

A Gripping Story of Crime

**DEATH'S
MANNIKINS**

By
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MAGPIE



SERIES

DEATH'S MANNIKINS

(Dolls of Death)

Max Afford

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1: The Riddle of the Marionettes

(Saturday, March 6th)

JEFFERY BLACKBURN became embroiled in the strange affair of the Rochester family by sheer chance. For some years, since he had relinquished the Chair of Higher Mathematics at Greymaster University in favour of the more fascinating pastime of criminology, Jeffery had used the gracious and well-appointed rooms at the Akimbo whenever he journeyed to London from his cottage on the gorse-covered slopes of Thursby village. On this particular occasion he had made the journey to visit his friend, William Jamison Read, Chief Inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard.

But he was destined not to see his friend. Read had, a week previously, taken charge of a murder case at Hartlepool, and there was little chance of his return for some days at least. Whereupon Jeffery turned his footsteps in the direction of the Akimbo, where he could plan his next move amid comfortable surroundings.

Blackburn was not in the least surprised to find Rollo Morgan in the lounge. They shook hands, and Jeffery, pulling up a chair, ordered drinks.

"Must be close on two years since I saw you," he remarked, lighting a cigarette. "What have you been doing all the time?"

Rollo made a grimace. "Stewing in a study all day," he complained. He patted his waist-line regretfully. "I'm getting fat as a pig on it, too. Round of golf twice a week and an occasional game of tennis is the only exercise I get. Except on a typewriter— I get hours of that!" He paused and glanced at his companion. "I'm a private secretary, you know."

"I didn't. Who are you working for?"

"Old Professor Rochester."

Blackburn's tone conveyed surprise. "Not old Cornelius Rochester, the demonology student?"

Rollo nodded. "That's the chappie."

"Do you like it?" Blackburn asked casually.

His companion shrugged. "It's a job," he returned. "I suppose I should be thankful, especially when there are ten thousand chappies with much better qualifications than mine hunting feverishly through the Want Ads. every morning. But don't get the idea that my work's anything of a sinecure. The patrician nose is kept pretty close to the grindstone, I assure you!"

Blackburn blew a smoke-ring. "The patrician nose appears to be very far from the grindstone at the moment," he observed mildly.

Rollo Morgan did not reply for a moment. He drained his glass and lit a cigarette. Over the match-flame, his eyes were sombre.

"Work's been postponed for a while," he said quietly. "There's been a death in the family— and the old man's rather upset about it. It was his sister, Beatrice. She was an invalid and pretty close to the Prof." He shrugged. "As a matter of fact, I've taken the chance to get a few days off. The place— well— it rather depresses me..." His voice tailed off.

"Something's on your mind, Rollo. What is it?"

For just a moment the other hesitated. Then he crushed his cigarette in the ash-tray and began fiddling with the ashes, brushing them into small heaps. He did not look up as he spoke.

"Blackburn, what would you say if I told you that not two hundred miles from London there'd been a recrudescence of medieval witchcraft?"

"I'll reserve comment until I hear more," the other said calmly. He beckoned an attendant and gave an order. When fresh drinks were brought, he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"Go on," he invited.

"ROCHESTER HOUSE," Morgan began, "is situated in a lonely valley on the borders of Exmoor, where all the fogs in the world seem to roll up from the Bristol Channel.

"The greatest drawback to Rochester House— from the younger people's viewpoint— is its isolated state. The house itself is placed half-way down the valley. It runs to three storeys and is topped by a square tower, battlemented and giving the house a rather medieval appearance. On the flat roof of this tower, which serves as a landmark, there's a telescope, a windmill, a rain gauge that not only measures the fall but indicates when it starts and stops, and a glass arrangement for focusing the heat of the sun."

"Sounds rather like a miniature observatory," observed Jeffery.

"And looks like one," Rollo agreed. "It seems that the former owner was cranky on reading the stars, and it was he who fixed these instruments on the roof. The Rochesters have been in possession about ten years now, I believe. Cornelius took it because of the isolated position.

"Now for the family.

"The head of the house is old Cornelius. He moves from his library to his study, venturing out of doors only when his daughter drags him there by the coat-tails. The Prof. used to leave everything to his sister, Beatrice. She was a woman about fifty, a spinster. *Nil nisi bonum* and all that," muttered Rollo; "but I must admit that Aunt Beatrice had a bitter tongue, and an almost uncanny faculty of prying into other people's business. She was crippled with

rheumatism and could walk only with a crutch. Yet she was amazingly agile and could get around the house as fast as any of us. She managed the business affairs, handled all finances, paid the bills, and acted as parent, housekeeper, and general adviser to the household.

"There are three children. The eldest is Roger, close on forty. Remember the White Knight in 'Alice?' There's Roger! Shaggy hair turning grey, gentle face, and large mild eyes. Always vague and living in a world of his own.

"Then," he continued, "comes the youngest son, Owen Rochester, in his early thirties. Owen is at the opposite end of the pole to Roger, an athletic, husky young man who considers his father's studies as just so much morbid nonsense. Owen spent five years on his uncle's ranch in Montana, where he learned to spin a rope and toss the knife and all that kind of thing. He stays at 'Rochester' only because he can use the slopes for a gallop every morning. His sister, Jan, is the youngest child. Twenty-three years old, pretty as they come, and with an amazingly good headpiece from the intelligence point of view also.

"There are, however, three guests staying at 'Rochester' at the moment. One is a journalist chappie, Phillip Barrett. Then, about three weeks ago, Jan invited two friends down to stay. A young doctor, Brian Austin, and his fiancée, Camilla Ward. They're a bright couple and it does Jan good to get some people of her own age about her.

"Of course there are servants. Five of them. There's Michael Prater, the butler-cum-manservant-cum-valet, an old relic who's been in the family for years. He must be almost as old as the Prof. Prater is assisted by Bianca Considine, who acts as housemaid and general girl. A regular gypsy beauty, is Bianca. Smooth black hair, dark eyes in an olive skin, and a mouth that looks as though it is freshly painted every hour, only it isn't! Her mother, old Hannah, who supervises the kitchen, sees to that. Old Hannah is a real type. I believe that Corney picked her up in Transylvania during one of his trips abroad and brought her back with her daughter, Bianca. She's heavy-featured and has a nasty habit of peering at you from dark corners and muttering to herself in some foreign lingo. Then there is a hired couple who come from the village. They attend to the furnaces and the electric light plant and the garden."

Rollo Morgan paused and stretched for his pipe. He began to thumb it with tobacco. When it was lit and drawing to his satisfaction, he took up the story again.

"Now, about twelve months ago, a German professor friend of Cornelius presented him with a rather unusual gift. He was a man whose hobby was wood-carving and he had been staying at Rochester House. During that time he amused himself by fashioning a number of dolls from soft pine-wood, each being a replica in miniature of a member of the house. There were six of these

mannikins in the set— models of the Professor, Beatrice, Roger, Owen, Jan, and Prater. At the end of his stay the guest presented the dolls to Rochester, who placed them in a box in his study and forgot all about the business. About three months ago, when Jan opened the drawer, the box had disappeared. A search followed and the servants were questioned. Each denied touching or even seeing the mannikins.

"Last Tuesday week Prater came in just before the luncheon bell sounded. We were all gathered in the living-room, the Prof., Roger, Beatrice, Owen, Jan, and myself. Miss Ward and Austin were coming in later, I remember. Anyhow, there we were waiting when the butler came in. There were letters for everyone except Roger— who has very few acquaintances and no close friends, as far as I know— and a parcel for Beatrice. They were passed round, and we were deep in our correspondence when we heard Beatrice give a little snort of indignation. Then she snapped, 'What fool's trick is this?' and we looked up to see the lady peering into a small box.

"She tilted it up for us to see inside. And there, lying among some white tissue paper, was Beatrice's doll! I can tell you that there was something mighty unpleasant about that little figure, so much like its original, lying stiff and white in its bed of paper. Then Jan looked round at us. 'What's the idea? Who's the practical joker?' But if any of the household had sent that doll to Beatrice, they certainly weren't going to admit it. So Jan accused Owen, but he vowed he'd nothing to do with it.

"It was an ordinary wooden box about the size of those used for cigars. It was wrapped in coarse brown paper with the address printed upon it. The postmark showed it had been lodged in Rockwall. Whereupon Jan accused Owen again, for he had just returned from the village. But Owen got rather annoyed, and the whole thing was bordering on a family row when Roger intervened and calmed them down. We went in to luncheon, and by mutual and unspoken agreement the matter was dropped...

"Until last Friday night," Morgan said impressively, and his tone was weighted. "Until last Friday night, when Beatrice, coming down to dinner with Roger, slipped and fell at the bend of the stairs. When we picked her up she was dead!"

"Ah!" It was not an ejaculation so much as a long-drawn breath of a word. Jeffery opened his eyes and sat upright. He looked at his companion.

"Coincidence...?"

Rollo spread his hands.

"What do you think? I know nothing save the fact that I was working in the library. I heard a crash and rushed out. Beatrice was lying in a heap at the foot of the stairs. Roger was standing over her, bleating like a panic-stricken sheep,

while Owen, Jan, and Dr. Austin were raising the dead woman. Roger said that Beatrice had moved down the stairs ahead of him, and that on the bend she stumbled and fell."

"What caused her death?" Jeffery inquired as the other paused. "Her heart?"

Morgan shook his head. "Her neck was broken," he said quietly, and was silent.

"And that's the end of the story?"

Rollo roused himself.

"Not quite." He seemed to be speaking with an effort. "I'll skip the gloomy details and make the remainder as brief as possible. The days following the burial of poor Beatrice were anything but pleasant. The guests were in a particularly awkward position. They were for leaving right away, but Jan persuaded them to stay— begged them almost, on the plea that friends in the house made the circumstances more bearable."

"The business of the doll was not considered?" Blackburn asked.

"No one, by so much as a suggestion, referred to it," Rollo answered. "Partly because the situation was unhappy enough already, but mainly, I think, because none of us had the courage to suggest that Beatrice's accident might be anything else but a mishap. And so, as the days passed, each morning brought a lessening of the tension among the household. Until last Tuesday, four days ago, when things were almost normal again. That is, until that Tuesday lunch-time, when Prater brought in the collection of mail from the village."

Jeffery made a sudden exclamation, but a gesture from Morgan stayed him.

"Yes," said that young man grimly. "I know exactly what you're going to say. Well, you're right! Among those letters was another parcel— addressed to Roger this time. When he opened it he found the doll of himself, packed in tissue paper. And through the back of the mannikin a thin sharp spike had been driven!"

"MOST INTERESTING," said Mr. Blackburn, nodding his head.

"Interesting!" Rollo's tone was shrill. "Is that all you call it? I call it damned disturbing! Or damned senseless. Who's at the bottom of this crazy charade?"

Blackburn considered for a moment. "And what does the gentle Roger feel about all this? Has he taken any steps to protect himself?"

"He's in a blue funk," Morgan confessed. "So much so that, against his father's wishes, he's got a private detective down from London to guard him. A man named Pimlott." The young man grimaced. "Came down on Wednesday

last and follows Roger about like a shadow. Very officious and mysterious, but hasn't the brains of a rabbit. Still— there he is! And here I am!"

Jeffery grinned at his friend's expression.

"Cause and effect?"

Rollo nodded.

"Yes. Can't stand the fellow, myself. And the atmosphere of the house is rather turgid at the moment, so I came up to breathe some of the blessed petrol-laden London air. I'm staying here."

"But surely you did some poking around on your own?"

"I did," his companion admitted. A shadow crossing his face suggested that the recollection was not pleasant. He leaned forward. "The post-markings on those parcels, for instance. Aunt Beatrice's doll, as I said, was posted in Rockwall. But Roger's came from London. That was why we took it as a joke at first. Because the family and the guests had all been up here at various times during the previous few weeks. Owen and Jan, with Miss Ward and Brian Austin, motored up for a matinee only a few days before. Barrett often comes up on his journalistic business. So does the Professor. Even Roger dares the traffic on occasion. Yet they all denied sending the dolls, so much so that we came to the conclusion that it must be the work of some stranger." He glanced at the other's face. "Yet how could a stranger get hold of the dolls? And as there were no strangers in the house on the night of Beatrice's accident, there seems to be no connection."

"All of which brings us back to the suggestion of coincidence."

"Yes— perhaps. But remember this." Rollo's fingers drummed the arm of his chair. "You must admit that whoever is playing the joke (if joke it is) with these dolls, is possessed of a most perverted sense of humour to keep the thing going after the death of Beatrice. Under normal circumstances, the person, finding the trick had produced— coincidentally or otherwise— such tragic results, would be only too keen to have everyone forget such an ill-timed joke. I can't understand why this person should want to carry on the business with Roger!"

"The explanation of that might lie in the fact that the person who sent the dolls, being in London, hasn't heard of Beatrice's death," Blackburn suggested. "He or she sent the second doll to Roger, still under the impression that it is all an innocent practical joke."

Morgan's face was puckered with bewilderment.

"Yes," he repeated. "But who's at the bottom of it all?" He leaned forward and his voice was as serious as Jeffery had ever heard it.

"You know I'm not superstitious, Jeff. But I can't help thinking that there's something monstrous and ugly behind all this. Don't ask me what— I haven't

any idea! I'm convinced that there's more in this mannikin business than we dream of. I've felt it for days— ever since Beatrice's death." He raised his eyes to the other's face. "That's why I came up to town. To see you and persuade you to come down to 'Rochester.'"

Blackburn was surprised.

"But, you said— "

"Never mind what I said. I might as well make a clean breast of it. If I hadn't seen you here tonight, I would have sought you out at Thursby. I mean it, Jeff! I'm worried stiff. I simply had to see you and tell you about all this— and Persuade you to come back with me in the morning."

2: Queer Attitude Of Mr. Roger Rochester

(Sunday, March 7th)

WITH A TWIST of the wheel Morgan steered the car around a muddy pot-hole in the road. As Jeffery predicted, they hummed through a weeping world. Some five miles out of London they had run into a thunderstorm. Pressing on, they passed through the worst of the downpour and emerged into a sad grey land that stretched, even as Rollo had said, into infinity.

"The dumb sky rhinoceros glum," quoted Jeffery, feeling for his cigarette-case. "It takes a day like this to impress one with the Sitwells' originality of words and colour—"

"There's 'Rochester,'" interrupted Morgan shortly. And he pressed his foot on the accelerator.

Built of some dark stone, it rose out of the valley like a stranded ship carried far inland. The mansion was gaunt, four-square, and ugly, with harsh lines emphasized rather than concealed by the drooping mantel of ivy that matted the house. The tower rose up sharply like a stocky warning finger, and on the serrated top Blackburn could see the collection of meteorological instruments his friend had spoken about.

At the side of the house was a smaller building of weathered stone, with pointed roof and walls heavily buttressed. He gestured towards it.

"What's that?"

"The chapel," Morgan told him. "Cornelius holds family prayers in there every Sunday morning. The Prof. is rather too theological— he studied for the Church before taking up his present work. The chapel's quite a feature of 'Rochester'. Has central heating and all modern accessories."

"Central heating?"

"Yes. Sounds unconventional in this lonely spot, doesn't it? It was more for Beatrice's comfort than anything else. She was intensely devotional and used to spend hours in the chapel. So her brother had the heating system extended from the house and it can be turned on inside the chapel itself. Makes Sunday morning prayers almost a physical pleasure."

"And does everyone attend these— er— devotions?"

"Everyone excepting Roger," Morgan said. "He's a self-confessed agnostic. Personally, I think he's too lazy to walk the distance between the house and the chapel."

"And the staff?"

"Prater attends. But Bianca and her mother are not forced to go. The Girt couple join up when they're on duty here. And, of course, the guests are naturally expected to fall in with the old man's wishes." Rollo grinned, a trifle wryly. "You'll probably get your own introduction to the chapel this morning."

Blackburn was stretching his neck. "There's another low building adjoining it," he said presently. "I can just see something that looks like a door—"

"That's the family vault." The other's tone was curt.

Jeffery nodded slowly. The drive towards the house continued in silence. Rollo manipulated the wheel and the tyres bumped on to a macadam track which led to the front of the house. As they approached, Jeffery saw that his glimpse of the garden had not given him a false impression. Desolation was everywhere. The front of the house alone showed signs of cultivation. Here was some semblance of flower-beds, and weedy gravelled paths wound off into the undergrowth. Urged by the thought of a long-delayed breakfast, he glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes after ten o'clock. At that moment the car pulled up before a deep porch with a scuffle of tyres.

"There's Jan waiting," said Rollo suddenly.

Stepping out of the car, Jeffery turned. She was dressed with attractive carelessness: a heavy knitted jumper and a two-piece Harris tweed suit. The two men walked across and Rollo, after introductions, left to garage the car. In the silence that followed his departure, Jan Rochester measured the young man with level eyes. She spoke quietly.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Blackburn. You're very clever."

Jeffery said drolly, "Now, what *am* I to say to that?"

"Mr. Blackburn is down here merely on holiday, Miss Jan. It's better that way, seeing how touchy your father is about official investigation." put in Rollo.

Jeffery smiled and nodded.

"That's so. Rollo has told me the story of this mannikin business. But he hasn't convinced me that there's really anything serious to investigate as yet."

The dark fear in the girl's eyes flashed to the surface.

"I rather think there is," she said quietly. "Because Roger has disappeared!"

MORGAN'S EYES and mouth gaped wide. Blackburn, watching, could see a dozen questions trembling on his lips. But when the young man spoke it was merely a surprised, toneless echo:

"Disappeared?"

Jan Rochester nodded.

"So it would appear. No one seems to have set eyes on him since ten o'clock last night. He was in the drawing-room then. This morning, when he didn't come down to breakfast, I asked Michael to go to his room, thinking he'd

probably overslept." She turned to Jeffery. "My brother had a touch of indigestion last night and sometimes takes sleeping tablets. Anyhow, Michael came back and reported that the bed hadn't been disturbed." Anxiety flamed afresh in her eyes. "Pimlott's raving about like a lunatic!"

"Why wasn't he watching Roger?" demanded Rollo. "That's why he's down here!"

"He wasn't keeping his eye on Roger because he was with me last night," Jan retorted. "We drove into the village. I wanted to make some purchases and Pimlott had to post some documents into his office. We took Dad's car and left here about eight o'clock."

"Was Roger here when you got back?"

"We didn't get back. Not until early this morning."

"What happened?" Morgan asked.

"Cloudburst," said Miss Rochester succinctly. "It came down just after we reached the village. We hung around until about eleven o'clock, when the storm began to slacken off. Just as we were starting out we ran into an A.A. man, who told us that the Moor road was two feet under water in the low-lying places. He said we'd never get through and warned us against trying. So we drove back to the hotel and stayed the night. We left early this morning and got back here about an hour ago."

Morgan frowned.

"I don't like the sound of this," he muttered. "Looks as if someone was just waiting until Pimlott turned his back. It's peculiar that the moment he takes his eyes off Roger this thing happens." He paused, to add rather unconvincingly, "I don't suppose your brother could have gone out for a walk?"

"Gone for a walk— in this?" The girl swept an arm at the grey sky and sodden moors. Her voice was sharp, almost irritable. "Don't be ridiculous, Rollo. Even Roger isn't quite as impossible as that!"

Jeffery interposed gently.

"I believe you mentioned, Miss Rochester, that your brother's bed had not been slept in? Doesn't that appear as though he went out last night and, like yourself, was prevented from returning by the storm?"

Jan shook her head.

"You don't know conditions here," she said. "My brother isn't likely to go out without letting us know, and even if that was to happen— where could he go? There's nothing between here and the village, and I can't imagine Roger walking eight miles on a stormy night. He rarely visits Rockwall, even by car. And if he didn't go to the village, where else would he be walking? Don't forget, my brother was a sick man last night. His indigestion was troubling him badly."

Morgan turned and stared out across the fog-veiled moors.

"He can't be out there! Consequently, he must be somewhere in the house. And if he's there, he's safe enough. Nothing could possibly happen to him inside 'Rochester!'"

Something coloured the girl's tone darkly as she replied:

"You told us that once before, Rollo. Only, it was Beatrice instead of Roger."

A silence damp as the trailing clouds fell upon the trio. It was broken by the sound of footsteps and a deep voice that called, "Who's that, Jan?" Then the speaker came out of the shadows of the hall— a curly-headed, fresh-complexioned young man with the solid build of a wrestler. He wore a bright sweater over a pair of grey-flannel trousers, and from his open-necked shirt rose a throat like the trunk of a young tree. He paused on seeing the stranger, and glanced quickly from Jan to Rollo Morgan, who stepped forward. He glanced at the girl. "Would you...?"

Miss Rochester said quietly, "This is my brother Owen, Mr. Blackburn."

The young man extended his hand. "Friend of Rollo's, eh?" he said cheerfully. "You'll find this a dull hole, I'm afraid. This weather's put the lid on any sport, although we might scrounge some grouse-shooting."

Blackburn's quick eye noticed a wrinkle form between the girl's brows.

"I wish you'd put some of your athletic energy into searching for Roger," she said, and turned to their guest. "You see, Mr. Blackburn, I'm the only person in the house who takes my brother's disappearance at all seriously."

"Rot!" said Owen shortly. "Just because we don't go rushing about letting our hair down all over the place, Sis thinks we're callous! It isn't that. Roger's such a wandering old sheep— he may turn up any moment and ask if his breakfast's been kept hot for him."

Jan shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps I am getting fussed over nothing," she admitted. "Anyhow, you'd better let Dad know your guest has arrived, Rollo. You'll find him in the study, I think."

"Good! Where are the others?"

"Still lingering over breakfast, I believe."

She nodded to Jeffery and turned away. Owen hesitated for a moment, then followed her. Sister and brother moved into the house, deep in a muttered conversation.

"This way," said Rollo.

The two men passed into the wide hall. Inside the light was dim and green— a misty, undersea radiance that filtered from an overcast sky. Jeffery had the impression of panelled walls and a generous hearth set at one end. A

flight of stairs, set in the far corner of the hall, twisted to an upper landing, Rollo indicated this with a nod.

"That was where Beatrice fell," he said quietly.

Jeffery inclined his head without speaking. He stood looking about him. Up on the gallery the strange green twilight had deepened to gloom. He could perceive but dimly the far end of the landing, terminating in a high, narrow window with stained glass vivid even against the dull sky. The voice of Morgan recalled his attention. He turned to find his companion Beckoning towards a door set under the gallery.

"Cornelius' study," Rollo explained. He pushed open the door and glanced inside. "The Prof. doesn't seem to be here. Wait inside while I find him."

As Blackburn passed into the study the other turned away, and the sound of his departing footsteps echoed across the hall.

Professor Rochester's sanctum was little more than a cubbyhole containing the bare essentials. There was a littered writing-desk, an old-fashioned bureau, and three small straight-backed chairs. Books were everywhere. The walls were lined with the volumes. They overflowed into the room itself, piled in tottering heaps in the corners, spreading from desk to chairs to window-seat. Bindings of red and gold and calf and cloth, they drew Blackburn like a magnet, and walking across he examined the volumes, at first idly, then with growing interest.

"Who are you?"

He swung round. Standing in the study entrance was a stocky, sharp-featured little man. His eyes, magnified by a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, peered suspiciously into the room. At the same time his lower jaw moved rhythmically and tirelessly. This mechanical cud-chewing made no difficulty of speech, for the newcomer barked through moving jaws:

"What's your business here?"

Jeffery said mildly: "My name is Blackburn. I arrived this morning as a guest of Professor Rochester."

An expression of surprise crossed the other's face. He moved into the room with a jerky, sparrow-like strut. "Well, well!" he exclaimed. "Well, well!"

"Since I take it that you know my name." Jeffery said, "may I have a similar pleasure. Mr...?" He paused expectantly.

With the air of a conjurer producing a rabbit from a top-hat, the little man brought a card from his pocket. Jeffery took the slip of pasteboard, and slanting it towards the light, read:

TREVOR PIMLOTT
Argus Detective Agency

"Oh!" Blackburn nodded slowly. "So you're Trevor Pimlott?"

"In the flesh," admitted Mr. Pimlott, chewing. "In the flesh!"

THEY SHOOK hands.

Blackburn, his tongue busy with polite trivialities, inspected his companion. Save for the air of pompous self-assurance that surrounded the private detective like an aura, there was little to criticize.

"I hear you've lost track of your man, Mr. Pimlott."

The private detective made a deprecatory gesture.

"Can't be in two places at once," he muttered. "I've been closer to him than his shadow for the past few days. And last night— the first time I leave him— this thing happens. I don't mind admitting that I'm worried."

Jeffery nodded sympathetically.

"When did you last see him?"

"When I left for the village last night." The frown that shadowed his face gave it an expression of childish petulance. "I naturally assumed he'd be safe for a few hours— never dreaming, of course, that we'd be kept away all night."

"He'll probably turn up safe and sound," Jeffery said cheerfully. "The family seem to think so, anyhow."

Pimlott was about to make another remark when the sound of footsteps came echoing along the hall. With a muttered word the detective excused himself and slipped out of the study. A few moments later Morgan entered, accompanied by another man. "This is Mr. Blackburn, Professor," he was saying.

Cornelius Rochester came forward and extended a white hand. He was tall and thin and stoop-shouldered, dressed in sombre, untidy clothes which emphasized his leanness. There was a scholar's unhealthy pallor about his complexion and the tired red-rimmed eyes were set in a face surmounted by an aureole of grey hair. It was a gentle, saintly-face, marred only by the mouth with its thin blue lips curved in a fretful droop. Jeffery was to have proof of this pettish weakness immediately.

"You haven't touched anything in here, have you, I don't like strangers pawing over my things. Matters are bad enough as it is, with things disappearing under our noses. Don't know what's come over this house lately. Can't put a thing down without it's being stolen."

Jeffery's mouth gaped a little at this rudeness, but the weak, complaining voice flowed on. "First those dolls of Reinersmann's, then my witchball. The witchball that was on my desk yesterday morning. And now it's gone— stolen!

And on top of all this they tell me that Roger is hiding away somewhere! Fit of pique, I suppose! But I'm worried about my witchball— really worried!"

"I'm sorry to hear— " began Jeffery, but the Professor cut him short with an irritable gesture.

"Nonsense! You're not in the slightest sorry. You're just saying that to be polite! I don't believe you even know what my witchball is! I'll tell you, my boy. It's a bladder of unguent, believed to have been used by the witches of the sixteenth century to anoint their bodies before flying to the Sabbath. And do you know what they say it's composed of?"

"No," said Blackburn, quickly and firmly. He had no desire to listen while this ghoulish old gentleman elaborated on the horrors of medieval witchcraft. And because his refusal sounded rather childish, he added: "I can quite imagine you prizing such a thing, sir. I should have thought curiosities like that disappeared long ago."

"They say it is four hundred years old," Rochester replied. "And I had it in here— on my desk. Now it's gone!"

"Perhaps one of your guests interested himself in it?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" snapped the old man. "What possible use could they find for the unguent? It's set hard as iron. Like a ball— hard, black, and round. Guests indeed!" He dismissed the idea with a contemptuous snort, and moving across to his desk, pulled up a chair and sat down. Blackburn, taking this as a gesture of dismissal, turned and began to walk out of the study. He was at the door when the Professor's voice halted him.

"Don't forget, young man, that I expect my guests to attend chapel with me this morning." His tone was brusque. He was sitting crouched over his desk, his thin blue-veined hands shuffling among the papers.

Jeffery nodded. "Very good, sir." But Rochester seemed to have forgotten his visitor's presence, and the young man shrugged his shoulders and walked out.

Morgan was hovering near the door.

"How did you find the Professor?" he demanded.

Jeffery was charitable. "I rather imagine that his bark is worse than his bite."

Rollo nodded. "That's right. He might brush up a little on his manners; but, after all, he isn't living in this age at all. He's back in the sixteenth century most of his time. Besides, the old boy's worried about Roger, although wild horses wouldn't drag an admission out of him."

They walked out into the hall. "Our host seems rather upset over the loss of what he calls his witchball," Jeffery observed.

Morgan grinned. "You should have seen him last, when he first discovered its loss. He prizes that grisly relic— brought it back with him from his last trip. I've seen it dozens of times. Looks just like a ball of clay, cracked here and there from the exposure to the air."

"The Professor gathers curios like that?"

"Oh yes. He's collected quite a museum of medieval weapons and objects pertaining to the black art. There's a sixteenth-century cross-bow used in the witch-hunts, a jar of ashes reputed to be the burnt remains of some poor devil, and a shrivelled hand which the Professor swears belongs to the corpse of the infamous Cornelius Agrippa. Fortunately the place is kept securely locked, and the key is never out of the old man's possession."

Jeffery shrugged. "He's welcome to his chamber of horrors. Personally, I prefer goldfish." He stared round. "Where do we go from here?"

"To the breakfast-room," his companion replied. "I want you to meet the rest of the household. Dr. Austin, Miss Ward, and Barrett are in there, I believe. By the way," he added, "you'll probably have the dusky Camilla trailing you for your signature."

"Oh!" said Jeffery. "The lady collects autographs?"

"Among other things!" Morgan's tone was so cold that the other glanced at his grim face in surprise. But there was no time for inquiries; the secretary had pushed open a door, and he motioned Jeffery to enter.

"This is the breakfast-room," he announced.

HERE WAS THE remainder of the Rochester household, breakfasting and chatting and generally filling in the time before the beginning of chapel prayers— which, out of regard for their host's feelings, they were forced to attend. As the two men entered, a lull occurred in the conversation, and Jeffery felt every eye in the room turn towards him.

"Miss Camilla Ward," Rollo was saying.

At first glance Miss Ward appeared very fragile and infinitely lovely. With smooth black hair folded across a forehead, against a skin of pale ivory, with large violet eyes and scarlet mouth, she was like some exquisite statuette carved from purest alabaster. When she smiled slowly and greeted Blackburn in her throaty voice, the young man thought that here was surely one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Only when she dropped her eyes and her face slipped back into repose did he detect an underlying expression that almost shocked him— a hard, bitter expression of hungriness that formed in the set of her lips and the narrowings of those dark-fringed eyes. In that moment the remark made by Morgan as they entered the room came bark to him, and he wondered anew...

"And Dr. Brian Austin."

So this was Camilla Ward's future husband— a stocky young man with butter-yellow hair and a fair moustache set above white teeth that flashed in a smile of welcome. Not at all a good match, Jeffery decided. The marriage of this good-natured, pleasant-faced young man to the exotic Miss Ward was rather like the mating of an Irish terrier and a Borzoi. Yet it might be the best thing that could happen for both parties.

"And Mr. Phillip Barrett."

Jeffery found himself shaking hands with a broad-shouldered, bespectacled man in his early forties. On his rugged, almost aggressive face, the spectacles sat oddly, like a bow of pink ribbon on a young bull. He grasped the young man's hand in a powerful grip, then made room for the newcomers at the table. Jeffery took his seat and was soon drawn into the current of conversation that flowed backwards and forwards.

The clanging of a bell broke into the silence of the room. At the sound, Morgan, Barrett, and Austin rose to their feet. Camilla Ward crossed and crushed out her cigarette in the ashtray. Her face bore a resigned expression.

"Well," she remarked, "here we go— sinners all."

The chapel stood some two hundred yards away to the side of the house. It was reached by a tarred path sadly in need of repair. Only careful walking prevented tripping in the cracks and pot-holes. The party moved off, splitting into separate groups. Miss Ward, with Jan and Brian Austin, led the way, followed by Jeffery, Morgan, Barrett, and Owen Rochester. The Professor and Pimlott brought up the rear. Cornelius watched his little band with almost jealous eyes, paying small attention to the man at his side who was talking earnestly as they walked.

A brisk wind was clearing the sky and the sun shone through the rain-washed air. Fresh under the sunshine, the garden of lush leafage gave off a strong earthy scent. At one side of the chapel, rubbing hands chafed with the bell-rope, Prater awaited them. The first group was almost to the chapel entrance when Blackburn, who had been looking about the grounds, heard Camilla's voice. "We surely can't be expected to walk across that!" was her indignant comment, and he looked up to find that the trio had halted and were staring down at the path. A few moments later he had reached their side and was examining the cause.

