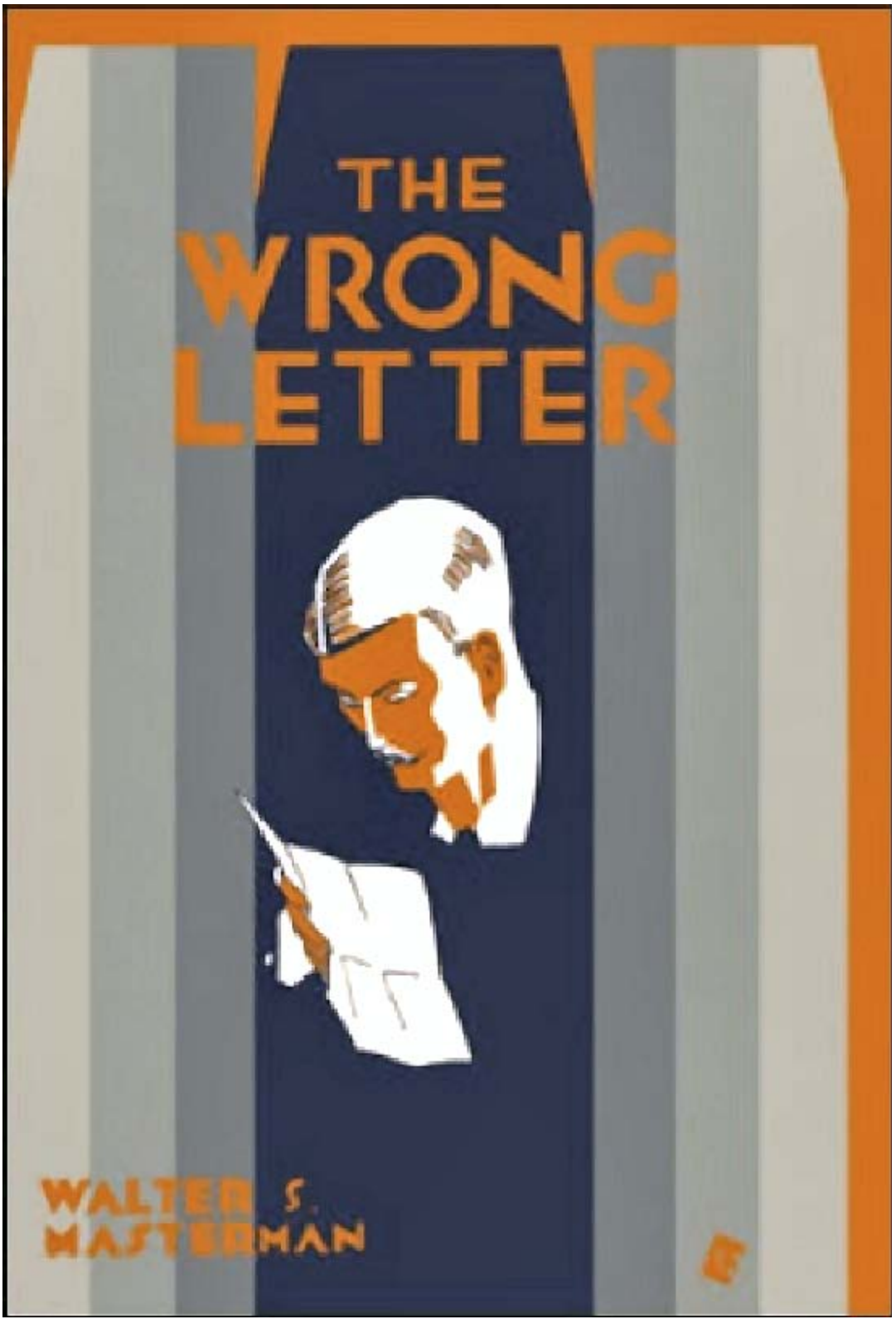
THE
WRONG
LETTER
WALTER S.
MASTERMAN

THE WRONG LETTER

Walter S. Masterman

1876-1946

Dutton, 1926

With a preface by
G. K. Chesterton
1874-1936

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Preface

I CAN SAY with all sincerity, nay with all solemn responsibility, that this detective mystery deceived me. And as I have been looking out for a long time for a detective mystery that should be at least deceptive, whatever its other merits or demerits in being detective, I very willingly write a word to serve as a preface to it, though such books ought not to need such prefaces. The detective story is in this way a paradox (if I may use a word that has very painful memories for me) because the true reader and critic not only desires to be gulled, but even desires to be gullible. I wish when reading such a story to become as simple as Dr. Watson; to be in the happy, cheerful, childlike, radiant condition of Dr. Watson and not in the much more dark and disillusioned and satiated and sceptical condition of Sherlock Holmes. I generally am in that childlike condition. But in every case it is my ardent and aspiring ambition to be stupider than the man who wrote the story. And in the case of this story I actually succeeded.

This desire to be deceived is really peculiar to detective romance. It is in another sense that we say the same thing of other types of romance. It is sometimes said that when we go to the theatre we pay to be deceived. But we are not really deceived; we do not think that the dramatist intends something that he does not intend; we do not think the actor is doing something that he is not doing. We only forget, or half forget, for a moment, in the continuity and consistency of certain events, the fact that they come from a dramatist and an actor. But if we happen to remember it, we do not remember it with surprise. We are not astonished to discover that there is an actor on the stage, as we are (or ought to be) astonished to discover that there is a corpse in the summer-house. We do not feel a momentary incredulity when we are told that the play was written by a playwright, as we do feel (or ought to feel) when we are told that the crime was committed by a curate. We watch a great actor performing Hamlet so well that (if we have luck) we lose for an instant the sense that he is a great actor; we feel for the moment that he is young Hamlet trying to avenge the death of old Hamlet upon Claudius. But we do not, either in forgetting or remembering, feel any shock of fact or the change of fact. We do not feel as we should feel if the play took a new and sudden turn, and we found that Hamlet had killed his own father and that his uncle was a perfectly blameless character. That would be the Detective Drama of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, and now that so many peculiar experiments are being tried with that tragedy, I respectfully suggest it to the managers of the London Theatres.

If it is the first rule of the writer of mystery stories to conceal the secret from the reader, it is the first duty of the critic to conceal it from the public. I will therefore put my hand upon my mouth; and tortures shall not reveal the precise point in this story at which a person whom I had really regarded as figuring in one legitimate capacity suddenly began to figure in another, which was far from legitimate. I must not breathe a word about what the writer of this dramatic mystery does. I will confine myself strictly to saying what he does not do. And merely out of the things which he does not do, I could construct an enthusiastic eulogy. On the firm foundation of the things he does not do, I could erect an eternal tower of brass. For the things he does not do are the things being done everywhere to-day, to the destruction of true detective fiction and the loss of this legitimate and delightful form of art. He does not introduce into the story a vast but invisible secret society with branches in every part of the world, with ruffians who can be brought in to do anything or underground cellars that can be used to hide anybody. He does not mar the pure and lovely outlines of a classical murder or burglary by wreathing it round and round with the dirty and dingy red tape of international diplomacy; he does not lower our lofty ideals of crime to the level of foreign politics. He does not introduce suddenly at the end somebody's brother from New Zealand, who is exactly like him. He does not trace the crime hurriedly in the last page or two to some totally insignificant character, whom we never suspected because we never remembered. He does not get over the difficulty of choosing between the hero and the villain by falling back on the hero's cabman or the villain's valet. He does not introduce a professional criminal to take the blame of a private crime; a thoroughly unsportsmanlike course of action and another proof of how professionalism is ruining our national sense of sport. He does not introduce about six people in succession to do little bits of the same small murder; one man to bring the dagger and another to point it and another to stick it in properly. He does not say it was all a mistake, and that nobody ever meant to murder anybody at all, to the serious disappointment of all humane and sympathetic readers. He does not make the general mistake of thinking that the more complicated the story is the better. His story is complicated enough, and on many points open to criticism; but the secret of it is found in the centre; and that is the central matter in any work of art.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

March, 1926.

Chapter 1

The Crime

THE TELEPHONE bell rang on the table of Superintendent Sinclair at Scotland Yard. He was a busy man, and had given orders that he was not to be disturbed except on matters important.

Putting down a paper he had been reading, he picked up the receiver. A woman's voice spoke.

"Is that Scotland Yard?"

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently, "Superintendent Sinclair speaking, what is it?"

"Listen carefully," said the voice. "The Home Secretary has been murdered at his own house, it would be as well if you would come at once. Have you got that? Just repeat."

Even Sinclair, the coolest head in the service, was staggered for a moment. There was not a trace of hurry or emotion in the voice. It might have been inviting him to tea. Before he could collect himself, the voice began again.

"I will repeat," and the same impassive message came through with the concluding words, "Have you got that?"

Sinclair pulled himself together.

"Who is speaking?" he said. He heard a laugh and then the voice—

"Oh, no one in particular, just the murderer," and then silence.

He rang his bell, and his assistant, or 'familiar' as he was termed, Lewis, entered.

"Someone is playing a joke of sorts on us. Just find out who called up," he said abruptly, and went on reading. The thing was so absurd, but something was wrong, and someone would have to answer for this. In a minute Lewis returned.

"They don't seem to know downstairs, sir, there is a new operator at the exchange, and it seems that someone said she was a personal friend of yours, and must speak at once to you."

"Oh, of course, the same old game. I suppose they think it's funny," and he turned savagely to his work.

"By the way, Lewis, just find out where the Home Secretary is," he added.

About ten minutes had passed, when a knock came at the door, and a clerk ushered in Mr. Collins.

Sylvester Collins was not a Sherlock Holmes or anything like it, but after a successful career at the Bar, at a time when all his many friends had expected him to 'take silk,' he had suddenly thrown up his whole career, and started as an Inquiry Agent and Amateur Detective, though he hated the expression, and always claimed that he was merely trying to use his experience at the Bar in a practical way.

However, he had been phenomenally successful, perhaps through luck, perhaps through a keen, trained brain and good common sense.

If his friends wanted to upset him, they would call him Sherlock Holmes, which was like a red rag to a bull to him.

He worked excellently with the official force, and had been "briefed" by them on many occasions, with the happiest results to all except the criminals who had been run to earth.

A clean-cut face with a large nose, and a firm mouth, were his chief characteristics. Soft brown eyes, and curly hair almost black, gave his face a curiously paradoxical expression.

When not engaged professionally, he was a keen sportsman, and enjoyed life to the full.

He was entirely devoid of 'side' or 'swank.'

Sinclair was a very different type. He was more like the Scotland Yard officer of real life than of fiction. After successful work in India, he had applied for and obtained his post. He had just a detective's training and education. He made no pretensions to be other than a trained official with no particular brilliance, and he was glad to have the help of his friend, who had brains and not his experience.

Collins always came to Sinclair without ceremony.

He entered smoking a cigarette, and placed his hat and stick on the table.

"Well," he said. "What's the trouble now?"

Sinclair looked up in some surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"You sent for me?"

"I'm sure I didn't," said the other.

"But someone from here called me up on the 'phone about— " he looked at his watch—"about ten minutes ago, and said you wanted to speak to me."

"Someone from here. Who was it?"

"I am sure I don't know. It sounded like a woman."

"What did she say?" said the Superintendent turning in his chair.

"Nothing more than that. Simply asked if I were speaking, and said 'Superintendent Sinclair wants to speak to you at once if you can come,' and rang off."

"Well, I'm damned," said Sinclair.

"You may be for all I know, but I was just off to tennis," and he glanced at his flannels. "I suppose someone has been playing the fool. I'll get off."

"Stop. If they have, they have been trying to fool me, too," and he told of the message he had received.

Collins listened with interest.

"What have you done?" he said.

"I asked Lewis to find out where the Home Secretary was. I expect he has found him now. The thing is absurd."

Lewis came in.

"Well?" said Sinclair.

"The Home Secretary is not in the House or at the Home Office. They do not know where he is."

"Call up his house," said Sinclair, irritated.

"Better not," said Collins. "If there's nothing in it we don't want to look fools, and if there has really been murder done the less known the better. I'll tell you what— I have my car outside. Let's run up to his house in Leveson Square. You can make some excuse. You often want to see him."

The Superintendent made a face. "I'm not big enough to go calling on the Home Secretary."

"Never mind, fake up something. I'll come with you."

"All right, I'll bring two plain clothes officers in case there is anything in it. We often have to keep a special watch there, so that'll be quite in order."

Collins laughed. "Thank goodness I am not official. What a lot of red tape you people have."

"Why, what would you have done, then?"

"Charged up and asked him if he were dead by any chance."

"Come along."

Lewis had been listening to them.

"Come along, Lewis, and bring Smith," said Sinclair.

To his surprise Lewis was as white as chalk, and his hand trembled.

"If you don't mind, sir," he said, "I would much rather not come. I don't feel very well." Collins gazed keenly at him for a moment.

"How long have you felt ill?" he said.

"Only just a few minutes ago, sir, I think it's the heat."

"Let's get someone else, then, only hurry along, I want to get to my tennis," said Collins impatiently.

Sinclair was about to grumble, but a look from Collins made him silent. "Go and get two men then at once. Tell them to meet us at the door."

"What the devil was the matter with Lewis?" said Sinclair in the car. "He is my right-hand man."

"Dunno," said Collins who was driving, "wait till we know what has happened."

Every incident that transpired from that moment was so stamped on the memory of the two men that there was no mistake about the facts.

On arriving at the door of the Home Secretary's house, Sinclair stationed Smith at the front entrance, with orders not to show himself, but to watch.

The second man was disposed at the back, where was a high wall, but no actual entrance. The basement opened into an area in front.

The two men ascended the front steps and Sinclair rang the bell. An aged housekeeper, Mrs. Simmons, opened the door.

"Is the Home Secretary in?" said Sinclair.

"Yes, sir, he's in his study," she looked at the men doubtfully, "he did not wish to be disturbed."

"When did you see him last?" said Collins, looking at her keenly.

"Why, about half an hour back, sir," said she in surprise.

"What fools we have been," said Sinclair, "we'd better go."

"Not at all. Now we are here we will see him. We can ask him about Blake who is to be hanged next Thursday. There's a big petition you know for a reprieve."

"Very good, but it's a fool's errand." He turned to the housekeeper.

"Would you kindly take my card to Sir James, and ask him if he could spare me a minute?"

When the woman had gone, Sinclair said, "I shall get hell for this. He will ask me what it has got to do with me, and why I did not use the ordinary channels."

"Leave it to me," said the other with his easy confidence. He generally got his own way in most things.

After a brief interval Mrs. Simmons returned.

"I have knocked twice," she said, "but there is no answer. I expect he is asleep. I hardly like to disturb him unless it is a very important matter."

The two men exchanged glances.

"I am afraid it is," said Collins. "We had better see. This is Superintendent Sinclair from Scotland Yard."

At the name the old woman turned pale.

"Scotland Yard?" she stammered. "I hope nothing is wrong?"

"Why should anything be wrong," said Collins. "The Home Secretary often sees officials from the Yard, doesn't he?"

"Yes," said she; "but there have been some queer things to-day here."

"What things?" said Collins.

"Oh, come along, don't start asking questions now," said Sinclair. The two men entered the hall.

The housekeeper disappeared down the stairs, but the others did not notice her departure at the moment.

They made for the library door where the housekeeper had knocked. Sinclair tried the handle. The door was locked. He knocked loudly, but there was no response.

"We shall have to break the door down," said he.

"Oh, that's very clumsy," said Collins, "and makes such a noise." Stooping down he examined the lock.

"That's an easy matter, the key is in the lock."

He produced a fine pair of pliers, and deftly gripping the end of the key, turned it without difficulty.

"You would make a good burglar," laughed the superintendent. Collins opened the door and glanced round.

The room was in semi-darkness, and after the glare outside it was hard to see anything for a moment. By the empty grate was a large arm-chair, and seated in this was the familiar figure of the Home Secretary, Sir James Watson. He was huddled up in his chair, and his head was at a curious angle to his body.

Sinclair was about to advance into the room.

"Stop," said the other. "For Heaven's sake don't go inside and leave footmarks. Whatever is the matter, this requires a doctor. I will wait here, you telephone for a doctor."

He glanced round the room.

"There doesn't appear to be one here. Ask the housekeeper."

Sinclair went to the head of the stairs and called.

There was some delay, and he called again angrily.

A muffled voice answered him.

"Where's the telephone, quick?" he shouted.

A sound was heard on the stairs, and Mrs. Simmons came up. She was crying.

"Stop that," said Sinclair roughly. "Where is the telephone?"

"There isn't one in the house, sir," she said. "Sir James had it taken away. He was always being rung up."

Collins was getting impatient. "Send one of your men for a doctor, then, the old woman is no good. There are plenty of them round here. Hurry, man, it may be life or death."

Sinclair dashed down the steps, and called the man on duty. He returned breathless.

Collins had dragged two large mats to the door of the library, and was carefully spreading one on the floor. The two men entered, and placed the second mat beyond the first.

"On your knees," he said in a whisper.

They approached the figure in the chair.

One glance was sufficient. Even in the semi-darkness they could see an ugly mark on the side of the head from which a very thin trickle of blood was coming.

"A bullet hole," said Sinclair, who was versed in these matters. "He's been shot."

"Hum," said Collins, "wait for the doctor. Meanwhile I will have some light." With the utmost precautions he moved his rugs to the window, and pulled up the blinds.

The room was beautifully furnished, for Sir James was a man of taste and had the means to gratify it.

The walls were covered with books to a height of seven feet.

Above that one or two choice pictures were hung.

The fireplace was a fine piece of carved oak.

As far as they could see, the room was empty.

The windows were hasped, and there was no other entrance.

The library had originally been two rooms, and ran the full depth of the house. It had been adapted by Sir James, and was his favourite room.

A fussy little doctor arrived, and was brought into the room with the same precautions.

Sinclair introduced himself and his companion.

The doctor made a very careful examination, while the others waited.

"Dead," he said. "I should think about half an hour, possibly more. It is difficult to tell exactly." He looked up.

"Is it a case of murder or suicide?"

"At present we know no more than you do," said Sinclair. "We had only just come, and sent for you at once."

"Quite right, quite right," said the little doctor pompously.

"Meanwhile you will, of course, keep this entirely to yourself," said Collins.

"But isn't this?" he glanced at the stricken man. "Surely this is the Home Secretary."

"Exactly," said Collins dryly. "That is why it is necessary for you to remain silent until you are asked to speak. Superintendent Sinclair represents Scotland Yard. You understand?"

The doctor bowed. He saw himself playing a prominent part in a great drama, which would bring him notoriety and clients.

"The body had better be moved for me to make a more exhaustive examination," said he.

"Would you please wait outside till we have made our observations if you don't mind, as the fewer in here the better, but I think you had better remain in the house, if you can manage it."

"Certainly," said the doctor, "I am at your service."

"Then perhaps you would tell the housekeeper to stay where she is," said Sinclair.

"Now for your men," said Collins, when the doctor had gone out.

"We must tell them to see that no one leaves the house." They went first to the front door and called Smith.

Collins was careful to keep the open library door in sight all the time.

After giving him his orders, they had to get in touch with the man at the back. There was a small garden, bounded by a high wall, and beyond that a lane. Seated on the wall was the figure of the other man, keeping a good look-out. Collins went to a back window and called him softly.

"Seen anything?" he asked.

"No, sir, nothing doing here," said the man cheerfully.

It was refreshing in the midst of what looked like a grim tragedy to find a cheery soul who seemed to be enjoying himself.

He returned to Sinclair.

"Now for the room."

The two had been used to work together, and Sinclair knew exactly when to leave matters to Collins and when to take charge himself.

As was usual in these cases, Collins thought aloud, and the other checked his statements.

He approached the dead man, moving still on the rugs.

"Clean bullet wound— no burning— fired from a distance— probably while he slept— entered right temple— bullet lodged in the brain— all straight forward— both hands limp, and peaceful expression— ergo unexpected attack and no resistance— now, let's see— eyes shut— confirms first impression. Anything else about the body?"

Sinclair looked at it critically.

"No;" he said, "but from the way he lies the shot must have come from the doorway, or somewhere near that."

"We are coming to that in a minute," said the other.

"Now let's have a look round. Observation only, no speculation. Table, with two glasses." He took one up and then the other.

"Just whisky and soda. There's the decanter and there's the syphon."

"Nothing very mysterious about that. But who was the visitor?... Cigar ash, I cannot tell five hundred kinds of ash," said he with a smile, "still, they both smoked."

"Now for the floor— help me with the rugs. Right— hullo."

As they moved the second rug they disclosed a revolver lying on the floor. Collins picked it up.

"Service revolver— Webley— now obsolete— " He broke the revolver carefully.

"Five full and one empty— seems obvious— too obvious." He was always disappointed if a problem proved quite easy of solution.

"Well, we must wait for the bullet— I hope it doesn't fit— "

Sinclair laughed. "I don't believe you care in the least whether the murderer is punished or not, as long as you have something interesting to solve."

"Oh, I must say I like something abstruse; but never mind.

"Now for footprints. On this soft pile carpet they ought to show, thanks to our precautions."

He went down on his knees, and examined the carpet carefully.

The other took a chair and watched.

After a long and keen search all over the room, he rose to his feet.

"There are three sets of marks," he said.

"Here are one lot walking up and down and crossing frequently. Number two was sitting down here, it is quite a different type of boot, or rather shoe, I think, and here are the marks which I rather fancy are my own when I stepped to lay the rug."

He removed his shoe and placed it on the mark.

"That's right," he said. "It shows how careful one has to be. If you and I and the doctor had all walked over the carpet we should have obliterated the others....

"Now which of these is the dead man's?"

Sinclair was hardened in criminal matters, and without compunction removed one of the dead man's boots.

"Exactly," said Collins, fitting it to a mark on the floor. "That's that. He was the one who walked about the room. How does that fit in with the idea of him being shot when asleep?"

"No theories yet," said Sinclair.

"Right you are. That's the floor. Now the windows. Firmly fastened. Anything curious there?"

"Nothing that I see except we have to find how the murderer escaped."

"A hot day in summer, and all the windows close fastened. Well, perhaps he did not want the shot to be heard."

"Are you suggesting suicide?"

"Why not? Oh, I see, you are thinking of the telephone message. Still, we must not eliminate the possibility at present."

"Door locked on the inside, and no trace of the second person."

"Of course, the walls and floor will have to be examined," said Sinclair.

"Of course, and the ceiling and chimney. Well, that's all here, and we had better get the doctor and remove the body."

"Wrap those glasses and decanter and syphon carefully up for finger prints," said Collins.

Sinclair turned scarlet.

"I am most awfully sorry. I ought to have known better, but this thing upset me rather. While you were grovelling on the floor I helped myself to a little whisky— it was really unpardonable."

"I saw you," said Collins coolly. "It would cost you your place if it were known, but I shan't tell any tales."

"Thanks," said Sinclair simply. It was a little weakness he had.

They took the body carefully into the dining-room, and left it with the doctor.

"Now for the housekeeper," said Sinclair.

