

OWL OF DARKNESS

MAX
AFFORD

*A Jeffrey
Blackburn
Thriller*



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Max Afford

OWL OF DARKNESS

(Fly by Night)

Max Afford

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For Thelma

Contents

Prologue	3
Chapter 1: Monday, June 10th	10
Chapter 2: Tuesday, June 11th	22
Chapter 3: Saturday, June 15th	37
Chapter 4: Sunday, June 16th	59
Chapter 5: Sunday, June 16th (Continued)	78
Chapter 6: Monday, June 17	96
Chapter 7: Monday, June 19th (Continued)	115
Chapter 8: Tuesday, June 18th	133
Chapter 9: Wednesday, June 19th	153
Chapter 10: Thursday June 20th	173

"It is my belief, Watson, founded on my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does this smiling and beautiful countryside. You look at these scattered houses and you are impressed with their beauty. I look at them and the only thought that comes to me is a feeling of their isolation and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there."

— The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.

Prologue

Notes from Jeffery Blackburn's Diary of the Case.

IN GIVING EVIDENCE later, Andy Maxton swore it was the hoot of an owl that woke him.

For some moments he lay motionless, his body relaxed, his mind on that vague borderland between sleeping and waking, conscious of nothing save the liquid whisper of water hissing softly in his ears. The outlines of the room, dim in the light of a spent moon, were unfamiliar to him. Then his eyes moved to the long window framing the dark garden, and in that moment his mind cleared.

This was his bedroom in that riverside villa— Lady Evelyn Harnett's villa at Richmond. In the murmurous silence the pattern of his thoughts spun smoothly. Four weeks ago Andy Maxton had come to London from Australia. He had made Lady Evelyn's acquaintance through the Victorian League, when, home-sick and lonely, he had run across Ted Bissinger in the British Museum. Bissinger, a school-friend of Maxton's, was in the office of a film company, and, taking pity on the solitary young man, had introduced him to the League.

Over tea and buttered buns the League had arranged this week-end.

"You'll find Lady Evelyn very interested in Colonials," the secretary explained, "and there'll be other guests down there besides yourself." And before the young man, whose mind was feverishly reviewing the condition of his laundry, had time to reply, the secretary continued: "Lady Evelyn suggests the fourteenth. I take it that's quite convenient to you?"

Andy, his mouth full of buttered bun, nodded.

The house was cool and green and stood back in grounds that sloped gently towards the river. Comparing it with the confined grubbiness of his Bayswater room, the young man offered up a silent prayer for the ultimate

salvation of the League and his hostess. Lady Evelyn was in the garden when he arrived.

Wearing heavy gloves and armed with a pair of garden shears, she was trimming her roses. This plump pink cocoon of a woman smiled vaguely upon him, paused in her arborial labours long enough to inquire his name and introduce him to the other guests— two Canadian girls and a lanky New Zealander named Insmith— and then, to his embarrassment, apparently forgot all about him.

A manservant named Keaton took him in hand, showed him his room, explained the position of the bath, and left the visitor hopelessly marooned in a terrifying maze of doors and passages. He was finally rescued by Insmith, who had been through all this before. The two men descended to the garden, where they found the Canadians wandering disconsolately. It was Insmith who suggested the walk, and the quartette spent the remainder of the afternoon exploring Richmond Old Church and examining the curious inscriptions on the tombstones.

Andy met his hostess again at dinner. Lady Evelyn's manner was even more vague. Over the joint course she became politely curious and asked him a number of questions about Canada. The young man countered these inquiries as well as he could, ignoring the sly twinkle in the eyes of the Dominion's daughters.

"And is it true," continued Lady Evelyn, "that your mounted policemen wear those charming red coats only on dress parades?"

Andy decided this false impression must be rectified, and on his halting explanation the hostess excused herself with a shrug and a smile that never reached her dark eyes.

"I feel," she murmured, "that this is the right time to ask Keaton to turn on the wireless." The awkward situation was carried off with an ease that was admirable, yet the young man could not help thinking that the charm, like the smile, was a little too mechanical. For the remainder of the meal, he watched covertly. Andy Maxton was no fool, and while one part of his mind was alive to the small-talk across the table, another was analysing the problem of Lady Evelyn Harnett. Before the meal was finished the young man was convinced that the pretty plump woman at the head of the table was hag-ridden by some dark anxiety she dared not face alone. Was it for this reason she had sought to fill her house with guests on this weekend?

Later they had danced to a programme of swing music broadcast from the B.B.C. Conversation consumed the interval before supper— conversation that centred around the Threat of War, What Struck Me Most in London, and, inevitably, the English Climate. They all retired, eventually, at the respectable

hour of 11.15. Except for one disturbing incident, Andy Maxton's first evening at Malden Villa had been pleasant, suburban, and just a little disappointing.

THE YOUNG MAN sat up in bed. A breeze from the open window chilled his bare chest where his buttonless pyjamas hung open. He pulled the garment about his broad shoulders and reached for the wristwatch lying on a small table near by. The luminous hands pointed to 3.30.

What had awakened him?

Certainly not discomfort. The bed was soft and warm under his body. Snuggling into the feather pillows, he had fallen asleep almost instantly, to dream of wide paddocks and fire-scorched tree-trunks. And now, even as he sat staring into the darkness, scattered fragments of that vision returned. He had been bird-nesting in that blackened forest, and had spied a magpie's nest tilting on a charred bough. A lone bird guarded it, and as he climbed, it was not a magpie that waited there, but a huge owl. It had screeched and swooped down on him beating wings...

An owl!

He found himself listening for that screech again. And his mind flew back to that incident in the drawing-room before supper. The dance music had faded and, as the partners stood waiting, a voice had apologized for the interruption and announced a police message. The concentrated sharpness that new impressions always make had etched phrases of that message on Andy Maxton's brain.

"One hundred pounds reward will be paid for information regarding the criminal known as 'The Owl'...he operates alone...takes his name from his habit of moving out after nightfall and giving a curious cry like the screech of an owl...lock your doors...The Owl flies by night..."

And as those last ominous words had faded and the music had swelled again, Lady Evelyn Harnett had uttered a bitten-off scream. When they turned, she had fainted to the floor. Servants hurried with restoratives. A few minutes later she had recovered and permitted herself to be led, leaning heavily and with her face pale and twitching, to the bedroom.

Twenty minutes later she was once more among armoured in that cold self-control, murmuring apologetically of a faulty heart. Nothing particularly sinister, perhaps, in the memory of a swooning woman, yet, linked with her strange detached manner of the afternoon, the incident returned to the young man's mind, touched with dark significance.

Then he heard the footsteps.

Gentle, light, and somehow *rustling*, they were moving down the passage outside his room. Maxton swept back the bedclothes and thrust out one leg, to

pause in an agony of indecision. All the Colonial's horror of a breach of convention was on him, and his position as guest in this house made the situation even more uncertain. What would happen if he challenged this nocturnal prowler to discover some member of the household bent on legitimate business?

He pulled the bedclothes about him and waited.

The footsteps had passed now, swallowed in the ceaseless mutter of the river. The room was darker. Through the window he caught a glimpse of a sickle moon tangled in the trees. The luminous face of his watch glowed coldly. Somewhere in the room a beam cracked, and every nerve in Maxton's body leapt and throbbed and tingled. He found himself listening again, ears strained until the drumming of his blood merged with the river's whisper. Sweat had sprung out on his body; he felt it oozing down his bare chest, but he made no move to wipe it away. The unbroken undercurrent of sound in the room was almost hypnotic.

That is why he did not move until the voice screamed a second time.

The screams followed each other so closely that only a sharp, indrawn breath of terror separated them. They tore at the drumming silence with the incisive shrillness of ripping silk. And almost immediately the house responded. The place became alive with scuttering febrile movement. Voices were raised. Doors slammed. Lights flashed on. Footsteps, the heavy blundering footsteps of honest panic, ran and halted and ran again. Someone was hammering at a door.

Andy Maxton leapt from the bed, fought his way into his dressing-gown, and without waiting to switch on lights tore open the door of his room and raced out into the corridor. The brightly lit, carpeted length was unfamiliar to him. He stood for a moment, trying to focus that rising tide of perturbation. At one end of the passage a long window looked out on the dark garden. Then the front of the house lay behind him. He was about to turn when his attention was attracted by the sudden appearance of a figure at the far end, near the window. In the same moment the newcomer saw him, stiffened and paused, motionless.

Andy stared. "Good God!" he whispered.

The creature at the far end of the passage was swathed from head to foot in a long black robe that swept the floor. But the face above it was the face of a bird of prey! Two pale, lidless eyes blazed above the cruel hooked beak of a nose. Maxton felt the hair on his neck prickle, and he was conscious of a great wave of nausea that engulfed him. Fear was blotted out in the primitive urge to rend and destroy this inhuman thing. With a bellow of rage, the young man charged down the passage.

What followed was more horrible still.

The creature in black raised its arms, sweeping the robe into two billowing, wing-like drapes. Maxton had a brief, nightmarish glimpse of fingers crooked like claws, then with a harsh scream the figure sprang for the window. So powerful was the movement that Maxton had the impression of a great bird gliding through the air; there was a sudden splintering of glass and it was gone. Then he was aware that the passage was filled with faces. He wheeled and licked his dry lips. Menzies, the chauffeur, was approaching, a heavy iron wrench in his hand. Insmith followed a pace behind, leaner than ever in a hastily tied dressing-gown. The two Canadian girls clung to each other, eyes wide in shiny faces. A small knot of frightened domestics brought up the rear. It was the New Zealander who spoke first, pushing his way forward.

"Maxton, are you all right?"

Andy nodded, gesturing towards the window. "Went that way— out into the garden..." He moistened his lips again and his deep tone trembled. "My God, Insmith, what was it?"

The New Zealander's thin face was dark. "You saw it?"

"My oath! I made a dive at it— and it flew through that window! Flew— like a bird!"

Menzies gave a dry chuckle. "Pretty downy bird, then. 'Cause he's jus' got away with one o' the finest necklaces in England! Lifted 'em right under her ladyship's nose, calm as custard!" As he spoke, the chauffeur stared at that splintered hole in the window as though mesmerized.

Maxton looked at Insmith. "What's this?" he snapped.

The other nodded. "The pearls were in the safe in Lady Evelyn's bedroom," he said quietly. "She woke up and caught him in the act. She screamed twice before he sprang on her."

"Was she harmed?"

Insmith shook his head. "No. She fainted. The alarm was raised at once, thank God. That manservant..." — he wheeled on Menzies — "what's his name...?"

"Keaton."

"Yes. He's getting the police on the 'phone now. But the safe was open and the necklace had disappeared."

One of the doors farther down the passage opened and Keaton stepped out. His smooth face was waxen pale and wiped clean of all expression. But as he came closer Maxton noticed that the dark eyes were very bright and he could not quite control his mouth. Keaton's first words were addressed to the staff rather than the guests.

"There must be no panic. No panic at all. The police will be here in a few

minutes." His voice was soft, modulated, kept that way by the same iron control that ruled his face. He turned to Menzies. "Take Ada and Jenny back to their rooms and wait there for me. I shall call you when the police arrive."

The chauffeur nodded and, shepherding the servants before him, set out for the rear of the house. Keaton turned to Insmith. "Might I suggest, sir, that you take the two young ladies into the drawing-room? I have poked up the fire;" and, like Menzies, the New Zealander and his shivering companions moved off without a word.

Keaton watched them go. Standing there, Maxton felt a genuine admiration for this man's icy repose. To break the awkward silence that had fallen he asked lamely:

"You got on to the police all right?"

Keaton turned slowly. "Yes, sir." His eyes flickered in the direction of the shattered window. "If Lady Evelyn had taken my advice," he added, "they would have been in this house all day."

"What do you mean?"

A movement, too indeterminate to be called a shrug, settled lightly on the other's shoulders. "There is a reward of one hundred pounds for the capture of The Owl," he said calmly.

Andy stared. "That's it— an owl!"

Keaton said quietly: "Her ladyship knew he was coming. She had been warned. Three times in the past week those cards came." He was speaking more naturally now, as though it was almost a relief to talk. "I begged her to go to the police, but she feared the publicity. Instead, she preferred to fill her house with guests." The pause was subtly barbed.

But Andy Maxton's mind was on other things. "You were first into Lady Evelyn's room after that scream?" And as Keaton nodded: "What did you see?"

"The small bowl lamp beside the bed was alight. Lady Evelyn was lying in the centre of the floor, between the bed and the wall safe." The servant closed his eyes as if picturing the scene in his mind. "I noticed that the door of the safe was hanging open. I noticed two other things, also."

"What?"

"One was the empty case of the necklace, tossed down on the floor. The other..." Keaton stopped and gave a quick glance over his shoulder. "The other was this..." He reached in the pocket of his dressing-gown and produced a small square of white pasteboard. Maxton took the proffered card and turned it over. One side was blank. On the reverse, three words were printed in ink.

"Fly by Night."

Andy looked up. "Where did you find this?" he asked.

"It was lying a few inches away from Lady Evelyn's body," Keaton replied.

A loud knocking sounded through the house. The servant started like a man springing to attention. With that summons, all the old subservience returned, and Keaton inclined his head. "Excuse me, sir," he murmured. "This, I think, will be the police."

But Andy Maxton did not move. He was still staring at the card in his hand when Keaton opened the door to the officers of the law.

Chapter 1

Monday, June 10th

THUNDER on his brow, three morning papers twisted in his right hand, Chief Inspector William Jamison Read strode the corridors of New Scotland Yard. Manners, his private secretary, heard those heavy footsteps and gave a hopeless little shrug. When the door was flung open, he was typing busily. He looked up and nodded.

"Good morning, sir."

Read nodded curtly. "'Mornin'. Mail in yet?"

"I'm expecting it any moment now, Mr. Read, But I've put all the morning papers on your desk."

The big man's mouth set like a trap. "Don't talk to me about morning papers," he snarled, and waved a tightly rolled baton over his secretary's head. "What d'you think these are— Valentines?" He hunched his shoulders. "I'd like to take every single copy of this morning's press and ram it down the throats of those lily-livered editors till their eyes popped out!"

Manners' fingers reached for a typewritten slip among the papers on his desk. He cleared his throat preparatory to speaking, but Read cut in before him.

"What's that?" he snapped.

The secretary's voice was toneless. "Memorandum from the Assistant Commissioner, sir. He'd like to see you at your earliest convenience."

"You bet he would!" The Chief Inspector started in the direction of his private office. "Got any other good news, eh?"

"Mr. Blackburn is waiting inside, sir."

Read halted. He jerked his head towards his door and his tone was incredulous. "Jeff in there?" And as Manners nodded, "How long's he been waiting?"

"He came here shortly after nine o'clock," the secretary explained.

The big man nodded and strode across the room. He halted with one hand on the door, and his clipped grey moustache lifted in the faintest semblance of a sour smile. "Bring the mail in as soon as it comes, Manners." His tone was curt. "And I'm not to be disturbed— understand? If anyone wants me, I've gone roaming somewhere in Tibet— looking for a Shangri-la!"

He swung the door open and walked inside.

Lounging loosely in his swivel chair, his shoes on the desk, a tall, powerfully built young man lay back with his hands clasped behind his head, staring at the ceiling through the smoke of a cigarette. A lock of brown hair snaked down

across his forehead. The cigarette between his lips quivered as he spoke without moving.

"Ah!" said Mr. Jeffery Blackburn. "Joy cometh with the morning! How are you Chief?"

Read closed the door and stood with his back against it. His tone was savagely genial. "Who— me? Oh, I'm all right. And you're pretty comfortable yourself, I should say. If not, just let me know, and I'll send Manners out for a couple of cushions and a hot-water bottle!"

Jeffery took his feet off the desk, sat up and eyed the older man reproachfully. "Now, Mister Read, is that nice? Is that real old English courtesy? I tear myself away from my charming cottage at Thursby—"

The Chief Inspector crossed to the desk and leant over it, supporting himself on clenched fists. "Now, just a minute, my young cockerel," he said measuredly. "Just because your respected father was my closest friend— just because I took you under my wing when he died— just because I've given you more or less the run of this place, and in return you've given me a hand in solving a few tricky cases, all this doesn't give you permission to blow in here as though you owned the building, sit down in my chair and shove your number nines on my desk!" Read drummed with his fist. "So get out of that chair— *tout suite!*"

"Dammit," protested Jeffery, rising, "it's the only comfortable seat in the room!" He crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray. "You know dashed well you use these others to torture confessions out of your suspects."

"Jeff,"— Read folded his arms and fixed the young man with a basilisk eye—"I'm in no mood for your cheerful badinage this morning." He uncoiled one hand and waved a slip of paper in his companion's face. "See that, my boy? It's from the Assistant Commissioner. In half an hour I'm going to get enough hot air to last me for the rest of my life!" The Chief Inspector turned on his heel and dumped himself in his chair with such force that every spring squeaked in violent protest. "Where the devil have you been all this time, anyway? You weren't at your cottage, my boy. Parker told me you'd gone to the Riviera."

"All right, all right!" Ignoring the other's frown, Jeffery pushed a wire basket on one side and sat on the corner of the desk. "I was at Antilus, if you must know. But what's got you so rattled?"

"Seen the paper this morning?"

Jeffery shook his head. "Only the crossword puzzle. I started to do it while I was waiting for you."

"Crossword puzzle, eh!" Read's tone was heavy with contempt. "Well, my young professor, here's another crossword puzzle to occupy your mind— and if

you work this one out, I'm the monkey's uncle!" A big paw thumped the half-dozen papers piled neatly on his desk. "You didn't, by any chance, read the editorial in this morning's *Clarion*?"

Jeffery was watching his friend curiously. Long association had inured him to the Chief Inspector's crusty whims, but this present mood was something deeper. There were lines on Read's bulldog face that told of sleepless nights and gnawing anxieties; the heavy wrinkle between the greying bushy eyebrows was newly formed. The young man stifled the flippant reply that rose to his lips. Instead he said simply: "No, Chief, I didn't."

The Chief Inspector rummaged through the pile of newspapers with ungentle hands, dragged one out and flicked through the pages. Coming upon what he sought, he folded the paper and leaned back in his chair. "Listen to this little journalistic classic," he snarled, clearing his throat.

"For a number of years" [he read], "Scotland Yard has been the Aunt Sally of the popular crime novelist. The great public have accepted this with the same good-natured tolerance with which they accept the mother-in-law gag or jokes about the English weather. But when the laugh is turned upon the public— when a single individual snaps his fingers at the resources of Scotland Yard and spreads terror and violence unhampered— it is quite time we readjusted our ideas concerning the so-called efficiency of an organization which spends thousands of pounds— taxpayers' money— in what is laughingly called 'protection' and law and order..."

The Chief Inspector raised his eyes and glared at his companion. "I don't see you smiling, Mr. Blackburn," he commented.

"I'm saving it till you get to the funny part," Jeffery said quietly.

"That's coming," Read announced, burying his head again. "Listen:

"Over the past two months, an individual cloaking his true identity under the fantastic sobriquet of 'The Owl' has committed no less than four major robberies. We first learnt of this criminal's existence when the strong room of the International and United Bank was blown open and an attempt was made to make off with £10,000 worth of bonds. We were told that the only clue obtained by the police was left by the criminal himself— a small piece of white pasteboard inscribed with three words— '*Fly by Night*'. We were to become very familiar with that card, for the next appearance was pinned to the unconscious body of a caretaker when Sir Charles Mortlake's famous Cellini Cup was stolen from his private museum..."

Again the Chief Inspector paused. Blackburn, in the act of lighting a cigarette, did not speak, but nodded to him to continue. Read's fingers tightened around the newspaper as he read on:

"The public had scarcely recovered from the shock of this audacious

robbery when the newspapers were headlining the theft of the Duchess of Doone's diamond, snatched from her throat as she sat in her darkened box at Covent Garden. And the latest exploit of this daring criminal— the stealing of Lady Evelyn Harnett's valuable necklace— is too fresh in the public mind for detailed description. Meanwhile, however, the public rightfully demand an explanation as to why this reign of terror is allowed to continue unchecked. Is it because incompetent officials, collecting huge salaries, are hiding behind a political smoke-screen of..."

The big man, whose voice had gradually gathered rage, broke off with a snarl like an enraged animal. Jumping to his feet, he hurled the newspaper far across the room.

"Hell blast and blister their ruddy souls!" he roared. Hands thrust in pockets, bull neck forward, he began to pace the floor. "By God, I'd like to get my hands on the scribbling scavenger who wrote that benediction! I'd show him how 'incompetent' I am!" The big man halted opposite his friend, his eyes glittering. "Son, do you realize I haven't had a decent night's sleep since this unbegotten sneak thief jumped into the headlines? Do you know what I've been living on? Black coffee, black looks, and abuse!" He almost spat the words.

"Have a cigarette," suggested Jeffery calmly.

Read swept the proffered case aside with an angry gesture and resumed his pacing. "And you— the one person I can look to for help— where are you? Tanning the body beautiful in some moth-eaten watering place in the South of France!" The fire died out of the Chief Inspector's eyes and his square shoulders slumped. "Son, I'm beginning to think I'm too old for the job. I'm just waiting for the A.C. to suggest that it's time I retired, and so help me bob, I'll grab the chance with both hands!"

Blackburn edged himself off the desk and walked across to where Read stood plucking irritably at his grey clipped moustache.

"So it's as bad as that?" he asked quietly. "Then it's just as well I came at once."

"At once! Goddlemighty, boy, I sprayed telegrams all over the Continent after you!"

"One reached me only yesterday," Jeffery told him. "I chartered a 'plane straight away."

Slightly mollified, the other returned to his desk and sat down. "But didn't you know, Jeff? Every newspaper's been carrying scareheads bigger than a theatrical poster."

"Shunned 'em like a plague," retorted Jeffery cheerfully. "Haven't glanced at a newspaper or listened to a wireless in weeks." He pulled one of the

recently maligned chairs up to the desk and sat down. "Anyway, I'm here, and that's all that matters for the moment. How long since our night-flying friend swooped?"

"Five days ago. Paid an early-morning call at Richmond. Got away with a pearl necklace, valued at something like six thousand pounds, the property of some scatterbrained society woman down there." The Chief Inspector pulled open a drawer and took out a small sheaf of papers fastened together with a clip. "You'll find the full report written here." He pushed the file across.

There was a pause as Jeffery flicked through the typewritten sheets. Read opened a box on his desk, took out a cigar and lit it, watching the young man as he did so. Presently the other raised his eyes.

"I notice," he observed, "that our mysterious friend is a stickler for the social niceties— always sends out his card before he calls."

The cigar in Read's mouth stuck out at a truculent angle. "That's his way of thumbin' his nose at us! I tell you, son, he's got the cheek of the devil himself."

Jeffery pushed the report to one side and leaned his elbows on the desk. "You've explored every possible avenue, of course?"

"Been over the scene of every crime with a small-tooth comb," Read assured him. "A dozen of our best men have raked the underworld and we've had salt on the tail of every informer in the square mile. Nothing doin'. Mister Owl flies solo."

"But surely there's some lead somewhere?"

The Chief Inspector shook his head. "Only those visiting-cards he leaves round about. I tell you, boy, it's almost uncanny the way this skunk covers his tracks! He's getting away with it so often it's starting to give Mr. and Mrs. John Public the blue willies!"

The faintest undercurrent of anxiety in the other's contemptuous observation made Blackburn glance at him sharply. "And just what do you mean by that, Chief?" he asked.

"Some damned sensation sheet started it." Read's voice was a disgusted mutter. He avoided the young man's eyes, being very interested in the burning tip of his cigar. "It suggested that this blighter might be superhuman, some arch-criminal who'd learnt the power of levitation— like a ruddy bird flying!" He thrust the cigar into his mouth and bit it savagely. "Lot of damn-fool nonsense, of course, but they say that's why he doesn't leave any tracks. And between you and me and a row of Commissioners, son, it's— well— it's gripping the public mind. Lots of people are afraid to venture out after dark lately— 'specially in isolated country areas."

Jeffery made no comment. He gathered his big loose figure together and, rising, strolled across to the window. Outside, the river glittered under the

fresh morning sun, dancing with a million spearpoints of light. The Air Force monument towered into a sky flecked with tiny clouds. Abruptly, the young man turned, and his voice was very quiet.

"All right, Chief, I'm ready. To tell the truth, I'm hungry for it! We'll work together again— between us we'll spread the birdlime all over England. And when The Owl settles on our own particular branch," — he dropped his smoking cigarette to the floor and set his foot on it—"we'll crush him as easily as that!"

The Chief Inspector stood up and grasped his companion's hand. "Son," he said, "that's done me more good than a month at Margate. Old Horseface can chew the paper off the walls for all I care now. I'll just wait until he stops for breath," said Mr. Read, "then I'll stand back, look him squarely between those fishy eyes of his, and I'll say—"

Exactly what the Chief Inspector meant to tell the Assistant Commissioner, Jeffery was fated never to learn, for at that moment a knock sounded at the door. It opened, and Manners insinuated himself cautiously through the aperture, a movement that reminded Blackburn of a keeper entering the den of a fractious lion. The secretary carried a number of letters in his hand. He advanced to the desk, a wary eye on the Inspector.

"Mail, sir," he announced, depositing the letters in a wire basket. "And, Mr. Read..."

"Well?"

"Two people outside to see you— a young man and a girl."

Read, shuffling through the letters, did not even glance up. "Tell 'em I'm busy— tell 'em I'm in quarantine. Tell 'em anything, but don't let 'em in here."

Manners nodded. He was almost to the door when Jeffery spoke. "Who are these people?" he asked.

"The young woman said she was connected with a newspaper—" the secretary began.

A sudden detonation drowned the rest of his remark, for Read had thumped the desk with a force that made the metal inkpot jump from its stand. "God dammitall," he roared, "you let any of those ink-fingered spies into this office and, so help me Moses, I'll get you six months' solitary confinement on bread and water!" The big man glared at his unfortunate subordinate from under drawn brows. "Don't stand there gaping like an imbecile! Get rid of 'em— d'you hear me?"

"Yes, sir." Manners swallowed and reached for the door. "I wouldn't have mentioned it, but they said they had information about The Owl robberies."

"Then tell 'em to write another editorial about it."

The secretary shrugged. "As you like, sir. But this Miss Blaire seemed very

anxious—"

Jeffery, watching this duologue with faint amusement, looked up sharply. "What name did you say?"

Manners turned to him. "The young lady gave her name as Miss Blaire— Elizabeth Blaire."

"Betty Blaire!" Jeffery's face lit up and he took a half step in the direction of the door. "Why, Chief, surely you remember Miss Blaire? She was the newspaper woman connected with that murder at the B.B.C.— don't you remember she gave us a most important suggestion regarding the locked studio?" Unconsciously, Jeffery pushed the lock of hair off his forehead. "You must recall the girl? Why, you were the one—"

Read interrupted sourly: "All right— yes— I remember her. But just because she's given us some help in the past doesn't mean we've got to put the welcome mat down whenever she appears."

"But didn't you hear what Manners said?" Jeffery demanded. "She wants to give us some information regarding these Owl robberies."

"So you think. She wants an exclusive interview so that she can spread my bleeding carcase all over the front page of her scandal sheet—"

An urgent young voice spoke from the door. "No, no, Mr. Read! Please believe me— you've got it all wrong!" And as the three men wheeled, Elizabeth Blaire walked into the room. She halted opposite the Chief Inspector, a slim, defiant figure with cheeks pink at her own temerity and brown eyes very bright. A ridiculous hat resembling an inverted bowl of fruit clung perilously to her sleek brown head. Her hands, twined in each other, were pressed nervously against her breast. The Chief Inspector stared blankly at her, and, taking advantage of his silence, the girl spoke again.

"Mr. Read—" her voice trembled slightly. "Give me five minutes— that's all I ask. If only you'll listen to me..." The words trailed off. The Chief Inspector, his face dark, stabbed a finger in the air.

"Young woman," he said measuredly, "there's a notice outside that door. It's a single word— Private! P-R-I-V-A-T-E! And it's not written up there for the fun of the thing. Understand?"

Elizabeth Blaire nodded. "I know I haven't any right to push my way in here, but I'll promise to go in five minutes—"

"In time to catch the first edition with your interview, eh?" Read growled. He gestured to Manners, who was still hovering uncertainly near the door. The girl saw the movement and turned towards Jeffery.

"Mr. Blackburn," she said desperately, "you remember me, I know. Please help me convince the Chief Inspector that I don't want an interview. I'm not even connected with newspapers now. I— I..." The brown eyes dropped for a

moment. "I only said that because I— I thought it would get me in here." She moved a step closer so that the bunch of scarlet cherries on her hat was almost level with his chin. "It's about this Owl— this criminal. I know when he's going to strike again. My brother Edward has received the warning cards!"

She paused. Her breast rose and fell with her hurried breathing.

With a gesture of his head, Jeffery sent Manners from the room and pulled up a chair. "Sit down, Miss Blaire," he invited.

The girl turned for Read's approval. That gentleman nodded curtly. "All right," he growled, "but if this is a stunt—"

"Of course it isn't," Jeffery snapped. "Haven't you heard what Miss Blaire said?" He turned to the girl, who had seated herself gingerly on the edge of the chair. "Now, what's all this?" he asked gently.

Elizabeth Blaire glanced towards the door. "I have a friend waiting outside," she told them. "If he could be present..." She ignored the Chief Inspector's frowning figure and addressed the young man. "He's my— my fiancé...Robert Ashton."

Blackburn strode across the room and flung open the door. As he did so, a stocky, fair-haired young man pacing the floor turned sharply. He had strong, masculine features and a mouth that could be both obstinate and sulky. Jeffery beckoned him inside and Elizabeth performed rather awkward introductions. Then Jeffery pulled up a chair for himself. "Now, Miss Blaire," he said genially, "what's the trouble?"

Elizabeth Blaire spoke quietly.

"I don't know if either of you two gentlemen have heard of my brother Edward." A little half smile touched her lips. "It's probably extremely bad taste to sing his praises like this, but Ted is really rather extraordinary. When he was eighteen he took the Charteris Medal for Advanced Chemistry, together with a travelling scholarship which took him to Vienna. There he studied physics under Professor Karl Kauffmann. Anyhow, he stayed in Vienna until his scholarship finished, then, having no money, he returned home." She paused, then added quietly: "Ted and I are completely alone in the world. We have very little money. Whatever my brother has achieved has been by hard work alone."

Jeffery nodded. "What is your brother doing now?" he asked.

"Working on certain valuable experiments," the girl explained.

The Chief Inspector, toying with a pencil, looked up. "What sort of experiments?" he demanded.

"I'd better start at the beginning," Elizabeth said quietly. She settled back in her chair and clasped her hands in her lap. "About eighteen months ago my brother returned from the Continent. The threat of war was banging very

heavily over Europe, and, back in England, Edward became interested in the country-wide precautions against gas attacks. For some time he'd had in his mind the development of anti-toxic gas." A little wrinkle creased her forehead. "I'm not too sure of the actual details, but my brother believed that this formula would purify gas-laden air and, apart from the actual value of the discovery itself, would save the Government the enormous expense of manufacturing gas-masks and erecting gas-proof shelters."

"But surely," interposed Jeffery, "experiments for such a formula would cost a considerable amount of money?"

The girl nodded. "Indeed, yes. Our own finances were so small that it seemed Edward couldn't hope to achieve anything, when out of the blue came the offer from Sir Anthony Atherton-Wayne."

The pencil dropped from Read's fingers. He sat up abruptly,

"Isn't that the chap who's mixed up in this big armament deal?" he demanded.

"The same," Elizabeth replied. "And this is where Robert comes into the story." She turned to where Ashton sat hunched in his chair, following the conversation with slow movements of his head. "Robert was actually responsible for Sir Anthony's interest," she added.

Blackburn transferred his attention to the stocky young man. "Indeed?" he prompted.

Ashton nodded. His voice, slow and deep, was that of a man who weighs his words. "Betty should have explained that I'm private secretary to Sir Anthony," he said. "She happened to mention to me about her brother's experiments; I felt sure Sir Anthony would be interested. He interviewed Mr. Blaire and offered him certain generous terms, together with the use of a small cottage in the grounds of Sir Anthony's home— Rookwood Towers. Mr. Blaire lives in this cottage and carries on his experiments. If he is successful, Sir Anthony has first claim to buy the formula outright for a certain sum of money agreed on by both parties."

Jeffery turned to the girl. "So far, has your brother had any success with his experiments?"

"Well— yes and no."

Read, who had been listening closely to the recital, snorted.

"What d'you mean— yes and no? Either they've been successful or they haven't."

"Not quite, Inspector." Elizabeth Blaire eyed the testy man steadily. Her tone was edged with a trembling excitement. "About a month ago," she continued, "a most amazing thing happened. Edward mislaid some of his notes, and, afraid to tell Sir Anthony, muddled on desperately. One night he

came to see me. He was throbbing with a sort of— of frenzied jubilation. It was some time before I could get anything sensible, out of him. Then he told me that something had gone wrong with his anti-gas experiments. By sheer chance, he had hit upon something else— another formula— something almost as revolutionary in its own way."

She paused, her face alight with recollection. Read and Blackburn stared, but before they could speak Ashton said curtly:

"Go on, Betty— tell them!"

The girl steadied her trembling hands in her lap. "My brother," she said slowly, "has discovered a perfect foolproof substitute for petrol, possessing all the qualities of the article, at about one-twentieth its price!"

Jeffery gave a long whistle of incredulous amazement. The Chief Inspector was leaning across his desk, staring at the girl. It was Blackburn who broke the silence. "But is this formula actually developed— or is it merely on paper?"

"Developed to the most practicable degree," Elizabeth assured him. "Formula Number Four, as Edward calls it, has so far stood up to every known test, giving three times the power of ordinary petrol!"

Jeffery felt for his case, opened it and took out a cigarette. "I suppose," he said quietly, "that your brother realizes the magnitude of his discovery? It's going to throw the whole manufacturing world into chaos." He struck a match, and over the tiny flame his eyes were sombre. "And think what this power would mean in the hands of an invading country."

From his corner, Ashton spoke dryly. "That's what's keeping Sir Anthony awake at night."

"But surely it belongs to him?" Jeffery said sharply. "What about the arrangement?"

"That's the whole trouble," Elizabeth said slowly. "You see, Mr. Blackburn, my brother declares that he signed himself to Sir Anthony to produce an anti-toxic gas. He is convinced that the baronet has no right to this formula discovered quite by chance."

"And that," commented Ashton, "is the least of our worries." He stretched his stocky body and pulled his coat about his shoulders. "You see, gentlemen, in some inexplicable way, this criminal calling himself The Owl has got wind of Mr. Blaire's invention."

"The Owl!" Read shot up like a jack-in-a-box, spraying cigar-ash across his desk. "Great Thundering Herds! How do you know?"

Ashton shrugged. "Blaire's been getting The Owl's visiting-cards in his mail," he said shortly. "Four have come along up to date. They all say the same thing. Unless he gives up his formula by a certain date he's going to be killed."

Read chewed at his cigar. He turned to Elizabeth. "And what does your

brother say about these little birthday cards?"

The girl hesitated before replying, twisting the engagement ring nervously on her finger.

Ashton spoke for her. "That's the trouble," he said quietly. "Blaire doesn't take this business very seriously. He declares that The Owl is an invention of the sensation sheets— a catch-penny stunt to increase circulation."

Something in the slight curl of his lips, in the faint disparagement that coloured his voice, rallied the girl. She said quickly: "There is some excuse for Ted's attitude. He lives in a world bounded by the walls of his laboratory. Robert gets very impatient because he won't come down to realities."

The Chief Inspector stood up and crushed out his half-smoked cigar in an ashtray. "Mr. Ashton mentioned that your brother had been receiving these warnings..." and as Elizabeth nodded, "Did they give a time limit?"

"Yes. The twenty-third of this month."

Jeffery grabbed at the newspapers on the desk and scanned the date line. "Twenty-third," he murmured. "That's the day after tomorrow."

"He's been given until eleven o'clock on the night," supplemented Ashton, and again Blackburn was conscious of the faint hostility in his tone. The young man leaned over and muttered something in the Chief Inspector's ear. Read gnawed thoughtfully at his grey moustache for a few moments, then nodded. Elizabeth was watching with anxious eyes.

"All right," Read announced, addressing the girl. "We'll give you all the protection you need. I'll have a squad of men down in the morning. Rookwood Towers, you said?"

Ashton was producing a small leather case from his pocket. He extracted a card, rose and handed it to the big man. "You'll find the address on that," he said, and nodded to Elizabeth. She was pulling gloves over her slim fingers. Then she crossed to where Read was standing and put out her hand. Jeffery noticed, with inward amusement, that his friend gave it an awkward, embarrassed squeeze and turned abruptly to throw open the door.

"Now, don't you worry, Miss Blaire," he said with curt amiability. "We'll clip this Owl's wings once and for all." The girl thanked him with a little smile and tucking her arm through her fiancé's moved from the room. Jeffery ushered them out and closed the door. When he turned, Read was standing beside the desk, turning Ashton's card over in his fingers. "Well, son," he queried, "what do you think of it all?"

"I'll tell you one thing," Jeffery said levelly. "That girl was frightened. And the sturdy boy friend wasn't too easy in his mind, either. Also— they were keeping something back— something neither of them had the courage to talk about."

"So you got that, too?" Read's tone was quizzical. "What d'you think it was?"

"That," replied Jeffery, "is what I mean to find out. I Hope Rookwood Towers has all modern conveniences. I do so like my comfort." He turned towards the window and stared out at the swaying tree-tops. "I wonder," he remarked lazily, "why Mr. Ashton doesn't like his fiancée's brother?"

"What I'm wondering," the Chief Inspector returned, "is how a man like Atherton-Wayne comes to be mixed up in—"

"*Look out!*" yelled Jeffery, and ducked.

There was a sudden crash and splintering of glass. A heavy object plumped on to the carpet, rolled a few inches and stopped. The Chief Inspector, who had bobbed behind his desk at the other's shouted warning, raised himself slowly. The door flew open and an agitated Manners projected himself into the room.

"W-what happened?" he stammered.

Read, his eyes on the shattered hole in the window, ignored him. A wave of dull scarlet crept slowly over his heavy face. "By the great living Hokey!" he gasped, and rage choked the words in his throat. He grasped the edge of the desk and swallowed audibly, working his thick neck from side to side. Slowly he turned, to find Jeffery over a piece of crumpled paper he had picked up from the floor. The stone around which it had been wrapped gleamed whitely against the dark pattern of the carpet.

"What happened?" Manners repeated.

Jeffery was smoothing the paper in his fingers. He ran his eye over it and gave a deep chuckle. "The cheek of the very devil," he murmured. "Chief, you're certainly right." He held out the message. "Take a look at this— it's meant for both of us."

The Inspector almost snatched it from the young man's hand. His eyes popped as he read the words, printed in ink across the white surface.

"Keep out of this. My first and last warning!"

And it was signed. "*The Owl.*"

Chapter 2

Tuesday, June 11th

JEFFERY BLACKBURN depressed the brake pedal of the two-seater and the car came to a halt with a slither of gripping tyres.

"That will be Rookwood Towers," remarked the young man, gesturing with a gloved hand. The Chief Inspector, beside him, leaned forward.

They were descending Pewley Hill into a green and rolling pasture land, bisected with white roads. Under the clean morning sky the countryside lay fair and verdant. The River Wey, curling like a slumbrous serpent, glistened between sloping banks and they caught a glimpse of the Silent Pool, reflecting the glory of the morning and blue as a baby's eyes.

Rookwood Towers nestled under the slope of the hill and from their elevation it gave the impression of cuddling into the green valley below. A number of rambling outbuildings were almost hidden in the dark army of trees that were lined up to the very windows. A winding drive led through stone-pillared gates and more trees stood sentry-like along its white convolutions. The house was built of grey stone and thick columns and massive groinwork conveyed, even at that distance, an impression of age and strength. Adjoining the house at either side and rising above roof level were two octagonal towers, pierced at intervals with tiny windows. Centred between these eminences was a tall cupola rising to a high dome which held the blank face of a clock. This curious mixture of Jacobean, Hanoverian and Edwardian architecture was mercifully cloaked by a wide-spreading growth of ivy and the windows peeped almost coyly from behind this leafy curtain.

"The house that bombs built," remarked Jeffery. He pressed the accelerator and the car moved forward.

"Eh?"

The young man grinned. "Not actually, of course. Rookwood Towers goes back far, far beyond Sir Anthony's title. But bombs supplied the filthy lucre to buy that lovely old place. Did you know Sir Anthony had only been in possession over the last twenty years?"

The Inspector grunted. "I didn't. How did you know?"

"Had dinner with Ken Bretherton last night." Jeffery shaded his eyes with his hand against the glare of the road. "It's the story of the self-made man, Chief. Before the war, the present owner of the Towers was plain Mr. Wayne. A stockbroker with political ambitions. Round about 1906, Wayne married Lucy Atherton, the daughter of old Cornelius Atherton, an American steel magnate. The war broke out and with his wife's money plus his father-in-law's business acumen, our friend branched out into the armament business. A few years

later the wife died, but her husband retained her money and her name, plus a hyphen." Jeffery chuckled as he swung the wheel. "After all, Chief, you can't blame him Anthony Atherton-Wayne! Why, it simply rolls off the tongue."

"And the knighthood?"

"*Circa* nineteen-twenty," retorted Blackburn. "And at that time Sir John Rookwood, whose ancestors had built the Towers back in the Tudor times, died. The war had left the Rookwoods with little but their fine old name, and the death duties were the final crippling blow. Gossip says that Sir Anthony got the Towers for a song." Jeffery settled back in his seat. "So let that be a lesson to you, Chief. Big guns are more than coronets, poison gas than Norman blood."

Read grunted, but made no other comment. Twenty minutes later, Jeffery slid the cream two-seater through the stone gateway of the Towers and guided it round the winding drive. All about them the trees whispered in the morning breeze. In the distance, a dog barked, a lonely hopeless sound. As they approached the house, the trees thinned and they came upon trim lawns, broken by ornamental shrubs and garden beds. Blackburn pulled the car up before a short flight of steps leading to the main doorway.

Elizabeth Blaire was waiting for them, a slim figure in well-cut tweeds. She was hatless, and as she ran down the steps to meet them her hair glinted golden in the sunlight. She greeted both men with a smile, then:

"I'm so glad," she said happily. "You know, after I'd left your office yesterday I was struck with the awful thought you'd only consented to get rid of me..."

"Miss Blaire!" Jeffery's tone was a reproach.

"Oh, I didn't really believe it," the girl assured him. "But Robert kept undermining my faith. As a matter of fact, he laid a wager you wouldn't come."

The Inspector cocked an eyebrow at the girl. "Why should your fiancé think that?" he grunted.

"Oh, Robert gets the weirdest ideas." Her tone dismissed the subject. She turned and shepherded them up the steps. "Leave the car. Adams will put it away and bring your bags inside." They halted before a large iron-studded door. Elizabeth thrust it open and led them into a wide hall. After the brilliant sunshine outside, it seemed unusually gloomy and Jeffery, peering, could make out only the vaguest details. What light the place contained seeped through four windows set high up and, by this meagre illumination, the young man could perceive a wide staircase at the far side, winding upwards. Following its curve, he saw that a railed gallery ran round the entire square of the hall. As his eyes focused, he noticed a surprising number of doors opening off in various directions.

"Wait here," Elizabeth invited. "I'll get Sir Anthony. He's expecting you." She moved away towards one of the doors.

As it closed behind her, Jeffery turned to the Inspector. "Well, Chief, what do you think of it?"

Read smoothed his stubbly moustache. "Like the rear end of an elephant," he commented. "Big, but not impressive."

"For Pete's sake! Doesn't tradition mean anything to you?" Jeffery waved his hand to the four dim-seen walls. "Do you realize that Inigo Jones and Chris Wren probably had a hand in adding to this building. According to legend, the Playdelles built this house around the ruins of an old Abbey, abandoned when the Black Plague swept over England! And we're going to stay down here in this historic spot. Why, Chief, what more could you ask?"

Read's answer was prompt. "Hot and cold water and central heating," he snapped. "I'm an old man that likes my comfort. And what's more, so do you, my boy." The Inspector chuckled deep in his throat. "One night in a draughty bedroom with a stone floor— and you'll exchange all the tradition in the world for a hot-water bottle."

"Double nuts to you!" retorted Jeffery inelegantly. He thrust his hands into his pockets and strolled aimlessly. The stone floor threw back faint echoes of his footsteps. In the thick silence, the ghostly repetition annoyed the young man; he paused to light a cigarette. Somewhere in the gloom a door opened, but as he wheeled sharply it clicked shut again. Jeffery glanced at Read. The big man's face was an indeterminate patch of grey among the shadows, but from his set stance the other knew he was frowning and alert.

Jeffery jerked his head in the direction of the interruption. "Somebody curious?" he asked.

"Whole damn' place is curious," the Inspector growled. "Where is everybody? Hanged if I wouldn't like to drop one of Atherton-Wayne's bombs round here— just to wake somebody up." He crossed to where Jeffery stood and glanced at his wrist-watch. In the gloom, the tiny luminous face was a bright oval. "Do you realize, son, it's nearly ten minutes since that girl left this room?"

Jeffery opened his mouth, but the remark died unborn. Another door swung open. He heard a soft well-bred ejaculation, there was a sudden click and the hall flamed in brilliant light. The transition was so unexpected that the slim grey-haired man who accompanied Elizabeth Blaire across the room was standing before Blackburn while that gentleman was still gaping.

The girl said quietly: "Sir Anthony. This is Jeffery Blackburn...and this is Inspector Read, of Scotland Yard."

The three men shook hands.

Jeffery, murmuringly polite over greetings, was engaged in rapid mental reorientation. From Ken Bretherton's information, he had built up his own picture of the owner of Rookwood Towers, an image that was heavily built, red-faced and rather careless with aspirates. But the man who stood before him now was as smooth and as polished as one of the shells from his own factory. Under medium height— Sir Anthony had to raise his chin to meet Read's eyes— he had slim hands and delicate, almost feminine features, their paleness accentuated by his closely cut silver grey hair. Lines about his eyes gave his face a tired expression, but the mouth was mobile and a suggestion of gentle mirth about the lips compensated for their thinness.

The baronet was saying: "I must apologize, gentlemen, for keeping you waiting." His voice was modulated, each word, like his personality, was neat and polished. "I was over at young Blaire's cottage. Frankly, I didn't expect you down so soon."

Read nodded. "What's your opinion of these cards the lad's been getting?"

Sir Anthony shrugged slim shoulders. "One can only hope it is the work of a practical joker. If, however, it is this criminal, then the question arises— how did he learn of the existence of the formula?"

"These things get about," the Inspector muttered. "I'd like to have a talk with young Blaire."

Sir Anthony nodded. "As a matter of fact, you've come down at a very opportune moment," he said. "Edward has arranged a demonstration of Formula Number Four in his laboratory this morning. I was discussing the matter with him when you arrived. If you would care to watch...?"

"Delighted," murmured Jeffery, and Read nodded. The baronet turned to Elizabeth, but before he could speak, the girl shook her head.

"I won't come, if you don't mind," she said. "I've seen the stuff working, and Ted hates a crowd in his lab. Besides, I haven't finished the final arrangements for Ted's party yet. And there's not too much time before tomorrow night, not with the hundred and one things to do. So if you'll excuse me..." She flashed a smile at the two guests and moved away. Sir Anthony turned back to his companions.

"This way," he said gently.

He led them across the hall, and ushered them into a passage lit at intervals with tall stained-glass windows which spilt warm colour at their feet as they walked. Various doors opened off, but the three men did not halt until they reached the end of the corridor. It was while Sir Anthony busied himself with the bolt of the iron portal guarding this entrance that Jeffery remarked:

"Mr. Blaire is having a party tomorrow night?"

Their guide swung open the door and gestured them through, "Just an

informal little gathering," he returned. "I believe it's Edward's birthday. Some of his school-friends are coming down from London."