Near the chapel entrance the pathway had broken away completely, leaving some ten feet of rough track. Across this the rain of the previous night had carried a bed of soft mud, a patch of soggy clay some six inches deep. The sticky space looked particularly uninviting, and Miss Ward, with a glance at her dainty shoes, repeated in disgust:

"Chapel or no chapel, I for one am certainly not wading across this morass!"

Barrett, who had approached with Jeffery and Owen, looked at the mud-patch, then darted a quick glance at the girl. Again Blackburn noticed that faint hostility in his tone as he spoke. "Apparently somebody in the house isn't quite as fastidious as you, Miss Ward." He pointed downwards. Across the muddy stretch were two sets of footprints. Although the storm had disfigured the prints, they were obviously those of a fairly large foot. Then Cornelius reached the spot, and voices were raised in explanation.

Professor Rochester was in no way alarmed. He called for Prater to bring a roll of matting from the tool-shed. When the butler returned this was laid over the mud-patch and the party moved dry-shod towards the chapel entrance. At the entrance Camilla drew back to murmur to Austin: "Remarkable how ingenious our host can be when it affects him personally."

Now the party stood clustered before the locked door, while Cornelius gestured to Prater. The servant moved forward. Taking a small key from his pocket, he fitted it into the lock. The key turned, the doors were pushed back, and immediately a rush of hot air swept out into the faces of the party. The Professor gave an outraged gasp, and pushing the butler out of the way shrilled in indignant excitement:

"The heat is on! Somebody has turned on the heat! Scandalous waste!"

There was no reply. Eyes sought faces, surprised, then amused. Cornelius gave a snort of anger and strode into the chapel. Scarcely had he taken a dozen steps when those waiting outside heard him give a choking cry, a queer, strangled ejaculation that held fear and astonishment and something not so easily named.. They heard the thud as his prayer-book dropped from his hand to the floor. Then, with a scrambling rush, they were inside the chapel, by his side, staring with wide, frozen eyes at the sight before them.

At the far end of the chapel where the candles burnt like splashes of pale gold against the gloom, Roger Rochester lay, his body sprawled grotesquely across the aisle, for all the world like some loose-jointed doll flung down carelessly. But it was not Roger's attitude, astonishing though it was, that held the party's horrified gaze.

All eyes were focused on a wide crimson pool that had formed beneath his body, a wet stain that filtered from the hilt of a knife thrust into his heart.

3: Ab Intra

(Sunday, March 7th)

CAMILLA WARD screamed shrilly, harshly.

That was all. There was no other demonstration. Jan Rochester, her face pale, stared from one to another without speaking. Her father had dropped into a seat, crouched down with bowed shoulders and grey head in trembling hands. Although no sound broke the horrified silence that had fallen on the group, they seemed conscious of a curious agitation in the air about them as though all manner of unspoken fears and suspicions quivered invisibly about their heads. Only the white columns of the candles burnt undisturbed, chaste, aloof, and motionless as the body sprawled in violent death beneath their gentle radiance.

Trevor Pimlott was first to speak. The almost arrogant satisfaction in his voice, desecrating the reverent silence, was like a blow in the face.

"Don't touch anything!"

He stepped forward with a perky movement and elevated his chin. "Mr. Owen and Mr. Barrett, would you take the ladies outside? I shall want Dr. Austin to stay for an examination of the body. Professor Rochester, I shall want you, too..." He paused and ran excited eyes over the remainder of the group.

"May I stay?" asked Jeffery meekly.

Pimlott considered gravely.

"Yes," he said at length. "You may stay."

"Thank you," smiled Mr. Blackburn. "I had every intention of doing so."

Pimlott's chest protruded a perceptible inch. "Might I remind you, sir, that this is my case and that I shall most certainly resent outside interference!"

Blackburn's tone was very charming. "And, in turn, might I remind you that a private detective, no matter how competent"— he bowed gravely— "is not permitted and has no authority to handle a murder investigation."

The representative of the Argus Detective Agency, his voice thick with rage, spluttered: "Damn it all, man— we don't even know that it is murder!"

Jeffery turned on him, then made a gesture waving him aside.

Cornelius, sinking back in his seat, was moaning with weak, childish insistence. "No reporters! I won't have any publicity— I won't!"

Pimlott, his face scarlet with suppressed anger, stared at Blackburn, eyes popping and hard. The remainder of the party shuffled uncomfortably near the entrance. The candles burnt on steadily, pale disinterested ghosts far removed

from this atmosphere of strife. There was a long silence. Then Morgan spoke again and his tone was chilly with reproof.

"Listen, J.B. Since you insist that this is a case for the official police, why not take it on yourself? You could wire your friend the Chief Inspector for permission."

Blackburn shook his head.

"Scotland Yard has no jurisdiction over a case in this locality. Nor has the Chief Inspector. The responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Chief Constable. He must be informed at once."

The old man raised his head and looked from one to another.

"Do as you wish, Blackburn," he said wearily. "Do as you wish." He dropped his eyes and resumed his staring at the stained floor.

Trevor Pimlott, sweating unpleasantly in that steam-heated atmosphere, demanded:

"What about me?"

Blackburn wheeled on him.

"Don't you understand that I'm relying on you for assistance?" he snapped. "Until the Department steps in, we have a gargantuan task on our hands."

Pimlott nodded sulkily. It was obvious that he did not relish the idea of following the other's lead.

"All right," he grunted.

Jeffery bowed slightly.

"Then we'll get on." He raised his voice. "Dr. Austin!"

The young medico, pale but eager, stepped forward from the group near the doorway. The three men, leaving Professor Rochester sunk in melancholy contemplation, moved to where the body of Roger Rochester sprawled across the aisle.

BLACKBURN HALTED a few paces away from the dead man and passed a handkerchief across his dewed face.

"Can you turn off this confounded heat?" he murmured. "Place is like a Turkish bath." And as Pimlott started away, he added quickly: "Get everybody outside, too. And close those front doors."

Jeffery turned and looked about the building. There were four windows, glassless but fitted with heavy iron shutters which opened outward. These apertures, set breast high, showed the thickness of the massive walls, for the sills were almost a yard wide. A cough by his side made him wheel. Mr. Pimlott stood there, transferring a pellet of chewing-gum to his mouth.

"This," he announced owlshly, "is a strange business."

"True— very true," Jeffery agreed thoughtfully.

His eyes had strayed past his companion to the carpet slippers which enclosed the feet of the dead man. Pimlott saw the significance of the glance and gave a dry snigger.

"You haven't seen anything yet?" he said. "Just come round here a moment."

Without waiting for assent, he led the way to the side of the altar. Jeffery, with a final frowning stare at the slippers, followed him. Pimlott halted suddenly and shot out a forefinger.

"Look there!"

A white tablecloth had been laid on the floor. On it three plates were placed. The first contained slices of cooked ham, the second an uncut loaf of white bread, and the third a slice of angel cake with cream filling, writhing in elaborate scrolls about the top. Anything more incongruous in these surroundings could scarcely be imagined.

"A picnic," commented Blackburn grimly.

"It was for a dead man, then!" Pimlott looked very wise. "Angel cake was a favourite of Mr. Roger's. He was a baby for sweets!" He dropped his eyes and masticated violently. "But what's it doing down here?"

"I'll ask you one," Jeffery countered. "How did Roger Rochester walk across that mud-patch outside without leaving traces of clay on his slippers. And if he didn't walk across the mud, whose tracks are those we saw outside?"

"But Roger couldn't have got in here that way," the other objected. "The door was locked! I saw Prater use a key to open it." He paused and added brightly: "Besides, one of those tracks in the mud leads away from this chapel. And that one certainly doesn't belong to Roger!"

Jeffery poked a cigarette into his mouth and struck a match so viciously that it broke.

"Mad," he said. "Mad! It all boils down to one thing!"

Trevor Pimlott, eyes wide behind his glasses, whispered:

"*Witchcraft?* Oh, I say!"

"Why not?" Jeffery swung round on him. "Murderer rubs himself with stolen unguent and materializes out of thin air!" He broke off with a dry chuckle. "Lord! I'll talk myself into believing it if I go on like this! Come on—let's get back to fundamentals. We've got a corpse, haven't we? Let's get back to a sane and matter-of-fact beginning! A man's been killed! Right!"

"And we're not even sure whether it is murder," the private detective pointed out. "People have committed suicide by stabbing themselves, you know."

Blackburn did not answer. They walked back to where Dr. Austin was rising to his feet. He turned to face them.

"Not much to report," he said. "Fairly straight-out killing. Powerful knife thrust through the left breast, the weapon taking a slightly upward tilt before lodging in the major blood-vessels about the heart. Broad blade of knife inflicted wide slitting wound— accounts for amount of blood shed. Thrust sudden and wielded by a strong arm."

"Suicide?"

Austin shook his head slowly.

"Can't say without an autopsy. But I don't think so. The thrust is too strong, too deep, for voluntary infliction."

Jeffery nodded.

"What about the time of death?"

"Roughly twelve hours ago. Can't Say nearer than that."

Mr. Pimlott was clearly disappointed. "You can't?"

Austin shook his head.

Jeffery nodded, his eyes on the body all his feet. "Could you say if Rochester was standing on this spot when he was struck down?"

"Either on this spot or somewhere very near it."

"How do you know?" demanded Pimlott.

"Merely common sense," Austin said sharply. "When the blood-vessels of the heart are penetrated, the haemorrhage begins at once. There's no sign of blood anywhere else in this place. Again, you'll notice that there's no trace of blood beneath the body, which seems to prove he must have dropped almost immediately, even before the blood had time to drip from the wound to the floor."

"Of course." Blackburn smoked in silence for a moment. "You say, Doctor, that this knife-thrust had great strength behind it?"

"Extraordinary strength, really. The knife-blade has penetrated the heart."

"Then I take it that it would have been impossible for a woman to have inflicted the wound?"

Austin was wary. "Unless she was an extraordinarily powerful woman."

Jeffery was silent for a moment. Then, turning abruptly, he walked to the closed doors of the chapel and, turning, addressed the young doctor sharply:

"Would it be possible to inflict that wound by throwing the knife from a point beyond these doors?"

"Almost impossible." The reply came without hesitation. "Not only would the thrower have to be an expert marksman to find the heart at such a distance, but he would need strong light to make such a hit. Again, the weapon is buried too deeply to have lodged in the body by means of throwing." Austin shook his head. "No, Mr. Blackburn. From the cursory examination given the body, I should say that the person who thrust that knife stood directly in front

of Roger, wielding the stroke with every atom of his strength." He paused and nodded to Jeffery. "Come here."

When the three men stood over the body, Austin pointed down.

"See for yourself. Not only has the knife penetrated directly to the hilt, but also the haft has impressed itself into the clothing. The knife has been thrust into the body as far as it could go. And that takes a powerful arm!" He considered moodily. "It's going to take all my strength, to get that knife out of the wound."

"That's going to be a messy business," Blackburn agreed. "I think we can leave that in your hands."

"And use a handkerchief," chimed in Pimlott. "You know— finger-prints."

Brian said coldly:

"Of course."

He stooped over the body and Jeffery turned away. Almost a minute passed before the doctor rose and placed the knife on the altar. Blackburn moved across and examined it. The broad blade, tapering to a point and keen as a razor at the edges, was fitted into a wooden handle, a handle grooved into shallow undulations. He replaced it on the altar and turned back to Pimlott.

"Would you cover the body with that cloth? It's nudity rather disturbs me."

"Just a moment." Austin stayed Pimlott with a gesture. He spoke to Jeffery. "There's one small detail you ought to know. It may have nothing to do with this murder— but, all the same..." His voice trailed away and he bent over the body, lifting the right arm stiffly. "Take a look at the underside of the wrist."

Both men did so.

"It's only a scar," exclaimed Pimlott.

Jeffery was running his fingers over the half-healed cicatrix. He noticed that the skin on either side was red and inflamed.

"Septic, I should say, Doctor. About how old would it be?"

"About a month old."

Pimlott was regarding the mark, head on one side.

"I say," he said abruptly, "there's more in this than meets the eye, you know."

"Indeed?"

"Yes!" The little man's tone was defensive. "I'd like to know just how Mr. Rochester got that scar on his wrist. I mean— he wasn't the kind of man who ever did any manual labour. I can't see how he could have cut himself by accident. And it's such an extraordinary place to be wounded— on the inside of the wrist! If the cut was made by design, well, what does it mean?"

Brian Austin nodded.

"I see the point of our friend's argument. Roger was an old woman about knives and firearms. I remember showing him a case of scalpels I have in my medical kit and he went quite white at the sight of them. And I can't imagine him cutting himself without running to someone for comfort. In that case, he'd most likely come to me. Yet this is the first indication I've had of this wound."

Blackburn was pulling thoughtfully at his lower lip. He shook his head slowly.

"I can see," he said grimly, "that the sooner I get the Department on to this business, the better. This is no task for a lone hand." He paused, to swing off at a tangent: "By the way, Doctor, what time did the rain begin down here last night?"

Austin blinked a little at the rapid change of subject. He exchanged an inquiring glance with Pimlott, who was covering the body with the cloth.

"About half past nine, I believe. I remember Roger pottering in and out of the drawing-room where we were sitting. Once he crossed to the window and looked out, saying something about a storm coming up. The clock struck nine shortly before that."

"Was that the last time you saw Roger alive?"

"Yes. I retired to my bedroom quite early."

"Who was with you in the room?"

Austin considered.

"Miss Ward was there. And Owen and Barrett. That was all— besides Roger. Oh— and then Prater came in to inquire what we wanted for supper."

"And Professor Rochester?"

"I suppose he was in his study. I didn't see him after we left the dining-room."

Pimlott seemed to be ruminating on some problem.

"The rain must have begun earlier in town," he said presently. "We reached the village about half past eight. After I dropped Miss Rochester I stayed talking to the postmaster. The rain began then, because we had to go inside for shelter. That was about nine o'clock." He glanced at Jeffery. "Is it very important?"

"I think so," the other said shortly.

"Professor Rochester might be able to help you," suggested Austin. "He sometimes goes up on the tower— "

"*Tower!*" Blackburn seemed to come to life. "Isn't there a rain-gauge among the instruments up there— a gadget showing the exact time the rainfall starts and ends?"

The doctor nodded. "So I've been told."

"Blessings on the shade of Mr. Monkham!" Jeffery wheeled on Pimlott. "That's your job. Hop up to that tower and see if the instrument registered the time of the rainfall! Hurry, man!" He took the little man by the arm and almost thrust him away.

"All right," said Pimlott disgruntledly as he went. "There's no need to shove."

Austin grinned. "There walks offended dignity," he murmured, as the private detective disappeared. He turned to Jeffery. "Now, is there anything else I can do? I don't mind admitting that I'm all at sea."

"Aren't we all?" murmured Blackburn. He appraised the expression that crossed the other's face and added wryly, "Hardly measure up to your standards as a detective, do I? But I'm not used to this wholesale responsibility."

"But Morgan said..."

Jeffery shrugged. "I'm afraid Rollo has presented me in rather a false light," he said. "It's true that I have, on occasion, helped the Department. But it has always been in the role of looker-on, a mere idler in the wings. The Department officials have produced all the data and I've merely tried to analyse it. But, in this case..." He spread his hands. "Consider the facilities the Department has at its disposal, the scientific aids! Despite Professor Rochester's objections, the official police must be called in."

"If by scientific aids, you mean finger-print experts and photographers," smiled Austin, "you've got the very man for that kind of work down here on the spot."

"Who?"

"Pimlott. He brought down a case of gear with him. Takes his profession very seriously does our Pimlott."

Blackburn was not impressed. "This is no time for musical comedy methods," he said curtly. "Pimlott's ideas may be all right in theory. In practice, I prefer the experience of the Department." He looked around the chapel. "Don't think I'll be needing you for a while, Doctor. But you might tell Prater I'd like to have a word with him. I want to clear up this business about the rain-storm last night."

Austin nodded and moved away. He seemed almost eager to go. A few minutes later the doors opened to admit the butler. Prater stood at the entrance, blinking in the dim light. Jeffery called sharply: "Come in, man. And shut the door." The servant obeyed and came slowly down the aisle.

Blackburn, until this moment, had been too interested in the remainder of the party to notice the butler's appearance, and he was surprised to find the real man totally unlike his mental picture. Prater's age, shown by his almost

bald head and wrinkled face, was belied by a powerful body held with almost military stiffness. He sidled reluctantly forward, his eyes on the rigid outlines of the body showing beneath the cloth. Jeffery, noticing this, gestured to a heavy carved screen folded against the wall of the chapel.

"If you bring that screen across," he said casually, "we can put it to better use, I think."

Prater nodded without speaking. He turned and, lifting the screen, easily brought it to the position indicated by the other. Jeffery arranged the framework about the body, then nodded to a seat.

"I thank you, Prater. Sit down. I want to have a talk with you."

The grizzled old man shook his head.

"Thank you, sir," he said simply. "I would rather stand."

"As you wish." Jeffery crossed to the altar rail and took up the knife, holding it carefully. "Ever seen this before, Prater?"

The servant nodded. "I've seen it many times, sir."

"Then it belongs to someone in the house?"

Prater replied stolidly: "It is the property of Mr. Owen, sir."

"OH!" SAID Mr. Blackburn shortly, and laid down the knife. As he turned back he experienced a faint shock. Prater was looking away from him, staring fixedly at the screen concealing the corpse of Roger Rochester, and on that lined face was an expression of unholy satisfaction, a cruel vindictive mask that was in place for just a moment and then wiped away.

"So it belongs to Mr. Owen?" Jeffery said quietly.

Prater's eyes were mild now, almost bovine. "Yes, sir. I understand he brought a number of such knives from his uncle's ranch in the States. This one was among them."

"Where were the knives kept?"

"In the museum room. Professor Rochester has a collection of medieval curios. Most of these are kept in locked cases. But the larger objects, like weapons, are fixed to the wall. The knives are among the weapons."

"Within reach of any person?"

The servant shook his head. "The museum room is kept locked."

Jeffery took a small black-covered note-book from his pocket and made an entry. His tone dropped its casualness, became crisp.

"Now, Prater. I saw you unlock the doors of this chapel. Do you keep the key?"

"Yes, sir. There is only one key. I have used it for the past five years."

"Do you keep this key on your person?"

Once more Prater shook his head. "No, sir. It hangs on a nail in the corridor leading to the kitchen. Mrs. Considine is the only other member of the household who uses the key. She takes it when she cleans out the chapel on Saturday afternoon in preparation for the Sunday ceremony."

"And during the week I take it the place is locked?"

The ring of white hair bordering Prater's pink scalp bobbed again. "That is so. When we arrived here we found tramps and such— er— undesirables might break in and rob the place. Those silver candlesticks are quite valuable, and although two are fixed to the altar the third can be moved. Consequently a new lock was fitted."

"What time does Mrs. Considine finish her cleaning here?"

"Usually about six o'clock, sir. She then locks the door, gives the key into my hand and I place it on the nail."

Jeffery considered a moment. "Then, from six o'clock last night, any member of the household could have got in here merely by going to the kitchen and taking the key?"

Again Prater shook his head. His fingers twisted and a faint excitement tinged his voice. "On any other night, sir— yes. But last night, no. Because Mrs. Considine gave me the key at six o'clock and I slipped it into my pocket." A note of apology smarmed his tone. "I quite forgot to hang it on the nail. There was some disturbance— the Professor had lost one of his valuable curios. He was upset and demanded that the house— "

"I know all about that," Blackburn cut in. "So the key was not on the nail at all last night?"

"Oh yes, sir. I was going to explain. I forgot to hang the key on the nail until close on eleven o'clock. I wouldn't have remembered it then— only I saw the young lady, Miss Ward, down in the corridor. She was looking at the nail on which the key usually hangs."

"Miss Ward!" It was an exclamation. "You say you saw Miss Ward looking for the key of this chapel at eleven o'clock last night?"

Before Prater had a chance to speak, a voice interrupted sharply from the end of the aisle: "That's a damned lie! Camilla wasn't anywhere near the kitchen at that time!"

It was Brian Austin who had returned and was standing near the doors.

Jeffery swung round. His voice was hard. "Doctor, I thought I asked you to leave?"

Brian said angrily: "That's all very well."

"Please, Doctor!" Blackburn's tone was so cold, so steely that Austin halted in the act of striding down the aisle. His eyes, hot with indignation, held Jeffery's in a clash of wills. Then he dropped his head and turned away. The

door closed behind him with a slam that echoed through the little building. Blackburn addressed the servant again and his voice retained something of its harshness.

"Well, Prater. You heard what Dr. Austin said. Are you positive that it was Miss Ward whom you saw?"

The old man hesitated. Across his naked scalp a slow pink tide crept. "Truth to tell, sir, I couldn't swear to the actual face," he faltered. "The corridor was dark and my eyes aren't what they might be. But it was the raincoat, sir, that made me think—"

The young man's voice lashed out like a whip. "Wait!" He led the old man to a seat and almost pushed him into it. "There now. Relax. Take your time. Start at the beginning."

Prater's eyes were no longer vacant. Now they were uncertain, with something like fear. "It— it must have been about half past nine, sir, when Professor Rochester finished questioning me about the loss of his witchball. I left his study and went into the drawing-room to inquire what the young people wanted for supper. With the exception of Mr. Roger, all refused. He asked me for a glass of milk. It took me about five minutes to prepare it. I brought it back to the corridor leading to the side entrance of the house and found Mr. Roger waiting there. He took the milk and drank it standing there."

"And the time?"

"I can't say exactly, sir. It must have been around five-and-twenty minutes to ten o'clock." The servant paused, but a nod from Jeffery hurried him on. "I returned to the kitchen and called for Bianca to wash the glass. It was Mrs. Considine who took it. The clock struck ten as I went to my room. I sat down and began to read a novel. I must have read for an hour, because I remember hearing the clock strike eleven. The late hour recalled my bedtime, so I put down the book and was preparing to retire when I heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside."

"Pretty good hearing, haven't you?" snapped Blackburn. "I take it your door was closed?"

"The floor of the corridor is stone, sir." Mild reproof expressed itself on the servant's face. "Footsteps echo on it surprisingly loud. So, thinking it was one of the Considines wanting me, I went to the door and looked out. Some little distance away, looking up at the nail that customarily holds the chapel key, was a young woman. She was wearing a scarlet raincoat such as Miss Ward owns— that was what made me think it was she. Then I remembered I had not hung the key on the nail."

"What did you do?"

"I called to the young lady," Prater replied. "I said, 'Excuse me, miss— were you looking for the chapel key?' The young lady didn't answer, sir. I heard her give a startled kind of gasp and she hurried off down the corridor without turning. Naturally I was surprised. But it was no business of mine. So I hung the key on the nail and went to bed."

"And this morning the key was in the same place?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you heard no other sounds in the corridor after eleven o'clock?"

Prater shook his head. "No. I read myself to sleep and turned out my light about midnight. There was no other disturbance during that time."

Blackburn nodded and was silent. He drew the small book from his pocket, changed his mind and replaced it. The servant watched him with cringing eyes. The young man seemed to have forgotten his presence; he stared unseeingly into the shadows massed in the corners of the chapel. Presently he nodded to himself and his face cleared. "Prater?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to take a look at Mr. Roger's body. Tell me if he is dressed as you saw him in the side corridor last night."

Jeffery was folding back the screen. The butler rose to his feet, fingers clenched, face paper-white, and took one quick glance at the figure revealed by the whipped-aside cloth. Then his eyes combed a spot near the altar. He licked pale lips, and his voice was barely audible.

"Exactly the same— as last night, sir."

Blackburn said slowly: "Even to the slippers?"

"Even to the slippers," repeated the servant.

"You're positive of that?"

"Yes, sir. They were the only pair of slippers Mr. Roger possessed."

Blackburn shrugged. "You have ruined a most promising theory by your observation, Prater." He was moving the screen back into place.

Thus it was that Pimlott found them. He thrust open the doors and came puffing down the aisle, waving a narrow strip of paper in his hand. It was criss-crossed with green lines and a jagged smudge of purple ink see-sawed down one side.

"Sorry to be so long," he grunted as he approached. "Had to get this paper off the cylinder."

"Is it any use?"

"It proves beyond all doubt that the rain began at five minutes to ten last night," said Pimlott impressively.

Prater coughed deferentially. "Will you be wanting me further, sir?" he asked as Jeffery looked at him.

"I want the key of that museum," the young man told him. "Will you get it from Professor Rochester? And you might let me have the key of this chapel, too."

Prater delivered it into his hand without a word, then turned and walked from the building. Jeffery watched him go. Not until the doors had closed behind the butler did he turn. He placed a hand on Pimlott's arm and led him to a seat.

"Sit down," he invited. "I want to talk to you."

Behind his glasses Pimlott's eyes were owl-like with curiosity. The two men took their seats some distance from the screen and Blackburn produced first his note-book, then his cigarette-case. He lit a cigarette and replaced the burnt match in the box. Through a halo of smoke he surveyed his companion thoughtfully.

"To the mathematician who prides himself on accurate balance, this business is bewilderingly tangled. Already, though our discovery of Roger's body is not half an hour advanced, there are at least half a dozen glaring inconsistencies that cry out for elucidation. Let us take the most outstanding of these." He paused and gestured towards the strip of paper from the rain-gauge, still clutched in the little man's fingers.

"You hold in your hand conclusive evidence that the rainstorm which swept over 'Rochester' last night began at five minutes to ten. Now, as you have noticed, the body of Roger behind that screen is clothed in untidy but comfortable garments and he is wearing cloth slippers on his feet. Although you know more of the dead man's habits than I do, I imagine that he is wearing the kind of clothes in which he pottered about the house, which seems to prove that he came here from the house that night. But— note these two most important points. He is wearing old cloth slippers on his feet and he is not wearing any topcoat or overcoat."

"Well— " began Pimlott.

"Far from well," Jeffery assured him. "There is something very rotten in the state of 'Rochester'. Recall, if you will, that it was no light rain that fell last night. It was a cloudburst, an abrupt drenching downpour of such proportions as to cut off communication with the village, as you know to your sorrow. Now, is it not ridiculous to assume that Roger could have possibly walked from the house to this chapel dry-shod and unwet through such a deluge? Even allowing for the premise that he was too absent-minded to don overcoat and rubbers— a most unlikely supposition, by the way— we cannot get over the fact that somehow he contrived a meteorological impossibility, that of walking through a torrential downpour bone-dry."

"Just a minute," objected Pimlott. "You're taking a lot for granted, aren't you? How do we know Roger didn't come to this place before the storm broke?"

"I know that he didn't," Jeffery replied. "Roger couldn't have got into this chapel before the storm because the doors were locked and the only existing key was safely in Prater's pocket. It was not out of the butler's pocket until after eleven o'clock, at which time, according to Dr. Austin's evidence, Roger was already dead."

Blackburn paused and studied the smoke of his cigarette.

"Now, perceive the first two irreconcilable facts. Roger could not have entered here before eleven o'clock because the doors were locked against him and he had no way of obtaining the key. He did not enter after that hour since, if this was so, his clothes and slippers must be sodden by the storm. Follow my argument?"

Pimlott chewed thoughtfully, his eyes closed. Suddenly he thumped the seat-back with his fist.

"I've got it! And this explains another puzzling fact." He lowered his voice impressively. "Roger let himself in here after eleven o'clock by getting hold of the key after it left Prater's possession. He was wet through with the storm. But his murderer turned on the heating system in here to dry his clothes, because for some reason we're wanted to believe Roger came in here before the storm broke." He paused and sat back, surveying Jeffery triumphantly.

The young man shook his head. "Good reasoning, my friend," he said. "But unfortunately it doesn't fit all the facts."

"Why not?"

"Because that mud-patch, which must have softened as soon as the rain fell on it, proves otherwise. If Roger had entered this chapel after eleven o'clock, he must have passed over that clay. In that event, there would be only one set of tracks left— the incoming marks of Roger's feet— But— there is also a second trail across the mud— the prints of feet *leading out from this chapel!* We know that Roger never left this place." Blackburn stared at his companion. "So we are brought to the question— to whom does that outlying set of footprints belong?"

The private detective considered the point. "Well, how about this?" he said at length. "The murderer was hidden in the chapel before the storm began. Ergo, he left no footprints because the clay was not soft enough to take impressions. The storm begins— Roger comes in— first set of prints. The murderer leaps on his victim in the dark; Roger falls. The murderer leaves— hence the second track across the mud." Mr. Pimlott sat back with a self-satisfied cluck.

"I seem doomed to shoot your theories full of holes," smiled Blackburn, as the smugness drained out of the other's face. "I admit that your reasoning is sound enough in its way, but it still doesn't fit the facts."

Pimlott was silent.

Jeffery rose and, beckoning to his companion, walked towards the altar and shifted the screen concealing the body. He said slowly: "I think I can prove to your satisfaction that this man did not, at any time during last night, walk through the mud-patch. Consequently, we are faced with the only possible alternative— that he was already inside the chapel when the storm began."

"But the locked door— the key— "

"It sounds impossible, I admit," nodded Blackburn. "But I am basing my belief on something almost as tangible as a locked door." He gestured downward. "Roger's slippers! If he walked across that mud-patch, nothing could prevent his slippers from being coated with clay. Even if, as you suggested, the murderer, waiting in the darkness, turned on the heat after the killing to dry his victim's clothes, that same heat would have dried the mud on the slippers. Yet you can see for yourself that the slippers are clean."

Pimlott nodded.

"Now," continued the other, "you might suggest that our murderer, who is nothing if not canny, may have foreseen this complication and removed Roger's stained slippers, replacing them with a clean pair. There are two arguments against this. The first is our original premise that Roger, mentally unsound as he undoubtedly was, was not an imbecile and would therefore be scarcely likely to wander out into a torrential downpour in carpet slippers. The second is even sounder. Roger possessed only one pair of slippers. Therefore, if the murderer did change the footwear, Prater, who saw the original pair of slippers Roger was wearing and who later examined the body, would, have recognized the substitution. Even if we extend the theory as far as to admit that the killer might have had another similar pair of slippers specially made— a most far-fetched assumption, since it was impossible to foresee the storm— the very newness of the duplicate slippers would give the trick away. But Roger's slippers are not new. As you see, they are old, scuffed and worn out of shape. In other words the very pair in which he left the house last night."

The private detective grunted. "Nice kettle o' fish! We're not only faced with a murder, but a dozen loose ends. And why should the victim be Mr. Roger? A poor harmless old idiot."

Jeffery looked at him. "Do you mean that literally?"

Pimlott had the grace to flush. "Well— perhaps not exactly that," he said awkwardly. "But everyone in the house knows that this chap's mental balance wasn't particularly firm. They wouldn't admit it, of course. But that's the main

reason why they hired me to look after the man, because he was mentally incapable of doing so himself. Which brings us back to what I was saying. Who could possibly want to harm this poor old chap?"

Pimlott glanced about the chapel and his eyes came to rest on that sprawled thing in the aisle. He hunched his shoulders as men do against a sudden draught of chill wind. "I say," he muttered uneasily, "let's get out of this."

"There's a job for you first," Jeffery said. He put his hand in his pocket and drew forth the key of the chapel, handing it to the private detective. "I want you to go around and lock every one of those window-shutters so that this place is sealed against possible intrusion. Then lock the doors and bring the key to me. And remember to touch nothing. I want this place left exactly as we found it for the police when they arrive."

Pimlott nodded. "I understand."

Jeffery crossed and, taking up the knife from the altar, wrapped it carefully in a handkerchief. "I'll be responsible for this," he said. "When you've finished bring that key to me at the house. And then..."

The words broke on his lips as the chapel doors were pushed open, and the morning sun flooded in, stabbing fierce spears of light into their surprised faces. In the doorway a hunched gibbous shadow blocked the glow, black as the gates of Erebus against the golden dancing notes. Jeffery blinked, and in that moment his eyes focused, taking in every detail.

