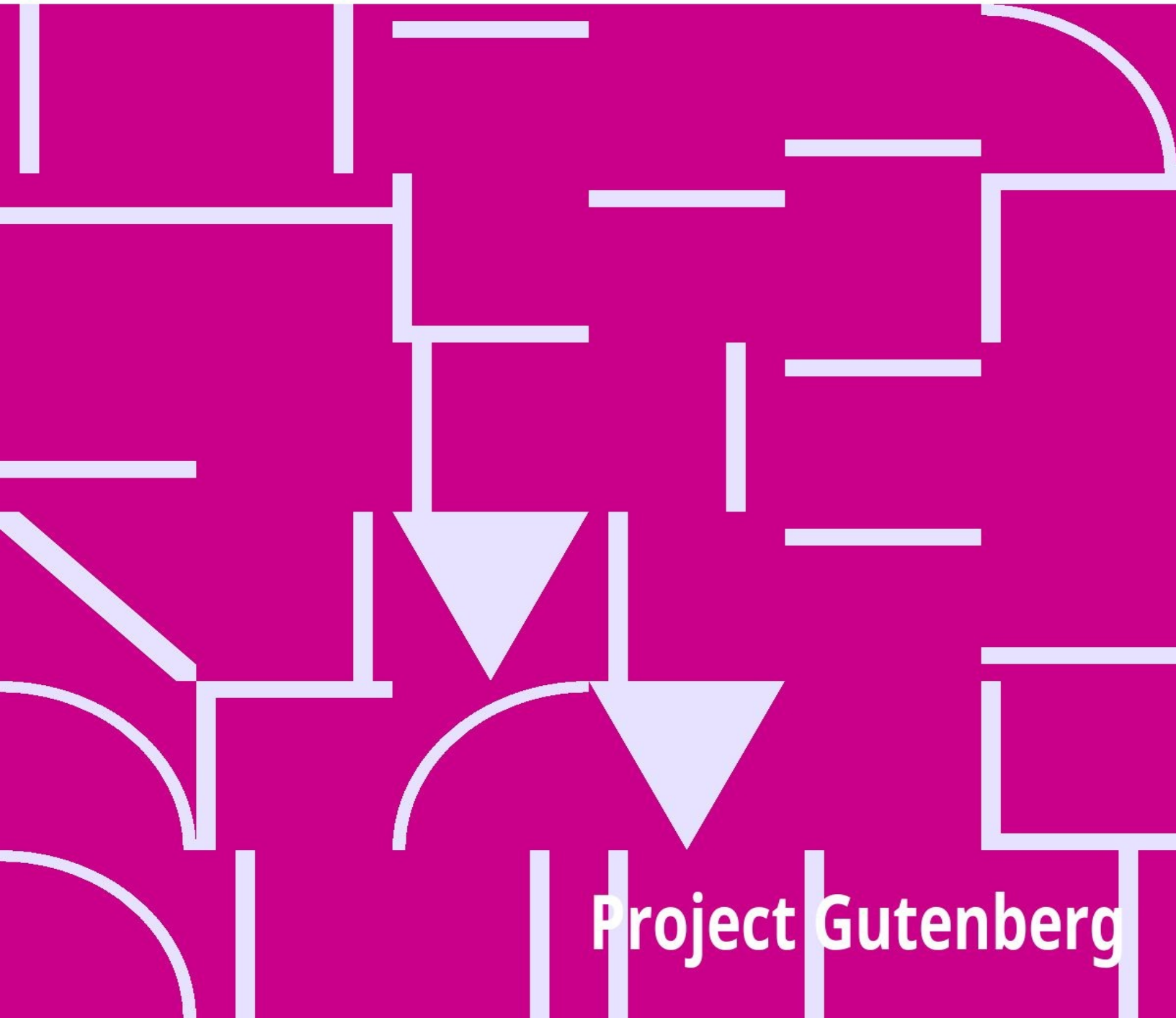
The Riddle of the Mysterious Light

Mary E. Hanshew and Thomas W.



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THE RIDDLE OF THE MYSTERIOUS LIGHT

"Mr. Narkom saw Cleek run to the tower's foot ... and then, almost immediately, he saw him throw up both hands and stagger backward."

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THE

RIDDLE OF

THE

MYSTERIOUS

LIGHT

BY

MARY E. and THOMAS W. HANSHEW

McKINLAY, STONE & MACKENZIE

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CHAPTER I

TRAPPED BY THE APACHES

There are days, even in the capricious climate of London, when the whole world seems at peace; when the blue of the summer sky, the fragrance of some distant flower brought in by a passing breeze, and the contented chirp of the birds, all unite to evoke a spirit of thankfulness for the very gift of life itself.

This was the spirit of Mr. Maverick Narkom, Superintendent of Scotland Yard, on this particular day in July. Even the very criminals had apparently betaken themselves to other haunts and distant climes, and the Yard, therefore, may be said to have been surprisingly slack. Up in his own private room, seated in front of his desk—both desk and room reduced to a state of order and tidiness uncanny to behold—sat the Superintendent, if the truth must be told, oblivious to all the world; a purple silk handkerchief draped itself gracefully over his head and rose softly up and down with the rise and fall of his breath. This was his last day at the Yard, for to-morrow would see him well on the road to Margate for a blessed two weeks' holiday with Mrs. Narkom and the children, not to mention guests who were nearly as precious to him, namely Ailsa Lorne and Hamilton Cleek.

His famous ally had himself been absent for more than two months, but was returning this very day—day, in fact, might be expected to arrive now at any minute, so it was little wonder that peace reigned supreme in the worthy Superintendent's heart, and induced his gentle slumbers even in the sacred precincts of what has been termed the Hub of London.

But outside, in the blue azure of the sky above, a tiny cloud, no bigger than that of the proverbial man's hand, had gathered, and as if it were a reflection of the storm-clouds of crime hovering round, there came the sharp *ting-ting* of the telephone bell at his elbow. For a minute, thus suddenly aroused, Mr. Narkom stared blankly at the disturber of his peace. A swift glance at the indicator told him it was a summons from the Chief Commissioner, and Mr. Narkom betook himself to the interview.

It lasted only fifteen minutes as registered by the clock ticking gently on the mantelshelf, but its deadly effect was that of fifteen years on Mr. Narkom, and

when he once more entered his own official sanctum, he sank down into the chair with a groan. For he had heard the first details of that mystery of the haunted village of Valehampton, which later on was to rouse a whole county, and bring to Hamilton Cleek one of the chief problems of his career. That the strangeness of the case was apparent on the face of it could be gathered from Mr. Narkom's muttered remarks.

"Curses!" he growled. "Suicides! Murders! Ghosts! Prophecies! It's the work of the devil himself." He consulted his notes again, but though copious enough, it was clear they afforded no further light. He pulled out his watch and heaved a sigh of relief. "Only half-past nine now," he ejaculated, "and if only Cleek arrived safely by the 8:40, I think he said, at Charing Cross, there's a chance of seeing light. I don't know where he's been, the amazing beggar, but he's never been wanted so badly here in his life. Thank goodness he's back again."

He reached out a hand for that friendly instrument the telephone receiver; but his complacent gratitude had evidently tried the patience of the Fates, for ere his fingers closed round the familiar black handle, the door of his room was thrown violently open, and without ceremony or even apology a slim figure fairly hurled itself before the gaze of the astonished Superintendent.

It was Dollops, worshipper of Cleek and his ever-faithful assistant. His face was the colour of a Manila paper bag, and his eyes bulged out of his head as they took in the fact that Mr. Narkom was alone.

"Lor' lumme!" he cried, relapsing into broad cockney, as he invariably did when excited. "Don't go for to say he ain't 'ere, neither," he blurted out, his eyes seeking those of Mr. Narkom with a very agony of impatience.

For both of them there could be but one "he," and Mr. Narkom's face became nearly the same colour as the lad's as he realized that his famous ally was not at hand.

"Didn't he arrive at Charing Cross by the 8:40?" he cried.

Dollops shook his head.

"No, bless 'im, that's just what he didn't do, Mr. Narkom. Me and Miss Lorne waited for 'im, me wivout so much as a bite to keep my insides from sticking together, and them blooming Apaches—beggin' your pardon, Mr. Narkom, but they are blooming, too—merry and bright they was, I tell you, buzzing round that station like bluebottles round a piece of meat. That's wot made me come 'ere, thinkin' he'd twigged 'em as usual and come another way. But if 'e ain't 'ere,

'e ain't, and I'll get back to Portman Square."

With a dejected lurch of the shoulders, he turned, leaving Mr. Narkom to make his own preparations.

Soon deep in the business of issuing orders to his underlings, despatching telegrams—one, of course, to Mrs. Narkom herself to prepare her for the disappointment of a postponed holiday—and in writing and expanding the notes of this last case just entrusted to him by his chief, Mr. Narkom for the first time in his life since he had known and learned to love his famous ally, Hamilton Cleek, once known as the Man of Forty Faces by reason of his peculiar birth-gift, his ability to change instantaneously his whole appearance by an extraordinary distortion of his facial muscles, and also as the Vanishing Cracksman, for his capacity of extricating himself from perilous positions, and now as Cleek of Scotland Yard—for the first time, we say, Mr. Narkom forgot to be anxious at his evident non-arrival.

The sound of hurried footsteps in the corridor outside struck upon his ear and he wheeled suddenly in his chair. But if he had expected to see Cleek, he was doomed to disappointment. There came a knock, the door opened and closed, and a deprecatory cough came from Inspector Hammond, white-faced and anxious, his lips set in a grim line of tense anxiety.

"Hammond—why, what is wrong, man? Speak up," cried the Superintendent. "Come, out with it."

"It's 'im, sir," said Hammond. "A kid of a paper-boy just pushed this 'ere paper into my 'and as I was leaving my beat and 'ops it before I could as much as breathe Jack Robinson."

His hand shaking, he extended to the obviously irritated Mr. Narkom a scrap of dirty paper, and as the Superintendent gave a glance at the few words scrawled on it, his own ruddy face was drained of every vestige of colour, and it looked not unlike that of Dollops but a brief half hour previous.

The scribbled words were barely half a dozen in number but in their import they told of more dire disaster to him than could any voluminous cabinet epistle.

Irregularly penned as by one in imminent peril, the message danced before his blurred eyes.

"*Come, God's sake, 1st barge, Limehouse, Dock 3.—Cleek.*"

"What does it mean, sir?" asked Hammond, anxiously, as Mr. Narkom sucked in

his breath and stood staring rigidly.

"Means," he gasped, "that they've got him, the devils. Dollops was right. Apaches! God, but he's gone by now perhaps. Cleek, my pal—my——"

He wheeled on the now frightened Inspector. "Quick, man—the car. You follow, with Petrie and whoever else is off duty."

Hammond needed no second telling. He almost fled from the room, and the dread news preceding him, Lennard was on the spot and waiting as impatiently as the Superintendent himself.

"Limehouse Docks, Lennard—and streak it. Mr. Cleek is in danger——"

"I know, sir. Hop in, and Lord help the man or vehicle in my way!" was the fervent reply as he cranked up and took his seat.

"Streak it" he did, and not a policeman on duty, after a brief glance at his grim face and that of the Superintendent within, did more than hold up every cart, cab, tram, or 'bus that was likely to impede his way. Obviously the Yard, as vested in the sacred person of Superintendent Narkom and his prime minister Lennard, was "on active duty" and like a fire engine in speed and purpose, the Yard limousine rocked and swayed its way through grimy lanes and malodorous byways till it reached the squalid region known as Limehouse Docks. Here Lennard could go no farther, and ere the car had pulled up, quivering, the portly form of the Superintendent had thrown itself out, and was peering into the sunlit distances.

"Wait here, Lennard, and when the others come along bring them to Dock 3 and look out for Barge No. 1, if we are not here first."

"Righto, sir," said Lennard.

But already Mr. Narkom was out of sight, all other duties forgotten.

Swiftly he turned a sharp corner, nearly falling over a sailor leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette. At the first whiff, Mr. Narkom glanced up swiftly. It did not take his trained sense long to recognize that it was a French cigarette—hence Apache—and that Cleek must be here, in need of him!

"La, la, but you are queek," the man muttered. "It is ze brave Super-in-tend-ent and he come for his gr-great frien' Cleek—is it not so, my frien'?"

"Yes, yes—*you know*! He is here?" gasped Mr. Narkom, barely, if at all, stopping to think of any possible peril to himself. "You shall be finely rewarded for this,

my good man," he said, warmly. "Lead on——"

"But yes," was the reply, "a brave reward. Come!" He turned silently and swiftly, beckoning to the Superintendent to follow.

Nothing loath and unsuspecting, Mr. Narkom turned and followed the sailor till they reached one of the docks—and a barge.

"This is dock 3," he said, as he noticed the number.

"Quite right," said his guide. "Get in, queek—ze boat—ze others, zay weel return and it weel be too late."

That was sufficient for Mr. Narkom. Obviously, his friend was in danger; equally obvious was it that this guide had brought him as a reinforcement against returning Apaches.

"Get in" he did, and it was not until he had stumbled down a dark companionway into the grimy cabin and heard the door click swiftly behind him that he realized he was trapped—deceived by a trick as simple as it had been effective. The sweat stood out on the Superintendent's forehead, rolling down in great beads, while his hands grew cold and clammy.

"Cleek!" he cried, hoping even now that his ally were with him to help and be helped! But a light laugh—half snarl, half sneer—caused him to turn. His guide stood regarding him with mocking amusement.

"Bravo! my frien'—so easy it was! Caught like the great big turkey-gobbler. Oh, *non, non*—but not so queek, my frien'——"

For Mr. Narkom had flung himself forward in a vain effort to escape. A sharp whistle and a door hitherto unseen in the darkness of the cabin behind him was flung open. Mr. Narkom was seized from behind, flung down some three minutes later, and trussed up, panting and helpless, tears of rage and mortification in his eyes.

Soon, as it grew darker and darker, betokening the fall of the summer night, he felt the movement of the boat beneath him, and even while Lennard and a posse of his own men were interviewing the officials and overhauling Dock 1, the boat with its valuable burden was drifting out to meet a larger vessel, waiting well up the river's mouth, bearing away one of the only two men who could solve one of the greatest mysteries the Law had ever been faced with.

CHAPTER II

A KISS FOR A LIFE

It was just dusk when the police officials were obliged to give up their quest for the Superintendent and Hammond returned to Scotland Yard to make his report to the Chief Commissioner. Dejected of mien and heavy of heart he stopped mechanically at the door of the Superintendent's room. He would have given worlds if he had never been the unconscious instrument of his superior's disaster. The door stood slightly ajar and he halted with the intention of closing it.

The electric light had been switched on and he stood in the doorway. A figure sat at the familiar desk and as the Inspector gave one brief glance, a cry of half pain, half fear, burst from his shaking lips.

"Mr. Cleek—you, sir! But——"

Cleek—for he it was—switched round in his chair, exclaiming at sight of the man's face, "Why, man! What's wrong?"

"Mr. Narkom, sir—they've got him. He's gone!"

"Got him—who've got him? He's not dead?"

Hammond shivered at that; then hoarsely and somewhat incoherently got out the tale of the afternoon. And as Cleek realized the trap the Superintendent had bravely entered to save him, his friend and associate, from danger, he collapsed into the chair, his face hidden in the palm of his hand.

"God! A friend indeed! They think to hurt me through him," he muttered. "They'll never dare to injure him, surely! God, if only I hadn't lost that train—only by a minute, too! But I'll get him, I swear it. The rats shall pay for this——"

He leapt to his feet, his eyes narrowed down to slits, his lips set in a straight line, as he mentally reviewed once more the facts of Hammond's story.

"Leave me alone, Hammond. You can do nothing more. Keep a lookout at the docks. Tell Dollops I'm all right, and to lie low himself—or he'll be the next."

Hammond saluted and left the room, as Cleek turned to the telephone. A quarter of an hour later, out of the sacred precincts of the Yard itself, slouched one of the

most villainous-looking Apaches that Soho or Montmartre itself ever could have seen. It was Cleek the Vanishing Cracksman, Cleek the Man of Forty Faces—the King Rat himself on the warpath. Had Marise of the Twisted Arm, Gustave Merode, or even Margot herself, the Queen of the Apaches, seen him, they would have feared and trembled.

Meanwhile, the barge had transferred its precious if bulky burden to one of the numerous produce boats going up the river and it was well on its way to Havre before police launches or port officials were made aware of the loss.

But it was not until midnight had struck that the cramped, aching body of the Superintendent was hustled out of the boat at a little landing place outside the port itself, and smuggled hastily down into cellars of the Coq d'Or. Officials were too used to drunken sailors being helped in and out of this none too savoury tavern to note one more helpless, stumbling figure, held up between comrades, and a brief second found Mr. Narkom in the midst of an uproarious, shouting crew of Apaches, headed by no less than Margot herself, disguised as a Breton fishwife. She had escaped the eagle eye of her born foes, the French gendarmes, and here reigned supreme, surrounded by her compères in crime and those subject to her sway.

Her shrill cries of delight resounded to the roof as her eyes fell upon the gagged and bound figure of Mr. Narkom.

"Brava, brave Jules; so you succeeded! La! La! but we 'ave the rat himself now. This is the toasted cheese, and Cleek will come after his friend very soon—if we send for him. Eh, *mes amis*? A splendid plan, and meanwhile the good Duke is being hurt, eh! But it is good!"

Jeering and laughing, she thrust her face close to the drawn one of the Superintendent.

"But not so clever, eh, my friend? We cannot afford to have you and Cleek, the rat!"—she spat the words out—"in England. We want a rest."

"Into the cellar—hark, what's that? All right, an aeroplane—that's all right. Into the cellar with him, lads. All we have to do now is to wait for the rat to come to the trap!"

To the accompaniment of another laugh, Mr. Narkom was pulled down into the vaults below, where, dazed with hunger, pain, and anxiety lest Cleek should indeed be led into fresh danger, he sweated an hour away.

Upstairs all was renewed merriment, and in the midst of it the door opened and a

familiar figure slouched in—evil of face, disfigured with scars and bruises. As a shout arose at his appearance, there was no question as to his identity. "Merode. *Nom de dieu*, Gustave!" cried Margot. "But a pretty picture you cut!"

"*Sacré nom!*" he growled through his clenched teeth. "So would you, if you had been fighting for your life! The pigs of police are after me. Give me a drink and take me down through the cellar. The boat goes back to-night, doesn't it?"

"It does," said Margot. "Here's your drink—and drink to Jules there for he caught the turkey gobbler. Cleek the Rat's man—Narkom!"

"Nonsense—impossible!" cried Merode with an oath.

"But not so, my friend, you shall see him," cried half a dozen voices.

"See him? I'll mark him for life, the devil. Someone go for the vitriol—here!"

With dirty, scratched, and bloodstained hands, Merode threw a coin to one of the Apaches who vanished in the blue fumes of smoke and wine, while Merode slouched deeper into the shadows as there came the sound of a gendarme's clattering sword on the cobbles outside.

"*Mon dieu*, Margot, I mustn't be caught."

Margot gave orders swiftly. "Down with him, Jeannette, into the vaults, while I hold the fort."

Jeannette clutched Merode's arm. "Come, *mon ami*, through here! You know the way!"

Stumbling, cursing, praying all in one breath, Merode followed down the rickety wooden ladder, down, it seemed, into the very bowels of the earth.

Thrusting open another door, Jeannette grumblingly lighted a torch stuck in the woodwork, and as Merode's eyes fell upon the figure of Mr. Narkom an oath of triumph burst from his lips.

"*Dieu*, but Margot spoke the truth. It's the pig himself. I've half a mind to take him with me and make him dance with a hot iron or two! Better than vitriol ——" He gave vent to a hoarse, chuckling laugh, at the sound of which the Superintendent shivered, even though the confined space was close enough on the hot summer's night.

"Margot will never stand that," said Jeannette. "She means to keep him here till Cleek the Rat comes——"

"Margot! *Nom du pipe!* If she is Queen, I am King. Leave him to me and give me the key of the door."

Jeannette wheeled suddenly on him.

"What key—what door?" she asked. Then without waiting for an answer she snatched the torch from the wall and thrust it in Merode's face.

He drew back from her piercing gaze.

"*Hola!*" she cried in triumph. "I was right—it is not Merode!" For Merode knew of the trap-door. And as the man followed her glance toward it he realized his mistake.

"And you, who are you?" she cried.

As the man shrank back she advanced, and with a swift gesture plucked at the matted hair. It came away in her hand, and her own cry of triumph as it revealed the smooth head beneath drowned the Superintendent's cry of "Cleek!" even as he realized the double peril of himself and the man whose friendship was dearer to him even than life itself.

"Aha, I know you now," cried Jeannette. "The great Cleek himself! And it is I who have got you—*moi*—whom she laughed at."

"And will again, *ma petite*," said Cleek, for he indeed it was. "Jeannette, be merciful, as you hope for mercy. Let me get my friend here through the door into the boat and you shall deliver me up to Margot. I will come back—I swear it—if you set him free."

"Free to bring the gendarmes on us—*pas si bête*. No, my friend," laughed the girl.

"He will not do that, I swear it. Did Cleek the Cracksman ever break his oath?"

"No, but Cleek of what do you call your quarters—eh—ah—Scot-land Yard—eh—yes, *he* might!" said the girl.

Swiftly, in a torrent of French patois that Narkom could not follow, Cleek pleaded, disregarding the Superintendent's own pleas to exchange his life for that of Cleek himself.

Minutes passed and the girl remained obdurate. Suddenly she looked up.

"They say you have a white-and-gold lady to be your woman over on the other side—is it not so?"

Cleek shivered and shut his eyes in a veritable agony of spirit at this reference to Ailsa Lorne—his adored Ailsa who awaited him in the rose-clad riverside home, and who within a few brief days was to have been his wife.

A low, sibilant laugh burst from Jeannette's painted lips.

"Eh, but she would not like to know of this little meeting, my friend? She would scorn the poor Jeannette, eh? But it is Jeannette who holds you like that!" She snapped her finger and thumb in triumph, and as the bursts of merriment above them seemed to roll nearer, Cleek grew very, very still. This was indeed the end, and though he would die for the sake of his friend, the blow would be none the less bitter.

Jeannette stood silent, too, looking at him. One, two, perhaps three minutes passed before she turned again.

"Well, *mon ami*, I don't know that I owe anything to Margot up there. What happens to me if I let you go? How do you pay me—eh?"

"Jeannette, you will? You have only to tell me what to do in return."

Cleek's voice trembled despite himself at this shadow of renewed hope, and Jeannette flushed in the dark.

"Bah, but I am the fool she calls me," she muttered, "But death comes soon enough. Pay me——" She came close to him, thrusting her face close to his. "No lover have I. I am old and plain; you are Cleek, once the lover of Margot the Queen. Kiss me! Nay, as you value your life and that of your friend there, kiss me as you would your woman over there—that is the price you shall pay!"

For one brief second Cleek's soul revolted. The thought of offering his lips—which he held sacred to the one fair woman who had led him up from depths such as these to her own pure level—sickened him. He would sooner yield life itself. Yet Narkom's life depended on his own, and with a secret prayer for forgiveness he bent over, took the thin, shaking figure literally into his arms, and kissed the painted lips, not once, but thrice. "God bless you, Jeannette!" he murmured. "He alone can reward you."

With a little moan of pain Jeannette clung to him as if indeed he were the lover she craved; then, slipping from his arms, she turned, sped across the room, and tugged at a small, half-hidden trap-door.

"Quick," she panted. "Slash his ropes and go—before I repent! I'll tell them you've gone!"

Without another look or sound she disappeared up the staircase, leaving Cleek to make good the escape of them both, in his heart a prayer of gratitude, and a resolution to save Jeannette from this den of crime if he but lived to escape into safety.

Hardly daring to breathe, he and Narkom stumbled down another foul-laden ladder and into a noisome passage, which eventually brought them onto the little landing stage.

"I have the 'plane here," said Cleek, with a little happy laugh. "Be brave, my friend, but a few more minutes."

He vanished in the darkness, and though it seemed ages to the aching Superintendent, it was barely three minutes before the shadowy, whirring body of a War Office hydroplane hovered over him. Not more than five minutes later they were once more on the way to safety and to London, there to unravel the riddle which had been propounded to the Superintendent by his chief but a few hours before.

"What's that, my friend—how did I find you?" said Cleek, later, when Mr. Narkom had got through a meal which would have done justice to Dollops himself.

"Well, I 'phoned for the use of one of our sea-planes, and scouted over every likely boat and barge in the Channel. When I saw one pass by Havre and stop just beyond, I remembered the old Coq d'Or and determined to risk it. And now, my friend, all you have to do is to rest. What's that? A case? Not to-night, Mr. Narkom, nor this morning. We both want rest and a quiet hour to offer up thanks to *le bon dieu* and Jeannette for our escape."

And that is why the case of the Mysterious Light, the riddle which was terrifying a whole village, was given no thought until many hours later. It had been a time too fraught with danger to be thought of lightly, and both men realized perhaps even more clearly the bond of friendship which had prompted both to walk into the very shadow of death in each other's service.

CHAPTER III

THE HAUNTED VILLAGE

It was more than twenty-four hours later, and Superintendent Narkom, fully recovered from the effects of the awful night in the cellar of the Apaches at the Coq d'Or, was now in fine feather. Anything that had to do with what certain of his men were wont to allude to as "the hupper clarses" possessed an especial interest for him, and to-day's affair was flying high in the social scale indeed.

"A duke, I think you said?"

The inquiry came from beside him, from Cleek, as they both sat in the Superintendent's limousine, in which they were skimming onward in the direction of the Carlton, where they were due at half-past two.

"A duke—yes," agreed Mr. Narkom.

"But there are so many. And you whisked me off in such hot haste that there was no time to inquire which. Now, however, if you don't mind satisfying a natural curiosity——"

"The Duke of Essex. He came up to town this morning and called me to a private interview at his hotel. It was a corroboration of what he told the Chief the other day."

"Ah!" said Cleek, with something like a twinkle in his eye. "That will be a pleasant little bit of news to tell Mrs. Narkom over the dinner table to-night. The Duke of Essex, eh? Well, well! That is the illustrious personage, is it not, who is famous for having a castle whose underground dungeons have been converted into a vast banqueting hall, and who is said to possess a service of gold plate which is the equal, if not the superior, of that which adorns the royal table on State occasions? That's the Johnnie, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's the—— My dear Cleek, you are hardly respectful, are you?"

"No, I am not. But you see, there must be something of the—er—well, fashionably democratic strain in my blood, and I'm never quite so overcome by the importance of dukes as a policeman ought to be. But we will stick to our—duke, if you please. Will his call upon us have something to do with guarding

that gold plate and the very remarkable array of wedding presents which is sure to be an accompaniment to the marriage of his only child, Lady Adela Fulgarney?"

"Nothing whatsoever. It is an affair of a totally different kind."

"H'm! That is both disappointing and gratifying, Mr. Narkom. Disappointing, because I see by the papers that Lady Adela's wedding is set for Thursday, the day after to-morrow; and gratifying, because to tell you the truth, I shouldn't much care to play the role of plain clothes man and special guard over the wedding gifts of even so important a lady as a duke's daughter."

"As if I would have brought the case to *you* had it been anything of the sort!" came reproachfully from Mr. Narkom.

"I think my only reason for imagining that the duke's call would be something in connection with Lady Adela's approaching marriage lay in the fact that a good many of the guests have, according to the newspapers, already arrived in Valehampton and either become domiciled at Essex Castle or at some of the neighbouring estates. At such a period one would naturally expect the duke to feel an interest in nothing but the forthcoming event—or, at least, not sufficient interest in anything else to cause him to leave his guests and make a flying trip up to London within forty-eight hours of the ceremony. It must be something of very serious importance, I take it, Mr. Narkom, to impel him to make this sudden visit to town and this urgent appeal to the Yard at such a time as this."

"It is. Wait until you hear the full details, old chap. I've had only a mere outline of them, but even that was sufficient to make me sit up. It's the devil's own business. And if Old Nick himself isn't at the bottom of it I'm blest if I can imagine who in the world can be. You've tackled about all sorts in your day, but I don't think you ever went spook hunting before."

"Went *what*!"

"Spook hunting, ghost tracking, spirit laying—that sort of thing. That blessed village of Valehampton is haunted. The country folk are leaving it by the dozen. Half the duke's tenants have flown the place already, and the other half are getting ready to follow suit. That's what he's come up here for, that's what he wants you to do: Lay the ghost that's making life in the place a nightmare and driving people almost insane with fright."

"Tommyrot!"

"No, it isn't, Cleek—it's facts. The place seems under a curse on account of some

infernal dead man who was buried there. The duke will give you the particulars —I can't—and the beggar's making life a burden to the village folk. Somebody or other said that a curse would follow wherever that dead Johnnie's body rested, and it has, too. One of the duke's tenants let it be buried from his house, and since that time nobody can live in the blessed place. And as for the church bells —lord! They make a perfect pandemonium of the neighbourhood at night—ring, bang, slam, without rhyme or reason, until people are silly with terror over the peal of them."

"Who rings them?"

"Nobody—that's the devil of it. The duke thought it was the work of somebody who was doing the thing for a lark, and he and the vicar had all the ropes removed. It didn't make any difference. The bells rang just the same the next night, and they've rung pretty nearly every night since. But that's not the worst of it. People have begun to be spirited away—out of their own houses, in the dead of night, without a blessed sign of where or how they went, and not a trace of them since. Last night, as if to cap the climax—— Hello! here we are at the Carlton at last. Jump out, old chap. We'll soon be with the duke now, and he will tell you."

The limousine had come to a halt. Mr. Narkom, opening the door, got out, dapper and sleek as always—doing the gentlemanly part of the Yard's business in a gentlemanly way—and Cleek, silk-hatted and morning-coated, the very antithesis of the professional detective, followed him, crossing the pavement and entering the hotel with an easy grace and repose of manner.

It was at once the envy and despair of his associates, that "way of carrying himself," as they expressed it, "like as if the earth wasn't none too good for him to walk upon, and he was sort of expecting a red carpet." And it was a curious fact that men of all classes on coming into contact with him were conscious of an indefinable something about the man which commanded rather than asked for respect.

And yet the man seemed, as a general thing, inclined to efface himself when in public. He did so now. Keeping in the background, he neither spoke nor asserted himself in any way; simply stood there and waited passively while Mr. Narkom sent up a card to the duke, and was wholly unperturbed when, a few minutes later, the messenger returned and stated that "His Grace would be pleased to see the gentlemen at once if they would kindly go up."

They went up forthwith, and were shown without delay into the presence of the

Duke of Essex.

"Your fame is world-wide, Mr. Cleek, and I hold myself most fortunate in being able to have a man so ably equipped for taking up this amazing case," began the duke as Narkom introduced his famous ally. "I wish to enlist your services in ferreting out a very remarkable affair—in fact, one of the most unbelievable mysteries which even the fictionists could possibly evolve."

"Mr. Narkom has been giving me a hint of the case," said Cleek, as he seated himself upon the chair which the duke indicated. "It is about the reputed 'haunting' of the village where your country seat is located, I believe? I am told that you desire me to discover the mysterious agency which causes the church bells to ring without ropes or hands and is supposed to be accountable for the mysterious disappearance of certain persons."

"That's it precisely. I do not wonder at your smiling, Mr. Cleek. At first the affair appears so utterly absurd that it is difficult to imagine anybody with an ounce of brains regarding it seriously. Let me tell you the facts, however, and you will, I am sure, change your views upon that point as completely as I have been compelled to change mine. I may say, however, that it is an exaggeration to state that 'persons' have disappeared. Two have come to an untimely end because of the mysterious visitation, but only one can be said to have disappeared. The body of the second victim has been discovered. It was found this morning at daybreak lying at the foot of the church belfry. The poor fellow's skull had been battered in by some implement of which no trace is to be found. The other victim—the one who disappeared—was a girl of thirteen. She vanished from her father's cottage in the dead of night one week ago. Every door and window was found locked on the inside in the morning, and whatever the diabolical power may have been that spirited her away, it did so effectually; for not the faintest shadow of a clue to her whereabouts has been discovered from that hour to this."

Cleek's brows gathered, and his direct eyes lost something of their placid expression.

"This would seem to be something more serious than I had at first imagined," he said. "Would you mind giving me the full details as explicitly as possible, and from the very beginning, please?"

The duke did so with as little divergence from the direct line of evidence as was consistent with the narration of a story so amazing.

CHAPTER IV

WEIRD CHURCH BELLS OF THE NIGHT

"To begin with, Mr. Cleek, the origin of the affair dates back eleven months, when the engagement of my daughter, Lady Adela Fulgarney, to the young Marquis of Uppingham was first made public. I do not know if you have any knowledge of the Valehampton district or of the immediate surroundings of Essex Castle, so I must tell you that the former consists of some thirty or forty cottages with outlying farm lands, and that the latter is within easy access of St. Saviour's Church, which, with its detached belfry and surrounding graveyard, is separated from the western boundary of the castle grounds only by a narrow road upon which front two buildings, known as the Castle Cottages on account of their having been erected unintentionally within the precincts of the castle grounds years before a proper survey was carried into effect. I call attention to these two buildings because it is out of one of them that the whole perplexing mystery arises. They stand fronting upon the road which passes the churchyard, and their gardens encroach upon the castle demesne at a point about ninety-six yards distant from the west wing of the castle itself. Do I make that clear?"

"Perfectly."

"I am glad of that, because it is important. In the days when the late Duchess lived she frequently begged of me to have the cottages razed, as she considered them not only an intrusion upon our privacy, but a detriment to the place in every way. I could not, however, bring myself to comply with the request, because both had been taken under lease for a term of years, and although I could, doubtless, have purchased that lease from the tenants holding it, I did not like to do so, since one of the two cottages was occupied by the aged parents of James Overton, my land steward, and they were both very loath to leave it. The other had been occupied by the wife and family of the curate of our vicar. About thirteen months ago, however, the Rev. Mr. Giles was appointed to a living of his own in Yorkshire, and took his departure after a long and pleasant sojourn with us. I could not, however, tear down the one house and leave the other standing with any benefit to the appearance of the estate, so I concluded to allow both to remain until the end of the Overton lease, at which time I proposed to demolish both. A hundred times since, Mr. Cleek, I have regretted that decision. If the

cottages had to stand, I said to myself, it was as well that they should both be bringing in a revenue as for one of them to remain vacant. So as the Overton lease had still six years to run I consented to my land steward finding a tenant for the one vacated by the curate for that period only.

"James Overton found a tenant almost immediately, and at that one who improved rather than detracted from the natural beauty of the castle grounds. He inhabits the place still. He is an elderly man with some small private means of his own and an absolute mania for horticulture. The result is that he makes his little garden a veritable Eden of beauty; and as there are only himself and wife, neither children nor grandchildren, and as they not only have no visitors, but hold themselves aloof from even the village folk, this Mr. Joshua Hurdon is a very desirable tenant indeed."

"So I should imagine, Duke. And your land-steward?"

"He is one of the best. Been with me for nine years. I look upon him as my right-hand man, Mr. Cleek. But that is not to the point. Efficient as he was in speedily finding a model tenant for the cottage vacated by the curate, he was not by any means successful in the case of that vacated by his parents."

"They, too, have left then, after all?"

"Yes. Old Mrs. Overton caught a chill and died about a fortnight after the Hurdons moved in, poor creature. She had gone on a visit to a married daughter in Scotland, and her death occurred there. Of course, the old man could not be left altogether to the tender mercies of the village charwoman, who used to come in two or three times a week to do the rough household work, so his son, after returning from the funeral, procured him a housekeeper in the person of one Mrs. Mallory, a widow, who, with her sister, undertook the entire charge of the place and dispensed with the services of the charwoman altogether. This Mrs. Mallory appears to have been a most excellent person for the post and to have performed her duties satisfactorily, although she was of a highly romantic and even emotional disposition. She seems to have devoured love stories and cheap romances with appalling avidity. It is to her propensity for viewing life in the utterly unnatural and luridly coloured manner set forth by such literature that Valehampton owes its unhappy state to-day.

"I cannot vouch for the facts, Mr. Cleek, for I never saw the person, and never even heard of him until after his death; but, as the report goes, this romantic creature, wandering about the country lanes and dreaming her silly dreams, one day heard the sound of someone sobbing and crying out in pain. On going to

ascertain the cause, she found a young man of about nineteen, evidently in the last stages of consumption, lying on his face in the woods, and a big, burly gypsy standing over him and beating him with a whip, at the same time mumbling some outlandish gibberish which the woman declared she recognized at once as the spell to avert the Evil Eye.

"Well, to make a long story short, this buxom Diana of the Turnip Fields flew at the gypsy, plucked the whip from his hand, and laid it about his shoulders to such good purpose that he made off and left her with the consumptive youth. She declares, however, that before the man vanished for good he turned and shouted back to her: 'There is a curse on the creature—he is a Vampire. Evil goes with him where he lives, and evil will linger where he dies. Rivers will be choked and devils ride on the air in the place that holds his body. Children shall be stolen and the blood of them sucked by spirits, and they shall be stricken blind who cross any threshold which his accursed foot has pressed!'"

"What utter drivel!" commented Cleek, with a derisive laugh. "It is the baldest rubbish I ever heard in all my life. What happened next?"

"Well, it appears, from what I have heard, that the woman not only took pity on the unfortunate youth she had rescued, but smuggled him into the Overton cottage and tucked him away in a spare room, intending to give him a few nights' shelter and food and to build him up a bit in strength before she sent him on his way. Unfortunately, however, that night the fellow grew worse, and by the morning he was in such a bad way that she had to call in the village doctor. By that time he was dying, Doctor Forsyth declares—in the very last stages of galloping consumption and beyond all possibility of saving."

"H'm! Yes, I see. Couldn't speak, I suppose? Couldn't give any account of who he was?"

"Not a syllable. Forsyth said, however, that in *his* eyes he looked pretty much like a gypsy himself—had all the characteristics of the Romany race. He further declared that, had he been asked, he should have said that it was well nigh a physical impossibility for the young man in his condition to have walked a step or even lifted a hand to help himself for days and days before he first saw him. But, of course, even the best of doctors are sometimes at fault in their diagnoses, and if the fellow hadn't walked—well, the woman must have got him into the house somehow."

"Yes; you are right there, Duke. The woman must have got him into the house somehow. By the way, was there any tribe of gypsies known to be in the vicinity

of Valehampton at the time?"

"No, not then. There had been, a few weeks previously. But they had moved on. Why?"

"It is of no consequence. Go on, please. What happened after Doctor Forsyth's visit?"

"That night the unfortunate wretch died. Fortunately in one sense, there was no necessity for the coroner to be called in and the cottage thrown open for a general inquiry. I can tell you that James Overton was highly incensed when he heard of what the woman had done; incensed at the liberty she had taken without consulting him; for, had Forsyth not been able to issue a death certificate and to declare positively the nature and cause of the disease, the result might have been serious indeed. However, the stranger died and the burial permit was issued in due form, so that put an end to any distressing business with the law. Though it didn't put an end to James Overton's worry over the matter, by any means."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, there was the question of interring the body. In the usual course of events it would have been buried in the local potter's field with the remains of other paupers; but James Overton is a soft-hearted sort of man and—well, he didn't like to think of it ending that way, so he went to the vicar and offered to pay half the price of a grave to have the body properly buried. The other half was soon raised by subscription, and there was enough to pay for a modest headstone as well. So the poor wretch was buried in the churchyard of St. Saviour's and a cross put over the grave bearing, at Overton's suggestion, the inscription, 'Lord, I come as a stranger, but am I not known unto Thee?'"

"Very pretty, very touching. He is a man of sentiment as well as of charity, this James Overton, it would seem. So the poor wretch who 'came as a stranger' went on to where all are known. And then—what?"

"Oh, you'll scarcely credit it, Mr. Cleek. That night the church bells began to ring as though a madman had laid hands on the ropes, and the whole village was roused from sleep by their dreadful din. The vicar, thinking that someone was playing a foolish prank, dressed and went out to the belfry to reprimand the vandal, but—there was no one there! The bells were clanging and the dangling ropes moving up and down with each swing of them, but no hand was on those ropes and no living thing in sight. He climbed the belfry stairs until he came right underneath the bells themselves. There was no one there, either—they were swinging and clanging above his head apparently of their own accord! That was

the beginning of the mischief, Mr. Cleek. Every night following those bells would peal out through the darkness like that. I myself have stood in the belfry and both seen and heard them do it, so the matter is not one of hearsay, but of actual experience.

"The result of this state of affairs I think you can imagine. The whole village suddenly awoke to a remembrance of Mrs. Mallory's adventure, and recalled what she had declared the vagrant gypsy had said in regard to the dead youth. The 'curse' prophesied had fallen; the 'devils' spoken of had begun to ride on the air, and in the end all the other things would happen. People with children were the first to act. They vacated their cottages and left the village by dozens. Almost the first to go was the woman who was indirectly the cause of the panic—Mrs. Mallory. She and her sister fled. A fortune could not have tempted them to stay—they were simply panic-stricken. Then, hard on the heels of that, Overton's old father went so nearly daft with fright that, in common humanity, his son had to take him out of the house and send him to Scotland to the married daughter. The old man would have gone out of his mind with terror if he had not done so. The place was stripped of its equipment, the furniture sent to be sold at auction, and the cottage was left as bare and as empty as an eggshell. And so, but for a period of one brief week, it has remained ever since. But other parts of the diabolical prophecy have come to pass as threatened. The river—a branch of the lovely Colne, which flows within gunshot of the castle boundaries—has begun to choke up and there is no longer a free passage, as formerly, for the skiffs and dinghys."

"What's that? What's that?" ejaculated Cleek. "The river stopped up? Whatever by?"

"By sudden shoals which seem to have risen from the bed of it, and will permit no craft to pass. But the abominable likeness to the things predicted by the gypsy do not cease with that. He spoke of children being spirited away, and at least one child *has* been.