"Mrs. Simmons, will you come here, please?"

The woman came in very distressed, and seated herself, at a word from Collins.

"Now, Mrs. Simmons," he said in kind tones, "Can you throw any light on this affair? Please calm yourself and tell us all you know."

After a prolonged examination, the following facts were elicited, which are better put together.

The Home Secretary was a widower. He had one daughter, Mabel, who lived with him. She had gone down to their country place in Devonshire, from which he had come the day before, and he intended to return the next day. The servants had gone, leaving Mrs. Simmons to look after Sir James.

He had been at his Office all the morning, re turning for lunch. He was a solitary man and shunned company.

At about three o'clock a ring had come at the door, and she had gone up to answer it. When she got to the top of the stairs, she saw that Sir James had already opened the door. A man came in and went straight to the library. She could not see anything of him, as Sir James was between them. She thought nothing of it, as it was probably an official from the Home Office. Sir James

locked the door, and the two were together for about half an hour. She heard nothing, as the kitchen was not under the library.

Then there was a ring from the library. She was quite certain of that. She went up after a moment, as she had been writing a letter. When she got to the hall, Sir James was showing the visitor out, and she did not see him. Sir James stood on the steps and watched him go. As she was not wanted she went down again.

A little later Sir James came out from the library, and went across the road with a letter, which he put into the pillar-box. She waited for him, as she wished to ask about arrangements for the evening.

When he came back he told her he should be out to dinner, and that he was on no account to be disturbed.

He had then gone in and locked the door. She was certain of that— she had heard the key turn. After that she had been busy in the dining-room, and was quite certain that no one else had called. She had heard nothing until the two men had come. She had heard no sound of a shot.

She would certainly have heard one from where she was.

"Why was she so agitated when the door was opened?"

She was given to presentiments, and was feeling afraid of something after the strange man had called.

At the conclusion Collins asked her about the household. Were there any relations who came?

"No, sir," she said, "though Sir James used to have regular house-parties at his country place. He lived very quietly in London."

"Has he ever shown any signs of being afraid of an attack, or anything of that sort?"

"Well, sir, there have been times when he seemed uneasy. He has asked whether there was anybody hanging round the house, and he always kept a loaded revolver in his room."

"Oh, did he? And where is it now?"

The housekeeper led them into the library, now guarded by a plain-clothes man. She opened a drawer in the writing table. Within lay a small silver-plated revolver, fully loaded.

"You say that Sir James had one child, a daughter?" said Collins.

Mrs. Simmons hesitated. "Well, sir, I have been with the family twenty years. There was another, a son, but he was a wrong 'un, and went abroad many years ago, and, as far as I know, the family have heard nothing since."

"But hasn't Sir James kept in touch with him?"

"Of course, I do not know all that has happened, but I do know that Sir James used to make an allowance to him; but the time came when the firm of lawyers said they had lost all trace of him, and the money was stopped."

"Where was he at that time— I mean in what country?"

"I don't properly know, but it was in one of those South American States."

"And that is all you can tell us," said Collins, fixing the housekeeper with a sharp look.

"Yes, sir, as far as I can remember, but of course I am all of a fluster. Something more may occur to me; but, oh, sir, what shall I do, I cannot stay in this dreadful house?"

"There is no need for you to do so, is there, Sinclair?" said Collins.

The other tugged at his moustache. "I don't know. Where are you going?"

"I want to go to my sister's house at Forest Gate, if I may, I am so upset with all this."

Collins drew Sinclair aside.

"Let her go," he said, "and have her watched. It may be useful."

"Very good," said he. To Mrs. Simmons, he said, "You can go, but you must give us your address, you will be wanted as a witness at the inquest. Don't talk about the affair at all. Do you understand?"

"Thank you, sir, I will go and pack," said she gratefully.

Collins watched her go.

"What do you make of her?" he said.

"She seemed quite straightforward; I think she's told us the truth."

Collins gave a laugh. "Yes," he said. "The truth, but not the whole truth. She's a clever old woman."

"What do you mean?"

"When a simple soul tells the tale, and tries to conceal something, she gives herself away. She will not look straight at you. When you are dealing with the cunning type, she will look at you with a particularly open face and innocent look. All the time she was telling her narratives she was confused and upset, as was natural. But when I asked her if she had anything else to say her manner altered, and she became collected and looked me straight in the face."

"Oh, you imagine these things. I didn't see any difference."

"Very good," said Collins, "we shall see."

"Now for the next move," said Sinclair, who always got irritated when his colleague assumed this superior manner. "I must go to the Yard and make a full report. We cannot keep this thing secret. It will make a great stir. Will you come with me?"

"I will run you down in my car, and then must get off at once."

"Where to?" said the other in surprise.

"Someone must break the news to the girl. It's a rotten job, but it's of the greatest importance. I am off to Devonshire, and hope I shall arrive in time."

"In time?"

"Before the news reaches there."

"You've got something at the back of your mind, I can see that. It's not just to spare the girl's feelings."

Collins smiled. "I would like to make the acquaintance of the family," he said.

"But there is only one in the family," said Sinclair surprised.

"Perhaps," said Collins.

They made their way into the Square, where dusk was falling.

Several persons were looking up at the house and pointing.

"What the devil is the meaning of that?" said Sinclair, as Collins was starting the car.

"Ask me another, jump in," and they went off.

As they turned into Bond Street, where the lights were on, they saw a newspaper boy shouting, and running down the street. In front of him was a news-bill, on which was printed:

"Home Secretary Murdered at his House.
Full Details."

"Well, I'm damned," said the Superintendent.

Collins stopped the car, and bought a paper.

On the News page, across two columns, was a flaring account of the murder.

"What in Hell's name is the meaning of this?" said Sinclair.

"Let's go to the Yard," said Collins, putting in the clutch.

Mr. Boyce was a flabby man of fifty. He had had an unsuccessful career at the Bar which would have ruined a man without means; but his father was a distinguished Judge of the High Court, and had considerable influence. After trying to get his son a job as Stipendiary and a County Court Judge, he at last jobbed him into the position of Commissioner in Scotland Yard, where he subsisted on the brains of his subordinates. He listened with an assumption of wisdom to the account of the affair given by Sinclair. Collins had come with him after the incident of the newspaper. He had a profound contempt for Boyce, which the other resented though he dared not show his resentment.

While Sinclair was reporting, Collins had got busy with a timetable, and then turned to the telephone.

The others waited while he called up.

After several conversations, he laid the receiver down, and turned to the other two.

"The Editor of the 'Evening Rag,'" said he. "I asked him where he got the news of the murder from, and he says via the Central News. He says he was careful to ascertain whether it was authentic before he sent it to press. What do you think he says?"

"Can't guess," said Sinclair shortly.

"He says it came in in the form of a report from Scotland Yard, on official paper, signed by Superintendent Sinclair."

Sinclair turned purple.

Boyce looked at him with large, fishy eyes.

"Really, really," he said, "this is most unorthodox."

"You don't suppose I sent it in, do you, sir," spluttered Sinclair.

Collins intervened.

"I can answer for that," said he; "Sinclair has been with me the whole time. No; there is another explanation for this."

"What is that?"

"Why the same person who called us on the 'phone, and probably the murderer. It is curious how vain these people are. He may have stepped too far. It's just possible he's given us a valuable clue. One cannot send letters with impunity. There's the post mark, and the time."

"The document must be obtained," said Boyce.

"I have already asked the Central News to send it here for inspection. It is coming now by hand."

While they waited, Collins turned to Sinclair.

"About that telephone call, you say it was a woman's voice?"

"Well, of course, I thought so at the time; but it may have been a man's disguised."

"Or something else?" said Collins.

"What do you mean?" said Boyce, almost startled.

"Well, it might have been a boy's voice."

"Oh, surely not."

"We cannot eliminate the possibility, and then again it might have been a man's voice not disguised."

"How could that be?"

"There are some men with treble voices who sing falsetto like a boy. We cannot take anything for granted."

Boyce gave a sniff. He did not like this sort of speculation.

"I must get back and change, and then get some food, and catch the night train," said Collins. "I have plenty of time, so we can go into the position if you care to. You had better have some grub with me, and if you care to join us," he said to Boyce, "I shall be delighted."

"Thank you very much, I will with pleasure," said the other. It was just what he wanted. He could listen to the others and then retail the information as his own. It was the way in which he worked his department.

A messenger boy was ushered in by a clerk, and handed a document to Sinclair, who signed the receipt and the lad departed.

In haste he opened the envelope, and pulled out another which had been opened. It was addressed to the Central News Agency, and was a Government envelope. Inside was a sheet of paper with the official stamp of Scotland Yard.

The note was short and in type.

"Sir," it said, "I am authorized to inform you that the Home Secretary, Sir James Watson, was murdered this afternoon at his house in Leveson Square between three and four o'clock, by an unknown assailant. He was shot through the head, and death was instantaneous.

" 'The cause of the crime is at present unknown, and no trace of the assailant can be found. Scotland Yard have the matter in hand, and a reward will shortly be offered for information leading to the apprehension of the murderer.' "

It was signed 'Arthur Sinclair, Superintendent, C.I.D.' and had the official stamp on it.

Sinclair laid the paper down with a look of bewilderment.

"We must keep this carefully," said Boyce sententiously. "It is a document of the utmost importance."

"This is of greater importance," said Collins quietly.

The other two looked at him in surprise. He was holding the envelope.

Slowly he laid it on the table and pointed.

"This has escaped the notice of the Central News people. Probably because they have an assistant to open envelopes who simply throws them into the waste-paper basket. I particularly asked them to get the envelope, which they have done."

"But what is the point?"

Collins placed his finger on the postmark.

"Two forty-five," said he. "This was sent off before the murder took place."

The three men looked at each other in silence.

Chapter 2

Speculations

COLLINS, SINCLAIR AND BOYCE had just discussed an excellent glass of port after a frugal but well-cooked meal at Collins' flat.

The room was tastefully but not luxuriously furnished, and was stamped with the individuality of the occupier.

Over the mantelpiece was an oar, a relic of the time when Collins had stroked his college boat to victory in the "Mays."

Four selected pictures were on the walls, but the eye was caught by 'Napoleon, the Last Phase,' which seemed to dominate the room, with its tortured sadness.

Collins rose, rang the bell for coffee, and handed round cigars.

During the meal all reference to the tragedy of the day had been dropped by tacit consent. Now each of the men drew up his chair to the fire, and prepared to discuss the affair— in spite of the heat of the day the nights were cold.

Collins suggested, with an irony which was lost on the others, that Boyce should give them the light of his wisdom on the problem.

This he hastily declined, and Sinclair asked Collins to open the ball. Here he was in his element.

"I will go through the facts, and Sinclair can check me." The others nodded assent. The cigars were good and the chairs comfortable. They were in the right mood for listening.

"First then," said Collins, "there are four possibilities. It may have been suicide, but the doctor does not think that is possible. There was no blackening round the wound, and it would not be likely that a man could shoot himself through the head and throw the revolver away from him."

"But what about the telephone messages and the newspaper article?" said Boyce.

"We are coming to that, but they may have nothing to do with the crime."

The other two exchanged glances.

"Then we come to accident. That is a possibility. A man may have tried blackmail or to extract some secret, and fired by accident. Here again the position of the body and the whole arrangement of the room are against such an idea."

"Then there is only murder?" said Boyce.

"Not quite," said the other. "There is first the work of a madman."

"But that is nevertheless murder," said Sinclair.

"Yes; but we then have to proceed on an entirely different basis. If this is the work of a lunatic, it explains the telephone messages and the newspaper article. It is just the sort of thing that a madman with an inordinate vanity would do. And we need not look for motive. If that is so, our task will be simplified."

The others agreed.

"Now we come to the fourth. A cold-blooded and deliberate murder, of which each detail was planned beforehand so accurately that the criminal had the effrontery to inform the Press before it was done."

"That is the most probable," said Sinclair.

"I agree, but we must not lose sight of the others."

"Now for our facts. At sometime before 2.30 when the box was cleared, a letter was posted at Westminster Bridge Post Office, the contents of which you know. At 3.00 o'clock a man calls on the Home Secretary who is either expected or well known to Sir James."

"How do you know that?" said Boyce.

"Surely," said Collins; "he opened the door himself, and takes him straight to his library."

"This man may have been the actual murderer or not. We are here going on the statements of the housekeeper, which may turn out to be a tissue of lies; but I do not think so, she is not a good enough actress for that. This man stays for half an hour, and is let out by the Home Secretary. After that Sir James writes a letter and posts it himself. He returns and goes to his room complaining of feeling sleepy."

"Did he?" said Sinclair, "I did not hear that."

"Certainly," said Collins, "Mrs. Simmons said so, if she is reliable. Very good, he locks himself in, and asks not to be disturbed. Here he remains, as far as we know, till the murder takes place. We find the door locked and the windows fastened, with no apparent means of escape. There is no one in the room."

"By Jove, he was a cool hand," said Sinclair. "All the time he was talking with Sir James the letter was on its way to the Central News, and might have arrived. He must have calculated things pretty well."

"Undoubtedly, and he probably knew that there was no telephone in the house."

Collins got up and handed round the cigar box. When he resumed his seat he continued, and his face was grave.

"A Home Secretary is very open to attack. He may have refused to pardon a criminal, and the man when he comes out from penal servitude or imprisonment will seek revenge. He is always getting threatening letters. Then

there are murderers whom he reprieves, and the relatives of the murdered man may seek revenge. Again, there are political fanatics. You remember the Phœnix Park murders."

"Of course," said Boyce, "the whole staff will be put on to-morrow to investigate this side of the question." Collins nodded.

"Then there is a personal revenge. His life appears to be a blameless and honourable one, but one never knows; there are skeletons in the best of cupboards."

"There was a ne'er-do-well son," said Sinclair.

"Chut, don't let's come to any personalities until we have more data; we shall be following wandering fires."

Sinclair was not to be silenced.

"What do you make of the behaviour of Lewis when I asked him to come with me?" he said.

"I don't pretend to make anything of it. It may have the most natural of explanations."

"I have never known him to behave like that before," he persisted. Collins ignored him.

"We have five things to bear in mind, or shall I put it we have five questions to answer:

"Who sent the letter to the Central News, and for what object?

"Who called us up on the telephone, and why?

"Who was the man who called at three?

"How did the murderer get in, and how did he escape?

"What was the motive of the murderer?"

"You've left out the most important of all," said Boyce, "who was the murderer?"

"Yes, of course, there's always that," said Collins with an indulgent smile.

"You've put it very well," said Sinclair, who was in a genial mood after Collin's excellent fare.

"We must find out all we can about the letter and envelope."

"It was a most extraordinarily good forgery, that signature," said Boyce, "I would have sworn in any court it was yours."

Sinclair's face flushed. "Are you suggesting anything, sir," he said.

"Of course not, my dear fellow, only it was, wasn't it?"

"Then you must try and find out about the telephone calls," intervened Collins.

"I shall have Mrs. Simmons up to the Yard and take down a full statement," said Boyce, anxious to show he had a grasp of the situation.

"All right, I must put a few things together and get off. We will each carry on with our own line of research."

And he went into the next room.

"Has he got something up his sleeve?" said Boyce. "It's not like him to go off when there's an interesting problem to solve. It can't be just to break the news, he knows nothing of these people."

"He's pretty deep, and it may be he saw something that I didn't," said Sinclair, modestly. "He seemed to think Mrs. Simmons was holding something back."

Collins came back with a small suit-case.

"I will let you know when I am coming back," he said, "and we will meet and compare notes. This will make a most almighty stir, and if the Prime Minister thinks it is the work of an ex-convict or anything of that sort, you will get it hot."

Boyce made a wry face.

"I am afraid so," he said.

Chapter 3

At the Vale

The Vale was situated in one of the lovely valleys of North Devon on the borders of Somerset. In the distance could be seen the Mendip Hills. Here the summer stayed on when autumn had taken hold of less favoured spots.

It was a fine old house, half-timbered, nestling in the valley, almost hidden in trees and covered with ivy. The gardens had been the special joy of Sir James Watson. It was here he led his simple home life away from the factions of Westminster and the labours of his thankless office.

He was a cold, haughty, reserved man, with few friends. His one joy in a rather lonely life was his daughter Mabel. Like so many widowers with an only daughter, he was somewhat selfish, and could never believe that she had grown up. He had watched with anxiety the attentions which had been paid to her by the many who had appeared as possible suitors.

She, unconscious of it all, had led a secluded life among her flowers; she hated the times she had to spend in the gloomy house in Town, and had no liking for London or its gaieties.

Her mother had died when she was a baby, and no cloud of sorrow except one had crossed her path.

That one had been when her brother, quite a boy, had been sent down from Oxford, and her father had sternly pointed to the door, and told him never to come back till he had redeemed his character.

He had provided ample funds for the young, man to make a fresh start, and had recommended him to the care of an old friend in Monte Video. He had refused to tell his daughter where the brother had gone, lest they should write to each other.

Mabel had been only a child at the time, but she never forgot her brother. As she sat in the garden after breakfast no shadow crossed her mind. The letters and papers had not arrived, as they were out of the beaten track.

John, the butler, approached her from the house with a salver, on which he bore a visiting card.

"A gentleman wishes to see you, Miss Mabel," he said, and handed the card. She took it and read,

Mr. Sylvester Collins,
14, Severn Street,
London, W.

"What does he want?" said she.

"I do not know, Miss, but he asked if you could see him on an important matter. He has come down by the night train from London."

"Oh, I'll come and see him," and she got up and went in.

Collins had slept on the way down, and had breakfasted on the train. He felt quite fresh after a motor ride from Wilton-on-Sea, but he had a strong distaste for his task.

He walked up and down the fine old drawing-room, through the open windows of which came the scent of roses.

The girl entered, and he was struck with her simple beauty, without any of the adornments of the modern girl, and in her dainty morning frock of cretonne.

He knew that in a few moments her present happiness would be turned to bitter sorrow. She advanced towards him at once, and took his hand in a friendly way.

"You are a friend of my father's, I suppose," she said.

"Miss Watson," he said gravely. "It is no good beating about the bush. I have some bad news for you. You must try and be brave."

"My father," she said, with quick instinct.

He nodded.

"Don't tell me anything has happened to him. He only left me the day before yesterday. Is he ill?"

In her excitement she had not let go of his hand, and her fingers retained their hold.

"You must try and bear up, a terrible thing has happened. The worst that can happen."

"You mean," she said, her face turning pale, "that he is dead."

"Yes," he said.

The shock of such an announcement does not, as a rule, have the instant effect that is supposed to take place. The mind cannot at once grasp the facts. It is like a shell wound. For a moment the wounded man gazes in surprise at a stump where his arm was a moment before. It takes some seconds before realization or pain is felt.

So it was with Mabel. It was as though someone were telling her a tale of some remote happening which did not concern her.

"How was it?" she whispered.

He had expected tears, possibly a fainting fit. This calm surprised him for the moment.

"Shall I tell you?" he said.

"Please."

"He was found shot in his library yesterday."

"Do you mean murdered?" she said, dismissing the thought of suicide unconsciously.

"I am afraid so," he replied. The sweat stood on his forehead. What a fool he had been to undertake this task!

"And you have come to tell me about it? How kind of you," she said, as in a dream. He saw this could not last, and with quick instinct rang the bell.

The door opened, and an old servant with a sweet face came in. She had been Mabel's nurse, and had remained with her as a sort of companion and friend. At the sight of her something seemed to snap in the girl's head, and she ran to her.

"Oh, Nanna," she cried. "My father has been murdered."

The woman looked indignantly at Collins, as though he had struck her darling, and took her in her arms, where the tears came at last.

Collins withdrew to the farther side of the room, and looked at the garden. When he turned, the room was empty.

Irresolute, he strolled into the old garden. What a catastrophe had he brought by his news! Better, perhaps, if he had wired.

Still, he must go through with it. He could not study the feelings of the poor girl when larger issues were at stake.

Presently he saw the butler coming towards him.

The old man was bent, and he had been crying.

"My mistress is too upset to see you, sir," he said; "but I was to ask you to make yourself at home. And would you like some refreshment?"

"Thank you," he replied. "I have had breakfast. I do not need anything. You have heard the sad news."

"Yes, sir, the papers have come, and the post. They all know now," and he broke down.

"Come, come, man," said Collins almost roughly. "It's all right for women to cry."

"I had known him for twenty-five years, sir," said the old man simply, "and I wish it had been me instead of him. Do you think they will catch the murderer?"

"Surely," said Collins. "But perhaps I had better go."

"Oh, no, sir, Miss Mabel wants to see you when she is a bit better. She particularly asked me to say so."

"Well, then, if so, perhaps you could give me a minute? I would like to ask a question or two."

The old butler bowed and waited.

"You were here when Sir James' son went away?"

"Master Ronald? Oh, sir, I am sure he is nothing to do with this terrible murder."

"Whoever said he was? But he is now heir to his father's baronetcy even if he has been cut out of his father's will, and we must try and find him."

"You'll excuse me, sir," said the old man. "But are you a friend of the family?"

"I hope so," said Collins cheerily, and not to commit himself.

"What exactly did young Ronald do? Anything very dreadful?" he asked.

The butler drew himself up with dignity.

"I think, sir, you had better ask someone else," he said.

"That's very stupid of you," said Collins, with a smile which took the sting from his words. "You only make me believe it was something very dreadful, and I don't expect it was at all."

The butler was not sharp, he fell at once.

"Oh, no, sir, not at all, it was only when he was at Oxford. He went off to the 'Derby' without leave, and lost a lot of money there. It was what he had for the term, and when he was sent down he had to tell Sir James. He had been rather wild before, and that's what happened," he concluded lamely.

"Hum," muttered Collins. "I see, and nothing has been heard from him for some time?"

"No, sir, he seems to have quite disappeared. I don't think he is dead, or we should have heard. Still, if you were to advertise for him he might come back. He ought to be here to look after Miss Mabel till she is married."

Collins looked up sharply.

"Is she engaged, then?" he said.

"Well, not exactly, but how my tongue does go. I must get back to the house." He moved to go.

"One moment," said Collins quietly. "You can trust me; who is the fortunate gentleman who is— well— nearly, eh?"

The butler looked at him doubtfully. Had he offered a bribe he would have refused information, but Collins was too old a hand for that.

"Well, seeing as poor Sir James is gone, I don't think it matters. It is Mr. Eric."

"Mr. Eric what?"

"I thought you would know, being a friend of the family. Mr. Eric Sanders, Sir James' private secretary," and he looked at Collins with suspicion.

He saw the look. "Oh, that's it," said he. "Of course, I ought to have guessed, and how does his suit prosper?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?" said the other.

"I mean are they engaged, or just likely to become so?"

"Sir James wouldn't hear of it, and last time Mr. Eric was here they had words over it, for I heard them, but I must really be going."

"All right, John, I will wait here till Miss Mabel wants to see me. You might bring me any papers you have." The butler bowed and made his way to the house.