Standing in the entrance was an old, old woman, a crone bent of back and peering of eye who might have stepped straight from the borders of an Arthur Rackham illustration to Grimm's Fairy Tales. She was bundled rather than dressed in a faded green skirt bordered at the lower hem with peeling gilt discs the size of a half-crown. Her flopping blouse was a dirty tarnished rainbow of scarlet and gold. Over her head was thrown a shawl once colourful as a Navajo blanket but now faded by time and careless handling to a pale flux of hues that almost defied analysis. This barbaric parody held at arms-length two heavy wooden buckets, matching almost perfectly the clumsy men's boots that encased her feet.

Jeffery, his surprise giving way to curiosity, strode up the aisle towards her.

The woman waited his coming with the stolid indifference of a cow watching the approach of a milker. Not a single expression crossed her face, a face strong as rock, rock hewed into some grotesque semblance of a hook nose, deeply furrowed eyepits, and a wide, greedy mouth. The skin that stretched tightly across these promontories was as lined as an etching and smeared darkly with the smoke of a million camp-fires, and something hotly

slumbrous in the seething button eyes gave Blackburn clue to the invader's identity even before Pimlott chirped:

"It's Mrs. Considine."

Slowly, like a vulture scenting carrion, the old creature turned her head. The enormous gilt rings in her ears quivered.

In that moment Jeffery knew something of the age-old primitive fear of the evil eye; it stirred restlessly deep in his consciousness. And young Mr. Blackburn, who had never in his life raised his voice to a woman, almost barked:

"What do you want here?"

Mrs. Considine's rock-like face twitched. The wide slit of a mouth worked for a moment, then a gush of unintelligible jargon poured forth. She seemed suddenly galvanized, her whole dumpy body alive with expressing her meaning. Lean fingers flew from the buckets, now deposited on the floor, to the aisle. Arms hued like the spectrum made sweeping, washing, scrubbing motions. Then she paused and looked at them, little eyes filmed with cunning.

"There!" said Pimlott. "She wants to clean up the chapel. To clean it up, mind you."

"Does she, indeed," murmured Jeffery. "Now that is very interesting. I wonder who could have sent her here? Or did she come here on her own accord?"

Trevor Pimlott, determined not to be outclassed, turned and snapped the question at the old woman. The wrinkled face puckered. She placed a curved claw behind her ear and something between an exclamation and a snarl shot from her lips. The private detective bawled at her. Abruptly the crone straightened her crooked body, threw back her shoulders, and held her hand high above her head. The two men stared at this pantomime, and in the sane moment something in this grotesque parody recalled a personality.

"*Prater!*" they cried simultaneously.

Mrs. Considine grinned toothlessly and bobbed her head with the insistence of a child. Both men exchanged a glance; then Jeffery, catching the old woman's eye, shook his head and pointed out of the door. Again that craggy face puckered; the woman stood her ground until Pimlott took her by the shoulders, turned her round and thrust her gently outside the door. They heard her chattering to herself like an angry monkey as she clumped her way across the fibre matting protecting the mud-patch and up towards the house.

Jeffery watched her go with vague eyes. "Now I wonder why friend Prater should be so keen on their pursuit of cleanliness?" he murmured. Pimlott was at his side, chirping and garrulous, full of accusations and suspicions. Blackburn waved him aside and began to follow the old servant towards the house. He

passed by the side entrance and made his way to the front, to see something that shot him abruptly from his reflections.

Before the wide entrance were two large suit-cases, newly strapped, and near by three smaller boxes. Jeffery did not hesitate. He reached the spot in one swift bound, thrust open the heavy door, and almost ran down the hall into the living-room. He heard the sound of voices that died suddenly. Unceremoniously, he burst in.

There were a number of people in the room. Jan Rochester, a pale ghost, was seated with Rollo Morgan and Phillip Barrett on the wide chesterfield near the wall. They were watching with uneasy eyes a trio that stood before the fire. Brian Austin, his pink face flushed with anger, his blue eyes sapphire-hard, was glaring at Camilla Ward, who was shaking her head and pulling gloves on her slim hands. She was dressed for travelling; a check coat was belted about her body and a tiny hat of the same material clung at an angle to her sleek hair. Owen Rochester faced her, holding out a leather bag embossed with the initials "C.W." As though jerked with a string, every head shot round at Blackburn's entrance. The young man advanced into the room and looked at Camilla Ward. The ticking of the watch on his wrist was plainly audible.

"Where are you going?" Not for an instant did his eyes leave hers.

It was a pallid mask turned towards him, a face drained of all colour save for those shadowed violet eyes. The girl made an obvious effort to pull herself together and she fumbled at her hat with clumsy fingers. The voice had lost its drawl. Now the words came jerkily. "I— I am leaving— leaving for London."

Jeffery shook his head. "I wouldn't advise you to leave just now, Miss Ward. It might be rather awkward."

The colour flamed into her face. Up went her chin and the girl's words were steadied by a subtle harshness that barbed each syllable. "I beg your pardon, sir! Awkward? What do you mean?"

"I mean, young lady, that if you leave this house without my permission, I shall be forced to order your arrest."

"Arrest!"

"Arrest on suspicion of being concerned in the murder of Mr. Roger Rochester," Blackburn said levelly.

"Is this your idea of a joke?" Her voice was hard and brittle as glass. "You can't keep me here."

Blackburn took two steps backward and his glance took in the whole room.

"I can't keep you here— any of you. It is Scotland Yard that can do that. And they'll do it because each and every person in this house is under the same suspicion. Suspicion of the murder of Roger Rochester. They will keep you here because the murderer of that unfortunate man is somewhere in this

house. And until Scotland Yard takes over, I have no intention of allowing that murderer to escape."

4: Inquisition

(Sunday, March 7th)

THE TALL CLOCK in the corner of the living-room struck the hour of nine.

It was an unusual timepiece, another curiosity gathered by Cornelius Rochester during one of his trips abroad. It had been built in Nuremberg. The baroque ornamentation and unusual though somewhat childish mechanical features attracted the Professor from the moment he glimpsed it in the corner of the cluttered shop. The hands were carved from ivory into the design of pointing fingers, and they crept around a dial on which was painted the sun, moon, and stars. There was also a thermometer, a barometer in the form of two dolls which poked painted faces from adjacent windows, and an arrangement for telling the phases of the moon.

The clock's novelty, however, did not end here. When the pointed hands touched the hour, a tiny door above the dial opened and a small green huntsman appeared, to toot a rusty but no less emphatic note on a microscopic horn. At noon, when the hands crossed each other in pious attitude, a tinsel fairy emerged in place of the huntsman, waved her wand, and vanished. At midnight, when the twelve chimes pealed through the darkened rooms, a painted wooden skeleton popped out— a grinning doll complete with tin scythe and tiny hour-glass. Owen had immediately christened this nocturnal effigy "Mahatma Gandhi," and Jan had offered to supply a loincloth if only the figure could be prevailed upon to appear long enough for the fitting.

Despite the fact that there were only seven people in the living-room, the wide apartment held that hot, tight atmosphere of a crowded auditorium. The members of the Rochester family, with their guests, had gathered here after the evening meal. Camilla Ward was prowling restlessly, puffing at a cigarette. Jan, sitting between Owen and Phillip Barrett, was making a pretence at reading— or, rather, studying— the pictures in a month-old illustrated paper. Dr. Austin and Rollo Morgan stood by the fire-place, uneasy hands and shuffling feet showing plainly their nervousness. Only Professor Rochester seemed unmoved. He had pulled a chair up to the table and was deep in a book of Norwegian folk-tales. And sitting at another smaller table in the far corner of the room, fountain-pen and letter-pad in position, was Sergeant Richard Colmer, of the Rockwall police force. This assembly was waiting, more or less apprehensively, for the coming of Mr. Jeffery Blackburn.

THE CHIMES had barely died away when the door opened to admit Jeffery, with Pimlott trotting at his heels.

The silence in the long room could be almost felt when Jeffery crossed to the table and looked about him. Cornelius with a sour grunt pushed aside his book and stared at the carpet. The young man gave a little introductory cough.

"There is, I think, no reason to reiterate the reasons for this gathering," began Jeffery. "A murder, a particularly brutal murder, has taken place within these grounds. As I said before, there seems very little possibility that this crime is the work of some outside influence— a point which I will make clearer shortly. Unpleasant though it is, the truth we must face is that someone under this roof was responsible for the murder of Roger Rochester."

He paused and glanced about the room.

"In a telephone conversation with the Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard this afternoon I was given to understand that, with the exception of Sergeant Colmer, the police cannot get down here until tomorrow morning. I have been elected to conduct this preparatory cross-examination before they arrive. However, I will be frank with you all. I want you to understand that I am helpless without the co-operation of the people in this room. I ask you to tell me the truth. Concealment means waste of time, for tomorrow the C.I.D. will swarm over this house. They will ride roughshod over all objections; each and every one of you will be forced through the ruthless mechanism of the law, and sooner or later the truth will come out. It is for you to judge whether you prefer the more painful method of extraction. But I do not expect any such evasion— it, must, naturally be in your own interests to help unmask this murderer."

He paused. There was no sound in the room save the ticking of the tall clock and the scratch of Sergeant Colmer's fountain-pen, covering his pad with pothooks and squiggles.

"Now," continued Jeffery, "when I speak of the murderer being under this roof, I make three exceptions. The first of these fortunate people is Rollo Morgan, who was sitting with me in a London club when, according to the medical evidence, the murder was committed. The other couple are Miss Jan and Mr. Pimlott, who were marooned by the storm away from the house last night. It had occurred to me that this alibi might have been a clever fake, but investigations this afternoon have convinced me otherwise. The hotel-keeper has sworn that at eleven o'clock last night he was talking to these people in the lounge of his hotel, and there is evidence of the servants to support it. Also, there is further evidence to show that they stayed all night at the hotel. And finally there is the testimony of the A.A. man, who not only remembers reporting to Pimlott that the moor road was under water, but also swears that

it was impassable until the early hours of the morning. Therefore, unless these two people possessed the faculty of being in two places at once, or unless we are willing to believe that they in some way escaped from their rooms, walked the distance between Rockwall and 'Rochester' and back in a blinding cloudburst, suspicion against them seems groundless."

"Really!" said Mr. Pimlott.

Jan Rochester, her face faintly coloured, stared at Jeffery with cold, hostile eyes.

"Now you will probably demand on what grounds I have based the serious statement that the murderer came from inside the house," continued Jeffery quietly. "While some of the reasons must be plain to you, a review of all the points must convince you beyond all doubt. Take in the first place the scene of the murder— the chapel. The body was killed in this place, for one reason, that its discovery would be delayed until the following morning when the family gathered for prayers. This in itself proves a knowledge of the household routine. But that is a small point. More important is the fact that the chapel was inaccessible— the windows were shuttered and the doors locked. After eleven o'clock the key of the chapel was hung in a position at the centre of the house. Now would it be humanly possible for any outsider not only to enter the house, but to go through the passages and obtain that key without being noticed? I say no.

"Then there is the problem of the weapon, proved to be one of a set of knives taken from the museum, which is also locked. Why should an outsider choose a weapon from such an extraordinary place as the museum when any other knife would suffice? Again, how could an outsider have possibly taken the knife from the museum without his presence being noticed?

"Thirdly, we have to consider the storm. The road, you recall, was impassable for vehicles. In that case, we must picture our theoretical outsider shunning the only thoroughfare and walking across the sodden moor in a heavy downpour. In his wet clothes he had then to enter the house, take the knife and the key, and get down to the chapel— all the while unseen.

"The whole picture is too illogical for credence.

"Now come the two final and clinching arguments. If we are to take it that the mysterious reappearance of the dolls and Roger's murder are connected— and the chances that the two incidents are unrelated are too far-fetched for consideration— then we must realize that no one save the donor and the household at 'Rochester' *knew that the dolls existed*. In other words the mutilated doll received by Roger must have been dispatched to him either by a member of this household or Professor Reinersmann himself.

"And finally we come to the peculiarity of the body itself. It lay before an altar on which were two candlesticks. Near by were several plates containing food. The victim's clothes were unruffled, his slippers still on his feet, and the expression on his face calm— cheerful almost. Now remember, Roger *was in fear of his life*, following the warning of the marionette. His insistence on bringing Mr. Pimlott down proves that. Therefore, if he were alone in the chapel and an outsider walked in, isn't it likely that some alarm would be given? And if attacked, Roger would certainly not die without a struggle, yet there are no signs that anything of that nature took place. Roger seems to have gone down to the chapel to meet somebody. He talked quietly with that person— somebody he was so familiar with that he had infinite trust in them— and suddenly this mysterious unknown pulled a knife and stabbed Roger to the heart. An outsider could not have possibly accomplished this miracle. Only a person with whom Roger had lived— a person in this household— could have done this thing."

He paused and swept a glance about the room. It took in a succession of white faces, uneasy eyes, and fluttering, uncertain hands. Sergeant Colmer's pen raced over the paper. Phillip Barrett was first to speak.

"Convincing enough," he said curtly. "What's the next move?"

Jeffery's voice was quiet. "I want each of you to try and remember every incident of the night of the murder," he said. "What you tell me will remain confidential and you will be questioned separately. If you will go to your rooms, Prater will call you as you are wanted. Miss Jan— would you stay, please? The others are free to go."

"NOW, MISS JAN." Jeffery nodded to the girl who sat alone on the sofa. "There's a few questions I'd like to ask you about your brother Roger."

Jan Rochester inclined her head briefly. "Anything I can do...." she murmured.

"Is it true that your brother was a mental case?" Jeffery made his tone very kind. But the girl glanced up sharply. For a moment she seemed defiant; then with a helpless shrug she relaxed. Her eyes were glued on her fingers clenched in her lap. She nodded slowly.

"You might as well know the truth. Yes, Roger was mentally unbalanced. Only at certain times, you understand. Otherwise he was quite normal. But when these fits were on him he was dangerous, especially towards any person whom he disliked. And he disliked Aunt Beatrice, so much so that once he attacked her with a knife."

Blackburn nodded, his face expressionless. "What was the outcome of that incident?"

"Aunt Beatrice wanted Father to have Roger shut away. But Dad wouldn't hear of it. Aunt was very angry— she said Roger wasn't to be trusted and that he would have to be guarded. She told Dad—that if he didn't do something about it she would." There was an expression of distaste on the girl's face as she spoke. "Aunt said she would give Father a month in which to do something, or she would place the matter in the hands of the police herself."

"When did this attack take place?"

"About a month ago," replied Jan. "It wasn't the first time Roger had vented his spite on Aunt Beatrice. But this attack was serious— Roger threw a knife at her across the table and narrowly missed her face— and we all realized that something must be done very soon. My brother, finding no sympathy for himself among the family, began to whine about a conspiracy among us. He said that we were deliberately plotting to have him locked up so that we could share his money between us."

Jeffery looked interested. "His money? Was your brother a wealthy man?"

"Very much so. You see, Roger is really our stepbrother. Father married when he was very young and his first wife died when Roger was born. That's why Roger is— was— so different from Owen and myself. Roger's mother was extremely wealthy. On her death she left every penny of her money to her son. Later, Father married again. Our own mother was killed in a railway accident when we were children. Aunt Beatrice brought us up." The girl's voice softened. "That might help to explain why Father is sometimes so hard to get on with. He's had more than his share of misfortunes."

Jeffery nodded sympathetically. "How long did these attacks stay with your stepbrother?"

"Sometimes only for a few hours. In this case he was quite well on the following day. He went into Rockwall and bought a large bottle of liniment for Aunt's rheumatism and presented it to her with abject apologies for his behaviour. That's the kind of thing he used to do, so that it was impossible to be angry with Roger for long."

"Morgan mentioned nothing of these things— " began Jeffery, when a gesture from the girl cut him short.

"Rollo knew very little about my stepbrother's attacks," Jan explained. "We did our best to keep them a secret among the family. Luckily there were no guests at the table on the night of the knife-throwing incident. Outsiders looked upon Roger as a rather doddering old ass. They knew nothing of his vile temper and insane rages." She paused and eyed Blackburn rather uncertainly. "But I think Mr. Barrett suspected something about them."

"Barrett? Why?"

"Because of something I heard," said Jan levelly. "I wasn't listening— the door was open and I couldn't help overhearing certain words as I passed. It was about three days ago. I was walking past Roger's room when I heard Mr. Barrett say angrily, 'Sooner or later you'll have to face the responsibility! Why don't you do it like a man?' Then Roger mumbled something I couldn't hear, and Barrett replied, 'You can't go on like this much longer!' Then I was out of hearing." Miss Rochester's charming face was pink. But the eyes that stared into Jeffery's were frank and unwavering.

"When did you last see your stepbrother alive?"

"At the dinner-table," replied Jan. "Mr. Pimlott and myself rose earlier than the others as we wanted to get into the village. Roger was there with the rest of the family. I didn't see him again until..." Her voice faltered and died away. The flush had faded from her cheeks, leaving them unnaturally white.

Jeffery nodded. "That's all, Miss Jan— and thank you."

The girl rose stiffly and walked out. When the door had closed after her, the young man nodded to Pimlott. "Now we'll see Mr. Barrett."

That gentleman made his appearance promptly, so promptly that he had obviously been awaiting the summons. His rugged features were expressionless as he entered and took a seat. There was something assumed in his attitude, a forced lightness, a casualness overdone. He nodded to Blackburn.

"Are the thumbscrews ready, the rack strung, and the boiling oil a-bubble?"

"I sincerely hope such methods will not be necessary," murmured Jeffery amiably. "Mr. Barrett— what can you tell us about last night?"

"In connection with the murder, you mean?"

"Of course."

Barrett pulled out his pipe and began to fill it.

"I can tell you my own movements," he said easily. "Now let me see." He applied a match and puffed blue smoke. "Yes. We started dinner about seven— it was early because Jan wanted to get away. After she'd gone we sat about talking until close on eight-thirty. We then went to the drawing-room, leaving Cornelius, who had come down late to dinner."

"What people went into the drawing-room with you?"

The big man puffed thoughtfully.

"Owen was there, and young Austin with Miss Ward, and Roger. We sat around and tried to make up our minds whether we'd play bridge, then Prater came in to ask whether we'd want supper later on. We all refused, but Roger asked for a glass of milk and went to the kitchen with Prater. A few minutes later he came back, pottered around the room, and crossed to the window. I

remember him saying something about a storm coming up. Then he said he was going to bed and went out of the room."

"Just a moment," interrupted Jeffery. "How was Roger dressed?"

Barrett considered. "Shabby grey suit— the same one he had on when we found him this morning— and a pair of slippers on his feet. I recall him shuffling about the room in them."

Jeffery nodded.

"Well, I must have stayed in the drawing-room until close on quarter past ten. Then, feeling tired, I went upstairs to bed. I knew nothing until Prater called me with a cup of tea this morning. Slept the moment my head touched the pillow."

Mr. Blackburn clicked his tongue.

"Unfortunate," he murmured.

"Meaning," said Barrett imperturbably, "that you have only my bare word that I went to my room." He shrugged amiably. "Sorry, but you can take it or leave it."

"And you know of nothing else which might throw light on the murder?"

"Nothing."

Jeffery picked up a brass paper-knife and turned it over in his fingers.

"Perhaps I can refresh your memory. Can you recall a certain conversation held with Roger some three days ago, when you attempted to point the moral of responsibility making for manliness?"

A pause. Jeffery raised his eyes. Gone was Barrett's nonchalance, the air of bored indifference. It was as though caution had tightened the man's body— he looked smaller, more alert.

"Just what do you mean?" he said slowly.

"Stop playing for time, Barrett," said Jeffery sharply. "You heard me!"

Behind his spectacles, the journalist's eyes were coldly blue— blue with the faintest gleam of red.

"All right," he said thinly. "I'll answer you. That conversation has nothing whatever to do with Rochester's murder. It was a purely private talk which concerned no one but ourselves. I cannot see any possible use in repeating it, even were I willing."

Sergeant Richard Colmer rose to his feet with a movement that suggested clinking of handcuffs. He looked from Barrett to Jeffery, but that young man waved him back into his seat. "You are taking a very foolish attitude, Mr. Barrett," he said stiffly.

The big man got to his feet. Very deliberately he crossed to the fire-place and knocked his pipe out. There was a sluggishness in his movements, almost a weariness. When he turned he spoke through twisted lips.

"You're wasting your time, Blackburn. Why don't you admit that this case has beaten you? This isn't one of your two-and-two-are-four highway robberies. You're up against a criminal with brains this time, and, so far, he's just leading you around by the nose." He thrust his pipe into his pocket and walked from the room. Sergeant Colmer glanced rather curiously at Jeffery, and it was clear he was making certain mental revision. Pimlott frowned portentously.

5: Death Moves At Midnight

(Sunday, March 7th)

WHILE WAITING for Professor Rochester to appear, the thought crossed Jeffery's mind that his cross-examination was scarcely as successful as he had hoped it would be. He began to realize that the people with whom he was dealing would yield more to the influence of the iron hand rather than the velvet glove. Force rather than flattery seemed to be the necessary medium, and he was still cogitating on the matter when Cornelius entered.

The old man was patently nervous. He bustled in, arms gesticulating and coat flapping, like a panic-stricken hen being cornered for the chopping-block. Excuses babbled from his lips as he entered, one hand still clutching the volume of folk-tales.

"It's no use! There's nothing I can tell you, young man. I was in my study until I went to bed. That's all I know about last night." He halted, free hand plucking at his bootlace tie.

Jeffery, lighting a cigarette, made his voice disarmingly casual.

"Last night? Oh— yes, of course. But I want you to go back much farther than last night, Professor. I want you to go back forty years."

Reluctantly Cornelius lowered himself into the seat.

"What do you want to know?" he said.

"We understand," explained Jeffery, "that your first wife left a large amount of money to your eldest son on her death?"

The old man nodded sourly.

"What was the amount?"

"Something like a quarter of a million." replied Rochester.

Mr. Blackburn glanced up sharply.

"I beg your pardon? Did you say that Roger was worth a quarter of a million pounds?"

"No, I didn't!"

Cornelius snapped like an irritable Pekinese.

"I said Roger's mother left him that amount. But there has been all manner of drains on that money. He— he lent me certain sums from time to time."

"I see. And just how much money did your son leave?"

"Between one hundred and one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, I believe," Rochester said.

"My first wife was much older than I." Cornelius avoided the young man's eyes. "She was very rich, the only daughter of an American meat-packer. I met her when I was studying in London, and we were married. Then Roger was

born. It is not true that my wife died at his birth. Our son was nearly ten years of age before my first wife passed away. She left certain sum of money to me, but the bulk of it went to Roger." The thin hard tones faltered. "Roger was— well— different from other children. His mother realized that he was rather handicapped. She loved him very deeply and, because of this, divided her fortune that way. I was appointed trustee for the money until Roger was twenty-one. Then he was free to do whatsoever he pleased with it."

"And you married again?"

"Yes. A few years after the death of my first wife. Owen and Jan were born. While they were still but children, my second wife was killed in a railway accident on the Continent. My sister, Beatrice, brought up the family."

Jeffery nodded.

"And did your eldest son leave a will?"

The old man shook his head.

"I don't think so. He never spoke of doing so. Unless he made one secretly. In that case he would probably lodge it with Miles Pennefather. He handles all our legal business."

Jeffery considered a point.

"Then," he said at length, "if my legal knowledge is not at fault, and your son died intestate, his money must be divided equally among the remaining members of his family?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"Is that the way it goes?" He stood up. "Anything else?"

"Just one thing," said Blackburn. "I understand you have been in this house about ten years, Professor. Can you tell me anything of the former owner?"

"Monkham?" Cornelius blinked at the young man. "Not much. He's supposed to have built the house, but that's a lie! Some portions of this house are hundreds of years old. I believe he built on to the ruins he found here. Even allowing for the fact that Monkham was cracked, not even a raving lunatic would choose this site for a house unless some design was already there."

"And the same thing applies to the chapel, I suppose?"

"I suppose so." Rochester was patently indifferent, his thoughts still in the troubled past. "If you're interested," he added, "there is an old book somewhere in the library giving all the details of the chapel and the altar. Prater knows where it is— he could probably find it for you."

Jeffery nodded. "Thank you, Professor. That's all for the moment, Would you send Dr. Austin in here as you go?"

But Brian Austin, when he appeared, was either unwilling or unable to add to the store of information. He knew nothing of the dolls, save what he had glimpsed of the two which came so mysteriously through the post. (And it was

at this juncture that Blackburn realized that he, of all the people staying at 'Rochester,' was the only individual who had not seen these sinister omens of death.) Austin gave what details he could without rancour. He had come down to Exmoor for a holiday, only to learn that Miss Ward was visiting Jan, whom she had met in London some months before. An invitation had been extended to him. His movements of the night before were a monotonous *ibidem* of the previous witnesses— dinner, drawing-room, and bed. Jeffery, on whom the strain of the over-long day was beginning to tell, halted his inquisition at this point to demand black coffee from the hovering Prater. Fortified by the potent draught, he returned to the questioning of Owen Rochester, next on the list, with renewed vigour though rather shaken optimism.

At first it appeared that Owen would prove as difficult as Phillip Barrett. He refused a seat and stood sullenly by the door, hands thrust in pockets. He seemed a different being from the cheerful young man who had greeted Jeffery at the house twelve hours ago.

"I was entering my room at eleven o'clock last night," he declared in answer to Blackburn's question. "I heard the clock on the landing strike as I opened the door."

Jeffery sighed rather theatrically.

"I might have guessed as much," he murmured. "Go on."

Owen's face darkened.

"It's the truth, anyhow. I left the table with the others and went into the drawing-room. We talked— "

"Yes— yes!" snapped Jeffery. "I know all about that. What time did you leave the room?"

Owen considered broodingly.

"A few minutes after ten-thirty, I think. Barrett asked Miss Ward the time at about quarter past ten and I went out after that. Austin came with me. Miss Ward was reading and wanted to finish a chapter. So we left her in the drawing-room and went straight upstairs to bed."

Jeffery did not speak as he paused. He stood looking at the younger Rochester, his expression quizzical and faintly amused. The silence became strained. Then he said:

"And that's all?"

"That's all," repeated Owen doggedly.

Blackburn crushed out his cigarette in the tray.

"You're a very stupid liar, Rochester," he said calmly.

Owen's hands, abruptly metamorphosed into ugly fists, shot out of his pockets. Hot, angry blood stained his face. His body tensed and he advanced across the room with slow deliberate movements.

"Say that again," he invited.

Cold as chilled steel was Blackburn's voice, hard as chilled steel his eyes.

"I said you were a very stupid liar, my boy. And don't be so damned pukka! You'll find your strong-arm methods won't get you anywhere this time."

"Do you think you can say things like that?" snarled Owen, glowering.

"Then why don't you tell the truth?" barked Jeffery. "You ask me to believe that you left the drawing-room at ten-thirty and entered your bedroom as the clock struck eleven. Accordingly, you took half an hour to walk the length of the passage and up one flight of stairs! Don't be absurd."

Lashed by that frigid scorn, Owen's belligerence died. He swayed a little like a man unsure of his balance. A hot embarrassment painted his cheeks crimson. He shuffled heavy feet and spoke with eyes lowered to the carpet.

"If you must know, I didn't go straight to my room." The words were forced, unwilling. "About half-way along the passage I heard something that sent me back to the drawing-room."

"What sent you back?" Jeffery's tone was coldly interested.

Owen hesitated. His face was rich crimson and he mumbled his words.

"I heard Cam— Miss Ward— cry out as though she were frightened. I knew she was alone in that room, so I hurried back to see what had happened."

"Well?"

Owen rubbed the palms of his hands across his thighs.

"Camilla was sitting in her chair. She wasn't reading— just staring at the window. Her face was white— and frightened. She jumped as I came in. I asked why she had screamed out so suddenly. She said something about a rat running across the floor."

Young Rochester shook his head.

"I know that wasn't true. But I didn't press her— she seemed so nervous and sort of on edge. I stayed with her for about a quarter of an hour. Then, as she seemed all right, I left her again. It was striking eleven when I entered my room."

Jeffery drummed his fingers on the table.

"You think it was something outside the window— something Miss Ward saw there— that frightened her?"

Owen Rochester nodded.

"Yes. I looked at the window as I came into the room, but there was nothing there then."

Jeffery fixed the young man with grave eyes.

"Didn't you say that when you left the room on the first occasion, Austin was with you?"

Owen swallowed something in his throat. He nodded soundlessly. Jeffery pressed on.

"Then, if Miss Ward's frightened scream reached your ears, I take it that Austin also heard it?"

Again that nod. The young man's eyes were sick. But Jeffery was merciless.

"The lady, I understand, is betrothed to Mr. Austin. Wasn't it extraordinary, under those circumstances, that Austin, hearing his fiancée's voice cry out in terror, should deliberately ignore that sound, leaving you, a comparative stranger, to investigate the cause?"

The youngest Rochester son was a study in confusion. Clearly he writhed on the horns of dilemma.

"Dash it all— !" he began explosively, then stopped as Blackburn's eyes bored into his. Something of his old sullenness crept back.

"If you must know," he muttered, "Camilla and Brian had had words during the night. Nothing serious, of course— just one of those things that crop up between every couple. When Brian heard Camilla scream"— and here poor Owen became almost inaudible— "he said something about her putting on an act to attract attention. We— we stood arg— talking about it for a minute or so and then I went back."

"And Austin?"

"I think he went up to his room."

Blackburn nodded to Pimlott, who opened the door and signalled Prater.

"Thank you," he said to Owen. "It will be rather interesting to hear Miss Ward's version of that story." He turned to the butler, who appeared in the doorway. "Prater, would you ask Miss Ward to come along."

From the first moment of her appearance, it was clear that Miss Camilla Ward was prepared to make the most of this opportunity for a little mental sparring with the tall, grey-eyed young man who nodded with bleak politeness at her entrance.

"Should I lift the skirt to reveal the dimpled knee, Mr. Blackburn?" she cooed. "It's so long since I've made the rotogravure section."

For thirty dragging seconds Jeffery stared at her with frozen face, a set and unrelaxing scrutiny that pierced her through and through. And as concentrated sunlight will strip the mists from the earth, so under this silent unwavering examination did Camilla Ward's arrogant control melt and run. She shifted uneasily, while Colmer and Pimlott watched apprehensively. Then Jeffery spoke, slowly, biting, every word a verbal little slap in the face.

"Might I suggest, young lady, that you have the good taste to observe the fundamental decencies of the occasion? Or perhaps you do not realize that your peculiar sense of humour is rather repellent in a home visited by death?"

Camilla Ward's painted lips set like a thin new wound. Her narrowed eyes gleamed greenly. "How dare you?" she whispered. "How dare you?" One small foot drummed the carpet.

The shadow of a smile thawed Blackburn's face.

"Now that we understand each other better, I think we might proceed with the business in hand." He took his stand a few feet away from the girl, his fingers linked behind his back. "I'll ask the questions. You'll answer them."

Tiger before, she was basilisk now. Through tight lips she muttered something that might have been an assent or a malediction.

"Miss Ward— were you down in the kitchen corridor at eleven o'clock last night?"

"I was not?"

"But Prater believes he saw you down there at that time."

The narrowed eyes glinted.

"Then Prater is mistaken," the girl snapped. "I know to what you're referring— Brian told me of some absurd story Prater carried to you about a person in a scarlet raincoat. I was not that person!"

Mr. Blackburn shrugged.

"You possess a scarlet raincoat, I understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you keep it in your room?"

"The raincoat," said Camilla Ward deliberately, "has, for the past week, been hanging in the hall. Everyone in the house knows it is there. Consequently the person whom Prater saw could have been anyone who cared to borrow it for the time."

Behind his back, Jeffery's hands beat a tattoo.

"Then you are prepared to state, on oath, young lady, that it was not you whom Prater saw last night?"

The girl nodded.

Quick as Pouncing cat, the young man's question leapt at her. "Then where were you at eleven o'clock last night?"