"With such a reputation hanging over it Overton could get no tenant for the cottage from which his father fled in a panic. No man would live in the place rent free, indeed, no soul in all the district could be persuaded to pass by it, either by night or by day—on account of the threat of sudden blindness, and for the whole eleven months which have passed since that wretched youth was buried the place has known no tenant until eight days ago. Then there suddenly appeared—from God knows where—a man named Smale, who wandered into the district peddling rush baskets in company with his daughter, a girl of thirteen. He heard of the place, laughed at its reputation. He was homeless and well-nigh

penniless; he wanted a shelter, and was willing to risk anything to find one. He went to Overton, but Overton had not the heart to yield to his entreaties, so he finally came to me in person. If I would let him have the house rent free for six months, he'd live in it and brave all the spirits that ever existed. I listened and—yielded. Eight days ago the man and the child took possession. A week ago this very night the child vanished—in the dead of the night, with all the doors and all the windows fast bolted on the inside. After two horrible days of rushing about and wildly trying to find a trace of her, the father went insane, flung himself into the river, and was drowned.

"Nor have the tragedies ceased with these two terrible things, Mr. Cleek. The bridesmaids and the guests for my daughter's forthcoming wedding have arrived at the castle. Among them is Captain Weatherley, and with him came his soldier servant—a loyal and intrepid fellow named Davis, who had been through countless perils with his master, and was afraid of nothing living or dead. Early this morning he was found by the Vicar at the foot of the belfry. His head had been smashed in, and he was beyond all earthly aid."

"Any attempt been made to decide the matter? Upon the part of the local authorities, I mean; for, of course, they would be notified of the affair."

"Naturally. The vicar attended to that. But beyond the fact that the body was removed by them to the morgue attached to the local almshouses, I know nothing whatsoever of their movements; nor do I quite see how they could have come to any definite conclusion about the affair."

"No doubt, however, their first step would have been to investigate the condition of the earth in the immediate vicinity of the cottage," suggested Cleek.

"Ah! I see what you mean. They might have found traces of footprints, you think?"

"Something of that sort—yes. If it had rained recently, to put the ground in a condition to receive and retain an impression——"

"The dead man's boot might have been fitted to it, and the point established that way," put in Mr. Narkom, somewhat hastily, his mind travelling along well-worn grooves.

"Oh! no," said Cleek. "Not necessarily a footprint at all, Mr. Narkom, and certainly not a booted one. A boot is never conclusive proof of the identity of the wearer. It may be removed for the purpose of *creating* certain impressions and afterward returned to the body of the owner. Contrary to the methods of the

fictionists, the imprint of a boot or shoe is of no possible value as a clue whatsoever. The only footprints that can be relied upon to furnish positive evidence of the personality of their author are those made either by an animal or the human foot when it is absolutely bare."

"But bare or booted, Mr. Cleek," interposed the duke, "neither could be relied upon to establish—were it important to do so—any proof relative to the movements of Captain Weatherley's servant in the neighbourhood of that abandoned cottage. Two circumstances render such a proceeding impossible. You suggested a moment ago that—well—er—*something* might be discovered in the immediate vicinity of the cottage provided it had rained recently. Well, it has not. As a matter of fact, the county has been suffering from an absolute drought for the past five weeks, and the earth is baked as hard as flint. That is the one circumstance; the other is even less promising. Both cottages—that of the Hurdons and that left vacant—have courtyards entirely paved with red tiles. A broad, red-tiled footpath surrounds each building, and runs down the middle of its accompanying garden. Nor is that all. Even the belfry of St. Saviour's itself could not have furnished any evidence of the man ever having been there had not his body been found on the spot. It is a curious old Norman structure which originally stood in the midst of a sort of 'square,' paved with cobbles, and extending outward from the walls of the tower for a distance which, roughly, is about four yards in every direction. The uneven surface presented by these cobbles after ages of wear having proved dangerous walking for the thick-soled boots of the bellringers, had caused more than one of them to have a nasty fall, so the vicar sought to rectify the matter by having them entirely covered by a thick layer of cement. The result is that the square in the middle of which the belfry stands presents a smooth, firm, level surface as hard as iron and as bare as one's hand. An elephant could not leave a footprint upon it, much less a man."

The duke paused a moment, as if to give due weight to these unpromising circumstances, then leaned back in his chair.

"There," he said, "that is the case as it stands, Mr. Cleek."

CHAPTER V

THE PRIVATE AFFAIRS OF A DUKE

"A very interesting little problem," said Cleek, studying his finger-nails as if the condition of them was of moment. "You are not, sir, I take it, inclined to share the general belief obtaining in the village, and to attribute these remarkable doings to any supernatural agency?"

"Certainly not," the duke replied. "That would be the very height of absurdity. It must certainly be apparent to anybody with an ounce of common sense that there is not only a human brain engineering the affair, but that there is behind it a definite purpose."

"Beyond all question."

"Yes, but what? That is the point. What end can be attained, what purpose served by a proceeding of this nature? That is the inexplicable part of it. Were it not for the disappearance of the child and the murder of the man, it would be but one degree removed from farce."

"Quite so," admitted Cleek, still studying his finger-nails. "But the elements of farce come perilously near to the borderline of tragedy at times; and we have it upon the best authority that it is but a step from the sublime to the ridiculous. Besides, when one has large landed interests—— H'm! Yes. By the way, I see that, despite all the rumours to the contrary, you have finally decided not to take a place on the board of directors of the company formed for exploiting the new cement which is to make the present variety as obsolete as the mud bricks of the Early Britons. Septarite it is called, is it not? I see that the company's prospectus is out and that the name of the Duke of Essex is not upon it."

"No; it is not," admitted the duke, with some heat. "Its mention in that connection was an unwarranted presumption. The thing had merely been broached to me in the most casual manner, and while I was considering the project my name was made use of in the most flagrant manner to bring the company before the public."

"I fancy I have heard that it was the present chairman of the board, Sir Julius Solinski, who was responsible for that."

"It was. And a piece of infernal impertinence it was, too! Geological borings have established the fact that there is in all probability a large deposit of septaria underlying a tract of land which I own in the village, and the man approached me with a proposition to sell or lease it to his wretched company for a term of years. As the land was practically of no importance to me, I told the fellow that I would consider the matter, and on that basis he made the most flagrant misuse of my name to bolster up his pettifogging business. Of course, I immediately declined to have any further dealings with him, and that settled the affair altogether."

"Unless by one means or another—depreciated value, a deserted village, something of that sort—he might, in time, bring you round to another way of thinking," said Cleek, quietly.

The duke sat up sharply. It was impossible not to catch a hint from that line of argument.

"Do you mean to say that he—that that pettifogging fellow—— The thing is monstrous, Mr. Cleek, monstrous! If that's the little game—if his is the hand that's behind the thing——"

"Pardon, but I have not said that, Duke. It is possible, of course, and there is a suggestiveness about it which—— Oh! well, I shall know more about that when I go down to Valehampton and look into the matter at close quarters. And now may I venture to ask a question touching upon more personal matters? I distinctly remember reading that, at the time of making known Lady Adela's engagement eleven months ago, you chose the opportunity to declare also your intention of taking another wife. Is that so?"

"It is perfectly true. The fact is now public property. If all goes as planned, I shall be married to Lady Mary Hurst-Buckingham this coming autumn."

"I see. One other question, please. Your first marriage never having been blessed by a son, the heir to your title and estates—failing, of course, direct issue in the future—is, I believe, the son of a distant cousin, one Captain Paul Sandringham?"

"That, too, is true."

"You have no very great respect for that gentleman, I imagine. Is that a fact?"

"Your pardon, Mr. Cleek," replied the duke, stiffly. "I am afraid I cannot enter into a discussion of my personal affairs. They cannot concern Scotland Yard, nor have any bearing upon the matter in hand."

"That, I fear, Your Grace," said Cleek quietly, "is a matter upon which I may be the better judge. One should be as frank with one's detective as with one's doctor. Each has the greatest interest in being able definitely to lay his finger upon the root of a disease, and each may become useless if perfect confidence be not given with regard to all points."

"I ask your pardon, Mr. Cleek. I did not at first see it in that light. I admit it then: I have no respect for Captain Sandringham—none whatever. He is a person of dissolute habits and very questionable ways. He left the Army under compulsion, but he still retains the title of 'Captain.' People of any standing, however, no longer receive him."

"So that, naturally, he will not be invited to share in the festivities in connection with Lady Adela's wedding?"

"Most emphatically he will not! I have not written to him, spoken to him, nor even seen him these ten years past. That, however, would not prevent his inheriting both the title and estates were I to die without male issue. I have not the slightest doubt that he has raised money on the anticipated reversion, which he will now, of course, be obliged to pay back. I don't know how he will manage it, nor do I care."

"H'm! Yes! I see! So then your marriage would be something in the light of a severe blow to the gentleman, of course. In England is he?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. The last I heard of him he was on the Continent somewhere. But that was ten years ago, and I have forgotten the exact place. It would be where there is gaming and life of that sort, of course."

"Quite so—if one is given to that sort of thing. Mr. Narkom!"

"Yes, old man?"

"Don't happen to know the market price for fullers' earth in bulk, do you?"

"Good lord, no! Why, what in the world——?"

"I should like about fifteen or sixteen pounds of the ordinary variety—not the bleached sort, you know," interposed Cleek, rising. "You might 'phone through to the Yard and order it. And, by the way, I'm afraid you won't be able to join Mrs. Narkom at dinner this evening, after all. We shall spend the night at Valehampton. And now, before I set out to look into the matter of this engaging little affair, Duke, one last question, please. Did you take anybody into your confidence regarding this visit to London to-day?"

"Yes, naturally. I spoke to the Marquis and to Captain Weatherley about it, of course; and—yes—to Overton. I fancy I may also have mentioned it while Carstairs was present; he was coming in and out of the breakfast room a great deal, of course. He's the butler."

"H'm! Yes, I see! You wouldn't mind letting it be understood when you go back, would you, that a couple of ordinary Yard men have been put on the case? Just ordinary plain-clothes men, you know—called—er—let us say, 'George Headland' and 'Jim Markham.' Can you remember the names?"

"I can and I will, Mr. Cleek," the duke replied, stopping to write them down on the margin of a newspaper lying on a table beside him.

Cleek stood and watched the operation, explaining the while that he should like the names to get into circulation in the village; then, after having obtained permission to call at the Castle and interview the duke whenever occasion might arise, he took his departure in company with Mr. Narkom, and left their noble client alone.

"Rum sort of a case, isn't it?" remarked the Superintendent as they went down the stairs together.

"Very. And it will depend so much upon what they are. Geraniums, lilies, pansies!—even roses. Yes, by Jupiter! roses would do—roses and fuchsias—that sort of thing."

"Roses and—— My hat, what the dickens are you talking about?"

"Let me alone for a minute—please!" rapped out Cleek. "I say—you'd better tell Hammond and Petrie to bring that bag of fullers' earth with them instead of sending it. Have them turn up with it—both of them—at the King's Head, Liverpool Street, as soon as they possibly can. The light lingers late at this time of the year, and the limousine ought to get us down to Valehampton before tea time if Lennard makes up his mind to it."

CHAPTER VI

THE GHOST IN THE CHURCH BELFRY

If you have ever journeyed down into Essex by way of the Great Eastern from Liverpool Street, you may remember that just before you come to Valehampton—six or seven miles before, in fact—the train stops at a small and exceedingly picturesque station bearing the name of Willowby Old Church, behind which the village of the same name lies in a sort of depression, a picture of peaceful beauty.

But if you do not recall it, it doesn't matter; the point is that it is there, and that at a period of about two and a half hours after Cleek and Mr. Narkom had left His Grace of Essex there rushed up to the outlying borders of that village a panting and dust-smothered blue limousine in which sat four men—two on the front seat and two on the back. And the remarkable fact about it was that the two "back seaters" looked so nearly the image of the two "front seaters" that if you hadn't heard all four of them talking you might have fancied that at least one pair was seated in front of a looking-glass.

They differed not a particle in anything, from sleek, well-pomaded hair to bristly, close-clipped moustache, or from self-evident "dickey" and greasy necktie to clumping, thick-soled, well-polished cow-hide boots with metal "protectors" on the heels—policemen's boots by all the signs.

"Safe enough here, sir, I reckon," came through the speaking tube from the chauffeur as the car halted in the shadow of some trees. "No one in sight, and the station not more than a hundred yards away—get to it in two minutes without half trying."

The pair on the back seat pulled farther back from observation and the pair on the front one rose and got out. The last to do so spoke a few sentences to the chauffeur.

"The train won't be in for another half-hour yet," he said. "You ought to be in Valehampton before that. Keep out of sight as much as possible. You won't have much difficulty in finding out where we put up, and when you do, keep as close to the neighbourhood as you can with safety. Meanwhile, impress it upon Hammond and Petrie not to pull down the curtains, but to keep out of sight, if they have to lie on the floor to do it. Come along, Mr. Narkom. Step lively!"

"All right, sir," said Lennard; then the limousine flashed away, bearing the original Hammond and Petrie in one direction while the counterfeit presentments of them walked off in the other.

In half an hour the down train from London arrived. They boarded it, and went, with their brier-woods and their shag, into a third-class smoking compartment, and were off a minute or so afterward.

The sun had not yet dropped wholly out of sight behind the west wing of Essex Castle when they turned out at Valehampton, and they had only got as far as the door where the ticket collector stood when a voice behind them said abruptly: "Mr. Headland—Mr. Markham. One moment, please." Facing round they saw a pleasant-faced man on the right side of forty coming into the waiting-room from the platform, and advancing toward them. His clothing was undeniably town-made, and selected with excellent taste. He wore tan boots and leather puttees, and carried a hunting crop in his hand. He came up and introduced himself at once as James Overton, land-steward of the Duke of Essex.

"Hallo! The duke got back a'ready, has he?" asked Cleek, when he heard this.

"Oh, no. I do not expect him for quite another hour at the very earliest. He will come down as he went up—in the motor. And he is always a little uneasy about travelling fast. It was at Captain Weatherley's suggestion that I telephoned him at the Carlton to inquire if there was any likelihood of somebody from Scotland Yard being sent down before morning. That is how I came to know—and to be here. His Grace informed me that you had already started. The local time-table told me the rest."

"Good business! But I say, Mr. Overton, what put it into Captain What's-his-name's head to have you telephone the duke and inquire? Nervous gent, is he?"

"No; not in the least. He suddenly remembered that the only inn in the village closed its doors this morning. Last night's affair finished the landlady. She cleared out, bag and baggage, at noon. Couldn't be hired to stop another hour. The Captain thought I ought to telephone to His Grace and make the inquiry, because if anybody *should* be coming down to-night something ought to be done to find lodgings beforehand."

"I see. Nice and thoughtful of the gent, Markham—eh, what? Much obliged to you for the trouble, I'm sure. Did you manage to find us any, then?"

"Yes, Mr.—er—Headland, will it be? Thanks.... I had some difficulty in doing so for a time; but finally Carstairs came to the rescue. Carstairs is His Grace's

butler. He is engaged to a young woman living on the other side of the village, and her people have eased matters up a bit by placing a room in their cottage at the disposal of Mr. Markham and yourself. Shall I show you to it? I regret that I was thoughtless and neglected to speak for a conveyance."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," replied Cleek, knocking out his pipe against his heel. "My mate and me, we're used to hoofing it; and, besides, it'll be a change to stretch our legs after being cooped up for nigh three hours in the train. Wot price Shanks's mare for a bit, Jim? Agreeable?"

"Hur!" grunted Mr. Narkom, nodding his head in the affirmative without troubling to remove his pipe from his lips.

"Right you are, then—best foot forward. Mustn't mind Markham's little ways, Mr. Overton. Some folks get the idea that because he doesn't talk much the beggar's sullen. But that ain't it at all. Fact is, he's a bit hard of hearing. Shell in the South African War. Busted ear-drum."

"What, *deaf*?"

"Yessir. Deaf as a blooming hitching post in the left ear, and the right one not up to no great figger, either. A thundering good man though, one of the best."

"God bless my soul! Deaf, and yet——"

Here Mr. Overton's voice dropped off suddenly, and he did the rest of his thinking in silence. The thoughts themselves were anything but complimentary to a police force which retained deaf men on its active list and could send out nothing better than this precious pair of illiterates to investigate an important case.

"The duke does some funny things sometimes," he said to himself as he walked over to the spot where he had tethered his horse and began to unfasten it. "And that's what Scotland Yard takes the rate-payers' good money to support, eh? Good lord!"

He rejoined the two undesirables a moment later, and with the horse's bridle over his arm, walked on beside Cleek while Mr. Markham dropped back a few paces into the rear and clumped along in heavy-footed, listless style.

Mr. Overton, too, was silent for a time—as if the apparent inefficiency of these two upon whose perspicacity the duke was relying rather weighed upon his spirits, and he saw little more hope of getting to the bottom of this perplexing affair than if it had been left to the local constabulary. Cleek was sorry for that.

He could see that the man was of a hearty, jovial disposition, and likely to be a rather pleasant companion for a long walk. He therefore set out to put him more at his ease and to start the conversational ball rolling.

"Fine country this, Mr. Overton," he said, looking round over the wide sweep of green land. "Reminds me of Australia, them trees and fields. Though I never was there; but I've seen the photographs. Brother's a sailor on the P. and O.—fetched back heaps of 'em. Hello! Wot price that church spire away over there to the left? Will that be St. Saviour's?"

"Yes."

"Church where the goings on takes place, ain't it? The bell-ringing and the like. Reckon I must have a look at that place some time to-morrow."

"Not until to-morrow, Mr. Headland?"

"Well, you see, I didn't expect that the box containing our magnifying glasses and camera for taking photographs of fingerprints and things of that sort, you know, will arrive before then, and it's no use working without your tools, is it? Superintendent said he'd ship it down to us either to-night or the first thing in the morning, and he's pretty prompt about such things."

"So then, of course—— To-morrow, eh? I suppose you haven't formed any opinion regarding the genesis of the case, Mr. Headland?"

"The which, sir?"

"The genesis, the start, the beginning, the cause."

"Oh! I see. No, I haven't made up my mind so set that it ain't liable to be changed. I never was one of them pig-headed sort that gets an idea and then can't be shook off it. I've formed a sort of general notion regarding it, you know, but, as I say, nothing fixed."

"I see. Would it be too much to ask what the 'general notion' is?"

"Why, it'll be just what that dead chap—the one that was killed last night—called it: a case of hanky-panky. Somebody is engineering the business. For a purpose, you know. Depreciating land values for the sake of getting hold of that piece of property the cement company wants to get from the duke."

Mr. Overton stopped short.

"I hadn't thought of that!" he declared. And it was clear enough from the manner in which the blood drained out of his face, and then came rushing back again,

that he never had.

"Hadn't you?" said Cleek, with a slight swagger. "Lord, I did—the first thing!"

It was evident that this hitherto unthought-of explanation had a remarkable effect upon Mr. Overton.

"It would be that Hebrew chap, the company promoter who was knighted last New Year, Sir Julius Solinski," he said as he resumed the walk. "It would be that fellow who would be at the bottom of any scheme to acquire the land; and the man has a country seat in the adjoining district. Yes, but the bells, Mr. Headland—the bells?"

"Oh, that will be the doing of boys. Up to a lark, you know. A blackened fishing-line carried over the branch of a tree—that sort of thing. Did it myself when I was a youngster. It's all tommyrot about it's being a 'spirit,' you know. Drivel."

"You think so?"

"Why, cert'nly. Don't you?"

"I did once," replied Overton, sinking his voice. "I changed my mind upon that score last night. I'd have stopped that chap, Davis, going to the belfry if I had known in time. I didn't. I was over at Willowby Old Church on business connected with the estate. I was kept later than I had expected, and didn't get back to Valehampton until after dark."

His voice dropped off. He walked on a few steps in silence, his face curiously grave, his eyes very large. Of a sudden he took a slight shivering fit—the last thing in the world one would have expected of such a man—and then threw a nervous glance over his shoulder and looked up at Cleek.

"Mr. Headland," he said, gravely, "heretofore people have merely heard things. Last night I *saw*!"

"Saw? Saw what?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I never shall. I can give it neither name nor description. I only know that whatever it was it certainly was nothing human."

"A ghost?"

"It was a jolly good imitation of one then, if it wasn't. Up to that minute I had been as certain as you are that human hands, and human hands alone, were at the back of this diabolical business, and that the talk of the bells being rung by spirits was the baldest rubbish in all the world. To-day I don't know what to

think! It wasn't a case of nerves. I didn't imagine the thing. I'm not that kind of man. I *saw* it, Mr. Headland—saw it as plainly as I now see you."

"I say, you know, you make my flesh crawl. How did it happen? And where?"

"In the road on the far side of St. Saviour's, at about half-past ten last night," said Overton, with grave seriousness. "I was coming up over the slope between Valehampton and Willowby Old Church, intending to turn off at the crossroads and take the short cut to the Lodge, where I live. The moon was shining brightly and there was no air stirring. The trees were as motionless as wooden things, and the road, after the long drought, was baked like iron. Had any footstep fallen upon it I must have heard it in that complete quiet. Had any living creature passed me in the road, that creature I must have seen. I saw and I heard nothing.

"All of a sudden, just as I got to the top of the slope, I happened to look up and catch sight of the flat top of the bell tower of St. Saviour's. I was a goodish bit away from it, but there was a break in the roadside trees at that point and I could see it clearly. I shouldn't have given it a second glance under other circumstances, for I am quite used to the sight of it and, up to that moment, never had the slightest belief in there being anything supernatural connected with it in any way. But it so happened that a curious thing about it forced itself upon my notice at that moment, so I stood still and looked at it fixedly. The curious thing was this: at the very moment when I first looked up and saw the tower's top, the moon dipped out of sight behind a passing cloud. The place should, naturally, have been plunged into darkness; instead a curious blob of light still lay on the roof of the place, as if the moon still shone upon some circular silver thing that rested there.

"I could not make it out. There is no metal on the belfry's top. Like all towers of the Norman type, it is simply a huge, truncated stone cylinder, roofed over with stones and pierced here and there with bowman's slits cut in the circular walls. But suddenly, to my immense surprise, that curious light began to move; then, presently, it went circling round and round the tower's top at a terrific rate of speed.

"'O-ho,' said I to myself, thinking, of course, that I had had the rare good fortune to stumble upon the spot at a moment when the person responsible for the ringing of the bells was on the ground for some purpose of his own. 'Well, I'll precious soon make short work of you, my friend, I promise you that.' I had not spoken any louder than I am speaking now, Mr. Headland, so it would have been utterly impossible for any one or anything on the tower's top to have heard me

all that distance away. But I swear to you that in the very instant I spoke those words and made to cut across into the graveyard of St. Saviour's a sudden gust of wind as furious as a tropical hurricane seized upon the trees about me and whipped and twisted them into writhing cones of green; a dozen unseen hands slapped and tore at me and flung me back; and the light on the belfry's top lurched out into space and came careering toward me with a shrieking noise. I saw for a moment the outlines of a frightful, bodiless, inhuman face, wrapped in streaming ribbons of light, and then the thing rushed by me in the darkness, shapeless and screaming, and for the first time in my life I fainted."

CHAPTER VII

A GARDEN OF TRANSPLANTED FLOWERS

Cleek made not a single sound. A curious, intense, half-frightened expression had settled down over his face. He walked on with brows knit and eyes fixed on the road, and when Overton, impressed by his silence, looked round at him, he saw that his lower lip was pushed outward beyond the upper one, and that the pipe he had taken out and refilled hung from the corner of his mouth still unlighted.

"It was a shocking experience, Mr. Headland," Overton said, fetching a deep breath.

"Must have been," admitted Cleek, without looking up. "You're putting some new ideas into my head, Mr. Overton. If it had been one of the villagers, or even a servant from the Castle—anybody but *you*! H'm! Wot happened afterward?"

"When I came to I was lying on my back in the road. The wind had died utterly away, the trees were standing motionless again, but there was a curious sound as of wheels passing and repassing me at a furious rate. There was, however, not a moving thing in sight, and as the moon was again shining brightly I could see quite clearly. Nevertheless, frightened as I was—and I confess that I *was* frightened, Mr. Headland, horribly so—I struck several matches and examined the surface of the road thoroughly."

"Why?"

"I had heard of those phantom wheels that were said to rush about the village by night, but this was my first personal experience with them. To judge by the sound alone, I should have declared that vehicles on rubber tyres were scudding past me at the rate of five or six a minute and almost within touching distance. When I struck those matches and looked at the white dust of the road, there was nothing on it but the prints of my own feet and a shapeless mark where I had fallen. The wheels, however, were still speeding by in an unbroken stream of traffic. I turned tail and ran as I haven't run since I was a boy, and I never slackened pace either, until I was safe inside the Lodge and the door bolted behind me. If I had had a bit of pluck just then, I should have faced the dark avenue up to the Castle and told about the affair. I wish now that I had. It would

have saved that poor chap's life."

"Maybe, but you can't be sure of it, Mr. Overton. He was a daredevil sort from what I've heard, and you can't do much with them kind of chaps when they take a notion in their heads."

"Possibly not. Still, I might have tried. I shall never be quite able to forgive myself for being such a coward. But I was absolutely in a blue funk, and wouldn't have faced that long walk up the Oak Avenue for the best thousand pounds I ever saw."

"Say anything to the duke about it?"

"No. I was going to do so, but this morning, when poor Davis's body was found, His Grace was in something so very like a panic over the horrible turn the abominable affair had taken, that I hadn't the heart to harrow up his feelings still further—particularly as he was determined on going up to town and putting the matter into the hands of Scotland Yard at once. I shall do so, of course, when he's calmer. It is no use making matters worse than they are. It is bad enough to feel that you have to cope with natural forces without dragging supernatural ones into it. And there *is* some supernatural force connected with it, Mr. Headland—I'm convinced of that now. Human beings may engineer a plot to haunt a village for some purpose; may even brain a man and spirit away a child to keep what they are up to from being found out—but they can't make church bells ring without hands, nor wheels fly through dust without leaving traces. Nor can they produce that monstrous Thing which I saw with my own eyes last night."

"Well, I'll own it's got a devilish queer look, Mr. Overton," admitted Cleek, gravely. "And, as I said before, if it was anybody but a level-headed gent like you, I should think it was, maybe, a case of the D.T.'s coming on. Still, of course, you know, they can do wonderful things these days with electricity and flying machines—and Solinski's no fool. Besides, the Cement Company's got the money to spend if it wants to set about things properly and means to have a tract of land that it needs. So, of course——Geraniums! Geraniums, fuchsias, delphiniums, and lilies, or I'm a Dutchman!"

This remark had been rapped out so suddenly and with such vehemence, and was so utterly foreign to the subject under discussion, that Mr. Overton looked round at Cleek in absolute bewilderment.

By this time the walk from the station had brought them abreast of the western boundaries of the Castle domain, and a rise in the road gave a view of part of its splendid grounds. Beyond a low wall stretched an expanse of lawn, green, close-

clipped, level as a billiard table; on the right there was the gleam of a water garden, the blaze of a rose-laden pergola, and the snow of swans' wings; on the left, two straw-thatched cottages and the rich green of a clipped yew hedge shutting in an enclosure that glowed with a myriad blossoming flowers.

Mr. Overton, following the direction of Cleek's eyes, looked round and saw that they were fixed upon that glorious garden.

"Oh, I see what you mean," he said, with a smile of sudden understanding. "Old Hurdon's flowers. Fine, aren't they?"

"Something more than fine from what I can see of 'em at this distance. They will be 'Pollacks' and 'Paul Crampels' them geraniums, if I know anything about it. Do a bit in that line myself at home."

"I shouldn't have thought it," replied Overton, rather abruptly; then hastened to amend his blunder by adding discreetly, "I should have supposed that the business of Scotland Yard would leave you so little time. But possibly you have 'off days' and little opportunities of that kind."

"Something of that sort. I've always sort of prided myself on my little bit, but it isn't a patch on that show, I can tell you. How would it be if we slipped over the wall and had a look at 'em a bit closer, Mr. Overton? You being who you are, the gardeners wouldn't say nothing, I reckon."

"Yes, I suppose it will be all right if you like. That will be Mrs. Hurdon herself that's working in the garden. Come along."

They swung over the low boundary wall into the Castle grounds, and walked directly toward the cottages, Mr. Overton flinging a reassuring, "That's all right, Johnston, the gentlemen are with me," to a protesting gardener who came running across the lawn.

Cleek observed, however, that, although the gardener heard the land-steward's voice clearly enough, and went about his business at once, the woman in the radiant garden of the cottage did not so much as look up.

"Old lady's something after the style of my mate here, ain't she—a bit deaf?" he observed.

"Yes, a little. That is one reason why she never is worried by the ringing of the bells."

"I see. And the old man—wot about him? He deaf, too?"

"Oh, dear no. Ears as sharp as a badger's. He is a very strong-minded, practical, level-headed old chap, without a grain of superstition in him. He declares that he has never in all his life found soil so fertile or a garden that gives such good return for his work as that one, and he wouldn't give the place up if ghosts danced round the house all night in dozens."

"Oh, so that's why they didn't get out and chuck the place when the mischief began, is it? I was wondering. One deaf and the other with his head screwed on the right way. Old gent must have a power o' confidence in his missus, Mr. Overton, to let her go messing about with his plants and him not there. Blowed if I'd let mine do it—no fear."

"I don't fancy that Hurdon would either, if he could help it. He's as fussy a horticulturist as any," said Overton, with an amused laugh, "and, in an ordinary way, it would be as much as anybody's life was worth to touch a single one of his plants. Unfortunately, however, the old chap had a slight accident the day before yesterday. Fell down the stairs and strained his back. It will probably keep him laid up for the next five or six days; and, as his garden is his hobby, I suppose he has sent the old lady out to attend to it. I'm told, too, that she's as well up in garden matters as he."

"Is she now?" commented Cleek with a casualness which masked an emotion of a totally different character; for he observed, as he drew nearer, that the good lady was in the act of inserting a blossoming begonia into a nice round hole which she had scooped out from one of the beds with her trowel, and that there was an empty flower pot and a full watering-can standing on the tiled path beside her.

Nor did his observations cease there. His eye, seeing while it seemed not to see, detected dotted here and there about the crowded flower beds fuchsias and geraniums whose foliage was of that clear, rich, glossy green which betokens plants fresh bought from a greenhouse and whose general appearance indicated that they had never before been exposed to the rigours of the open and the dust from a near-by road.

He looked round to see if there was any greenhouse attached to the cottage garden, or any glass frame of any sort from whose shelter these speckless plants might have come. There was none. The garden was simply a rectangle of brilliant bloom cut through the middle by a red-tiled footpath—a glowing, gorgeous spot of beauty, blazing in the sunshine.

When he came close enough to lean over the low hedge with Mr. Overton,

however, and to see what that hedge had hidden heretofore, he observed that just below him there was a little heap of broken pots and withered plants lying, waiting to be removed. Drooping fuchsias and yellowing geraniums they were with the original ball of earth from a florist's pots still clinging to their dry roots.

Here it was that a flash of memory brought back to Mr. Narkom that moment on the stairs at the Carlton and a recollection of what had been said. If there were geraniums and fuchsias much would depend upon it, Cleek had murmured. And now here were geraniums and fuchsias in dozens!

He twitched an inquiring glance at Cleek; but Cleek was looking at the dying plants, not at the thriving ones, and the curious one-sided smile peculiar to him was looping up his cheek.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Hurdon," called out the land-steward, leaning over both the low hedge and the stone wall it screened and shouting across the garden to the woman who had never once looked up during the whole period of their approach.

She did now, however.

"Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Overton, sir," she said, rising instantly and brushing down her gardening apron with conspicuous haste as she did so. She displayed as she got on her feet a figure of grenadier-like proportions. "And how will you be doing this fine weather, sir?"

"Very well indeed, Mrs. Hurdon, thank you. And how is the good man coming on?"

"Middling, sir, middling. The pain's a bit less, but he's uncommon stiff, poor dear. Can't bend to so much as pick up a pin!"

"Poor old chap! Too bad he can't come out. I've a gentleman here who takes an interest in gardening, and I'm sure he and Mr. Hurdon would enjoy a few words on a subject so agreeable to both."

"Ah! that he would, yes, indeed! Talk flowers to Joshua, Mr. Overton, sir, and he'll listen to you by the hour."

"And here, evidently, is a kindred spirit. Mr. Headland was so struck with the beauty of your garden that nothing would do him but to come over and have a good look at it. You will be pleased to hear that he calls this as fine a display of the kind as he has ever seen."

"Doo-ee, now? Well, I'm sure that's very nice of him. We do take a pride in our

garden, sir, and that's a fact."

During all this Cleek had said nothing—had not even so much as glanced at Mrs. Hurdon a second time after she rose to her feet. He seemed to be wholly absorbed in contemplating the beauty of the flowers, and, with his arms folded on the top of the wall, and his pipe in his mouth, was giving them his entire attention. It had occurred to him, however, that to be owned by one so erect, so broad-shouldered, and so seemingly virile, Mrs. Hurdon's voice was singularly thin and high-pitched, and had the quavering, cracked quality of eighty rather than that which usually goes with the appearance of fifty-five.

"I'm struck most with them Paul Crampels of yours, ma'am," he declared, breaking silence suddenly, and looking up. "Never saw a finer lot in all my life. Would you mind telling me where your husband got them?"

At the first word he knew, from the blank expression which came into her face, that what he had said was Choctaw to her—that she did not know a Paul Crampel from a Pollock, and hastened to land her still deeper into the mire by seeming to give a hint.

"Them with the white and scarlet bells is the best I ever see."

"Yes, they are fine, aren't they now?" she said, her face clearing, as, guided by his gesture, she looked in the direction of the plants bearing blooms of that description. "No; I don't know where he got them, sir. But it will be from somewhere in England, of course—he says he don't hold with them foreign seeds."

"Doesn't know a fuchsia from a geranium!" was Cleek's unspoken comment. "Doesn't even know whether they are propagated from cutting or from seed." Aloud, however, he simply declared, "No more do I, ma'am—that's where me and him agrees. All the same, though, I would like to know where he got that particular lot. You ask him for me, will you? And you can tell me some time when I drop round this way again."

"With pleasure, sir," said she. "Going, are you, Mr. Overton, sir?"

Evidently Mr. Overton was, but Cleek delayed the departure rather unexpectedly. On the top of the wall a seed had found lodgment, and was rooted between the stones. He caught hold of it suddenly, and pulled it up roots and all.

"Here's something your husband will be interested in, ma'am, I know," said he. "Hold your apron—catch! Don't let it get bruised."

With that he swung the plant forward, threw it to her, and she, catching up the corners of her apron, received it therein.

"Well, now, I never! To think of it growing up there, and me never noticing such a beautiful thing before! Oh, thanky, sir, thanky. Joshua *will* be pleased!"

Then she took up the plant and looked at its fuzzy little yellow blossoms, and let her apron fall into place again.

But not before Cleek had remarked the fact that the skirt it covered was baggy and very badly smudged in the neighbourhood of the good lady's knees, and that the smudges bore a curious resemblance to dried mustard.

The smile went up his cheek again.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MURDER OF CAPTAIN SANDRINGHAM

Overton and Mr. Narkom had already turned away, and with a pleasant "Good afternoon" to Mrs. Hurdon, Cleek moved off after them.

"Sorry to kep' you hanging round so late, gov'ner," he said, as he came up and joined the land-steward, Narkom again dropping back into the rear. "I never give a thought to how the time was flying until I see you make a move."

"Oh, don't let that distress you, Mr. Headland," replied Overton, good naturedly. "I have plenty of time at my disposal, fortunately. It was only my horse I was worrying over. He gets a bit restless if he's tied up too long, and that roadside sapling I fastened him to is none too firm a thing if he should suddenly take it into his mind to go back to the stables and leave me. You can see for yourself that he is beginning to get uneasy."

Cleek could. The animal was exceedingly restless, so they quickened their steps and got back to the road in time to take him before he did any mischief.

A short walk brought them to the curve where the road went round the bend of the Castle grounds and past the front elevation of the two cottages, and there before them stood St. Saviour's, with its moss-grown lich-gate, its well-worn footpath, its grim surroundings of sagging and discoloured tombstones, and its scarred and time-worn bell-tower.

Tower and church stood back from the highway at a distance of some thirty feet or more, and looking past them one could catch a glimpse through the trees of the gate and the path which led to the adjoining vicarage.

Cleek paused a moment and looked at the place. It seemed peaceful enough in the waning light and the pleasant country hush—far too peaceful to be in any way connected with matters of mystery and blood-shed.

"Seen a bit of time go over its head, that has," said he, as he struck a match and lit his pipe. "That'll be the bell-tower over there to the left, won't it, the round thing with the cement pavement all round it?"

"Yes. Would you like to go in and examine it? There's plenty of time."

"Not me. I want my supper and a good night's rest first. Will this be the road where you saw that thing last night, Mr. Overton?"

"No. It is on the other side of the graveyard—over there, where you see that row of trees in the distance. It runs parallel with this one. I couldn't have come over from Willowby Old Church by this road, you know. It takes another sharp turn presently, then another again, and goes off in a totally different direction. I remember hearing an American gentleman who was here last summer saying that he guessed it must have been paced off by an Early Briton who'd just risen from sitting down on a nest of bees and was hunting around for a drug store."

"Hallo!" interrupted Cleek, "this is the front of the Hurdons' cottage, I see. They *do* keep it tidy and no mistake. And the one adjoining it is where the child disappeared, eh?"

"Yes. Would you care to go in and have a look at it? I haven't the key, of course, but I could borrow Mrs. Hurdon's. They both have the one kind of lock, so I dare say hers would do. Shall I ask?"

"No, thanks. That'll do for to-morrow—when the magnifying glass and the other things arrive. Let's move on. I'm a bit tired and anxious to get to our rooms. I can tell from the way my mate drags his feet that he's about done up, too."

"He *is* an uncommunicative beggar, and no mistake!" declared Overton, with a laugh. "Hasn't spoken a blessed syllable the whole way. I should say an oyster was about as sociable a companion for you as he."

"Oh, Jim's all right when you know him. Not much on the talk, I'll allow; but deaf folks never is. I like him because he never worries me none. Hallo! who's this Johnnie, I wonder? He looks a bit excited."

By this time they had negotiated the farther turning in the road and had come in sight of a gate and a man standing before it—someone whom the clustering lilac bushes completely screened from view.

"That will be Carstairs, he's butler at the Castle, you remember," said Overton as he looked up and saw him. "The gate is the gate of the vicarage. No doubt it's the vicar himself he's talking to."

It was, as they saw clearly when they came abreast of the place. But even before they did so, the butler hearing their approach, looked round and saw them, and Cleek could not remember when he had seen any man's face and eyes express such exultation.

"Well, Carstairs, taking a constitutional before dinner-time?" inquired Overton, genially. "Ah! good afternoon, Vicar. Instructing Carstairs how to go about putting up the banns? He looks uncommonly well pleased."

"So I am, Mr. Overton; so I am, sir," declared Carstairs, with a satisfaction openly manifest. "One doesn't serve a good master like His Grace for years without being glad when good news comes his way—and this will mean the lifting of a great cross from his shoulders, bless him!"

"Now what do you mean by that? Something come to light about last night's horrible affair, Vicar?"

"No, Mr. Overton, nothing at all—unfortunately. It appears that I have been the means of imparting a piece of important news which has not yet reached the Castle—although I naturally supposed that it had. I dare say, however, that the duke was so much upset this morning that he neglected to read his newspaper."

"There was something of importance in it, then?"

"Of very great importance, Mr. Overton. I had to send to my study for the paper before I could convince Carstairs that I had not made a mistake. Here it is—look! 'Tragic Close of a Mis-spent Life. English Duke's Heir Murdered in Paris.' The victim, Mr. Overton, was Captain Paul Sandringham. He was shot dead in the street in Paris last evening by a Pole he had fleeced and ruined at cards."

Mr. Narkom glanced at Cleek; and Cleek catching that glance from the tail of his eye began to smoke hard.

In Paris, eh? Not in England at all! So, then, whoever was engineering this Valehampton affair, Captain Paul Sandringham was out of it. For last night he was in France; last night he was a dead man; yet last night the bells of St. Saviour's sent forth their peal as usual!

CHAPTER IX

A FAINTLY FAMILIAR FACE

Different men view things from a different standpoint. It was clearly evident that Mr. Overton was moved by this announcement of the unhappy termination of Captain Sandringham's life, but he did not show such great elation as Carstairs displayed. His countenance, as he took the paper which the vicar extended, was grave rather than gay, and there was a troubled expression in his kindly eyes.

"Mind reading it aloud, sir?" suggested Cleek. "The reverend gentleman spoke as though it was something as had to do with the duke."

"So it has. Captain Sandringham was his heir. But pardon. Mr. Saintly, this is Mr. George Headland, a detective His Grace had sent down from Scotland Yard to look into the matter of the bells and the murder of young Tom Davis last night."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said Cleek. "This will be my mate, Jim Markham. Yessir, a queer business and an ugly one, as you say, sir. Ought to get at the bottom of it in a week or so, however. Still, you never know."

The vicar gave Mr. Overton a puzzled glance. It was evident that he was no more favourably impressed by these two "specimens of the police" than the land-steward had been. Then, too, one of them had not bothered to take even the slightest notice of the introduction to him.

"Mr. Markham is rather deaf," volunteered Overton, in explanation of the omission; and it may be that it was because of the blank wonder in the vicar's eyes at this announcement that Carstairs so far forgot himself as to titter. Still, as it was a very mild titter, it apparently did not reach Cleek's ears, so there was no harm done; and Mr. Overton proceeded to read the article in the paper aloud.

That it was a thoroughly authentic one there could be no doubt, for, after giving the fullest details of the affair and stating that he himself had seen the body of the victim, whom he had long known by sight as well as by reputation—a fact which utterly precluded the possibility of its being that of anybody merely resembling the captain and not actually the captain himself—the writer proceeded to sign the article with a name which was known to be that of one of the most reliable, careful, and conscientious of special newspaper

correspondents. Beyond all question the report was true. Cleek was as convinced of Captain Paul Sandringham's death as if he had stood by and seen him killed.