"So that's it, is it?" he said to himself. "There are at least two candidates for honours. We are getting on." The papers told him nothing. Sinclair had been to work, and apart from a bald statement of the facts, and obituary notices, there was nothing striking. Of course, there were leading articles on the perils of foreign anarchists and on the saintly character of the deceased, but this was old stock-in-trade, kept ready for any assassination of a notable person which might occur, and adapted to circumstances.

"As long as this country continues to harbour, etc.," said one Daily. He tossed them aside, one by one. Sir James, of course, had a good selection of papers sent to his house, and they arrived whether he was there or not.

He sat long in deep thought, smoking continuously. Presently he put his hand into his pocket, and drew out his pocket book. He looked round with his habitual caution, and then took out a visiting card. On one side was the name of Mr. Eric Sanders, and the address of a well-known London Club, and on the other was written in pencil—

"For God's sake, see me. I will not detain you."

"Sinclair, my friend, you would have liked to get this— pushed under the door. Mrs. Simmons, you were not telling the whole truth. I think this requires further investigation."

He rose from his seat and strolled through the old garden with its gorgeous, herbaceous beds of late summer, where delphiniums and hollyhocks and the bright blue of borage made a dream of colour.

It was all very fair, and quiet after the dust and sweat of London. He returned to the house filled with a vague disquiet. Entering the hall, he was met by a maid.

"Miss Mabel would like to see you in her own room," she said, and on his nodding assent she conducted him to a sweet sitting room, fragrant with flowers and furnished with the taste of a girl who had the means to gratify her every wish.

She was seated on a sofa, white faced, and dressed all in black.

She had conquered her emotion. Her old nurse stood by her like a sentry on duty.

"Mr. Collins," she said: "I am puzzled to know why you undertook this long journey to break this sad news to me. Were you a friend of my father's? I am

very grateful," she continued hastily, as though fearing she was too frigid in her manner.

"Really, to tell the truth, I don't know myself why I came," he answered. "When this terrible event happened, your old housekeeper was quite unnerved, and there seemed no one to undertake the job. It did not seem right that you should see it first in the papers, or get a telegram."

"I am much obliged to you. You must not think me ungrateful, but of course I am rather upset at present. I have read what the newspapers have to say. Perhaps you can tell me more?" and she motioned him to sit.

"I won't go into details, Miss Watson," he said. "The accounts in the papers are accurate as far as they go. I can, however, tell you this. Your father did not suffer at all. His look was most peaceful, and it appears that he was shot while asleep."

A look of pain crossed her face, but she mastered her emotion.

"I am thankful for even that," she said. "Have the police any idea at all who can have done this cruel thing. I do not believe my father had any enemies, he was such a good and upright man that no one could have a grudge against him."

"At present all is dark," he replied, "but of course you must remember that as Home Secretary your father was brought in contact with the worst criminals in the country, and one of them may have been trying to avenge a fancied wrong. Then, again, it may have been the work of a lunatic. That is more than probable."

"In a way I hope it was," she said. "One could feel that it was the sort of accident that might happen to anyone. It is so dreadful to think that someone has deliberately murdered him."

She stumbled over the ill-omened word, and nearly broke down. The watchful nurse came near and laid a hand on her head. A look of gratitude shone for a moment in her eyes, and she reached up and took the hand in hers.

It was a pathetic picture.

"You will forgive me asking," she continued, "but I do not quite see what you were doing there, Mr. Collins, you are not in the Police Force?"

"I am a barrister by profession," he replied, "and had gone there with Superintendent Sinclair, who is an old friend of mine. Now, can I do anything for you before I go? You will forgive a stranger saying so, but you seem so entirely alone. Oh, I know you have the most loyal and faithful servants," he added hastily, "but you don't seem to have a friend to help you. Haven't you some relation I can wire for?"

"I have no near relative. We have led a very secluded life. You see we are so much in town. My father had many acquaintances, but no real friends. Those who did not know him thought him very reserved. He was not really so, you know."

"You were an only child?" he said carelessly.

"Mr. Collins, I am going to tell you. It will all come out now. I had a brother, ten years older than I. He quarrelled with my father. It was nothing very dreadful, but father thought he was doing no good and getting into bad company, so he sent him off to South America. For some years now we have lost sight of him. It was a great grief to father. He had hoped that Ronald would have come back and settled down here."

"Well, we must find him now, as he will be the new Baronet, and there will be advertisements everywhere for him. I suppose there is no reason why he should not come back?"

"None whatever," she said proudly. "What he did was only a boy's escapade when at Oxford, there was nothing criminal."

"Well, I expect there will be little difficulty in finding him now," he said hopefully; "but it will take some time. Meanwhile, isn't there anyone who could help?"

The colour rose to her pale face.

"I think you ought to wire for Mr. Sanders," she said, "he was my father's private secretary, and knows more about his affairs than anyone else."

Collins gave her one keen look. "Certainly," he said. "He is obviously the man to come. Where shall I find him?"

"At the Home Office," she said. "He is certain to be there, but I expect he has been round to Leveson Square this morning."

"I will send off a wire at once, and then I will take my leave."

"Certainly not," she said. "You must stay to lunch, if you don't mind a house of mourning," she added sadly.

At that moment a knock came at the door, and the butler entered.

"The post, Miss," he said, presenting a salver, "and the postman brought this telegram at the same time. Is there any answer?"

She broke the envelope and read, a look of pleasure passing over her face.

"This is from Eric— Mr. Sanders, he is coming down here to-day. I am so glad. It will save you the trouble of wiring."

Collins said nothing. The butler had handed him a letter in Sinclair's writing. He put it into his pocket, and rose to his feet. "I am very glad for your sake," he said. "You will be glad to have a man's advice. I suppose you will be coming to Town?"

"Of course. I ought to go at once, but it is such a shock. I think I must wait till tomorrow."

"If you will excuse me, I will just go and read this letter, then," he said, and took his departure.

He went into the garden and to his old seat, and broke the seal of the letter.

It was short, and he read it twice, a puzzled look on his face. It ran:

Dear Collins,

If you are expecting to find out anything in Devonshire, you are on a wild goose chase. Lewis has fled, and we have damning evidence against him. Come at once if you want to be in at the death. What's your game, anyway?

Yours in haste,

A. Sinclair.

"I must get back," he muttered to himself. "Whatever is Sinclair after?"

A gong sounded within the house, and he slowly rose to his feet and went in. Miss Watson was waiting for him, and they sat down. She was lost in her own mournful thoughts, and would scarcely eat anything. She tried hard to rouse herself. Collins was a brilliant conversationalist, and had a charm of manner which few could resist. He set himself to interest her, not without success.

At the end of the meal he told her he must get back at once, and noticed that she gave a look almost of relief, though she tried to hide it.

"I am deeply grateful to you for coming down here, and for your offer of help," she said.

"Not at all," he answered. "I will go to your house and do anything I can in London. Of course, there will have to be an inquest, but we will spare you all we can."

"We?" she said, in surprise. "Then you are mixed up in this?"

"Oh, there is no secret," he said. "I am a barrister, as I told you, but I do a little in helping in an amateur way with these sort of cases. It is my hobby."

"A rather horrible hobby," she said, "but of course it is necessary. I hope you find out the criminal— and yet, I don't know, in some ways I hope you don't."

"The murderer of your father," he blurted out, scandalised at such sentiments.

"Oh, I know I ought to want him punished, and yet, the awful trial, the cold cell, and then the last horrible scene. I am afraid I am always on the side of the criminal. Of course, you think that's dreadful."

"I think it does more justice to your heart than to your head," said he with a smile.

"English justice is such a cold, merciless thing. When I hear of people who come forward to what they call 'further the ends of justice,' I always think it is either for notoriety or for reward."

He laughed.

"It's a good thing everyone does not think as you do," said he.

"I was taught as a child that vengeance belongs to God, not to man, and I believe it is a worse punishment to leave the criminal to his conscience than to punish him."

"You say that because you have never come in contact with the real criminal," said he. "He has no conscience."

"I don't believe that. I am sure I would always rather hide a fugitive from justice than give him up."

"This is rank treason," he said; "but I admire your sentiments."

"But don't agree with them?"

"We must each of us act according to our lights," he answered more gravely than he intended.

She held out her hand.

"If you will excuse me, I will say goodbye. The car will be ready for you, and, I hope, we shall meet again in happier circumstances," and she gave a pathetic little smile.

When she had gone, he stood where he was.

"What a fool I was to start bandying words with her in her present state. Now for London. You've no time for sentiment."

Chapter 4

The Missing Letter

SINCLAIR was sitting at his desk, and his brows were knitted. Before him was a letter.

He read it over again for the third time, and then told the clock that he was damned. Then he picked up the envelope, and examined it closely.

It was the morning after the murder.

This was what he read.

89, Leveson Square
London, W.

Dear Mr. Sinclair,

I am writing to you, but I have grave doubts whether this letter will ever reach you, and therefore, I am not telling you more than necessary. I am in the hands of one of the cleverest ruffians that this generation has produced. My life is in imminent danger if it is not already forfeited. There is not time for explanations.

Follow these instructions carefully.

Find my son who has disappeared for some years, but was last heard of in Monte Video. Tell him to look in the place where I hid my will in his presence, and he will find all the necessary documents to bring a great criminal to justice. I cannot be more specific. I am writing to you because I know you have done good service and are painstaking. Boyce is a fool. Sylvester Collins is a theorist who will be no help to you in this matter. Do not consult him. If I am dead when this reaches you, act as I have said. If nothing has happened, I rely on your honour to destroy this letter and I will send for you. I am very tired.

Yours faithfully,
James Watson.

Sinclair sat long over this letter. What a vista of happenings did it conjure up. He was a plain man. Why did not Sir James write plainly, give the name of the criminal straight out and save further bother? Why all this mystery? What had happened in that grim library in the afternoon? Oh, bother it all, what a maze of evidence. If only it had been a straightforward murder, with plenty of blood and clues as in a detective story.

No; he would not tell Collins. He had something up his sleeve— well, let them both follow their own line.

He took a pen and paper, and put down his facts. Here was one thing cleared up. This was the letter which Sir James had posted himself, after his interview with the unknown man.

That, at any rate, corroborated the housekeeper's evidence. Then the visitor had threatened his life; if not, why was the danger hanging over him so greatly that he dare not venture further than the post?

A message was brought in. It was a wire from Collins to say he was on the way to London. "Do nothing till I come," it ended.

"That's like his cheek," said Sinclair to himself.

He put the letter carefully away in his pocket book, and took his hat and stick. "I am going to Leveson Square," said he to the messenger. "There is no answer."

Once inside the house, through the usual, morbid crowd who gathered outside, he met the plain-clothes officer on duty.

"Anything to report?" he said, in answer to the other's salute.

"No, sir," said he. "They are still at work on the floor and ceiling and the walls."

A gang of expert men had been engaged to search for a means of exit from the room by which the murderer had escaped. There had been found no trace of a secret door, or so much as a crevice through which a mouse could get. They had even ripped up all the boards, and taken off the oak panelling from the walls. The ceiling had been examined all over and the chimney sounded. There was nothing.

"Have you found anything in the nature of a letter or anything, anywhere?" he asked of the man in charge.

"Nothing, sir, but we can search all the furniture and books."

"Please do so. It is of great importance, and say nothing about it to anyone."

"Very good, sir," said the man who was keen on this job, and wanted to stand well with the superintendent.

Sinclair addressed the plain-clothes officer.

"Has the body been searched?"

"Yes, sir. All that was found on him has been put on the dining-room table."

"Good," he said, and went into the room.

Here were all the little things a man carries about with him, which look so pitiable when he is dead. A fountain pen, pocket book, cigar case, and a leather case containing a miniature of his dead wife and his daughter.

Chapter 5

A Mysterious Visit

BY DINING on the train, Collins had just time to do a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. He had a seat permanently booked, which was to be disposed of if he did not turn up in time.

After the excitement of his daily life, he found these plays, which he knew almost by heart, very refreshing. It was the dear old 'Yeoman of the Guard' this night, and he lay back and listened with his eyes half shut, absorbing the delicious tunes like a rare old vintage.

"It is easier to die well than to live well, for in sooth I have tried both," says Colonel Fairfax.

How many cases he had come across in his work where this was true. Some of the worst of men had earned the admiration of men by their brave end.

He made his way home in the purple night through back streets and half-lighted squares which he always preferred to the rush and dazzling brightness of West London, when he had thinking to do.

He arrived at his flat to find Sinclair waiting for him, as he had almost expected.

"You're a nice fellow," said the latter. "I've been waiting for you for over an hour. Your man did not know where you had gone."

"Anything wrong," said the other, carelessly.

"Wrong," said Sinclair. "I should think there was. You can't have a Home Secretary murdered for nothing. The Premier sent for Boyce this morning, and half the Cabinet have been round or calling up. They all have 'theories' which they want us to work out.... Luckily, Boyce is in his element, and professes great hopes of capture and all that sort of thing."

Collins helped Sinclair to a generous whiskey and soda, took a more modest one for himself, and sat down.

"Now let's hear all about it," he said.

"Well," said the other. "We have done a good deal of spade work, and the negative results are of use anyhow, though our many critics would not say so. First, as to the room. It has been so thoroughly examined that there is no possibility of the murderer having got out by any secret means."

"I could have told you that," said Collins almost contemptuously.

"How?" said the other.

"Well, nowadays, people in modern London houses do not have trap doors and secret panels, and all that sort of thing. That's kept for detective stories."

"Then how in the world did he come and go?"

"I can't tell you. That's what we've got to find out."

"Perhaps Mrs. Simmons was an accomplice?"

"Not necessarily, but how did you get on with her?"

"She came, and you remember Boyce said he was going to examine her himself. The great man was engaged with higher game, and I did the examining. We got her whole statement down, and turned her inside out. I am sure she was telling the truth. She had nothing to add to what she said yesterday."

Collins grunted.

Sinclair looked at him for a moment, then continued.

"We could get nothing further about the letter sent to the Central News. It was, as you said, posted at Bridge Street, but of course no one can say any more than that. I have sent it to an expert on typewriting to see whether we can ascertain what machine was used."

"Good."

"The telephone has given us nothing. They cannot say where the call came from, and it was probably a Public Telephone Office. What a nerve the man had."

"Yes, but it was clever. Haven't you noticed that where there is nothing but the bare deed, it is easier to concentrate on that, but all these extraneous matters lead one away from the essentials?

"Now I see you are dying to tell me. What about Lewis?"

Sinclair gave a start. This man's instinct was uncanny.

"As I told you, Lewis has bolted. He did not turn up again yesterday, and I sent a man to see if he was ill. He had gone home, coolly packed his things and paid his bill, telling his landlady he would not be back, and gone."

"And so you think he is the murderer?"

"It is suspicious, but you have not heard all. Of course, this, coupled with his curious manner the day before, caused me to make enquiries. Two important facts have come to light. On the afternoon of the murder he told his typist that he was going out. He was very restless, and said he could not work, and then he seemed to come to a decision, and said, 'I must go and see Sir James Watson,' and took his hat and stick."

"When was this?" said Collins, leaning forward.

"About 2.30, and he did not return till just before I sent for him after the telephone message came."

Collins laughed.

"Then, you suppose that, having planned the murder and written the letter saying that it had taken place, and posted it, he tells his typist he is going to do

it and comes back in time to call you up, and me too, and then answers your bell."

"I suppose nothing," said Sinclair, nettled. "I am giving you facts, and I haven't done."

"Fire away, then."

"When we searched his rooms after he had gone, his landlady said he always kept a revolver in the top drawer in his bedroom. The day before yesterday she saw him take it out, and put it in his pocket."

"My dear fellow, this is too crude for words. Couldn't he have shut his door, or taken some precaution?"

"Of course, I know that, but it is this sort of mistake which hangs men."

"Well, go on."

"That's all, but it is enough to go on for me. Why has he fled, tell me that?"

"My dear fellow, let me demolish your house of cards. First, would a man who is so cool a hand that he can do what he has done, show nervousness and fright when asked to go to the house? Would he not rather welcome the chance, as these vain-glorious murderers invariably do?"

"Perhaps."

"Then, from what you tell me, he seems to have made up his mind to go and see Sir James suddenly. That doesn't fit in."

"How did he get into the house and out again the second time?"

"It's no good asking questions. He may have had accomplices for all we know."

"Ah, now you are opening up a new question altogether. We have rather assumed that there was only one man in it, but let's keep to Lewis."

"All right, then. He had access to official paper, and knew my signature well. He had letters of mine, and could have copied it. Then he knew my habits, and where I should be found, and he knew where to find you. He might even have called up from the Yard itself."

"That's one to you, certainly," said Collins. "I can see Lewis having a thin time if you catch him. What do you know about him, anyway?"

"Nothing much. He has been here for three years. He came from a merchant's office, and applied for a clerkship. He was well recommended, and was always keen on his work, and very reliable. So I took him on as my right-hand man and confidential clerk. He was known there as my 'familiar.'"

"That's all straightforward. Have you taken any action?"

"I have sent a full description of him to the papers, and posted him as 'wanted.'"

"Oh, my God," said Collins, jumping up, "when will you people learn the folly of this? You know what will happen? First, you put him at once on his

guard. Then we shall have letters from Tokio and Leningrad, besides Brighton and Battersea, from people who have seen him and talked to him. You know that always happens, and if, by any chance, he is guilty, we shall have his body washed ashore by the Thames in about a month's time. Or," he added grimly, "possibly if he is innocent."

"Well, that's the official procedure. I cannot go behind that, especially in a case like this."

Collins laughed, and sat down.

"It may not be a bad thing," he said. "It may put the murderer into a false position of security."

"You don't think much of this, then?"

"I reserve judgment, but if you are right he was one of the cleverest scoundrels of this generation."

Sinclair started. The words were the same as in the letter he had received, and which was burning in his pocket.

"But you, what did you find in Devonshire?"

"A charming house and a charming girl. It was a rotten job to have to break the news to her."

"Then why on earth did you go?"

"Oh, I learnt some interesting facts about the family."

"It's a dark business altogether, and the worst is that we shall have no peace till it is solved. I have had our staff working all day tracing the movements of well-known criminals who are at large, and any who may have had a grievance against the Home Secretary. Also of any lunatics who are at large, and, as you know, there are many of them."

They smoked in silence for a while.

"Have you any clue at all? Don't tell me if you would rather not, but I fancied you were holding something back?" said Sinclair.

"You have asked me, and I will tell you. I have. The only reason I have not confided in you is, not from lack of confidence, but because I was afraid of just such action as you have taken in the case of Lewis. You see, you are bound to do certain things by your position. If this develops I will tell you."

"Thanks," said the other, his face clearing.

"Did you notice anything curious in Mrs. Simmons' statement?" said Collins, after a few minutes' silence.

"In what particular?"

"I commend it to your notice. She said that when the unknown visitor had been with Sir James for some time, she heard a ring from the library. When she went upstairs, Sir James was showing the visitor out. If so, who rang, and why?"

"Just a moment, I have the statement here," and he pulled out his pocket book, and took out a folded paper. "Here we are. Yes, you are quite right, I did not notice it at the time. You think that curious?"

"I think it— Hush, what was that?"

"What?" said the other.

"I could have sworn I heard someone moving."

"Your man, probably. I heard nothing."

"My man does not live in. Don't move."

He got to his feet without noise, and went to his desk. Opening a drawer he took out an automatic pistol, and went to the door. With a swift movement he flung it open. Outside was darkness. Collins turned on the light and looked around.

"Nothing," he said. "Must have been my imagination. Hullo, what's this?"

He stooped down and picked up a piece of paper from the floor.

It was a sheet torn from a pocket book, and he brought it into the room, closing the door carefully.

"Read that," he said, and for all his coolness there was a tremble in his voice. "You are both on the wrong track. Poor fools," and that was all.

"Come," said Collins, incisively. "We must search the flat."

It did not take long, as the flat was not a large one. There was not a trace of anyone, and the door was fast.

"Well, well, things are getting lively. We have to deal with a pretty customer. We shall have to look out for ourselves."

Sinclair was white. He got up and helped himself to a whiskey.

Collins picked up the statement of Mrs. Simmons from the floor, and read it carefully through.

Then he folded it up and handed it back to Sinclair.

"Was there anything else found on his person of interest?" he said.

"Yes," said Sinclair, and took from his pocket a leather case. "The other things were just the ordinary things a man carries: they are at the house. This I brought with me. It contains miniatures of Sir James' wife and daughter. She is a beautiful girl, you saw her to-day?"

Collins looked at the miniature long. It showed Miss Watson as a very young girl, with quaint curls encircling her face, but from the eyes there looked out the same brave innocence, and there was the wistful curve of the lips which he had seen in the girl of to-day.

He turned to the other picture, and gave a start. An intent look came into his face, and he looked long and earnestly.

Sinclair looked up.

"They are very much alike, aren't they?" he said. "Anyone would know them for mother and daughter. Do you know, when I saw that photo miniature I almost seemed to recognise it, there is something familiar."

Collins composed his face before he answered.

"The likeness is striking. It's very strange," he said.

"Strange?" said the other.

"Yes, strange, because I, too, seem to recognise it. I saw her portrait at the Vale to-day."

"Perhaps that is why it looks familiar," said Sinclair.

"Perhaps," said Collins, carelessly, but his eyes were still on the picture.

"You had better stay here for the night after what has happened— it's very late, and it's no good playing the fool," he said.

"Do you know, I think I will. No one is sitting up for me."

"Good. I shan't be sorry to have you," and he laughed.

"We can go to Leveson Square to-morrow, or rather to-day," he said. "Let's turn in. I can rig you out."

He rose and turned to the door, slipping the leather case into his pocket.

It was not the first time that Sinclair had accepted Collins' hospitality, and he knew from experience what an excellent host he made.

Chapter 6

At Leveson Square

THE BLINDS were drawn at the house in Leveson Square, and a crowd was still gazing up at the blank windows. There is always something gruesome in drawn blinds, and the policeman standing at the door added to the air of mystery and dark deeds.

Collins and Sinclair, refreshed by an excellent breakfast, arrived in Collins' car. They had been to the Yard first.

Within, the appearance of the house was as though a bomb had been dropped. All the oak panelling from the library was piled in the hall, with furniture and books. The library door was open, and the floor was covered with plaster. The men had made small holes in the ceiling at various places, as well as having examined the floor above. The search had been very thorough.

In a room upstairs lay the silent figure of the dead statesman.

It had been decided that the body should remain in the house and the doctor's examination had taken place at the house.

A Home Office expert had conducted this, and the fussy little doctor, who had been summoned at the first, had wormed his way in to assist. He was full of importance.

They met the doctors in the dining-room.

"Well?" said Sinclair. "Have you found anything?"

"We have extracted the bullet," said Broughton, the Home Office doctor. "As might have been expected, it fits the empty cartridge, and is exactly similar to the other five."

"What a pity," said Collins.

The doctor looked at him in surprise.

Sinclair gave a laugh.

"Nothing straightforward satisfies Collins," he said. "He loves mystery. He would have liked you to have found a rifle bullet, or no bullet at all."

"There's no accounting for tastes," said the other. "For my part I am glad enough when I find things fitting in."

"And that's all?" said Collins.