A scarlet finger-nail ripped through the chiffon handkerchief she was kneading. Camilla Ward did not look up. Her voice was low.

"Why— I— eleven o'clock, let me see, I was in the drawing-room, reading a novel."

"You had, I presume, almost recovered from your fright by that time," drawled Jeffery.

This brought her head up sharply.

"You know about that?" she whispered. And as he nodded, she added defiantly: "Yes, I'd got over it. It— it wasn't a very bad scare."

"And it wasn't a rat, Miss Ward." Suddenly the young man smiled. "Even Mr. Owen didn't swallow that story. Now, let's make an end to this sparring and be neighbourly. I'm only trying to find out the truth."

The truce was not accepted wholeheartedly, for the girl's tone was still sullen with wounded pride.

"No," she said. "It wasn't a rat. But I was afraid to tell Owen the truth. He would have wanted to rouse the whole house and make a search. It would have seemed ridiculous to cause such a disturbance, especially as, after the first shock, I was inclined to think it all my imagination."

Jeffery said patiently: "What did you think you saw outside the window?"

Camilla Ward drew a long breath. "It was a face," she whispered. "A horrible face, that peered in at me and then vanished!"

"A FACE, Miss Ward? What kind of face?" asked Jeffery.

She drew on her cigarette.

"I can't say— exactly. I glimpsed it for a few seconds only. It was pressed against the window, looking into the room. I screamed and it disappeared."

Jeffery was gently insistent.

"But surely you could describe it?"

The girl was silent for a moment.

"It seemed swarthy and wrinkled," she said at length. "But it was like no other face I've ever seen." She made a little helpless gesture. "You can't compare a thing when there's no standard of comparisons."

"I see." Jeffery nodded. "And what time would this be?"

Again she considered.

"Owen left the room at half past ten. This happened a few minutes after he went— say five minutes at the outside. I was reading, when something suddenly urged me to look up." She gave a shudder. "And there was this— thing staring at me through the glass! When I screamed Owen came running back."

"Just one more question, Miss Ward. Why didn't you tell Mr. Owen the truth about what had frightened you?"

She blew little agitated puffs of smoke.

"I've told you. I wasn't quite sure what I'd seen. And I didn't want Owen to rouse the house— "

"You didn't want the house roused, eh?" Blackburn strode across and stabbed a forefinger at her. "That's the whole truth! Now— why didn't you want the house roused at that hour?"

"I've told you— "

Blackburn waved aside her whispered echo.

"Now, I'll tell *you*! You didn't want the house roused at that hour because you had something to do late last night! Something secretive! And if the people were roused, all chance of secrecy would be destroyed!" He stepped closer, towering over her and his words rapped like knuckles on hard wood. "Miss Ward— *what was it you wanted to do before midnight last night?*"

The smoking cigarette snapped like a dry twig between suddenly clenched fingers. Camilla Ward jumped to her feet, and for a moment it seemed she would spring like a wild beast. Her face, twisted by hatred and rage, was like a Gorgon's head, at which Pimlott and Colmer gaped in frozen amazement. She faced Jeffery, breath coming in long shuddering gasps.

"Damn you!" She spat the words in his face. "How dare you abuse me like a common pickpocket? How dare you— you— you *swine!*"

She almost ran across the room and the slam of the heavy door reverberated around the room.

There was a stunned silence, a pregnant hush that follows the passing of the whirlwind. Sergeant Colmer lowered himself into his chair.

"I say..." he began, and licked his lips.

Pimlott took off his glasses, wiped them very deliberately and set them on his sharp nose.

Mr. Blackburn lit a cigarette.

"Do you know," he said complacently, "I don't think the Chief Inspector himself could have handled that any better!"

"And so to bed," announced Mr. Pimlott.

Jeffery shook his head.

"Brightly burns the midnight oil for some time yet," he said. "We must get these records typed and filed tonight."

"Then I'm staying," said Pimlott. Abruptly he swung round. "We've forgotten Prater!"

Blackburn was crossing the room.

"Far from it," he said. "Prater has been in my mind all night." He raised his hand and jerked at the bell-rope. "I had a special reason for saving our most important witness until last."

He came back and dropped half an inch of cigarette ash in the tray on the table.

"Do you know, Pimlott, if any of those seats in the chapel have been moved this past week?"

The little detective shook his head.

"Fraid I can't help you there," he admitted. "I had never set foot inside that chapel until this morning. Know nothing whatever about it." His face brightened. "Prater will probably be able to tell you, though."

As if waiting for the cue, a soft knock came at the door. It opened and the butler's tall figure was revealed.

"Come in," invited Blackburn.

Prater closed the door behind him and walked to a chair indicated by the young man.

"You wanted me, sir?" said the old man.

"Just a few questions," said Jeffery cheerfully. "The first concerns those footprints across the mud-patch outside the chapel. I understand you were first on the scene to ring the bell. Did you walk across that patch, Prater?"

The butler shook his bald head.

"No, sir. The bell is built into one side of the chapel wall. I approached it from another direction altogether."

"Oh!" Jeffery pursed his lips. "And, Prater— is it right that you act as valet to Professor Rochester?"

"In a minor capacity— yes, sir. I keep an eye on Mr. Rochester's clothes and lay out the changes of garments for him. Sometimes, if he is in a hurry, I help him to dress."

Jeffery inclined his head.

"I see. Such as changing various articles from one suit to another?"

Prater nodded in turn.

"Yes, sir."

Blackburn took from his pocket a small leather-bound notebook, flicked the pages and glanced at a pencilled line. He spoke without raising his eyes.

"I understand, Prater, that you called for the mail at Rockwall twice a week?"

The butler murmured an acquiescence.

"Then I take it you also posted any mail going out from this house?"

The grey fringe bobbed.

"Now— among the mail which has left this house during the past month, can you recall a long official envelope?"

"No, sir." Prater's reply was prompt. "No such envelope has passed through my hands for some months. But if you are thinking of Mr. Roger's will, I believe there was one in existence, although it was not posted from this house. I believe Mr. Roger made a will about three weeks ago, sir."

Jeffery looked up.

"Why should you think that?"

A gentle smile dawned on the servant's grey face.

"Why, sir, everything indicated it. A few days before, Mr. Roger had quarrelled with the family. The day following this disturbance he rang for me— it was late in the evening— and told me to tell the Girt couple to see him when

they arrived in the morning. Later, the Girts told me that Mr. Roger had asked them to witness his signature at the foot of a document." Prater made a little gesture. "Everything seemed to point to Mr. Roger having made a will."

"Did you mention this to any of the family?"

A slight hauteur crept into the other's Voice.

"No, sir. It was not my business."

Again Jeffery consulted his note-book.

"I want to check over the chronology of this business with you," he said at length. He thumbed a page. "Now, listen carefully:

"Twelve months ago, a number of dolls are given to Professor Rochester. Three months ago, these dolls are sought but cannot be found. Two months later— which brings us to a month ago— Roger quarrels with the family and makes a will."

"Quite right, sir."

"Now, last Tuesday week— twelve days ago— the first of the dolls arrive, this one being the mannikin of Miss Beatrice. On Friday night she falls from the stairs and is killed. Last Tuesday the second of the dolls arrive. Four days later Roger is found murdered." He shut the book and slipped it into his pocket.

"Which brings us to last night, Prater. And also to a rather interesting detail." He spaced his words. "You hated Roger, didn't you?"

The servant's white fingers crept to his mouth. He glanced sharply at the young man, then spoke with lowered gaze.

"Hated him, sir? I— I don't understand."

Jeffery's words were as weighted as the swing of a pendulum.

"You hated Roger! *Why?*"

Prater's fingers, clenched on his chest, writhed like waking serpents.

"You're— you're mistaken, sir. I— I..." His voice trembled, died away. He watched Blackburn with frantic eyes. That young man folded his arms deliberately.

"Listen, my man. I don't have to remind you that you are in an extremely dangerous position. You had the key of the chapel in your possession during the interval in which the crime was committed. On your own admission, you have shown you had access to the museum keys held by Professor Rochester. And you handed to Roger the last drink he took upon this earth. Add to this the fact that you hated Roger deeply— and refuse to say why. Finally, your rooms are in the rear of the house— you would have easy access to the chapel and the chances of your being seen are greatly reduced by the position of your rooms. Don't you see the net that you're weaving for yourself?"

A greenish tinge, like damp on a sunless wall, crept slowly over the servant's face. His eyes had that puckered, watery appearance of a child about to burst into tears. He cringed back in his chair, licking his dry lips.

Jeffery stared at him.

"Say— -Just say, Prater— that you borrowed a drug from Dr. Austin's medicine chest and dropped it in that milk. And you carried Roger's unconscious body across that mud-patch, let yourself into the chapel with the key and murdered the drugged man. No sign of struggle, because an unconscious man cannot fight. Then you returned, leaving that to-and-fro track in the clay, and put the key on the nail. But you realize that you must have some alibi. And so you fake a story involving a member of the household. And when that person makes indignant denial, you fall back on the excuse of your weak sight! Even so, your alibi is comparatively safe, since its chief feature is a red raincoat— a raincoat which you know hangs in the hall within reach of any— "

"Stop, sir— stop!" Prater had risen to his feet, trembling as some gnarled old tree torn by vindictive winds. "Oh, you're wrong— wrong!" His distress was pitiable. He thrust out one quivering hand as though it might check those searing, stabbing words. Then he sank back into his chair. "I've— I've told you everything— everything except— "

"Ah!" said Blackburn.

Prater raised haggard eyes.

"It isn't much, sir. Something so trivial that I had almost forgotten about it. And as it concerned another person in this house— -"

"Cut out the palaver," interrupted Blackburn curtly. "What is it?"

The old man's voice was steadier now.

"As I told you, sir, I went to bed a little after eleven o'clock last night. I was tired, but it has been my habit to read a few pages before settling down to sleep. Last night I must have dozed off with the book still in my hand. I wasn't fast asleep, if you understand, sir— just on the borderline. And it seemed that, after a while, I could hear voices and furtive movements outside. They seemed part of my dream and yet too real to be fantasy. There was a man's voice, and although the others spoke in whispers this man's voice was raised occasionally. The voices stopped. Some time later I woke up, to find the light blazing into my eyes. It was then shortly after midnight. The place was silent as a grave. But my dream— if it was a dream— had been so vivid that I opened the door and looked outside. There was nothing to be seen. I came back, switched off the light and fell asleep immediately. When I awoke this morning it was all confused. I could not tell dream from reality. So I decided to say nothing about

it, sir." Prater returned Blackburn's hard stare unflinchingly. "And that's the truth, sir— so help me God."

A pause.

"You said that this story concerned another member of this house, Prater," said Jeffery. "Do you mean that, in this half-dream, you recognized a voice?"

The servant nodded. "The man's voice, sir."

"And it was— ?"

"It sounded very like the voice of Mr. Barrett." Prater said quietly.

Again that pause. Jeffery eyed the servant keenly for a moment, then, turning, walked across to the table and crushed his cigarette-end in the ash-tray. Prater watched him as a show dog watches its trainer. Then the young man turned.

"I cannot say, Prater, that this latest story strengthens my belief in your veracity," he said coldly. "Again you have sought to avoid the main issue by a rather rambling account that seeks to embroil a second party. Again, your story is not consequential enough to constitute direct evidence. With it, as with your story of the scarlet raincoat, you have left yourself a wide loophole of escape should the account be denied or proven false."

Prater's face was wooden.

"I have told the truth, sir. I can do no more than that."

Jeffery ignored the interpolation.

"I feel I must warn you, Prater, that you will be called upon to give a much more comprehensive account of your movements to the Chief Inspector. He will be down here with his detectives tomorrow." The young man's tone was grim. "For your own sake, I would advise you to be frank with him. Otherwise you will find yourself in a difficult and rather painful position." He gave a gesture of dismissal. "That's all, Prater. You can go now."

The servant rose. His tone was almost beseeching.

"But, sir, I have told— "

"That is all, Prater!" Jeffery turned his back on the old man. The servant gulped, a broken, sobbing sound, and walked from the room.

Blackburn watched him go, a queer indeterminate expression on his face. Then he smothered a yawn and, turning, glanced at the clock.

"Ten-thirty," he murmured. He rubbed his hands. "Now— to work. The sooner we get these statements typed and checked, the sooner we sleep."

Sergeant Colmer rose, screwing the cap on his fountain-pen. He nodded to the writing-pad by his side.

"I think I've got it all, sir. Don't know if you'll be able to read my shorthand back, though."

"That's your job," announced Jeffery. "Pimlott— can you work a typewriter?"

The little man shook his head regretfully. "No," he said. "But we can get Morgan— "

But Jeffery cut him short. "There's no need to get Rollo out of bed at this time of the night," he said shortly. "I'll type at the Sergeant's dictation. And someone will have to check through and number the sheets."

"I'll do that," said Pimlott eagerly.

Jeffery glanced around the room, shading his eyes from the glare of the light.

"Much too bright," he said. "There's a portable stand-lamp in the library that we can use very well. Small use ruining our eyes." He turned to Pimlott. "Would you bring Morgan's typewriter from his study?"

Pimlott nodded and went.

Blackburn looked at Sergeant Colmer.

"Anything you want?"

"Well— I could do with my pipe," the young man admitted. "Haven't had a smoke— "

"Better get it now," Jeffery interrupted. "We don't want to be disturbed once we get started."

Ten minutes later Jeffery returned, carrying a hand-lamp and a coil of flex. He found Pimlott tapping aimlessly at the space-bar of a typewriter. As he was plugging the light to the extension cord, Colmer returned, stuffing a briar pipe from an oilskin pouch. Blackburn set the lamp on the small table, gestured to Pimlott to carry the typewriter across, and sat down before it. He danced his fingers over the keys and nodded.

"Rather out of practice— still, I'll pass." He pushed over the writing-pad and screwed a sheet of paper into the machine. "You dictate, Sergeant, and Pimlott can collect the typewritten sheets for checking. You'd better sit by that centre table, Pimlott, under the hanging lamp."

And so they set to work.

The minutes ticked by. The brisk clatter of the typewriter filled the room, a staccato obbligato to Sergeant Colmer's slow deliberate tones. From time to time this unhurried level of sound would be broken as Blackburn paused to insert a fresh slip of paper into the machine. Pimlott made regular trips between typewriter and table, and the stack of papers by his side fattened. The clock struck eleven— quarter past— half past. Jeffery, in the act of changing the paper, looked up to see Pimlott, spectacles in hand, wiping his eyes rather sheepishly. The private detective caught the other's inquiring glance and nodded wryly.

"You're certainly right about this strong light. It plays old Harry with your eyes. Must be the close lines of type— but I've got a splitting headache."

"Slip off to bed," said Jeffery kindly. "We'll finish this work."

The young man should have known Trevor Pimlott better than to suggest such, a thing. The little man shook his head stubbornly.

"I'll stick it," he said doggedly. "I've a pair of special reading-glasses in my den. I'll ask Prater to bring them down."

He rose determinedly, and crossing the room jerked at the bell-rope. Jeffery shrugged and returned to his work. The typewriter chattered afresh. A minute passed, during which time Pimlott prowled the room, muttering to himself. He tugged at the bell-rope again.

"Where is that fellow?" he demanded.

Jeffery raised his eyes from his work.

"Prater's probably fast asleep," he murmured.

"Then I'll get them myself." Pimlott strode across the room and swung the door open. "Seems a mighty poorly run house— " This grumbling tone broke, to be replaced by sharpness. "Ah! There you are, Prater. Come on, man! I've rung twice for you!"

The butler's reply was an unintelligible mutter drowned in the clatter of the typewriter. But Pimlott cut him short.

"All right— all right! I want you to get my reading spectacles. They're in a black-leather case on the chest of drawers in my room."

He closed the door and reseated himself at the table.

"Surly brute, that butler," he grunted. "Suppose he'll come back with the excuse that he couldn't find them."

But in this estimate of Prater's character he was wrong. A few minutes later a soft knock sounded above the noise of the typewriter. Pimlott rose, opened the door. Jeffery, who had paused in his work, heard him give a grunt of thanks. He returned clasping a small leather case, from which he extracted a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. These he fitted in place, picking up a sheet of paper and scanning it.

"Much better," announced Mr. Pimlott and, harmony restored, the trio again settled down to work.

At length the task was finished. Jeffery pulled the last sheet from the machine. Sergeant Colmer tossed his pad on the table and, crossing to the divan, sat down and lit his pipe. Pimlott took the last slip of paper, corrected a typing error, inscribed a neat numeral in the corner, and placed the sheet on the pile.

"There!" he announced. It was the tone of one who battled adversity and triumphed.

Blackburn rose and stretched himself, his face grey with fatigue. He glanced at the tall clock. The gesturing hands were close to midnight. A shuddering yawn racked his body from head to foot.

"Gosh," he breathed. "I could sleep for— " But a second yawn swallowed his words.

Sergeant Colmer, from the divan, said curiously:

"Isn't it quiet?"

"Yes," said Jeffery. It was a gentle whisper that sighed about the room.

Pimlott was making much ado about changing his spectacles. Now he slipped the case into his pocket.

"I'm going to bed," he announced. His tone was that of one desperately whistling in the dark.

Jeffery grinned tightly.

"Better take a candle with you, Pimlott. If the Bard of Avon is to be believed, 'tis now the hour when hell itself breathes out, when men do such bitter business as the day would quake to look upon."

"I don't want— " began Pimlott.

The words died on his lips, for at that moment the clock gave a dry metallic whirr like some robot stirring to life. Three heads shot round at the sound, three pairs of eyes stared. The hands were folded one, on the other. It was midnight.

And, as they watched, the small door above the painted dial flew open and out upon its platform danced the marionette of death. But it was not this bizarre little figure that held the startled gaze of the three men and caused Trevor Pimlott to whisper dryly:

"God! Look! Look there!"

They all saw it. Slung carelessly across the shoulders of the wooden mannikin was another tiny figure, an effigy fashioned with amazing skill. Even as they started forward, this little doll overbalanced and fell to the carpet with a soft thud. They were at the spot in one bound, staring down with horrified eyes. There was no need to seek identification. It was the carved model of Michael Prater, and through the back of the doll a two-inch nail had been thrust.

Pimlott's voice, a high, shrill treble, quavered through the room:

"What does it mean? *What does it mean?*"

A deep sonorous tone answered him, the first of the twelve chimes. They echoed about the silent corridors like muffled drums beating out the passing of a human soul.

IT WAS too much. Nerves, strained tighter than fiddle-strings, snapped at that sight. Trevor Pimlott went first. He sank weakly into a chair, his face pallid, his body quivering like jelly. He opened his mouth to speak, but no speech came, only a rusty cackle that changed to a laugh and climbed to the wavering crescendo of hysteria. Sitting there, shaking with helpless mirthless laughter, his glasses askew and his body limp like a bag of wash, there was something pitiable and unnerving about the man. Jeffery strode forward, and gripping his shoulders shook him until the spectacles dropped from his nose. Miraculously, this sobered the little man. The ugly laughter broke on its high note, the insane grin vanished from his face. He sank back in his chair, twitching, sucking in the air with greedy gulps.

"I say," began Sergeant Colmer. "I say!"

Blackburn ignored him, standing over Pimlott. "Pull yourself together, man," he said sharply. "Come on! Get a grip on yourself!"

A pale colour was creeping into the other's wan face. He bent and groped for his glasses, avoiding Jeffery's eyes. Finding them, he set them on his nose and blinked. His voice was husky with terror.

"I'm getting out of this place! *Tonight!* Rochester first— now Prater? Who's next? It might be any of us— it might be *me!*" His voice tensed and he stood up. "I didn't bargain for anything like this when I took the job on. This isn't an investigation! It's witchcraft— and bloody, black witchcraft at that!"

Blackburn eyed him keenly for a moment, then turned away. He moved to the clock and picked up the doll from the carpet. It was about five inches long and every detail of the living model had been transferred to the mannikin with uncanny accuracy. So lifelike was it that Jeffery could not repress a shudder as he realized what its sudden appearance foreboded, his face set like a rock. Thrusting the doll into his pocket, he swung round on his companions.

"Come on. We must see Prater. *And pray God that we're not too late!*"

The dimly lit corridor with its solitary weak electric globe at one end loomed uninvitingly before them. Pimlott, between his companions, walked like a man approaching quicksand. They paced the corridor in silence, and a few moments later stood outside the door of Prater's bedroom. The yellow light threw their shadows, distorted, grotesque, on the opposite wall.

"We— we'd better stick together," muttered Pimlott. He moved closer to Sergeant Colmer. "Something wrong here. We'll take a look!"

He grasped the handle of the door, turned it and pushed. The stout oak gaped but did not open. Jeffery set his weight against a panel and heaved. With a crash the door flew wide. At the same time a tall dark object fell forward and thudded to the floor.

Pimlott gave a half-choked whimper.

Plain in the light of the electric bulb they recognized the body of Michael Prater. He stared up at them with a surprised, cod-fish expression of popping eyes and amazed dropping jaw. It was as though, in that last moment, he had recognized his murderer and death had stamped the features with his witless amazement.

Jeffery bent and turned the body over, to recoil with unclean hands. Between the servant's shoulder-blades a knife was buried to the hilt.

JEFFERY'S labours to gain a handhold on this killing were as the labours of Penelope, a sleepless errand that sapped his already drowsing brain. No one knew anything— no one could offer advice or aid. The family and guests, summoned from their beds, half-clad, tousled, weary-eyed, stared with incredulous horror at the latest work of the fiend. Their faces seen in that half-light, were like masks of the damned from the Inferno's inner circle. Camilla Ward gave a soundless little gasp and dropped to the floor. Professor Rochester wrinkled his face and cried, the weak futile tears of a terror-stricken old man, horrible to look upon. Jan Rochester walked like one in the grip of nightmare, scarcely aware of brother Owen's protecting arm about her shoulders. Rollo Morgan and Dr. Austin had that dazed look of shell-shocked men. Philip Barrett's teeth were clenched on his empty pipe, his jaw muscles standing out like cords. Mr. Pimlott was being quietly sick into his handkerchief among the veiling shadows of the corridor.

Had any of them left their beds that night? Like marionettes they shook their heads. Had they heard any sound? Again that speechless negative. Jeffery, nerves rasped raw by weariness, and the thought of Read's comment, shouted at them. This man had been murdered not later than a half-hour ago— where were they during that time? Like sheep they stared at him. Like sheep they huddled together. Blackburn brought from his pocket the mannikin of the butler, shook it in their faces.

"See this! It was placed in the clock some time before the party had gathered in the living-room. One of you put it there! Who was it? Why?"

Professor Rochester sniffled, wiped the back of his hand across his nose like a caned schoolboy.

Dr. Austin, bending over the fainting Camilla, muttered with dumb irrelevance:

"Got to get this girl to bed."

"Get back to bed— the lot of you!" yelled Jeffery, dignity shredded with nervous exhaustion. "And sleep soundly, by God, for tomorrow..."

He waved them away. Without a word they went.

Blackburn beckoned to Sergeant Colmer.

"Take the car," he ordered. "Go into Rockwall, get the Chief Inspector on the 'phone and tell him there's been another murder. Tell him to get down here in the morning— "

Colmer's eyes popped.

"But, sir, I can't order— "

"Tell him," Jeffery snapped, "that if he isn't down here by ten o'clock, I'm walking out. That's all! Now go!"

And Sergeant Colmer went.

With Pimlott's help, Jeffery lifted the body of Prater back into his room and deposited it on the bed. Then he locked the door and dropped the key into his pocket.

"I'm going to bed," he said curtly. "You'd better do the same. And make yourself scarce before the Chief arrives tomorrow."

"I'm going," said Pimlott fervently. "I'm going. I wouldn't stay in this house..."

And Jeffery left him mumbling to himself. He climbed the stairs to his room, threw off his clothes and fell like a log on to the bed. Once more silence reigned over Rochester House.

6: Camilla Ward Is Contrite

(Monday, March 8th)

Jeffery awoke shortly after twelve o'clock. He sat up, yawned, and glanced at his wrist-watch. With an ejaculation of dismay he leapt for the shower. Twenty minutes later, bathed, dressed, and shaved, he went downstairs. In the hall he encountered Detective Connolly. This big moon-faced Irishman had worked with Blackburn on previous cases, and as they shook hands:

"Nice mess you've got yourself into here," said Connolly

"Nice mess I've got you into," corrected Jeffery with a grin. "How's the old gentleman taking it?"

"Like an armless man with the hives." The detective gestured towards the living-room. "He's in there now— going over your reports of the case."

Jeffery nodded and entered the room. The Chief Inspector was sitting at the table, spectacles on his nose, conning the typewritten sheets. He glanced up as the young man entered.

"Chief!" Jeffery came across and grasped Read's hand. "Jove, but it's good to see you again! You're positively manna from heaven and dew upon thirsty plains."

The big man eyed him grimly. "Yesterday, over the telephone, I was a— "

"Yesterday," said Jeffery apologetically, "I was a different man. A man groaning under the weight of responsibility, a being nervous, distraught, rattled— "

"And what about me?" The Chief Inspector flicked the typewritten pages with the back of his hand. "I've seen nothing crazier than this outside of the mirror house at Blackpool! It doesn't make sense anywhere."

The young man became serious.

"It seems to me Chief, that our stumbling-block is lack of motive. Why was Roger murdered? And why Prater?"

Read tossed the report on the table.

"Oh, we know why Prater was killed," he said with suspicious casualness.

"You do? Why?"

The Chief Inspector rose.

"Come along to Prater's room," he said. "There's something there that might interest you."

As they made their way to the rear of the house, the big man produced a key.

"Picked your pocket while you slept." he explained. "And I took the keys of the museum and the chapel."

They passed through the green-baize door and Jeffery, with a little grimace, glanced about that narrow corridor, gloomy even in broad daylight. Halting before Prater's room, Read turned the key and opened the door.

The room was just as Jeffery had seen it some hours previously, except that the body had been removed. It was a small apartment, with a single bed along one wall, a chest of drawers at its side, and a wardrobe fitting into the corner. The only other pieces of furniture were a small table and a chair pushed back from it. A curtained window gave a view of the grounds.

"Come here," said Read. He gestured to the table.

The surface was covered with American cloth. On this was an inkstand with pens, a silver watch ticking fussily, four books supported by metal ends, and a large blotter. The Chief Inspector lifted this to reveal a sheet of notepaper, obviously a half-finished letter, for the white expanse was covered with a dozen scrawled lines.

"Just as we found it," he explained. "Seems as though this butler slid the note under the blotter to hide it. When you read those lines you'll understand."

He picked up the note and thrust it under Jeffery's nose.

The young man glanced at it, idly at first, then with quickened interest. The lines began abruptly with no mode of address and they finished half-way through a word. Jeffery read:

"What has happened in this house tonight makes it impossible for me to remain silent any longer. The police suspect me. Therefore I will give you exactly twelve hours to think over what I have said. If by ten-thirty tomorrow you have not told the police, I will give them the full story of how I saw Mr. Roger push Miss Beatrice from the stairs and, in conse— "

The letter finished on the half-written word.

"Whew...!" Whistled Mr. Blackburn. "So that's what Prater was hiding? It also explains his hatred of Roger. And he was murdered to close his mouth! Then the deaths of these three people are connected."

"Looks that way, doesn't it?" Read took the letter, folded it carefully and placed it in his wallet. "But look here— if Roger killed this woman, he be the one to fear Prater's tongue. Yet Roger was murdered himself. Or was he killed in revenge? In that case, why not let Prater talk and have the law take its course?"

Blackburn's eyes were thoughtful.

"Now, why in the name of sin should that letter be hidden under the blotter?"

"Obviously because Prater didn't want the murderer to find it." The Chief Inspector eyed the younger man curiously. "You aren't the only one with a corner in this deduction business," he grunted. "This is how I see it. Prater was writing a most important letter, a letter on which his very life depended. We know that he was interrupted. Consequently, only one thing could have happened. He must have been murdered before he could write the last lines."

Jeffery shook his head.

"Aren't you forcing your conclusions a little? We know Prater was alive last night at half past eleven. Pimlott rang for him. I remember he was a long time coming. Isn't it possible that he could have been writing the letter then— and our call interrupted him?"

"I don't agree," Read objected. "That letter was too important. If Prater had been called out of this room, he would either have taken the letter with him or locked it in a drawer. He wouldn't have left it under a blotter where a chance visitor might have found it."

"Then what did happen?"

The Chief Inspector folded his arms.

"I believe that after Prater left you he came back here and started that letter. He was interrupted by a knock on the door. Quickly he slipped the letter under the blotter and went to open the door." The big man's voice slowed. "But he never came back. And the letter remained as we found it this morning."

Jeffery shrugged.

"Sounds logical," he murmured. "Anyhow, that angle is comparatively unimportant. The most significant thing in that letter is the fact that someone else in this house knew the truth about Aunt Beatrice. What a pity Prater couldn't have left us some indication who it was."

He turned to look at the doorway, with the dark stain near the threshold. The grim sight recalled something to his mind.

"Where did the knife come from this time, Chief? It wasn't one of the set from the museum."

Read shook his head.

"From the kitchen, this time. A carver. The M.O.'s got it at the moment. He'll hand it on to the boys for prints." There was dull foreboding in his voice. "Not that we expect anything from that source!"

"You've seen the knife that killed Roger?"

"That's being dusted, too," said Read curtly.

Jeffery lit a cigarette.

"A carver, eh? Doesn't get us very far. Anyone could have picked it up from the kitchen." He looked up. "You've groomed the staff?"

"What there is," said the Chief Inspector disgustedly. "Those gypsy women are as tricky as a hatful of moneys! I had to question the old woman through the daughter. They heard nothing, of course. Asleep at ten o'clock last night, they say."

There was a pause. Jeffery blew a smoke-ring. "Note anything peculiar about these two murders?"

Read glared.

"Say— are you being funny! Peculiar— !

"One special peculiarity, I mean," said Jeffery hastily. "Both men were stabbed with knives. But here's the point. Prater, if we revert to your theory, must have risen to open the door to the murderer. He would be facing the killer. Yet he was stabbed in the back."

He paused, but the other did not speak.

"Now Roger, whose body was facing away from the chapel doors, was stabbed in the chest! Taking the facts as we know them, it would seem that the reverse should have happened. Roger should have been stabbed in the back and Prater in the chest."

The Chief Inspector moved towards the door with Blackburn at his heels.

"Gosh, son," he exclaimed, "don't go manufacturing fresh mysteries! We're up to our teeth as it is." He re-locked the door of Prater's room and pocketed the key. "By the way, that bladder of lard old Rochester lost, turned up this morning."

"Where did you find it?"

"In one of the outhouses. The boys combed the place pretty thoroughly this morning and this was one of the first things that came to light."

"Find any muddy shoes?"

Read's expression was morose.

"Thinking of those footprints in front of the chapel, eh? A grand wash-out! The Professor's brilliant idea in laying the matting across, so that his parishioners could walk dry-shod, ruined the impressions completely. They were so trodden out of shape you couldn't tell if a dinosaur had made them!"

"But whoever wore those shoes must have put them somewhere," the other pointed out.

"I'll tell you where they put them," Read said savagely. "In the outhouse, where they found that pretty curio, there's a furnace as big as the fires of Baal. Kept going night and day to supply hot water to the house. You could destroy your mother-in-law in that incinerator without anyone being the wiser!"

Jeffery sighed.

"Professor Rochester's demon seems to be carefully watching over his own," he murmured. "Did you find anything in the chapel?"

The Chief Inspector glanced at his wrist-watch.

"The boys are going through that now. But don't hope for too much. Whoever worked this thing isn't leaving any visiting-cards."

His companion's thoughts seemed elsewhere. As they came out into the hall:

"I suppose there's no doubt about that letter being Prater's handwriting?" Jeffery said.

"Not the slightest," the big man returned. "It's the only definite thing in this business. We not only compared it with other documents found in Prater's room, but three members of the family also identified the writing."

Jeffery nodded.

"Were they surprised at the information about Beatrice's death?"

