dunn’s surprise. “Oh, yes, she’s back—you didn’t expect to see her this morning. Well, Ella, Dunn’s surprised to see you back so soon, aren’t you, Dunn?”

Dunn did not answer, for a kind of vertigo of horror had come upon him, and for a moment all things revolved about him in a whirling circle wherein the one fixed point was Ella’s gentle lovely face that sometimes, he thought, had a small round hole with blue edges in the very centre of the forehead, above the nose.

It was her voice, clear and a little loud, that called him back to himself.

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"He's not well," she was saying. "He's going to faint."

"I'm all right," he muttered. "It was nothing, nothing, it's only that I've had nothing to eat for so long."

"Oh, poor man!" exclaimed Ella.

"Come up to the house," Deede Dawson said.

"Breakfast's ready," Ella said. "Mother told me to find you."

"Has the woman come yet?" Deede Dawson asked. "If she has, you might tell her to give Dunn some breakfast. I've just been telling him I'm willing to give him another chance and to take him on as gardener and chauffeur, so you can keep an eye on him and see if he works well."

Ella was silent for a moment, but her expression was grave and a little puzzled as though she did not quite understand this and wondered what it meant, and when she looked up at her stepfather, Dunn was certain there was both distrust and suspicion in her manner.

"I suppose," she said then, "last night seemed to you a good recommendation?" As she spoke she glanced at her wrists where the bruises still showed, and Deede Dawson's smile broadened.

"One should always be ready to give another chance to a poor fellow who's down," he said. "He may run straight now he's got an opportunity. I told him he had better shave, but he seems to think a beard suits him best. What do you say?"

"Breakfast's waiting," Ella answered, turning away without taking any notice of the question.

"I'll go in then," said Deede Dawson. "You might show Dunn the way to the kitchen—his name's Robert Dunn, by the way—and tell Mrs. Barker to give him something to eat."

"I should think he could find his way there himself," Ella remarked.

But though she made this protest, she obeyed at once, for though she used a considerable liberty of speech to her stepfather, it was none the less evident that she was very much afraid of him and would not be very likely to disobey him or oppose him directly.

"This way," she said to Dunn, and walked on along a path that led to the back of the house. Once she stopped and looked back. She smiled slightly and disdainfully as she

did so, and Dunn saw that she was looking at a clump of small bushes near where they had been standing.

He guessed at once that she believed Deede Dawson to be behind those bushes watching them, and when she glanced at him he understood that she wished him to know it also.

He said nothing, though a faint movement visible in the bushes convinced him that her suspicions, if, indeed, she had them, were well-founded, and they walked on in silence, Ella a little ahead, and Dunn a step or two behind.

The garden was a large one, and had at one time been well cultivated, but now it was neglected and overgrown. It struck Dunn that if he was to be the gardener here he would certainly not find himself short of work, and Ella, without looking round, said to him over her shoulder:

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"Do you know anything about gardening?"

"A little, miss," he answered.

"You needn't call me 'miss,'" she observed. "When a man has tied a girl to a chair I think he may regard himself as on terms of some familiarity with her."

"What must I call you?" he asked, and his words bore to himself a double meaning, for, indeed, what name was it by which he ought to call her?

But she seemed to notice nothing as she answered "My name is Cayley —Ella Cayley. You can call me Miss Cayley. Do you know anything of motoring?"

"Yes," he answered. "Though I never cared much for motoring at night."

She gave him a quick glance, but said no more, and they came almost immediately to the back door.

Ella opened it and entered, nodding to him to follow, and crossing a narrow, stone-floored passage, she entered the kitchen where a tall gaunt elderly woman in a black bonnet and, a course apron was at work.

"This is Dunn, Mrs. Barker," she called, raising her voice. "He is the new gardener. Will you give him some breakfast, please?" She added to Dunn:

"When you've finished, you can go to the garage and wash the car, and when you speak to Mrs. Barker you must shout. She is quite deaf, that is why my stepfather engaged her, because he was sorry for her and wanted to give her a chance, you know . . . "

CHAPTER XI

THE PROBLEM

When he had finished his breakfast, and after he had had the wash of which he certainly stood in considerable need, Dunn made his way to the garage and there occupied himself cleaning the car. He noticed that the mud with which it was liberally covered was of a light sandy sort, and he discovered on one of the tyres a small shell.

Apparently, therefore, last night's wild journey had been to the coast, and it was a natural inference that the sea had provided a secure hiding-place for the packing-case and its dreadful contents.

But then that meant that there was no evidence left on which he could take action.

As he busied himself with his task, he tried to think out as clearly as he could the position in which he found himself and to decide what he ought to do next.

To his quick and hasty nature the swiftest action was always the most congenial, and had he followed his instinct, he would have lost no time in denouncing Deede Dawson. But his cooler thoughts told him that he dared not do that, since it would be to involve risks, not for himself, but for others, that he simply dared not contemplate.

He felt that the police, even if they credited his story, which he also felt that very likely they would not do, could not act on his sole evidence.

And even if they did act and did arrest Deede Dawson, it was certain no jury would convict on so strange a story, so entirely uncorroborated.

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The only result would be to strengthen Deede Dawson's position by the warning, to show him his danger, and to give him the opportunity, if he chose to use it, of disappearing and beginning again his plots and plans after some fresh and perhaps more deadly fashion.

"Whereas at present," he mused, "at any rate, I'm here and he doesn't seem to suspect me, and I can watch and wait for a time, till I see my way more clearly."

And this decision he came to was a great relief to him, for he desired very greatly to know more before he acted and in especial to find out for certain what was Ella's position in all this.

It was Deede Dawson's voice that broke in upon his meditations.

"Ah, you're busy," he said. "That's right, I like to see a man working hard. I've got some new things for you I think may fit fairly well, and Mrs. Dawson is going to get one of the attics ready for you to sleep in."

"Very good, sir," said Dunn.

He wondered which attic was to be assigned to him and if it would be that one in which he had found his friend's body. He suspected, too, that he was to be lodged in the house so that Deede Dawson might watch him, and this pleased him, since it meant that he, in his turn, would be able to watch Deede Dawson.

Not that there appeared much to watch, for the days passed on and it seemed a very harmless and quiet life that Deede Dawson lived with his wife and stepdaughter.

But for the memory, burned into Dunn's mind, of what he had seen that night of his arrival, he would have been inclined to say that no more harmless, gentle soul existed than Deede Dawson.

But as it was, the man's very gentleness and smiling urbanity filled him with a loathing that it was at times all he could do to control.

The attic assigned to him to sleep in was that where he had made his dreadful discovery, and he believed this had been done as a further test of his ignorance, for he was sure Deede Dawson watched him closely to see if the idea of being there was in any way repugnant to him.

Indeed at another time he might have shrunk from the idea of sleeping each night in the very room where his friend had been foully done to death, but now he derived a certain grim satisfaction and a strengthening of his nerves for the task that lay before him.

Only a very few visitors came to Bittermeads, especially now that Mr. John Clive, who had come often, was laid up. But one or two of the people from the village came occasionally, and the vicar appeared two or three times every week, ostensibly to play chess with Deede Dawson, but in reality, Dunn thought, drawn there by Ella, who, however, seemed quite unaware of the attraction she exercised over the good man.

Dunn did not find that he was expected to do very much work, and in fact, he was left a good deal to himself.

Once or twice the car was taken out, and occasionally Deede Dawson would come into the garden and chat with him idly for a few minutes on indifferent subjects. When it was fine he would often bring out a little travelling set of chessmen and board and proceed to amuse himself, working out or composing problems.

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One day he called Dunn up to admire a problem he had just composed.

“Pretty clever, eh?” he said, admiring his own work with much complacency. “Quite an original idea of mine and I think the key move will take some finding. What do you say? I suppose you do play chess?”

“Only a very little,” answered Dunn.

“Try a game with me,” said Deede Dawson, and won it easily, for in fact, Dunn was by no means a strong player.

His swift victory appeared to delight Deede Dawson immensely.

“A very pretty mate I brought off there against you,” he declared. “I’ve not often seen a prettier. Now you try to solve that problem of mine, it’s easy enough once you hit on the key move.”

Dunn thought to himself that there were other and more important problems which would soon be solved if only the key move could be discovered.

He said aloud that he would try what he could do, and Deede Dawson promised him half a sovereign if he solved it within a week.

“I mayn’t manage it within a week,” said Dunn. “I don’t say I will. But sooner or later I shall find it out.”

During all this time he had seen little of Ella, who appeared to come very little into the garden and who, when she did so, avoided him in a somewhat marked manner.

Her mother, Mrs. Dawson, was a little faded woman, with timid eyes and a frightened manner. Her health did not seem to be good, and Ella looked after her very assiduously. That she went in deadly fear of her husband was fairly evident, though he seemed to treat her always with great consideration and kindness and even with a show of affection, to which at times she responded and from which at other times she appeared to shrink with inexplicable terror.

“She doesn’t know,” Dunn said to himself. “But she suspects —something.”

Ella, he still watched with the same care and secrecy, and sometimes he seemed to see her walking amidst the flowers as an angel of sweetness and laughing innocence; and sometimes he saw her, as it were, with the shadow of death around her beauty, and behind her gentle eyes and winning ways a great and horrible abyss.

Of one thing he was certain—her mind was troubled and she was not at ease; and it was plain, also, that she feared her smiling soft-spoken stepfather.

As the days passed, too, Dunn grew convinced that she was watching him all the time, even when she seemed most indifferent, as closely and as intently as he watched her.

“All watching together,” Dunn thought grimly. “It would be simple enough, I suppose, if one could hit on the key move, but that I suppose no one knows but Deede Dawson himself. One thing, he can’t very well be up to any fresh mischief while he’s lounging about here like this. I suppose he is simply waiting his time.”

As for the chess problem, that baffled him entirely. He said as much to Deede Dawson, who was very pleased, but would not tell him what the solution was.

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"No, no, find it out for yourself," he said, chuckling with a merriment in which, for once his cold eyes seemed to take full share.

"I'll go on trying," said Dunn, and it grew to be quite a custom between them for Deede Dawson to ask him how he was getting on with the problem; and for Dunn to reply that he was still searching for the key move.

Several times little errands took Dunn into the village, where, discreetly listening to the current gossip, he learned that Mr. John Clive of Ramsdon Place had been injured in an attack made upon him by a gang of ferocious poachers—at least a dozen in number—but was making good progress towards recovery.

Also, he found that Mr. John Clive's visits to Bittermeads had not gone unremarked, or wholly uncriticized, since there was a vague feeling that a Mr. Clive of Ramsdon Place ought to make a better match.

"But a pretty face is all a young man thinks of," said the more experienced; and on the whole, it seemed to be felt that the open attention Clive paid to Ella was at least easily to be understood.

Almost the first visit Clive paid, when he was allowed to venture out, was to Bittermeads; and Dunn, returning one afternoon from an errand, found him established on the lawn in the company of Ella, and looking little the worse for his adventure.

He and Ella seemed to be talking very animatedly, and Dunn took the opportunity to busy himself with some gardening work not far away, so that he could watch their behaviour.

He told himself it was necessary he should know in what relation they stood to each other, and as he heard them chatting and laughing together with great apparent friendliness and enjoyment, he remembered with considerable satisfaction how he had already broken one rib of Clive's, and he wished very much for an opportunity to break another.

For, without knowing why, he was beginning to conceive an intense dislike for Clive; and, also, it did not seem to him quite good taste for Ella to sit and chat and laugh with him so readily.

"But we were told," he caught a stray remark of Ella's, "that it was a gang of at least a dozen that attacked you."

"No," answered Clive reluctantly. "No, I think there was only one. But he had a grip like a bear."

"He must have been very strong," remarked Ella thoughtfully.



"I would give fifty pounds to meet him again, and have it out in the light, when one could see what one was doing," declared Clive with great vigour.

"Oh, you would, would you?" muttered Dunn to himself. "Well, one of these days I may claim that fifty."

He looked round at Clive as he thought this, and Clive noticed him, and said:

"Is that a new man you've got there Miss Cayley? Doesn't he rather want a shave? Where on earth did Mr. Dawson pick him up?"

"Oh, he came here with the very best testimonials, and father engaged him on the spot," answered Ella, touching her wrists thoughtfully. "He certainly is not very handsome, but then that doesn't matter, does it?"

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She spoke more loudly than usual, and Dunn was certain she did so in order that he might hear what she said. So he had no scruple in lingering on pretence of being busy with a rose bush, and heard Clive say:

“Well, if he were one of my chaps, I should tell him to put the lawn-mower over his own face.”

Ella laughed amusedly.

“Oh, what an idea, Mr. Clive,” she cried, and Dunn thought to himself:

“Yes, one day I shall very certainly claim that fifty pounds.”

CHAPTER XII

AN AVOWAL

When Clive had gone that afternoon, Ella, who had accompanied him as far as the gate, and had from thence waved him a farewell, came back to the spot where Dunn was working.

She stood still, watching him, and he looked up at her and then went on with his work without speaking, for now, as always, the appalling thought was perpetually in his mind: “Must she not have known what it was she had with her in the car when she went driving that night?”

After a little, she turned away, as if disappointed that he took no notice of her presence.

At once he raised himself from the task he had been bending over, and stood moodily watching the slim, graceful figure, about which hung such clouds of doubt and dread, and she, turning around suddenly, as if she actually felt the impact of his gaze, saw him, and saw the strange expression in his eyes.

“Why do you look at me like that?” she asked quickly, her soft and gentle tones a little shrill, as though swift fear had come upon her.

“Like what?” he mumbled.

“Oh, you know,” she cried passionately. “Am I to be the next?” she asked.

He started, and looked at her wonderingly, asking himself if these words of hers bore the grim meaning that his mind instantly gave them.

Was it possible that if she did know something of what was going on in this quiet country house, during these peaceful autumn days, she knew it not as willing accomplice, but as a helpless, destined victim who saw no way of escape.

As if she feared she had said too much, she turned and began to walk away.

At once he followed.

“Stop one moment,” he exclaimed. “Miss Cayley.”

She obeyed, turning quickly to face him. They were both very pale, and both were under the influence of strong excitement. But between them there hung a thick cloud of doubt and dread that neither could penetrate.

All at once Dunn, unable to control himself longer, burst out with that question which for so long had hovered on his lips.

“Do you know,” he said, “do you know what you took away with you in the car that night I came here?”

“The packing-case, you meant” she asked. “Of course I do; I helped to get it ready—what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” he muttered, though indeed he had staggered as beneath some sudden and violent blow. “Oh—did you?” he said, with an effort.

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"Certainly," she answered. "Now I've answered your question, will you answer me one? Why did you tell us your name was Charley Wright?"

"I knew a man of that name once," he answered. "He's dead now."

"I thought perhaps," she said slowly and quite calmly, "that it was because you had seen the name written on a photograph in my room."

"No, it wasn't that," he answered gravely, and his doubts that for a moment had seemed so terribly confirmed, now came back again, for though she had said that she knew of the contents of the packing-case, yet, if that were really so, how was it conceivable that she should speak of such a thing so calmly?

And yet again, if she could do it, perhaps also she could talk of it without emotion. Once more there was fear in his eyes as he watched her, and her own were troubled and doubtful.

"Why do you have all that hair on your face?" she asked.

"Well, why shouldn't I?" he retorted. "It saves trouble."

"Does it?" she said. "Do you know what it looks like—like a disguise?"

"A disguise?" he repeated. "Why should I want a disguise?"

"Do you think I'm quite a fool because I'm a woman?" she asked impatiently. "Do you suppose I couldn't see very well when you came that night that you were not an ordinary burglar? You had some reason of your own for breaking into this house. What was it?"

"I'll tell you," he answered, "if you'll tell me truly what was in that packing-case?"

"Oh, now I understand," she cried excitedly. "It was to find that out you came—and then Mr. Dawson made you help us get it away. That was splendid."

He did not speak, for once more a kind of horror held him dumb, as it seemed to him that she really—knew.

She saw the mingled horror and bewilderment in his eyes, and she laughed lightly as though that amused her.

"Do you know," she said, "I believe I guessed as much from the first, but I'm afraid Mr. Dawson was too clever for you—as he is for most people. Only then," she added, wrinkling her brows as though a new point puzzled her, "why are you staying here like this?"

“Can’t you guess that too?” he asked hoarsely.

“No,” she said, shaking her head with a frankly puzzled air. “No, I can’t. That’s puzzled me all the time. Do you know—I think you ought to shave?”

“Why?”

“A beard makes a good disguise,” she answered, “so good it’s hardly fair for you to have it when I can’t.”

“Perhaps you need it less,” he answered bitterly, “or perhaps no disguise could be so effective as the one you have already.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Bright eyes, a pretty face, a clear complexion,” he answered.

He spoke with an extreme energy and bitterness that she did not in the least understand, and that quite took away from the words any suspicion of intentional rudeness.

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"If I have all that, I suppose it's natural and not a disguise," she remarked.

"My beard is natural too," he retorted.

"All the same, I wish you would cut it off," she answered. "I should like to see what you look like."

She turned and walked away, and the more Dunn thought over this conversation, the less he felt he understood it.

What had she meant by that strange start and look she had given him when she had asked if she were to be the next? And when she asserted so confidently that she knew what was in the packing-case, was that true, or was she speaking under some mistaken impression, or had she wished to deceive him?

The more he thought, the more disturbed he felt, and every hour that passed he seemed to feel more and more strongly the influence of her gracious beauty, the horror of his suspicions of her.

The next day Clive came again, and again Ella seemed very pleased to see him, and again Dunn, hanging about in their vicinity, watched gloomily their friendly intercourse.

That Clive was in love with Ella seemed fairly certain; at any rate, he showed himself strongly attracted by her, and very eager for her company.

How she felt was more doubtful, though she made no concealment of the fact that she liked to see him, and found pleasure in having him there. Dunn, moving about near at hand, was aware of an odd impression that she knew he was watching them, and that she wished him to do so for several times he saw her glance in his direction.

He could always move with a most extraordinary lightness of foot, so that, big and clumsy as he seemed in build, he could easily go unheard and even unseen, and John Clive seemed to have little idea that he remained so persistently near at hand.

This gift or power of Dunn's he had acquired in far-off lands, where life may easily depend on the snapping of a twig or the right interpretation of a trampled grass-blade, and he was using it now, almost unconsciously, so as to make his presence near Ella and Clive as unobtrusive as possible, when his keen eye caught sight of a bush, of which leaves and branches were moving against the wind.

For that he knew there could be but one explanation, and when he walked round, so as to get behind this bush, he was not surprised to see Deede Dawson crouching there, his eyes very intent and eager, his unsmiling lips drawn back to show his white teeth in a threatening grin or snarl.

Near by him was his little chess-board and men, and as Dunn came up behind he looked round quickly and saw him.

For a moment his eyes were deadly and his hand dropped to his hip-pocket, where Dunn had reason to believe he carried a formidable little automatic pistol.

But almost at once his expression changed, and with a gesture he invited Dunn to crouch down at his side. For a little they remained like this, and then Deede Dawson moved cautiously away, signing to Dunn to follow him.

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When they were at a safe distance he turned to Dunn and said

“Is he serious, do you think, or is he playing with her? I’ll make him pay for it if he is.”

“How should I know?” answered Dunn, quite certain it was no such anxiety as this that had set Deede Dawson watching them so carefully.

Deede Dawson seemed to feel that the explanation he had offered was a little crude, and he made no attempt to enlarge on it.

With a complete change of manner, with his old smile on his lips and his eyes as dark and unsmiling as ever, he said

“Pretty girl, Ella—isn’t she?”

“She is more than pretty, she is beautiful,” Dunn answered with an emphasis that made Deede Dawson look at him sharply.

“Think so?” he said, and gave his peculiar laugh that had so little mirth in it. “Well, you’re right, she is. He’ll be a lucky man that gets her—and she’s to be had, you know. But I’ll tell you one thing, it won’t be John Clive.”

“I thought it rather looked,” observed Dunn, “as if Miss Cayley might mean—”

Deede Dawson interrupted with a quick jerk of his head.

“Never mind what she means, it’ll be what I mean,” he declared. “I am boss; and what’s more, she knows it. I believe in a man being master in his own family. Don’t you?”

“If he can be,” retorted Dunn. “But still, a girl naturally—”

“Naturally nothing,” Deede Dawson interrupted again. “I tell you what I want for her, a man I can-trust-trust-that’s the great thing. Some one I can trust.”

He nodded at Dunn as he said this and then walked off, and Dunn felt very puzzled as he, too, turned away.

“Was he offering her to me?” he asked himself. “It almost sounded like it. If so, it must mean there’s something he wants from me pretty bad. She’s beautiful enough to turn any man’s head—but did she know about poor Charlie’s murder? —help in it, perhaps? —as she said she did with the packing-case.”

He paused, and all his body was shaken by strong and fierce emotion.

“God help me,” he groaned. “I believe I would marry her tomorrow if I could, innocent or guilty.”

CHAPTER XIII

INVISIBLE WRITING

It was the next day that there arrived by the morning post a letter for Dunn.

Deede Dawson raised his eyebrows slightly when he saw it; and he did not hand it on until he had made himself master of its contents, though that did not prove to be very enlightening or interesting. The note, in fact, merely expressed gratification at the news that Dunn had secured steady work, a somewhat weak hope that he would keep it, and a still fainter hope that now perhaps he would be able to return the ten shillings borrowed, apparently from the writer, at some time in the past.

Mr. Deede Dawson, in spite of the jejune nature of the communication, read it very carefully and indeed even went so far as to examine the letter through a powerful magnifying-glass.

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But he made no discovery by the aid of that instrument, and he neglected, for no man thinks of everything, to expose the letter to a gentle heat, which was what Dunn did when, presently, he received it, apparently unopened and with not the least sign to show that it had been tampered with in any way whatever.

Gradually, however, as Dunn held it to the fire, there appeared between the lines fresh writing, which he read very eagerly, and which ran:

“Jane Dunsmore, born 1830, married, against family wishes, John Clive and had one son, John, killed early this year in a motor-car accident, leaving one son, John, now of Ramsdon Place and third in line of succession to the Wreste Abbey property.”

When he had read the message thus strangely and with such precaution conveyed to him, Dunn burnt the letter and went that day about his work in a very grave and thoughtful mood.

“I knew it couldn’t be a mere coincidence,” he mused. “It wasn’t possible. I must manage to warn him, somehow; but, ten to one, he won’t believe a word, and I don’t know that I blame him—I shouldn’t in his place. And he might go straight to Deede Dawson and ruin everything. I don’t know that it wouldn’t be wiser and safer to say nothing for the present, till I’m more sure of my ground—and then it may be too late.”

“Just possibly,” he thought, “the job Deede Dawson clearly thinks he can make me useful in may have something to do with Clive. If so, I may be able to see my way more clearly.”

As it happened, Clive was away for a few days on some business he had to attend to, so that for the present Dunn thought he could afford to wait.