"There's one thing I can't make out, it's probably nothing, but it's queer. I have had a very extensive experience with this sort of thing, as you know. The bullet had only just penetrated the brain. Now, a revolver bullet of that calibre, fired at the distance it was, should have smashed the back of the skull, and made a dreadful wound. It is the heavy Army type. I sent a policeman for a sheep's head, which is harder than the human skull, and fired at it in the back

garden. Look at the mess it has made," and he showed them the gruesome sight.

"Have you any suggestion to make?" said Sinclair.

"The only thing I can think of is that a half charge was used to deaden the noise. But then, why put a half charge in one cartridge only?"

"I give it up," said Sinclair.

Collins was taking little notice. He was in a furious mood. The morning papers had come out with full details, not only of the crime, but of the telephone messages and the letter to the Central News, which made excellent copy, but was in the highest degree indiscreet.

"Who the devil has done this?" he had said in the car.

Sinclair had hastily disclaimed all knowledge of it.

"Then it must be Boyce," said Collins. "He is the only other that knows about it. The fool!"

Presently the man himself came in, puffing and blowing, for he had walked.

Collins tackled him at once.

"I say, Boyce, did you tell the Press all those details which have come out to-day?"

Boyce looked uncomfortable.

"No," he said. "I have told the Press nothing. I only told the facts to one or two of the Cabinet who were asking me about things yesterday."

"Then you've put your foot into it properly," said Collins, bluntly. Boyce began to bluster after the manner of a man who knows he is in the wrong.

"I don't see that any harm is done, and anyway it is a matter for my Department to decide. I really don't see what it has to do with you, Collins."

"You'll see," said the other, shortly.

Boyce was offended, and, like men of his kind, began to sulk. He ignored Collins, and turned to Sinclair.

"Any news of the missing man? I see you have a full description of him, but no photo. That's a pity."

"We could not find one, sir," said Sinclair. "He seems to have been one of those men who do not care to have their photo taken."

"Suspicious, very, that," said Boyce.

Collins laughed contemptuously.

Boyce shot him an angry look.

"We must lay him by the heels soon— he won't be able to get out of the country," he said in a challenging way.

"I don't think we can do any more here," said Collins.

"You've searched all these books and the furniture for any documents?" said Sinclair.

"What do you expect to find?" said Boyce.

"One never knows," said Sinclair hastily.

The man addressed said "Yes, sir, and we have been through all his papers as you told us; there appears to be nothing of importance. He was very methodical, and did not appear to keep any private documents here. Perhaps they are in Devonshire."

"We are trying to find the whereabouts of the new Baronet, who was last heard of in Monte Video," said Sinclair.

"I see you are," said Boyce; "but I should have thought that would have been for the relatives to do. It does not seem a Home Office matter."

"Perhaps not," said Sinclair; "but as he was Home Secretary?"

"Exactly, as an act of courtesy, perhaps," and Boyce assumed a manner of importance. He had become a prominent man in the last few days. Sinclair breathed a sigh of relief. He was thinking of the letter which he had no intention of showing to anyone else.

There was a ring at the door, and the policeman on duty brought in a telegram.

"For you, sir," he said, handing it to Collins.

He read it while the others watched. Not a muscle moved.

"No answer, thanks," he said to the policeman, and put it in his pocket.

"Anything important?" said Boyce, officiously.

"Oh, no," said the other.

He turned into the library, and looked round.

"What the devil is he doing with telegrams sent to this house?" said Boyce, irritably.

The remark called for no answer.

The telegram was from Miss Watson to say she was coming to Town that afternoon, and would he meet her.

It did not ask for an answer, which pleased him somehow. He strolled out of the room, and said:

"What a pity some of our spook merchants cannot come and make an incantation or beat tom-toms or something, and conjure up the scene for us. It would be most interesting."

"What is more important than mere interest," said Boyce, "is to bring the criminal to justice."

"Oh, I suppose so, but it's so dull when the problem is solved, especially if it turns out banal. It's like a game of cricket, when you expect an exciting ending, and the other side all get out for about 20."

"I am afraid I do not play cricket," said Boyce, curtly.

Collins eyed him, "No, you wouldn't," he said, and made an enemy of him forthwith.

Chapter 8

Valuable Information

COLLINS WAS punctual to the minute at Paddington. He had dressed himself up for the occasion, though he felt contempt for so doing. The express from Wilton-on-Sea was up to time.

From a first-class compartment Mabel Watson descended. Her face was white and calm, but she wore no veil. Collins walked towards the door and stopped. After the girl, a man descended from the carriage. He was tall and dressed in good taste, but had a weak looking face, with a wandering light moustache and straw-coloured hair.

His eyes were a cold blue. He was the sort of man that women 'rave about.' Collins took careful stock of the man, and then advanced with raised hat. The girl gave a smile of recognition, and shook hands.

"It is very good of you to come and meet me," she said. "This is Mr. Eric Sanders, Mr. Collins." The men shook hands and exchanged a look not too friendly. They were antipathetical.

"I have brought my old nurse with me, and John. I shall go to an Hotel, of course. I suppose our house is in the hands of the police," and she shuddered. "We stayed at Ackroyd's when we had let our house one year," she said.

"A very good hotel, and quite convenient," said Collins.

"John, tell the porter to get a taxi, please," she said.

"I have brought my car," Collins interposed, "and if you care to come with me, the servants can come on with the luggage."

"That is very kind of you, but I will bring Nurse, if you don't mind."

Sanders had been standing by, gloomy and resentful.

Collins led the way to the car.

"Will you come with me, then?" said he.

"I should like to," she replied. "Eric, will you take care of Nurse?" She got into her seat, and Sanders, with not too good a grace, helped the old nurse into the back seat.

The drive was all too short. In spite of the terrible cloud hanging over her, her youth was strong, and she felt the relief of getting away from Devon and her thoughts there.

They had tea in a private sitting room, and Collins laid himself out to keep her mind off the tragedy.

"You must come to a theatre to-night," he said.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly," she answered.

"If I may say so, I don't agree with you. I know what is in your mind. You don't think it would be right after what has happened, but if you stay in, you will only brood over things and make yourself miserable, and," he added earnestly, "I am sure your father would not have wished you to do that. I am not asking you to forget him, but you have had a bad ordeal to go through, and must keep yourself going."

"What do you think, Eric?" she said, addressing Sanders, who had been silent during the meal.

"Of course, you must please yourself, but I should hardly have thought it was quite the thing," he said.

There was something in his tone which annoyed her.

"Why not?" she said.

"Well," he said, floundering. "I suppose it's a matter of taste, but in the circumstances—"

She gave a toss of her head, and turned to Collins.

"Thank you; yes, I will accept your kind invitation."

"I hope you will join us, too," said he politely to Sanders.

For a moment he was about to refuse, then he said, "Thank you, very much."

"Then I will get a box for four. Of course, Nurse will come as well."

"That is very kind of you. It would be a great treat for her. Only in that case you must both dine here first. You know I feel very guilty in doing this, but it will only be a very quiet dinner."

"I quite understand," said Collins, "and I will get a box for Gilbert and Sullivan's. I know the management there, and it is just what you want, something soothing and not too gay. Now, I know you will want to go to Leveson Square. I will go and see that everything is all right for you there. Come on, in about half an hour's time."

He saw with a thrill of pleasure the look of gratitude come to her expressive eyes.

After he had taken his leave, she turned to Sanders.

"I think you might be a little more gracious to Mr. Collins, he is most kind."

"You seem to have made great friends with him at short notice," he said, churlishly.

She bridled up. "And if I have, I suppose I can choose my friends."

"And forget the old one for the new."

"What nonsense. You are behaving like a spoilt child. I have watched you all the time."

"What do you know of this fellow, anyway? He is only a sort of policeman. I suppose he didn't tell you that?"

"If it is any satisfaction to you, he did, and perhaps we had better stop discussing Mr. Collins any more."

He got up and wandered round the room.

"I suppose I had better go," he said.

Her lip curled with contempt. "You can please yourself, but I should hardly have thought that my oldest male friend would have deserted me at such a time."

"Forgive me. I will say no more. Of course I will stay with you."

"All right. It is time we started for Leveson Square."

"What a brute I have been," he said. "I ought to have thought of you."

"Would you fetch a taxi?" she said.

Collins was at the door when they drove up.

He bowed slightly to Mabel, in the deferential but not subservient manner of a courtier.

"Everything is ready for you," he whispered. "I brought your old nurse with me. I knew you would like to have her here. She is waiting in the bedroom." She felt a sense of pleasure at the thoughtfulness.

"I will go up," she said.

The two men were left alone in the hall.

"I suppose you know this place well," said Collins, carelessly.

"Of course. I was private secretary to Sir James," said the other, stiffly.

Collins lit a cigarette, and offered his case. The other could not well refuse. "Thanks," said he.

"This is a wretched business," said Collins.

"It is very terrible, but of course you are used to these crimes in your profession."

"Yes," he said solemnly, "and we get used to all kinds of criminals," and he looked into the empty library.

"Have you any theory as to who did the murder?" said Sanders.

"I never allow myself the luxury of theories," said Collins.

"Prig," said the other under his breath.

"It is strange how the murderer escaped, isn't it?" said Collins. "I wonder if you ever heard tell of any secret doors, or trap doors, or anything of that sort?"

"Oh, really, are we back in the Middle Ages? This is a modern, London house. Besides, by the look of things your men have had a pretty thorough hunt."

"When did you see Sir James last?" said Collins, lighting another cigarette from his old one.

"Oh, I was with him at the Home Office in the morning of the day."

"Fancy, and you little thought then that you would never see him again alive," said Collins musingly.

The other was silent.

"Do you know," continued Collins, "you mentioned the Middle Ages. How much easier detection was then. All you did was to parade suspects in front of the departed, and when the right man arrived blood gushed out from his mouth, and you spotted a winner every time."

"What a horribly morbid mind you must have," said Sanders with a shudder.

"I am glad I am not mixed up with crime."

"I have not any great sense of horror of crime, murder least of all, There are so many reasons for that," and he looked straight at the other man.

"Miss Watson will be down soon. I hope it has not upset her too much. You are an old friend. Wouldn't you like to go up and see."

"No, thanks. I would rather not. But I will knock at the door."

He went up the stairs, and Collins followed him with his eyes.

"I wonder if that blood would gush out," he said to himself.

Miss Watson stayed in London until the inquest was over. This was hurried forward out of deference to the position of the deceased. She had to give evidence of identification.

There was nothing fresh in spite of the efforts of those engaged on the case. Tremendous excitement was aroused, not only because of the fact that the murdered man was a Cabinet Minister, but on account of the bizarre events which had surrounded the mystery.

All efforts to trace the ownership of the revolver had failed. Lewis's landlady could only state that she thought it was his, as it looked like it. But a Webley is so common a type that this did not count for much. The number was an old one, and the weapon had probably passed through many hands.

The police did not press their case against any particular individual, and the jury returned the usual verdict against some person or persons unknown.

Collins had been most assiduous in his attempts to make Miss Watson's part as small a one as possible, and had endeavoured to keep her spirits up, without intruding himself. Sanders, in spite of all his efforts, was still sulky, and plunged into the work of going over Sir James' papers, which fell to his lot.

The ordeal was over, and all those women of Society who had crammed themselves into the court were trying to sort themselves out again. Opinion was about equally divided between Lewis and a lunatic as the villain of the piece.

Collins sought the back room where the witnesses had gone.

His face was stern. He walked directly to Mrs. Simmons, who was sniffing in a corner.

"I would like to have a word with you, if I may," he said.

"Certainly, sir," she replied.

"Would you kindly come into the next room, there are too many people here?" She rose and followed him without a word.

In the little side room he faced her.

"Mrs. Simmons, you gave evidence on oath, You know the nature of an oath?"

"Oh, yes, sir," she replied, without hesitation.

"You swore to tell the truth, didn't you?"

"Why, yes, sir, of course."

"Very good. In your evidence you said that you did not know who the man was who called on Sir James?"

With all her control, a look of relief passed rapidly over her face.

"Quite right, sir, I had no idea. I could not see him. It might have been you, sir, for all I know."

"It won't do, Mrs. Simmons. You were asked whether anyone else had come to see Sir James after that, and you said 'No.' That was a lie."

If one has seen a child's balloon touched with a lighted cigarette, the collapse of this woman was not more complete.

She seemed to shrivel up. She tried to speak, but all she could do was to lick her lips and open her mouth.

Collins waited.

"You had better tell me," he said. "If I had wanted to have this known publicly, couldn't I have had this out in court? Shall I tell you who called?"

"Oh, no, no, sir," she moaned, raising her hand as though she were threatened with a blow.

"You know perfectly well that Mr. Eric Sanders came, and you let him in?"

"Oh, sir, how do you know?" she said, with a look of blank astonishment.

"The best thing for you is to tell me exactly what did happen. Perhaps I know more than you think."

She looked at him in a frightened way.

"Oh, sir, he had nothing to do with the murder, sir, I am sure he didn't."

"Tell me exactly what did occur, or must I call the police?" he said.

"What happened was this, sir," she said, gazing round her, as if for help. "After the visitor had gone, and I am sure I wish I knew who he was, I was in the dining-room, as I told in court.

"Mr. Eric came in without so much as a knock, he being free of the house. He seemed to be very excited, and he says 'I must see Sir James.' I says, 'He

does not want to be disturbed.' Then he says 'I'll just knock at his door and ask him.'"

"One moment, Mrs. Simmons. Was this after Sir James had sent the letter?"

"Oh, yes, sir, after he had come in."

"You are quite sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Go on."

"Mr. Eric knocked at the door, but there was no answer. Then he knocks again, but there wasn't a sound. So he writes something on a card, and slips it under the door, and says, 'Sir James, do you mind reading the card,' and he waits.

"There was a noise inside, as though someone was a moving very slowly, and a voice said, 'go away.'"

Collins drew in a quick breath. "You are quite certain about that?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I was standing by the door. I was afraid he would come out, and there would be blows."

"Why?"

"Because, sir, Mr. Eric and Sir James had had a terrible set-to the night before."

"Do you mean they came to blows?"

"Oh, no, sir, I meant a figure of speech. Only words."

"What about?"

"Well, sir, it isn't my business, but I think it was over Miss Mabel."

"Go on," said Collins.

"Then Mr. Eric says, 'Won't you see me for a minute?'"

"Was there any answer?"

"Only a horrible sort of groan, so I says to him, 'you'd better get out of this, quick. The master's got a loaded revolver in there.' I don't know what made me say that, but I wanted to get rid of him."

"What did he say?"

"He says, 'so have I, if it comes to that.' But he turned and went out without another word. Oh, sir, I hope I haven't done wrong in telling you."

"Don't get excited, you have done quite right, but you must not tell anyone else, mind that."

"I will, sir, and I am sure that he had nothing to do with it, sir. That's why I said nothing about it."

"Now, one more question, and I have done. Think carefully before you answer. Was it Sir James who answered from the room?"

All the colour fled from her face, and she seemed on the verge of a collapse.

"Oh, sir, I don't know. I have thought of nothing else since this terrible affair. I don't believe it was. It was like him, but muffled and sort of mumbling." She was shivering now, and on the verge of breaking down. Collins drew a flask from his pocket and took out the stopper.

"Drink this. It will do you good. I have finished now."

"Thank you, sir," she said, taking a deep drink.

"And you won't tell anyone. You must keep absolutely silent. I shall not tell unless I find it necessary. Now, mind, not a word. You will do infinite harm if you do."

The effect of the strong drink had made her maudlin, and she sank weeping on a chair.

"Oh, what would Miss Mabel say?" she said between her sobs.

Collins gave one look at her, and then left the room. He had got the information he wanted.

Chapter 8

Enter Mr. Allery

After the inquest there was nothing to keep Miss Watson in London. A sad cortège started from Leveson Square after dark, for, in the circumstances, they had no wish for public display.

The body of the dead statesman was being taken to Devonshire for burial. In all the arrangements Collins had played an important but unobtrusive part, and now, on the departure platform, he had quietly seen to her comfort in the little ways a woman appreciates.

Papers were ready, seats booked at the dining table, and the carriage reserved by a well-tipped guard.

Eric Sanders had already gone on, as it was necessary to go through all the dead man's papers, and, as private secretary, he was assisting the police in this matter.

An aged and lachrymose aunt had turned up from somewhere, and was acting chaperon.

The old nurse had been relegated to what the aunt called her proper place. Collins had completely won the heart of the old nurse with an easy courtesy which is neither patronage nor familiarity, and she had sworn by him ever since he had taken them to the theatre. On that occasion he had, with great tact, laid himself out to amuse the old lady, while Mabel was left to her sulky Eric, which accentuated the contrast.

Now he had taken as much care in seeing to the comfort of the two old servants (for the butler was going back with them), as with Miss Watson herself— a fact she was quick to note and appreciate.

They were standing on the platform, waiting for the train to start, and Mabel gave him her hand.

"I am most awfully grateful to you for all you have done," she said. "I don't know how I should have got on without you. This has been a very trying time, but it would have been far worse but for your management." He was pleased at the compliment.

"It has been a real pleasure to do what I could, and no trouble, for I have had to be in the thick of things, from my position."

A cloud crossed her face.

"Yes, of course. You are trying to find the criminal."

"I am trying first to find your brother."

"Oh, I hope you do. It would be so comforting at this time if he were here."

"I will let you know directly I hear anything."

"Oh, but I hope you will do more than that. You must come and see us when we are more settled," she added wistfully.

They were joined by Mr. Allery, the senior partner of Allery & Watkins, the family lawyers. Collins and he had seen a good deal of each other during these few days, and had grown to like each other.

He took Mabel's hand in a fatherly way.

"Now, you must not get down there and fret and worry. It's all terribly sad, but you are young, and when you have got over the first grief, you must rouse yourself up. There's nothing worse than moping."

"Then the best way you can help is to come and see me," she said with a smile, "and bring Mr. Collins with you. You are both golfers, and there are several excellent links near us."

"I shall be delighted," said the lawyer. "I need a change. Only you must remind me, or I shall never come," and he laughed in a genial, full-blooded way.

He had a charming, old-world courtesy, and what in doctors is called a good bedside manner.

The train moved off, leaving the two men standing on the platform.

"Poor girl," said Allery. "I have known her since she was a baby. It's a sad blow to her, but, between ourselves, it may be a good thing. Sir James was a fine man, but he was very selfish with her. She was absolutely tied up with him, and could go nowhere. He warned off all possible suitors, and made her live the life of a nun."

"I gather that Sanders rather bit his fingers there." Allery looked at him shrewdly.

"You haven't taken long to find that out," he said. "Yes, I believe he did. He is an able young fellow, of good family, and in every way desirable, but for some reason Sir James would not hear of an engagement. Of course, it was very awkward, as he was his private secretary, and Sir James was too fair minded a man to get rid of him for domestic reasons which would have ruined his prospects. But it couldn't have gone on. He actually talked to me about altering his will if Mabel did not give Eric up."

Collins looked interested.

"We can't stand talking here. Let me give you a lift in my car. Where can I take you?"

"That's most kind of you. I have an hour before my train goes, so I shall just go to my club. You'd better come in for a few minutes."

In the club smoking room, after a general talk, Collins gently led the conversation back to the subject about which he wanted information.

"You knew young Watson, I suppose?" The lawyer's face hardened.

"Yes," he said shortly, "I knew him. A wastrel."

"I rather gathered," said Collins, "that he was just a somewhat wild youth, who went the pace at Oxford."

"I am afraid it did not stop at that," said the other, and closed his mouth in a way that indicated he did not wish to continue. Collins saw it, and asked no more.

Allery, however, volunteered one bit of information.

"Sir James made a curious will. It will be proved soon, and so there is no particular secret. If his son was found, and was willing to settle down in Devonshire, he was to have a half share after certain small legacies had been paid. If not, the whole was to go to Mabel. She gets half in any case. It was left to me to decide whether he was fulfilling the conditions. That'll be a nice task."

"Supposing we can't find him."

"Then Mabel takes her half and the interest on the other, which remains in trust, until it is decided that he is dead. The discretion rests with me."

"A very reasonable arrangement," said Collins.

Chapter 9

A Confession

SINCLAIR AND BOYCE were sitting in the former's room, waiting for Collins.

"I wonder how he will like this?" said Boyce.

"Not at all," said the other, making a face. "He is so fond of a problem that he dislikes a simple solution to anything."

He shuffled uncomfortably. He did not altogether like it, himself. Collins entered and greeted the others.

"Well?" he said. "I got your message."

Boyce took his cigar from his mouth.

"We have got a confession of the murder of Sir James." If he expected Collins to show any feeling, he was disappointed.

"Who is it?" he said, quietly seating himself.

"A man called Jackson. He came into the Vine Street police station late last night and said he wished to give himself up for the murder."

"Of course," said Collins contemptuously, "we shall have plenty of them."

"Wait a moment. This man is well known to the police. He has been in an asylum for years, but unfortunately his people got him certified sane, and had him out. He had homicidal tendencies. He has made a complete statement."

"A statement from a lunatic. Really, Boyce."

"Well, listen to this, then," said Boyce, and spread a document out on the desk.

He began to read:

I, John Henry Jackson, being of sound mind, and having been warned by the police, declare the following statement to be a true account of what I have done. On the afternoon of the — , I killed that dog, Sir James Watson, because he is not fit to live. He will not hear the cry of the prisoner or the oppressed, but his heart has been hardened like Pharoah. I went to his house in Leveson Square, which I had been watching for an opportunity, and he opened the door to me. He was delivered into my hands, but I would not slay him then. I knew that the time had come, so I wrote to the Central News Agency, with whom I have often had correspondence, and told them of his death. I had called at Scotland Yard some days before and seen Superintendent Sinclair." Boyce paused, and Sinclair looked up with a start.

While he was not looking, I took some of his paper, and a letter he had signed, and so I wrote on the paper to show that it was not murder. Sir James came out and posted a letter, and I nearly killed him then, but the time had not

come, so I followed him into the house, and shot him. It is a good deed and I do not mind having done it.

(Signed) J. H. JACKSON.

"Well, what do you make of that?"

Sinclair and Collins looked up, and their eyes met.

"Absolute rubbish," said Collins, "the man is obviously a lunatic."

"What about the reference to you?" said Boyce to Sinclair.

"I do remember a wild man coming here with some grievance. I don't know how he got in at all. Lewis let him in, but I have no recollection of him taking any letter of mine."

"Still, he may have done," said Boyce.

"Of course," said the other. "There is always a tray full of type-written letters of no great importance, waiting to go out. They would not be registered till they had been collected and one might have gone. It's possible."

"The whole thing is preposterous. What about the telephone messages that Sinclair and I had?" said Collins.

"Oh, he says he sent them from a Call Office."

Collins laughed. "This is all your doing, Boyce. I knew how it would be. You let the whole story out to the papers, and this lunatic has been turning it over in his mind till he really believes he has done it. It's quite a common phase. I wonder you take the trouble to go into the matter."