"It will be a great relief to the duke, there can be no denying that, Vicar," declared Overton as he finished reading the report; "but, all the same, I can't help thinking that it's a sad business, sir, for a human creature to go out of the world like that and with never a chance to repent. I saw him once—quite by accident—when I went over to Ostend a year ago, on business for the estate, and a fine, upstanding, splendid-looking fellow he was, too. He might have made much of his life had he only tried. But to be shot down like a dog! It's too awful, sir, too awful."

"Your sentiments do you credit, Mr. Overton; but they are no more than I should have expected of you," declared the vicar. "Carstairs here is less thoughtful, I fear."

"What would be the sense of wasting tears over such a man, sir?" replied Carstairs, emphatically. "It is enough for me to remember that a load has been lifted from the shoulders of the best master I ever had. Besides, sir, there are bad men enough in the world without grieving over a thinning out of the ranks. There'll be one the less to reckon with, that's all!"

Cleek began to smoke furiously. Mr. Narkom, twitching round an inquiring eye, saw that his attention had fallen suddenly upon something across the road, and was not at all surprised when he abruptly walked over and, leaving the vicar to lecture Carstairs, began to examine a particularly thrifty wild rose whose branches were smothered with delicate bloom. But of a sudden he gave his shoulders a shrug and came back.

"False alarm!" he said, quietly. "I thought I'd stumbled on a find, Mr. Overton, but it's only a common brier, after all. But hadn't we better be moving? I won't be half sorry to sit down a bit. Much farther to the house where your young lady's folks live, Mr. Carstairs?"

"No; not very. Another ten minutes' walk will do it easily."

"Good business. Don't mind telling you that I am tired and shan't be none too sorry to get some food. My mate here, he's about done for, I reckon; and Mr. Overton, he must be a bit done up, too. I say, wot price letting him stand here and talk with the vicar for a time while you show us the rest of the way? You look as fresh as paint. Anyway, I reckon the young lady will be gladder to see us fetching *you* with us than if we was piloted by Mr. Overton here."

"Good idea that, Carstairs—act on it," put in the land-steward with a laugh. "You've got plenty of time before you need think of dinner; and I dare say that Emmy Costivan won't be sorry to have a few extra words with you on her own account."

Apparently Carstairs himself wouldn't be sorry for the opportunity either, for he fell in with the suggestion with alacrity, and with a farewell salute to the vicar and a "So long, sir, see you again," to the land-steward, Cleek and Mr. Narkom surrendered themselves to the leadership of this new guide and fared forth in his company to the abode of the Costivans.

"Can't stand that Overton," volunteered Carstairs, as soon as they were at a safe distance from the vicarage gate. "Always poking his blessed 'humanity' ideas down a man's throat and snivelling over people's souls."

"Just so. Quite agree with you, Mr. Carstairs."

"Fancy his wasting pity on a bounder like Captain Paul Sandringham! I don't hold with any such nonsense."

"And, as you very properly said, it makes one the less to reckon with. My sentiments exactly, Mr. Carstairs. It will be a welcome bit of news to the duke, I take it; and he's got enough worry on his mind over this business."

"More than enough. Ghastly sort of business, isn't it? Formed any sort of an idea, Mr. Headland?"

"None worth speaking of. Hasn't been time. I should have said it was boys up to a lark, if it hadn't been for the killing of that chap Davis last night. Wish I'd been somewhere about then, or could meet with somebody who heard the sounds of the struggle. Don't happen to know of anybody that did, do you?"

"That I don't. As a matter of fact, I don't think anybody did hear a blessed thing of it. Nobody had the least idea that anything had really happened to him until the vicar found the body at the foot of that accursed bell-tower this morning. Of course, if anybody was likely to have heard anything, he would be the one—the vicarage is so near, you know. But he never heard a sound."

"Heavy sleeper, I suppose."

"On the contrary, according to Mrs. Marden, his housekeeper, he's an exceedingly light one. Even lighter than herself, she says, and it's her boast that an owl flying past would wake *her*."

"She hear anything last night, then?"

"Not a sound—beyond the clanging of the bells. But she's getting used to them. Besides, they don't last long, you know. Just off and on now and again, and never later than eleven or twelve o'clock. Last night, however, they started earlier than they ever did before—about ten, I believe, and they never sounded a solitary peal after half-past."

"H'm! maybe the murder was committed whilst they *were* pealing, then. That would account for her not hearing the struggle, of course."

"She says not, though. Constable suggested that first thing. Says she's become so used to the bells they don't affect her hearing of other things at all—that she could hear any other sound that there might be right through the pealing of them. She called vicar to prove that one night last week she cried out to him while the things were ringing to say that she believed he must have left the door of the stable open, as she could hear a scratching noise in there. Vicar dressed and ran out, and sure enough he had left the door open and there was an old dog fox in the place trying to scratch his way through to the fowl-house. If she could have heard that through the sound of the bells it's pretty certain she could have heard Davis putting up a fight if he had been attacked by anything human. But he wasn't! You take my word for it, Mr. Headland, devils are at the bottom of this business, and the thing will never be stopped until that dead Johnnie's body is dug up out of the churchyard and carried out to sea and chucked overboard."

Cleek had no opportunity to reply, for at that moment the quiet of the country was suddenly broken by the sharp *Honk! honk!* of a motor-horn, and round the bend of the road swung a high-powered car, driven by a liveried chauffeur, and containing an overdressed gentleman of a dark, Hebraic cast of countenance.

"That will be Sir Julius Solinski, the great company promoter," explained Carstairs, offhandedly. "Got a fine place over Framleigh way. Motors through here every day about this time. Same old course, without a break or a change—down here, round the curve, past the cottage where those Hurdon people live, and then down behind the grounds of the Castle and off Willowby Old Church way. Should think he'd be about fed up with it by this time."

"Ever stop anywhere on the road?"

"Not that I know of. Never seen him do so, at all events. Still, of course, he might, you know, without—— Here we are at last. This is where you and your friend are to put up, Mr. Headland. Come in."

Cleek had merely time to remark that the cottage was a thatched one with a goodly allowance of garden surrounding it on all sides, and that the tops of tall

trees were visible in the rear, showing that it was close to the adjacent woodland, when following Carstairs' lead, he walked inside. He was at once presented to a young, dark-haired, exceedingly pretty girl whose bright eyes impressed him with an odd sense of familiarity. Somewhere, somehow, he said to himself, he had certainly seen someone who bore a very marked resemblance to Miss Emmy Costivan.

CHAPTER X

A WALK IN THE GARDEN

"Here you are, Emmy. These are the gentlemen you are expecting," announced Carstairs, cheerily.

Miss Costivan—who was about four-and-twenty—said she was pleased to meet them, and then turned to call through an open door, "Mother, the London gentlemen have come. Luke's just fetched 'em."

Immediately the sound of someone making vigorous use of a washboard, which all along had been issuing from the door, came to an abrupt end; a pair of clogs clattered noisily across a tiled floor, and there issued from the scullery a tall, gaunt, black-haired, somewhat slatternly female whose cast of features was so strongly suggestive of the Romany race that one might well have suspected her of having more than a mere dash of gypsy blood in her veins.

She advanced into the room, drying her hands on her apron, and welcomed the newcomers heartily. Cleek decided that never in his life had he seen a mother and daughter who bore so little resemblance to each other.

"I'll have the kettle on and some tea ready in a very few minutes, gentlemen," declared Mrs. Costivan, with an odd use of certain words which was not lost upon Cleek. "But maylike you'd be glad to run up to your room and wash a bit, the whiles the kittle's boilin'? Luke, lad, show the way, there's a bonny. Old Man's not home from the fields yet. They've a power o' hay to get under cover over at Mason's before the weather breaks." By which it was clear to Cleek that the good lady wished her visitors to understand that her husband was a field hand on one of the outlying farms.

Carstairs announced his readiness to perform the suggested office, and called on the two "London gentlemen" to follow him—an act which pulled Cleek up with a jerk, for he had fallen into a state of abstraction born of a sudden realization of the peculiar character of the wet marks Mrs. Costivan had left upon her apron when she dried her hands.

He had never heard of anybody washing things in mustard water—things which required hard rubbing on a laundry board. Yet, if the yellow stain left by drying

her hands on her apron suggested anything, it certainly suggested that.

Here, catching the sound of Carstairs' voice, Cleek turned, and together with Mr. Narkom, followed him up the stairs to an airy, double-bedded room overlooking the garden in the rear.

Here Carstairs, after looking to see that there were towels on the rack and soap in the dish, left them and went below. Presently they could hear his voice and Emmy Costivan's blent in half-subdued laughter.

Cleek, leaving the door partly open and signalling to Narkom to place himself so that he could see if anybody started to come upstairs, went to the open window, looked out across the neglected garden to the belt of woodland beyond it and, putting up his hand, tilted his hat to one side and began reflectively to scratch his head. Immediately, a bare branch moved above the level of a thick clump of wild elder bushes just by the broken paling which marked the rear boundary of the garden. It remained stationary for an instant, and then dropped out of sight again.

"All right, Narkom, they are there!" he said in a swift whisper. "Sit tight a minute and don't speak."

Then he slopped a quantity of water out of the jug into the wash-basin, plunged his hands into it, then rubbed them along the window-sill. After which he partially rinsed them and then dried them off on first one towel and then the other—all the while moving up and down the floor and whistling contentedly.

"All right," he announced, presently. "Needn't do sentry duty any more. Leave the door wide open. I don't think our friend Carstairs will be quite such an idiot as to waste his time in sneaking up; but if he should the open door will be enough for him and, at the same time, give us a chance to see him. A bad egg, that gentleman. He is pretty deeply involved in this little business unless I miss my guess."

"I thought you suspected him of something when you crossed over to that wild rose bush."

"What! Am I dropping into the habit of giving signs, then?" exclaimed Cleek. "I wonder if our friend the vicar noticed, too? I caught his eye fixed upon me more than once."

"The vicar! Good heavens, man, you don't mean that you suspect——?"

"Ch't! Not so loud, or I shall wish I had made you a dumb man as well as a deaf one. Sh-h! Nothing now—your time is coming. We have dawdled to the end of

the dawdling period, and come to the active one. You shall have speech and excitement enough the minute the darkness falls."

"You have an idea, then?" murmured Mr. Narkom. "You have really picked up a clue?"

"I have picked up many. They may be good and they may be bad, I can decide only when St. Saviour's bells start ringing to-night."

"You have a clue to that, then?"

"Not I. They will be the last on my list for investigation. At present I am principally concerned with the astonishing circumstance regarding the noise of that fellow Davis's death struggle."

"But, man alive, he didn't make any."

"Precisely. That's the astonishing circumstance to which I allude!" said Cleek. The queer one-sided smile travelled slowly up his cheek.

Midway down the neglected garden Mrs. Costivan was engaged in the task of hanging up a pair of wet gray overalls, and along the path beside her a stream of yellowish water from a recently emptied washtub was trickling down the drain.

"Mr. Narkom!"

"Yes."

"Essex is your native county, I believe, so naturally you ought to be an authority on it. Tell me something. Is it a peculiarity of Essex hay, then, to give off a deep yellowish stain?"

"Hay? Hay *stain*? What confounded nonsense!"

"Precisely. That's how I feel about it myself. And as between Mrs. Hurdon and Mrs. Costivan——Come along, let's get down and eat. I hope the fair Emmy will give us something good. I'm famished."

The "fair Emmy" did, presiding over the tea-pot herself, and laying out such a tempting spread that even Carstairs was prevailed upon to join with the others and to defer his departure for another half-hour or so.

But finally he had to go, and Emmy, excusing herself, rose to see him as far as the door. And it was only then, as she looked round over her shoulder at leaving, and a flash of alertness came into her eyes, that Cleek was able to put his finger on a point which heretofore had baffled him. He had wondered from the first

whose eyes hers reminded him of; now, when he saw them with that expression in them and accompanied by a certain twitching movement of the head, he knew!

Carstairs went his way, and Emmy returned to set about making matters as pleasant for the visitors as she knew how. Then, after a time, Emmy's father having come home and had his meal in the kitchen, and gone "straightaway up to bed, poor lad! the sun havin' give him a splittin' headache." Mrs. Costivan, too, came in while Emmy went out to wash up the dishes. It soon became very apparent to the two "London gentlemen" that they were not going to be allowed to get out of the sight of one or other of the occupants of this house for so much as one minute if the thing could be avoided.

Meantime, night was drawing in and Cleek, borrowing a sheet of paper and an envelope, sat down to "drop a line to my missus before I turn in." Mr. Narkom, taking his cue from this, slipped down in his chair and began to snore softly.

Cleek wrote on until darkness fell and the moon rose and all the tree-tops beyond the garden were picked out in silver; then sealed the letter in its envelope and put it into his pocket. He rose then, stretching and yawning, from his chair. Mr. Narkom, hearing him, opened a pair of blinking eyes and looked up.

"Bedtime?" he inquired, sleepily.

"'Most," said Cleek. "Feel like having a pipe and a toddle up and down the garden before turning in? Come along then, old sport. Mind our going through the kitchen, missus?"

Mrs. Costivan did not; but for fear they should not quite know the way, piloted them, and as they stepped out into the shadowy darkness and lighted up they were conscious of the fact that, as soon as she put out the kitchen light, she sat down beside the window and kept watch of them.

The flare of the lighted match had done more than merely supply fire for their pipes. They knew that it would; but they were in no haste. Time must be given and—they gave it. Three times they made the journey up and down the garden's length, smoking and chatting away now and again, before Cleek, coming abreast of the broken palings and the clump of elder bushes, ventured to say in a whisper, "Next time down be ready to grab the pipes!" and they faced round and strolled back toward the cottage again.

It was the fourth time down the garden that the thing was done. Suddenly both men gave a jump, Cleek shouting excitedly, "A hare, by Jove! Grab it!" Then

both plunged into the elder bushes. A voice said, "Missed it! Lord, didn't the beggar bolt?" Then Hammond took Narkom's place and Petrie took Cleek's, and Mrs. Costivan, who had just started to run down to the spot where she had seen them dive out of sight, suddenly saw that they had come back laughing and twitting each other over their failure to catch the hare, and were again walking up and down the garden and smoking. And the good lady slipped back into the darkness again. And so it fell out that when the pipes were finished and the smokers tired enough to go to bed, it was Petrie and Hammond who slept that night under the thatch of the Costivan cottage.

CHAPTER XI

CLUES FROM A DEAD BODY

At a point just off the road, and where the thick trees hid it, the big car waited, with lights hooded and Lennard on watch. Narkom was the first to wriggle through the broken palings and make his way to it; a short time afterward Cleek, who had lingered to make sure that everything was safe, came up and joined him.

"They'll eat the beggars out of house and home, that pair, and lead them the devil's own game of follow-my-leader to-morrow," laughed the Superintendent. "And now then—what next?"

"What I told you back there, Mr. Narkom—the beginning of action. The race now will be to the swift. Lennard, hand me out that bag of fullers' earth. Look sharp! Thanks. Mr. Narkom, take this letter; I think you must have understood that I was writing it to you. Read it, then hop into the car and act upon it at once. No questions now, please—there isn't time. Simply go. Arrange things—you can change back to your own dapper self on the way—and then get back here as soon as you can. I shall be waiting for you at this spot. That's all."

It was—it had to be; for in an instant he had swung the bag up over his shoulder, moved away, and disappeared in the darkness of the woodland.

When, at the end of half an hour, however, Narkom returned from his errand, there Cleek stood again, leaning against a tree, with arms folded, his chin on his breast, and his forehead puckered thoughtfully.

"You are just one minute too soon, Mr. Narkom," he said, with a sort of sigh as the limousine halted and the Superintendent jumped out. "I was just working out a little question in mental arithmetic, and in another sixty seconds I should have had the answer. Look here: Given a space of two hundred and eighty feet in length by about, say, three feet in breadth, and intervals of probably three and a half yards between each balk, how many cubic feet of timber, one and a half inches thick and six inches broad, do you think it would take to—— Oh! let it go! There isn't time at present. I'll work it out to-morrow. Come along—quick! We've plenty to do before those bells set up their peal to-night."

Here he sprang past the Superintendent and got briskly into the limousine. By the time Mr. Narkom joined him he was stripping off his coat.

"Now, then, down with the curtains and up with the light," he said, as Narkom shut the door and the car took the dark road at a lively clip. "Thanks very much. Sit this side, please, and let me get at the locker, and we'll dig up our old friend 'Mr. Philip Barch' for the rest of the game."

It still wanted some few minutes of ten o'clock when the limousine, panting up to the Valehampton almshouses, swung round the angle of the buildings and made its way to the small detached one which served the double purpose of isolation hospital and, when occasion demanded, morgue.

Here, in a small, brightly lighted anteroom, Cleek and Mr. Narkom found four persons waiting to receive them: Mr. Bevington Howard, the local justice of the peace; Mr. Hamish, the master of the almshouses; Mr. Naylor, the chief constable of the district; and a certain Dr. Alexander Forsyth.

They all rose as the Superintendent and his famous ally came in, and two of them at least—Mr. Howard and Mr. Naylor—regarded Cleek with deep-seated earnestness.

"Mr. Cleek, this is a pleasure and a privilege," said Howard. "I have long desired to meet you."

"Will you forget that you have done so, Mr. Howard, until after this Valehampton business is settled? It may hamper me somewhat if my identity is known too soon. I shall be obliged if you will think of me until then as one 'Philip Barch,' an ordinary civilian. And now, if you please, may I not see the body of Davis at once?"

Together the six men passed into the adjoining apartment, carrying with them the lamps which Mr. Hamish had supplied for the purpose, and in a minute's time all were standing round the bier upon which the dead man lay.

The body was that of a well-developed, muscular fellow, of about thirty years of age, big-framed, and in the very pink of physical condition, who in life must have been as strong as an ox and as difficult to handle in a rough-and-tumble fight as man could well be. Yet here he now lay, the whole back of his head crushed in, yet his face expressing no sign of any such agony as one would have

thought must have convulsed it as the result of an injury so appalling. Instead, its expression was rather peaceful than otherwise. The features of a man who had died in his sleep could not have been more placid.

The curious, one-sided smile curved the corner of Cleek's mouth, and beckoning Mr. Narkom to hold the light closer, he bent down over the body, and with the aid of his lens minutely examined the ghastly wound. From that he went, in turn, to other points. With his thumb and forefinger he uncovered the dead eyes and studied the condition of cornea and pupil; from thence he turned to the lips—inspecting them with the glass, touching them, smelling them—then went to fingertips and the cuticular folds of the nails. At the end of five minutes he put his glass in his pocket and rose.

"Gentlemen," he said, gravely, "I think I shall be fairly correct in asserting that the wound on the back of this poor fellow's head was made by a sledge-hammer which had previously been used in demolishing an ordinary house wall of lath and plaster. There are distinct traces of both mortar and lime, and very minute particles of what, for want of a better term, one might call old wood dust, in the hair—those atoms which the blow of a heavy instrument upon wood that is in the primary stages of dry rot would cause to rise like dust. The man, having been addicted to the use of pomade for the hair, has furnished a very useful adhesive for the collection and retention of those particles.

"From the first, gentlemen, it has been a matter of great surprise to me that such an injury could be inflicted upon such a man without a terrific struggle and a very considerable uproar. It is a surprise to me no longer. I shall be something more than astonished if that blow was not delivered after death, and decidedly *not* at the place where the body was subsequently found."

"You think it was carried to the bell-tower, then?"

"Yes, Mr. Howard, I do. It was taken to that spot and left there for just such a purpose as it has served—namely, to divert every atom of suspicion from channels which might lead to the identification of the murderer and still further to strike terror into the minds of the ignorant and superstitious. If this man had carried into effect what he set out to accomplish last night, somebody stood to lose a pretty high stake. It was, therefore, to the interest of that somebody to prevent his doing it, and as this poor fellow was not the kind that could be coaxed or bribed or cajoled into a crooked course, the only preventive was the desperate one of death."

Here he turned to Doctor Forsyth and addressed him personally.

"Doctor," he said, "you may have wondered why the request was made to you to bring your surgical instruments and to meet these gentlemen here in the interests of science and the law. Let me confess that I made that request merely upon the off-chance of a theory of my own proving correct and requiring such services at your hands. I am now pretty thoroughly convinced that it *is* correct, and that this man's death is the direct result of poison."

"Poison, sir, poison?"

"Yes, Mr. Naylor, poison. Accepting, on the evidence of that fearful injury to the head, the cause of death as being the result of a blow, you would not, of course, look for any other in the face of a thing so apparent. It was quite natural. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the man was poisoned, and that that poison was administered through the medium of drink. There is a distinct odour of alcohol still clinging about the mouth, so there can hardly be a question that death must have ensued soon after the taking of a drink, and that the man neither smoked nor ate afterward. In the presence of these witnesses, Doctor Forsyth, have the goodness to perform an autopsy and to subject the contents of the stomach to chemical analysis. I'll lay my life that if you do—I know my man! That's all for the present, gentlemen. I will leave you to witness the autopsy, and will call for the result to-morrow. My compliments to you all; good-night!"

He turned and, beckoning Mr. Narkom to follow, walked out of the building and returned to the waiting limousine.

"Where now, sir?" questioned Lennard, as he appeared.

"To the River Colne," he replied. "Drive like the devil, and follow the river's course till I tell you to stop."

The limousine took the angle of the building with a rush and went racing off through the moonlight at a mile-a-minute clip.

CHAPTER XII

A JANGLE OF PEALING BELLS

The moon was high up over the tree-tops and the river, when they reached it, was a shining silver ribbon lying between sloping banks.

Cleek, as they rushed along beside it, leaned forward with his elbow on the window-ledge and his cheek in his palm, and studied its shining surface narrowly. Of a sudden, however, he called out sharply "Stop!"

The vehicle ran on for a yard or two and then came to a halt. Cleek, despite that fact, did not alight at once. Instead, he pulled down all the leather curtains, switched on the light, and taking out his note-book, began to write. His stylo travelled rapidly, but even at that it was a good six minutes before he tore out the leaves he had covered, switched off the light, and, opening the door, said "Come!" and stepped out with Mr. Narkom.

Carefully folding the written leaves, he walked round to the front of the limousine and put the little bundle into Lennard's hand.

"Take that to the vicarage of St. Saviour's, and deliver it to the Rev. Mr. Saintly," he said. "If he asks you any questions, answer them—truthfully. After that you may return to Willowby Old Church and put up for the night. We shall not need you again until to-morrow. Move lively, lad, and the quicker you get that note into the vicar's hands and take yourself out of Valehampton, the better I shall be pleased."

"Do both inside of the next five minutes, sir; the river path has brought us round on the other side of the church—there's her spire just above those trees to the left. Good-night! I'm off."

And so he was, so swiftly that it might almost be said that at the very moment he spoke the moonlit landscape held no trace of any living thing but a silk-hatted Narkom and dapper Cleek standing in the middle of the road and looking very much out of keeping with their surroundings.

The Superintendent looked at his watch, saw that its hands pointed to twenty minutes to eleven, and then faced round on Cleek.

"And now what, old chap?" he inquired. The habit of blind obedience to the lead of his famous ally had become a fixed one with the Superintendent, who was nevertheless most alert when in charge of affairs himself. "I suppose you know what you're about, but I don't. It seems to me that, having sent Lennard off for good, you've done us out of all hope of finding a bed anywhere to-night. And I'm blest if I shall relish prowling about the neighbourhood in this sort of a get-up until morning."

"Oh, don't worry. You will get a bed, I promise you. Indeed, the matter is the one uppermost in my mind at this minute—the reason for our presence here—only it happens to be a bed of another colour from the one you're demanding. It is, in short, the bed of a river—this one beside us."

"Now what the devil can the bed of a river have to do with the matter in hand?"

"That is precisely what I am anxious to settle to my own satisfaction. It is almost the last point in the case which we have to investigate; and it is an extremely interesting one. Brush up your memory a bit, Mr. Narkom. Part of that extraordinary prophecy was that the river should become choked, and, according to the duke, choked it has become."

"Oh, ah! Yes, I remember. Shoals formed, didn't they?"

"Exactly. And I am extremely anxious to discover why. Perhaps we may, presently. You observe that we are at the point where the stream begins to narrow perceptibly. As yet, however, I perceive no sign of shoals. Still, if we follow this narrowing course for a time—— Come on."

They walked on, and for the next ten or fifteen minutes they scarcely spoke a word, keeping their eyes fixed steadily on the ever-narrowing stream, but finding nothing to reward them for their diligence.

"It will be a fake, I'm afraid, Cleek."

"Possibly; but I doubt it. It is one of the essential points—a thing so absolutely necessary that, if it doesn't exist, I'm on the wrong scent, that's all."

For another two or three minutes they walked on in silence; then Cleek gave a satisfied grunt and pointed to where the hitherto placid surface of the stream was broken into a little patch of eddies and ripples that circled round a clump of trembling river grass.

"We are coming to it, you see!" he said, and moved quickly to a spot where the eddies played closer to the shore, and the water, obstructed, encroached upon the

land. By the time Mr. Narkom came up with him he had laid aside his coat and was hastily turning back the cuff of his shirt sleeve.

In another moment he had gone down the shelving bank and jumped out to where a half-submerged rock offered a footing and his arm was elbow deep in the eddying water. For a time his hand remained invisible, groping and tugging at something, then it came into view again, and Narkom could see that it held a heavy, sodden lump of something from which the water trickled in yellowish streams.

"Have a look at that," said Cleek, with an exultant laugh as he threw it over onto the bank and, dipping in his hand again, fished up another lump and sent that flying across in the wake of the other. "And there's a second to show that it isn't merely an isolated specimen."

He whirled his hand round in the water to wash it, then rose, and jumping back to the shore, began to pull down his sleeve while Mr. Narkom was inspecting the two slimy lumps.

"Don't trust the moonlight—get out your electric torch and have a good look at them. They are worth it, Mr. Narkom—the beauties. They are a rich find all right."

"*Rich?* Are you off your head, old man? They're nothing but lumps of common clay."

"Certainly—that is what makes them so valuable."

"Valuable?"

"To be sure," replied Cleek, serenely. "There is a lot more where they came from, and it's worth in the aggregate something like one hundred and fifty thousand pounds in gold! If you doubt that——"

Here he stopped, and, reaching round, made a grab for his hat and coat. Of a sudden the stillness of the night was broken into by a tuneless and discordant jangle of pealing bells.

The chimes of St. Saviour's had begun their nightly ringing.

"Come!" exclaimed Cleek, excitedly, and started off up the slope and across the intervening fields and spinneys in the direction of the churchyard, putting on his coat as he ran.

His pace was so swift that he was already a good twenty yards on his way before

Mr. Narkom could grasp his intention and start after him.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MYSTERIOUS LIGHT

A good sprinter at all times, to-night it seemed to the Superintendent that the man was fairly outdoing himself, in this wild "cross-country" race; and, although Mr. Narkom put forth all the energy and all the speed that was in him, never once could he lessen the space which lay between him and that flying figure in front of him. And all the time the jangling bells went on, flinging their harsh discord out upon the night.

As yet Cleek could get no sight of the church tower, for the centuries-old luxuriance of a group of fir trees screened tower and bells alike from view on this side of the church, and the upward slope of the land from the river's edge to the graveyard wall rendered their screen doubly effective. But presently he came abreast of that wall, vaulted over it, zigzagged his way through a wilderness of crowded tombstones, came out into the open, and looking upward—saw!

It was the first moment since the beginning of the sound that he had checked his speed or halted for so much as a second. That he did so now was only natural. For here was a thing totally unexpected. Here was corroboration of James Overton's story. Here was, indeed, a suggestion of the supernatural.

High up in the open space where the bells—themselves unseen—were swinging and clashing out their jarring discords, a globe of light, its radiance intensified by the black shadow of the tower's roof, was careering about as if it hung in mid-air, and was dancing a ghostly tarantella to the time of the clanging bells.

He stood stock still and looked at it, conscious of a swift, prickling sensation travelling up his spine to his very hair; then catching a gasping sort of sound and a low exclamation from somewhere behind him, he knew that Mr. Narkom, too, had come within sight of the thing, and, pulling himself together, took up the lead again and ran toward the tower.

Racing behind in a state of mind bordering closely upon panic, Mr. Narkom saw Cleek run to the tower's foot, whip out his electric torch, and splash the light of it about its base—a square now spread inches deep with fullers' earth—and then, almost immediately, he saw him throw up both hands as if to recover an equilibrium disturbed by a violent blow, and stagger backward.

"My God! What is it?" Mr. Narkom called in a shaking voice, as he made a mad rush toward him. And indeed there was sufficient cause for the horror in his voice.

For Cleek, crying out that he was burning up, had suddenly faced about, dashed through the lich-gate, and lurched out into the road, and when, presently, the Superintendent dodged out of the churchyard after him, it was in time to see him stagger to the Hurdons' cottage, fall so heavily against the door of it that it flew inward with a bang, and drop, a crumpled heap, upon the threshold—limp and inert as a man shot dead.

Narkom, a picture of terror too real to admit of any doubt, was across that road and kneeling beside him before you could have counted twenty, and to the astonished eyes of Mrs. Hurdon, drawn to the window by the uproar, and well-nigh carried off her feet by the bursting in of the door, there appeared a man's hat rolling across her floor and a fashionably dressed gentleman sprawling over her threshold in a fainting condition, while another was bending over him trying to revive him as well as terror would permit.

"Old man, wake up, pull yourself together, speak to me!" exclaimed the Superintendent with the utmost concern and then, becoming aware of the woman's presence, appealed to her.

"Help me!" he cried. "Don't stand there like a stone! Can't you see the man's ill? Get some sort of a stimulant, quick!"

Here the woman's wits came back to her.

"We haven't any," she replied, tartly. "And what's more, you can't bring him in here. There's no room for him—none at all. Besides, I never saw either of you before. Take him outside—take him where he belongs. I can't have him here, I tell you. I've got a sick husband, and—and I'm going to shut the door."

She caught hold of it as she spoke, intending to carry her words into execution, and Narkom, fairly bursting with indignation, had just begun to call her everything his concerned mind was capable of, when there came the sound of a voice and the rush of footsteps up the red-tiled path behind him. In another moment the vicar of St. Saviour's put in an unexpected appearance.

"God bless me, it will be Mr. Barch, will it not, Mr. Williams?" he said, as he met Mr. Narkom's upturned glance. "I guessed as much when I heard the noise. I told you—I told you, you foolish men! What madness to let a weak-nerved, weak-minded fellow like that go prowling about country roads in the night. Mrs.

Hurdon, these are two London gentlemen, Mr. John Williams and Mr. Philip Barch, who have just come down to spend the week-end with me at the vicarage, and Mr. Barch is unhappily addicted to fainting fits."

"Deary me! That is it?" said Mrs. Hurdon with suddenly awakened sympathy. "Oh, the poor, dear gentleman. But he did scare the wits half out of me, sir, bursting into a body's house like that."

"No doubt, no doubt. Hand me his hat, please. Thank you. Now, my dear Mr. Williams, you get hold of his head, and I'll take his feet, and we'll carry him back to the vicarage between us."

Mr. Narkom, his head in a whirl with an overwhelming sense of having been taken in, acted upon the suggestion without a word, and two minutes later he and the vicar were trudging down the dark road with Cleek lying a dead weight between them.

"I'd let you put me down, only one never knows what may happen," he took the opportunity of saying in a low voice when they were some twenty or thirty yards down the road. "Mr. Saintly, you were excellent; but I had some groggy moments lying there, and not being sure if you would understand the note or not. And your worried expression, Narkom, couldn't be beaten."

"I should say not. It was perfectly genuine, and I was pretty well off my head with fright. I think you might have given me a hint."

"It wouldn't have been anything like so natural. You were positively superb. Sorry to be such a burden, gentlemen, but we shall soon be at the vicarage, and after that—— Mr. Saintly!"

"Yes, Mr. Cleek?"

"We are close to the end. If you will write and invite the duke and a few other gentlemen at the Castle to honour you with a call at St. Saviour's vicarage to-morrow night at half-past ten o'clock, I will give them the riddle's answer as soon as the bells begin to ring!"

CHAPTER XIV

"GEORGE HEADLAND" KEEPS AN APPOINTMENT

On the morrow the village of Valehampton knew that the vicar of St. Saviour's was entertaining two gentlemen, Mr. John Williams and Mr. Philip Barch, who had come down from town by the last train the preceding night and were to stop with him over the week-end; and, being informed that Mr. Barch was a gentleman of poor health, it was not at all surprised that he should make an early call on Doctor Forsyth.

It did not, however, know that at the time that call was made the doctor was entertaining Mr. Justice of the Peace Howard and Mr. Chief Constable Naylor, and that Mr. Barch remained in close council with all three for upward of an hour, afterward making a personal call upon His Grace the Duke of Essex and spending yet another hour at the Castle.

When that hour was over he went back to the vicarage, every link was fitted into its place, and the chain complete at last.

It was about twenty minutes past ten that evening that Mr. James Overton, answering a hand-delivered note, was shown into the vicarage drawing-room, and found himself in the presence of a most distinguished company, made up of the Duke of Essex, the Marquis of Uppingham, Captain Weatherley, and two gentlemen who were alluded to as Mr. John Williams and Mr. Philip Barch.

Mr. Overton, who had been over at Braintree ever since noon on business for the duke, and was, of course, still wearing his ordinary riding clothes, apologized for his appearance on the score that he had not had time to change.

"I found Your Grace's man waiting for me with your note when I arrived at the Lodge," he said; "and, of course, came on immediately, as requested. But surely there must be some error—the thing seems so impossible. You said in the note that the man, George Headland, would be here by eleven o'clock to offer a solution of the mystery, and that simply can't be. I saw him myself over at Earl's Colne as I rode through this afternoon, he and his deaf companion. They were sitting outside an inn drinking stout and smoking their pipes as contentedly as you please; and when I stopped and asked them what on earth they were doing there, Headland told me that their effects had not come down from London as

they expected, and they were taking a holiday until they did. As I came back I learned that they were strolling about Pebmarsh as late as seven o'clock this evening, and had been over in that section of this county pretty much all day. How can it be possible for them to have discovered anything *here*?"

"That I can't tell you, I'm sure, Overton," replied the duke. "I merely know that he sent word to me through the vicar that if I would be here at eleven o'clock to-night he would give me a full and clear explanation of the diabolical affair. It occurred to me at the last moment that you, probably, would like to hear that explanation with the rest of us, so I left Roberts to deliver that note as soon as you returned."

"Thank you—it was very kind. Naturally I am very deeply interested; but I am more mystified than ever when Your Grace tells me that Headland sent the message through the vicar. Have you then seen the man to-day, Mr. Saintly?"

"Oh, dear, no. The message came to me through Mr. Philip Barch here."

"Meaning the gentleman who is your guest, sir?"

"Meaning me—yes, Mr. Overton," remarked Cleek. "We met quite accidentally while I was out this morning. Personally, I must admit that I haven't very much faith in our actually seeing the man to-night."

"You couldn't be blamed for not having much faith in the man's ability, I am sure, Mr. Barch. To tell you the truth, sir, I have very little myself. I never even heard of him until yesterday. He seemed a stupid sort of fellow."

Here Captain Weatherley chimed in:

"Judging from his appearance when he was pointed out to me, I should say that he was nothing less than an idiot!" was his contribution.

"With the odds on the idiot," supplemented Cleek. "Still, let's give him his chance. We shall know the best or the worst in half an hour, Captain Weatherley. Eleven o'clock will tell the tale."

And eleven o'clock did tell it.

Cleek, to pass away the tedium of waiting, had taken his seat before the vicarage organ and was deep in a selection from Handel when, all of a sudden, a clanging noise broke through the outer stillness and all the night echoed to the clash of the discordant bells.

"Hallo! There's our friend the ghost starting in with his nightly jamboree," he

said, screwing round on the organ stool and rising, as the sound of hasty feet coming up the vicarage steps and along the vicarage hall followed on the peal of bells. "He's a prompt beggar to-night, that spook—a very prompt beggar indeed."

"But no prompter than that Headland fellow," exclaimed Captain Weatherley, catching the sound of the running footsteps and jumping to his feet. "Here he comes now, by Jove!—and it's two minutes short of the hour."

In his excitement, he jumped to the door and whirled it open, and almost in the same instant there entered the room, in a state of breathless excitement, no less a person than Mr. Justice of the Peace Howard, with Chief Constable Naylor close upon his heels.

"They've started—don't you hear them?" he cried, looking up at Cleek. "That was to be the signal, wasn't it? Shall Naylor give the word?"

"By all means," replied Cleek, calmly. "Start them going, Mr. Naylor, and start them going *hard*!"

Mr. Naylor's response was not given in words. Facing about instantly, he ran down the hall and out into the forecourt of the vicarage, blowing a police whistle, and shouting at the top of his voice: "In with you, my boys! Get 'em."

Almost instantly there was a sound of rushing feet, a banging and a smashing of hammers on wood, the crash of a door going down, and the sound of a dozen voices crying lustily, "Come out of it! Come out of it!" voices which soon dwindled off in the distance.

The duke and Mr. Overton were on their feet at once. There could be no mistake about the direction whence these sounds came. A force of men, acting upon a given signal, had made an attack upon the Castle cottages.

"Oh, don't be alarmed, Duke. Don't be alarmed, Mr. Overton," said Cleek, coming up with them as master and man, realizing the state of affairs, moved hastily to the nearest window and tried vainly to peer through the intervening trees. "It is nothing very serious—only a small detachment of police, aided by some of your own gamekeepers, paying their respects to Mr. and Mrs. John Hurdon. It will be over soon, and the interesting party will take a turn at oakum-picking with this gentleman—dear, clever man!"

Here his hands reached over quickly toward those of the land-steward; there was a jingle and a click, and by the time Overton became aware that something cold had touched his wrists, the handcuffs were locked and the thing was done.

He gave a queer sort of cry—half gasp, half howl—and lurched backward in a panic.

"In the name of God——" he began, but got no farther, for Cleek's hand was on his shoulder and Cleek's voice was saying soothingly:

"Oh, fie, my friend! So tender a heart should be mated with a reverent tongue. And if you must cry out, surely there is another name more fitting to the occasion? But why cry at all? You cannot alter matters. It is fated, you see, that none of you is ever to go up that underground tunnel or touch one article of that splendid gold service, even though Captain Paul Sandringham is dead and, as Carstairs said, 'It makes one the less to reckon with!' Sit down, Mr. Overton, and make yourself comfortable until Mr. Naylor comes back to take care of you. And let me take this opportunity to thank you for our very pleasant walk up from the station yesterday. Do you know, I always did like that ghost story from the time when I first read it in a fiction magazine, and it lost none of its charm through your telling. Oh, yes—I'm the same person—I'm the George Headland you told it to. The one your sister and the gypsy woman have been following all day is a fake. I expect he and his mate have rounded on them by this time and have taken them into custody, and—— Fainted, by jupiter! Ah, they are a weak-nerved lot, this sneaking kind, when it comes to the final corner, and it's the wall behind them and the law in front. Pardon? Oh, yes, Marquis! Oh, yes, Captain Weatherley. That was the game: tunnelling from the Hurdons' cottage to the Castle to get at the Essex gold service which they knew would be brought down from the bank for Lady Adela's wedding; and they have been at it for eleven months. Captain Paul Sandringham's was the mind that conceived the thing—how I know this I'll tell you in due time—and he planned the scheme with this fellow a year ago in Ostend when first the duke made public his intention to marry again. He has been over, too, off and on, and taken an actual hand in the work, has the late captain, and I dare say he would have been over again to-morrow night to take part in the final act of the little drama if the curtain had not been rung down on all the dramas for him the day before yesterday. Oh! he was a clever schemer, was Captain Paul Sandringham, and he neglected nothing. That is the strongest point in the whole armour of the educated criminal: the brains to reason and the wit to provide for all contingencies. You cannot tunnel the earth for a distance of ninety-six yards without having a deal of refuse to dispose of, you know; therefore, the prophecy had to take in the question of a choked river, and there had to be phantom wheels to account for the vehicle which conveyed it to the stream by night; there had to be those bells which are ringing now to account for the supernatural agency, and there had to be a curse on the adjoining

cottage to prevent——"

Here he stopped—his ear caught by a confused murmur of voices rising above the clashing of the bells.

"Let us go and see the rest of the interesting collection," he said. "I think the raid is over, and Mr. Naylor's fishers are pulling in the nets."

He turned and walked briskly out of the vicarage and, taking a short cut across the churchyard, made his way to the curve of the road, the bells still clashing out discordantly as he passed through the lich-gate and turned to the Castle cottages —and the duke and the marquis, the captain and the vicar, and Mr. Maverick Narkom, too, followed close upon his heels.

CHAPTER XV

THE LAYING OF THE VALEHAMPTON "GHOST"

AS they issued from the churchyard a couple of gamekeepers, standing on guard with loaded shotguns, challenged them.

"That's all right, Norton," said Cleek, as one of them stepped forward to bar the way. "It is only His Grace and the rest of us coming to see the final kick-up. You can let us pass with impunity."

"Right, sir," said Norton, and stepped aside.

"The beggars made fine work of it, didn't they, Mr. Narkom?" said Cleek with a laugh, as he pointed to the battered condition of the raided cottage. "Door, window, and half the wall battered down! They *were* an energetic lot! Did they all go in, then, Norton?"

"Yes, sir, every blessed one of them; and Mr. Naylor himself with the lot. They'll be coming out in a minute, I'm thinking—fancy I can hear someone running."

He had scarcely more than finished speaking than there came a clatter of hasty footsteps running up wooden steps, and presently a man, smeared and streaked with yellow clay, dashed in through the scullery door of the cottage and flung himself across the main room, as if running for dear life.

The two gamekeepers rushed forward, and their guns went up like clockwork.

"Now, then, *you*! Stop where you are," sang out Norton. "You don't take your hook without there's a line on it—and a sinker, too, if you don't look sharp. Hands up!"