But during the week-end Clive returned, and on the Monday he came again to Bittermeads.

It was never very agreeable to Dunn to have to stand aloof while Clive was laughing and chatting and drinking his tea with Ella and her mother, and of those feelings of annoyance and vexation he made this time a somewhat ostentatious show.

That his manner of sulky anger and resentment did not go unnoticed by Deede Dawson he was very sure, but nothing was said at the time.

Next morning Deede Dawson called him while he was busy in the garage and insisted on his trying to solve another chess problem.

“I haven’t managed the other yet,” Dunn protested. “It’s not too easy to hit on these key-moves.”

“Never mind try this one,” Deede Dawson said; and Ella, going out for a morning stroll with her mother, saw them thus, poring together over the travelling chess-board.

“They seem busy, don’t they?” she remarked. “Father is making quite a friend of that man.”

“I don’t like him,” declared Mrs. Dawson, quite vigorously for her. “I’m sure a man with such a lot of hair on his face can’t be really nice, and I thought he was inclined to be rude yesterday.”

“Yes,” agreed Ella. “Yes, he was. I think Mr. Clive was a little vexed, though he took no notice, I suppose he couldn’t very well.”

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"I don't like the man at all," Mrs. Dawson repeated. "All that hair, too. Do you like him?"

"I don't know," Ella answered, and after she and her mother had returned from their walk she took occasion to find Dunn in the garden and ask him some trifling question or another.

"You are interested in chess?" she remarked, when he had answered her.

"All problems are interesting till one finds the answer to them," he replied.

"There's one I know of," she retorted. "I wish you would solve for me."

"Tell me what it is," he said quickly. "Will you?"

She shook her head slightly, but she was watching him very intently from her clear, candid eyes, and now, as always, her nearness to him, the infinite appeal he found in her every look and movement, the very fragrance of her hair, bore him away beyond all purpose and intention.

"Tell me what it is," he said again. "Won't you? Miss Cayley, if you and I were to trust each other—it's not difficult to see there's something troubling you."

"Most people have some trouble or another," she answered evasively.

He came a little nearer to her, and instead of the gruff, harsh tones he habitually used, his voice was singularly pleasant and low as he said:

"People who are in trouble need help, Miss Cayley. Will you let me help you?"

"You can't," she answered, shaking her head. "No one could."

"How can you tell that?" he asked eagerly. "Perhaps I know more already than you think."

"I daresay you do," she said slowly. "I have thought that a long time. Will you tell me one thing? —Are you his friend or not?"

There was no need for Dunn to ask to whom the pronoun she used referred.

"I am so much not his friend," he answered as quietly and deliberately as she had spoken. "That it's either his life or mine."

At that she drew back in a startled way as though his words had gone beyond her expectations.

"How do I know I can trust you?" she said presently, half to herself, half to him.

“You can,” he said, and it was as though he flung the whole of his enigmatic and vivid personality into those two words.

“You can,” he said again. “Absolutely.”

“I must think,” she muttered, pressing her hands to her head. “So much depends—how can I trust you? Why should I—why?”

“Because I’ll trust you first,” he answered with a touch of exultation in his manner.

“Listen to me and I’ll tell you everything. And that means I put my life in your hands. Well, that’s nothing; I would do that any time; but other people’s lives will be in your power, too—yes, and everything I’m here for, everything. Now listen.”

“Not now,” she interrupted sharply. “He may be watching, listening—he generally is.” Again there was no need between them to specify to whom the pronoun referred. “Will you meet me tonight near the sweet-pea border—about nine?”

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She glided away as she spoke without waiting for him to answer, and as soon as he was free from the magic of her presence, reaction came and he was torn by a thousand doubts and fears and worse.

"Why, I'm mad, mad," he groaned. "I've no right to tell what I said I would, no right at all."

And again there returned to him his vivid, dreadful memory of how she had started on that midnight drive with her car so awfully laden.

And again there returned to him his old appalling doubt:

"Did she not know?"

And though he would willingly have left his life in her hands, he knew he had no right to put that of others there, and yet it seemed to him he must keep the appointment and the promise he had made.

About nine that evening, then, he made his way to the sweet-pea border, though, as he went, he resolved that he would not tell her what he had said he would.

Because he trusted his own strength so little when he was with her, he confirmed this resolution by an oath he swore to himself: and even that he was not certain would be a sure protection against the witchery she wielded.

So it was with a mind doubtful and troubled more than it had ever been since the beginning of these things that he came to the border where the sweet-peas grew, and saw a dark shadow already close by them.

But when he came a little nearer he saw that it was not Ella who was there but Deede Dawson and his first thought was that she had betrayed him.

"That you, Dunn?" Deede Dawson hailed him in his usual pleasant, friendly manner.

"Yes," Dunn answered warily, keeping himself ready for any eventuality.

Deede Dawson took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it and offered one to Dunn, who refused it abruptly.

Deede Dawson laughed at that in his peculiar, mirthless way.

"Am I being the third that's proverbially no company?" he asked. "Were you expecting to find some one else here? I thought I saw a white frock vanish just as I came up."

Dunn made no answer, and Deede Dawson continued after a pause

"That's why I waited. You are being just a little bit rapid in this affair, aren't you?"

"I don't know why. You said something, didn't you?" muttered Dunn, beginning to think that, after all, Deede Dawson's presence here was due to accident—or rather to his unceasing and unfailing watchfulness, and not to any treachery of Ella's.

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" he agreed pleasantly. "But you are a working gardener taken on out of charity to give you a chance and keep you out of gaol, and you are looking a little high when you think of your master's ward and daughter, aren't you?"

"There was a time when I shouldn't have thought so," answered Dunn.

"We're talking of the present, my good man," Deede Dawson said impatiently. "If you want the girl you must win her. It can be done, but it won't be easy."

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"Tell me how," said Dunn.

"Oh, that's going too fast and too far," answered the other with his mirthless laugh. "Now, there's Mr. John Clive—what about him?"

"I'll answer for him," replied Dunn slowly and thickly. "I've put better men than John Clive out of my way before today."

"That's the way to talk," cried Deede Dawson. "Dunn, dare you play a big game for big stakes?"

"Try me," said Dunn.

"If I showed you," Deede Dawson's voice sank to a whisper, "if I showed you a pretty girl for a wife—a fortune to win—what would you say?"

"Try me," said Dunn again, and then, making his voice as low and hoarse as was Dunn's, he asked:

"Is it Clive?"

"Later—perhaps," answered Deede Dawson. "There's some one else —first. Are you ready?"

"Try me," said Dunn for the third time, and as he spoke his quick ear caught the faint sound of a retreating footstep, and he told himself that Ella must have lingered near and had perhaps heard all they said.

"Try me," he said once more, speaking more loudly and clearly this time.

CHAPTER XIV

LOVE-MAKING AT NIGHT

Dunn went to his room that night with the feeling that a crisis was approaching. And he wished very greatly that he knew how much Ella had overheard of his talk with her stepfather, and what interpretation she had put upon it.

He determined that in the morning he would take the very first opportunity he could find of speaking to her.

But in the morning it appeared that Mrs. Dawson had had a bad night, and was very unwell, and Ella hardly stirred from her side all day.



Even when Clive called in the afternoon she would not come down, but sent instead a message begging to be excused because of her mother's indisposition, and Dunn, from a secure spot in the garden, watched the young man retire, looking very disconsolate.

This day, too, Dunn saw nothing of Deede Dawson, for that gentleman immediately after breakfast disappeared without saying anything to anybody, and by night had still not returned.

Dunn therefore was left entirely to himself, and to him the day seemed one of the longest he had ever spent.

That Ella remained so persistently with her mother troubled him a good deal, for he did not think such close seclusion on her part could be really necessary.

He was inclined to fear that Ella had overheard enough of what had passed between him and Deede Dawson to rouse her mistrust, and that she was therefore deliberately keeping out of his way.

Then too, he was troubled in another fashion by Deede Dawson's absence, for he was afraid it might mean that plans were being prepared, or possibly action being taken, that might mature disastrously before he himself was ready to act.

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All day this feeling of unrest and apprehension continued, and at night when he went upstairs to bed it was stronger than ever. He felt convinced now that Ella was deliberately avoiding him. But then, if she distrusted him, that must be because she feared he was on her stepfather's side, and if it seemed to her that who was on his side was of necessity an object of suspicion to herself, then there could be no such bond of dread and guilt between them as any guilty knowledge on her part of Wright's death would involve.

The substantial proof this exercise in logic appeared to afford of Ella's innocence brought him much comfort, but did not lighten his sense of apprehension and unrest, for he thought that in this situation in which he found himself his doubts of Ella had merely been turned into doubts on Ella's part of himself, and that the one was just as likely as the other to end disastrously.

"Though I don't know what I can do," he muttered as he stood in his attic, "if I gain Deede Dawson's confidence I lose Ella's, and if I win Ella's, Deede Dawson will at once suspect me."

He went over to the window and looked out, supporting himself on his elbows, and gazing moodily into the darkness.

As he stood there a faint sound came softly to his ear through the stillness of the quiet night in which nothing stirred.

He listened, and heard it again. Beyond doubt some one was stirring in the garden below, moving about there very cautiously and carefully, and at once Dunn glided from the room and down the stairs with all that extraordinary lightness of tread and agility of movement of which his heavy body and clumsy-looking build gave so small promise.

He had not been living so many days in the house without having taken certain precautions, of which one had been to secure for himself a swift and silent egress whenever necessity might arise.

Keys to both the front and back doors were in his possession, and the passage window on the ground floor he could at need lift bodily from its frame, leaving ample room for passage either in or out. This was the method of departure he chose now since he did not know but that the doors might be watched.

Lifting the window down, he swung himself outside, replacing behind him the window so that it appeared to be as firmly in position as ever, but could be removed again almost instantly should need arise.

Once outside he listened again, and though at first everything was quiet, presently he heard again a cautious step going to and fro at a little distance.

Crouching in the shadow of the house, he listened intently, and soon was able to assure himself that there was but one footstep and that he would have only one individual to deal with.

“It won’t be Deede Dawson’s,” he thought to himself, “but it may very likely be some one waiting for him to return. I must find out who—and why.”

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Slipping through the darkness of the night, with whose shadows he seemed to melt and mingle, as though he were but another one of them, he moved quickly in the direction of these cautious footsteps he had listened to.

They had ceased now, and the silence was profound, for those faint multitudinous noises of the night that murmur without ceasing in the woods and fields are less noticeable near the habitations of men.

A little puzzled, Dunn paused to listen again and once more crept forward a careful yard or two, and then lay still, feeling it would not be safe to venture further till he was more sure of his direction, and till some fresh sound to guide him reached his ears.

He had not long to wait, for very soon, from quite close by, he heard something that surprised and perplexed him equally—a deep, long-drawn sigh.

Again he heard it, and in utter wonder asked himself who this could be who came into another person's garden late at night to stand and sigh, and what such a proceeding could mean.

Once more he heard the sigh, deeper even than before, and then after it a low murmur in which at first he could distinguish nothing, but then caught the name of Ella being whispered over and over again.

He bent forward, more and more puzzled, trying in vain to make out something in the darkness, and then from under a tree, whose shadow had hitherto been a complete concealment, there moved forward a form so tall and bulky there could be little doubt whom it belonged to.

“John Clive—what on earth—!” Dunn muttered, his bewilderment increasing, and the next moment he understood and had some difficulty in preventing himself from bursting out laughing as there reached him the unmistakable sound of a kiss lightly blown through the air.

Clive was sending a kiss through the night towards Ella's room and his nocturnal visit was nothing more than the whim of a love-sick youth.

With Dunn, his first amusement gave way almost at once to an extreme annoyance.

For, in the first place, these proceedings seemed to him exceedingly impertinent, for what possible right did Clive imagine he had to come playing the fool like this, sighing in the dark and blowing kisses like a baby to its mammy?

And secondly, unless he were greatly mistaken, John Clive might just as sensibly and safely have dropped overboard from a ship in mid-Atlantic for a swim as come to indulge his sentimentalities in the Bittermeads garden at night.

“You silly ass!” he said in a voice that was very low, but very distinct and very full of an extreme disgust and anger.

Clive fairly leaped in the air with his surprise, and turned and made a sudden dash at the spot whence Dunn’s voice had come, but where Dunn no longer was.

“What the blazes—?” he began, spluttering in ineffectual rage. “You—you—!”

“You silly ass!” Dunn repeated, no less emphatically than before.

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Clive made another rush that a somewhat prickly bush very effectually stopped.

"You—who are you—where—what—how dare you?" he gasped as he picked himself up and tried to disentangle himself from the prickles.

"Don't make such a row," said Dunn from a new direction. "Do you want to raise the whole neighbourhood? Haven't you played the fool enough? If you want to commit suicide, why can't you cut your throat quietly and decently at home, instead of coming alone to the garden at Bittermeads at night?"

There was a note of sombre and intense conviction in his voice that penetrated even the excited mind of the raging Clive.

"What do you mean?" he asked, and then:

"Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am," answered Dunn. "And I mean just what I say. You might as well commit suicide out of hand as come fooling about here alone at night."

"You're crazy, you're talking rubbish!" Clive exclaimed.

"I'm neither crazy nor talking rubbish," answered Dunn. "But if you persist in making such a row I shall take myself off and leave you to see the thing through by yourself and get yourself knocked on the head any way you like best."

"Oh, I'm beginning to understand," said Clive. "I suppose you're one of my poaching friends—are you? Look here, if you know who it was who attacked me the other night you can earn fifty pounds any time you like."

"Your poaching friends, as you call them," answered Dunn, "are most likely only anxious to keep out of your way. This has nothing to do with them."

"Well, come nearer and let me see you," Clive said. "You needn't be afraid. You can't expect me to take any notice of some one I can't see, talking rubbish in the dark."

"I don't much care whether you take any notice or not," answered Dunn. "You can go your own silly way if you like, it's nothing to me. I've warned you, and if you care to listen I'll make my warning a little clearer. And one thing I will tell you—one man already has left this house hidden in a packing-case with a bullet through his brain, and I will ask you a question: 'How did your father die?'"

"He was killed in a motor-car accident," answered Clive hesitatingly, as though not certain whether to continue this strange and puzzling conversation or break it off.

“There are many accidents,” said Dunn. “And that may have been one, for all I know, or it may not. Well, I’ve warned you. I had to do that. You’ll probably go on acting like a fool and believing that nowadays murders don’t happen, but if you’re wise, you’ll go home to bed and run no more silly risks.”

“Of course I’m not going to pay the least attention,” began Clive, when Dunn interrupted him sharply.

“Hush! hush!” he said sharply. “Crouch down: don’t make a sound, don’t stir or move. Hush!”

For Dunn’s sharp ear had caught the sound of approaching footsteps that were drawing quickly nearer, and almost instantly he guessed who it would be, for there were few pedestrians who came along that lonely road so late at night.

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There were two of them apparently, and at the gate of Bittermeads they halted.

“Well, good night,” said then a voice both Dunn and Clive knew at once for Deede Dawson’s. “That was a pretty check by the knight I showed you, wasn’t it?”

A thin, high, somewhat peculiar voice cursed Deede Dawson, chess, and the pretty mate by the knight very comprehensively.

“It’s young Clive that worries me,” said the voice when it had finished these expressions of disapproval.

“No need,” answered Deede Dawson’s voice with that strange mirthless laugh of his. “No need at all; before the week’s out he’ll trouble no one any more.”

When he heard this, Clive would have betrayed himself by some startled movement or angry exclamation had not Dunn’s heavy hand upon his shoulder held him down with a grave and steady pressure there was no disregarding.

Deede Dawson and his unknown companion went on towards the house, and admitted themselves, and as the door closed behind them Clive swung round sharply in the darkness towards Dunn.

“What’s it mean?” he muttered in the bewildered and slightly-pathetic voice of a child at once frightened and puzzled. “What for? Why should any one—?”

“It’s a long story,” began Dunn, and paused.

He saw that the unexpected confirmation of his warning Clive had thus received from Deede Dawson’s own lips had rendered his task of convincing Clive immensely more easy.

What he had wished to say had now at least a certainty of being listened to, a probability of being believed, and there was at any rate, he supposed, no longer the danger he had before dreaded of Clive’s going straight with the whole story to Deede Dawson in arrogant disbelief of a word of it.

But he still distrusted Clive’s discretion, and feared some rash and hasty action that might ruin all his plans, and allow Deede Dawson time to escape.

Besides he felt that the immediate task before him was to find out who Deede Dawson’s new companion was, and, if possible, overhear anything they might have to say to each other.

That, and the discovery of the new-comer’s identity, might prove to be of the utmost importance.

"I can't explain now," he said hurriedly. "I'll see you tomorrow sometime. Don't do anything till you hear from me. Your life may depend on it—and other people's lives that matter more."

"Tell me who you are first," Clive said quickly, incautiously raising his voice. "I can manage to take care of myself all right, I think, but I want to know who you are."

"H-ssh!" muttered Dunn. "Not so loud."

"There was a fellow made an attack on me one night a little while ago," Clive went on unheedingly. "You remind me of him somehow. I don't think I trust you, my man. I think you had better come along to the police with me."

But Dunn's sharp ears had caught the sound of the house door opening cautiously, and he guessed that Deede Dawson had taken the alarm and was creeping out to see who invaded so late at night the privacy of his garden.

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“Clear out quick! Quiet! If you want to go on living. I’ll stop them from following if I can. If you make the least noise you’re done for.”

Most likely the man they had seen in his company would be with him, and both of them would be armed. Neither Clive nor Dunn had a weapon, and Dunn saw the danger of the position and took the only course available.

“Go,” he whispered fiercely into Clive’s ear.

CHAPTER XV

THE SOUND OF A SHOT

He melted away into the darkness as he spoke, and through the night he slipped, one shadow more amongst many, from tree to bush, from bush to tree. Across a patch of open grass he crawled on his hands and knees; and once lay flat on his face when against the skyline he saw a figure he was sure was Deede Dawson’s creep by a yard or two on his right hand.

On his left another shadow showed, distinguishable in the night only because it moved.

In a moment both shadows were gone, secret and deadly in the dark, and Dunn was very sure that Clive’s life and his own both hung upon a slender chance, for if either of them was discovered the leaping bullet would do the rest.

It would be safe and easy—suspected burglars in a garden at midnight—nothing could be said. He lay very still with his face to the dewy sod, and all the night seemed full to him of searching footsteps and of a swift and murderous going to and fro.

He heard distinctly from the road a sudden, muffled sound as Clive in the darkness blunderingly missed his footing and fell upon one knee.

“That’s finished him,” Dunn thought grimly, his ears straining for the sharp pistol report that would tell Clive’s tale was done, and then he was aware of a cat, a favourite of Ella’s and often petted by himself, that was crouching near by under a tree, most likely much puzzled and alarmed by this sudden irruption of hurrying men into its domain. Instantly Dunn saw his chance, and seizing the animal, lifted it and threw it in the direction where he guessed Deede Dawson to be.

His guess was good and fortune served him well, for the tabby flying caterwauling through the air alighted almost exactly in front of Deede Dawson on top of a small bush. For a moment it hung there, quite unhurt, but very frightened, and emitted a yell, then fled.

In the quietness the tumult of its scrambling flight sounded astonishingly loud, so that it sounded as through a miniature avalanche had been let loose in the garden.

“Only cats,” Deede Dawson exclaimed disgustedly, and from behind, nearer the house, Dunn called:

“Who's there? What is it? What's the matter? Is it Mr. Dawson? Is anything wrong?”

“I think there is,” said Deede Dawson softly. “I think, perhaps, there is. What are you doing out here at this time of night, Charley Wright?”

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"I heard a noise and came down to see what it was," answered Dunn. "There was a light in the breakfast-room, but I didn't see any one, and the front door was open so I came out here. Is anything wrong?"

"That's what I want to know," said Deede Dawson. "Come back to the house with me. If any one is about, he can just take himself off."

He spoke the last sentence loudly, and Dunn took it as a veiled instruction to his companion to depart.

He realized that if he had saved Clive he had done so at the cost of missing the best opportunity that had yet come his way of obtaining very important, and, perhaps, decisive information.

To have discovered the identity of this stranger who had come visiting Deede Dawson might have meant much, and he told himself angrily that Clive's safety had certainly not been worth purchasing at the cost of such a lost chance, though he supposed that was a point on which Clive himself might possibly entertain a different opinion.

But now there was nothing for it but to go quietly back to the house, for clearly Deede Dawson's suspicions were aroused and he had his revolver ready in his hand.

"I suppose it was only cats all the time," he observed, with apparent unconcern. "But at first I made sure there were no burglars in the house."

"And I suppose," suggested Deede Dawson. "You think one burglar's enough in a household."

"I don't mean to have any one else mucking around," growled Dunn in answer.

"Very admirable sentiments," said Deede Dawson and asked several more questions that showed he still entertained some suspicion of Dunn, and was not altogether satisfied that his appearance in the garden was quite innocent, or that the noise heard there was due solely to cats.

Dunn answered as best he could, and Deede Dawson listened and smiled, and smiled again, and watched him from eyes that did not smile at all.

"Oh, well," Deede Dawson said at last, with a yawn. "Anyhow, it's all right now. You had better get along back to bed, and I'll lock up." He accompanied Dunn into the hall and watched him ascend the stairs, and as Dunn went slowly up them he felt by no means sure that soon a bullet would not come questing after him, searching for heart or brain.

For he was sure that Deede Dawson still suspected him, and he knew Deede Dawson to be very sudden and swift in action. But nothing happened, he reached the broad,

first landing in safety, and he was about to go on up to his attic when he heard a door at the end of the passage open and saw Ella appear in her dressing-gown.

“What is the matter?” she asked, in a low voice.

“It’s all right,” he answered. “There was a noise in the garden, and I came down to see what it was, but it’s only cats.”

“Oh, is that all?” she said distrustfully.

“Yes,” he answered, in a lower voice still, he said:

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"Will you tell me something? Do you know any one who talks in a very peculiar shrill high voice?"

She did not answer, and, after a moment's hesitation, went back into her room and closed the door behind her.

He went on up to his attic with the feeling that she could have answered if she had wished to, and lay down in a troubled and dispirited mood.

For he was sure now that Ella mistrusted him and would give him no assistance, and that weighed upon him greatly, as did also his conviction that what it behoved him above all else to know—the identity of the man who, in this affair, stood behind Deede Dawson and made use of his fierce and fatal energies—he had had it in his power to discover and had failed to make use of the opportunity.

"I would rather know that," he said to himself, "than save a dozen Clives ten times over." Though again it occurred to him that on this point Clive might hold another opinion. "If he hadn't made such a blundering row I might have got to know who Deede Dawson's visitor was. I must try to get a word with Clive tomorrow by hook or crook, though I daresay Deede Dawson will be very much on the lookout."

However, next morning Deede Dawson not only made no reference to the events of the night, but had out the car and went off immediately after breakfast without saying when he would be back.