They were walking in the open now, clear of the house. Read's heavy footsteps crunched among the gravel. "Isn't tomorrow night the time The Owl's supposed to call?" he asked.

Sir Anthony, leading the way, spoke without turning, but they sensed the smile in his voice. "I'm afraid Edward doesn't mean to let that interfere with his pleasure." His tone sobered. "And, after all, if this criminal does mean business, I think the lad would be much safer in his cottage with a crowd of people than roaming these grounds on his own."

"That," said Jeffery, "depends on the people."

"And the cottage," added Read.

They had come some distance from the house and now walked among that army of dark trees. Dead leaves rustled under their feet and the sky, seen between the tangle of branches, seemed very far away. They seemed to walk beneath a green and tossing sea that whispered and broke and whispered again. The baronet led them right and left, picking his way with cat-like delicacy around mossy trunks. As they emerged once more into bright sunlight, he paused and gestured before him.

"There is the cottage. Judge for yourself."

It had once been a small chapel, but the thick crumbling walls were buttressed and shouldered by modern concrete supports. The narrow pointed windows and arched doorway were the sole remaining traces of the building's theological origin and, as with the main house, the additions and replacements were half-hidden under a luxuriant growth of ivy. A low privet hedge surrounded the cottage. Sir Anthony led the way through a neatly clipped gap, moved to the door and rapped on it.

The sound of voices inside, heard softly through an open window, ceased at that summons. They waited. Read shifted his weight from one leg to another. Jeffery lit a cigarette. There was no sound but the wind rustling in the creeper. A frown of annoyance darkened Atherton-Wayne's aristocratic features; he had already lifted his hand to the door a second time when it opened abruptly. Robert Ashton stood revealed. The secretary blinked at the trio, and his eyes rested on the Inspector.

"So you did come down, after all?" he said.

"Obviously!" Sir Anthony spoke before Read could answer and the baronet's tone was edged with irritation. "I certainly didn't expect to find you here, Ashton. Is Blaire inside?"

The young man nodded. If he resented the snub, he did not betray it. He said quietly: "Yes, Sir Anthony. I've been talking with Edward. You'll find him in

the parlour."

The baronet nodded curtly. Jeffery, watching closely, divined that something more important than merely being kept waiting at the door had upset the spruce little man, but he made no comment as Atherton-Wayne gestured him inside. They were moving across a shallow hallway when from the room beyond, a voice cried shrilly.

"Who's there?"

Ashton, following Sir Anthony, said levelly: "It's all right, Edward. You can come out now."

As he spoke, they entered a wide sunny room, lit by four windows. Standing under the nearest of these, one hand clasping a whisky glass, a young man in his middle twenties faced them. The baronet halted inside the room. "Blair," he said, "I want you to meet these two gentlemen— they are from Scotland Yard."

Edward Blair set his glass down, took off his thick-lensed spectacles, then replaced them after a quick, nervous wiping. His handshake, as he greeted the newcomers, was limp and unenthusiastic. Ashton was motioning them to seats but Blackburn could scarcely take his eyes off Blair's face. Above the thick glasses, the brow was high and broad, suggesting an intellect of extraordinary power. Yet this noble forehead accentuated pitifully the tapering face with its weak petulant mouth and sloping chin. It was a face without ballast and Jeffery, his eyes flitting from Blair's unsteady hands to the almost empty whisky decanter on the sideboard, realized that the moral courage lacking in that face was being augmented in other ways.

They were seated now. An uncomfortable silence had fallen. It was broken by the Chief Inspector, who sat balancing his big figure on the edge of a divan bed.

"Well, son," he began, "from what Sir Anthony tells me, You've got something on your hands about as harmless as a bagful of rattlesnakes— especially now that Mister Owl's put the finger on you."

Blair shrugged. "Providing such a person exists, Inspector."

"But those warning cards—" began Atherton-Wayne, when Blair swung round to where Ashton sat watching them.

"Come on, Robert," he said, "now's your chance to own up. You sent me those cards as a joke, didn't you?"

Ashton made a weary gesture. "For the twentieth time— no." A trace of irritation edged his tone. "Even admitting I was stupid enough to do such a thing, I'd hardly go to the trouble of dragging these gentlemen down here on a fool's errand."

The bed creaked as Inspector Read leaned forward. "The Owl exists all

right," he said grimly. "And quite apart from our night-flyin' friend, you've got a headache on your hands, son. We're all grown men and none of us believe in fairies. If your formula goes on the market, there's a packet of oil companies who are goin' to be pinched where it hurts most— in the bank account." He wagged a stubby finger at the young man. "Boiled down, son, it means that while there's a lot of people who'd be glad to see your formula on the market, there's also a mighty tough crowd who'd give anything they possess to keep it off."

Blaire had crossed to the sideboard and was pouring himself a drink. He turned, glass in hand. The smile about that small mouth was very close to a sneer.

"Inspector Read, you said a moment ago that we are all grown men and that none of us believe in fairies. Yet you ask me to believe in the existence of a criminal who flies through the air like a bird, who hoots like an owl and possesses a sort of superhuman intelligence." He drained his glass and set it on the sideboard. "I gave up believing in that kind of thing on my tenth birthday."

Read's jaw tightened. "But we're convinced—"

"So much so that you'd bring an army of detectives down here to upset my daily routine and hamper my work. Very well. I can do nothing to stop you doing that. On the other hand, I shall certainly do nothing to help you. The whole thing is a childish waste of time and money."

Atherton-Wayne rose to his feet. "Upon my soul, Blaire," he said stiffly, "you are surely one of the rudest and most obstinate young men I have ever met. Surely you realize—"

"That we're wasting time talking like this," Blaire cut in sharply. His restless hands tightened the tapes of the chemical-stained smock he wore over his suit. "Perhaps these gentlemen from Scotland Yard would like to see the demonstration of the formula?"

The baronet said coldly: "If you have no objection."

"Why should I? The whole world will see it in operation within the next few months." The young man crossed and threw open a door at the far end of the room. "This is the lab," he explained.

The three men rose and followed him, but half-way across the room Ashton paused and glanced at his wrist-watch. "Not much use my coming in," he muttered. "I've seen the stuff working before, so I'll be cutting off..." He nodded to the group and made his way out into the hall. Read and Jeffery— a curiously silent Jeffery— were close behind Atherton-Wayne as Blaire stood back to usher them inside. And as the young chemist closed the door behind them, Jeffery glanced round.

The laboratory was small, but bright and spotlessly clean. One wall was

occupied by a large bookcase, packed with volumes that overflowed on to the floor. Under the windows, a bench ran the full length of the room, a bench which supported racks of test tubes, bottles of liquids in varying colours and a large glass retort over an unlit Bunsen burner. Near the centre of the floor, anchored to a concrete base, a stripped petrol engine held Jeffery's attention.

Blaire saw his interest. "My mechanical guinea pig," he explained. "It's an ordinary twelve-cylinder car engine, the exact counterpart of tens of thousands on the road today." Gone was the languid condescension of a few minutes before; there was a tremor of excitement in his voice and the pale cheeks were flushed with triumphant anticipation. He extracted a bunch of keys from his pocket and, selecting one, crossed to a small iron safe half-hidden under the bench. A few seconds later he returned, carrying a wooden box and, sliding back the cover, revealed a stoppered test-tube lying cushioned in cotton wool. The young chemist handed the box to Sir Anthony, and extracting the test-tube almost reverently, held it up to the light.

"Formula Number Four," he announced.

The three men gathered round, staring at the colourless solution that almost filled the tube. Jeffery spoke for the first time since his introduction. "What exactly is this substance?" he inquired.

Blaire returned the tube to its nest of cotton wool. "Naturally, I haven't time to go into all details." Again that faint note of condescension had crept into his tone. "But briefly, you probably already know that there are factories in Russia and America producing alcohol— the basis of all motor fuel— from waste and other cellulosid materials. But the process of chemical decomposition is far too costly to compete with the present-day price of ordinary petrol. That means every chemist under the sun has been searching feverishly for a micro-organism which can be cultivated and which can carry out this decomposing process quickly and cheaply."

Jeffery nodded.

Behind his thick spectacles, Blaire's dark eyes were alight. "By sheer accident," he said, "I have discovered a perfect substitute for that micro-organism! By chance, I have found the one thing that chemists have been searching for!"

Atherton-Wayne caressed one slim hand in another. "You realize the possibilities, gentlemen? Blaire has discovered a process for obtaining petrol from any starchy or sugary substance. From figs, potatoes, beets, artichokes, maize, prickly pear or even ordinary garden weeds!"

"Great thundering herds!" the Inspector ejaculated. And in the silence that followed, the whisper of the wind in the trees outside seemed to fill the whole room.

"And the secret is mine alone," Blaire said softly. The queer ill-balanced face was alight with some strange inward fire, and he spoke like an oracle pronouncing divination. "Who knows that my name may not rank with Newton and Pasteur and Edison—" He broke off, glanced quickly over his shoulder and his tone climbed shrilly. "Who's there?"

Read was staring at the young man. "What's the matter?" he grunted.

"Thought I heard someone at the door— like a soft knock." They waited, but nothing broke the sibilant silence of the laboratory. Blaire shrugged. "Getting like an old woman," he muttered irritably. "All this damned chatter about ghosts and boogles!" He picked up a teaspoon from the bench, wiped it with cotton wool, then lifted the phial carefully from the box. "Let's get this show over," he said and led them towards the engine.

Blaire uncorked the phial with his teeth and poured a few drops of the formula into the teaspoon. He handed the precious tube to Atherton-Wayne and, bending, fed the liquid delicately into the carburettor. Then, straightening, he pointed to a black button set a few feet away from the engine. "Self-starter," he said tersely, and nodded to Read. "Put your foot on it."

The Inspector did so. There was a dry whirring, a soft splutter from the engine, and a moment later it began to purr. Jeffery could visualize the shining cylinders rising and falling in perfect timing. A tiny wisp of green smoke rose from the working parts and hung lazily on the quiet air. Edward Blaire spread his hands.

"There you are, gentlemen."

Read was peering short-sightedly at the gently pulsing engine. "And just how long do you expect it to work on those few drops?"

The young chemist stroked his chin. "According to my calculations, that amount should drive a fourteen horse-power engine over a distance of twelve to fifteen miles," he replied.

No one questioned the statement. The positive sincerity in the young man's tone stamped the words with the finality of fact. The Inspector nodded and turned away, satisfied. "All right," he said shortly. "We've seen enough." He glanced at Blackburn. "What do you think, son?"

"Wonderful— and dangerous," Jeffery said quietly. He was staring at the purring engine. Blaire had pulled a small pad from his pocket and was making calculations on it with a stylo pen. Atherton-Wayne coughed gently: when they glanced at him, he nodded towards the entrance. The three men moved across the bright room. The baronet swung open the door and turned to speak to Blaire, when the Inspector gave a sudden sharp ejaculation.

"What's that?"

Three heads snapped round. Three pairs of eyes followed his riveted stare. Driven into the centre panel of the door was a short-handled knife and pinned into position by the blade was a piece of paper.

"Holy sinners! Read said softly. Atherton-Wayne's face was grey marble, only his sensitive nostrils quivered as he breathed deeply. Blackburn was first to move; he flicked a handkerchief from his pocket and, stepping forward, wrapped it around the knife-handle and jerked. The blade came out easily. The paper fluttered to the floor. Inspector Read stooped to pick it up, but with a sudden movement like the uncoiling of a spring, Atherton-Wayne was before him. Holding the paper delicately between forefinger and thumb, he read the words scrawled upon it. Read and Blackburn shouldered him on either side, then the Inspector spoke without turning.

"A message for you, Blaire."

The chemist crossed the room, walking lightly, as a cat walks. Behind the thick lenses his eyes were wary. Without a word, he took the proffered paper and peered at it. The words were printed in ink.

*I will call tomorrow night.
Listen for the hooting of The Owl.
Listen for the hooting of The Owl.*

THOSE OMINOUS words, like some dark refrain, kept recurring in Jeffery Blackburn's mind as he sat, drink in hand, on a divan in the living-room of Edward Blaire's cottage. The time was almost ten o'clock on the following night and the birthday party was in full swing. Around a room stripped of rugs and denuded of as much furniture as was convenient to move, a dozen young couples danced to radio music from the Luxemburg station.

Across the room, Sir Anthony Atherton-Wayne stood by the flower-decked sideboard, watching the festivities with grave, thoughtful eyes. His secretary was dancing with a tall, dark-haired beauty who chattered animatedly as they moved in time to the music. Elizabeth Blaire was the centre of a group near the fireplace. It seemed a high-spirited gathering, as gay as the coloured streamers and balloons that decorated the room. But if the brightness was a little forced, if the laughter was rather too shrill and the trips to the improvised bar in the next room too frequent, Jeffery was only too well aware of the reason. By shifting his position slightly he could see out of the window, perceiving the sturdy outlines of the uniformed figure, one of the chain of policemen whom Inspector Read had placed on guard around the cottage.

"Listen for the hooting of The Owl."

Read and Blackburn had made the most of every minute which had passed since the inexplicable receipt of that warning. Both men had returned to the

city, the Inspector to draft together a force of men to carry out his instructions with regard to Blaire's safety; Jeffery to collect and mentally digest every single piece of information available regarding The Owl robberies. Both men had returned to the Towers in time for lunch that day. The Inspector had spent the afternoon instructing and arranging the picketing of the cottage, while Jeffery, through Ashton, had obtained the warning cards received by Blaire.

A hail broke into his troubled thoughts. He glanced up. Blaire, piloting a young woman rather unsteadily around the room, passed close to him. Jeffery nodded absently, his thoughts flying off at a tangent. The young chemist's cheerful nonchalance did not deceive him. At each lull in the merry-making, Jeffery had noticed Blaire's surreptitious glances at his wrist-watch and the quick bird-like movements of his head whenever a door opened suddenly. As the evening advanced, the young man's drinking had accelerated. Now his face was flushed and the thick lenses of his spectacles emphasized the slight glaze over his eyes; but Jeffery knew that the pallid worm of fear was coiled about the other's heart and it gnawed deeper with the passing of every minute.

The dance music went on and on, and the couples circled and dipped and circled again like mechanical mice. Jeffery felt a certain sense of the grotesque. What sinister influence could possibly strike in this decorated, music-filled room? Yet what of the warning? That had surely come flying through the air from some unknown hand. Its appearance could only mean that The Owl was already in their midst. Blackburn scanned the fresh young laughing faces and shook his head. Impossible! It was this waiting that intensified the situation. If only something would happen...

"Not dancing, Mr. Blackburn?"

Jeffery gave a start that quivered the whisky in his glass. Elizabeth Blaire was smiling down at him. The light gleamed on her bare shoulders and sparkled in the tiny stars she wore in her brown hair. Jeffery's dress shirt crackled as he rose.

"Aren't you?" he said.

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "I'm afraid to walk up to a man in case he pulls out a police whistle. And you can't sit out in the garden unless someone comes up and jangles handcuffs under your nose.

"We're being cruel to be kind, you know."

"Poor Mr. Blackburn." She had lovely shoulders, Jeffery noticed, and the simple white evening frock she wore showed them off to advantage. "You know what I'm going to do? Find you some beautiful lady all of your own."

"Thank you, Miss Blaire. But I have already found one."

"Indeed? Where is she?"

"Standing close to me."

"Oh!" Elizabeth turned her head and looked round the room. "I had promised the next dance to Sir Anthony—"

"Who is old enough to know better," Jeffery told her. "While I am young and simply aching to dance. Miss Blaire, your duty as a hostess impels you."

The music came to an end. The couples drifted from the floor. The girl shrugged. "Now, you see, we can't dance even if I had decided to disappoint Sir Anthony. Let's sit down here."

They did so.

"Now," commanded Mr. Blackburn. "Talk to me."

"What about?"

"Anything."

"H'm," Elizabeth considered. "How do you like the decorations?"

"Excellent. That sideboard looks like a miniature jungle. Did you do them?"

"With these toil-worn fingers."

There was a pause. A little group of couples were gathered around the radio, twisting the dial in search of dance music. Sir Anthony had left his place near the sideboard and had crossed to a window, staring out into the dark garden. Edward Blaire, temporarily deserted, roamed the floor restlessly. His sister followed him with her eyes.

Jeffery said lightly: "There's a very worried little wrinkle between your brows. Why the unpleasant thoughts?"

The girl's face cleared. "Speaks the detective!"

"It's that warning your brother received yesterday, isn't it?"

She faced him now. Unconsciously, she placed one slim hand on his arm. "But it's so fantastic— it's like something out of Hollywood. I keep saying to myself— such things just don't happen to people like us."

Jeffery made no attempt to remove the hand. "The knife found in that door was the cold steel of fact," he reminded her.

"Oh— but to happen to one's own brother!"

Jeffery's tone was gentle. "If I may say so, Miss Blaire, your brother isn't actually going out of his way to prevent it happening."

She nodded, her face very serious. "I know he's stubborn— but Edward feels the same way about it as I do— that it's too impossible to be real. You see, Mr. Blackburn, so few things *are* real to my brother, things outside his own scientific orbit, I mean." She became suddenly aware of her hand on his arm and withdrew it with a quick movement. "Any attempt to anchor him down to a world of realities irritates him immensely."

"The artistic temperament, of course."

"Perhaps." A sudden coolness had crept into her tone. A thought seemed to strike her; she glanced at her wrist-watch and rose hastily. "Almost missed

my surprise," she said, and crossed the room to where the group was still playing with the radio set.

Elizabeth Blaire turned and clapped her hands. "Attention, everybody, please!"

The conversation died and as all heads turned towards her the girl whispered something to a young man at her side. He turned and manipulated the knob of the set. The final strains of an organ solo filtered into the room.

"Quiet, everybody!" Elizabeth called.

From his corner, her brother said thickly: "What's all this about, sis?"

"You listen carefully."

The reedy music vibrated to a close. There was a few seconds' pause, during which Elizabeth glanced across the room at Robert Ashton and closed one eye significantly. Her fiancé raised his eyebrows, then the voice of the announcer, brisk and brash, was heard.

"We interrupt our programme to send a birthday call to Edward Blaire...are you listening, Edward?...a birthday call to Edward Blaire who is celebrating the occasion with a party at his home."

The young chemist, who had been pouring himself a drink, gave an ejaculation of anger and almost dropped his glass.

"What the devil...?" he snapped, but a dozen gleeful voices quietened him.

"...and now if Edward will look in the centre drawer of the sideboard in his living-room, he will find a nice present there. In the centre drawer of the sideboard, and may we take this opportunity of wishing you—"

Blaire had reeled across the room. With a vindictive flick of his hand he snapped off the voice of the announcer. Face pale, eyes glittering behind his glasses, he faced his guests. "Which one of you is responsible for this damn' foolishness?" he demanded.

The dark-haired beauty at his side laughed. "Don't be such a spoil-sport, Ted! Go and look in the sideboard drawer." And half a dozen other voices took up the plea.

"Yes, go on, Blaire!"

"Take a look in the drawer."

"Go on, old man— don't spoil the joke."

Ashton called across the room: "Snap out of it, Edward. Where's your sense of humour?"

"There's nothing wrong with my sense of humour," Blaire returned. "But if you think I enjoy being humiliated from one end of the country to the other—"

Atherton-Wayne joined the discussion. The baronet's eyes were twinkling and he looked more human than Blackburn had ever seen him. "Really, my boy," he said smoothly, "I must confess I see nothing to be annoyed about."

Blaire raised a face darkening with anger. "How would you feel if you were in my position?" he demanded.

The baronet flicked something from his coat. "I should feel overwhelmingly curious as to what that drawer contained." There was a general laugh that contained a certain amount of sycophancy and was a subtle comment on the young chemist's churlishness. Blaire sensed it. His weak mouth set stubbornly.

"It's a pretty good joke, isn't it?" He addressed the room at large. "Well, here's where it falls flat. For all I care, whatever is in that drawer can stay there till it rots. Come on, get some dance music on that thing and let's get on with the party."

The childish ill temper in his voice was more than enough to cancel out his invitation. No one moved. In the embarrassed silence that followed, Elizabeth gave a little sigh. "All right," the girl strove to keep her voice light, "I'll own up. I arranged for that call to be put over, Edward."

"Thank you for nothing."

His sister ignored the comment. "I'll get the present myself," she said levelly. "I'm sorry if all this has upset you. I might have known better."

A light-hearted jest had assumed the proportions of a major issue. All eyes followed the girl as she crossed the room towards the flower-decked sideboard. She was reaching her hand for the centre drawer when a command snapped through the waiting room like the crack of a whiplash.

"*Stop!*"

Blackburn was striding towards the sideboard, his eyes blazing. He thrust himself in front of the girl and brushed her hand down from the drawer. Atherton-Wayne gave an ejaculation and it was repeated in little stifled echoes of amazement from everywhere about the room. Robert Ashton pulled his hands from his pockets and squared his shoulders as Blackburn wheeled on him. "I noticed a walking-stick hanging in the hall," he snapped. "A walking-stick with a crooked handle. Get it for me." The urgency in his voice had the crispness of a command. Ashton obeyed without a word. Returning, he handed the stick across. Jeffery grasped it by one end, backed a pace and crooked the handle about the knob of the drawer.

"Bless my soul—" began Atherton-Wayne.

"Stand back!" Jeffery rapped. "Right back behind me— everyone— please!" He waited until the shuffling ceased. "Now— *watch!*"

Standing off at an angle, he gave the stick a sharp tug. The drawer slid open and a sharp report echoed through the room. Simultaneously, there was a crash and a picture on the opposite wall slid to the floor, the glass splintering over the polished boards.

"Blackburn!" whispered Blaire. He was staring at Jeffery as though

hypnotized, his loose mouth working. Sobered now, he bent down and retrieved the picture. Near the centre of the canvas was a small ragged hole.

"Oh, God!" His voice was cracked, dry with fear. "What— what does this mean?"

Blackburn was fumbling among the profusion of blossoms on the sideboard, sweeping them aside with ruthless hands. "Look," he invited. Spliced with twine to one of the supports was a small pistol, and from the trigger a line of thin piano wire was connected with the drawer. Jeffery turned to the hushed assembly.

"Thank heaven I recognized that piano wire in time," he muttered. He looked at Elizabeth. "I noticed the light glinting on it when we were talking about the flowers. But for the life of me I couldn't make out what it was. It was only when you started for the drawer that I realized." He jerked his head towards the weapon. "Notice how the pistol is set breast high? There wasn't the slightest chance in the world of it missing if a person opened that drawer in the normal way."

Elizabeth gave a little shudder. "You— you saved my life." Her voice was very small. She seemed almost convincing herself of a fact. "Yes, you saved my life."

Edward Blaire tried to speak, swallowed and tried again. "That—" he began, "that was meant for me?"

Atherton-Wayne produced a handkerchief from his sleeve and patted a forehead dewed with perspiration. He coughed. "You realize what this means, Blackburn? The Owl set that devilish trap! That means, in spite of all your precautions, somehow the criminal got inside this room."

Ashton, balancing his stocky body, glanced quickly from face to face. "Then how did he get out again?"

"He didn't get out." Blackburn walked with slow deliberation to the door and set his back against it. "It's impossible for any living human being to get through that cordon of police outside. Do you realize what this means? The Owl is still here— hiding somewhere between these walls And we're going to dig him out if it means taking this cottage apart...brick by brick!"

Chapter 3

Saturday, June 15th.

THE GREY-FACED CLOCK in the tower had scarcely chimed the hour of ten on the following morning when Elizabeth Blaire, a frown between her eyes and her soft mouth firm, walked resolutely down one of the corridors of Rookwood Towers. She paused outside a door and knocked sharply on the stout oak.

There was no answer. She knocked again. This time a sulky voice cried from within:

"Who's there?"

"You know very well who it is!" The girl's tone was sharp with irritation.

"Let me in, Ted!"

A muffled grunt answered her. Then the lock clicked and the door swung back. A tousled heavy-eyed figure, still half-dressed in clothes of the previous night, faced her. Edward Blaire's face was as white as the crushed dress shirt beneath it. His sister drew a quick breath as the reek of stale whisky caught her nostrils.

"Ted! After what you promised me...!"

She advanced two steps into the room, closing the door behind her. Anger had hoisted scarlet danger signals in her pale cheeks and her eyes were bright and hard. "So this explains why you refused to sleep alone in your cottage last night— why you came over here! And why you haven't been down to breakfast this morning. Ted, I'm ashamed of you!"

Blaire gave a surly chuckle that ended in an abrupt hiccup. "What if I did? What right have you to question me? I'm not a child!"

Elizabeth said quietly: "You are a child, Ted. A very frightened child."

Her brother stared, blinking in an effort to focus his eyes. Then, abruptly, he collapsed on to the bed, burying his face in his hands. With a sudden pitying fear, the girl saw that he trembled from head to foot. In a moment she was by his side, one arm round his shoulders, steadying the trembling body against her own.

"Now, now, Ted..." her tone was gentle.

"Yes. I'm scared. And why not?" Her brother spoke through his fingers and Elizabeth sensed that he was unwilling that she should look upon his face.

"When— when I think of the escape I had last night, I— I go all to pieces. Now, go on, laugh at me if you like!"

Elizabeth said quietly: "I'm not laughing, Ted." She tightened her arm around his body. "It isn't as bad as it seems, old man. Remember, you have all the resources of Scotland Yard for your protection."

"Protection!" Blaire raised his head. "And a fine job Scotland Yard made of

it last night! Every copper in the Metropolitan area down here— and for all the good they were, they might as well have stayed on their beats. Don't talk to me about your precious police force!"

Something ugly in his tone stirred Elizabeth's anger afresh. "At least," she said sharply, "they're doing something better than cowering behind locked doors swilling whisky!"

Blaire leapt to his feet, tossing away her arm. "Oh, leave me alone, can't you?" His voice was shrill, tinged with hysteria. "Why does all this have to happen to me? I wish to God I'd never found that damnable formula in the first place!" He wheeled on the girl, his face working. "My life isn't worth living! Do you know why I didn't come down to breakfast? Because I'm afraid to eat my food in case it's poisoned. Yes, poisoned! Why do I lock my door? Because I'm afraid that if I sleep I'll— I'll never wake up again. And you, my own sister— the one who should understand me best of all— you come here and preach at me like a Temperance tract!"

Elizabeth rose. The naked terror of this man had shaken her more than she realized, and it was with an effort that she kept her voice level. "Sit down, Ted." She took her brother by the arm and led him to a chair. There was a silence. Then Blaire spoke again, his tone an apology.

"Sorry, sis." It was a sheepish mumble. "No sleep...nerves shot to pieces..."

Elizabeth nodded. "That's what I'm afraid of, old man." And as her brother glanced up, she continued: "Can't you understand that's just what this Owl creature wants to do? He's out to break your nerve until sheer terror forces you to give up your formula."

"But what can I do?"

"Here's my advice, Ted. Give that Dutch courage a wide berth, and stop brooding on that yellow press sensationalism. Get it firmly into your head that this Owl criminal is human— and being human he can't do the impossible."

Blaire licked his lips. "I— I wouldn't be too sure, Betty."

"What do you mean?"

"I— I think he came back here...early this morning."

"Ted!"

Her brother shrugged. "I know it sounds fantastic. Now that it's morning, with the sun shining, I can't quite believe it myself. But I'll swear that, sometime before dawn, I— I heard him." His voice dropped a note, darkened. "I think I even saw him."

"Here— at the Towers— early this morning?"

Blaire nodded.

"I went to bed shortly after midnight." His voice was low. "I couldn't sleep— it was the excitement of the party, I suppose. So I had a few drinks." An

exclamation escaped from his sister's lips and he added quickly: "Only to make me sleep, sis— to forget. Then I laid down on the bed. I must have fallen into a doze, for the last thing I remembered was the moon shining through this window on to the floor. And somewhere in the house I heard a clock strike once. A few moments later, the tower clock echoed the chime..."

He paused, his hands clasped, his eyes on the floor. Elizabeth prompted gently: "Yes?"

"I slept badly— had horrible, disconnected dreams. Creatures with the bodies of men and the heads of birds watched me as I stumbled through a dark wood. There was all about me a terrible silence, the silence of death. That's why the hooting, when it did come, sounded all the more terrible. I gave a start and woke up, to find myself sweating with fear and trembling."

Elizabeth's tone was soothing. "It was a dream, old boy— a nightmare."

"No." Blaire's voice was as sombre as the shadows that still clung to the corners of the room. "That's what I thought— at first. Then I heard that hooting again, and I'll swear I was wide awake this time. And as I turned on the bed I noticed that the patch of moonlight had gone from the floor. Instinctively I turned and looked at the window..."

Elizabeth Blaire's fingers tightened on her brother's arm, but she did not speak. The young man licked his lips. "There was someone— or something standing there, staring in at me. Something in a long black cloak that stretched like wings to block out the moonlight. I tried to cry out, but my voice seemed rusty, useless. And even as I stared back the shadow slipped from the window and was gone. The moonlight shone through, splashing on to the floor." His voice rose hysterically. "He was there, sis— waiting for me! I saw him!"

The girl rose and, crossing to the decanter on the table by the tall cupboard, poured a stiff drink. She returned and pressed the glass into her brother's hand. She could hear the rim of the glass clatter against his teeth as he gulped the fiery spirit. He drew a deep breath.

"I needed that, sis. You're a great scout, you know."

Elizabeth took the glass and turned it over in her fingers. She said slowly, as if considering: "If you did actually see that figure at the window, then The Owl knows this house quite well."

Blaire nodded. "You mean it must be someone under this roof?"

His sister shrugged. "We must face facts, Ted. Only three people besides yourself knew of the formula. Sir Anthony, Bob and myself."

The young man rose to his feet. He crossed and took down a dressing-gown from behind the door. He spoke without turning:

"That's not quite right."

"What do you mean?"

Blaire's restless fingers were busy with the strings of his dressing-gown. "When I said you three were the only people who knew of the discovery— I meant, in England."

"Ted! You haven't told anyone else?"

"Why not?" He swung round on her, face sullen, mouth mutinous. "The formula is mine. I've a perfect right to do what I please with it. If you must know, I wrote to a friend of mine— a chap I met when I was studying in Vienna. He's a high official in one of the Balkan Governments now. I told about the formula— said it was on sale to the highest bidder."

"Oh!" Elizabeth was silent, striving to quell the bitter words of censure that rose to her lips. After a pause, she said quietly, "When did this happen?"

"A few days after the discovery," Blaire told her. "I told you how Atherton-Wayne demanded the formula under the terms of our agreement. I refused to give it up, saying that the formula was on sale for twenty-five thousand pounds. He laughed at me— laughed in my face, Betsy!" He turned away. "Naturally I went in search of another bidder."

Elizabeth rose. "Do you realize that what you've done practically amounts to treason?"

Her brother essayed a shaky laugh. "Rot! Atherton-Wayne's been doing just the same thing for years in his armament business."

"That's no excuse—"

Edward Blaire wheeled on her and something in his face made the girl shrink back. "Perhaps not. But here's my excuse. I've never known luxury— all our lives we've been poor. I've had to struggle and fight for every single thing I've got." He began to pace the room, his hands flying. "Do you think I liked it? Do you think I've swotted over books and choked myself with stinking chemicals for the love of it? Well, I haven't! Not me! I've worked and studied, praying for the day when I could make a discovery valuable enough to keep me in comfort for the rest of my life." He paused and faced her, his eyes blazing. "Now, I've done it! I've found that discovery! And, by God, I'm going to make it pay me well!"

Elizabeth, her face pale, was staring as though hypnotized by his sudden passion. The tension in the room tightened like a stretched band. It was the girl who cracked first. She gave a choking sob and reached blindly for the door. Her brother, his mouth working, heard the sound of her footsteps, quick with panic, echo down the long corridor and die in the distance.

He gave a shaky laugh, kicked the door shut and crossed to the table by the tall cupboard.

AN HOUR LATER, Ashton, a dozen opened letters in his hand, knocked on the

door of the library and let himself in. Sir Anthony, seated at a desk under the long windows, spoke without turning.

"Is that you, Ashton?"

"Yes, Sir Anthony.

"You're rather late, I think."

The secretary placed the letters at his employer's elbow. He spoke as he pulled up a chair. "I know, sir. I looked for you in the study. Mrs. Tamworth told me you were in the library."

The baronet accepted the explanation with a curt nod and took up the letters. "Anything of importance here?"

"There is a directors' meeting next Thursday morning, sir. They would like you to be present. I have made a note of it. There's an acknowledgement of your cheque for the Allied Women's Peace Movement—"

"Yes, yes. Is that all?"

"There is a letter from Lord Dewhurst which needs your attention, sir."

Sir Anthony raised his eyes. "Dewhurst— what does he want?"

"It's written from Buenos Aires," the secretary explained. "Lord Dewhurst is staying there. A friend of his— Dr. Hautmann, I think the name is— happens to be visiting London with his daughter. Lord Dewhurst writes that he'd appreciate any hospitality you could show these people."

"H'm." Atherton-Wayne's tone was non-committal. "When are these people expected to arrive?"

"The letter mentioned the fourth. That would be yesterday." The secretary paused, but as the baronet made no comment, he continued: "Shall I ask Mrs. Tamworth to have rooms prepared, sir?"

Sir Anthony turned and faced Ashton in that politely vague manner which always irritated the young man. It was always as though his presence was a mild shock to the baronet. "Yes, yes. Attend to that, my boy. Is there anything else?"

"That's all, sir."

"Then you might bring over the chess set." The secretary nodded, and crossing to a cupboard returned with an inlaid box which he placed before the elder man. Atherton-Wayne opened it and began to extract the ivory chessmen. "I evolved a rather, intriguing problem during the night. I should like to test it." His long delicate fingers were placing the carved figures carefully on the board. "You don't play chess, of course, Ashton?"

The young man squared his shoulders. "No, sir. I pref something more strenuous."

"The cultivation of muscle rather than of mind?"

The gentle irony in the tone stung Ashton and for a moment the man

peered out from behind the servile cloak of the secretary. "It's just as easy to be fit as otherwise," he said rather sharply.

"I'd be willing to tackle any man my own weight with or without gloves. And as for that—"

"Of course, of course." The tone had all the shock of cold water. "This problem may require all my— er— concentration." The sleek grey head looked up and two steel-blue eyes fixed on the young man. "Would you see that I am not disturbed?"

"Certainly."

Atherton-Wayne pulled his chair closer to the desk, a gesture of dismissal. Robert Ashton eyed him for a brief second, then wheeled and walked out of the library.

The baronet rubbed his hands and bent his head over the board. From outside the open window came the comfortable hum of an electric lawn mower and the sweet scent of newly cut grass floated into that sombre book-lined room. Some distance away a dog barked, to be answered by another. Rooks were busy in the spreading elms that shadowed the lawn. But to the man in the library all this was but a harmonious background for the pattern of his thoughts as they spun smoothly about the problem beneath his fingers. Intermittently, he moved or sat in thoughtful silence, tapping his lips in ecstatic perplexity. The whole thing was plainer now. With this one last move...The baronet tapped his finger-tips together in mild excitement.

"Now," he murmured. "Knight in four...bishop... queen...rook. So...so...! Now, if I move my bishop...? No, not that! Perhaps the knight— ?"

"Why not," announced a bright voice by the window, "move your queen?"

Atherton-Wayne started as though galvanized. Standing in the open window, looking down at the board with undisguised interest, was Mr. Blackburn. The baronet said softly: "God bless my soul!"

"So sorry to startle you, sir." Jeffery smiled winningly and advanced into the library. "But chess happens to be an obsession of mine. I noticed your placings— and as the window happened to be open...I hope I haven't disturbed you?"

"Disturbed me!" Surprise had given way to a cold-blooded anger. "Confound you, sir, am I to have no privacy in my own house?" In the baronet's grey cheeks, two flushed spots appeared and his small eyes glittered. "Do you realize what you've done? Put the moves completely out of my head— and just when I am concluding a particularly interesting variation of the Maroczy gambit—"

"Then you'll never make it with your knight in four, sir," Jeffery announced cheerfully. "Allow me." He reached a hand over the chess-board. "Now, watch!

Knight... knight-pawn... knight... black pawn... rook! And the result?"

"Fool's Mate!"

"Exactly!" Jeffery removed the captured men from the board and dropped them into the astonished baronet's hand. "And there you are."

Into Atherton-Wayne's face something approaching the light of admiration had dawned. "Extraordinary, Blackburn! Most extraordinary! However did you learn to play so well?"

Jeffery dropped his long body into a chair and lit a cigarette. "I always remember Plattner's advice, Sir Anthony. Foresight, circumspection and caution. Those three points have helped me out of many a tight corner. And,"— he cocked an eyebrow at the elder man—"not only on a chess-board."

Atherton-Wayne leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. There was an expression on his face that the young man could not quite understand. His voice was that of the suave diplomat. "You are apparently a most versatile young man. Mathematician— detective— chess player." He linked long fingers on his lap. "Anything else?"

Jeffery sat upright. "At the moment— Nosy Parker!"

"Indeed?"

"I'm on the trail of some information about this house. You see," explained Mr. Blackburn, "I'm not one of these blighters who can look at a heap of mouldering ruins and say, 'Ah! ten-sixty-six and all that!' Frankly, I can barely tell the difference between a Gothic arch and a Queen Anne bungalow."

A wintry smile lingered about Atherton-Wayne's thin lips. "If I can help in any way..." he suggested.

"When was Rookwood Towers built, sir?"

"Somewhere about the year sixteen-hundred, I believe," was the reply. "During the reign of the first James. It is supposed to have been built by Thomas Howard, first Earl of Suffolk, who was Lord Treasurer to James the First."

Jeffery nodded. "And the cottage that Mr. Blaire occupies would be roughly the same age as the house, I suppose?"

"That is so," the baronet assured him; "they were both built at the same time. There is some sort of legend to the effect that Howard fell into disgrace with James for hiding the Earl of Gowrie in the cottage after he had carried off the boy king, James the Sixth. The king's nobles surrounded the cottage, but when they forced an entrance, Ruthven had disappeared."

Blackburn dusted his cigarette in the silver ashtray at his elbow. "How did that happen?"

"I have no idea," Atherton-Wayne admitted. "Nevertheless, this story has given rise to some tale about a secret passage connecting this house with the

cottage." The baronet shrugged. "It's quite possible, of course. The place is old enough."

"Haven't you ever searched for the passage?"

The elder man took out a silver case, extracted a cigarette and tapped it delicately. "My dear Blackburn," he said gently, "when you reach my age, you find more dignified recreations than crawling about on your hands and knees, tapping woodwork like the hero of a melodrama. I consider the whole thing merely a romantic legend— particularly after what happened some months ago..." He paused to light his cigarette.

"I was foolish enough to allow myself to be prevailed upon to throw my house open to a party of antiquarian gentlemen who had heard of the legend. They went about testing every floor and wall and after some days of making my life almost intolerable, departed no wiser than when they came."

Jeffery nodded and rose. "Thank you, sir. You've been most helpful. And if there's anything I can do in return..."

The baronet's eyes moved to the chess-board. "I'm intensely curious regarding those moves of the Maroczy gambit. Perhaps, if you have half an hour to spare this afternoon..."

Mr. Blackburn nodded. "At your service. Shall we say here— at three o'clock?"

"Very well." The elder man hesitated. "Er— Blackburn, where actually did I go wrong?"

Jeffery had moved to the door. He paused in the act of opening it. "You gave away far too much at the beginning of the game, sir," he said. "It always pays to keep a few surprise moves up your sleeve. Understand what I mean?"

Sir Anthony's voice was very quiet. "I think I am just beginning to understand."

A HALF-SMOKED cigarette between his lips, hands thrust into his pockets, Mr. Blackburn sauntered along the corridor from the library. As he passed a closed door, the muffled rattle of a typewriter caught his attention. He paused, hovered irresolutely for a moment, then, stamping out his cigarette, turned and rapped on the panels.

The typewriter ceased. Ashton's voice called, "Come in."

Jeffery did so, closing the door behind him. "Am I intruding?" he inquired.

"No." The secretary pushed the typewriter to one side.

"Pull up a chair." And as Jeffery seated himself, "What's the matter?"

"How did you come to be a secretary?"

Ashton frowned, but the other's face was guileless. "What's this?" he said shortly. "Cross-examination or curiosity?"

"More vulgar curiosity," Jeffery assured him. "Didn't you play rugger for England against Australia a couple of years, ago?"

The secretary's face lightened. "Fancy you remembering that!" Then he grinned. "So that's the reason for the question?"

The other shrugged. "When one sees a hefty young athlete who turns the scale at fourteen stone sitting picking away at a typewriter—"

Robert Ashton jumped to his feet with a suddenness that set the chair rocking. "For God's sake, Blackburn," he exclaimed, "do you think I like it? Do you think I enjoy sitting around and nodding and sir-ing like a scullery maid?" He spread his big hands helplessly. "But what else am I to do? Forget professional sport— a torn ligament in my shoulder's put that right out of the running. Fortunately, I went to a good school that taught me something else beside athletics. And so— here I am, picking at a typewriter."

Jeffery nodded, his eyes sombre. "Bad luck, old man."

Ashton dragged his chair forward and straddled it. "I shouldn't grumble, I suppose. It's a job, after all. But what I'd give for one blazin' night of excitement— one chance to let off steam!"

The other seemed to be considering a point. Presently he looked up.

"Keep yourself pretty fit, I suppose?"

"Matter of habit," Robert grunted. "Otherwise, in this kind of job, I'd swell up like a balloon." He paused and eyed his companion keenly. "I say, what's behind all this?"

Blackburn leaned forward. "Tonight," he said crisply, "I'm going exploring. I need a companion. The Chief Inspector won't be on tap— he's going up to headquarters this afternoon. How would you like to come with me?"

"Like a shot! What's the idea?"

"Do you know anything about a secret passage in this house?"

The secretary replied promptly: "There's a sort of tunnel leading from the ruined lodge house inside the gates. But that's no secret."

Jeffery shook his head. "A few minutes ago, I learnt that a secret passage was supposed to connect this house with young Blaire's cottage."

"Oh, that!" Ashton dismissed it with a gesture. "Good lord, Blackburn, surely you're not taking that old legend about the Earl of Suffolk too seriously?"

"And why not?"

Robert shrugged his big shoulders. "Because it's nothing more than a story that's grown up round this place. Every old place has its fairy tale. Ours happens to be that passage. I suppose Atherton-Wayne told you about it?"

"That's so."

"Did he tell you about that party of antiquarians?"— and as Jeffery nodded:

"Then you think two of us poking about in the dark are likely to succeed where these other chaps failed? It seems rather absurd."

Mr. Blackburn had his own way of dealing with the situation. He said casually:

"Perhaps, on second thoughts, you'd better not come. Sir Anthony might not approve..."

Ashton flushed. "What's it got to do with him what I do in my spare time?" he demanded. "I'll come with you."

"Splendid!" Jeffery stood up. "Meet me at the gate in the hedge at ten o'clock. Is that all right?"

Robert Ashton nodded. "Quite all right."

But little did both men realize what was in store for them. It is indeed a merciful Providence that has shrouded the future from human eyes.

PATIENCE WAS not the strongest of Mr. Blackburn's virtues. To sit with folded hands was anathema to his lively mind and restless body. The excitement of the previous night had wetted his appetite and the proposal to search for the supposed secret passage was more an outlet for this energy than a step in unmasking The Owl. That there was danger lurking within the stout walls of Rookwood Towers Jeffery did not doubt for an instant, especially as Elizabeth had confided to him her brother's story of the midnight visitor and Edward's foolish betrayal regarding the precious formula.

Although he would admit it to no one but himself, Jeffery was, for the moment, at a loss. So carefully had The Owl covered his tracks after the cowardly attempt on Blaire's life that any further investigation along that line seemed fruitless. Until Read returned from Scotland Yard, there seemed nothing to do but wait for the second visitation, though the consequent inaction was as gall and wormwood to the young man's soul. On the other hand, he dare not relax his vigil at the Towers. The Owl's bravado was amazing— not only had he warned, but he had actually essayed an attempt at striking. If Scotland Yard was caught unprepared a second time, the resultant scandal would spell finish for William Jamison Read. Jeffery realized that his friend was becoming more and more reliant on his help and, under the circumstances, the responsibility was not pleasant.

It was a very worried young man who strode through the dark belt of trees towards the cottage.

It was rather eerie under the trees. The night was warm and still, so that even the soft whispering in the branches had ceased. His feet rustled on the dry leaves as he walked. He picked his way among the sturdy trunks, distinguishable only as heavy black masses from the shadowy walls that

hemmed him in. Once, a sudden rapid patter on the dry carpet set his heart pounding and caught the breath in his throat. A rabbit, of course! This place was alive with them. He squared his shoulders and walked on, the scurry of his footsteps giving queer comfort. But Jeffery was glad when he emerged from that dark barrier and saw the moonlight silvering the roof of the cottage. At that moment, the clock in the tower struck the three-quarter hour. The young man paused and, cupping his hand round the luminous dial of his watch, grunted:

"I'm early!"

Even so, Robert Ashton was waiting. The creak of a gate reached Jeffery's ears and the stocky figure of the secretary came through, peering left and right. He spied Blackburn at once.

"Been waiting long?" Jeffery greeted him.

"Five minutes." Ashton glanced towards the cottage. "You think it's better we start at this end?"

"Much better. We couldn't work at the Towers without being disturbed. But the cottage is empty." Blackburn swung open the gate and began to usher his companion through. "It's going to be a long job, I fear. We're hunting for a needle in..." The words died on his lips. Jeffery stood stock-still, his hand still on the gate. Ashton looked up sharply. "What's the matter?"

For answer, Jeffery thrust out an arm and pushed him back against the hedge. His voice was a whisper. "Thank heaven we decided to come early! Look— the centre window."

Ashton gave a soft ejaculation of surprise. Crawling unsteadily across the panes of the window, a circular disc of light hovered, flashed and disappeared. The secretary's tone trembled with repressed excitement. "Someone in there— that was a beam from a torch!" He stared at the dark window for an instant, then: "What's he up to?"

"Monkey business," grunted Blackburn. "Otherwise, he'd turn on the cottage lights." He glanced sideways at his companion. "How's the old rugger tackle?"

"Good as new."

"Right! We'll tackle this blighter as he comes out—" Jeffery broke off as the soft click of a lock caught their ears. "Keep back— here he comes now."

They pressed close in to the hedge. Quiet cautious footsteps sounded on the flagged pavement. Blackburn, his eye aligned with a gap in the greenery, caught a glimpse of a tall straight figure, a dark cloak streaming behind him. The face was an indeterminate patch of grey bisected by the shadow of the hat rim. The figure passed from eye level and the footsteps were closer. There came the soft creak of the gate.

"Now!" roared Jeffery, and hurled himself forward.

But Ashton was a shade faster. Fourteen stone projected itself at the stranger's legs. The cloaked man went down with a throaty grunt and the two figures, an inextricable whirlwind of arms and legs, rolled over and over. Suddenly they were still. Ashton rose, brushing leaves and earth from his coat. The stranger lay where he had fallen, limp as a bag of wash.

"Must have winded the chap," muttered the secretary. He was breathing heavily. "Guess I put a bit too much weight behind it." He stared down at the fallen man. "Who is he, anyway?"

"Don't you know?" And as Robert shook his head, Jeffery bent over the unconscious stranger. The moonlight illuminated his features, an arrogant beak of a nose set in a thin, pale face, surmounted with greying, close-cropped hair. Jeffery pulled aside the cloak that had fallen across the man's body and revealed a well-cut but sadly dishevelled suit of some dark material. He was still staring at the stranger when an ejaculation from his companion made him turn.

Ashton was picking an object off the ground. Now he turned with it in his hand. "Wallet," he said briefly. "Must have fallen from his pocket in the dust-up. This might tell us something."

Blackburn, still on his knees by the fallen man, took the wallet and peered inside. He extracted a card and screwed his eyes over it. But the small print defied him. "Let's have a light," he snapped. The secretary fumbled for matches and struck one with clumsy fingers. The tiny flame stained the pasteboard a dull lemon and Jeffery slanted the card closer to the light.