The runner obeyed one part of the command at least. That is to say, he stopped short, but instead of throwing up his hands he shouted out in a voice of great excitement:

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Norton; it is only I—Naylor. Get a litter! Get a doctor! We've nabbed the two Hurdons and the gypsy, Costivan; but that fellow Carstairs had a pistol with him, the brute, and after putting a ball through Weston's leg and another into Farley's cap, the beggar shot himself."

"What's that? Shot himself? Carstairs?"

"Oh, that you, Mr. Cleek, is it? Yes, sir, shot himself—through the temple, and I'm afraid he's done himself in."

"Dead?"

"As a doornail, sir. Hole in his head you could put your two fingers in! It's Weston I want the doctor and the litter for. Carstairs won't need anything any more—his little jig is done!"

"And I let the beggar slip me like that!" said Cleek, striking his tongue against the roof of his mouth with a mild clicking sound thrice repeated. "A cold-blooded butcher of that fellow's type—the one real tiger in the whole skulking pack of jackals—and to get off so easily! Too bad, too bad. Well, it can't be helped, I suppose. You got the others all safe and sound, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir, all three."

"Close to the end, were they?"

"Very close, sir. Just as you reckoned. They'd have been in before morning. The floor of the strong-room was just beginning to show in places, and they had the soup all ready and waiting. We nabbed them just in time."

Here the sound of a woman's smothered screams and of men's curses became dimly audible. Mr. Naylor jerked his thumb backward over his shoulder in the direction from which they came.

"That will be them now," he said. "They are bringing the lot up."

"Get down and stop them, then," said Cleek. "All these good people will not care to see an exhibition of that sort now that it has taken a tragic turn. Hold them there for another ten minutes. Don't bring even Weston up. The sight would not be a pleasant one for the duke."

Here Mr. Narkom, waiting only for Naylor to take his departure, chose to deliver a dig at his friend.

"I notice," he said in an undertone, "that for all your fine scorn of dukes you are taking devilish good care of this one."

"Excellent, my friend! Your powers of observation are improving. Notice anything else as well?"

"Yes. You are conducting this affair somewhat off your usual lines, and instead

of being bowled over with astonishment by your revelations, this particular duke doesn't seem surprised at anything."

"He isn't. I told him everything beforehand. Doctor Forsyth advised it; his heart is weak. Any more questions, please?"

"Yes, one. In the name of Heaven, what did you cut up that fainting caper for last night?"

"Come over to the cottage door. Look there. See that thing in the corner? By the sofa there—with the quilt half over it?"

"Mean the box with the wire netting over the front?"

"Exactly. That's what I did it for. I wanted to see if there was such a thing here. It was necessary to get down on the floor to see it, and there it was."

"But what on earth——?"

Mr. Narkom did not bother to complete the sentence. It would have been useless. Cleek had walked away and left him—going back to the place where the duke and the others were standing.

"I think, Duke, it will be as well to return to the vicarage," he said, "and leave the rest of this unpleasant business to the law alone. I am sorry, gentlemen, that I have put you all to the useless trouble of coming out here. I should not have done so had I known or even guessed of Carstairs' act. Still, it doesn't matter. You know the result; you know the game. The robbery of the gold service has been prevented, the criminals unmasked, and—that's all. I think we may be satisfied that the riddle has been solved."

"Do you? Well, I'm blest if I do, then!" exclaimed Captain Weatherley. "There is one little point which you decidedly have not cleared up, if you don't mind my saying so. That thing!" Here he flung out his hand and made a sweeping gesture in the direction of the bell-tower, from which the discordant clang had all the time been sounding. "How about that, please? Who has been managing that little dodge, and—how?"

"Oh, the ghost, you mean?"

"Yes, the ghost, the power—the thing, or whatever it is, that rings bells without ropes, and yet—Uppingham, Essex, look round, look round, for Heaven's sake. It has got beyond mere sound alone—it has become visible now—visible! Look, there's a light there—a light!"

"Yes," said Cleek. "It appeared for the first time last night. It gave me quite a shock for the minute, until I remembered."

"Remembered?"

"Yes. Our friend Mr. Overton arranged it for me. He knew, of course, that 'George Headland' would inspect the place some time or another, and he wanted to back up his little ghost story of the night before."

"Overton? Overton, Mr. Cleek?"

"Yes; he is a quite ingenious gentleman when you come to know him—only he is not very original at bottom, I fear. Would you like to see the Valehampton ghost laid, Captain? Would you like to know how bells can be rung without hands or ropes, or wires, or anything of that sort, gentlemen? Very well, then, step this way, and you shall."

Here, beckoning Norton to follow, he walked to the lich-gate, opened it, and, accompanied by the six men, led the way to the belfry.

The clanging bells still flung their discord upon the air, the globe of light still circled in the darkness of the tower's top, and, although the head which had devised it was laid low and the hand which had directed it was now a manacled one, the Valehampton ghost still played its uncanny part.

Cleek turned to the gamekeeper, a smile hovering around his lips.

"Gun for a minute, please, Norton. Thanks. Keep your eyes on the light, gentlemen, and stand back a bit. All ready, are you?"

Bang! Bang!

The gun barked twice in rapid succession, and two charges of buckshot rattled against the bells. A scream, almost human in its note, shrilled out from the tower's top, the ball of light lurched outward and came tumbling downward till it struck the earth with a curious crunching sound, and then lay quiet in a cloud of fullers' earth.

"Gentlemen, the Valehampton Ghost," said Cleek; then he whipped out his torch and switched a circle of light upon it where it lay—a little black monkey with a wire muzzle over its mouth and a sponge that glowed brightly and smelt strongly of phosphorus fastened to the top of its shattered head. And hard by the spot where it lay there was one single trail of its footprints going across the fullers' earth and pointing toward the stone tower.

CHAPTER XVI

CLEEK EXPLAINS

"How did I manage to find the thing out?" said Cleek, answering the duke's query as they all sat together in the vicarage drawing-room, an hour or more afterward, discussing the affair. "Well, to tell you the truth, I think I got the very first inkling from the ringing of the bells. Oh, no, not through any special power of deduction or any super-human nonsense of that sort, but simply and solely through my memory. You will remember that I said Overton was not very original in his methods. Well, it so happened that I recalled the circumstance of a monkey which escaped from its cage and terrorized a Swiss village some years ago by climbing into the church belfry and inadvertently setting the bells ringing in the middle of the night by hopping from one to the other in an effort to maintain its equilibrium. That, of course, suggested a similar possibility here, and I set about deciding the point by means of the fullers' earth. By the way, Mr. Narkom, I chose fullers' earth not alone because of its yielding quality and its ability to receive impressions of even very slight things falling upon it, but because by reason of its weight and its rather tenacious character it was not so likely as another medium to be blown away by any sudden rising of the wind. I suppose you know that I placed the stuff about the tower's base when I left you at the limousine?"

"I judged that," replied the Superintendent. "The thing which amazed me, however, was all that meaningless stuff about timber and cubic feet you talked about when you came back. I can't even yet get the hang of that."

"Can't you? It will be getting in advance of the story a bit, but I may as well explain it now as later. I had come to the point of certainty regarding the making of a tunnel—how, you shall hear later—and as a tunnel of 288 feet in length will require shoring up and bracing with balks at intervals if one doesn't want it to become one's grave, timber for that purpose becomes a necessity. Now, as it would have been a pretty risky business to have left a trail by purchasing timber, and a worse one to attempt to smuggle it into the Hurdons' cottage, I had to figure out just where those beauties were going to get it. Old or new, they simply must have it, and the idea of *old* timber set my thoughts going—opened up, as it were, the possibility of the adjoining house being kept tenantless so that they

could quietly demolish it and get the wood from there. So, when I went to lay the fullers' earth about the tower, I determined to have a look inside that other cottage and decide the point. A skeleton key let me in, and one flicker of my torch settled the question. The floors were up, the walls had been broken with a sledge-hammer until the place was fairly littered with mortar and lime from end to end, and every joist and beam that could be removed without bringing the place down had been taken away. I made a rapid inventory, calculated roughly about how much timber it would take to supply what had been removed, reduced that to the requirements of the tunnel, and when you caught me going about that little problem in mental arithmetic, I was trying to discover just how far those chaps must have progressed with the tunnel on the basis of the cubic feet of timber used.

"Now, to get back to the beginning. The tunnel idea was really the outcome of speculating with regard to Sir Julius Solinski's possible connection with the matter. That, of course, set me to thinking on the subject of digging for the purpose of getting something out of the earth by secret means and defeating the duke that way; then, when I got to thinking over Captain Paul Sandringham's position in the event of the proposed marriage and the possibility of an heir coming between him and his expectations, and added to that my knowledge of the dishonest character of the man—why, there you are! The tunnel and the reason for it simply evolve themselves by natural means out of such fertile soil as that; and, this much accomplished, it was but a step to the Hurdons and that very delightful garden which was so delightfully kept."

"How?"

"I didn't like the idea of that garden in that particular place for one thing, and then, for another, I didn't like its being so wonderfully kept up by a couple of people who couldn't apparently be scared into neglecting it or frightened out of the neighbourhood by all the ghosts and bells and curses in Christendom. I asked myself: 'Why do people of position and means so humble that they have to live in a little thatched cottage go to the expense of a garden so ornamental that even a ducal residence is enhanced by the presence of it?' The answer appeared to be that they were doing it for the purpose of making the duke pleased to have them remain there; and if they had any reason for spending a lot of money in plants and flowers simply to prevent the duke from tearing down the cottages and putting an end to the nuisance of that ill-kept one next door, there must be something at the bottom of it that would not stand looking into. If there was to be a tunnel, then, why should not that be the starting point? The more I thought

over the thing the more promising it looked. For, I said to myself, to keep up a garden in the state of constant bloom and continual perfection, as that one appears to be, will need a lot of work; in fact, will keep that one old man and woman busy in it pretty much all their time, if there is no fake about it; but if there is, and they are digging in the tunnel, and the garden still bears those outward signs of constant care, why, there will be only one possible solution, one possible way to do it. In other words, there will have to be a constant supply of fresh plants that can be popped into the place of any that show the slightest trace of neglect, and that means that they will have to be shallow-rooted things like geraniums, fuchsias, lilies, and the like, so that the change cannot only be accomplished quickly, but will show no sign to the casual observer."

"Ah, now I understand what you meant by all that stuff about geraniums which I couldn't make head or tail of at the time. And that's why you were so interested and so anxious to go over and talk with the Hurdon woman the minute you caught sight of the place."

"That's it precisely, Mr. Narkom. I saw at once that I had hit upon something very like the truth; and as I also saw that the woman was very particular in rising from her work to see that her gardening apron was brushed down over her skirt, I wondered what she was so anxious to hide, and took means to find out by tossing the wall plant to her on the plea of its being a very choice plant. When she caught it in her apron and I saw those marks of caked yellow clay about her knees, I was both gratified and—disappointed."

"Disappointed, old chap?"

"Yes, in the colour of the stuff. I'd expected it to be blue. For, as you know, the county of Essex may be said to rest almost entirely on a foundation of what is geologically known as 'London clay' and that is decidedly blue. All in a moment, however, I remembered that we were close to the border line of Suffolk, and consequently on the edge of the yellow clay belt, and—there you are. Pardon, Duke? How did I get the idea of Captain Sandringham's connection with the affair? Oh, that fellow Carstairs gave me the first hint of that at the vicarage gate when the news of the man's death was made known, and Overton clinched the nail at once. He was obviously distressed by the news, and didn't know how to proceed; but when Carstairs flung out that little hint about there being 'one the less to reckon with' the fellow's eyes lit up in a manner not to be mistaken. They are expressive eyes. To-day, when I went over to the Castle and got the duke to send him off to Braintree so that I could slip into the Lodge and search his effects I found all the proof of 'Miss Emmy Costivan's' identity and of the

beggar's arrangements with Captain Sandringham.

"I also made use of my time at the Castle to question the duke's valet and to learn what happened when Tom Davis went out to investigate the matter of the bells that night. Just before he went, Carstairs had treated him to half a bottle of the ducal champagne. When I heard that, I knew at once how the morphia had been administered. I had known from the first, however, that, if morphia should turn out to be the drug employed, Carstairs would be the man, because the rascal had it handy. How did I know that? Well, you remember that time when Sir Julius Solinski passed us in his motor? Carstairs saluted him. As the beggar put his hand to his hat, his sleeve slipped down, and I could see the evidence of the thing. The man was addicted to the use of hypodermic injections of morphia—the scars of the needle were clearly visible. I don't think there is any doubt of how poor Davis died. The drug overcame him on the road, and he dropped down in a stupor. There is clear evidence of that. You saw me examine his nails? The flint dust of the road was under them. After that, I suppose, Carstairs, who had been following him and watching him out for just such a time, pounced on him, carried him into the half-demolished cottage, and brained him with the hammer that was being used to batter down the walls and beat out the joists. As for the other tragic affair connected with the same cottage—namely, the mysterious disappearance of the child and the insanity and suicide of the father? I don't suppose we need regard that as other than a pleasant little fiction upon the part of Mr. James Overton. The duke tells me that the body of the man Smale was never recovered, and that his going insane and drowning himself rests only upon a 'farewell note' from him to Mr. Overton, who afterward declared that he had seen his body fished out of the river a good ten miles away. Of course the story of the child's vanishing in the dead of the night was another piece of fiction of the same sort. Nor would it surprise me in the slightest if the man called Smale, who posed as her father, was really no less a person than Captain Paul Sandringham himself.

"One thing, however, I think we can assert positively, and that is that Mrs. Mallory, the widow who set the ball rolling, was no other than Miss Emily Overton, otherwise Emily Costivan, and that the person who figured as her sister is the woman who passed as her mother."

"Mrs. Costivan?"

"Yes. I think we shall find that she and her husband were admitted into the game simply because they had at the time a nephew who was in the last stages of consumption. Of course the story about the gypsy who was beating him and who

told the curse that would follow if he were buried here was made from whole cloth. The youth was simply carried into the house in the night, and Doctor Forsyth was right in the matter of his not having been able to lift a hand for days before he was called in to him. Since then it would appear that Mrs. Costivan had directed her energies toward washing the clay-stained overalls of one and the other of the 'tunnellers' when her husband carried them to her—for I dare say that every one of them—Carstairs, Overton, Costivan, all of them, took a hand in it at times; and if it hadn't been for poor Tom Davis, they might have carried it through successfully, after all. Which shows again that 'there's many a slip ——!'"

And so ended the case of the Mysterious Light which nearly lost a duke a most valuable heritage and to which only Cleek could find the solution.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MYSTERY OF THE "ROSE OF FIRE"

Some few days later, Mr. Narkom, breathing noisily and obviously hard pressed for time, pushed open the door of Cleek's apartment on Portman Square and carefully inserted his head into the room. His face lighted up and he drew a deep sigh of relief as he caught sight of Cleek, reclining in an easy-chair and apparently day-dreaming.

He glanced up as the Superintendent entered.

"Well, for once you have caught me napping, Mr. Narkom," he said. "I was so deep in thought, I never heard a sound. But sit down, old friend. You look worried."

"I am," admitted the Superintendent. "I was on pins and needles for fear this gorgeous day might have drawn you up the river, and I didn't dare use the public telephone."

"Which tells me very plainly that you have not come directly from the Yard. So I may assume it is a case of some importance that has brought you here in post haste," said Cleek.

"It is indeed," said Narkom, "and it is a case connected with jewels.

"You remember that young American chap I pointed out in a motor last week—the fellow who came over about the Panama Canal, intending to go back, but wound up by getting engaged to an English girl and settling down here...?"

"Anthony Winton, do you mean? Yes, of course I do. If my memory holds right, he is the son of a California millionaire, and with a pretty taste in jewels. Made a hobby of outlandish settings, photographs were in the *Connoisseur*. The woman who marries him will never go short of unique jewels. Wasn't he to have been married to-day, by the way, according to the papers?"

"'Was' is the correct word, Cleek," said Narkom in a hushed tone. "There will be no wedding for him, poor chap. The man has been murdered——"

"Murdered!" Cleek interrupted, sitting up suddenly. "Winton murdered! How? When?"

"Last night," said Narkom. "Robbery is supposed to have been the motive, and suspicion points in half-a-dozen directions."

"What has been stolen, something from his collection?"

"Yes. As you yourself said, he had a mania for queer jewels, and the one that is missing is the queerest of the lot—rubies mounted on a stem. A Burmese thing, known as the 'Rose of Fire,' made of priceless pigeon-blood rubies, and supposed to have been stolen from the temple of Buddha in Mandalay.

"I was told it was a rose with ruby petals and emerald stem and worth thousands."

"Of course; everyone knows of it. Thousands won't replace it," said Cleek. "Its historical value alone makes it priceless. It is supposed to have belonged to Buddha himself. But to come back to Winton. How was he killed? Stabbed? Shot?"

"I can't say for certain," said Narkom, "save that he was certainly not shot or stabbed. There is no mark or blemish on the body at all. All that is positive, according to the doctor, who did not arrive until after his death, is that he had been asphyxiated by some unknown fumes. He was found by his servant, who says he heard him struggling with an assailant, but when he forced the door in, the room was empty, the windows shut, and he was only just in time to reach his master and hear him say with his last gasp 'Death's Head!' Then he fell back, dead as the skeleton to which he pointed."

"'Death's Head'," repeated Cleek, knitting his brows. "Does anybody know what he meant?"

"Not unless he was still thinking of his words with Miss Parradine, the bride-to-be."

"What had she to do with it?" asked Cleek.

"A great deal, I should say. As you know, Winton had queer taste in jewels and it seems that he had had some of his finest diamonds mounted in skull-and-crossbones brooches as his present to the bride and as bridesmaid gifts. He was obsessed with breaking superstitions—insisted on sitting down thirteen at table when possible, had the knives crossed, had skull and crossbones on his notepaper and cutlery. He defied, in fact, every legend and superstition known, even to having a skeleton present at the table."

"H'm, cheerful companion! Every man has some whim, but for a young man all

this was peculiar, to say the least of it. I suppose he wanted his future wife to indulge in the same tricks, eh?"

"Yes, that's just it, Cleek, and evidently she resisted. Anyhow, with the exception of Calvert, the valet, she was the last person to see him alive last night. She arrived unexpectedly during the evening, and was shown in to him. It seems that they were not entirely on the best of terms. Both have, or had I suppose I must say, strong wills, and Miss Parradine was obviously in a furious temper, for Calvert declared that he heard her voice raised high and shrill more than once. He even goes further than that, for he swears that as he was passing the door, just before she flung herself out, flushed with rage and mortification, he heard her say distinctly: 'I won't have it. I'd sooner see you a skull and crossbones yourself than ask such a thing'."

"Humph," commented Cleek. "I wonder if Calvert is to be trusted. Sure he wasn't making the words fit those of the dying man? Possibly Miss Parradine was angry at the gift and carried away by temper. Vanity plays a great part with women at the best of times, and a wedding, after all, is a trying experience."

"In this case vanity, or rather wealth, plays the chief part, I fear, Cleek, for to all accounts the lady only consented to the marriage because of the pressure brought to bear upon her by her family, and secondly because of her own love of precious stones. According to the marriage settlements, on his death all jewels go to her."

"Oho!" said Cleek in two different inflections.

"The lady herself," continued Mr. Narkom, "was really engaged to a neighbouring land-owner, Robert Bristol, but she had to give him up. Probably Winton had a financial hold over her father. Anyhow, the marriage was hastened, and Winton had decided to take his bride back to America before settling down here."

"And where did the murder take place—in London?" queried Cleek, diving for his cigarette-case.

"No, in Essex, in the village of Grays, where Winton had leased a very old solidly built manor house, and had had his jewel collection, which he made while travelling from place to place, transferred to the big picture gallery there. This collection included the famous 'Rose of Fire'."

"H'm. I see. And considering that the Burmese priests will never rest till they regain that holy relic, it was positively asking for trouble. The Death's Head, sign

of the skull and crossbones, is an emblem of one of their rites, I believe, and if one of them were in the neighbourhood, might Winton not have recognized the instigator of his death? The hypothesis is rather far-fetched, I admit, but still—— Well, continue with the story, please. How long had the lady left before Calvert began to suspect trouble?"

"About ten minutes. As a matter of fact, she let herself out, apparently. Calvert was called away by the telephone down another passage, and when he came back she was gone. He took the 'phone message to Mr. Winton and found the door locked. According to him, he called, and at last broke in the door on hearing a funny scuffling noise inside, but getting no answer to his knocks found his master dying, and later discovered the loss of the 'Rose of Fire' from his table. That is as far as I can get."

"How was it that Miss Parradine was able to make such an inopportune call? Does she live in Grays, too?"

"Yes, she does. She is, as you doubtless are aware, the daughter of Colonel Parradine, late of the Bengal Lancers, and——"

"Stop a moment," cut in Cleek, sharply. "It isn't often my memory fails me. Wasn't it about '74 when the Bengal Lancers were stationed at Mandalay? I seem to remember some yarns about ragging. If I am not wrong, I expect it must have been that same Colonel, or Captain Parradine as he then was, who nearly got cashiered. Is he still up to high jinks?"

"Well, he acts pretty queerly," said Narkom, "according to Winton's butler, Wills. It was he, by the way, who went flying off for the doctor when they found that the telephone was out of order at the same time as the lights."

"What's that? The lights wrong?"

"Yes, he said, and Calvert, too, that every light in the place went out just as Calvert got into the room. Then they flashed on again, and that's how he looked for the jewels, directly he saw his master was dead, in order to find whether they had been stolen."

"Very thoughtful of him," put in Cleek, pinching up his chin. "Very!"

"Yes, and that's not the only funny thing. Nothing else but the 'Rose' was missing, although other stones of the collection were there. Winton had evidently been polishing or looking at them. You would have thought the thief would have cleared the lot."

"Possibly! And yet, too, he might have banked on one single jewel not being missed immediately and let him get a good start away."

"But to come back to Colonel Parradine," said Narkom. "Wills tells me he met him half-way down the lane as he was going for the doctor either very ill and shaken or much the worse for drink. His clothes were dusty and awry as if he had had a fall, and that's how he accounted for his condition. He said he had been knocked down by a motor on his way from the station. But there were scratches on his face and hands which gave him the appearance of having dropped from a high window rather than of having been in a motor accident. As Winton's gallery is a sheer drop of thirty feet from the ground, you can imagine it looks strange. Anyhow, Wills told him what had happened and left the Colonel to come on to the Manor Lodge as best he could."

"Looks bad, I must say. Still, if he had had any hand in it, he would hardly have been hanging about the lane near the scene of the murder. But you never know. Anyhow, it's easy to round up someone who saw or heard of that accident. It remains to be seen what the Colonel has to say. Any possibility of his secreting the jewel himself?"

"Hardly," said Narkom. "Considering that he drew my attention to its loss. Besides, to make things worse, I phoned through to headquarters on my way up and learned that some loose rubies were pawned in London at nine o'clock this morning by a woman who answers vaguely a description of Miss Parradine herself."

"That looks worst of all," said Cleek. "Give me five minutes to jump into another suit, Mr. Narkom, and we'll see what Mr. George Headland can do."

CHAPTER XVIII

MURDER AT MANOR LODGE

It did not take the motor more than an hour to cover the difference between Portman Square and Manor Lodge, Grays, and in a very brief time Cleek in the character of George Headland had the satisfaction of seeing all the actors in this tragic drama. Narkom's assertion that Colonel Parradine was "acting queerly" had led him to expect a broken-down, shifty-eyed half-pay officer, glad to be free from the iron hold of the dead man. He found instead a collected, typical Anglo-Indian, as keen on probing the mystery as Cleek himself, and full of suggestions as to possible clues. It was only when there arose the subject of motor-cars, which he detested ordinarily, that his calm was broken.

Miss Parradine, however, appeared to be on the verge of hysterics, and though in normal times she would have been a very handsome girl, now her eyes were red with weeping, her hair dishevelled, and had she been the dead man's widow she could not have evinced more grief. All this, in face of Mr. Narkom's statement that she loved another man, made her manner over-done, and almost theatrical.

"I suppose, Miss Parradine," said Cleek in a casual, off-hand sort of way, "you don't happen to know who will inherit Mr. Winton's fortune, or if he ever made a will? I am aware from what Mr. Narkom has told me that the collection of jewels will come to you, but that is not the whole extent of his wealth. There is no one you know who might benefit by his death?"

"No one who would be likely to injure him," said Miss Parradine. "His only relative is a distant cousin, Richard Deverill, I believe, a wealthy man in Buenos Ayres. I know, because Anthony told me when he had our settlements drawn up that he would leave all the jewels to me, and in case anything happened to him, Mr. Weston, the solicitor, was to send over to South America and find out if Deverill was still alive."

Cleek switched round quickly.

"Anything happen?" he inquired. "Did he expect anything to happen then?"

"Well," said Miss Parradine, "I think he was always nervous, especially about the 'Rose of Fire.' And as that very day I had caught sight of some Burmese natives,

of high caste, it is true, hanging about his London hotel, the Savoy, where we had all been staying, I got nervous, too. That is why I came straight to him last night, to ask him to give the 'Rose' up to me for safety. But he refused, and I was angry about those horrible brooches. But if only I had known! No, Mr. Headland, there is no one else I know."

"Well, there's nothing wrong there," said Cleek. "Clearly a case of local robbery, I should say."

"Yes, that's what Robert said." She flushed as Mr. Headland twitched an inquiring eyebrow.

"Robert Bristol and I at one time were engaged," she said, huskily. "This terrible tragedy sets me free. I confess that I regret parting in anger from Mr. Winton, but he could be very, very cruel. Robert said he could save me—but oh——" She broke off as if frightened at what she had said, and Cleek flashed a glance of deepest significance at Mr. Narkom.

"Robert could save her," could he! How, except by removing the obstacle which stood in their path of mutual happiness, that with the jewels left her by one lover she might find happiness with the other? Was this the explanation?

"Perhaps you would like to see Mr. Bristol," she said, hurriedly. "I know he is here, because he, too, is worried over it."

"I should indeed," said Cleek, and as she left the room it seemed to him that Parradine cast an anxious glance after her.

"I cannot understand Bristol," he said, "since my daughter's engagement to Mr. Winton. He went away until yesterday, the day before the wedding, then arrived evidently in good time...." his voice trailed away as the door opened to admit Robert Bristol, a typical gentleman-farmer, but now his face was pale and lined with anxiety, his whole appearance as of one who has had little sleep, and as Cleek noticed his carelessly brushed clothes and shaking hands, his eyes narrowed down. But when the first formalities were over, he spoke as he always did at such times, in the heavy, befogged tones of utter incompetence.

"You are just the man I want to see, Mr. Bristol, before I go upstairs. I'm fairly puzzled, but I'd like to know any other facts you can give me——"

"I can give you nothing, tell you nothing," declared the young man in shaking tones. "It has been such a colossal shock to me. I hated the dead man, Heaven knows, and could not bring myself to return till after—that is—— But I could not keep away, and when I learned what had happened...."

"From whom did you hear the news, Mr. Bristol?" asked Cleek, sharply.

"Well, I think it was old Twells," he said. "He's a bit of a character, kind of naturalist and all that sort of thing," Bristol stammered. "He said Wills, the butler, had told him on his way to Doctor Smith's, and as I passed him ... he told me.

"Passed him!" ejaculated Cleek. "Where were you; where had you been during the evening?"

"Most of the time, at the Electric Power House. I know one of the engineers there, and I just happened to be there, and so ... so...." His voice trailed away as though he had given the most lucid of explanations.

"I see," said Cleek, pinching up his chin, as the thoughts raced through his mind. What connection had this explanation with the sudden failure of the electric light at the exact moment of the discovery of the murder, and how was Miss Parradine connected with it? Were the two in league, after all? But he said no more, only switched round on his heel and allowed himself to be led upstairs to the gallery where the dead man still lay.

It was a large square room, solidly built, without corners or panels. Along its dull, gray-papered walls hung large pictures of long dead and gone ancestors of the owner of Manor Lodge, himself a wanderer in strange lands. Small tables held the cases of curios collected by Anthony Winton, and but one big window gave it light. Clearly there was no room for concealment of any unknown assailant, and when Cleek had dismissed the plain-clothes man on guard, and told Calvert, who had quickly been sent for at Cleek's request, to open up the blind, he turned his attention to the dead man.

As Mr. Narkom had said, there was no sign of wound or mark on the body.

"Suffocated, it is clear enough," commented Cleek, having made minute examination. "But how?" He looked round. "You have no gas fittings here?"

"None in the house, sir," said Calvert. "The whole place was lit by oil-lamps till my master took it and then the local company wired it for electricity. All the rooms are not done yet, but this one and downstairs were finished first. The company also connected up the house telephone to theirs, so as to oblige Mr. Winton while waiting for his own connection with the company. I suppose that was why that went wrong, too, when the electric light went off."

"What did he have to eat last?" said Cleek, suddenly, almost as if he had not been listening. "Do you know?"

"Yes, I do," said Calvert. "He dined downstairs at 7 o'clock, as usual, and the rest of the dinner was finished in the servants' hall and nothing better could be desired. I came in at 9 o'clock to see whether he would have anything more, but Mr. Winton said no. And then Miss Parradine came."

"Yes, I know. And what about her visit?" said Cleek. "How long was she here, do you remember?"

"Yes, sir. The hall clock was striking a quarter past nine when I let her in, and at a quarter to ten the telephone bell rang. Miss Parradine flung herself out of the gallery as I went to answer it, and the master was alive then. I heard his voice. Whether she went back while I was answering the 'phone, I don't know...."

"Went back?" said Cleek, excitedly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, sir," said Calvert, "as I said, just as she came out, the bell rang, and Miss Parradine said she would let herself out, and I turned and ran to the instrument. When I returned—it was only a message from the tailor, and nothing important—she was gone. But she might have gone back to the master, and perhaps it was her dress fluttering that I heard inside the room. You see, sir, I knocked, and then I heard that kind of struggling and fluttering and ... I am almost sure, the sound of the window being shut. Then I forced the door, but the room was pitch dark. If any one slipped by me then I didn't know it, but when the lights flashed on again I saw Mr. Winton crouched up against the window, and he pointed to the skeleton, saying, 'Death's Head!' And that was the end."

The man gave a half-sob and his words rang true. If it were acting, it was perfect of its kind. Cleek stood silent, his shoulders hunched up.

"Where was your master sitting before that, do you know?"

"When I went in about nine, as I said, he was sitting right under the light. The window was wide open then. I noticed it particularly, and the Rose of Fire, was in front of him. Very fond of that jewel he was, and used to say he'd give his life for it."

"Which he did," muttered Cleek, advancing to the table and standing just where the dead man had sat a few short hours before. Suddenly he switched round.

"Mr. Winton was cleaning his jewels then, was he? He preferred Venetian powder to jeweller's rouge, eh?"

"Cleaning, sir? No, indeed. He never touched them last night, that I'll swear."

Cleek bent down lower. "Ah, I see my mistake, a little cigarette ash, nothing of

importance. Well, Calvert, I see there is nothing more to be gained here. Tell Mr. Narkom I am ready for him, will you?"

"Certainly, sir," and Calvert turned as if glad to make his escape.

Had he waited another minute he would have seen Cleek pounce swiftly on the little feathery yellow dust on the table, gather it up, and transfer it to his note-book, and when Mr. Narkom had come upstairs, it was to find his famous ally gazing thoughtfully out of the window, his face serene, as if there were no such gruesome things as a murdered man and a withered skeleton behind him.

"Mr. Narkom," he said, when he had followed the Superintendent downstairs and out into the country road, where the limousine was waiting, and as he stepped into it, "I want you to wait here for me. I've got an idea that death takes strange shapes, and Mr. Winton recognized his foe rightly, though too late. I want to poke about for myself a little farther afield. Give me a couple of hours, and if I am right, my friend, the riddle is at an end. What's that? A clue? I want to find out which sticks the best to metal, glue or soap." With this Mr. Narkom had to be content, and only Lennard, at the wheel of the car, heard the direction to drive to South Kensington Museum as hard as he could go.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WINGED MESSENGER OF DEATH

That Lennard did go at considerable speed was very evident, for it was under two hours when the limousine, gray with dust, raced once more into Grays High Street, and pulled up in front of the solitary inn, the Royal Arms. Here Mr. George Headland, after giving some directions to a weedy youth of dejected mien, who had sat beside him in the car, flashed the door open and shut again, and vanished up the village street.

He crossed the road and struck into the woods, his face relaxed from its tenseness, and swung across country in the direction of the Manor House. There was still one link missing in his chain, and he wanted it quite finished before he met Mr. Narkom.

Reaching the house through the trees, he searched carefully along the ground on the side on which gave the window of the gallery, and in a very few moments leaned forward with a little cry of satisfaction. His case was complete.

He turned swiftly back, but as he passed silently through the heavy undergrowth, the sound of snapping twigs brought him up short. Then he moved on with indrawn breath. Someone was shadowing him without a doubt. Well, if necessary, he could make a run for it, but the path was indistinct—— And just then came a snarl and a spring from somewhere behind him. A thick cloth was thrown rapidly over his head, two arms like vises closed about his struggling shoulders, and he was carried, fighting for dear life, away from the Manor House and the scene of the murder. He was conscious of being forced inside some building and here a voice greeted him the sound of which sent a little dagger of fear stabbing its way into his heart.

"The Cracksman at last!" shrilled the voice, excitedly, and Cleek knew, for the time being, that the game was up. He was here in the shadow of these woods, and in the power of the accursed Apaches themselves—alone and helpless! A door closed behind them, bolts were shot, the cloth torn from his head, and he saw before him, in the interior of a half-ruined cottage, three of the best-known scoundrels in Paris, men he had known only too well in the past. "At last, *nom de Dieu,* we have you!" cried one as he seized a rope and bound Cleek's struggling

hands and feet. "Margot shall hear of this, I promise you! Margot, who thirsts for your blood for your escape from her as we thirst for the money she will pay us! Where is this precious 'Rose of Fire'? That is what we are after. No foolish priest shall have a jewel which *we* are after. Where is it, pig of a cracksman, where, I say?"

"Where I have failed to find it, that I can promise you!" replied Cleek in as level a voice as he could muster under the circumstances. "It has wholly disappeared."

"You lie!" screamed Dubois, furiously. "You lie! You know well where it is concealed. Do you not always find the answers to the cases propounded to you? But we shall see what we shall see. A touch of fire may loosen your tongue, *cochon*! Come, *mes amis*!"

Turning, they swarmed into a tiny kitchen, and Cleek could see them throwing paper and wood into the range. Luckily for him the wood was damp, and the chimney smoky from disuse. He writhed his hands to and fro in their ropes. It was not for nothing that those old days in Paris had been lived. He knew a thing or two about knots which would teach these devils something. A tug, a twist, and at last one hand was free. The other followed in a jiffy. Quickly and soundlessly he worked upon the rope about his feet, while the snarling Apaches cursed and swore at the fire which would not burn. In another moment he was free. But he stood still, awaiting his opportunity. Then of a sudden there came to his ears a sound that made his heart leap. He did not even know he was near a road, and yet there sounded the soft purr of the Scotland Yard limousine—he would have known it among a thousand! He did not stop to think how his plight could have become known, he simply leapt for the window, and making a cup of his hands, shouted as loudly as his lungs would permit, "All right, boys! Well played! Get round to the back! They're in the kitchen!"

The trick worked like magic. He heard the car come to a grinding stop, saw the leaping figures of three Apaches dart like frightened rats across the little kitchen floor, and in the twinkling of an eye every man of them had vanished into the wood beyond. With a bound Cleek was out of the door, onto a road, into the limousine, with a very excited Dollops at his side, and death was once more behind him.

"How did you know?" he said, curiously, as the car went speeding down the road under the guidance of Lennard.

Dollops heaved a heavy sigh.

"I saw some of the blighters up the road after you left me. I told you, sir, you

should have took me along"—this very reproachfully—"and I tells Lennard here, we don't leave this neighbourhood till I sees you safe and sound."

"It was a narrow squeak this time, old man," said Cleek, softly, and put out his hand. "You are the best ever of a helper. Bless you."

Dollops' eyes gleamed with pleasure as the car swept on in the direction of Grays Village.

And this was why Mr. Narkom had begun to feel very uneasy about the whereabouts of his colleague when he finally received a message from one of his men that "Mr. George Headland" was having a meal at the Royal Arms and would be pleased if all the company from the Manor House would give him the pleasure of joining him there.

There was an indignant murmur of dissent from the Parradines, but Mr. Narkom, knowing there must be a very good reason for this invitation, succeeded in persuading them to accompany him down to the inn, though they expressed no faith in what "that fool of a policeman was doing."

In the old-fashioned inn, at the bar of which most of the villagers were smoking and drinking, at one of the window tables they found Mr. Headland certainly busy in front of a meal though it was the youth beside him who was eating it voraciously. As Mr. Narkom recognized Dollops, he beamed delightedly. The landlord of the inn was himself in attendance, but Mr. George Headland was evidently in a state of indignation with the youth at the table and was pointing to a small yellow object in his hand.

As the little party came up, he turned to Mr. Narkom.

"Look, sir, that's what that young varmint's done while I've been down 'ere. Let my prize canary starve in the office. I wouldn't have parted with that bird for a fortune, and what I'm to say to my missus. Lord only knows."

Colonel Parradine gave a snort of disgust. "I suppose you haven't sent for us to look at a dead canary when we are faced with such a tragedy," he thundered.

"Sent for you, sir," said Mr. Headland, innocently. "Never thought of such a thing. Lennard must have made a mistake. I asked for Mr. Narkom to come, as I can't find anything more out, and am giving up the job. But this canary fair beats me...."

"I suggest having it stuffed, sir," put in the landlord, thoughtfully. "We've got the man here that'll do it, in a trice."

"Why, of course," said Bristol, patiently, turning in the direction of the bar. "Old Twells, the very man."

"The very thing," said Cleek, and switching round on his heel looked interestedly at the old gray-haired man to whom the landlord was evidently explaining the situation. Then, as he came over to them, Cleek turned to Mr. Narkom. "If you'd get the cage out of the locker in the car, sir, we could stick it on its blessed perch and make a good job of it. Here's the key; I think it's the right one."

Whether it was the right one or not Mr. Narkom looked down on the label attached to it, and seeing the message that Cleek had scribbled on it, ran out of the place as fast as legs could carry him.

When he returned Mr. Headland was still directing the taxidermist as to what he was to do and how and when to do it.

"Did you find it, sir?" he asked as Mr. Narkom rushed in, his face red with excitement.

"Yes, exactly where you said, Cleek," cried the Superintendent, blurting out the name unconsciously in his agitation.

A little gasp of interest sounded, but Cleek took no heed. With shining eyes and mouth set in a thin red line he switched round on his heel, his voice sounding clear and sharp:

"Game's up, my boy; stand aside, Bristol. It's no use trying to shield yourself or your accomplice. I want you both."

With a little spring he threw himself forward, bearing down on the old bent figure of Twells, still standing with the dead canary in his hands, leaving Narkom and Dollops to keep an eye and hand on the younger man, who had collapsed into a chair.

"Richard Deverill, I arrest you for the murder of your cousin, Anthony Winton," rang out Cleek's imperious voice.

"It's a lie! Who are you? How dare you?" shrieked the supposedly old man, his voice no longer quavering, but full and shrill.

"No lie, my man." And Cleek, leaning forward, twitched off the gray wig, revealing a close-cropped head and sallow forehead. "Also for the theft of the 'Rose of Fire,' but in that I think we have forestalled you."

"Yes, here it is," said Narkom, as he held up the exquisite gem, and a cry burst from the lips of the prisoner.

"Take him away, boys," said Cleek to Petrie and Hammond, who had entered unnoticed in the general confusion. Then turning to Bristol he said: "You did a foolish thing, young man, in not telling the complete truth last night. You knew Twells had something to do with it."

"Yes, I did. He asked me to get the lights switched off at exactly 10 o'clock last night, saying he could stop the marriage of Winton and Miss Parradine without any harm if the lights were off in that house for two minutes, and I was so desperate that I yielded. While I was talking with my engineer friend at the Power House I leant up against the switch. Afterward I went nearly mad thinking that I had helped to kill Winton, if I was not a murderer myself."

"No, but you let the murderer escape, my friend. If you had told me, it would have saved me a lot of trouble."

"But how and by what was Winton killed? How could the murderer escape through closed doors and window and in the dark? Nothing human could do it ——"

"I never said it was human," flung in Cleek, a little one-sided smile creeping up his face. "It was as Mr. Winton said—the Death's Head. What's that, Miss Parradine, the skeleton? Oh, dear no; something far more deadly, though not as dead as that. Here it is!"

Diving into his pocket he pulled out a large match-box, and opening it turned out onto the table a splendid moth.

"The Death's Head," he said. "See the skull and crossbones?"

"Twells or Deverill was a ruined man and desperate. I soon found out by cabling from headquarters that he had left Buenos Ayres for London some two months ago. Being already known to the police over another shady transaction, they had kept watch and there was no doubt he was in league with the Burmese priests to try and recover the 'Rose of Fire' for them. You may be sure that he knew from gossip that the jewels had been willed to Miss Parradine, so he settled down here to await his chance and got it, last night."

"But how?" said Bristol.

"Through the open window," was the reply. "From his post in that big oak tree opposite the gallery he let loose this moth, knowing the bright electric light right

in front of Winton's face would attract it. Its wings were heavily laden with that deadly poison dust the natives use both in South America and Burmah for their blow-pipes. The heat of the lamp would make it more deadly. I take it that Winton knew his danger when he got the first whiff of the poison dust, and tried to drive the intruder out, but could not manage both, dying as he was.... Yes, both, Colonel—Deverill had not played the part of naturalist for nothing and he had ready a natural thief. In the magpie, or raven, was it, Mr. Narkom?"

"Magpie, Cleek."

"Yes, as I thought. Trained to pick up a red rose probably, it responded nobly to its training, and picked up the brilliant red 'Rose of Fire'."