As soon after his departure as possible, Dunn also set out and took his way through the woods towards Ramsdon Place on the look-out for an opportunity to speak to Clive unobserved.

He thought it most likely that Clive would be drawn towards the vicinity of Bittermeads by the double fascination of curiosity and fear, and he supposed that if he waited and watched in the woods he would be sure presently to see him.

But though he remained for long hidden at a spot whence he could command the road to Bittermeads from Ramsdon Place, he saw nothing at all of Clive, and the sunny lazy morning was well advanced when he was startled by the sound of a gun shot some distance away.

"A keeper shooting rabbits, I suppose," he thought, looking round just in time to see Ella running through the wood from the direction whence the sound of the shot had seemed to come, and then vanish again with a quick look behind her into the heart of a close-growing spinney.



CHAPTER XVI

IN THE WOOD

There had been an air of haste, almost of furtiveness, about this swift appearance and more swift vanishing of Ella, that made Dunn ask himself uneasily what errand she could have been on.

He hesitated for a moment, half expecting to see her return again, or that there would be some other development, but he heard and saw nothing.

He caught no further glimpse of Ella, whom the green depths of the spinney hid well; and he heard no more shots.

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After a little, he left the spot where he had been waiting and went across to where he had seen her.

The exact spot where she had entered the spinney was marked, for she had broken the branch of a young tree in brushing quickly by it, and a bramble she had trodden on had not yet lifted itself from the earth to which she had pressed it.

By other signs like these, plain enough and easy to read—for she had hurried on in great haste and without care, almost, indeed, as one who fled from some great danger or from some dreadful sight, and who had no thought to spare save for flight alone—he followed the way she had gone till it took him to a beaten public path that almost at once led over a stile to the high road which passed in front of Bittermeads. Along this beaten path, trodden by many, Ella's light foot had left no perceptible mark, and Dunn made no attempt to track her further, since it seemed certain that she had been simply hurrying back home.

"She was badly frightened over something or another," he said to himself. "She never stopped once, she went as straight and quick as she could. I wonder what upset her like that?"

He went back the way he had come, and at the spot where he had seen her enter the spinney he set to work to pick up her trail in the direction whence she had appeared, for he thought that if he followed it he might find out what had been the cause of her evident alarm.

The ground was much more open here, and the trail correspondingly more difficult to follow, for often there was little but a trodden blade of grass to show where she had passed; and sometimes, where the ground was bare and hard, there was no visible sign left at all.

Once or twice at such places he was totally at fault, but by casting round in a wide circle like a dog scenting his prey he was able to pick up her tracks again.

They seemed to lead right into the depths of the wood, through lonely spots that only the keepers knew, and where others seldom came.

But that he was on the right trail he presently had proof, for on the bank of a lovely and hidden dell he picked up a tiny embroidered handkerchief with the initials "E. C." worked in one corner.

It had evidently been lying there only a very short time, for it was perfectly clean and fresh, and he picked it up and held it for a moment in his hands, smiling to himself with pleasure at its daintiness and smallness, and yet still uneasily wondering why she had come here, and why she had fled away again so quickly.

The morning was very fine and calm, though in the west heavy clouds were gathering and seemed to promise rain soon. But overhead the sun shone brightly, the air was calm and warm, and the little dell on whose verge he stood a very pretty and pleasant place.

A small stream wandered through it, the grass that carpeted it was green and soft, near by a great oak stood alone and spread its majestic branches far out on every side to give cool shelter from the summer heat.

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The thought occurred to Dunn that this was just such a pretty and secluded spot as two lovers might choose to exchange their vows in, and the thought stung him intolerably as he wondered whether it was for such a reason that Ella had come here.

But if so, why had she fled away again in such strange haste?

He walked on slowly for a yard or two, not now attempting to follow Ella's trail, for he had the impression that this was her destination, and that she had gone no further than here.

All at once he caught sight of the form of a man lying hidden in the long grass that nearly covered him from view just where the far-spreading branches of the great oak ceased to give their shade.

At first Dunn thought he was sleeping, and he was just about to call out to him when something in the rigidity of the man's position and his utter stillness struck him unpleasantly.

He went quickly to the man's side, and the face of dead John Clive, supine and still, stared up at him from unseeing eyes.

He had been killed by a charge of small shot fired at such close quarters that his breast was shot nearly in two and his clothing and flesh charred by the burning powder.

But Dunn, standing staring down at the dead man, saw not him, but Ella. Ella fleeing away silently and furtively through the trees as from some sight or scene of guilt and terror.

He stooped closer over the dead man. Death had been instantaneous. Of course there could be no doubt. From one hand a piece of folded paper had fallen.

Dunn picked it up, and saw that there was writing on it, and he read it over slowly.

"Dear Mr. Clive,—Can you meet me as before by the oak tomorrow at eleven? There is something I very much want to say to you.—Yours sincerely,

"Ella Cayley."

Was that, then, the lure which had brought John Clive to meet his death? Was this the bait that had made him disregard the warnings he had received, and come alone to so quiet and solitary a spot?

Dunn had a moment of quick envy of him; he lay so quiet and still in the warm sunshine, with nothing to trouble or distress him any more for ever.

Then, stumblingly and heavily, Dunn turned and went away, and his eyes were very hard, his bearded face set like iron.

Like a man in a dream, or one obsessed by some purpose before which all other things faded into nothingness, he went his way, the way Ella had taken in her flight—through the wood, through the spinney to the public foot-path, and then out on the road that led to Bittermeads.

When he entered the garden there, he saw Ella sitting quietly on a deck-chair close to her mother, quietly busy with some fancy work.

He could not believe it; he stood watching in bewilderment, appalled and wondering, watching her white hands flashing busily to and fro, hearing the soft murmur of her voice as now and then she addressed some remark to her mother, who nodded drowsily in the sunshine over a book open on her knees.

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Ella was dressed all in white; she had flung aside her hat, and the quiet breeze played in her fair hair, and stirred gently a stray curl that had escaped across her broad low brow.

The picture was one of gentleness and peace and an innocence that thought no wrong, and yet with his own eyes he had seen her not an hour ago fleeing with hurried steps and fearful looks from the spot where lay a murdered man.

Somewhat unsteadily, for he felt so little master of himself, it was as though he had no longer even control of his own limbs, Dunn stumbled forward, and Ella looked up and saw him, and saw also that he was looking at her very strangely.

She rose and came towards him, her needlework still in her hands.

"What is the matter?" she said in a voice of some concern. "Are you ill?"

"No," he answered. "No. I've been looking for Mr. Clive."

"Have you?" she said, a little surprised apparently, but in no way flustered or disturbed. "Did you find him?"

Dunn did not answer, for indeed he could not, and she said again:

"Did you find him?"

Still he made no answer, for it seemed to him those four words were the most awful that any one had ever uttered since the beginning of the world.

"What is the matter?" she said again. "Is anything the matter?"

"Oh, no, no," he said, and he gave himself a little shake like a man wakening from deep sleep and trying to remember where he was.

"Well, then," she said.

"I found Mr. Clive," he said hardly and abruptly. And he repeated again: "Yes, I found him."

They remained standing close together and facing each other, and he saw her as through a veil of red, and it was as though a red mist enveloped her, and where her shadow lay the earth was red, he thought, and where she put her foot it seemed to him red tracks remained, and never before had he understood how utterly he loved her and must love her, now and for evermore.

But he uttered no sound and made no movement, only stood very still, thinking to himself how dreadful it was that he loved her so greatly.

She was not paying him, any attention now. A rose bush was near by, and she picked one of the flowers, and arranged it carefully at her waist.

She said, still looking at him:

“Do you know—I wish you would shave yourself?”

“Why?” he mumbled.

“I should like to see you,” she answered. “I think I have a curiosity to see you.”

“I should think you could do that well enough,” he said in the same low, mumbled tones.

“No,” she answered. “I can only see some very untidy hair and a pair of eyes—not very nice eyes, rather frightening eyes. I should like to see the rest of your face some day so as to know what it’s like.”

“Perhaps you shall—some day,” he said.

“Is that a threat?” she asked. “It sounded like one.”

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"Perhaps," he answered.

She laughed lightly and turned away.

"You make me very curious," she said. "But then, you've always done that."

She went back to her seat by her mother, and he walked on moodily to the house.

Mrs. Dawson said to Ella:

"How can you talk to that man, my dear? I think he looks perfectly dreadful—hardly like a human being."

"I was just telling him he ought to shave himself," said Ella. "I told him I should like to know what he was really like."

"I shall ask father," said Mrs. Dawson sternly, "to make it a condition of his employment here."

CHAPTER XVII

A DECLARATION

Dunn knew very well that he ought to give immediate information to the authorities of what had happened.

But he did not. He told himself that nothing could help poor John Clive, and that any precipitate action on his part might still fatally compromise his plans, which were now so near completion.

But his real reason was that he knew that if he came forward he would be very closely questioned, and sooner or later forced to tell the things he knew so terribly involving Ella.

And he knew that to surrender her to the police and proclaim her to the world as guilty of such things were tasks beyond his strength; though, to himself, with a touch of wildness in his thoughts, he said that no proved and certain guilt should go unpunished even though his own hand— It was a train of ideas he did not pursue.

"Charley Wright first and now John Clive," he said to himself. "But the end is not yet."

Again he would not let his thoughts go on but checked them abruptly.



In this dark and troubled mood he went out to busy himself with the garden, and all the time he worked he watched with a sort of vertigo of horror where Ella sat in the sunshine by her mother's side, her white hands moving nimbly to and fro upon her needlework.

It was not long, however, before the tragedy of the wood was discovered, for Clive had been seen to go in that direction, and when he did not return a search was made that was soon successful.

The news was brought to Bittermeads towards evening by a tradesman's boy, who came up from the village to bring something that had been ordered from there.

"Have you heard?" he said to Dunn excitedly. "Mr. Clive's been shot dead by poachers."

"Oh—by poachers?" repeated Dunn.

"Yes, poachers," the boy answered, and went on excitedly to tell his tale with many, and generally very inaccurate, details.

But that the crime had been discovered and instantly set down to poachers was at least certain, and Dunn realized at once that the adoption of this simple and apparently plausible theory would put an end to all really careful investigation of the circumstances and make the discovery of the truth highly improbable.

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For the idea that the murder was the work of poachers would, when once adopted, fill the minds of the police and of every one else, and no suspicion would be directed elsewhere.

By the tremendous relief he felt, Dunn understood how heavy had been the burden of fear and apprehension that till now had oppressed him.

If he had not found that handkerchief—if he had not secured that letter—why, by now the police would be at Bittermeads.

“All the same,” he thought. “No one who is guilty shall escape through me.”

But what this phrase meant, and what he intended to do, he would not permit himself to think out clearly or try to understand.

The boy, having told his story, hurried off to spread the news elsewhere to more appreciative ears, for, he thought disgustedly, it might have been just nothing at all for all the interest the gardener at Bittermeads had shown.

As soon as he was gone, Dunn went across to the house, and going up to the window of the drawing-room where Ella and her mother were having tea, he tapped on the pane.

Ella looked up and saw him, and came at once to open the window, while from behind Mrs. Dawson frowned in severe disapproval of what she considered a great liberty.

“Mr. Clive has been shot,” Dunn said abruptly. “They say poachers did it. He was killed instantly.”

Ella did not seem at first to understand. She looked puzzled and bewildered, and did not seem to grasp the full import of his words.

“What—what do you say?” she asked. “Mr. Clive— Who’s killed?”

Dunn thought to himself that her acting was the most wonderful thing he had ever seen.

It was extraordinary that she should be able to make that grey pallor come over her cheeks as though the meaning of what he said were only now entering her mind; wonderful that she should be able so well to give the idea of a great horror and a great doubt coming slowly into her startled eyes.

“Mr. Clive?” she said again.

“Yes, he’s been killed,” Dunn said. “By poachers, apparently.”

“What is that? What is that man saying?” shrilled Mrs. Dawson from behind. “Mr. Clive—John—why, he was here yesterday.”

Dunn turned his back and walked away. He heard Ella call after him, but he would not look back because he feared what he might do if he obeyed her call.

With an odd buzzing in his ears, with the blood throbbing through his brain as though something must soon break there, he walked blindly on, and as he came to the gate of Bittermeads he saw a motor-car coming up the road.

It was Deede Dawson’s car, and he was driving it, and by his side sat a sulkily-smiling stranger, his air that of one not sure of his welcome, but determined to enforce it, in whom, with a quick start, Dunn recognized his burglar, the man whose attempt to break into Bittermeads he had frustrated, and whose place he had taken.

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He put up his hand instinctively for them to stop, and Deede Dawson at once obeyed the gesture.

Dunn noticed that the smile upon his lips was more gentle and winning than ever, the look in his eyes more dark and menacing.

"Well, Dunn, what is it?" he said as pleasantly as he always spoke. "Mr. Allen," he added to his companion, "this is my man, Dunn, I told you about, my gardener and chauffeur, and a very industrious steady fellow—and quite trustworthy."

He seemed to lay a certain emphasis on the last two words, and Allen put his head on one side and looked at Dunn with an odd, mixture of familiarity, suspicion, hesitation, and an uncertain assumption of superiority, but with no hint of recognition showing.

"Glad to hear it," he said. "You always want to know whom you can trust."

"Mr. Clive has been murdered," Dunn said abruptly. "Poachers, it is said. Did you know?"

"We heard about it as we came through the village," answered Deede Dawson. "Very sad, very dreadful. It will be a great shock to poor Ella, I fear. Take the car on to the garage, will you?" he added.

He drove on up the drive, and at the front door they alighted and entered the house together. Dunn followed, and getting into the car, drove it to the garage, where he busied himself cleaning it. As he worked he wondered very much what was the meaning of this sudden appearance on terms of friendship with Deede Dawson of this man Allen, whom he had last seen trying to break into the house at night.

Was Allen an accomplice of Deede Dawson, or a dupe, or, more probably, a new recruit?

At any rate, to Dunn it seemed that the crisis he had expected and prepared for was now fast approaching, and he told himself that if he had failed in Clive's case, those others he was working for he must not fail to save.

"Looks as if Dawson's plans were nearly ready," he said to himself. "Well, so are mine."

He finished his work and shutting the garage door, he was turning away when he saw Ella coming towards him.

She was extremely pale, and her eyes seemed larger than ever, and very bright against the deathly whiteness of her cheeks.

She was wearing a blouse that was cut a little low, and he notice with a kind of terror how soft and round was her throat, like a column of pale and perfect ivory.

He hoped she would not speak to him, for he thought perhaps he could not bear it if she did, but she halted near by, and said:

"This is very dreadful about poor Mr. Clive."

"Very," he answered moodily.

"Why should poachers kill him?" she asked. "Why should they want to?"

"I don't know," he answered, watching not her but her soft throat, where he could see a pulse fluttering. "Perhaps it wasn't poachers," he added.

She started violently, and gave a quick look that seemed to make yet more certain the certainty he already entertained.

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"Who else could it be?" she asked in a low voice.

He did not answer.

After what seemed a long time she said:

"You asked me a question once—do you remember?"

He shook his head.

"Why don't you speak? Why can't you speak?" she cried angrily. "Why can't you say something instead of just shaking your head?"

"You see, I've asked you so many questions," he said slowly. "Perhaps I shall ask you some more some day—which question do you mean?"

"I mean when you asked me if I had ever met any one who spoke in a very shrill, high whistling sort of voice? Do you remember?"

"Yes," he said. "You wouldn't tell me."

"Well, I will now," she said. "I did meet a man once with a voice like that. Do you remember the night you, came here that I drove away in the car with a packing-case you carried downstairs?"

"Do I—remember?" he gasped, for that memory, and the thought of how she had driven away into the night with, that grisly thing behind her on the car had never since left his mind by night or by day.

"Yes," she exclaimed impatiently. "Why do you keep staring so? Are you as stupid as you choose to look? Do you remember?"

"I remember," he answered heavily. "I remember very well."

"Well, then, the man I took that packing-case to had a voice just like that—high and shrill, whistling almost."

"I thought as much," said Dunn. "May I ask you another question?"

She nodded.

"May I smoke?"

She nodded again with a touch of impatience.

He took a cigarette from his pocket and put it in his mouth and lighted a match, but the match, when he had lighted it, he used to put light to a scrap of folded paper with writing on it, like a note.

This piece of paper he used to light his cigarette with and when he had done so he watched the paper burn to an ash, not dropping it to the ground till the little flame stung his fingers.

The ash that had fallen he ground into the path where they stood with the heel of his boot.

“What have you burned there?” she asked, as if she suspected it was something of importance he had destroyed.

In fact it was the note that had fallen from dead John Clive’s hand wherein Ella had asked him to meet her at the oak where he had met his death.

That bit of paper would have been enough, Dunn thought, to place a harsh hempen noose about the soft white throat he watched where the little pulse still fluttered up and down. But now it was burnt and utterly destroyed, and no one would ever see it.

At the thought he laughed and she drew back, very startled.

“Oh, what is the matter?” she exclaimed.

“Nothing,” he answered. “Nothing in all the world except that I love you.”

CHAPTER XVIII

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ROBERT DUNN'S ENEMY

When he had said this he went a step or two aside and sat down on the stump of a tree. He was very agitated and disturbed for he had not in the very least meant to say such a thing, he had not even known that he really felt like that.

It was, indeed, a rush and power of quite unexpected passion that had swept him away and made him for the moment lose all control of himself. Ella showed much more composure. She had become extraordinarily pale, but otherwise she did not appear in any way agitated.

She remained silent, her eyes bent on the ground, her only movement a gesture by which she rubbed softly and in turn each of her wrists as though they hurt her.

"Well, can't you say something?" he asked roughly, annoyed by her persistent silence.

"I don't see that there's anything for me to say," she answered.

"Oh, well now then," he muttered; quite disconcerted.

She raised her eyes from the ground, and for the first time looked full at him, in her expression both curiosity and resentment.

"It is perfectly intolerable," she said with a heaving breast. "Will you tell me who you are?"

"I've told you one thing," he answered sullenly, his eyes on fire. "I should have thought that was enough. I'll tell you nothing more."

"I think you are the most horrid man I ever met," she cried. "And the very, very ugliest—all that hair on your face so that no one can see anything else. What are you like when you cut it off?"

"Does that matter?" he asked, in the same gruff and surly manner.

"I should think it matters a good deal when I ask you," she exclaimed. "Do you expect any one to care for a man she has never seen—nothing but hair. You hurt my wrists awfully that night," she added resentfully. "And you've never even hinted you're sorry."

His reply was unexpected and it disconcerted her greatly and for the first time, for he caught both her wrists in his hands and kissed them passionately where the cords had been.

"You mustn't do that, please don't do that," she said quickly, trying to release herself.

Her strength was nothing to his and he stood up and put his arm around her and strained her to him in an embrace so passionate and powerful she could not have resisted it though she had wished to.

But no thought of resistance came to her, since for the moment she had lost all consciousness of everything save the strange thrill of his bright, clear eyes looking so closely into hers, of his strong arms holding her so firmly.

He released her, or rather she at last freed herself by an effort he did not oppose, and she fled away down the path.

She had an impression that her hair would come down and that that would make her look a fright, and she put up her hands hurriedly to secure it. She never looked back to where he stood, breathing heavily and looking after her and thinking not of her, but of two dead men whom he had seen of late.

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"Shall I make the third?" he wondered. "I do not care if I do, not I."

The path Ella had fled by led into another along which when she reached it she saw Deede Dawson coming.

She stopped at once and began to busy herself with a flower-bed overrun with weeds, but she could not entirely conceal her agitation from her stepfather's cold grey eyes.

"Oh, there you are, Ella," he said, with all that false geniality of his that filled the girl with such loathing and distrust. "Have you seen Dunn? Oh, there he is, isn't he? I wanted to ask you, Ella, what do you think of Dunn?"

She glanced over her shoulder towards where Dunn stood, and she managed to answer with a passable air of indifference.

"Well, I suppose," she said, "that he is quite the ugliest man I ever saw. Of course, if he cut all of that hair off—"

Deede Dawson laughed though his eyes remained as hard and cold as ever.

"I shall have to give him orders to shave," he said. "Your mother was telling me I ought to the other day, she said it didn't look respectable to have a man about with all that hair on his face. Though I don't see myself why hair isn't respectable, do you?"

"It looks odd," answered Ella carelessly.

Deede Dawson laughed again, and walked on to where Dunn was standing waiting for him. With his perpetual smile that his cold and evil eyes so strangely contradicted, he said to him:

"Well, what have you and Ella been talking about?"

"Why do you ask?" growled Dunn.

"Because she looks upset," answered Deede Dawson. "Oh, don't be shy about it. Shall I give you a little good advice?"

"What?"

"Never shave."

"Why not?"

"Because that thick growth of hair hiding your face gives you an air of mystery and romance no woman could possibly resist. You're a perpetual puzzle, and to pique a



woman's curiosity is the surest way to interest her. Why, there are plenty of women who would marry you simply to find out what is under all that hair. So never you shave."

"I don't mean to."

"Unless, of course, you have to—for purposes of disguise, for example."

"I thought you were hinting that the beard itself was a disguise," retorted Dunn.

"Removing it might become a better one," answered Deede Dawson. "You told me once you knew this part fairly well. Do you know Wreste Abbey?"

Dunn gave his questioner a scowling look that seemed full of anger and suspicion.

"What about it if I do?" he asked.

"I am asking if you do know it," said Deede Dawson.

"Yes, I do. Well?"

"It belongs to Lord Chobham, doesn't it?"

Dunn nodded.

"Old man, isn't he?"

"I'm not a book of reference about Lord Chobham," answered Dunn.

"If you want to know his age, you can easily find out, I suppose.

What's the sense of asking me a lot of questions like that?"

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"He has no family, and his heir is his younger brother, General Dunsmore, who has one son, Rupert, I believe. Do you know if that's so?"

"Look here," said Dunn, speaking with a great appearance of anger. "Don't you go too far, or maybe something you won't like will happen. If you've anything to say, say it straight out. Or there'll be trouble."

Deede Dawson seemed a little surprised at the vehemence of the other's tone.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't you like the family, or what's upsetting you?"

Dunn seemed almost choking with fury. He half-lifted one hand and let it fall again.

"If ever I get hold of that young Rupert Dunsmore," he said with a little gasp for breath. "If ever I come face to face with him—man to man—"

"Dear me!" smiled Deede Dawson, lifting his eyebrows. "I'm treading on sore toes, it seems. What's the trouble between you?"

"Never you mind," replied Dunn roughly. "That's my business. But no man ever had a worse enemy than he's been to me."

"Has he, though?" said Deede Dawson, who seemed very interested and even a little excited. "What did he do?"

"Never you mind," Dunn repeated. "That's my affair, but I swore I'd get even with him some day and I will, too."

"Suppose," said Deede Dawson. "Suppose I showed you a way?"