"Wait a moment. You always think no one can be right but yourself. You have not heard all. A policeman has identified him. He saw him several times hanging about Leveson Square. And he has been further examined and his story hangs together. I don't think there is any doubt that we have got the right man."

"I am perfectly sure you haven't," said Collins.

Boyce turned to him. "Of course it will be a disappointment to you. I know you always like something out of the way, with mystery and special features. What do you think, Sinclair?"

"I don't know, sir, I don't know what to say. I don't somehow think he is our man."

"I am quite sure he is; he's got to be. You understand. And I expect loyal support from my Department," said Boyce, with decision.

"It won't do, Boyce, old fellow," said Collins.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. Have you ever seen the Mikado? If so you may remember a song beginning, 'As some day it may happen that a victim must be found.' "

"I am afraid I don't follow you," said the other coldly.

"Between us three there is no need for bluff. You are being worried by all kinds of people to solve the problem. You see that your professional reputation is at stake and that much hangs on it. And you see here a good chance of finding a victim, who will not suffer any hardship in any case, as he obviously ought to be under lock and key.

"It is the Stenie Morrison case over again, only here you will not have to have an innocent man tried, because this man will not be able to plead. It will all work out finely. This man will go to Broadmoor, where he will be quite happy, and there will be much praise for the smart Commissioner."

Boyce flushed scarlet. "You mean I should fake up a charge against a man I knew was not guilty," he said.

Collins shrugged his shoulders. "I have known it done," he said, and turned to Sinclair. "Well, here ends the wonderful mystery of Leveson Square. There will be no difficulty in getting a case. I have not been at the Bar for nothing. There will be no defence, because there will be no trial. Personally, I could drive a horse and cart through the whole thing. So could you. But it will be beautifully stage-managed."

Boyce rose in anger. "I suppose because you are a free-lance you think you can say what you like, unless you are trying to make a joke in rather doubtful taste. I do not see that any useful purpose would be served by continuing this discussion," and he went out.

The other two looked at each other. Collins burst out laughing.

"Cheer up," he said, "you look as if you had just missed backing the winner."

"That's just what I have done," said Sinclair gloomily. "It's all right for you, but I have to do what I am told. I know this is all wrong."

"Do you? So do I," said Collins quietly.

The other looked up quickly. "You are very certain."

"Exactly. And so are you." They both stared hard at each other for a moment. "I wonder what you have got hold of?" said Sinclair.

"That's just what I was wondering," said Collins.

"There's one thing. This will put the real man right off. He will think he's safe and may return," said Sinclair.

"Return? What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing."

A clerk entered, and laid an early edition of the "Evening Rag" on the table. Sinclair picked it up.

"Read that," he said, indignantly.

Across the page was printed:

MURDER OF THE HOME SECRETARY,
SUSPECT ARRESTED,
MAKES FULL CONFESSION.

There followed an account of how that brilliant Civil Servant, F. D. Boyce, Commissioner of Police, after devoting his nights and days to the problem, had at last effected the arrest of a violent lunatic who had made a full confession of the dastardly crime.

There followed a paragraph in praise of their worthy official, and in self-laudation of the Press generally, whose co-operation had been so effectual.

Collins put it down with a smile.

"So that's that," he said. "I wash my hands of the case."

On his way back to his flat he stopped at a Post Office, and sent off a wire. "Delighted to accept your kind invitation. Will come tomorrow," and addressed it to "Miss Watson, The Vale, Holbrook."

Chapter 10

The Portrait

A SURPRISE awaited Collins on his arrival at Wilton-on-Sea. Eric Sanders was on the platform, and came forward with a pleasant smile. He was a changed being. The sulky petulance was gone, and he seemed like a man from whom a load of care has been removed. His manner was friendly without being effusive.

Collins surveyed him keenly.

He was too used to studying human nature not to notice the change, and too clever to show that he saw it.

They drove to the Vale among the autumn trees and over the hills from whence magnificent views stretched out beneath them. Eric opened the conversation.

"You people have done a smart bit of work capturing the murderer of Sir James so quickly," he said. "The papers were full of it this morning."

"Yes," said Collins, dryly. "I read them on the way down."

"He seems to be a desperate ruffian. I didn't quite make out how it was he was actually caught."

"He wasn't," said Collins, "he gave himself up."

"Oh, I see. It was not clear in the account," he looked at Collins doubtfully wondering how far it was right to ask him questions without breach of etiquette.

"This is a wonderful piece of country," said Collins. "It's one of the finest views I know just before we go down again into the valley. It's like the view from the Delectable Mountains."

"You've read the *Pilgrim's Progress*?" said the other in surprise.

Collins gave a laugh. "Oh, I don't spend all my time in bones and blood, though problems do interest me."

At the risk of courting a snub Eric said, "I expect you are sorry this one is over so quickly?"

"Oh, there will be plenty more," said he lightly.

On their arrival Mabel met them at the door and greeted Collins warmly— a trifle too warmly— there was just a touch of over effusiveness, which his quick eye noticed.

"We're quite a party," she said. "It is really too big so shortly after—" she hesitated: "while we are in mourning. Mr. Allery is here, with his wife and daughter."

When they sat down to dinner that night there was indeed an atmosphere of quiet enjoyment far removed from the horror of the past days. Mr. Allery had had a word with Collins.

"I came as a duty. I was so much afraid that the poor little girl would mope. It's no earthly good crying over spilt milk. She has all her life before her. Besides," he added with a smile, "I think her old aunt is far from an ideal chaperon. My wife is used to all occasions."

"You mean?"

"You'll see, my boy," said the old lawyer with a chuckle, "The course of true love is running smoother."

Then the ladies had come in.

The dinner was a merry one; Allery had a fund of humour culled from his long experience, and he found an able supporter in Collins. Sanders was no fool, and now that he was absolutely happy he took his part. He had taken Miss Allery in, but Collins noted that he was sitting next to Mabel. Collins had taken in the Aunt, who was only a cousin of Sir James. He was sitting with his back to the windows from which the setting sun still shone into the room, for they had dined early. In front of him was a great fire-place, and over the mantel was a large portrait of Sir James in court dress.

"Fancy," Sanders was saying, "I find Mr. Collins spends his spare time reading the *Pilgrim's Progress*. "

"And very good taste, too," said Allery. "It contains some of the most glorious pieces of English ever written.

"Not one of our modern writers can touch it."

It was getting dark in the room.

"I think," said the aunt, "we might have a light, my dear?"

"Certainly," said Mabel. "John, turn on the electric light."

At that moment a last ray, almost blood-red, came from the dying sun through the window, and shone full on the portrait over the fire-place. Collins was idly looking at it, when his face suddenly became rigid and fixed. An intent look came into his eyes, and he stared hard at the portrait. Then the brilliant light came on. At that moment he felt rather than saw that Mabel was watching him. He turned to her and she looked down in confusion, and a red pervaded her face. They both recovered and their eyes met. He read in them a certain uneasiness or dread.

Instantly he composed his features and said, "That's better, but the sunset was very beautiful."

"We've missed the first News bulletin," said Allery, "but we must get the second. I always feel lost in the country when there's no wireless. Miss Watson has a splendid receiving set."

While conversation was general Collins leant over to Allery.

"Better not say too much about the news," he said. "There will be something about the murder, certain to be, and it may distress her."

"Perhaps you are right, but as a matter of fact, she has been much more cheerful since she heard that they had got the man."

The receiving set was in the old oak-pannelled hall in a neat cabinet. The company foregathered here at ten o'clock for the news. Eric was the operator. After the hundred and fortieth chess move between two Scotsmen, and the usual dismal forecast of the weather, an account was given of the preliminary examination of Jackson, who was being kept under observation by Home Office doctors. Two facts emerged, that the Home Office was satisfied in a guarded way that he was the man, with plenty of the cautious word 'alleged,' and that he was hopelessly mad. Collins smiled as he listened. He had seated himself on a cushion in the shadow where he could watch Mabel's expressive face. He saw a look of relief, and something more, a puzzled look on her face.

After the news an announcement was broadcasted, as had been done for the past few days, asking for information as to the whereabouts of Ronald, now Sir Ronald Watson, last heard of at Monte Video, etc.

As the loud speaker announced this, Collins saw a swift glance pass between Mabel and Allery.

When the Savoy bands were in full blast, Sanders and Allery departed to finish an interrupted game of billiards. The four ladies continued a game of bridge. Collins had joined with neither party, but watched each in turn. When Mabel was "dummy" she came across to him. "I wish you were not out of things like this," she said, "I feel I am not doing my duty as hostess."

"Not a bit of it," he replied. "I am enjoying myself."

"I suppose you are feeling more at rest now that this horrible affair has been cleared up?"

"Of course it ends the matter as far as I am concerned— for the present," he said. "And you?"

"Oh, I told you," she said. "I would much rather it turned out to be a man who was not responsible. There will be nothing done to him, I suppose?"

"He will be confined to Broadmoor for life, now. He has been there before, you know. They won't let him out again."

"How sad," she said; "but it's better than a man being hanged, isn't it?"

"If he's guilty," said Collins.

"Of course they will have to prove their case, won't they?" she said.

He gave a scornful laugh. "Oh, they will do that all right," he said.

"Do you mean whether he is guilty or not? But that is too dreadful."

"If a man once gets into the clutches of the Law it doesn't matter much whether he's guilty or not. He's about as much chance as a fly in a spider's net."

"What an awful thing. But you were a barrister once yourself?"

"That's why I say that," he answered with meaning.

"But we must not keep on talking about this, it will make you morbid."

"Come on, Mabel, we are waiting for you," came from the table.

Collins strolled out into the garden where a bright moon was shining. What should he do? Let things slide altogether, and the Law take its course? That was best, but a curious streak of vanity and desire for mystery goaded him on to fresh research. There were other problems beside the main plot which called for solution.

There was the curious disappearance of Lewis. And what about Eric Sanders? Besides he grudged an easy triumph for the oily Boyce. He would like to upset his apple-cart.

The scent of the flowers and a cool breeze were delightful after London. He wandered round the house like a nocturnal cat, and came to the dining-room window. He stopped dead. Yes; he would have another look, while the others were busy.

Returning to the house he went to the dining-room and turned on the electric light. Sir James was staring down at him from over the mantelpiece. He lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of the table, gazing keenly at the portrait. He sat there motionless, in thought. He had an unusually keen sense and he felt, rather than saw, that someone had come into the room. He made no sign. A quiet voice at his elbow said, "It's a very good likeness, and cleverly painted, isn't it?" He turned without haste. Allery was standing beside him with an inscrutable smile on his face.

"I came to look for you as we have finished, and I thought you might like a nightcap before turning in."

"Thanks, I will come along," said Collins. "I never saw Sir James to speak to. He had a remarkable face. A strange mixture of hardness and sympathy. The mouth is hard as a rock, but the eyes are sympathetic."

"You are a student of these things, of course," said the lawyer. "But you are quite right. He was a contradiction, but his intellect always ruled his emotions."

"Was his son anything like him?"

"In character, yes; in face he was too young to say. He was undeveloped."

Collins turned out the light and they went to join the others.

Chapter 11

An Apparition

THE NEXT three days passed outwardly in the usual enjoyments of a country house-party. They golfed and motored and played tennis. Behind the scenes many things were happening.

It was obvious to anyone that Eric Sanders and Mabel had come to an understanding, though a definite engagement so soon after the death of Sir James was repugnant to her.

On the other hand, so long as she had had to fight a battle with her father on behalf of Eric, she had been passionately devoted to him; but now that all opposition had ceased at the gates of the vault, and things had become easy, she almost resented the air of ownership with which Eric treated her. Woman-like she did not like being regarded as being cheaply won. She turned to Collins and was much in his company to show her lover that he had not a monopoly of her society.

Here was ground ready for sowing. He had gone through life with a cynical view of women, partly because he had come in contact with the sordid side of human nature, and partly because he had led a lonely life.

From the first moment that he had seen Mabel his interest had been aroused, and that interest was growing to something more intimate. She either did not or would not see, and the situation was soon acute. She was attracted to him by the very distaste for his profession, for she had inherited much of her father's contradiction in character.

His invitation had been indefinite, and with all the party he was very popular. He carefully refrained from referring to the subject of the murder, and tried to lead the conversation away from it. And so the age-long battle began.

An excursion had been arranged to the Cheddar Gorge and Caves, and as they passed down that wonderful panorama of riven rocks, unsurpassed in England, the grandeur of the scene drew them together. Each had a vein of savagery in their natures to which the wild aspect of the scenery appealed. Collins was driving the car, and Mabel had taken her place with him.

"Stop a moment here," she whispered. "This is wonderful."

Eric was sitting morosely in the back.

Far up, the trees growing on the edge of the precipice looked like the toy trees of a Japanese garden, and the fantastic rocks formed castles of fairy legend. The twisted road curved steeply down into the depths.

"I would like to come here by moonlight," she said. "It would be wonderful."

"Why not have a picnic here, then?" he answered. "It is quite warm still."

"We will," she said gaily. "Come on, or the others will get restive. My aunt sees nothing in these rocks— in fact, she is rather frightened." They descended to the caves no less wonderful.

There were no tourists at that time so they made a party by themselves and went in with a guide.

Far in the depths of "Solomon's Temple" with its amazing stalactites lit by electric light, they saw the entrance of a dark cave.

The guide was speaking: "That cave has been explored for over two miles, but is not open to the public. We do not know where it ends. There must be exits somewhere, or the air would not keep so fresh."

"What a place for a criminal to hide from justice," said Collins. "If one of our friends could make his way from Dartmoor here, he might stay for months with an accomplice to bring him food."

"Only in the summer," said the guide; "the caves are flooded in the winter."

Mabel shivered.

"How cold and damp it would be," she said, "and fancy a storm coming on and the water dashing down on one from above."

"Really, Mabel," said Sanders, "you are getting very morbid, let's get out and have some lunch."

She turned on him.

"How unromantic you are. I would like to buy this place, and turn it into a sort of Monte Cristo's cave."

"And get chronic rheumatism," said Allery, laughing.

"Well, I must give way to the craving for lunch," she said, and led the way out.

When they had got back in the afternoon, Mabel's old nurse met them with a startling announcement. Old John, the butler, had seen a ghost, and was prostrated with terror.

"Nonsense," said Collins, "ghosts don't come in the day time, it's against all the rules of the game. Let's have him up and question him."

Mabel did not take it quite so lightly. "Poor old man," she said, "he has been brooding on my father's death, and I expect he has imagined things."

"Better ask for the cellar key," said Sanders.

Mabel turned on him, angrily. "That's a mean thing to say. John has been with us now for twenty-five years and I have never known him the worse for drink."

Sanders hastily apologised.

Allery intervened. "Perhaps I had better see him, and talk to him."

"If I may suggest it," said Collins, "why not just send for him in the ordinary way, and let him tell his story? These old family servants are entitled to being treated to respect."

Mabel gave him a grateful look. Without waiting for an answer, Collins rang the bell. It was answered by John himself.

He was looking white and scared, but made no remark.

After giving some trivial order, Mabel said in a casual way:

"I hear you have had an unpleasant experience, John. Would you care to tell us about it?"

The old man was dying to do so, and plunged into his story at once.

"Thank you, Miss Mabel, it has upset me somewhat, but I am sorry I mentioned it. While you were away I had occasion to go into the dining-room to fetch some silver. When I opened the door there was Sir James standing on the hearth-rug as plain as life."

"How was he dressed?" said Collins, quickly.

"He was in court dress, with a sword on, and he was holding his hat in his hand."

Sanders burst out laughing.

"Exactly, and I suppose the picture frame was empty," he looked round in surprise. No one else had laughed.

"I was too frightened to look, sir," he said.

"What happened then?" said Collins in a soothing tone.

"I don't quite know, sir, I think I must have turned faint. I believe he turned and looked at me, and when I looked again he was gone."

"But why were you so frightened?" said Collins.

"It was a warning, sir, I am sure of that. He came to tell me my time is up. Well, I suppose we all have to go sometime, and I have tried to do my duty."

Collins cast a quick glance round the room. Sanders was frankly sceptical. Mrs. Allery and her daughter were looking scared. The Aunt was not there. Mabel was dead white, and her eyes nearly closed; but Collins saw one quick look pass between her and Allery, though the face of the old lawyer was inscrutable.

There was a silence in the room.

Collins went to the old servant with a quick movement and took his hand.

"Now listen to me, John. I will tell you exactly what happened. You have been allowing yourself to brood over your old master's death, and it has got on your nerves. You were probably thinking of him because the house was quiet, and when you came into the dining-room, the sun was shining right on to the portrait of Sir James, and you imagined he was standing on the rug. It is really quite a common thing. It's what we call hallucination. You must not let it worry

you. It's not a warning or anything like that, and you must not think any more of it."

He spoke with such conviction that the old man was greatly relieved.

But Collins had gone to the old man for another reason. John was standing with his back to a looking-glass, and Collins could see the room. He saw two things, a look of intense annoyance on the face of Sanders, and an expression on Mabel's face in which gratitude was mixed with relief.

"Mr. Collins is right," she said. "That is the explanation. I am sure there is nothing else in it. Now don't worry any more about it."

"Thank you, sir, thank you, Miss Mabel, it has relieved me a lot," and the old man went out.

"Well done, Collins," said Allery, "you have disposed of the ghost in quick time. I hope the old fellow will forget all about it."

Collins laughed and helped himself to a cigarette from a silver box, but he watched the other. Allery drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and furtively wiped his forehead.

The company drifted off to various interests. Sanders and Mabel found themselves alone for a moment.

"I think I will go to Town to-morrow, if you don't mind," he said.

"Why should you go?" she said.

"Well, I seem to be always putting my foot into it somehow, and I don't think I am wanted here," he added petulantly.

She stiffened. "You must please yourself. I hope you don't find it very boring here?"

"You know I don't, Mabel, but you seem to have changed towards me. You are always trying to snub me in front of Collins, and you treat me almost as a stranger. Why can't we announce our engagement, and then we should know where we stand?"

She flushed. "Really, Eric, you sometimes behave like a spoilt child. You know my reasons. It is too soon after my father's death, especially as he disapproved, and I would like to wait till my brother comes back."

"But he may be dead, and we may have to wait for years. He has been advertised enough for, and if a man will not come to take up a title and position, there must be something wrong."

"What do you mean?" she said, angrily.

"Oh, I don't mean anything dishonourable, but something to prevent him coming. He may be out of touch of civilisation," he said, lamely.

"Very well," she said, "then I will go further. I will not become engaged until my brother comes back. I am certain he is not dead."

"That means, I suppose, you have ceased to care for me?"

"It means nothing of the sort and you know it. If I did not care for you, should I have stuck to you against my father's wishes?"

"Why don't you say that you will marry the man who finds your brother?" he said, bitterly.

"Eric, you go too far," and she threw up her head.

"I go too far! Well, Mabel, since you have said that, I will tell you I think it is you to whom that would apply. You are 'carrying on'— there is no other phrase for it, vulgar as it is— with that fellow Collins. You are always with him, and I can see by the way he looks at you that he is getting too fond of you. You have only known him for a short time."

"That's enough," she interrupted. "You had better say no more or we shall come to a real quarrel. I think you better go as you have suggested, and you can think things over. I am going to see how my aunt is," and she went out without another word.

"Curse the fellow," said Sanders. "What does he mean by foisting himself here, and staying on. He's trying to cut me out with his damnable polite manners. And she's everything in the world to me."

Chapter 12

What Happened in the Night

THE INCIDENT of the day had cast a gloom over the party.

Mabel's aunt had been in bed all the day, with one of her sick headaches. Collins was down before the others, and had a word with old John. The old servant was devoted to him.

"I hope you got over your scare," said he.

"Oh, yes, thank you, sir, but it frightened me at the time. But you were probably right. I have been thinking about the master a lot lately."

"I have often come across cases like that," said Collins. "Now I suppose you came in quite quietly, without making any noise?"

"Yes, sir, as the family were out I was wearing carpet slippers, as I suffer with my feet a good deal, and the door was only ajar."

They were standing in the dining-room.

Collins walked to the fire-place.

"And you thought you saw Sir James standing here," he said, but he took in a breath. With an effort he controlled his voice.

"Don't let me stop your work," he said.

"Thank you, sir," said the other, hurrying to complete his preparations.

Collins stooped quickly.

The impression of two feet was plainly visible on the thick rug. No one had been in the room since the morning, as they had all been out for lunch. Hastily Collins walked up and down the rug two or three times, sliding his feet over the soft pile.

Then he glanced up at the portrait.

"I wonder," he said.

Dinner was a dreary performance. Even Collins was preoccupied. The first news bulletin had told them that Jackson had been declared by the doctors unfit to plead. It remained to be seen whether there was sufficient evidence to convict him as the murderer.

"How is your aunt?" said Allery, to make conversation.

"Oh, she is not very bad. She takes to her bed at intervals."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" said Mrs. Allery.

"Only nerves."

"What a blessing she did not hear about the ghost," said Sanders.

"I think the less said about that the better," said Allery.

"I quite agree," said Collins with meaning. "Once these things get about they get exaggerated, and you will have the psychical research people offering to investigate, which would never do," and as he said this he glanced at Allery.

"No," said he without a flicker of the eyelid, "we don't want this to get about at this time."

"Cunning old ruffian," said Collins to himself.

There was an awkward silence. John had come into the room.

After dinner Collins seized an opportunity when his hostess was alone for a moment. "May I have a word with you?" he said.

Mabel felt almost inclined to make an excuse, but braced herself.

"Certainly," she said. "Is it anything private?"

"Not at all," he said, with a smile. "Only that I shall be leaving you to-morrow. I must return to Town, and I wanted to thank you for a very delightful visit."

"How provoking," she said. "Mr. Sanders is also going. It is a break-up of the party, and I was enjoying it so much."

In spite of the words Collins noted an insincerity which was foreign to her nature.

"I must get back to my work," he said.

"Not about— my father? You have finished with that, haven't you?"

"The matter has been taken out of my hands," he answered.

"When all this has passed over, you must come and see us again. You have been very good and helpful."

"Miss Watson, you will forgive me saying a thing I have perhaps no right to say, but I rather fancy Mr. Sanders does not care for my presence here."

"Surely you are mistaken. Why should he not like you? I thought you got on very well together."

"It won't do, Miss Watson, you know differently. And I expect you can guess the reason. So I had better go."

This was said with such a charm of manner that it disarmed her from the haughty tone she would have assumed.

"Well, I am very sorry. But perhaps you two will get to know each other better."

"Perhaps we shall," he muttered under his breath.

Allery entered. "Oh, Mr. Allery," said Mabel, "here's Mr. Collins going off to-morrow. This will mean the break-up of our party."

"Well, I am afraid we shall have to go too, very soon. My business will not wait, you know."

"Oh, you must not go," she said, with a look of terror coming into her eyes.

Allery laughed. "I dare say we can manage another day or two," he said.

When Sanders heard that Collins was going the next day, he was both relieved and angry.

"Just my luck," he thought, "if I had kept quiet, I need not have gone myself."

Collins paced his room restlessly. Things were taking shape in his mind. Something was going on which his keen intellect could not explain, but which gave rise to wild conjecture.