"But why did he want the light off?" asked Bristol.

"Because he knew that just as the light had attracted them in, the dark would send them out into the moonlight. Winton probably exhausted his last strength driving them away and pulling down the window, which sound Calvert heard.

"All Twells had to do was to see that his pet came home safely, and left the jewel I expect where the bird itself took it, to his cage. Was I right, Mr. Narkom?"

"Right as a trivet, Cleek—hidden under the straw."

"I recognized the yellow feathery dust, and had it analyzed in town to make sure," continued Cleek. "The trace of bird-lime, or some sticky substance in the shape of a bird's claw, gave me the first clue as to the actual thief, and a black feather under the table confirmed it. The dead moth I found outside the window, so I knew the whole thing. The fact that coming back from finding the moth, I nearly met my own death is another story. If I hadn't brought Dollops back with me, this case might have ended very differently. All I wanted to find out in town was whether Richard Deverill was still in South America, of which I had my doubts."

"What's that, Mr. Narkom? Why did I suspect old Twells? Well, it was rather suspicious that he should be hanging about at that hour, and discovering that he was so keenly interested in natural history made me think a whole lot. As I found the number of that motor-car that knocked you down, Colonel, I knew you were out of suspicion. Besides, I had a good look at 'Old Twells,' and though his voice and face were well kept up, his hands were full-blooded and strong. All I had to do was to find an excuse to get him into my clutches, without losing the 'Rose of Fire,' and my canary did the trick. I was only just in time, for to-day old Twells would have vanished forever. The 'Rose of Fire' would have been sold to return

to Mandalay and the new heir would have come home with a flourish of woe and mourning. He gambled that Mr. Bristol would be afraid to mention the light business, even if he ever connected it with the murder. And now I think as Dollops here has demolished my meal and his own too, I propose we get back to town. Miss Parradine, take my advice, either bank that jewel, ill-fated as it is, or strike a bargain with the envoys of Buddha, for they will not hesitate to strike again, and the next time they may be even more successful."

With a little bow, and with Narkom and Dollops in the rear, Cleek passed out, and soon the soft whirr of the departing limousine was heard. Only a gilt cage, with a dead canary in it, was left to remind them of the riddle that had so quickly been solved.

CHAPTER XX

THE STOLEN FORMULAS

Cleek's first object on getting back to town was to make for Ailsa's cottage at Hampton.

Always, when staying at the cottage alone, Cleek's disguise was that of "Cap'n Burbage," guardian of his ward, Ailsa Lorne. Mrs. Condiment, the housekeeper, therefore, greeted the "Cap'n" heartily on the threshold of the cottage when he arrived. Ailsa was for the present in safe hands—on a visit with Mrs. Narkom. Secure, therefore, in his "Cap'n Burbage" disguise, Cleek went to and fro, with peace and serenity restored to his soul. So determined was he to have these few days undisturbed that in spite of his affection for Mr. Narkom, he instructed Mrs. Condiment to say, in answer to any telephone calls, that he was not at the cottage.

Mr. Narkom, seated in his office at the Yard, a few days later, flung aside the pen with which he had been beating an idle tattoo, thus showing the tension and anxiety under which he was almost unbearably labouring, and wheeled round in his chair. He heard the sound of footsteps, telling him that his trusted messenger, Hammond, was returning at last. He gave vent to a little sigh of relief. Now he would know what had really happened, and be able to prove to a waiting public and sneering newspapers that Scotland Yard was not "asleep," but that neither was it to be bullied nor cajoled into blurting out all that it knew. "Gad," he ejaculated, mentally, wouldn't he like to have some of those brilliant young cub reporters have his job for a week, and let them see if they could fathom mysteries, such as were searing his forehead at the present moment, any quicker than he himself.

The door opened and shut, and Detective-Sergeant Hammond was stepping briskly across the room.

"Well?" rapped out the Superintendent in a sharp staccato born of nervous impatience. "A false alarm, wasn't it?"

"No, sir, it's not. It's the greater part of Tooting Common this time—sheep blown to bits and a few kiddies, too, I'm afraid. I was just in time to see a second explosion myself, as I got there—that's the seventh one altogether, and heaven

knows what's the cause or reason. And where will the next one be? The papers will be raving over this to-night."

"Can't rave more than they've done now. I'd give my head to make those beastly reporters sit up!"

"There's only one man to help you, sir, beggin' yer pardon." Hammond dropped his voice almost to a whisper. "That's Mr. Cleek——"

"Do you think I don't know that?" Narkom snapped back, impatiently. "Do you think I'd have waited till now if I'd known where he was? I've done nothing but ring that confounded 'phone day in and day out and all I get is that 'Captain Burbage is away.' Captain Burbage, indeed! To think that after all these years we can't protect him against those devils of Apaches without his living in this constant disguise."

'"Tisn't like Mr. Cleek to be long away from the Yard, either," said Hammond, scratching his head reflectively.

"No. I don't doubt, though, there's some good reason for it, but my lord! what wouldn't I give to hear his blessed voice or see his face at this moment!"

Possibly in the whole period of his professional career Mr. Narkom had never had a wish granted so speedily, for as the words left his lips, the door behind him flashed open and shut again and there on the threshold stood a stout, elderly, seafaring man. The sight of him caused the Inspector fairly to spring from his seat.

"Cleek!" he cried. "Cleek! Lord, I did want you. I——"

Cleek smiled as he bore up under the onslaught. "Thought you would when I saw the papers," he said. Mr. Narkom snorted as if at the name of a hated enemy, then turned to Hammond.

"Nor a word outside, Hammond, but tell Lennard to come round at once. We shall need him!"

Once alone, he turned again to his partner.

"I suppose it's those explosions," said Cleek, as having divested himself of some of the "Burbage disguise," he dived for a cigarette.

"No, they're an extra burden," said Mr. Narkom, "as if I'm not nearly mad already! And now there's been another one this morning on Tooting Common. But it's this Government business that is killing me."

Cleek twitched an inquiring eyebrow and waited patiently for the facts.

"The Kenneth Digby case. I'm expecting him here every minute, but I've nothing new to tell him."

"Kenneth Digby?" echoed Cleek, a little pucker between his brows. "Any relation to the soldier and scientist-inventor of that new machine-gun tried out last year?"

"His son, Cleek. And, as his father is practical guarantee of his integrity and uprightness, you can imagine what a blow this has been to Colonel Digby and his family."

"A blow! Does that mean you are trying to tell me that Graham Digby's son is a traitor to his country?" flung back Cleek in rising tones of amazement. "Suppose you give me all the facts, old man—just what has happened."

"It's like this, Cleek," answered Mr. Narkom. "Young Digby is engaged in laboratory experiments with high explosive; trying, as far as I can gather, to evolve a smokeless powder—— Good heavens, what's wrong?" For his famous associate was sitting erect in his seat, his eyes sparkling and brilliant, his brows twitching with excitement, his breath coming in gasps.

"Smokeless? Is that the secret? Blithering idiot I was! Of course, a child would have guessed it. But go on, old man. Don't mind me. I've been reading the papers, and am just beginning to see."

"Well, it's more than I am," ejaculated Mr. Narkom, blankly. "However, to continue: it seems that as fast as Digby evolves a formula our Secret Service reports to the War Office that it is known immediately to a certain unfriendly foreign power. Well, Digby is nearly frantic, and is to be here again at 11 o'clock."

"H'm, it's that now," said Cleek, as he glanced out of the window, "and unless I am mistaken here he comes. Introduce me as Lieutenant Deland in mufti, will you? I'll have a look into things for myself, directly I have made a few necessary changes."

And that was why a minute or two elapsed before, after a brief word on the house 'phone, Captain Digby was shown in. He was a fine, upstanding, manly-looking young soldier of about eight and twenty, a man with something of the scholar's refinement in his bearing. But this morning he was nearly as hysterical as a schoolgirl.

"Oh, Mr. Narkom, help me! For God's sake, solve this mystery!" he cried as he gripped Mr. Narkom's outstretched hand in his own and pressed it excitedly. "My father said everything would be all right just as soon as you had the matter in your hands—but it's gone, another! The horror and disgrace of it! I shall kill myself in the end!"

"Steady, Captain Digby. Let me introduce you to Lieutenant Deland, who will help you," said Mr. Narkom.

The young man acknowledged the introduction dumbly, and his look of appeal went straight to Cleek's heart.

"Look here, get a firm grip on yourself, Captain, or you'll be in a bad way," said Cleek. "Here, swallow this capsule. Swallow it, man! There, that's better. Now let me get a clear grasp of the facts of the case, for I know nothing about it whatever. Begin at the beginning, please. Just what *has* happened? What has 'gone'?"

"My latest formula," replied Captain Digby, regaining his composure somewhat. "I am at work on smokeless powder experiments in my laboratory down at my country home in Hampshire. It was specially built for me two years ago when I first took up this work, and I have a special detachment of police and military to guard it."

"When did you miss this formula?"

"This morning," was the quick answer. "I had been working over it three days—night and day. Last night I tested the stuff, and the results were more satisfactory than hitherto, so I made up my mind to knock off and go to bed—after I had written out the completed formula as usual."

"What did you do with it then?"

Captain Digby passed a hand, stained with chemicals, over his lined forehead. "That's just it," he almost moaned. "I can't remember. I thought I locked it up in my little wall safe! I meant to, I know, but failing that, it lay there on the laboratory table and I must have come away and left it. In the morning it was gone! I searched the place over, inch by inch. This is my last chance; the authorities will never get over this." His head sank down in his hands.

"Where is the laboratory and how is it built?"

"It is at the side of the house, and was originally a stable till we had it concreted inside and out. Solid six feet of concrete doors, ceiling—everything.

"Hullo! Concrete everything? How do you see in it?"

"Artificial light always, run by my own generator and dynamo, overhead. Only one door opens into the laboratory and that is from the drawing-room inside the house and it is guarded by a soldier. No one ever enters save myself; no one, not even among the rest of the family, save my father, knows of the nature of my work. Is it any wonder that my chief suspects me?"

"Well, there's nothing to be said or done till I come down and see things for myself," said Cleek, very quietly. "Will there be any difficulty in your admitting me into the laboratory, by the way?"

"Not a scrap. I shall just say you are another colleague——"

"Another, Captain Digby?" Cleek flashed round on the young man. "Another? Does that mean that you have had a colleague or assistant before this?"

"Why, yes—a fellow officer, Captain Brunel—Max Brunel. We are bosom friends as well. We were at Heidelberg together, and he is the very soul of honour."

"H'm——" Cleek turned aside to pick up his hat from the rack, a queer little smile twitching up the left side of his face, and when he looked back at Captain Digby his gaze was a very intent one, as if he were asking himself whether the Captain's innocence and belief were real or assumed.

It was exactly two o'clock when Lieutenant Arthur Deland, tall, well-set, and debonair, with the stamp of the army all over him, arrived as arranged at St. Mary's Abbey, Hampshire, the family seat of the Digbys, which was noted for a wonderful painted shrine of the Virgin Mary, said to date back to the sixteenth century and renowned throughout all the southern counties of England.

He found the laboratory exactly as the young scientist had described it, absolutely sound-proof, light-proof, and as innocent of hole or aperture in its concrete walls and floor—with the exception of the door leading from the dining-room—as the inside of an egg.

His introduction to the family—a large one—caused him to be voted an acquisition to its amusement by its younger and more frivolous members. Before he had been in the house an hour, the very sight of his gold-rimmed monocle and

the sound of his inane laugh was a signal for the spoilt Digby twins, aged eight, literally to fling themselves upon him, notwithstanding the gentle protests of their meek little fair-haired governess. She had been curtly introduced as Miss Smith by his hostess, and then allowed to fade away into the obscurity she so obviously preferred.

Within the next twenty-four hours Lieutenant Deland gained much intimate knowledge as to the ways and characters of an interesting family. Fancies are queer things, and he found himself greatly disliking Colonel Digby's wife, a hard-faced, gushing woman, shrill of voice, and quick to scold, and he was not surprised to learn that she was the Colonel's second wife, and not the mother of the Captain at all. According to the gossip elicited in the servants' hall by Dollops, who had been allowed to accompany him at the last moment, the dreamy, absent-minded scientist had been snapped up by the lady, herself a widow, when on a visit to Vienna. He had found himself married "before he was properly awake," as Dollops expressed it with a significant grin.

Cleek soon found, too, that her contempt for Captain Kenneth was as great as her inordinate love for her own son by her first marriage, Max Wertz, a brilliant young scamp of the class of bar-loafers and roulette-table haunters. It did not take Cleek long, either, to discover that, unknown to the old Colonel or Kenneth, both mother and son were keenly curious as to the work carried on in the concrete laboratory.

Cleek played right up both to mother and son, however, and had the satisfaction of obtaining from both unqualified approval.

"I say, Deland, you're a good sort," said young Wertz in the drawing-room that evening—a shade too enthusiastically, perhaps—"but hang it all, if you can go into that silly old stone coffin of a laboratory, why can't I? Jealousy, that's it! Old Ken thinks he's the only one with brains in his head. What—what's it like in there, anyway?"

"Dem dark, dirty, and smelly, my boy," was the lieutenant's drawled and expressive reply. "You keep out of it, old sport. Give you my word, my clothes'll smell of rotten eggs for a week. Hullo, though, who's that coming out of it now?"

Wertz spun round and looked across at the door which led into the laboratory. "Oh, that's Brunel," he said, carelessly. "Ken's other self, alter ego, and all that sort of thing. Can't bear the man myself. I'll introduce you if you like, and then I'll go along."

He performed the ceremony carelessly enough, and then lounged away whistling

the latest jazz melody.

Left alone, the two men found themselves mentally sizing each other up as men will do, and Cleek decided silently that he liked the look of Max Brunel—but not on account of his appearance. That was not very prepossessing. His face was too scarred from his student days at Heidelberg, and his clothes, which were stained, also reeked of the chemical compounds with which he, like his friend Kenneth, spent his days. But his voice was an attractive one, and his eyes, when unshaded by disfiguring glasses, were clear though undisguisedly penetrating.

That he had been let into the secret of the vanished formula was evident by his sudden remark.

"This is a rotten business for Ken, my friend, Mr. Deland. Do you think you are likely to make any discovery?"

"Well, Mr. Brunel, to tell you the truth and just between ourselves I don't think there is a ghost of a chance. It's gone. I must get a squint into the room and write immediately—you have no telephone, have you?"

"No, Mr. Deland, and only one post. At that all the letters have to go by motor to the next town. Lately the Colonel has had all letters censored, so as to be quite sure no knowledge leaks outside."

"There you are, you see—absolutely impossible, don't yer know. I shall have to stay down here for another day to make things look ship-shape, but I really think they'll have to put a more brainy chap on to the case than yours truly. Eh, what?" Deland gave an inane little giggle, and fixing his monocle turned away, leaving Max Brunel with a frown of contempt on his fair, stolid face. He continued on his way toward Mrs. Digby as she stood near the fireplace.

"The youngsters have been telling me about that painted shrine, Mrs. Digby," he said, twisting his monocle affectedly, and eyeing her with something very much akin to admiration, which pleased her immensely. "Sort of thing interests me, doncher-know."

"Indeed? Well, I know little about it myself," she responded with a forced laugh. "Miss Smith will be able to give you the most assistance as to the legend. She fairly worships at it, and spends all her spare time painting pictures of it on postcards and sending them to her friends. Her father was an archeologist, I believe, and it runs in the family. If you're interested you should get her to talk on the subject."

She turned at the moment to speak a word to her son, and Cleek made his way to

the door in the wall in order to join Captain Kenneth in the laboratory. He found him frowning over test-tubes, Bunsen burners, and retorts. Also he was not alone. Brunel was with him, and at the look of concentrated interest upon Brunel's face, Cleek's own took on a peculiar expression.

His entrance caused the two young men to look up, and they came forward to him, as if eager to help him in some way.

"Going to poke about a bit if you don't mind," he said, smiling, and proceeded to put the words into immediate action. He searched, he sniffed—much to their secret amusement—and he took measurements as would a furniture man preparing to lay a carpet. Finally he climbed up into the loft where stood the generator and dynamo which supplied electric current for the laboratory. There was clearly nothing to be learned there, and as he descended, plainly irritated by his failure, he found young Digby standing alone in the centre of the room, his hand pressed to his forehead.

"Got a rotten headache," he explained to Cleek's unspoken inquiry. "Can't think what's caused it, either, unless it's the gas, and——"

"Gas!" exclaimed Cleek, suddenly. "How's that? I thought you used electricity for lighting?"

"So we do, but I made some nitrous oxide yesterday—one of the kids had toothache, and I pulled out the molar. Came like lightning, too, but that little fool of a governess fainted just as I was going to administer the gas—you learn to do a lot of things shut off in the country, you know, sir. So I had to make some more of the stuff. It escaped, no doubt, and that's what's given me this beastly head."

"Very probably." Cleek's detached air seemed to dismiss the affair. His eyes were fixed upon one of the Bunsen burners beneath which stood a retort labelled plainly enough, "Nitrous Oxide." Casually he picked up a strand of hair and seemed to cast it away, absent-mindedly. Suddenly he switched round upon his heel.

"Did you have that headache last night?" he asked, his hand resting for a moment upon the retort.

"No, I didn't notice it, but I was so dead beat that I simply flung myself down and slept like a log."

"H'm," Cleek said, thoughtfully. "Well, Captain, there is very little to be gained here. Still, I should like to go through some of the rooms of the house myself, if you've no objection."

"Why, of course not. Do as you please. But it's no use suspecting the servants because they couldn't get past the guard, and——"

"I suppose not. But I'll have a talk with that guard, too, if you don't mind. It's as well to take all precautions."

"By all means."

Cleek followed the Captain out of the room and into the drawing-room, now empty save for the guard in question, a big man in soldier's uniform who saluted as they came up to him.

The Captain spoke first:

"Marshall, this gentleman would like to know if any one came in here last night," he said, quietly. "Speak out."

"No, sir." The man's voice was rough and emphatic. "Only yourself—and that but for a moment."

"*Myself?*" Captain Digby's voice registered utter amazement. "You're dreaming, man. I was never down here last night, I'll swear——"

"Beggin' yer pardon, but yer were, sir," responded Marshall, stoutly. "You just switched on your torch, saying you'd forgotten something, and was in and out before you could say Jack Robinson. You've 'ad so much on your 'ands, sir, it's no wonder you forget. Nothin' wrong, is there?"

Cleek's quick voice interposed before the Captain had time to reply, but his dazed, blank face answered for him.

"No, Marshall, there's nothing wrong at all. Everything, in fact, is quite in order. The Captain forgot, I expect. That's all I wanted to ask you. Better come along upstairs, Digby. I'd like to have a word with your father when I come down, but if you'll be good enough to show me the way upstairs now——"

The dazed look was still upon the Captain's face as he led Cleek upstairs, and at sight of it that gentleman gave vent to a low, amused laugh.

"Don't worry, Captain," he said, softly. "Keep quiet and don't get disturbed about it. Every cloud has a silver lining, you know, and I've an idea that this one has a touch of gold in it."

He said no more, and the two went from room to room, through bedroom and bathroom, nursery and servants' quarters, until at last Cleek expressed himself satisfied, and consented to join Colonel Digby in the library.

They found him engaged in looking over the letters which were to go by that night's post.

"Not a very big 'bag' this evening," he said, smiling up into his son's pale face. "We confine ourselves mostly to postcards—they're easier to censor."

"Can't put much on them certainly, especially the picture ones," remarked Cleek with some amusement. "That's a pretty thing you've got in your hand there, Colonel. The celebrated shrine, isn't it?"

"Yes." Colonel Digby handed it across with a kindly smile. "Another of poor little Miss Smith's attempts. She's always painting the thing, and I should think the little brother to whom she sends them must know it off by heart. He's a cripple, I believe, and very much devoted to his sister. Anyhow, she sends him dozens of these cards. Nothing from you to-night, Kenneth?"

"No, Dad. I haven't felt up to writing," responded the Captain, gloomily.

Meanwhile, Cleek's eyes were dwelling upon the crudely painted little picture of the shrine. It was finished with a conventional hexagonal border, obviously imitated from some old illuminated missal.

Suddenly he turned about and ejaculated with some show of excitement: "I must be right. The Benzene Ring, of course. I might have known. Only give me till to-morrow at three o'clock, Colonel, and if I'm right your son's honour is as safe as the Bank of England. I'll be off at once. I'll take the motor which carries the postbag, if you don't mind. There's no use in wasting fuel these days. Three o'clock to-morrow will find me back again, never fear. Until then, good-night."

He caught up his hat from the table where it had lain since he entered the house, dashed to the door, flashed it open, and was gone in the twinkling of an eyelash. But he left the dawn of hope behind.

If punctuality is the virtue which the world paints it, then Lieutenant Deland was clearly not gifted with that quality, for on the afternoon of the next day the clock on the mantel in the Colonel's library had long ago struck three and was creeping steadily on in the direction of four, and still the lieutenant had not as yet appeared.

The Colonel's usually grave face was grim, and the light of that sudden hope

which had made the night so sweet was slowly but gradually dying out of his eyes. His son could not rest a moment, and seemed unable to do anything but pace up and down the long room. Of a sudden came the sound of wheels on the gravel of the drive beneath their window. Both men looked eagerly toward the doorway, where there soon appeared a servant with the announcement that they were needed in the drawing-room.

"Thank God!" said young Digby with a sigh of relief. "The beggar's come at last, has he? All right, Blake, we're coming along at once."

But their hopes were doomed to disappointment for it was not the dapper lieutenant who awaited them, but Mr. Narkom, beaming genially upon them from the chair where he was seated near Mrs. Digby.

"I am sorry you've been kept waiting," he said as he shook hands. "It's all the fault of that idiot Deland. He couldn't make head or tail of the business so I took him off and put a new man on to the job—Mr. George Headland. I expect him down by the next train, and I thought if I could wait here——"

"Why, of course, Mr. Narkom," was the reply. "I didn't expect he would or could discover any solution; it's beyond everybody——"

"We'll give you some tea, Mr. Narkom," gushed Mrs. Digby. "Perhaps your new man will be as amusing as the lieutenant—such a nice boy."

So that was how, when at 4:30 the door opened to admit another arrival, Miss Smith, the children, and all the family were gathered around the tea table. It was, however, Lieutenant Deland who appeared and not the successor the Superintendent had announced.

"Headland couldn't come, Mr. Narkom, so I thought I'd come down and tell you that I was right," that gentleman remarked, casually.

"Good," exclaimed the Superintendent, his face beaming with excitement. "And did you bring the warrant with you?"

"Yes, I——"

"Warrant?" The word was echoed from various pairs of lips, in varying tones of surprise.

"Yes, my friends, the warrant. A traitor in a family is not a pleasant thought," said Cleek in clear, ringing tones, at the sound of which the Colonel and his son started in amazement. "What's that? No, Mr. Wertz, leave that door alone, no one goes out from here now—not even the kiddies. They must put up with it; we

can't afford any risks. Perhaps Miss Smith would not mind giving them these pictures to look at to divert their attention."

"Certainly, sir." The timid little black-robed figure advanced, while Cleek gave a watchful glance toward the corner where Mr. Max Brunel was watching him as if fascinated.

"That's right," he said, producing a big package of pictures, adding laughingly, "you'll want both hands." As she extended them he snapped out: "And so shall I, Fraulein Schmidt. Quick, Narkom, the handcuffs—in my pocket. No, you don't, you she-cat. I've got you. Never again will you betray the country that has shielded and paid you. No more painted picture postcards. You see, I smelt the trick—and smelt the gas, too."

Not without considerable difficulty and more than considerable noise Mr. Narkom and his ally overcame the struggling little figure, and before the children had realized what had happened, their governess was escorted from the room by two stalwart policemen. Then they themselves were hustled from the room, as dazed at the occurrence as their elders.

"Sorry to seem to accuse you, Mr. Wertz," said Cleek. "But I was afraid she would recognize Hamilton Cleek even as I recognized her. Then the fat would have been in the fire with a vengeance!"

"Cleek!" came in varying tones of amazement from the group around him. "*Cleek!*"

"Yes—just Cleek of Scotland Yard. And perhaps it was as well that I came when I did, for Captain Kenneth might not have awakened from the next sleep he took, and—— What's that, Colonel? An explanation? Oh, certainly. That's very simple.

"In the first place, I discovered that your laboratory was, as you had said, absolutely proof against all outside observation. Clearly, also, there was only one means of entry and that by the simple method of the door. Here I must admit I was puzzled for a while, until I heard through your son of the nitrous oxide and found a strand of blonde hair caught in that Bunsen burner. That explained everything—your headache, Captain, and the second visit of which you knew nothing. Your tooth-pulling operation gave my lady her chance. Probably she had been provided with tubes of that gas, for all her painting tubes smelt of it. Anyhow, I take it that she secured your tube while pretending to faint. After she had succeeded in sending you to sleep, she dressed herself in your clothes, and went downstairs—it was easy enough in the dim light."

"What's that? She spoke to Marshall, you say? Oh, yes, I remember that quite clearly. But you must remember that I recognized Elsa Schmidt from the first, and knew her to be a male impersonator of no mean order. She used to be a shining star among the Apaches of Montmartre—but that's another story. Anyhow, having secured the formula, she burnt it and——"

"Burnt it?" exclaimed Captain Digby.

"Yes, burnt it. The ashes were beside the Bunsen burner as you will see for yourself next time you enter the laboratory. Then all she had to do was to come back and send a picture postcard to her brother Johann, one of the cleverest spies in Europe. By the way, Colonel, he is no more a cripple than I am!"

Everyone in the room by this time was looking at Cleek in utter amazement.

"Picture postcards you said, Mr. Cleek?" broke in the Colonel, suddenly. "Not those silly little painted things with the fancy borders?"

"The very same. And each time they passed through your hands for the postbag, your son's formula passed, too. But that was not your fault. It was simply a matter of that conventional border she was so fond of painting. Look at this one." He drew one from his pocket. "Evidently in this formula you used a combination of that mobile and highly inflammable liquid known as benzene chemically expressed as $C_6 H_6$. Now give a glance at this postcard. You will see that it is bordered with multiples of that Benzene Ring, and the dot and dash message underneath gives the exact proportions. All that the lady had to do was to paint a different border round her picture of that shrine and the thing was done.

"What's that, Mr. Narkom? How did I guess? Well, first of all, her face seemed familiar—though her hair had taken upon itself another colour. However, the strand of gold-dyed hair told me the truth of my suspicions. Secondly, when the children showed me the large quantity and size of these painting tubes, and when I saw the card when the Colonel put it into the postbag yesterday—well, I simply used my brains, and the rest was easy."

He stopped speaking for a moment and smiled into young Digby's face, stretching out his hand.

"Well," he resumed, "here's luck to your next formula, Captain. And at the same time, here's luck to London as well. For we shan't be having any more of our parks destroyed and our kiddies mutilated for the pride of a lustful nation. Johann was clever enough with his experiments—though God alone knows to

what a pitch he might have carried them. But I happened to be up on the outer edge of Totting Common when the centre of it blew up yesterday, with hardly a puff of smoke, either. But when it comes to using innocent human life as an *experiment—well*, it's beyond the conception of the average man!... Mr. Narkom, whenever you're ready we'll be making tracks. I've an appointment this evening and I'm afraid I shall miss it if we don't hurry. Good-bye, Mrs. Digby. Good-bye, Colonel—and you, too, Captain. Good-bye, all of you."

His hand went out and clasped each hand extended toward him. As Max Brunel's hand met his, he paused a moment.

"If you take my advice, my friend," he said, softly, "you'll never let young Kenneth know of your suspicions of him. I saw it all. I knew, even though you would have shielded him with your own life. But friendship and suspicion can never be in union. Take it from one who knows."

CHAPTER XXI

COUNTESS MARAVITZ ENTERTAINS

Upon what small circumstances will great events hinge! It was barely twenty-four hours later when Ailsa Lorne followed Cleek up to town, and together they spent the next few days rioting in shopping. Ailsa was now preparing for an event which would put an end to these delays and separations, and Cleek, set free for the time being from the Yard by an unexpected absence of Mr. Narkom, was as happy as a schoolboy on leave in term-time.

All thoughts of peril from the Apache friends of Margot seemed to have been banished, and possibly the knowledge that Ailsa was shadowed—unknown to her—by two of the Yard's most trusty men whenever he himself was not with her had much to do with Cleek's peace of mind. Strangely enough, his customary fears seemed to have been transferred to Dollops. Ever since the return of Cleek to London, Dollops had grown nervous and worried. His eyes had a strained, hunted look, and even his appetite had lost something of its voracity—a sure sign of trouble. Cleek, however, was too happy to note the trouble of his young satellite, and thus for the first time in their companionship had cause for regret in view of the event to come.

"Lor lumme, sir, you ain't a-going out again to-night, are ye?" the boy said, anxiously, one evening, as he noted Cleek about to change again into evening clothes.

"Why not, you inquisitive young monkey?" rejoined Cleek, amusedly. "Didn't I hear you say you were going to the theatre yourself? I'm dining with Countess Maravitz this evening, both Miss Lorne and I. Unless you have any objection," he added, ceremoniously. Then noting Dollops' dejected mien, he asked, "What's wrong, old man?"

"Nothing wrong, sir," said the boy, bravely, "only I don't like that 'ere Countess Mara—what's-her-name. 'Er eyes flash too much when she claps 'em onto yer. Besides, I saw 'er talking to too many French-looking characters last week. I didn't mean for to go and worry you," he blurted out. "Thought perhaps it was a mistake, but it ain't."

Cleek's face grew grave and he pinched up his chin thoughtfully.

"Countess Maravitz? Are you sure, Dollops?"

The boy nodded. "In the park it was by the Ash-heels statue, I saw her talking to what was Apaches or I miss my guess. They didn't see me 'cos I nipped round to the back, but I wasn't mistaken nohow. Couldn't yer telephone you was ill, sir?" he added, anxiously.

"No," was the decisive reply. "I'm not going to show the white feather, Dollops. Besides, Miss Lorne will be there, and in the enemies' hands, if you are right. Gad! When will it end!" he added, under his breath. Then he darted into the dressing room again, and it was some ten minutes before he emerged, immaculate as ever, to all appearances the customary fashionable man about town. But there were grim lines about the well-cut, flexible mouth, and a watchful gleam in the eyes that restored more peace to Dollops' heart than he had known for the past week.

"Don't you stay in, old man. You cut along to the Oxford. I'll keep my eyes open, all right. Forearmed is forewarned, thanks to you," said Cleek with a little laugh, as opening his hand he revealed a tiny automatic revolver, as deadly as it was small.

Dollops' eyes gleamed.

"Golly! That's the stuff to give 'em," he said, approvingly, and after Cleek had driven off in a taxi he, too, sallied forth, but not in the direction of any theatre. "Not for me, old thing," he soliloquized to the lamp-post. "Where Mr. Cleek goes is good enough for me. I wonder how the money goes." Under the light he counted his handful of coins and again nodded approvingly as he shot along now in the vicinity of Wardour Street.

Meanwhile, Hamilton Cleek's taxi had joined the string of carriages in Park Lane outside the pretty white house which the Countess Maravitz, a Polish count's widow, had taken for the season.

Once inside the flower-filled hall, Cleek searched anxiously amidst the guests trying to catch a glimpse of Ailsa Lorne.

The Countess Maravitz had evinced a strong liking for her, bringing, so she said, a verbal introduction from Mrs. Hawkesley—once Lady Chepstow—whose son both Ailsa and Cleek had saved from imminent peril.

Cleek's senses, quickened by the information given him by Dollops, noticed almost mechanically that although the number of guests was large they consisted mainly of men. There were very few women, and such as were present were

decidedly of foreign aspect. Polish, Belgian—and French. Cleek's heart sank and then pounded violently as his eyes rested on a slender, white-gowned figure shaking hands with their hostess. It was Ailsa, and as several of the guests closed round the group it seemed already to Cleek's strained nerves as if they were closing in on the one woman in the world.

A feeling came over him that right well had they played into their enemies' hands. Would they live to emerge safe? Cleek's fingers tightened instinctively on the pistol in his pocket. Almost he felt inclined to dash forward and at its point to bear Ailsa out of the house into safety. He blamed himself for his blindness—blamed even Dollops for not speaking out before.

Quietly and as unconcernedly as usual, however, to all outward mien, he sauntered across the great ballroom, and gently insinuated his way to Ailsa, who greeted him with that smile of infinite trust that always pierced his very heart. The thought that her life should be in danger because of him was one of his greatest sorrows.

Giving her his arm and in the buzz of talk and laughter, as they commenced to dance a few minutes later, he contrived to whisper: "Dearest, be brave! I fear we are in danger. Keep as close to me as possible and make some excuse to leave early. Laugh now if you can. I feel sure that that woman is watching us!"

"That woman" was the Polish countess, and she was indeed watching them. Just then, whether impelled by the signal of Ailsa's paling and flushing face, or because she actually read the movements of Cleek's lips, she glided over to them as they came to a standstill at one side of the ballroom.

"Ah, *mes amis*, but you dance so beautifully! You are tired, eh? Miss Lorne, come, do me the pleasure of seeing some pictures of my countrymen. They came to-day!"

She opened a small and almost hidden door behind her and, not knowing for the moment what else to do, Ailsa, with Cleek close behind, followed her as she stepped through the doorway. The room was almost dark, and, blinded by the sudden transition from the brilliantly lighted ballroom, Ailsa stopped short, but too late! The door closed behind them with a little vicious click, and as the Countess gave a low laugh of infinite triumph she switched on the lights. The sudden blaze revealed the presence of half a dozen men, guards evidently, and as Cleek recognized the familiar brand of his implacable enemies, the Paris Apaches, his heart sank.

"My pictures, sir! They came but to-day! *Our* clansmen, yours and mine, at your

service, Cracksman," and she made an ironic curtsey in front of Cleek, his face gray with anger at the trick, his lips set in a thin line.

Ailsa clutched swiftly at his arm. She, too, realized their danger and was prepared to fight with him to the bitter end.

"Enough of this play-acting, Countess," he said, harshly. "You seek queer companions for one of noble birth, but I have been blind indeed."

"Ah, yes, indeed, most impeccable of detectives," she mocked, "and now your eyes are to be opened, eh?" She stamped her foot, and, at what was very obviously a signal, the men with one swift movement seized Cleek's hand even as it clutched the tiny pistol, while others sprang from the darkness behind them and seized Ailsa. In less than a minute the two were separated, helpless, impotent in the hands of their captors.

"It is regrettable, sir," said the Countess more gently, "but I have to obey my orders. When the Queen arrives——!"

"Margot!" cried Cleek. "I might have known! Her influence is everywhere!" Then, seeing that resistance was vain, he submitted to the inevitable with as good a grace as possible. He recognized that both Ailsa's and his own safety lay in the hands of Margot alone, and nothing was to be gained by exhausting either his breath or his strength against a dozen men trained in the service of the most desperate band in Europe.

In secret anguish he watched them bind Ailsa in a huge carved chair at one end of the room, while he was subjected to the same indignity at the other, and again he cursed his stupidity.

It took but a few moments to bind them, and barely had the men stepped back when a knock sounded and the door opened to admit a figure only too familiar to Cleek, and to the men, who saluted with real or mock solemnity. For this was Margot, Queen of the Apaches.

"Good, sister! You have indeed succeeded where I failed," said Margot, as her eyes took in the scene. As Cleek noticed the hatred in the glance she directed at the serene face of Ailsa Lorne, his courage almost failed.

As the woman who had once held so much influence over his life advanced toward Cleek, her face became a mask, and even he, trained to read the motives of all classes of men, was at a loss to tell what emotions were at play behind her steely eyes. Used to her letting her uncontrolled Latin temperament have full sway, this was a new Margot, and his master mind was puzzled.

"I regret this step"—her voice was hard—"but we have sworn an oath that you shall return to the fold. When that happens we will do with you as we will: accept you back into the band, or subject you to a lingering death—both are in our power—but return you must. We have so decreed it."

"I——" began Cleek, indignantly, but she raised her hand for silence, and went calmly on:

"There are many ways we could force you to return and, as for our own safety you must be rendered impotent to work against us, we hope that you will not make it necessary for us to use the one we have chosen——"

A cry of horror burst from Cleek's lips as Margot glanced significantly at Ailsa Lorne, and the meaning of that glance dawned on his senses.

It was not his life that was in danger, but hers, the woman who in Margot's thoughts blocked the way to his return to his old life—and to her. Broken at last by the horror of it, a string of pleas and adjurations came from Cleek's lips.

Margot listened with a scornful smile upon her lips.

"The woman dies, Cracksman, unless you consent to return to Paris with us to-night."

"Why not kill her first, Queen Margot?" put in the slow, seductive voice of one of the men behind them, and Cleek strove impotently at his bonds.

He could not let Ailsa die, as die she would, if he refused. And if he consented, she would be lost to him forever.

It was the cruellest dilemma in which man had ever been placed, and he cried aloud in agony. Margot turned on her heel and dismissed with a few words the grim, waiting members of her band.

"Return to your guests, madame," she said to the Countess whose real identity Cleek would have given much to know. "You have done your work well, and we will not forget. Keep the orchestra playing, and if the sound of a shot reaches you, let no one open the door. Have a carriage at the side gate, and give orders for it to be driven where bidden. That is all, I think. I will write to you for the rest."

The door shut softly and the three were alone!

"You have ten minutes to decide!" Margot drew out a watch and a revolver, which Cleek knew only too well she would not hesitate to use.

"My dear—my dear, forgive me, but you must be saved, whatever happens," he groaned. "And——"

"Death would be preferable to life without you," said Ailsa. "Even if they kill me, they cannot force you to rejoin them. Besides, they would not dare. The police——"

Margot smiled. "Brave words, Miss Ailsa Lorne, but we care not that for these pigs of English police," and she snapped her fingers.

Again Cleek turned, and then a sharp knock sounded at the door.

"A man just come from Paris, with some special news," said the voice of the Countess.

"I will see him," was the curt reply, "but do not let any one come near the room afterward."

The door opened and shut as a desperate looking a character as one could imagine entered with a swaggering mien, his cap pulled low over his eyes. How he could have come through the London streets Cleek found himself wondering, in spite of his own fearful predicament.

"You have a special message for me?" said Margot, concealing the revolver in her hand.

There was dead silence. The messenger evidently was listening to the sound of the retreating footsteps.

"Be queek. I haf not time——" she went on in English as if she wished Ailsa Lorne to know how little she regarded her presence.

"Not 'arf I ain't, lady!" was the astonishing reply, as Dollops hurled himself forward.

With an exclamation Margot whipped out the revolver again. A shot rang out, but Dollops was too quick. Like a veritable human catapult he flung himself on the figure of the woman, the impetus carrying her down on the slippery floor, her head striking against the carved table leg. Then all was silence.

"God bless you, Dollops!" breathed Cleek, as the lad bounded over and slashed furiously at the binding ropes.

"Quick, sir! Miss Ailsa, put my coat on. Gawd bless yer both, and now let's get out before this beauty wakes up, or shall I finish her, sir?"

"No, no," said Cleek, catching Ailsa in a fervent embrace while Dollops picked up the revolver which had fallen from Margot's hand.

"Through here, Dollops. There's a side door and a carriage she said."

Quickly the three stepped out into a deserted corridor. Even if the Countess had heard the shot, she had evidently obeyed orders. Not a soul was in sight, and darting down the corridor to the door at the end, they found it led out to a small gate in the high surrounding wall.

Outside there waited a carriage, and Cleek, muttering a well-remembered password, bade the driver take them to Charing Cross. But when that individual drew up at the station and a porter opened the carriage door, its passengers had strangely vanished.

But it was not until Cleek had seen Ailsa safe in her own room that he dared give a sigh of relief.

"Good boy, Dollops," he said, softly, as that individual hovered over them both. "How did you manage it?"

"Looked himportant, sir, and swore at the footman. That's the way to treat their sort, sir. Works hevery time."

"Maybe you're right, boy," said Cleek.

CHAPTER XXII

AN INTERRUPTED HOLIDAY

Some twelve hours later Cleek had the pleasure of learning through some of Scotland Yard's scouts that Margot had departed for the Continent. Evidently she had recognized defeat for the time being, and Ailsa having, at Cleek's own advice, gone down to Mrs. Narkom to rest her quivering nerves, Cleek himself thought it only right to give Dollops the holiday his action had earned him. Had it not been for his ingenuity things would have gone very differently. The charm of the river now called to him, and as there was no urgent summons from the Yard, Cleek ordered Dollops to pack a couple of bags, to that young gentleman's delight and excitement, while he went out to ring up the owners of a motor-launch standing in the upper reaches of the Thames.

"Unless Mr. Narkom rings me up, we'll have a few days in Paradise," he said, not knowing of the secret fear already in Dollops' breast lest Mr. Narkom should do that very thing. But once left to himself, Dollops, with an uneasy twinge of conscience, promptly lifted the receiver off the hook; and then set to work with a will. Had not Cleek been so absorbed in his thoughts of Ailsa he must surely have noticed the almost frantic haste with which his faithful henchman packed up clothes and provisions and literally bundled him into a taxi to Waterloo, en route for Kingston, without so much as stopping for refreshment.

This is how it happened, therefore, that on reaching Kingston Station both felt disinclined to proceed farther until they had had lunch. Faggs Island was the place Cleek selected, and Dollops, who had long wished to see that famous resort, seconded the motion heartily. And it was just this small circumstance which brought the case of the Fire Opal to Cleek's notice, for as they came slowly out into the roadway and turned into one that would lead them to the river, there sounded in the distance the whirring hum of a speeding motor. As it swung down on them Cleek instinctively looked over his shoulder. The effect was most startling for everyone concerned, for it proved to be a Scotland Yard car, with the familiar figure of Lennard at the wheel.

"Cleek!" shouted Narkom as the car came to a standstill and he sprang out and seized his famous ally by the arm. "It's just like magic. Here I have been trying

desperately to telephone you"—here Dollops turned a dull brick-red and swallowed noisily—"and here you are, on the spot, within half an hour of where you're wanted—more urgently than anywhere else in the world. It's magnificent!"