Dunn did not answer at first, and for some moments the two men stood watching each other and staring into each other's eyes as though each was trying to read the depths of the other's soul.

"Suppose," said Deede Dawson very softly. "Suppose you were to meet Rupert Dunsmore—alone—quite alone?"

Still Dunn did not answer, but somehow it appeared that his silence was full of a very deadly significance.

"Suppose you did—what would you do?" murmured Deede Dawson again, and his voice sank lower with each word he uttered till the last was a scarce-audible whisper.

Dunn stopped and picked up a hoe that was lying near by. He placed the tough ash handle across his knee, and with a movement of his powerful hands, he broke the hoe across.

The two smashed pieces he dropped on the ground, and looking at Deede Dawson, he said:

“Like that—if ever Rupert Dunsmore and I meet alone, only one of us will go away alive.” And he confirmed it with an oath.

Deede Dawson clapped him on the shoulder, and laughed.

“Good!” he cried. “Why, you’re the man I’ve been looking for for a long time. The fact is, Rupert Dunsmore played me a nasty trick once, and I want to clear accounts with him. Now, suppose I show him to you—?”

“You do that,” said Dunn, and he repeated the oath he had sworn before. “You show him to me, and I’ll take care he never troubles any one again.”

“That’s the way I like to hear a man talk,” cried Deede Dawson. “Dunsmore has been away for a time on business I can make a guess at, but he is coming back soon. Should you know him if you saw him?”

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"Should I know him?" repeated Dunn contemptuously. "Should I know myself?"

"That's good," said Deede Dawson again. "By the way, perhaps you can tell me, hasn't Lord Chobham a rather distant cousin, Walter Dunsmore, living with him as secretary or something of the sort—quite a distant relative, I believe, though in the direct line of succession?"

"Very likely," said Dunn indifferently. "I think so, but I don't care anything about the rest of them. It's only Rupert Dunsmore I have anything against."

CHAPTER XIX

THE VISIT TO WRESTE ABBEY

It was a little later when Deede Dawson returned to the subject of Wreste Abbey.

"Lord Chobham has a very valuable collection of plate and jewellery and so on, hasn't he?" he asked.

"Oh, there's plenty of the stuff there," Dunn answered. "Why?"

"Oh, I was thinking a visit might be made fairly profitable," Deede Dawson said carelessly, for the first time definitely throwing off his mask of law-abiding citizen under which he lived at Bittermeads.

"It would be a risky job," answered Dunn, showing no surprise at the suggestion. "The stuff's well guarded, and then, that's not what I'm thinking about—it's meeting Rupert Dunsmore, man to man, and no one to come between us. If that ever happens—"

Deede Dawson nodded reassuringly.

"That'll be all right," he said. "So you shall, I promise you that. But we might as well kill two birds with one stone and clear a bit of profit, too. I've got to live, like any one else, and I haven't five thousand a year of my own, so I get my living out of those who have, and I don't see who has any right to blame me. Mind, if there was any money in chess, I should be a millionaire, but there isn't, and if a man can make a fortune on the Stock Exchange, which takes no more thought or skill than auction-bridge, why shouldn't I make a bit when I can? There's the 'D. D.' gambit I've invented, people will be studying and playing for centuries, but it'll never bring me a penny for all the brain-work I put into it, and so I've got to protect myself, haven't I?"

"It's what I do with less talk about it," answered Dunn contemptuously. "Why, I've guessed all that from the first when you weren't so all-fired keen on seeing me in gaol, as most of your honest, hard-working lot, who only do their swindling in business-hours,

would have been. And I've kept my eyes open, of course. It wasn't hard to twig you did a bit on the cross yourself. Well, that's your affair, but one thing I do want to know—how much does Miss Cayley know?"

For all his efforts he could not keep his anxiety entirely out of his voice as he said this, and recognizing that thereby he had perhaps risked rousing some suspicion in the other's mind, he added:

"And her mother—the young lady and her mother, how much do they know?"

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"Oh," answered Deede Dawson, with his false laugh and cold-watchful eyes. "My wife knows nothing at all, but Ella's the best helper I've ever had. She looks so innocent, she can take in any one, and she never gives the show away, she acts all the time. A wonderful girl and useful—you'd hardly believe how useful."

Dunn did not answer. It was only by a supreme effort that he kept his hands from Deede Dawson's throat. He did not believe a word of what the other said, for he knew well the utter falseness of the man. None the less, the accusation troubled him and chilled him to the heart, as though with the touch of the finger of death.

"You remember that packing-case," Deede Dawson added. "The one you helped me to get away from here the night you came. Well, she knew what was in it, though you would never have thought so, to look at her, would you?"

His cold eyes were very intent and keen as he said this, and Dunn thought to himself that it had been said more to test any possible knowledge or suspicion of his own than for any other reason. With a manner of only slight interest, he answered carelessly:

"Did she? Why? Wasn't it your stuff? Had it been pinched? But she was safe enough, the police would never stop a smart young lady in a motor-car, except on very strong evidence."

"Perhaps not," agreed Deede Dawson. "That's one reason why Ella's so useful. But I've been thinking things out, and trying to make them work in together, and I think the first thing to do is for you to drive Allen and Ella over to Wreste Abbey this afternoon, so that they may have a good look around."

"Oh, Miss Cayley and Allen," Dunn muttered.

The new-comer, Allen, had been making himself very much at home at Bittermeads since his arrival, though he had not so far troubled to any great extent either Ella in the house or Dunn outside. His idea of comfort seemed to be to stay in bed very late, and spend his time when he did get up in the breakfast-room in the company of a box of cigars and a bottle of whisky.

The suggestion that he and Ella should pay a visit together to Wreste Abbey was one that greatly surprised Dunn.

"All right," he said. "This afternoon? I'll get the car ready."

"This is the afternoon the Abbey is thrown open to visitors, isn't it?" asked Deede Dawson. "Allen and Ella can get in as tourists, and have a good look round, and you can look round outside and get to know the lie of the land. There won't be long to wait, for Rupert Dunsmore will be back from his little excursion before long, I expect."

He laughed in his mirthless way, and walked off, and Dunn, as he got the car ready, seemed a good deal preoccupied and a little worried.

“How can he know that Rupert Dunsmore is coming back?” he said to himself. “Can he have any way of finding out things I don’t know about? And if he did, how could he know—that? Most likely it’s only a guess to soothe me down, and he doesn’t really know anything at all about it.”

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After lunch, Allen and Ella appeared together, ready for their expedition. Ella looked her best in a big motoring coat and a close-fitting hat, with a long blue veil. Allen was, for almost the first time since his arrival, shaved, washed and tidy.

He looked indeed as respectable as his sinister and forbidding countenance would permit, and though Deede Dawson had made him as smart as possible, he had permitted him to gratify his own florid taste in adornment, so that his air of prosperity and wealth had the appearance of being that of some recently-enriched vulgarian whose association with a motor-car and a well-dressed girl of Ella's type was probably due to the fact that he had recently purchased them both out of newly-acquired wealth.

Dunn wore a neat chauffeur's costume, with which, however, his bearded face did not go too well. He felt indeed that their whole turn-out was far too conspicuous considering the real nature of their errand, and far too likely to attract attention, and he wondered if Deede Dawson's subtle and calculating mind had not for some private reason desired that to be so.

"He is keeping well in the background himself," Dunn mused. "He may reckon that if things go wrong—in case of any pursuit—it's a good move perhaps in a way, but he may find an unexpected check to his king opened on him."

The drive was a long one, and Ella noticed that though Dunn consulted his map frequently, he never appeared in any doubt concerning the way.

A little before three they drove into the village that lay round the park gates of Wreste Abbey.

Motors were not allowed in the park, so Dunn put theirs in the garage of the little hotel, that was already almost full, for visiting day at Wreste Abbey generally drew a goodly number of tourists, while Ella and Allen, in odd companionship, walked up to the Abbey by the famous approach through the chestnut avenue.

Allen was quiet and surly, and much on his guard, and very uncomfortable in Ella's company, and Ella herself, though for different reasons was equally silent.

But the beauty of the walk through the chestnut avenue, and of the vista with the great house at the end, drew from her a quick exclamation of delight.

"How beautiful a place this is," she said aloud. "And how peaceful and how quiet."

"Don't like these quiet places myself," grumbled Allen. "Don't like 'em, don't trust 'em. Give me lots of traffic; when everything's so awful quiet you've only got to kick your foot against a stone or drop a tool, and likely as not you'll wake the whole blessed place."

“Wake,” repeated Ella, noticing the word, and she repeated it with emphasis. “Why do you say ‘wake’?”

CHAPTER XX

ELLA’S WARNING

Ella did not say anything more, and in their character of tourists visiting the place, they were admitted to the Abbey and passed on through its magnificent rooms, where was stored a collection rich and rare even for one of the stateliest homes of England.

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"What a wonderful place!" Ella sighed wistfully. Yet she could not enjoy the spectacle of all these treasures as she would have done at another time, for she was always watching Allen, who hung about a good deal, and seemed to look more at the locks of the cases that held some of the more valuable of the objects shown than at the things themselves, and generally spent fully half the time in each room at the window, admiring, the view, he said; but for quite another reason, Ella suspected.

"I shall speak when I get back," she said to herself, pale and resolute. "I don't care what happens; I don't care if I have to tell mother—perhaps she knows already. Anyhow, I shall speak."

Having come to this determination, she grew cheerful and more interested apparently in what they were seeing, as well as less watchful of her companion. When, presently, they left the house to go into the gardens, it happened that they noticed an old gentleman walking at a little distance behind a gate marked "Private," and leaning on the arm of a tall, thin, clean-shaven man of middle-age.

"Lord Chobham, the old gentleman," whispered a tourist, who was standing near. "I saw him once in the House of Lords. That's his secretary with him, Mr. Dunsmore, one of the family; he manages everything now the old gentleman is getting so feeble."

Ella walked on frowning and a little worried, for she thought she had seen the secretary before and yet could not remember where. Soon she noticed Dunn, who had apparently been obeying Deede Dawson's orders to look round outside and get to know the lie of the land.

He seemed at present to be a good deal interested in Lord Chobham and his companion, for he went and leaned on the gate and stared at them so rudely that one or two of the other tourists noticed it and frowned at him. But he took no notice, and presently, as if not seeing that the gate was marked "Private," he pushed it open and walked through.

Noticing the impertinent intrusion almost at once, Mr. Dunsmore turned round and called "This is private."

Dunn did not seem to hear, and Mr. Dunsmore walked across to him with a very impatient air, while the little group of tourists watched, with much interest and indignation and a very comforting sense of superiority.

"He ought to be sent right out of the grounds," they told each other. "That's the sort of rude behaviour other people have to suffer for."

"Now, my man," said Mr. Dunsmore sharply, "this is private, you've no business here."

“Sorry, sir; beg pardon, I’m sure,” said Dunn, touching his hat, and as he did so he said in a sharp, penetrating whisper: “Look out— trouble’s brewing—don’t know what, but look out, all the time.”

He had spoken so quickly and quietly, in the very act of turning away, that none of the onlookers could have told that a word had passed, but for the very violent start that Walter Dunsmore made and his quick movement forward as if to follow the other. Immediately Dunn turned back towards him with a swift warning gesture of his hand.

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"Careful, you fool, they're looking," he said in a quick whisper, and in a loud voice: "Very sorry, sir; beg pardon—I'm sure I didn't mean anything."

Walter Dunsmore swung round upon his heel and went quickly back to where Lord Chobham waited; and his face was like that of one who has gazed into the very eyes of death.

"Lord in Heaven," he muttered, "it's all over, I'm done." And his hand felt for a little metal box he carried in his waistcoat pocket and that held half a dozen small round tablets, each of them a strong man's death.

But he took his hand away again as he rejoined his cousin, patron, and employer, old Lord Chobham.

"What's the matter, Walter?" Lord Chobham asked. "You look pale."

"The fellow was a bit impudent; he made me angry," said Walter carelessly. He fingered the little box in his waistcoat pocket and thought how one tablet on his tongue would always end it all. "By the way, oughtn't Rupert to be back soon?" he asked.

"Yes, he ought," said Lord Chobham severely. "It's time he married and settled down—I shall speak to his father about it. The boy is always rushing off somewhere or another when he ought to be getting to know the estate and the tenants."

Walter Dunsmore laughed.

"I think he knows them both fairly well already," he said. "Not a tenant on the place but swears by Rupert. He's a fine fellow, uncle."

"Oh, you always stick up for him; you and he were always friends," answered Lord Chobham in a grumbling tone, but really very pleased. "I know I'm never allowed to say a word about Rupert."

"Well, he's a fine fellow and a good friend," said Walter, and the two disappeared into the house by a small side-door as Dunn pushed his way through the group of tourists who looked at him with marked and severe disapproval.

"Disgraceful," one of them said quite loudly, and another added: "I believe he said something impudent to that gentleman. I saw him go quite white, and look as if he were in two minds about ordering the fellow right out of the grounds." And a third expressed the general opinion that the culprit looked a real ruffian with all that hair on his face.

"Might be a gorilla," said the third tourist. "And look what a clumsy sort of walk he has; perhaps he's been drinking."

But Dunn was quite indifferent to, and indeed unaware of this popular condemnation as he made his way back to the hotel garage where he had left their car. He seemed rather well pleased than otherwise as he walked on.

“Quite a stroke of luck for once,” he mused, and he smiled to himself, and stroked the thick growth of his untidy beard. “It’s been worth while, for he didn’t recognize me in the least, and had quite a shock, but, all the same, I shan’t be sorry to shave and see my own face again.”

He had the car out and ready when Ella and Allen came back. Allen at once made an excuse to leave them, and went into the hotel bar to get a drink of whisky, and when they were alone, Ella, who was looking very troubled and thoughtful, said to Dunn

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"We saw Lord Chobham in the garden with a gentleman some one told us was a relative of his, a Mr. Walter Dunsmore. Did you see them?"

"Yes," answered Dunn, a little surprised, and giving her a quick and searching look from his bright, keen eyes. "I saw them. Why—"

"I think I've seen the one they said was Mr. Walter Dunsmore before, and I can't think where," she answered, puckering her brows. "I can't think—do you know anything about him?"

"I know he is Mr. Walter Dunsmore," answered Dunn slowly, "and I know he is one of the family, and a great friend of Rupert Dunsmore's. Rupert Dunsmore is Lord Chobham's nephew, you know, and heir, after his father, to the title and estates. His father, General Dunsmore, brought him and Walter up together like brothers, but recently Walter has lived at the Abbey as Lord Chobham's secretary and companion. The general likes to live abroad a good deal, and his son Rupert is always away on some sporting or exploring expedition or another."

"It's very strange," Ella said again. "I'm sure I've seen Walter Dunsmore before but I can't think where."

Allen came from the bar, having quenched his thirst for the time being, and they started off, arriving back at Bittermeads fairly early in the evening, for Dunn had brought them along at a good rate, and apparently remembered the road so well from the afternoon that he never once had occasion to refer to the map.

He took the car round to the garage, and Allen and Ella went into the house, where Allen made his way at once to the breakfast-room, searching for more whisky and cigars, while Ella, after a quick word with her mother to assure her of their safe return, went to find Deede Dawson.

"Ah, dear child, you are back then," he greeted her. "Well, how have you enjoyed yourself? Had a pleasant time?"

"It was not for pleasure we went there, I think," she said listlessly.

He looked up quickly, and though his perpetual smile still played as usual about his lips, his eyes were hard and daunting as they fixed themselves on hers. Before that sinister stare her own eyes sank, and sought the little travelling set of chessmen and board that were before him.

"See," he said, "I've just brought off a mate. Neat isn't it? Checkmate."

She looked up at him, and her eyes were steadier now.

"I've only one thing to say to you," she said. "I came here to say it. If anything happens at Wreste Abbey I shall go straight to the police."

"Indeed," he said, "indeed." He fingered the chessmen as though all his attention were engaged by them. "May I ask why?" he murmured. "For what purpose?"

"To tell them," she answered quietly, "what I—know."

"And what do you know?" he asked indifferently. "What do you know that is likely to interest the police?"

"I ought to have said, perhaps," she answered after a pause, "what I suspect."

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"Ah, that's so different, isn't it?" he murmured gently. "So very different. You see we all of us suspect so many things."

She did not answer, for she had said all she had to say and she was afraid that her strength would not carry her further. She began to walk away, but he called her back.

"Oh, how do you think your mother is today?" he asked. "Do you know, her condition seems to me quite serious at times. I wonder if you are overanxious?"

"She is better—much better!" Ella answered, and added with a sudden burst of fiercest, white-hot passion: "But I think it would be better if we had both died before we met you."

She hurried away, for she was afraid of breaking down, and Deede Dawson smiled the more as he again turned his attention to his chessmen, taking them up and putting them down in turn.

"She's turning nasty," he mused. "I don't think she'll dare—but she might. She's only a pawn, but a pawn can cause a lot of trouble at times—a pawn may become a queen and give the mate. When a pawn threatens trouble it's best to—remove it."

He went out and came back a little late and busied himself with a four-move chess problem which absorbed all his attention, and which he did not solve to his satisfaction till past midnight. Then he went upstairs to bed, but at the door of his room he paused and went on very softly up the narrow stairs that led to the attics above.

Outside the one in which Dunn slept, he waited a little till the unbroken sound of regular breathing from within assured him that the occupant slept.

Cautiously and carefully he crept on, and entered the one adjoining, where he turned the light of the electric flashlight he carried on a large, empty packing-case that stood in one corner.

With a two-foot rule he took from his pocket he measured it carefully and nodded with great satisfaction.

"A little smaller than the other," he said to himself. "But, then, it hasn't got to hold so much." He laughed in his silent, mirthless way, as at something that amused him. "A good deal less," he thought. "And Dunn shall drive."

He laughed again, and for a moment or two stood there in the darkness, laughing silently to himself, and then, speaking aloud, he called out:

"You can come in, Dunn."

Dunn, whom a creaking board had betrayed, came forward unconcernedly in his sleeping attire.

"I saw it was you," he remarked. "At first I thought something was wrong."

"Nothing, nothing," answered Deede Dawson. "I was only looking at this packing-case. I may have to send one away again soon, and I wanted to be sure this was big enough. If I do, I shall want you to drive."

"Not Miss Cayley?" asked Dunn.

"No, no," answered Deede Dawson. "She might be with you perhaps, but she wouldn't drive. Night driving is always dangerous, I think, don't you?"

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"There's things more dangerous," Dunn remarked.

"Oh, quite true," answered Deede Dawson. "Well, did you enjoy your visit to Wreste Abbey?"

"No," answered Dunn roughly. "I didn't see Rupert Dunsmore, and it wouldn't have been any good if I had with all those people about."

"You're too impatient," Deede Dawson smiled. "I'm getting everything ready; you can't properly expect to win a game in a dozen moves. You must develop your pieces properly and have all ready before you start your attack. As soon as I'm ready—why, I'll act—and you'll have to do the rest."

"I see," said Dunn thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XXI

DOUBTS AND FEARS

In point of fact Dunn had not been asleep when Deede Dawson came listening at his door. Of late he had slept little and that little had been much disturbed by evil, haunting dreams in which perpetually he saw his dead friend, Charley Wright, and dead John Clive always together, while behind them floated the pale and lovely face of Ella, at whom the two dead men looked and whispered to each other.

In the day such thoughts troubled him less, for when he was under the influence of Ella's gentle presence, and when he could watch her clear and candid eyes, he found all doubt and suspicion melting away like snow beneath warm sunshine.

But in the silence of the night they returned, returned very dreadfully, so dreadfully that often as he lay awake in the darkness beads of sweat stood upon his forehead and he would drive his great hands one against the other in his passionate effort to still the thoughts that tormented him. Then, in the morning again, the sound of Ella's voice, the merest glimpse of her grave and gracious personality, would bring back once more his instinctive belief in her.

The morning after Deede Dawson had paid his visit to the attic there was news, however, that disturbed him greatly, for Mrs. Barker, the charwoman who came each morning to Bittermeads, told them that two men in the village—notorious poachers—had been arrested by the police on a charge of being concerned in Mr. Clive's death.

The news was a great shock to Dunn, for, knowing as he thought he did, that the police were working on an entirely wrong idea, he had not supposed they would ever find themselves able to make any arrest. As a matter of fact, these arrests they had made

were the result of desperation on the part of the police, who unable to discover anything and entirely absorbed by their preconceived idea that the crime was the work of poachers, had arrested men they knew were poachers in the vague hope of somehow discovering something or of somehow getting hold of some useful clue.

But that Dunn did not know, and feared unlucky chance or undesigned coincidence must have appeared to suggest the guilt of the men and that they were really in actual danger of trial and conviction. He had, too, received that morning, through the secret means of communication he kept open with an agent in London, conclusive proof that at the moment of Clive's death Deede Dawson was in town on business that seemed obscure enough, but none the less in town, and therefore undoubtedly innocent of the actual perpetration of the murder.

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Who, then, was left who could have fired the fatal shot?

It was a question Dunn dared not even ask himself but he saw very plainly that if the proceedings against the two arrested men were to be pressed, he would be forced to come forward before his preparations were ready and tell all he knew, no matter at what cost.

All the morning he waited and watched for his opportunity to speak to Ella, who was in a brighter and gayer mood than he had ever seen her in before.

At breakfast Deede Dawson had assured her that he could not conceive what were the suspicions she had referred to the night previously, and while he would certainly have no objection to her mentioning them at any time, in any quarter she thought fit if anything happened at Wreste Abbey—and would indeed be the first to urge her to do so—he, for his part, considered it most unlikely that anything of the sort she seemed to dread would in fact occur.

“Not at all likely,” he said with his happy, beaming smile that never reached those cold eyes of his. “I should say myself that nothing ever did happen at Wreste Abbey, not since the Flood, anyhow. It strikes me as the most peaceful, secluded spot in all England.”

“I’m very glad you think so,” said Ella, tremendously relieved and glad to hear him say so, and supposing, though his smooth words and smiles and protestations deceived her very little, that, at any rate, what she had said had forced him to abandon whatever plans he had been forming in that direction.

Her victory, as it seemed to her, won so easily and containing good promise of further success in the future, cheered her immensely, and it was in almost a happy mood that she went unto the garden after lunch and met Dunn in a quiet, well-hidden corner, where he had been waiting and watching for long.

His appearance startled her—his eyes were so wild, his whole manner so strained and restless, and she gave a little dismayed exclamation as she saw him.

“Oh, what’s the matter?” she asked. “Aren’t you well? You look—”

She paused for she did not know exactly how it was he did look; and he said in his harshest, most abrupt manner

“Do you remember Charley Wright?”

“Why do you ask?” she said, puzzled. “Is anything wrong?”

“Do you remember John Clive?” he asked, disregarding this. “Have you heard two men have been arrested for his murder?”

“Mrs. Barker told me so,” she answered gravely. He came a little nearer, almost threateningly nearer.

“What do you think of that?” he asked.