He was fully dressed, but had a pair of slippers on. He would know the truth that night somehow.

The wind had got up, and was howling round the old house, making the timbers creak and the windows shake, till it died down to a moaning sound.

Several times he went carefully on to the landing and listened.

It was an ideal night for ghosts to walk.

He would piece the puzzle together. There was Jackson, the lunatic. He knew he was not the murderer, though the police would certainly make out a case against him. Very well. Then there was the strange disappearance of Lewis, on which Sinclair was basing a case until his official position compelled silence.

Then there was his own piece of evidence which was closing in. There was something else.

When he and Sinclair had discussed the matter in his flat, the latter had taken out the statement of Mrs. Simmons from his pocket book. He had done more. There had slipped on the floor a letter. Collins' keen eyes had seen the signature 'James Watson' and the date. Under pretence of reading the statement he had picked up the letter and rapidly read it. So Sinclair had kept this from him, for some reason. What was he afraid of? Did he know more about the murder than he cared to own? There was nothing but his word that he had been in the office on the fateful afternoon. What a lark if the sober Sinclair— but he broke off suddenly. His quick ear had caught something that sounded in the house in spite of the wind, a stealthy step. He moved noiselessly to the landing.

There was a stirring in the house, as the wind increased in volume, but the other sound was quite distinct.

Very quietly Collins closed the door, and went to the window. Outside, the old ivy came round, but Collins preferred the safety of a rope. Even this would have been no easy work for a man who was not in condition. He hung for one moment turning round in the air as the wind caught him.

Once on the ground he made his way cautiously round the house till he arrived at the dining-room window. Here he paused. A wild gust of wind, with

a wisp of rain in it, caught him, as he stood listening. Not a sound was heard from within, and no light was showing.

Was it a fool's errand after all? The whole house was dead still. Collins felt his way round the corner. By the old, oak door he paused. All was dark, but a sort of ghostly radiance was shining on an ancient elm.

He stepped back from the house, and presently saw, high up in the gabled roof, a beam of light was shining from a slit in a shutter or a badly-fitting blind. Probably some servant who could not sleep, or was frightened at the weather.

Cold and wet he returned to beneath his window, and with the practised skill of an athlete hauled himself up.

He stood in thought. Unless he had made a mistake things were happening in this house which were, to say the least, interesting. He opened the door, and slid down the bannisters without noise. Once in the hall he waited, holding his breath. The dining-room door was open, and, faint as it was, he caught the sound of a living thing breathing.

Like a cat he stole across the intervening space, and carefully put his hand round the edge of the doorway. Inch by inch the fingers crept till they touched the switch. A flood of light illuminated the room, and showed a man standing on the hearth-rug, rigid. It was Eric Sanders. In his hand was a revolver. For a moment the two men gazed at each other without a word. A look of hate was on the face of Sanders.

"So," he said, "it was you. I thought I could not be mistaken. You foul brute, you're not fit to live," and he raised his pistol.

"You're very free with your shooter," said Collins coolly. "May I ask for an explanation?"

"It is no good my saying anything. Of course you will deny everything, and so will she, but I heard."

"You will excuse me, but I haven't the faintest idea what on earth you are talking about." His face was stern. "We don't want to rouse the whole house at this hour. Hadn't you better tell me what the trouble is? In the first place, what are you doing here at all?"

"You know perfectly well. It's no good lying. I heard everything and came down here to see you. You are not going out of this room alive."

Collins slowly drew out his case, and lit a cigarette. He knew a hasty action might force the issue.

"What did you hear?" he asked, casually.

"Oh, it's no good. I could not sleep, you know why. Then I thought I would try a whiskey, which I never touch as a rule, so I came down. As I passed Mabel's bedroom, I heard talking and— I know I ought not to have done, but I listened."

"If it interests you to know," said Collins, "I do not even know where Miss Watson's bedroom is, so if I were you, I should hesitate to make any insinuations."

The other was shaken by his firm tones.

"But I tell you I heard a man's voice in there, and Mabel called him dear. And then she said 'Go to the dining-room, I will join you there.'"

"And you pretend to love this girl, and dare to make such foul accusations. If Miss Watson was talking to anyone, it is her own business, and I am sure she has her own reasons. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. As for my being here, if you want to know, I could not sleep, and I heard someone moving about the house. I am an investigator as you know, and apart from the question of burglars, I am convinced there is something happening in this house which requires investigating. So I came down and found you here."

Sanders looked at him doubtfully.

"But I tell you, Mabel was talking with a man in her bedroom."

"You make me sick with your insinuations. How do you know it was a man? A woman can imitate a man's voice as a man can a woman's."

Sanders was in perplexity, and slowly put the revolver on the table. Without any sudden movement Collins picked it up. "Is this yours?" he asked casually.

"No," said Sanders. "It belonged to Sir James. I found it here among his papers."

"Sir James was very fond of pistols," said the other, "he had one in London, too."

"Yes," said Sanders, "he was always afraid of being attacked."

"I wonder you did not have one, too," said Collins.

"I did," said Sanders and stopped.

Collins was quite at his ease. Sander's fit of wild jealousy was passing away. "Lost it?" he said.

"Yes, I got rid of it," said Sanders in some confusion.

"But we must not stay here; if you tell me on your word of honour it was not you I heard, I will apologize for my words."

"Certainly I will, but it is to Miss Watson that an apology is due, not to me."

"Of course I cannot mention it to her, she would never forgive me. And I hope you will not do so."

Collins looked straight at him.

"I should advise you to keep these fits of excitement within bounds— and," he added slowly, "when they do come on, to leave your revolver behind you."

"What do you mean?" said Sanders, turning white.

"When you called on Sir James Watson and asked to see him, you were in one of those fits, It is dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

"When you left your card under the door, with a note to say you must see him at once, I don't suppose you forget the day," and he looked at him with meaning.

"Are you suggesting that I—?"

"I am suggesting nothing," said Collins, sternly. "I am citing facts."

"If you think I had any hand in the murder, you had better arrest me," said the other wildly.

"I am not a policeman, and do not go about arresting people. The police know their business. I am merely giving you a friendly warning against temper. And now I think I will go to bed. I am sure someone has been listening to our conversation. And if you don't mind, I think I will take this." And he picked up the revolver. Sanders watched him go without a word.

Chapter 13

The Car in the Dark

IN SPITE OF the adventures of the night, Collins was the first down in the morning. Old John was in the dining-room.

"Oh, sir," he said, "Mr. Eric has gone off early this morning. He has left a note for Miss Mabel, and he left something for me as he always does, with a note to say he had to go back to London, and would have breakfast on the train."

"Oh, yes," said Collins. "Miss Watson told me he was going to-day, but I did not think he was going so early."

"May I say a word to you, sir? You have been very good to me, and did not laugh at me the other day. You know, sir, about— what I saw."

"What you thought you saw," said Collins, with a smile.

"Yes, sir, well I was awake last night and I can swear I heard people talking. I should have come down, but after what happened, I was afraid to."

"That's quite all right, I was about myself, and so was Mr. Sanders. I expect it was the storm which kept us all awake."

"But what were you doing in the empty room in the attics, sir, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"In the attics?" said Collins; then, quickly, "Oh, yes, of course, we heard a window banging, and went to see."

John looked sceptical. "But forgive me, sir, it sounded as though there was a woman with you, or a man disguising his voice."

Collins dared not ask further.

"You must have been mistaken, surely," he said.

"Perhaps so, sir," he said, doubtfully.

The room with the light in it, thought Collins. This is getting interesting.

Allery came in. "Hullo, Collins," he said. "Down already. What a night of storm, but it has cleared up now."

"Yes, it has cleared up now," said Collins, with such meaning in his voice that the other man looked at him with surprise.

"Sanders has gone," said Collins.

"Really, I knew he was going to-day, but he is very early. You are off, too?"

"Yes, I must get back. It is very jolly down here, but not business. There are a lot of things I must see to in London."

The others drifted in slowly, but a message came from Mabel that she was not feeling well, and would not be down till later.

There was a general feeling of uneasiness in the air.

Collins had ordered the car for ten o'clock, and thought he would not see his hostess, but she came in as he was getting ready to go.

"I am most awfully sorry I could not be down this morning. Pray forgive me."

"I hope you are feeling better," he said. She was obviously ill, and lines of black showed round her eyes.

"I am afraid this visit has been very dull for you," she said.

"On the contrary, I have enjoyed it immensely," he hesitated. "Miss Watson," he said, "I would not like to worry you, but if it should happen that certain suspicions gather round someone who is perhaps dear to you— "

He got no further. Her face turned ashen, and she reeled as though about to faint. Collins caught her, and held her, but she repulsed him.

"What do you mean?" she said in a hoarse whisper.

"I want to warn you. If you hear anything— any rumour about Sanders—"

"Eric?" she said, in unmistakable astonishment. "Whatever should there be against him?"

There was more relief than indignation in her tone, which Collins was quick to notice. He took a quick resolve.

"I will tell you. On the day that your father was murdered, after he had posted a letter, Mr. Sanders called to see him."

Now her eyes were wide open with horror.

"He handed a note under the door, begging your father to see him."

"But how do you know this?" she said breathlessly.

He pulled out his pocket book without a word, and handed her the card. She looked at it, turning it over in her hand, and gave it back to him.

"I found this in the room at the first examination, and Mrs. Simmons afterwards told me the truth."

"Did he see my father?" she asked.

"No; he would not see him."

"And— have you told this to the police?"

"No," replied he; "I work independently. I have not told a soul."

Tears came into her eyes.

"How good of you, and he has treated you so badly all the time, and you never said a word. Of course you don't really suspect him, but you might have given him an awful time."

"I am afraid you give me credit for too much generosity. I never move till I am certain. In any case I would not have let his behaviour affect my attitude."

"Well, I think you have acted like a sportsman, and I am very grateful," and she gave him her hand.

"You haven't got to go at once, have you? Do stay a little longer."

"This is very good of you," he said, "but I must get off by this train."

"I am sorry," she said, and went out.

Collins stood in thought.

"Why was she so scared, and then so relieved when I mentioned Eric's name?" This was getting interesting.

He went outside and ordered the car, telling the man he would want it immediately.

When he returned Allery met him in the hall. He came forward at once.

"Collins, Mabel has told me what you have done about Sanders. Let me tell you it is a generous action. Although I know the boy is as straight as a die, you could have made havoc of his life, and something would have clung to him, even when he had cleared himself."

"Don't mention it. I knew he was not the murderer."

Allery looked at him.

"You have done a very clever thing," he said, "by accident. Oh, I have been keeping my eyes open. If you had used this against Sanders you would have made all Mabel's sympathy turn to him, and against you. It was like that with her father. She would have turned on you with loathing. As it is she is struck with your generous conduct towards Sanders, and angry with him for his treatment of you."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," said Collins, "You are entirely wrong about—what shall we say— the situation."

Allery gave a keen glance at him. "Humph," he said, "I wonder."

"The car is waiting, sir," said John.

Collins took his leave, and was driven to Wilton-on-Sea. At the station he dismissed the chauffeur with a liberal tip, and watched him drive off. He then went to the parcels office and despatched his bag to his flat in London. Having done this he set out for a long walk, with nothing but a stout stick, and a rucksack with a few necessaries for the night. He had a long tour in front of him.

A STEADY rain was falling through the thick night, but the wind had dropped. The Vale was wrapped in shadow, not a light was showing. In the shrubbery Collins watched, getting what shelter he could. Unless all his calculations were at fault, here was the crisis of the situation. He was in front of the main door, and here it was that something would take place.

The time passed slowly, and he was thankful for the flask he had brought. Away in the distance a clock was striking. It was only nine o'clock.

Presently a familiar sound broke on his ear, the purring of a car. Along the drive came a gaunt, formless mass showing no light. He parted the bushes and

looked keenly into the body of the car. It was empty. There was no one but the driver, who was heavily wrapped up. The car drew up at the door, and the driver got down. It was too dark to see further, and Collins came stealthily from the bushes, and turned down the drive. He was stiff from his waiting, but broke into a run, and only paused when he came to the entrance into the main road. The gate was open, but he carefully shut it.

It would be necessary to open it and to light up. He concealed himself.

It was not long before he heard the car coming down the drive.

Silently he drew from his pocket an automatic pistol and stood ready.

At the gate the car came to a stop. He heard a woman's voice say, "Bother, the gate must have shut. Just open it, will you?"

"A man's voice replied, "Hush, not so loud," and a figure got out of the car, and went forward.

The gate swung back, and at the same moment the driver turned on the headlights. They were dimmed and did not give much light, but a flicker struck the man, though he tried to dodge out of the way.

In that brief moment Collins recognised him. The next moment the car had swung out into the road.

"Allery, by all that's holy," said Collins, "and the other is Mabel, of course." Then he laughed.

"So that's it, is it?"

He set out on his long tramp to the nearest town.

Chapter 14

Back in London

BOYCE WAS smoking an excellent cigar, and was generally pleased with himself. He had just received a short note from the Prime Minister, thanking him for his good work in running the murderer of the Home Secretary to earth, and hinting that when the time came for the retirement of that fine old soldier, Sir Thomas Hawley, as Chief Commissioner for London, the new Home Secretary could not do better than appoint so efficient an officer as he had proved himself to be.

This was good reading. He had feared some strong words about his allowing lunatics to be at large, but the truth was that Sir James had never been popular with his colleagues, as he was considered reserved, and had not lent himself to giving soft berths to the nephews and friends of his fellow Cabinet Ministers.

His death had enabled the Premier to reshuffle the Ministry, and bring in an impecunious nephew of his own to a minor post.

So everyone was happy.

Boyce rang the bell and sent for Sinclair.

The latter was not in the same genial mood. None of the reflected glory of Boyce's triumph had come his way, and he was perfectly convinced that whoever was guilty of the murder, Jackson was not.

"Take a seat, Sinclair," said Boyce. "You might care to see this letter from the Premier," and he handed it over with an air of indifference which did not deceive the other.

"Very good, sir, I congratulate you," he said, simply.

"And now, Sinclair, I want to read you the indictment which Giles, of the Public Prosecutor's office, has drawn up. I think it is very well done. Of course it is only in the form of notes.

Case against John Jackson, for the murder of Sir James Watson, Bt.

(1) Jackson confesses in three separate statements that he has done the murder. But this without corroboration is of little value, since he has been declared insane by Medical Experts.

(2) We have, therefore, to seek corroboration. Jackson states that he was several times hanging about the house in Leveson Square waiting for his chance.

This is confirmed by P.C. Jenkins and P.C. Whiting, both of whom have identified the man as having been seen in the vicinity of the Square.

(3) Jackson states that he called on Superintendent Sinclair three days previous to the murder, and while in his office, stole writing paper, and a letter signed by the latter, and on this paper wrote to the Central News Agency.

Superintendent Sinclair confirms that such a call was made, but cannot trace any missing letter, though there might have been one.

"Is that so?" said Boyce, glancing at the other.

Sinclair made a face.

"Well, I certainly said I remembered the man calling, but I told them there was no missing letter. When the lawyer asked whether it would have been possible for such a letter to have been taken, I said of course it was possible, but highly improbable. That's the way the lawyers twist evidence, but go on, sir."

Boyce looked as though he was about to rebuke him for this heretical sentiment, but continued.

(4) Jackson states that he called Sinclair and Collins on the 'phone, and corroboration can be obtained— he had the opportunity to do so— and there is a doubtful identification by a paper seller, who says he saw him leave the Public Telephone Call Office at Piccadilly Circus, at the time named. This man is not a reliable character, but the evidence can be used if necessary.

(5) Revolver:

Jackson makes a rambling statement as to how he got the revolver which cannot be relied upon, but as he is mad this does not count for much.

Sinclair lifted his eyebrows. "That's rather amusing," he said. "Where they find corroboration, they accept his statements; where they don't, they say he is mad."

Boyce looked at him severely. "This is only a confidential memo," he said, "for the information of the office only."

"I see," said Sinclair, with contempt.

Boyce went on reading.

(6) Motive:

Although motive is not essential in the case of a lunatic, it is helpful with a certain type of criminal's mental derangement. There is abundant evidence that Jackson had a fancied grievance against the late Home Secretary, who had turned down all his petitions for release from the asylum at Broadmoor. He had also sent threatening letters to Sir James.

(7) The Actual Crime:

Jackson states that he followed Sir James in, after he had been to the Pillar Box in the Square to post a letter. Mrs. Simmons declared on oath that he did not, but on further examination, when asked to swear that no one came in after that, said she could not do so, and showed great signs of confusion.

Sinclair pricked up his ears. "I wonder," he said.

"What's that?" said Boyce.

"Well, sir, Collins always said that she was not telling the whole truth to us, and that she was hiding something."

"There you are," said Boyce. "Of course if it was a matter of a trial, and of life and death, we should turn the old woman inside out, and she would probably confess; though why she should try and screen him, is more than I can tell; we may have it out of her in any case. Well, that's the case. What do you think of it?"

"I don't think any jury would convict," said Sinclair doggedly.

"Really, Sinclair, you are very obstinate; I suppose because you had no hand in catching the man."

"I see in all the accounts," said Sinclair, "it is made out that the police caught the man, and nothing is said of him giving himself up." Boyce looked uncomfortable.

"It doesn't do any harm, and does the police good," he said; "and in any case I am sure they would have got him," he ended, lamely.

Sinclair remained silent.

Boyce was annoyed.

"Here's my idea of what occurred," said he, rather peevishly.

"Jackson comes out from the asylum, we will assume, partially cured. He has nothing to do, and gradually the old madness comes over him. He nurses his grievance against Sir James until it becomes an obsession. He comes to you about it. Then he sees the official paper on your desk, and with a madman's cunning he takes some pieces.

"Perhaps he thinks he will write to Sir James on it, who can say? He hangs about waiting for a chance, possibly only to speak to him. He had obtained a revolver, goodness knows where, and then the plan matures. With the cunning and vanity of insanity, he writes to the Central News— which by the way no one but a madman would do, and calls you and Collins up for the same reason. Perhaps he was watching you all the time when you were at the house.

"He sees Sir James come out with a letter, and as he states, he nearly killed him then, but thinks he will do so inside.

"He follows him in, and shoots him and escapes.

"He is watching you, and when you go to Collins' flat, he follows and leaves that stupid message which also is the work of a madman which you told me about. How's that for a case?"

Sinclair remained silent for a minute.

"A good counsel could smash it to pieces. I am certain that he never took anything from my room, but of course it is one of those things one cannot swear to. If he followed Sir James in, why did not Mrs. Simmons see him; and if she did, why should she screen him? Why did she hear no shot? And if she did, why did she not raise the alarm? How did he get out again, and close and lock the door behind him? Then who was the man who called on Sir James in the afternoon? Jackson makes no claim to be that man, probably because no mention was made of it in the papers?

"What I think happened is as Collins suggested. This man read all the accounts and so got them into his head that he is quite certain he did the murder. It is not an uncommon phase."

Boyce interrupted. "I have no patience with all this. Of course there are difficulties. Whoever heard of a case where there were not, but the evidence in my opinion is overwhelming. Anyway, I am satisfied."

"Very good, sir, if you are convinced, that is sufficient. What does the Public Prosecutor think of it?"

"My dear Sinclair, have you been so long in the service as not to know that the Public Prosecutor is not concerned with opinions, but to make out a case on the evidence."

"And so you think that the case is ended?"

"I think," said Boyce unctuously, "that this poor fellow will go back to Broadmoor, from which he ought never to have been released, and that our Department will have scored a triumph."

"By the way," he said, as if anxious to change the conversation. "What has happened to our friend Collins, he seems to have disappeared?"

"Oh, he's gone down to Devonshire to Sir James' place."

"What, is he still on some wild goose chase?"

Sinclair smiled. "I rather fancy it's a different sort of chase from what I saw in London. Eric Sanders will have to look to his laurels."

"Ho-ho, is that it? Fancy our friend Collins. He doesn't fit in with marriage bells, somehow. I expect if there's anything in it, he will give up amateur detective work."

"Mr. Sylvester Collins to see you, sir," said the messenger.

"Show him in," said Boyce. Then in a whisper— "Not a word about this, he will only start arguing."

Collins entered. He was neatly dressed as always, but he had a gaunt look and the lines on his face suggested sleepless nights.

"Where have you sprung from?" said Boyce, with affected geniality of manner. He was not anxious to go over the whole case with this man whose keen intellect he feared.

"Oh, I have been first in Devonshire and for the last three days on a walking tour."

"You look it," said Boyce.

"I really came to see Sinclair, but heard he was with you, so came on."

Boyce looked uncomfortable. "Would you two rather be together? I have finished with him."

"I suppose you have just settled the case of Sir James to your satisfaction, eh?" he said with a laugh.

"Oh, I know you do not agree with our conclusions, but I would much rather not go into the whole matter."

"I don't wish to discuss it. I think you have come to the wisest decision you could under the circumstances."

"Now you are trying to be sarcastic."

"Not at all. I had an idea of my own, but I don't think it is worth following up. I have finished with the case, and am quite satisfied with the way things have turned out."

The other two looked at him in astonishment.

"Well, you have changed your opinion. I am very glad," said Boyce, with genuine satisfaction.

Sinclair looked bewildered.

"So your clue proved a fraud, did it?" he said.

"It did not lead where I expected," he answered.

"This is all Greek to me," said Boyce; "won't you tell us?"

"No; it would only introduce the name of a man who has nothing to do with the matter."

"You wanted to see me?" said Sinclair, still puzzled.

"Any time will do. By the way, Boyce, how long do you think it will be before your case is finished? I mean, all settled?"

"I can't say, you know the course of the law is not swift."

"Shall we say a month?"

"I should think that will easily cover it."

"Why are you so anxious to know?"

Collins flicked the ash off his cigarette into an ash tray.

"Nothing much, only I know who the murderer was, and I wanted to know how long it would be before your man was convicted."

The other two gazed at him in utter astonishment.

"Do you mean to say that you think you know who murdered Sir James and you are not going to tell who it was?" said Boyce.

"I never had any doubt in my own mind at all. But to give him up— no, I am afraid that would be impossible. You see, he doesn't exist."

"Doesn't exist? What nonsense. Are you trying one of your jokes on us?" said Boyce, crossly; he hated mysteries.

"He's gone, disappeared, vamoosed."

"Do you mean he's dead?" said Boyce.

"The question is, did he ever exist?"

"Oh, I've no patience with this sort of talk," said Boyce. "If you know anything, for goodness sake say what it is; if not, don't talk in riddles."

Sinclair had been watching keenly. His face was grave.

"Yes, I think I know what you mean," he said.

"Oh, you, too. What on earth are you getting at?"

"I shall be in a position to say in a few days' time, to tell you more," said Sinclair.

"I wish you two would not be so confoundedly mysterious," said Boyce.

"If you've got anything to tell me, do so. As for you, Sinclair, I expect loyalty from you at any rate."

Sinclair replied with some stiffness.

"I shall not take any action without consulting you, sir, and I may be quite wrong."

"Very well," said Boyce, with a gesture of dismissal.