"That's more than I say, you incorrigible spoil-sport!" returned Cleek, with a little sigh of resignation. "Another two minutes, and Dollops and I would have been carried away safe and sound out of your clutches. Well, it can't be helped. Here you are, and I must be at your command. Dollops, cut along to the launch and lay in a supply of provisions—you know best what to buy. Well, what is it this time, Narkom? I can fairly see the excitement bubbling out of you. Out with it."

Mr. Narkom sighed heavily. Then he pushed Cleek into the car, which headed back to Hampton Court at a great pace.

"It means two thousand pounds to you, my dear fellow, if you can solve the riddle. It's the British Government that's going to pay it," he said after a slight pause.

"Phew! Sounds interesting. Where does it begin?"

"It began for me," returned the Superintendent, grimly, "at one o'clock this morning, in Soho, when I was dragged out of bed to investigate a murder. It had evidently been committed within an hour of its discovery, for the body was still warm. It was, to all appearances, that of a Hindu; but subsequent examination showed it to be a man of European birth, French, probably. Funny thing about him was the colour of his eyes. One was black and the other brown. As for the Hindu part of it, he was as white as a man could be save for his stained face and hands. There were no means of identification, so I had to let the case slide. I don't say it has anything to do with the present case; still, the details are so strange:——"

"What is this case?" asked Cleek, abruptly. "Forgery, swindling, robbery?"

"Worse," returned the Superintendent. "It's murder—cunning, almost supernatural. Perpetrated by some diabolical means in the dark without any apparent cause. Three people, all inhabitants of the same house, have died within a year, and in spite of the fact that the subsequent autopsy has pointed to a case of heart failure, and there is not the least trace of any wound or blemish, yet each one who has been done to death would appear to have died just as that Syrian priest swore that whoever attempted to touch the stone should die—accursed, in darkness, and alone."

"What's that?" said Cleek, sitting up sharply. "A Syrian priest, a stone—by that, I presume, a precious stone of some sort—and three mysterious deaths! A regular melodrama! Let us have the details, please. What is this stone, and to whom does it belong?"

"Sir Thomas Montelet was the first European owner. I dare say you have heard of him; he is, or rather was, a noted collector of Oriental *objets d'art*, and I remember I had to lend him official protection some years ago, on the occasion of his moving his treasures to the country house to which we are now going."

"And it is this man who has been murdered?"

"No. Sir Thomas died peacefully in his bed. I rather fancy, though, you were in Paris during the case of that Red Crawl business. No, it is his widow, Lady Montelet, who is the latest and most important victim."

"Why most important?" asked Cleek, a note of irritation in his voice. "Are not all lives equal in the sight of the law?"

"True enough, my dear fellow, but by the good lady's death the British Government will inherit many valuable Eastern jewels, bequeathed by Sir Thomas in his will, and amongst them is this very jewel which has now been stolen—a yellow, reddish stone, known as a fire opal."

"H'm. Years ago, if I remember rightly," said Cleek, "Sir Thomas went out from England to investigate some ancient Assyrian discoveries, and brought back a unique opal known as the Eye of Ashtaroth—the Astarte of the Assyrians. Is that the stone in question?"

"The very one. Montelet not only made some perfectly astounding discoveries, but brought back many wonderful relics of the past, bequeathing them, on his death, to his widow, and thence to the nation which had so generously rewarded him. He took special pains for the safety of this great stone, the Fire Opal, for which a steel and cast-iron temple was made, a life-size model of the one from which it had been wrested—for which act an old native had cursed him up hill and down dale. Sir Thomas did not take any notice, however, but continued to remove and collect other and various treasures of the East, sending them to his deserted wife at home."

"Deserted wife! What do you mean?"

"Well, perhaps that does sound rather strange, Cleek, though it really does describe the case. For years and years he spent most of his time out of England, travelling in the Far East, and never returning home at all. Considering he had

made a second marriage, and a love match at that, this seemed rather strange. However, he made it up to her, as far as he could, in the end, for he brought back this Fire Opal himself and remained in England. Then he left the second Lady Montelet every stick and shilling in the world, even to the exclusion of his only son, Hubert, who was thus left dependent on his stepmother. Luckily, they fairly idolized each other, so it hasn't made much difference to him."

Cleek threw up his chin with a quick gesture.

"I see, I see," he said. "Left them with plenty of money, an historic and fate-laden jewel, if I know anything of precious stones, to say nothing of an Assyrian curse! Pleasant little heritage that! Did Lady Montelet believe in the curse?"

"According to young Montelet, she did not. Indeed, she was more angry than frightened when the other two deaths occurred——"

"Ah, yes, what of them? Who were they?"

"One was a servant, a young parlour-maid, who was by mistake shut up in that ungodly temple and was found dead at the foot of the altar apparently killed by fright. The second was a French girl visiting Lady Montelet. She appeared to have been killed by the same mysterious agency. Then the servants got to saying that one of the statues of the collection came to life at night, and had been seen walking down a passage near the temple. Sheer nonsense, of course, but it so angered the old lady that in the face of the strongest opposition she announced her intention of sitting up all night in the Assyrian temple, to prove that nothing would happen. What did happen Heaven alone knows, but she was evidently found dead before the altar, just as the others were; for I received a wire asking me to come immediately. I was just trying to find you when Providence threw you in my path. So there's the case in a nutshell, Cleek."

"H'm! and one with a pretty tough kernel," responded Cleek, grimly. "However, we shall get to the bottom some day, as the stone said when it fell in the well. Hallo! we're slowing down, aren't we? Where are we?"

"The old 'Crown Inn' I expect. I told young Montelet I would wait there for him if I could get hold of the right man to take up the case. So if you don't mind jumping out.... And as to disguise—Lord, what a miracle you are! If I hadn't actually known it was you, I should declare it was another man."

"It is," responded Cleek, blandly. "For the next few hours you will have the pleasure of the company of Mr. George Headland."

The car drew up with a little jerk before the inn door, and two minutes later

Cleek was listening to the story of the case as told by Mr. Hubert Montelet, a fair-faced, boyish, impulsive, and altogether lovable young fellow of two-and-twenty.

CHAPTER XXIII

A DIVIDED LEGACY

Brought down to mere essentials, it differed very little from what Mr. Narkom had already told him. It was the tale of a man who had incurred the wrath of native priests for what was in reality nothing less than looting their temple of its greatest treasure, a Fire Opal, which was known historically as the Eye of Ashtaroth, the Assyrian goddess of beauty. In the fight at the temple Sir Thomas had only saved his own life and those of his few followers by shooting the head priest with his revolver. Dying, the man had cursed him in one of the fearful curses of the East, and vowed that his spirit would follow the Sacred Eye to the uttermost ends of the earth, and that every human being that touched the stone should die "in the darkness that walketh by night, by fire that knows no heat, and by a death that leaves no sign, but passes through walls of stone and bars of steel."

"Splendid!" commented Cleek, with a little nod of approval. "By the way, Mr. Montelet, who told you the history of this ill-fated stone and its fearful curse of a wandering spirit that slays in the dark?"

"Why, my father himself, Mr. Headland. I remember when he brought the wretched stone back and fixed it up in a steel-lined case, of which the top was glass. He had a kind of mimic altar made—you shall see it for yourself—on which the case was put. No one but my dear stepmother knew how the stone was put into its pedestal. No one but my father had ever touched it, and after the priest died I don't believe even he did so with his bare hands."

"H'm. I see! And did Lady Montelet believe in the priest's curse or not?"

"Not at first—not, in fact, till after that poor maid of ours died last year. She accidentally let her broomhandle fall through the glass top of the case and whether she did touch the stone or not, or whether it was, as our doctor said, that she died of fright, her heart having been known to be weak, one can't say. But she was found dead. Then, six months later, a young orphaned French girl from a Russian convent, Celestine Merode—— Why, what's the matter?"

"Celestine! A convent!" Cleek ejaculated. "The two things are so utterly incongruous!"

"Why, did you know her?" asked the young man in natural bewilderment.

"Know her! Yes, she was the sister of one of the worst scoundrels that ever formed a unit of the Apaches."

"The Apaches!" gasped young Montelet. "Good heavens! But she came with the very finest credentials, to act as companion for my stepmother. She was a dear girl, and it nearly broke my mother's heart when she, too, was found dead. Lady Montelet has a penchant for French companions, and her present one, Marie Vaudrot, who has been with her ever since, is also French. She was vouched for by a Countess Somebody or other, and she has been like a daughter to my mother.... Oh! it is too, too awful!" he burst out, fiercely. "First my dear, dear father——"

"Good heavens!" burst out Mr. Narkom. "Did he too, die mysteriously? I understood that he died from pneumonia."

"So he did," was the low-toned reply; "but on the night of his death he eluded the nurse while she slept, and we—my mother and I—found him lying in front of the altar. The glass was removed, leaving the stone exposed. He must have touched it—and he had died...." His voice trailed away into silence, and a wave of emotion surged over him, choking him. Suddenly he swung round with an intense desperation in his face and voice. "Help me, Mr. Headland! Let me avenge these deaths. The stone I care nothing for. Thank Heaven it is gone, that no more murders may be committed for its sake. Help me to avenge the woman who was more than a mother to me—the best, the truest that ever lived! If I could have done anything in this world to have saved her, but I couldn't, I couldn't! Nothing on earth could save her."

Cleek twitched up an inquiring eyebrow.

"Save her from what, Mr. Montelet? The effect of the curse?"

"The curse!" he echoed in tones of unutterable contempt. "No, there's nothing supernatural about that! You know as well as I do that such a thing is all rot. People can't be killed like that in a steel-lined room, with a bolted door and barred windows, thirty feet above the ground; nor do I believe in heart disease. No; there's a human agency at the back of the mystery, and you yourself have given me a clue as to the perpetrators. It is that gang of thieves, the Apaches, who are the root of the mystery, and Miss Marie Vaudrot will turn out to be a second Celestine Merode. No wonder Laura distrusts her."

"Laura! And, pray, who is that?" interposed Cleek, gazing into the young man's

excited face.

A flush came over it. He shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Miss Laura Gwynne, Mr. Headland—Lady Montelet's stepdaughter. She, you know, was married twice, and Laura was brought up in the French convent of Notre Dame. She is a few years older than I am, though no one would believe it, and a noble girl.

"Laura says Marie Vaudrot was outside the long gallery the night of the murder. One hates to bring suspicion against a woman, Mr. Headland, but when you consider how greatly that woman would, and does, benefit by our dear mother's death, you must feel yourself that I—we—have strong grounds for suspicion."

"Certainly, I understand," said Cleek, promptly. "But in what way does this young lady benefit? She is no relation, is she?"

"Not in the least; but while I was away this summer my mother grew to love her as if she were her own daughter, and made a will leaving her, I believe, nearly a third of Sir Thomas's fortune; and as most of the historic jewels were willed by him to the nation, including the stolen Fire Opal, that diminished our share considerably, and you will admit it is not entirely just to either of us personally. There will be more than enough for my modest needs; but Laura, Miss Gwynne, is angry because Lady Montelet had always shown her the deepest affection and promised that the property should be equally divided between us. She is so self-sacrificing, however, that she has begged me to hush the matter up, so that no scandal shall be attached to the name. She is absolutely sure that Miss Marie Vaudrot is connected in some way with the murder. She——"

Suddenly the door opened behind them, and framed in the open doorway stood the slim figure of a sweet-faced girl. It did not need young Montelet's worshipping if surprised cry of "Laura" nor Mr. Narkom's greeting to tell Cleek who this girl was. A moment or two later the young man had made that assurance doubly sure, and the detective and Miss Gwynne were shaking hands together.

"I ought not to have intruded on you," said Miss Gwynne in a voice low-pitched and musical, "but—but—I was passing, and I saw Hubert's face through the window, and I guessed what he had done. He wishes to spare my feelings," her sweet voice broke in a sob, "but, of course, he is right. I must not let my feelings for one of my own sex blind me to my duty both to the dead and to my country."

Cleek raised an inquiring eyebrow at the latter part of this remark.

"Yes," she continued, "if it was Sir Thomas's wish that the Government should have the sacred stone, then surely it is only right that I should do all that lies in my power to get it back."

"Quite right," said Cleek, approvingly. "Now, what about this Marie Vaudrot? I understand that she was found wandering down the corridor near the place of the murder. Is that so?"

"Yes, alas, it is. Miss Vaudrot was very, very upset when mother announced her intention of watching in the gallery, because of the ridiculous story of the servants."

"It was possibly Miss Vaudrot's own story, Laura," put in young Montelet, excitedly.

Miss Gwynne shook her head at him.

"Mr. Headland must be left to draw his own conclusions, Hubert," she said, somewhat sharply. "After all, it may be someone else, and I cannot bear to accuse people behind their backs. Let us leave the matter till Mr. Headland has been up to the house. Don't you think so yourself, Mr. Headland?"

"Right you are," said Cleek with a smile and a nod. "I quite appreciate your feelings in the matter, Miss Gwynne. And, I say, Mr. Narkom," looking at his watch, "if I'm going to get up the river to-day, and get back in town in time to dress for the theatre, don't yer know, I think I had better come right away and have a peep at this fascinating young murderess of yours. So if Miss Gwynne has no objection to my going on with the case, we'd better be moving."

Miss Gwynne was all eagerness to "get on with the case," despite the report of her desire for letting things go.

"Oh, dear no, Mr. Headland. Please come right along now," she said, quickly. "It was only my foolish fear of scandal, and perhaps pity for one of whom my dear mother was so fond, that has caused me to raise even a slight objection. We are quite close, and in Mr. Narkom's car it would not take ten minutes."

"Good," said Cleek, stooping suddenly to retie his shoelace close beside the chair where Mr. Montelet stood, waiting for his companions to move. "Go on and tell Lennard to get his engine going, Mr. Narkom. I want to get up the river some time to-day, and the quicker I get through this blessed report of mine the better."

Two minutes later the limousine was racing away in the golden sunshine,

carrying its passengers to the scene of the mysterious death; and Cleek was again stooping to retie another shoelace, which apparently was giving him a lot of trouble.

CHAPTER XXIV

"THE FIRE THAT SLAYS IN THE DARK"

A swift run of about fifteen minutes brought them to the residence of the Montelet family. It was a fine place standing in spacious and well-kept grounds, and by the involuntary upward look of young Montelet, as they swept round past one of the wings, Cleek knew that this must contain the ill-fated gallery wherein had reposed the "Eye of Ashtaroth." In that brief second his trained eye had noted the bare wall with its clear thirty-foot drop from the nearest barred windows, and that the sharply pointed roof and entire absence of chimney precluded any possibility of either thief or murderer entering from the outside. But he made no comment, and two minutes later found him being introduced to the late Lady Montelet's French companion, Marie Vaudrot. She was short and petite, with dark, velvety brown eyes, which glanced in mute question from one face to the other, and betrayed to Cleek that she was in deadly fear of the discovery of some secret. What secret it would be his business to find out.

"She knows more than she has told, evidently," was his immediate mental comment as he noticed her start of dismay when, having swung on his heel, he announced his desire to see the body of Lady Montelet where it lay, and just as it had been discovered in the miniature temple.

But this desire was heartily approved by both Miss Gwynne and Mr. Montelet, and the little party speedily were on their way along corridors and up stairs, until at last they reached the fatal room.

"As you see, the door itself is of steel," whispered young Montelet as he fitted the key into the lock and let it swing inward. "My dear father chose this room on purpose, and had every inch covered with steel plates. These in their turn have been covered with tapestries and objects of art, as you see."

Cleek did see, for his eyes were comprehensively taking in the strange scene before him. The room was practically a replica of an Assyrian temple, supported at one end by two fluted columns between which could be seen the figures of the Assyrian bull gods, dedicated to Assur-bani-pal and Ishtar, or Ashtaroth. Sombre and inscrutable, they seemed to gaze down in contempt on the little group huddled before the stone steps which led up to an altar on the top of which

twinkled a little flame. Just below it stood a marble pedestal, with a shining engraved steel case on the top, and from the glass panel surmounting it Cleek guessed that this had been the home of the vanished Fire Opal.

He gazed from this pedestal round the walls, hung with priceless tapestries, then to the floor carpeted by Oriental rugs that seemed to reproach them for their profane footsteps.

"Very pretty idea," said he, finally, scratching his head and letting his mouth gape open stupidly. "Sort of reminds me of Earl's Court, don't yer know. Pretty little light that, but not much good to see by, eh?"

"No one ever had need to come in at night, Mr. Headland," said young Montelet, with quiet dignity. "I have never seen it at night, though neither have I ever seen that little lamp out. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose I have entered the place half a dozen times since it was constructed."

"Nor I," put in Miss Gwynne. "I hate it. The very atmosphere reeks of death and crime." She gave a quick, apprehensive glance about her, and shivered against Mr. Montelet's shoulder.

Cleek crossed to where a couch, at the end of the room, bore the shrouded body of Lady Montelet, and drew back the covering with gentle fingers.

It was evident at a glance that at whatever hour of the night or morning death had come to her, she had made no preparation for going to sleep; for though her body was arrayed in a warm dressing-gown, her hair was elaborately waved and coiffed as it had been during the day.

Cleek bent over it, and began a minute examination of the body, then said suddenly: "Let me have a little more light, please, Mr. Narkom. It is somewhat dark here, and in such circumstances——"

He stopped short, sucking in his breath with a curious gasping sound, and felt eagerly for his magnifying glass. For his eye had been caught by the slightest of marks on the fingertips of the dead woman. Then he looked at her lips, and stooping, sniffed vigorously. For a moment he stood very still, then with a sort of new dignity rose and faced round on Mr. Montelet, who was watching him with intense eagerness written upon his countenance.

"Do you know if Lady Montelet had anything to drink previous to her retirement to this room?" he said abruptly.

It was Mademoiselle Vaudrot who interposed a reply.

"But, yes, m'sieur; she had a cup of black coffee, so that she should keep awake, and it was I that brought it to her with my own hands. And my dear, dear lady put it down on this little table. See, this one"—pointing to a little Persian stool that stood near the left-hand column—"then she kissed me good-night and locked herself in."

"Locked herself in!" rapped out Cleek. "How, then, was this door opened in the morning?"

"I opened it," said young Montelet in low tones. "I have a duplicate key. When we knocked and knocked and called this morning and could get no answer, I remembered that my father had given me a key to be used in case of accidents, years ago. No one knew I had it. And then I wired for Mr. Narkom."

"I see," said Cleek, stroking his chin pensively. Then he added suddenly: "I've got a book down in the car that I believe might be a bit of a help. It's a new detective story; nothing like a good story to refresh one's mind. If you would get it; here's the title, Mr. Narkom, and exactly where I left it. Run down and get it, there's a good chap."

The "good chap" was out of the room before Mr. Montelet could voice the protest which shone so plainly in his eyes.

"I think, somehow, that we've all been on a wrong tack. What if the old lady—her ladyship—took out the stone, and when the pain at her heart caught her, let the blessed thing drop? Anyhow, I'd like to pull up the rugs—if you've no objection, Miss Gwynne."

"Not in the slightest," answered that lady quickly. "I'll help you if you like, and so shall Miss Vaudrot. We'll all search."

Another minute saw the four people on hands and knees, searching and pulling at the rugs and draperies; and it was thus vainly employed that Mr. Narkom, flushed and excited, found them when he returned.

"Did you find it, Mr. Narkom?" inquired Cleek, jumping briskly to his feet, his example followed by the other three.

"Rather! Just as you said."

"Oh, well, never mind about it now. Shan't want it, after all. I've just struck another idea." And he crossed over to the marble pedestal.

"What's that?" asked young Montelet, interestedly as he followed Cleek's beckoning hand.

"I forgot I hadn't examined the blessed pedestal. A ducat to a guinea that it's hollow, and the beastly stone has slipped down."

As he spoke he plunged his fingers into the casket, to pull them back with a little cry of excitement. "Yes, there's something loose down here; hard and shiny it feels. Feel for yourself, Mr. Montelet."

But before the young man could make a move, Miss Vaudrot pushed forward.

"Oh, m'sieur, let me feel!" she cried, and advanced toward the pedestal.

"No, no," said Cleek. "It is not your place, mademoiselle, is it? Come and see for yourself, Mr. Montelet."

The young man came forward, his face just a little pale; very slowly, one might say unwillingly, he put out his hand, which was shaking visibly, then turned to Cleek. But, to his colossal surprise, Cleek was not looking either at him or the pedestal. With a light of triumph in his eyes he had stepped back, and all in a moment those who were watching saw a startling thing occur: They saw Cleek swerve to one side, heard a sharp clicking sound of snapping steel as he flung himself upon Miss Laura Gwynne, who had been so intent on watching Hubert Montelet's movements that she was too bewildered to offer resistance.

"Got you, my Judas of a woman—got you!" they heard Cleek say as, with a scramble and a snarl, there lay on the floor a biting, clawing, struggling fury, with a pair of handcuffs on her wrists, and her triumphant conqueror kneeling by her.

Young Montelet made a dash at him and tore at his detaining arms. His face was transfigured, furious.

"What do you mean, you fool?" cried he, angrily. "How dare you lay a finger on this lady! She is my future wife!"

"I hope not, Mr. Montelet"—Cleek swung round and looked at him, then was on his feet like a flash—"for you, too, would not live long to enjoy the wealth she has unwillingly endowed you with. No, Miss Gwynne, the pedestal would not have harmed him, for, see, the light is out!"

The eyes of all were directed to the little flame lamp, which was now dark.

"It was a clever trick of your father's, Mr. Montelet, to utilize electricity as 'the fire that knows no heat, and slays in the dark.' It was still more clever of this young lady to manage to abstract the jewel in such a way as not to be struck by the current. You found it, didn't you, Mr. Narkom?" He turned to the

Superintendent, who plunged his hand into his pocket and drew forth a cake of yellow toilet soap in which was embedded a reddish-yellow stone. This he handed over to his ally.

Holding it up, Cleek let the light flash through it, till it looked a veritable "eye" of wrath.

Young Montelet looked at it with white, haggard face. The awakening had been too much of a shock.

"But I don't understand," said he, drearily. "Does it mean that Laura *stole* the stone?"

"Stole! Aye, and committed murder for it, too; though whether she actually killed the other victims I cannot say. Possibly they touched the stone's resting place which was protected by a very heavy electric current. In the case of a person whose heart was already weak, probably it would be sufficient to kill. I guessed it was by the means of electricity when I saw the flame lamp that never went out, and noted Miss Laura Gwynne's rubber soled and heeled shoes, which she had inadvertently put on again this morning. I expect the whole altar part may be rendered active with electricity if the truth be known, and that kept me away from it—while the current was on. Mr. Narkom disconnected it while he was downstairs.

"What's that, Mr. Narkom? Why didn't I suspect Miss Vaudrot here? Oh, for many reasons. First, because if she had only been here for a few months she could not have been responsible for the other deaths; secondly, when I got you all kneeling down on the floor, I could see only Miss Gwynne was wearing rubber-protected shoes—which I had noticed down at the inn."

"At the inn! But how, Mr. Headland?"

"Cleek for a change, Mr. Montelet!"

"Cleek! Good heavens! Are you the great Cleek?"

"No, merely Cleek, the detective—that's all. Yes, my young friend, when I stooped to tie up that bootlace of mine I was inspecting feet. That 'gave me to think' as you would say, Miss Vaudrot." He smiled at the girl, who was watching and listening fascinatedly. "I knew already that the Apaches were on the track of that stone directly I heard of the murder of Antoine Duval in Soho while disguised as an Indian. The different colour of the eyes brought him back to my memory, Mr. Narkom; and the fate of Celestine Merode showed my guess to be a correct one. 'Miss Gwynne' here is probably connected with the gang, and not

only managed to send the man, who was their first emissary, away empty-handed, so that he should be killed by the gang for failure, but obviously intended to keep the stone herself. Had she not left the traces of the soap on the casket, I should not have known where it was actually hidden. Of course, it might have been removed; but I was right."

"But you said she had poisoned my dear mother?" cried Mr. Montelet.

"And so she had. There were just the slightest traces of concentrated amylene hydrate on her lips. Probably administered in the coffee, dropped in while Lady Montelet was locking the door, by someone else who knew of the secret opening as well as Miss Vaudrot."

An exclamation burst from the lips of all present.

"The secret opening!" cried young Montelet, as the girl sank down in a crumpled heap. "Good heavens! man, you are mad. Where is there such an opening?"

"Here," said Cleek, crossing the room and tapping the left-hand pillar. "I saw the marks when I got near, and as I thought Miss Vaudrot was taking pains to hide it, I had to wait and see whether she knew, too, of the electric guard over the jewel. Even Lady Montelet could not have known about this for her fingertips showed traces of having been subjected to a shock. Miss Vaudrot cleared herself by being the first to volunteer to search in the pedestal. But why did you seek to conceal the other entrance, mademoiselle?"

A burning flush surged over the pale face.

"I was afraid less someone else should be accused, m'sieur," she said, naïvely. "I heard a sound in the night, and I went down the corridor; but all was quiet, so I returned to my own room. But in the morning I thought all sorts of silly things, and I kept silence in case—in case——" Her voice broke, and the rest of the sentence went by default.

"In case Mr. Hubert might get involved, eh?" finished Cleek, softly, with one of his curious one-sided smiles. "Your ideas of justice, mademoiselle, are common to your sex. Ah, well! I think that is all, Mr. Narkom. And as you disconnected the current downstairs, I should advise that this room be locked up. The police can take away that wretch there. Come, Mr. Narkom; the riddle is solved, and I think I shall get an hour up the river, after all."

Without vouchsafing another look toward the sullen figure of the woman or at young Montelet, who was gazing into the face of Mademoiselle Marie Vaudrot with a new look in his eyes, Cleek walked from the Assyrian gallery in which for

a brief time longer would shine the "Eye of Ashtaroth." Two minutes later the limousine was flying at a mile-a-minute clip riverward, where waited Dollops and the launch and the blue sky above—with a brief hour in which all the crime and sordidness of the world could be blotted out.

CHAPTER XXV

THE PRICELESS STATUE THAT VANISHED

It is strange what undue fascination exists for things belonging to the ancient stories of the past, and curiously enough, Dollops had recently developed a deep interest in the British Museum. For days he would haunt that classic building, poring religiously over guide books and catalogues until it seemed as if he must have committed to memory their entire contents. Strangely enough, too, by reason of his very energetic admiration for the arts of the dead peoples of the earth, he was able to bring to Cleek's notice a remarkable case.

With puzzled brows and straining eyes, a day, some weeks later, Dollops sat in the dusk on top of the stairs in the house at Portman Square anxiously awaiting the return of his master.

Since this development of affection for art galleries and museums, Cleek had marked the auspicious event of Dollops' birthday with a copy of a famous classical dictionary. Henceforward the boy had diligently sought out the known statues of every god and goddess mentioned therein, and it was this queer hobby which led to the solution of one of the strangest riddles Cleek had ever been asked to solve.

Dollops had attached himself to the galleries of the Imperial Institute where was being held a special exhibition of sculpture. Priceless statues and examples of the sculptor's art had been gathered from almost every museum and private gallery in the world. When it was learned that the Italian Government had consented to lend the actual statue of the Capitoline Venus, public excitement was raised to fever pitch, and half London had crowded in to see the two-thousand-year-old figure.

Special precautions had been taken against fire or possible theft, for more than one millionaire would have risked a fortune to become even the secret owner of the statue.

Having purchased a subscription ticket for Dollops, Cleek was devoting his own time to Ailsa Lorne, and those exquisite days spent on the river in her company were to remain in his memory for many months to come. It was close on ten o'clock of this certain night that he came quietly up the stairs in Portman Square,

nearly breaking his neck stumbling over the recumbent and sleeping figure of Dollops, tired out with waiting and excitement.

"What the deuce is the matter, you young monkey?" was his affectionate greeting, as he noted the excited look of his young protégé.

"Matter enough, Mr. Cleek, sir," stammered forth the boy. "I'm orf my bloomin' nut, sir. That's wot it is. Got no eyes in my 'ead, I don't think, or they're going orf duty. Strike me, sir, but you could 'ave knocked me down wiv a piece of chalk. I tell you, I ain't 'ad a scrap inside me since for thinkin' of it."

Cleek hung up his hat and coat, and sat down to the supper which Dollops hastened to place before him. "Now, then, suppose you tell me what you are talking about," he said good-humouredly. "Where have you been all day?"

"At the Himperial Institute, sir," was the response, "and as merry as a sandbag. Those statues are just immense, sir; and as for that Wenus—the Cap—Cap—or something—she's gorgeous."

"Capitoline, eh?" interposed Cleek, smiling at the lad's enthusiasm. "Well, so she is, Dollops."

"Well, sir, it's the last day, yer know, and I stayed till after the doors were closed and people were all gone. I comes to 'ave one parting look at 'er, but when I gets to the top of the gallery and looked down—Mr. Cleek, sir, she was gone."

"What!" Cleek's knife and fork dropped out of his fingers as he took in the sense of the words. "Nonsense, Dollops! How could as large an object as the Capitoline Venus disappear in broad daylight? Preposterous!"

"Yus, sir. I know that; so I turns and runs off for a policeman, or one of those commissionaire chaps. There was one, Scott—not 'arf a bad fellow, neither—an' he come back wiv me, and nearly larfed his 'ead off, for there was that blessed statue on the pedestal again. He didn't 'arf chaff me, and away I comes, leaving him on guard for the last time. It's all shut up to-day, but——"

Cleek gave a little laugh. "I should think he would laugh. You've got statues on the brain. A great fright you gave me, though it would be an impossibility to steal the Capitoline Venus. You must have been dreaming, my boy."

"I tell you, she wasn't there," said Dollops, stubbornly.

"She was there all right when you came away, wasn't she?" said Cleek. "Well, then, it's indigestion, shall we say?"

But Dollops for the first time in their companionship was indignant at Cleek's teasing, and retired to his own quarters in high dudgeon, leaving the detective to dreams of Ailsa Lorne and love and peace, and all things that make life desirable.

It was not until the following morning, when the whir of a hastily driven motor was heard stopping outside, followed by the hurried appearance of Mr. Narkom himself, that Cleek recalled the incident of the preceding night.

"Haven't come to tell me the Capitoline Venus has disappeared, have you?" he said, jokingly, as the puffing Superintendent strove to get his breath. "Dollops had a nightmare——"

He got no further, for the purple face of Mr. Narkom had turned almost white with the shock of what seemed to him quite supernatural knowledge, and he nodded feebly.

Then it was Cleek's own turn to show amazement, and for a minute he stood transfixed.

"Nonsense, man!" he rapped out. "She was there last night. Here, Dollops——" He flung open the door, but the lad, scenting trouble from the early arrival of the Superintendent, was already tumbling into the room.

"She *is* all right, ain't she, sir?" he squealed, turning from one man to the other. "The Wenus, I mean. A fair beauty she was."

"That's just it, Dollops; though what you have got to do with it, I don't know," said Narkom, slowly. "But your 'Wenus' has gone, vanished in the night out of that gallery, steel-lined and steel-gated as it is, and with barred windows, Petrie and Hammond outside all night, too, as a special favour to the Italian Government. And there you have it." He looked at Cleek, who stood staring through narrowed eyelids, his face pale and set, his mouth in a straight line. "But what do you know about it, youngster?"

Dollops told his tale of the preceding night with renewed gusto, but the Superintendent only shook his head.

"Only makes matters worse," he said, "for it proves that the thing was safe at closing time. How it's been done beats me! All your invisible deaths and vanishing stones are nothing to it. I've had a good many mysterious cases to deal with, but this beats all. If it wasn't for the blessed lump of marble being so valuable——"

"Valuable?" echoed Cleek, a queer, little one-sided smile flickering round his mouth. "I should just think it is valuable. Why, my dear chap, the Capitoline Venus is more than two thousand years old, and one of the most perfect and uninjured pieces of ancient art ever found. It was discovered in the eighteenth century, carefully bricked up in a cell of masonry, and wonderfully preserved. It is of almost priceless value. I only wonder that it was ever allowed out of the museum at Rome."

"I wish to goodness it hadn't been," groaned Mr. Narkom, wiping his heated brow.

"My dear Narkom," Cleek said, "for a heavy marble statue to melt into air is so preposterous that you may well call it supernatural. Tell me all the details, please. When was the loss discovered, and how?"

"The dickens of it is, there doesn't seem to be much to tell," said Narkom. "There hasn't been a sign of any suspicious character visiting the Institute since the exhibition was opened, and the number of plain-clothes men had been augmented. Not a door or window was touched, there was not the slightest sign of any struggle or upset, yet at nine-thirty this morning, when the secretary came to see about the dispatching of the statues to their respective owners, the Venus was missing. In front of the empty pedestal lay one of the commissionaires, Tom Scott—a member of the force really, only he was wearing the Institute uniform. He had evidently died——"

"What's that?" rapped out Cleek, spinning round in the chair in which he had just seated himself. "Do you mean he was murdered?"

"No," returned the Superintendent. "It was heart disease, so the doctor said. They fetched one in, and then made a quick tour round the building, to see where the burglars had made an entry, or whether any other articles of value were missing. But, as I said before, there isn't a hole or a crack big enough to let a mouse through."

"Hm! what about keys?" said Cleek. "This Scott—if he was out of the way, they could unbolt the doors and walk out."

"That's just it, Cleek. Every door save one has been screwed up, and on the outside. Scott was invariably locked in at night, the keys of the one door remaining with the secretary. Petrie and Hammond remained on duty outside all night, and they swear there was neither suspicious sight nor sound."

"The first thing is to come and look at the place for myself," said Cleek, quietly.

"Who is at the head of affairs, by the way?"

"The Marquis of Willingsley is the president of the Institute with a whole host of bigwigs," replied Narkom; "but the man in charge is the secretary, Charles Belthouse, and he's nearly out of his mind over it."

For the second time that morning Cleek sprang up in astonishment.

"Gad, man! Charles Belthouse—Charles Galveston Belthouse?" he cried.

"Yes, I think it is," returned the bewildered Superintendent. "At least his note to me this morning is signed C. G. Belthouse; but what——?"

For Cleek had sunk down, his two hands planted on his knees, a rueful and sarcastic look on his face.

"Oh! our national intelligence!" he cried. "Charles Galveston Belthouse! The man was kicked out of one of the biggest galleries in America for smuggling in forgeries of well-known masterpieces. And that man, out of all the millions in this city, is in charge of the Capitoline Venus!" He jumped up. "Well, it's no use abusing the jockey after he has sold the race. I presume you have not mentioned my name in the matter?"

"Not a word," returned Mr. Narkom, promptly. "I didn't know whether you were free."

"Ah, well, we'll see what that well-meaning and amiable individual George Headland can do."

CHAPTER XXVI

FLECKS OF WHITE POWDER

It did not take more than twenty minutes to cover the distance between Portman Square and the Imperial Institute, and they found that aristocratic building a veritable whirlwind of repressed excitement. It was closed to the public, and downstairs in the outer hall was already assembled an army of expert packers, ready to despatch the units of the exhibition to their respective galleries. But toward none of these men did the two stolid-looking policemen give even a passing glance.

It was the redoubtable secretary whom Cleek was most anxious to see, and two minutes later found him in that gentleman's presence. Narkom's assertion that Mr. Belthouse was "half out of his mind over the matter" had prepared him to find an excitable, fear-shaken, harassed official, while his own expectations were of seeing a shifty-eyed individual who had succeeded in effecting a clever coup. He found instead a serious-faced, undemonstrative man of about forty-five, with the kindest eyes and the handsomest and most sympathetic countenance he had seen for many a day.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Headland," he said, heartily, after the first formalities were over; and Cleek, who had assumed, as he always did at first introduction, a heavy, befogged expression indicative of incompetence, felt his suspicions of Charles Galveston Belthouse melting away like snow beneath a winter sun. "This business has me distracted, and if you can hunt up any sort of clue that'll keep the directors quiet for a few days, I'll be only too glad. When I undertook to see this business through for my friend, the Marquis of Willingsley, I didn't expect to run up against the British police."

"It's a pretty tall order, Mr. Belthouse," said Cleek, scratching his head perplexedly, "but I'll have a thorough look around, anyway."

If he had anticipated any sign of confusion upon the part of Mr. Belthouse, he was wholly disappointed, for the man, with a sudden and unexpected burst of enthusiasm, seized his hand and pressed it warmly, saying heartily:

"Oh, do, Mr. Headland, do. Search anywhere, do anything that will get on to the track of the thieves. One blessing is, they cannot offer the statue for sale in open

market. It is intrinsically utterly valueless, and what the object of stealing it at all is I can't imagine. Still it must be got back somehow, without the Italian Government's knowing what has happened. Personally, I don't mind saying, I'll give every penny I have in the world, if only you can get it restored safe and sound."

Cleek darted a swift look at the speaker, but the man was evidently in dead earnest.

"Your sentiments do you credit, sir," he said, stolidly, "and I'll do my best. First of all, who was it that discovered the actual loss of the statue?"

"I did, myself," was the prompt reply. "I came early to see which statues were to be sent off first, and although some ten minutes were spent pacifying a confounded woman——"

Cleek twitched an inquiring eyebrow.

"Oh, an indignant female who stayed too late and got locked in all night."

Cleek looked at Mr. Narkom, as if mutely asking why he had not been told of this fact before, and Mr. Narkom looked back blankly at his ally.

"First I've heard of it," he said, quickly, and the secretary looked from one to the other in bewilderment. Then he laughed.

"Why, what's wrong? You don't think that a fat old woman could have smuggled out the Capitoline Venus in her reticule, do you? I never gave thought to her on that score. She says she got locked in one of the distant galleries, and though she hammered and shouted, she couldn't make a soul hear. She went off in a cab that one of our men fetched for her—wouldn't have a taxi, must have a fourwheeler—and swore vengeance against the whole board of directors. She declared it had been done on purpose, and we should hear from her solicitors. Regular old virago, I do assure you."

"Did you get her name and address?" asked Cleek.

"Good gracious, no. I was only too glad to get rid of her. I dare say Thompson can give you the address she gave the cabby, though. I'll send for him, if you like."

"Yes, do, please," said Cleek. "I don't suppose there is any connection, but you never know your luck. What happened after the young lady—did you say?—had gone?"

"Young lady!" The secretary smiled broadly. "She was about sixty-five if a day, with a face like a full moon, and a ridiculous child's hat perched on her head. She was no Venus, I assure you. After she had gone I went upstairs with my friend, Doctor Montret—I had met him just coming down the Cromwell Road, and I was jolly glad he was with me—when we came plump on the body of poor Scott. The sight of it and that empty pedestal gave me all sorts of thoughts of murder and burglary, but Montret soon found that the poor fellow had died naturally. As I take it, he must have been making his rounds and when he came down the gallery, and discovered the loss, he dropped dead with the shock. But you shall see for yourself."

While talking he had led the way down one passage and up another, till they were in the actual gallery from which the famous statue had so mysteriously vanished. It stood out in one of the wings of the Institute, its steel-barred windows on each side, being some thirty or forty feet clear from the ground. The walls were lined with pictures, not one of which obviously had been moved, and it seemed impossible for secret entry to have been made either during the day or the night.

The empty pedestal stood some six feet away from the wall, against which stood some heavy grouped figures and examples in plaster of bas-relief.

For a few minutes Cleek walked aimlessly round and round the gallery, his eyes dull and heavy, his face stupidly blank in expression.

Suddenly he looked up at the exquisitely painted ceiling and gave an inane little chuckle that caused the secretary to look at him in surprise.

"I see," he exclaimed. "I wondered where it came from; but I suppose you have had the ceiling repaired—eh, what?"

If ever a man looked puzzled, it was the secretary.

"Ceiling repaired?" he echoed. "Really, Mr. Headland, I can't understand you. What on earth makes you think that?"

Mr. Headland pointed to two or three flecks of powdered plaster, obviously dropped from the ceiling above, but the secretary only gave a little sniff of contempt.

"Vibration of the traffic," he exclaimed. "No one's been near the ceiling." He turned suddenly. "Ah, here is Thompson. If you think you will want that address ——?" He was clearly not very taken with the deductive powers of Mr. Headland, and he showed it very plainly.

"Yes, sir," said Thompson, when Cleek had questioned him. "Quite plain I heard it: 'Imperial Mansions, Shepherd's Bush,' and I dare say I could find out from the cabman himself. He's sure to be on the stand outside."

Dismissed on this errand, he left the gallery, while Cleek wandered to the window, which looked out on a little courtyard. His eyes noted almost unconsciously the presence of a large moving van standing near the gateway to the street.

"Oh, Mr. Belthouse," he exclaimed, "going to move the blessed statues in a furniture van?"

Mr. Belthouse joined him, but his voice was even more irritable as he exclaimed:

"Certainly not; that must be for the effects of the caretaker. She has lived in the basement, but she said she was moving as soon as the exhibition was over. And now, perhaps, Mr. Headland, if you don't mind my saying so, my time is valuable. So if you will ask me anything else you want to know——?"

Cleek stopped short in his prowl at the top end of the gallery, and stood, looking the very picture of perplexity.

"This case fair stumps me, Mr. Belthouse, I must say. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me where this door leads to?"

He touched the frame of a door almost concealed by a huge picture which was hung across it.

"That? Oh, that, I believe, opens on to a passage which leads to the caretaker's quarters. Very estimable people, the Perrys, mother and daughter, and I should say the Institute people will be sorry to lose them. They are moving, as you noticed, and into the country. This door, though, has been kept locked and screwed up—you can see the screws for yourself, can't you?—so there has been no possible means of ingress or egress. Anything else, Mr. Headland?"

Mr. Headland shook his head dolefully.

"Nothing to be learned here. I think I'd like to get that address, the old woman's, you know," he added, meekly.

"Oh, that! Still thinking of that elderly Venus, eh? Well, I'll go and find Thompson for you myself," said the now openly sneering Mr. Belthouse.