She lifted one hand and put it gently on his arm. The touch of it thrilled him through and through, and he felt a little dazed as he watched it resting on his coat sleeve. She had become very pale also and her voice was low and strained as she said

“Have you had suspicions too?”

He looked at her as if fascinated for a moment, and then nodded twice and very slowly.

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"So have I," she sighed in tones so low he could scarcely hear them.

"Oh, you, you also," he muttered, almost suffocating.

"Yes," she said. "Yes—perhaps the same as yours. My stepfather," she breathed, "Mr. Deede Dawson."

He watched her closely and moodily, but he did not speak.

"I was afraid—at first," she whispered. "But I was wrong—quite wrong. It is as certain as it can be that he was in London at the time."

From his pocket Dunn took out the handkerchief of hers that he had found near the body of the dead man.

"Is this yours?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Yes, where did you get it?"

He did not answer, but he lifted his hands one after the other, and put them on her shoulder, with the fingers outspread to encircle her throat. It seemed to him that when she acknowledged the ownership of the handkerchief she acknowledged also the perpetration of the deed, and he became a little mad, and he had it in his mind that the slightest, the very slightest, pressure of his fingers on that soft, round throat would put it for ever out of her power to do such things again. Then for himself death would be easy and welcome, and there would be an end to all these doubts and fears that racked him with anguish beyond bearing.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, making no attempt to resist or escape.

Ever so slightly the pressure of his hands upon her throat strengthened and increased. A very little more and the lovely thing of life he watched would be broken and cold for ever. Her eyes were steady, she showed no sign of fear, she stood perfectly still, her hands loosely clasped together before her. He groaned, and his arms fell to his side, helpless. Without the slightest change of expression, she said:

"What were you going to do?"

"I don't know," he answered. "Do you ever go mad? I do, I think. Perhaps you do too, and that explains it. Do you know where Charley Wright is?"

"Yes," she answered directly. "Why? Did you know him, then?"

"You know where he is now?" Dunn repeated.



She nodded quietly.

"I heard from him only last week," she said.

"I am certainly mad or you are," he muttered, staring at her with eyes in which such wonder and horror showed that it seemed there really was a touch of madness there.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"You heard from him last week," he said again, and again she answered:

"Yes—last week. Why not?"

He leaned forward, and before she knew what he intended to do he kissed her pale, cool cheek.

Once more she stood still and immobile, her hands loosely clasped before her. It might have been that he had kissed a statue, and her perfect stillness made him afraid.

"Ella," he said. "Ella."

"Why did you do that?" she said, a little wildly now in her turn. "It was not that you were going to do to me before."

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"I love you," he muttered excusingly.

She shook her head.

"You know too little of me; you have too many doubt and fears," she said. "You do not love me, you do not even trust me."

"I love you all the same," he asserted positively and roughly. "I loved you—it was when I tied your hands to the chair that night and you looked at me with such contempt, and asked me if I felt proud. That stung, that stung. I loved you then."

"You see," she said sadly, "you do not even pretend to trust me. I don't know why you should. Why are you here? Why are you disguised with all that growth of hair? There is something you are preparing, planning. I know it. I feel it. What is it?"

"I told you once before," he answered, "that the end of this will be Deede Dawson's death or mine. That's what I'm preparing."

"He is very cunning, very clever," she said. "Do you think he suspects you?"

"He suspects every one always," answered Dunn. "I've been trying to get proof to act on. I haven't succeeded. Not yet. Nothing definite. If I can't, I shall act without. That's all."

"If I told him even half of what you just said," she said, looking at him. "What would happen?"

"You see, I trust you," he answered bitterly.

She shook her head, but her eyes were soft and tender as she said:

"It wasn't trust in me made you say all that, it was because you didn't care what happened after."

"No," he said. "But when I see you, I forget everything. Do you love me?"

"Why, I've never even seen you yet," she exclaimed with something like a smile. "I only know you as two eyes over a tangle of hair that I don't believe you ever either brush or comb. Do you know, sometimes I am curious."

He took her hand and drew her to sit beside him on the bench under a tree near by. All his doubts and fears and suspicions he set far from him, and remembered nothing save that she was the woman for whom yearned all the depths of his soul as by pre-ordained decree. And she, too, forgot all else save that she had met her man—her man, to her strange, aloof, mysterious, but dominating all her life as though by primal necessity.

When they parted, it was with an agreement to meet again that evening, and in the twilight they spent a halcyon hour together, saying little, feeling much.

It was only when at last she had left him that he remembered all that had passed, that had happened, that he knew, suspected, dreaded, all that he planned and intended and would be soon called upon to put into action.

“She’s made me mad,” he said to himself, and for a long time he sat there in the darkness, in the stillness of the evening, motionless as the tree in whose shade he sat, plunged in the most profound and strange reverie, from which presently his quick ear, alert and keen even when his mind was deep in thought, caught the light and careful sound of an approaching footstep.

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In a moment he was up and gliding through the darkness to meet who was coming, and almost at once a voice hailed him cautiously.

"There you are, Dunn," Deede Dawson said. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Tomorrow or next day we shall be able to strike; everything is ready at last, and I'll tell you now exactly what we are going to do."

"That's good news," said Dunn softly.

"Come this way," Deede Dawson said, and led Dunn through the darkness to the gate that admitted to the Bittermeads grounds from the high road.

Here he paused, and stood for a long time in silence, leaning on the gate and looking out across the road to the common beyond. Close beside him stood Dunn, controlling his impatience as best he could, and wondering if at last the secret springs of all these happenings was to be laid bare to him.

But Deede Dawson seemed in no hurry to begin. For a long time he remained in the same attitude, silent and sombre in the darkness, and when at last he spoke it was to utter a remark that quite took Dunn by surprise.

"What a lovely night," he said in low and pensive tones, very unlike those he generally used. "I remember when I was a boy—that's a long time ago."

Dunn was too surprised by this sudden and very unexpected lapse into sentiment to answer. Deede Dawson went on as if thinking to himself:

"A long time—I've done a lot—seen a lot since then—too much, perhaps—I remember mother told me once—poor soul, I believe she used to be rather proud of me—"

"Your mother?" Dunn said wondering greatly to think this man should still have such memories.

But Deede Dawson seemed either to resent his tone or else to be angry with himself for giving way to such weakness. In a voice more like his usual one, he said harshly and sneeringly:

"Oh, yes, I had a mother once, just like everybody else. Why not? Most people have their mothers, though it's not an arrangement I should care to defend. Now then, Ella was with you tonight; you and she were alone together a long time."

"Well," growled Dunn, "what of it?"

"Fine girl, isn't she?" asked Deede Dawson, and laughed.

Dunn did not speak. It filled him with such loathing to hear this man so much as utter Ella's name, it was all he could do to keep his hands motionless by his side and not make use of them about the other's throat.

"She's been useful, very useful," Deede Dawson went on meditatively. "Her mother had some money when I married her. I don't mind telling you it's all spent now, but Ella's a little fortune in herself."

"I didn't know we came to talk about her," said Dunn slowly. "I thought you had something else to say to me."

"So I have," Deede Dawson answered. "That's why I brought you here. We are safe from eavesdroppers here, in a house you can never tell who is behind a curtain or a door. But then, Ella is a part of my plans, a very important part. Do you remember I told you I might want you to take a second packing-case away from here in the car one night?"

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"Yes, I remember," said Dunn slowly. "I remember. What would be in it? The same sort of thing that was in—that other?"

"Yes," answered Deede Dawson. "Much the same."

"I shall want to see for myself," said Dunn. "I'm a trustful sort of person, but I don't go driving about the country with packing-cases late at night unless I've seen for myself what's inside."

CHAPTER XXII

PLOTS AND PLAYS

"Very wise of you," yawned Deede Dawson. "That's just what Ella said—what's that?"

For instinctively Dunn had raised his hand, but he lowered it again at once.

"Oh, cut the cackle," he said impatiently. "Tell me what you want me to do, and make it plain, very plain, for I can tell you there's a good deal about all this I don't understand, and I'm not inclined to trust you far. For one thing, what are you after yourself? Where do you come in? What are you going to get? And there's another thing I want to say. If you are thinking of playing any tricks on me don't do it, unless you are ready to take big risks. There's only one man alive who ever made a fool of me, and his name is Rupert Dunsmore, and I don't think he's today what insurance companies call a good risk. Not by any manner of means." He paused to laugh harshly. "Let's get to business," he said. "Look here, how do I know you mean all you say about Rupert Dunsmore? What's he to you?"

"Nothing," answered Deede Dawson promptly. "Nothing. But there's some one I'm acting for to whom he is a good deal."

"Who is that?" Dunn asked sharply.

"Do you think I'm going to tell you?" retorted the other, and laughed in his cold, mirthless manner. "Perhaps you aren't the only one who owes him a grudge."

"That's likely enough, but I want to know where I'm standing," said Dunn. "Is this unknown person you say you are acting for anxious to bring about Rupert Dunsmore's death?"

"I'm not answering any questions, so you needn't ask them," replied Deede Dawson.

"But I will tell you that there's something big going on. Or I shouldn't be in it, I don't use my brains on small things, you know. If it comes off all right, I—" He paused, and for

once a thrill of genuine emotion sounded in his voice. “Thousands,” he said abruptly. “Yes, and more—more. But there’s an obstacle—Rupert Dunsmore. It’s your place to remove him. That’ll suit you, and it’ll mean good pay, as much as you like to ask for in reason. And Ella, if you want her. The girl won’t be any use to me when this is over, and you can have her if you like. I don’t think she’ll object from what I can see—not that it would matter if she did. So there you are. Put Rupert Dunsmore out of the way and it’ll be the best day’s work you’ve ever done, and you shall have Ella into the bargain—if you claim her. Makeweight.”

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He began to laugh again and Dunn laughed, too, for while he was not sure what it was that amused Deede Dawson, there were certain aspects of all this that bore for him a very curious and ironic humour.

"All right," he said. "You bring me face to face with Rupert Dunsmore and you won't have to grumble about the result, for I swear only one of us will go away alive. But how are you going to do it?"

"I've my plan, and it's simple enough," answered Deede Dawson. "Though I can tell you it took some working out. But the simplest problem is always the best, whether in life or in chess." Again he indulged in a low and guarded outburst of his thin, mirthless laughter before he continued: "I suppose you know Rupert Dunsmore is one of those restless people who are never content except when wandering about in some out of the way place or another, as often as not no one having the least idea of his whereabouts. Then he turns up unexpectedly, only to disappear again when the whim takes him. Lately he has been away on one of these trips, but I happen to know he is coming back almost at once—what's the matter?"

"I was only wondering how you knew that," answered Dunn, who had given a sudden start.

"Oh, I know, never mind how," Deede Dawson said. "I know that tomorrow afternoon at four o'clock he will be waiting by the side of Brook Bourne Spring in Ottom's Wood, near General Dunsmore's place. Which is as out of the way and quiet and lonely a spot as you could wish for."

"And you have information that he will be there?" Dunn said incredulously. "How can you possibly be sure of that?"

"Never mind how," answered Deede Dawson. "I am sure. That's enough. My information is certain."

"Oh, it is, is it?" Dunn muttered. "You are a wonderful man, Mr. Dawson. You know everything—or nearly everything. You are sure of everything—or nearly everything—but suppose he changes his mind at the last moment and doesn't come after all?"

"He won't," answered Deede Dawson. "You be there and you'll find him there all right."

"Well, perhaps," said Dunn slowly. "But what I want to know is why you are so sure? There's a good deal hangs on your being right, you know."

"I only wish I was as certain of everything else," Deede Dawson said.

"Oh, all right," exclaimed Dunn. "I suppose you know and you may be right."

"I am," Deede Dawson assured him. "Listen carefully now, there mustn't be any blunders. You are to make an early start tomorrow. I don't want you to take the car for fear of its being seen and identified. You must take the train to London and then another train back immediately to Delsby. From Delsby you'll have an eighteen-mile walk through lonely country where you aren't likely to meet any one, and must try not to. The less you are seen the better. You know that for yourself, and for your own sake you'll be careful. You'll

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have no time to spare, but you will be able to get to the place I told you of by four all right—no earlier, no later. You must arrange to be there at four exactly. You may spoil all if you are too early. Almost as soon as you get there, Rupert Dunsmore will arrive. You must do the rest for yourself, and then you must strike straight across country for here. You can look up your routes on the map. There will be less risk of attracting attention if you come and go by different ways. You ought to be here again some time in the small hours. I'll let you in, and you'll have cleared your own score with Rupert Dunsmore and earned more money than you ever have had in all your life before. Now, can I depend on you?"

"Yes—yes," answered Dunn, over whom there had come a new and strange sense of unreality as he stood and listened to cold-blooded murder being thus calmly, coolly planned, as though it were some afternoon's pleasure trip that was being arranged, so that he hardly knew whether he did, in fact, hear this smooth, low, unceasing voice that from the darkness at his side laid down such a bloody road for his feet to travel.

"Oh, yes, you can depend on me," he said. "But can I depend on you, when you say Rupert Dunsmore will be there at that time and that place?"

It was a moment or two before Deede Dawson answered, and then his voice was very low and soft and confident as he said:

"Yes, you can—absolutely. You see, I know his plans."

"Oh, do you?" Dunn said as though satisfied. "Oh, well then, it's no wonder you're so sure."

"No wonder at all," agreed Deede Dawson. "There's just one other thing I can tell you. Some one else will be there, too, at Brook Bourne Spring in Ottam's Wood."

"Who's that?" asked Dunn sharply.

"The man," said Deede Dawson, "who is behind all this—the man you and I are working for—the man who's going to pay us, even better than he thinks."

"He—he will be there?" repeated Dunn, drawing a deep, breath.

"Yes, but you won't see him, and it wouldn't help you if you did," Deede Dawson told him. "Most likely he'll be disguised—a mask, perhaps; I don't know. Anyhow, he'll be there. Watching. I'm not suggesting you would do such a thing as never go near the place, loaf around a bit, then come back and report Rupert Dunsmore out of the way for good, draw your pay and vanish, and leave us to find out he was as lively and troublesome as ever. I don't think you would do that, because you sounded as if you

meant what you said when you told me he was your worst enemy. But it's just as well to be sure, and so we mean to have a witness; and as it's what you might call a delicate matter, that witness will most likely be our employer himself. So you had better do the job thoroughly if you want your pay."

"I see you take your precautions," remarked Dunn. "Well, that's all right, I don't mind."

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"You understand exactly what you've got to do?" Deede Dawson asked.

Dunn nodded.

"What about Allen?" he asked. "Does he take any part in this show?"

"He and I are planning a little visit to Wreste Abbey rather early the same night, during the dinner-hour most likely," answered Deede Dawson carelessly. "We can get in at one of the long gallery windows quite easily, Allen says. He kept his eyes open that day you all went there. It may be helpful to give the police two problems to work on at once; and besides, big as this thing is, there's a shortage of ready money at present. But our little affair at Wreste Abbey will have nothing to do with you. You mind what you've got to do, and don't trouble about anything else. See?"

"I see," answered Dunn slowly. "And if you can arrange for Rupert Dunsmore to be there at that time all right, I'll answer for the rest."

"You needn't be uneasy about that," Deede Dawson said, and laughed. "You see, I know his plans," he repeated, and laughed again; and still laughing that chill, mirthless way of his, he turned and walked back towards the house.

Dunn watched him go through the darkness, and to himself he muttered:

"Yes, but I wonder if you do."

CHAPTER XXIII

COUNTER-PLANS

The hour was late by now, but Dunn felt no inclination for sleep, and there was no need for him to return indoors as yet, since Deede Dawson, who always locked up the house himself, never did so till past midnight. Till the small hours, very often he was accustomed to sit up absorbed in those chess problems, the composing and solving of which were his great passion, so that, indeed, it is probable that under other circumstances he might have passed a perfectly harmless and peaceful existence, known to wide circles as an extraordinarily clever problemist and utterly unknown elsewhere.

But the Fate that is, after all, but man's own character writ large, had decreed otherwise. And the little, fat, smiling man bending over his travelling chess board on which he moved delicately to and fro the tiny red and white men of carved ivory, now and again removing a piece and laying it aside, had done as much with as little concern to his fellow creatures from the very beginning of his terrible career.

Outside, leaning on the gate where Deede Dawson had left him, Dunn was deep in thought that was not always very comforting, for there was very much in all this laid out for him to accomplish that he did not understand and that disturbed him a good deal.

A careful, cautious "Hist!" broke in upon his thoughts, and in an instant he stiffened to close attention, every nerve on the alert.

The sound was repeated, a faint and wary footstep sounded, and in the darkness a form appeared and stole slowly nearer.

Dunn poised for a moment, ready for attack or retreat, and then all at once his tense attitude relaxed.

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"You, Walter," he exclaimed. "That's good! But how did you get here? And how did you know where I was?"

The new-comer drew a little nearer and showed the tall, thin form of Walter Dunsmore to whom Dunn had spoken at Wreste Abbey.

"I had to come," he murmured. "I couldn't rest without seeing you. You upset me the other day, saying what you did. Isn't it very dangerous your being here? Suppose Deede Dawson—"

"Oh, if he suspected, there would soon be an end of me," answered Dunn grimly. "But I think I'm going to win—at least, I did till tonight."

"What's happened?" the other asked sharply and anxiously.

"He has been telling me his plans," answered Dunn. "He has told me everything—he has put himself entirely in my power—he has done what I have been waiting and hoping for ever since I came here. He has given me his full confidence at last, and I never felt more uneasy or less certain of success than I do at this moment."

"He has told you—everything?" Walter Dunsmore asked. "Everything, except who is behind it all," answered Dunn. "I asked him who he was acting for, and he refused to say. But we shall know that tomorrow, for he told me something almost as good—he told me where this employer would be at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. So then we shall have him, unless Deede Dawson was lying."

"Of course, it all depends on finding that out," remarked Walter thoughtfully. "Finding out his identity."

"Yes, that's the key move to the problem," Dunn said. "And tomorrow we shall know it, if Deede Dawson was speaking the truth just now."

"I should think he was," said Walter slowly. "I should think it is certain he was. You may depend on that, I think."

"I think so, too," agreed Dunn. "But how did you find out where I was?"

"You know that day you came to Wreste Abbey? There was some fellow you had with you who told the landlord of the Chobham Arms, so I easily found out from him," answered Walter.

"Anyhow, I'm glad you're here," Dunn said. "I was wondering how to get in touch with you. Well, this is Deede Dawson's plan in brief. Tomorrow, at four in the afternoon, Rupert Dunsmore is to be killed—and I've undertaken to do the deed."

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Walter, starting.

“I’ve promised that if Deede Dawson will bring me face to face with Rupert Dunsmore, I’ll murder him,” answered Dunn, laughing softly.

“A fairly safe offer on your part, isn’t it?” observed Walter. “At least, unless there’s any saving clause about mirrors.”

“Oh, none,” answered Dunn. “I told Deede Dawson Rupert Dunsmore was my worst enemy, and that’s true enough, for I think every man’s worst enemy is himself.”

“I wish I had none worse,” muttered Walter.

“I think you haven’t, old chap,” Dunn said smilingly. “But come across the road. It’ll be safer on the common. Deede Dawson is so cunning one is never safe from him. One can never be sure he isn’t creeping up behind.”

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"Well, I daresay it's wise to take every precaution," observed Walter. "But I can't imagine either him or any one else getting near you without your knowledge."

Robert Dunn,—or rather, Rupert Dunsmore, as was his name by right of birth—laughed again to himself, very softly in the darkness.

"Perhaps not," he said. "But I take no chances I can avoid with Deede Dawson. Come along."

They crossed the road together and sat down on the common at an open spot, where none could well approach them unheard or unseen. Dunn laid his hand affectionately on Walter's shoulder as they settled themselves.

"Old chap," he said. "It was good of you to come here. You've run some risk. It's none too safe near Bittermeads. But I'm glad to see you, Walter. It's a tremendous relief after all this strain of doubt and watching and suspicion to be with some one I know—some one I can trust—some one like you, Walter."

In the darkness, Walter put out his hand and took Dunn's and held it for a moment.

"I have been anxious about you," he said. Dunn returned the pressure warmly.

"I know," he said. "Jove, old chap, it's good to see you again. You don't know what it's like after all this long time, feeling that every step was a step in the dark, to be at last with a real friend again."

"I think I can guess," Walter said softly.

Dunn shook his head.

"No one could," he said. "I tell you I've doubted, distrusted, suspected till I wasn't sure of my own shadow. Well, that's all over now. Tomorrow we can act."

"Tell me what I'm to do," Walter Dunsmore said.

"There's a whole lot I don't understand yet," Dunn continued slowly. "I suppose it was that that was making me feel so jolly down before you came. I don't feel sure somehow—not sure. Deede Dawson is such a cunning brute. He seems to have laid his whole hand bare, and yet there may be cards up his sleeve still. Besides, his plan he told me about seems so bald. And I don't understand why he should think he is so sure of what I—I mean, of what Rupert—it's a bit confusing to have a double identity—is going to do. He says he is sure Rupert Dunsmore is to be at the Brook Bourne Spring tomorrow at four. He says his information is certain, and that he has full knowledge of what Rupert Dunsmore is going to do, which is more than I have. But what can it be that's making him so sure?"

“That’s probably simple enough,” said Walter. “You said you suspected there was a leakage from Burns & Swift’s office, and you told Burns to make misleading statements about your movements occasionally when he was dictating his letters. Well, I expect this is one.”

“That may be; only Deede Dawson seems so very sure,” answered Dunn. “But what’s specially important is his saying that his employer, whoever it is, who is behind all this, will be there too.”

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"A meeting? Is that it?" exclaimed Walter.

"No, that's not the idea," answered Dunn. "You see, the idea is that Rupert Dunsmore will be there at four, and that I'm to be there in ambush to murder myself. Whoever is behind all this will be there too—to see I carry out my work properly. And that gives us our chance."

"Oh, that's good," exclaimed Walter. "We shall have him for certain."

"That's what I want you to see to," said Dunn. "I want you to have men you can trust well hidden all round, ready to collar him. And I want you to have all the roads leading to Ottam's Wood well watched and every one going along them noted. You understand?"

"That's quite easy," declared Walter. "I can promise not a soul will get into Ottam's Wood without being seen, and I'll make very sure indeed of getting hold of any one hiding anywhere near Brook Bourne Spring. And once we've done that—once we know who it is—"

"Yes," agreed Dunn. "We shall be all right then. That is the one thing necessary to know—the key move to the problem—the identity of who it is pulling the strings. He must be a clever beggar; anyhow, I mean to see him hang for it yet."

"I daresay he's clever," agreed Walter. "He is playing for big stakes. Anyhow, we'll have him tomorrow all right; that seems certain—at last."