"They seemed so." Read gnawed his moustache. "Yet not as much as you'd expect. They all appear so dazed that it looks as if nothing short of an earthquake would stir them. You still stick to your notion that it's someone in this house, son?"

"That," said Mr. Blackburn, "is the only thing I am positive about in the whole crazy mess."

And at that moment the gong sounded for lunch.

ON HIS WAY to the luncheon-room, Jeffery passed the room lately occupied by Trevor Pimlott. It brought to him the fact that he had not seen the private detective that morning, so he paused and knocked on the door. It was opened by a thick-set, heavy-featured man with a cast in his right eye. He was dressed in a brown overall over moleskin trousers. He carried a broom in his hand.

"Sorry," said Jeffery. "I was looking for Mr. Pimlott." The man touched his forehead. "Gorn away, 'e has, sir. Lef' early this morning."

"Oh," said Jeffery. "And you are...?"

"Name o' Girt, sir. Wife 'n' me are hired couple. Miss Jan, she ask us t' stay on seein' as what's 'appened to Mr. Prater, sir." He waved a brown and horny hand about the room. "Jus' bin a-doin' the cleaning."

The young man nodded and studied Girt interestedly.

"If I remember correctly, it was your wife and yourself who witnessed a document for Mr. Roger some weeks ago?"

The hired man nodded. Yes— he remembered it all right. Matter of some four weeks ago because, the day before, their niece Minnie had come to stay with them. No— Girt could not say what the document was. It had been

covered with a sheet of blotter, all except three dotted lines at the bottom. Mr. Roger had written his name on the top line and the Girts had added theirs beneath. No— Mr. Roger had not said anything, but he had looked very pleased. He had given them a florin for their trouble.

Jeffery thanked the man and continued on his way. So Prater was right. Roger had made a will. Then where was it now? If, as Prater said, it was in the hands of the family lawyer, the sooner the investigators had a peep at the contents the better. Roger was a wealthy man. Was his money the mainspring behind the dark machinery of this plot? Blackburn made a mental note to speak to the Chief Inspector as soon as possible.

Decency commanded that Jeffery lunch with the Rochester group, though the young man was not looking forward to the meal. He was relieved when, on entering the luncheon-room, he found Barrett and Morgan the only members present. He nodded and came forward. The two men greeted him civilly; indeed, they seemed anxious to avoid all mention of the tragedies.

Austin, he was informed, was taking lunch with Miss Ward in her room, and Jan, Owen, and Professor Rochester were eating together in the girl's room. Conversation flowed sluggishly between the trio for some minutes, then lapsed into monosyllables and finally died completely.

The meal continued in silence. Bianca waited upon them, her dusky face inscrutable. No one had much appetite. After ten minutes Barrett rose to his feet with a muttered excuse and retired. His departure lifted some restraint between the two friends. Rollo set down his tea-cup and looked at Blackburn with eyes clouded with anxiety.

"This is plain hell," he said. "Where's it all going to end, Jeff?"

Blackburn shrugged.

"I'm not a magician, old man. I've never known such a case. Every strand we lay hold of leads to a more tangled knot. If only these people would be frank with us it would help enormously, But they won't! Take Barrett, for instance. What's he keeping so secret? And that Ward girl— and Professor Rochester! They're all hiding something. Surely they realize that they're playing right into this murderer's hands by keeping silent!"

Rollo whispered:

"You think one of these four people is the"— his tongue faltered over the word and he went on— "is responsible for these murders?"

Jeffery smiled a little, but his voice was grave.

"Please believe me, old chap, when I tell you that so far I can't see the faintest glimmer of light." He rose from the table. "If you expect lightning deductions and dramatic 'there-stands-the-killer' denouements, I'm afraid

you'll be terribly disappointed. The thing requires as much spade-work as brain work. Until the former is over I can take a quiet vacation."

He left the room and almost collided with the Chief Inspector, on whose florid cheeks scarlet danger signals were flying.

"Ah, there you are," he announced.

"I can see no possible use in denying it," murmured the young man. "But why the touch of spleen, Chief?"

Read swallowed something, tucked the young man's arm in his own and marched him to the foot of the staircase. There he released him, gave a hurried glance around and, delving into his pocket, brought out a small object. He handed it to his companion. Jeffery examined it.

The object was a tiny silver-plated cigarette lighter, slender as a powder compact. One flat side held a tiny watch, the glass broken and the mechanism stopped. The hands pointed to quarter past seven. On the other side were two initials, C. W., elaborately engraved.

Jeffery raised questioning eyes.

"Donlin found it," the other said shortly. "Found it in the chapel a few minutes ago. It had fallen between the floorboards just inside the door. Notice the time— seven-fifteen?"

Blackburn nodded. "Camilla Ward's property, of course. But how long has it lain in its hiding-place?" He answered his own question. "Not long— there's scarcely any dust on it. And the fair Camilla admitted to shunning the chapel except when the Professor and civility called. So it looks as if the lady was in the sanctuary quite recently. But why?"

"That," said the Chief Inspector grimly, "Is what we're going to discover before we're many minutes older. Come on, son. Lead the way to this Ward girl's room."

"She's in bed," murmured Jeffery, as they climbed the stairs.

"I don't care if she's in the bath!" Read's moustache bristled against his florid face. "What kind of an investigation is this? Don't these people want the murderer discovered?"

"At least one of them doesn't," was the dry reply. In silence they climbed. On the gallery the young man led the way, halting outside a closed door. Murmurous little sounds came from inside the room. The Chief Inspector advanced.

With scant ceremony he thumped on the door and pushed it open. There was the scuffle of quick movement as they entered. Jeffery, blushing for his superior's lack of taste, had a quick glimpse of a man kneeling beside the bed, his lips on the girl's fingers.

There was a sudden flash of action, like a quick motion film unreeling. Then the scene was stationary, the characters chained. Camilla Ward, tiny pearls dewing her unpowdered cheeks, stared with parted lips. Brian Austin, standing by her bed, was white and trembling with anger. His fingers clenched, unclenched, clenched again.

"What the devil do you mean by bursting into a lady's room like this?" The words, whispered, trembled on the tense atmosphere. The man's distress was embarrassing. Jeffery felt the colour creeping into his face. Camilla Ward stared and stared, her breast rising and falling. The Chief Inspector fixed Austin with unflinching gaze, his brows almost meeting over hard eyes. His tone, each word underlined, was *pesant*.

"I want to speak to you, young lady. Alone!"

Brian Austin advanced on the big man.

"Listen," he said through clenched teeth. "If you've anything to say to this lady, you'll say it in front of me. She's been bullied— "

"Brian!" Camilla put out a hand and took his fingers. Immediately, at her touch, the hot rage simmered down. His taut attitude relaxed. The girl said quietly: "Please go, dear. I'll be quite all right."

Brian placed his other hand on her fingers, smoothing them gently.

"But I can't leave— "

She silenced him with a gesture. There was weariness in her tone when she spoke.

"I'm going to tell them exactly what happened, dear. We've nothing to hide. And the police have probably found— "

"Found this!" Read interjected. He tossed the lighter on the bed. "Found it down at the chapel. Perhaps some of your confessions will reveal what you were doing in that place on Saturday evening."

Camilla Ward pounced on the lighter, her fingers closing over it thankfully.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I was down at the chapel on Saturday— "

"Camilla!" Austin gave her a beseeching look. Slowly the girl shook her head, and the young man, with a gesture of despair, almost ran from the room.

The Chief Inspector rubbed his hands.

"Now, Miss Ward..."

She was wearing a pink creation of silk and fur and this she pulled about her shoulders as though cold. With her eyes on the coverlet, she began to talk.

"You'll probably wonder why I didn't tell the truth before. I was afraid— these horrible murders! I— I might have been accused. But now that poor Prater is dead, I can't remain silent any longer. I did that man a wicked injustice. I lied deliberately and put him in the wrong." Her voice dropped to a whisper and she fingered the coverlet nervously. "I was the girl in the scarlet

raincoat. Prater actually *did* see me at eleven o'clock that night. But I was afraid to own up. Once I told the truth about that, all the— the rest would have to come out." Her voice trembled. She was very near to tears.

"You know, of course, that I am engaged to Mr. Austin," she said after a pause. "What I'm going to tell you isn't very easy for me, but it's the truth. I came down here and met Owen. We were— well— mutually attracted to each other. It, was nothing serious at first, just a holiday flirtation. At least, that was all I meant it to be. But Mr. Rochester took it more seriously." She paused.

"And that didn't upset you at all," was Jeffery's mental rejoinder. Aloud he said. "Go on."

Camilla twisted uneasy fingers.

"It was amusing until Brian came down to Rochester House. Then it became rather hole-in-corner. We used to have to pretend, and meet in all sorts of furtive ways, until at last it began to pall. But by this time Owen was— was very much in love with me. It was my fault, I suppose. I'd encouraged him. He said he was going to Brian to ask him to release me from my engagement. I was horrified. Already the business had gone beyond a joke. Brian suspected something, I knew. He was always short with Owen. And Mr. Barrett was aware of what was happening, I think. He showed it by being unpleasant to me whenever he could."

"On Saturday afternoon I determined to break with Owen once and for all. I guessed he would be hurt, but the whole business was becoming too much of a worry. I told Owen I wanted him to meet me inside the chapel at seven o'clock that evening, choosing this place because it gave the most privacy. A few minutes after seven I wandered casually down to the chapel. Owen was waiting there and we went inside."

"But the door was locked," Read objected.

She shook her head.

"It was open. I'll come back to that point directly. Anyhow, we went just inside the door, because we wanted to slip back to dinner as soon as we could. I told Owen that our affair must stop there and then. We argued for some time. Then, as I was lighting a cigarette, I happened to drop my lighter on the floor. It was almost dark by that time and the inside of the chapel was gloomy. I couldn't see where the lighter had fallen. We searched around for a few minutes, then the sound of voices in the distance attracted our attention. Someone was coming towards the chapel. We dare not risk being caught together, so leaving the lighter we slipped out of the door. We were just in time. Two people were coming out of the darkness towards the place. They didn't see us, but we saw them quite plainly."

"Two other people," Jeffery said quickly. "Who were they?"

"Roger and Phillip Barrett," said the girl.

"In— deed...!" It was a long-drawn menacing sound from the Chief Inspector. His foot tapped the floor quietly. "And did these two go into the chapel, miss?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "We were too anxious getting away unseen. They passed us in the dusk and it was plain they were having some kind of dispute. Barrett was waving his arms about and Roger walked stiffly— sullenly, as if he were being forced to do something unpleasant. I couldn't catch any words, for they were talking in a low tone of voice. Anyhow, they passed us and we got back to the house in time for the dinner gong."

"Pardon another interruption," said Jeffery. "But can you recall how Roger was dressed?"

Camilla Ward nodded. "Just as we saw him later in the evening. That sloppy old grey suit and slippers on his feet."

"And the time was...?"

"I should say about half past seven or quarter to eight."

The girl arranged the coverings about her, threw a darting glance at the faces of the men and dropped her eyes. She continued her agitated fiddling with the coverlet.

"All that night I was worried about the lighter," she went on. "The household knew I was not in the habit of visiting the chapel. If it were found there the following morning when we assembled for prayers how could I explain it away? They would have guessed I had been meeting Owen in clandestine fashion at the chapel and that would have meant a fresh scene. I determined to wait until the house had retired and go down to the chapel to find the lighter. Which brings me to the point about the key.

"When I had met Owen and we had walked inside the chapel, I had naturally assumed that he had taken the key from its nail in the kitchen corridor and opened the door. I took it for granted that the key would be on the nail after we had left. So I planned to wait, get the key from the kitchen, unlock the chapel, and find the lighter. As luck went, the family decided to retire fairly early. By a quarter to eleven they had left the drawing-room and I was alone. I decided to wait another quarter of an hour. As I sat reading I happened to glance up and there was that face staring in at me through the window. My scream brought Owen back. And now, Mr. Blackburn, you know the reason why I wouldn't allow him to do it. If the house were roused, my chances of getting to the chapel unseen were almost impossible. I told Owen this. He wanted to get the lighter for me. But I didn't want him in my debt. When I refused, he went off grumbling. I waited until eleven o'clock."

Her voice had dropped to a whisper. The two men leaned closer to follow her story.

"The rain had eased off outside, but it was plain that we were in for a downpour very soon. Passing through the hall I slipped on my raincoat and made my way to the servants' quarters. It was then a few minutes after eleven. The corridor was empty and there was a light under Prater's door. The nail which customarily held the key was empty. I hadn't expected this— I stood there in surprise trying to think what to do. Then I heard a door open and Prater's voice. I was sick with fright— recognition must lead to discovery. I almost ran from the corridor, staying only long enough to put the raincoat in the hall. Then I hurried upstairs to my room I was scared that Prater might follow me.

"On the first gallery I met Owen. He said he was coming down to tell me that I didn't want the key to get into the chapel. The door was unlocked. He said that when he had gone, some hours before, to look for the chapel key, it was missing. Believing that Mrs. Considine must be in the chapel cleaning up, and consequently with the key in her possession, he had gone down to the place. The door was open, but the chapel was empty. Why the place should be left open puzzled him. But other matters put the business from his mind."

She was obviously nearing the end of her confession. The sentences tumbled on each other, as though the girl was anxious to have done as soon as possible.

"I told Owen that the key was still missing. He said that someone might have locked the chapel since we were there, but there was a chance that it was still open. He offered to go down and see. I prevented him. Now that Prater was suspicious we dare not make any move until morning. We decided to try and find it before prayers. That was why I was first to arrive at the door yesterday morning." Her voice faltered. "But other things prevented any search from being made."

Jeffery rose and bowed slightly.

The Chief Inspector, his tone uncompromising, said: "Shorn of its amorous trappings, Miss Ward, what you have told us boils down to this. The chapel door was open from seven to eight o'clock on Saturday night and you saw Barrett and Roger Rochester going towards the building during that interval?"

She gave no hint of resenting his churlishness. Quietly she said: "That is so."

As they left the room they heard the sound of stifled sobbing behind them. Young Mr. Blackburn's face was rather clouded.

"And that," said Jeffery, as they reached the head of the stairs, "is that!"

The Chief Inspector was glancing about with eyes that glinted.

"I wonder," he said softly, "if Mr. Barrett would resent an informal visit. Which is his room?"

Jeffery was not enthusiastic.

"Go browbeat your suspects on your own," he said. "I have other work to do."

"Such as— ?"

"Time alone will show," said the young man evasively. He lit a cigarette and sauntered to his room. Opening the door he found mild domestic turmoil within. A plump, rosy-faced woman was making his bed. Familiarity with the staff told him it could be only one person.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Girt," he said pleasantly. "It's very kind of you to help us out by staying at a time like this."

"That's all right." Her voice was soft, with a pleasant broadness of the vowels. "This place is like home to me, sir. I've known it for so long."

"Indeed?" The young man's tone was an encouragement.

"Why, yes, sir. Our people 'ave been in the village for years. Wren, my name was, sir. You'll hear the Wrens spoken of well indeed, in the village." She smoothed a pillow-case with capable fingers. "My father helped to rebuild the chapel outside."

Jeffery lowered his cigarette.

"*At spes non fracta*," he murmured. Then conversationally: "So the chapel has been rebuilt, Mrs Girt?"

She nodded, pushing back a strand of black hair that had escaped from beneath her cap.

"They had to take one wall down, to get that altar in, sir. That was in Mr. Monkham's time. My father was one o' the men who did the job. Took twenty o' them, it did. Great thing, that came in parts and had to be put together inside."

She paused and faced him.

"An' I may make so bold, sir, there's ill-luck about that thing. Look what 'appened to poor Toby Collins!"

"And just what did happen to him, Mrs. Girt?"

"Slip, an' fell and ricked his poor back," the woman said, impressively. "Week before 'is marriage, too. Poor Patience Malmsley, her what was to be his bride, never got over it. Lef' for other parts, she did, jus' broken-hearted with— "

"About Mr. Collins," interposed Blackburn.

The woman blinked.

"Oh, him? It was like this, sir. Old Toby— though to be sure he was quite young then, as I'm speakin' of thirty years ago— he was foreman on this job.

Mr. Monkham, 'e asked for the men t' come down from the village. Well, Toby was liftin' one of the parts, and suddenly— pop over backwards 'e goes. Slipped, you see. But Toby, 'e says no. That's after they picked him up with 'is back ricked cruel," said Mrs. Girt parenthetically. "Toby, he says that he were pushed over. Foolishness, of course. How could 'e have been pushed when there was no one near him?"

Jeffery nodded thoughtfully.

"How, indeed?" He looked at the woman. "Is Mr. Collins still alive?"

"And kickin'," said Mrs. Girt emphatically. "Never worked since that day. Mr. Monkham, 'e gave Toby some sort of pension. You'll find him around the 'Bunch of Keys,' any day, spry for all 'is back, which I say wasn't as bad as 'e made out."

"And you say that the altar was brought here?"

The woman nodded.

"Have you any idea where it came from in the first place?"

Mrs. Girt shook her head. Just a tot she was at the time. Old Toby might remember.

Jeffery thanked her and turned away. At the door he paused.

"Oh, Mrs. Girt?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I understand that you and your husband witnessed a document for Mr. Roger some weeks ago?"

Mrs. Girt was spreading a counterpane, tucking it neatly. Composedly she replied:

"Yes, sir. It was a will that we signed."

"Indeed?" The young man's tone was casual. "Your husband spoke of the document being covered with a sheet of blotting-paper."

The woman straightened.

"Well, it were and it weren't, in a manner o' speaking. You see, sir, Girt was first to sign 'is name, and like a loon he signs it on the bottom line. So the ink has t' be blotted before I can sign mine above. An' Mr. Roger, he pulls that blotter down to dry Girt's writing. I was standin', pen in hand, waiting to sign, and I couldn't 'elp seeing what was writ on that paper."

Jeffery put his hand in his pocket, produced two florins and clunked them suggestively.

"Can you recall..?" he murmured.

Mrs. Girt's plump cheeks reddened. "Well, sir, seein' as you're of the police..." She smoothed her apron with nervous hands. "I caught but a glimpse. There was some fancy letterin' about last will and testyment, then somethink in Mr. Roger's writin' about all his worldly goods. The blotter was over the rest

of it, but further down there was more writin'— I caught a glimpse of another word..."

"Yes?"

"A word that looked like 'brother,' sir, but there was some other letters before it. I couldn't make out what they were. I can only remember an S an' a T an' somethin' what might a' been an E, I think."

She stood fumbling with her apron.

Jeffery walked across and deposited the coins on the dressing-table. Without turning, he spoke. "Mrs. Girt— could that first word have been S-T-E-P. making the whole 'Stepbrother?'"

Eyes fixed on those shining coins, the woman nodded. Her voice was soft.

"Yes, sir— it could 'a' been."

Jeffery made his way downstairs to Cornelius' study. Knocking, he entered. The old man glared from his mounds of books like a black malignant spider in its web.

"Well, what now?" he croaked.

"A moment of your precious time," said Jeffery amiably. "I remember your mentioning a book in the library dealing with the history of this house. Do you know where I can find it?"

"It's catalogued," Rochester said sourly. He raised his voice. "Morgan— Morgan!" and as Rollo came in— "That book I was looking at some weeks ago, the one with the history of 'Rochester' in it. Show Blackburn where it is."

He turned away and went on with his reading. Jeffery glanced at Rollo, grimaced, and followed him out.

The library was situated next to Cornelius' study and a few steps brought them inside. Morgan crossed to a small cabinet in one corner and opened a drawer, to reveal a card-index system. He ran experienced fingers over the leaves, to lay one bare.

"Here it is," he announced. "Number 721."

He walked to a shelf at the end of the room and ran his eyes across the multi-coloured bindings. Then he gave a sharp ejaculation.

"Why! It's missing!" He gestured to the vacant space between the upstanding rows of volumes.

Jeffery tapped his fingers.

"So..." he murmured. "A ray of light. The faintest crawling flicker." He swung round on his companion. "Rollo— can I borrow your car again tonight?"

"Of course," Morgan replied. "But the magneto's rather dicky. Must have some water in it, I think. Might be safer to borrow the house bus."

Blackburn shook his head.

"No. I'd rather have yours. I'll take a chance on being stranded. Anyhow, I'm only going into Rockwall."

MR. BLACKBURN was annoyed.

To be forced into pedalling a rattling push-bicycle against a head wind at one o'clock in the morning is scarcely the most comfortable of situations. Add a black and weeping sky, a rutted road that threatens to unseat the luckless rider, and singular lack of training for the performance, and Jeffery's attitude may be understood.

Eight o'clock on the previous evening had seen him setting off to Rockwall behind the wheel of Rollo's single-seater. The village reached, Jeffery had experienced no difficulty in locating the whereabouts of Toby Collins and he had spent a most illuminating night with the old man. It was close on midnight when he climbed into the single-seater and headed the car towards Rochester House. And just a mile out of town the engine gave a curious choking, spitting sound, died abruptly and the car came to a halt. The young man, with no light, save a few stars peering through the gathering storm clouds, emerged and, lifting the bonnet, tinkered hopefully for some minutes. The result tended only to complicate matters. At the end of a quarter of an hour Mr. Blackburn was faced with the fact that a storm was approaching. He was still eight miles away from 'Rochester' and the time was close on twelve-thirty. Whereupon, he cursed magnetos in general, fools with sublime faith in chances, and his own sense of curiosity which had led him into Rockwall.

His feelings relieved by this profanity, Jeffery sat on the step of the car, lit a cigarette and considered the situation. If he wished to get back to the house before dawn he could do one of two things: either trudge the intervening miles between himself and 'Rochester,' or Walk back to the sleeping village and beg some means of conveyance. Neither plan, it must be confessed, appealed greatly to him. The alternative of staying in the car all night suggested itself. Jeffery, tired with his day's labours, had almost decided on this when a wind, chill as the breath of an iceberg, blew the first drops of the coming rainstorm into his face. That decided it. Mr. Blackburn's lips moved in vituperative exclamation. He rose, and buttoning his coat began to plod back to the village.

It took him fifteen minutes of fast going to reach the main street. Another fifteen minutes was lost in knocking up the landlord of the "Bunch of Keys" and negotiating the loan of an ancient push-bicycle. It was years since Jeffery had straddled a push-bike saddle and his first attempt was most unsuccessful. However, once learnt, the art of cycling is not easily forgotten, and after his first spill the young man progressed, albeit slowly and with pain. He pushed on,

feet losing pedals at every hump, shaken in body and sore in mind. At long last the gates of Rochester House loomed before him.

He dismounted ungracefully and glanced at his wrist-watch. The illuminated hands showed that it was close on two o'clock. Jeffery wheeled his bicycle into the grounds and flung it vindictively into the garden. On reaching the house he was in no way mollified to find the front door locked against him. Standing there, shivering and wet, he almost yielded to the impulse to hammer down the door, then his common sense asserted itself. He began a tour of the building, trusting that an entrance might be made from the side or rear of the house. He tripped on tangled beds and uneven paths as he walked.

He was almost to the side of the house when he noticed a light in the dynamo-room at the rear.

This was a large outhouse sheltering the electric-light plant. At first glance he imagined it must be reflected starlight glancing on the galvanized iron roof. A closer scrutiny convinced him of his mistake. Those dancing gleams came from inside the shed. The young man's weariness and irritation dropped like a garment. Who could possibly be prowling the shed that hour of the morning? And why?

Quietly as a shadow he edged his way forward. The sound of voices reached him, quiet voices, hushed conspiratorially. The door was partly open. Jeffery moved closer and peered inside.

The place was lit by two candles standing on an upturned box. There were three people in the shed. Professor Rochester, a heavy coat flung over his pyjamas, stood close to Phillip Barrett, who was fully dressed. The third figure was that of a girl, young, slim, vibrant. It was Bianca Considine. Something in her tense attitude told the young man that this was no amicable conversation. Now Barrett was addressing the girl, his voice sharp.

"But you must have known what would happen? If you lacked courage to go through with this thing, why did you do it at all?"

Professor Rochester's thin voice, high with emotion, slipped in on the other's speech.

"And now that it is done, you must promise to say nothing. Don't you realize that if this gets out, it means ruin for us all?"

Bianca, hands on hips, faced them sullenly.

"I'm not afraid of what I done."

Cornelius took a step forward. His tones were wheedling.

"Listen, my girl. We have done a lot for you. We're only trying to shield you. Everything will be all right. We'll get you away from here where no one would ever dream of connecting you with Roger. And nothing will ever be suspected."

Bianca's voice, harsh, angry, rang out:

"And what if I lose my life? What then?"

"You won't lose your life," Barrett said shortly. "You won't even be in danger. But you will be, if you stop here, with that Blackburn fellow nosing around— "

"I do wish," said Jeffery coldly, insinuating himself through the door, "that you wouldn't refer to me as 'that Blackburn fellow.'"

Though quite impromptu, it was a most impressive entrance. The effect on the two men was overwhelming. Professor Rochester, his thin face green in the candle-light, gave a long whistling gasp and swayed as if he were about to faint. Barrett stared at the newcomer with dropping jaw, his eyes like round moons behind his glasses. He put one hand to the wall to steady himself. Bianca alone seemed unruffled. An enigmatical expression, vague as a Mona Lisa smile, lingered about her lips. There was a swollen bursting silence that trembled the candle-flames. Then Cornelius, his old face working, his body swaying, spat at the young man.

"Spying scoundrel! Sneaking blackguard! Get out of my house!" His voice rose to a scream. "Get out, do you hear? *Get out!*"

He seemed almost beside himself with rage. He glared like some mad animal and little flecks of spittle formed at the corners of his mouth.

Barrett had gained control of himself. He grasped the old man's arm.

"Quiet," he said fiercely. "You'll rouse the whole place!" He turned to Jeffery, his tone bitter. "This is a pretty rotten thing, even for you, Blackburn."

Jeffery said slowly: "And I am to do something even more pediculous. I am going to rouse the Chief Inspector and have you all put under arrest on a charge— "

"No." Professor Rochester's voice shook like a leaf in a gale. "No— not that! For God's sake— no!"

Blackburn turned on his heel. But Phillip Barrett was faster. He moved like a streak of light and blocked the doorway with his big frame. He was panting.

"Just a minute, man. You're making a ghastly mistake!"

"I am sure the Chief Inspector will be more than willing to assume the responsibility," Jeffery assured him. "Stand aside!"

"But if we explain— " began the big man, when Cornelius interrupted shrilly:

"No, Phillip! Don't say anything!"

Barrett turned to the old man. His forehead was wet with perspiration, but he steadied his voice with an effort.

"Listen, Professor. We must tell the truth. Can't you see we've no alternative? It's either telling the story to these people and trusting in their

confidence— or broadcasting it to the entire world. Once the newspapers get hold of it, you're finished! We must trust the police! It's the only way!"

Cornelius did not answer. He sank down on an upturned case, his face twitching like a man stricken with palsy. He tried to speak, but nothing came from those grey lips save horrid choking sobbing sounds. And all the while Bianca looked on, with the proud indifference of the Empress Theodora above the arena. Barrett wiped a sleeve across his forehead.

"You'll do your best to hush this thing up?" he said, almost pleadingly.

"There can be no such things as terms," Jeffery said curtly. "Enough of this beating about the bush! What is the truth? Why do you want this young woman out of the way?"

A silence. Professor Rochester, head in his hands, rocked to and fro like a tortured soul. His shadow, in the candle-light, clawed blackly at the walls. Jeffery could hear his wrist-watch tickling. Barrett was watching him. Their eyes met, glances interlocked. Jeffery repeated slowly:

"Why do you want this young woman out of the way?"

The big man licked his lips.

"Because— she is going to have Roger's child."

It was Jeffery's turn to look astounded. It was plain that this was the last thing he had expected, the most undreamed-of contingency. Bewilderment was writ large on his face. He stared at the girl, at the old man, then back to Phillip Barrett.

"What does this mean?"

The shadow of a bitter smile twisted at the other's lips.

"It means something that, with all your cleverness, you never even suspected." He flung a hand towards the girl. "Bianca was Roger Rochester's wife!"

7: Zigeuner!

(Tuesday, March 9th)

"IF I HADN'T BEEN such a woolly-brained imbecile," confessed Jeffery to the Chief Inspector, "I would have guessed it for myself! That scar on Roger's wrist which corresponded with a similar mark on Bianca's— what else could they signify except the mark of some secret ritual both parties had entered into?"

It was the following morning after breakfast. The two men were sitting in Jeffery's room awaiting the coming of Phillip Barrett. Following the amazing disclosure of the early morning hours, the journalist had been eager to pour out the full details. But Jeffery realized that he was in no mood to give such an important recital his full attention. Moreover, he demanded that his friend Read be present at the telling. He had therefore enjoined Barrett to come to his room after breakfast that morning.

The big journalist entered. Clearly he had slept but little since his dramatic announcement in the dynamo shed. Yet he had all the appearance of a man who has been relieved of some pressing burden, and it seemed anticipation and not anxiety that had broken his rest. He nodded briefly to the two men. Pulling up a chair he sat down and began to fill his pipe. He said quietly:

"While it is true that I can throw some light on the peculiar facts surrounding the death of Roger, of his actual murder I am as completely in the dark as you yourselves. And of Prater's murder I know nothing. I want to make this clear before I begin."

He applied a match to his pipe and sucked.

"Let's hear the story," said Read briefly.

Barrett glanced at him. "You will probably blame me for not making a clean breast of this business before now," he said. "But unless I betrayed a confidence, such a thing was impossible. Roger's marriage was known to three people only— the Professor, old Hannah and myself.. Cornelius came to me for advice, first extracting the and promise that I would never reveal what had happened. Had I had myself alone to consider, I would have spoken days ago.

"The whole business will be clearer to you if we go back six months. It was about that time when Roger fell violently in love with this girl, Bianca Considine. I'm not a psychologist— I can't attempt to explain why such a thing should have occurred. Anyhow, it happened. Roger was very quiet about this business.

"It went on for almost five months without a soul being any the wiser. It might not have been discovered even then had not Bianca gone to the

Professor with some startling information. She was going to have a child! And that child was his son's— Roger's child!"

He paused and Jeffery put the question:

"Just when did this happen?"

"Bianca went to the Professor about six weeks ago," the other replied. "The girl's attitude in connection with the whole affair rather puzzles me. She could have held no deep affection for Roger. Moreover, she was already betrothed to another. You must understand that Bianca and her mother are not true gypsies; their strain has intermingled with that of the Hungarian peasants. The result is a curious mixture of greed and gypsy superstition.

"Thus it came about that when Bianca was eight years old she was betrothed to a lad, the son of the owner of a troupe of tumblers and acrobats. This lad's name, as near as I can translate it, is Tanasi the Bold. This boy travelled with his father's troupe about the country, and it was a generally accepted fact that when both young people came of age they would be married. But Professor Rochester was the unconscious ruin of this scheme. Travelling through the Pustos country some ten years later, he gathered Bianca and her mother into his retinue, offered them good wages and a home in England if they would leave their own country. The offer was generous. Both women fell in with the plan willingly. Tanasi, who seems to have loved Bianca, had other views on the matter. He swore that if the girl left he would follow her to the ends of the earth. No notice was taken of these threats, since gypsies are notorious for their wild and extravagant vows. Bianca and her mother waited until Tanasi was gone on another of his trips, when they left the village and joined Professor Rochester. He brought them to England and installed them down here at the house."

He paused and applied another match to his pipe.

"When Bianca broke the news of her impending motherhood to the old man there was hell to pay. Cornelius offered the girl money to close her mouth. She was adamant. Only one thing would satisfy her— Roger must marry her. In this decision Bianca was cunning. She realized that she held the whip-hand, and marriage to the wealthy Roger was infinitely preferable to a few pounds hush-money. Cornelius was distraught. He bullied Roger, who in turn went into one of his mad rages and threatened to tell the world. Frantic with worry, the Professor sought my advice, first binding me to secrecy. I lived for a number of years in Hungary, making a special study of the gypsy types; I could speak their language and knew some of their customs. Would I, Cornelius pleaded, speak to Bianca? I did, only to make matters worse. The girl, faced with this opposition, turned nasty. She gave us an ultimatum. If she were not married to Roger within a week, she would go to the law for her rights!"