"Any ideas, old chap?" whispered Mr. Narkom, as his ally bent down and touched another few flakes of plaster-like white powder.

"Bushels," was the laconic reply. "But when a mouse gets into a trap, what does it do?"

"Why, stays in, of course!" said the mystified Narkom, and Cleek gave a little satisfied laugh as he lurched to the end of the hall where Mr. Charles Galveston Belthouse, in a supremely bad temper, arrived a moment later in company with the stalwart commissionaire, Thompson.

"No go, sir; no sign of that blessed cab, and the taxi men never noticed it on the stand before. They are rare in these parts nowadays, sir. I hardly expected to get one, only the good lady was set on it. Said she wouldn't go near one of those dangerous motor things, and the way she sniffed even at the cabby——!"

A queer little smile crept round Mr. Headland's mouth.

"It's of no importance, my man. I don't think we shall want either the cab or the good lady again."

The man returned to his own post, and Cleek followed the secretary from the gallery. But a little distance away he stopped short, feeling in his pocket, then uttered a little cry of dismay.

"I thought I heard it. Excuse me, sir, it's my pen. I dropped it. Won't keep you waiting a minute."

He turned and ran swiftly back, returning some three minutes later, the pen in his hand, a smile on his face, and still further patches of white on his coat that would have suggested to even a less keen observer than Mr. Narkom that he had been very near to the ceiling.

"And now to see the body, Mr. Belthouse," he said, briskly, looking placidly at that gentleman's perturbed face as he opened the door of a little room wherein had been borne the body of the unfortunate policeman.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RUSE OF THE SPRAINED WRIST

The body was that of a man in the very prime of life, and but for the strangely set and rigid face might have been thought that of one asleep.

Cleek examined it minutely, even pulling down the lips and raising the closed eyelids. For a moment he stood looking down at the still figure, then he shut up his magnifying glass with a snap.

"Lucky thing that doctor friend of yours was at hand," he said, irrelevantly. "Known him long, by the way?"

"Well, no, not what you might call long," was the surprised reply. "We came over on board the same ship together a few months ago. He's a French-Canadian doctor, only on a visit, I believe. A charming man——" But his words apparently fell on deaf ears, for Cleek was again bending over the body, and before either of the men could save him his foot had caught on something and he measured his length on the polished floor, his wrist doubled beneath him. He was on his feet, immediately, with Narkom's assistance, but he surveyed his wrist with a rueful smile.

"It's a pity he isn't here now," he ejaculated. "I've done for my wrist this time—broken it, I think."

The secretary uttered a little sound indicative of mild sympathy.

"He'll turn up in a minute. I'll 'phone through to him. He is lodging quite near." And turning, Mr. Belthouse ran to the office on the other side of the hall.

"Is it broken, Cleek?" asked Mr. Narkom, anxiously, as he looked into his ally's face. A significant wink was the only response.

"I'd like to see that doctor who calls curari poisoning heart disease," he whispered. "Look." He turned and pulled down the collar of the dead man, showing a tiny red spot just under the chin, so small as to be hardly noticeable.

"Poisoned," he whispered, "but whether by our excellent secretary or the good doctor remains to be seen."

Two minutes later Mr. Belthouse rushed back into the room.

"I got him," he announced, triumphantly, "and I've sent for the caretaker and told her to bring some hot water and bandages. Nothing like hot water for sprains."

Cleek expressed himself in thorough agreement with this theory, and stood nursing his aching wrist until the caretaker herself entered with the articles.

She was a middle aged woman with a pale face and deft hands, and Cleek gladly submitted his wrist to her manipulations, wincing slightly as her fingers touched the strained tendons.

His eyes were fixed on the ground, watching the drops of water splashing on to the polished floor that had brought him to grief.

"Did you hear our prisoner last night, Mrs. Perry?" said Belthouse, genially. "One of the blessed British public got shut in and said she almost knocked the place down trying to get help."

Mrs. Perry looked up placidly.

"The walls are very thick, sir, and we were tired out with packing, I expect. I certainly never heard a sound. There, sir, I think that's right." She looked at Cleek.

"Thank you, that will be all right now," he said, but without giving her another glance.

Mrs. Perry had left the room as silently as she entered it, when all at once Cleek gave a little cry of delight.

"Scotland!" he cried, his face lighting up with relief. "I've got it!"

"What?" exclaimed the secretary. "A clue?"

"No, no, the cure for my wrist," said Mr. Headland, fumbling in his pocket for his note-book, while Mr. Belthouse snorted indignantly. "Fancy my forgetting that incomparable liniment. Mr. Narkom, go and get me a bottle, there's a good chap; here's the name. Shan't need your precious doctor now, Mr. Belthouse. You can call in as you pass, Narkom, and tell him so. What's his address, Mr. Belthouse?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I'll ring him up," said that gentleman. "But it's 716 Cromwell Road, I believe, if you want it."

"Mustn't waste a doctor's valuable time," said Mr. Headland, and Mr. Narkom

darted off with a detached leaf from the note-book, as if the very life of his companion hung upon the desired compound. Left to himself, Cleek turned to the secretary.

"I'll have another look at that gallery of yours, Mr. Belthouse, and then I think my part of the job is at an end."

"And a good job, too," was the irritable response. "I tell you, I can't afford to waste more time this morning, and if that's all you can do——"

"One can't do more than one's best," was Mr. Headland's meek response, as with a queer little smile running up one side of his face he followed the secretary out of the room, up the passages, and into the fateful gallery.

"Now, what's the next thing?" asked Mr. Belthouse.

"I think," said Mr. Headland, scratching his head again, "I think it's a case of 'wait and see'."

Without apparently noticing the word which slipped out from the chaste lips of Mr. Belthouse, Cleek cocked his head on one side as if waiting for some expected sound.

He had not long to wait, for there came the distant sound of screaming and fighting. It came nearer and nearer, till at last, with a resounding crash, the picture over the panelled door came down with shattered glass and broken frame, the door swung open noiselessly and easily, and in the aperture stood the flushed and triumphant figure of Mr. Narkom.

"Right was I, old chap?" said Cleek in sharp, concise tones, at the sound of which Mr. Belthouse started violently.

"Right as a trivet. Just moving it into the cart. Petrie and Hammond have got her ——"

This fact was now a self-evident one, as the stalwart officers just named appeared in the doorway, between them a struggling woman, in whose oaths in English and fluent French, disarranged hair and torn dress, Mr. Belthouse could hardly recognize the competent, "estimable" caretaker. But before he could speak a word there came a fresh interruption.

"Hallo! What is this? They tell me you want me, Mr. Belthouse," said a voice from the main doorway of the gallery.

"Doctor Montret!" said the secretary. "Come in, by all means. I cannot explain

what this means, but——"

"Save yourself, Jules," shrieked the woman. "Quick, fly! I was not in time. It is Cleek, see, he is here! Fly, fly——"

"So we have caught the pair of you, eh?" cried Cleek, who had silently worked his way round so that he stood between the sallow-faced, black-haired stranger, addressed as Doctor Montret, and the door.

"Quick, boys. Mr. Narkom, help me here," and there was a quick struggle, then the sound of clicking handcuffs. Cleek stood over his captive triumphantly, and gave a little laugh as he unrolled the wet cloths from his uninjured wrist.

"So my little trick succeeded, eh, Jules Berjet? And you, too, Marie Peret?"

"But what dees it all mean?" wailed Mr. Belthouse. "What have they done, Mr. Headland, or Cleek? I don't know what to think."

Cleek gave a short little laugh.

"Done! They nearly did you, Mr. Belthouse. What they did was to steal the Capitoline Venus tween them."

"The Capit—— Oh, impossible!" exclaimed the secretary, his eyes starting from his head.

"Impossible, is it?" laughed Cleek. "I don't think so. Do you, Marie Peret, when you've got such a clever cousin as Margot to pose as the statue? Oh! that hits the mark, does it? And a deep box-feather bed to conceal it in, too. What's that, Mr. Belthouse, where is the statue? Why, I should say it is here. That's right, boys, bring her in. Got the moving men, too, did you? Good!"

Two more policemen, aided by Thompson, brought in a familiar white figure, the sight of which caused Mr. Belthouse to utter cries of delight and thanksgiving. It was evident that his experiences in America had been a lesson, for his relief was only too real.

"The Venus safe! Thank Heaven!" he repeated again and again.

"Yes," said Cleek, plucking away several feathers which still clung to her marble features. "None the worse, and no one need be the wiser." His voice grew very stern.

"None the wiser!" echoed Mr. Belthouse. "But what about the police? What will the charge be at the police court?"

"Murder, Mr. Belthouse," was the answer, "the murder of poor Scott out there. It was a neat trick to poison the man by means of an injection of curari and have the doctor accidentally near at hand to certify to heart disease. Bah! Take them away, men, and, Mr. Belthouse, give me a hand. We'll put the lady up on her pedestal again. Mr. Narkom, just look into the large urn over there, will you?"

Both gentlemen did as they were requested, and as Cleek and Mr. Belthouse stepped back from the pedestal, they watched Mr. Narkom as he stood with a white bundle from which powder dropped copiously.

Cleek gave a little exclamation of delight. "Poor old Dollops' Venus," he said, as he held up what was evidently a suit of white elastic tights such as are used on the stage.

"The lady who wore these you very kindly let out first thing this morning, Mr. Belthouse, and if ever Margot, Queen of the Apaches, and at one time one of the finest artists' models in Paris, enjoyed herself, it was when she passed through your fingers so neatly.

"What's that, Mr. Narkom? How did I guess? But I didn't guess. I was shown it. Look at the tiny flakes of white, especially behind the pedestal and close to the big urn, where she stood well powdered ready to turn to marble if any one were heard approaching. The statue had been lifted down and taken through that door to Marie Peret. The door screwed up, Mr. Belthouse? Nothing of the kind. The screw-heads are there, and glued down, but the screws themselves have been cut through by a fine metal saw, as I found when I came back again—for my pen.

"Margot, I take it, in the tights, her face and hands whitened, took the place of the statue for the last quarter of an hour before closing time. I suppose they were afraid to leave it until the night time for fear they were heard by the guards and policemen. Probably poor Scott was thinking of Dollops—he's a young friend of mine, Mr. Belthouse, who thought he saw an empty pedestal, and he was right! Well, Scott must have come to examine the Capitoline Venus for himself, only to have it fling itself on him and do only too deadly execution with a poisoned needle, all ready for just such an emergency. No, Mr. Belthouse, the Apaches make burglary a fine art, I can tell you; they were prepared for everything and everybody——"

"Except Hamilton Cleek," said Mr. Belthouse, with a little smile. "You certainly have performed a miracle."

Cleek smiled oddly.

"I would like to have caught Margot," he said, musingly, "and it was a clever trick to divert suspicion right away from the caretaker by posing as an indignant sightseer, locked up all night, but there was too much deafness on the part of the others concerned."

"Even then I don't know why you suspected Mrs. Perry," said Mr. Belthouse, as they retraced their steps to the entrance hall.

Cleek laughed again.

"I suspected everybody," he replied, "yourself included, until I saw Marie. Then if a straw will show you which way the wind blows, the presence of many feathers clinging to the lady's skirts and the sight of that very deep French-made feather bed being moved out by two French-looking moving men told me the rest.

"Good-bye, Mr. Belthouse, and here's to our next meeting."

He stepped into the waiting limousine and was whizzed away with Mr. Narkom beaming beside him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MYSTERY OF THE "ROPE OF FEAR"

"Let's hope we have a few weeks' peace," said Cleek with a little gesture of weariness as the car drew up at his lodging, and he took leave of Mr. Narkom.

But his hope was not to be realized. In fact, no sooner was Mr. Narkom back at the Yard, than Cleek's telephone was ringing and he was being given the details of as complicated a business as the Yard had ever tackled.

He groaned in spirit, but promised to be right over as soon as he had had some food and a chance "at least to change my collar."

This last had been added in a doleful voice when the Superintendent had given him the news that this new case was to take them to the end, nearly, of England —to Westmoreland.

If you know anything of the county of Westmoreland you will know the chief market-town of Merton Sheppard, and if you know Merton Sheppard, you will know there is only one important building in that town besides the massive Town Hall, and that building is the Westmoreland Union Bank—a private concern, well backed by every wealthy magnate in the surrounding district, and patronized by everyone from the highest to the lowest degree.

Anybody will point the building out to you, because of its imposing exterior, and because everyone in the whole county brings his money to Mr. Naylor-Brent, to do with it what he wills. For Mr. Naylor-Brent is the manager, and besides being known far and wide for his integrity, his uprightness of purpose, and his strict sense of justice, he acts to the poorer inhabitants of Merton Sheppard as a sort of father-confessor in all their troubles, both of a social and a financial character.

That afternoon, while Mr. Narkom and his ally were being borne swiftly, if somewhat reluctantly, toward him, Mr. Naylor-Brent was pacing the narrow confines of his handsomely appointed room in the bank, visibly disturbed. That he was awaiting the arrival of someone was evident by his frequent glance at the marble clock which stood on the mantelshelf and which bore across its base a silver plate upon which were inscribed the names of fifteen or more "grateful customers" whose money had passed successfully through his managerial hands.

At length the door opened, after a discreet knock upon its oaken panels, and an old, bent, and almost decrepit clerk ushered in the portly figure of Mr. Narkom, followed by a heavily built, dull-looking person in navy blue.

Mr. Naylor-Brent's good-looking rugged face took on an expression of the keenest relief.

"Mr. Narkom himself! This is indeed more than I expected!" he said with extended hand. "We had the pleasure of meeting once in London, some years ago. Perhaps you have forgotten——?"

Mr. Narkom's bland face wrinkled into a smile of appreciation.

"Oh, no, I haven't," he returned, pleasantly. "I remember quite distinctly. I decided to answer your wire in person, and bring with me one of my best men—friend and colleague you know—Mr. George Headland."

"Pleased to meet you, sir. And if you'll both sit down we can go into the matter at once. That's a comfortable chair over there, Mr. Headland."

They seated themselves, and Mr. Narkom, clearing his throat, proceeded in his usual official manner to "take the floor."

"I understand from headquarters," said he, "that you have had an exceptionally large deposit of banknotes sent up from London for payments in connection with your new canal. Isn't that so, Mr. Brent? I trust the trouble you mentioned in your telegram has nothing to do with this money."

Mr. Naylor-Brent's face paled considerably, and his voice had an anxious note in it when he spoke.

"Gad, sir, but it has!" he ejaculated. "That's the trouble itself. Every single banknote is gone—£200,000 is gone and not a trace of it! Heaven only knows what I'm going to do about it, Mr. Narkom, but that's how the matter stands. Every penny is *gone*!"

"Gone!"

Mr. Narkom drew out a red silk handkerchief and wiped his forehead vigorously—a sure sign of nervous excitement—while Mr. Headland exclaimed loudly, "Well, I'm hanged!"

"Someone certainly will be," rapped out Mr. Brent, sharply. "For not only have the notes vanished, but I've lost the best night-watchman I ever had, a good, trustworthy man——"

"Lost him?" put in Mr. Headland, curiously. "What exactly do you mean by that, Mr. Brent? Did he vanish with the notes?"

"What? Will Simmons! Never in this world! He's not that kind. The man that offered Will Simmons a bribe to betray his trust would answer for it with his life. A more faithful servant or better fellow never drew breath. No, it's dead he is, Mr. Headland, and—I can hardly speak of it yet! I feel so much to blame for putting him on the job at all, but you see we've had a regular series of petty thefts lately: small sums unable to be accounted for, safes opened in the most mysterious manner, and money abstracted—though never any large sums, fortunately—even the clerks' coats have not been left untouched. I have had a constant watch kept but all in vain. So, naturally, when this big deposit came to hand on Tuesday morning, I determined that special precautions should be taken at night, and put poor old Simmons down in the vault with the bank's watchdog for company. That was the last time I saw him alive! He was found writhing in convulsions, and by the time the doctor arrived upon the scene, he was dead; the safe was found open, and every note was *gone*!"

"Bad business, indeed!" declared Mr. Headland, with a shake of the head. "No idea as to the cause of death, Mr. Brent? What was the doctor's verdict?"

Mr. Naylor-Brent's face clouded.

"That's the very dickens of it. He didn't quite know. Said it was evidently a case of poisoning, but was unable to decide further, or to find out what sort of poison, if any, had been used."

"H'm. I see. And what did the local police say? Have they found any clues yet?"

The manager flushed, and he gave vent to a forced laugh.

"As a matter of fact," he responded, "the local police know nothing about it. I have kept the loss an entire secret until I could call in the help of Scotland Yard."

"A secret, Mr. Brent, with *such* a loss!" ejaculated Mr. Narkom. "That's surely an unusual course to pursue. When a bank loses such a large sum of money, and in banknotes—the most easily handled commodity in the world—and in addition a mysterious murder takes place, one would naturally expect that the first act would be to call in the officers of the law, that is—unless—I see——"

"Well, it's more than I do!" responded Mr. Brent, sadly. "Do you see any light, however?"

"Hardly that. But it stands to reason that if you are prepared to make good the

loss—a course to which there seems no alternative—there is an obvious possibility that you yourself have some faint idea as to who the criminal is, and are anxious that your suspicions should not be verified."

Mr. Headland (otherwise Cleek) looked at his friend with considerable admiration shining in his eyes. "Beginning to use his old head at last!" he thought as he watched the Superintendent's keen face. And then aloud, "Exactly my thought, Mr. Narkom. Perhaps Mr. Brent could enlighten us as to his suspicions, for I'm positive that he has some tucked away somewhere in his mind."

"Jove, if you're not almost supernatural, Mr. Headland!" returned that gentleman with a heavy sigh. "You have certainly unearthed something which I thought was hidden only in my own soul. That is exactly the reason I have kept silent; my suspicions, were I to voice them, might—er—drag the person accused still deeper into the mire of his own foolishness. There's Patterson, for instance, he would arrest him on sight without the slightest compunction."

"Patterson?" threw in Cleek, quickly. "Patterson—the name's familiar. Don't suppose, though, that it would be the same one—it is a common enough name. Company promoter who made a pile on copper the first year of the war, and retired with 'the swag'—to put it brutally. 'Tisn't that chap, I suppose?"

"The identical man!" returned Mr. Brent, excitedly. "He came here some five years ago, bought up Mount Morris Court—a fine place having a view of the whole town—and he has lately started to run an opposition bank to ours, doing everything in his power to overthrow my position here. It's—it's spite, I believe, against myself as well as George. The young fool had the impudence to ask his daughter's hand, and what was more, ran off with her and they were married, which increased Patterson's hatred of us both almost to insanity."

"H'm. I see," said Cleek. "Who is George?"

"George Barrington, my stepson, Mr. Headland; unfortunately for me, my late wife's boy by her first marriage. I have to admit it, regretfully enough, he was the cause of his mother's death. He literally broke her heart by his wild living, and I was only too glad to give him a small allowance—which, however, helped him with his unhappy marriage—and hoped to see the last of him."

Cleek twitched up an inquiring eyebrow.

"Unhappy, Mr. Brent?" he queried. "But I understood from you a moment ago that it was a love match."

"In the beginning it was purely a question of love, Mr. Headland," responded the manager, gravely. "But as you know, when poverty comes in at the door, love sometimes flies out of the window, and from all accounts, the former Miss Patterson never ceases to regret the day she became Mrs. George Barrington. George has been hanging about here this last week or two, and I noticed him trying to renew acquaintance with old Simmons only a day or two ago in the bar of the Rose and Anchor. He—he was also seen prowling round the bank on Tuesday night. So now you know why I was loath to set the ball rolling; old man Patterson would lift the sky to get the chance to have that young waster imprisoned, to say nothing of defaming my personal character at the same time.

"Sooner than that I must endeavour to raise sufficient money by private means to replace the notes—but the death of old Simmons is, of course, another matter. His murderer must and shall be brought to justice while I have a penny piece in my pocket."

His voice broke suddenly into a harsh sob, and for a moment his hands covered his face. Then he shook himself free of his emotion.

"We will all do our best on that score, Mr. Brent," said Mr. Narkom, after a somewhat lengthy silence. "It is a most unfortunate tragedy indeed, almost a dual one, one might say, but I think you can safely trust yourself in our hands, eh, Headland?"

Cleek bowed his head, while Mr. Brent smiled appreciation of the Superintendent's kindly sympathy.

"I know I can," he said, warmly. "Believe me, Mr. Narkom, and you, too, Mr. Headland, I am perfectly content to leave myself with you. But I have my suspicions, and strong ones they are, too, and I would not mind laying a bet that Patterson has engineered the whole scheme and is quietly laughing up his sleeve at me."

"That's a bold assertion, Mr. Brent," put in Cleek, quietly.

"But justified by facts, Mr. Headland. He has twice tried to bribe Simmons away from me, and last year offered Calcott, my head clerk, a sum of £5,000 to let him have the list of our clients!"

"Oho!" said Cleek in two different tones. "One of that sort is he? Not content with a fortune won by profiteering, he must try and ruin others; and having failed to get hold of your list of clients, he tries the bogus game of theft, and gambles on that. H'm! Well, young Barrington may be only a coincidence after

all, Mr. Brent. I shouldn't worry too much about him if I were you. Suppose you tell Mr. Narkom and myself the details, right from the beginning, please. When was the murder discovered and who discovered it?"

Mr. Naylor-Brent leaned back in his chair and sighed heavily as he polished his gold glasses.

"For an affair of such tragic importance, Mr. Headland," he said, "it is singularly lacking in details. There is really nothing more to tell you than that at 6 o'clock, when I myself retired from the bank to my private rooms overhead, I left poor Simmons on guard over the safe; at half-past nine I was fetched down by the inspector on the beat, who had left young Wilson with the body. After that——"

Cleek lifted a silencing hand.

"One moment," he said. "Who is young Wilson, Mr. Brent, and why should he instead of the inspector have been left alone with the body?"

"Wilson is one of the cashiers, Mr. Headland—a nice lad. It seems he found the bank's outer door unlatched, and called up the constable on the beat; as luck would have it the inspector happened along, and down they went into the vaults together. But as to why the inspector left young Wilson with the body instead of sending him up for me—well, frankly, I had never given the thing a thought until now."

"I see. Funny thing this chap Wilson should have made straight for the vaults, though. Did he expect a murder or robbery beforehand? Was he acquainted with the fact that the notes were there, Mr. Brent?"

"No. He knew nothing whatever about them. No one did—that is, no one but the head clerk, Mr. Calcott, myself, and old Simmons. In bank matters, you know, the less said about such things the better, and——"

Mr. Narkom nodded.

"Very wise, very wise indeed!" he said, approvingly. "One can't be too careful in money matters, and if I may say so, bank pay being none too high, the temptation must sometimes be rather great. I've a couple of nephews in the bank myself——"

Cleek's eyes silenced him as though there had been a spoken word.

"This Wilson, Mr. Brent," Cleek asked, quietly, "is he a young man?"

"Oh—quite young. Not more than four or five and twenty, I should say. Came

from London with an excellent reference, and so far has given every satisfaction. Universal favourite with the firm, and also with old Simmons himself. I believe the two used sometimes to lunch together, and were firm friends. It seems almost a coincidence that the old man should have died in the boy's arms."

"He made no statement, I suppose, before he died, to give an idea of the assassin? But of course you wouldn't know that, as you weren't there."

"As it happens I do, Mr. Headland. Young Wilson, who is frightfully upset—in fact, the shock of the thing has completely shattered his nerves, never very strong at the best of times—says that the old man just writhed and writhed, and muttered something about a rope. Then he fell back dead."

"A rope?" asked Cleek in surprise. "Was he tied or bound then?"

"That's just it. There was no sign of anything whatever to do with a rope about him. It was possibly a death delusion, or something of the sort. Perhaps the poor old chap was semi-conscious."

"Undoubtedly. And now just one more question, Mr. Brent, before I tire your patience out. We policemen, you know, are terrible nuisances. What time was it when young Wilson discovered the door of the bank unlatched?"

"About half-past nine. I had just noticed my clock striking the half-hour, when I was disturbed by the inspector——"

"And wasn't it a bit unusual for a clerk to come back to the bank at that hour—unless he was working overtime?"

Mr. Naylor-Brent's fine head went back with a gesture which conveyed to Cleek the knowledge that he was not in the habit of working any of his employees beyond the given time.

"He was doing nothing of the sort, Mr. Headland," he responded, a trifle brusquely. "Our firm is particularly keen about the question of working hours. Wilson tells me he came back for his watch which he left behind him, and——"

"And the door was conveniently unlatched and ready, so he simply fetched in the inspector, and took him straight down into the vaults. Didn't get his watch, I suppose?"

Mr. Naylor-Brent jumped suddenly to his feet, all his quiet self-possession gone for the moment.

"Gad! I never thought of that. Hang it all, man, you're making a bigger puzzle of

it than ever. You're not insinuating that that boy murdered old Simmons, are you? I can't believe that."

"I'm not insinuating anything," responded Cleek, blandly. "But I have to look at things from every angle. When you got downstairs with the inspector, Mr. Brent, did you happen to notice the safe or not?"

"Yes, I did. Indeed, I fear that was my first thought—it was natural, with £200,000 Bank of England notes to be responsible for—and at first I thought everything was all right. Then young Wilson told me that he himself had closed the safe door.... What are you smiling at, Mr. Headland? It's no laughing matter, I assure you!"

The queer little one-sided smile, so indicative of the man, travelled for a moment up Cleek's cheek and was gone again in a twinkling.

"Nothing," he responded, briefly. "Just a passing thought. Then you mean to say young Wilson closed the safe. Did he know the notes had vanished? But of course you said he knew nothing of them. But if they were there when he looked in——"

His voice trailed into silence, and he let the rest of the sentence go by default. Mr. Brent's face flushed crimson with excitement.

"Why, at any rate," he ejaculated, "the money wasn't stolen until young Wilson sent the inspector up for me. And we let him walk quietly out! You were right, Mr. Headland, if I had only done my duty and told Inspector Corkran at once ——"

"Steady, man, steady. I don't say it *is* so," put in Cleek with a quiet little smile. "I'm only trying to find light——"

"And making it a dashed sight blacker still, begging your pardon," returned Mr. Brent, briskly.

"That's as may be. But the devil isn't always as black as he is painted," responded Cleek. "I'd like to see this Wilson, Mr. Brent, unless he is so ill he hasn't been able to attend the office."

"Oh, he's back at work to-day, and I'll have him here in a twinkling."

And almost in a twinkling he arrived—a young, slim, pallid youngster, rather given to over-brightness in his choice of ties, and somewhat better dressed than is the lot of most bank clerks. Cleek noted the pearl pin, the well-cut suit he wore, and for a moment his face wore a strange look.

Mr. Naylor-Brent's brisk voice broke the silence.

"These gentlemen are from Scotland Yard, Wilson," he said, sharply, "and they want to know just what happened here on Tuesday night. Tell them all you know, please."

Young Wilson's pale face went a queer drab shade like newly baked bread. He began to tremble visibly.

"Happened, sir—happened?" he stammered. "How should I know what happened? I—I only got there just in time and——"

"Yes, yes. We know just when you got there, Mr. Wilson," said Cleek, "but what we want to know is what induced you to go down into the vaults when you fetched the inspector? It seemed a rather unnecessary journey, to say the least of it."

"I heard a cry—at least——"

"Right through the closed door of a nine-inch concrete walled vault, Wilson?" struck in Mr. Brent, promptly. "Simmons had been shut in there by myself, Mr. Headland, and——"

"Shut in, Mr. Brent? Shut in, did you say? Then how did Mr. Wilson here and the inspector enter?"

Young Wilson stretched out his hand imploringly.

"The door was open," he stammered. "I swear it on my honour. And the safe was open, and—and the notes were gone!"

"What notes?" It was Mr. Brent's voice which broke the momentary silence, as he realized the significance of the admission. For answer the young man dropped his face into his shaking hands.

"Oh, the notes—the £200,000! You may think what you like, sir, but I swear I am innocent! I never touched the money, nor did I touch my—Mr. Simmons. I swear it, I swear it!"

"Don't swear too strongly, or you may have to 'un-swear' again," struck in Cleek, severely. "Mr. Narkom and I would like to have a look at the vault itself, and see the body, if you have no objection, Mr. Brent."

"Certainly. Wilson, you had better come along with us. We might need you. This way, gentlemen."

Speaking, the manager rose to his feet, opened the door of his private office, and proceeded downstairs by way of an equally private staircase, to the vaults below. Cleek, Mr. Narkom, and young Wilson—very much agitated at the coming ordeal—brought up the rear. As they passed the door leading into the bank, for the use of the clerks, old Calcott came out, and paused respectfully in front of the manager.

"If you will excuse me, sir," he said, "I thought perhaps you might like to see this."

He held out a Bank of England £5 note, and Mr. Brent took it and examined it critically. Then a little cry broke from his lips.

"A 541063!" he exclaimed. "Good heavens, Calcott, where did this come from? Who——?"

Calcott rubbed his old hands together as though he were enjoying a tit-bit with much satisfaction.

"Half-an-hour ago, sir, Mr. George Barrington brought it in, and wanted smaller change."

George Barrington! The members of the little party looked at one another in amazement, and Cleek noticed for a moment that young Wilson's tense face relaxed. Mr. George Barrington, eh! The curious little one-sided smile travelled up Cleek's cheek and was gone. The party continued their way downstairs, somewhat silenced by this new development.

A narrow, dark corridor led to the vault itself, which was by no means a large chamber, but remarkable for the extreme solidity of its building. It was concrete, as most vaults are, and lit only by a single electric light, which, when switched on, shone dully against the gray stone walls. The only ventilation it boasted was provided by means of a row of small holes, about an inch in diameter, across one wall—that nearest to the passage—and exactly facing the safe. So small were they that it seemed almost as if not even a mouse could get through one of them, should a mouse be so minded. These holes were placed so low down that it was physically impossible to see through them, and though Cleek's eyes remarked their appearance there in the vault, he said nothing and seemed to pay little attention to them.

A speedy glance round the room gave him all the details of it! The safe against the wall, the figure of the old bank servant beside it, sleeping his last sleep, and guarding the vault in death as he had not been able to do in life. Cleek crossed

toward him, and then stopped suddenly, peering down at what seemed a little twist of paper.

"Hullo!" he said. "Surely you don't allow smoking in the vault, Mr. Brent? Not that it could do much harm, but——"

"Certainly not, Mr. Headland," returned the manager, warmly. "That is strictly against orders." He glared at young Wilson, who, nervous as he had been before, became obviously more flustered than ever.

"I don't smoke, sir," he stammered in answer to that managerial look of accusation.

"Glad to hear it." Cleek stroked his cigarette-case lovingly inside his pocket as though in apology for the libel. "But it's my mistake; not a cigarette end at all, just a twist of paper. Of no account, anyway." He stooped to pick it up, and then giving his hand a flirt, appeared to have tossed it away. Only Mr. Narkom, used to the ways of his famous associate, saw that he had "palmed" it into his pocket. Then Cleek crossed the room and stood a moment looking down at the body, lying there huddled and distorted in the death agony that had so cruelly and mysteriously seized him.

So this was Will Simmons! Well, if the face is any index to the character—which in nine cases out of ten it isn't—then Mr. Naylor-Brent's confidence had certainly not been misplaced. A fine, clean, rugged face this, with set lips, a face that would never fail a friend, and never forgive an enemy. Young Wilson, who had stepped up beside Cleek, shivered suddenly as he looked down at the body, and closed his eyes.

Mr. Brent's voice broke the silence that the sight of death so often brings.

"I think," he said, quietly, "if you don't mind, gentlemen, I'll get back to my office. There are important matters at stake just now, so if you'll excuse me—it's near closing time, you know, and there are many important matters to see to. Wilson, you stay here with these gentlemen, and render any assistance that you can. Show them round if they wish it. You need not resume work to-day. Anything which you wish to know, please call upon me.

"Thanks. We'll remember." Cleek bowed ceremoniously as the manager retreated. "But no doubt Mr. Wilson here will give us all the assistance we require, Mr. Brent. We'll make an examination of the body first, and let you know the verdict!"

The door closed on Mr. Brent's figure, and Cleek and Mr. Narkom and young

Wilson were alone with the dead.

Cleek went down upon his knees before the still figure, and examined it from end to end. The clenched hands were put to the keenest scrutiny, but he passed no comment, only glancing now and again from those same hands to the figure of the young cashier who stood trembling beside him.

"H'm, convulsions," he finally said, softly, to himself, and Mr. Narkom watched his face with intense eagerness. "Might be aconite—but how administered?" Again he stood silent, his brain moving swiftly down an avenue of thought, and if the thoughts could have been seen, they would have shown something like this: Convulsions—writhing—twisting—tied up in knots of pain—a *rope*.

Suddenly he wheeled swiftly upon Wilson, his face a mask for his emotions.

"Look here," he said, sternly, "I want you to tell me the exact truth, Mr. Wilson. It's the wisest way when dealing with the police, you know. Are you positively certain Simmons said nothing as to the cause of his death? What exactly were his last words to you?"

"I begged him to tell me who it was who had injured him," replied Wilson in a shaking voice, "but all he could say was, 'The rope—mind the rope—the rope of fear—the rope of fear,' and then he was gone. But there was no sign of a rope, Mr. Headland, and I can't imagine what the—dear—old—man was driving at. And now to think he is dead—dead——"

His voice broke, and was silent for a moment. Once again Cleek spoke:

"And you saw nothing, heard nothing?"

"Well—I hardly know. There was a sound—a faint whisper, reedlike and thin, almost like a long-drawn sigh. I really thought I must have imagined it, and when I listened again it had gone. After that I rushed to the safe and——"

"Why did you do that?"

"Because he had told me at dinner time about the notes, and made me promise I wouldn't mention it, and I was afraid someone had stolen them."

"Is it likely that any one overheard your conversation then? Where were you lunching?"

"In the Rose and Crown." Wilson's voice trembled again as though the actual recalling of the thing terrified him anew. "Simmons and I often had lunch together. There was no one else at our table, and the place was practically empty.

The only person near was old Ramagee, the black chap who keeps the Indian bazaar in the town. He's an old inhabitant, but even now hardly understands English, and most of the time he's so drugged with opium that if he did hear he'd never understand. He was certainly blind to the world that lunch time—because my—my friend, Simmons, I mean, noticed it."

"Indeed!" Cleek stroked his chin thoughtfully for some moments. Then he sniffed the air, and uttered a casual remark: "Fond of sweets still, are you, Mr. Wilson? Peppermint drops or aniseed balls, eh?"

Mr. Narkom's eyes fairly bulged with amazement, and young Wilson flushed angrily.

"I am not such a fool as all that, Mr. Headland," he said, quickly. "If I don't smoke, I certainly don't go about sucking candy like a kid. I never cared for it as a youngster and I haven't had any for a cat's age. What made you ask?"

"Nothing, simply my fancy." But, nevertheless, Cleek continued to sniff, and then suddenly, with a little excited sound, went down on his hands and knees and began examining the stone floor.

"It's not possible—and yet—and yet. I must be right," he said, softly, getting to his feet at last. "'A rope of fear' was what he said, wasn't it? 'A rope of fear.'" He crossed suddenly to the safe, and bending over it, examined the handle and doors critically. And at that moment Mr. Brent reappeared. Cleek switched round upon his heel, and smiled across at him.

"Able to spare us a little more of your valuable time, Mr. Brent?" he asked, politely. "Well, I was just coming up. There's nothing really to be gained here. I have been looking over the safe for fingerprints, and there's not much doubt about whose they are. Mr. Wilson here had better come upstairs and tell us just exactly what he did with the notes, and——"

Young Wilson's face went suddenly gray. He clenched his hands together and breathed hard like a spent runner.

"I tell you they were gone," he cried, desperately. "They were gone. I looked for them, and didn't find them. They were gone—gone—gone!"

But Cleek seemed not to take the slightest notice of him, and swinging upon his heel followed in the wake of the manager's broad back, while Wilson perforce had to return with Mr. Narkom. Half way up the stairs, however, Cleek suddenly stopped and gave vent to a hurried ejaculation.

"Silly idiot that I am!" he said, crossly. "I have left my magnifying glass on top of the safe—and it's the most necessary tool we policemen have. Don't bother to come, Mr. Brent, if you'll just lend me the keys of the vault. Thanks, I'll be right back."

It was certainly not much more than a moment when he did return, and the other members of the little party had barely reached the private office when he fairly rushed in after them. There was a look of supreme satisfaction in his eyes.

"Here it is," he said, lifting the glass up for all to see. "And look here, Mr. Brent, I've changed my mind about discussing the matter any further here. The best thing you can do is to go down in a cab with Mr. Narkom to the police station and get a warrant for this young man's arrest—no, don't speak, Mr. Wilson, I've not finished yet—and take him along with you. I will stay here and just scribble down the facts. It'll save no end of bother, and we can take our man straight up to London with us, under proper arrest. I shan't be more than ten minutes at the most."

Mr. Brent nodded assent.

"As you please, Mr. Headland," he said, gravely. "We'll go along at once. Wilson, you understand you are to come with us? It's no use trying to get away from it, man, you're up against it now. You'd better just keep a stiff upper lip and face the music. I'm ready, Mr. Narkom."

Quietly they took their departure, in a hastily found cab, leaving Cleek, the picture of stolid policemanism, with note-book and pencil in hand, busily inscribing what he was pleased to call "the facts."

Only "ten minutes" Cleek had asked for, but it was nearer twenty before he was ushered out of the side entrance of the bank by the old housekeeper, and though perhaps it was only sheer luck that nearly caused him to tumble into the arms of Mr. George Barrington—whom he recognized from the word picture of that gentleman given by Mr. Brent some time before—it was decidedly by arrangement that, after a few careless words on the part of Cleek, Mr. Barrington, his face blank with astonishment, accompanied this stranger down to the police station.

They found a grim little party awaiting them, but at sight of Cleek's face Mr. Narkom started forward and put a hand upon his friend's arm.

"What have you found, Headland?" he asked, excitedly.

"Just what I expected to find," came the triumphant reply. "Now, Mr. Wilson,

you are going to hear the end of the story. Do you want to see what I found, gentlemen? Here it is." He fumbled in his big coat pocket for a moment and pulled out a parcel which crackled crisply. "The notes!"

"Good God!" It was young Wilson who spoke.

"Yes, a *very* good God—even to sinners, Mr. Wilson. We don't always deserve all the goodness we get, you know," Cleek went on. "The notes are found, you see; the notes, you murderer, you despicable thief, the notes which were entrusted to your care by the innocent people who pinned their faith to you."

Speaking, he leaped forward, past the waiting inspector and Mr. Narkom, past the shabby, down-at-heel figure of George Barrington, past the slim, shaking Wilson, and straight at the substantial figure of Mr. Naylor-Brent, as he stood leaning with one arm upon the inspector's high desk.

So surprising, so unexpected was the attack, that his victim was overpowered and the bracelets snapped upon his wrists before any one present had begun to realize exactly what had happened.

Then Cleek rose to his feet.

"What's that, Inspector?" he said in answer to a hurriedly spoken query. "A mistake? Oh, dear, no. No mistake whatever. Our friend here understands that quite well. Thought you'd have escaped with that £200,000 and left your confederates to bear the brunt of the whole thing, did you? Or else young Wilson here whom you'd so terrorized! A very pretty plot, indeed, only Hamilton Cleek happened to come along instead of Mr. George Headland and show you a thing or two about plots."

"Hamilton Cleek!" The name fell from every pair of lips, and even Brent himself stared at this wizard whom all the world knew, and who unfortunately had crossed his path when he least wanted him.

"Yes, Hamilton Cleek, gentlemen. Cleek of Scotland Yard. And a very good thing for you, Mr. Wilson, that I happened to come along. Things looked very black for you, you know, and those beastly nerves of yours made it worse. And if it hadn't been for this cad's confederate——"

"Confederate, Mr. Cleek?" put in Wilson, shakily. "I—I don't understand. Who could have been his confederate?"

"None other than old Ramagee," responded Cleek. "You'll find him drugged as usual, in the Rose and Crown. I've seen him there only a while ago. But now he

is minus a constant companion of his.... And here is the actual murderer."

He put his hand into another capacious pocket, and drew forth a smallish, glass box.

"The Rope of Fear, gentlemen," he said, quietly, "a vicious little rattler of the most deadly sort. And it won't be long before that gentleman there becomes acquainted with another sort of rope. Take him away, Inspector. The bare sight of him hurts an honest man's eyes."

And they took Mr. Naylor-Brent away forthwith, a writhing, furious Thing, utterly transformed from the genial personality which had for so long swindled and outwitted a trusting public.

As the door closed upon them, Cleek turned to young Wilson and held out his hand.

"I'm sorry to have accused you as I did," he said, softly, with a little smile, "but that is a policeman's way, you know. Strategy is part of the game—though it was a poor trick of mine to cause you additional pain. You must forgive me. I don't doubt the death of your father was a great shock, although you tried manfully to conceal the relationship. No doubt it was his wish—not yours."

A sudden transformation came over Wilson's pale, haggard face. It was like the sun shining after a heavy storm.

"You—knew?" he said, over and over again. "You *knew*? Oh, Mr. Cleek, now I can speak out at last. Father always wanted me to be a gentleman, and he's spent every penny he possessed to get me well enough educated to enter the bank. He was mad for money, mad for anything which was going to better my position. And—and I was afraid when he told me about the notes, he might be tempted ——Oh! It was dreadful of me, I know, to think of it, but I knew he doted on me. I was afraid he might try and take one or two of them, hoping they wouldn't be missed out of so great an amount. You see, we'd been in money difficulties and were still paying off my college fees after all this time. So I went back to keep watch with him—and found him dying—though how you *knew*——"

His voice trailed off into silence, and Cleek smiled kindly.