"At last," agreed Dunn, with a long-drawn sigh. "Ugh! it's all been such a nightmare. It's been pretty awful, knowing there was some one—not able to guess who. Ever since you discovered that first attempt, ever since we became certain there was a plot going on to clear out every one in succession to the Chobham estates— and that was jolly plain, though the fools of police did babble about no evidence, as if pistol bullets come from nowhere and poisoned cups of tea—"

"Ah, I was to blame there, that was my fault," said Walter. "You see, we had no proof about the shooting, and when I had spilt that tea, no proof of poison either. I shall always regret that."

"A bit of bad luck," Dunn agreed. "But accidents will happen. Anyhow, it was clear enough some one was trying to make a jolly clear sweep. It may be a madman; it may be some one with a grudge against us; it may be, as poor Charley thought, some one in the line of succession, who is just clearing the way to inherit the title and estates himself. I wish I knew what made Charley suspicious of Deede Dawson in the first place."

"You don't know that?" Walter asked.

"No, he never told me," answered Dunn. "Poor Charley, it cost him his life. That's another thing we must find out—where they've hidden his body."

"He was sure from the first," remarked Walter, "that it was a conspiracy on the part of some one in the line of succession?"

"Yes," agreed Dunn. "It's likely enough, too. You see, ever since that big family row and dispersion eighty years ago, a whole branch of the family has been entirely lost sight of. There may be half a dozen possible heirs we know nothing about. Like poor John Clive. I daresay if we had known of his existence we should have begun by suspecting him."

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"There's one thing pretty sure," remarked Walter. "If these pleasant little arrangements did succeed, it would be a fairly safe guess that the inheritor of the title and estates was the guilty person. It might be brought home to him, too."

"Perhaps," agreed Dunn dryly. "But just a trifle too late to interest me for one. And I don't mean to let the dad or uncle be sacrificed if I can help it. I failed with Clive, poor fellow, but I don't mean to again, and I don't see how we can. Deede Dawson has exposed his hand. Now we can play ours."

"But what are you going to do?" Walter asked. "Are you going to follow out his instructions?"

"To the letter," Dunn answered. "We are dealing with very wary, suspicious people, and the least thing might make them take alarm. The important point, of course, is the promise that Deede Dawson's employer will be at Brook Bourne Spring tomorrow afternoon. That's our trump card. Everything hangs on that. And to make sure there's no hitch, I shall do exactly what I've been told to do. I expect I shall be watched. I shall be there at four o'clock, and ten minutes after I hope we shall have laid hands on—whoever it is."

Walter nodded.

"I don't see how we can fail," he said.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN APHORISM

"No," Dunn agreed after a long pause. "No, I don't see myself how failure is possible; I don't see what there is to go wrong. All the same, I shan't be sorry when it's all over; I suppose I'm nervous, that's the truth of it. But Deede Dawson's hardly the sort of man I should have expected to lay all his cards on the table so openly."

"Oh, I think that's natural enough," answered Walter. "Quite natural—he thinks you are in with him and he tells you what he wants you to do. But I don't quite see the object of your visit to the Abbey the other day. You gave me the shock of my life, I think. I hadn't the least idea who you were—that beard makes a wonderful difference."

Dunn laughed quietly.

"It's a good disguise," he admitted. "I didn't quite know myself first time I looked in a mirror. We went to the Abbey to prepare for a burglary there."

"Oh, is that on the cards, too?" exclaimed Walter. "I didn't expect that."

“Yes,” answered Dunn. “My own idea is that Deede Dawson sees an opportunity for making a bit on his own. After all of us are disposed of and his friend has got the title and estates, he won’t dare to prosecute of course, and so Deede Dawson thinks it a good opportunity to visit the Abbey and pick up any pictures or heirlooms or so-so he can that it would be almost impossible to dispose of in the ordinary way, but that he expects he will be able to sell back at a good price to the new owner of the property. I think he calculates that that gentleman will be ready to pay as much as he is asked. I don’t know, but I think that’s his idea from something he said the other day about the uselessness of even good stuff from a big house unless you knew of a sure market, or could sell it back again to the owner.”

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"Jolly clever idea if it works all right," said Walter slowly. "I can see Mr. Deede Dawson is a man who needs watching. And I suppose we had better be on the look-out at the Abbey tomorrow night?"

"Evening," corrected Dunn. "It's planned for the dinner-hour."

"Right," said Walter. "We shall see some crowded hours tomorrow, I expect. Well, it's like this, as I understand it—we had better be sure everything is quite clear. Their idea is that you will meet and murder Rupert Dunsmore, who they have no notion is really your own self, at Brook Bourne Spring at four tomorrow afternoon, and the unknown somebody who is behind all this business will be in hiding there to make sure you do your work properly. Our idea is to watch all the roads leading to Ottam's Wood and to have men in ambush near the spring to seize any one hiding there at that time. Then we shall know who is at the bottom of all these plots and shall be able to smash the whole conspiracy. In addition, Deede Dawson and this other man you speak of, Allen, are going to break into the Abbey tomorrow evening and we are to be ready for them and catch them in the act?"

"Yes," said Dunn, "that's the idea; you can manage all right?"

"Oh, yes," answered Walter. "It's all simple enough—you've planned it out so jolly well there's nothing much left for me to do. And I don't see what you're nervous about; there's nothing that can go wrong very well—your plans are perfect, I think."

"It's easy enough to make plans when you know just what the other side are going to do," observed Dunn. "There's one point more. Miss Cayley—I mentioned her in one of the notes I sent you through Burns."

"Yes, I remember—Deede Dawson's step-daughter," said Walter. "I suppose she is in it?"

"She is not; she knows nothing," declared Dunn vehemently.

"But it was she who took away poor Charley's body, wasn't it?" asked Walter. "But for that you would have had evidence enough to act on at once, wouldn't you?"

"She did not know what she was doing," Dunn replied. "And now she is in danger herself. I am convinced Deede Dawson is growing afraid of her, he dropped hints; I'm sure he is planning something, perhaps he means to murder her as well. So besides these other arrangements I want to see that there's a trustworthy man watching here. I don't anticipate that there's any immediate danger—it's almost certain that if he means anything he will wait till he sees how this other business is turning out. But I want some one trustworthy to be at hand in case of need. You will see to that?"



“Oh, yes, I can spare Simmonds; I’ll send him,” answered Walter. “Though, I must say, my dear chap, I don’t think I should trouble much about that young lady. But it can be easily managed, in fact everything you want me to do is easy enough; I only wish some of it was a bit difficult or dangerous.”

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"You're a good chap, Walter," said Dunn, putting his hand on the other's shoulder again. "Well, I think it's all settled now. I tell you I'm looking forward a good deal to four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. I feel as if I would give all I possess to know who it is."

"Don't make that offer," Walter said with a smile, "or the fates may accept it."

"I feel as though there's only one thing in the world I want one half so much," Dunn said. "As to know who this—devil is."

"Devil?" repeated Walter. "Well, yes, devil's a word like any other."

"I think it's justified in this case," said Dunn sternly. "Poor Charley Wright dead! One thing I can't understand about that is how they got him back here when you saw him in London when you did. But they're a cunning lot. They must have worked it somehow. Then Clive. I feel to blame for Clive's death—as if I ought to have managed better and saved him. Now there's this other devilry they are planning. I tell you, Walter, I feel the whole world will be a sweeter place after four o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

"At any rate," said Walter, "I think we may be sure of one thing —after four o'clock tomorrow afternoon you will know all—all." He paused and repeated, slightly varying the phrase: "Yes, after four o'clock tomorrow afternoon you will know everything—everything." He added in a brisker tone: "There's nothing else to arrange?"

"No," said Dunn, "I don't think so, and I had better go now or Deede Dawson will be suspecting something. He'll want to know what I've been stopping out so late for. Good-bye, old chap, and good luck."

They shook hands.

"Good-bye and good luck, Rupert, old man," Walter said. "You may depend on me—you know that."

"Yes, I do know that," Dunn answered.

They shook hands again, and Dunn said: "You've hurt your hand. It's tied up. Is it anything much?"

"No, no," answered Walter with a little laugh. "A mere scratch. I scratched it on a bit of wood, a lid that didn't fit properly."

"Well, good-bye and good luck," Dunn said again, and they parted, Walter disappearing into the darkness and Dunn returning to the house.

Deede Dawson heard him enter, and he came to the door of the room in which he had been sitting.

“Oh, there you are,” he said. “Been enjoying the night air or what? You’ve been a long time.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Dunn muttered in the heavy, sulky manner he always assumed at Bittermeads.

“Not weakening, eh?” asked Deede Dawson.

“No,” answered Dunn. “I’m not.”

“Good,” Deede Dawson exclaimed. “There’s a lot to win, and no fear of failure. I don’t see that failure’s possible. Do you?”

“No,” answered Dunn. “I suppose not.”

“The mate’s sure this time,” Deede Dawson declared. “It’s our turn to move, and whatever reply the other side makes, we’re sure of our mate next move. By the way, did you ever solve that problem I showed you the other day?”

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"Yes, I think so," answered Dunn. "It was a long time before I could hit on the right move, but I managed it at last, I think."

"Come and show me, then," said Deede Dawson, bustling back into his room and beginning to set up the pieces on his travelling chess-board. "This was the position, wasn't it? Now, what's your move?"

Dunn showed him, and Deede Dawson burst into a laugh that had in it for once a touch of honest enjoyment.

"Yes, that would do it, but for one thing you haven't noticed," he said. "Black can push the pawn at KB7 and make it, not a queen, but a knight, giving check to your king and no mate for you next move."

"Yes, that's so," agreed Dunn. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Unexpected, eh? Making the pawn a knight?" smiled Deede Dawson. "But in chess, and in life, it's the unexpected you have to look out for."

"That's quite an aphorism," said Dunn. "It's true, too."

He went up to bed, but did not sleep well, and when at last he fell into a troubled slumber, it seemed to him that Charley Wright and John Clive were there, one on each side of him, and that they had come, not because they sought for vengeance, but because they wished to warn him of a doom like their own that they could see approaching but he could not.

Toward's morning he got an hour's sound rest, and he was down stairs in good time. He did not see Ella, but he heard her moving about, so knew that she was safe as yet; and Deede Dawson gave him some elaborate parting instructions, a little money, and a loaded revolver.

"I don't know that I want that," said Dunn. "My hands will be all I need once I'm face to face with Rupert Dunsmore."

"That's the right spirit," said Deede Dawson approvingly. "But the pistol may be useful too. You needn't use it if you can manage without, but you may as well have it. Good-bye, and the best of luck. Take care of yourself, and don't lose your head or do anything foolish."

"Oh, you can trust me," said Dunn.

"I think I can," smiled Deede Dawson. "I think I can. Good-bye. Be careful, avoid noise and fuss, don't be seen any more than you can help, and if you shoot, aim low."



"There's a vade mecum for the intending assassin," Dunn thought grimly to himself, but he said nothing, gave the other a sullen nod, and started off on his strange and weird mission of murdering himself. He found himself wondering if any one else had ever been in such a situation. He did not suppose so.

CHAPTER XXV

THE UNEXPECTED

To the very letter Dunn followed the careful and precise instructions given him by Deede Dawson, for he did not wish to rouse in any way the slightest suspicion or run the least risk of frightening off that unknown instigator of these plots who was, it had been promised him, to be present near Brook Bourne Spring at four that afternoon.

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Even the thought of Ella was perhaps less clear and vivid to his mind just now than was his intense and passionate desire to discover the identity of the strange and sinister personality against whom he had matched himself.

“Very likely it’s some madman,” he thought to himself. “How in the name of common sense can he expect to inherit the title and estates quietly after such a series of crimes as he seems to contemplate? Does he think no one will have any suspicion of him when he comes forward? Even if he is successful in getting rid of all of us in this way, how does he expect to be able to reap his reward? Of course he may think that there will be no direct evidence if he manages cleverly enough, and that mere suspicion he will be able to disregard and live down in time, but surely it will be plain enough that ‘who benefits is guilty’? The whole thing is mad, fantastic. Why, the mere fact of any one making a claim to the title and estates would be almost enough to justify a jury in returning a verdict of guilty.”

But though his thoughts ran in this wise all the time he was journeying to London, and though he repeated them to himself over and over again, none the less there remained an uneasy consciousness in his mind that perhaps these people had plans more subtle than he knew, and that even this difficulty of making their claim without bringing instant suspicion on themselves they had provided for.

It was late in the year now, but the day was warm and very calm and fine. At the London terminus where he alighted he had a strong feeling that he was watched, and when he took the train back to Delsby he still had the idea that he was being kept under observation.

He felt he had been wise in deciding to carry out Deede Dawson’s instructions so closely, for he was sure that if he had failed to do so in any respect alarm would have been taken at once, and warning telegrams gone flying on the instant to all concerned. Then that self-baited trap at Brook Bourne Spring, wherein he hoped to see his enemy taken, would remain unapproached, and all his work and risk would have gone for nothing.

When he alighted at his destination he was a little before time, and so he got himself something to eat at a small public-house near the station before starting on his fifteen-mile walk across country. Though he was not sure, he did not think any one was observing him now. Most likely his movements up to the present had appeared satisfactory, and it had not been thought necessary to watch him longer.

But he was careful to do nothing to rouse suspicion if he were still being spied upon, and after he had eaten and had a smoke he started off on his long tramp.

Even yet he was careful, and so long as he was near the village he made a show of avoiding observation as much as possible. Later on, when he had made certain he was

not being followed, he did not trouble so much, though he still kept it in mind that any one he met or passed might well be in fact one of Deede Dawson's agents.

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He walked on sharply through the crisp autumn air, and in other circumstances would have found the walk agreeable enough. It was a little curious that as he proceeded on his way his chief preoccupation seemed to shift from his immediate errand and intense eagerness to discover the identity of his unknown foe, with whom he hoped to stand face to face so soon, to a troubled and pressing anxiety about Ella.

Up till now he had not thought it likely that she was in the least real danger. He knew Simmonds, the man Walter had promised to put on watch at Bittermeads, and knew him to be capable and trustworthy. None the less, his uneasiness grew and strengthened with every mile he traversed, till presently her situation seemed to him the one weak link in his careful plans.

That the trap the unknown had so carefully laid for himself to be taken in, would assuredly and securely close upon him, Dunn felt certain enough. Walter would see to that. Sure was it, too, that the enterprise Deede Dawson had planned for himself and Allen at the Abbey must result in their discomfiture and capture. Walter would see to that also. But concerning Ella's position doubt would insist on intruding, till at last he decided that the very moment the Brook Bourne Spring business was satisfactorily finished with he would hurry at his best speed to Bittermeads and make sure of her safety.

Absorbed in these uneasy thoughts, he had insensibly slackened speed, and looking at his watch he saw that it was two o'clock, and that he was still, by the milestone at the roadside, eight miles from his destination.

He wished to be there a little before the time arranged for him by Deede Dawson, and he increased his pace till he came to a spot where the path he had to take branched off from the road he had been following. At this spot a heavy country lad was sitting on a gate by the wayside, and as Dunn approached he clambered heavily down and slouched forward to meet him.

"Be you called Robert Dunn, mister?" he asked.

Dunn gave him a quick and suspicious look, much startled by this sudden recognition in so lonely a spot.

"Yes, I am," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "Why?"

"If you are, there's this as I'm to give you," the lad answered, drawing a note from his pocket.

"Oh, who gave you that?" Dunn asked, fully persuaded the note contained some final instructions from Deede Dawson and wondering if this lad were one of his agents in

disguise, or merely some inhabitant of the district hired for the one purpose of delivering the letter.

But the lad's drawled reply disconcerted him greatly.

"A lady," he said. "A real lady in a big car, she told me to wait here and give you this. All alone she was, and drove just like a man."

He handed the letter over as he spoke, and Dunn saw that it was addressed to him in his name of Robert Dunn in Ella's writing. He blinked at it in very great surprise, for there was nothing he expected less, and he did not understand how she knew so well where he would be or how she had managed to get away from Bittermeads uninterfered with by Deede Dawson.

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His first impulse was to suspect some new trap, some new and cunning trap that, perhaps, the unconscious Ella was being used to bait. Taking the letter from the boy, he said:

"How did you know it was for me?"

"Lady told me," answered the boy grinning. "She said as I was to look out for a chap answering to the name of Robert Dunn, with his face so covered with hair you couldn't see nothing of it no more'n you can see a sheep's back for wool. 'As soon as I set eye on 'ee,' says I, 'That's him,' I says, and so 'twas."

He grinned again and slouched away and Dunn stood still, holding the letter in his hand and not opening it at first. It was almost as though he feared to do so, and when at last he tore the envelope open it was with a hand that trembled a little in spite of all that he could do. For there was something about this strange communication and the means adopted to deliver it to him that struck him as ominous in the extreme. Some sudden crisis must have arisen, he thought, and it appeared to him that Ella's knowledge of where to find him implied a knowledge of Deede Dawson's plans that meant she was either his willing and active agent and accomplice, or else she had somehow acquired a knowledge of her stepfather's proceedings that must make her position a thousand times more critical and dangerous than before.

He flung the envelope aside and began to read the contents. It opened abruptly, without any form of address, and it was written in a hand that showed plain signs of great distress and agitation: "You are in great danger. I don't know what. I heard them talking. They spoke as though something threatened you, something you could not escape. Be careful, very careful. You asked me once if I had ever heard a man with a high, squeaky voice, and I did not answer. It was to a man with a voice like that I gave the packing-case I took away from here the night you came. Do you remember? He was here all last night, I think. I saw him go very early. He is Mr. Walter Dunsmore. I saw him that day at Wreste Abbey, and I knew I had seen him before. This morning I recognized him. I am sure because he hurt his hand on the packing-case lid, and I saw the mark there still. He and my stepfather were talking all night, I think I couldn't hear everything. There is a General Dunsmore. Something is to happen to him at three o'clock and then to you later, and they both laughed a great deal because they think you will be blamed for whatever happens to General Dunsmore. He is to be enticed somewhere to meet you, but you are not to be there till four, too late. I am afraid, more afraid than ever I have been. What shall I do? I think they are making plans to do something awful. I don't know what to do. I think my stepfather suspects I know something, he keeps looking, looking, smiling all the time. Please come back and take mother and me away, for I think he means to kill us both."

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There was no signature, but written like an afterthought across one corner of the note were the scribbled words:

“You told me something once, I don’t know if you meant it.” And then, underneath, was the addition—“He never stops smiling.”

Twice over Dunn read this strange, disturbing message, and then a third time, and he made a little gesture of annoyance for it did not seem to him that the words he read made sense, or else it was that his brain no longer worked normally, and could not interpret them.

“Oh, but that’s absurd,” he said aloud.

He looked all around him, surprised to see that the face of the country-side had not changed in any way, but was all just as it had been before this letter had been put into his hands.

He began to read a third, but stopped half-way through the first sentence.

“Then it’s Walter all the time,” he muttered. “Walter—Walter!”

CHAPTER XXVI

A RACE AGAINST TIME

Even when he had said this aloud it was still as though he could not grasp its full meaning.

“Walter,” he repeated vaguely. “Walter.”

His thoughts, that had seemed as frozen by the sudden shock of the tremendous revelation so unconsciously made to him by Ella, began to stir and move again, and almost at once, with an extraordinary and abnormal rapidity.

As a drowning man is said to see flash before his eyes the whole history and record of his life, so now Dunn saw the whole story of his life-long friendship with Walter pictured before him.

For when he was very small, Walter had been to him like an elder brother, and when he was older, it was Walter who had taught him to ride and to shoot, to hunt and to fish, and when he was at school it was Walter to whom he looked up as the dashing young man of the world, who knew all life’s secrets, and when he was at college it was Walter who had helped him out of the inevitable foolish scrapes into which it is the custom of the undergraduate to fall.

Then, when he had come to man's estate, Walter had still been his confidential friend and adviser. In Walter's hand he had been accustomed to leave everything during his absences on his hunting and exploring trips; and at what time during this long and kindly association of good-fellowship had such black hate and poison of envy bred in Walter's heart?

"Walter!" he said aloud once more, and he uttered the name as though it were a cry of anguish.

Yet, too, even in his utter bewilderment and surprise, it seemed strange to him that he had never once suspected, never dreamed, never once had the shadow of a suspicion.

Little things, trifling things, a word, an accent, a phrase that had passed at the time for a jest, a thousand such memories came back to him now with a new and terrible significance.

For, after all, Walter was in the direct line. Only just a few lives stood between him and a great inheritance, a great position. Perhaps long brooding on what might so easily be had made him mad.

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Dunn remembered now, too, that it was Walter who had discovered that first murderous attempt which had first put them on their guard, but perhaps he had discovered it only because he knew of it, and when it failed, saw his safest plan was to be foremost in tracking it out.

And it was Walter who had last seen poor Charley Wright alone, and far from Bittermeads. But perhaps that was a lie to confuse the search for the missing man, and a reason why that search had failed so utterly up to the moment of Dunn's own grim discovery in the attic.

With yet a fresh shock so that he reeled as he stood with the impact of the thought, Dunn realized that all this implied that every one of his precautions had been rendered futile that of all his elaborate plans not one would take effect since all had been entrusted to the care of the very man against whom they were aimed.

It was Walter for whom the net had been laid in Ottam's Wood; and Walter to whom had been entrusted the task of drawing that net tight at the right moment.

It was Walter's friends and agents who were to break into Wreste Abbey, and Walter to whom had been entrusted the task of defeating and capturing them. It was Walter from whom Ella stood in most danger if her action that morning had been observed, and it was Walter to whom he had given the task of protecting her.

At this thought, he turned and began to run as fast as he could in the direction of Bittermeads.

At all costs she must be saved, she who had exposed the whole awful plot. For a hundred yards or so he fled, swift as the wind, till on a sudden he stopped dead with the realization of the fact that every yard he took that way took him further and further from Ottam's Wood.

For there was danger there, too—grim and imminent—and sentences in Ella's hasty letter that bore now to his new knowledge a deep significance she had not dreamed of.

As when a flash of lightning lights all the landscape up and shows the traveller dreadful dangers that beset his path, so a wave of intuition told Dunn clearly the whole conspiracy; so that he saw it all, and saw how every detail was to be fitted in together. His father, General Dunsmore, was to be murdered first at the Brook Bourne Spring, to which he was being lured; and afterwards, when Dunn arrived, he was to be murdered, too. And on him, dead and unable to defend himself, the blame of his father's death would be laid. It would not be difficult to manage. Walter would arrange it all as neatly as he had been accustomed to arrange the Dunsmore business affairs placed in his hands for settlement.

A forged letter or two, Dunn's own revolver used to shoot the old man with and then placed in Dunn's dead hand when his own turn had come, convincing detail like that would be easy to arrange. Why, the very fact of his disguise, the tangled beard that he had grown to hide his features with, would appear conclusive. Any coroner's jury would return a verdict of wilful murder against his memory on that one fact alone.

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Walter would see to that all right. A little false evidence apparently reluctantly given would be added, and all would be kneaded together into the one substance till the whole guilt of all that happened would appear to lie solely on his shoulders.