"Heinrich Hautmann..."

The secretary gave a start that almost extinguished the match. "Who?"

"Dr. Heinrich Hautmann— Buenos Aires." Jeffery glanced up sharply. "What's the matter?"

Robert Ashton was staring at the unconscious man with dropping jaw. "Dr. Hautmann— oh, my aunt! This is where the balloon goes up!"

THE LITTLE VILLAGE OF Tilling sprawls raggedly across the slope of the downs a few miles from Rookwood Towers. It is a typical corner of England; the neighbourly cottages, the smithy, store and post-office straggle along the white road curving like a flung rope through the green valley. On the fringe of this handful of dwellings stands the "Green Man," heavily tiled and creeper-clad, built of local materials and weathered to a fine hue.

It was mid-morning, two days after the encounter with the unfortunate Dr. Hautmann, when Jeffery Blackburn pushed open the swing doors of the inn. He almost collided with Elizabeth Blaire. The girl stopped short, her face puckering

with surprise.

"Mr. Blackburn!"

"Good morning, Miss Blaire." Jeffery raised his hat. "Come to see me?"

"I thought you were in London," Elizabeth responded. "Are you staying here?"

"I am." Jeffery waved an expressive hand to the landscape. "And why not? Could the metropolis give me anything like this? 'Ye distant spires, ye antique towers,' as Thomas Grey sings..."

"Poetic evasion," said Miss Blaire, "doesn't explain why you're hiding away at the 'Green Man.'"

Blackburn placed his hand lightly on her arm and piloted the girl towards a wooden seat in the tiny strip of garden outside the inn. "Be seated," he commanded, "and have a cigarette." He sat beside her as they lit up. "You know all about my sudden exodus from the Towers, of course?"

The girl nodded. "Bob told me."

"It's true," admitted Jeffery. "I was metaphorically lifted from the grounds on the toe of Sir Anthony's expensive shoe. After the little fracas near the cottage, Ashton and I were ordered to the library. Atherton-Wayne made a few pungent remarks about turning his home into a barracks and acting like a drunken sailor, with the result that here I am."

Elizabeth smiled. "Too bad!"

Jeffery looked pained. "Spare me your mirth. You behold in me a man without a country. The bird of the air has his nest, the beasts their humble lair, but I—"

"Why don't you go back to London?"

Mr. Blackburn repressed a shudder. "There's another shoe waiting for me there. A size ten belonging to the Chief Inspector— and believe me, there's nothing metaphorical about that one."

Elizabeth shrugged. "Well, young man, if you creep about in the dead of night man-handling your host's respected guests, what else can you expect?"

"How was I to know it was this confounded doctor," demanded Jeffery not without heat. "Anyhow, what was he doing sneaking around in your brother's cottage that night?"

"Says he lost his way in the darkness."

"And I say Aunt Mary's fruit-hat!" snorted Blackburn. He dropped his half-smoked cigarette and set his foot on it. "Atherton-Wayne might swallow that story, but not this vinegar-souled cynic! People don't lose their way to the extent of getting inside a strange house and prowling round with a lighted torch."

There was a pause. A small grimy-faced child poked its head over the low

wall separating the garden from the road, surveyed them gravely for a moment, then disappeared. Elizabeth was silent, staring out across the green downs, rolling mound upon mound to the far horizon. Presently she spoke:

"Jeffery..."

"Yes?"

Again that pause. This was the first time she had called him by his Christian name, but she did not appear to have noticed it. There was a worried little frown between her eyes.

"Do you think Dr. Hautmann has something to do with this Owl business?"

"That," said Blackburn, "remains to be seen. How are things at the Towers?"

"Quite normal. Sir Anthony seems to think that the danger is past."

"No." Elizabeth turned. Gone was her companion's flippancy, now his young face was set. "Don't think I'm an alarmist, but I'd advise your brother to be doubly careful now." He shook his head slowly. "This looks to me dangerously like the lull before the storm."

"So that's why you came here to stay instead of returning to London?"

Jeffery nodded. "The Chief Inspector sent me down to the Towers to keep an eye on your brother. Somebody has manoeuvred to get me out of that house." His voice slowed. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, somebody is going to take advantage of my absence."

"Jeffery!"

He shrugged. "There's a gift of prophecy on me today. I tell you this. Something is going to happen in that house before tomorrow morning."

Elizabeth was staring at him, her blue eyes shadowed. The shadow lay across her voice when she spoke. "What kind of thing?"

"I don't know." Blackburn's gesture and tone held an irritable frustration. "That's the very devil of it! I've never worked on a case like this before. It's this confounded waiting...waiting! And there are so many loose ends, One instance— who and what is Dr. Heinrich Hautmann?"

The girl shook her head. "I only know what Bob told me— that the doctor came to Sir Anthony with the best of credentials. He was recommended by Lord Dewhurst, whom he met in Buenos Aires."

"Then Hautmann was a complete stranger to Atherton-Wayne? The two had never met before?"

"No."

Jeffery jumped to his feet. "Listen— we must do two things and do them promptly. There's mischief afoot and blood on the moon, my girl! Now the first and most important is to get me back into the Towers. Had I known what I know now, nothing in the world would have induced me to leave. There must

be some place where you can hide me for a few days?"

His excitement was contagious. Elizabeth nodded quickly. "What's wrong with Ted's cottage? No one is using it now."

"Splendid!"

"Ted would have to know, of course."

Jeffery frowned. "Yes, I see that. Still, we'll have to trust him to hold his tongue. Next thing— how do we get inside the grounds without being seen?"

"That's simple," the girl responded. "There's an old tunnel that runs from the gate up to the vaults—"

"Vaults?"

Elizabeth nodded. "You didn't have the chance to explore that part of the Towers. Horrible place— great underground stone rooms, dark and airless. Supposed to have been used at one time as torture chambers." The girl shuddered. "I can quite believe it. There are still rusty chains clamped to the walls..." She dismissed the idea with a gesture. "Anyhow, Bob and I explored this tunnel a few weeks ago. It brings you out quite near the cottage."

"All right. When can you get me in?"

Elizabeth considered a moment. "Just before dinner when the others are dressing. How's that?"

"Splendid," Blackburn assured her. "Now, the other thing is to get Ashton to write to Lord Dewhurst—"

"No," said Elizabeth sharply. She rose to her feet and stood with face averted. Her tone was cold. "If we write, we must do it ourselves—"

"But surely your fiancé—" began Jeffery, but again the girl interrupted.

"We can expect no help from Bob. I don't know what he thinks of Dr. Hautmann, but he seems more than satisfied with Miss Elsa."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this!" The girl wheeled on him and the young man was amazed to see her eyes swimming.

"Bob's had plenty of time to study the question. He's scarcely been out of Elsa Hautmann's pocket for the past two days!" She stared at him, head high, chin defiant, then abruptly she turned away. As Jeffery stood awkwardly, she continued in a small voice: "Sorry. You caught a glimpse of my claws then. Please forget it."

"Of course," murmured Jeffery. He addressed the girl's rigid back and his tone was gentle. "Your fiancé is Sir Anthony's secretary, you know. He's bound by duty as well as courtesy to be polite to Miss Hautmann."

"Duty! Courtesy!" Elizabeth's voice rose, but she controlled it with an effort. "Listen. Last night I couldn't sleep— I went down to the library to borrow a book. The place was in darkness. I was just about to open the door

when I heard voices...their voices!"

"You weren't mistaken?"

The girl turned and faced him. "Could I possibly mistake the voice of the man I've been engaged to for the past two years?" she said quietly. "And this morning I asked Bob to drive me down here. He made some excuse about Sir Anthony wanting him to entertain Miss Hautmann. I did something rather rotten then..." Her voice faltered, but she continued: "I— I asked him if Sir Anthony had asked him to entertain Miss Hautmann in the library last night..."

"Oh, my aunt!" murmured Jeffery, "What did he say?"

"Flushed up and went out without saying a word." Elizabeth dropped her eyes. "We— we haven't spoken since."

Jeffery made little soothing noises, conscious of his extreme inadequacy in coping with such a situation. "I shouldn't take it too seriously. These silly flirtations end very quickly. Meanwhile, I have an excellent suggestion."

"Yes?" said Elizabeth doubtfully.

Blackburn gestured towards the inn. "This hostelry makes the most delightful scones that ever came out of an oven. You halve them, spread them with jam, pile them with clotted cream...and the cares of the world dwindle into insignificance!"

"And tea?"

"Tea that makes nectar taste like the scrapings of the wine-vat!" Jeffery smiled and crooked his arm invitingly. "Hungry?" he asked.

The girl smiled in turn. "Jeffery," she said, "as a detective I have my doubts about you. But as a delightful companion, you are heaven's gift to a lonely woman!"

"Very well then," said Mr. Blackburn grandiloquently. "On to the sconnery!"

"WE ARE very near to home— yes?" said Elsa Hautmann.

"Not far now," Ashton replied. "Tired?"

"A little, I think." She pulled off her small hat and even the falling dusk could not dim the fine, spun gold of her hair. She wore it long, in two plaits that wound to and fro about her head like a yellow crown.

Ashton said softly: "You should never wear a hat, you know."

Elsa wrinkled her nose at him. "Silly. I get struck with your sun, perhaps, eh?"

They were walking the road that led to the gates of Rookwood Towers. The high stone wall surrounding the grounds was already in sight, although the extremities were lost in the encroaching gloom. Elsa Hautmann walked a few paces ahead, swinging her hat and humming a little air. Ashton spoke again.

"Enjoyed your afternoon, Miss Elsa?"

The humming stopped, but the girl did not look round as she spoke. "Miss Elsa? Last night it was just Elsa. Please, I like it that way. Then I call you Bobbee."

Ashton grinned. In two sharp paces he had caught up with her. "That a kid's name. Call me Robert, like everyone else."

"No, no!" Miss Hautmann shook her head. "I like Bobbee. In Vienna, I meet a very handsome American called Bobbee. You, too, would love Vienna. You could sit with me in the Opern Restaurant and drink coffee. Or we could travel to Egern, and you could wear leather breeches and a green hat with a scarlet feather." She sighed. "Egern in lilac time...it is heavenly."

"That's all very well, Elsa. But travel costs money. I must stay here with my work."

The girl shrugged. "Perhaps if I ask my father, he will take you as a secretary. Then we can go to Vienna and walk under the linden trees—"

The young man gave an indulgent laugh. "Here, wait a minute! I've known you only two days and you want to whisk me out of the country. Besides, you don't even know if your father wants a secretary."

Elsa Hautmann turned and smiled at him. Her white teeth glistened as she spoke. "My father is kind— he give me whatever I want. You see?"

Ashton nodded. "I see. But there's more to it than that. I happen to be engaged to a young lady—"

The girl stopped suddenly and faced him. "Engaged?" There was a little shrill note in her voice. "Is that betrothed?" And, as the secretary nodded: "But, Bobbee, last night you say to me—"

It was Ashton's turn to interrupt. "Yes, I know," he said curtly. "Look here, if we're going to get back in time for dinner, we'd best not be standing here." He glanced at his watch. "We'll scarcely have time to dress as it is."

They began walking. After a short silence, Elsa spoke and her tone held a hint of malice. "Sir Anthony will be very angry with you if you keep me late— yes?"

"Wait!" They were close to the gates now. The stone pillars loomed like pale, squat ghosts before them. "I've an idea how we can creep in unseen." He turned to the girl. "Are you on for a bit of a lark?"

Elsa eyed him doubtfully. "You mean— some joke?"

"In a way— yes." Robert brushed aside any explanation and continued hurriedly. "A few steps along here there's an old tunnel that leads right up to the house. It will get us there quicker, though it's rather dark and steep..."

"Dark...steep?" The girl seemed to ponder over the words. Then she said abruptly: "Yes. It is a— a lark. Let us go that way."

Ashton nodded and led the way through the gates. Near where the trees began, a shell of what had once been a lodge house raised ruined serrated walls. The secretary picked his way over the fallen stones and paused before a tilting stone archway, draped with thick ivy. He thrust back this leafy curtain and revealed the mouth of a black hole. Elsa, close behind him, gave a little ejaculation.

"Ach— but it is so dark...!"

Ashton said quietly: "Frightened?"

"A little, I think. You will hold my hand— yes?"

Robert thrust out his hand and felt soft fingers close around it. "I'll go first," he muttered. "No need to be scared— I know every inch of this passage. It's as safe as the roadway."

He dropped the ivy draping behind him and complete darkness enclosed them. Elsa's fingers tightened on his own as their feet scrabbled on the loose stones of the passage. Once a spider web brushed her face and she gave a little cut-off scream and pressed closer to him. Presently, he gently disengaged his hand and she cried out fearfully:

"Why do you let me go? What is happening?"

The other pressed her arm reassuringly. "There's a steep step down here. I'll go on first and lift you..." His voice moved away. In the darkness she heard the rattle of matches and a tiny flame flickered in the gloom. It revealed a sharp drop of about two feet where part of the floor had sunk. Ashton retraced his steps and led Elsa to the edge of the drop. The match flickered and died and blackness engulfed them again. In that second, Elsa screamed.

"Bobbee...I'm falling!"

Ashton was at her side, his arms tight about her. The girl clung to him, trembling. He could feel her breath warm upon his cheek, the terrified pounding of her heart as she shrank closer in his arms. He soothed her as one would a frightened child. "I'm holding you, Elsa, I'm holding you." Then, on an impulse, he bent his lips to the smoothness of her cheek.

Elsa gave a little sigh and relaxed in his embrace. "Hold me like this always, Bobbee," she murmured. "Never, never let me go," and in the thick darkness he kissed her lips.

There came a sudden interruption. Almost simultaneously, voices and footsteps echoed down the passage and the dancing beam of a torch flickered on the roof above their heads. The next moment the pair were outlined in a pool of light that wavered, steadied and was abruptly cut off. In the darkness, thicker now by contrast, the footsteps halted. A woman's voice said coldly:

"Too late, Jeffery. I saw it."

Ashton said sharply: "Elizabeth!" The light flashed on again and the

secretary flung one hand across his eyes to protect them from the glare. Elsa Hautmann was staring into the shadows with wide eyes.

From out of the gloom behind the glow of the torch Elizabeth stepped. Her voice was brittle with anger. "Jeffery, I don't think you've met Miss Hautmann. The gentleman with the lipstick on his face was, at one time, my fiancé!"

Robert Ashton cried out: "Elizabeth, you don't understand—"

Deliberately the girl turned her back and spoke to her companion. "Jeffery, would you take me back the other way. I feel we're both rather in the way here."

Then the torch snapped out again and a merciful darkness enveloped the unfortunate scene.

AFTER DINNER that same night Robert Ashton knocked on the door of Elizabeth Blaire's room. Without waiting for an invitation, he thrust open the door and walked inside. The girl was curled up in an armchair, rather too intent upon a novel. She glanced up as the secretary entered. Ashton closed the door and stood with his back against it.

"Ted told me I'd find you here, Betty," he began. "I've come to explain..."

Elizabeth carefully marked a place in her book, closed it and stood up.

"There's nothing to explain," she said levelly. "I'm giving you your freedom."

"But, look here—"

"I've known for months our engagement was a mistake. What happened a few hours ago just clinched my suspicions." She placed the book on the table.

"I'm not blaming you, Bob. I'm setting you free. I think that's all there is to be said."

Ashton advanced a step and thrust out pleading hands. "Betty, I— I know I lost my head, but try to see it from my point of view."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"I don't think there's any use in discussing the matter further, Bob." She glanced at her wristwatch. "Now, I have an appointment to keep—"

Ashton backed to the door, blocking it with his heavy body. "Who with?" he demanded.

The girl eyed him with faint distaste. "Would you kindly allow me to pass?"

"It's Blackburn, isn't it?"

Elizabeth drew a deep breath. "Would you kindly allow me to pass?" she repeated.

The edge on her tone sent the blood rushing to the secretary's face. "No, I won't!" He stood firmly, head thrust forward, mouth sullen. "You've refused to allow me to explain. All right! How about doing a little explaining yourself?"

"I don't understand you."

"What were you doing in that passage with Blackburn?" Up came the girl's head and her tone snapped like a whiplash. "Mind your own dashed business!"

Ashton's mouth twisted. "I guessed you'd say that. You'd find it pretty difficult to explain why you were sneaking him into the house through the underground passage! And why you asked your brother to set him up in the cottage like a star boarder." He thrust out a pugnacious jaw. "Come on— explain that! Why did you want Blackburn back in the house after Sir Anthony had kicked him out?"

Elizabeth Blaire was staring at him, almost as though she was seeing this man for the first time. The same slow wonder was reflected in her voice when she spoke. "Why, you jealous fool!"

"Well, answer me!" A pulse in the young man's forehead fluttered like a trapped insect. "I'll tell you why! Because you're in love with him! You've been in love with him ever since he came down here!" His voice, thick with passion, rose harshly. "You're so much in love with him you can't bear him out of your sight!"

Their mutual antagonism quivered the air about them. Elizabeth clenched her hands, choking back the searing words that rose to her lips. She felt a rising tide of colour staining, her face and her throat was hot and tight. "I'm going to cry," she thought feverishly. "I mustn't— not in front of him— I mustn't..." In that swollen bursting silence, Ashton's heavy breathing was plain.

And then—

Although muffled by the intervening walls, the scream tore through the hush like a knife ripping stretched silk. The sound acted like a cold douche on the two people in the room. Ashton blinked like a man waking from a dream. Elizabeth gave a startled gasp, but it was wiped from her lips by a second scream, a long quivering note of terror that was suddenly cut off at its highest note.

"That's Ted's voice!" The girl's hand flew to her mouth. "Jeffery— he warned me—"

"Come on!" cried Ashton. He wheeled and flung open the door. Side by side they raced down the long corridor. To Elizabeth the oak-panelled walls had the infinity of a nightmare; it seemed hours before they reached her brother's room and paused, breathless, before the stout door. Ashton had stretched out his hand and was about to grasp the knob when a new sound froze them both motionless.

It came from inside the room, a harsh inhuman cry such as could never have issued from human lips. To the listeners in the corridor, it seemed the very embodiment of triumphant evil. Even as they stood staring at each other, the sound died away. Elizabeth Blaire was trembling from head to foot. The

high colour had drained from Ashton's face, leaving it pale. He passed a tongue over dry lips. "What was that?" he muttered.

The girl's reply was a whisper. "The hooting of an owl..."

"The Owl!" Ashton squared his big shoulders and made a sudden thrust at the door. The stout oak did not budge. The secretary wrenched helplessly at the knob. "Locked!" he exclaimed.

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than the corridor rang with hurried footsteps. Blackburn turned a bend ahead of them almost at the double. "Those screams," he rapped as he approached. "I was coming across the grounds..." He halted, his eyes flashing from their pale startled faces to the closed door. "For God's sake, what are we waiting for?"

For answer the secretary rattled the door-knob. "Can't you see?" he snapped. "It's locked!"

Jeffery swung round on the girl. "Duplicate keys...?" he began, but Elizabeth had divined his thought almost as the words left his lips. She was already half-way down the corridor.

"Housekeeper's room— quite near— won't be a moment," she flung back over her shoulder.

Blackburn turned back to the door and drummed his fists upon it. "Blair," he called. "Blair, are you all right?" There was no reply. He addressed his companion without turning. "Is there any other entrance to this room?"

"Only the windows," Ashton replied. He measured the door with his eye and braced his muscles. "Can't we smash this down?"

"You'd smash your shoulder first." Jeffery turned as Elizabeth came into view, holding a bunch of keys. Her fingers were busy separating one from the others and she held this out to Blackburn. He took it without a word, slipped it into the lock and gestured his companions back. With a thrust of his arm he flung the door wide.

The room was empty!

So much they saw at first glance, crowding behind him in the open doorway. Then their questing eyes took in each ominous detail— the overturned table with its scattered papers, the shade of the tall standard lamp tilted askew, a lone slipper discarded on the floor and the thick curtains hanging in crooked folds where some violent force had wrenched the material from the rings. And three pairs of eyes travelled to the long window, standing wide open with the heavy shutters swinging gently to and fro in the breeze...

A darker shadow on the pattern of the carpet caught Jeffery's attention. He strode into the room and, bending, poked inquisitive fingers at the pile. They came away stained crimson. A sharp exclamation brought him to his feet. Elizabeth Was staring at his hand.

"Jeffery..." she said softly.

He gripped her arm. "Courage," he whispered, and turned to where Ashton was surveying the wrecked room incredulously "When did you last see Blaire?"

"Twenty minutes ago— less than that. I left him sitting at that table." The secretary made a vague gesture towards the wreckage. "I say, this is impossible! The door was locked. This room is on the third floor and there's a fifty-foot drop under those windows..." His voice tailed off.

Then Elizabeth spoke.

"Why is it so impossible?" she asked quietly. "Are you forgetting an owl can fly?"

"An owl!" Jeffery snapped the words. "You mean...?"

The girl nodded. "We heard the hooting— Bob and I— out there." Her eyes sought the empty corridor and suddenly, as though on an impulse, she moved and closed the door. "And then, Jeffery, you came running along..." The words died suddenly on her lips.

"Look!" she said huskily.

There was no need for that startled injunction. With the closing of the door, something pinned on the centre panel had swung into view. It was a small square of white pasteboard and in the top right hand corner were three words:

"Fly by Night."

And underneath, printed in straggling inked capitals, was an additional phrase.

"I am still among you!"

Chapter 4

Sunday, June 16th

HANDS IN POCKETS, a deep wrinkle between his brows, Jeffery stood in Atherton-Wayne's study, gazing unseeingly out across the green lawns that flanked the long windows.

It was a glorious morning. Under the bright morning sun, the world gleamed like a new toy. The air had that fine clarity which brings all details into sharp focus so that from where Blackburn stood he could make out the vehicles crawling across the green and rounded shoulder of Pewley Hill. Nearer at hand, a curve of the river glinted like a burnished shield. But all this beauty was lost on the tall young man at the window. Jeffery's thoughts moved in darker spheres. So engrossed was he in his own reflections that when Atherton-Wayne's voice spoke behind him, he started and dropped an inch of cigarette ash down his coat.

"Blackburn..."

The young man wheeled sharply. The baronet sat at his desk, thin fingers shuffling among papers like creatures taking quick cover. A little to one side, Dr. Hautmann stood so rigidly that Jeffery envisaged a corset beneath the dark pin-striped suit.

"Blackburn." Atherton-Wayne spoke levelly. "Both Dr. Hautmann and myself feel we— er— owe you an apology."

"Yes?"

The answer was mechanical. For as Hautmann nodded in agreement, Jeffery realized that this was the first time he had seen the German doctor at close quarters. His first impression was something in the nature of a shock— never had he seen such a curious pallor. It was more than just dead white; almost it seemed as though some faint greenish tinge shone through the doctor's closely shaven skin, stretched tight on the spare framework of his face. That jutting nose beaked above a mouth straight and thin as a sabre-cut. The only indeterminate feature of the face were the eyes; indeterminate because they were never quite revealed from under the pale heavy lids. Jeffery had a quick impression of a powerful personality, repressed now as a spring is coiled. Suddenly, the thought of a cobra came into his mind, the same sinuous lean body, the same cruel veiled eyes...

With an effort, he attempted to concentrate on what Sir Anthony was saying.

"I blame myself most bitterly for what happened last night. I should never have permitted you to leave the Towers." Those restless fingers toyed with the ink-well. "Quite unwittingly, I played right into this criminal's hands."

Jeffery shrugged. "I doubt if my being here would have made much difference, Sir Anthony."

Dr. Hautmann pulled a chair forward and sat down, stiffly, as a jack-knife bends. His dark eyes flicked for a moment across Jeffery's face. "Surely it is rather significant that this criminal should wait until you were out of the way to act?" There was, the young man noticed, no trace of Teutonic harshness in the tone. Rather was it too gentle, like a watchful cat purring. "You have examined the room, Mr. Blackburn, you found no clue?"

"In the room...no."

"I should suggest examining the ivy on the wall rather than the room itself." Atherton-Wayne's tone was precise. Jeffery was selecting a cigarette. He raised his eyes.

"You believe that The Owl climbed up the ivy and left the same way, carrying Blaire on his back?"

"It seems fairly obvious, I should say."

Jeffery shook his head. "Have you ever tried to climb ivy, sir? Do you know what happens when any weight is placed on the plant? The creeper is torn and lacerated, the ground beneath littered with leaves..." He paused, his eyes searching the other's face over a tiny match-flame. "I examined the ivy closely. There was not even a tendril misplaced!"

The baronet said thinly: "But the door was locked on the inside."

"That is true."

There was no sound in the room save the soft tap-tap of Hautmann's shoe drumming an unconscious little beat on the floor. Jeffery, noting this and watching Atherton-Wayne's restless fingers crawling across the desk, realized with a shock that both these men were strung on the thin wires of hysteria. Not for the first time he asked himself...why? What was hidden behind Atherton-Wayne's aesthetic features? What secrets lay deep in the doctor's obsidian eyes? It was the latter who broke the silence with a laugh forced as water from a rusty pump.

"Are you suggesting, Mr. Blackburn, that this criminal picked up young Blaire...and flew out of the window with him like the great bird in the *Arabian Nights'* tale?"

Jeffery chose to ignore the sneer that smarmed the words. He said calmly: "I am suggesting this, Doctor. By what means Blaire was removed from that room I do not know, but I will stake what little reputation I have that he is somewhere within the grounds of this house. What's more— he is still alive."

"How can you say that?"

"The Owl wants the formula. To kill Blaire would be to defeat his own purpose. That much is common sense." Jeffery paused to blow smoke. "As to

whether this criminal has learnt the art of levitation, we may yet come to accept even the fantastic before this case is over. If you had heard that scream last night..." Abruptly he pounded. "By the way, Doctor, did you hear it?"

"I? Why, no. I was walking in the garden near the cottage. Mr. Blaire's room is at the opposite end of the house."

"I see." The young man studied that pallid mask for a moment, then wheeled. "And you, Sir Anthony?"

"I was working out a chess problem, here in this room." The baronet gestured vaguely. "Apart from my concentration on the game, the walls of this study are extremely solid." The tone took on a note of mild reproof. "I was rather surprised that no one told me of the— er— outrage until quite half an hour after it had occurred."

Jeffery raised his eyebrows. "But I sent Ashton to look for you as soon as we found Blaire had gone."

"Really?" It held a note of finality. "I was here." Atherton-Wayne rose and dusted an imaginary speck from his coat. "You have informed the Chief Inspector?"

"He'll be down this morning." As he spoke, Jeffery crossed to the bookcase and selected a volume. Turning, he displayed it. "May I borrow this for a few hours, sir? It's the history of Rookwood Towers."

"Why, certainly."

Blackburn was flicking pages. "I'm rather interested in the old vaults under this house. I understand that they were put to certain inquisitorial purposes when the Mother Church introduced persuasive ways into England—"

Something made the young man glance up sharply. Atherton-Wayne was staring at him, his thin face as grey as his hair. If ever a man's face showed naked fear, it was at that moment. And again Jeffery felt that unnamable prickling at the base of his skull. Then, as swiftly as the turning of a leaf, the expression vanished. Bland was the face, smooth was the voice as the baronet spoke.

"If you're thinking of going down into those vaults, you'll be careful, Blackburn. There is...danger."

"Danger?"

Something constricted the baronet's throat so that a cough choked the next words. "I— I— the vaults are extremely ancient. Only recently, a fall of rock blocked one passage completely. I should have had the main entrance shut off months ago..." The thin voice trailed away.

Jeffery nodded. "Thank you for the warning. I shall be careful. It would be most fortunate for The Owl if I were entombed."

The knock on the door came with such suddenness that Blackburn's pulses

leapt. In answer to the baronet's invitation, the door opened and Ashton's face was framed in the entrance. He spoke to his employer, ignoring the other men in the room.

"A Mr. Todhunter to see you, sir."

"Todhunter?" The elder man frowned. "I know of no Todhunter, Ashton. What does he want?"

The secretary produced a card and handed it across. "He asked for Mr. Blaire, sir. When I told him that was impossible, he insisted on seeing you. Then he mentioned the name of one of your directors— Mr. Standish. A close friend, apparently."

Sir Anthony was still musing over the card. "Charles Todhunter, Ajax Oil Company, Detroit. H'm..." He raised his eyes, addressing the room at large. "Oil? Rather significant under the circumstances, I think." Then he nodded. "Very well, Ashton. I will see this Mr.— er— Todhunter."

Ashton nodded and withdrew. Jeffery, the book tucked under his arm, moved across to the long windows and passed through. Sir Anthony watched him go. Then he turned. Dr. Hautmann had not moved from his chair. The baronet cleared his throat.

"Er— if there is nothing further, Doctor..." There was polite dismissal in his tone. Hautmann, however, remained seated. He linked his long fingers and sat back.

"If it would not be an intrusion, I should like to remain. I am interested in Mr. Todhunter."

The calm assurance in his manner ruffled the little baronet. He said stiffly: "But surely, Doctor..."

The other's smooth purr cut into his words. "I rather think our visitor has an interesting proposition to make to us both." He settled his lean body more comfortably. "I am afraid I really must insist on remaining."

Sir Anthony jumped to his feet, but the angry words died on his lips as the study door opened and Ashton ushered in the newcomer. Mr. Charles Todhunter stood looking around the room. The others had an impression of a lean, dried stick of a man in his late forties. Under a thatch of red hair that shone like a beacon, a shrewd-eyed, tight-lipped face surveyed them.

"Sir Anthony?" inquired the visitor.

Atherton-Wayne advanced and nodded. "I am Atherton-Wayne." He barely touched the outstretched hand, then gestured to a vacant chair. "Sit down, Mr. Todhunter."

The representative of the Ajax Oil Company lowered himself into a chair and balanced a small leather brief-case on his knees. In his seat, Hautmann sat like a graven image. Abruptly, the American leaned forward.

"Well, Sir Anthony, I suppose you wonder why I'm here." His voice had a pleasant, lazy burr. "You're a busy man. So am I. There's no sense in beating about the bush. No, sir. I'll give you the whole thing wrapped up small."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir." The red pate nodded sagely. "Here's the proposition. My company— Ajax— want the sole rights of Mr. Blaire's petrol formula. And we're willing to pay up to one hundred thousand dollars for it!"

Sir Anthony dropped slowly into his seat. "God bless my soul!" he murmured.

A smile that began and ended with his mouth crossed Todhunter's bleak face. "Startled you, eh? That's real money, that is!" He tapped the leather case on his knee. "All the documents are ready. Say the word and we'll put your John Hancock on the dotted line right now!"

"One moment!" The baronet drew a handkerchief from his sleeve and patted his forehead. "This— this is amazing! I was under the impression that merely a handful of people inside this house knew that the formula even existed."

"Say, you don't imagine you can keep news like that secret!" The American leaned back and crossed his legs. "Well, what's your answer?"

"Merely this. Blaire's formula is not for sale. Even if it was, I would never dream of selling it outside this country."

Todhunter shrugged. "Please yourself, of course. But twenty thousand pounds is real money, even in this tight little island. Hang on to the formula as long as you like— that's good business. But I'm telling you. You'll never get another offer as generous as ours."

From his corner, Hautmann spoke. "Don't be too sure, Mr. Todhunter."

"What's this?"

The doctor rose, stood stiffly to attention, clicked his heels and bowed. "Allow me to introduce myself, sir. I am Dr. Hautmann, foreign service officer for the German Minister of War and attached to the National Defence Department, Berlin." He turned. "Sir Anthony, I am authorized by my Government to offer you twenty-five thousand pounds for your petrol formula."

Atherton-Wayne blinked like a man waking from a nightmare. With fingers gripping his chair, he stared from one man to the other, anger and surprise struggling for expression in his face. Two pink spots burnt fiercely in his cheeks and his eyes glinted like newly minted coins.

"This is fantastic!" he panted. "Never in all my life..." He paused and drew a deep breath, striving to regain his control. "Dr. Hautmann, am I to understand that you came into my house as a guest, accepted my hospitality, when all the

time you were planning to purchase the formula?"

The other said calmly: "That is so."

"Just a moment." Todhunter was on his feet. "I got in first with my offer. Therefore, I claim first consideration."

The doctor felt in his pocket, produced a gold-rimmed monocle and screwed it into his eye. Turning, he surveyed the American steadily. "May I remind you, sir, that the formula is on sale to the highest bidder?"

Todhunter flushed angrily. He ignored the doctor and addressed the baronet: "Listen, Sir Anthony—"

Hautmann barked: "The matter is closed."

"No, by heck, it isn't."

"Twenty-five thousand pounds—"

"Don't listen to him, Sir Anthony."

"Wait!" Atherton-Wayne rose and flailed protesting hands in the air. "Gentlemen— please! This undignified bickering is neither desirable nor necessary. Rather than see the formula leave England, I shall myself become the highest bidder."

The doctor said harshly: "You'll buy it yourself?"

"Exactly!" Sir Anthony pulled back his sleeve and studied his wrist-watch with deliberation. "And now, gentlemen, if you will excuse me, I have some work to do."

Todhunter's narrowed eyes raked the baronet's thin face for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, if that's how you feel about it." He picked up his brief-case. "I'm mighty sorry we couldn't do business, but it serves me right for dealing with a third party. Next time I'll see Mr. Blaire himself."

"You are merely wasting your time," Atherton-Wayne told him.

"I wonder." Mr. Todhunter paused with his hand on the door. "Maybe within the next few days you'll be wanting to see me again. I'll be staying at the 'Green Dragon'. Good morning."

The door closed behind him. Atherton-Wayne turned to where the tall man stood, polishing his monocle on a silk handkerchief. He said smoothly: "Mr. Todhunter shows surprisingly good taste, Doctor. The 'Green Dragon' is an excellent example of the English inn..."

The pause was not lost on Hautmann. His dark brows rose a trifle and his tone matched his companion's in silkiness. "You are suggesting that my daughter and myself— avail ourselves of its hospitality?"

Atherton-Wayne inclined his head. "At your earliest convenience."

Their eyes met and for a moment there was a clash of wills. Then Dr. Hautmann stepped back, screwed his monocle in place and gave a stiff bow.

"As you wish, sir. But I think it only fair to warn you that we shall meet again. To return to my country without that formula would be to admit failure. In Germany, at the present time, failure has particularly unpleasant consequences."

With a click of his heels he turned and strode from the room. As the door closed, it seemed to the baronet that the study had grown perceptibly darker. Atherton-Wayne bent and pulled open a drawer in his desk. A small automatic lay revealed. Sir Anthony picked up the weapon, balanced it thoughtfully in his hand for a moment and, as though on a sudden impulse, slipped it into his pocket.

In another room in the Towers, an apologetic Ashton faced Elizabeth Blaire.

"Betty," the man was saying. "You must listen to me."

Elizabeth, curled up on the window-seat, nodded calmly.

"Very well, Robert," she said, "what is it?"

"Why don't you ask Atherton-Wayne to bring the police down here?"

The girl stared at him. "But the police are down here."

The secretary brushed her remark aside with a gesture. "I mean Scotland Yard— not an incompetent amateur! Betty, be sensible! Ted has been missing for almost twelve hours now. And Blackburn— what's he doing about it? Swotting over books in the library!"

Elizabeth said almost casually: "Robert, why do you want Jeffery out of the way?"

A slow pink tide stained Ashton's plump face. "So it's got to Jeffery now...?"

"Answer my question."

"Why?" The big man took a step forward. "Because he—" then something, perhaps a warning glint in the girl's eye made him change the sentence on his lips—"because I think this job's too big for him. This isn't petty larceny, it's a case that's going to require the full resources of Scotland Yard." His voice dropped and he gave a quick glance over his shoulder. "I tell you, Betty, this whole thing's deeper than the Mendip mine! And it's dangerous."

This was a changed Ashton, a man that Elizabeth had never seen before. She said quickly: "You know something?"

The other shook his head. "I can't say— yet. But this morning, going through some private papers, I came across a small detail that didn't quite make sense. Or rather, it made too much sense— a sense of the fantastic." His voice slowed. "Promise you won't mention this to anyone?"

"Not even to Jeffery?"

Ashton's face hardened. "Certainly not," he replied curtly. "This is my show. Let that blighter discover things for himself. Now, promise?"

For just a moment the girl hesitated, then she smiled. "All right. But you

won't do anything foolish, Robert? You yourself admit that this thing is mighty dangerous."

The secretary hunched big shoulders. "I'm not afraid..."

"That's just it," Elizabeth said quietly.

The young secretary cocked an eye at her and something like a grin touched his lips. "Friends again?" he asked.

"Of course."

"And, Betty..." the words came haltingly, "if this hunch of mine is right, it means that we'll have The Owl where we want him. There'd be no more fear or terror or suspicion. We'd be just as we were before all this started...I mean..." And now Ashton's cheeks were crimson. "We...you and I...could we go on just as we were before— before...?" He looked at her, appeal in his eyes, and Elizabeth smiled.

"We'll see," she replied lightly. "But first catch your Owl."

The young man's face lit up. "That's all I wanted to know," he returned. As though on sudden impulse he reached out one hand and, before the girl was aware of his intention, he gave her fingers a friendly squeeze. Then with a jaunty swing of his shoulders, he turned and strode from the room. Elizabeth heard him go whistling down the passage.

Left to herself, the girl resumed her seat by the window. Adjusting the cushion behind her head, she lay back, relaxed, her mind revolving about Robert's last remark. There was no real harm in him, she reflected. Strange how some men never seemed to grow up. Always she thought of Robert as a shock-headed boy with a tear in his coat through climbing forbidden apple-trees. But Jeffery— Jeffery was different. Whereas Robert would climb apple-trees for the danger of it, Jeffery would climb them to see what lay on the other side of the hill.

Life with Jeffery would be exciting— a keen, calculated adventure of which the issue would always be secure. Lazily her thoughts floated here and there, to entangle themselves on the one scene she wanted to forget— the incident in the tunnel. Or did she want to forget it?...The warm, strong clasp of Jeffery's hand around hers...the way that absurd lock of brown hair fell across his forehead when he dipped his tall figure...

Elizabeth Blaire sat up abruptly. "This," she told herself warmly, "is sheer folly! For one thing, you're still engaged to Robert. For another, Jeffery probably considers you a number one nuisance for ever bringing him into this business in the first place. And third, you should be frantic with worry about Ted!"

Even in that moment of self-reproach she realized something was wrong. She was anxious about her brother— but was she really worried? Was it

because she had complete faith in Jeffery, or was there some darker reason for her blind acceptance of the kidnapping? Why, even Robert seemed more distressed than she was!

"Nonsense!" Elizabeth said sharply, not liking the way her thoughts were moving. "I'm getting morbid," she told herself. "After all, it's no good flying around the house like a mad thing, tearing my nerves to shreds. The inspector and his men will be down this afternoon. They'll find Ted. That's what Scotland Yard is paid to do." Then, with a shock, Miss Blaire realized she was talking aloud to herself.

She made a little grimace of disapproval and swung her silken legs to the floor as though to rise. Then, for the first time, she realized how silent the house had fallen. Outside the window, the noonday sun was bright overhead, but in that room there was the quietness of shuttered cities standing deserted under a pallid moon. Also, for the first time, Elizabeth realized that Rookwood Towers was a house with a past— old enough for memories, old enough even for ghosts. Heaven alone knew how many queer emotional storms had left their invisible mark on the stuffy air of those shuttered rooms and curtained corridors. Sitting there, it was easy to imagine that once upon a time dark-robed monks had paraded these rooms, rustling musty drapes in the shadows, turning door-handles with whitening fingers and, where admission was barred to them, tapping...tapping...

Tapping!

The girl drew a quick, cut-off breath. For a second it had seemed that thought had been transformed into action— that the image in her mind had assumed tangible reality. Elizabeth rose, taking in the room with a swift, puzzled glance. She had the queer sensation that she, in turn, was being watched. With an uneasy shrug of her shoulders, she walked across to the cigarette-box on a small table. But scarcely had she taken two steps when she froze rigid with fear.

Something was tapping behind the panelling!

There was no mistaking that soft, intermittent drumming. It seemed to travel around the room toward her. Elizabeth stood frozen into an attitude, conscious of a slow terror creeping across her mind like some numbing anaesthetic. It was like a nightmare in which commonplace objects take on the suggestion of things strange and horrible. The tapping ceased. It was so quiet in the room that the girl could hear the blood singing through her pulses.

As she stood listening there came another sound— the low humming of oiled machinery. Elizabeth's eyes flew back and forth like small trapped animals, to rest finally on a portion of the panelling opposite where she stood. There was no mistake— the panel was opening, slowly, inch by inch...

Then, from the aperture already widening, a hand groped into the room, feeling the adjoining panel with an oddly caressing gesture— a hand with blackened, broken nails, a hand the third finger of which ended in a spatulate stump...

With fingers clawing at her throat, Elizabeth screamed.

Then it seemed as though all the world were suddenly accelerated into double speed. The hand was jerked back the gaping panel snapped shut. Almost simultaneously the door of the room was flung open and Blackburn burst in. He was at the side of the near-fainting girl in a moment, his arm about her.

"Elizabeth!" The name came naturally to Jeffery's lips. "Are you all right?" And as the girl nodded, he rapped: "What happened?"

She fought down the suffocation in her throat. "The panel...it opened..." Jeffery could feel her trembling with the shock. "A hand came out..." her voice bubbled hysterically, "and, Jeffery, it— it only had four fingers..."

Blackburn led the girl to a chair and pushed her gently into it. Reaching in his pocket he pulled out his case, extracted a cigarette and gave it to her. As he applied his lighter, she puffed deeply, wreathing her pale face in the paler smoke. Presently Jeffery said:

"Feel better?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes."

He was staring at the wall with narrowed eyes. "Which panel opened?"

The girl gestured with her cigarette. Jeffery strode across and applied his knuckles to the woodwork. He nodded grimly at the hollow resonance, then his long fingers began to crawl over the section, pressing here, pausing there. And as though responding, again that low humming filled the room. Slowly the panel reopened, wider this time, to reveal the black mouth of a tunnel. Into the room floated a smell of mustiness, of decaying undergrowth and of things long denied sunlight and fresh air.

Jeffery, standing off at one side, craned his head around the aperture. He spoke without looking at the girl.

"All right now?"

"Yes." Elizabeth rose and crushed out her cigarette. "Jeffery, you're not going in there?"

He ignored the question. "My room is fourth around the bend in the corridor," he told her. "The door's unlocked. In the top drawer of the bureau you'll find a torch. Bring it to me here."

"But, Jeffery—"

Blackburn rapped sharply: "And hurry! Every moment's precious!"

It was a command. Elizabeth almost ran from the room. She was back

within two minutes. Jeffery was standing as she had left him, rigid before that black cavern, so that she was reminded of a terrier guarding a rat-hole. She thrust the torch into his hand.

"Are you going in there?" she repeated.

"Naturally."

"Then I'm coming with you."

Jeffery turned and surveyed her. His face was harder than she had ever seen it before. "Now listen to me, young woman," he said curtly. "You're going to do just what you're told. You're going to close this panel after I've gone through. The Inspector's down in the morning room with some of the boys—they arrived about ten minutes ago. Tell Read just what happened and say I want two men guarding this end of the passage."

Elizabeth said urgently: "But what if you're trapped— down there?"

"That's my job," Blackburn said shortly. He switched on the torch and flashed it through the opening. "Seems all clear," he muttered, then, over his shoulder: "Remember your instructions." Bending his head, he stepped into the cavity. As the darkness swallowed him, Elizabeth reached out a hand and began to push the panel shut. Then suddenly an expression crossed her face, an obstinate stiffening of her rounded little chin. She inclined her ear to the slit and listened. Jeffery's footsteps were dying away in the distance. Quickly the girl crossed to the table, picked up a box of matches then, with a squaring of her shoulders, she returned to the wall.

Ahead, the footsteps were faint echoes.

Elizabeth gave a quick look around the room, then, slipping through the panel, pulled it shut after her. The darkness was like two hands pressed across her eyes. Cautiously she began to grope her way forward...

AFTER LEAVING Elizabeth alone in the Oak Room, Robert Ashton returned to his own quarters. Locking the door he advanced to a small bureau, unlocked a drawer and fumbled among the papers inside. He selected an envelope and drew out a typewritten letter. Although the secretary knew the words written there almost by heart he re-read each syllable carefully. Then he shook his head.

"No," he said softly, "it can't be possible. Marsden's making a bloomer. He must be confusing the two men." He gnawed his underlip thoughtfully. "But, just say he's right! It'd turn the whole thing upside down..."

A knock on the door made him turn. His voice was none too steady when he called, "Who's there?"

Outside, a soft voice answered: "It's Reynolds, sir. I have a message for you."

Ashton frowned. Reynolds was one of the footmen, a smooth-voiced, softly walking creature. Instinctively, Robert mistrust him, although he had spoken but half a dozen words to the man. With a quick movement the secretary returned the letter to the drawer, relocked the bureau and crossed to the door. As he opened it, a man in his mid-thirties stood revealed. His light eyes and thin fair hair gave his face an almost expressionless appearance. He bowed slightly as Ashton faced him.

"Excuse me, sir, but Sir Anthony would like to see you in his study."

"Business?"

Reynolds said smoothly: "I believe so, sir."

With a curt nod Ashton turned away, picked up his notebook and made his way to his employer's study. He knocked and entered. The baronet was at his desk, writing. He spoke without raising his eyes. "Close the door, Ashton, and pull up a chair." Presently he laid down his pen and handed across a document.

"I should like four copies made of that," he instructed. "One is to be signed by myself, another by Blaire. You, as a witness, will sign the third and the fourth is to be filed."

"May I read it now, sir?"

"It isn't necessary. Briefly, it is a statement in which I offer Blaire ten thousand pounds for the sole rights of his petrol formula."

Ashton's jaw dropped. "But— does Blaire know about this?"

The baronet said testily: "Naturally, it has been discussed between us."

"But, Sir Anthony, wouldn't it be wiser to wait and see what's happened to that lad? For all we know he may be dead!"

Atherton-Wayne shook his head. "I don't think so," he replied. "It is my opinion that The Owl has kidnapped Blaire with the intention of frightening him into giving up the formula. This criminal evidently understands Blaire's temperament; he believes that if he persecutes the young man enough, Blaire will be bullied into yielding." The elder man cleared his throat. "At least, that is Blackburn's opinion."

"Blackburn!" It was a snort from Ashton.

The baronet ignored the outburst. "Moreover," he said calmly, "I have been talking with Inspector Read, who arrived a few minutes ago. We discussed Blaire's disappearance, naturally. Read scoffed at the suggestion that Blaire is dead. The Owl, he assured me, is not a killer. A thief, an audacious and highly theatrical robber, but not a murderer. The Inspector has had a dossier prepared on this criminal. He has never shed blood before. Why, then, should he begin now?"

Ashton folded the baronet's document with slow deliberation. "May I speak frankly, sir?" he asked. "Neither Inspector Read nor Blackburn have the

smallest idea of what they're up against in this case. It's bigger than they dream." He rose, note-book clutched in his big fist. "You say that in his other robberies The Owl has never attempted murder? Do you know why? Because he was only laying a trail to the main objective— the acquiring of this formula."

The baronet was lighting a cigarette. He paused with the match-flame half-way to his lips. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Simply this!" The secretary drummed a finger on the desk to emphasize his words. "All those robberies, successful though they were, were relatively unimportant. They were necessary to build up this personality of The Owl! The police were meant to go seeking a theatrical robber, when the character of the real man was the direct antithesis of this. The man behind the mask of The Owl is a normal, everyday business man. What is more— that man is down here under this roof."

"Indeed?" Atherton-Wayne raised thin brows. "What a pity we don't know who it is."

Robert Ashton tensed his muscles like a man plunging into cold water. He said steadily: "We do...that is, I think / do!"