Alone together Collins and Sinclair went to the latter's room.

"What an ass that man is," said Collins. "He hasn't the brains of a rabbit."

"I wonder," said the other, "whether he is quite the fool you think him."

"What are your plans?"

"Do you know a place called Wilton-on-Sea?" said Sinclair. Collins looked keenly at him.

"Yes, I know it," he said.

"I am thinking of running down there," said Sinclair.

"What on earth are you going there for?"

"I have been told that it is very good air, and as I have a few days' leave, I thought I would try it."

Collins thought for a moment.

"Well, you probably don't know, but it is quite close to Sir James Watson's place— in fact, it is the station for it."

"Really?" said Sinclair. "Then of course you know it well?"

"If you are really going there I will run you down in my car. You might like to see Sir James' place."

The men looked at each other.

"I would like to see inside your head, and find out what there is there," said Sinclair. "You've something concealed."

Collins laughed. "That's just what I was thinking. What are you after? Well, we will each keep his own counsel."

Chapter 15

The Crisis

BEYOND WILTON-ON-SEA, there is a bare hill standing gaunt above the surrounding country.

On the seaward side the cliff is sheer, and to the West a sudden drop into a quarry pit makes for danger. On the East a very steep path leads to a semi-ruined church, surrounded by a church yard, and some little distance away is a tower where once stood an ancient castle.

The church forms a landmark for miles.

From a distance it appears to be an imposing edifice. On near approach there is a tiny chancel which still retains a roof, and a nave with no roof. It is all very small, like the chapel of a stronghold in days gone by. At the base of the hill is a public-house of mean appearance, and also some straggling houses.

It was here that Sinclair and Collins had taken up their residence. For three days they had been glued to the spot. A fretful distrust of each other was growing up, which they tried their best to hide.

There had been no talk of going to Sir James' house. Collins would sit in the little sitting room upstairs, reading, with one eye on the window. Sinclair was more restless; he wandered outside, prowling round the base of the hill but never going up.

He appeared to be drinking more than was good for him, and evidently suffering from the strain of waiting. Each was sure that the other was keeping something to himself, but whatever it was it had drawn them to this spot. Evening was coming on after a grey autumn afternoon, and a thin drizzle was falling. It was a time when a wise man hugs his fire, and is glad to draw the curtains and light a cheery lamp.

There was no light in the small upper room where Collins sat like a sphinx. Sinclair was glowering in the arm-chair, his face slightly grey, and a worried look in his eyes.

The hillside was getting dark, and the church on the top stood out black against the western sky. A straggling group of people were coming down the steep path. There had been a service in the tiny chancel, and curiosity had drawn visitors to attend.

Perhaps a dozen or so were descending the steep pathway.

Collins gave a slight movement, and drew in his breath quickly.

"At last!" he said, almost involuntarily.

He sprang to his feet, and took his mackintosh from a chair.

Sinclair got up, too. "Well?" he said.

Collins laughed. "Come on then. I see you want to be in at the death."

Without a word Sinclair put on his coat, and followed.

At the point where the steep path wound upwards there was a lych-gate. Here in the shadow they waited while the rain dripped off the tiled roof. The people had passed, and a solitary figure was approaching in the gathering gloom.

He was scarcely a yard off, when Sinclair made an exclamation, and sprang forward. He laid his hand on the other's shoulder and looked straight in his face. "Ah," he said, "Lewis at last! I arrest you for the murder of Sir James Watson, and I warn you— but of course you know all about that." The other made no movement of protest or resentment. Collins came forward smiling blandly.

"Steady, Sinclair, don't let your professional zeal run away with you. You haven't a warrant to start with, and you are mistaking your man."

"What do you mean?" said Sinclair, turning to him.

"You are mistaking your man, that is all. Let me introduce you. This is Sir Ronald Watson, Baronet, Superintendent Sinclair."

A look of blank astonishment was on Sinclair's face, and he looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

"What on earth do you mean?" he said.

The other man turned to Collins, "Hast thou found me, oh mine enemy?" he said, with a smile, which belied his words.

"Come on," said Collins; "let's get indoors, it's beastly out here."

"So be it," said the other.

They crossed the road where the mud was splashing, and entered the house. Once in the room, the stranger turned to Sinclair.

"Yes; I am Ronald Watson, though how Mr. Collins has run me to earth is a mystery. And what you are doing in the matter, unless you knew my identity, is more than I can say."

"I don't understand it at all," said Sinclair, who was inclined to be sulky at the turn of affairs. "It seems to me there will have to be a lot of explanation."

"You shall have it. The time has gone by for this concealment. It was a mistake. Only let me tell you I had nothing to do with the murder of my poor father."

"I can answer for that," said Collins.

"Look here," continued Collins, "I have my car here, and I suggest that we run over to The Vale, and have a full explanation there."

"Yes; that will be the best thing," said Watson, or Lewis. A sudden thought crossed Sinclair's mind. "Oh, of course. That will do," he said. Collins was watching him keenly.

"Will you settle up here then, while Watson and I get the car ready?"

Sinclair was about to demur, but after all this was Collins' capture, and he could not very well insist on keeping the man with him, and as Collins had said he had no warrant.

Without waiting for an answer, the other two went out.

In a few minutes the humming of the car was heard, and Sinclair, having paid their bill, went to the front door.

The small luggage they had brought was always ready packed, for each had felt they might have to move in a hurry.

At the door Collins and Watson were already in the car, and Sinclair got in behind with none too good a grace.

They set off into the night at a rapid pace.

OLD JOHN came to the door in answer to their ring, and Collins got down, leaving the others in the car.

In a matter-of-fact voice he asked whether he could see Miss Watson— he would not come in, he had some friends in the car.

John said he would ask her to come. Whatever astonishment he felt he did not show. Warned by some premonition she could not master, Mabel came at once. She had just been going up to dress.

"How do you do, Mr. Collins?" she said. "John tells me you won't come in."

"I wanted to speak to you first," he said. "Don't be alarmed, I have your brother here with me. I brought him over from Wilton."

She turned white and caught hold of the post of the door.

"My brother?" she stammered.

"Yes; he feels, and I agree with him, that the time has come for a full explanation."

She lifted her head proudly. "There is nothing shameful or underhand."

"I know that," said Collins quietly, "but I have Superintendent Sinclair here, an old friend of mine from Scotland Yard, and he would like to hear the whole thing."

"Scotland Yard?" she said. "He has not—?"

"Arrested him. Oh, no, there's nothing of that sort."

A figure came from the car.

"It's all right, Mabel, don't be frightened. We've made fools of ourselves with all this secrecy, and we'll have all the cards on the table now. Let's get out of this wet."

Sinclair advanced and shook hands with Mabel. He had met her, of course, in London, at the time of the Inquest, but could hardly claim acquaintance.

In the hall they were met by Allery and Eric Sanders.

Collins opened his eyes in surprise.

"Eric," said Mabel. "This is my brother." The two men shook hands with a mutual look of interest.

Allery laughed outright.

"You young dog," he said. "How did you come to be caught after all our trouble. I was afraid Collins would be one too much for us.... I congratulate you on your cleverness," said he, turning to Collins.

"I am afraid this is all Greek to me," said Sinclair stiffly. He had expected Tragedy, and found Comic Opera.

"You shall know everything," said Allery; "but come to dinner first. Can you manage it?" he said to Mabel.

"I'll go and see about it at once," said she.

"As these three poor men have no dress clothes with them, we will have a scratch meal, and then a round talk." Her spirits seemed to have risen now that the affair was over.

Dinner was a merry meal, even if the gaiety was somewhat forced.

Old John moved round with a look of blank astonishment on his face. His eyes were round and wide, and he could not keep them off Watson. The aunt had sent a message that she would not come to dinner. The news had proved too much for her nerves.

When the port was on the table, and John had retired, Mabel said, "This room is very comfy, and I think we might go into matters here. You can smoke."

"Not till after this excellent port," said Collins. "Our ancestors would turn in their graves if we smoked with the port. Isn't that so, Watson?"

"That was the custom," said the other with a smile. There was no trace of the Scotland Yard 'hack' now in this man who presided at the table as one born to it.

"Well, before we have your story," said Collins, "I would like to know how many were in the plot. Miss Watson and you, Allery, I know. Anyone else?" and he glanced sharply at Sanders.

"You are a wizard," said Allery. "No, there were only us two. Sanders knew nothing about it."

Sinclair moved uneasily. Was he in a madhouse? 'Plot' and 'secret'! These people were talking as though they were playing a game, and he had come on the track of a murderer.

"Can we have the explanation of all this?" he said, testily.

"Certainly, Sinclair," said Watson, "and you are entitled to one from me, at any rate. Here goes."

The main lights were turned off, and only the electric bulbs in shades threw a soft light on the table. There was no sound in the room while Watson spoke.

"I will not be more tedious than possible, but I want to make the narrative clear, so I must go back."

"I need not go into the reasons for my leaving England. Allery here, I know, thought I had done something criminal— in fact, forged my father's name. But I think I have convinced him that it was only a youthful outbreak, which I sincerely regret." Allery nodded, gravely.

"I wandered about in the South American States. I found I could not settle down to any definite occupation, and after a time I got mixed up with a pretty little revolution. Partly through pride, and partly because I was not carrying out the conditions my father imposed, I stopped communicating with the lawyer at Monte Video, and then I was in prison, and nearly executed for my part in the revolution which failed. When I got out, I had had enough of plots, and was only released on my agreeing to leave the country. I knew a man who was a merchant, and he gave me a job to come to England in charge of some freight for his firm which required some one to travel with it, largely bullion. It was a responsible job, though an easy one, and with a strong letter of recommendation from the firm I got a position in the London office, where my knowledge of the other end was useful. I had intended to go to the old man, and tell him the whole thing, but it savoured too much of the prodigal son, and I delayed doing so. I soon got sick of the office work, and as I had always had a taste for detective stories, I got the idea that I would try and get into Scotland Yard. My father was not then Home Secretary, or I would not have risked a chance meeting. As Sinclair here knows I got in as a clerk on the recommendation of my good merchants. Only the head of the firm knew where I had come from, and he died soon after, so my past was hidden.

"I believe I discharged my duties satisfactorily, and was promoted to be right-hand man to Superintendent Sinclair. I might even have become an Inspector in time.

"All this time I had held no communication with my father or sister, though I couldn't resist the temptation of coming down here and looking at the old place, and saw them both without being seen. This was only three weeks before the death of my father." He paused and steadied his voice. "It got on my nerves and I had almost made up my mind to come and tell him the whole story. On the very day of the terrible occurrence, I had made up my mind to go to him, and as you know now, I had spoken aloud on the subject. I went out with the intention of doing so, but wandered round in a state of uncertainty, and then returned. Would to God I had gone!"

"Wait a moment," said Sinclair. "Then you were not the man who called on Sir James on that afternoon?"

"No; I never saw him again," he answered sadly.

"You can imagine the awful shock I had when you sent for me and told me of the telephone message, although I hoped it was, as you thought, a hoax. When you asked me to go into the house, I was so upset I felt I could not do so, and made an excuse. I wandered out in a terrible state of anxiety till the evening papers came out with an account of the affair. I didn't know what to do, but I felt I must get in touch with Mabel and declare myself. I was really half off my head, and so I settled up at my old lodgings and left London. I did not go back to the office, as already I had the idea of disappearing as Lewis and coming back as myself. I suppose it was pride. I thought somehow it would not look very well that I had been a clerk in Scotland Yard. Then next morning the papers came out, and I saw to my horror that I was 'wanted' in connection with the crime. You can imagine my feelings. I could see the frightful construction that would be placed on my actions— the most awful accusation that can be brought against any man.

"It was dreadful. Of course I knew I could clear myself, but there would be that nasty suspicion which always hangs round a man who has been accused and that damnable saying 'there is no smoke without a fire.' I had arrived the night before, and not wishing to go to the house at once, I had spent the night in the old tower near the chapel, where I used to go birds-nesting when I was a youngster. I came on here in the early hours of the morning, and roused Mabel up. She came down and let me in, and we had a very long talk. We could not decide what to do. It seemed difficult for me to get out of the country, and equally difficult to stay.

"Mabel had to go up to the inquest, and there was no one to advise us. So we decided to take Allery into our confidence. He came down here and we told him the whole story."

All eyes were turned on the old lawyer.

"Yes," he said. "They dragged me into it, and I had to give advice. I was quite convinced that our young friend had nothing to do with the crime. There was nothing criminal in his remaining in hiding. If he could have got away to Monte Video, he could have come back from there in the ordinary course and established his identity. But, in the meantime, he had better wait till the police had got hold of the real man, and then there would be no case against him. It was hard to decide what to do, but the publicity was what we all wanted to avoid."

"We arranged," continued Watson, "for me to stay in the old attic over the hall door; there are no secret chambers or anything of that sort in the house. I

just lived as best I could while Mabel was in London. Then you all came down here to stay. That made matters easier in a way, as Mabel and Allery could both come and see me. We hit on the rather absurd scheme of my dressing up in my father's court dress and with a wig and false moustache. We thought, if by any chance I were seen, it would be thought to be the ghost of Sir James. We thought that would be the lesser evil."

"So then it was you that old John saw in this room?" said Sanders.

"Yes, and I would have taken him into our confidence, but he fled like a madman. I don't think he knew where he was. After that we thought it was too risky for me to remain in the house, and I was in Mabel's room all ready to go, when we heard noises downstairs, and sounds of talking, so I had to take cover again."

"So it was you who were talking to Mabel that night?" said Sanders before he realised what he had said.

"What do you mean?" said Mabel, sharply.

He was crimson with shame and could hardly meet her eyes.

"Only that I heard someone talking in your room with you, and came down here and— met Collins."

Mabel's eyes glittered ominously. "I think you had better explain yourself," she said.

"Oh, please, don't ask me. Well, if you must know, I accused Mr. Collins of having been— with you, and we had heated words over it. There, that's the truth, and you must think what you will of me," and he moved his hands in a gesture of despair.

They all looked at Collins.

"I would rather not say anything about the matter, but since we are all giving explanations, I found Sanders in here with a loaded revolver waiting to shoot me. I was able to prove to him that it was not I that he had heard, and that his suspicions were groundless and unworthy. That is all."

"How horrible," said Mabel, clenching her teeth.

"Oh, I know," said Sanders, "I was a brute and Collins here acted like a gentleman. I had better go."

"Please stay where you are— for the present," said Mabel. "Since you have acted like this I will also say something. Mr. Collins knew that you had called on Sir James on the very afternoon of the crime, and he said nothing about it, because he was certain that you were not the criminal, or connected with the crime. He could have ruined you if he had liked to tell what he knew. And you repay him with vile suspicions. Now you will wait to hear the end."

There was an awkward silence for a few minutes. Sinclair looked unasked questions at Collins.

"I am sorry Miss Watson has mentioned this, but since it is out I rely on you, gentlemen, to keep it to yourselves. I picked up a card on the floor of the library which Sanders had dropped. Mrs. Simmons knew all about this visit."

"Oh, so that's it, is it?" said Sinclair. "I begin to see. That's what she was keeping back in her evidence. That's what you had up your sleeve."

"I thought it would not be fair to tell you this at the time, as you would be bound to use it officially. If it had led to anything, of course I would have told you; when I was satisfied in my own mind that Sanders had nothing to do with the crime." Sanders squirmed with shame. "I decided to tell no one."

"That's why you told Miss Watson, I suppose," Sanders blurted out.

"You wrong Mr. Collins, he only told me when we had got at cross-purposes. When he told me there might be suspicion on someone dear to me I thought he meant Ronald. He treated you most generously all through," she said, coldly.

"We are rather wandering from the main story," said Allery, to pour oil on the water. "Let's hear the rest, Watson."

"There is little more to tell. We decided that I must get out of the house, and I thought of the old tower. Allery here had arranged for a motor boat to take me to Bristol, and I was going on board a tramp bound for Rio. I was going to answer the advertisement from there and return. To-morrow I should have been off, but our friend here," he pointed to Collins, "seems to have been one too much for us, and came in the nick of time."

Collins gave a laugh. "I see you all want to know my part in the matter. I am afraid there is no mystery about it, and no great skill. I will confess that when I found the visiting card on the floor I thought it was a possible clue, and worth following up. But when I became acquainted with Sanders I realised that it was a mere coincidence." He bowed slightly to Sanders with a politeness which was almost a mockery, and Sanders looked hatred at him. Every word was putting him in a position of humiliation and Collins as the hero of the piece, and it was gall to him.

Collins continued.

"The first thing which put me on the track was the fact that no news had been heard of Lewis. I was certain that he had nothing to do with the crime, and yet he had disappeared. His confusion when asked to go to Leveson Square was taken to be a sign of guilt, but if there was no guilt there must be another explanation. He had not fled instantly. He had gone back to his lodgings, and paid his bill, and then gone. There was, therefore, I argued, another reason for going. It must be connected in some way with Sir James, especially when he had said that he was going there on that afternoon. There

was a hue and cry out for him, and he had not come forward to clear himself. Then he must have a reason beyond the mere shrinking from publicity.

"Then it is difficult for a man without friends, as he appeared to be, to disappear entirely, as he seemed to have done.

"If it was anything to do with Sir James, there might conceivably be a clue at this house. On the first night I was here as the sun was setting a ray shone on that portrait of Sir James, and I saw Lewis looking at me."

"What do you mean?" said Mabel, startled.

"I mean the likeness was unmistakable. The light was peculiar, and the eyes, nose and forehead were all that showed up, and there was the striking family likeness."

"I saw the expression on your face," said Allery, "and it made me uneasy."

"And I saw the look that passed between you and Miss Mabel," said Collins with a laugh, "and it confirmed my suspicions."

"Then the ghost, of course, was as clear as daylight to me. The dress was a good idea, if I may say so. I found the marks of real feet on the hearth-rug. When I went from here I did not go back to London, but kept watch. I thought I had got you," he said turning to Watson, "when the car left here secretly at night; but you were too cunning, there was only Allery and Miss Mabel. I suppose that was your doing, Allery?"

Allery burst out laughing. "We did you there. We had no idea that anyone was watching, of course, but we had to take precautions, so Mabel fetched the car from the garage, and Watson was waiting there. He was on the floor of the car, covered with a rug, and I came out of the front door and joined them. It was in case any servants were about. We didn't want another ghost episode. But how did you pick up the clue?"

"I hung around. The night was too wet to follow the tracks of the car, but twice I saw you going on the road to Wilton in the evening, and each time I was further along the road, and on the second occasion was able to follow up, and saw the car at the bottom of the hill. I was certain Lewis, or Sir Ronald, as I now thought it was, was hiding in the neighbourhood, and knew a search would simply give the game away.

"So I came down here and watched, and finally saw you coming down the hill. I had found out about this strange service, and calculated that if a lonely man wanted to come down he would take the chance when a lot of others were coming."

"Very clever," said Allery.

"I think that explains all there is to explain. But how did you get on the track, Sinclair?"

"I had my suspicions, but pardon me, I am not a free-lance like you are, but an official, and you must allow me to keep my secrets."

"Of course," said Collins, carelessly.

"What I don't understand," said Allery, "is, why you were so keen on finding out the whole thing?"

"Blackmail, I should think," said Sanders.

Mabel gave him a look of contempt, and the rest ignored him.

"I really couldn't tell you. I suppose a problem always fascinated me, and then I thought I might be of some use, perhaps," and he glanced at Mabel.

"You have certainly cleared up the mystery," said Allery.

"Yes," said Sinclair, "but we are no nearer to the question of the murder."

"I thought they had got the man," said Mabel in surprise.

"They think they have," said Sinclair.

"I suppose it will remain one of those unsolved mysteries."

"By the way, Sir Ronald," said Sinclair, starting up, "can I have a word with you, I shan't keep you a minute?"

"Oh, really, Mr. Sinclair, I think he has had enough for this evening," said Mabel.

"I am afraid the matter is very urgent," insisted the other.

Something in his manner irritated Allery. "Mr. Sinclair," he said, "you must remember, please, you are a guest here, and not on official duty. Are you not satisfied with the explanation you have heard?"

Collins interposed. "Don't you think you ought to tell old John and the servants that you have come home? You know how servants gossip."

"Of course," said Watson, "I must do that at once. Don't disturb yourselves, we don't want any solemn announcement. I will just go and tell him, in an off-hand way. The old fellow will be very pleased."

He got up and went out. Sinclair bit his lip.

There was a silence when he had gone out.

Allery cleared his throat.

"Mr. Sinclair," he said, "this brings about an awkward situation. We are rather in your hands. Your department is searching for Lewis. You have— if I may say so— unofficially found him. The question is, if you are satisfied that he has nothing to do with the crime, will you consent for us to carry out our plan and let him go, as we had arranged."

"That places me in a curious position. I can't give an answer off-hand. I must think it over."

"Take your time," said Collins pleasantly. "Have a whiskey and soda?" He rose from the table and went to the sideboard.

"Bother, there's none here. Miss Mabel, may I act as butler and fetch some, we don't want to send for old John just now?"

"Certainly," she said with a smile.

He went out.

Sanders spoke for the first time since his gross insinuation.

"I will go. After what has happened you will not want me to remain."

"That is a matter for you to decide," said Mabel stiffly.

"Oh, that's all nonsense," said Allery, "you two are not going to let this business upset you. It only needs an apology, and I am sure Sanders will give that. He was upset, and perhaps a little jealous," he added.

Sanders coloured.

"Your remark is in doubtful taste," he said. "I don't think any apology would serve in a case like this." He rose.

Sinclair put up his hand. "Stop," he said firmly, "I may want you."

Sanders turned from red to white. "What do you mean?" he said.

"I have no warrant, and cannot make any arrest. But it would be advisable if you did not leave this house."

"This is about the last straw," said Sanders, and sank into his chair.

Chapter 16

The Criminal Found

"HE'S A LONG TIME getting that whiskey," said Allery.

"I expect he's having a talk with John and my brother," said Mabel. Sinclair sprang forward in his chair.

"Good God," he shouted, and without waiting for leave, he rang the bell, keeping his hand on the button in his excitement.

A maid answered the door.

"Where is Mr. Collins?" said he at once.

The maid looked her surprise. She was not used to being spoken to like that.

"Mr. Collins and Sir Ronald have gone out for a run in his car, sir," she replied stiffly. "Sir Ronald left a message that they might not be back for some time."

"Why didn't you come and tell us, Mary?" said Mabel quietly. She also resented Sinclair's interference.

"He said it would do later on as you were busy, Miss," and she looked surprised.

Allery was quick to notice it, and said:—

"All right, Mary, thank you. That's quite all right."

The maid went out. Sinclair's face was ashy. He buried his face in his hands.

"What's the matter, man?" said Allery sternly.

"Matter, he's gone to his death," said Sinclair.

For a moment there was a silence tense and vital. It seemed as though the horror of these weeks had come into the room in a living form. Powers of evil gathered round.

The shadows deepened at the word. There was utter and crushing conviction in the tones.

Mabel was the first to grasp the meaning, and a flush mounted to her face. "Do you suggest that my brother, after all you have heard, is a murderer?" she said in a passionate voice.