Barrett paused, took his pipe from his lips and laid it on the table beside him. The two listeners did not interrupt. In silence they waited for him to continue.

"I then went to Roger," the journalist went on, "and asked him to take Bianca away to another part of the country and marry her quietly. He refused. We argued." The speaker raised his eyes to Jeffery. "Miss Ward overheard one of these discussions, with the result that I found myself in a most awkward situation. But my lips were sealed. So, after a week of haggling and bickering, we decided that no other course lay open to us save that Roger must marry Bianca.

"Then came the question of an officiating minister. We dare not bring in the local preacher from Rockwall. Within twelve hours the news would be in the scandal sheets. I suggested a minister from London, with a fee sufficient to close his mouth. Cornelius was afraid. He said that a bribe would place him for ever in the man's power should he choose to be unscrupulous— that such an occurrence might well lead to lifelong blackmail. Then I had an idea. If I could talk Bianca into agreeing, the ceremony would be performed under Tzigane rites. I could officiate with old Hannah. I approached the girl. She was not enthusiastic until I told her it was this or nothing. Then she consented. And so it was arranged. Roger and Bianca were to be married on the following night by the sacred blood-mingling of the Zigeuners."

Jeffery put a quick interjection.

"Did the girl realize that such a marriage would never be recognized as legal in English courts?"

Barrett gave a wry smile.

"You may be sure we didn't labour that point," he said. "I couldn't help thinking how, if the marriage were to be legal, it would be most advantageous to Bianca if anything should happen to Roger. But I'll come back to that point directly.

"Bianca insisted on the ceremony being performed in the chapel. I don't know the reason for this wish except that perhaps she supposed it gave an additional air of sanctity to the binding. Anyhow, Roger, Bianca, Hannah, and myself crept down late one night and the various rites were performed. There's no need to go into detail about these. The only one concerning us is the blood-mingling. The wrists of Roger and Bianca were slit and bound together so that their blood might unite. The ceremony was finished within half an hour. Bianca Considine was Mrs. Roger Rochester according to Zigeuner law.

"Then, a week after the marriage or a month before Roger's death— to make the chronology clearer, something happened that incommoded our

plans seriously. We were just beginning to breathe a little easier when, like a bolt from the blue, Bianca received a letter from Tanasi! The young man had come to London with a circus act. He had managed to trace the Consodines and, in his letter, announced his intention of coming down to Rochester within the month and claiming Bianca as his bride!"

Barrett looked at each man in turn.

"Here was a pretty situation," he said. "Once Tanasi knew that Bianca had married, the game would be up, with a vengeance. In some way we had to explain to Tanasi what had happened and, if necessary, pay him money to keep silent about the affair. Then came the Friday— the day before Roger's murder. On that day, Bianca received a note from Tanasi, saying to expect him down on the following night. In some way we had to conceal his coming from those members of the household who were ignorant of Roger's intrigue. We arranged to have Roger meet Tanasi in the chapel, with myself present in case violence should be used.

"In consequence of this I asked old Hannah to leave the chapel door open after she had finished her cleaning on the Saturday afternoon. On that evening I took Roger down to the chapel, showing him the open door, and explained our plan of paying the gypsy boy to keep silent about the marriage."

"You were seen going down," Jeffery said briefly.

The journalist ignored the interruption. It was almost as though he had not heard it.

"Now we come to the night of Roger's murder," he said. "In his note Tanasi had said that he would catch the late afternoon train, which would get him into Rockwall about half past seven in the evening. As he would have to walk to Rochester House I calculated that he could not arrive before ten lock at the earliest. I had decided to go down to the gateway, head him off, explain what had happened and ask if he would accept the hush-money. If he assented I was to send him down to the chapel, while I went into the house for the bribe. Roger would keep Tanasi talking until I arrived.

"I left the drawing-room later than I had intended— it was almost quarter past ten when I went out into the garden. I made for the gate, waited a quarter of an hour, but there was no sign of the lad. I was getting worried, realizing that I had missed him. At half past ten I began to walk back to the house. As I was passing the drawing-room I noticed a man crouched outside the window. It was Tanasi. He was peering in through the glass."

"So that's the explanation of the face at the window!" exclaimed Read. "And no wonder this Ward girl couldn't recognize it."

Barrett nodded.

"Well— I went up and spoke to the man, addressing him in his own tongue. At first he was afraid, suspicious. After a few minutes, however, I managed to gain his confidence. I told him he had to listen to a long story, and there and then I went into details of Roger's marriage. We must have talked until close on eleven o'clock. After some demurring, Tanasi decided to accept the money. I told him that if he went down to the chapel I would slip into the house and get the promised amount. But Tanasi was still uneasy. I think he suspected some trap and he insisted that I come down to the chapel with him. We approached by the main path."

"Just a moment." It was Blackburn. "You say you entered by the main path?"

"That's so."

"Then how do you account for the fact that you left no footprints on that mud-patch?"

"Simply because there wasn't any mud-patch," replied Barrett. "You must remember that until eleven o'clock the rain had been merely a series of spasmodic drops. The main cloud-burst didn't fall until well after eleven. As it was only a few minutes after that hour when we reached the chapel, that section of broken path was almost dry. It wasn't until much later that the downpour churned it into mud."

Jeffery nodded.

"Go on. I understand."

The journalist's voice lowered a tone. "We pushed open the door. A wave of heat came out at us. I was surprised at the darkness, since Roger had been told to go in and light the candles preparatory to our coming. Believing something had detained Roger, I went on and headed for the candles on the altar. As we groped forward Tanasi, who was a little in front of me, gave a sudden gasp of fear as he stumbled. Then he called out something about a body. I struck a match, and there, lying at our feet, with a knife buried in his body, was Roger!"

A silence.

"I dragged one of the seats across and, standing on this, lighted the two candles high on the altar. By their light we examined the body. Roger was dead. I bent over and touched him. His flesh was still warm." Barrett paused and passed a shaking hand across his face. "God— that was a horrible few minutes!"

"And then?" prompted Jeffery quietly.

"My one thought was to get Tanasi away," the other went on. "He was in a dangerous position. He had come down to Rochester vowing vengeance on Roger. He stood over the dead body. He had a knife in his belt. At any moment

he might be found. Leaving everything as we had discovered it, we turned and raced back to the servants' quarters, where we told Hannah and Bianca what had occurred."

Again Jeffery nodded. Incidents were beginning to fall into place. He recalled the luckless Prater's story of the voices he had heard late on Saturday night. Here was confirmation that those furtive whispers had been no dream.

"Naturally, Tanasi's one thought was to get away from the house as soon as possible," Barrett continued. "He went that night, a badly frightened man, swearing that he would trouble us no longer. But our relief at seeing the last of him was overwhelmed in the horror at Roger's death. I waited only to see the gypsy leave, then crept up to my own room and locked the door. But you can guess I didn't shut an eye all night. The hardest task came the following morning, when I had to be perfectly natural while waiting for the discovery of the body, which I knew must follow our entrance into the chapel." He paused and made a little gesture with his hands. "And that's all."

"Not quite," said Jeffery. "If you didn't leave that to-and-fro track across the mud-patch, who did? And how did those plates of food come to be in the chapel?"

"Oh— that?" A half-smile twisted the journalist's lips. "I'd forgotten about the food. That was old Hannah's doing. She left that to-and-fro trail when she took the meat and bread into the building. It was almost midnight and the heavy rain had softened the clay. Hence her footprints."

"But why the food?" snapped Read.

"An old gypsy superstition," said Barrett slowly. "You see, since his marriage with her daughter, Hannah looked upon Roger as one of her own race. Now the gypsies have a ritual called the Cult of the Dead. The gypsies of Romania, Bulgaria, France and Spain believe that the spirit of the dead does not leave the body until a year has passed. Consequently that spirit must be fed. In cemeteries in those countries— cemeteries where gypsies are buried— it is no uncommon thing to see food left regularly on the graves. For twelve months— indeed, sometimes longer— this practice is continued, and the most horrible punishments are believed to fall upon the heads of faithless wives or children who thus neglect the dead one. So deep-rooted is this superstition among the gypsies that you will find many cases of tribesmen who swear they have been visited by grandparents, or dead wives or husbands, and reproached for the neglect of the spirit's sustenance."

The Chief Inspector had been staring at Barrett during this recital, his grey moustache bristling. Now he sucked in his breath sharply. Jeffery, who read the portents, interposed quickly.

"What time did Hannah lay this food in the chapel?"

"After I left for bed," the journalist answered. "Must have been near midnight. I knew nothing of it until I saw the food on the following morning. I guessed what had happened. When I asked her she told me she had left it there."

"Then she must have gone out on Saturday and left the candles burning?"

Barrett nodded.

"Yes."

"And locked the door?"

"She pulled it shut after her. It is a Yale lock. It clicks shut."

Jeffery caressed his cheek.

"On Sunday morning old Hannah came down to the chapel to clean up. Do you know who sent her."

Again Barrett nodded.

"I sent her. I was afraid we might have left footmarks. I thought I'd take a risk and send the old woman to clean them away before inquiries could be made."

"But she told us Prater had sent her," said Jeffery sharply.

Barrett looked surprised.

"Prater. Prater," he repeated. Then his face cleared and he smiled. "I can see now how that mistake occurred. Hannah's knowledge of English was very limited. And she is deaf. The word 'Pralo,' a gypsy term meaning 'friend,' would sound rather like Prater to a deaf old woman. She apparently understood you to say 'friend.' And as I had sent her she naturally answered in the affirmative."

Jeffery nodded. The Chief Inspector rose. Feet apart, hands in pockets, he stared down at the journalist, his brows level across frowning eyes.

"Now, mister," he said gruffly, "you've had your say. How about answering a few questions for me?"

Barrett said coldly:

"With pleasure."

"You say that when you opened that chapel door you felt a rush of hot air. Then the heat was already turned on at that time?"

"I believe so."

"And the chapel door was open— open for any person in the house to gain entrance— from six o'clock when Hannah completed her cleaning, until midnight when she slammed it shut, after placing the food by the altar?"

Barrett nodded without speaking,

"And when you touched the body it was still warm?"

Again the nod.

"What time would that be?"

"I should say about ten minutes past eleven," the journalist replied.

Read stared down at him with cold eyes. Then he turned to Jeffery and made a gesture that indicated "the witness is yours." Blackburn had been covering the back of an envelope with neat pencilled lines. He slipped his notes back into his pocket and faced Barrett.

"Just one question." His voice was tense. "You said that after you saw Roger's body in the light of the match you went to the altar and lit the two candles standing there?"

"That it so."

Jeffery slowed his words.

"Yet when we entered the chapel on Sunday morning *there were three candles burning on the altar!*"

Barrett nodded calmly.

"That's right. I forgot a small detail. When I lit the two candles I discovered that the third had fallen from the altar and was lying near Roger's body. I naturally concluded it had been knocked over in the struggle. Needing all the light possible, I picked it up and lit it. That's how the three candles came to be burning on the following morning."

For some unknown reason Jeffery was smiling.

"A small detail, you say, Mr. Barrett. To paraphrase the Bard, 'How far that single candle throws its beams...!'" He nodded. "That's all, as far as I'm concerned. Do you want Mr. Barrett further, Chief?"

Read grunted.

"No. He can go."

The journalist rose, glanced at the two men, then shrugged his shoulders. He left the room without a word. As the door closed behind him, Blackburn rose and clapped the older man on the shoulder.

"Well, Chief— and what do you think of that story?"

The Chief Inspector's tone was sour.

"More inconsistencies than a hedgehog has quills." He levelled a finger at the young man. "There's that business of the third candlestick, for instance. If Barrett picked it up and set it on the altar, why didn't it show his finger-prints? The boys dusted every available thing in that chapel yesterday and there wasn't a single print on any of those candlesticks!"

Jeffery pursed his lips.

"Rather intriguing, isn't it?" he said. "Still— I rather fancy that Barrett was telling the truth. He wouldn't dare make up an elaborate fiction like that, knowing well that we could soon disprove it by making inquiries. By the way, Chief, I suppose you'll follow up that circus angle?"

"On your life!" Read's tone was emphatic. "I'll get a man on that this afternoon. Trace that circus and find if a gypsy acrobat is a member of the

company." He shook his iron-grey head in something very like despair. "Another step backward instead of forward. When we do clap the manacles on this bird, I'll take my hat off to him as a genius!"

THAT AFTERNOON a cloud of melancholy hung low over 'Rochester.' The autopsies completed, the bodies of Roger Rochester and Michael Prater were laid side by side in their last resting-place, the tomb in the tangled weeds at the rear of the house.

Neither the Chief Inspector nor Mr. Blackburn attended the ceremony. They shut themselves in the library with the autopsy reports. These revealed nothing of particular interest. Then the Chief Inspector announced his intention of motoring into Rockwall. He intended to put a call through to headquarters and detail a man to trace the circus of Barrett's story. Jeffery said he would come along as a passenger.

"And while you're in the village, Chief, it might be as well to ring Pennefather, that lawyer chappie, and see if he has a copy of Roger's will," he suggested. "Methinks there's something fishy about that testament. If old Pennefather has it, he's bound to have shown up here before now. He must know of Roger's death. It's been headlined in every paper in the British Isles."

Jeffery drove a police car. They passed various vehicles on the road and at length drew up before the post-office. The young man smoked a cigarette while the Chief Inspector busied himself on the telephone. He was absent for fifteen minutes. When he returned his florid face was dewed with perspiration. "Let's down a pot of beer," was his greeting remark.

In a private room at the "Bunch of Keys," he replaced his pewter on the table and wiped the back of his hand across his moustache. "Much better!" he announced.

"And our lawyer friend?" asked Jeffery.

"Hasn't seen any will," replied Read. "Knew Roger intended making one—Rochester got in touch with him about five weeks ago and spoke about making Pennefather executor. That's all the old man knows."

"Then where is the will?" demanded Blackburn. "We know Roger made one. We know that the Girts witnessed it. If it's hidden somewhere in the house, it must be concealed pretty thoroughly or your men would have found it when they combed the place yesterday."

The Chief Inspector drained his glass. "Do You think that will's so important, son?"

"Important? Good lord, Chief!" Jeffery drummed a finger to emphasize his words. "Of course it's important. Roger was a wealthy man. He left, at a

conservative estimate, something like a hundred thousand pounds— *to whom?* A nice little temptation, Chief."

"How do you know the amount— ?" began the elder man, when Jeffery silenced him.

"I've been doing some poking round myself," he said airily. "I had a telephone conversation with Roger's bankers yesterday. Oh yes— our erratic friend certainly had a fair share of this world's goods."

A pause. Read looked up.

"With all that money lying about," he said slowly, "it would be very fortunate for the Rochesters if that will was never found. If Roger died intestate, his money would be equally divided between all the family."

"Of course," said Jeffery quietly. "Of course."

Read jumped to his feet.

"By Jupiter! That gives us the whole case on the silver plate! Roger was bumped off because of his money and his will was destroyed so that the family would inherit! Prater was murdered because— " His excited tone broke and he stopped, staring at Jeffery.

"Yes," said that young man imperturbably. "Prater was murdered because he knew Roger had killed Beatrice. And if you can fit that into your inheriting family theory, you're Philo Vance, my dear Inspector."

"Wait a minute," Barked Read. "Prater might have seen one of the family kill Roger— and that's why he went! To shut his mouth!"

Jeffery nodded calmly. "Then, in that case, why didn't Prater say that in his letter? Obviously the only thing preying on the old man's mind was the murder of Beatrice. If he had known who murdered Roger he would have revealed that crime. No, Chief. Prater is your trip-stone, all right."

"Then perhaps Prater himself killed Roger?"

"And the Avenging Angel struck him down, not by a thunderbolt or a flash of celestial fire, but by stabbing him in the back with a carving-knife?"

"Aach— !" snorted the big man. "You and your blasted fooling— "

Jeffery sobered. "I'm not clowning, Chief. I'm raising a most interesting point." He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. His voice slowed. "You suggested just now that Prater might have killed Roger. Now, remember the evidence of those reports I made out for you? Recall how everything pointed to the butler's guilt. That evidence stacked up so neatly against him that, *had he lived*, he would have had a difficult task clearing himself. Everything pointed to the fact that he had murdered Roger Rochester!"

"Well?" said Read as the young man paused.

"In spite of this accumulation of evidence against him," the other continued, "Prater's innocence was proved in the most amazing and conclusive manner— it was proved by his own murder! Which, in turn, made it clear that Prater could not have murdered Roger. Then, if this is so, the evidence against him must have been deliberately faked by the real murderer. Following out this theory, we are faced with an amazing anomaly. The real murderer, after painstakingly faking up a splendid case against an innocent man, goes to the trouble of proving this same man innocent with his own hand! In other words, why should the real murderer go to all the trouble of building up that chain of evidence against Prater, only to destroy it all by killing the man and so proving him innocent?"

The Chief Inspector was prompt with his answer.

"Obviously because Prater, being innocent, was in a position to destroy that evidence, to prove it false, by speaking something that he knew. It was only by his death that the murderer could be safe."

Jeffery nodded, his eyes gleaming.

"Exactly! Then in that case, *why didn't the murderer make Prater's death look like suicide?*"

"Suicide?"

"Of course! Perceive the advantages!" Blackburn was on his feet now, pacing the room with nervous strides. "If Prater's murder could be made to appear as a suicide, the murderer would score on two most important points. Firstly, it would appear as if that false chain of evidence was so damning that its discovery had driven the butler to take his own life rather than face an arrest. Secondly, he would have succeeded in closing the butler's mouth without risk to his own skin— since the death— because of that chain of evidence— would have been accepted as a suicide and, consequently, no investigation as a murder would be made!"

8: The Horror In The House Of God

(Thursday, March 11th)

WEDNESDAY passed.

During that entire day Blackburn had scarcely stirred from his room. Prior to the Chief Inspector's departure to London he had borrowed from his superior the letter found in Prater's room, the ill-omened mannikins of Beatrice, Roger, and the butler, together with other data Read had collected on the case. With a large tin of cigarettes at his elbow he had spread this varied assemblage before him and set about what he had laconically termed "sitting and thinking."

Late on the previous afternoon an incident had occurred that gave him much food for thought. Being Tuesday, Abraham Girt had travelled into Rockwall to pick up the 'Rochester' mail. Among the letters a small parcel had arrived addressed to Professor Rochester. At first sight, and bearing in mind the manner in which the previous dolls had come, Jeffery was prepared for a recrudescence of the sinister business. Two things convinced him otherwise; not only was the parcel too small to contain a mannikin, but Cornelius was obviously expecting the parcel.

The Chief Inspector had demanded to see the contents. Unwillingly the old man had consented. He stripped off the wrappings to reveal a small leather case. Opening it he showed a string of well-matched pearls lying on their velvet bed. In explanation the Professor said that the pearls were the property of Roger, being bequeathed to him by his mother. Roger had asked his father to have the pearls sent to a jeweller to be valued. Now they were returned.

Quite a natural event. It was just the sort of thing Roger might do— and yet there was something in Rochester's bearing that had raised doubts in the young man's mind. Or was it that the poisonous miasma of suspicion that surrounded this house was polluting his mind, making him read deceit into the most innocent of actions? But Jeffery could not rid himself of the thought that the old man's prompt reply had been offset by his furtive demeanour.

The question of the missing will was another stumbling-block. Roger had made his testament quite openly; why, therefore, should he seek to hide the document? If, as Mrs. Girt's evidence seemed to indicate, Owen Rochester was the beneficiary of the will, it would be to his greatest advantage to have the will found. The alternative theory was that Professor Rochester, wishing to have his family inherit equally, had destroyed the will. But surely Roger, who had obviously made the will to prevent such a thing happening— since the

document was drawn up after the family squabble— would he cunning enough to take steps preventing the will falling into other hands? Why, in that case, had he not posted the document directly to the family solicitor? The more Jeffery considered it, the more obscure the business seemed to become.

Thus it was that the Chief Inspector found him late in the afternoon when he returned. He pushed open the door of the young man's room and blinked at the grey smoke-screen within. Jeffery was lying back with closed eyes, hands clasped behind his head, a cigarette between his lips and a pile of crushed ends in the ash-tray.

"I didn't expect you back so soon," Jeffery greeted him.

"Came back for the inquests," said the other shortly. "They're holding them in the Rockwall Institute tomorrow."

Jeffery nodded. "How did your business turn out in the city?"

"Usual bundle of negatives." The Chief Inspector's tone was morose. "I saw Pennefather myself. His story was mainly repetition. Knew Roger intended making a will naming him as executor. And that's all."

The other nodded, his eyes on Read's clouded face.

"It's three days since that first murder," the big man went on. "Three days— and we've discovered nothing! Those intrigues that were explained have done nothing to enlighten us on the main issue. And those people in the house..." He waved a hand in the direction.

"Yes," said Jeffery quietly. He knew what was coming.

"We can't hope to keep them here much longer. After the inquests, they're bound to get nasty. Technically, they're all under suspicion, of course, but we've no right to stop them from walking out if they want to. Yet we can't let them go. Once they scatter, it's good night!"

They had resumed slow pacing. Blackburn's tone when he spoke, echoed his companion's despair.

"It's lack of motive that's chaining us, Chief. Why were these last two murders committed? In the case of Beatrice I think the explanation is pretty clear. Roger hated her. She was going to have him shut away in an asylum— had already taken steps, in fact. I can easily imagine him yielding to an insane urge and pushing her downstairs on that night— that would be well in keeping with Roger's character as we know it. The family believe it, I feel sure. Roger knew that so long as Beatrice lived he was in danger. So he took the only way out."

"Then he must have sent her the doll?"

Jeffery nodded.

"I believe he did. It's just the kind of perverted joke that would appeal to Roger's diseased mentality. And he had opportunity. For one thing, he knew

the story surrounding the dolls and he could lay his hands on them at any time. And do you recall Miss Jan telling us that on the day following his quarrel with Beatrice he went into Rockwall and bought a bottle of liniment for his aunt? I believe he gave the parcel containing the doll to some person in the village that day and asked them to post it to the house on a fixed date. That person must have been given a sum of money sufficient to close his mouth, and now he or she is afraid to come forward."

Read considered a moment.

"But Roger received a mannikin himself!"

"Yes." The young man's voice was grave. "That's where the devilry started. Because someone knew of what Roger had done— *and carried the scheme on for their own ends!* Someone who knew Roger had killed Beatrice, knew that he had sent the doll! Someone, therefore, in the house. *The person to whom Prater was writing when he was murdered!*"

The Chief Inspector sat down. He was breathing rather heavily.

"Now, just a minute," he said. "We're getting a bit out of our depth. Let's take this thing step by step." He held up a hand and began to tick off the points on his fingers. "Roger quarrels with his aunt and threatens her life. Beatrice, afraid, takes steps to have him locked in an asylum. Roger, knowing this, determines to murder his aunt and sends her the mannikin from Rockwall. Some weeks later he sees his opportunity while walking downstairs, and pushes the woman, knowing that her death will be thought an accident."

Jeffery's eyes were gleaming.

"That's it. Now let us progress from there. Someone in the house— *besides Prater*— knows what Roger has done. It may be man or woman, but, for reasons of clarity we'll assume it to be a man. He obtains the remainder of the mannikins, goes to London and arranges his plans with an accomplice. The accomplice, in due time, sends a doll to Roger. That gentleman is terrified— he realizes that someone knows about his crime and means to revenge Beatrice's death. Hence his insistence on a guard!"

"That's plausible." Read rubbed his hands. "And here's another suggestion. Prater may have been in the plot from the beginning. Roger's plot to murder his aunt, I mean. He might have been the one who kept the doll and posted it from the village!"

"Quite likely," agreed Blackburn. "His hatred of Roger might be explained by the fact that the elder brother refused him hush-money. And after Roger's death he decided to talk. But the third person, realizing that if Prater opened his mouth the whole scheme would be revealed, murdered the butler before he could speak."

"Then," said Read, "Prater must have known who this third person was—because he was writing to him!"

Jeffery rose to his feet.

"We're fumbling in the dark," he said. "But I'm convinced that we're somewhere near the truth. The more I consider it the more plausible it seems that Roger started this horrible business for his own ends and someone turned the tables on him by taking the game out of his hands. And when we discover why this was done, we'll be on the right road to the final problem. *Who is this mysterious third person?*"

On the following morning Mr. Blackburn's whole attitude towards the world seemed exuberant and living proof that joy cometh with the dawn. His mood of depression seemed to have slipped from him in sleep; he hummed discordantly in his bath and as he set about dressing, the brisk alertness of his movements betokened that there was business to be done. He met the Chief Inspector at the breakfast-table and smiled upon him. They were alone.

"What's the idea?" inquired Read, struck by his companion's good spirits. "Won the Irish Sweep?"

"Eggs tear you down socially," retorted Jeffery, his eye on the Chief Inspector's plate. "And you must be a social success today, chief. A hundred cameras clicking in your face. A thousand pencils noting the words of wisdom—"

"We're very bright this morning, aren't we?" Read said bitterly. "You'll be a genuine ray of cheer at Rochester's inquest—"

"I'm not going," said Jeffery, reaching for the toast. "Not to Roger's inquest. Unfortunately, I must be present at the other. But I think I can get back by this afternoon."

"Get back?" The Chief Inspector looked up. "Where are you going?"

"Motoring into Bridgewater. Visiting an acquaintance of mine. Vansittart Ross. Clever chap, Van. Wrote an interesting little brochure called *William or Edward*, in which he tried to prove that Edward the Confessor introduced the Norman style of architecture into England," explained Jeffery pleasantly. "Until then it was believed that William the Conqueror was responsible..." He broke off suddenly. "Chief! I declare I'm boring you!"

"Oh, not at all," said Read, with vicious politeness. "Go on. Drool away. I like it!"

"Your lips say yes but your heart says me nay," said Jeffery lyrically. He waved his table-napkin quickly. "All right. I'll be serious. This Ross is one of England's leading authorities on medieval architecture. I want his advice on a few points. Like Abou Ben Adhem, I received a visitation last night. That's what

comes of going to bed worrying over a problem. It's the subconscious mind stepping into the breach."

He returned shortly before noon, his cheerful demeanour evidence that the journey had met with full success. He was further delighted to learn that so multifarious were the details of the first inquest that it would run well into the afternoon, with the result that the inquiry into Prater's death had been postponed until Friday. "Gives me the afternoon to myself," was the young man's comment. "I couldn't have ordered the circumstances better."

He refused to divulge a syllable about his journey to Bridgwater, save that its result had taken the investigators a full step forward in the elucidation of the mystery of Roger's death. To his friend's pleas he vouchsafed the policy of patience and even went as far as to quote Rousseau. Then, with the blandest of smiles, he locked himself in his room and concentrated his attention on the books brought from the library of Vansittart Ross.

At four o'clock he came forth and sought the Chief Inspector, to find him taking afternoon tea in the library. The house was very quiet. The household, with the exception of the servants, were at the inquest. Jeffery rang for fresh tea. It was brought by Mrs. Girt, and when the door closed behind her he turned to his companion. Read had a number of pencilled notes by his elbow. Jeffery indicated this with a nod. "What's the literary composition?"

Read set down his cup.

"It's a detailed list concerning the time-factor in the case," he explained. "I've completed it from evidence to date." He handed the paper across the table. "It might interest you."

Jeffery took up the pencilled slip and read:

TIME SCHEDULE

Murder of Rochester.

Saturday, March 6th.

P.M.

6.00 Hannah Considine leaves chapel door open after cleaning building.

7.05 Camilla Ward goes down to chapel, meets Owen Rochester. They talk for some time.

7.30 Ward loses lighter. Attempts to find it when Phillip Barrett and Roger Rochester are seen coming towards the chapel.

7.40 Ward and Owen Rochester enter house for dinner.

8.00 Jan Rochester leaves for Rockwall.

8.30 Ward, Owen, Barrett, Austin, and Roger leave dining room for drawing-room. Professor Rochester goes to his study.

9.30 Prater enters drawing-room to inquire about supper.
9.35 Roger leaves drawing-room and has glass of milk.
9.40 Roger returns to drawing-room.
9.50 Roger leaves drawing-room.
9.55 Rain begins.
10.15 Barrett leaves drawing-room, goes to head off gypsy, misses him and waits by gate.
10.30 Austin and Owen Rochester leave drawing-room.
10.32 Ward sees gypsy's face at window.
10.33 Owen returns to drawing-room.
10.50 Barrett, having discovered gypsy, talks to him in the garden.
10.51 Owen leaves Ward and starts for his room.
11.00 Ward goes to servants' quarters for chapel key.
11.05 Prater sees Ward looking for key. By this time, Barrett and gypsy have gone to chapel.
11.07 Camilla goes from servants' quarters.
11.10 Barrett discovers Roger's body in chapel.
11.15 Barrett and gypsy go from chapel to servants' quarters.
11.30 They tell Hannah and Bianca of Roger's death.
11.45 Gypsy goes from Rochester House.
11.55 Hannah takes food to chapel, leaving trail of footprints across soft mud.

Sunday

A.M.

8.00 Jan Rochester returns from Rockwall, being isolated in the village by the storm.
8.30 Roger is found missing from his room.
11.02 Roger's body discovered in chapel.

"Very comprehensive," was Jeffery's comment. "Certainly this helps to clarify the points, but does it take us any further?" He tossed the paper on the table.

Read picked it up, folded it carefully, and slipped it in his pocket. He spoke without raising his eyes. "Son, you're still of the opinion that these murders are an inside job?"

"More sure than ever," was the reply.

"Then take a look at these notes." The Chief Inspector pushed over a second pencilled slip. His forefinger indicated certain lines. "According to the autopsy report— and we have Barrett's evidence of the warmth of Roger's body, when he touched it, to support this— the murder must have taken place

not later than quarter to eleven. Now, unless the evidence given to us has been deliberately falsified, Owen Rochester, Camilla Ward, and Phillip Barrett could not have killed Roger. Owen and Camilla were talking to each other in the drawing room at that time. Barrett— though we have no proof of this until that gypsy is questioned— says he was talking to Tanasi in the garden. Prater is also exonerated. At eleven o'clock he was in his room. And it seems impossible that Brian' Austin, who left the drawing-room at ten-thirty, could have taken that knife, donned an overcoat, got down to the chapel, murdered Roger and returned, all in the space of fifteen minutes." He tapped a finger on the paper to emphasize his next words. "That leaves only Professor Rochester— and it is impossible that this weak old man could have struck such a knife-thrust as to bury the weapon to the hilt in his son's body. Therefore, as I see it, none of the members of the family or their guests could possibly have wielded that knife!"

Jeffery leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling.

"That's the brilliance of the whole plan, Chief," he said softly. "*They didn't have to be there!*"

"What d'you mean?" snapped Read, his eyes narrowed.

"I mean that no human hand wielded that knife!" The young man's body tensed. He broke his lazy attitude and leaned forward. "Surely it's obvious, Chief? Remember the autopsy report! It said that the knife had been driven into Roger's body with almost superhuman force!"

Read's eyes glittered under frowning brows. "What's this?" he snapped. "More of this black magic nonsense!"

"It does sound rather like black magic, doesn't it?" agreed Blackburn. He was staring thoughtfully at the rows of volumes on the opposite wall. "Imagine it! The night dark with storm— the empty chapel. Roger comes in. He walks down the aisle. Then suddenly, out of the darkness, this thing swoops! Then silence— and Roger a sprawled heap on the floor, with that knife buried in his heart!" He shook his head. "*And no human being save himself had set foot in the chapel!*"

The Chief Inspector was on his feet. "For the love of Pete, son, talk sense! Haven't I got enough to drive me grey without your mutterings on bogies and ghosts? What have you got into your head now?"

Jeffery rose and put his hand on his friend's arm. "Come down to the chapel," he said. "And bring one of those crooked walking-sticks from the hall. A fairly stout one.

"What are we going to do down there?" demanded the Chief Inspector.

"We go to unmask the murderer of Roger Rochester," said Jeffery calmly.