There was one of those hushed silences when all the world seems to have paused, listening; the blank, timeless break between thunder-clap and downpour when the very air hovers motionless. From where he stood, Ashton could see tiny beads of perspiration forming on the baronet's forehead, slowly, one by one, like a slow-motion study. Atherton-Wayne was first to speak.

"Amazing, my dear Ashton, amazing!" He avoided the younger man's eyes and, turning, crushed out the end of his cigarette in the ashtray. "I had no idea you were so versatile. This would appear to save us a considerable amount of bother." He was patting his forehead with a folded handkerchief. "Er— just who is this person?"

But the secretary shook his head. "It isn't as easy as that, sir," he replied. "For one thing, I'm not sure. And even if I was I haven't any proof. But it's only a matter of time. This chap's made one stupid mistake and—"

The words faltered on his lips. The secretary wheeled as a slight click sounded through the room. He was just in time to see the door closing. He swung round on the elder man.

"What was that?"

His body tense, Atherton-Wayne was staring at the door. Then he relaxed and gestured towards the half-open windows. "Probably just a breeze," he murmured, but his eyes were thoughtful.

The secretary shook his head. "Couldn't have been the wind," he muttered. "More likely someone to see you. Dr. Hautmann perhaps."

"Perhaps. The baronet's mind seemed on other things. After a pause he

continued: If, as you say, the person masquerading as The Owl is actually down here, is it wise to air your suspicions so— er— publicly?"

Ashton's jaw protruded. "Perhaps I want him to know, sir."

Atherton-Wayne said testily: "Really, Ashton, I cannot understand you. Moreover, at the moment, I have neither time nor the patience to try." He waved a slim hand in the direction of the door. "Be good enough to let me have those copies before lunch."

The secretary nodded. Returning to his own room he opened the portable typewriter, set it on the stand and, drawing up a chair, inserted paper and carbon. But his fingers did not touch the keys; instead he sat hunched over the machine, plucking thoughtfully at his lower lip. The thin, precise, almost effeminate handwriting on the document before him recalled the baronet's words to his mind. Was he really in danger? If so, it meant his suspicions were right. And if this was so, then this thing was far too big for one person to tackle single-handed.

What about Blackburn?

A shadow settled across Ashton's rugged face. Intuitively, he was jealous of this newcomer. He realized that his fiancée was more than just casually interested in this tall young stranger from London. Well, he knew that streak in Elizabeth's nature that was attracted to danger and excitement as steel filings fly to the magnet. Blackburn epitomized all these things, plus charm and physical attraction. Ashton, no fool in many things, knew that here was good reason why he should dip his fingers in this murky broth of trouble. If he, unaided, could tear the mask from the face of The Owl, automatically would he assume importance in Elizabeth's eyes. In his own way, Robert was genuinely in love with Elizabeth; but quite apart from the tender emotions, it galled the big man's obstinate nature to think that any outsider might poach on preserves rightfully his.

On the other hand, all this went for nought if in attempting this adventure he lost his life. "And if I'm right," muttered Ashton, with an uncomfortable movement of his shoulders, "The Owl'd no more think of wiping me out than he'd worry about crushing an ant underfoot!"

Yes, on second thoughts, perhaps it might be wiser to talk to Blackburn. The blighter had seemed quite a decent sportsman on the one or two occasions Ashton had spoken with him— and it had been rather handsome of him to take all the blame over that attack on Hautmann. He'd explain the situation to Blackburn about Elizabeth and all that, and then bring the conversation around to his theory about the Owl. It would have to be worked very delicately, of course.

With this resolution, the secretary attempted to dismiss the subject from

his mind. His eyes rested on the baronet's statement and his thoughts revolved about a new axis. So Blaire had been talked into selling his formula to Atherton-Wayne? It might have been some special arrangement between them, but he could not help thinking that ten thousand pounds seemed an extraordinarily small sum for the sole rights of such a formula. Perhaps it was that Sir Anthony had insisted that the invention actually belonged to him in the first place. Ashton shrugged his shoulders and began to dance his fingers over the keys of the typewriter. But scarcely had two lines formed on the white paper when a knock came at the door.

"Come in," Robert called: He looked up as the door opened. Elsa Hautmann stood there.

Against the dark background of the corridor with the sombre oaken panelling, she looked radiantly lovely. With her corn-yellow hair folded across a forehead like pale ivory, with her large, slightly oval blue eyes and warm, scarlet mouth, she moved inside like a living ray of sunlight, and the whole room seemed brighter, larger, with her coming. Ashton rose quickly, conscious of the slow tide of warmth that crept through his veins.

"Hello," he said. "What's brought you here?"

Elsa Hautmann's almond-shaped eyes rested for a moment on his face in a glance soft as a caress. Then she dropped her long lashes and the red lips contracted in a suggestion of a pout.

"I have come," she told him, "to say good-bye and thank you."

"Good-bye?" Robert stared at her. "But— where are you going?"

"To London."

The secretary frowned. "Your father's business takes you away?"

Her slender, ringless fingers entwined nervously. She did not raise her eyes as she spoke. "Sir Anthony has ordered that we should go. When he found that my father came here only to buy Mr. Blaire's formula he says we are to go." She looked up and he could see those lovely eyes glistening. "And so I have come to say good-bye to you, Bobbee."

"Never mind that for a moment!" Ashton, his brow puckered, bent and picked up Atherton-Wayne's written statement. "Elsa, this is a personal question, but its rather important. Do you know how much Herr Hautmann offered Sir Anthony for the formula?"

The girl nodded. "Twenty-five thousand pounds," She replied.

"Twenty-five...!" The secretary paused, then: "Did Sir Anthony tell your father that Blaire had already arranged to sell the formula to Atherton-Wayne himself?"

Elsa Hautmann shook her head. "If Sir Anthony said that it is not true..."

"What do you mean?"

"It was only after my father and Mr. Todhunter had named their prices that Sir Anthony decided he himself would become the highest bidder."

Ashton muttered softly: "The highest bidder!" Then he addressed the girl. "This Todhunter chap— what did he offer?"

"Twenty thousand pounds."

She was staring at her companion, a little wrinkle of bewilderment between those smooth plucked brows. Ashton was pacing the floor, one clenched fist drumming impatiently in the other. Presently, as though acting on an impulse, he crossed and whipped the sheet from the typewriter. Substituting another, he bent and danced his fingers rapidly over the keys. Disengaging the paper, he signed his name at the foot, blotted the signature and picked up an envelope. He was slipping the folded note inside as he approached the girl.

"Listen, Elsa," he said rapidly. "I've got to act fast, and there's no time for explanations. Do you know where Mr. Todhunter is staying?"

The girl nodded. "At the 'Green Man— '" she began, but the other cut her short.

"Good! Now, I want you to find Blackburn and give him this note. He's somewhere in the house— the servants will know."

"But where do you go?"

"Down to the 'Green Man.'" As he spoke, Ashton tossed aside the sheet of paper he had been crumpling in his hand and reached for his hat. He moved across to the long windows. "You'll know the reason for all this when I come back," were his parting words. "In the meanwhile, Elsa, get the note to Blackburn without delay."

Pulling his hat on his head, the secretary slipped through the windows and made his way quickly across the lawn. Elsa Hautmann stood watching his retreating figure. Her name rapped sharply from the door made her turn. Dr. Hautmann moved into the room, closing the door behind him.

"My dear child, what are you doing here?"

"Papa, I don't understand." In a few words she told him what had happened.

That curious green pallor of Hautmann's face was more marked as he spoke softly: "Did our young friend mention what price Atherton-Wayne was paying?"

Elsa shook her head, then her eyes lighted. "One moment—" she glanced swiftly around the room. "I remember Bobbee took a piece of paper from this desk. Then he screwed it up and— ah!" Quickly she pounced. Straightening, she handed the crumpled ball of paper to her father. With unsteady fingers the doctor smoothed the creased document, then tilted the surface to the light.

There was a pause. Then slowly Dr. Hautmann turned his head. Those dark eyes, no longer hooded, blazed with hidden fire. His thin lips curved in a cruel smile.

"This is interesting, Elsa. Sir Anthony becomes the highest bidder...for ten thousand pounds—"

"But you offered twenty-five thousand pounds...!"

"Exactly!"

Elsa Hautmann shrugged slim shoulders. "Truly all English are mad," she said. "First there is this. Then Bobbee hands me a note to give to Mr. Blackburn and rushes out of the window like one demented."

Hautmann said sharply: "A note for Blackburn?" He almost snatched it from his daughter's hand. Ignoring Elsa's gasp of astonishment, he calmly slit the envelope and extracted the folded message. His eyes flickered over the typewritten words. When he spoke his tone was that old soft purr.

"This time there is a method in the young man's madness." He handed the note across. "Read that, Elsa."

The girl obeyed. The note was brief and to the point.

If you want to know the name of the person masquerading as The Owl [Ashton had written], be in the library at 11 o'clock tonight. Come alone.

The secretary's boyish signature was scrawled across the bottom. Elsa raised questioning eyes.

"Papa, what does all this mean?"

Hautmann was selecting a fresh envelope from the desk. He took the note from his daughter's fingers, slipped it inside the envelope and sealed the flap. "It means," he said smoothly, "that you will find Mr. Blackburn and deliver the note just as you were told. We must not obstruct the ways of justice, my dear Elsa."

"But, Papa, our packing...?"

Her father waved a dismissing hand. "Do not worry me with trivialities, my child," he said curtly. "I have on my mind a more pressing problem than our packing. Deliver your message and do not worry your pretty little head about other things."

Underlying the soft tone was the hard edge of command. Elsa Hautmann tucked the envelope in her pocket and moved towards the door. She was reaching for the knob when her father spoke again.

"Did Mr. Ashton say where he was going?"

Elsa nodded. "Down to the 'Green Man' in the village."

Dr. Hautmann rubbed thin hands together and in the silence it was the sound of dead leaves rustling. "Indeed," he purred "He is a very impetuous young man, that one."

ELIZABETH BLAIRE had not been in that hidden passage two minutes before she bitterly regretted her decision to follow Jeffery.

How far she had come she did not know. Never before had she encountered such darkness. It was opaque, and it seemed to press upon her from all sides, suffocatingly, so that she had to resist the impulse to thrust it away with both hands. And in that blind, black void not a sound broke the heavy stillness. Blackburn's footsteps and the dim nimbus of his torch had long been swallowed in an engulfing vacuum where day and night were as one.

Close at hand, a sudden sharp rattle sounded monstrously loud in the silence. Elizabeth gasped; next moment she realized that she held matches in her own trembling hand. She shook the box, gaining comfort from the sound. Those thin slivers of wood were her weapons to fight the all-embracing gloom that seemed to gather and coil thicker and thicker every moment.

Even if she could find her way back she doubted if she could have opened the panel again. Elizabeth clenched her hands and fought down that rising tide of panic. There was only one thing to do— go forward and trust to luck.

Cautiously, one hand sliding along the rough surface of the wall, she groped her way. Floating webs passed thin caresses across her shrinking face, unseen protuberances plucked at her dress and more than once her feet stumbled on the uneven floor. Only one thing she knew— the passage led downwards. It had cost her a minor heart attack to learn this, when for one sickening moment the passage disappeared beneath her and her feet tottered on the edge of what appeared to be a bottomless pit. A hurriedly struck match revealed a flight of rough steps, broken, mossy, dropping one by one to heaven knew what terrors below.

Below, the air was dank and cool. Somewhere, far ahead, Elizabeth imagined she could hear a trickle of water, but when she paused to listen the blood drumming in her ears blocked out all lesser sounds. Drawing a deep breath, she struck a match and held it up. The suddenness of the glare blinded her for a moment, then with that reluctant retreating of the darkness she saw ahead a bend in the passage.

In that last bright flicker she had a glimpse of dark irregular walls, blotched with damp and supporting a groined roof only a few inches above her head. Then the light died, a tiny charred hook in her fingers. As she stood undecided, from somewhere came a new and unexpected sound— the dull clang of metal meeting stone. Unexplained, yet it gave her new confidence. Someone else, friend or foe, moved in that black silent world beneath the earth.

Forward again. Now all her senses seemed concentrated in the tips of her groping fingers. Presently they encountered a rough angle of the wall. This

must be the bend. She negotiated it slowly, foot by foot, eyes straining through the gloom for a relieving pin-point of light. But she could see nothing. How much farther must she feel her way? Fool that she was ever to leave the sunny sanctuary of the Oak Room! And into her mind, unbidden, came the memory of that hand, and of the broken blackened nails...

With a gasp, Elizabeth Blaire froze rigid as the walls about her. In that moment her groping fingers had encountered something new...soft and yielding to the touch. Her whole body tingled with the shock of contact.

Someone, or something, was standing pressed up against the wall a few feet away from her. Was it her imagination or could she make out the dim white smudge of a face? Hardly daring to breathe, she waited. In a dazed way she wondered if the unseen could hear the pounding of her heart...

Five dragging leaden seconds passed.

Elizabeth Blaire felt her skin crawling. Somehow, in some way, she must put an end to this mute ordeal. She moistened her lips and worked her throat, but it was only after the third attempt that she essayed a dry cracked whisper.

"Who— who are you?"

No answer.

There is a limit to everything, even to terror. Suddenly, Elizabeth felt a hot wave of resentment sweep through her. She gritted her teeth. I'll see who you are, she resolved, and almost automatically, scratched a match across the box and thrust the flame out into the darkness. Then she almost collapsed with relief.

Robert Ashton stood there, watching her steadily.

"Bob! Oh, Bob!" The girl swayed a little, hand to head, half laughing, half crying. "Bob, what on earth are you doing down here? You great goose, you gave me a fearful shock!" She took a half step forward. "How did you get down here, anyway?"

But why didn't he speak? Why did he continue to look at her with that steady, wide-eyed stare? Was it a trick of the match-light or did his eyes seem glassy?

"Robert!" Elizabeth said sharply. She reached forth her free hand and touched him on the arm.

Not a muscle of Ashton's face moved. But slowly, with that steady unwavering gaze straight ahead, he began to slip sideways. In front of the girl's horrified eyes the body gave suddenly at the knees and fell face downwards, limply, like a bag of washing.

The match burnt down to Elizabeth's fingers, flared and died. That final glow was caught for an instant in the hilt of a knife the blade buried deep between Robert Ashton's shoulders.

Chapter 5

Sunday, June 16th (Continued)

MEANWHILE, what of Blackburn?

Nobody had been more surprised than Jeffery when the panel in the Oak Room had yielded under his fingers. As he slipped through into that uninviting cavern, part of his mind was concentrating on the way before him, partially revealed in the dancing gleam of his torch. But other and more disturbing mental processes buzzed in his head.

Atherton-Wayne had assured him that no secret passage existed inside Rookwood Towers. As evidence, the baronet had produced his story of the antiquarians and their unsuccessful search. But why should a party of experts fail when he, Blackburn, had found the entrance to the passage almost at once? It was too fantastic to call this chance. A mere tapping of the panelling had revealed the cavity behind. Either the antiquarians were a set of blundering duffers, which seemed highly unlikely, or else...

Or else they had discovered the passage, and Atherton-Wayne, for some reason best known to himself, wished to keep the discovery a secret.

Walking carefully, his eyes glued on that bright oval of light sliding smoothly along the dark walls, Jeffery considered. If The Owl was hiding at Rookwood Towers, what more likely place of concealment than this dark tunnel? Was this the reason Atherton-Wayne wished to keep its existence a secret? The momentary suggestion that the little baronet himself might be The Owl was dismissed by Jeffery as absurd. It smacked too much of melodrama. And yet, what was this whole thing but melodrama personified? The young inventor. The valuable formula. A criminal who wore the wings and false face of an owl and could seemingly come and go at will.

But what of the strange, disfigured hand that Elizabeth had seen opening the panel? To whom did that belong? And what of the striking Dr. Hautmann and his lovely daughter— where did they fit into this grim riddle? And Mr. Todhunter, who was interested in oil and came all the way from Detroit? Jeffery shook his head irritably. There was too much secrecy here, too many dark undercurrents. He was glad the Inspector had returned. As soon as possible they must get together and demand an explanation of all these things.

Until this audacious kidnapping of Blaire, Jeffery realized, the hands of the investigators had been tied. Except for the attempt on the young chemist's life in his cottage on the night of the party, they had nothing to go upon except vague warnings and frightened whispers. And even a bellicose individual as Read might well hesitate to upset an august household as Rookwood Towers

on such scanty excuses. Atherton-Wayne was a man to be handled with gloves. Jeffery sighed. If only something real and tangible would happen, something that the investigators might grip upon, something that would give the Inspector good reason for striding through this house of secrets, letting loose the snarling efficiency of Scotland Yard, cleaving the murky half-truth and dark suspicions that clung thick as spider webs under this grey roof!

Abruptly, Jeffery stopped and sniffed the air.

For some seconds he had been dimly conscious of a new odour, a more familiar smell that permeated the dankness of the tunnel. Quickly the young man dropped his torch beam to the floor, swept it about and then pounced with a soft cry of satisfaction. Holding the torch close, he examined the object— a cigarette end, smoked down to the last inch. And printed on the paper was the trade-mark of a well-known brand of American cigarettes.

Todhunter! The name leapt to his mind at once. He clicked out his torch and waited in the darkness. Or was it too obvious a clue? After all, anyone in the house might smoke that particular brand of cigarette. One thing, however, was certain. There was very little ash on the cigarette and it was still smouldering. Someone had passed this way only a few minutes before. Was it the owner of the missing fingered hand, or was it someone he knew as a guest— ?

The thought snapped as a sudden sound in the passage ahead caused him to freeze motionless.

Then it came again, the soft slow creaking of a heavy door opening cautiously.

Walking gently as a cat, Jeffery crept forward. His outstretched hands came into contact with a right-angle wall, a bend in the passage. He was feeling his way around when a spurt of light, some distance ahead, caused him to press back against the rough masonry. Warily, he insinuated his head around the corner and stared with narrowed eyes at the scene before him.

Not a dozen yards away a man stood holding a lighted match above his head. Jeffery had a glimpse of a swarthy, bearded face from which glared two fear-stricken, white-rimmed eyes. The figure was dressed in a long overcoat that came almost to his ankles and his feet were slippered.

The unknown peered right and left, turning that unkempt head with quick bird-like movements. Then he lowered the match and with his free hand began straining at an iron ring set in the wall at shoulder height. Again Jeffery heard that reluctant creaking and he realized that the bearded stranger was tugging at a heavy door set into the wall. Then the match flared and died. As it did so, the young man noticed the hand holding the light. The third finger was missing!

Jeffery leapt forward, flashing on his torch. The unknown stood transfixed in the sudden circle of light, staring as though hypnotized. Then, with a cry, he flung one arm across his face, turned and bolted like a rabbit down the stone passage. Jeffery, who had paused opposite the stone door, heard his footsteps go blundering away into the darkness.

Uncertain whether to follow, he stood hesitant. Then, from near by, came a sound that rooted his attention— the soft choking moan of a person in pain. Wheeling, Jeffery flashed his light up and clown the corridor. It was empty. Then the sound was repeated, seemingly right behind him. He swung round. The heavy door was slightly ajar. He grasped the iron ring and, exerting all his strength, tugged mightily. The door swung open abruptly, crashed against the wall with a ring that echoed and re-echoed through the passage and Jeffery flashed his torch inside. The next moment...

"Good God!" he exclaimed softly.

He recognized Edward Blaire only by that swollen, purpling face and bulging, pain-distorted eyes, for the figure on the stone floor of that dungeon was so twisted by its bonds that it had no natural shape. There was something horrible in that distorted motionless figure, but it was not until Jeffery sprang to the young chemist's side that he realized how diabolically cruel was this imprisonment.

Blaire was lying on his stomach, the upper part of his body expertly laced into a strait jacket. A thin cord was bound tightly about his legs and feet, then pulled tightly to a noose around his throat, so that the body was forced into an unnatural bow. It was only when he bent low over the young chemist and saw more closely the cord about his throat that a hot anger fired the blood in his veins. The cord was a slip-knot, connected with the rope that bound the feet. With every attempt to free himself, Blaire was slowly tightening the cord around his swollen throat, automatically strangling himself by slow and unutterably painful degrees!

Setting his torch on the floor, Jeffery pulled out a pocket-knife and severed the cord between throat and feet with one thrust. As Blaire rolled over, the other jerked at the wide bandage about the young chemist's mouth. Spitting out a gag of material, Blaire croaked hoarsely:

"Throat...cord...choking..." Then, as Jeffery's fingers eased the pressure on the knot, the young man gulped the air like a drowning man.

"Blackburn...I...you..." his tongue floundered like someone learning to speak. "Just in time..."

"Easy— easy," Jeffery said curtly. He was sawing through the cord that bound the legs, then he turned his attention to the strait jacket, ripping at the constricting folds with almost savage pleasure. At length Blaire lay free. His

first action was to massage his throat into which the cord had bit a cruel scarlet weal. Then he tried to stand, only to collapse against Jeffery's arm.

"Pins and needles," he gasped weakly. "Give me a moment..."

"Easy," repeated Blackburn. Blaire clung to his arm, straightening each leg gingerly. Then he stood alone, supporting himself against the wall.

"My glasses," he said. "Somewhere on the floor." Jeffery found them and handed them across. As Blaire was fitting the spectacles in place, the other was gathering the strait jacket and ropes into a bundle. Then he turned.

"Can you walk?"

Blaire nodded. "It's my throat that hurts." He stretched it and gave a sudden gasp of pain. "God knows how long I've been here. It seems weeks." His voice faltered, trembled. "I— I thought it was the end this time, Blackburn."

"Steady," said Jeffery. He reached out an arm to the near-fainting lad, when a sudden cry stiffened him. Somewhere away in that dark maze, a voice charged with terror was crying:

"Jeffery! Help— Jeffery, where are you?"

The effect on Blaire was almost electric. His limp body tightened as though pulled together on a string. "That's Beth's voice," he cried. "Does that mean— she's down here?"

"God forbid!" Blackburn's face was as hard and as grey as stone. He ran a quick glance over the other's dishevelled figure. "You'd better wait—" he began, but the younger man brushed his words aside.

"I'm not staying here alone," he said. "Besides, I want to know what's happening to my sister!"

Side by side, they almost ran from the room. Outside, Jeffery flashed his torch along the passage. As far as the light penetrated, it was empty. As they paused, baulked for an instant, Blaire muttered:

"I'll swear that voice came from down here! Is there another passage?"

Then it was that Jeffery had a sudden inspiration.

"The turn-off," he cried. "She must have followed me down here and lost herself in the dark."

Without further explanation, he gestured to Blaire to follow him. Their footsteps threw up ghostly echoes as they ran. At the bend, the tunnel forked. Over his shoulder Jeffery said curtly: "This way."

Blaire was so close on his companion's heels that he almost bowled Jeffery over as the latter halted suddenly, the beam of his flashlight trembling slightly. They recognized the girl from some distance away. Elizabeth Blaire lay in a heap where she had fallen fainting beside the body of Robert Ashton.

AN HOUR LATER Chief Inspector William Read faced Jeffery in the library at

Rookwood Towers.

Blackburn had wasted no time in getting Elizabeth and her brother back into the Oak Room, summoning the housekeeper to attend to the girl, and seeking medical attention for Blaire, who by this time was near collapse with the strain of his ordeal. Then he brought the Inspector to the library and gave him a detailed account of his sensational adventures. When he finished Read fixed him with a gimlet eye.

"Well, young fella," he grunted, "a lovely mess you've made of things. I leave you down here to manage the business and what happens? Your charge gets himself kidnapped, The Owl moves about the place like a star boarder and the whole schemozzle ends in a bang-up murder! That," announced Read, "is just dandy! I can practically hear the Commissioner congratulating me!"

Jeffery's tone was sullen. "What do you think I've been doing— playing Kiss in the Ring?"

Read gnawed his moustache. His voice had the rumble of distant thunder. "Do you know, I shouldn't be at all surprised!"

"Meaning just what?"

"Look here, son, I wasn't born yesterday. It took me just five minutes down here to sum up the situation between you and this Blaire woman." Hands in pockets, the big man faced the younger sternly. "If anyone had told me that you were the man who caught the Sheldon murderer and let the daylight into that business of the Dolls of Death, I'd tell them to climb a tree!" Read's tone held that official bark. "I'm telling you, son— the dumbest flatfoot on the Petticoat Lane beat could have handled this thing better than you."

Jeffery was silent for a moment. Then he muttered: "All right. I have made a mess of it all. I must be getting old— the brain cells are atrophying..."

"Getting old!" It was dangerously near a snort. "That's not the trouble! You made a success of those other cases because son, you didn't trip over any petticoats. You kept your mind on your work. The real trouble is that you've gone moony-eyed over this Blaire wench, and you can't think of anything else but moonlight and roses. Bah!" Read turned on his heel and began to pace the floor. "If I had my way I'd shove all pretty faces away behind bars— and keep 'em there!"

Jeffery grinned in spite of himself. "Speaks the misogynist!"

"This is no joke," snarled Read, turning. "When I saw you carrying that girl out through the secret panel in the Oak Room, with the love-light burning like Christmas crackers in your eyes, I knew the cause of all this fuss!"

"Someone had to carry her out," snapped Jeffery. "You didn't expect me to leave her in the tunnel?" He was aware that he was blushing and to cover his embarrassment lit a cigarette. "Blaire was in no shape to look after anyone but

himself." He became very interested in the end of his cigarette and spoke without raising his eyes "Now, I suppose the best thing I can do is to get back to London."

"Oh no, you don't!" The Inspector stood with his back against the library door as if afraid Jeffery would bolt then and there. "You're staying right here—on the spot."

"Is that an order?"

Read's tone softened.

"You don't have to take orders from me, son. But you can take advice." He walked across and faced the younger man soberly. "This thing isn't a bogey-man scare any longer, Jeff. Someone put four inches of cold steel into that secretary chap. And we've got to find out who it was before I'm asked for my resignation."

"But—"

"And you've got to help me," Read went on quietly. "Forget this girl for a while and buckle down to some solid work. I need you on this case, son. It promises to be one of the toughest things we've ever tackled. Later, when we clean up all this mess, if you still feel the same about this girl:..." a shrug of Read's big shoulders completed the sentence.

Jeffery flicked half an inch of ash into the ebonite tray. "When I think of Ashton's end, it seems almost indecent to consider the subject."

Read thumped one hand in the other, a gesture of irritation. "There's the biggest snag," he barked. "Why should that secretary be rubbed out? What's the motive for his murder?"

Jeffery felt in his pocket and extracted a folded note. "Here's the reason," he replied. A frown gathered on the Inspector's brow as he read the note Ashton had scrawled to Jeffery earlier in the day.

"So he thought he knew the name of The Owl, eh? And judging by what happened, he was pretty right!" Read looked up. "Where did you get this, son?"

"Elsa Hautmann gave it to me about ten minutes ago," Blackburn told him. "She said Ashton asked her to deliver it to me. Then he went out into the grounds, saying he meant to call at the inn at the village." He paused, considering. "As far as I can make out, that would be about a quarter of an hour before his death."

Read was plucking at his moustache. "Then this fräulein was the last to see him alive?" And as Jeffery nodded, "What do you make of those two, son?"

The younger man's tone was sombre. "I don't know, Chief. People in this house are covering each other— that's the whole trouble. For instance, I'd give anything to know what went on during that interview between Hautmann,

Atherton-Wayne and Todhunter."

"Todhunter?" The Inspector frowned. "Who's he?"

In a few words Jeffery explained how Atherton-Wayne had received the American in his study that morning. "I got out before our friend came in," Blackburn went on, "so I can't even tell you what he looks like. But I'd give anything to know what brand of cigarettes he smokes."

"What do you mean?"

Blackburn told of the finding of the smoked stub in the tunnel. As he concluded, Read swore softly. The big man's eyes glinted. "There's too much jiggery-pokery going on in this house," he snarled. "We're going upstairs in a few minutes to get young Blaire's story. Then, after dinner, I'll get my boys to corral the entire household here in this room— and I'll grill 'em all green!" Scarlet danger signals were flying high in the Inspector's cheeks. "I've been wanting to do this ever since I stepped inside the place, but I hadn't the authority. But this murder's changed that, and I'm going to get some tongues wagging, or, by hokey, I'll know the reason why!"

Jeffery said mildly: "You'll be careful, Chief. Atherton-Wayne's a very influential man, you know."

Read's face was hard. "Murder's a great leveller, son. And our killer friend has been hiding behind the respectability of this house too long. He's been getting away with things under our very noses. That business of the strait jacket, for instance—"

"Didn't you get that?"

The Inspector shook his head. "When the boys went into that passage to bring out Ashton's body, I gave Connolly and Armstrong instructions to collect it from that room. Well, they found the room all right, but it was empty."

Jeffery clicked his tongue. "I should have brought it away with me, but so many things happened at the one moment down there...You know, Chief, it's rather ironical that just as we were going about assuring everybody The Owl wasn't a killer, he was planning to shut Ashton's mouth by the most efficient means."

"That's what worries me, son. I've got a nasty feeling at the back of my mind that this business is only beginning." Read's face was hard. "If you ask me, up till now The Owl's just been playing with us. He's been deliberately building up this masquerade of a harmless, though rather theatrical sneak-thief. But Ashton's discovery forced him to show his real self."

Jeffery nodded. "And there's the fiendish way he trussed up that lad. A knife between the shoulders is cowardly, but it's clean compared to the torture of slow and deliberate strangulation. Blaire must have suffered so much I'm almost dreading asking him for all the details of the attack."

"We'll treat him gently," the Inspector promised. "Meanwhile, I'm wondering what's happened to Armstrong and his boys. I set 'em to comb that tunnel and rout out that gent with the missing finger—" He broke off as a knock sounded at the door. It opened and Dennis Connolly walked into the room.

Detective Connolly was a big moon-faced Irishman, but at the moment his natural geniality seemed under a cloud. His first words made the reason plain. "No luck, Chief," he reported.

Read said curtly: "What happened?"

"We— Armstrong and myself— took half a dozen of the boys down into the passage," Connolly told him. "Where the tunnel forks, Armstrong took three men and went one way, I went the other with the rest of the boys. Armstrong says that his passage led down into the vaults. Nothing there. Just big stone rooms, crumbling away."

"What about the passage you explored?"

"We followed it for about two hundred yards, to find it blocked with an iron door. Caked with rust and studded with iron bolts it was— looked as though it hadn't been opened since Doomsday, except..."? Connolly paused and rubbed his broad jaw—"when I examined the hinges, they'd been freshly oiled. Looks a bit fishy, eh, Chief?"

"I'll say!" Read snapped. "What did you do?"

Connolly shrugged. "It'd have taken a blow torch to get through the door without the key. There wasn't anything else to do but come back here."

"No sign of our black-bearded friend?" Jeffery asked.

Connolly shook his head. "But I'll wager a month's salary we've found his hide-out. What's more, someone in this house must be looking after him. All we have to do now is to find out who that person is and that part of the show's cleared up neat and tidy."

Read considered a moment, plucking at his clipped moustache. Then he squared his shoulders. "All right," he said briefly. "Now, here's your next job. I want every person under this roof— and that includes the domestic staff, mind you— here in the library after dinner. The only exception is young Blaire— his presence depends on what that doctor says. Everybody else, do you understand?"

Connolly nodded and a slow grin spread across his face. "A little pep talk, eh, Chief?"

"That'll do!" Read barked. The big detective turned, closed one eye significantly at Jeffery and walked towards the door. As he swung it open, there was a quick movement outside. A man was rising swiftly to his feet. The Chief Inspector roared like an angry bull.

"Hey, you!"

The man approached, pushing past the astonished Connolly. Jeffery, watching closely, noticed how quietly the newcomer walked. He halted opposite the Inspector, who looked him up and down. Then:

"Who are you?"

The man said softly: "My name is Reynolds, sir. I am one of the footmen here."

Read took a step forward and thrust his face almost into the other's expressionless countenance. "You were listening at that door, weren't you?"

The servant dropped his eyes.

"Oh no, sir. Really, I assure you—"

"Don't lie, man! You had your ear glued to that keyhole!"

"Indeed, no, sir." There was shocked reproach in the tone. "I was sent here by Dr. Newbury. I heard voices in this room— I didn't wish to disturb you, so I waited..." Reynolds' pale eyes flicked for a moment across Read's granite face. "When the door opened so suddenly, it took me by surprise—"

"I'll bet it did," began the Inspector, when Jeffery interposed.

"You say Dr. Newbury sent you here?"

The footman turned a smooth face to the speaker. "Yes, sir. The doctor asked me to say that Mr. Blaire has had a short sleep and feels much better. If you gentlemen wish to talk to him, could you come along at once?"

Jeffery glanced at the elder man, who nodded. Read dismissed the servant with a wave of his hand. "And next time you listen at keyholes," he rapped, "be a bit smarter about getting up! That's all."

The man was almost to the door when Jeffery spoke again. "Oh, Reynolds!" and as the servant turned: "Would you bring me that silver ashtray from the reading table? And you might empty this one— it looks rather a mess."

With an inclination of his head the servant obeyed. As the door closed behind him, Jeffery sprang up. Whipping a handkerchief from his breast pocket he folded it carefully about the silver ornament, then handed it to the astonished Inspector.

"Chief," he said. "Get this to headquarters as soon as you can and have Craven dust it for prints. Then check up on 'em."

Read, staring at the younger man, took the folded cambric almost mechanically. "What's the idea, son?"

"It may be my nasty suspicious mind," Jeffery told him, "but I'm sure I've seen that man's face before. And, somehow, it's connected with surroundings that restricted his freedom rather more than Rookwood Towers." He nodded towards the ashtray. "Hence the prints."

The Inspector grunted and slipped the object into his pocket. "Do you

know, son," he said, "I do believe you're coming out of that trance at last. What next?"

Jeffery buttoned his coat. "While the mood is on me," he suggested, "why not have our interview with young Blaire? Perhaps the divine inspiration may visit the me again!"

It was a very chastened Edward Blaire who faced the two investigators in his bedroom on the second floor. A sedative had calmed his twitching nerves, but the countenance that stared across the bed was as white as the pillows that supported his head. Dr. Newbury, a big red-faced country G.P., stood aside to allow Jeffery and Read to pass, then paused with his hand on the door.

"Ten minutes," he said. "No more and no less. And if you excite my patient too much, then heaven help him, because I can't!"

As the door closed Jeffery pulled up a chair while Read lounged against the edge of the bed. Blackburn pulled out his case and offered it to the younger man. Blaire took the cigarette and as Jeffery applied a light he puffed thankfully. Then:

"I'm giving up," he said briefly. "I'm as brave as any man alive, but I'm no match for a murderer. The Owl can have the formula— he can take it with pleasure if it means an end to this reign of terror." His voice dropped. "Ashton...there's no chance...?"

Jeffery shook his head slowly. "Not a hope. He was dead when we found him."

The cigarette in Blaire's hand trembled slightly. "Who's next? It might be any of us! The formula's valuable, but it's not worth bloodshed! This murdering swine can take it whenever he likes!" His voice rose, high and thin with the edge of hysteria. "Do you hear me, wherever you are? Take the formula! Take it, and leave us alone!"

"Steady, son." Read put out a hand and gripped the young man's shoulder. "That's not the way to behave. Can't you see that's what he's trying to do— scare you into giving in?" Under his hand he felt Blaire's tightened muscles relax and the tide of colour faded slowly from his face. "Now, son, get out of your mind that this Owl is a supernatural bogey-man. He's a nasty individual with a red streak of murder running through his brain, but at least he's human. You must know that yourself." Blaire's voice was none too steady when he replied: "Yes. He was flesh and blood all right. Blood particularly." The faintest suspicion of a smile lingered about his lips for a moment. I punched him in that beak and made his nose bleed.

"You did?" It was Jeffery who put the sharp question. "What happened then?"

Read waved a restraining hand. "Let's start this thing from the beginning,"

he suggested. "All we know is that you were in your room on the next floor with the door locked. Then Blackburn and your sister heard a scream and when they unlocked the door you were gone."

Blaire was staring at the smoking end of his cigarette, his eyes shadowed with the memory of that night. "Yes," he said slowly. "I'd had a few words with Betsy over— over something." As though recollecting, he looked up. "My sister— Betsy— she was down in that passage, too."

"Your sister's all right," Jeffery assured him. "She'll be up and about tomorrow. Go on with your story."

The young man leaned back and closed his eyes. "When Betsy left, I felt all on edge," he began. "I had a couple of drinks to straighten myself up, then sat down at my desk to work out some figures. But I must have fallen asleep. When I woke it was dark. I sat very still for a few seconds, trying to recall what had happened. Then I reached up and switched on the desk-light. For some reason or other I felt unaccountably jumpy. I remember starting to help myself to another whisky, but the bottle was empty. Then I just sat there listening...the house was very quiet..."

His voice trailed away. Jeffery did not speak. Vivid in his mind was the picture of the frightened boy, sitting alone in that room in the silent old mansion, while outside the shadows coiled and thickened about the windows. After a pause Blaire continued:

"How long I sat like that I don't know, but it was a sound that roused me. A slow creaking, so soft that it was difficult to tell from what direction it came. I jumped up and, crossing to the door, switched on the room lights. The sound came again and this time I located it. The door-handle was turning, slowly, cautiously. I still don't know how I acted so fast, but there was a key in the lock and I literally sprang and turned it. I was near sweating with fright. With the locking of the door the sound stopped. I could almost hear my heart panting. Then, as I stood hesitating what to do, there came that tapping on the window."

An inch of ash dropped from his cigarette Blaire wiped it away nervously, leaving a grey trail of smudge on the white counterpane. To Jeffery, it seemed that the room had grown smaller, as if the very walls about them edged closer to listen. Read cleared his throat with a cough like a bark. The sound seemed unnaturally loud in that hushed apartment. When Blaire spoke again his voice was low, almost as though he was afraid of other ears overhearing his story.

"I can't hope to make you understand how terrifying that tapping sounded. Then I realized that the window was on the third floor— it was therefore impossible that any human agency could be responsible for that sound. It was, I told myself, a tendril of ivy blown against the pane by the wind. There were

heavy curtains drawn across part of the window and it seemed to me that they bellied slightly, as when a breeze moves them. That was surely the cause. Some careless servant had left a window open— and the thought gave me courage. I crossed to the curtains and swept them aside. And then gentlemen...there was The Owl, motionless, waiting, swathed in that long black cloak, a dead thing save for the eyes that blaze down at me through the slits in that horrible beak-like mask!"

The words choked in the young man's throat as his voice ran dry with fear at the memory. Read, nearest the wash-basin, poured a glass of water and handed it to the man in the bed. Blaire barely sipped it, but his voice was steadier as he went on.

"I just stood there, frozen, paralysed. Then, with a screech I shall remember to my dying day, this creature pounced on me. He had a pad of something white in his hand and as we struggled he tried to press it over my nose. This knowledge gave me a sort of desperate strength— with all my force I hit out at that terrifying mask. The man behind it gave a grunt of pain as my fist connected and I saw the blood stream down his black gown. And that's the last thing I do remember, because next minute he had that chloroform pad over my face. I have a vague memory of being lifted, then of ivy brushing against me and then steps and more steps." He paused and raised his eyes to Jeffery. "And when I came to I was down in that black room, trussed and choking, just as you found me."

As he paused, Jeffery clicked his fingers. "So that's how The Owl took you from that room!" He rose and began to pace the floor. "He climbed up the ivy and on to the roof. It was only one floor, anyhow. Then he probably took you down the fire-escape to the vaults. It would have been child's play, with the darkness to cover him."

Read's thoughts were taking a different track. "So you made his nose bleed, eh?" He stood teasing his clipped moustache. "Then if that skunk is someone in this house, he ought to be quite easy to trace. You can't cover a bruised nose very easily."

"You'll never find him." Blaire's tone was heavy with despair. "There's only one way to end this persecution— let him have the formula."

From the window, Jeffery spoke:

"Tell me, Blaire, how long has the footman Reynolds been down here?"

The other looked slightly irritated at the apparent irrelevance of the question. "Can't say off-hand," he replied. "Three or four months, I believe."

Jeffery merely nodded. It was Read who made the observation. "If this lad marked The Owl's face, that's one step forward."

"In what direction?" Jeffery snapped. "Backwards, I should say. Because,

with the exception of a few of the downstairs staff, I've met everyone under this roof during the last twenty-four hours. And I didn't notice any marked faces among them."

Read was frowning. "Then, son, it looks as if we've got to the stage of looking for an invisible man."

And in that moment, had they but known it, the whole truth, fantastic as it was, lay within their grasp. All unwittingly the Inspector had voiced a suggestion that was to prove, later, strangely prophetic. Perhaps Jeffery alone felt some prescience. Read noticed him blink suddenly and pass his hand before his eyes, like a man blinded by a dazzling light. The big Inspector opened his mouth to speak, but the sound of a gong vibrating along distant corridors was heard, and the familiar resonance jerked Blackburn back to normal.

"Come along, Chief." His tone was curt. "We've done all we can here. And man must eat though the mind starves." He turned to Blaire, who was lying back on his pillows with half-closed eyes, seemingly exhausted by his recital "You'd better take things easy for a while," he advised, "and we'll ask Dr. Newbury to step in here as we go down to dinner."

Read grunted his approval and the two men left the room. Rounding a bend in the corridor, they sighted Connolly coming towards them. The detective's face flushed. He spoke as the two approached.

"I gave 'em all your order about getting down to the library after dinner, Chief." He fell into step beside them. "People in this house have funny notions about a murder investigation. They've got an idea, some of 'em, that it's a sort of picnic."

Read grunted. "Stubborn?"

"The old chap and that square-head doctor were the worst," Connolly added darkly: "But they'll be there, all the same!"

"Good! Now, here are two more jobs to be attended to straight away. Send a couple of the boys down to the 'Green Man' and tell them to rope in a Mr. Charles Todhunter, staying there. Have them bring him back here tonight."

Connolly nodded.

Read felt in his pocket and produced the wrapped ashtray. "Get this up to the Record Office at once— I want it dusted and the prints checked. Don't send Armstrong or Mason." The Inspector's jaw protruded slightly. "I want them down in the library after dinner with me. I'm going to do some pretty plain speaking down there and they may be needed to read the riot act."

The tall clock in the corner of the library struck the hour of nine.

Despite the fact that there were only seven people in the room, the wide apartment held that hot, tight feeling of a crowded auditorium. The little group

gathered under the book-lined walls was presided over by a silver-haired and coldly furious Sir Anthony, who had appealed to Blackburn to spare himself and his guests the indignity of being cross-examined in front of the domestic staff. Read had consented with reluctance, finally deputizing Connolly to interview the servants.

Sir Anthony stood with folded arms under a fading portrait of the former owner of the Towers, disapproval in every rigid line of his slender figure. Dr. Hautmann, his pale saturnine face expressionless, stood by a chair in which his daughter sat. Elsa Hautmann's slender body was swathed in a white close-fitting evening gown that accentuated the spun gold of her hair. She sat with head bowed demurely; only now and then did she raise her eyes to where Blackburn's tall figure lounged by the desk. In a chair opposite, young Blaire sat. Only the ceaseless drumming of his long fingers upon the upholstery revealed the nervous excitement pent up within him.

Reynolds, the smooth-faced footman, fidgeted uneasily near by. His eyes never left the Inspector who stood, stern as Rhadamanthus, in the centre of the room, his narrowed eyes flitting from one face to another.

Read said brusquely:

"There's no need for me to tell you why you people have been gathered here tonight. You know as well as I do that shortly before lunch today a young man was murdered under this roof. It was a pretty climax to a lot o' funny happenings inside these walls. This bogey-man stuff upset a few people, principally Mr. Blaire here, seeing that he was the focal point of it all. But there's a big difference between threats to murder and the actual commission of the crime. For one thing, it gives us a chance to get a lot of things straightened out that we couldn't touch before. That's why you're all down here tonight."

He paused and swept a glance around the room. It took in a succession of white faces, uneasy eyes and fluttering uncertain hands. But there was no sound in the room but the tick of the clock and the rattle of a coal falling in the log fire, burning undisturbed and aloof in the big fireplace.

"It's difficult enough to investigate a murder when all the facts are open to discovery," the Inspector continued. "But it's well-nigh impossible when truth is distorted and evidence deliberately withheld." His eyes narrowed. "And I charge various persons in this room of having deliberately withheld information from my department which would aid us in the clearing up of this mystery."

Atherton-Wayne stared at the big man with cold, hostile eyes. "Aren't you being a little fantastic, Inspector?"

Read squared his shoulders. "Perhaps I could answer that question if you'd

be frank with me, Sir Anthony. Yes, you're one of the people we feel could help us more if you chose." He wheeled on Hautmann, who stiffened, watching the Inspector closely under those heavy lidded eyes. Jeffery had the impression of a snake coiled to strike. Read said gruffly: "And you, Doctor, what's your business down here?"

"That is rather a personal matter, sir."

"I'm afraid I can't accept that as an answer."

Hautmann took a step forward, leaving his daughter staring up at him. "You really want to know the reason I am down at Rookwood Towers, Inspector? Very well." The slight pause was deliberately theatrical.

"I am down here to prevent Atherton-Wayne cheating Mr. Blaire out of fifteen thousand pounds!"

There was a sudden naked quivering silence in the room, a concentrated electrification of the atmosphere that was almost too tense to be borne. Every eye in the room flashed to the little baronet, who stood like a man turned to stone. A slow tide of scarlet crept across his chiselled face. Then he spoke.

"I can only conclude, Hautmann, that you have taken leave of your senses!"

The doctor swung round. "Don't deny it," he said harshly. "You deliberately withheld from Blaire the fact that Todhunter had offered twenty thousand for his formula! You said nothing of my offer of twenty-five thousand! Instead, you took advantage of Blaire's kidnapping to trick him into signing away the formula to you for a paltry ten thousand pounds!"

Atherton-Wayne's colour deepened. He panted slightly as he spoke. "It's a lie! I demand that this man produce proof of his outrageous accusation!"

"You mean that?"

"Most emphatically!"

Hautmann shrugged. "Very well— if you wish to humiliate yourself further..." The doctor took from his pocket crumpled statement he had retrieved from Ashton's study and handed it across to the Inspector. "Read that," he invited. "I do not think Sir Anthony will be foolish enough to deny his handwriting."

In silence, Read took the statement and nodded to Jeffery, who crossed and examined it over the other's shoulder. Blaire, meanwhile, sat staring at the baronet like a man hypnotized, Presently Read looked up.

"This is your handwriting, sir?"

Sir Anthony nodded.

"Then what Dr. Hautmann tells us is true?"

The bones in the baronet's face had gone suddenly hard and prominent, the face of a man who stares upon disaster. Quickly he passed a tongue across his lips. Jeffery, watching that countenance, could almost see the nimble brain

ticking feverishly behind it. Save yourself! Save your face! Do anything anything, but save your face in time. Atherton-Wayne drew a deep breath.

"Yes, Inspector, I wrote that document. At the time, however, circumstances were different. Now I realize the whole thing was a mistake."

Dr. Hautmann caressed thin hands. "Rather a fortunate mistake, I should suggest. Particularly as Ashton was the only witness you had, Sir Anthony. With that young man— er— out of the way, there was really nothing to prevent Blaire from signing that paper."

Before the baronet had chance to reply, Blaire had sprung to his feet, eyes blazing behind his spectacles. His hands clenched by his sides as he faced Atherton-Wayne.

"You— you'd do this to me?" The words were thick in his throat. "After I've kept to my part of the bargain, given my energy and ability without stint, existing on a mere pittance, this is the kind of thing you do!" Almost beside himself with anger he raised his hand. "God! If you were a younger man, I'd have it out with you in a way you wouldn't forget!"

"Here! No rough stuff!" Read stepped forward and pushed the angry young man back into his chair. "We're not going to get anywhere coming to blows." He addressed the baronet. "Well, Sir Anthony, it looks as if you're in rather an awkward position. What have you got to say?"

Conscious of every eye upon him, Atherton-Wayne drew himself up. Even at this juncture, Blackburn was conscious of the queer power that flowed from the man, a magnetism that could not be denied. The baronet spoke quietly.