As for motive, it would simply be put forward that he had been in a hurry to succeed his uncle. And very likely some tale of a quarrel with his father or something of that sort would be invented, and would go uncontradicted since there would be no one to contradict it.

And most probably what was contemplated at Wreste Abbey was no ordinary burglary, but the assassination of old Lord Chobham, of which the guilt would also be set down to him.

Very clearly now he realized that this tremendous plot was aimed, not only at life, but at honour—that not only was his life required, but also that he should be thought a murderer.

With the realization of the danger that threatened at Wreste Abbey he turned and began to run back in the direction where it lay, that he might take timely warning there, but he did not run a dozen strides when he remembered Ella again, and paused.

Surely he must think of her first, alone and unprotected. For she was the woman he loved; and besides, she had summoned him to her help, and then she was a woman, and at least, the others were men.

All this flood of thoughts, this intuitive grasping of a situation terrible beyond conception, almost unparalleled in bloody and dreadful horror, passed through his mind with extreme rapidity.

Once more he turned and began to run—to run as he had never run before, for now he saw that all depended on the speed with which he could cover the eight miles that lay between him and Ottam's Wood, whether he could still save his father or not.

The district was lonely in the extreme, there was no human habitation near, no place where he could obtain any help or any swift means of conveyance. His one hope must be in his speed, his feet must be swift to save, not only his own life and his father's, but his honour, too, and Ella and his old uncle as well; and all—all hung upon the speed with which he could cover the eight long miles that lay between him and Brook Bourne Spring in Ottam's Wood. Even as he ran, as he thought of Ella, he came abruptly to a pause, wrung with sudden anguish. For each fleet stride he was making towards Brook Bourne Spring was taking him further and further away from Bittermeads just as before each step to Bittermeads had been taking him further from Ottam's Wood.



He began to run again, even faster than before, and it was towards Ottam's Wood that he ran, each step taking him further from Bittermeads and further from the woman he loved in her bitter need and peril, who looked to him for the help he could not give. With pain and anguish he ran on, ran as men have seldom run—as seldom so much was hung upon their running.

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On and on he sped, fleet as the wind, fleet as the light breeze that blew lightly by. A solitary villager trudging on some errand in this lonely place, tells to this day the tale of the bearded, wild-eyed man who raced so madly by him, raced on and down the long, straight road till his figure dwindled and vanished in the distance.

A shepherd boy went home with a tale of a strange thing he had seen of a man running so fast it seemed he was scarcely in sight before he was gone again.

And except for those two and one other none saw him at all and he ran his race alone beneath the skies, across the bare country side.

It was at a spot where the path ran between two high hedges that he came upon a little herd of cows a lad was driving home.

It seemed impossible to pass through that tangle of horns and tails and plunging hoofs, and so indeed it was, but Dunn took another way, and with one leap, cleared the first beast clean and alighted on the back of the second.

Before the startled beast could plunge away he leaped again from the vantage of its back and landed on the open ground beyond and so on, darting full speed past the staring driver, whose tale that he told when he got home caused him to go branded for years as a liar.

On and on Dunn fled, without stay or pause, at the utmost of his speed every second of time, every yard of distance. For he knew he had need of every ounce of power he possessed or could call to his aid, since he knew well that all, all, might hang upon a second less or more, and now four miles lay behind him and four in front.

Still on he raced with labouring lungs and heart near to bursting —onward still, swift, swift and sure, and now there were six miles behind and only two in front, and he was beginning to come to a part of the country that he knew.

Whether he was soon or late he had no idea or how long it was that he had raced like this along the lonely country road at the full extremity and limit of his strength.

He dared not take time to glance at his watch, for he knew the fraction of a second he would thus lose might mean the difference between in time and too late. On he ran still and presently he left the path and took the fields.

But he had forgotten that though the distance might be shorter the going would be harder, and on the rough grass he stumbled, and across the bare ground damp earth clung to his boots and hindered him as though each foot had become laden with lead.

His speed was slower, his effort greater if possible, and when he came to a hedge he made no effort to leap, but crashed through it as best he could and broke or clambered or tumbled a path for himself.

Now Ottam's Wood was very near, and reeling and staggering like a man wounded to the death but driven by inexorable fate, he plunged on still, and there was a little froth gathering at the corners of his mouth and from one of his nostrils came a thin trickle of blood.

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Yet still he held on, though in truth he hardly knew any longer why he ran or what his need for haste, and as he came to the wood round a spur where a cluster of young beeches grew, he saw a tall, upright, elderly man walking there, well-dressed and of a neat, soldier-like appearance.

“Hallo—there you are—father—” he gasped and fell down, prone unconscious.

CHAPTER XXVII

FLIGHT AND PURSUIT

When he came to himself he was lying on his back, and bending over him was his father’s familiar face, wearing an expression of great surprise and wonder, and still greater annoyance.

“What is the matter?” General Dunsmore asked as soon as he saw that his son’s senses were returning to him. “Have you all gone mad together? You send me a mysterious note to meet you here at three, you turn up racing and running like an escaped lunatic, and with a disgusting growth of hair all over your face, so that I didn’t know you till you spoke, and then there’s Walter dodging about in the wood here like a poacher hiding from the keepers. Are you both quite mad, Rupert?”

“Walter,” Rupert repeated, lifting himself on one hand, “Walter —have you seen him?”

“Over there,” said the general, nodding towards the right. “He was dodging and creeping about for all the world like some poaching rascal. I waved, but he didn’t see me, and when I tried to overtake him I lost sight of him somehow in the trees, and found I had come right out of my way for Brook Bourne Spring.”

“Thank God for that,” said Rupert fervently as a picture presented itself to him of his unsuspecting father trying in that lonely wood to find and overtake the man whose murderous purpose was aimed at his life.

“What do you mean?” snapped the general. “And why have you made such a spectacle of yourself with all that beard? Why, I didn’t know you till you spoke—there’s Walter there. What makes him look like that?”

For Walter had just come out of the wood about fifty yards to their right, and when he saw them talking together he understood at once that in some way or another all his plans had failed.

He was looking at them through a gap in some undergrowth that hid most of his body, but showed his head and shoulders plainly, and as he stood there watching them his face was like a fiend’s.

“Walter,” the general shouted, and to his son Rupert he said: “The boy’s ill.”

Walter moved forward from among the trees. He had a gun in his hand, and he flung it forward as though preparing to fire, and at the same moment Rupert Dunsmore drew from his pocket the pistol Deede Dawson had given him and fired himself.

But at the very moment that he pulled the trigger the general struck up his arm so that the bullet flew high and harmless through the tops of the trees.

Walter stepped back again into the wood, and Rupert said:

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"You don't know what you have done, father."

"You are mad, mad," the general gasped.

His face was very pale, and he trembled a little, for though he had heard many bullets whistle by his ears, that had happened in action against an enemy, and was altogether different from this. He put out his hand in an attempt to take the pistol that Rupert easily evaded.

"Give it to me," he said. "I saved his life; you might have killed him."

"Yes, you saved him, father," Rupert muttered, thinking to himself that the saving of Walter's life might well mean the loss of Ella's, since very likely the failure of their plots would be at once attributed by the conspirators to her. "Father, I never wrote that letter you say you had. Walter forged it to get you here, where he meant to kill us both. That's why he looked like that, that's why he had his gun."

General Dunsmore only stared blankly at him for a moment.

"Kill me? Kill you? What for?" he gasped.

"So that he might become Lord Chobham of Wreste Abbey instead of Lord Chobham's poor relation," answered Rupert. "The poison attempt on uncle which Walter discovered was first of all his own doing; it was through him Charley Wright lost his life. He has committed at least one other murder. Today he meant to kill both of us. Then he would have been heir to the title and estates, and when uncle died he would have been Lord Chobham."

"Nonsense, absurd, impossible. You're mad, quite mad," the general stammered. "Why, he would have been hanged at once."

"Not if he could have fixed the blame elsewhere," Rupert answered. "That was to have been my part; it was carefully arranged to make it seem I was responsible for it all. I haven't time to explain now. I don't think he is coming back. I expect he is only loaded with small shot, and he doesn't dare try a long range shot or come near now he knows I'm ready for him."

"But it's—it's impossible—Walter," stammered the general. "Impossible."

"The impossible so often happens," answered Rupert, and handed his pistol to him. "You must trust me, father, and do what I tell you. Take this pistol in case you are attacked on the way home. You may be, but I don't think it's likely. Get the motor out and go straight to Wreste Abbey. An attempt on uncle's life will be made tonight, if they still carry out their plans, about dinner-time tonight. See that every possible precaution

is taken. See to that first. Then send help as soon as you can to Bittermeads, a house on the outskirts of Ramsdon; any one there will tell you where it is."

"But what are you going to do?" General Dunsmore asked.

"I'm going to find Walter, if he's still hiding in the wood here, as he may be," Rupert answered. "I should like a little chat with him." For a moment he nearly lost his self-control, and for a single moment there showed those fiery and tempestuous passions he was keeping now in such stern repression. "Yes a little talk with him, just us two," he said. "And if he's cleared out, or I can't find him I'm going straight on to Bittermeads. There's some one there who may be in danger, so the sooner I am there the better."

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"But wait a moment," the general cried. "Are you armed?"

"Yes, with my hands, I shall want no more when Walter and I meet again," Rupert answered, and, without another word, plunged into the wood at the spot where Walter had vanished.

At first the track of Walter's flying footsteps was plain enough for he had fled full speed, panic having overtaken him when he saw Rupert and his father together and understood that in some way his deep conspiracy had failed and his treachery become known.

For a little distance, therefore, he had crashed through bracken and undergrowth, heedless of all but the one need that was upon him to flee away and escape while there was yet time. But, after a while, his first panic subsiding, he had gone more carefully, and, as the weather had been very dry of late, when he came to open ground his footmarks were scarcely visible.

In such spots Rupert could make but slow progress, and he was handicapped, too, by the fact, that all the time he had to be on his guard lest from some unsuspected quarter his enemy should come upon him unawares.

For, indeed, this enterprise he had undertaken in the flood tide of his passion and fierce anger was dangerous enough since he, quite weaponless, was following up a very desperate armed man who would know that for him there could be henceforth no question of mercy.

But there was that burning in Rupert's heart that made him heedless of all danger, and indeed, he who for mere love of sport and adventure, had followed a wounded tiger into the jungle and tracked a buffalo through thick reeds, was not likely to draw back now.

Once he thought he had succeeded, for he saw a bush move and he rushed at once upon it. But when he reached it there was nothing there, and the ground about was hard and bare, showing no marks to prove any one had lately been near. And once he saw a movement in the midst of some bracken and caught a glimpse of what seemed like Walter's coat, so that he was sure he had him at last, and he shouted and ran forward.

But again no one was there, though the bracken was all trampled and beaten down. The tracks Walter had made in going were plain, too, but Rupert lost them almost at once and could not find them again, and when he came a little later to the further edge of the wood, he decided to waste no more time, but to make his way direct to Bittermeads so as at least to make sure of Ella's safety.

He told himself that he had failed badly in woodcraft and, indeed, he had been too fierce and hot in his pursuit to show his wanted skill.

The plan that had been in his mind from the moment when he left his father was to take advantage of the fact that on this edge of the wood was situated a farm belonging to Lord Chobham, where horses were bred and where he was well known.

Some of these horses were sure to be out in the fields, and it would be easy for him, wasting no time in explanation, to catch one of them, mount bare-backed and ride through the New Plantation—the New Plantation was a hundred years old, but still kept that name—over the brow of the hill beyond, swim the canal in the valley, and so straight across-country to Ramsdon.

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Riding thus direct he would save time and distance, and arrive more quickly than by going the necessary distance to secure a motor-car which would have also to take a much more circuitous route.

He jumped the hedge, therefore, that lay at the wood's edge and slid down the steep bank into the sunken road beyond where he found himself standing in front of Walter, who held in his hands a gun levelled straight at Rupert's heart.

"I could have shot you time after time in there you know," he said quietly. "From behind that bush and from out of the bracken, too. I don't know why I didn't. I suppose it wasn't worth while, now I shall never be Lord Chobham."

He flung down his gun as he spoke and sprang on a bicycle that he had held leaning against his legs.

Quickly he sped away, leaving Rupert standing staring after him, realizing that his life had hung upon the bending of Walter's finger, and that Walter, with at least two cold-blooded murders to his account, or little more to hope for in this world or the next, had now inexplicably spared him for whose destruction, of life and honour alike, he had a little before been laying such elaborate, hellish plans.

With a gesture of his hands that proved he failed to understand, Rupert ran on and crossed a field to where he saw some horses grazing.

One he knew immediately for one of his father's mares, and he knew her also for an animal of speed and endurance.

The mare knew him, too, and suffered him to mount her without difficulty, and without a soul on the farm being aware of what was happening and without having to waste any precious time on explanations or declaring his identity, Rupert rode away, sitting the mare bare-backed, through the New Plantation towards Bittermeads, where he hoped, arriving unexpectedly, to be able to save Ella before the danger he was sure threatened her came to a head.

Of one thing he was certain. Deede Dawson would never do what his companion in villainy had just done, he would spare no one; fierce, malignant and evil to the last, his one thought if he knew they had and vengeance approached would be to do what harm he could before the end.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BACK AT BITTERMEADS

When, riding fast, Rupert Dunsmore came in sight of Bittermeads he experienced a feeling of extreme relief. Though what he had feared he did not quite know, for he did not see that any alarm could have reached here yet or any hint come to Deede Dawson of the failure of all his plotting.

Even if Walter had had the idea of returning to give his accomplice warning, he could not have come by the road on his bicycle as quickly as Rupert had ridden across country. And that Walter would spend either time or thought on Deede Dawson did not appear in any way probable.

To Rupert, therefore, it seemed certain that Deede Dawson could know nothing as yet. But all the same it was an immense relief to see the house again and to know that in a few moments he would be there.

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He tied up the mare to a convenient tree, and with eyes that were quick and alert and every nerve and muscle ready for all emergencies, he drew near the house.

All was still and quiet, no smoke came from the chimneys, there was no sign of life or movement anywhere. For a moment he hesitated and then made his way round to the back, hoping to find Mrs. Barker there and perhaps obtain from her information as to the whereabouts of Deede Dawson and of Ella and her mother.

For it seemed to him it would be his best plan to get the two women quietly out of the way if he could possibly do so before making any attempt to deal with Deede Dawson or letting him know of his return.

For the mere fact that he was back again so soon would show at once that something had gone seriously wrong, and once Deede Dawson knew that, he would be, Rupert well realized, in a very desperate and reckless mood and ripe for committing any mischief that he could.

Cautiously Rupert opened the back door and found himself in the stone-paved passage that ran between the kitchen and the scullery and pantry. Everything seemed very quiet and still, and there was no sign of Mrs. Barker nor any appearance that she had been that morning busy about her usual tasks. The kitchen fire was not lighted, a pile of unwashed crockery stood on the table, there had apparently been no attempt to prepare any meals.

Frowning uneasily, for all this did not seem to him of good omen, Rupert Went quickly on to the living rooms.

They were unoccupied and did not seem to have been much used that day; and in the small breakfast-room Deede Dawson had been accustomed to consider his special apartment, his favourite little travelling chessboard stood on the table with pieces in position on it.

There was a letter, too, he had begun but not finished, to the editor of a chess-column in some paper, apparently to the effect that a certain problem “cooked,” and that by such and such a move “the mate for the first player that appeared certain was unexpectedly and instantly transferred in this dramatic manner into a mate for his opponent.”

The words seemed somehow oddly appropriate to Rupert, and he smiled grimly as he read them and then all at once his expression changed and his whole attitude became one of intense watchfulness and readiness.

For his quick eye had noted that the ink on the nib of the pen that this letter had been written with, was not yet dry.

Then Deede Dawson must have been here a moment or two ago and must have gone in a hurry. That could only mean he was aware of Rupert's return and was warned and suspicious. It is perhaps characteristic of Rupert's passionate and eager temperament that only now did it occur to him that he was quite unarmed and that without a weapon of any kind he was matching himself against as reckless and as formidable a criminal as had ever lived.

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For want of anything better he picked up the heavy glass inkpot standing on the table, emptied the contents in a puddle on the floor, and held the inkpot itself ready in his hand.

He listened intently, but heard no sound—no sound at all in the whole house, and this increased his apprehensions, for he knew well that Deede Dawson was a man always the most dangerous when most silent.

It was possible of course that he had fled, but not likely. He would not go, Rupert thought, till he had made his preparations and not without a last effort to take revenge on those who had defeated him and in this dramatic way turned the game he had expected to secure into a win for his opponent.

Still Rupert listened intently, straining his ears to catch the least sound to hint to him where his enemy was, for he knew that if he failed to discover him his first intimation of his proximity might well come in the shape of the white-hot sting of a bullet, rending flesh and bone.

Then, too, where was Ella, and where was her mother?

There was something inexpressibly sinister in the utter quietness of the house, a quietness not at all of peace and rest but of a brooding, angry threat.

Still he could hear nothing, and he left the room, very quickly and noiselessly, and he made sure there was no one anywhere in any of these rooms on the ground floor.

He locked the front door and the back to make sure no one should enter or leave too easily, and returned on tiptoe, moving to and fro like a shadow cast by a changing light, so swift and noiseless were his movements.

For a little he remained crouching against the side of the stairway, listening for any sound that might float down to him from above.

But none came—and on a sudden, in one movement, as it were, he ran up the stairs and crouched down on the topmost one so that any bullet aimed at him as he appeared might perhaps fly overhead.

But none was fired; there was still no sound at all, no sign that the house held any living creature beside himself. He began to think that Deede Dawson must have sent the two women away and now have gone himself.

But there was the pen downstairs with ink still wet upon the nib to prove that he had been here recently, and again very suddenly Rupert leaped to his feet and ran noiselessly down the corridor and entered quickly into Ella's room.

He had not been in it since the night of his arrival at Bittermeads, but it appeared to him extraordinarily familiar and every little object in it of ornament or use seemed to speak to him softly of Ella's gracious presence.

Of Ella herself there was no sign, but he noticed that the tassel at the end of the window blind cord was moving as if recently disturbed.

The movement was very slight, almost imperceptible, indeed, but it existed; and it proved that some one must very shortly before have been standing at the window. He moved to it and looked out.

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The view commanded the road by which he had approached Bittermeads, and he wondered if Ella had been standing there and had seen his approach, and then had concealed herself for some reason.

But, if so, why and where was she hiding? And where was Deede Dawson? And why was everything so silent and so still?

He turned from the window, and as he did so he caught a faint sound in the passage without.

Instantly he crouched behind the bed, the heavy glass inkpot that was his one weapon poised in his hand.

The sound did not come again, but as he waited, he saw the door begin to open very slowly, very quietly.

Lower still he crouched, the inkpot ready to throw, every nerve taut and tense for the leap at his foe's throat with which he meant to follow it up. The door opened a little more, very slowly, very carefully. It was wide enough now to admit of entry, and through the opening there sidled, pale and red-eyed, Ella's mother, looking so frail and feeble and so ruffled and disturbed she reminded Rupert irresistibly of a frightened hen.

She edged her way in as though she dared not open the door too widely, and Rupert hesitated in great perplexity and vexation, for he saw that he must show himself, and he feared that she would announce his presence by flight or screams.

But he could not possibly get away without her knowledge; and besides, she might be able to give him useful information.

He stood up quickly, with his finger to his lips. "Hush!" he said. "Not a sound—not a sound." The warning seemed unnecessary, for Mrs. Dawson appeared too paralysed with fear to utter even the faintest cry as she dropped tremblingly on the nearest chair.

"Hush! Hush!" he said. "Where is Ella?"

"I—I don't know," quavered Mrs. Dawson.

"When did you see her last?"

"A little while ago," Mrs. Dawson faltered. "She went upstairs. She didn't come down, so I thought I would try to find her."

"Where's Deede Dawson?" Rupert asked.

"I—I don't know," she quavered again.

"When did you see him last?"

"I—I—a little while ago," she faltered. "He went upstairs—he didn't come down again. I thought I would try to find her—him—I was so frightened when they didn't either of them come down again."

It was evident she was far too confused and upset to give any useful information of any nature, even if she knew anything.

"Deede's been so strange," she said. "And Ella too. I think it's very hard on me—dreams, too. He said he wanted her to help him get a packing-case ready he had to send away somewhere. I don't know where. I don't think Ella wanted to—"

"A packing-case?" Rupert muttered. "What for?"

"It's what they came upstairs to do," Mrs. Dawson said. "And—and —" She began to cry feebly. "It's my nerves," she said. "He's looked so strange at us all day—and neither of them has come down again."

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CHAPTER XXIX

THE ATTIC

It was evident that more had occurred to make Mrs. Dawson afraid that she would, or perhaps could, say.

"Wait here," Rupert said to her. "Don't stir." The command seemed superfluous, for she had not at that moment the appearance of still possessing the power to move. Without speaking again, Rupert left the room and went quickly to the foot of the narrow stairs that led to the attics above.

He listened, crouching there, and heard nothing, and a cold fear came to him that perhaps Deede Dawson had done up above what he wished to do and then effected his escape while he himself had been lingering in Ella's room.

Adopting his plan of a rapid rush to disconcert the aim of any one who might be about to fire at him, he made a swift dash up the stairs and on the topmost one crouched down again and waited.

But still nothing happened, all was very quiet, and the door of one attic, the one which had been assigned to him as a bed-chamber, was wide open so that he could see into it and see that it was unoccupied.

But the doors of both the others were closed, and as he looked he made out in the gloom, for this landing by the attic was very badly-lighted by a small and awkwardly-placed skylight, a scattered dozen or so of hairpins, and a tortoiseshell comb such as he had seen sometimes in Ella's hair, lying on the floor near the door of the larger of the two attics, the one in which he remembered well he had found Deede Dawson on a certain night busy measuring and examining and empty packing-case.

With one quick rush he crossed the landing and flung himself at the door.

It opened at once, for it was not locked, and within he saw Deede Dawson, screw-driver in his hand, standing behind a large packing-case, the lid of which he had apparently that minute finished fastening down.

He looked up as Rupert entered thus precipitately, and he showed no sign of surprise or alarm.

"You're back early," he said. "Something gone wrong?"

"What are you doing? What's in there?" Rupert asked, looking at the packing-case, his mouth and lips so suddenly dry he found it difficult to speak at all.

Deede Dawson began to laugh, a low and dreadful laughter that had in it no trace of merriment at all, but only of mockery and malice.

It was such laughter as a devil from the nethermost pit might give vent to when he saw at last a good man yield to long temptation.

“What’s in there?” Rupert said again, pointing to the packing-case, and it was as though his soul swooned within him for fear of what the answer might be.

“What do the children say?” Deede Dawson returned with his terrible smile. “I’ll give you three guesses, isn’t it? See if you can guess in three tries.”

“What’s in there?” Rupert asked the third time, and Deede Dawson laid down the screw-driver with which he had just driven home the last screw.