The chapel had the faint musty odour of untenanted places as Jeffery swung open the door and advanced with the Chief Inspector down the aisle some ten minutes later. Read carried a crooked walking-cane, holding it with firm grasp as though he expected to use it as a means of protection from an enemy materializing from the stale air about them. Blackburn went first. He led the way to the altar and gestured to a seat. "Sit down," he invited. "There's a few things to be explained before our demonstration.

"I'll say there are!" grunted his companion, as he seated himself. Jeffery leant against the altar.

"Do you remember," the young man began, "my pointing out a minor peculiarity about Roger's death, this being that he was stabbed in the heart. If you recall the position of the body, you'll know that he had fallen directly in front of the altar, at a distance of roughly six or eight inches from that centre panel. We have Dr. Austin's evidence that Roger had been killed on that particular spot— that the body must have dropped in that position immediately the blow was struck. Now, what does this suggest? It suggests that the blow must have been struck by some person standing in front of Roger— standing, that is, between the altar and the victim— or else, that person must have been on the altar itself!"

He paused. Read nodded.

"Both these suggestions are ridiculous. As regards the first, Roger's closeness to the altar definitely precludes the possibility of a person standing in front of him. As regards the second, the architecture of the altar rules this out. The only place where a person could gain foothold on the altar is the narrow shelf below the reredos— and that shelf is occupied by three large silver candlesticks. Therefore, where *did* the murderer stand? He could not have flung the knife from the rear of the chapel, since the altar makes an effective shield for anyone standing, as Roger stood, in front of it. And it is impossible to throw a knife around corners. Had Roger been stabbed in the back none of these inconsistencies would have arisen. But his knife was indubitably buried in Roger's heart, which meant that the victim was *facing* his murderer when the blow was struck."

Again the pause. The Chief Inspector tapped his cane gently against his shoe. "Go on, son," he said quietly.

"We now come to the problem of the knife-thrust. All the medical reports commented on the tremendous force behind that blow. The autopsy surgeon spoke of it as being inconceivable that a human arm could have wielded that stroke. Now, consider that statement in the light of our first theory. It seems impossible that the murderer could have occupied the position necessary to

strike the blow. It seems impossible that such a blow was delivered by a human arm." He paused and gestured towards the altar. "Come here, Chief."

He led his companion across and pointed to the centre of the five panels, the one on which appeared the carving of the dying soldier. "Here," said Jeffery, "we have a rather grotesque example of medieval craftsmanship. But does it not strike you as a coincidence that the soldier in that representation lies dying with an arrow in his heart, even as Roger was found with the knife-blade in his body? And that the soldier grasps a candlestick in his hand— and we have the evidence of Barrett that a candlestick lay near Roger's body?"

"It wasn't until Barrett mentioned this fact that I began to suspect the truth. Then I asked myself— why should that candlestick be moved? I came down here yesterday and made an investigation— to learn a surprising fact. Of the three candlesticks on the altar, the centre one alone was movable. The other two were fixed to the shelf. I sat down and tried to picture what had happened on that Saturday night. Roger had come into the chapel. The place was in darkness. He had gone to the altar, leaned over and picked up the candlestick— and in that moment death had struck him. Now— watch closely."

Jeffery took the cane from the Chief Inspector's hand. Read craned over his shoulder. The shelf supporting the candlesticks was chin-high and narrow. The second candlestick had been shifted slightly from its central position but a circular depression in the wood indicated where its heavy base fitted. Blackburn reached out and pulled the ornament towards him, fitting the base into the circular mould. At the same moment there came a soft grating click from somewhere inside the altar.

"Stand back!" cried Jeffery. His eyes were gleaming excitedly. They moved back some three feet. "Now that candlestick is in exactly the same position as it was on Saturday night when Roger came in here. He goes to the altar, leans against the centre panel, reaches over and takes the candlestick"— as he spoke Jeffery reached out and passed the crook of the cane around the silvered base— "and he moves the candlestick like this— !"

The crook dragged at the ornamental holder, it swayed and fell forward to the floor with a crash. And, in the moment of its moving, there came the sudden spiteful *zoom* of a released spring. The top of the centre panel slid aside, and from the dark aperture a sleeve of metal shot out with vicious thrust and vanished again. The panel clicked shut and it was over.

"My God!" whispered Read. There were tiny beads of perspiration on his forehead. "What does this mean? What is it?"

Jeffery laid the walking-cane on a nearby seat. "An ingenious little horror used by the medieval priests to protect the altar vestments from robbers," he explained quietly, "you saw that metal sleeve. The ancients fitted an arrow into

it. Roger's murderer was more up-to-date. He used one of the knives from the museum."

THE CHIEF INSPECTOR dabbed at his face with a handkerchief. "When did you stumble on this?" he asked. There was respect in his tone.

Jeffery sat down and felt for his case. "It's the result of half a dozen isolated incidents," he explained, selecting a cigarette. "From the time of the discovery of Roger's body I was worried about the inconsistency of its position so close to the altar and the fact that he was stabbed in the heart. These details, added to the great force of the thrust, aroused the first suspicions in my mind."

He paused to light his cigarette.

"Then, in a gossip with Mrs. Girt last Monday, she happened to mention an incident that gave me inspiration," he continued. "She described how, when the workmen were assembling the altar thirty years ago one of the men had been knocked over as he was handling a certain piece. It was all rather vague and confused, but I managed to get this man's name from her and went into Rockwall on Monday night to see him. Old Collins— that was his name— remembered the incident clearly. He had been carrying the central panel into the chapel when something had whirled inside and a bolt had thrust him in the chest with such force as to send him spinning. What had happened, of course, was that the man had accidentally released the hidden spring."

Jeffery broke off, as if recollecting something. "I forgot to mention," he said, "that after Mrs. Girt had told me of this thirty-year-old accident I recalled Professor Rochester saying that the library contained a volume dealing with the history of this place. I went to look for this, only to find it gone. This threw a rather sinister light on the business. If there was some dark secret hidden in the altar, and if this was revealed in the book, it meant that *someone in the house* knew of it and, determining to use that secret for their own ends, had destroyed the book! I was more than ever convinced that there was something dangerous about this altar.

"But I could not, for the life of me, see how it could be applied to Roger's murder— until Barrett happened to mention the fallen candlestick. When I discovered that this candlestick was the only movable one of the three, it occurred to me that, in some manner, this might be the means of releasing the instrument. But what instrument? Then, last night, I recalled Van Ross. He, if anyone, would be able to advise me.

"I saw him this morning. He was a perfect mine of knowledge. Van told me that the fourteenth and fifteenth century priests were up to all manner of ghastly dodges to preserve the sanctity of their altars. This concealed

instrument was only one of them. It was worked by a counter-weight that released a spring when the ornament was removed."

The Chief Inspector was scrutinizing the altar.

"So that's how you figured it out?" he said at length.

Jeffery nodded. "It seemed obvious that Monkham imported this altar from the Continent. He either knew of the secret or discovered it by accident. As a warning to others who might follow him, he wrote of the contrivance in that volume dealing with the history of the house. Only one person in the present household knew about the mechanism—the person who must have found the book and learnt the secret. Desiring to use the contrivance for his or her own ends, they destroyed the book to ensure no one else discovering the secret."

Read tugged at his moustache.

"Feasible," he muttered. "But— does it take us any further in naming that person?"

"I think it does," the other said slowly. He sat back, hands clasped about one knee, his eyes half-closed against the drift of smoke from his cigarette. "Let's use our imaginations, Chief."

Read did not comment. He sat worrying his moustache, watching the younger man's frowning face with speculative eyes. Presently Jeffery spoke.

"Our starting point must be the irrevocable fact that, to make a success of his plan, the murderer had to be sure that Roger would do two things. He must come down here into the chapel and he must *move that centre candlestick!* Let us attempt to analyse these twin facts.

"First, however, we must bear in mind two minor details. The first is that Roger rarely, if ever, visited the chapel. The second is that it was raining on that Saturday night. Now, if Roger desired a rendezvous with some person in secret, is it not likely he would choose the chapel? For one thing, it gave the necessary shelter. For another it was the last place anyone would dream of looking for Roger. So we may assume, *quod erat demonstrandum*, that Roger came down here on Saturday night to meet somebody."

"Agreed," said the Chief Inspector.

"That being surmised," continued the young man, "we now ask ourselves— whom did Roger come down to meet? The murderer?" He shook his head. "I don't think so. The murderer had planned for Roger to be killed without benefit of his presence, as it were— then our murderer would naturally keep as far away from the chapel as possible, in order to establish an alibi. Remember, he had plotted for Roger to be killed *in the most inexplicable manner!* Killed without leaving a single trace of the method."

Read opened his mouth to make an objection, but Jeffery waved him into silence.

"I know what you're going to say, Chief. You're going to ask: If the murderer planned to kill without leaving a trace of the method, why was Owen's knife left in Roger's body? That brings me to a most illuminating conclusion which I'll elaborate in a moment.

"First I want to clarify the second of our points— the fact that the murderer had to be sure that Roger would move the second candlestick. Consider Roger's attitude as he enters this chapel on Saturday night. It is pitch-dark in here. He walks down the aisle: perhaps he strikes a match. His eyes detect the candles on the altar. Remember, this place is quite strange to Roger— he visits it rarely. Candles suggest illumination. He walks to the altar. The candles are three feet above his head. He cannot light them unless *he lifts them down!* And because the first and third candles are fixtures, he can move only the centre candle, as *the murderer realized he would!* He stands against the centre panel and lifts the second candlestick— and the concealed weapon, released by the spring, flashes out and stabs him in the heart!"

The Chief Inspector nodded.

"What about my point, son? If the murderer wanted to make the death absolutely clueless, why the knife left in the body?"

Jeffery changed his position, blowing a feather of smoke.

"That," he said, "is the most interesting question of all. At first sight it appears as though the knife was left deliberately to cast suspicion on Owen. But let us consider the medium by which the murder was committed. A steel sleeve holds the hilt of a knife concealed behind a panel— this being released by a spring, to disappear after the thrust is made."

The young man leaned forward and tapped his fingers impressively.

"*To disappear*, Chief! In other words, the very nature of that mechanism led the murderer to believe that the knife would vanish behind the panel when its horrible work was done. That was the very basis of his planning— murder without weapon!"

"Then why was the knife left in the wound?" demanded Read.

"Something went wrong!" Jeffery's tone was emphatic. "It might have been that the knife, being a makeshift, didn't fit tightly into the sleeve. Or perhaps Roger was standing too close to the panel, with the result that the weapon drove itself too deeply into the body and became dislodged. The murderer had no way of gauging these things, remember! No chance of rehearsal. He had to rely on the first effort being successful."

The Chief Inspector was following his companion's words with narrowed eyes, nodding occasionally.

"Then where does that bring us?" he said.

"To this interesting fact," said Jeffery. "The murderer expected Roger's body to be found with only the wound in his heart. But although he might conceal the weapon, he could not prevent an investigation being made— unless he could throw the blame of Roger's murder on someone else. Someone who would be so hopelessly incriminated that his apparent crime would leap to the eye without question."

Read shook his head.

"Can't get that, son," he said briefly.

Blackburn was on his feet. He held up one hand, ticking off the points on his fingers.

"I'll make it simpler, Chief. Is there a person connected with this case who— One: hated Roger and was heard to threaten his life? Two: came down to 'Rochester' with the deliberate intention of making trouble for Roger? Three: went to the chapel and might have been found standing over Roger's still-warm body. Four: had a knife in his belt— "

"*Tanasi!*" cried Read, his face alight. "That gypsy lad!"

"Exactly." Jeffery sat down. "I believe that the murderer of Roger knew that the gypsy lad was coming down here on Saturday night, knew that he was going to the chapel and deliberately laid the trap to catch two birds. Roger was to be killed and the gypsy accused of his murder!"

The Chief Inspector expelled his breath in a long whistle of amazement. The younger man continued, his voice animated:

"See the devilish ingenuity of it? Roger dead. An innocent man accused and convicted of his murder. A tidy, clean-cut plan." A thin smile curved Blackburn's lips. "And all of it ruined because because of two things. The first was the knife in the wound. And the second...?" He raised inquiring eyes to his companion.

"Phillip Barrett!" ejaculated Read.

"Exactly!" Jeffery's eyes were shining. "As it would have been impossible to get a clear case against Tanasi if he were a witness when Roger's body was found, Phillip Barrett's intrusion into the chapel was the second hitch in the murderer's plans! Because of the manner in which the killer plotted, he could not have known that Barrett would go into the chapel at the same time as the gypsy."

Blackburn rose and began to pace the floor. "Now— recall Barrett's story of his meeting with Tanasi. He told us that professor Rochester had arranged that the gypsy *should be sent to the chapel alone*, while Barrett went to collect the hush-money from Cornelius! But the gypsy, suspecting a trap, insisted that Barrett accompany him.

"Can't you see how this narrows the search for that mysterious third person, Chief? He or she must have the following attributes. Access to the dolls

and an opportunity of sending them from Rockwall and London. Knowledge of Roger's lunacy and the fact that he killed his aunt. Access to the library to obtain the knife. Access to the library to get the volume containing the secret of the altar. Opportunity to get into this chapel and set the trap. He must have known Tanasi was meeting Roger in the chapel on Saturday night. But there was one thing he did not know— *the fact that Barrett would accompany Tanasi to the chapel!*"

He halted opposite Read. The light had died from his eyes. His voice was very grave. "There is only one person in the house to whom those qualifications fit perfectly. And his name is— "

The Chief Inspector gave a roar.

"*Professor Rochester!*" he bellowed. He was on his feet. "I'll have the handcuffs on that bird before you can say 'knife'!"

"But we can't!" cried Blackburn, holding his arm. "We're still helpless. Don't you see, Chief, that all this is merely theory? Airy reconstruction? We must have proof, and until we can furnish that, those handcuffs are useless."

"You don't expect us to wait— " began Read.

"Give me another twenty-four hours, Chief." Blackburn's grip on the older man's arm tightened. "That's all I want. If within that time I haven't the necessary proof I'll leave the responsibility in your hands. But first we must see one thing— the final missing link in the chain."

"What's that?" growled the Chief Inspector.

"The most important detail of all," said Jeffery quietly. "Roger Rochester's last will and testament."

9: Fourth Appearance Of A Poppet

(Friday, March 12th)

CAMILLA, BRIAN, OWEN, Phillip and Jan were together when they heard it.

Muffled by distance but no less horrifying, a scream tore through the hush of the room, a shrill, frenzied scream that vibrated on their strung nerves and was cut off on its highest note, to die away in a sobbing babble. For just a moment they stood in silence more terrifying than that cry of panic. Then Owen Rochester jumped to his feet with a movement that rocked the heavy table.

"That's Dad voice!" he cried. "It came from the study! Oh, God— !"

Useless the attempt to name from whose lips that exclamation had come. Like sinners flying before destruction, the party crowded towards the door, through the hall and past the twisting staircase. They jostled one another cruelly. The Chief Inspector was first to reach the door of Cornelius' study. It was open. They shouldered inside, then halted at the sight that met their eyes.

Professor Rochester crouched down behind his writing-table, hands gripping the corners so that the knuckles gleamed like polished bone. He was staring directly opposite him at a tall cupboard, staring with a horrid fixity of gaze, eyes dilated, jaw dropping, terror written on every line of his frozen face. Nor did his gaze move as they crowded in and stood silent. As though hypnotized by that cupboard, he spoke without turning. His voice was husky with some emotion deeper than mere fear.

"*It's in there,*" he whispered. "*It's— in— there!*"

The trembling repression in his voice, the suggestion aroused by his words, that stark immobility of gaze— all these things were responsible for the cold hand that closed about their hearts. Even the Chief Inspector was affected.

"What's in there?" he said, his voice unsteady.

Eyes still on that cupboard, Cornelius tried to speak. A purple tongue licked at his dry lips.

"My...my...!" He choked and was silent.

Read squared his shoulders and strode to the cupboard. He yanked open the door and recoiled.

The mannikin of Professor Rochester hung from a peg inside, suspended at the end of a loop of string. This tiny noose was passed about the neck of the doll and the head was broken. It lay stiffly upon one shoulder.

"Hanged by the neck!" a voice exclaimed. Read wheeled quickly. Phillip Barrett stood at his side.

THE CHIEF INSPECTOR turned and, reaching forward, took the doll down. Dangling it at the end of the string, he held it out to the others.

"Know anything about this?" Even as the words left his lips, he realized the futility of the question. The group near the door stared back with blank faces— faces too scoured of expression to show even resentment at the implication suggested by the query. Read waited a few moments, sweeping them with fierce eyes. Then:

"Well— !" he announced, with a rising note of finality. He stuffed the doll in his pocket and turned away. As though gaining courage with the disappearance of that dread omen, Professor Rochester came to life. He rose from his crouched position and faced the Chief Inspector, his fingers plucking at blue lips.

"Can't you do something?" he whined. "Can't you? Is there no such thing in this country as law and order? No such thing as protection?" His voice climbed. "Are we expected to stand here and be murdered— one by one— while you march around and do nothing?" Terror was working the old man into a weak trembling rage. "What good is a police force that can't even protect honest citizens! You say that murderer is under this roof! Then find him! Find him before the Rochesters are wiped out, root and branch! Because that's what he wants— to finish us all!"

"Just a minute— just a minute," barked Read. He gripped Cornelius' bony arm and pushed him gently into a chair. "Now just relax, Professor. This Father Christmas hasn't got you yet." He paused to allow the old man to recover. "Now— how did you come to find this doll?"

Cornelius hunched in his seat, rocking himself to and fro. "That cupboard holds my stationery," he moaned. "Pencils and paper and ink. I was writing at my desk," he freed one hand and gestured to the littered secretary, "and I wanted some fresh paper. That was about ten minutes ago. When I opened the door of the cupboard— I found that— thing..." His voice trailed away.

"When did you last go to the cupboard?"

"About three days ago. I wanted some envelopes."

Read asked curtly:

"Who else uses the cupboard?"

The old man's eyes, glittering, almost green, roved the group inside the door and came to rest on one member. "Morgan uses it," he cried.

Rollo took a half-step forward, consternation on his face.

"I haven't been near— " he began, when the Chief Inspector silenced him with a gesture.

"When did you last open that cupboard?" he snapped.

"A week ago," replied Rollo promptly. "I wanted some quarto paper for my typewriter, and— "

Read cut in: "The cupboard isn't kept locked?"

"Of course it isn't," cried Cornelius pettishly. "Why should we want to lock a stationery cupboard?"

The Chief Inspector drew a long breath like a man about to plunge into cold water. His lips tightened. He swung round on the party. "I'm going to ask for the last time. *Which one of you put that doll in the cupboard?*"

Twenty dragging seconds passed. The very walls about him were no more silent than the people in that room. It was almost as though they did not realize they were being addressed. Then without taking his eyes from them the Chief Inspector made a gesture to his sergeant. When he spoke the words were heavy, spaced, falling into the silence like stones tossed one by one down some depthless well.

"Connolly! Take the police car and go into Rockwall. Ring through to Headquarters and tell them I want twenty men. Yes— twenty! They must be down here first thing in the morning. The remainder of these dolls are somewhere in this house, and I'm going to find them if I have to take this place apart brick by brick!"

With a nod the big detective was gone. The group in the room, chained by Read's hypnotic eye, did not move. The Chief Inspector folded his arms.

"Just one more thing," he said grimly. "If any of you are harbouring the delusion that you'll have a chance to destroy those dolls before morning, you can put it right out of your head! This entire household, including the servants, is coming back to the drawing-room— and they're staying there under the guard of my detectives until those dolls are found." A hard smile twitched his bristling moustache. "For the sake of your own comfort, I hope the search will not be unduly protracted!"

AND THUS it was, at ten o'clock the following morning, that Jeffery Blackburn found them.

He drove into the grounds, a smile on that not unprepossessing face of his, to find Rochester House experiencing something in the nature of a mild earthquake. There were square-jawed men probing grimly about the garden. Parking the car in the garage, he was surprised to find other men delving oily but determined fingers into the entrails of the family's automobiles. Inside the house the upheaval was even more pronounced. Men were stripping rooms, shaking mattresses, flapping books, prying into wardrobes and cupboards. The grind of shifting furniture, the clatter of dishes, the bump and thump of dislodged objects and the heavy panting and breathing of many bodies— all

these were fused into one gigantic symphony of movement that reverberated through the place from cellars to tower. It gave Jeffery impression that some American Croesus had taken a fancy to Rochester House and was having it dismantled piecemeal, preparatory to shipping it across the broad North Atlantic.

He stopped a herculean gentleman engaged in dragging an oaken bureau into the hall and inquired:

"What's the idea of spring-cleaning?"

The behemoth paused in his labours to wipe a dripping brow.

"Idea of the Chief's," he explained. "That's all I know. We're looking for some toys."

"Yours not to reason why," murmured Blackburn. He glanced at the other. "I don't suppose those toys would be— dolls?"

The man nodded.

"That's it."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Blackburn. "Where's the Chief now?"

"In the drawing-room, sir." The beefy one returned to his work and Jeffery, with a nod of thanks, sought that apartment.

As he entered he received a fresh surprise. The entire household was clustered in the centre of the room, a sullen, weary-faced little island guarded by the stern sea comprised of Donlin, Armstrong, Connolly, and the Chief Inspector himself. Several divans pulled to the middle of the floor, crumpled cushions, and the creased appearance of the women showed that the night had been passed under this strict surveillance. Forced abstinence from toilet and a sleepless night had wrecked havoc with Camilla Ward's complexion. Even Jan Rochester was wilted. The men bunched together, drowsy and irritable. The detectives prowled the outskirts of the room like sentries.

"Well!" exclaimed Jeffery in astonishment.

Read glanced up.

"Oh, come in," he said without enthusiasm.

Jeffery did so.

"And what," he inquired, "is the idea of the siege? Things appear to have been happening in my absence."

"They've been happening all right," Read assured him, "Another doll's turned up. Professor Rochester— this time." Tersely he placed before the young man an account of the finding of the fourth doll and his reasons for segregating the household. Outside the bumps and crashes had risen to a crescendo. Jeffery listened in silence until his friend paused. Then he shook his head slowly.

"You won't find the dolls in this house, Chief."

That brought them to their feet with a rush.

"Why not?" barked Read.

"Because I have every reason to believe that the remainder of the mannikins have been reduced to ashes in some far-away fire!"

The Chief Inspector rose slowly, teeth bared in a snarl:

"You knew that? And yet you allowed me to go on with this?" He waved a hand to the chaos outside.

"But this search is most necessary," Jeffery assured him hastily. "Most necessary! It won't unearth the dolls, but it may discover something of much greater importance— Roger's Will!"

A pause. Then:

"I protest— " squeaked Cornelius.

"Shut up," snapped Read. He measured his friend with glowering eyes. "You mean that, son?"

"Of course I mean it! Have your men take the house apart if you like— but first tell them what to search for. Not a box of dolls. A long official envelope, probably marked 'last Will and Testament of Roger Rochester.'"

The Chief Inspector strode to the door. Jeffery met him, placed a hand on his arm and spoke with lowered voice.

"I'd let these people go, Chief. If the will hasn't been destroyed they'll have small chance of doing anything about it with the house filled with detectives. They wouldn't take the risk."

Read hesitated for a moment, then turned.

"All right," he said sourly. "You can go now— all of you! But no funny business, mind! There'll be a detective behind the ear of every one of you."

He marched out and they heard his voice raised in explanation, ringing through the hall.

Shepherded by the detectives, the members of the household filed out. Jan Rochester, in the act of passing through the door, broke her line and approached Jeffery. She said quietly:

"Tell me the truth, Mr. Blackburn— will there ever be an end to this ghastly business? Have you discovered *anything*?"

Jeffery nodded slowly.

"I can promise you two things, Miss Jan. Not only have you seen the last of the marionette murders, but you will soon be free to leave this house. All of you— with the exception of one person!"

The girl turned her head, her eyes on the last of the departing figures.

"Who is that person?" she whispered.

"I wish I knew," said Mr. Blackburn earnestly. "I wish I knew!"

All through the close hot Saturday morning and far into the afternoon the search went on.

The Chief Inspector was here, there, and everywhere, barking directions, exploding false alarms, urging his men to still greater effort. Jeffery was by his side, a nervously excited Jeffery, stuffing endless cigarettes into his mouth, lighting them and tossing them away half-consumed. His mental turmoil was such as to find relief only in personal exertion. He shoved at furniture, flipped through books, sent papers scattering like white birds in flight, pausing only to inquire, "Anything yet?"

The answer was the same. "Nothing there, sir." "Not in that room, Chief!" "Bare as the palm of your hand." "Not yet." "No sign of an envelope." "Not a thing there, sir." An ominous litany, its undercurrent of despair more pronounced as the army advanced; the chant of failure beating down hope by its very inevitability.

"It must be somewhere in the house, Chief," said Jeffery for the twentieth time that afternoon. He dabbed at his streaming forehead, squatted on an adjacent table and lit another cigarette, only to toss it away with a wry mouth. The searchers, brought up against the door leading to the servants' quarters, were taking a breathing spell.

"I hope to heaven you're right!" The Chief Inspector was looking round at the disorder about him.

Jeffery wagged his head in emphasis.

"I am— I know I am! It can't possibly be anywhere else!"

"Unless the murderer destroyed it," muttered Read.

"That," said Blackburn grimly, "is the last thing our elusive friend wants to happen. I'll wager my white-handled pocket knife it hasn't been destroyed."

Read shrugged.

"Well, there's still the kitchen..." He turned and snapped his fingers. Reluctantly the men rose from their comfortable positions.

The corridor led to the kitchen. It was a generous chamber, the polished stove, scrubbed floor, and shining equipment a credit to old Hannah's industry. There seemed little in the actual room to offer concealment, even for an envelope. But at one side a tall partition walled off a separate enclosure and this contained the stores. There were cases of dried fruit, bags of potatoes, a high metal bin holding flour, and a number of small receptacles of tin with their contents painted on the outside. Half a dozen sides of bacon swung from the roof.

The receptacles caught Jeffery's eye at once. He dived on them, flinging back the lids and poking fingers into coffee, tea, pepper and salt. The air was

fragrant with spices. After some minutes the young man rose, sneezed, and wiped his fingers.

"No go," he muttered. "Try those potato bags, Dennis."

The big detective set to work, hauling and tugging on the weighty sacks. Jeffery, staring about, spied the flour-bin. It was a large receptacle, almost as high as a man, and raised on a three-legged support from the dampness of the floor. He pulled forward a wooden box, and mounting it lifted the lid of the bin and peered inside. It was full. The Rochesters apparently bought their supplies in bulk. Rolling up his shirt-sleeves— for he had long since discarded his coat— Jeffery thrust his arm into the friable powder and stirred energetically. The white dust clung to his hair and eyebrows, blinded him, made him sneeze. After some five minutes he gave it up.

He began to climb down. As he put his foot to the floor it came into contact with the remains of a squashed apple, mangled by Connolly's gargantuan boot. Jeffery put his weight on this foot— and abruptly the world shot from under him. He gave an astonished gasp and clutched at the nearest solid thing in this spinning universe. It happened to be the flour-bin. With a crash that brought everyone within earshot to their feet, the bin toppled and fell to the stone floor.

Alas for the men in that small room! They were lost in a mist of pulverulence. Flour was everywhere, a great white mountain on the floor and drifting clouds in the air. Through this gauzy atmosphere Jeffery and Connolly coughed, sneezed, and spluttered their way into fresh air. The remainder of the searchers grinned as the hapless figures came into view. Then the Chief Inspector's bark restored order.

"Come on," he snapped. "Get this mess cleaned up!" He beckoned to three of the watching men. "Put this thing back into position."

The flour-bin lay on its side, almost emptied of its contents. The men started forward, when a choked exclamation from Blackburn halted them. That young man, handkerchief to rebellious nostrils, swooped down like a hawk on a rabbit.

"Look!" he cried. The others gathered around, staring in the direction of his pointing finger. On the bottom of the bin, protruding from the residue of the flour, was a long envelope!

"Eureka!" screamed Jeffery.

He sprang forward and plucked the envelope from its floury bed, slapped it free from the film of powder and held it up. Plain on the outside they read the scrawled words— "Last Will and Testament of Roger Rochester."

"Now," mused Jeffery, "how the devil did this envelope get on the *bottom* of the flour-bin?"

The Chief Inspector was almost dancing with excitement.

"Never mind about that!" he roared. "Open the thing! Read it!"

With fingers that trembled, the young man ripped the flap and drew forth a folded length of crackling paper. He smoothed it out. Blinking the dust from his eyes he read slowly:

"This is the last will and testament of me, born Kenneth John Temple, sometime known as Roger Rochester, gentleman, of Rochester House, Exmoor. I hereby revoke all other testamentary depositions heretofore made by me and declare this to be my last will and testament. I appoint Miles Spencer Pennefather, of 9a King's Bench Walk, London, solicitor, to be the sole executor and trustee of this my will. Firstly, I bequeath to my father by adoption, Cornelius Rochester, professor, of Rochester House, Executor, the string of pearls containing thirty-two stones and threaded on platinum wire, now in the safe in the library. Secondly, I give, bequeath, and devise the remainder of my estate, both real and personal, to my absent brother by birth, Arthur Herbert Temple, of Adelaide, South Australia."

Jeffery paused, then added:

"The will is signed by Roger, witnessed by the Girts and dated February 14th."

Silence. They stared at one another. Superb anti-climax laid a finger on every lip. These men had performed the labours of Hercules to find this document, this key to the whole enigma, this final revealing answer to the black mystery. And the discovery had achieved just the opposite effect—served only to plunge them more deeply into the gloom.

Read was first to speak. He ran his fingers across his iron grey hair.

"Born Kenneth John Temple?" he muttered. "What's he talking about? And who's this 'absent brother by birth?'"

Jeffery tapped the document gently against his fingers.

"It means," he said quietly, "something that Professor Rochester has deliberately held back. Something we should have guessed from the start. *Roger was an adopted son!* His real name was Temple."

10: Behold The Foul Fiend!

(Saturday, March 13th)

AN HOUR LATER Jeffery Blackburn entered the living-room and said quietly. "It's all over now."

For a moment they did not comprehend the significance in his tone. Then eyes flashed up to his face, eyes inquiring, hopeful, bewildered. Brian Austin was first to speak. "You don't mean— "

"Yes," said Jeffery. "I mean that the Rochester murders are no longer a mystery. The case is finished. With the exception of one person, I want you all out of this house by nightfall. You are free to go this minute."

A great light blazed in Phillip Barrett's hawk-like face and he took a step forward.

"You're— you're not joking with us, Blackburn? We are free to go?"

The young man nodded gravely.

"With the exception of one person— yes."

No one in that room moved. It was Brian Austin who asked the question that leapt to every lip.

"Who is that person?"

Like an actor awaiting a cue, the Chief Inspector marched into the room, followed by Dennis Connolly and Donlin. The three men halted inside the door. Read surveyed the room with hard eyes, then his glance came to rest on one individual who stirred uncomfortably. There was a silence in which a pin could be heard to drop. The Chief Inspector spoke slowly:

"Rollo Morgan! I arrest you on a charge of suspicion of being concerned in the deaths of Roger Rochester and Michael Prater and I warn you that anything you may say will be taken down in evidence against you!"

News of the sensational culmination to the Rochester murder case reached London in time to catch the front pages of the Sunday editions which would be distributed the length and breadth of the country. No more juicier morsel of news had dropped into the sub-editorial baskets in many a moon, and after the first breathless intimation the Press, that Argus-eyed and hydra-headed creation, once more descended upon Rochester House. Its minions came, not as single spies, but in battalions.

The house was emptied of its family and guests. An hour after Jeffery's announcement that they were free to go there had been a wholesale exodus from the place. The guests had returned to their various homes and the Rochesters, on the advice of the Chief Inspector, had gone to London. They

fled not only from the horror of the house itself, but also from the demon publicity. Read had cautioned everybody severely before they left; they were to say nothing, *nothing at all*, regarding the events at 'Rochester'. Any information must come from one source only— from the Chief Inspector himself. Even Jeffery had been included in the censure. But it was not needed. The participants in the terrors of the past week were unlikely to court further notoriety. Swearing eternal silence they fled from the house like prisoners released from some grim bastille.