"I realize that this is one occasion on which actions speak louder than words. Dr. Hautmann—" he flashed a contemptuous glance over his shoulder "— has accused me of swindling Mr. Blaire of fifteen thousand pounds. My answer to this charge is that I am prepared, here and now, to pay Blaire the sum of fifty thousand pounds for the sole rights of his formula!"

Again that silence. Blaire whispered, "Fifty thousand..." and the words fell into the hush like pebbles tossed one by one into a dark pool. Hautmann gave a little bitten-off gasp of amazement and sat down on the arm of his daughter's chair as if his legs had suddenly weakened. Only Reynolds, that curious person, remained unmoved. His face expressionless, he gave the impression of being as aloof from this scene as the flames that muttered in the fireplace. Then Blaire spoke again, blinking up at the baronet.

"Are you—" he stumbled over the words "— are you prepared to give me that amount...now?"

Sir Anthony did not reply. He crossed to the desk and, taking cheque book and fountain-pen from his pocket, wrote rapidly. The thin scratching of the pen was audible to everyone in the room. Then, with a gesture that was a

challenge, he ripped the cheque from the book and handed it to the wide-eyed young chemist.

"I will expect your sample of the formula, together with the full data on its manufacture and other notes in your possession, to be lodged within my safe tonight," he said icily. "In the meanwhile, I shall have an agreement drawn up for you to sign." He wheeled, addressing the room at large: "Now may I presume that this rather embarrassing incident is closed?"

No one spoke, for no one knew quite what to say. The baronet's gesture, so calmly executed, had robbed even the Inspector of comment. Dr. Hautmann was first to break the silence. He rose and bowed.

"Surely you are fortunate, Sir Anthony, in that your money will buy practically everything." He paused, and his thin lips curled. "I am wondering, however, if it will buy you immunity from The Owl now that you, in turn, have come into possession of this apparently dangerous secret?"

Atherton-Wayne deliberately averted his eyes from the speaker. "That is a subject I prefer to discuss with the police. And now, Dr. Hautmann, you will oblige me by leaving this house with your daughter and depart on the first train in the morning."

"Oh no!" The Inspector hunched his shoulders aggressively. "There's been a murder committed under this roof. No one leaves this place until I give them permission." He turned as Atherton-Wayne started a protest. "Sorry, sir," he said curtly, "that's the way things are worked, you know."

The baronet stared at him almost insolently. "Do you honestly mean to infer, Inspector, that I am in danger of arrest for the murder of my secretary?"

A lesser man might have quailed before those cold blue eyes, but not a muscle of Read's face moved as he returned the other's stare. He said almost woodenly, "No one's mentioned arrest, sir."

"I still say you have inferred it. I warn you, Mr. Read, that you will regret any constriction of our liberty in this house. I shall most certainly complain to the Commissioner. What you suggest is virtual imprisonment. In any case, you have no grounds for such an action."

From his corner, Jeffery spoke for the first time: "I think sir, that we have."

"What do you mean?"

"Your own conduct, if I may say so, might even be termed peculiar."

"My conduct!" Those cold eyes swept over Jeffery. "There is nothing in this house I wish to conceal."

Jeffery took a step forward so that he came shoulder to shoulder with Read. "Not in this house, perhaps, sir. But I was thinking of the vaults under the house."

Atherton-Wayne's head jerked back like a man receiving a blow. His whole

body seemed to sag and he put a hand to a chair to steady himself. Jeffery's eyes never left his opponent's face, but Read, alert, saw a curious expression cross Reynolds' pale visage; he could have sworn that, for an instant, a malicious smile lingered about the colourless lips. Then the baronet spoke and his words were a whisper:

"What do you mean?"

Jeffery said quietly: "Don't you know?"

The baronet said huskily: "This is persecution— brutal persecution! I warn you— I shall complain." Almost wildly, he brushed the two investigators aside and walked quickly from the room. Read made a movement after him, but Jeffery, laying a hand on his arm, shook his head.

As the baronet's footsteps died away in the corridor, Dr. Hautmann addressed the Inspector, "I take it that this interview is at an end?" and as Read nodded, the doctor gave his arm to his daughter. Obediently, Elsa Hautmann rose. With slow dignity the pair left the room. Reynolds, avoiding the big man's eye, followed. When the door closed behind them, the Inspector turned to Blaire:

"You'd better get some rest, son— that's if you can rest with fifty thousand tucked away in your belt."

Blaire rose and approached them. "That's what I want to speak to you about," he said. "Will you take charge of this money until I can get to town tomorrow?" He gave a half-glance over his shoulder. "After what's happened today, I couldn't sleep with that amount in my room."

"Why, sure!" Read took the slip of paper and tucked it into his waistcoat pocket. "We'll look after it for you, son. You hop off to bed." He addressed Jeffery: "Funny we've heard nothing from those boys who went down to pick up Todhunter. I'd like a few words—"

"What's that?" interrupted Blackburn sharply.

Read turned. Below the desk, plain against the pattern of the carpet, lay a small white envelope. Jeffery pounced on it. The Inspector was beside him as he slit the flap and extracted a folded piece of paper.

A single sentence was printed roughly across the white surface. The words danced before their eyes.

"Atherton-Wayne will follow Ashton."

The message was signed:

"The Owl."

Chapter 6

Monday, June 17

The death of Robert Ashton caused an amazing acceleration of events at Rookwood Towers.

It was as though the knife buried between the secretary's shoulders was a stick poked into an anthill. On the morning following the scene in the library, Inspector read rose early, breakfasted and moved his hand to the telephone. The subsequent message reached out into the heart of that sprawling building on the Thames Embankment, up to a department known as the Central Record Office. Wires hummed, lights flashed, machines began to tick, fingers flicked on files. A certain Assistant Commissioner was interviewed and, even as the group of cowed servants were preparing for another day at the Towers, the Criminal Investigation Department took over The Owl murder case in earnest.

The little village of Tilling had never known such a morning. Sleek black cars, filled with broad-shouldered men and driven by uniformed constables, surged into the hamlet, sweeping the dust into gaping eyes, leaving behind a smell of petrol gas and a bewildered but excited throng of locals. An institute in the village had been turned into a mortuary, where delicately fingered medical men probed and peered at the body of the secretary, brought from the Towers in a black van. And then came the gentlemen of the Press, with orders verbal, telephoned and telegraphed. They came with pencils sharpened at both ends, with cameras like wide-awake inquisitive eyes. They came by motor-cycle, by car, even by push-bicycle, ready and willing to record both truth and gossip, while miles away in London editors kept pages "open," compositors were talking of bold Bodoni type in which to fling the obituary of the victim across the front page.

Alas for Sir Anthony's dislike of notoriety! "The Owl Murder," as the Press dubbed the tragedy, had all the components of good red meat for the reading public, and the little baronet might as well have attempted to stay the rising sun as to hide from the slowly creeping spotlight of publicity that was already being focused on that rambling old mansion in the whispering trees.

While at the house itself, chaos was come.

Like some huge mechanical robot, the Criminal Investigation Department strode through the corridors, bullying, cajoling, flattering, asking endless questions, taking innumerable photographs, measuring distances, testing locks, weighing, calculating, noting, docketing— a tough-fibred, thick-skinned army, obedient to nothing save the barking commands of a big, florid-faced man who stamped the passages tugging at his grey clipped moustache.

TEN O'CLOCK was striking when Chief Inspector Read called Connolly to the small room in the west wing that he had requisitioned as an office. The detective, entering, announced the arrival of the finger-print expert.

"Don't bother me about that," Read snapped. He was poring over a plan of the Towers, obtained from some obscure source. "You know what he's to do. Work on that knife first." He raised his eyes. "The only finger-prints I'm interested in are the ones on that ashtray we sent to town. Any report from Mallalue yet?"

"I rang through this morning," Connolly reported. "They're going through the files at once."

"Any report from the 'Green Man' about Todhunter?"

Connolly shook his head. "All we know is that he went out yesterday morning and hasn't shown up since. But he hasn't skipped for good."

"Why?"

"His luggage is still in his room."

Read chewed his moustache. "We'll give him until this evening," he announced. "Then, have one of the boys go through his bags. That might give us something."

The detective was looking at the plan on the desk. "What are you doing about that chap hiding in the vaults, Chief? Do you want the boys to smoke him out?"

"No." Read tapped the paper before him. "I'm getting down to that now. We're satisfied that Atherton-Wayne's got a finger in that pie somehow and it means walking carefully. As it is, I'm taking a big risk turning the place into a monkey-house like this. We've only got to guess wrong once and that little cock-sparrow'll have the Commissioner down on me like a ton of bricks!"

"What are you going to do, Chief?"

"Give him one more chance to tell the truth. If he's still stubborn, I'll get a locksmith over from the village and we'll rip that door open in two shakes." Read's tone was truculent. "Have you seen Blackburn this morning?"

Connolly nodded. "He was talking to a couple of the boys in the garden about ten minutes ago."

Read turned back to his plan, smoothing it on the desk. "You might tell him to slip in and see me as soon as he can," he suggested. And as the detective turned to go: "Just one other thing, Dennis. Young Blaire's got my permission to go into town this morning and cash Atherton-Wayne's cheque. You might put someone on his tail, unobtrusively, of course." He waved aside the question that rose to his companion's lips. "No, we've got nothing at all on the lad, but we can't be too careful. This case is getting so that I'm beginning to

suspect myself!"

When the detective had gone, Read pulled a cigar from his pocket, bit the end, lit it and puffed smoke reflectively. He pushed aside the plan of Rookwood Towers and picked up another sheet of paper. Six names were written on it. Read's chair creaked as he leaned back and studied the list.

Sir Anthony Atherton-Wayne.

Elizabeth Blaire.

Edward Blaire.

Dr. Heinrich Hautmann.

Elsa Hautmann.

Reynolds.

These were the individuals mixed up in this chronicle of robbery, fear and murder. Six people, under the same roof as he, any of whom he could arrest at an order. Which one? Was The Owl among these six people or was he an outsider working alone from some isolated base as yet undiscovered? An outsider! The Inspector chewed his cigar to the corner of his mouth, reached forward, picked up a pen and added a name:

Charles Todhunter.

"We are seven," muttered Read grimly. The phrase seemed to amuse him and he chuckled.

At that moment Jeffery walked in. He wrinkled his nose at the fug in the room, for Read had a strong taste in cigars.

"What's the game?" inquired Jeffery. "Smoking a herring?" He crossed to the window and threw it open.

The Inspector clutched at the papers on his desk as the breeze fluttered them.

"Didn't you have enough fresh air in the garden?" he grunted.

Jeffery ignored the remark. He returned to the desk and took a chair.

"I've come here," he told Read, "partly because you wanted me and partly for sanctuary. You've let all hell loose out there. You can't talk without stepping on a bloodhound!"

The Inspector leaned back and folded his arms across an ample chest.

"Well, son," he observed, "we've tried your airy deductions and mental processes. Now we'll see what some good, dyed in the wool spade-work 'll accomplish."

Through the open window, Jeffery could see two beefy gentlemen cross-examining a gardener. He shrugged. "You still think this wholesale invasion necessary?"

His cigar protruding aggressively, Read sat bolt upright.

"Necessary?" he snarled. "Now, you listen to me, son. You know what sort of a reputation we were getting down here? Last night one of the serving maids waylaid me in the corridor. It seems that two white rabbits she'd been keeping for her young brother had got loose." Read waved a finger across the desk. "And, damnitall, she had the sublime nerve to suggest that I put somebody on to finding them!" A splay hand thumped his chest. "Me— Chief Inspector William Read, asked to look for a pair of white rabbits!"

But Jeffery had risen from his seat and was staring at the elder man, his eyes alight, his lips apart.

"Oh, my aunt!" he said softly. "Oh, my glorified, sainted aunt!"

"I'll say it's your sainted aunt," the Inspector grunted. "That was the final straw! I don't care whether Atherton-Wayne's the closest friend of the Grand Duke Ferdinand of Lithuania! I went straight away to ring the Commissioner and put the whole thing before him. And now perhaps we'll get somewhere!"

Jeffery, seated again, stretched his legs and smothered a yawn. "Quite right, Chief," he admitted. "All this hearty activity makes me feel thoroughly ashamed. Are you aware I've only just got up from breakfast? I wonder if it was the maid who brought in the coffee— I mean, the one who spoke to you about her rabbits?"

"How should I know?" The Inspector's tone was short. "Perky little piece with red hair, it was." He glowered across the desk and his tone dripped sarcasm. "Of course, you would have taken down all particulars and made a sort of case-history of the business!"

Jeffery's eyes twinkled.

"We can't afford to ignore the slightest possibility, Chief," he said with mock reproach. "After all, there is a definite connection with this case. Isn't an owl supposed to prey on rabbits— or is it young lambs?" He lit a cigarette. "That's the worst of being a town-dweller. One's natural history becomes so rusty."

Very deliberately, Read took the cigar from his mouth, leaned both hands on the desk and stared at the younger man.

"What's up with you this morning?" he demanded. He swept on before the other could open his mouth. "I haven't worked with you for the past three years without knowing the signs and portents, son." The Inspector stood up, clamped his cigar in his mouth and barked: "You're on to something, eh?"

Mr. Blackburn nodded calmly.

"As you say, Chief, I'm on to something. As a matter of fact, it was something that happened last night."

"Well, come on. Out with it."

"Oh no!" Jeffery shook a dogged head. "You've tried all my airy deductions and mental processes. And you've gently but firmly deposited them all in the ash-can! You'd rather try some good dyed in the wool spade-work." He paused to blow a smoke-ring. "A very laudable decision, too. Go ahead, Mr. Read. You take the high road and I'll take the low road..." The gentle banter dropped abruptly and he rose. "And if I don't clap the handcuffs on The Owl before you, I'll give a banquet for every Jew in Whitechapel!"

Surprise and resentment struggled for mastery in Read's face. It was a very testy old gentleman who snarled:

"We're very sure of ourselves, aren't we?"

"No, Chief." Jeffery's tone was sober. "Not sure by any means." He leaned over and crushed out his cigarette. "You know what I feel like at the moment? A lost person, walking on quicksands towards a tiny flicker of light in the distance. It's just the faintest pin-point in the darkness, and I have only to take one step in the wrong direction and—" he snapped his fingers in the air.

Read was staring at the other, the cigar smouldering unheeded between his fingers.

"For God's sake, son," he muttered, "what are you hinting at?"

The answer was a sharp rap at the door. It opened to admit a small, foxy individual whose keen black eyes flicked around the room. Read barked:

"Well, Armstrong, what is it?"

"Woman outside to see you, Chief," the detective announced. "Dr. Hautmann's daughter."

Jeffery raised his eyebrows.

"The lovely Elsa?" he murmured. "Now what can she want?"

Armstrong stood with his hand on the door.

"Says she has information about something that happened in the night. Will you see her now or will I tell her to come back later?"

Read glanced at Blackburn, who nodded briefly. "All right. We'll see her now."

Both men were conscious of a change in Elsa Hautmann the moment she stepped into the room, although they could put no name to it until later. Outwardly she appeared the same, tastefully dressed, slow-moving and graceful, so that Jeffery was reminded of a summer breeze stirring a field of ripe wheat. But that air of self-possession bordering on arrogance was somehow lacking, and her face was curiously blank, as though the light had gone from it. She stood by the door, uncertainly, twisting a muslin handkerchief in her slender, ringless fingers.

Jeffery, sensing her diffidence, said gently: "You wanted to see us, Miss Hautmann?"

The girl nodded. She took a half step forward. As she moved into the bright glare from the window, he could see her face more clearly and his eyes narrowed. That Elsa Hautmann was oppressed by some brooding anxiety was only too plain. Dark rings about her eyes, which even skilful make-up could not conceal, told of a sleepless night, and there were new lines about her mouth. She stood looking from one man to the other and the fingers that teased and twitched the handkerchief were trembling slightly. Suddenly she wrinkled her nose like a child about to cry, and the words poured forth in a turbulent spate.

"This is a horrible place. You must let us go— my father and I— do you hear? You must let us go! All this that goes on here— it is nothing to do with us— nothing— nothing! Do you understand?"

Jeffery set a chair in place. "Sit down, Miss Hautmann," he invited.

She did so, gingerly, sitting upright as though ready to spring to her feet any instant.

The young man smiled. "Now what's the matter? You can tell us. And I promise we'll listen and help you in every way we can."

He was watching her as he spoke. As though conscious of that unflattering light from the window, Elsa Hautmann pulled her chair a little to one side. Then she relaxed more comfortably. Those long-lashed eyes rested for a moment on Jeffery's face.

"Please do not think I am silly," she said. "But all this I am not accustomed to. Policemen coming into my room, asking this and that, taking my photographs and making funny eyes at me. I am not a criminal. I have done nothing wrong..."

Read leaned his arms on the desk. "If you're unfortunate enough to be staying in a house where there's been murder committed, you must expect these things. We're all sorry if you're being put to any inconvenience, and if you've any definite complaint about my men, I'll investigate it at once and—"

"No, no!" Elsa interrupted. She shrugged slim shoulders. "They are doing their duty, yes. But the days go by and nothing is done about this— this Owl creature. The place is filled with policemen— and yet he comes and goes just as he chooses."

Read's face hardened. "I assure You, miss," he said brusquely, "that we'll soon put a stop to his comings and goings."

"Ach!" The girl almost spat the harsh ejaculation. "Talk, talk, talk, just like a big bull-frog!" Her tilted eyes, glinting green, fixed themselves on Read's slowly crimsoning countenance. "Do you still talk big when I tell you that The Owl was here last night?"

"What's that?" The Inspector was on his feet. "The Owl here?"

"Yes, yes. In the garden, very late. Perhaps after midnight."

"How do you know?"

Elsa Hautmann's fingers tightened in her lap. She passed a tiny pink tongue swiftly over coral lips.

"I saw him." The words were almost inaudible.

Read, black brows drawn, was staring down at her. But if his face mirrored surprise, the expression on Jeffery's face was almost witless.

"Oh no," he murmured, almost in entreaty. "Oh no, it couldn't be!" and he shook his head like a man waking from a dream. With something like a bound, he left his place at the window and sat down on a corner of the desk, looking full into the girl's face.

"Miss Hautmann, are you telling the truth?"

Her eyes never left his own. She said simply: "Dear God, why should I lie?"

"Tell me what happened last night. Everything!"

The fair head nodded. "Last night, after what has happened in the library, I go to my bedroom. I am very tired, although it is not ten by the little clock by my bed. I kiss my papa good night and lock my door, as papa tells me. And no sooner am I in bed than I fall asleep."

The slow even tones, with their slightly guttural edge, paused. Jeffery, in the act of selecting a cigarette, offered his case, but she shook her head.

"I sleep for an hour— perhaps two— I do not know. Then I am awake, and it is bright moonlight outside. For some time I lie there, but never have I felt more wide awake. So I switch on the little light by my bed and look at my clock. It says ten minutes past ten. That is impossible. But it has stopped. Because I am so tired I forget to wind him that night.

"Then I think I will wait for the big clock in the tower to strike. But it seems I lie there for hours and there is no sound— nothing. Now I am really awake, so I get up and the moonlight takes me to the window. Outside it is too beautiful to be real. There is a kind of silver over everything and if I put out my head, I can see one wing of the house, all dark except for a lighted window. Into this I can see. It is Mr. Blaire's room and he is reading in his bed. Then I think that I, too, will put on my light and read my book. But it is so lovely by the window and I have never seen moonlight so bright. And then— then I see it!"

As she paused, Elsa Hautmann gave a little movement of shrinking back into her chair. Something of the terror she had experienced communicated itself to the two listeners, and Jeffery, always sensitive to impressions, felt a tingling of his skin. Read was watching her with narrowed eyes, his mind working. Either this woman was a superb actress or this whole thing mad, ugly and dangerous...

"As I watch, I see one of the moon-cast shadows move. At first I think it is the branch of a tree, waving in the wind. But there is no wind. Then it moves

again and something steps out into the moonlight. I can see only a long black cloak trailing across the grass. It moves forward softly, like a cat, then it stops, then it moves forward again. It goes from shadow to shadow, but as it steps out into the moonshine I see it is carrying something..."

"Something?" prompted Jeffery.

"All I can see is something white, with no shape and not big. The shadow slips across the lawn to the little lily-pond near the glass-house. I can hear a soft splash. Only once do I see this creature before it goes among the dark trees. But the white thing is gone."

Read nodded slowly. "Popped it in the lily-pond, eh?" He turned to his companion. "Jeff, would you get Connolly on to dragging that pool straight away?" He raised his voice after Blackburn's departing figure. "Tell him to bring whatever he finds in here." Then he addressed the girl.

"Miss Hautmann, when you saw this happen, why didn't you give the alarm?"

She looked up. "But I tried to," she said quickly. "I put on my dressing-gown and go to Mr. Blackburn's room. It is but two doors away from my own. I knock, but there is no answer. Then I grow afraid—"

"Afraid for Jeff?"

Elsa Hautmann shook her head. Her eyes widened. "No, but for myself. The house is so silent. The passages so dark. I think of what happened to Mr. Ashton. And as I stand there, it seems that there are queer shapes all around me. So I run back to my room, afraid, and lock the door and cry into my pillow. And I can sleep no more that night."

Her voice quivered. There were tiny pearls of tears on her cheeks, and she dabbed furtively with the slip of muslin. So woebegone and childlike did she seem in that moment that Read, sentimentalist at heart, thawed at the sight. He came around the desk and patted the girl on the shoulder.

"There now, Miss Hautmann," he said gruffly. "Don't let's have you breaking up about it. It's a pretty raw time for all of us, but you don't make it any easier by going to pieces." He paused awkwardly, conscious of the banality of his words. "Now, you just go to your room and lie down and have a nice cup of tea."

Elsa Hautmann rose and flashed him a grateful smile. "Please," she said primly, "I am sorry I called you a bull-frog. You forgive me?"

The Inspector turned away. "Forget it," he grunted. "We all lose our heads at times." The girl reached out slender fingers and to Read's profound embarrassment, she gave his horny hand a warm squeeze. The next moment she was gone from the room.

"Well, I'll be damned!" gasped William Read, and his colour was still high

when Jeffery returned. The Inspector made great business of relighting his cigar as the young loan took the recently vacated chair.

"Connolly's on the job now," he announced. "We'll soon know if the lovely Elsa was telling the truth."

Read tossed a burnt match-end through the window. "What do you think of her story, son?"

"One part of her tale was authentic," the young man returned. "Blaire certainly sat up reading most of the night."

"How do you know?"

"For the simple reason he kept me awake, too." Jeffery grinned at the bewilderment in the other's face. "It's no enigma, Chief. Young Blaire buttonholed me in the corridor last night and asked me if I'd do him the favour of sharing his room. He frankly admitted he was afraid to sleep alone, particularly after the finding of that note in the library. So I turned in on the divan in his bedroom." Jeffery stretched. "The young blighter talked to me half the night and kept the light on reading for hours. That's why I slept in late this morning."

Read's face cleared. "So that's why you weren't in your room!" He explained Elsa Hautmann's excursion to Jeffery's apartment, and barely had he finished when a knock came to the door. It opened to admit Connolly. He was carrying a muddy bundle, dripping wet. The detective crossed and held it up to view.

"Got it without any trouble at all," he announced. "Where do you want it, Chief?"

Read was clearing the papers from his desk. "Just here, Dennis," and, as the other deposited the bundle before his superior, "that'll be all for the moment."

Jeffery was eyeing the stained parcel. "Looks as if we might have misjudged the lady after all," he commented. Reaching out a hand, he weighed the bundle. "Surprisingly heavy. Wonder what's inside?"

The Inspector was taking a pocket-knife from his waistcoat. "We'll soon know," he grunted. "Hold it steady, son." He sawed at a string which gave abruptly; the wrapped bundle unrolled and something fell with a clatter to the floor. Read's face was a study in surprised disappointment.

"Two pieces of rock," he muttered. "Now, what's so mighty incriminating about that?"

Jeffery said calmly: "Relatively unimportant— except as weights." The Inspector turned, to see his companion holding an irregularly shaped piece of canvas material. "This is the incriminating evidence The Owl wanted to conceal. Recognize it Chief?"

Read's eyes glittered. "By hokey, I do! That's the strait jacket that

disappeared from the vaults yesterday!"

"Exactly! The strait jacket that imprisoned young Blaire." Jeffery's tone reflected his rising excitement. "No wonder our mysterious friend wanted to get this out of his possession." In his agitation, he shook the garment in Read's face. The action dislodged a soft pulp of material which had been clinging to a fold in the canvas. The Inspector pounced on it almost before it reached the floor.

"What's this?" With eager fingers, he was picking at the water-soaked ball. It fell apart, half a dozen squares of fine cambric, now stained and ruined by the slime of the pond. It was Blackburn who identified them.

"They're part of this outfit," he announced. "Blaire was gagged with a wad of handkerchiefs. It's a pity..." but the words died on his lips.

Read had thrust the corners of three handkerchiefs under his nose. "Take a look at that!" he barked.

Embroidered in each corner in a certain fanciful design were two letters. A double A entwined. Jeffery gave a slow whistle of astonishment and tossed the strait jacket into a corner.

"You know, Chief," he remarked, "somehow, I don't think Atherton-Wayne will be writing to the Commissioner after all."

THE CLOCK in the tower was striking ten-thirty when Sir Anthony Atherton-Wayne entered his apartment in the south wing, closed the door and turned the key in the lock.

A stocky shadow passing the window drew his attention. He crossed and stood watching, partly hidden by the heavy drapes. Outside, two thick-set men were kneeling in the gravel path flanking the lawn; one was measuring with tape, the other writing in a note-book. The baronet wrinkled his nose in disgust and dragged the curtains together with a jerk that was almost vindictive. He returned to his desk and sat down, thin fingers teasing thinner lips, eyes staring vacantly out across the room.

A deferential tap on the door roused him.

"Who is it?" he said sharply.

Through the stout oak, a muffled voice announced: "Reynolds, sir. May I speak with you?"

"No, you may not!" Sir Anthony returned. "Go about your duties!"

The voice persisted. "That is what I wished to see you about, sir. I will only detain you a few moments."

With an irritable shake of his head, Atherton-Wayne crossed to the door, turned the key and threw it open.

"What is it?" he snapped.

Reynolds moved inside and closed the door behind him. Sir Anthony's eyes widened a trifle and his thin brows were raised.

"This would appear to be a very private conversation," he observed coldly. Reynolds stood, fingers entwined, looking at his employer without speaking. There was something curious about his attitude that the baronet could not understand. The humility in the servant's manner seemed more marked than ever, but Atherton-Wayne would have preferred to read the face. But Reynolds, either by accident or design, was standing in a shadow thrown by the draping curtains. At length, the baronet said testily:

"Come, come, my man! What is it?"

Reynolds said: "It has occurred to me, sir, that the tragic death of Mr. Ashton has left you without a secretary." He paused as his employer nodded curtly. "I am wondering if you would consider me for the position."

"God bless my soul!" Atherton-Wayne stared at the servant as if he were some strange freak strayed into the room. "Really, my good man..."

The other shrugged. "I assure you I have the highest qualifications."

Sir Anthony turned away. Picking up a long pencil from his desk, he twisted it in his fingers. "I am not even faintly interested in your qualifications, Reynolds. Indeed, I feel that your suggestion borders dangerously on impudence!"

"Oh no, sir."

"Moreover, I know nothing whatever about you. Surely you must be aware that the position of my secretary is only open to a person of proven integrity and constant discretion."

In the shifting shadows of that room the servant's face was like a pale mask seen under running water.

"I assure you, Sir Anthony, that I can be the soul of discretion. When the police cross-examined me this morning, I was most careful to avoid even the slightest mention of the murder of Colonel Pearson in that Bayswater apartment house five years ago..."

A brittle crack sounded through the room. The pencil between Atherton-Wayne's fingers splintered and fell soundlessly on the carpet. The baronet spun round and his face was that of a man who looks upon death. He swayed a little as he tried to speak, but only a dry croak came forth.

"Reynolds— you..." he choked, and was silent.

The servant bowed his head. "I can quite understand you being upset, sir. It would be most embarrassing if that case were recalled just at the moment."

By his sides, Atherton-Wayne's hands clenched and unclenched. His eyes avoided that grey man in the shadows. "What— what do you want?" he said huskily.

"Surely I made that clear, sir?" The deferential tone was edged with mockery. "I am applying for the position of your secretary, made vacant by Mr. Ashton's unfortunate death."

"In other words, those are your terms?"

Reynolds inclined his head. "You will find me a wry efficient secretary, sir. And I am sure the appointment will be— er— to our mutual advantage, shall we say?"

The baronet took a handkerchief from his sleeve and patted his forehead. For a moment he hesitated, then he turned away. "Very well. You leave me no option in the matter."

"Thank you, sir. I need not detain you longer." Reynolds moved to the door. "I think you will find me a most efficient secretary, Sir Anthony. Much more valuable than poor Mr. Ashton." He paused as Atherton-Wayne turned.

"Naturally," he continued smoothly, "because of that increased value I fear I may be a little more expensive than your former secretary. Thank you, Sir Anthony." The door closed and he was gone.

For some seconds the baronet remained staring at the portal, then he shrugged his shoulders as if to dislodge something that crouched there. He turned and, as though recollecting something, he glanced at his wrist-watch. The tiny hands pointed to eleven-forty-five. Atherton-Wayne nodded, as though making up his mind and, crossing to a panel in the wall, opened it swiftly. A small wall-safe was revealed. Sir Anthony's fingers worked the combination, pulled open the door and extracted a small wooden box. Carrying this carefully, he made his way back to the desk. Seating himself, he opened the box and took out a small phial of colourless liquid. Holding it between thumb and forefinger he stared at it thoughtfully. There was an expression of indecision on his face. He had the air of a man faced with two important issues, one of which must be chosen. Suddenly his face cleared and, reaching for the telephone, he dialled a number.

The seconds ticked by. In that silent room the muffled burring of the ringing signal, at the other end, sounded tinnily. Then it was broken and a voice crackled through the receiver.

"This is Atherton-Wayne," the baronet announced. "Would you put me through to Berlitski? And hurry, please; it is most urgent!"

IN HER ROOM, Elizabeth Blaire lay in bed, turning over in her fingers a long envelope the maid had handed her with the breakfast-tray.

The girl had by no means recovered from her ordeal in the passage. But she had only a vague recollection of events following her unnerving discovery. Incidents returned fleetingly; the blinding light in her eyes as she staggered

back through the panel, supported by Jeffery, into the Oak Room; the gentle hands of the motherly housekeeper undressing her; Dr. Newbury's anxious face and the bitter tang of a potion on her lips. And then the cool smoothness of sheets and pillow as she snuggled deep down and sleep laid thin dark veils, one by one, across her aching brain.

A drugged slumber, heavy and dreamless, claimed her until the maid entered, throwing back the curtains and filling the room with morning sunlight. The servant had bobbed respectfully, placed the breakfast-tray on the little table by her bed and retired. Elizabeth, half raising herself, had noticed a letter propped up against the silver teapot. She sat up, still only half-awake and took the envelope. It had apparently been delivered only that morning; plain across the stamp was the post-mark "London," then, as she lowered her eyes, she realized that her name and address were in the handwriting of Robert Ashton.

In that moment the events of the past night flooded back into her mind. Her eyes rested on that so-familiar calligraphy for a moment, then the outlines blurred in the tears that misted her eyes. Bob's writing. Dear, lovable, slow-thinking, stolid Bob. Little pictures came crowding back into her mind, irrelevant images like the tiny bald patch that showed pink on the crown of his curly pate, the worried wrinkle between his eyes as he wrestled mentally with a problem, the dependability of him, typified in the way he stood, feet planted firmly, head thrust just a little forward. That was how she had first seen him, she remembered, twelve months before. She had come down to the Towers to a party her brother was giving in his cottage and had noticed this sturdily built young man watching her with interest. He had caught her eye, given that shy half-smile and then, rather haltingly, requested a dance. He was a surprisingly good dancer.

"Oh, Bob, Bob!" she whispered brokenly, and groped blindly under the pillow for her handkerchief.

She realized that she was going to miss him more than she had ever imagined possible. In that forlorn moment she knew that the very thing about him that tended to irritate her, his prosy matter-of-factness, was the solid rock to which she had unconsciously clung in the dark tides that washed about her. At that thought, she cried anew. It did her good. Slowly the ache in her heart lessened, to be replaced by another and bitterer sentiment, the determination never to rest until she had performed what part she could in avenging this cowardly murder of a good man.

So busy had been her thoughts that she had forgotten the letter. Now she picked it up. Evidently the missive had been posted from the Towers to the city (she recognized the crest on the stationery) and then re-mailed from there. Why? With slightly trembling fingers she slit the envelope, extracted the sheet

of paper and began to read. The communication was hurriedly written in Ashton's big sprawling hand and it was dated the previous day.

Dearest Betsy (the letter began),

I am sending this communication through the post because I dare not trust it to anyone under this roof and I cannot, as circumstances are, give it to you myself. Don't think I'm an alarmist, but as I hinted to you this morning, this business of The Owl goes far deeper than anyone suspects. In fact, now that I have the full details worked out, it frightens me very badly— and you know, Betsy, I'm not the type that frightens easily.

Now, you know my nature only too well. I'm not brilliant, but once I got my nose down to something the old bulldog isn't in it. I've worked this whole thing out, partly from some chance information that came my way and partly from things I've seen and heard in this house. And I must be right! When you read what I've written in the other envelope, your first thought will be that I've gone stark, raving mad. But when you see how everything fits together, you'll know you've been a witness to one of the most amazing criminal plots of modern times.

Elizabeth put the letter on one side and peered into the long envelope. There was an enclosure inside. She extracted it and her eyes widened a little as she read the words written across one corner.

To Elizabeth Blaire. To be opened only in the event of my death.

With a puzzled shake of her head she turned back to the letter.

I've known you long enough to be certain of your courage and initiative, so I feel sure you won't do anything silly when I tell you this. Somehow or other, The Owl has guessed that I know the truth. Therefore, he's going to stop at nothing to shut my mouth before it's too late. Now, I'm pretty capable of taking care of myself, but if by chance something should happen to me I want you to open that envelope, read what I've written and take it straight to Blackburn. Is that clear?

And now, Betsy, I pray you'll never have to open it. I only hope that I'll be by your side when you receive this letter and that I can explain it all personally. But should anything go wrong, well, we've had some mighty good times together, you and I, times that were worth a great deal to me. And so, good luck, dearest!

*Yours affectionately,
Bob.*

Elizabeth Blaire remained staring at that letter for a long time. Then slowly she folded it and pressed it to her lips. *I only hope I shall be by your side when*

you receive this... Robert had penned those words with slow confidence, little dreaming how each separate syllable was to twist like a knife in her heart. She sat white-faced and dry-eyed, for this was something too deep for tears, too fine for pallid snivelling sympathy. On the table by her bedside the silver teapot gleamed untouched, the crisp toast hardened while the girl stared unseeingly out into the sunlit garden.

Then slowly she turned away and her eyes came to rest on the other envelope, lying on the quilt. She snatched at it almost fiercely. Could it be really true, she asked herself— did she now actually hold the key to this dark riddle? Her fingers tightened about the stationery so that it crackled protestingly. A man very near in her affections had died for this! At that thought, her heart began to pound and she was conscious of a fluttering in her throat. Involuntarily she glanced over her shoulder. Was she to learn the truth so easily? Would no movement be made to stop her? If she was to rip that sealed flap now, what would happen?

With fingers that trembled, Elizabeth Blaire tore open the second envelope...

There came a sudden crashing detonation that gouged every strained nerve in her body, so that she gave a quick, bitten-off scream. Then she realized that someone had knocked sharply on her door.

The enclosure— where to hide it? Quickly! Her eyes flashed here and there, to rest on the embroidered cover of the breakfast-tray. A second and more urgent knocking finalised her indecision. With a quick movement she lifted the cover and thrust the opened envelope underneath the one corner. Then:

"C—" she had trouble in enunciating "— come in," she called.

The door opened and in walked Dr. Newbury. Elizabeth gave a little sigh and lay back on her pillows, conscious that her forehead was dewed with perspiration.

Newbury, small black bag in hand, crossed and looked down at his patient, shaking his head in deep reproach. "My dear young lady," he asked, "what on earth have you been doing?"

The girl forced her stiff lips into a smile. "Why, nothing, Doctor."

"Nothing!" The doctor's rich, fruity tones rose a trifle. "Bless my soul, you look as if you had just run a mile in record time." He cleared a space on the little table and set down his bag. Then, very deliberately, he brought a large, turnip-faced watch from his pocket, and, stooping, gathered her pulse between finger and thumb. His thick eyebrows arched.

"Tch, tch! This is terrible! And I ordered you complete relaxation!"

"I know, Doctor." Elizabeth avoided his eye. "But after what I went through

last night it isn't very easy to relax."

Newbury frowned. "You didn't sleep?"

Tell him anything, a small voice within her urged. Get rid of him— any pretext, anything! And the girl shook her head. "Not very well," she murmured. "I was wondering if you could give me something now. If I wasn't disturbed, perhaps I could sleep this morning."

"Most decidedly!" Newbury turned away, opened his bag and began to busy himself with the contents. "You can't go on like this, Miss Blaire. You'll have us all seriously worried." Dexterously, he was mixing ingredients from various stoppered bottles into a medicine glass. Presently he turned.

"Now, young lady, drink this down and I don't want to hear a word out of you for the next five hours!" And as Elizabeth took the tiny glass, he added: "It will probably make your heart pound for a minute or so, but don't worry. It's a nerve draught. Drink it, then lie back quietly."

"Thank you, Doctor." The girl was fumbling about the bed with her free hand. "Oh dear, I wonder if you'd get me a clean handkerchief out of that drawer over there?" She gestured to a dressing-table set under the window. Newbury nodded and turned away. Swiftly, Elizabeth lifted the top of the teapot and poured into it the contents of the medicine glass. When the doctor tossed the folded handkerchief on the bed, she was lying back on the pillow with closed eyes. The chink of glassware told her that Newbury was re-packing his bag. As it clicked shut the doctor spoke.

"Feel better?"

Elizabeth opened her eyes and smiled. "I think I do."

The doctor crossed to the window and drew the curtains, darkening the room. Then he picked up his bag and made for the door. He spoke with his hand on the knob. "Don't worry, my dear," he said. "Try to sleep. I'll drop in later on and have a peep at you." With a reassuring nod he went out.

For some seconds after the door had clicked behind him, the girl remained motionless. Then cautiously she put forth a hand and retrieved the envelope from beneath the tray-cloth. Holding it tightly she jumped from the bed, and crossing to the window pulled back the curtains. Quickly she inserted two fingers into the torn flap, only to withdraw them with a sudden breath of astonishment.

The envelope was empty!

CHIEF INSPECTOR READ, with Mr. Blackburn at his elbow, knocked sharply on the stout oak that barred the entrance to Atherton-Wayne's study. There was no answer. Read knocked again, more peremptorily. This time the baronet's voice bade them enter. The two men passed through. As Jeffery closed the

door, Read set his back against it.

Atherton-Wayne was sunk dejectedly into an armchair. He made no attempt to rise as the Inspector said curtly: "We'd like a few minutes conversation with you, sir, if we may."

The baronet made a weary gesture. "Since I appear to have forfeited all rights to my personal liberty," he said coldly, "I cannot refuse. I can only ask, however, that you keep this interview as short as possible."

"Suits me." Read advanced and tossed a piece of paper on to the desk. "I'd like you to take a look at that, sir." Atherton-Wayne hesitated, then he rose sluggishly as though his extremities were leaden. He took up the message, glanced over it and raised his eyes. "Where did this come from?"

"It was found on the floor of the library last night, after you had left."

The baronet shrugged his shoulders. Holding the paper between finger and thumb, he dropped it neatly into the wastepaper basket.

"That's my answer," he said curtly.

Jeffery, watching closely, spoke. "You are a very brave man, Sir Anthony."

The other's eyes met his for a brief space. Then he smiled and it was like winter sunlight glinting on ice. "On the contrary, Blackburn, I am extremely cowardly. It is The Owl who is brave, daring to threaten me when"—and now the smile was twisted—"when the vast resources of Scotland Yard are down here to protect me." He returned to his chair. "Is that all you wished to see me about?"

The Inspector took a step forward. He rapped the words sharply. "What's going on down there in those vaults?"

But the baronet was not to be caught a second time. He merely raised his eyebrows in pained surprise and his voice was almost languid when he replied.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean. I have no knowledge of anything going on, as you express it, in the vaults."

Faced with this calm denial, Read seemed temporarily at a loss. It was Jeffery who took up the questioning.

"As you know, sir," he said quietly, "following the murder of Ashton, detectives examined that passage behind the Oak Room. They found one fork blocked off by an iron door. The other fork leads down into the vaults and out into the garden by the lily-pond near the conservatories." And as Atherton-Wayne nodded, "Down in the vaults, however, our men discovered a second iron door, blocking the exit of the fork. May we inquire what lies between those two doors?"

"As far as I know," the baronet replied, "nothing but a mass of fallen masonry."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Blackburn.

Sir Anthony shifted restlessly in his chair. "Two years ago," he explained, "a guest in this house discovered that passage behind the Oak Room and decided to explore. He lost his way and narrowly escaped injury when part of the tunnel roof caved in. I decided the place was too dangerous and had both ends of the passage blocked."

Jeffery nodded. "In that case, why did you deny any knowledge of such a passage when I inquired a few days ago?"

"Because I had no wish to see the unfortunate experience repeated," the baronet replied.

Blackburn was silent, considering. Was there a ring of genuine truth in the tart phrases, or was it a clever masquerade? The Inspector, who had been listening with ill-concealed impatience, put the next question.

"In that case," he queried, "why are the hinges on both doors freshly oiled?"

A frown darkened the baronet's face. "I find that very hard to believe."

"Nevertheless, one of my men assures me it's so!"

Atherton-Wayne shrugged. "Oh— mere hearsay." His tone was slightly contemptuous. "I would suggest that you examine the door for yourselves before asking me a ridiculous question like that."

The Inspector's tolerance, strained by this unproductive interview, snapped suddenly. With a face like thunder, he wheeled and barked at his companion: "Come on, son, we're wasting time!" Shepherding Blackburn before him, he tramped heavily from the room, closing the door with unnecessary force behind him.

They trod the passage in silence. As they reached the bend, Jeffery cast a look at Read's black, set face. "Whither now?" he asked.

"Vaults!"

Within a few minutes they were clear of the house. The Inspector's heavy boots crunched on the gravel flanking the lily-pond. Now they had reached the trees and walked in a cool green undersea light that flickered and danced to the pattern of the weaving branches above. Some distance away a round dome of weathered masonry protruded like some giant mushroom and it was towards this that the two men turned their steps. At one side a flight of stone steps, broken and moss-covered, led down into the earth. Read produced a torch from his pocket and flashed it into the depths. Then he turned to where Jeffery was peering closely at some words on the stone, almost obliterated by the passing of the years.

"What's that?" he snapped.

"Just an inscription," the young man returned mildly. He traced the carven stone with his finger. "*Facilis descensus Averno*," he murmured.

"Meaning what?"

"The descent into hell is easy. In other words, it's much easier to get into trouble than get out of it." Jeffery made a grimace. "Curious sense of humour on someone's part, don't you think?"

Before the Inspector had chance to answer, a voice rapped sharply:

"Put up your hands, baby-face!"

The Inspector whirled with a snarl of fury, then froze motionless. Standing in the shadow of the nearest tree, a man with a shuttered, tight-lipped face was regarding them woodenly. A stray shaft of sunlight flamed in his copper-coloured hair and glinted on the muzzle of a small black automatic held in one steady hand. Jeffery heard Read give a sudden ejaculation amazement.

"Recognize me, eh, Inspector?" The tight lips barely moved. "When you sent your bloodhounds ferreting around the 'Green Man', you never guessed they'd bring me to light, did you?"

The nasal twang of the voice, the reference to the inn, gave Jeffery a sudden inspiration.

"Todhunter!"

Read's tone was bitter. "Is that so? Well, son, he may be known as Todhunter down here, but in the Central Record Office this bird goes under the name of Red Lacey, one of the greasiest crooks that ever crossed the broad Atlantic!"

Chapter 7

Monday, June 19th (Continued)

"WELL, I'LL BE HANGED," exclaimed Jeffery, staring.

The humour of the situation seemed to appeal to Lacey. His tight lips twitched slightly. "Me first, Buddy! A gypsy told me."

Read's partly raised hand trembled with suppressed rage. "Listen to me, you sneaking, gutter-bred rat!" he snarled. "Where do you think you are—Chicago? Drop that gun!"

"Another word like that and I'll drop you— fair and square in your tracks!" Lacey took a step forward. "Hear that, bonehead?" His eyes flicked in Jeffery's direction. "Take off your tie and bind the big bozo's hands behind him." And as the young man did not move, "You got just ten seconds, bud!"

"You," retorted Mr. Blackburn calmly, "can go to hell!"

Both men saw Lacey's finger tighten around the trigger. Both men ducked almost simultaneously. Jeffery, however, was not quite fast enough. There was a sudden *plunk!* as of two cupped hands-brought sharply together and Mr. Blackburn's hat leapt from his head. As it settled on the ankle-deep grass, he saw where the bullet had ploughed a neat incision through the crown.

"You got five seconds," Mr. Lacey announced. He was removing the silencer from the automatic.

"Sorry, Chief," the young man murmured. Read submitted to the indignity with a snort like an angry bull. Lacey watched the operation with a coldly critical eye, and when Jeffery had finished:

"Now turn round, both of you, and march!"

The Inspector, his face a rich purple, made a last appeal. "Lacey, I'm warning you—"

The nose of the automatic was poked roughly into his ribs.

"Down into the vaults," Lacey commanded harshly. "Walk— don't talk!"

At the head of the stairs he felt in his pocket with his free hand, produced a flashlight and clicked it on. One behind the other, Read and Jeffery passed downward. Once in the darkness of the tunnel leading to the vaults they were at a hopeless disadvantage. Outlined as they were in that circle of light, Lacey could see and forestall any possible break for freedom. The trio marched in silence. Read walked with hunched shoulders, glaring suspiciously right and left into the darkness. His shadow, sliding before him, was that of some huge, distorted orang-outang.

They were almost to the vault itself when things happened with disconcerting suddenness. Their first intimation was when they heard Lacey

give a quick ejaculation, then the flashlight spilt its radiance drunkenly about the groined roof. Next moment they heard the rush of a moving body and, simultaneously, the passage echoed with violent movement. The flashlight crashed to the floor and died. Both men wheeled. Dimly outlined against the feeble light that percolated down from the steps, they saw Lacey writhing and twisting. The walls threw back the noise of the conflict; the heavy breathing and muttered curses of Lacey and the grunting and panting of his unseen assailant. Uncertain what to do, Read and Jeffery stood irresolute, pressed back against the rough masonry.

The struggle ceased almost as abruptly as it had started. They had a quick glimpse of a flailing arm; there came the unmistakable crack of bone against bone, a sudden tremulous gasp and the dancing mass fell apart. One half lay motionless on the stones, the other rose unsteadily and seemed to pause. Then, before either Read or Jeffery could move, the unknown had whisked past them. Even as they realized and sprang forward, the distant clang of an iron door rang like a mocking challenge in their ears.

"Matches, son," snapped Read.

Jeffery found a box and struck one, holding it high. The Inspector, his hands still tethered, shouldered his way forward. "There's a torch in my right-hand pocket. Get it out and then see if you can untie me."

Tossing the match away, the young man went to work. The torch found, he clicked it on and holding it between his teeth had his companion's hands free in a few minutes. Read, massaging his wrists, grunted:

"Now let's take a peep at Mr. Clever Lacey!"