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"Oh, see for yourself, if you want to," he said. "But you ought to know. You know what was in the other case I sent away from here, the one I got Ella to take in the car for me? I want you to take this one away now, the sooner it's away the better."

"That's it, is it?" Rupert muttered.

He no longer doubted, and for a moment all things swam together before him and he felt dizzy and a little sick, and so weak he staggered and nearly fell, but recovered himself in time.

The sensation passed and he saw Deede Dawson as it were a long way off, and between them the packing-case, huge, monstrous, and evil, like a thing of dread from some other world. Violent shudderings swept through him one after the other, and he was aware that Deede Dawson was speaking again.

"What did you say?" he asked vacantly, when the other paused.

"You look ill," Deede Dawson answered. "Anything wrong? Why have you come back so soon? Have you failed?"

Rupert passed his hand before his eyes to clear away the mist that hung there and that hampered his sight.

He perceived that Deede Dawson held his right hand in the pocket of his coat, grasping something that bulged out curiously.

He divined that it was a pistol, and that Deede Dawson was ready to shoot at any moment, but that he wished very greatly to know first of all what had happened and why Rupert had returned so soon and whether there was immediate necessity for flight or not.

That he was uneasy was certain, for his cold eyes showed a hesitation and a doubt such as Rupert had never seen in them before.

"I'll tell you what's happened," Rupert heard himself saying hoarsely. "If you'll tell me what's in there."

"A bargain, eh?" Deede Dawson said. "It's easy enough. You can look for yourself if you unscrew the lid, but then, after all, why should we take all that trouble?"

As he spoke his pistol showed in his hand, and at once the heavy glass inkpot Rupert had held all this time flew straight and true, and with tremendous force, at Deede Dawson's head.

He avoided it only by the extreme rapidity with which he dropped behind the packing-case, and it flew over his head and crashed against the centre panel of a big wardrobe that stood in one corner of the room, splitting the panel it struck from top to bottom.

Following it, Rupert hurled himself forward with one great spring, but agile as a cat that leaps away from the mastiff's teeth, Deede Dawson slipped from his grasp to the other side of the room. In doing so he knocked his arm against the corner of the packing-case, so that his revolver fell to the ground.

With a shout Rupert stooped and seized it, and straightened himself to see that Deede Dawson had already another revolver in his hand —a second one that he had drawn from an inner pocket.

They remained very still, watching each other intently, neither eager to fire, since both wished first to make the other speak. For Rupert desired very greatly that Deede Dawson should tell him where Ella was, and Deede Dawson needed that Rupert should explain what had gone wrong, and how imminent and great was the danger that therefore most likely threatened him.

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Each knew, too, that the slightest movement he made would set the other shooting, and each realized that in that close and narrow space any exchange of shots must almost of necessity mean the death of both, since both were cool and deadly marksmen, well accustomed to the use of the revolver.

Deede Dawson was the first to speak.

"Well, what next?" he said. "If that inkpot of yours had hit me it would pretty well have knocked my brains out, and if I hadn't hit my elbow against the corner of the packing-case I would have had you shot through with holes like a sieve by now. So far the score's even. Let's chat a bit, and see if we can't come to some arrangement. Look, I'll show I trust you."

As he spoke he laid down, much to Rupert's surprise, and to his equal suspicion, his revolver on the top of a moth-eaten roll of old carpet that leaned against the wall near where he was standing.

"You see, I trust you," he said once more.

"Take your pistol up again," answered Rupert grimly. "I do not trust you."

"Ah, that's a pity." Deede Dawson smiled, making no effort to do as the other said. "You see, we are both good shots, and if we start blazing away at each other up here we shall both be leaking pretty badly before long. That's a prospect that has no attraction for me; I don't know if it has for you. But there are things I can tell you that might be interesting, and things you can tell me I want to know. Why not exchange a little information, and then separate calmly, rather than indulge in pistol practice that can only mean the death of us both? For if your first bullet goes through my brain I swear my first will be in your heart."

"Likely enough," agreed Rupert, "but worth while perhaps."

"Oh, that's fanaticism," Deede Dawson answered. "Flattering perhaps to me, but not quite reasonable, eh?"

"There's only one thing I want to know from you," Rupert said slowly.

"Then why not ask it, why not agree to the little arrangement I suggest, eh? Eh, Rupert Dunsmore?"

"You know me, then?"

"Oh, long enough."

"Where is Ella?"

Deede Dawson laughed again.

"That's a thing I know and you don't," he said. "Well, she's safe away in London by this time."

"That's a lie, for her mother's here still," answered Rupert, even though his heart leapt merely to hear the words.

"Unbelieving Thomas," smiled the other. "Well, then, she is where she is, and that you can find out for yourself. But I'll make another suggestion. We are both good shots, and if we start to fire we shall kill each other. I am certain of killing you, but I shan't escape myself. Well, then, why not toss for it? Equal chances for both, and certain safety for one. Will you toss me, the one who loses to give up his pistol to the other?"

"It seems to me a good idea," Deede Dawson argued. "Here we are watching each other like cats, and knowing that the least movement of either will start the other off, and both of us pulling trigger as hard as we can. My idea would mean a chance for one. Well, let's try another way; the best shot to win. You don't trust me, but I will you."

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Leaving his pistol lying where he had put it down, he crossed the attic, and with a pencil he took from his pocket drew a circle on the panel of the wardrobe door that Rupert had split with the inkpot he had thrown.

In the centre of the circle he marked a dot, and turned smilingly to the frowning and suspicious Rupert.

"There you are," he said, and made another circle near the first one. "Now you put a bullet into the middle of this circle and I'll put one afterwards through the second circle, and the one who is nearest to the dots I've marked, wins. What have you to say to that? Seems to me better than our killing each other. Isn't it?"

"I think you're playing the fool for some reason of your own," answered Rupert. "There's only one thing I want to know from you. Where is Ella?"

"Let me know how you can shoot," answered Deede Dawson, "and I'll tell you, by all that's holy, I will."

Rupert hesitated. He did not understand all this, he could not imagine what motive was in Deede Dawson's mind, though it was certainly true enough that once they began shooting at each other neither man was at all likely to survive, for Rupert knew he would not miss and he did not think Deede Dawson would either.

Above all, there was the one thing he wished to know, the one consideration that weighed with him above all others—what had become of Ella? And this time there had been in Deede Dawson's voice an accent of twisted and malign sincerity that seemed to say he really would be willing to tell the truth about her if Rupert would gratify his whim about this sort of shooting-match that he was suggesting.

The purpose of it Rupert could not understand, but it did not seem to him there would be any risk of harm in agreeing, for Deede Dawson was standing so far away from his own weapon he could not well be contemplating any immediate mischief or treachery.

It did occur to him that the pistol he held might be loaded in one chamber only and that Deede Dawson might be scheming to induce him to throw away his solitary cartridge.

But a glance reassured him on that point.

"Let me see how you can shoot," Deede Dawson repeated, leaning carelessly with folded arms against the wall a little distance away. "And I promise you I'll tell you where Ella is."

Rupert lifted his pistol and was indeed on the very point of firing when he caught a glimpse of such evil triumph and delight in Deede Dawson's cold eyes that he hesitated and lowered the weapon, and at the same time, looking more closely, searching more

intently for some indication of Deede Dawson's hidden purpose, he noticed, caught in the crack of the wardrobe door, a tiny shred of some blue material only just visible.

He remembered that sometimes of an afternoon Ella had been accustomed to wear a frock made of a material exactly like that of which so tiny a fragment showed now in the crack of the wardrobe door.

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CHAPTER XXX

SOME EXPLANATIONS

He turned quickly towards Deede Dawson. Their eyes met, and in that mutual glance Rupert Dunsmore read that his suspicions were correct and Deede Dawson that his dreadful trap was discovered.

Neither spoke. For a brief moment they remained impassive, immobile, their eyes meeting like blows, and then Deede Dawson made one spring to seize again the revolver he had laid down in the hope of enticing Rupert into the awful snare prepared for him.

But quick as he was, Rupert was quicker still, and as Deede Dawson leaped he lifted his pistol and fired, though his aim was not at the man, but at the revolver lying on the top of the roll of carpet where Deede Dawson had placed it.

The bullet, for Rupert was a man who seldom missed, struck the weapon fair and whirled it, shattered and useless, to the floor. Deede Dawson, whose hand had been already outstretched to seize it, drew back with a snarl that was more like the cry of a trapped wolf than any sound produced from human lips.

Still, Rupert did not speak. With the smoking pistol in his hand he watched silently and steadily his helpless enemy who, for his part, was silent, too, and very still, for he felt that doom was close upon him.

Yet he showed not the least sign of fear, but only a fierce and sullen defiance.

"Shoot away, why don't you shoot?" he sneered. "Mind you don't miss. I trusted you when I put my revolver down and I was a fool, but I thought you would play fair."

Without a word Rupert tossed his pistol through the attic window.

They heard the tinkling fall of the glass, they heard more faintly the sound of the revolver striking the outhouse roof twenty feet below and rebounding thence to the paved kitchen yard beneath, and then all was quiet again.

"I only need my hands for you," said Rupert softly, as softly as a mother coos to her drowsy babe. "My hands for you."

For the first time Deede Dawson seemed to fear, for, indeed, there was that in Rupert Dunsmore's eyes to rouse fear in any man. With a sudden swift spring, Rupert leaped forward and Deede Dawson, not daring to abide that onslaught, turned and ran, screaming shrilly.

During the space of one brief moment, a dreadful and appalling moment, there was a wild strange hunting up and down the narrow space of that upper attic, cumbered with lumber and old, disused furniture.

Round and round Deede Dawson fled, screaming still in a high shrill way, like some wild thing in pain, and hard upon him followed Rupert, nor had they gone a second time about that room before Rupert had Deede Dawson in a fast embrace, his arms about the other's middle.

One last great cry Deede Dawson gave when Rupert seized him, and then was silent as Rupert lifted him and swung him high at arm's length.

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As a child in play sports with its doll, so Rupert swung Deede Dawson twice about his head, round and round and then loosed him so that he went hurling through the air with awful force, like a stone shot from a catapult, clean through the window through which Rupert had the moment before tossed his pistol with but little more apparent effort.

Right through the window, bearing panes and sash with him, Deede Dawson flew with the impetus of that great throw and out beyond and down, turning over and over the while, down through the empty air to fall and be shattered like a piece of worthless crockery on the stone threshold of the outhouse door.

Surprised to find himself alone, Rupert put his hand to his forehead and looked vacantly around.

"My God, what have I done?" he thought.

He was trembling violently, and the fury of the passion that had possessed him and had given his mighty muscles a force more than human, was still upon him.

Going to the window, he looked out, for he did not quite know what had happened and from it he looked back at the wardrobe door.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Yes."

He ran to it and tore open the door and from within very tenderly and gently he lifted down the half-swooning Ella who, securely gagged and tightly bound, had been thrust into its interior to conceal her from him.

Hurriedly he freed her from her bonds and from the handkerchief that was tied over her mouth and holding her in his arms like a child, pressing her close to his heart, he carried her lightly out of that dreadful room.

Only once did she stir, only once did she speak, when lifting her pale, strained face to him she murmured very faintly something in which he just caught the words:

"Deede Dawson."

"He'll trouble us no more nor any one else, I think," answered Rupert, and she said no more but snuggled down in his arms as though with a feeling of perfect security and safety.

He took her to her own room and left her with her mother, and then went down to the hall and took a chair and sat at the front door.

All at once he felt very tired and one of his shoulders hurt him, for he had strained a muscle there rather badly.

His one desire was to rest, and he did not even trouble to go round to the back of the house to see what had happened to Deede Dawson, though indeed that was not a point on which he entertained much doubt.

For a long time he sat there quietly, till at last his father arrived in a motor-car from Wreste Abbey, together with a police-inspector from the county town whom he had picked up on the way.

Rupert took them into the room where Deede Dawson's chessmen and the board were still standing and told them as briefly as he could what had happened since the first day when he had left his home to try to trace out and defeat the plot hatched by Walter Dunsmore and Deede Dawson.

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"You people wouldn't act," he said to the inspector. "You said there was no evidence, no proof, and I daresay you were right enough from the legal point of view. But it was plain enough to me that there was some sort of conspiracy against my uncle's life, I thought against my father's as well, but I was not sure of that at first. It was through poor Charley Wright I became so certain. He found out things and told me about them; but for him the first attempt to poison my uncle would have succeeded. Even then we had still no evidence to prove the reality of our suspicions, for Walter destroyed it, by accident, I thought at the time, purposely, as I know now. It was something Walter said that gave Charley the idea of coming here. Then he vanished. He must have roused their suspicions somehow, and they killed him. But again Walter put us all off the scent by his story of having seen Charley in London, so that it was there the search for him was made, and no one ever thought of Bittermeads. I never suspected Walter, such an idea never entered my head; but luckily I didn't tell him of my idea of coming to Bittermeads myself to try to find out what was really going on here. He knew nothing of where I was till I told him that day at Wreste Abbey, then of course he came over here at once. I thought it was anxiety for my safety, but I expect really it was to warn his friends. When I saw him here that night I told him every single thing, I trusted the carrying-out of everything I had arranged to him. If it hadn't been for a note Miss Cayley wrote me to warn me, I should have walked right into the trap and so would my father too."

The police-inspector asked a few questions and then made a search of the room which resulted in the discovery of quite sufficient proof of the guilt of Deede Dawson and of Walter Dunsmore.

Among these proofs was also a hastily-scribbled note from Walter that solved the mystery of John Clive's death. It was not signed, but both General Dunsmore and Rupert knew his writing and were prepared to swear to it. Beginning abruptly and scribbled on a torn scrap of paper, it ran:

"I found Clive where you said, lucky you got hold of the note and read it before she sent it, for no doubt she meant to warn him. Take care she gets no chance of the sort again. I did Clive's business all right. She saw me and I think recognized me from that time she saw me over the packing-case business, before I took it out to sink it at sea. At any rate, she ran off in a great hurry. If you aren't careful, she'll make trouble yet."

"Apparently," remarked the inspector when he had read this aloud, "the young lady was very luckily not watched closely enough and did make trouble for them. Could I see her, do you think?"

"I don't know, I'll go and ask," Rupert said.

Ella was still very shaken, but she consented to see the inspector, and they all went together to her room where she was lying on her bed with her mother fussing nervously about her.

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She told them in as few words as possible the story of how she had always disliked and mistrusted the man whom so unfortunately her mother had married, and how gradually her suspicions strengthened till she became certain that he was involved in many unlawful deeds.

But always her inner certainty had fallen short of absolute proof, so careful had he been in all he did.

"I knew I knew," she said. "But there was nothing I really knew. And he made me do all sorts of things for him. I wouldn't have cared for myself, but if I tried to refuse he made mother suffer. She was very, very frightened of him, but she would never leave him. She didn't dare. There was one night he made me go very late with a packing-case full of silver things he had, and he wouldn't tell me where he had got them. I believe he stole them all, but I helped him pack them, and I took them away the night Mr. Dunsmore came and gave them to a man wearing a mask. My stepfather said it was just a secret family matter he was helping some friends in, and later on I saw the same man in the woods near here one day—the day Mr. Clive was killed by the poachers—and when he came another time to the house I thought I must try to find out what he wanted. I listened while they talked and they said such strange things I made up my mind to try to warn Mr. Dunsmore, for I was sure there was something they were plotting."

"There was indeed," said Rupert grimly. "And but for that warning you sent me they would have succeeded."

"Somehow they found out what I had done," Ella continued. "As soon as I got back he kept looking at me so strangely. I was afraid—I had been afraid a long time, for that matter—but I tried not to show it. In the afternoon he told me to go up to the attic. He said he wanted me to help him pack some silver. It was the same silver I had packed before; for some reason he had got it back again. This time I had to pack it in the little boxes, and after I had finished I waited up there till suddenly he ran in very quickly and looking very excited. He said I had betrayed them, and should suffer for it, and he took some rope and he tied me as tightly as he could, and tied a great handkerchief over my mouth, and pushed me inside the wardrobe and locked it. I think he would have killed me then only he was afraid of Mr. Dunsmore, and very anxious to know what had happened, and why Mr. Dunsmore had come home, and if there was any danger. And I was a long time there, and I heard a great noise, and then Mr. Dunsmore opened the door and took me out."

CHAPTER XXXI

CONCLUSION

Three months had passed, and in a quiet little cottage on the outskirts of a small country town, situated in one of the most beautiful and peaceful vales of the south-west country, Ella was slowly recovering from the shock of the dreadful experiences through which she had passed.

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She had been ill for some weeks, but her mother, fussily incompetent at most times, was always at her best when sickness came, and she had nursed her daughter devotedly and successfully.

As soon as possible they had come to this quiet little place where people, busy with their own affairs and the important progress of the town, had scarcely heard of what the newspapers of the day called "The Great Chobham Sensation."

But, in fact, very much to Rupert's relief, comparatively little had been made known publicly, and the whole affair had attracted wonderfully little attention.

The one public proceeding had been the inquest of Deede Dawson, and that the coroner, at the request of the police eagerly searching for Walter Dunsmore, had made as brief and formal as possible. Under his direction the jury had returned a verdict of "justifiable homicide," and Ella's illness had had at least one good result of making it impossible for her to attend to give her evidence in person.

At a trial, of course, everything would have had to be told in full, but both Allen, Deede Dawson's accomplice, and Walter Dunsmore, his instigator and employer, had vanished utterly.

For Walter the search was very hot, but so far entirely without result. Now could Allen be found. He was identified with a fair degree of certainty as an old criminal well known to the authorities, and it was thought almost certain that he had had previous dealings with Deede Dawson, and knew enough about him to be able to force himself into Bittermeads.

Of the actual plot in operation there he most likely knew little or nothing, but probably Deede Dawson thought he might be useful, and the store of silver found in the attic that Ella had been employed in packing ready for removal was identified as part of the plunder from a recent burglary in a northern town.

It was thought, therefore, that both Allen and Deede Dawson might have been concerned in that affair, that Deede Dawson had managed to secure the greater share of the booty, and that Allen, on the night when Rupert found him breaking into Bittermeads, was endeavouring to get hold of the silver for himself.

But the actual facts are not likely now ever to be known, for from that day to this nothing has been heard of Allen. His old haunts know him no more, and to his record, carefully preserved at Scotland Yard, there have been no recent additions.

One theory is that Deede Dawson, finding him troublesome, took effectual steps to dispose of him. Another is that Deede Dawson got him away by either bribes or threats, and that, not knowing of Deede Dawson's death, he does not venture to return.

In any case, he was a commonplace criminal, and his fate is of little interest to any one but himself.

It was Walter for whom the police hunted with diligence and effort, but with a total lack of success, so that they began to think at the end of three months that he must somehow have succeeded in making his way out of the country.

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During the first portion of this time Rupert had been very busy with a great many things that needed his attention. And then Lord Chobham, his health affected by the crimes and treachery of a kinsman whom he had known and trusted as he had known and trusted Walter, was attacked by acute bronchitis which affected his heart and carried him off within the week. The title and estates passed, therefore, to General Dunsmore, and Rupert became the Honourable Rupert Dunsmore and the direct heir. All this meant for him a great deal more to see to and arrange, for the health of the new Lord Chobham had also been affected and he left practically everything in his son's hands, so that, except for the letters which came regularly but had been often written in great haste, Ella knew and heard little of Rupert.

But today he was to come, for everything was finally in order, and, though this she did not know till later, Walter Dunsmore had at last been discovered, dead from poison self-administered, in a wretched lodging in an East End slum. Rupert had been called to identify the body and he had been able to arrange it so that very little was said at the inquest, where the customary verdict of "Suicide during temporary insanity" was duly returned by a quite uninterested jury.

That the last had been heard of the tragedy that had so nearly overwhelmed his life, Rupert was able now to feel fairly well assured, and it was therefore in a mood more cheerful than he had known of late that he started on his journey to Ella's new residence.

He had sent a wire to confirm his letter, and it was in a mood that was more than a little nervous that she busied herself with her preparations.

She chose her very simplest gown, and when there was absolutely nothing more to do she went into their little sitting-room to wait alone by the fire she had built up there, for it was winter now and today was cold and inclined to be stormy.

Rupert had not said exactly when she was to expect him, and she sat for a long time by the fire, starting at every sound and imagining at every moment that she heard the front-door bell ring.

"I shall not let him feel himself bound," she said to herself with great decision. "I shall tell him I hope we shall always be friends but that's all; and if he wants anything more, I shall say No. But most likely he won't say a word about all that nonsense, it would be silly to take seriously what he said—there."

To Ella, now, Bittermeads was always "there," and though she told herself several times that probably Rupert had not the least idea of repeating what he had said to her—there—and that most likely he was coming today merely to make a friendly call, and that it would never do for either of them to think again of what they had said when they were

both so excited and overwrought, yet in her heart she knew a great deal better than all that.

But she said to herself very often:

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"Anyhow, I shall certainly refuse him."

And on this point her mind was irrevocably made up since, after all, whether Rupert would accept refusal or not would still remain entirely for him to decide.

At half-past three she heard the garden-gate creak, and when she ran to the window to peep, she saw with a kind of chill surprise that there was a stranger coming through.

"Some one he's sent," she said to herself. "He doesn't want to come himself and so he has sent some one else instead. I am glad."

Having said this and repeated again the last three words, and having gulped down a sob—presumably of joy—that unexpectedly fluttered into her throat, she went quickly to open the door.

The newly-arrived stranger smiled at her as she showed herself but did not speak. He was a man of middle height, quite young, and wrapped in a big, loose overcoat that very completely hid his figure. His face, clean-shaven, showed clear, strongly-marked well-shaped features with a firm mouth round which at this moment played a very gentle and winning smile, a square-cut chin, and extremely bright, clear kindly eyes that were just now smiling too.

When he took off his hat she saw that his hair was cut rather closely, and very neatly brushed and combed, and she found his smile so compelling and so winning that in spite of her disappointment she found herself returning it.

It occurred to her that she had some time or another seen some one like this stranger, but when or where she could not imagine.

Still he did not speak, but his eyes were very tender and kind as they rested on her so that she wondered a little.

"Yes?" she said inquiringly. "Yes?"

"Don't you know me, Ella?" he said then, very softly, and in a voice that she recognized instantly.

"Is it you—you?" she breathed.

Instinctively she lifted her hands to greet him, and at once she found herself caught up and held, pressed passionately to his strongly-beating heart.

An hour later, by the fire in the sitting-room, Ella suddenly remembered tea.



“Good gracious! You must be starving,” she cried, smitten with remorse. “And there’s poor mother waiting upstairs all this time. Oh, Rupert, are you very hungry?”

“Starving,” he asserted, but held her to him as closely as ever.

“I must get the tea,” she protested. She put one cheek against his and sighed contentedly.

“It’s nice to see the real you,” she murmured. “But oh, Rupert, I do miss your dear bristly beard.”