Blackburn had also journeyed to London. Not, like the others, to hide from the tentacles of publicity, but to interview old retainers at the St. Augustine's Home, to scan dusty record-books and poke through pigeon-holes for dog-eared birth-certificates. There were the birth-certificates of Kenneth John and Arthur Herbert Temple, born in Whitechapel. Records told their own pitiful and sordid story. The children were the offspring of a tainted union. The mother had been incarcerated in a lunatic asylum shortly after the birth of the youngest child. The father had been sentenced to a long term of imprisonment for a particularly brutal case of robbery with violence. This, however, was not discovered until his death in prison, some years later, when he confessed that the two children, left outside the orphanage door with their birth-certificates pinned to their clothing, were his own.

At the age of eighteen Arthur Temple had journeyed to Australia on the immigration scheme mentioned, by the Professor. The Home kept an official eye on the lad until he was twenty-one, when they relinquished all claim. Since that time he had corresponded with the authorities irregularly. They understood he was working on a farm somewhere in the south-eastern portion of South Australia. From his letters, he appeared to be a steady, industrious young man.

Jeffery remained in town overnight and returned to Rochester House on the following afternoon. The heat of the previous afternoon had increased to a close humidity, aggravated by the heavy low-hanging clouds that draped the sky. The meter on the bonnet of Jeffery's car pushed up a scarlet warning finger as he drove through Rockwall. Over the Channel, where the clouds were dark and lowering, a flicker of lightning danced and was gone.

Jeffery drove into 'Rochester', parked the car and entered the house. He found Read in the living-room, sprawled across a table littered with newspapers. The Sunday editors had played up the Rochester case to the greatest extent of their wide organization. There were photographs of the Rochesters, plans of the house and chapel marked with the inevitable X, "reconstructed" pictures showing the mechanism of the altar. There were articles by "special" writers on witchcraft and superstitions, on actual historical

cases of mannikins being used to bring about death. One paper went so far as to recall "the mysterious business of hoof-marks which were found in the snow about the south of Devon in February 1855" when it was believed that Satan himself had walked through the towns of Topsham, Lympstone, Exmouth, Teignmouth, and Dawlish.

Had any of the scribblers responsible for those sensational columns been present at that meeting between Jeffery and his friend, they would have noticed a marked change in the Chief Inspector's attitude. Vanished was Read's air of confident bonhomie; in its place was one of acute anxiety. His fingers strayed continuously to that clipped grey moustache and there were lines about his eyes and mouth that gave indication of strain. He looked up as the young man entered, nodded, and indicated the papers with a gesture.

"Your trap's set, son. Now we've got to worry if the animal rises to the bait!"

Blackburn slumped down in a chair and drew off his gloves.

"I had to take this chance, Chief," he said sombrely. "It's the only way. Once this person knows that the house is deserted, he's bound to come back here. He must! All our reasoning points to this being the only thing that can happen!"

Read grunted.

"Well, I hope you're right. But I can't help wondering what the A.C.'s going to say if we slip up. He's warned me already about your little surprise stunts."

"To hell with the A.C.," said Jeffery irritably. He dragged his chair across to the table and pulled a slip of paper from his pocket. Taking up a pencil he began to draw a shaky diagram on the sheet. At various points he marked neat little figures. Then he pushed the design across to Read.

"Here's your plan, Chief," he said. "You'll need to post your men at those points indicated. You and I will wait inside with Morgan." He raised his eyes. "All clear?"

The Chief Inspector nodded.

"And one last word," said Jeffery quietly. "Have your men keep their revolvers to hand. Our friend has very sharp claws and means to use them without the slightest hesitation."

At nine o'clock that Sunday night the storm broke.

Since evening the air had been sullen with thunder and sharp with lightning. The dense mass of cloud crawled forward until it covered the sky, blotting out moon and stars, sealing the brooding countryside under a leaden cover. Cavernous rumbling starting as far-away echoes moved closer like the guns of an advancing army, lit by the spasmodic fairy lights of the storm. Then the first heavy warning drops fell, large as shillings, a quick patter that raced

across roof-tops. The silence that followed was fraught with tingling presentiment. Under that hot canopy an awed world cowered, waiting. Abruptly the thunder boomed like Stentor, wrenched open the floodgates, and the rain gushed forth, smashing in its tumbling eagerness.

Inside Rochester House, inside the library where Jeffery, Rollo Morgan, and the Chief Inspector crouched in an alcove, the beat of the rain was dulled to a sodden drumming that called up queer echoes from the shuttered rooms. It seemed incredible that only yesterday this house had teemed with agitated movement. Tonight it stood mute as the Pyramids, a dead house, with room upon room of emptiness' and gloom and silence.

The relief brought about by the unleashing of the down-pour' found no response in Jeffery's heart. Standing in the darkness, he heaped manifold but subdued curses on the impassive head of Jupiter Pluvius.

Read, by his shoulder, whispered:

"What's biting you, son?"

"This storm. The one detail I overlooked in my reckoning."

"You think it may prevent— "

"I don't know. If my calculations are sound nothing can prevent our friend's appearance tonight. But can one be sure...?"

Silence. Outside the drumming had faded to a monotonous hum. Little creaks and rustles from various parts of the room proved that others were alert and watching in that blackness. The minutes ticked on. The illuminated hands of Jeffery's wrist-watch crawled around the tiny dial— half past nine. Ten o'clock. Half past ten. The downpour had slackened outside. Stillness, complete and unbroken, enveloped Rochester House. Rollo Morgan yawned. The Chief Inspector shifted his weight to alternate legs. From the living-room the chimes of eleven o'clock trembled through the silent room. And then—

"Sssh!" breathed Jeffery.

They stiffened and then they heard it. From somewhere came a soft shuffle of footsteps. That usually commonplace sound was indescribably sinister in the hushed atmosphere, and Rollo Morgan felt the small hairs on his neck rise as the skin tightened in anticipation. By his side his companions were as immovable as the wall that sheltered them. The footsteps came closer, paused outside the library door, and there came the faint creak of hinges. Rollo, scarcely daring to move an eyelid, stared at the slowly opening door.

Something darker than the shadows of the room, something unformed, amorphous, slipped through and hesitated. The sound of breathing was distinct in the silence. The figure began to move towards one end of the room, moving with a peculiar gliding motion. To the far wall it went, halted, and there

came little rustles of clothing. A pause. Then a faint click and the soft scrape of metal against metal. Something white gleamed faintly in the darkness—

In that moment the library seemed to spring into life. There was a crash of something hurtling to the floor and the room was filled with struggling figures coiled blackly about that shadow by the wall. Curses mingled with heavy breathing as they fought, to terminate with a jingle of handcuffs and a roar from Dennis Connolly:

"We've got 'im, Chief!"

Jeffery was at the light-switch first, but Rollo and the Chief Inspector were only a pace behind. He pressed it down and the light blazed forth, blindingly, so that they stood blinking in the sudden glare. Rollo Morgan turned and stared with open mouth. At the far end of the library, writhing in the grasp of Connolly and Donlin was a familiar figure— a stocky, sharp-featured man, eyes glittering like a fiend's behind horn-rimmed spectacles.

"*Trevor Pimlott!*" gasped Rollo.

Blackburn walked towards the group. Reaching forward he took from the struggling man's pocket a string of milk-white pearls and balanced them in his hand.

"I rather imagined these would draw you back to the house," he said grimly. Then he turned to Rollo:

"By the way, Morgan, you might give our murdering friend his real name."

"Real name?" stuttered Rollo.

Jeffery inclined his head.

"Yes. This is Roger Rochester's not-so-absent brother by birth. Meet Arthur Herbert Temple, late of South Australia!"

11: Dawn After Black Sabbath

(Saturday, March 20th)

(Copy of a letter written by Jeffery Blackburn and sent to Rollo Morgan, c/o the Akimbo Club, Park Lane, London):

Dene Cottage, Thursby,
Saturday, March 20th.

My Dear Rollo,

Your interesting but, I fear, rather illegible missive to hand, in which you inform me you are "perishing with curiosity" as to the whys and wherefores of the Rochester case. Then it is only right that you should be enlightened. Neither the Chief Inspector nor myself have forgotten your sportsmanlike attitude in reference to the false arrest which was, as you probably now realize, most necessary as a legitimate excuse for clearing the house of its people and setting the trap for our wily and altogether dangerous quarry.

Looking over my notes I find that my introduction to the Rochester case occurred on a Saturday, March 6th. According to Temple's confession, the dark business began some three months before that date. Temple, who was unemployed in South Australia, knew that his elder brother was living in luxury in England. The contrast between the positions of his brother and himself rankled deeply. He determined to meet his brother, and by fair means or foul divert some part of Roger's enormous wealth into his own pocket. He therefore left Australia and arrived in London at the beginning of the New Year. At this time Temple asserts (and I see no reason to doubt him) that he had no definite plan in mind.

His first act on reaching the city was to get into touch with his brother. Roger journeyed up to London, met the new arrival, and lent him a small sum of money. There seems to have been some affection on Roger's part for his younger brother. Then they parted. In the meanwhile Temple met a shady acquaintance whom he had known in Sydney. This individual's name was Trevor Pimlott. He had come to London some ten years before and had opened a detective agency in Bloomsbury. Pimlott needed an assistant; he took Arthur Temple on to help him.

It was on, the second meeting of the brothers, about a month later, that Roger showed Temple the box of dolls he had taken from the house. In his confession Temple says that these Mannikins held a curious fascination for his brother (an indication, perhaps, of Roger's unbalanced mental state?) and that

he stated he had taken the dolls because they appealed to him. Nothing of interest occurred at this second meeting.

Arthur Temple did not hear from his brother again until Saturday, February 29th, when he received an urgent message to meet Roger in Rockwall. Arthur travelled down, to be met by a frantic brother who told him an extraordinary story. Roger stated that on the previous evening he had murdered his aunt-by-adoption, Miss Beatrice, by pushing her downstairs. He detailed how they had quarrelled and how Beatrice had announced her intention of having him shut away in an asylum. Roger, angry, had first played a trick on her by posting her a doll from Rockwall. Somehow the influence of this mannikin had so taken possession of his mind that he became obsessed by the idea of killing the woman. They had been walking downstairs on the previous evening, and suddenly this impulse became too strong. He had tripped and flung the unfortunate woman from the bend of the stairs. It was at this juncture, I believe, that Temple realized that his elder brother was insane, although he does not make specific mention of this in his confession.

And this was but a small part of Roger's plight. He said he believed that his crime had been seen by the butler, Prater. And, finally, he told Arthur of his entanglement with the gypsy girl, Bianca, and the proposed visit of her betrothed. He begged Arthur to help him; he could trust no one in the house—had no other living soul to whom he could turn for aid. Then he told his brother that only a few weeks before he had made his will in his (Arthur's) favour. If his brother would get him out of this fix, Roger would hand over the will there and then. If Arthur refused, he would destroy it and the brother would inherit nothing.

Arthur Temple cogitated deeply over this last piece of information. His first idea (so he admits) was to report Roger's crime to the police and inherit the money after his brother was hanged. Then he realized that, under the circumstances, it's doubtful if the extreme penalty would be inflicted. Roger would probably be incarcerated in a mental home— would probably live for years, and the chances of his fortune descending to Arthur would be remote, indeed.

It was Roger, with all the cunning of the insane, who suggested the plan that was to engineer his own death, if he could but realize it. He suggested that he give the box of dolls to Arthur and that Arthur post Roger's mannikin to Rochester house from London. This would tend to remove any suspicion that Roger was concerned either in the sending of the mannikin to Beatrice or her subsequent death. Then Roger, in pretended fear of his life, would get Arthur down and into the house in his role of private detective, Arthur's duty being ostensibly to guard Roger. But his brother must not take the risk of coming

down under his own name, since his identity would at once be known to Professor Rochester. Arthur must sink his own personality under the name of Trevor Pimlott.

Arthur Temple, with his brother's vast wealth so close under his nose, consented. And that, my dear Rollo, was the story behind what we might call the first murder. Beatrice dead by Roger's hand and Arthur Temple masquerading at 'Rochester' as Trevor Pimlott, private detective.

IN HIS CONFESSION Arthur Temple openly admits that, from the moment he stepped into Rochester House, he planned to murder his brother. Roger had placed the will in Arthur's hands and that individual realized that a man's life was all that stood between a vast fortune and himself. The way was already prepared by the posting of Roger's mannikin. Therefore, Arthur cast about for the safest and easiest way to remove his brother from this earth.

He discovered a method by sheer accident. Poking about in the library on the day after his arrival he discovered the volume containing the history of Rochester House and read of the mechanical contrivance hidden in the altar. He describes how he first destroyed the book so that no other person might gain the same knowledge, then went down to the chapel, found the secret panel and examined the sleeve. This was on Friday, March 5th. And it was on this day that Bianca received the note from Tanasi telling her to expect him on the following night. Roger knew of this and, desperately afraid, begged Arthur to help him. Roger said that Barrett had suggested he (Roger) go to the chapel and keep the gypsy there while Barrett went to get the money for the bribe. Roger suggested to Arthur that the brother should wait nearby for this meeting, that Roger should provoke Tanasi into attacking him while Barrett was absent, and that Arthur, in the role of a detective, should arrest the gypsy. It was a stupid, childish, and altogether ridiculous scheme— in fact, just the kind of plan a mentally unbalanced person would suggest.

But the information that Roger was going down to that chapel to wait for the gypsy gave Arthur Temple an idea that was a positive flash of evil genius. Alone in his room that night, he brooded over it. And the closer the examination, the more foolproof did it seem. Next he must think out details of execution. If a knife were to be placed in that contrivance behind the altar-panel and Roger could be persuaded to release the weapon, he would be dead by the time the gypsy entered the chapel. Dead with no sign of his execution save the knife wound, since Arthur Temple believed that the sleeve would carry the weapon behind the panel of the altar. And if Tanasi could be discovered standing over Roger's dead body it would mean his arrest on a charge of murder. Thus not only would Roger be removed but the arrest of the

gypsy would make the business complete. The more Arthur looked at it, the more perfect did this plan become.

We learn that the choice of a suitable knife worried Temple not a little. The weapon must be pointed and razor-edged, since that one thrust had to kill immediately. In a casual conversation with Roger on the following morning (the Saturday of his death) Temple heard his brother mention the collection of knives brought back from Montana. He determined to obtain one of those knives. Finding the museum locked he obtained the key by a cunning move. He removed Professor Rochester's witchball from his study. The old man, finding the curiosity gone, pressed Temple into searching for it, as the latter guessed he would. This gave Temple opportunities of prowling unsuspected about Cornelius' study and bedroom. It was while the Professor was changing for his Saturday afternoon sleep that Temple obtained the keys. To slip from Cornelius' room, open the museum, wrench the knife from the wall, relock the door, and return the keys, was the work of a few minutes.

The afternoon passed uneventfully, with Roger drilling his brother in the final details of the night's scheme for Tanasi's arrest. Roger, little realizing he was going to his own death, was full of the plan. Tanasi was expected to reach "Rochester" about ten o'clock. Barrett was to meet him, send him to the chapel alone. Arthur must be waiting nearby. He (Roger) would go to the chapel, light the candles on the altar and wait for Tanasi's arrival and the appearance of Arthur. So it was arranged. Temple agreed, as well he might. First, however, he must go into Rockwall. He would return about nine-thirty.

Roger demanded the reason for this journey and Temple explained that Jan Rochester had asked him to drive her into the village. There was, Arthur said, no reason for Roger to worry, They would be back soon after half past nine. So it was left at that. At eight o'clock or thereabouts Temple left the dining-room, went to the chapel, set the altar trap, and was about to leave when he realized a small flaw in his plan. If Roger were to enter the chapel earlier than they had arranged he might fall a victim to the altar trap straight away. In that case an autopsy might prove that he had been killed before Tanasi had arrived at "Rochester". How, then, to retard the rigor of the body? It was then that Temple remembered the artificial heating of the chapel. This, he thought, should help. He turned it on, left the chapel, brought the car around to the house, picked up Miss Jan and the couple set off for Rockwall.

But, as you now understand, Rollo, there were three sad hitches in Temple's supposedly foolproof plan. The first was the dislodging of the weapon, which came free of the sleeve and remained in Roger's body. The second was that Barrett, forced to accompany Tanasi to the chapel, was actually with him when Roger's dead body was discovered. The third was an

act of God— the cloudburst which kept Temple and Jan Rochester away all night.

Roger's brother returned on Sunday morning to find that, although his plan had misfired, he was in no immediate danger, since the storm which had helped to ruin his scheme was, paradoxically, the greatest element in his favour as it provided him with an unshakable alibi. Following the discovery of Roger's body by the chapel party, I played into Temple's hands splendidly by allowing him to remain alone in the building. This gave him the chance to remove all finger-prints and other clues which he might have left on the previous evening while setting the trap. And how his detestable soul must have smirked as I trotted forth my brain-fagging deductions! That air of wholesale condescension wasn't so very much assumed as you might think. How I blush when I realize the unholy mirth my poor blundering must have caused him! In pity for my self-respect we will draw a veil over the events of that first unhappy morning.

Now, with the exception of one thing, there was no obstacle in the way of Arthur Temple's leaving Rochester House for good. Roger was dead— and while the murder had failed to become the neat framed-up scheme he had planned, he was, nevertheless, perfectly safe. No breath of suspicion was heard against him. But— and it was a rather menacing but— there was the problem of the will.

To exonerate him from all suspicion of association, Temple wanted Roger's will to be found inside Rochester House. Yet he could not afford to have the document discovered until sufficient time had elapsed to allow him to leave the country. If the will was produced before this time his presence in London would be discovered, Arthur Temple would be revealed as Trevor Pimlott, and the whole plot might be discovered. Therefore, Temple realized that the will must be hidden until he could return to South Australia and take up his residence there. He was a bird of passage and no one would have missed him during his absence. But where to hide the will so that it would remain a secret for some months, yet would inevitably be found?

The answer was supplied by a chance conversation he happened to overhear between Prater and Girt on the day previous to Roger's murder. The butler ordered Girt to restock the flour-bin with the usual three months' supply! Three months' supply! The words must have had a musical ring in Temple's ears. He slipped down into the kitchen that night, hid the document in the residue of the flour at the bottom of the bin and next morning the ordered bulk arrived. It was tipped into the bin, to hide the will until the receptacle was again emptied. And by that time Temple would be safely ensconced in his Antipodean home!

So far— so good! Luck was favouring Temple with almost incredible perversity. And he was preparing for his departure when chance, in the form of Michael Prater, smashed his carefully laid plans into ruin.

It was on the Sunday afternoon when, with Sergeant Colmer, I was interviewing the Chief Constable, that Prater went to Temple, told him he knew his true identity and accused him of the murder of Roger Rochester to obtain his brother's money!

WE CANNOT BE SURE just how much was knowledge and how much guesswork on the part of Michael Prater, regarding this abrupt accusation. His lips are sealed, and in his confession Arthur Temple remains provokingly vague about this phase. However, as the old servant was with Professor Rochester at the time of Roger's adoption and knew of the younger brother at the orphanage, he may have noticed certain resemblances that escaped less experienced eyes. Or perhaps Mrs. Girt had mentioned the circumstances of glimpsing the will, and the fact that a brother was beneficiary aroused the old man's suspicions. At all events he went to Temple, faced him with his knowledge, and gave him twenty-four hours to reveal his true identity to the police.

You can imagine Temple's feelings! Just as he had set his foot on the smooth road to freedom and wealth this irritating stone tripped him up. Prater was, of course, more than foolish to have opened his mouth to Temple. He should have communicated at once with the police. As it was he signed his own death warrant— to borrow a phrase from Wilkie Collins. Now Temple saw the danger of losing the money for which he had committed murder; he also saw a good chance of being hanged. And he was not the type to sell his life so easily. Prater's tongue must be silenced.

To add to Temple's consternation, I returned that afternoon from Rockwall with the information that Scotland Yard was taking over the case on the following day. Temple realized he must act at once. Faced with a squad of detectives, no power save death could prevent Prater revealing the secret the other had striven so hard to keep hidden. And the manner in which Temple accomplished this murder is surely one of the most brilliant examples of concealed killing in the history of criminology.

As I had demanded a cross-examination on that night at which every member of the household was to be present, Temple had no chance to commit his crime until that investigation was finished. As you know, Prater was the last man to be questioned. He left the room at ten-thirty. Five minutes later I sent Temple (who was present all through the cross-examination) to your office for the typewriter. This was his chance. He slipped into the servants' quarters,

took a carver from the kitchen, knocked at Prater's door and was let in by the servant, who was engaged in writing a letter to Temple. As Prater turned away to his table, Temple drove the carving knife through his back. Temple then raced to his room, which was a few doors from the servants' quarters, took the mannikin of Prater and his reading-glasses in their case, slipped them into his pocket and returned to the living-room bearing the typewriter.

Now Temple intended the body to be found that night, and his first scheme had been to drop the mannikin somewhere on the floor so that it might be found accidentally. But when he discovered the room empty (I had gone to the library for a hand-lamp and Colmer for his pipe) he evolved the idea of shoving the mannikin inside the clock, knowing well that it must be disclosed when midnight chimed. Because— and note this point carefully— Temple wanted Colmer and myself to be present in the room when that mannikin appeared. He knew that we would immediately go to Prater's room, and if he was with us when the body was discovered it was an almost perfect alibi.

But Temple was cunning. He realized that when we came to investigate the time-factor of that night we would remember that he had been absent, ostensibly looking for a typewriter, for ten minutes. So he planned the final touch of perfection. He staged a little monologue by the door to make us believe that the servant was still alive *at half past eleven!* Because, if we were given evidence that Prater was alive at half past eleven, and his dead body was discovered at midnight— *during which interval Temple had never left the living room*— how could we possibly suspect him of the crime?

It wasn't until some time later that I realized the worthlessness of that evidence. Nor, until then, did I recall that neither Colmer nor myself had actually *seen* the servant! Temple had pulled the bellrope, gone to the door, reproached Prater with his tardiness, and sent him for the spectacles, which were, of course, in Temple's pocket all the time. We had, to be sure, heard a soft knock which was supposed to have been delivered by the servant, but Temple, who was sitting with his hands under the table, could have easily faked that. He did fake it, as we know. Then he walked to the door a second time, opened it so that he could extract the spectacle-case from his pocket unseen, dismissed the butler and came back with the case in his hand.

Remember, your typewriter was going at full pelt through this pleasant little masquerade, our minds were concentrated on our work and we were tired with the strain of a long day. Add to this the fact that, because we suspected nothing, we were not on the alert for trickery, and you can readily see that we were in an ideal frame of mind for such a deception. It was not until later that I realized how we might have been fooled by the trick.

One curiously illogical fact focused my attention upon incidents of that night with almost microscopic concentration. I could not, for the life of me, understand why the murderer of Prater had not planned his death to appear as suicide. The servant was under suspicion and his suicide would have been feasible because of these very circumstances. Yet why was the doll placed in the clock? Why were we given warning of the butler's demise? It was a most inconsistent point and only after some days could I see the answer.

Now, of course, that is apparent. Temple could not make Prater's death look like a suicide because the body had to be found as soon as the mannikin appeared from the clock. If the body was discovered before eleven-thirty his carefully staged farce at the door was useless. If discovered after midnight, after he had left our company, he would have been as much under suspicion as the rest of the household. The Chief Inspector was inclined to scoff at the business of the doll, believing it to be an indication of the murderer's love of the theatrical. But that mannikin was as necessary to the success of Temple's plan as the knife that killed Prater!

Arthur Temple was practically forced into the trap we laid for him. When he read in the newspapers that Roger's will had been found and a letter was being forwarded to the brother in Australia by the first available boat, he realized that he, too, must catch that boat, since it was imperative that he should be in Australia when that letter arrived. The boat sailed on the Monday morning. We could have caught him as he boarded it. Then it occurred to me that when, he read the published account of Roger's necklace being in the house, his greed might overcome his caution. As it seemed, he had little to fear. An arrest had been made, and as far as the police were concerned investigations had ceased. The guests and members of the family had gone; the house was deserted. As that important boat sailed on Monday, Sunday night was his last opportunity. And Arthur Temple walked into that trap as we guessed he would.

12: Tail-Piece

THREE WEEKS after the above letter was written two men sat in the lounge-room at the Akimbo Club. They were sipping black coffee. Jeffery Blackburn had the inevitable cigarette between his fingers, while Chief Inspector William Read replaced his cup and reached for his cigar-case. He leaned back and slipped the band from his cigar. There was a deep-set twinkle in his eyes as he addressed the younger man.

"Y'know, son, Temple is boasting that, had it not been for the confession which he made, the Crown would never have been able to prove a case against him." He struck a match. "His story is that we took a blind chance that night and it was only through the greatest stroke of luck that the chance came off."

"Indeed?" Blackburn's tone was slightly weary. "Much as I regret having to rob Temple of his last strutting glory, it's only fair to myself to say that I knew Temple was deeply involved in the murders four days before his arrest!"

Read sat up.

"Then why the devil— "

Jeffery pushed him back in his seat.

"Now— now," he said soothingly. "I didn't breathe a word to you because I didn't know Temple's motive— in fact, I didn't even know Pimlott was Temple, until the finding of the will in the flour-bin!" He shook his head. "I know your bull-at-a-gate methods, Chief. If I had mentioned a syllable of my suspicions, you would have arrested Temple— and then you would have been forced to release him through lack of proof. And how the Assistant Commissioner would have appreciated that!"

Read chewed at his cigar.

"Then how did you know about Temple?" he barked.

"It was Prater's letter that gave me the first clue," replied Blackburn. Cigarette between his lips. He lounged back in his chair. "The letter which Prater was writing when he was attacked late on Sunday night." He produced a pocket-wallet and extracted a typewritten slip of paper. This he unfolded and handed across to his companion. "This is a copy of Prater's letter, Chief. Read it aloud."

The Chief Inspector took the flimsy sheet, removed the cigar from his lips, and read:

"What has happened in this house tonight makes it impossible for me to remain silent any longer. The police suspect me. Therefore I will give you exactly twelve hours to think over what I have said. If by ten-thirty tomorrow—
"

"Stop!" Jeffery sat up as Read stared at him. "Now do you see, Chief?"

"Hanged if I do," grunted the other.

"Listen." Jeffery slowed his words. "Prater wrote: 'I will give you *exactly twelve hours* to think over what I have said. If by *ten-thirty tomorrow*,' etc. He leaned forward and tapped the table. "That meant only one thing. It meant that Prater was writing that letter at *ten-thirty on Sunday night!*"

The Chief Inspector puffed smoke.

"Agreed," he nodded.

"Now, consider your own argument, Chief. You said that there was only one reason why Prater couldn't finish writing his letter. Because he was murdered before he could finish it! Consequently, *he was murdered at ten-thirty!*"

Read gave a little gasp. He did not speak and Jeffery hurried on.

"If this was the truth— and all indications pointed to it being the truth—we were faced with an amazing inconsistency. Prater had been killed at half past ten. Yet, at half past eleven, we were asked to believe that he was still alive! For had he not answered Temple's ring and brought Temple's spectacles? Obviously there was a discrepancy— a most sinister discrepancy— somewhere!

"I cast my mind back to that evening. Then it was I realized the amazing truth. Neither Colmer nor myself had seen or heard Prater. We had nothing save Temple's word that the servant had come. But it was impossible for Prater to have answered that door when he was murdered an hour before. You can imagine the shock of realization.

"What had happened at ten-thirty? I next asked myself. We had— all three of us— left the room for at least ten minutes. That meant Temple would have had ample time to commit the murder and place the mannikin in the clock. And it also explained that other puzzling factor— the reason why the murderer could not make Prater's death appear as suicide.

"Then, as these facts wove themselves together, I was aware of other curious inconsistencies on the part of the man I knew as Pimlott. One such incident had happened just after the discovery of Roger's body in the chapel. I had asked Pimlott (as we will call him) to turn off the heat. He went straight to the turncock and obliged. Some time later I myself went to look for this same turncock and I had to search almost *ten minutes* before I could find it.

"Yes, on the Sunday night before questioning Prater, I asked Pimlott a casual question about the chapel. Imagine my astonishment when he said he had never set foot inside the building before that morning. If that was so how had he known where to find a turncock so hidden that it took me ten minutes to locate it?"

He paused and drew on his cigarette. Read was listening closely.

"Then there was the incident of Camilla Ward's lighter. I had detailed Pimlott to search the chapel following the investigation of Roger's death. He stayed in the building for some time, to emerge and report that although he had combed the place he had found nothing. Yet that lighter was one of the first things your men located. Pimlott had obviously never searched the chapel."

"When did you tumble to all this, son?"

"It wasn't until the Wednesday— you had gone to London. I shut myself up with the exhibits. I knew there was something wrong with that letter— but it wasn't until the night, when I was lying in bed worrying the thing out, that the inspiration occurred to me. And when I learnt that there was a weapon of destruction concealed in the altar which made it unnecessary for the murderer to be near Roger at the time of his death, the case against Temple was greatly substantiated.

"Consider his advantages! He was, in his role as private detective, on the inside of the case all the time. He knew every-step I took and could make plans to circumvent me. As in the case of my leaving him alone in the chapel, he could even destroy clues and lay other false trails. And but for that letter which Prater left— the only step in the case of which he was ignorant, remember— he might have gone on being unsuspected."

"I wish you'd given me a tip." grunted Read.

Jeffery spread his hands.

"I couldn't, Chief. Because my own theories were tangled and snarled by lack of motive. I had, remember, not the faintest suspicion that Roger had a brother and that Pimlott was Arthur Temple. The apparent lack of motive was the greatest stumbling-block. I kept asking myself— why should an obscure private detective desire to murder two men who were complete strangers to him? Pimlott was not a homicidal maniac. Then it occurred to me that perhaps Pimlott had, in some way, persuaded Roger to make a will in his favour. But that idea was too fantastic for credence! How could I possibly say anything? All I could do was to pray that the will would turn up and enlighten us."

"And when it did?"

"It took us a step forward," explained the young man. "It proved Roger had a brother. Then Professor Rochester told us that his brother had gone to Australia *and had not been seen for many years!* Immediately the question occurred to me— could Pimlott be this brother, Arthur Temple? Then a counter-query was raised. How could he inherit this money if he were in London when the will stated definitely that he was in Australia? Assuming Pimlott to be Temple, he would never dare claim the wealth after being so

closely associated with Roger's mysterious death. Questions would be asked that must reveal the plot.

"Then, just when my poor head threatened to split with its whirling, Professor Rochester remarked on the peculiarity of the hiding-place and the fact that three months must, in the natural course of events, have elapsed before the will was discovered. Three months! Time for Temple to get back to Australia and claim the money from there! He need never set foot in London. Proofs of his relationship could be obtained from the orphanage and lawyers could do the work. It was, as I said, the missing piece of the puzzle, fitted into place at last!"

The Chief Inspector dropped an inch of cigar-ash into the tray at his elbow.

"You knew, of course, that the real Pimlott and Temple were friends. Temple got him into the game in case we should look up the records of the Argus Detective Agency. When we found that this place had been established for years we were scarcely likely to suspect that its representative had landed from Australia only a few months before."

Jeffery yawned.

"Let's drop the subject," he suggested. "I'm heartily sick and tired of criminology. I'm going back to my cottage and soak myself in Wodehouse. I feel I never want to hear the word 'investigation' again."

The Chief Inspector grunted. He reached into a pocket and brought out a telegram. Examining it, he spoke almost musingly.

"That's a pity, son. There's rather an interesting case turned up in Whitechapel. Young sailor found strangled. Marks on his throat indicated something like the claw of a gigantic bird—"

A soft, polite snore interrupted him. Mr. Blackburn was apparently fast asleep in his chair.

The End