Jeffery held the torch downward while his companion bent over the unconscious figure on the floor of the tunnel. Lacey's face, never prepossessing at its best, was sadly disfigured. Under a lacerated brow, one eye was swollen and slowly purpling. Three long scratches marked one side of his face to meet a split and bleeding lip. But the blow that had laid the gangster out had left its mark on the narrow, rat-like jaw. Here an irregular-shaped scarlet weal had formed, through which little pin-points of blood were slowly seeping. Jeffery, surveying this unhappy visage, shook a foreboding head.

"Among the things I would rather not be," he murmured, "include Mr. Lacey waking to a cold, unsympathetic world!"

Read, who had the injured man's head on his knee, looked up. "I suppose we can thank your black-bearded friend for this?" he grunted.

"It looks like it."

The Inspector eyed the battered face again. "Well, son, when we do dig him out, it's a job for Connolly and his strong-arm brigade. I've got too much sense to go cornering a wildcat at my age! Friend Lacey looks as if he's run up

against a threshing machine."

Jeffery nodded. "You know why? Blackbeard was terrified, Chief. Those injuries of Lacey's are the marks of a man wild with fear— literally battling for his life."

"But why should he attack Lacey at all?"

"As I see it, Blackbeard was stalking us," the young man replied. "For one thing, we were between him and his shelter. For another, we were plainly visible in that circle of light, whereas Lacey couldn't be seen at all. That was the cause of the trouble."

"How?"

"Blackburn must have been pretty close behind Lacey. Our crooked friend heard him and swung the torch round. Blackbeard, in sudden blind panic, closed with Lacey at once. Fought like a tiger because he thought that, at any moment, we'd be in the fray."

Read gave a snort that echoed along the passage. "Risk my hide for this rat? Not on your sweet life! He's had this lesson coming to him for a long, long time." He was easing the unconscious man into sitting position against the wall. "And what in the name of Noah is he doing down here at all?"

"As Todhunter, ostensibly to buy Blaire's formula."

"What with?" the Inspector snapped. "The last time this crook was financial was when he stole the contents of a blind flower-seller's box in Trafalgar Square!" He paused and his voice slowed. "Wait a minute. Say that Lacey is The Owl. Some of those robberies he pulled off early in the piece'd bring him in quite a nice little wad, even allowing for what the fence would take."

"Hmm," murmured Mr. Blackburn doubtfully.

"Well?" the big man grunted. "Got any better suggestion?"

"Only that this is neither the time nor the place to dwell upon the possibilities of the case," Jeffery returned mildly. "I suggest we get Lacey back to the house. You never know. When he comes round he may decide that confession is good for the soul."

"If he has one!" Read bent down and put his hands under Lacey's limp arms. "All right, son. Shove that torch in your pocket and grab his feet." He shifted uncomfortably as the light snapped out. "Come on, Jeff, make it snappy. This place is giving me the willies!"

IN ONE OF THE SMALL summer-houses that dotted the wide gardens of Rookwood Towers, Elizabeth Blaire sat alone.

It was the gentle hour between sunset and dusk. In the west the sky was a rich gold, and the sun's passing smeared the horizon with long purple clouds like brush-strokes. The half-light seemed to enrich the colouring of the garden

and it took on an aloof dignity that was very near beauty. The hush of approaching night was omnipresent, even the wind was stilled.

Elizabeth had seen the gentle loveliness of the fading day from her room. With a mind tortured by doubts and fears she had come out into the garden, drawn by the soft tranquillity of the evening. In the house it was impossible to think clearly and logically. Out here, in this little world of soft scents and half-heard sounds, she could better sort out the fantastic jigsaw of suspicions that crowded her head.

Had Dr. Newbury removed the name of The Owl from that envelope? The girl felt in the pocket of her dress, brought out the empty enclosure and stared at it in the fading light. "*To Elizabeth Blaire. To be opened only in the event of my death.*" It was common knowledge throughout the Towers that Ashton had known the true identity of The Owl. Had Newbury seen this inscription on the envelope, recognized Robert's handwriting, and known intuitively what the enclosure contained? In that case, what had prompted the removal of the contents? Mere curiosity— or something deeper, more sinister in its implication?

Elizabeth, with these questions ticking ceaselessly in her mind, had found rest impossible. She had risen shortly before lunch with the determination of seeking out Jeffery. But Blackburn was closeted with the Inspector, and the entire house was buzzing with the news that Mr. Todhunter was in reality a dangerous American crook; moreover, this protean gentleman was already languishing behind double-locked doors in one of the rooms on the ground floor.

On the horns of dilemma, the girl had hung about the corridors the best part of the afternoon, hoping for some glimpse of Jeffery. But he could not have been more elusive if he were avoiding her deliberately. Like an unquiet spirit, she moved from room to room, formulating plans and rejecting them. She finally decided to confide in her brother, but on going to his apartment discovered that he had not yet returned home. Then it was that she had decided to come into the garden. But after half an hour of mental wrestling she was no nearer the solution of the problem than before.

In the rich peacock-blue of the sky, a lone star twinkled. It was reflected in the dark pile of the Towers, as one by one windows began to light up. A wind, rising far down the valley, brushed the trees with furtive fingers, and Elizabeth, with a little shiver, rose to her feet. Night was stealing through the garden, and something whispered to her that it was not good to be out alone.

She was almost running when she reached the entrance to the Towers.

Inside, her fancied terror vanished. Three detectives stood in a little group before a suit of armour near the main entrance, another sat on an oak settle

making entries in a note-book. This is sanctuary, she told herself, but her strange restlessness persisted. She had the sudden desire for human companionship, to talk and laugh with somebody. Back into her mind crept the memory of Robert, but with a little stiffening of her chin she thrust the thought away. Not that. Not now. Not when I'm so wretchedly lonely.

With a little dejected droop of her shoulders, Elizabeth started upstairs. On the landing she met Mrs. Tamworth, who was taking several garments from one of the maids. The housekeeper at the Towers was a middle-aged, rather stout matron with a below-stairs reputation of a martinet. Rather given to black lace and bracelets, Cornelia Tamworth balanced this tendency towards the exotic with nightly Bible readings, a horror of strong waters, and a primitive but powerful faith in astrology. She turned as the girl approached.

"Good evening, Miss Elizabeth. Its nice to see you up and about again."

The girl smiled. "Thank you, Mrs. Tamworth. And it was very kind of you to look after me the way you did." Her eyes rested on the mackintosh and thick grey woollen muffler over the housekeeper's plump arm. "Somebody tempting the clerk of the weather?" she asked brightly.

"Now you're the second one to ask me that in three minutes," the housekeeper replied. "Mr. Blackburn wanted to know the same thing. I told him I was taking them along to Sir Anthony's room. He just rang through for them."

Elizabeth tried to make her tone casual. "Where is Mr. Blackburn?"

"Gone down to the village with the Inspector." Mrs. Tamworth, sensing her companion's willingness to gossip, edged closer. "Naturally, they were curious why Sir Anthony should need an overcoat and muffler on a hot August evening, but after tonight I've just got past wondering the reason of things."

"Why?" asked the girl. "What happened tonight?"

Mrs. Tamworth paused, as though making up her mind.

Then she said abruptly: "Miss Elizabeth, why should anyone in their right senses want to steal an old pair of curtains?"

"Curtains?"

"The old pair from Mr. Blaire's bedroom," the housekeeper said firmly. "They were in place at the window when Clarice did the room out this afternoon. Half an hour ago, when she went in to turn down the beds, they were gone!"

The girl shrugged. "It's rather unimportant, isn't it? After all, one of the policemen probably took them down."

The housekeeper, in the act of transferring the raincoat from one arm to the other, paused.

"Don't talk to me about the police, miss," she said scornfully. "I could tell

them all a thing or two if I liked to open any mouth!" She lowered her voice and glanced cautiously over her shoulder. "Who is it, for instance, that eats all the food that goes to Sir Anthony's room each night?"

Elizabeth stared at her. "Good heavens, how should I know? Sir Anthony himself, I suppose."

Mrs. Tamworth shook a stubborn head. "Not he! Doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive, the master. Up till a month ago he couldn't look at supper—not even a glass of hot milk. Then all at once he changes his mind and orders enough food for a labourer each night. *And* cleans it all up! That tray comes down in the morning with barely a crumb left on it."

The conversation had run into channels rather displeasing to Elizabeth. She had enough questions of her own to answer. In an attempt to divert the housekeeper's garrulous flow, she glanced at her wrist-watch and gave a sudden ejaculation.

"Heavens! I'll never be dressed in time for dinner!" She smiled and moved away. "Actually, I'm not supposed to be out of bed, you know. Dr. Newbury would be furious if he saw me."

"Then you'd better keep out of his way," Mrs. Tamworth warned her, "because he's staying the night here."

The girl half turned. "Why?"

The housekeeper's face hardened. "That wicked Yankee has to have the doctor's care all night, if you please!" She tossed her head. "If you ask me, miss, he got just what he deserved. Kindness is wasted on the devil's disciples!" She was about to add more when the indicator on the landing buzzed imperiously. Mrs. Tamworth gave a sudden start and recalled her position. "That will be the master," she said quickly. "Excuse me, miss." Smoothing the garments over her arm she hurried away to Sir Anthony's rooms.

Elizabeth's mind revolved about this new information as she continued her walk. An impulse to confide in Atherton-Wayne was quickly stifled by Mrs. Tamworth's furtive suggestions. And what of Dr. Newbury? Should she go to his room and confront the man with a straight accusation? But a moment's reflection convinced her that this would be merely a waste of time. If Newbury had taken the paper with any sinister intent he would certainly not admit the theft.

She was almost to her room now. Automatically, as she walked, her hand sought the pocket of her dress; abruptly she halted with fingers groping wildly. But the pocket was empty.

Swiftly, she turned and looked along the passage. The envelope had been in her pocket when she left the summer-house; she remembered folding and stuffing it away as she rose. It must have worked loose during her flight across

the garden and dropped somewhere in the hall or the corridor. Feverishly she was casting left and right, but the carpeted flooring showed no trace of what she sought. She was feeling in her pocket for a second time when a voice spoke at her elbow.

"Have you lost something, miss?"

It was Reynolds. The servant stood looking at her curiously. Elizabeth, startled by his sudden appearance, stumbled over her answer.

"Er— yes— no— I—" Something in the man's smooth scrutiny made her colour up. She said rather coldly: "It is nothing, Reynolds."

"As you say, miss." His eyes were still riveted on her pale face. "I have a message for you— from your brother."

"He's back?"

"Mr. Blaire returned about five minutes ago. He would like to see you in his room. He said to tell you it was very urgent."

Elizabeth nodded. As she walked quickly towards her brother's room she was conscious that Reynolds was staring after her. She was glad when a bend in the corridor blocked her from his view. Moving to a door, she knocked. Inside, a voice replied:

"Is that you, Betsy?" Then: "Come in, sis."

When she entered and closed the door behind her, Edward Blaire was standing by the elaborate marble fireplace, staring down moodily into the empty grate. As the girl crossed he lifted a dark and worried face to greet her. Elizabeth stopped short.

"Why, Ted! Whatever's the matter?"

Blaire gestured to a chair. "Sit down, Betsy. I want to talk to you."

The girl obeyed. Then: "You scarcely look like a person who has come into a small fortune," she said, with an attempt at lightness. "Did anything happen about Sir Anthony's cheque?"

Blaire said curtly: "Oh no. The cheque was all right."

"Then what is it?"

The young man sat down in the chair opposite and, leaning forward, clasped his hands. He spoke without looking at her.

"I had a bit of a shock today, Betsy. It's— well— sort of cut the ground from under my feet." Now he raised his head and behind his glasses his eyes were sombre. "There's no use beating about the bush. You've always thought of me as your brother, haven't you?"

"Naturally!"

Edward Blaire shook his head. "I'm not, Betsy. I— I'm an adopted child."

The girl half rose. "Ted!"

"Oh, there's no mistake about it!" Weary resignation weighed the young

man's voice. "Pennefeather showed me the actual adoption papers— as our lawyer, he'd taken them over when our"— his tone faltered slightly—"when your parents were killed in that railway accident. It seems my real name is Edward Conway. Your father and mother took me from a foundling home when I was eighteen months old."

Elizabeth sank back into her chair. Despite the incredulity written on her face, instinctively she knew that the young man opposite her was speaking the truth. Here was the explanation of many things that had troubled her; the wide difference in their natures; his brilliant achievements that left her bewildered; the lack of true sympathy between them. For some time now she had suspected that this man came from a different mould, but she had put this odd changeling quality down to some distant ancestral throwback. Always she had stood rather in awe of him; of his cold, hard nature, streaked with those violent temperamental outbursts; of his evasive personality that was almost the antithesis of her own forthright nature. But she had attributed all this to the streak of near-genius that he possessed. Now she knew that all these things had their roots in more logical soil.

She was aware that the young man was watching her closely, as though reading these secret thoughts in her face. Intuitively, the girl realized that his ultra-sensitive make-up must be sorely bruised by this revelation. Elizabeth smiled and, reaching forward, placed a slim hand on his knee. Her voice was purposely light.

"Oh, my dear! What does it matter?"

"Eh?"

"For twenty-five years I've looked upon you as my brother," the girl said gently. "Nothing can change that. In spite of all the legal documents in the world, you'll always be serious old Ted Blaire to me!"

"Betsy!" He caught her hand in his own, holding it so tightly that she almost winced. After a pause, he went on:

"I— I had to tell you. Otherwise, it wasn't fair—"

"Oh, nonsense!" Her tone was almost motherly. "You're making a great deal of fuss of something that doesn't matter a row of pins!"

Blaire released her hand to light a cigarette. "You'd have known the truth when you saw the will..." he began.

"What will?"

"Mine." He dropped the charred match-end on the floor. "That's how it all came out. I took Atherton-Wayne's cheque to Pennefeather and asked him whether he advised banking or investments. The old chap was very serious about it all; pointed out that I was now a comparatively rich man and had I made a will."

"What did you say?"

"Told him a will wasn't necessary. Said that you were the only relative I possessed in the world, and being my sister any money I had would automatically descend to you as next of kin. Then it was that Pennefeather broke the news."

Elizabeth said gently: "Yes?"

Blaire's voice was low. "It seems you're not my next of kin, Betsy. My father is still living somewhere in the north of England." He paused for a moment, then went on: "I wouldn't believe it, until Pennefeather dug out the actual papers. So I had him draw me up a will there and then." His voice slowed. "If anything should happen to me, Betsy, you'll be pretty comfortably off for the rest of your life."

Elizabeth was on her feet, staring down at him. "Ted, you shouldn't have! What about your father?"

Blaire's face flushed, and behind their lenses his eyes glittered angrily. "What's that man to me?" he cried. "What can I possibly owe him— when, as a wee helpless baby, he dumped me into a foundling's home? What possible responsibility can I feel towards a creature like that?" He shook his head. "No, Betsy! I want that money to go to the one person who has shown me kindness and consideration."

"But, Ted—"

The young man rose. "That's all," he said doggedly. "I don't want to talk about it any more. In fact, I want as much as possible to try and block this day completely out of my life."

He turned away, but the girl was by his side in an instant. She laid a hand on his arm. "Ted! You're keeping something back from me. What is it?"

The colour faded suddenly from the young man's face, leaving it deathly pale. He tried to control a slight twitching at one corner of his mouth. "Don't be ridiculous!" he muttered sullenly.

Elizabeth's fingers tightened. "Then why are you so upset?" she demanded. "There's no shame in being an adopted child! That in itself isn't enough to make you so miserable." She peered urgently into his face. "There's something else, isn't there?— something you haven't told me. Isn't there?"

Faced by those accusing eyes, Blaire hesitated. Then he nodded heavily.

"Yes."

The girl said sharply: "Well?"

The words came slowly, forced out one by one. "It's about my father." He avoided her gaze as he spoke. "Naturally, I was curious about him. I asked Pennefeather and couldn't understand why he was so evasive. I put the question to him point-blank; he coughed and muttered, and said something

about not seeing my father for the past five years..."

"He's been away?"

Blaire laughed, a harsh bitter sound. "Oh yes, he's been away all right! Pennefeather had to tell me the truth; he couldn't hedge any longer." The young man's face was as dark as the shadows outside the window. "My dear father was released three months ago from Wormwood Scrubbs, where he'd been serving a prison sentence for attempted murder!"

HALF AN HOUR after Edward Blaire had made his surprising confession to Elizabeth, Chief Inspector William Read faced Jeffery across the private room at the 'Green Man Inn' at Tilling.

"I've brought you down here to talk, son," he began, "because I don't trust a single inch of that place back there. Every time I open my mouth at the Towers I get the impression that those old codgers in the portraits are leaning forward to get an earful."

Jeffery, seated on a rather hard oak settle, nodded. "Very wise, Chief," he murmured. "For some time now I've wanted to get together with you on some sort of *résumé* of this case. It sort of clears the tracks for further work."

"All right," Read agreed. He felt in his pocket and produced a piece of paper. "I've been working on this all the morning. Now, it seems pretty obvious that this Owl is someone under the roof of the Towers. But before we get down to that, let's consider what qualifications any particular individual must have to come under suspicion of being our night-flying friend."

The Inspector paused, and holding up a broad hand began to tick the points off on his fingers.

"First, he must be a crook well versed in the ways of the underworld. Remember how the strong-room of the International Bank was opened— with a blow-torch! The slickness and efficiency of that job made it plain that this was no amateur at the game. It was the work of someone who'd spent the best part of a lifetime in crime. The same thing applies to the lifting of Mortlake's Cellini cup. Everything about that pinch was professional. No bungling, no finger-prints, no tracks of any kind. See what I mean?"

Jeffery nodded. "Point number one: The Owl is a clever professional criminal."

"Good! Now for the second thing." Read tapped his splay finger impressively. "The Owl works alone. In that way he guards against any chance of betrayal. Nobody can talk, because nobody knows anything. Also, there's the big advantage that, in pulling off a job, he collects the lot. There's no splitting with other thick-ears. But this has its disadvantages, as you'll see in a moment. It means that as well as picking up the loot on his own, the Owl has

to dispose of it, too."

"You mean—" began Jeffery, but Read held up his hand.

"All in good time, son." A third finger went up. "Now for the next point. The Owl's what you call theatrical. All this mysterious hotch-potch of black robes and hootin' noises and leaving sinister messages dropped about— that sort of stuff belongs to the films! It doesn't mean an extra grey hair in my head, but it does impress a lot of people who believe in looking under their bed for burglars before they turn in at night. And this skunk is wise enough to see that. Scare the daylights out of people and you can twist 'em around your little finger. That's that!"

"Agreed," said Jeffery. "Go on."

"Fourthly," continued the Inspector, "The Owl must know the Towers like the palm of his hand! The way he comes and goes as he pleases proves that. And he's awake to all those secret passages about the place. Look at the way he carried young Blaire over that roof and down into the vaults.

"And finally, son, The Owl's a killer. That's mighty important in more ways than one, as you know. Criminals, like tradesmen, stick to their own particular technique. Pick-pocket, safe-blower or thug, they rarely step out of their own hierarchy." Read paused and lowered himself into a chair. "Now, Jeff, on this paper I've written seven names. I suggest that we go over each one separately and see which one measures closest to those qualifications mentioned above."

"Very well," agreed Jeffery. "Where do we start?"

"Atherton-Wayne," announced Read.

"All right, Chief. Go ahead." Jeffery seated himself more comfortably and lit a cigarette.

"Atherton-Wayne," resumed Read, "appears, at first sight, a poor suspect. The only qualification that touches him is that he knows the Towers. He obviously isn't a professional crook, and he certainly isn't theatrical. But that bird has money! Is there anything to stop him from employing a professional crook to do the dirty work, putting him wise to the ins and outs of the Towers? None whatsoever!"

"Except," Jeffery pointed out, "the very material obstacle of his cheque! Why should Atherton-Wayne part with fifty thousand pounds— more than twice the sum Blaire was asking, remember— if he could get the formula by darker means?"

"For the simple reason," the Inspector continued, "that his Nibs' hand was forced. I'm willing to wager he'd never have dipped so deeply into his pocket if it hadn't been to save his face."

"And you think the missing-fingered gent he's hiding in the vaults may be the hired assassin?"

"Who else?" grunted Read.

Jeffery shook his head. "In that case, who dropped the note in the library threatening Atherton-Wayne's life?"

"That gentleman himself. If it is Atherton-Wayne, he probably realizes that he's played a losing hand. There's only one thing for him to do now. Direct suspicion away from himself by every possible means and get rid of the blackbearded killer in the vaults. What's more, this theory's borne out by Ashton's murder. That lad was more or less in Atherton-Wayne's confidence, and he had access to all sorts of private correspondence. It's my firm belief that the secretary discovered something fishy, taxed the baronet with it, and Atherton-Wayne tipped the wink to his hired thug. Exit Ashton!"

As he paused, Jeffery nodded. "Very ingenious, Chief— and certainly quite possible. Who's next?"

"That Blaire boy," grunted Read.

Jeffery made a wry face. "Oh, come, Chief," he murmured.

"I know!" the other returned. "An even less likely person than Atherton-Wayne. On the face of it, there seems no earthly motive for Blaire to carry out this reign of terror. He isn't a crook and there seems no reason why he should go to all this trouble to steal a formula that's his in the beginning. But just say that he and his sister and Atherton-Wayne are working this between them."

At the mention of Elizabeth, Jeffery sat up. "Working what?" he snapped.

Read ignored the young man's tone and continued evenly: "I don't say this is right, son, but it is a theory. Blaire discovers this formula. He tells his sister and Atherton-Wayne and immediately a scheme occurs to the baronet. Atherton-Wayne sees a chance to boost the value of the formula up ten times its value. They seize on The Owl robberies— quite a separate series of crimes, of course— and the girl comes up to the Yard with the tale that the lad's come under the evil eye of our night-flying friend. You fall at once for a pretty face; we come down here and immediately Blaire's invention jumps into the headlines. The trio foresee what will happen; bidding will start at once. There's a carefully worked up scene in the library; Atherton-Wayne offers fifty thousand, hoping that Hautmann will top the bid with even more. Oh, it seems perfectly plain to me, son! I noticed the criminal tendencies in that woman's face the moment she stepped into my office and—" here even Read was unable to control the twinkle in his eye at the sight of Jeffery's reddening face.

"You blithering old bag of wind!" exclaimed Jeffery heatedly. "You're pulling my leg!"

The Inspector sobered. "All right, son, let it pass. No, we've nothing on Blaire or his sister. Nor have we anything on the Hautmanns, which smells to me! The German Embassy have never heard of them, and reports that the

couple certainly haven't any authority to go around offering thousands on behalf of the German Government for a formula. Likewise, Lord Dewhurst disclaims all knowledge of the pair. The German Embassy reports that they may be genuine foreigners working for themselves, and they've promised to check up on them." Read slipped the paper in his pocket and faced the younger man. "That leaves us with Lacey and Reynolds."

"Ah!" said Mr. Blackburn. "Now perhaps we shall hear some common sense."

"Well, son, I've got it written down in black and white." Read took out an envelope, extracted a folded sheet of paper and handed it across. "Those," he said, "were checked with the finger-prints Reynolds left on the ashtray."

Jeffery was examining the paper closely. Two small photographs were pasted at one corner, showing the servant's features in profile and full face. Below these were five finger-prints. Below these again was the typewritten comment:

JOSEPH MARTIN, alias REGINALD CASTLE, alias D'ARCY KENTON. Confidence man and petty thief. Served two years' sentence at Pentonville in 1930 for swindling. Served eighteen months for attempted forgery three years later and eight months during last year for being concerned in robbery with violence.

General description:

Here followed the usual routine records. Jeffery raised his eyes.

"Interesting, Chief," he murmured, tossing the paper on the table, "but not at all surprising. Somehow I can't see the squirming Reynolds pushing a knife into Ashton's back! I don't doubt for one instant that he could plan all this, but he'd never have the nerve to commit murder."

"I agree," Read assented. "But what if two of them worked as a team? One to plan, the other to do the dirty work."

"Who else have you in mind? Lacey?"

The Inspector shook his head. "Not for the moment. Now we come to someone whom up till now has been right outside the scheme of things." Read leaned forward in his chair.

"Son, do you recall the Pearson murder at Bayswater about five years ago?"

Jeffery's face was sombre as he nodded. "I certainly do. One of the most brutal crimes that ever shocked the country. Colonel Pearson and his wife were battered to death for their little of hoard money, amounting, I remember, to about thirty pounds."

"That's it. It was one of the clumsiest pieces of butchery ever known. Three days later we arrested a chap named Arnold Patterson for the two crimes. His

guilt was as plain as a pikestaff, and he was sentenced to death. Later, because of some political string-pulling that's still a mystery to me, he was reprieved and sent to Dartmoor for the term of his natural."

"Arnold Patterson." Jeffery was wrinkling his forehead over the name. "Where have we heard of him lately? Or have we?"

"Three months ago," the Inspector said heavily, "Patterson escaped from the quarries under the cover of a fog. He's never been heard of since, and the authorities gave up the chase because they reckoned he'd fallen into one of the bogs on the moor. But here's the link, son. Reynolds served part of his last sentence at Dartmoor and became pretty thick with Patterson. Say that Patterson wasn't killed out there on the moor? Say that he and Reynolds are working this thing between them?"

But Jeffery shook his head. "No, Chief. This whole thing is too subtle for a common basher like Patterson. This thing has finesse, and cunning, too." He shrugged his shoulders rather wearily. "This talk may have clarified one or two points, but Mister Owl still remains cloaked in darkness. We're no closer to his true identity than before."

Almost desperately, Read demanded: "But what of your own pet theory, son? The one you're being so dashed secretive about?"

Again the young man shook his head. "Nothing fresh. If there was, you'd be the first to know it."

The Inspector brought an empty pipe from his pocket and jammed it aggressively into his mouth. "Then it's Lacey," he snapped. "He's our last hope! I'll rail him up to headquarters tomorrow and let the boys grill him green! And if he doesn't spill the whole bag o' beans, I'm Cleopatra's grand-daughter!" He wheeled and strode towards the door. "What do you say to an ale, son? We'll wipe the taste of this whole dirty racket right out of our mouths!"

Jeffery was rising when he heard, dimly, the clock in the bar below strike nine. The tinny beats were echoed in the deeper chimes carried on the wind from the clock at the Towers. The young man was about to speak when a tap on the door forestalled him. Read, closest, swung it open, to reveal the landlord. He touched his forelock as the Inspector looked him over.

"It be nine by the clock, sir," he mumbled, and thrust an envelope into the big man's face.

"What's this?" Read barked.

"My boy Joe found it on bar this even'." The landlord blinked. "Writin' on it says not to be given to Inspector till nine by the clock."

"Found it on the bar?" the Inspector snapped. "Who left it there?"

The landlord shook his head. "Bar be empty," he explained, "and my boy Joe be talking in pot-room with Sam Grimes the blacksmith. Then they heard a

sort o' call inside an' Grimes, he say, 'There be an owl roostin' in your bar.' Joe goes in and finds letter with florin piece on it. Writing on the letter says it goes to you at nine by the clock..." He paused as Read waved him to silence and slit the envelope with unsteady fingers.

Somewhere down below, a telephone shrilled. With an apologetic bob the landlord hurried away.

The note unfolded, Jeffery read the words over his companion's shoulder. As before, they were printed in straggling capitals.

I SHALL COME FOR ATHERTON-WAYNE AT NINE-THIRTY TONIGHT. YOU HAVE JUST HALF AN HOUR TO BE IN AT THE KILL!

There was no signature, but none was needed. Read crumpled the note in his hand and Jeffery could see the beads of perspiration forming on the big man's brow. The Inspector said hollowly: "Son, is this chap the devil himself?"

It was the landlord who spoke. He insinuated an uneasy face round the door. "You're wanted on the tellyphone, sir," he addressed Read. "Urgent-like, from the Towers."

The big man almost bounded from the room. Jeffery heard him go clattering down the stairs, listened to the barked monosyllables, and then sprang into life as Read's stentorian voice bawled from below:

"Into the car, son! We're going back to the Towers! Some misbegotten skunk's cracked Armstrong's skull with a life-preserver, and Lacey's free!"

THE CHIMES OF nine o'clock, dimly heard by Jeffery at the inn, boomed hollowly into a room in the north wing of the Towers. Almost invisible in the deep shadows that hemmed the apartment, the figure sat motionless, waiting until the last of the chimes had died away. Then two black-gloved hands pulled open a drawer, and a shaft of moonlight, sliding between the drawn curtains, glinted on an open case of knives of curious design. The gloved hands selected one, slightly curved, with a blade of razor sharpness.

Noiselessly the figure rose, and crossing to the window pulled aside one curtain and stared at the lighted windows of the opposite wing. As though waiting for this cue, there came a burst of muffled activity from below. Lights flashed on, heavy footsteps clattered here and there, voices were loud in shouted orders, and twice a police-whistle shrilled through the garden. The gloved hand holding the curtain clenched, and the figure rocked with wild stifled laughter. A near-by window glimmered into life and for a moment the thing was seen in quick silhouette— shapeless, dark, with folds that fell from the outstretched arms like black wings.

Next moment the curtains were swiftly drawn, and darkness, complete and

opaque, enveloped the room. Only an occasional creak of boards or a half-heard scrape conveyed that life moved in that dim apartment. Then, from somewhere, a soft click was heard.

Outside, feet marched up to the door, and a heavy fist rapped authoritatively on the stout oak. A few seconds later, the summons was repeated. Then the door was thrust open and a hand sought the light switch near the jamb. As the electric light in the centre of the room shone out, Detective Connolly was revealed, his head thrust forward, peering inside. He was breathing rather heavily.

The sound of footsteps made him turn. Donlin was advancing up the corridor, his face grave. He spoke as he approached. "I've just got through to the Chief," he announced. "They're coming back at once. Tell Dr. Newbury to get a move on— Armstrong's bleeding like a pig!"

Connolly clicked off the light and closed the door. "We'll have to look somewhere else," he said. "Dr. Newbury's not in his room."

IT WAS A LITTLE after nine-fifteen when Jeffery turned the bonnet of the two-seater through the gates of the Towers, and swung the car along the winding drive towards the house. Read, an empty pipe between his teeth, sat with hands clenched on his knees, staring out at the dark tunnel that hemmed them in on either side. The trees were so thick that the branches interlaced, and through this breeze-swung filigree he could catch only occasional glimpses of the lighted windows beyond. Once, when they passed a more sparsely planted grove, he thought he could distinguish agitated shadows moving here and there, but before he could be sure the drive wound back under denser growth and the house was once more lost to view.

Because of the convolutions of the drive, speed was out of the question. Jeffery drove with his foot caressing the accelerator. Now they were moving along a lane formed by the overhanging branches. The beam of their headlamps ran before them, now peering inquisitively through the massed tree-trunks, now sweeping along the white driveway ahead.

"There he is!" shouted Read suddenly.

Jeffery's foot drove hard at the brake pedal and the car slithered to a stop with a scuffle of tyres. Both men flung themselves out of the seat as a figure, momentarily blinded by the headlights, darted out into the drive, flung up one arm across his face and then slipped back among the trees. They could hear him crashing through the undergrowth ahead of them.

The Inspector was pushing forward like some remorseless Juggernaut, beating down obstructions with flailing arms, heedless of the spiteful twigs that slapped about his head and tore at his face. Jeffery ran more cautiously,

quieter and more swiftly. Then the blundering of the man pursued was heard to cease. Jeffery paused, listening, and Read caught up with him.

"Where'd he go?" the big man panted.

"Quiet!" Jeffery motioned his companion to silence. Then he muttered: "He's hiding somewhere in that thicket. Come on, Chief, we'll beat him out!"

The Inspector reached up, grasped an overhanging limb and tore it from the tree. Swiftly he stripped it bare of leaves and turned, grasping a very serviceable cudgel. "I'll rout the rat from his hole," he grunted, and began swishing and probing at the bushes. Blackburn walked warily, eyes everywhere, ready for the slightest movement. Read was a dozen paces ahead of his companion when Jeffery heard him stop with a sudden exclamation.

"Jeff!" he called. "Let's have your torch."

Pulling the flashlight from his pocket, Blackburn almost ran to the other's side and flashed a pool of radiance below where Read stood staring. Next moment he felt his stomach turn within him.

Half concealed in the undergrowth was the body of a man, a slim figure dressed in a checkered mackintosh raincoat with a grey muffler wound about the neck. The body was lying face downward and from the back protruded the handle of a knife. Jeffery gave a sudden groan.

"Atherton-Wayne! Chief, we're too late!"

Silence. Then somewhere a dog howled, a strange melancholy sound. A thin breeze moved the branches above their heads. The flashlight in Jeffery's hand trembled slightly. He heard Read give a dry cough.

"Seems a funny looking knife, Jeff," the Inspector said heavily.

Blackburn stepped forward and bent over the dead man. "It's a doctor's scalpel," he said. He was in the act of rising when an unforeseen interruption occurred. Another figure was pushing its way urgently through the bushes, making no effort at concealment.

"Who is that?" a thin sharp voice cried. "What is going on out here?"

Read gave a queer, inarticulate gasp of amazement. Jeffery raised his torch and flashed it full in the face of the newcomer.

Sir Anthony Atherton-Wayne stood blinking in the glare!

"You!" breathed Jeffery, staring at that grey, lined face. "Then— then who...?" But the Inspector was already on his knees beside the dead man. With a quick movement he turned the body over. Jeffery, diverting the flashlight, played in on a swarthy, bearded face with eyes already closed in death. "Blackbeard!"

There came a sudden cry of pain at his elbow. Atherton-Wayne stood trembling, his hands over his face as if to block out what the flashlight had revealed. He whispered huskily:

"Arnold...Arnold!..."

Read was on his feet, one big hand grasping the baronet's arm. "This is the chap you've been hiding in the vaults, isn't it?" Then, in sudden enlightenment, he barked: "And he's Arnold Patterson, the Bayswater murderer, isn't he?"

The baronet whispered thinly: "It's useless to hide the truth any longer. Yes...he was Arnold Patterson."

"And since we're tellin' the truth," rapped the Inspector, "would you mind letting us know why you've been hiding an escaped murderer?"

Under his hand, Read could feel the baronet trembling like a man sick with fever. When he spoke, the words croaked harshly in his throat:

"Arnold Patterson was— was my brother!"

Chapter 8

Tuesday, June 18th

THE HOURS FOLLOWING Sir Anthony Atherton-Wayne's dramatic statement in the garden of Rookwood Towers were filled with minor incident.

Neither Read nor Blackburn had asked the baronet for further details at the time. Scarcely had those trembling words been spoken than Edward Blaire, with Detective Connolly, pushed into the undergrowth. Their voices were loud with excited inquiries— inquiries that were suddenly halted as they beheld the body half hidden in the bushes. With gentle hands the big detective and the young chemist helped Jeffery carry the dead man into the hall and from there to Atherton-Wayne's own room. There the baronet, obviously labouring under great mental strain, had begged Read that explanations be postponed until the morning. And Read, after one keen glance at the elder man's grey, haggard face, nodded a curt consent.

Read's next move was to see Armstrong. The foxy-faced detective had been put to bed and the capable Mrs. Tamworth was applying cold compresses to an ugly laceration across the back of his head. The detective had recovered sufficiently to talk, but his information was relatively unimportant. He had been on guard outside Lacey's room when he had heard his name called softly. Puzzled, he had walked a few paces, pausing outside the door of the adjoining room. And as he stood looking up and down the corridor, there came a sudden creaking at his back. Wheeling, Armstrong explained that he had had a brief glimpse of a half-opened door before he was struck down. When he recovered consciousness, the key of Lacey's room had disappeared from his pocket.

Had he seen his attacker? "Only for a split second," was the reply. Man or woman Armstrong could not tell. The face was wrapped around with something like a shawl, but he could have sworn that his assailant wore spectacles. He remembered the light glinting on them. The Inspector swung round on Mrs. Tamworth: "Who, in the house, wore glasses?"

"Only Mr. Blaire," the housekeeper replied.

But Jeffery had interposed that this was scanty evidence. A pair of spectacles was the easiest disguise in the world to obtain.

Then Dr. Newbury bustled in, rather bleary-eyed and smelling so strongly of spirits as to cause Mrs. Tamworth to recoil with a gasp of righteous indignation. The doctor explained that he had been asleep—"just dozed right away on a couch in the Oak Room, gentlemen"— and was there anything he could do? They left him with an openly scornful Mrs. Tamworth, clicking his tongue reproachfully over Armstrong's broken head.

The investigators then repaired to inspect the room in which Lacey had been imprisoned. But except for a dozen cigarette-ends, identical with the brand that Jeffery had found in the vaults, the room was devoid of any trace of the American. Read was bewailing this fact when one of the detectives burst in with highly significant news. Information had just come through from Scotland Yard that Mortlake's Cellini cup had been recovered! The tracing of this valuable object was, incidentally, a tribute to Read's city organization, and the cup had been found in the possession of a certain Mr. Ebenezer Cheesling—the same gentleman being known to the Criminal Investigation Branch as one of London's most unscrupulous "receivers." After some persuasion, Mr. Cheesling had imparted a description of the man from whom he had received the cup—and that, description tallied feature for feature with the now-vanished Mr. Lacey!

Small wonder that Detective Connolly, who buttonholed Read with the information that he was holding for cross-examination one Reynolds, alias Martin, alias Kenton, found himself brushed aside with the curt rejoinder to guard the manservant until the morning. For the Inspector was anxious to review the situation in the light of this new evidence, and as midnight boomed from the clock in the tower he faced Jeffery across the desk in the room he had appropriated as his temporary headquarters.

"Well, son," he grunted. "Not a bad night's work, eh?"

Jeffery was lighting a cigarette. "This seems irrefutable evidence that Lacey is connected with The Owl murders," the young man admitted. "Unless, of course, The Owl used Lacey to sell the stuff to Cheesling."

Read shook his head. "No, Jeff. The Owl works alone! And I told you there was a professional hand in these robberies. Lacey builds up the character of The Owl, learns of young Blaire's formula and determines to get it. He comes down here in the guise of Todhunter—"

"Why?"

The Inspector made a gesture of irritation. "Goddlemighty, son, it's as plain as the nose on your face! He wants to spy out the lay of the land. In the disguise of that salesman, and staying so innocently at the 'Green Man,' he can come and go as he wishes."

Jeffery said mildly: "Don't think I'm raising objections, Chief. But I want to get every kink straightened out this time. We can't afford another mistake! So, if I'm hypercritical over small points, it's only because we want everything foolproof to convince a judge and jury.

"Any objections so far?"

"None at all."

"Very well." Some of the testiness dropped from the Inspector's tone.

"Now, I said that Lacey worked alone, but for his escape he had to have help. Clever though he is, he couldn't be locked in that room and coshing Armstrong, at the same time. So who's the most likely person in this house to help him?"

"Reynolds."

"Exactly!" Read produced a cigar from his pocket, bit the end and spat it accurately into the waste-paper basket. "Birds of a feather flock together, son. Lacey and Reynolds'd get on like the Siamese twins! What's more, from whatever way you look at it, Lacey seems best choice for The Owl. He's the only one connected with this case who isn't under our nose all the time. That leaves him free to work this racket at his own sweet will. And here's another thing—"

"What?"

"Remember how young Blaire was trussed into that strait jacket in the vaults? The knots were tied so tightly you had to cut him free. I sent those ropes up to one of the chaps at the Yard who's an expert on that sort of thing. He reports that those ropes were knotted by a sailor." Read's voice slowed. "After one of his crimes in the States, Lacey went into smoke by joining the Navy over there, and deserted as soon as the hue and cry for him was over!"

Jeffery's eyes were glittering. "The circle's narrowing," he exclaimed. "Mr. Lacey will have to talk very fast to get himself out of this mess." He flicked some ash from his cigarette. "By the way, talking of that strait jacket and ropes, did you ever ask Atherton-Wayne how his initialled handkerchief came to be used as a gag for Blaire?"

Read nodded. "Says he knows nothing about them. Which is probably true. It's as pretty a piece of planted evidence as I've seen for some time. I think the reason for Atherton-Wayne's mysterious monkey business is pretty plain now."

The big man paused, eyed the band on his cigar thoughtfully and then looked up.

"Jeff, how'd you like to run up to London for a few days?"

Blackburn was not particularly enthusiastic. "Of course, if it's going to help the case—" he began.

"It is," the other assured him. "I want somebody to tackle the Cheesling end of this business. If that misbegotten son of Jewry took the Cellini cup, it's on the cards he might know something about the Harnett necklace. The Doone diamond's gone to Holland by now, I'll bet, but we daren't neglect even the slightest chance of a lead. I'd go myself, son, but I must stay down here. I've got a net around these grounds, and the moment Lacey tries to slip through, I've got to be here on the spot!"

Jeffery smothered a yawn. "I can tell you this, Chief. The Owl won't attempt to leave this place within the next twenty-four hours."

"Why not?"

"Atherton-Wayne was telling me that tomorrow afternoon one of his factory chemists is coming down to take the formula up to town. Now, The Owl is desperate. Once the formula leaves the Towers, it's as good as lost to him. Therefore, he'll make an attempt to get it before that chemist arrives here. And he can only do that by hanging around." And, as the Inspector nodded: "The Owl knows that Atherton-Wayne daren't trust that formula in a place where it could be burgled. The baronet means to keep it on himself. The Owl saw what he thought was Atherton-Wayne sneaking through the garden tonight and struck him down, hoping to rob the body. Then he discovered his mistake."

Read was chewing his cigar. "I suppose the skunk lifted that scalpel from Doc. Newbury's collection," he grunted. "That seems to be Lacey's game at the moment. To put suspicion on everyone just to confuse us." And as the younger man was silent: "What's eating you, son?"

"Just cogitating," Blackburn returned. "Chief, remember that grubby-looking individual who ran out in front of our car as we were coming up the drive—the chap we chased? Did you recognize him?"

"Never saw him before in my life!"

"Same here." Jeffery's eyes were thoughtful. "I'll swear it wasn't anyone from the house. Of course, it might have been someone doing a spot of poaching and didn't want to be asked questions..." the words were suddenly smothered in a yawn that racked his body. "Gosh, I'm tired! I could sleep for a week!"

Read nodded. "Better turn in, son. Don't wait for me. I've a couple of reports to make out before I get any shut-eye. You can't do anything more here, and we'll both need all our wits about us in the morning." The Inspector looked up and deep in those steely eyes a twinkle lurked. "What's more, son, for the first time for a week I can wish you good night and mean it!"

"YES, GENTLEMEN. Arnold Patterson was my brother."

Sir Anthony Atherton-Wayne addressed Read and Blackburn in his study on the following morning. It was near noon. Both men had slept late after the excitement of the previous night. On rising, the Inspector's first act had been to 'phone through to Scotland Yard, asking for additional men. They were eating a hasty breakfast when a message came that the baronet was waiting to see them in his study.

Atherton-Wayne had received them quietly, and had gestured both men to be seated. Jeffery, studying the baronet's face, was conscious of a change in the man's appearance. Gone was that expression of shuttered, secretive

reserve; the same tired lines were there, but they seemed etched more lightly. The little man held himself as rigidly as ever, yet somehow he conveyed the impression of shoulders more squared, head held a little higher and glance more level.

The baronet's tone was unruffled as he continued:

"I am not going to waste any time with apologies for what has happened. Nor am I going to plead the excuse that blood is thicker than water. The truth is that three months ago my wretched brother came to this house and asked for sanctuary. I did the only possible thing, under the circumstances. I concealed my brother in the vaults, lied desperately and foolishly in an endeavour to keep everybody away from that place, showed him the secret passages around this house, fed him and last night clothed him in my own garments so that he might make an escape. I have compounded a felony in the full realization of the seriousness of my act. I should have known it was inevitable that sooner or later my brother's disgrace must touch my own life. But I was proud— proud as Lucifer— and I lacked moral courage." He paused and his glance moved from face to face. "And now, gentlemen, I am in your hands. What do you propose to do with me?"

Read, watching him with narrowed eyes, said curtly: "Ask you a few questions."

At that, the baronet's face went suddenly blank and hard, like a window when a shade is pulled down behind it. Blackburn spoke quickly.

"We both realize, Sir Anthony, that any probing of this matter must be distressing to you. On the other hand, we are naturally curious about this surprising relationship."

Atherton-Wayne did not speak for a moment, then he shrugged and ran a slim hand across his smooth silver hair.

"Surprising to you, perhaps," he murmured. "Not so to me. Arnold was always the wild offspring of the family. He had his first brush with the law when he was fifteen years old— stole a push-bike from outside a post-office. My father sought to cure him by the harshest means— he declared Arnold an incorrigible and my brother was sent to a reform school for months. The injustice of that move turned a normally naughty youngster into an embittered criminal. During the next ten years he was convicted no less than six times. Eventually, and to the great relief of us all, he changed his name to Patterson (since the police were getting rather familiar with his real name), and then the World War claimed him. Nothing was heard of him for some years after that and we fondly believed that he had died abroad. And then, five years ago, came the Pearson murder, and I realized that the dark shadow still haunted our lives."

Again he paused. Neither Jeffery nor Read offered comment. The baronet continued:

"Arnold came in the night and begged me to shelter him. If I would hide him until the search petered out, he swore that he would leave the country and never trouble me again. Unfortunately, someone in this house heard that conversation, recognized my brother and held the threat of blackmail over my head. Having taken the step, I was unable to draw back."

"That man was Reynolds?" barked Read.

The baronet nodded. "After Ashton's death, Reynolds came to me with the request that he take the place of my secretary. I dare not refuse. Troubled as I was, I could not help but appreciate the irony of the situation. Reynolds, a former gaol-bird, with access to my private papers. Of course, I saw Reynolds' scheme in a flash. He is a blackmailer by profession. A man in my position has certain valuable secrets that would fetch a wonderful market price. Fortunately, I was able to keep these from that man's reach. With other secrets, however, I have been less fortunate."

Jeffery said sharply: "You mean all business relating to the formula?"

"Yes. Not even the combination of my own safe was private." Atherton-Wayne's thin lips were touched with a suggestion of a smile. "Can you wonder, gentlemen, that at times I was rather— er— short with you during our interviews?" His face sobered. "There were moments when I found it impossible to keep going under the strain. That was why I told Arnold he must go from the Towers last night. My brother consented, on the condition that I give him five hundred pounds in ready money. I would have given ten times the amount to see him away from the place. I gave him some old garments of mine and arranged to have a fast car pick him up outside Tilling. But while he was moving through the garden, The Owl struck him down. A slow tide of colour stained the thin cheeks.

"It is a terrible thing to say, gentlemen, but with that blow The Owl not only wiped the shadow of fear forever from my life but freed me from the grip of a rascally blackmailer. I am quite prepared now to let the Law have its way with me."

Inspector Read got up slowly and began to pace the floor, one hand jingling some loose change in his pocket. Then he turned.

"You've certainly given us more headaches than we deserve, sir," he said gruffly. "But from what you tell us, you've had some provocation. And it seems to me we've got enough work on our hands without a lot of extra fuss." He peered at the baronet from beneath bushy eyebrows. "Naturally, we can't hush this thing up altogether. But I suggest you get the ear of the Chief Constable and tell him that we're quite willing to let sleepin' dogs lie."

Understand what I mean?"

Atherton-Wayne inclined his head. "Perfectly, Inspector. Thank you. And— er— would you accept my apologies for any— er— difficulties I may have raised in the past?"

Read dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his hand. "Forget it," he grunted. "I want to talk to you about other things. This factory chemist of yours—"

"Berlitzki?"

"That his monicker? Well, I believe he's coming down this afternoon to pick up the formula."

A shadow settled over the other's face. "That was the arrangement," he explained, "but there has been some delay. I had a call from Berlitzki this morning. He finds it impossible to arrive until tomorrow."

"Where's the formula now?"

The baronet felt in his vest pocket and extracted the phial, holding it between finger and thumb. Jeffery jumped to his feet as if his chair was suddenly red-hot. "Good heavens, sir, you surely don't carry it about like that!"

"But I am forced to do so," Atherton-Wayne assured him. "Matters in this house have reached the fantastic stage when I dare not trust even the locks on my own safe!"