"No, not for a moment," said Sinclair, "but before the morning comes he will be murdered, as his father was murdered, and by the same hand."

"You mean?" said Allery, leaning forward.

"Exactly. Collins, the cleverest scoundrel we have had for a generation."

"Mr. Collins," said Mabel, and there was pain in the voice. "I will never believe that. You must be mad."

Allery rose with a grim look on his face. "You have said too little or too much. We must know what you mean."

The temporary numbness passed from Sinclair and he was the man of action.

"Yes, yes, of course, everything, but not now. We must act at once. You must trust to my word. I shall want all your help. First, have you a car, and a driver?"

His energy infected the others.

"There's our car," said Mabel.

"Then get it ready at once," said Sinclair abruptly. "Ask questions afterwards." Sanders, who had not said a word after his last rebuff, sprang to his feet. "I'll go and see to it."

"Good. Can you drive? No, the chauffeur must do that. I will go, no, no, that won't do, I must telephone."

"I'll go," said Sanders quietly. "If you'll tell me where to go."

Sinclair looked doubtful. "It's dangerous your dealing with a man who will stick at nothing. Have you a revolver?"

"Yes," said Sanders blushing at the recollection which it conjured up, of the night he had unworthy suspicions of Mabel.

"Can you shoot? You are dealing with a crack shot."

"I'm pretty useful," said the other.

"Then go." Sanders went without a word.

"The telephone, in the hall isn't it?" he rushed out and seized the instrument. "Hullo, Trunks. Scotland Yard priority call. Superintendent Sinclair," he said, and hung up the receiver.

Sanders came in breathless. "We can't get the car to start," he said.

"Ah, I feared as much, he's tampered with it," said Sinclair.

He seized the telephone, "Hullo that call coming through?— "

"All right; give me the police station at Wilton in the meantime— urgent."

He waited a moment with the receiver in his hand. "Hullo, Superintendent Sinclair here. That you, Miles?— good. Get the best car at once, and come here with two men. Armed, you understand. I take full responsibility. Must ring off, I'm waiting for the Yard."

The bell tinkled, and he got through.

He issued rapid orders.

When he put up the receiver, he turned to the others.

"There's one point in our favour. He doesn't know he's suspected. He has always regarded everyone as a fool. But he's a clever rogue if ever there was one, and he'll take some catching."

"But my brother," said Mabel, "you said he was in danger."

"I am so sorry, Miss Watson. I was so upset for the moment. There is no immediate danger. In fact, his one chance lies with keeping your brother safe, for the moment, but his life is in danger. I am bound to tell you that I have given orders for the house in Leveson Square to be watched, but it may not be there."

"What may not be there?" said Allery; "we are all in the dark."

"I know. I will explain, but there's no time now.

"As far as I know he's gone to London and he will not spare the car. He may not go direct in case of some such action as I have taken."

Sanders came in.

"The car will go now," he said. "Luckily the chauffeur had spare parts, otherwise it would have been hopeless, and there was evidently not much time to tamper with it. I'll get off, if you tell me where to go."

"Oh, don't go," said Mabel with a revulsion of feeling. "Surely the police can do all that's necessary?"

"I'm going," said Sanders, and his jaw set square. There was a long account to settle with this man.

"Go direct to London, as hard as you can. Don't stop to ask questions on the way. Go to Leveson Square; here, take my card with you, and explain to the men on duty there. If you don't catch them on the road, and I'm afraid you have a poor chance, he will have got there first. They have full instructions to act, but you must get hold of Watson, and see to his safety if you can. Good luck to you. Telephone if you can. Use my name, and they will give you priority."

Without even looking at Mabel or saying good-bye, he went out.

"Oh, my brother and Mr. Collins! This is awful; surely there must be some ghastly mistake!"

"You must be brave," said Allery, "and wait for Mr. Sinclair's explanation."

A sound was heard outside as the car shot out into the night.

"Too long a start," said Sinclair, looking at his watch.

John had been hovering at the door, and now came forward.

"Can I be of any service, Miss?" he said.

"No, thank you, John," said she, "except you can tell the servants to keep absolutely silent about anything that is happening. They will all know in time. Meanwhile I depend on their loyalty."

The old man bowed. "I am sure you may depend on them, Miss; but can I get you anything?"

"Yes," said Allery, "some strong black coffee would do us all good. I can see we are going to have a night of it."

"Very good, sir," said John.

The sound of a car at the door was heard. Sinclair opened it, and a policeman in plain clothes entered and saluted.

"That's right, Miles. Our man has gone to London, at least I think so. A car has just gone in pursuit, and I have informed the Yard. The whole route will be watched and patrolled. They are also watching the house in Leveson Square. He has taken Sir Ronald Watson with him."

The Inspector opened his eyes wide.

"Yes," said Sinclair, "we have found Sir Ronald Watson only to-day."

He issued further instructions, with a description of the car, and its occupants. He gave them the number, "but," he said, "he's altered that, if I know him."

"Very good, sir," said the Inspector, "we'll catch him," he added cheerfully. It was not often such a chance came in his way, and visions of promotion floated before him.

When he had sent them off, Sinclair came back to the others.

"Shall we come into the dining-room?" he said. "I must remain here where I can be found, though I would have dearly loved the chase," he added sadly. "I don't expect in the least they will catch him. But I must try everything."

He sank wearily into a seat. "What a day," he said.

The others waited.

Presently he sat up.

"Of course you will want an explanation, and you are entitled to one. It will help pass the time."

"If you are too tired we can wait," said Mabel, but she was on the rack. Her brother, the man who had been her lover, and he who had lately filled so much of her life and whom she had grown to respect even if there was no deeper feeling, were all involved.

Sinclair started like a tired man, but as he went on he warmed to his tale.

"Collins was a deep scoundrel, but like all such he had two weaknesses. He was so vain that he could not leave things alone, he must try daring experiments, and he regarded all mankind as fools. That was where he made his great mistake. I don't expect we shall ever know the truth, for I am certain he will never be taken alive.

"A great amount is still obscure, in fact, it was only this evening that I was sure I was right. Otherwise, of course, I should have acted before. The first indication I had was a very slight slip, so slight that it was almost instinct that made me notice it. He was recounting Mrs. Simmons' evidence to Boyce and myself, and he said that she had stated that Sir James had complained of feeling sleepy. Now I was sure that she had said nothing of the sort, and I took the trouble to ask her after, and she was certain he had never said so. In a

curious way this kept on recurring to my mind, but I dismissed it. Mind you, I hadn't the remotest suspicion at the time. I merely thought it curious.

"Then, of course, I had a letter from Sir James the day after the murder."

The other two looked at him in surprise.

"Oh, of course, you don't know about that." He felt in his pocket and produced the letter, which he read to them.

"Again I was struck with the fact that he had been anxious not to have Collins told. It stuck in my mind, until recalled, in a vivid manner. I was in his flat, and we were discussing the evidence of Mrs. Simmons, when he suddenly said he heard a noise, and went to the door, dramatically taking his pistol with him.

"Now, my hearing is very good, and I was almost certain that there was no one there. Outside the door he found a piece of paper with a scribbled message on it. You know what that was because it has been in the papers. We searched the flat, but there was no one there. When we came back he picked up the evidence from the floor, and was reading it. He handed it back to me, and I saw that the letter from Sir James was with the other document. I could see then that he had got hold of this by a clever ruse, but I did not think it was anything more than a trick, though I did not like it.

"That night I stayed at his flat, and had very little sleep.

"I went over the scene at Leveson Square as I had done many times, and then I recalled that Collins had asked me to telephone for a doctor, and remained at the door while I called the old woman. When I came back he had spread mats on the floor in order not to obscure footmarks. He examined the floor himself, and said there were three sets of footmarks, Sir James' and the unknown man's, and then he said with a laugh, 'and these, I think, are mine when I stepped to lay the rug,' and he took off his shoes, and they fitted.

"I was so astounded that I had to help myself to a whiskey and soda, in order not to show my feelings, for the marks he found were under where the rug had been. Since he had spread it from the doorway, it must have been over the marks. It may seem surprising, but in the events which followed, this had entirely gone out of my mind, but now came back with added force. It is always said in my profession that we must never eliminate any possibility, however seemingly improbable.

"More or less for idle speculation, I began to think, as I could not sleep. Facts came crowding in. Mrs. Simmons had suppressed the fact that Sanders had come in the afternoon, that I did not know at the time, but I was sure that she would not hide a murderer. If that were so, then, as we found there was no possible means of leaving the room, and she had seen him go to his study and lock the door, the murder could not have taken place then. What

remained? It must have taken place after the door was opened by us. But the only person who was for a moment alone with Sir James was Collins. But the thing was absurd. We should have heard the shot. I dismissed the whole thing from my mind. But it would keep coming back. Collins had turned up at my office at the very moment, with a plausible story of having been called up on the 'phone. He would, of course, have been able to get official paper, and knew my signature perfectly well. Motive— well, I have been too long in the service to look for motive till I have a case.

"The next day we went to Leveson Square, and the Home Office doctor mentioned that the bullet had only penetrated a little way into the skull.

"Forgive me for going into all this," he said to Mabel.

"Go on," she said, bravely. "I must know the truth."

"I was on the alert, then, and I noticed that Collins started talking about his grievance against Boyce for letting the Press have details. As a rule, he would have picked up a point like that at once. The doctor had suggested a half charge as the explanation, but another came to my mind. An air pistol would make comparatively little noise, especially if one shouted out something at the same time. The whole appearance of Sir James was as though he was in a deep sleep. Here, again, my experience came in. I had known a similar case in India.

"The man who did the murder would have to be certain that he was asleep, or the plot would fail. There was only one way. Drugging! You might say why not poison, but here was no need, and always the risk of poison being found. A sleeping draught was all that was necessary, and then I remembered that Collins had slipped out the remark about Sir James feeling sleepy. There were two glasses which had contained whiskey, into which a sleeping draught could easily have been put.

"Things were beginning to take shape. I must confess I had suspicions of Lewis at first, but I soon dismissed that, and kept it up on purpose."

He paused and helped himself to coffee.

"You must understand," he continued, "that I had not a shred of evidence. If I had told my suspicions I should have been laughed at, and probably lost my job. Then there came the complication of Boyce and Jackson. I saw he was dead set on getting this man proved guilty, as he was sure we should never get the real man."

"Do you mean to say he was going to get an innocent man convicted?" said Mabel, in horror.

"Not convicted. He would merely be put back in an asylum, and I can assure you it happens far oftener than the public know, that an innocent man has to suffer. The police argue that they have got hold of a man with a terrible past, and that even if he is not the actual culprit he deserves to be put away.

You will find, in these cases where murder is the crime, he is always sent to penal servitude for life."

"How dreadful," said Mabel, "I thought our justice was so good in England."

"I am afraid what Mr. Sinclair says is true," said Allery. "I have never been mixed up with criminal cases, but I have heard a good deal. Please go on."

"I saw," said Sinclair, "that the real clue lay in the letter I had received, and it was disquieting that Collins had read it according to my supposition. The key to the situation lay in finding Sir Ronald Watson.

"I kept in touch with Collins' movements, and soon learnt of his visits here. I thought he was here for another reason," and he glanced awkwardly at Mabel, "but the mystery he made of it, led me to think he might have a double motive. I did not in the least suspect the truth, but thought he was trying to find the missing man from this end, if you understand me?"

Allery nodded. "That's all quite clear," he said.

"He turned up at my office the other day. I could see he had something in the wind. Even with his iron nerve the delay must have been fretting him, for there was always the possibility that we should get the man, and then the secret, whatever it was, would be out.

"I tried a bluff. I asked him where Wilton-on-Sea was, and said I wanted to go there. All I knew was that it was close to this place. He would not let me go alone, for he did not know how much I knew, and so we came down, and watched for those wretched days which have put years on to my life.

"I had to pretend to take to drink to throw dust in his eyes.

"When he found Sir Ronald in such a dramatic fashion, I realised that things had come to a crisis. There was danger, real and personal, in the air. With supreme bluff he introduced me, and I must confess he took me completely by surprise. When I saw Lewis coming, for a moment all my ideas crumpled like a pack of cards, and I thought I had made a colossal fool of myself; but when I realised who it was, I saw the whole game. He would not let him out of his sight, nor allow me a word with him.

"He saw his one chance was to get the document out of him before I had a chance.

"But he was one too good for me at the end. When he slipped out I never thought he would make a bolt for it like that."

He finished his story, and looked at the others.

Allery was scrutinising the end of his cigar. Mabel was deeply distressed.

"You've been working pretty hard lately, I suppose," said the former.

Sinclair started: "I am always pretty hard at work," he said.

"You've been letting this thing prey on your mind, I expect, a good deal?"

Sinclair stiffened. "Do you mean that I have been imagining things?" he said.

"It is a most entertaining exhibition of deduction," said Allery.

"Of course, I have not had time to tell you all," said Sinclair, "and it may never come out."

"It is a wicked lie," said Mabel. "I will never believe it." Her eyes were blazing.

"I am sorry, Miss Watson," stammered Sinclair.

"I am going to lie down, Mr. Allery," said she, and walked from the room ignoring Sinclair.

Chapter 17

The Wrong Letter

IN THE STILLNESS of the night the sound of a car was heard. Sinclair went to the door and waited.

Out of the blackness the car emerged, and came to rest at the door. From the inside issued Sanders. His face was set and grim. Without a word he walked into the house, and into the dining-room. Allery was sitting where he had sat immovable all the evening. Sanders took off his great coat, and took out his revolver and tossed it on the table.

"Let me have a drink," he said. "I'm done up."

"Tell us all about it," said Sinclair, pouring out a drink and handing it to him.

"Where's Mabel?" said Sanders to Allery.

"She went to lie down, but said she wanted to be called directly there was any news. I sent for her when I heard the car."

Mabel came in looking woefully drawn and pale. She was in *négligé* costume.

"Well?" she said in a dull voice.

"It's all over. I chased the car, but we had no chance of catching it. By a sheer fluke at the little village of Paxton, we saw men standing about which seemed strange at this hour, and happened to ask whether anything had happened. It appeared that a car had smashed up at the bend. A bad smash."

"And Mr. Collins?" said the girl.

"I should have thought your first thought would have been for your brother," said Sanders.

"Let's have the news," said Allery, crossly.

"I am thankful to say that Watson is safe and hardly injured at all. I saw him, and he is coming on as soon as he has made his statement to the Police. Your Inspector came along, and he is bringing Watson back."

"And the other," said Allery, almost in a whisper.

"Dead!" said Sanders solemnly.

The silence was broken by a woman's sobs. Mabel had thrown herself down on the sofa, and was weeping bitterly. Sanders was going to her, but Allery motioned him back. "Let her alone," he said. "She has had an awful time of it."

"You will be better in bed," he said gently to her. "Let me fetch your old nurse."

The faithful old servant had been hovering about all the evening. She came in and put her arm about the weeping girl, and led her from the room.

"Here he is," said Allery, jumping to his feet, as the sound of a car was heard. Watson and the Inspector came in, the former looking very white and shaken.

"A bad smash, sir," said the Inspector to Sinclair, "they must have been going at a cracking pace. I have a full statement from witnesses."

"Thank you, Miles," said Sinclair, handing him a drink. "I will send for you to-morrow, and there will be a report to draw up. The matter is more serious than you know. At present a discreet silence is best, you understand."

"Very good, sir," said the other, almost giving a wink, and withdrew. There was an awkward silence in the room.

"Whatever is the meaning of the whole business," said Watson. "I am all in the dark."

"Did Collins tell you nothing on the way?" said Sinclair.

"No, he came and said that it was absolutely necessary for us to get to London at once. He said the honour of my father's name was involved, and that the matter must be kept secret, especially from the police. He hinted that there was some secret connected with my father's past life. He was so insistent that I went blindly with him."

"You have had a lucky escape," said Sinclair. "Collins, in my view, was the murderer of your father."

"What!" said Watson, starting forward in his seat.

"The others here are sceptical, they cannot believe it. It all hangs on a document which your father said he had hidden. He wrote and told me." He took the letter from his pocket, and handed it to Watson, who read it with a puzzled air.

"But I don't understand. He says he hid it where he once put his will in my presence."

"Exactly."

"Then why did Collins want to go to London?"

"To get it, I suppose," said Sinclair.

"But it's not there at all; it's here," said Watson.

In breathless silence he rose and walked to the fireplace. Reaching up, he turned the portrait of Sir James from the wall. Behind was the oak panelling. Sliding a panel back he put his hand and drew out some papers, and brought them to the light.

One was a dusty envelope, tied and sealed. The other was new.

Picking up the first, Watson said with some emotion:

"When we had our last interview in this room, before I went to South America, my father told me he had made a will cutting me completely out, and had left this with Mr. Allery. Isn't that so?"

"That is quite correct," said Allery. "I tried to persuade him not to do so, in spite of the opinion I then had of you, but he would not make any change."

"Well, he told me here, he had made another dated after that. He said, 'I am going to hide it here. No one knows of the existence of this place, and I am placing you on your honour. If you come back having redeemed your character, and with a clear conscience, I will bring out this will, if I am alive. If I am dead you can produce it, if you think you have made good.' He was a strange man and had curious ideas, but he was absolutely just."

"That accounts for the Will he made some little time ago, bringing you back," said Allery. "I see it all now."

"But the other document?" said Sinclair impatiently. "Of course we supposed it was in the London house. I thought he would have it with him, and so did Collins, evidently."

Watson picked up the envelope, and broke the seal.

Within was a roll of paper, which he unfolded, and laid on the table.

The feeling in the room was intense.

The light shone full on the writing, and the men leant forward to scan the words. It seemed almost as though the dead man was with them speaking from the tomb his awful accusation.

Watson read in a firm voice.

To my son.

My dearest boy,

If you ever read this I will have passed for ever from your sight. I have longed for you for years, and have bitterly repented the hasty action which drove you from my side, though at the time I thought I was acting for your ultimate good, I pray to God that you may be still alive, and may return to take your place here.

I can write no more as to this as the time is short. A great menace hangs over me, and I feel that my life may be taken at any time. I will be brief.

In my capacity of Home Secretary it was necessary for me to be acquainted with the most dreadful secrets of crime, and criminals.

Among the most baffling problems of modern times has been the personality of a master criminal, a blackmailer, forger and rogue, whose diabolical cunning had eluded the police completely. Even his name and residence were entirely unknown, though he had gone under several aliases for blackmailing purposes. He seemed to know every shady secret in Society.

"Webb or Atkins," said Sinclair excitedly. "The man we have been trying to find for years."

"Go on," said Allery.

Some few days ago I received a letter from Sylvester Collins, the Investigator, who was actually trying to find this criminal. Several of the highest in the land had been asking me to locate this man, as their lives were being made a misery by him. Collins promised to send a report on the matter. When I opened the letter he sent me, the whole world seemed to go round, and for minutes I could not collect my thoughts. Instead of the letter I had expected, there was a typewritten document to the Duke of —— demanding instant payment of a very large sum, and in the case of refusal a threat that incriminating documents of the worst character would be sent to the Duchess.

It was on perfectly plain paper, with no address, but giving careful instructions as to how the money was to be paid in Paris.

Even then I did not grasp the full meaning of what I read. The note had come by hand, straight from Collins but within a few moments I received a letter by hand from the Duke, containing the note I was expecting from Collins, which, he said, had evidently been sent to him in error. There could be only one explanation, however improbable it appeared. The two letters had come from the same person.

I went at once to the Duke, and in strict confidence told him of what had happened. He told me the whole dreadful story.

This man Webb— Julian Webb— had been draining him like a cask.

Of course, I could have called in the police, but such terrible issues were at stake, and the scandal would have been so profound, that I chose the other course.

I knew the risk and counted the cost. I sent for Collins, and faced him with the letter, and the situation. He tried to bluff, and of course denied the whole thing. I told him quite plainly that if I put the matter into the hands of the police, as it was my duty to do, it would mean disgrace and a long term of penal servitude for him; but that I was willing to save a scandal, to let him leave the country after he had handed over the incriminating documents. I informed him that when he had gone I should place the whole thing in the hands of Scotland Yard. He asked me for a week to consider the matter, and make his arrangements.

He is coming to see me to-morrow in Town, and has agreed to bring the documents with him.

I feel that, to such a man, the disgrace and flight will not appeal, and my life is now in grave danger. I have promised, perhaps somewhat rashly, not to reveal anything till I have seen him, so I can take no steps, but I am writing this

and hiding it where you only will know, and if you come back, you will know what has happened to your father.

If all is well, I shall myself destroy this when this danger is past.

I can write no more. If you should ever read this you will know how to act.

Good-bye my boy, and think kindly of your father, who treated you harshly, but has always loved you.

Look after Mabel. If I am dead it is my wish that she marry Eric, who is a good boy. I have been very selfish in this matter.

JAMES WATSON.

Well, here it was at last.

Every one of the listeners remained lost in his own thoughts.

Ronald buried his face in his hands.

Allery broke the silence. Leaning across to Sinclair, he took his hand, and said, "I apologise. You were right and we were wrong, but who would have suspected it?"

"Please don't apologise, Mr. Allery," said Sinclair. "It was a terrible shock to me, and as I told you, it was only last evening that I could make up my mind.

"I think everything is clear now. Collins had no intention of going abroad. He got round Sir James to give him that week to mature his plans for as cunning and clever a murder as was ever planned.

"The visit in the afternoon, with all its precautions, was absolutely necessary, so that he could drug him, though how he managed to get him to take a whiskey and soda I cannot think. Probably he promised to agree with everything, otherwise Sir James would have immediately sent to Scotland Yard. Sir James' promise then held good, and Collins would say he would bring all the necessary documents. After he had gone, some misgiving must have come to Sir James. Perhaps he was feeling drowsy, and suspicion of evil was growing in his mind.

"Anyway he wrote that letter, which did not break his promise, as you see."

"There is a possibility, which is like the man's daring," said Allery.

"Collins may have gambled on Sir James taking a whiskey after he had gone. There are tasteless sleeping drugs which could have been put in the glass. You remember the room was in partial darkness."

"I will go and break it to Mabel. She must know the truth. It is better that I should tell her," and he glanced at Sanders.

Without another word he went out.

"What are you going to do about the whole thing?" said Ronald, turning to Sinclair.

"I shall have to lay the matter before Boyce, and of course Jackson must be exonerated, but I hope that nothing will be done. It would rake up the whole scandal which Sir James gave his life to hide, and the man is beyond the reach of the Law. I see no point in a sensational disclosure."

"I am glad," said Watson. "I would rather have it so."

Mabel came into the room with Allery. She held her head proudly, and was dry-eyed, though very white. She walked straight to Sanders.

"Eric," she said. "I have had a terrible lesson, and I do not suppose I shall ever forget it. I have misjudged you, and you were right in your opinion. If you wish our engagement to be announced, I am willing. And please forgive me for my temporary madness. I give you my word it was nothing more. I can never forgive myself."

Allery exchanged glances with the others, who quietly rose, and slipped from the room.

The End