"By the identical shape of your hands, my boy. I never saw two pairs of hands so

much alike in all my life. And then your agitation made me risk the guess.... What's that, Inspector? How was the murder committed, and what did this little rattler have to do with it? Well, quite simple. The snake was put in the safe with the notes, and a trail of aniseed—of which snakes are very fond, you know—laid from there to the foot of old Simmons. The safe door was left ajar—though in the half dusk the old man certainly never noticed it. I found all this out from those few words of Wilson's about 'the rope,' and from his having heard a reedlike sound. I had to do some hard thinking, I can tell you. When I went downstairs again, Mr. Narkom, after my magnifying glass, I turned down poor Simmons' sock and found the mark I expected—the snake had crawled up his leg and struck home.

"Why did I suspect Mr. Brent? Well, it was obvious almost from the very first, for he was so anxious to throw suspicion upon Mr. Barrington here, and Wilson—with Patterson thrown in for good measure. Then again it was certain that no one else would have been allowed into the vault by Simmons, much less to go to the safe itself, and open it with the keys. That he did go to the safe was apparent by the fingerprints upon it, and as they, too, smelt of aniseed, the whole thing began to look decidedly funny. The trail of aniseed led straight to where Simmons lay, so I can only suppose that after Brent released the snake—the trail, of course, having been laid beforehand, when he was alone—Brent must have stood and waited until he saw it actually strike, and—— How do I know that, Mr. Wilson? Well, he smoked a cigarette there, anyhow. The stub I found bore the same name as those in his box, and it was smoked identically the same way as a couple which lay in his ashtray.

"I could only conclude that he was waiting for something to happen, and as the snake struck, he grabbed up the bundle of notes, quite forgetting to close the safe door, and rushed out of the vault. Ramagee was in the corridor outside, and probably whistled the snake back through the ventilating holes near the floor, instead of venturing near the body himself. You remember, you heard the sound of that pipe, Mr. Wilson? Ramagee probably made his escape while the Inspector was upstairs. Unfortunately for him, he ran right into Mr. George Barrington here, and when, as he tells me, he later told Brent about seeing Ramagee, well, the whole thing became as plain as a pikestaff."

"Yes," put in George Barrington, excitedly, taking up the tale in his weak, rather silly voice, "my stepfather refused to believe me, and gave me £20 in notes to go away. I suppose he didn't notice they were some of the stolen ones. I changed one of them at the bank this morning, but I had no idea how important they were

until I knocked into Mr.—Mr. Cleek here. And he made me come along with him."

Mr. Narkom looked at Cleek, and Cleek looked at Mr. Narkom, and the blank wonder of the Superintendent's eyes caused him to smile.

"Another feather in the cap of foolish old Scotland Yard, isn't it?" said Cleek. "Time we made tracks, I think. Coming our way, Mr. Wilson? We'll see you back home if you like. You're too upset to go on alone. Good afternoon, Inspector, and —good-bye. I'll leave the case with you. It's safe enough in your hands, but if you take my tip you'll put that human beast in as tight a lock-up as the station affords."

Then he linked one arm in Mr. Narkom's and the other arm in that of the admiring and wholly speechless Wilson, and went into the sunshine.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF ELTON CARLYLE

"Won't 'old another blessed thing, sir," said Dollops, regretfully, trying hard to stuff a bundle of highly coloured ties and a cocoa-nut into a Gladstone bag already filled to overflowing.

Cleek, shirt-sleeves turned up, kneeling before a similar bag, looked up with a quizzical smile on his face.

"It certainly won't hold any more cocoanuts, you voracious young monkey," he said with an amused laugh. "I should say you've got enough things in there to last for a month at the Pole, instead of a couple of days on a houseboat. Hurry and get strapped up, or—who knows?—we shall have Mr. Narkom popping in with another case."

Dollops hurried up at once, gasping as he did so, "If he does, I'll eat my 'at. Lor' lumme, sir! but we ain't goin' to be done out of *this* 'oliday, are we?"

Cleek shook his head. But even as he opened his mouth to speak there came a sound which caused Dollops to assume a most dejected expression—a very ordinary sound, too, a hastily driven motor being sharply drawn up to the curb.

Cleek sprang to his feet.

"Lennard! A ducat to a guinea but it's Lennard!" he muttered under his breath, as Dollops, with the ease of an acrobat, took a flying leap over both bags to the window and peeped through the curtains.

It did not need his heartfelt groan of despair to tell Cleek that his conjecture was right, and the sound of hurried footsteps in the passage outside warned him of Mr. Narkom's approach only a minute before the door was thrown open and that gentleman stood in the doorway, breathless, but beaming complacently.

"Thank Heaven I'm in time, old chap," said he with a sigh of relief, advancing toward Cleek.

"Sorry we can't reciprocate the feeling, Mr. Narkom," said Cleek with a rueful smile; "but we can't, can we, Dollops? It's too bad, you interloper. I've ordered the taxi, there's a boat waiting for us out Hampton Court way, and in another

quarter of an hour——" He stopped significantly, and threw out his hand with a gesture indicative of the most utter despair.

Mr. Narkom nodded.

"It is hard lines," he agreed, "and I wouldn't worry you, only it's something very important. And if *you* fail me——"

"Well, old friend, you want me, and here I am. I suppose you are going to carry me off, so where do we go, and when?"

"Now, if you will," said Mr. Narkom. "I've got one car here, and Petrie and Hammond have gone off with another, made up so as to take followers off our trail. I want to catch the one o'clock from Waterloo," he said, consulting his watch, "and unless we hurry, there's no chance."

"Waterloo? Too far for us to go in the limousine, then?" said Cleek, picking up his light overcoat.

"Yes, it's just beyond Portsmouth, as a matter of fact, and we shan't be down there even now until late in the evening, but——"

"But me no buts," threw in Cleek with a little laugh. "Let's be off. Now, then, Dollops."

He gave the boy a few hurried instructions, turned upon his heel, seized Mr. Narkom by his substantial arm, and went clattering down the stairs like a schoolboy on the first day of the holidays.

"Now fire away," he said as he seated himself in the limousine beside the Superintendent, and drew out his cigarette-case. "Is the matter really a very important one?"

"I should think it is," was the emphatic reply. "I had the tip from a very high personage indeed to give the matter close attention. The actual client is a gentleman of considerable wealth and social standing. You may possibly have heard of him. He is Brian Desmond, the only son of the wealthiest banker in the kingdom, and recently made head of his father's firm."

"Of course I have heard of him," said Cleek with a nod. "Who hasn't? Wasn't that the man who owned 'Black Prince,' the last Derby winner? Not only has he been famous for outdoor sports, but no one can forget the fuss made in the papers over his marriage two years ago with the most beautiful débutante of the season, Lady Beryl Summerton."

"That's the man," said the Superintendent. "But all his sporting days—and ways—are over, for since he has become head of the great banking business he has devoted all his time to straight finance and hard work. Every day he spends at the provincial office in Portsmouth, near which is his country seat."

"Another case of Prince Hal, eh?" said Cleek, thoughtfully. "All right, old chap, don't worry over your history dates now—go ahead. What's wrong? I saw his cousin, Elton Carlyle, last week. He hasn't given up *his* sporting proclivities, because he was walking down Bond Street with a bookie, I'll stake my life on that."

"Poor chap!" said Mr. Narkom, softly. "The news of Elton Carlyle's death came to me this morning. It's been murder—cunning, crafty, diabolically planned murder. And there is no clue as to how the murderer got into the house unseen, much less how he managed to chloroform a man to death without a sign of a struggle. Yet the man evidently died last night. Mr. Desmond sent off for the police, and wrote me fullest particulars."

"Very thoughtful of him," said Cleek, pinching up his chin. "Should have thought he would have been too upset to have got a letter off in time to catch the post. That special midnight mail, I presume? H'm!"

"Yes," agreed the Superintendent. "I never thought of that, I was so glad to get all the facts. I had been in communication with him over the robberies all last week, and was going down when——"

Cleek sat up suddenly.

"What's that?" he snapped. "Robberies? What has been stolen from where?"

"So far, only gold has been taken, but now——Here's Waterloo, and the rest must be kept until we are in the train. What's that? Get the tickets and join you on the platform afterward. All right. And the coach next to the engine if I can manage it? Anything you say goes."

With this the Superintendent jumped nimbly out of the car and, with some instructions to Lennard, hastily made for the booking-office. There were evidently a goodly number of people going to Portsmouth, and Mr. Narkom frowned and fretted impatiently as he had to take his place in the queue. He noted with some alarm the presence of one man who was obviously of French birth, and but for the fact that this person took his ticket for a station some fifty miles from Portsmouth, the Superintendent would have given the fact more attention.

To his disgust there were no signs of Cleek on the platform, and he was still more angered by discovering that there was no empty carriage to be obtained. As a final reason for exasperation the carriage behind the engine was not only marked "Engaged" but was occupied by another Frenchman, an individual with long hair and Vandyke beard, who was leaning out of the window imploring every guard who came within hearing to tell him if "zis was ze right train for Dovaire." As he should have been going in exactly the opposite direction, and had been told so by every official on the platform, and as he still continued to argue the question in perfect French, they had, one and all, given him up in despair.

Mr. Narkom was also in despair as he saw the gate of the platform shut against a surging crowd of people who had arrived too late, and still there was no sign of Cleek.

That his ally had failed him intentionally he would not believe, and he halted disconsolately just outside the Frenchman's reserved carriage. The man had opened the door as if uncertain whether or not to get out at the last moment, and then as the whistle sounded, a guard, his green flag aloft, bundled both the Frenchman and Mr. Narkom unceremoniously into the same carriage, and bade them "Fight it out" between them.

Another shrill whistle, and the train moved out of the station, and Mr. Narkom, to the accompaniment of shrill vituperations from his French fellow-passenger, sank down into the opposite corner, the image of gloomy despair.

"Poor old chap! Sorry to——"

But the soft, laughing voice got no further, for with an acrobatic leap, worthy of Dollops himself, the Superintendent fairly hurled himself on his companion and tugged at his square black beard.

"Cleek!" said he in a voice that held some anger and a great deal of relief. "I might have known it, but what a scare you gave me!"

"You'd have had a worse one, my friend, if you had kept your eyes open, as I did," answered Cleek with a little shrug of disgust. "From the limousine I saw him. No less a person than Gustave Borelle, Margot's half-brother. What do you think of that?"

Mr. Narkom's brain flew to the booking-office, and his cheeks paled.

"The Frenchman in the queue!" he ejaculated, mopping his forehead with a silk handkerchief and looking the picture of pathetic despair. "I noticed him, old

chap, but he booked his ticket to Tarrington, so I felt assured."

"Let's hope it's only pure coincidence," said Cleek, thoughtfully. "Of course, he may have recognized the Yard car, and then again he may not. Anyhow, I don't think he would have recognized me in that get-up. Well, my friend, weren't you telling me something about a series of robberies in this precious new case of yours?"

The professional light came into the Superintendent's face, even as the anxious one went out of it.

"'Pon my soul," he said, briskly, "I was nearly forgetting what I was travelling for! Yes, robberies from a time-lock safe, in the study of Mr. Brian Desmond, at Desmond House. I expect you know the sort of thing."

"H'm, yes," said Cleek. "I ought to," he added, smiling a trifle sadly, "considering the amount of trouble I used to have in opening them. But that's another story. Anyhow, I know the apparatus; and one belongs to Mr. Desmond, eh? And money has been taken from it despite the time-lock precautions. Blown, I suppose?"

"No," replied Mr. Narkom with a grim smile. "For weeks and weeks sums of money have been disappearing from this safe overnight, and the mechanism of the lock has been absolutely intact, without scratch or blemish. The money has been put in at night, after the bridge parties are over."

"What's that?" rapped out Cleek. "Bridge parties? What has that hard-working, pleasure-shunning, late sportsman-banker, Brian Desmond, got to do with bridge parties?"

"He doesn't play himself. They are his wife's affair. Lady Beryl is devoted to the game. She gave up everything when she married Desmond—she might have married a duke, by the way—friends, parents, hobbies, all except bridge. That she still continued, having people down for the week-end solely to play."

"Oho! And where does Elton Carlyle come in in this pleasant little ménage? Is he the tame cat of the house, or master of the revels?"

"Well, something like that," admitted Mr. Narkom with a nod, "though he was called Brian's secretary. He was always a man-about-town, but he and Brian were inseparable. Now, on top of these robberies comes the news this morning of the murder of Elton Carlyle and the disappearance of the Eugenie pearl."

Cleek suddenly showed tremendous interest.

"What's that? What's that?" he rapped out. "You don't mean to say that any fool man bought that ill-fated jewel at Christie's last week? But yes, of course, he did, I remember now. Never anything but trouble has followed in the wake of that unhappy bauble of vanity since it first put in its appearance. It belonged originally to the Duchess Amelia Eugenie, from whom it acquired its name. Some stones seem to reflect the unhappiness of their various owners, and this pearl is the very embodiment of ill-luck. Desmond, I should think, with superstitious Irish blood in his veins, might have thought twice before he gave his wife such a jewel as that!"

"Well, he didn't," snorted Mr. Narkom, "and now it's gone."

For a time there was silence in the compartment. Neither spoke, neither stirred. Then suddenly Cleek jerked himself upright.

"Then that's what they're after!" said he with a crooked little smile. "I wonder. I wonder. It might be, and yet, Margot's no fool—no fool!"

With that he relapsed into silence again, a silence which lasted almost until the express landed them at Portsmouth Station.

CHAPTER XXX

THE SAFE WITH THE TIME-LOCK

The Superintendent had not been wrong in saying that Brian Desmond was driven fairly frantic by his cousin's murder, for the agony of the night and day was still visible on his face when he met the detectives in his own motor-car at the station.

"Thank God you've come at last, Mr. Narkom!" he said as they drove off. "And if only the Yard had acted more quickly I believe this horrid tragedy might have been averted. I don't care what it costs me—every coin I have in the world, if necessary—but this appalling mystery must be cleared up. I want the murderer of my cousin brought to justice. Justice? Yes, but vengeance, too. Let me but get my hands on the brute, and I'll save the law any further trouble."

"I quite understand your feelings, my dear Mr. Desmond," said Cleek, quietly, "but suppose you give the law a chance first. I have had only a sketchy outline of the case from Mr. Narkom. We had no time for more, so, if you will give me full details, it will perhaps facilitate matters. Tell me just when, where, and under what circumstances, the murder took place."

"I can only tell you the story just as Lady Beryl, my wife, and Estelle told it to me, Mr. Headland. I was not in the house at the time, more's the pity."

"That is just what I want. But, before you start, who is Estelle?"

"Estelle Jardine, an orphan protégée and companion to my wife, a dear little girl whom my wife found being worked to death in some sweatshop just before we were married. She sent her away till her health was fully restored, and she has lived with us ever since."

"A kindly act few women would perform," commented Cleek. "Lady Beryl must be a good woman."

"She is. She is an angel, and as clever as she is good," said her husband, his whole tragic face lighting up with tenderness. "Just now Estelle seems more upset than Beryl, as a matter of fact. Still, that isn't to be wondered at, is it, considering that it was she who found my poor cousin. The shock has nearly turned her brain. It seems, as far as I can make out, that Elton retired to the

library after lunch, as usual, to go through my correspondence, or any of Beryl's that needed his attention. The safe in the library was set for five o'clock, when I am usually home myself, and when, too, I lock away any surplus money I have brought home with me, in case my wife needs it at bridge. You see, one of her fads—if you like to call it so—is to pay her scores with ready money. There are no checks or I.O.U.'s flying around at her parties."

"A good plan, too," put in Mr. Narkom.

"Well, anyway, Elton retired into the library, and Beryl went up to her room for an hour's rest. She had a headache, she says."

"And Miss Jardine?" asked Cleek. "What became of her?"

"She remained with my wife, and sat at her side, reading, until Beryl went to sleep. She was still there, but asleep herself, poor youngster, when Beryl woke. About four o'clock, as near as I can make out."

"Rather a nice nap," said Cleek, thoughtfully. "Ought to have made her feel refreshed."

"Yes, but, strangely enough, it didn't. As a matter of fact, she complained that her head was worse than when she lay down. Still, as Estelle also complained of a headache, we attributed it to the storm which broke, pretty heavily, as you know, all over this part of the country last night."

"Quite so, quite so; it might well have been that. Is your wife a light sleeper?" asked Cleek.

Mr. Desmond shot a surprised look into his face.

"Very light, indeed," he said. "A breath of wind will disturb her." He gave a short little laugh. "I say! You're not supposing that Estelle got up and went down and drugged with chloroform a big strong man like Elton, are you? Without a struggle, and a man with whom she was deeply in love, at that?"

Cleek smiled and shook his head.

"In love, eh?" said he, twisting in his seat and facing Mr. Desmond. "That brings another element into the case."

"Oh, well, I shouldn't go so far as to call it love," said Mr. Desmond with an answering smile. "It was really more like hero-worship. Elton was one of those men who spend their lives always trying to be pleasant to people, and he petted Estelle, though she is on the top side of twenty. Not that she looks it; she'd pass

for sweet seventeen. Anyhow, at five o'clock I phoned through from the bank that I might be a little late, as I was staying for a meeting of provincial directors, and I sent a special message for my cousin."

"What was the message, and who took it?"

"I wish in one sense it had been the fool of a butler, who ought to have been in the hall, and wasn't, of course. But it was Estelle herself who had just come downstairs that answered, so I asked her to tell Elton to be sure and lock up the Eugenie pearl in the safe with my wife's other jewels, directly it opened, and not leave it in its case in my wife's boudoir. It had suddenly struck me that it wasn't right to have such a temptation put in the way of any one in or about the house. There is a great fascination about that particular jewel. Estelle said she would tell him, and she must have gone straight to the library and found Elton stretched out in front of the safe with the empty jewel-case of the pearl beside him—dead. It seems as if it were from some agonizing poison, though the doctor says only chloroform had been used. But I have no confidence in him."

"And the safe?" put in Cleek. "Was anything missing from that?"

Desmond nodded grimly.

"Yes; my wife, bless her for the only one of us who kept her head on her shoulders, not only sent for the police and for me, but opened the safe at the hour the time-lock allowed, only to find that that, too, was empty. Of course, she had thought at first that Elton had put in the jewel, re-set the safe, and then been attacked, but this was impossible, because I had set the safe the preceding night for five o'clock the next day. You see, Mr. Headland, I only use the time-lock when I have money or any special papers in the safe. Otherwise I just lock it ordinarily. And it has always been the day after the safe has been ordinarily locked, and on the nights when it has money in it and the time-lock has been set that the robberies have taken place. But this time——Well, the greatest mystery of all is that the bag of gold I left there in the morning was missing together with a lot of other jewels of my wife's which were there. And then, too, the pearl was gone from her room, and its case was beside the safe."

Cleek pursed up his lips and tapped his foot softly upon the carpeted flooring of the car. But he made no remark, and finally Desmond went on:

"Well, you can imagine my horror. As soon as I gathered from Bennett, the butler, what had happened, I came tearing over, to find my wife almost sick with horror, and the man I loved best in the world, the truest, the firmest friend that ever walked God's earth, foully murdered on my own hearth." He threw out his

hands suddenly and gave a sound like a sob. "My God! but it's almost unbelievable even now that I shan't find him on the steps waiting for me!"

Cleek stretched out his hand to place it gently on his shoulder.

"What will be, will be," he said, softly, but with a deep sympathy in his low tones. "We cannot quarrel with the Almighty, Mr. Desmond, though sometimes, I'll admit, we are greatly tempted to do so. This is the house, isn't it?" as the car turned in at a great gateway and swung slowly up the path toward a huge building alight with the glow of electricity. "Fine place you have here, I must say. After you, Mr. Desmond, after you."

Leaving the car in the hands of a chauffeur, who had evidently been on the watch for them, Cleek and Mr. Narkom followed their host into the great hall. Here Desmond turned to them.

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I will go and find my wife," said he, beckoning to a manservant to relieve them of their coats and hats.

"Certainly, Mr. Desmond," said Cleek, and their host vanished swiftly up the broad staircase.

"Any ideas, old chap?" asked the Superintendent, eagerly, as he saw his famous ally make a leap for the telephone apparatus and pick up a small, tightly rolled ball of paper which lay beside it.

"Ideas? Oh, several," was his grim answer as, having unrolled the paper, he read its contents. "Shall be able to tell you more when I know to whom this unsettled bridge score belongs. And, also, I've got a dim idea that the firm of Desmond & Co. was in danger of going into bankruptcy a few days ago. Merely a whisper, but——"

"Good Lord, man! Then, in that case, Mr. Desmond——"

"May have nothing whatever to do with the matter!" Cleek gave back quickly, as the sound of footsteps rang in the hall above, and down the stairway came Lady Beryl Desmond, one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. She was followed by her husband and a timid-looking little woman, whom Cleek did not need to be told was Estelle Jardine.

After the formal introduction Lady Beryl led the way into the library, wherein stood the time-lock safe.

On the threshold of the door, however, she turned to the girl, and her voice softened.

"Estelle, there is no need for you to come in here, *petite*. Go back to your room. I am sure you are not wanted." She flashed a look of interrogation at Mr. Narkom, though it was Cleek who took it upon himself to answer her, in rough, uncouth tones that made even Brian Desmond stare at him in dismay and wonder if he could have been mistaken in thinking the man a gentleman.

"Heaven bless your ladyship, but I don't see any reason to keep either of you ladies. I'll just poke about a bit, and then leave things till morning. In the night all cats are gray," and he gave an inane giggle, for which Mr. Narkom could have cheerfully shaken him, even though he realized that such behaviour was part of the game his ally knew so well how to play.

The door closed upon the two women, and Cleek, in the same dull, uncouth fashion, concentrated his attention on the time-lock safe.

Presently he switched round on Mr. Desmond, who was watching him anxiously, as his fingers darted over the mechanism, and he patted the immovable dial with something almost like affection.

A curious smile looped up one side of his face.

"Mr. Desmond," he said, speaking with excitement, "I have now set your safe to open at one o'clock to-morrow. I pray that three hours before that time the riddle may be solved. Now show me the room where the dead man lies."

Desmond at once led the way to a room down the corridor, and a word from Mr. Narkom to the two constables on guard was sufficient to allow the door to be unlocked. In silence the three men filed in.

There was a sort of bier upon which the body lay, and they looked down upon it reverently.

That Elton Carlyle's death had been attended with awful agony was only too apparent, and yet about the body still lingered the unmistakably sweet odour of chloroform.

"As I thought," said Cleek, briskly, as he laid bare the shoulder and pointed with a nod of satisfaction to a tiny red mark, a slight puncture of the skin. "Mr. Desmond, the doctors are not infallible. I think I know what means were used to do this thing, and why. But, to make sure, I want to borrow your motor, if I may. I shall just catch the last train back to town if I hurry, so, if you will be so kind—one other thing. Lock up this room, and let no one enter it—doctor, coroner, or mourner—until I return. That will be, if all is well, by nine to-morrow morning."

Then, with sudden briskness, he switched upon his heel and left the room. He was followed by Brian Desmond, who locked the door and pocketed the key, then went down to order the motor.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN THE DEN OF THE APACHES

Cleek, once in the train, pulled out the crumpled slip of paper he had found near the telephone in the Desmond home and reread it with knitted brows. It was, to all appearances, a bridge score, and a heavy one at that, but on the back was pencilled in a woman's handwriting:

"Bring pearl to old place, 14 Ratcliff Highway," and the signature beneath it was the one word, "Margot."

His first step on reaching London again was to make his way by devious cuts and many doublings and twistings to his rooms in Portman Square. To his immense surprise, there was a light burning there and when, having run swiftly and silently up the stairs, he advanced suddenly into the room, both he and its occupant had the surprise of their lives. It was Dollops, sitting disconsolately before the remains of a supper qualified to disturb the digestion of an ostrich.

"Dollops!" gasped his master, shutting the door behind him and facing the lad with astonished eyes. "Why, I thought you were at Hampton Court!"

"Lor' lumme sir, but I jest couldn't stop there 'aving a 'oliday without you, so I just bunked my things into the blooming boat, and 'ad a scrap of somefin' to eat, me feeling as holler as a sandwich-board, and back I comes," he explained, disjointedly, not meeting Cleek's keen eyes. "I meant to go down to the Yard in the morning for to try and cade your address out of Lennard."

"A pretty tough job that, my boy, even if he knew," said Cleek with a little smile. "Well, since you're here, Dollops, all the better. I've got a ticklish job ahead of me, and so, if I'm not back here before nine o'clock to-morrow morning, you can wire to Mr. Narkom to come on to me. These are the two addresses." He scribbled rapidly in his note-book. "But mind, not a single syllable before. You understand me?"

"Not 'arf, guv'nor. I'll stay 'ere as mum as a mouse," was the fervent reply.

"Good!" Cleek crossed to his locked medicine chest and drew from it a little phial containing some dark, thick-looking liquid, and put it into his breast-pocket. Then he whipped out his make-up box, twisted a short thick black beard

about his chin; grew, in some mysterious manner, a choppy little moustache upon his upper lip; threw off his clothing, threw on some others, and lo! in the twinkling of an eye he stood before the amazed and admiring Dollops, as perfect a representation of a typical Paris Apache as ever was.

Dollops gave a gasp of amazement, and stepped back a foot or two.

"Gor' save us, sir," he whispered in an awe-struck voice, "but if I 'adn't seen yer do it wiv my own blessed peepers I wouldn't 'ave thought it possible. You've got it all over me the night I bust into the Countess's Ball."

One more warning of complete silence, one more promise of fulfilment of it, and Cleek, with that litheness which characterized all his movements, had passed out into the night. Some five minutes later Dollops, armed with his beloved master's biggest revolver, sallied forth in his wake, and succeeded in following him, unseen, right up to the door of one of the evillest-looking dens of Limehouse.

Here Cleek knocked at the door, and on its being opened by a vicious-looking Apache, slipped quickly in. Dollops, knowing this was beyond his powers, contented himself with watching and reconnoitring from the outside.

Meanwhile Cleek, speaking the old Apache slang, had managed to persuade the men that he was from Desmond House, producing as evidence the crumpled bridge score.

"Name of a devil, yes! But what has become of Borelle? We sent him down to fetch the pearl this morning," said one of them, leaping forward and laying a hard hand on Cleek's arm. "At the last minute Margot was sure it would not arrive safe if trusted to the woman—the fickle jades that they are! But what has become of Borelle?"

Cleek shrugged a pair of nonchalant shoulders.

"Bah! how should I know?" he flung out, roughly, with a harsh laugh. "I was told to say that the trick has succeeded, *mes frères*, and that the jewels are coming. Perhaps *le cher Borelle* will bring them along later, who knows?"

Then someone opened the door. It was Margot, flushed, triumphant, a very queen returned from a revel at Covent Garden, a band of Apaches about her. Margot!

The disguised Cleek endeavoured to evade her sharp eyes, but that was an impossibility, and unwillingly he was dragged out of his corner, where he had pretended to fall asleep, overcome by the noise and the absinthe, and made to

give his story over again.

"*Hola*, then, but we must wait for the good Borelle," shouted Margot, as she pushed him from her with a sharp slap of her hand across his stupid face. "Drink, *mes enfants*, drink to the good day when we get that rat, the Cracksman, into our power, that Rat who deserted us for a pale-faced English woman. To the day!"

They lifted their glasses, draining them to the bottom, while Cleek laughed foolishly, as though the whole thing were a great joke, then slid back into his corner, edging his way toward the door.

Just then Borelle himself entered, carrying a bag upon which Margot fell with all the voracity of a young tigress. She tore it open, only to find that it contained nothing more valuable than a rather large bath sponge—only Cleek's keen eyes noticed that it seemed rather heavy.

Like a flash Margot turned upon Borelle, her eyes flashing with anger, but he held up a silencing hand.

"The great Cleek is handling the case, Margot," he said, swiftly. "The pig of a Narkom is down there, and the Cracksman followed him disguised as a Frenchman. I saw him myself, though it was almost impossible to know him. The fat Narkom was at the booking-office. He took the train to Portsmouth. I took a ticket fifty miles farther east. I saw the relief on the fat pig's face, and laughed at the child's play that had deceived him. And I saw him enter the carriage where the Frenchman sat. Is not that proof enough? Cleek is there. Cleek! Cleek! Cleek!"

The cry went up like a ribbon of flame licking round a burning building. It caught the whole crowd by the heels, as it were, sending them drunk with rage. With one accord they darted toward the stranger in their midst, and shoved him rudely toward Margot.

"What are you?" they shouted, discordantly mad with the madness of a possible triumph, and caught at the beard upon his chin. It came away in their hands.

"The Cracksman! *Nom de diable!* The Cracksman at last, at last!" screamed Margot in a very frenzy of joy. "Save yourself now, O Forty Faces, if you can! What shall we do with him, *mes amis*? Shall it be the knife, the poison, the rope? Oh, yes! but we have many ways of calling King Death! Come, choose, *mes frères*, and choose quickly. I want to see him dead with my own eyes *this* time—dead, *dead*!"

For a second one roared for one method, and one another; but all at once,

through the din and the noise and the hoarse shouting of many voices came the sound of snapping wood and trampling footsteps. Like a flash the cry went up:

"The police! The police!"

They were gone in a flash, tumbling over each other through the trap-door that suddenly sprang open at somebody's hand, and Cleek found himself being left alone. But Margot was the last to disappear, and even as the footsteps neared the door of their haunt she whirled round suddenly, whipped a revolver from the breast of her frock, pointed it at Cleek's tall figure, gave a little scream of hatred and triumph and fury all rolled into one, and fired straight at his heart!

He dropped like a log, and lay there perfectly still, perfectly motionless, until the little band of police, headed by Dollops, charged into the room and found him.

Then Dollops dropped to his knees, rolled him over, looked into his face, and then began blubbering like a baby. "My Gawd! It's Mr. Cleek! Mr. Cleek! And they've killed him! The Gawd-forsaken blighters!" he sobbed in an utter abandonment of grief. "Sir—sir! for Heaven's sake, say something! Tell us you're not dead, guv'nor! It's Dollops, Dollops who's a-asking of you!"

The still form shifted slowly, rolled over, shifted again, and then from the half-open lips came a voice that was as the music of Heaven itself to the boy.

"All right, you disobedient young angel, get off my back and let me get up," said Cleek, somewhat feebly. "Madame Margot fired a very straight shot, and if it hadn't been for the chain-armour which I put on, I'd have been as dead as a doornail, and no mistake!"

They took Cleek outside, thrust him into the waiting motor-car, and drove him to Scotland Yard. Here breakfast awaited him, and he was able to wash the paint from his face and brush his hair; then, somewhat tired, somewhat stiff, but ever the same smiling, well-groomed man, he went down at last to the limousine, entered it, and prepared himself for a comfortable snooze. Meanwhile, Lennard raced down to Portsmouth at a pace that by comparison made the speed limit as slow as that of a tortoise.

It was close on ten when the limousine dashed up to the steps of Desmond House, and Cleek tumbled out of it, to find a much-perturbed Superintendent, the very devil of anxiety shining in his eyes. For Cleek had never before missed an appointment.

"Gad! I was afraid something had happened to you. I've nearly gone frantic," Mr. Narkom said, with a little sobbing laugh of thankfulness, and Cleek's hand

sought his.

"I've had a pretty close shave, my friend," answered that gentleman with a wry smile, "and I've a yarn to spin to you later that'll turn your hair gray. It's a wonder mine isn't white! But I'm here, thanks to that young monkey, Dollops. And now let me finish my task." He flashed round on Brian Desmond, who stood near, and gave him a quick smile.

"Mr. Desmond," said he, briskly, "first of all, I want to show you how your money was taken, and then perhaps I will show you later who took it. So, to begin with, the library, if you please. I'm tired, I'm 'bed-hungry,' and I'm going there when I've finished, just as straight as I can!"

But the banker needed no further bidding. He turned and fled up the staircase, returning in a few minutes with Lady Beryl and Estelle Jardine. They all trooped into the library.

As Mr. Narkom was about to close the door, Cleek patted his pocket with a comical gesture of dismay.

"Blest if I haven't forgotten that book now, Mr. Narkom!" He turned blandly to the Superintendent. "You might run down to the limousine; you'll find a book and a bottle. I want both. It's open, I think."

The Superintendent needed no further instructions, but left the room as quickly and as expeditiously as possible, and Cleek turned to the Desmonds.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," he said, smoothly, "but now I think I can solve the riddle of the time-lock. Mr. Desmond, you saw me set that safe yourself, to open at what hour?"

"One o'clock," was the prompt reply.

"Quite so, and therefore it is impossible to open it until that hour——"

But he was interrupted here by Mr. Narkom, who came tumbling into the room, his face alight with eagerness.

"Ah," interposed Cleek, before the little man could speak. "It worked all right, eh?"

"I should just think so," was the brisk reply. "I left the——"

"That's all right then," interrupted Cleek, with a twitch of his eyebrow. "I was just asking Mr. Desmond to test his safe. Have you your key? If so, try it, please."

Mr. Desmond stepped forward and inserted it. To his surprise, it turned in the lock and the door swung slowly open.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "What does it mean? That thing should not have moved!" He looked at the dial, which stood for one o'clock, rigid, inscrutable.

Then he looked from Cleek to Lady Beryl, who was leaning against the table, overcome with emotion.

"I won't have it," she burst out. "It was not Elton. I swear it wasn't!"

"Have no fear," Cleek said, quietly. "Elton Carlyle was as true as steel, he never tampered with the lock. Perhaps Mr. Carlyle would prefer to tell us himself, Lady Desmond."

Before any one could so much as speak a word the amazing intimation had come true. With disordered dress and white, haggard face, the figure of Elton Carlyle himself stood in the doorway.

A shriek burst from Estelle Jardine's white lips, and she turned to fly to him.

"Oh, no, no, my girl; you don't make another attempt," snapped out Cleek. "You thought you were safe this time, didn't you, and that the dead tell no tales, eh?"

Speaking, he had sprung with a sharp movement, and immediately there was a scream, a struggle, and a click of clamping handcuffs.

"Well, my sweet-voiced little traitress, so I've got one more of your precious gang, have I?" Cleek snapped out, triumphantly, staring down into her upturned face. "I suppose your precious brother, Gustave Borelle, is at the bottom of it. Oh, yes, you may shriek, you may scream, but I hadn't forgotten Nita Borelle any more than her brother had forgotten Cleek!"

"Cleek!" broke out Carlyle in a weak voice. And "Cleek!" chimed in Lady Beryl and her husband in one breath.

"Yes, just Cleek, Mr. Desmond. Mr. Carlyle, you must keep quiet and rest. I know the effects of that drug this she-devil used on you, and the reaction of the reviving antidote that I sent Mr. Narkom upstairs with. You must retire to your bed for a few days. I take it that you were busy with the accounts when that hypocrite"—he flashed a glance of contempt at the huddled figure of Nita Borelle—"came into the room."

"That is so," said Carlyle. "She said Lady Beryl wanted to know whether I liked a new scent, a bottle of which she had just opened. Like a guileless fool, I buried

my face in the handkerchief, which was chock-full of chloroform; and then I felt a deadly stab in the shoulder, and an agony which caused me to faint. And that was the end."

"And might, indeed, have been the end if she had injected but a few more drops of the hellish compound," said Cleek, grimly.

"But how did the Eugenie pearl vanish with the other jewels? I had not got Mr. Desmond's message about putting it in the safe."

"No, but Nita Borelle *had*. So she knew that it was upstairs in Lady Beryl's boudoir. She must have been horribly disappointed when she found it wasn't in the safe with the gold and the other jewels. Weren't you, my girl? And then to learn so easily where it was!"

"But how did she get into the safe?" demanded Brian Desmond, eagerly.

"Just a moment," returned Cleek. "Wait till I show you what she got *out*!" And he pulled out of his pocket the very sponge that Margot had thrown down so contemptuously. The manacled woman gave a little sound indicative of despair and rage.

"After all your work, too, eh, mademoiselle!" And Cleek, tearing aside the substance, showed how the various stones had been pushed down the openings of the sponge. "She must have snatched up the jewels, brought them to the bedroom, and hidden them while you slept that drugged sleep. How pleased she must have been to be able to add the pearl to the collection! See, here it is," and he squeezed out the shining jewel itself onto the table. "She wasn't too excited, though, to leave the case beside Mr. Carlyle. Then all she had to do was to drop the sponge out of the window directly it was dusk, and Borelle could pick it up and walk off unseen. And now I think the riddle is solved, my friends."

"Yes, all but the safe," said Brian Desmond once more. "I don't see how she got the money and these jewels out before five o'clock when the safe was opened."

Cleek smiled at his host.

"That? Oh, quite simple, my dear sir, when you see the scheme. Look."

He crossed to the time-lock.

"Do you see, the dial is immovable, but a screw has been taken from the clockwork at the back, so that the body of the clock could be shifted round a quarter; so that when I set that clock last night for one o'clock, I knew it could be opened with the key at ten. And mademoiselle had so arranged it on days when it

was only simply locked. She had turned the clock so that when Mr. Desmond set the dial for five the following day, at two o'clock her duplicate key would fit it, when she could remove the money and jewels, re-set it to open at five, and there you are! Only unfortunately for him Mr. Carlyle interfered with her plan—and his interference was very nearly fatal to him. I saw that the two little marks which should tally on the rim and the clock body were not together, and when I tried it for myself, I knew the secret.

"Well, it is solved now, and there only remains one other thing, and that is to dispose of this woman. Will you send for the local police, Mr. Desmond?" Cleek flashed an inquiring look at his host, who in his turn was mutely questioning Lady Beryl.

"Ah, Mr. Cleek," said that lady, her voice quivering with emotion, "we all have much to thank you for; and yet I will ask but one more favour. And that is, to be allowed to set her free. Thanks to you, no real harm has been done. Elton is safe, the jewels are safe. Let her go, and perhaps she will sin no more."

Cleek's eyes shone his approval, though he shook his head dissentingly.

"People of her stamp are not likely to reform, Lady Beryl. Still, I appreciate your goodness of heart, and as the gang at Ratcliff Highway have had to fly for their lives, perhaps, if Mr. Narkom could be persuaded to look out of the window, the law might wink for once."

Mr. Narkom did look out of the window and the click of steel, followed by the swift closing of the door, soon told him that "Estelle Jardine" had disappeared from Desmond House forever.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE PASSING OF CLEEK

"Can't think how you manage to remember the faces of so many Apaches, seeing how many years ago it is since you were one of them," said the Superintendent, as the limousine bore them back to town.

"It's a trick, and a useful one," was the curt reply of his famous ally. Somehow, although it was in the sacred cause of law and justice, it always hurt Cleek when he had to take advantage of his inner knowledge of the Apache gang.

"Set a thief to catch a thief, I suppose," he added, with a tinge of bitterness in his tones, and Mr. Narkom looked curiously at him. It was not like Cleek to regret the successful solving of a difficult riddle, and still more unlike him to refer to the old dead days forever put behind him for the sake of one woman's smile.

"My dear chap," he blurted out at last, "you're tired. That's what it is, tired, and I don't wonder."

Cleek pinched up his chin. "Yes, I am tired," he jerked out, suddenly, "tired of being hunted." He sat up erect then, his eyes hard and brilliant.

"It's my turn, I think," he continued. "I want to hunt—myself. From Margot and her gang there seems to be no escape for Ailsa or myself. I thought we should have rounded them up to-day. Instead," he added ruefully, "they nearly got me ____"

"The artful devils," muttered Mr. Narkom.

"I have a plan," interrupted Cleek. "Do not send for me for a few days, no matter what happens. No matter what! Do you understand?"

And, as if carrying out a long-preconceived plan, he slipped from the moving car and vanished in the crowd.

About a week later, about ten-thirty of a certain morning, the well-known limousine drew up outside Scotland Yard and a certain great detective could be

seen seated within. Apparently his movements were already known to his enemies, for hardly had Lennard stopped at the curb than there whirred along the Embankment another car, its single occupant a woman with white face and eyes blazing with set purpose. Nearer and nearer it came till, obviously following a definite scheme, it drew up parallel with the Yard car wherein was Cleek, waiting apparently to obey the Yard's summons.

Before the few stray passersby had time to notice the presence of either car, drivers, or occupants, the woman, no less than Margot herself, drew her revolver, firing several shots in swift succession at the man in the limousine. As the form fell forward, riddled with bullets, she gave a shrill cry of triumph. Those near enough heard her exclaim in shrill, piercing tones: "Margot got you at last, Cleek the Cracksman, Cleek the Rat!"

Then as Mr. Narkom and a posse of police, startled by the sound of the shots, rushed onto the scene, her car made an attempt to escape. But this was impossible; men and police blocked its way, and in another second a screaming, fighting, struggling figure was brought into the building, while Mr. Narkom strove to dislodge the sobbing form of Dollops from the body of his master. And when the gaping, horror-stricken crowd saw Mr. Narkom take off his coat and lay it reverently over the white-faced body, a wave of horror and grief surged over the little crowd.

Cleek the Detective had been known and loved by the whole force, and the tragedy was an overwhelming one.

Up to Mr. Narkom's room, the scene of so many triumphs, the little funeral cortège went, while Mr. Narkom, putting his grief aside, conveyed by telephone and telegraph to Press and people the news that Hamilton Cleek, the best detective Europe had ever known, was no more. Since the news came from Scotland Yard itself, there could be no doubt of its authenticity, and Press and people did their utmost to show respect to the man who had "made good," only to lose his life at the hands of an assassin, and the papers blazed with threats and demands for Margot's death.

But far away on the rocky coast of Cornwall Mrs. Narkom and a happy—if remorseful—trio, in Dollops, Ailsa, and Cleek, basked in the sunlight of a world freed from enemies.

Once more Mr. Narkom had solved the problem "by death alone."

Money, that most powerful lever which moves the world, had produced a dead body. Skillful hands had made up the face to that of Cleek, and his proposed movements had been cleverly announced to Margot whose desire for vengeance had been growing daily stronger.

It was highly improbable that the truth would ever be revealed. Even the papers had been cleverly deceived, and with Margot secure in captivity, happiness secure before them in their love, and the love which surrounded them a living shield in itself, the two lovers prepared to tread the long road of happiness, undeterred and undismayed.

THE END

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