Jeffery was staring incredulously. "Sir Anthony, do you realize that is just what The Owl wants? To force you to carry the formula about with you! Think, sir, where would that formula be at this moment if The Owl had not made the mistake in identity last night!"

The baronet nodded. "Believe me, Blackburn, I have by no means overlooked such a possibility. Do you know how I spent last night? Lying awake reading, with the formula beside a loaded revolver on the table by my bed! When dawn broke this morning, there was no more thankful a man in this world! That is why Berlitzki's delay is so disturbing. I have no fancy to spend another such night."

Read was following this conversation closely. Now he spoke. "Blackburn's going up to town after lunch. Why not let him take the formula along to your factory and deliver it to Berlitzki himself?"

"Not on your life!" Jeffery retorted sharply. And as Read swung round: "Sorry, Chief, but I'd just as soon travel with a time-bomb in my pocket! I'd want an armed guard around me before I'd take charge of that stuff!" Then, as the Inspector started to speak: "Why don't you keep the formula?"

"Me?" exclaimed Read.

"Yes," Jeffery's tone was animated. "Seems to me it's safer with you than in the Bank of England. You're the one person The Owl wants to steer clear of,

and what's more, as far as he knows, Sir Anthony still has the formula. It's only for one night and you can put detectives three deep round your door while you sleep."

The Inspector was considering the suggestion with frowning brow. Then he turned to where the little baronet was still balancing the tiny phial in his hand. "What d'you think, sir?"

"It appears an ideal arrangement, Inspector. You could deliver the formula to Berlitzki tomorrow morning and arrange, perhaps, to have some of your men accompany him back to town?"

Read hesitated only a second longer. Then he thrust out a big paw. "Hand it over," he said gruffly. And as the baronet did so, he tucked the phial into his vest pocket. Then he buttoned his coat, patting the tiny bulge with appreciative fingers.

"That," announced Mr. Blackburn, "is that! It's a pity we didn't think of this days ago."

Both investigators were nearing the door when Atherton-Wayne spoke again. "I have been frank with you, gentlemen. Could I ask you to be equally frank with me?"

Read turned. "In what way?"

"How much longer do you expect this reign of terror to continue? Are you any nearer discovering the true identity of The Owl?"

The baronet was looking at the Inspector as he spoke, but it was Jeffery who replied. His voice was very quiet.

"We can promise you this, Sir Anthony. We both know the name of The Owl. But that does not mean we have heard the last of him. He may even strike again, for now he grows desperate indeed! But of this you may be certain— his career of crime is rapidly drawing to an end. And, if luck favours us, we may have him cornered within the next forty-eight hours. And may you be with us when we pull the mask from his face!"

He nodded curtly to the Inspector, and both men left the room. Sir Anthony, a curious expression on his face, stood staring for some seconds at the closed door.

LATE THAT SAME afternoon, Inspector Read gripped Jeffery's hand and watched as the two-seater car moved around the drive towards the white road beyond. Then, humming tunelessly below his breath, the big man turned and began walking towards the house.

For the first time in many days Read felt comparatively cheerful. Jeffery's substantiation of his own suspicions regarding Lacey swept away the last shadow of doubt in the Inspector's mind. Not that the case was by any means

finished: there still remained the task of trapping the elusive killer. Hands in pockets, brow furrowed, Read pondered as he walked.

A soft patter of footsteps behind made him turn. Bareheaded, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright, Elizabeth Blaire was coming towards him.

"Inspector," she cried, "could I speak to you?"

Read nodded. "What's the trouble?" he asked amiably.

The girl was a little breathless. "Who was it that drove out in Jeffery's car?"

"Jeff." And because the Inspector was in a communicative mood, he supplemented the bald statement. "He's gone up to town for a while, to keep an eye on some business at that end."

"Oh!..." said Elizabeth. It was not so much a comment as a disappointed little breath. She was carrying her hat in her hand, a large floppy straw trimmed with gay flowers. Suddenly she pulled it on her head so that, for a moment, the wide brim hid her face. And as she hesitated, the Inspector remarked:

"Didn't the lad tell you?"

Her face was still hidden, but the reply came bravely "No. After all, why should he?" Now she raised her head, and her eyes were wide and blue as a child's. "You've been keeping Jeffery very busy lately, haven't you, Inspector?"

"Things have been happening," Read grunted non-committally. He searched the girl's face for a moment, then: "What's on your mind, my girl?"

Steadily she returned his gaze. "Inspector, are you quite satisfied in your mind that I have nothing to do with these crimes down here?" And as Read brushed aside the imputation, she continued, "Because I'd like to get away from here as soon as I can."

The Inspector's moustache quivered in the semblance of a smile. "So would a lot of us," he muttered.

"But it's rather different with me," Elizabeth insisted. "You see, I've always earned my own living. I'd saved some money, and I was sort of between jobs when this business started. Now that money's almost gone. I can't live on Sir Anthony's hospitality any longer." Her voice was very quiet. "You understand?"

"Dashed if I do," the other returned. "I admire your independence, miss, but after all, your brother's just netted a small fortune. Surely you're entitled to a living from that!"

"Oh, you don't understand!" The girl turned away. "I couldn't accept my—my brother's money. I want to stand on my own feet."

The Inspector did not reply, instead he continued to look at her. Perhaps this searching scrutiny embarrassed the girl or perhaps she read something in those deep-set grey eyes that told her Read knew the truth. She turned her head away abruptly. In a tone surprisingly gentle, the big man spoke.

"Are you sure that's the only reason you want to leave the Towers?"

"Of course!"

"Then why all this interest in young Jeff's comings and goings?"

Elizabeth's face was slightly flushed as she turned to him. "There's something I think he ought to know."

Read's eyes narrowed. "Something to do with this case?" And as she nodded: "Any reason for keeping it exclusively for the boy?"

"None at all," the girl replied. She hesitated for a moment as though making up her mind, then quietly she told him the story of Ashton's communication and the losing of the empty envelope. The Inspector listened with head thrust slightly forward. When she paused, a shadow settled on his face.

"Boiled down," he muttered, "it looks as though someone has found that envelope thinking it contained the name of The Owl."

Elizabeth said softly: "That means The Owl thinks I know. That's one reason I want to get away from here— before he can strike...at me."

The Inspector shook his head. "Don't you worry, Miss Blaire. You're in no danger now. The name of The Owl isn't a secret any longer. Jeff and I have known the truth since last night."

"The real name of The Owl?" And as Read nodded, the girl's eyes widened. "Then why don't you arrest him?"

The big man shrugged. "It isn't quite as simple as that," he grunted. "We still lack proof— that's why Jeff has gone into town. Another thing is that we can't lay our hands on him straight away. We've got to get him out into the open somehow."

Elizabeth gave a half-glance over her shoulder. The misty gloom of the approaching evening was thickening among the trees that lined the drive. The sun had dropped behind the house and the long shadow of ivied walls crept slowly towards them. The breeze had taken on a sudden chill, so that the girl shivered. Involuntarily, she moved closer to the Inspector, and her voice was almost a whisper when she spoke.

"The real name of The Owl...is it Dr. Newbury?"

The Inspector said shortly: "What you don't know can't hurt you, miss But I can promise you one thing. The next forty-eight hours should see finish written to this business. Then you'll be free to go where you like."

Feet crunching on the gravel made him turn. Connolly was approaching from the house. He hesitated on seeing the girl, but as Read nodded curtly, he came forward. "Reynolds is waiting up in your office for you, Chief."

"Good!" Over his shoulder, Read addressed the girl, "Now, just you run along, miss, and don't lose any sleep over things. And above all, keep a watch

on your tongue." With a nod, he strode off at Connolly's side.

Inspector Read did not look back. But had he done so he would have seen Elizabeth Blaire pull a small handkerchief from her dress pocket and dab furtively at her eyes before she turned to follow him into the house.

CHIEF INSPECTOR READ leaned over his desk, supporting himself on clenched fists, and glared pugnaciously into the pale face of the man who stood opposite.

"So you're Reynolds, are you?" he barked.

The servant nodded calmly. "I thought I made that clear when we met—" he began, but the Inspector snapped him down.

"You didn't make it clear that you were usin' Reynolds instead of Martin or Castle or Kenton," he rapped. "And the reason for that was because we would have known you for the sneakin' blackmailer that you are!"

With those words a sudden change came over Reynolds. That smooth mask dropped from his face as though wiped away with a sponge. The shoulders straightened with a swagger that was near impudence. The loosely hanging hands fitted into his pockets.

"So, Inspector, the game's up?" he grinned.

"What's this?" snapped Read. "Another act out of your programme?"

Reynolds was lighting a cigarette. He raised his eyes over the tiny flame and in that moment the Inspector found his dislike warring with the man's dangerous charm. Here was a protean individual who could apparently turn on his personality at will and only the unsteady eyes and slightly twitching mouth revealed the mean soul that lay curled behind the mask.

"No," replied Reynolds calmly, in reply to Read's question. "I think this is the real Me. You know, Inspector, I get so used to playing parts that I find myself getting all mixed up. It's rather a pity," he added reflectively, "that I didn't go on the stage. But there's so little money in the game."

The cool insolence of the man caught the Inspector off his guard, so that, for a moment, he almost gaped open-mouthed. Then he gave a snort like an angry bull and striding round the desk caught Reynolds by the lapel of his coat and thrust a bulldog jaw into the other's face. His eyes were dangerous vicious slits, and when he spoke his voice was soft and purring, but with an undercurrent of something that made Reynolds put up his hand as though to shield himself from a blow.

"By the living God!" said Read softly. "Are you tryin' to put over your works on me?" The tight lips barely moved. "Do that again, mister— just do that once again, and I'll take you up to headquarters and have the boys straighten you up with a piece o' hose-pipe! And, believe me, you'll do no play-actin' for quite a

long time after that!"

There was no smiling charm on Reynolds' face now. It went hard, the mouth ugly, the eyes glittering. He backed away from Read's truculent countenance as far as the hand gripping his coat would allow.

"What do you want with me?" he muttered.

With a powerful sweep of his arm, the Inspector thrust him backward into a chair. Then, feet apart, arms akimbo, he stood over him. "You're going to talk to me," he snapped. "You're going to tell me the truth, or, by hokey, there'll be no sorrier man in England today! Understand?" And as Reynolds nodded sullenly, Read leaned forward.

"Where's The Owl's hide-out?" he barked.

Reynolds blinked. "How should I know?"

The Inspector eyed him for a moment without speaking. Then, turning, he picked up a round ruler from the desk and balanced it carefully in his hand. Reynolds gave a little gasp and shrank back in his chair. The Inspector said quietly:

"We're goin' to forget for a moment that you're a blood-suckin' rat, Reynolds. We're goin' to overlook the fact that you've got a prison record as long as your arm. In fact, if you come clean about your association with The Owl, we might be persuaded to forget these things altogether." He paused, and his strong fingers slipped down to the end of the ruler, holding it like a cudgel. "You and this sneakin' skunk The Owl have been workin' together down here, haven't you?"

Reynolds passed a pink tongue over pale lips. "You— you're crazy—" he began.

Read took a half-step forward, and the man in the chair squeaked like a cornered rat. "D— don't hit me," he stuttered. "I'll tell you the truth, Inspector, before God I will! Yes, I did come down here to put the squeeze on the old boy, but as for this Owl, I've never helped him once. I don't mix myself up with murders. You know that!"

"Oh, cut the twaddle," snapped the big man contemptuously. "You sandbagged Armstrong and let Lacey out of that room last night—"

"But I didn't," squeaked Reynolds. He sat bolt upright, gripping the arms of the chair in frenzied desperation. "You've got it all wrong, Inspector. I swear you have! I was nowhere near Lacey's room when he escaped. I was out in the garden—"

"Doing what?"

Again Reynolds licked his dry lips. "Talking to the man I believe is The Owl." Read's eyes narrowed. "Who was that?"

The man in the chair faced his persecutor defiantly. "Edward Blaire's

father," he said clearly.

The Inspector's fingers tightened around the ruler until the knuckles stood out ivory-white. "What did you say?" he asked softly.

Reynolds, too old a hand at this game not to know when he had the advantage, sat forward in his chair. Something of the former arrogance tinged his tone when he replied.

"It's the truth, Inspector. That Blaire boy and girl aren't brother and sister at all. He was an adopted child. His real father came out of Wormwood Scrubbs about three months ago after serving a sentence for attempted murder! Blaire didn't know himself until yesterday afternoon." And as the big man continued to stare at him: "You don't have to take my unsupported word for all this— get Blaire here and ask him for yourself. He'll bear out what I say!"

Read's eyes had never left Reynolds' face during this recital. Experience of dealing with this type of man told the Inspector that he was hearing truth, and deep in his stomach a nauseating little fear squirmed and writhed. When everything at last seemed straightened out and fitting into place, what did this new complication portend? He addressed the other.

"And you believe this man— Blaire's father— to be the Owl?"

Reynolds nodded. "Yes, Inspector."

Read tossed the ruler on the desk, walked round and sat heavily in his chair. Leaning forward, chin on clenched fists, he demanded:

"What's your idea?"

Reynolds, much more at ease, sat back and crossed his legs. One hand hovered for a moment near the pocket holding his cigarette-case, but Read's thunderous brow altered his decision. He said calmly:

"Inspector, have you ever wondered why it is that The Owl wants to kill young Blaire? Why not just take the formula and leave the boy alone?"

"That's ancient history," the Inspector returned. "Now that the formula's passed out of his hands, the lad's in no danger at all."

Reynolds leaned forward. "You're on the wrong track, Inspector. That lad's in greater danger than ever before. A few days ago he was penniless. Now he's worth fifty thousand pounds. And if he was to die, that money must automatically descend to his next of kin— in this case, Blaire's own father!"

He paused for a moment. "Another thing, is it just coincidence that these Owl robberies in the city began a few days after Blaire's father came out from the Scrubbs?"

Read had picked up a pencil and was drawing little squiggles on the blotting-paper before him. He made no comment as the other continued:

"You know, Inspector, that I've made my living by getting hold of certain facts and piecing them together. I'm right in nine cases out of ten. And here's

how I've figured out this thing. Blaire's father creates this character of The Owl and commits these robberies. Then he learns that Blaire has found this formula. Investigating, he finds that Blaire is his own son. His first idea is to steal the invention. But you put a stopper on that scheme. So now The Owl has another card up his sleeve."

Reynolds' voice slowed impressively.

"Blaire senior knows his son's character very well. If he can frighten his son enough, he knows the lad will sell the formula to get it out of his possession. Sell it, too, for a pretty good figure. Now, if the lad was to die, that money descends to the father, always providing, of course, Blaire hasn't made a will."

"How do you know he hasn't?"

Reynolds shrugged. "I don't *know* anything," he returned. "This is all pure theory."

Read looked up. "Then you think it's young Blaire and not the formula that is in danger now?"

"I don't say that. The Owl may be planning to get the formula as well as the money. Indeed, he'll probably come after the formula first. He can fix his son's death later— after all, the fifty thousand pounds won't vanish in a few weeks."

The Inspector put down his pencil. "Seems pretty far-fetched to me," he grunted. "The Owl had young Blaire in his power down there in the vaults. Why didn't he finish him off that time?"

"Because that was part of the scheme to frighten the boy into getting rid of the formula," Reynolds returned. "Remember how he was bound into that strait jacket? That was sheer torture! After an hour of that, the average man would be willing to sell his soul."

Read considered this for a moment. "And you say Blaire's father was here last night?"

Reynolds nodded. "He was out there in the garden. I was talking to him myself."

"What about?"

The other hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "Might as well tell the truth," he shrugged. "I knew Conway— that's Blaire's real name, by the way— when I was doing a term at the Scrubbs. About a month ago he got in touch with me. When Blaire discovered this formula, I told Conway about it. Then he told me that Blaire was his son and that he— Conway— had as much right to the formula as anyone. I warned him about The Owl and advised him to steer clear. His reply was that it was every man for himself in this thing—"

"And last night?"

"He came down to ask me where the formula was at that moment. I told him I hadn't the slightest idea. We talked on various things for half an hour and

eventually he slipped away."

The springs of Read's chair squeaked as the big man leaned back. "All right," he said at length. "I'll think over what you've told me. And for the time being, we'll say nothing about your other activities. You'll stay down here, of course, and remember, this is your last chance. If we find one more example of your greasy ways—"

Reynolds rose to his feet. "So help me, Inspector, it's the straight and narrow from now on! I've had my lesson, believe me!"

"Tell your grandmother," the Inspector snorted. "You could no more turn honest than a crab could walk straight! All right— get out!" And as the door closed behind Reynolds, the big man pulled a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end and lit the weed reflectively.

What significance did these new facts have on the evidence in hand? Read took it for granted that Reynolds was telling the truth. For one thing, his details could be easily checked up by an interview with Blaire. For another, the Inspector himself had seen the unknown figure dart across the drive, and it did not take much mental effort to identify this furtive shadow with Blaire's father. And if Reynolds' hypothesis was correct, the whole perspective of the case changed. It was not the formula that was the all-important motive, but the money Blaire had earned from the formula. Read considered, nodding as his mind ticked off the various points. It was possible. Men had taken far greater risks than this for fifty thousand pounds. With Blaire out of the way, his rascally father would inherit every penny, unless...

Unless Blaire had made a will!

The chances were that he had not. The young man's queer, self-centred nature would refuse to recognize anything outside of his own particular world of science and such a mundane thing as will-making might never occur to him. Again, when one is young the possibilities of death seem very far off and remote unless, of course, Blaire realized that he stood in danger. But then he would not. Having got the formula off his hands, he would naturally assume the danger shifted. On the other hand...

"No good conjecturing," Read grunted, as he rose. "Best to see the lad myself."

The dressing-bell for dinner sounded as he tapped on the door of Blaire's room. The young man's voice bade him enter. Blaire was sitting in the fading light from an open window, making notes from a book. He looked up as the Inspector approached, blinking short-sightedly through his thick glasses.

"You'll ruin your eyes, son," were Read's opening words. He nodded towards the open window. "Why don't you put on the light?"

"Hadn't noticed it was so dark— wrapped up in this work," Blaire muttered.

'Stretching out a thin hand, he switched on the standard lamp by the table then, taking off his glasses, rubbed his blood-flecked eyes wearily. Pushing book and papers to one side, he leaned back in his chair.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

Read did not beat about the bush. "Have you made a will?" he demanded.

Blaire was adjusting the spectacles on his nose. He looked up sharply.

"What makes you ask that?"

"Because it's mighty important, son."

Edward hesitated a moment before replying. Then: "Since you could find out by paying a shilling at Somerset House," he returned, "there's no sense in denying it. Yes, Inspector, I have made a will."

Read nodded, and dropped uninvited into a chair. "Mind telling me who benefits?"

Blaire's sullen mouth hardened for a moment. "Is this necessary?"

"Most necessary," Read assured him.

The young man shrugged. "Very well. My— Miss Blaire is the sole beneficiary of the will."

The Inspector studied the smoking cigar between his fingers for a space, conscious that the other's eyes were on him. Without raising his voice, he said: "I notice you don't call Miss Blaire your sister, son. That's because you come from different stock' isn't it?"

Blaire sprang to his feet, scattering the papers on his desk like white birds in flight. The bowl of the lamp cut off the upper portion of his face so that the light was focused on that weak, twisted mouth now trembling with unspoken words. Thin fingers flew to his lips as if to steady them, then the young man spoke hoarsely.

"Who told you?" And as the Inspector did not reply: "It was Betsy! And she promised me— faithfully— that she'd keep silent about this!"

The Inspector rose and, crossing to the table, laid a hand on the young man's shoulder, pushing him gently back into his chair. "Hold your horses, son," he said curtly. "You don't want to jump to conclusions like that, y'know. Matter of fact, Miss Blaire didn't tell me. Your parentage isn't quite the secret that you'd like to think."

Blaire was staring up at him, his face crimson. "You mean— others in this house...?" And as Read nodded, he buried his face in his hands. "I know what it will be," he whispered. "They'll all be pointing at me— pitying me to my face— sneering at me behind my back."

Read said slowly: "You've got a pretty warped opinion of the human race in general, haven't you, lad? The house isn't going to laugh at you, because, in the first place, only two other people besides your half-sister knows. And secondly,

people don't laugh about that kind of thing these days. That belongs to one of them mid-Victorian novels." And as Blaire raised his head again: "Come on, son, snap out of it!"

The young man was half-way across the room before he spoke again. "Care for a drink?" he muttered apologetically. And as the Inspector shook his head, he turned to a small cabinet and took out whisky decanter and a glass. Measuring himself a liberal potation, he swallowed half of it at a gulp. The liquid had immediate effect. Read, watching, saw his mouth become firmer, his hands ceased trembling. He swallowed the remainder of the contents and, still holding the glass in his hand, returned and leaned against the table. There was almost a hint of bravado in his manner as he addressed his companion.

"I suppose I should have made this official in the first place," he said. "But it's hardly the kind of thing one boasts about to strangers. Particularly the police! Still, if it's common knowledge you might as well know the whole truth." Haltingly at first, then with more assurance, he retailed Pennefeather's story to the Inspector, who listened in silence. The drink seemed to have released Blaire's perverse nature, and he spared himself nothing in the telling. Finally:

"That's the sort of rotten decayed stock I spring from," he said bitterly. "Can you wonder that I was ashamed to tell the truth?"

Read did not reply. Instead, he carefully deposited an inch of cigar-ash in the tray at his elbow. Then he looked up. "Have you seen your father since he came out of prison?"

The alarm on Blaire's face supplemented his reply. "Good God, no! I wouldn't have him within a mile of me!"

"He's been a good deal closer than that, son. What would you say if I told you he was out in the garden last night?"

Blaire was staring at him, his features twisted in horror. "That man— here? How do you know?"

"We saw him," the Inspector said quietly.

Blaire turned away, shoulders drooping dejectedly. "So he's found me at last," he whispered. "After all this time!" He half turned and the acid in his tone cut like a knife. "Isn't there something in the Bible about being sure your sin will find you out?"

"You don't want to meet your father?"

The young man spat the words: "I'd die first!"

Read leaned forward. "Then why don't you get away from here, son? Take a holiday— three months on the Continent. After all, there's nothing to keep you here now. And you can afford to go roaming where you please."

Blaire, in the act of sitting, paused. "What about your bloodhounds? They

won't let anyone step outside the house."

Read shrugged. "I think we might ease the regulations as far as you're concerned, son."

Blaire was watching the Inspector curiously. He adjusted his glasses carefully before he spoke. "I've told you the truth, Inspector. Might you return the compliment? What's the real reason for you wanting me out of this house?"

"You're in danger, son."

"But—"

"I know just what you're going to say," the Inspector returned. "But let me give you a tip. Get out of this place while you can. It's best for you and best for us. I don't mind tellin' you that we're closing the net round Mister Owl at last. When we pull the string, the less people in this house the better!" He rose and crushed out his cigar. "Well, what's your answer?"

Blaire nodded. "The idea certainly appeals to me," he confessed. "I haven't had a holiday since I was in Vienna six years ago. But I can't go straight away. I've got various things to finalize here."

Read was on his way to the door. "You can let me know in the morning," he said. "Meanwhile, keep your eyes open, son." He nodded. "See you at dinner."

Out in the corridor, he glanced at his wrist-watch. He had just time to write out a detailed report on the new developments. Mailed tonight, Jeffery should receive it in the morning. Returning to his room, Read sat down and, unscrewing his fountain-pen, set to work on the task.

THE CHIMES of two o'clock boomed hollowly through the deserted corridors of Rookwood Towers. Edward Blaire turned restlessly in his bed. Then he was wide awake, sitting up and staring out across the darkened room. No sound save the ticking of the small clock on the table by his bedside broke the silence that had settled once more over the house.

Blaire had not slept well that night. In the open cabinet an empty decanter of whisky attested to his particular means of wooing slumber. Now he woke with raging thirst, his mouth caked and dry. He recalled the water carafe near by and thrusting himself out of bed made his way towards it. He gulped down two full glasses and wiped his hand across his mouth. Never had he felt more wakeful than standing there in that silent room. Taking up his spectacles from the table he crossed to the long window and stood looking down into the dark garden. The full moon of the previous nights had disappeared; below him lay a pool of inky shadows, darker where the overhanging trees massed like sly conspirators.

On his right, an angle of the house pushed out into the garden, and the

reflected starshine glinted on the blank windows that followed one on the other down the length of the wall. Familiarity with the house told him how those rooms were occupied. Dr. Hautmann had the apartment nearest him, then came that of his daughter. Next was Elizabeth's room, and then the sleeping quarters of the Chief Inspector. An angle of the wall hid Atherton-Wayne's own suite of rooms, and standing there Edward allowed his mind to roam behind those shuttered panes. Were they sleeping, this odd assortment of individuals under this roof, or, like him, were they wakeful and busy with their own troublesome thoughts?

What had Read meant when he had told Blaire he was in danger? That was the question that had beaten ceaselessly at the young man's brain, making sleep impossible until he had drugged his ticking, agitating mind with the fumes of alcohol. That— and another phrase of the Inspector's: "Your father was out in the garden last night!" His father! Blaire's lip curled. After he had worked so hard and planned so much, why did chance send this shadow across his path again? And where was he now? Was it from this source Read expected the clanger to come? Was it possible that, even at this moment, his father might be somewhere in the garden, perhaps in the very house itself?...

In that instant, Edward happened to glance at the Inspector's window, and his thoughts snapped abruptly. The dark panes had been illuminated by a brief flash of light. Blaire's first impression was that Read was awake and had struck a match, but the gleam was too furtive for that. And no match ever gave out a smoothly crawling circular disc of light. Even as he stared, eyes blinking behind his thick lenses, the radiance appeared again. With a tightening in his throat, Edward recognized it. The subdued light of an electric torch...

Someone, or something, was prowling in the Chief Inspector's room!

It was as though a cold hand closed suddenly around his heart. His glasses blurred, and reaching up Blaire felt his forehead dewed with perspiration. And as he paused irresolutely, the silence was shattered by a roar like a goaded bull, followed by the sharp crack of a revolver shot. As if waiting for this cue, mild pandemonium descended. Two windows came alight almost immediately, somewhere a woman screamed. This sound was answered by Read's bellow, a frenzied yell in which anguish and command were blended.

"Donlin! Connolly! Stop the skunk, he's got the formula!"

Blaire started as if galvanized, and sprang for the door. Heavy footsteps ran down the corridor outside. The young man swung open the portal just in time to see a dark figure brush past him and, running with the speed of the wind, disappear in the direction of the Oak Room. The distant crash of a slamming door was heard, and then the lights flared in a corridor acrid with the smell of burnt gunpowder. Next moment Inspector Read, a lumbering figure in striped

pyjamas and one hand still grasping the automatic, rounded the bend, followed closely by the two detectives.

Read bore down on the young man like a thunderbolt. "Did you see him?" he panted. And as Blaire nodded, "Which way?"

"The Oak Room—" began Edward, when Read swept him on one side and raced onward. Blaire, careless of his appearance, followed. He came up just as Connolly was fumbling awkwardly at the entrance. The Inspector shouldered him aside and kicked open the door with his foot.

"Back!" he snapped. "The rat'll probably shoot his way out of here!"

The three men crouched behind the Inspector's broad shoulders as the door swung wide. There was a pause. Cautiously, Read inserted his head around the jamb. Next moment:

"Room seems empty," he grunted, then wheeled on Blaire. "You're sure he came in here?"

The young man shook his head. "I said he came in this direction."

The Inspector, ahead of the others, strode inside and stood staring around with narrowed eyes. "Might be anywhere by now," he muttered uneasily. Then he swore softly. "Got the cheek of the devil himself! Came into my bedroom and lifted that formula almost under my nose!"

Connolly, his eyes everywhere, said abruptly: "Isn't this the place with the panel arrangement?"

"By hokey, yes!" Read was already on his way to the opposite wall. "That's where he's hiding, or I'm a pink Chinaman!" He was passing one large hand caressingly over the woodwork. "Somewhere about here, I believe...ah!"

In the heavy silence of the room, the purr of the concealed machinery was unusually loud. All eyes were focused on that segment of the wall swinging open with irritating slowness. It gaped wider and wider...

"Look!" screamed Blaire hysterically, as a woman screams. From that dark aperture an arm appeared suddenly, hoisted in mock salute for a moment, then fell limply. With popping eyes, the quartette saw the figure of a man revolve slowly as the panel opened wider. They had a breathless glimpse of a pallid face and glassy stare, then the entire body pitched forward and thudded on to the carpet.

The purring stopped. Now the panel was wide open.

"Lacey," breathed Read. He shook his head like a man waking from a dream. "Lacey— dead— stabbed in the back..." The whisper trailed away into silence.

A quarter after two sounded from the clock tower, and in the stillness it was as though muffled drums beat out the passing of a human soul.

Chapter 9

Wednesday, June 19th

THE HOURS FOLLOWING the discovery of Lacey's body are among those which Chief Inspector Read would rather forget.

As he stood staring incredulously at that lifeless husk sprawled on the carpet, there came a sudden commotion at the door. Turning, he beheld a little group of people, all in various stages of disarray, pushing through the door. They spread fanwise into the room, tousled, weary-eyed, staring down at the latest work of the fiend. Their faces, twisted in horror, were like masks of the damned from the Inferno's inner circle. Elsa Hautmann gave a little choking gasp and would have collapsed but for her father's lean arm rigidly about her shoulders. Elizabeth Blaire moved like one in the grip of nightmare. Atherton-Wayne's thin face had that dazed look one sees on the features of the shell-shocked. Reynolds and Dr. Newbury stood together. Away in the corner of the room, Blaire was being quietly sick into a handkerchief...

Then, as though this tightening silence was the breathless pause between lightning flash and thunderbolt, Read's anger suddenly blazed forth, awe-inspiring in its vehemence. Had any of them left their beds that night? Like marionettes they shook their heads. Atherton-Wayne licked his dry lips. "We heard a revolver shot and then—" but Read thundered him down. Had anyone heard any sound before that? No answer. Who had been in the Oak Room that evening? Like sheep they stared wide-eyed at him. Like sheep they huddled together. The Inspector, exasperated at this dumb silence, shook clenched fists above his head.

"Someone was in my quarters not five minutes ago!" he roared. "Someone under this roof! That person is standing here in this room!" Red-faced, his eyes glinting, he scrutinized face after face. "Who was it? Which one of you stole that formula?"

"Dear God!—" It was Atherton-Wayne, his face tight and grey. The Inspector swung round on him and the rest of the sentence died on the baronet's lips. Read took a step forward and his mouth tightened ominously.

"Listen to me, all of you!" His words, heavy, spaced, fell into the silence like stones tossed one by one into some depthless well. "This game's gone on long enough. I know that the skunk calling himself The Owl is here in this room, listening to every word. Here's my bargain with him." Again his narrowed eyes flashed from face to face. "Step forward and give yourself up and you'll get as much leniency as the law allows. Otherwise, by God, I swear I'll never rest until you drop through the gallows's trap at the end of a rope!"

The big man paused, breathing heavily. He folded his arms slowly across his broad chest.

"I'm asking you for the last time. Which one of you is this murderer?"

Twenty dragging seconds passed. The very walls about him were no more silent than the people in that room. Read's head turned slowly, as if drawn on a string, taking in a succession of white faces, uneasy eyes, fluttering uncertain hands. But no figure moved. Then the Inspector's shoulders gave a twitch. Without taking his eyes from the group, he spoke to Connolly.

"Take the police car and get into Tilling. Bring the medical officer out here at once."

Connolly nodded, and was about to move when Read's bark forestalled him. "Wait a moment— I'm not finished yet. Go to the local station and bring back the constable's wife. She's the nearest approach to a police matron we can hope for down here."

The detective blinked. "Police matron, sir?"

"Yes." Read's mouth had set like a trap, and his lips barely moved.

"Because she's going to search the women in this party while Donlin frisks the men!"

"You mean...search us?" It was Dr. Hautmann. "Is there to be no end to these indignities?"

The Inspector ignored him, addressing the room at large. "The gloves are off now," he snapped. "I've given The Owl a chance to play ball with me— and he's refused. Very well. Until I've proved otherwise, I'm acting on the assumption that every person now in this room is guilty of murder— and you're going to be treated accordingly!"

A rustle of apprehension passed through the room, as palpable as the ripple of a breeze upon water. But before any person had a chance to speak, Read continued:

"No person is to move from this room until I give them permission. There's been far too much soft-soap and blarney about this investigation, and I'm putting an end to it right now! You can't go on patting a skunk for ever!" Read paused again, his jutting jaw an invitation to argue.

Dr. Newbury, his florid face redder than ever, bleated: "All this is very high-handed, Inspector—"

"That'll do!" snapped Read, wheeling on him. "You'll have a chance to air your views in a minute." He nodded to Connolly. "That's all, Dennis. Jump to it!" And as the detective almost ran from the room, the Inspector turned back to Newbury.

"Come over here, Doctor."

Newbury approached, eying the big man as a tramp might watch a savage

dog. Read gestured to the body on the floor. "Is that one of your little souvenirs sticking in his back?" he snapped.

The plump doctor blinked, flashed a glance downwards and turned back, fingers picking nervously at his lips.

"You mean...the weapon?"

"I meant the weapon," the other assured him.

Newbury nodded. "Yes...it is another of my scalpels..." His voice, robbed of its fruity quality, trailed away. Then, as the Inspector continued to stare at him, he gave a sharp squeak of fear. "Inspector...you don't think that I— I..." and it was as though the words choked in his throat.

Inspector Read turned suddenly. "Miss Blaire!" he rapped.

Elizabeth, staring down with horrified concentration, started. "Yes?"

"Come here, please." The Inspector addressed Newbury again. "Just where do you keep your instruments?"

"In a case in my drawer..."

"What drawer?"

Newbury licked his lips. "The desk drawer in my room."

"Is it locked?"

"The desk...yes. But the room is open." He swallowed something in his throat and added: "I— I have the keys in the Pocket of my waistcoat behind the door."

Read nodded curtly. "You hear that, Miss Blaire? Go to the doctor's room, get the keys, unlock that drawer and bring that case of instruments in here—" He broke off as Dr. Hautmann made a movement of protest. "What's the matter with you?" he snapped.

"Didn't I understand you to say, Inspector, that no person was to leave this room?"

"You did!"

Hautmann's eyes rested on the girl for a moment. "Then I take it that Miss Blaire, like Caesar's wife, is quite above suspicion?"

"You can take it what way you like," the Inspector snapped. "Get going, Miss Blaire, please."

All eyes were fixed on the girl as she moved across the room. The door closed behind her before Read spoke again. He addressed Hautmann: "Since you brought up the subject of suspicions, Doctor, there's one or two questions I'd like to ask you."

Hautmann shrugged. "Indeed?"

"Yes! I've been keeping my weather eye on you and your daughter ever since you were found prowling around young Blaire's cottage the first night you arrived."

The doctor said stiffly: "Must we go over all that again? I thought I had made it clear that I lost my way."

"Are you sure you weren't nosing around to try to get your hands on the formula?"

Hautmann drew himself up. "Really, sir, there are limits to your insolence. And I must warn you, sir, that every word of this will be reported to the Home Secretary!"

"On what authority?"

"The authority of the German Government, of whom I have the honour to be the representative."

Read did not reply for a moment. Instead, he walked across to the other and, folding his hands across his chest, fixed Hautmann with a gimlet eye. Then, slowly, he shook his head. "Come out from behind the mask, my man! Your name's no more Hautmann than mine is Shirley Temple! Don't try to bluff it out! We've been in touch with the German Embassy, and they've never heard of you or your precious daughter!" Now the silence in the room was electric. It held that tensed expectation of a tightly packed auditorium watching the climax of some gripping footlight drama. Only one person moved. Elsa Hautmann, her eyes unnaturally wide and fathomlessly blue, reached out a hand and steadied herself against a chair.

Then the doctor spoke.

"Inspector Read," he said, and his tones were gentle, almost pitying, "you requested me to stop— er— bluffing it out. May I address the same remark to you?"

Read snarled, but somehow the tone was curiously hollow: "What the devil do you mean?"

In his pale face, the doctor's eyes blazed almost frighteningly. "You're beaten, Inspector! You've got your back against a wall and you're fighting desperately— but already you know it's completely hopeless. The Owl, whoever he is, has won every round of this extraordinary game. You have brought the entire resources of Scotland Yard against this person...and he has laughed them to scorn. At this moment, as you stand here you have no more idea of the true identity of The Owl than the moment you stepped into this house a week ago—"

The Inspector's face was scarlet. "That'll do!" he barked.

"No, it won't do," Hautmann assured him. "You've snarled and snapped at every person under this roof— and it's time someone answered you back in your own key. It hurts to be spoken to like this, because you know what I'm saying is the truth! You're bluffing, Inspector— bluffing desperately! You're browbeating and bullying in the wild hope that you'll stumble on some clue or

frighten some timid person into a false confession!" The doctor's tone, level before, was now a glib sneer. "That would suit you perfectly, wouldn't it? So long as you could clap the handcuffs on somebody, you could easily manufacture a case around them! But you'll get no confession from me, Inspector! Because I know just what you are— a frightened, bluffing piece of stiff-necked authority—"

"By the great living God!" breathed Read. His face, scarlet before, was now a bright purple. Hands clenched into fists, he took a step forward, and so menacing was his appearance that Hautmann recoiled involuntarily. That the Inspector, livid with rage, was about to lay violent hands on the doctor was beyond contradiction, and fortunate it was for Read's future career that the interruption occurred when it did.

At that moment, from somewhere down the corridor, Elizabeth screamed: "Inspector...quickly! There's a strange man— !" The sound of a struggle drowned out next words, and almost before the Inspector had reached the door it burst open. Writhing in the grip of two policemen was a shabbily dressed, unshaven, middle-aged person who cowered and blinked in the strong light of the room. The policemen jerked him forward to where Read was standing, then backed watchfully to the door where Elizabeth Blaire waited.

Read reached out an ungentle hand, took the bristling chin and jerked it upward. The newcomer gave a little whimper of fright.

"Who the devil are you?"

The stranger jerked his head away, baring his teeth like an animal. The Inspector, in no mood for evasion, set his lips and turned to the constables. "Take this bird outside," he said evenly. "I'll talk to him there."

But before the two policemen could move, Edward Blaire stepped forward. In spite of his striped pyjamas and ruffled hair, he moved with a certain curious dignity. Placing himself between the newcomer and the Inspector, he addressed Read.

"There's no need for that, sir. This man's been punished enough."

"Eh? How do you know?"

Blaire said clearly: "This man is my father, Inspector."

THE MORNING dawned grey and cheerless, symbolic of the atmosphere which permeated the Towers following an extremely uncomfortable night.

Connolly, with the medical officer and the local constable's wife, returned shortly after Blaire's announcement in the Oak Room. Read had waited only long enough to see his men take over, then he had summoned the ex-convict to his room. The thoroughly cowed Conway disclaimed all knowledge of The Owl and his whereabouts. He explained that he had come seeking an interview

with his famous son, and because of his appearance, had climbed in through an open window. It was shortly after this that Elizabeth Blaire, on her way to Newbury's room, had seen him lurking in the corridor.

Inspector Read, baffled, tired and ill-tempered, passed the man over to one of the constables, with the order that he should be searched and then locked up until the morning. Ten minutes' conversation with Blaire's father convinced him that this man had neither the intelligence nor the courage to have planned and organized this reign of terror, but the testy official was taking no chances.

Meanwhile, a systematic search was taking place.

While Mrs. Dunn, the horny-handed and rather embarrassed constable's wife, attended to Elsa Hautmann, Connolly and Donlin went over each of the male guests in turn. They found nothing pertaining to the case in hand. Whereupon, acting under Read's orders, they placed two constables in the room to watch the indignant group and gathering fresh help began to comb the various rooms. Realizing in full the seriousness of the situation, the detectives worked slowly and thoroughly, and it was not until three o'clock in the morning that a tired group of searchers reported back to their superior.

"Nothing to be found, Chief," yawned Connolly. "The rooms are blank."

"What about the people?"

"Searched to the skin," was the laconic reply. "Nothing."

The Chief Inspector knuckled bleary eyes. "Might have known it," he grunted. "All right— let 'em get to bed. You'd better get some shut-eye, too."

Thus, when the gong sounded for breakfast on the following morning only two people descended. Edward Blaire walked into the morning-room to find Elizabeth at the window, staring out into a weeping world. It was a world grown suddenly smaller, hemmed in by low-hanging, leaden clouds that seemed to brush the tops of the dripping trees. The wide gardens were deserted except for the oil-skinned figure of a gardener slouching across the marshy lawn. So engrossed was the girl in this melancholy scene that she did not turn until Blaire stood at her elbow.

"Elizabeth..." he said.

She wheeled sharply. "Oh!...Hello."

"Are we the only one down?" And as she nodded, he crossed to the sideboard and blinked at the silver entrée dishes. "Can I get you anything?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, thanks, Ted. I'm not hungry."

"How about some coffee?" And as she hesitated, "Come on, you'd better eat something. Just some coffee and toast, eh?" Without waiting for her reply, he poured a cup, took a piece of toast from the rack and set them before her at the table. "This might be the last breakfast you'll eat with me," he told her.

The girl stared. "Why?"

"I'm going away." He was back at the sideboard, helping himself to a small serving of liver and bacon. "I had a talk with the Inspector yesterday. He seems to think I'm in some kind of danger here. I'm going to Vienna for three months."

"When do you leave?"

"As soon as I can." Blaire deposited his plate on the table and sat down opposite her. "You see, Elizabeth, this money I've earned with the formula—it's made rather a difference to everything. There's my father, for instance..."

Elizabeth was sipping her coffee. Over the rim of the cup, her eyes were sombre. "You mean...last night's episode?"

"Yes." The young man toyed with his fork. "I've always hated my father—he stood for everything I've tried to escape from. But last night, somehow, it all seemed so pitiable. There he was, ragged, dirty, cringing...some sort of grotesque parody of a man—and yet, my father! I realized, for the first time, that perhaps he wasn't so much to blame. If circumstances had been different...if he'd had money to make him independent..." He paused and pushed aside his plate.

"I'm going to give him a fresh start," he he announced quietly.

"Ted! That's splendid of you!" Elizabeth reached forth and gave his fingers a little squeeze. "I always knew you'd turn up trumps!—"

Blaire smiled and for a moment it gave his face a queer attractiveness. "You know, I always used to sneer about the novelists' theory that trouble brought one face to face with one's true self—but dammit all, Beth, there is something in it!" He was holding her hands now, and his voice was lighter and more youthful than the girl had ever heard it. "Before all this happened I was a pretty nasty piece of work! Self-centred, egotistical and rude! I lived for myself and reckoned that the cares of the world were just none of my business." He grinned again. "You must have been pretty well ashamed of me in those times."

"You were rather a trial," the girl admitted.

"It was the poverty that did it, Beth! It's all nonsense to say that money doesn't bring happiness. It brings independence, a chance to live decently, to enjoy the good things of life!" He shrugged. "Oh, I'm no hypocrite! If I've changed, it's partly caused by what I've been through—but Sir Anthony's money has an influence, too. And while I'm not going to wear a hair-shirt and live in a cave for my sins, I'm at least going to try to make certain restitution in my own way."

"What do you plan to do?"

Blaire pushed back his chair and lit a cigarette. "First, I'm going to see that my father enjoys what's left of his life. I'll set him up on a little farm

somewhere, or, if that doesn't appeal to him, I'll have Pennfeather draw up an annuity. Then I'd like to endow a scholarship to one of the universities— I can talk that over with Sir Anthony."

Elizabeth was smiling. "Now, that sounds more like the old Ted Blaire I used to know!"

The young man crushed out his newly lighted cigarette on the edge of his plate. He leaned forward and took the girl's hands again. His voice was very quiet.

"Elizabeth," he said gently.

"Yes?"

"You still think of me as your brother, don't you?"

The girl nodded. "Of course. I think I always will."

Suddenly, inexplicably, he dropped her hands and, rising, walked across to the window. He said briefly "I thought so!"

Elizabeth was staring at him. "Ted, what's the matter?"

The young man spoke without turning, and he seemed to have some difficulty with his throat. "I thought perhaps— perhaps you might come to look on me as...something else."

"Something else?"

Edward Blaire said slowly: "Your husband."

Elizabeth rose with a suddenness that sent her chair rocking. For three seconds she gaped open-mouthed, then the smile that broke about her lips was reflected in her voice: "Ted! That's hardly the kind of thing to joke about."

Then Blaire turned, and she saw, in dismay, his face grown suddenly thinner, paler. Behind those thick glasses his eyes burnt darkly. He said, huskily: "For God's sake, Elizabeth, do I look as though I'm joking?" Now he came forward, walking a little unsteadily. "Don't laugh at me— please! But I've got to tell you this. I think I've known it a long, long time. I'm in love with you, Elizabeth...and I've got it badly."

"Oh, Ted...!" It was a long-drawn breath. The girl went to him and took one thin hand in hers. "Ted, I had no idea you felt like that! Really— I just don't know what to say, old boy."

"Don't laugh at me," he said again.

"Of course I won't laugh at you. It's just that...well...I'm rather touched, I think." Gently, she let his hand drop and moved away. "It's all such a surprise, Ted."

He made no movement to follow her, but stood by the table watching. Presently he said: "Well, Elizabeth, you know now."

"Yes."

"And— and what do you think about it?"

Elizabeth shook her head. Her voice was very gentle. "Oh, Ted, it's all so impossible! Surely you must realize that? We were brought up as brother and sister."

He said harshly: "But we're not brother and sister."

"I'm afraid I can never think of you in any other way, old man." And as he turned away, she went on: "I like you, Ted, and I'm terribly proud of you—even more so since you've told me your future plans. You said just now that you were no hypocrite. Neither am I. Therefore, it's best that we have this thing out here and now."

"You don't think...you'll ever change your mind?"

Elizabeth said quietly: "I'm quite certain I won't."

Blaire shrugged. Sitting down in his chair, he began to push the untasted food about with his fork. "That's because there's someone else, I suppose?"

"What makes you think that?"

Now he looked up. "We're playing the truth game, Elizabeth. Is there someone else?"

The girl nodded. "Yes."

"Is it Blackburn?" And as the colour flooded into Elizabeth's face, he gave that old crooked smile. "We're brother and sister, remember. You can tell me."

"I can only tell you my side of it."

"Eh?"

Elizabeth Blaire's voice trembled ever so slightly. "We're both in the same boat, old boy. Love unrequited!" She drew a deep breath. "Why should I be ashamed of it? Yes, Ted...I'm head over heels in love with Jeffery. And he thinks so little of it that he could go off to town without even coming to say good-bye to me."

THE AFTERNOON OF the tenth day of the investigation dragged wearily on.

Inspector Read, sunk in grey melancholy following the loss of the formula, retired to his study and spent the hours after lunch alternately pacing the room or sitting hunched over his desk, pawing at the voluminous notes of the case as if he hoped, by sheer will-power, to extract some order from the chaos about him. The unfortunate man was rapidly approaching that mental state which afflicts the too-frenzied searcher, and he had begun to doubt if he could have recognized the truth even were it set down plainly before his eyes.

Dusk was falling over Rookwood Towers when the telephone at his elbow rang shrilly. Read could scarcely keep the elation from his voice as Jeffery's tone sounded over the wire. Into Blackburn's unseen but sympathetic ear, he poured the full chronicle of frustration, beginning with the stealing of the formula and the finding of Lacey's body in the Oak Room, and concluding with

the story of Blaire's surprising parentage. The Inspector went on to mention his suggestion that Blaire should leave the Towers as soon as possible.

"Seems quite in order to me," Jeffery assured him. "Now that the trail's getting plainer, the less people to watch the better." Read almost bit the mouthpiece of the instrument. "Trail getting hot! You mean— you're on to something up there?"

"Definitely," the other's voice assured him. And as Read began to speak, "It's too long to tell you over the 'phone, Chief— and what's more, it's dangerous! I've had proof that the telephone wires down there have been tapped more than once!"

"H'mm..." The Inspector considered for a moment, then: "What about the Hautmanns, son?"

"They're genuine enough," was the reply. "I don't know what game they're actually up to at the Towers but they certainly came into this country with the Government's blessing..." Jeffery's tone slowed. "And by the way Chief, I'd walk rather warily with those two. We don't want this thing to develop into an international crisis." There was a momentary pause and then the voice sounded almost too casual. "By the Way, how's Elizabeth taking all this?"

"You come down here and see for yourself," Read grunted.

"You'll see neither hide nor hair of me for another twenty-four hours," came the reply. "Too busy. But don't start gnawing your finger-nails, Chief. The end's in sight." They spoke for a few minutes on various matters and then a far-away click announced that Jeffery had hung up. Read muttered something deep in his throat and was reaching for a cigar when a tap came at the door.

It opened to reveal Dr. Hautmann.

"Well?" snapped Read. "And what do you want?"

Hautmann closed the door and came forward. In one hand he carried a telegraph form. Without speaking, he placed the flimsy slip of paper on the desk. The Inspector, staring distrustfully at the figure before him, glanced down at the writing, which was brief and very to the point.

Return immediately. Grave complications threatening. Council meets Sunday. Essential you be present. Kessler.

The Inspector looked up, his lips tight. "Well?" he demanded.

Hautmann shrugged. "Surely that message is self-explanatory?" he murmured. "I trust, Inspector, that you are not going to be— obstinate?"

Read was handing the telegram across the desk. "If by that you mean— am I going to let you leave here, the answer is No!"

"And if I were to take the law into my own hands?"

"You'd finish in the local lock-up," the Inspector snapped. Hautmann did

not speak for a few moments. He crossed to the window and stood looking out into the dusk-filled garden. Read took advantage of the pause to rise and switch on the light. As he moved back to his desk he saw that Hautmann had turned and that traces of a smile played about the thin lips.

"See something funny out there?" the other grunted.

"I am afraid," the doctor replied, "that the garden is as hard to define as my own course of action. You see, Inspector, I am a man in a quandary. If I leave this place without your permission, I am to be thrust into a prison. If I do not leave here, when I eventually return to my own country I shall be placed in a concentration camp for disobeying orders."

"Look here—"

But Hautmann raised his hand. "Let me finish, Inspector, please! Do you know what happens to a man in a concentration camp in Germany? I do...because I have seen things which people like yourself imagined for ever buried with the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition! During the past week, you yourself have experienced, in some small measure, terror and suspense. You have probably wondered why the events under this roof have left me so undisturbed. It is because, Inspector, I have seen in my own native Germany horrors beside which the happenings down here pale into insignificance!" Hautmann stepped forward, and the Inspector was surprised to see tiny beads of perspiration dewing his forehead. "And so, my good Inspector, I have no intention of allowing you to herd me into that living hell!"

Read sat silent, impressed in spite of himself. The doctor, too expert in the ways of diplomacy to overlook this advantage, quietened. He folded his arms, and all the former dignity had returned as he continued:

"Therefore, Inspector, I must follow the orders of that telegram. I know it is useless for me to tell you again that neither my daughter nor myself have anything to do with this Owl criminal. But I am going to make a suggestion to you."

Read said curtly: "I'm listening."

"Let two of your men accompany us during the remainder of the time we are in this country. Let these men examine our luggage, investigate our bona fides, follow us every step of the way." Hautmann spread his hands. "We are quite willing to put up with any inconvenience if it will persuade you that we are innocent. It will not be pleasant, but it will be much more palatable than what will follow the ignoring of this telegram."

Into the Inspector's mind, as he sat considering the proposition, came an echo of Blackburn's words: "Walk warily with these two." And it was this, as much as the obvious sincerity in Hautmann's manner, that decided him. Moreover, no one realized as much as the Inspector that, technically speaking,

he had no evidence whatsoever on which to hold either Hautmann or his daughter. And if the doctor chose to make things unpleasant with the Commissioner...Read leaned back in his chair.

"All right," he grunted. "You can go."

Hautmann inclined his head. "Thank you."

"On one condition," continued Read. "We'll forget about sending anyone out with you, provided you report to headquarters before you leave the country."

"Willingly!"

The Inspector picked up some papers on his desk. He spoke without raising his head. "That's all. Now you'd better go before I change my mind."

The doctor moved noiselessly to the door and paused with his hand on it.

"Inspector..."

"Yes."

"This Owl person— haven't you any idea who it might be?"

Read said curtly: "What's that to you?"

"Only that, having been among the suspects for so long, I would like to know the truth." The thin tones were edged with mockery. "It is rather like reading a detective story and becoming very interested— only to find the last chapter missing!"

The click of the closing door announced his departure. The Inspector was still staring moodily before him when a muffled gong downstairs announced the evening meal.

IN ONE OF THE MAIN LIVING-rooms on the ground floor, Elizabeth Blaire sat by the open window.

Earlier in the afternoon the rain had ceased, and for an hour the sun had blazed forth with almost angry vigour. Then the clouds had banked up again, not grey and leaden as before, but dark and somehow ominous, shot through with the brooding scarlet of the departing day. Now the air was thick, warm and heavy so that when the girl had flung wide the window not a breath of air stirred the shadowy garden. But somewhere beyond the horizon, lightning flickered palely and then came distant thunder, faint and ill-tempered, like one turning irritably in sleep. Of a sudden, a few drops of rain pattered sharply across the garden and were gone, furtive spies of an army massed somewhere out of sight. Elizabeth gave a little shiver and glanced uneasily to the west. Here the clouds had formed like black and lurid billows of smoke, chained in the act of rising from some vast conflagration.

"Walpurgis night," she muttered.

Perhaps it was this strange electric tension in the air that plucked at her

nerves and set them quivering like harp-strings. Elizabeth could never remember feeling so restless and disturbed. She rose and, crossing to the box on the table, extracted and lit a cigarette. But the tobacco was tasteless and the smoke seemed to gather chokingly in her throat, so she crushed out the tiny cylinder almost immediately. And now she stood motionless, fighting off a queer claustrophobic feeling that the very walls of the room were closing in on her. Then a beam cracked sharply in the ceiling and, as she spun round, her hands pressed to her throat, she could feel her heart pounding and thudding under her fingers.

"This won't do at all," said Miss Blaire sharply.

She returned to the window and looked out, breathing deeply of the warm damp smell of earth. Suddenly, acting on an impulse, she gave a half-glance over her shoulder, then, pushing the windows wider, walked out into the garden. Moving soundlessly on the thick lawn, she did not stop until the house was some distance behind her.

Out here, under the trees, the girl felt a sense of freedom. Turning, she looked back at the dark pile, broken here and there with lighted windows, seemingly brighter than usual in that heavy, still atmosphere. Most of the panes were flung wide, and she had occasional glimpses of the people within. This gave her a sense of security, and she told herself that if she stayed close to the house there was no need for her to return indoors for some little time.

Keeping within hailing distance of those windows, Elizabeth moved from under the trees and around an angle of the house. A flicker of lightning, brighter than before, momentarily outlined the lily-pond just ahead. The girl reached the low stone coping and, sitting, trailed one hand loosely in the water.

On this side, only a first-floor window was illuminated. This, Elizabeth knew, was the balconied apartment of the Hautmann couple, and that patch of flickering gold, so plain against the dark ivy growth around it, drew her eyes like a magnet. Because of the elevation, she could not see inside, but waving shadows, passing and re-passing, told of activity in that room. Sitting below, the girl's thoughts were as sombre as the garden around her.

Somewhere inside that dark huddle of masonry a murderer lurked. Yet lurked was scarcely the term, since all had rubbed shoulders and even talked with this man hiding behind the false face of a friend. What, she wondered, were his thoughts at that moment? How much longer would he be free to carry out this grim masquerade?

Suddenly she gave a little gasp, and her eyes became riveted to that bright window overhead.

On the balcony, peering quickly from left to right, Dr. Hautmann stood. In

the reflected light, Elizabeth recognized him plainly. He hesitated for a moment, then, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, fluttered it over the garden. A moment later he retraced his steps back into the room, and she heard the click of closing panes. Almost immediately, the light vanished as heavy curtains were thrown across the windows. Elizabeth was on her feet, every muscle tensed, her mind buzzing with new suspicions. What was going on in that room? If it was something innocent, why close the window and draw the curtains on such a stifling night as this? Should she go back to the house and inform the Inspector of what she had seen? Elizabeth's jaw became stubborn. Apparently Read considered her an unnecessary nuisance, and she was already convinced that he was the reason for Jeffery's abrupt departure on the previous day. And if by chance the Hautmanns were engaged in something quite harmless, she would only make matters worse by leading the Inspector on what must turn out to be a useless errand. No, the girl decided swiftly, this is where I must rely solely on my own discretion.

She crossed the lawn and stood directly under the window, looking upward. The balcony, with its wrought-iron railing, was some twelve feet above her head. Elizabeth hesitated a moment, then, reaching out a hand, felt among the ivy leaves until her hand encountered a stout tentacle. Dare she risk it? She had never attempted anything like this before. What would happen if, half-way up, she were to lose her nerve?

Elizabeth Blaire shook her head, and kicking off her shoes thrust a silken toe into the wedge of the stem. Then, clinging desperately, she began to work her way slowly up the face of the wall.

Slowly, teeth gritted, she moved from hand-hold to hand-hold. The edges of the leaves, suddenly razor-sharp, scratched her face. Dry twigs rent her stockings and clawed mercilessly at her legs. Before she was half-way up, the muscles of her arms ached with the unaccustomed strain. Twice she almost fell— once when she misjudged the strength of a stem and it ripped away in her hand, and then, more horrifying, when some cold and scuttling body, disturbed from its green lair, slithered across her face. It was sheer will-power alone that kept her going and when, after what seemed an age, her trembling fingers closed about that iron railing, she hung for a moment shaking and sick with the effort.

She dared not look down. A final appeal to her numbed muscles and she was pulling herself up on to the balcony. This last exertion was almost too much, and as her feet touched the firm surface she swayed, near fainting. She gripped the cold railing, drinking in the air with deep sobbing gasps, heedless of the perspiration that dripped blindingly into her eyes. Down below, the garden watched silently.

Then she felt better. The world swam into focus, the thumping of her heart lessened, and she began to look about her. Turning, she made her way cautiously to the window. Luck was with her! The curtains had swung aside very slightly, leaving a gap of several inches. Elizabeth knelt and applied her eye to the opening.

She was looking into the Hautmanns' living-room. Directly opposite was the door leading to the main corridor. But what held her eye were three suit-cases in the centre of the floor— one already strapped, the others opened and half-filled with clothes. Even as she watched, Elsa Hautmann walked into the angle of her view, carrying several folded garments which she proceeded to pack into the nearest suit-case. And Elizabeth, womanlike, could not help contrasting her own filthy tattered presence with Miss Hautmann's elegant and maddeningly chic appearance, so much so that Miss Blaire felt a wave of hot resentment sweep her as she watched this lovely creature move gracefully about the task of packing.

So this precious pair thought they were skipping, did they? Well, not if Elizabeth could prevent it! Here was some definite news for the Inspector— but how was she to let him know? Not for all the wealth of the Indies would she return the way she had come! There was only one other course— to wait an opportunity and— the next moment the girl's eyes almost started from her head!

Dr. Hautmann had approached his daughter and was holding her in earnest conversation. Between his forefinger and thumb the doctor held a small phial of colourless liquid, and he nodded to it from time to time as he talked. The closed panes shut out all sound, but there was no doubting the evidence of Elizabeth's eyes:...

Dr. Hautmann held the stolen formula in his hand!

Here, then, was the explanation of the shrouded window. The Hautmanns, having successfully accomplished their schemes, were preparing to depart with their prize! And hard on the heels of this thought came a further, grimmer realization— did this mean that she, Elizabeth Blaire, was seeing for the first time the real man behind the mask of The Owl? Was this person, standing not half a dozen feet away from her, the creature responsible for the reign of terror at Rookwood Towers?

Now there seemed some disagreement in the room. The doctor was mouthing soundlessly at his daughter, who was gesticulating and shrugging angrily. If only she could hear what the couple were saying! Elizabeth rose to her feet and pulled cautiously at the closed panes. With a little thrill of satisfaction she felt them move under her fingers. Then the window was not locked!

And now Dr. Hautmann had waved aside some suggestion made by his daughter. Bending, he slipped that tiny phial under the folded clothes in one of the open cases. With Elsa following, and apparently protesting still, the doctor walked away until the hang of the curtains blocked both people from view. And outside, Elizabeth was tugging gently at the windows. As they came apart, a chorus of guttural accents reached her ears. Evidently the argument was proceeding from another room. The girl insinuated her slender body between the tall panes and slipped thankfully behind the heavy curtains. From this temporary sanctuary she surveyed the now-empty living-room. The Hautmanns were in the adjoining bedroom, and although the door was partly closed Elizabeth could hear plainly the agitated rise and fall of their voices. She clenched her hands tightly. Ever since that window had moved under her fingers she had decided on the course of action and she was now about to attempt the most reckless adventure of her life.

Eyes glued to that bedroom door, she edged slowly through the curtains, moving closer and closer to the open suit-case. Nearer...nearer...and with every creak of that treacherous floor she sweated anew. On the other side of the bedroom door the voices had softened and there came the sound of a drawer pulled out. And now...now she was there! A quick fumble among the folded clothes and her fingers closed around that precious phial!

Feverishly, Elizabeth Blaire turned towards the corridor entrance, and she could have cried out in sheer exultation. The door was fast, but the key was still in the lock! Then, throwing aside all caution in this last desperate move, she prang forward, covering the distance in half a dozen striding jumps.

And at that moment the bedroom door opened and Elsa Hautmann emerged. As her startled eyes fell on the intruder she screamed shrilly:

"Papa! Papa!"

Elizabeth wrenched at the key, her fingers stiff with fear. And now Dr. Hautmann was at his daughter's side, peering over her shoulder. He spat forth a guttural ejaculation and propelled himself forward like a spring released. But before he could reach her, Elizabeth had flung wide the door, and wild-eyed, with streaming hair, was racing for her life down the long corridor.

Even as she ran she knew that this last bold spurt had taxed her endurance beyond its strength. It was as though she had leapt from the Hautmanns' room into the heart of a nightmare. The corridor was fantastically elongated and the walls about her undulated and receded. She could not feel the floor beneath her flying feet, instead, she seemed to float along, body and brain numbed by her terrifying ordeal. Only the dim, unextinguishable subconscious worked in her mind, guiding her feet around a bend in the passage, to where the door of her half-brother's room gaped open. With a little moaning sound she crashed

the door wider with her shoulder and almost falling into the room thrust it shut behind her.

Elizabeth Blaire remembers her blurring eyes taking in the familiar outlines of the empty apartment, crying wildly, "Ted— oh, Ted— where are you?" and she recollected trying to reach out towards his chest of drawers...then the dark waves of unconsciousness swamped her reasoning, and she fell prone to the floor.

ELIZABETH BLAIRE knew her face was very cold.

That was all she knew. Just that sensation of intense chill, Then she realized, in a vague way, that this feeling numbed her whole body and she must move it to get warm. But it would not move. She could not reason why. Her mind was smothered under with layer upon layer of thick black cloth, black cloth sewn with vivid golden lights and ridiculous faces. The lights would float towards her, growing larger and then they would explode agonizingly inside her head. And with each explosion some other part of her brain would shrink away and struggle maddeningly to free itself from those black wrappings only to drop back exhausted.

This is death, Elizabeth told herself. Yes. Then distinctly she heard someone moan. Would she have heard that if she were dead? Another globule of light burst in her brain, again that nauseating strain...and Elizabeth opened her eyes on complete blackness.

For some moments she lay quite still, allowing the slow tide of recollection to wash back. The climbing of the ivy— that terrifying venture into the Hautmanns' room— the finding of the formula— the formula! This memory rallied her strength so that she half-raised herself, fingers smoothing her dress. She remembered bursting into her half-brother's room with the phial in her hand...but where was it now? And what had happened to her since that time?

The shadows about her were opaque. She reached out a hand and her fingers encountered a cold, rough surface. Elizabeth gave a little gasp of realization. Once before she had been in a dark world like this, a world encompassed by these same uneven walls. Instinctively she recognized it, and the knowledge brought her trembling to her feet.

She was in one of the underground passages beneath the Towers

Elizabeth swayed on her feet, sick with the knowledge that she had failed. This could mean only one thing— the Hautmanns had found her as she lay fainting in Blaire's room. They had retrieved the formula, and to prevent her giving the alarm before they made their escape had brought her here.

But was it too late even now? She did not know. There was no way of marking the time that had passed. She did not even know what part of the

passage she was in. Did the Oak Room lie before or behind her? And as she stood irresolute in the darkness, from somewhere near at hand came a soft chuckle of amusement.

Elizabeth froze motionless in the darkness. And even as she listened the unknown laughed again, and to her straining ears came a new sound— a curious dry rustling that whispered sibilantly from wall to wall. Acoustics were confusing in this subterranean labyrinth, but she fancied the sounds were behind her. She began to grope her way forward again, only to find the wall suddenly vanish under her tapering fingers. Elizabeth clawed the air wildly for a second before she realized she had reached a point where the passage forked at right angles. She was half-way round the bend when she saw it.

A dozen yards ahead, a slit of yellow light split across the rough track from a partly opened stone door set in the wall. As she watched, the radiance was momentarily obscured by a shadow moving restlessly before it. Elizabeth recognized at once Jeffery's description of the room in which he had found her half-brother and now, craning forward, she could see the light outlining the heavy iron ring on the door.

With the suddenness of a blind lifting, Elizabeth's brain cleared. She knew, beyond all doubt, that the terror which for so long had shadowed Rookwood Towers had now assumed corporeal appearance in the room beyond. Yet, strangely enough, she felt no fear, only a sense of overwhelming excitement. It was as though this new courage flamed through her veins from some hitherto untapped well in the intricate mechanism of her body and she could feel every sense suddenly alive and tingling.

She moved forward, step by step, until she reached the door. Then, pressing flat against the rough-hewn wall, she inclined her head towards the aperture. Her eyes roamed over the small room, empty save for a wooden box supporting a lighted candle. Supporting, too, a long, thin doctor's scalpel, the blade stained yellow in the reflected light...

And now that steady flame trembled, as though a breeze brushed it, and again the girl heard that soft rustling sound. She recognized it now— the dry swishing of heavy material, rubbing fold on fold. And into her line of vision walked a creature draped from head to foot in a long black robe.

The Owl!

Elizabeth pressed close to the wall, only her eyes moving as she followed the movements in that silent room.

The creature came forward. Black gloved hands placed a third article on the box, a small glass phial. The unknown turned a quick, suspicious head left and right and Elizabeth had a glimpse of a hideous jutting beak below eyes that blazed yellow as the candle flame. Satisfied, the creature took up the phial,

removed the tiny cork and held the container close to that grotesque parody of a nose. She heard it sniff...pause and sniff again. Suddenly the draped body stiffened and, with an almost inarticulate snarl of rage, the gloved hand threw the phial and its contents into a corner where it crashed into a hundred fragments against the wall.

Reaching forward, a gloved hand snatched at the scalpel. Wheeling, the unknown faced the door and raised the knife high. A soft, unrecognizable whisper sounded through the room:

"Come inside, Miss Blaire. I am waiting for you."

It was so sudden, so totally unexpected, that Elizabeth's nerve cracked. She tried to scream, but her tongue seemed thick and heavy. And at that moment a new, familiar voice spoke over her shoulder.

"Drop that knife, rat!"

Elizabeth wheeled. "Jeffery!..."

"Look out!"

What happened then was merely a series of blurred impressions on the girl's mind. She heard The Owl scream and, turning, saw it leap from the ground, knife raised high. She is willing to swear that it was already hovering over them when Jeffery's revolver barked twice. Then the creature was down, rolling, threshing, its black draperies already stained scarlet, a struggling, twitching tangle that seemed even more horrible in death than in life.

And presently it lay still. From beneath the dark huddled bundle a stream of blood moved sluggishly across the stone floor towards the opposite wall.

Elizabeth was in Jeffery's arms, clinging to him. "Oh, Jeffery...Jeffery."

"Darling..." Gently he soothed her.

"But— but where did you come from?" Her voice broke and she cried, unashamed. "I thought you'd gone— d-deserted me."

Jeffery's arm tightened about her trembling body. "Silly, I've never been farther away than the village. I've been near you all the time, Beth...all the while."

"Oh..."

He let her cry for a few moments, then placed his hands on her shoulders and grinned down at her. "Feel better?" And as she nodded, sniffing openly, he spoke again. His voice sounded very deep. "It's all right now. No more danger, sweetheart. It's all over."

"Thanks to you."

Jeffery took a handkerchief from his pocket and gently wiped her wet cheeks. "You poor kid," he muttered. "You do look a wreck!" In the flickering light of the candle, his face was white and hard. "I suppose you know who we have to thank for all this?"

Elizabeth shook her head slowly.

He was stuffing the handkerchief back into his pocket.

"You mean to say you haven't guessed— not even after that business of the formula?"

The girl said steadily: "I don't even know if it's a man or a woman."

For just a moment, Jeffery paused. Then, turning, he strode across to the dead body and stood looking down at it. His voice was very quiet.

"What an end for a criminal genius— shot down like a dog in an underground cellar!" He dropped on one knee and grasped the tangled draperies. "Come closer, Beth. You're going to be the second person to learn the true identity of The Owl— and live to tell about it!"

Chapter 10

Thursday June 20th

CHIEF INSPECTOR William Read was back at school. Just why he was there he could not say, but he recognised the old quadrangle, the spreading elm at one corner and the broken top of the wall guarded by broken glass. William Read, a grown man and yet a boy in mind, was staring up into that elm tree, seeking something among the tangle of leaves over his head. Presently he saw it. A nest. And with a fat chuckle Read started to climb, shinning up the knotted trunk, pulling himself on to the lower boughs and resting, breathless, for a moment. It seemed to have suddenly grown darker, as though a cloud had passed across the sun or perhaps it was this green canopy of leaves over his head that caused the gloom about him. He glanced up, to shrink back with a quick breath of fear. Seated on the branch above his head was an owl.

Why the sight of this bird should inspire in his heart such cold terror he could not reason. He only knew that he sat staring into those round lidless eyes— and suddenly it was not an owl but Dr. Hautmann who sat there. And the doctor clutched in one taloned hand a scalpel as large as a lance. Slowly, keeping Read hypnotized with those blazing yellow eyes, Hautmann advanced...closer...closer...

With a strangled cry Inspector Read awoke, to find himself sitting bolt upright in his bed at Rookwood Towers. He gave a rather uncertain snort of disgust and reaching out a hand switched on the small light over the table by his bed. His eyes moved to the clock, the hands of which pointed to a few minutes after eleven. His mind had scarcely taken in this fact when it registered something else that set him knuckling his eyes in bewilderment.

"Great sufferin' cats!" he muttered. "Am I still dreaming?"

He looked again. Propped up against the clock was a small glass phial of colourless liquid!

"The formula!" gasped Read. He reached forward and picked up the phial, smoothing it in his fingers. "But how the devil did it get here?"

From the shadows of the room a voice spoke lightly: "Why, Chief, I put it there five minutes ago."

"Jeffery!" roared the Inspector. And in that moment there came a click of a switch, and the room was flooded with light. Mr. Blackburn, a little tousled but with an almost seraphic smile on his not unprepossessing countenance, leaned against the door. Read almost bounded from his bed. "Son! What the devil are you doing here? I thought you were in London!"

"Exactly!" Jeffery was lighting a cigarette. "That's just what I intended

everyone to think." He came forward, brushing his hair into place. "Actually, Chief, I was never farther away than the 'Green Man.'"

"Then your telephone calls came from the inn?"

Jeffery nodded. "It was necessary, Chief. The Owl would never have moved while I was around here. He was suspicious of me for some time. But he hadn't proof that I knew his true identity until I stole that formula from your room."

Read's face was purple. "You— you stole it?"

"Of course." Jeffery nodded calmly. "It was vitally important not to let The Owl get that formula into his clutches. Once he had destroyed it all proof of his guilt might have been lost."

Read sat down on the bed. "I *am* still dreaming," he muttered. "I must be!" Suddenly he became aware of the phial in his hand. "Son, we'd better get this back to Atherton-Wayne before The Owl makes another attempt.—"

"The Owl will make no more attempts, Chief. He's dead."

"Dead?"

Jeffery nodded. "I shot him, not half an hour ago, down in the vaults."

There was a long pause. Read drew a deep breath, expelled it and stretched out a hand. "Gimme a cigarette, son," was all he said, but the request was so unexpected that Jeffery blinked. As Read lit up, the younger man could see his fingers shaking slightly. Then, puffing smoke with all the vigour of the novice, the Inspector took his dressing-gown from the bed-rail and began to slip into it. As he tied the strings about his waist he spoke again.

"Where is he now?"

"I routed out Connolly and Armstrong," Jeffery replied. "They've put him in the room where Lacey was imprisoned."

Read said curtly, "Come along," and throwing open the door, he led the way down the darkened corridor. Neither man spoke until they came to the room at the far end. Then Read paused with his hand on the door-knob.

"He's in here?"

"Yes."

"It is a he?"

"Undoubtedly," returned Mr. Blackburn. "Go in, Chief, and see for yourself."

The door creaked open. The room inside was a well of shadows, blacker than the corridor outside. Read fumbled about the door-jamb and clicked on the light switch.

Stretched out in the centre of the room was a figure almost enveloped in the dark draperies of The Owl's costume. Read dropped the cigarette from his lips and crushed it under his foot. He crossed the room in three quick paces and halted over the body. There was a strange hesitation in his manner as he

stood there.

Jeffery was by his side. "What's the matter, Chief? Afraid to look on this man's face?"

Read said uneasily: "Dammitall, son, I think I am."

"Then let me help you!" Jeffery dropped on one knee and, grasping the dead man's shoulder, swung the body over. The light blazed pitiless on the white face, malignant even in death, Read stared down at that countenance for five long seconds and when he spoke his tone was a dry sick whisper.

"Oh no, son. You— you've made some ghastly mistake..."

"Why?"

"But..." the Inspector seemed to have some trouble with his throat. "This man...*this is Edward Blaire!*"

Jeffery nodded. "Exactly! Edward Blaire was The Owl, Chief. I've known it for the past two days."

"But..." Read dipped into the pocket of his dressing-gown and produced the phial. "Why should the lad go about murdering to obtain a valuable formula that was his in the first place?"

"For the simple reason, Chief, that the contents of that phial isn't and never was valuable." Jeffery bent down and pulled the drapings over that twisted face. "There's nothing in that phial save ordinary petrol— that's why Blaire was so keen to destroy it before Atherton-Wayne's chemists discovered the truth!"

"By hokey," breathed Read. "And Atherton-Wayne—"

"The innocent victim of it all," replied Jeffery quietly. "You see, Chief, this whole thing was nothing more or less than a brilliantly planned scheme to rob Atherton-Wayne of fifty thousand pounds!"

THE DEATH and final revelation concerning The Owl was good red meat to the Press, and on the afternoon of the following day the obituary of Edward Conway, alias Blaire, was flung across innumerable front pages in inch-high capitals. The gentlemen of the Press besieged the Towers, armed with pencils and sharp-eyed cameras, and only those scribes who came for personal interviews were dissatisfied. Because, only a few hours before, Dr. Hautmann, his daughter and Reynolds fled from the Towers like prisoners from some grim bastille. Dr. Newbury barricaded himself in his own cottage, while Atherton-Wayne placed Connolly and Donlin outside his apartment to repel the inquisitive. Elizabeth did the same. No detectives guarded her, but after one pushing young man had thrust his foot in her door, and was promptly thrown half-way along the corridor by an irate Jeffery, further precautions were not needed.

Inspector Read was, naturally, the focal point of much of this activity, and it

was not until late that same afternoon that he had a breathing-space. At five o'clock he dismissed the last of the reporters and called Jeffery to his room. The young man found him leaning back in his swivel chair, feet on his desk, and a cigar thrust into his mouth.

"Well, son," was his greeting, "now we can get together at last!"

Jeffery took the seat he indicated. "What's puzzling you, Chief?"

"Everything," the other grunted. "You're in bad with me, son, over that formula business. You'd better make your excuses pretty valid, too!"

"All right." Jeffery leaned back. "Here's the whole thing in a nutshell, Chief. Edward Conway, to give him his real name, was a pretty bad lot. Oh yes, he was brilliant when it came to studying, I'll grant you, but he had inherited a strong criminal strain from his father. He realized, pretty early in the piece, that he'd never make much money working for Atherton-Wayne. So he evolved this plot to swindle the baronet out of fifty thousand pounds. Like most crooked business, all kinds of complications occurred, and eventually the thing got right out of hand. That's when Conway got desperate. But I'm anticipating things.

"We'll never know the actual truth, because the two main characters—Conway and Lacey—are dead. But we've enough evidence to fill in the missing gaps fairly satisfactorily. I believe that, when Conway thought out this scheme, he wanted somebody crooked to help him. His first idea was his father, but Conway senior was languishing behind prison bars. I've evidence from the Scrubbs that Conway visited his father fairly frequently, and they must have talked over this scheme. It would be Conway senior who put his son into touch with Lacey."

"Quite probable," nodded Read.

"The scheme," Jeffery continued, "was perfect in its utter simplicity. Conway would pretend to discover this remarkable formula. Using ordinary petrol he would convince Atherton-Wayne that he had really unearthed an amazing discovery. By proclaiming this discovery far and wide it was certain that other bidders would rise to the bait. As a matter of fact, Hautmann was the only one. But Conway needed another to boost up the price, so Lacey came down in the role of Todhunter. You know what happened, Chief. By his very meanness, the baronet was forced into the position of paying fifty thousand for the worthless formula. Now Conway had a small fortune, and he was quite safe so long as nobody suspected the trickery."

"But what about The Owl?"

"We're coming to that," Jeffery assured him. "Now Conway was only safe as long as no expert analyst could see that supposed formula. In other words, once Atherton-Wayne's chemists got hold of that phial, Conway's plan was

ruined. Therefore, it was essential to keep the formula from their hands. But how to do that? Here again Conway showed brilliant cunning. What does he do but create a false figure— literally an invisible man— a criminal calling himself The Owl. If The Owl, alias Conway, steals the formula and destroys it, it can never be proved that the whole thing was a fake!"

Read sat up abruptly. "But wait a minute, son! These Owl robberies took place weeks before Conway discovered this formula— and we have proof that he was down here working in his laboratory at the time."

"Exactly!"

"Then how the heck could he be in two places at once?"

"He wasn't," returned Jeffery. "It was Lacey who committed those robberies."

"Lacey!"

Jeffery rose to his feet and began pacing the floor. "This thing is as deep as the inferno, Chief. You've got to admire Conway's cunning! You see, if this creature called The Owl had suddenly sprung out of nowhere and demanded the formula, we might have been suspicious. But Conway foresaw that. And so, weeks before, he plots with Lacey to begin a series of robberies, impressing this Owl creature on the public mind! Remember how The Owl used to leave visiting-cards everywhere and warn his victims in advance? We couldn't understand it at the time, but it was all part of the plot. The personality of The Owl was to be created so that, when Conway was ready to use this mythical creature to cover his own crime, we would be quite willing to accept The Owl as a tangible and dangerous creature." Jeffery paused, and his voice rose. "Do you remember, when we interviewed Conway after his supposed kidnapping by The Owl and imprisonment in the vaults, you said it seemed as though we were looking for an invisible man?"

"Well, we actually were, Chief. Because, at that stage, there was no such person as The Owl!"

Read sucked at his cigar. "I remember." He cocked an eye at the younger man. "I saw a funny expression cross your face then. That's when you started to get suspicious, I suppose?" And as Jeffery nodded, "So Lacey started The Owl robberies, eh?"

"No doubt about it," Blackburn returned. "Remember how, that night at the 'Green Man,' we reviewed those early robberies and decided they were the work of a professional criminal— someone who had spent the best part of a lifetime in crime? Naturally, it was Lacey! That's why there wasn't any bloodshed connected with them— Lacey isn't a killer. As I see it, Conway and Lacey were working hand in glove to split the fifty thousand between them."

Read nodded.

Jeffery continued his restless pacing. "Now, the moment this mythical Owl began to send his warning cards to Conway, things began to go wrong. For one thing, Elizabeth brought us down here. Remember how churlish Conway was about police protection, and how we put it down to his temperament? Naturally, the police were the last people he wanted about the place. So he staged that very clever little scene in his cottage, hoping that we'd get such a shock we'd clear out. You'll remember, also, that having put that pistol among the flowers himself, he wasn't at all keen to open that drawer."

"And what about Ashton's murder?"

"That was necessary, because Ashton must have learnt something dangerous to the success of the scheme. What it was we'll never know, but having killed the secretary, Conway was now up to his neck in trouble. It was more than ever important to establish that The Owl was down at the Towers, so what does Conway do? Have Lacey truss him up in a strait jacket and dump him where someone will be sure to find him."

"I don't see that," Read objected. "How could Conway have known you were going down into that passage?"

"He couldn't possibly have known," returned Blackburn. "But if I hadn't gone down there at that precise moment, you may be sure that Lacey, in the guise of Todhunter, would have either guided my steps into that underground room or discovered Conway, apparently by chance, himself. We know that Lacey was down in the passage because of the cigarette end I found burning down there."

Jeffery paused to light a cigarette. And Read observed: "I can fill in the next murder myself, son. Conway stabbed Atherton-Wayne's brother, thinking it was the baronet, and hoping to rob the body of the formula."

"Quite so." Blackburn tossed the match-end through the open window. "Knowing nothing about the brother, he'd seen Mrs. Tamworth taking those clothes to the baronet's room. The killing of Lacey is even more understandable. Not only did the crook know far too much for Conway's peace of mind, but his murder saved Conway splitting the fifty thousand. Apart from that, I rather suspect Lacey was getting terrified. He hadn't reckoned on murder when they evolved this scheme, and as killing followed killing he realized that he'd allied himself to a criminal lunatic! Lacey, I surmise, was willing to talk to save his own skin— and Conway meant to prevent that happening at all costs."

"When did you start to suspect Conway?"

"I had faint suspicions after Ashton's death," Jeffery returned. "These were clinched on the following day— I'll tell you how in a minute. But after you suggested I go to town, I realized that the formula was most unsafe so long as

it remained at the Towers. I went only as far as the inn, returned that same night and stole the phial out of your room. For a reason I'll explain directly, I daren't let you know I was the thief. But I took the liquid to the local chemist and asked him what it was. Not that I didn't know, but I wanted as much evidence as possible. He reported it to be ordinary petrol. And then I knew I was on the right track."

Read shifted in his chair. "How about this other phial of liquid— the one Elizabeth took from the Hautmanns' room last night?"

"Oh, that?" Jeffery grinned. "You know, Chief, the Hautmanns were very desperate. They were sent here to get that formula, and they weren't relishing the idea of returning without it. So they got hold of a phial the same size and shape, filled it with water, and were waiting for a chance to substitute it for what they believed was the real thing."

"By hokey," snorted the Inspector. "So that was their game! I'll pick 'em up—" but Jeffery interrupted.

"Better not, Chief. They've been punished enough. Besides, we don't want to start any international complications. Matters are touchy enough with Germany as it is."

"But didn't they shove Elizabeth into that passage?"

Blackburn shook his head. "I don't think so. That would be Conway's doing. He probably found her unconscious on the floor of his room with the phial in her hand. He pulled her into the passage, took the formula and donned his regalia, to make his last and final appearance. But when he came to examine the phial, all he had was clear water." Jeffery frowned. "That's why he attacked Elizabeth— he probably thought she knew much more than she did. Fortunately, I was on the spot just in time."

The inspector leaned forward and broke the ash from his cigar in the tray. "Lacey and Conway working this Owl stunt between them gave Conway those alibis for the time The Owl was seen prowling about, I suppose?" And as the other nodded: "But for the life of me, son, I can't see how you tumbled to it like that!"

Jeffery returned to his chair and sitting, leaned back with his hands clasped behind his head. From this position he addressed the ceiling of the room and his tone was thoughtful.

"Why is it that these criminals are never content to let well alone? We've all heard of the person who tries to be too clever— and in overdoing a perfect situation destroys everything he so carefully sought to build. Here was Conway with an almost water-tight plot, the result of inspired cunning. Now, had he been content to leave it as it was, the chances are that he would be walking around at this moment a free man. But no— he must elaborate, add a touch

here, another point there until finally he brought the whole edifice crashing down about his ears."

Read grunted. "What's all this leading up to, son?"

Jeffery sat up and eyed the older man across the desk. "Do you remember Conway's story of his kidnapping, Chief? It was a most impressive recital— particularly the part about hearing the tapping on the window, pulling the curtains aside and finding The Owl waiting for him. If only he'd have had the sense to stop there. But no! He must dramatize the situation by making himself a hero."

"You mean the part about his fighting with The Owl and making his nose bleed?"

"Exactly!" snapped Blackburn. "From the moment those words were out of his mouth my suspicions were aroused! For one thing, it was essentially out of the character of Conway as we knew him at that time. For another, no person under the roof of the Towers was marked about the face in any way. Yet we were acting on the assumption that The Owl was among the guests. Therefore, we were faced with one of two alternatives— either The Owl was someone whom we had not yet seen, or else Conway was telling a deliberate lie."

Read nodded. "That occurred to me, son. But I thought Conway might have concocted the story just to show he wasn't a coward."

"Oh no, Chief, that wouldn't wash, because there was direct evidence in the room that blood *had* been shed! Remember those spots on the carpet and the curtains?" Jeffery frowned. "When I saw those bloodstains I admit I was stumped. For here was clear proof of the blood! Then it meant that The Owl was someone with whom we had not yet come into contact. And that's how matters stood until you, quite by chance, happened to mention the affair of the housemaid's rabbits."

The Inspector's jaw dropped. "What rabbits?"

Blackburn chuckled. "Have you forgotten as easily that? On the day following Conway's supposed kidnapping, one of the maids waylaid you in the corridor and asked you to find two pet rabbits that were missing— remember? I told you that this disappearance had a direct connection with The Owl case— and you thought I was merely being facetious." His tone sobered. "Oh no, Chief, those two innocent little bunnies were instrumental in proving that if Conway wasn't actually The Owl, at least he was definitely hand in glove with the creature."

"So that was the reason for all your vague mutterings about owls preying on rabbits, eh?"

"Of course!" Now an excited Jeffery was on his feet again. "You see, Chief, the bloodstains in Conway's room must have come from somewhere. If it were

human blood, then Conway was telling the truth. But if those spots were animal blood, Conway was not only telling a deliberate lie, but it also explained the disappearance of those rabbits."

"What did you do?"

"Waited for a suitable opportunity— and that same night, took the curtains from Conway's room and cut out the stained spots. I sent these up to our analyst"— and here Jeffery's tone trembled at the recollection. "The following day, Chief, the thrice-blessed answer came back. The spots were undoubtedly rabbit's blood!"

"By hokey!" breathed Read.

Jeffery leaned over the desk, ticking off the points on his fingers.

"Now, Chief, follow the links in my chain of reasoning. Conway had lied deliberately about that blood— he had not fought with The Owl at all. Therefore, why go to all this trouble about stealing and slaying rabbits merely to convince us that he had? And suddenly, I had the first suspicion of the truth! Was it an attempt to actually *prove* that The Owl really existed— moreover, to prove the creature was really inimical toward him? But we were already prepared to accept these facts. Why take this elaborate means to underline them?"

"And then, Chief, I took the case from the other angle. I let myself assume that The Owl did not exist at all— and that Conway had invented all this elaborate fiction about kidnapping and warning cards and threats of murder."

Jeffery paused for a moment, then resumed.

"I went up to my room, and over a packet of cigarettes considered the affair from the beginning. After some deliberation I discarded the idea that The Owl did not exist, for we had the evidence of the robberies while Conway was down here. But why should Conway invent this story about being terrified of The Owl— why this stupid masquerade? He had given us to understand that The Owl was after his formula. The formula! That seemed the crux of the whole business. And then there flashed into my mind a thought that almost stood my hair on end! There and then, for the first time, I realized that *we had nothing save Conway's bare word that he had discovered anything at all!*"

"But—" began Read when an excited Jeffery talked him down.

"Oh yes, Chief, we had seen a carefully staged demonstration. But it was a demonstration that could have been made quite successful by the use of ordinary petrol! We saw a motor-car engine set in motion by what looked like petrol. Of course! Because the miraculous formula Number Four that Conway showed us on that day was nothing more or less than a phial of ordinary petrol!"

Jeffery, his eyes glittering and his face alight, waited for the elder man to

comment.

The Inspector nodded. "Smart work, son," he grunted. "Go on."

"Now then, if Conway hadn't discovered any formula, all this nonsense about The Owl's persecution was lies from start to finish. And hard on the heels of this realization came another disturbing thought. Surely Conway would never dare such far-fetched trickery as this? Why, Atherton-Wayne's chemists would reveal the swindle at first glance! But suppose— just suppose— that Conway could sell the fake formula to the baronet, receive his money, and then destroy the liquid before the chemists could examine it? But how could Conway possibly achieve this end? Was not The Owl after the formula also?"

Jeffery tossed his cigarette aside and faced Read. "And then, Chief, the whole astounding plot came suddenly dear. Conway *was* The Owl! He had invented this creature entirely as an excuse for the destroying of the formula before Atherton-Wayne's chemists could reveal the fake!"

The Inspector considered this for a moment, greying brows down over narrowed eyes. "But, son, what about Conway's alibis? Take that night, for instance, when Elsa Hautmann saw The Owl dumping the strait jacket into the lily-pond. You admitted yourself that you sat up with Conway the entire night!"

"Quite so," Jeffery agreed. "There was still a number of points to be straightened out. Regarding this particular incident, I remembered that the invitation to share Conway's room that night came from Conway himself. He buttonholed me in the corridor with the tale that he was scared to sleep alone, and would I metaphorically hold his hand all night. But this merely made the situation clearer. Conway obviously had a colleague— someone who would parade as The Owl when Conway needed an alibi. And the moment I realized this, other hitherto puzzling factors slipped neatly into place. For instance, The Owl robberies while Conway was working down here miles away from the city." Jeffery paused, then continued quickly: "It also explained Conway's kidnapping, and piecing this together with the smouldering cigarette-end I found in the vaults I realized Mr. Todhunter must have had something to do with it.

"Finally, when Todhunter was revealed as Lacey, an American crook, the whole thing dovetailed perfectly. And Lacey's death was the final clinching piece of evidence. Obviously, Conway had killed him to close his mouth."

Read nodded again. "When had you figured out all this, son?"

For the first time during his recital Jeffery revealed a slight hesitation. "A few hours before you sent me up to town," he confessed.

Read was on his feet, glaring at the younger man. "Then why the devil didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

"Because," replied Jeffery, "you would have arrested Conway there and then."

"And didn't you want him arrested?"

"No."

Read snapped: "Why not?"

Jeffery said clearly: "Because, at that time, I thought he was Elizabeth's brother."

"Oh!..." It was a long-drawn-out breath, expelled from between Read's tight lips. The anger died from his face, and the glint in his eyes was replaced by something very near a twinkle. "So it's like that, son?"

Jeffery nodded. "Yes, Chief," he said quietly. "It's like that." He was silent for a moment, making his way back to his chair. The Inspector waited for him to speak.

"It was the very devil of a situation for me, Chief," Jeffery said at length. "It meant that I had to betray as a cold and calculating murderer the brother of the girl I loved. And I couldn't bring myself to do it! I'm no policeman— I've taken no oath about this arresting business." The young man gave a little shrug. "I think those few hours, following that realization, will be among the blackest of my life!"

Read resumed his seat. "Well, son," he said at length, "you must have been mighty relieved when I told you over the 'phone yesterday that Edward Blaire was really Edward Conway."

Jeffery's face lit up. "Chief," he exclaimed, "I could have hugged you! You'd removed the last remaining obstacle from my path! I came back here last night and hid in the vaults. I felt sure that my theft of the formula would force Conway's hand in some way, and so I waited...And the rest you know."

A silence fell upon the room. Outside the fading day trailed drapes of russet and gold across the western sky. From the big elm near the open window came faint rustlings as the rooks settled for the night. The Inspector rose to his feet and, walking across to the door, switched on the light. As he turned:

"Well, son," he grunted, "it's been a long and exciting chase. But I can't help repeating what I said here in this room three days ago— if you hadn't got entangled in petticoats, the case would have been over in half the time."

"You mean— holding up the information because I believed Conway to be Elizabeth's brother?"

Read nodded. "Sure!" He raised quizzical eyes to the young man's face. "You must be pretty keen, Jeff, to do a thing like that to an old man."

Jeffery shrugged. "I'm sorry, Chief." His voice was low. "It was one of those things one just can't control. I know I was putting Elizabeth before you, before

my job, before my respect for law and order, even— but, well, it just couldn't be helped. That's how I feel about that girl." He stepped forward and put his hands on Read's broad shoulders. "You understand, don't you, Chief?" His tone was almost pleading.

The distress in Blackburn's face was too patent to ignore. Read's granite countenance relaxed. "Sure I do, son," he grunted. "But that girl ought to feel damned honoured. You've done more for her than any other man would."

Jeffery shook his head. "No, Chief. Ashton did precisely the same thing."

The Inspector stared at him. "That secretary?"

"Yes. Remember that envelope he sent Elizabeth, the one she thought contained the name of The Owl?"

Read nodded. "The enclosure that Dr. Newbury stole?"

"Dr. Newbury didn't steal it," the other returned quietly, "for the simple reason that the enclosure was never put in that envelope.—"

"Eh?"

"We'll never know for certain," the young man continued, "but we can be sure that Ashton discovered that Conway was The Owl. Not knowing the criminal's true parentage he addressed that letter to Elizabeth and was about to enclose the name of the man he knew as Edward Blaire, when he realised the sickening shock Elizabeth must get to open the letter and find that the murderer was her own, as Ashton thought, brother. So he didn't put anything in that envelope. In the excitement of Conway's supposed kidnapping, he forgot to destroy it. It must have got in among Ashton's business correspondence, and been posted in the ordinary way by the servants." He paused and smiled. "You see, Chief, that poor chap also loved Elizabeth very much."

"JEFFERY," called Elizabeth softly.

It was an hour later. Blackburn was waiting by the summer-house in the garden. The sun had set. Now the sky overhead was a deep purple canopy, picked out here and there with the first brave stars. But brighter than these were Elizabeth's eyes as she came up and took his hand.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"I've been talking to the Inspector," the girl said quietly.

"He told me about you keeping certain information because— because of me..." Her voice trembled a little, but she steadied it. "Jeffery, why did you do it?"

"Because," said Mr. Blackburn, "I happen to love you very deeply."

"Oh, my darling!"

He took her in his arms and kissed her, and they were silent, for this was a time when no words were needed. Presently, Elizabeth raised her eyes to his.

"You know that— that my half-brother wanted to marry me?"

"I'm not surprised."

"He asked me yesterday, in the morning-room. When I refused, the strangest look came over his face." She paused, and her voice was very low when she added: "I think I knew the truth— then."

Jeffery, holding her tightly, could feel her trembling in his arms.

"That was why he meant to kill me, I think. If you hadn't been there by my side..." She shivered, and her voice trailed away.

Jeffery said quietly: "I'm always going to be by your side from now on."

Then he kissed her again, and after a pause: "The Inspector's going to be awfully furious with me," Elizabeth told him.

"Nonsense!"

"He thinks I'll come between you and your work." She was very sincere. "I may, too, darling. I love you so much that when I think of the risks you take my heart just stops beating."

Jeffery smiled. "I have it all planned," he told her. "I shall pack you off to your parents while I muddle about with my criminals."

"Sweetheart, I have no parents."

"Oh, dear, no."

"You're all I have in the wide world. Darling, be very, very careful, for my sake, won't you?"

The End